

Chapter 3

PLACES OF FRANCIS

3.0 Introduction

Anyone reading the life of St. Francis of Assisi can hardly fail to be impressed by the strong awareness he had of the world about him. He had the good fortune to grow up in a very beautiful part of the world, Assisi, in Umbria, Italy. He cannot have been oblivious to the beauty of his native place and the multitude of pilgrims who have visited Assisi since his time have rarely failed to appreciate that beauty.

My contention in this thesis is that nature played a powerful role in the spiritual vision and life of Saint Francis. Some questions inevitably arise: What sort of ambiance did he seek? What kind of places did he favor in his spiritual quest, which was the very heart of his life?

Obviously Francis did not want to spend his days in a monastery, and he vehemently rejected any suggestion that he or his brethren should do this. This is quite clear, I think, in his response to the brothers who wanted him to adopt an existing monastic Rule (AC 18). Neither did Francis want to live in a city, although he had grown up in the city of Assisi and loved it.

It is noticeable that he was far from being the sort of character who had to be always on the move, unable to settle anywhere. He had a few favorite places to which he returned again and again. In this chapter I shall try to discern what they can tell us about his nature mysticism and spirituality.

When we take note of the places to which he retired when he needed to refresh and revive his soul, we are bound to notice his predilection for wild and remote places, the Carceri, outside Assisi, the Portiuncula itself, then abandoned and deserted, La Verna, Greccio, Fonte Columbo and the island in the Venetian lagoon, now called San Francesco del Deserto. These places attracted Francis and solaced his spirit. I think it would be worthwhile to reflect on this

predilection of Francis. It seems that Francis did form a very deep attachment to certain places and became very attached to them, apparently because in them the holy, the numinous, had gripped him in a very profound way. Thus, he had a deep love for his own city of Assisi where his conversion had begun, even though he decided not to live there but at a distance from it.

Even deeper perhaps, was his love for LaVerna where he received the Stigmata. One of the paradoxes of Francis was that even though he did not want to own “either house or place or any other thing” (LR 6:1), nevertheless he accepted the donation of the whole mountain made in proper legal form (ABF 9:4-31)! How attached he was to the place is clear in the sources, in the various accounts of his stay there. Perhaps the most poignant is found in a much later source which may however, come from much earlier times. It is the famous *Addio* to LaVerna (Armstrong 1973:51).

The deepest attachment however, was to Saint Mary of the Angels, the Portiuncula. It was very profoundly interwoven with the early history of the movement, a place that Francis restored with his own hands in the early days, the place where Clare had been received, the place that had seen a perfect living of the Gospel, the Rule and life of the Friars Minor. And it was, of course, the place where Francis died as he wished.

However, it is important to be entirely clear that these holy places were not places to be worshipped, but rather places in which to worship. They were to become places of pilgrimage, places in which prayer had been efficacious.

3.1 THE CARCERI

After the year-long imprisonment in Perugia, Francis’s health was in a precarious state and he took a long time to recover under the watchful care of his mother. When his health was restored he tried to resume his old way of life but somehow he could not summon up the old enthusiasm. The spell had been broken. He did, however, still have dreams of knighthood and military glory

and he made an attempt to join the crusade in Apulia under Walter of Brienne (1C 4). This attempt was foiled by an experience in Spoleto, a dream in which he was told him to return to Assisi and there he would be shown a better way to real glory in the service of the Lord of lords. He returned to his native city of Assisi in some ignominy and had to endure some taunting and mockery (1C 10-12). This was in 1205, probably in the month of June, the very time that his great hero, Walter of Brienne was killed at Sarno. There followed a long period of searching. Celano (1C 6) speaks of him going to a cave outside the city, very likely located, suggests Fortini, in the area of the Carceri.¹ We can only speculate about what went on in that cave. According to the sources his soul was in distress, seeking to find his way. During this time Francis poured out his soul to the Lord and sought the enlightenment that he needed. Again the sources tell us that after these periods of prolonged prayer it seemed that a different person had emerged from the cave (1C 6).

The decisive moment came for Francis as he heard the voice that spoke to him in the almost derelict church of San Damiano. He heard the clear command “Francis, go and repair my church” (2C 10), and it seemed to him that finally his way was clear and that he knew what to do, at least for the present. This is not the place to discuss all the details of this particular story since they can easily be found in the various lives of St. Francis. However, it would certainly seem that the caves of the Carceri had a role to play in his conversion and throughout his life in his desire for prayer and solitude.

