

Chapter 4

The World of Nature

4.0 Introduction

Nature afforded Francis a fundamental experience that left an ingrained mark on his life and thought. He discovered that the universe forms a unified and magnificent arrangement that reflected the beauty of God.

My investigation of the places of the places of Francis provided considerable help in the development of my hypothesis about the importance of nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis. The continual communion with nature that Francis enjoyed in these places was enormously important for him and I believe that this importance has been underestimated.

Now it is time to test the hypothesis by investigating the world of nature and its elements, and explore how Saint Francis related to them. It is convenient to consider first the elements of the inanimate world, then I will look at the far better known relationship Francis had with plants and flowers and all growing things. The best known of all the stories of Francis's life are those in which he related to animals, and bird, and insects, the whole animal creation.

4.1 Elements

In speaking of the elements I mean in the first place, the heavenly bodies, sun, and stars, and the elements of what the medievals called the sub-lunar world. They conceived it as consisting of the four elements or "essences" already identified by the ancient Greeks, that is, earth, water, air, and fire. They thought of the heavenly bodies as consisting of a fifth essence, the so-called quintessence, which was supposed to have a pure and divine nature (Aristotle 1953:*DeCaelo*.I,3;270b21-25).

Turning first to the heavenly bodies, it has to be noted that these have had an enormous influence on the way people in the ancient and medieval world thought of their nature and destiny (Colish 1998:217). It is known, for example, that the ancient Babylonians and Egyptians were intensely interested in the movements of the heavenly bodies, and spent vast amounts of time and energy studying them. The Babylonians, for instance, constructed the ziggurats,¹ as a symbol of ascent to the higher regions and also as quasi observatories (Douglas *et al* 1990:111-13). As regards the Egyptians, it seems clear that their pyramids and obelisks have a close relationship to the heavenly bodies (:309).

Well into medieval times people were still searching the skies for signs and portents. One can find several instances of this in the Chronicle of Salimbene.² For example, he mentions that Frederick II consulted astrologers on several occasions and had a personal astrologer, the famous Michael Scot.³ Speaking of Frederick's idiosyncrasies, Salimbene (Baird 1986:355) noted that:

he once asked Michael Scot to tell him the distance of his palace from heaven. And after Michael gave the answer that seemed correct to him, the Emperor took him away for a few months as if merely on a pleasure trip, commanding his architects and stone masons in the meantime to lower that room of his palace in such a way that no one could detect it. This was done, and when the Emperor returned to his palace with the astrologer, he asked him again how far distant the palace was from heaven. And after he had completed his calculations, Michael Scot answered that either the heavens had risen or the earth sunk. Then the Emperor knew that he was a true astrologer.

¹ Deist (1987:188) describes this as a terraced temple of the ancient Near East built in the shape of a pyramid. See also Douglas *et al* (1990:11) where ziggurat is described as "the Building whose top is in heaven", and whose "top reaches to heaven".

² Salimbene de Adam joined the Franciscans in 1238. His chronicle provides us with information about the daily life among the early Franciscans which we get from no other source.

³ Scanty information exists with regard to Michael Scot. However, it does seem clear that he was born in the last quarter of the twelfth century and died in 1236. As a result of his translations from Arabic of Aristotelian texts and commentaries, he exerted a profound influence on the scholarship and theology of the thirteenth century (Baird 1986: n.24:355).

When he mentions Michael Scot, Salimbene speaks of him with great respect and quotes a prophecy he made in verse form which contained several predictions that were fulfilled. It is worth noting, by the way, that Scot was also encouraged and favored by Popes Honorius III and Gregory IX. With such powerful and influential people displaying their interest in astrology one should not be surprised at the fascination with the heavenly bodies found in the medievals. For that matter, this fascination with the skies and particularly with the signs of the zodiac is very much alive today and there is hardly a newspaper which does not have a section giving advice and making “predictions” in suitably vague language about present situations and coming events. An editor once told me that omitting a political or financial section might go unnoticed by her readers, but never the astrology column.

It is clear that an interest in astrology is closely connected with the prophecies of the famous Abbot, Joachim of Fiore, in Calabria. As is well known, Salimbene is the most important source for the influence of Joachim on the early Franciscan Movement.⁴ He acknowledges that he was himself a great “Joachite” (xxii) and that his hero, Blessed John of Parma, was also a follower of Joachim. Joachim was known largely for his interpretation of the book of Revelation (Apocalypse), and his prophecies about the new age of the Holy Spirit that was to begin around the year 1260 (Wroblewski & Karecki 2002:2:10-11). One might say that his followers were the new age people of the 13th century. There must have been a great deal of anxious searching of the skies for signs that the prophecies were about to be fulfilled.

⁴ It may be of interest to note that Joachim, like Francis, had a great love of nature, held pacifist opinions, and had a bias against learning (Armstrong 1973:30).

What is surprising is to find a man as cautious and orthodox as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio showing a certain partiality to Joachite views. In the prologue (1) to the LMj he writes, “he is considered, not without reason, to be like the angel ascending from the rising of the sun bearing the seal of the living God” for, “at the opening of the sixth seal” John says in the Apocalypse, “I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the living sun having the sign of the living God” (Apocalypse 7:2).

Here, the question arises as to whether Francis himself was a Joachite or shared the belief in a new age to come. Did he ever think of himself as like the “angel of the sixth seal”? I can find no hint in the sources that Francis would ever have thought of himself in the way Bonaventure suggested,⁵ neither can I find any evidence in the sources that Francis was influenced by the fiery Abbot of Calabria. He is very explicit in declaring: “no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (Test 14). He was not a follower of any other master in the service of the Lord. He must have known something of Joachim who was very famous, but he seems to have remained quite immune to Joachim’s influence. I think that Francis steered clear of any involvement with the theories of Joachim. He was probably guided more by an instinct for what is sound rather than by any extensive knowledge of Joachim’s teaching. He was the first to acknowledge that he was no scholar. In the Test. (31-33) Francis uses very strong language against any friars who “are not Catholics”. It is quite clear that he had a very

⁵ Perhaps Bonaventure used this strange and daring image precisely in order to conciliate the Joachite followers who were numerous in the Order. Bonaventure had no experience of administration when he was elected General in 1257, but he must have been well aware that a great many of the friars, including the very popular, John of Parma, his predecessor, were keen Joachites. He was also well aware of the dangers posed by the Joachites, particularly as a result of the furor caused by *The Introduction to the Eternal Gospel* of Gerard of Borgo San Donino which threatened the very existence of the Order (Wroblewski & Karecki 2002:2:11). So Bonaventure had to walk a tight rope and try to placate both the Joachites and their opponents. It seems reasonable to conjecture that his reference to Francis as the “angel of the sixth seal” had this attempt at placation in view. But this must remain merely a conjecture.

strong sense of belonging to the Church and of loyalty to the Church. This loyalty is also clear in his condemnation of any friar who is not reciting the office according to the Rule, that is, according to the rite of the Holy Roman Church (Test 30). His request to have a Cardinal to be the lord protector and corrector of the fraternity reflects the same sense of belonging and loyalty. The fact that Joachim's criticism of Peter Lombard's views on the Trinity had been condemned by the Church in 1215 would have been quite sufficient for Francis to avoid any involvement with Joachim's teaching (Reeves 1969:30-32).

A question remains however, as to whether Francis believed in, or perhaps it would be better to say, hoped for, a new age of the Gospel. I think the answer to this is that he certainly did. For example, he thought of himself as the "herald of the Great King" (1C 8:16) bringing the Good News of His coming. And there is the saying that God had sent him as a "new fool in the world" (AC 18) to show His ways. The whole Franciscan story and its associated legends carry a sense of newness and freshness, a sense of being the coming of a new world and the renewal of the Gospel.