What exactly are the Carceri? About four kilometres outside the East Gate (*Porta del Parlascio*) of Assisi, high up on Mount Subasio, one comes to the Carceri, literally, “Prisons”. Until the 13th century there was only a small chapel there belonging to the Benedictines and Saint

¹ Fortini (1981:199) points out that “a constant local tradition holds” that the “grotto” where Francis went with his companion at the beginning of his conversion was a cavern on Mount Subasio.

Francis often retired to this place. Eventually the monks gave Francis and his followers the use of the chapel in the woods. There were various caves there that served as shelters for the brothers (Isabel 1975:162). It is now a well known tourist attraction, and the visitors and pilgrims flock there in the summer season. It is, however, a wild place, towering cliffs, rocky defiles, gnarled trees, holding on precariously to their inhospitable habitat. The vegetation is sparse, and even in summer it can be cold. In winter time the cold is bitter. It is clear that the Carceri had a very strong attraction for Francis. He loved the remoteness, the wildness, and the seclusion of the place. The Carceri had a very special role in the life of Francis because it is the place in which the great adventure of his quest for God began.² It was there that his spirit and his endurance were put to the test.

Today one visits the Carceri, which is now seen, and admired as one of the holy shrines of the Franciscan movement. The whole place, I think, is touched with a sort of patina of glory and holiness. It is a wilderness that has been tamed and transformed. No longer the fearsome, desolate wasteland where brigands and lawless people might be expected to lurk in hiding, but a holy place, consecrated by prayer and penance, willingly and cheerfully endured for the sake of the Lord. I still wonder and ask why Francis chose desolate and wild places. He could have sat in his house or garden, or gone to a church to converse with the Lord. However, there seemed to be something in Francis that drove him to the wilderness. Was it a taste for danger? It certainly seems that there was something of this in Francis's desire to join in battle. Was it an ambition to conquer, for the Lord, the wilderness that was supposed to be inhabited by demons? Eloi Leclerc (1977:138-139) remarks on the way that Francis sought the heights to seek the Most

² Fortini describes the path that Francis took with his friend to arrive at a place called Sasso del Maloloco, later called the Carcere of San Francesco, and now the Carceri (:198).

High³ and descended into a cave, there to seek the depths to do battle with the monster that dwells there and thus to accept the struggle, fear and death. This dynamic is also a feature in the Gospel in which after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan and had the great confirmation of his sonship, he was driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit.

We can see a similar dynamic operating in the lives of the desert fathers. They too were impelled to forsake the comfortable habitations of villages, towns, and cities to go into the wilderness and there search for the Most High (Dunne 1993:260-265). It seems that conversion to the Lord requires a radical break with old ways and habits of life. Going into the wilderness is one of the main ways of accomplishing this. One is reminded here of the stark saying in the Gospel about forsaking, even hating, mother, father, brothers, sisters, lands and houses, and even one's own life.

3.2 THE PORTIUNCULA

One of the pivotal moments of Francis's life was when he heard the voice from the cross in San Damiano saying to him "Francis, go and rebuild My house; as you see, it is all being destroyed" (2 C 10). The profound symbolism of this was not lost on Celano, for by the time Celano was writing, the Franciscan movement was exercising a huge influence throughout the world, and was renewing and revitalizing the Church in a remarkable way.

The rebuilding began in the most literal way in San Damiano, a little bit below the east gate, outside the city. He then turned to another church San Pietro della Spina.⁴ The third church

³ This expression, "the Most High", is a favorite of Francis, and recurs over and over again in his writings, most strikingly perhaps in the opening words of the Canticle of the Creatures. It could have come from the *Gloria in excelsis* of the Mass where Jesus is hailed as "*tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus Altissimus.*" Or from the breviary, where the term is often used of God, e.g. Psalm 91: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High".

⁴ According to Fortini the true identification of this church is to be found about three kilometres from San Damiano, about midway to the Portiuncula. This is contrary to the persistence of biographers who tell us that the church is that of the large Benedictine church of San Pietro that is in the lower portion of the city itself, and one which has had, throughout history, a rich endowment of lands and possessions. Fortini also suggests that this little church was also near the Bernadone family estates. It is now, once again, derelict as it was in the time of Francis (:248).

that Francis set out to repair was that of the Portiuncula. It had been abandoned by the Benedictines of Mount Subasio.