However, Francis was fascinated by the heavenly bodies, not in any attempt to foretell the future or to read the destiny of humanity. There is no trace of an interest in astrology here. His interest is in the heavenly bodies as manifestations of the power and glory of the "Most High, all powerful, good Lord" (CtC 1). This Lord was the source of all creation from the heavenly bodies to the lowliest of inanimate creatures. All are comprehended in an astonishing and powerful vision of the unity of all creation. Francis obviously felt a kinship with them all and proclaimed this kinship when he speaks of them as Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Fire and Sister Water. And with a curious indifference to the sexual differences in the animal world he speaks of his Sisters, the

Birds, and Brother Wolf. Celano says: “he used to call all creatures by the name of ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ ” (1C 81).

Another person, calling the sun “brother” and the moon “sister” would probably sound like an intolerable, or at least irritating affectation, but Francis was anything but a man of affectations so he was able to do it without reproach. One is struck by his attitude to the natural “sub-lunar” elements. Take, for example, the passage in the 2MP:

It is not surprising that fire and other creatures obeyed and showed him reverence because, as we who were with him very often saw, how much he loved them, and how much delight he took in them. His spirit was moved to so much piety and compassion toward them that he did not want to see when someone did not treat them decently. He used to speak with them with joy, inside and out, as if they were rational creatures, on which occasions he was frequently rapt in God (115).

For the inanimate elements, Francis sometimes approached what seemed the limits of sanity. Since water is used for baptism, he avoided treading where his washbasin had been emptied (:118). Similarly, out of his reverence for him who was called “the Rock” he would step with care on stones (2C 165).

His attitude to fire is even more extreme. Because of its beauty and usefulness, he loved it with singular affection (2MP116). Once when a fire started in his cell, he retrieved the hide he used to cover himself with at night and ran into the forest with it. Afterwards however, he reproached himself for his avarice in not allowing brother fire to consume it, and declared that he no longer wanted the hide over him (117). And in another case when Francis was sitting close to a fire his clothes caught fire. He refused to allow his companion to put the fire out saying: “No, dearest brother, do not hurt brother fire” (:116). He seemed to feel that brother fire had his own rights.

In incidents such as these, which are not to be found in Bonaventure's sanitized and air-brushed version of Francis's life,⁶ one is confronted with the question of Francis's sanity. In a passage I have already quoted, he referred to himself as a "new kind of fool", thus indicating that he was aware some people believed him to be mad. One might have expected him to be called "crazy Francis" on account of the bizarre things he did. But yet, this man made a deep impression, and was taken very seriously by some of the greatest and wisest, and most sincerely religious people of his day. Without doubt there was a certain wildness in him, and also what in the terminology of C.G. Jung is called the shadow side. But the overall impression is of a man who is very well centered and eminently sane.⁷

As regards the element earth, the Canticle of the Creatures has the splendid line:

Praised be you, my Lord, through our sister
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us and who
produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs (CtC 9).

And in that Canticle also, there is the praise of wind and air:

Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Wind
And through the air, cloudy and serene, and
every kind of weather,
Through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures (CtC6).⁸

The Canticle is, of course, a prime source revealing Francis's attitude to the heavenly bodies, especially Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the Stars. In addition, as I have mentioned, it bears witness to his veneration for the four elements, earth, fire, air and water.

⁶ Saint Bonaventure, in his account of the life of Francis was careful to exclude stories that would emphasize the "holy fool" element in Francis. He had available to him the material requested by Crescentius, but he selected the stories carefully in order to present an image he favored of Francis.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton suggested that Francis seems so eccentric precisely because he was one of the most truly centered people who ever existed.

⁸ In a footnote by the editors of FA:ED it is noted that the preposition *per* suggests a variety of meanings: "(a) a corruption of the Latin *per*, (b) the French *pour*, (c) the Italian *par*. Thus it may be translated "for" offering an attitude of thanksgiving; "by," expressing a sense of instrumentality; or "through," suggesting instrumentality and, at the same time, a deeper sense of praising God's presence in the creatures mentioned" (Armstrong, Hellmann & Short 1999:114).

Can it be said that these play a role in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis? It seems to me that the answer can only be a resounding yes. The passages I quoted from the 2MP leave no doubt that Francis was deeply moved and empathized with the natural world and its elements to an astonishing extent. When the authors of the MP speak of his reverence for water, stones and fire, I find myself asking whether there is a new kind of consciousness being encountered here. It is a matter of ordinary experience that some people are attracted to and sympathize with nature in a very deep way, while others remain largely indifferent to it. But Francis's attraction seemed to amount to something like intoxication. At times he was so carried away by the beauty and splendor of what he perceived and touched that he would go into a kind of ecstasy (LMj 8:8).

Is this a case of an extreme sensitivity to nature such as one finds in poets like Wordsworth or Keats? It seems to me that there is no doubt about this aspect of Francis's psychology. The evidence adduced above is sufficient to establish this, notably the passages from the MP (115-117).

A further question may be raised as to whether Francis is, at heart, a pantheist. It is a short step from seeing God in all the manifestations of nature and all its beauty and splendor, to believing that nature itself is God, or at least one of the modes of God.⁹ Sorrell (1988:147-148), in a trenchant appendix on Francis and Catharism demolishes Lynn White's view, that Francis held, not indeed, pantheism but a "unique sort of panpsychism of all things, animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator. White went so far as to say that the prime miracle of Saint Francis is that he did not end at the stake. A pantheistic or panpsychic interpretation of Francis is totally out of court. Armstrong (1973:11), in his fine study of Francis, makes a very clear,

⁹ One is reminded here of Spinoza's (Ethics 1938:142) famous formula *Deus sive natura* (God or nature) which, on the face of it, at least, seems to be an expression of pantheism.

and a very relevant distinction between pantheism and sacramentalism. The saint was a devoted sacramentalist. As Nothwehr (2000:125-127) notes Francis was absolutely captivated by the Incarnation and had a profound personal insight into its significance. Christ is the center of any relationship with the earth. Francis's union with nature is distinct from any pantheistic identification of God with nature.

Armstrong has, I think, put his finger on a fundamental element of Francis's spirituality. One sometimes finds, especially in spirituality inspired by Neo-Platonism, a sort of ethereal unworldliness that hardly acknowledges our carnal existence, a spirituality that is oblivious to the creatures around us. Francis was not like this. His spirituality is very clearly incarnational, and from his youth he took great delight in the sights and sounds, the colors and textures of things in the world around him. These things were not veils of illusion, concealing the Most High, but rather, signs revealing and making a bridge, as it were, to the God of light and glory. For him they were sacraments.

It seems to me that the CtC makes it quite clear that Francis was not singing the praises of nature because it is divine or because it is God, but rather, that he was singing the praises of God manifested in nature. I do not think that the matter of pantheism in regard to Francis requires any extended discussion. The sources are quite clear on this point.

4.2 Fruit, Colored Flowers and Herbs

In CtC Francis praises God through our Sister Mother Earth, who "sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit, with colored flowers and herbs" (CtC 9). Francis's love for Mother Earth and what she produces is very well attested to in the sources. Celano, in the *First Life*, written, in connection with the canonization process of Francis, speaks thus of his love for flowers:

How great do you think was the delight the beauty of flowers brought to his soul whenever he saw their lovely form and noticed their sweet fragrance? He would immediately turn his gaze to the beauty of that flower, brilliant in springtime, sprouting *from the root of Jesse*. By its *fragrance* it raised up countless thousands of the dead¹⁰(1C 81).

The 2 MP (118) and the AC (88) contain more evidence in the same strain.

[Francis] used to tell the brother who took care of the garden not to cultivate all the ground in the garden for vegetables, but to leave a piece of ground that would produce wild plants that in their season they would produce “Brother Flowers.” Moreover, he used to tell the brother gardener that he should make a beautiful flower bed in some part of the garden, planting and cultivating every variety of fragrant plants and those producing beautiful flowers. Thus, in their time they would invite all who saw those herbs and those flowers to praise God. For every creature says and exclaims: “God made me for you, O people!” (AC 88).