The Portiuncula is about half an hour's brisk walk from Assisi, and at the time of Francis it was a derelict little church hidden away in the woods and marshes of Assisi. It was dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels, and there were stories of angels being seen around the place (2MP 83). This was the poorest little church in the area around Assisi and was given to Francis and the brothers by the monks of Mount Subasio.

Of all the places that figured in the life of Francis, the Portiuncula was the only one to which he allowed himself an attachment. He was overjoyed at this place because "it was such a poor little church, and because of the surname it had, for it was surnamed: 'of the Portiuncula'" (AC 56). It had a very prominent role in the development of the Franciscan movement. It was here that Francis understood his vocation after hearing the Gospel and having it explained to him he exclaimed: "This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart" (1C 22).

One of the special moments in the story of the Portiuncula was the evening of Palm Sunday 1211 (1212), when the young girl Clare left her family home and set off for the chapel in the woods where she was received by Francis and dedicated her life to God.

This was the cradle of the Order and Francis wanted it to be the form and example of humility, and desired that the brothers who lived there be an example of perfect observance of the Rule (2MP 82). Celano tells us that Francis wanted the Portiuncula preserved as a mirror⁵ for gospel life. "The entrance there was not open except to specially selected brothers, gathered

⁵ The use of *mirror (speculum)* in medieval times was significant. It presented a description or portrait on which someone could gaze, and in so doing receive information or norms for everyday life (Armstrong, Hellmann & Short 1999, Vol.1 257 n.c).

from every region, whom the saint wanted to be truly devoted to God and perfect in every respect” (2C 18-19).

The Portiuncula was to figure again and again in the story of the movement, and chapters were often held there. It was also the scene of the famous quarrel between Francis and his brethren when he found a large house built there for the friars. He was afraid that such a house would destroy the spirit of the Order. He was enraged and mounted the roof, and began to throw down the tiles until he was stopped by some knights and informed that the building belonged to the Commune (2C 57). The Portiuncula also figures in the story of *True and Perfect Joy*.

Finally it was to the Portiuncula that Francis was carried when he realized his death was very near, for he wanted to die there. He composed the last stanza of the CtC there to welcome *Sister Death* (AC 5-7), and there he died on the evening of October 3rd, 1226 as the shadows of evening were falling and the larks were singing (AC 14).

As we look today at the prosperous and growing city of *Santa Maria degli Angeli*, it is not so easy to remember or to visualize it as the wild and uninhabited place with the little ruined church within the surrounding woods, but that is what it was and it was the one place on earth to which Francis was most attached. His injunction to the friars that they were never to leave it, and if they were driven out from one door they should go back in through another, (2MP 83; 1C 106) sounds strange for a man who was continually warning of attachment to any earthly creature. It is, I suppose, one of the endearing contradictions we find in Francis.

One may well ask why was it so important to Francis? The answer is perhaps given in Celano’s words: “As the blessed Father used to say, God revealed to him, that among all the other churches built in her honor throughout the world, that the blessed Virgin cherished that church with special affection. For that reason the saint loved it more than all others” (2 C 19).

3.3 LA VERNA

Mount LaVerna rises between a closely joined series of ridges called the Middle Appenines, and the Tyrrhenian Sea. It is made up of “numerable rocks so broken off and piled one upon another that they give the appearance of unusual formation, such as rough precipices, chasms, fissures and caves” (Schmucki 1989:161).

In 1837 the poet William Wordsworth made a journey to Italy and produced a kind of poetic chronicle of places he visited. One of those places was La Verna, the sacred mountain of the Franciscan movement. It is strange perhaps, that he would have visited such an inaccessible place. There was no well organized tourism in those days.

He was deeply impressed by the place. The great mountain, the wild crags, the dizzy heights, were the sort of landscape Wordsworth (1951: 285-286) loved and he was impressed by the hermits he saw there, dedicated to prayer and the worship of God:

For see, Laverna! Mark the far-famed Pile,
High on the brink of that precipitous rock,
Implanted like a Fortress, as in truth
It is a Christian Fortress, garrisoned
In faith and hope, and dutiful obedience,
By a few monks, a stern society,
Dead to the world and scorning earthborn joys.
Nay – though the hopes that drew, the fears that drove,
St. Francis, far from man’s resort, to abide
Among these sterile heights of Apennine,
Bound him, nor, since he raised yon House, have ceased
To bind his spiritual Progeny, with rules
Stringent as flesh can tolerate and live;....