Francis’s sacramental attitude is evident. In all creatures, whether worms or birds, water or rocks, trees or flowers, God could and did symbolize His Nature to humanity. All creation was and is an outward sign of divine grace. Francis was overwhelmed by God’s goodness in manifesting Himself to human beings in so many ways. He accepted, implicitly, and proclaimed by word and action that all creatures had dignity because of their value in the sight of God (Armstrong 1973:144 – 5). AC also confirms this attitude telling the reader that those who were with him always saw in him “such joy, inwardly and outwardly, over all creatures, touching them and looking at them, so that it seemed his spirit was no longer on earth but in heaven” (88).

4.3 The Animal Kingdom

“Isn’t Saint Francis the saint who loved animals and kept pets?” One has heard this sort of remark, and it conveys very well a popular impression of the saint. But, I suppose, it

¹⁰ This is, of course, a reference to the mystery of Christ, the resurrection and the life.

should be pointed out from the outset that there is no record of Francis ever keeping a pet, nor would it have been in keeping with his outlook.

Why should this be so? I have seen no direct explanation in the sources but it is clear from some of the stories about him that when he saved animals from being sold in the market he did not keep them himself as companions. He either set them free or returned them to the one who sold them with an injunction not to sell them again.¹¹

For example, in 1Celano we find:

he was traveling through the Marches of Ancona and the same brother (Brother Paul) was gladly accompanying him when he came across a man on his way to market. The man was carrying over his shoulder two little lambs bound and ready for sale. When blessed Francis heard the bleating lambs, *his innermost heart was touched* [1 Kings 3:26] and, drawing near, he touched them as a mother does with a crying child, showing his compassion. “Why are you torturing my brother lambs,” he said to the man, “binding them and hanging them this way?” “I am carrying them to market to sell them, since I need the money,” he replied. The holy man asked: “What will happen to them?” “Those who buy them will kill them and eat them,” he responded. At that, the holy man said: “No, this must not happen” Here, take my cloak as payment and give me the lambs.” The man readily gave him the lambs and took the cloak since it was much more valuable. The cloak was one the holy man had borrowed from a friend on the same day to keep out the cold. The holy man of God, having taken the lambs, now was wondering what he should do with them. Asking for advice from the brother who was with him, he gave them back to the man, ordering him never to sell them or allow any harm to come to them, but instead to preserve, nourish, and guide them carefully (79).

I have quoted this story at some length because in the first place it shows that Francis, for all his compassion in sparing the lambs, did not want to be burdened with the responsibility for them. He had obtained them by exchanging a valuable cloak he had borrowed from a friend that same day to keep out the cold. What was he to do with the

¹¹ Perhaps it was Francis’s desire not to dominate, or his desire for freedom for mission.

lamb? He gave them back to the man to take care of them. I wonder how this story would have been told by the man in question. Would it be a story of how he went to market with two lambs and returned with a valuable cloak, and the same two lambs as a result of this strange transaction with “the holy fool” he met on the way? I wonder too about the feelings of the friend who loaned his valuable cloak to Francis and may have hoped to get it back.

Another instance of Francis rescuing a lamb is found in 1C 77-78. He found the lamb among a flock of goats. He was filled with pity for the lamb thinking of Christ among his enemies and wanted to buy the lamb. Neither Francis nor his companion, the same Brother Paul, minister of the friars of the province of the Marches of Ancona, had any money with them, but a merchant on the way paid the price and Francis took the lamb with him to the city of Osima. But what was he to do with it? I must say it makes me slightly uneasy to recount that he presented it to the nuns of San Severino, because it became an embarrassment to him. I think these incidents make it quite clear that Francis did not keep any pets.