Even today, when LaVerna is very accessible by car or bus, it is impressive, even awesome. The friary buildings are quite extensive, but from a distance they look very small, dwarfed by the gigantic mountains around them. They almost look like a birds nest, clinging precariously to the side of the mountain.

Francis first went there as a result of a meeting with Orlando dei Catani, Count of Chiusi. It was at a gathering at the Castle of Montefeltro, on the 8th of May, 1213 (Fortini 1981:547). It is the date on which Orlando donated the mountain of LaVerna from its peak to its base to Brother Francis and his friars both present and future (:547 n.c).

It seems that Count Orlando gave this mountain to Francis as a place where he could find peace and solitude, far from crowded places:

a mountain in Tuscany, which is very solitary and wild and perfectly suited for someone who wants to do penance in a place far from people or who wants to live a solitary life. It is called LaVerna. If that mountain should please you and your companions, I would gladly give it to you for the salvation of my soul (Fortini 1981:551).

Francis was indeed pleased since solitude and deserted places were very dear to him. It is, I suppose, a little surprising that he should have accepted in legal form what amounted to the ownership of a large amount of real estate. Perhaps another endearing contradiction in Francis! The mountain itself is grim and harsh surmounted by an immense cliff. Fortini suggests that its name comes from the terrible winter (inverna) on its heights:

Sometimes in the January nights, when the cold north wind holds sway from one peak to another, from every cliff, every abyss, every inaccessible chasm, from all the precipices, voices not human rise up, like shackled unearthly spirits in frightful torment. It is said that even up here the demons did not give a moment's peace to Francis during his harrowing vigils (:551-2).

LaVerna was destined to be the most famous of all the solitudes that Francis sought. He did not go there in the year it was given to him as he was preparing for a journey to Spain. Two years later he went there for the first time and, according to Fortini (1981 :553), he is thought to have returned there in August 1216, in 1218, and 1220. The most famous sojourn at LaVerna however, took place in August and September of 1224. He had a practice of keeping a special

“Lent”⁶ from the feast of the Assumption, August 15, to the feast of St. Michael, September 29. It was during this particular “lent” that Francis received the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side. It was the crowning moment of his life, both for himself in becoming a kind of living icon of the crucified, and for his brothers and followers for whom it set the seal of divine approval on his life: “For at the very time Saint Francis sought approval of his Order from the pope, the stigmata of our Lord were imprinted on his body. This was God’s approval, not man’s, for men can be deceived” (1-4 Srm.1262).⁷

LaVerna will always be sacred in Franciscan tradition as the place of Francis’s sharing in the passion of Christ. We encounter again in LaVerna, the contrast between a place which is wild, savage and inhospitable to humans, an abode of demons and unholy spirits on the one hand, and on the other hand, a place that has been consecrated, sanctified and transformed by holiness into an abode of peace, tranquillity and the timeless presence of the all holy Creator God.

3.4 GRECCIO

There are a few other places that are worthy of note in the life of Francis. Perhaps the best known is the shrine of Greccio, high up on a mountain, by the side of the Rieti Valley. It is quite similar in location and atmosphere to the Carceri and to LaVerna. There is a sense of remoteness and isolation which evidently appealed greatly to Francis. One is tempted to say that it is a characteristically Franciscan location, wild, remote, high up a mountain, far from the well trodden ways of ordinary social life.

⁶ The term “Lent” refers to a period of forty days usually associated with the time before Easter. However, Francis was in the habit of keeping several “Lents” each year, the time from August 15th to September 29th being one of them.

⁷ For a more detailed account of this see LMj 13; and 1C 112.

Why did such places appeal so much to Francis? He was a city boy and grew up in the relative comfort and affluence of Medieval Assisi. Yet he turned his back on all that and headed for the wilderness. There he found that he could commune with the Lord and find peace of soul and mind in the natural world (1C 6). As already mentioned he was strongly tempted to spend his entire life as a hermit (cf Section 2.2.1). Clearly Francis needed to spend a great deal of time in seclusion and he often sought high places in order to find solace, and healing for his soul. Manselli (1988:266-267) points out that Francis became more and more desirous of solitude and that eremitical practice became one of his most frequent customs.

The Assisi Compilation tells us that during a Chapter⁸ held at the Portiuncula Francis was invited to adopt another, well-established rule of life such as that of Benedict, Augustine, or Bernard but he rejected the invitation very firmly:

Many wise and learned brothers told the Lord Cardinal, who later became Pope Gregory, who was present at the chapter, that he should persuade blessed Francis to follow the advice of those same wise and learned brothers and allow himself to be guided by them for the time being. They cited the *Rule* of blessed Benedict, of Augustine and of blessed Bernard, which teach how to live in such order in such a way.

Then blessed Francis, on hearing the cardinal's advice about this, took him by the hand and led him to the brothers assembled in chapter and spoke to the brothers in this way: "My brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity and showed me the way of simplicity, I do not want you to mention to me any *Rule*, whether of Saint Augustine, or of Saint Bernard, or of Saint Benedict (AC 18).

At Greccio Francis found solitude and peace, and spent some of his periods of retirement from the world. This is not the place to tell of that famous celebration of the babe of Bethlehem in 1223 when Francis gathered the people of the area for the feast of Christmas, and

⁸ A Chapter is an assembly or gathering of the members of an Order for the purpose of reviewing and improving their way of life. Many Orders and Congregations keep the practice of holding their Chapter around the time of Pentecost.

he himself sang the Gospel, preached the sermon and placed the image of the holy infant in the crib (LMj 10:7). Greccio is now a great shrine in which is kept alive the message of those early days when all the world seemed young.

3.5 FONTE COLOMBO

If one leaves Greccio and travels south along the edge of the Rieti Valley one comes to another famous Franciscan place called Fonte Colombo. It is not as high or as remote as Greccio and the surroundings are heavily wooded and more gentle and hospitable. It is, however, a place for seclusion and solitude and it is remembered in Franciscan history as the place where Francis wrote his rule.

Isabell (1975:185) states that this was previously known as Monte Rainerio, and the origin of the name Fonte Colombo comes from Francis's first visit there in 1217. It is said that Francis "stepped through a thicket in the woods and spied a beautiful spring of fresh water gushing out from beneath a high cliff. He called it the 'Dove Spring' (Fonte Colombo).

Again the love of nature and mountains and trees and springs and birds is very evident in this place. We do not seem to hear much of the feeling for nature and animals and birds before the time of Francis. No doubt there is something perennial about the human love of such things and one can expect that in any age some people would have a great sensitivity towards them.⁹ But to bring this love of nature and natural beings to the fore, as Francis did, seems to be something new in the European experience.

Fonte Colombo is a green and tranquil place. However, it was also the scene of a great struggle within Francis and within his Order over the writing of the Rule. This struggle, however, does not concern us here. Let it suffice to say that this lovely quiet place of seclusion confirms

⁹ Anyone acquainted with Irish and, of course, Native American spirituality cannot help being impressed by the attention paid to them.

our impression of Francis's sense of being in harmony with nature, and that it still radiates something of the aura of Francis, and that joyous springtime of the Franciscan movement.

3.6 SAN FRANCESCO DEL DESERTO

When Francis returned from the Holy Land in 1220, he arrived eventually in Venice with Brother Illuminato (Fortini 1981:439). True to his nature, he again sought solitude. This time it was a deserted island hermitage in the lagoon of Venice, then called *Isola del Deserto*. Fortini (:439) has a very poetic account of his arrival there, and it seems worthwhile to quote it here:

Isola del Deserto, Island of the Desert, is a lagoon hermitage where wide blue heavens are mirrored in still waters, an island locked in a deep spell that make true its ancient inscription: *O beata solitudine, o sola beatitudine!* ("Oh blessed solitude, oh, solitary blessedness!").

Already the twilight had begun to veil the mirror of the estuary when Francis went there with Brother Illuminato, and rising from the canebrakes was the vespers concert of the aquatic birds. It was a marvellous thing to see how these creatures of God did not fly away at the approach of the brothers, but devoutly saluted them by stretching their necks and flapping their wings.

There was no sound of bells. Francis knelt on the grass and began the evening prayer. His companion made the responses.

Little by little, as in the crescendo of an invisible orchestra, the chorus of the swamps rose, grew in intensity, swelled ever higher, became an overwhelming paean. At last it was a hymn so great, so full and sonorous, that it brooked no competition. It ruled the air, the sky, the waters. One could distinguish in the harmony the obstinate wailing of the wild duck, the shrill call of the summer teal, the pathetic clucking of the bittern, the piercing trumpet call of the crane. The coot sighed a motif like a reed instrument. The plover imitated the sibilance of the wind; the snipe interrogated with the sweet note of the flute; the curlew lamented; the waterhen cawed.