Perhaps one can see in this story an example of the way Francis saw nature through the optic of scripture. The sight of the lamb among the goats would have resonated within him, calling to mind the innocent Lamb of God led to the slaughter (Is 53:7). Concerning this story, Armstrong (1973:110) suggests that the lamb might have been a pet of the goatherd and is not likely to have been in danger from the goats. Francis’s compassion may have been very misplaced.

Even the lowly worm experienced his compassion. 1C 80 says that he would pick them up and put them in a safe place. He was similarly compassionate to the bees, providing wine or honey for them so that they would not perish from the cold in winter.

One slightly jarring note as regards these lowly creatures was his dislike for ants because they showed a lack of trust in God by being too careful to provide for the future, storing up in their barns, so to speak. This attitude of Francis is noted in the sayings of Brother Giles (7). Armstrong (1973:154) quotes the *Sayings of Brother Giles* thus: “Friar Giles said that the ant was not so pleasing to Saint Francis as other living things because of the diligence she hath in gathering together and storing up in the time of a summer, a treasure of grain for the winter;[...]”. Obviously, in this case Francis’s concern is with poverty. He wanted to live the Gospel literally and avoid storing up treasure and providing for the future. These concerns of storing and providing can get out of hand very easily as he realized, and the ants seemed a kind of paradigm of what he disliked.

Although the book by Edward A. Armstrong is entitled, *St. Francis, nature mystic*, his sub-title *The derivation and significance of the nature stories in the Franciscan Legend* (1973), gives a far more accurate idea of his treatment. With an impressive grasp of the ancient sources of stories about saints and holy people, and their relationship with animals and birds, and also with an up-to-date knowledge of natural history and a specialized knowledge of ornithology, he throws a great deal of light on the nature stories of the Franciscan tradition. He is able to trace sources and to show with consummate skill how nature stories were transformed and adapted to changing situations and circumstances in the course of time. He is particularly impressive in his knowledge of the Irish tradition and he makes a very strong case for the view that many Franciscan stories draw on older stories with which people of Francis’s time would have been more or less familiar (Armstrong 1973:34-41). Armstrong also seems to have a very good knowledge of the vagaries of folklore, and can trace quite clearly how stories are modified and adapted to changing situations.

One of the things that emerges clearly from Armstrong's study is the rather sketchy knowledge of medieval writers about the animal and bird world. They tended to see these creatures in the light of symbolism, rather than as careful observers of their habits and habitats (90). They had no difficulty in attributing to them what amounts to moral sensibility and even supernatural intuition. Thus, for instance, in Bonaventure's account of the falcon at La Verna he wrote that the falcon would awaken Francis for the Divine Office at night:

When he extended his stay there [La Verna], a falcon nesting there bound itself to him in a great covenant of friendship with him. For at the hour of the night when the holy man usually rose for divine office, it anticipated him with its noise and song. This pleased God's servant very much because such great concern for him shook out of him all sluggish laziness. But when Christ's servant was more than usually burdened with illness, the falcon would spare him and would not announce such early vigils. As if instructed by God, at about dawn it would ring the bell of its voice with a light touch (LMj 8:10).

Armstrong notes that no falcon would ever give a regular call at night (1973:79). Furthermore, he notes that falcons do not build nests but lay their eggs on ledges, or occasionally in the disused nests of other birds (78). Again, to suggest that a falcon's voice is anything like a bell is at best very misleading. Perhaps this is a case of poetic license. And finally, the mention of the nest at the time of the Stigmata, in the month of September, cannot be correct, as the young would have flown away by that time (:79).

Obviously then, Bonaventure and Celano have allowed themselves a very free hand in describing the habits of birds and animals. The fact that they were careless about details should make us wary about the stories they tell and aware of the manner in which traditional animal stories have been incorporated into the Franciscan legend.

It is not my intention here to follow the details of how traditional biographical stories and folklore have been incorporated into the stories of Saint Francis. This study is the main theme of Armstrong's work, and it seems to me that he has given a very fine account of it. My concern here, however, is the nature mysticism of Saint Francis, and the spirituality associated with it. Obviously Armstrong's study is of great interest and importance for this, but for me the detailed critiques of the genesis and transmission of the stories is less important.