The brothers could no longer hear each other; everything was submerged in the noise of the great echoing symphony of these mixed voices of joy and harmony.

Then Francis arose, and in the uncertain light when day is dying and it is not yet night, he spoke to his sister birds, asking them to allow the servants of God to say the evening lauds, so comforting and sweet to them after an exhausting and trying day. Immediately, as if

obeying the gesture of a magic baton, the song hushed(LMj.8:9).
 And in the great peace that reigned over the lagoon, where a red
 streak still remained on the edge of the waters, there was no sound
 but the prayer of the two *poverelli* of Christ.

Francis seems to have spent a good while there, and to have given himself over to prayer and penance in order to recover from his exertions in the East and even more to prepare himself for the struggles to come (Fortini:438).

A time of great crisis was looming over Francis. From what he had heard of the changes proposed for the Order while he was absent in the East, he knew that he would have to fight for his ideals. It would be his agony, his wrestling the enemies of his calling and of the gospel life as he understood it (ChrJG 11-13).

That island is known today as *San Francesco del Deserto* and is home to a Franciscan convent which serves as the novitiate of the Venetian province of the Friars Minor. I have not visited it myself but a Franciscan friend of mine once made a journey there and was deeply impressed by the beauty and the solitude of the place, the sound of water lapping on the shores, the birds and the wild life so abundant there, and the gentleness and hospitality of the friars.

One is struck by the solitude and remoteness but one cannot help noting that it was very near Venice one of the great cities of its time, a city that was a world power in the 13th century. Francis was not merely one who wanted to live in seclusion from the world, far from the rush and bustle of great cities and powers and their affairs. He saw the whole world as a place to be sanctified and consecrated, and in the proximity of this island to the great city I think one can detect something of his desire to evangelize the whole world. It was not for nothing that he said the whole world was his cloister. This brings me to the connection between wilderness and city in the life of Francis.

3.7 Dialectic of City and Wilderness in the Life of Saint Francis

Francis grew up in Assisi and he passionately loved his native city if we can judge by the words he spoke about it as he blessed it on his last journey to the Portiuncula:

Lord, he said, just as I believe that at an earlier time this city was the abode of wicked and evil men, with a bad reputation throughout all this region; so now I realize that, because of Your abundant mercy and in Your own time, You have shown an abundance of mercies to it. Now it has become the abode of those who acknowledge You, give glory to Your name, offer the fragrance of good life, doctrine, and good reputation to the whole Christian people. I ask you, therefore, Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies, not to consider our ingratitude. May it always be mindful of the mercies You have shown to it, that it always be an abode for those who acknowledge You, and glorify Your name blessed and glorious throughout the ages. Amen (AC 5).

We have abundant evidence (1C 2; AP 3-6; L3C 2-3; 2C 7) that Francis was a rich, extravagantly generous and popular young man, presiding over a band of like-minded young men devoted to the pursuit of happiness. How does someone like that come to be a lover of poverty, even to the extent of romancing poverty as a beautiful lady to whom he dedicated his life? How does someone like that come to choose to appear something like a scarecrow without any proper clothing or shoes or headgear? How does someone like that, used to good food and merry company, end up begging for food or the leftovers and scraps from people, including some of his own companions of whom he had once been the leader and patron?

We know enough from the sources of Francis that the transition was hard and painful. *Celano* (1C 11) tells us that even his former friends reproached him harshly, shouted insults and threw mud and stones at him. Even Francis's own father treated him with disgust, locked him up and beat him (1C 12). It would have been much easier for him to go to a far distant place and there take up the life of a hermit or a monk, or a student, or a servant in some ecclesiastical household and there devote himself to the pursuit of divine things. This was, after all, the way in

which many great saints had made their break with the world and had accomplished their conversion. Indeed one could also reflect on the great numbers of people from Francis's time to our own who left comfortable homes and careers to give up their whole life for the kingdom of heaven.

Francis chose to make his transition in a very hard way. He chose to stay near Assisi but to abase himself by appearing to his former companions, who loved and admired him, as a beggarly scarecrow, a man of no consequence, or even self-respect, a man who must have appeared to them, initially at least, as having gone mad.

One can see the transition Francis made from his former way of life, the transition in a very stark form of an agonizing "either – or". There was the obvious attraction of the life of feasting, serenading and merrymaking on the one hand, and the painful and even terrifying prospect of begging for food, dressing like a beggar and associating with and serving those people whom he most feared and loathed, the lepers. If one were looking for an instance of the concept of dread in Kierkegaard's sense, "a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy" (1957:38) one would surely find it here.

The break with his father must have been one of the most painful episodes in his life, and his father had plenty of reason to be angry with him. He seems to have indulged Francis's extravagant ways when he was leader of the youth of Assisi, and it looks as if Francis was quite a good worker in the family business. Celano (1C 8) even refers to Francis as a "successful merchant". It must have been maddening to the father when the young man gave up working and took to praying in caves and wild places. As we know, he locked him up for several days in order to "bend Francis's will to his own" (1C 12). However, Francis was undeterred, and soon after, he started repairing churches. To help his efforts he took some scarlet cloth from his father's shop, went to Foligno and sold them together with his horse (1C 8). His father demanded

redress and Francis obliged by taking off his clothes and renouncing his father in the presence of the bishop. It seems that they were never reconciled.

Even though Francis remained attached to Assisi it was apparently necessary for him to leave it. But he chose to make the environs of Assisi, down at Saint Mary of the Angels, the fountainhead of his movement. Many of his followers came from Assisi and the people and the Commune took a great interest in the friars and helped them even to the extent of building them a great house at the Portiuncula.

The dialectical relationship I am talking about consists in the fact that Francis left Assisi but he became a stronger presence in it. His absence from the ordinary and every day commercial and civic life of the city, from the preoccupation with property and the legal squabbles of the daily life of Assisi, seems to have enhanced his presence as a person of influence (AC 56; 84; ChrJG 50).

The process of transformation of Francis's standing in the city and the city's own change of attitude to Francis was gradual. At first, he seems to have been regarded as that young fool, Bernardone, acting the beggar and holy man. His father, his family and his former friends seem to have been at least, disappointed and, at most, outraged.

Twenty years later he is the most loved and venerated and admired man of Assisi. He is by now, the founder of a great movement of men and women, the friend of popes and kings who does not hesitate to write an open letter to the Emperor. He has gone to the Sultan, the sworn enemy of Christendom, without army or escort, and not only lived to tell the tale but was treated with respect and honor by that powerful figure (1C 57).

Above all perhaps, Francis was, by then, the "crucified Seraph of Assisi", the one who was first to bear the marks of the passion of Jesus in his body, the one who was now a living icon of the Lord Jesus, whose life and gospel he had set out to live all those years ago. He was,

and has remained, the favorite son of Assisi, the one who has done more than anyone else for the renown and glory of that little hilltop city of Umbria.

3.8 Conclusion

This study of the places dear to saint Francis and specially favored by him has proved to be quite enlightening as regards the traits of his character, the things that appealed to him in nature and which resonated in his soul. It is striking that some leaders of the romantic movement believed that they had found a kindred spirit in Francis, e.g. Wordsworth and Jørgensen.

I noted that in particular, Francis loved high places, and also that in those places he sought out caves, so that he combined an ascent to the heights with a descent into the depths of his own spirit. This combination of apparent opposites is characteristic of Francis.

It is seen again in what I have called the dialectic of city and wilderness. Francis loved his own city and its people, but made his home in the wilderness. I find no explicit evidence in the sources that he distrusted cities and city life. He may have sensed a great danger for living the gospel life if his followers were to be absorbed in the way of life of cities. He never lived in a city himself after his conversion, except as a passing guest.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the Franciscan movement has generally overlooked Francis's preference for the wilderness. One has only to look at the places where they live and one notices that they are nearly always located in towns and cities. Sometimes, indeed, the places in which they settled became towns, most notably Saint Mary of the Angels in Assisi, which grew up around the Portiuncula. Perhaps the followers of Francis need to look carefully at this issue of the wilderness. I am firmly of the opinion that living in the wilderness, in close communion with the earth, the air and the sky, and all the elements is very important for the nourishment of the Franciscan spirit. It seems to me that in the Franciscan movement there has been an easy

assumption that one can hold on to the 'spirit' of the movement while ignoring the circumstances and conditions in which that spirit came to birth and flourished.

Francis is known to us today as the patron of ecology. His respect and affection for the world of nature, for the mute elements, the living creatures of the fields and forests, the birds of the air and the fish in the waters, all of this is woven into the life of this amazing man. This will be the theme of my next chapter.