4.3.1 Wild Beasts and Tame

There can be no doubt about the sympathy Francis felt for all creation and especially all living things, birds and beasts. The sources are quite clear about this and I have already cited several of the main passages from 1&2C and 2 MP. I think it advisable to survey the stories in which Francis is shown relating to the various animals. I shall not attempt an exhaustive account here, but rather try to sketch, in a few strokes, how he treated them and the significance of his manner of relating to animals.

I have mentioned above the special compassion he had for lambs and how at times it led him to extravagant gestures. It is made clear that his sympathy is very closely related to the idea of Christ as the Lamb of God; the lamb led to the slaughter, the lamb in the midst of wolves (Is 53:7). Francis's mysticism is very much rooted in his understanding of scripture. It is not merely natural mysticism involving a kind of intoxication with nature as such, apart from any supernatural consideration. It is, one has to say, very strongly scriptural.

This compassion and sympathy extended however to other animals too. In regard to dogs who, in his time, were generally regarded as savage and disgusting (Armstrong 1973:103), not by any means "man's best friend", there is only one reference

in the stories about Saint Francis. It is a poignant reference because, at the time it took place, Francis was going blind and needed someone to guide him from place to place. He said. "I have seen before now a blind man with only a little dog to show him the way" (2C 144; AC 40; 2MP 11). The faithfulness of dogs was proverbial even then, but in general they were disliked and feared, perhaps because of rabies (Armstrong 1973:102). Salimbene's references to dogs are far from complimentary and he severely criticizes friars for fondling dogs or playing with puppies because it caused their character to appear frivolous to other people (Baird 1986:135).

Of cats, there is really nothing to note in the primary sources. I wonder whether Francis ever had any sympathy with these familiar household creatures. Perhaps, like many other people, he found them rather too calculating and self-centered. But one can only speculate. There is rather more to be found on pigs. But I do not think the stories throw any light on the nature mysticism of Saint Francis. They do clarify some of the ways in which Celano and the other early sources, such as the LFI, handle traditional material, weaving it into stories of Saint Francis and Brother Juniper. That material is treated very well by Armstrong (1973:113-123).

There is one rather disconcerting story about Saint Francis cursing a sow that had killed a lamb: "Cursed be the pitiless beast that slew thee and let no beast eat of her" (2C 111). In accordance with the curse the sow sickened and died, and its body was cast into the monastery ditch and no animal would feed on it or touch it. This incident, apart from revealing the dreadful lack of hygiene in those days, imputes to the animal kingdom a strong sense of moral justice, and this of course, is absurd. It also indicates something about the conception of certain animals in the mind of medieval persons and their symbolic interpretation of animals. I think Armstrong (1973:114) sees such stories as the

weaving of threads from other hagiographical materials, in particular, one from the legend of Saint Cuthbert. Here again, one needs to remember that Francis saw the whole of creation in a faith perspective. Thus, when he saw a lamb he thought of the Lamb of God, and the sow that killed it was perhaps seen as an enemy that came to a wretched end. This does not strike one today as a very reasonable way of interpreting the behavior of animals which simply follow their instincts, but it was Francis's way.

For my part, I am uneasy with Celano's story that Saint Francis cursed either the sow that killed the lamb, or in another story, the robin he is said to have rebuked for its greediness, a rebuke that led to its death (2C 18). I do not like to think of the gentle saint of Assisi uttering curses. But there is a harsh side of Saint Francis. For example, in his Test 30-33 he uses very severe language against friars who do not obey their guardians and those who do not recite the office according to the Rule. There is also the example, the famous curse of Saint Francis on the friars who tear down and destroy the good work done by holy and faithful friars of the Order (AC 59).

The horse was definitely considered a noble animal in medieval times. As the son of a wealthy cloth merchant who traveled extensively, horses would have been very familiar in the Bernadone household, and Francis would have learned how to manage them. In the battle between Assisi and Perugia Francis equipped himself as a knight, or potential knight, as one of the privileged and prestigious people of medieval Assisi. He was with the Compagnia dei Cavalieri, the elite of the city's armed companies. This group was made up of knights and prosperous merchants who could afford the necessary horse and costly armor (Fortini 1981:153).

Horses have often evoked compassion and tenderness among their owners. Indeed they still do as witness many stories about cowboys and their horses, and also

stories from the world of racing. There do not, however, seem to be any stories of a deep affection between Saint Francis and horses.

The *majores*, the upper class, also known as the *buoni uomini* appear in the history of all Italian cities. The title indicates a class of people invested with public power. It is made up of nobles, judges and notaries of the city. In Assisi the records make it clear that this class was mainly made up of the feudal lords of the city. On the other hand, the *minores* or *uomini del popolo* were those from whom the *majores* claimed forced labor, fees, and tolls. (Fortini 1981:36; 72). Because of the association of horses with the *majores*, it would have been an embarrassment to seem too familiar with horses. One of the provisions of the LR is that the friars should not ride on horseback, because they had thrown in their lot with the *minores*.

In his youth, Francis had ambitions to raise his status and become a knight. He equipped himself with armor and a horse and set off to join Walter of Brienne (in Calabria, south of Italy). A vision put an end to this and he renounced his ambition in order to serve the highest Lord, the King of Heaven in poverty and humility. This was the end for him of the great status symbol of the nobility, the horse.

In his later years, Francis was often unable to walk and had to be carried around on animals. Generally the friars managed to produce a donkey but sometimes only a horse was available. One can almost feel the embarrassment that he who had forbidden the friars to ride on horseback had himself to do just that (2C 96; AC 120).

Francis's affection for the humbler beast, the donkey, is well known, and even though he always preferred to walk when he was able, in accord with the Lord's example, he did use a donkey when necessary. As is well known, the other term used for a donkey is *ass*, and this was the metaphor Francis chose when he spoke about his own body as

“Brother Ass”. The expression seems to convey the half humorous, half impatient attitude of Francis towards his body, inclined to be a bit lazy and recalcitrant, sometimes even a bit sullen and needing to be driven, but on the whole good natured and responsive to a little kindness. It is significant that towards the end of his life, Francis felt he had to apologize to his body for treating it too harshly (2C 211).

Oxen figure in the Franciscan legend in the story of Greccio where Francis sought to re-enact the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem. He got his friend, Giovanni Velita, the Lord of Greccio, to help prepare “a new Bethlehem” (Armstrong 1973:133). Celano tells us that:

Indeed, the manger is prepared,
 The hay is carried in,
 and the ox and ass are led to the spot.
 ... and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.
 The night is lit up like day,
 delighting both man and beast.
 The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy.
 The forest amplifies the cries
 and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd.
 The brothers sing, giving God due praise,
 and the whole night abounds with jubilation (1C 85).

The story of the crib at Greccio is one of the loveliest in the Franciscan collection, and has remained an abiding inspiration ever since then. And it has, of course, contributed to that stream of compassion for the animal world that owes so much to the inspiration and love of the poor little man of Assisi.

The mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus can be treated in a rather abstract and notional fashion as a kind of theorem in a supernatural logic that takes very little account of the human drama, and human emotions. However, with Francis, the human drama is brought to life, and the birth of Jesus is vividly recalled. A manger is prepared and sweet

smelling hay is strewn about. An Ox and Ass are brought in to lie there to make the scene more life-like.

Francis himself ministered at the altar on this occasion as a deacon, the only reference in the sources to the fact that he was an ordained deacon. He preached with wonderful and moving eloquence (LMj 10:7).

What does Greccio tell us about the spirituality and mysticism of Francis? In the first place there is the very strong awareness that the birth of Jesus is not something that just took place in a remote land a very long time ago. Francis's spirituality is profoundly incarnational and for him the mysteries of the Lord are real and present in our world. Jesus is being born in our minds and hearts, in our families and communities year by year.

In the second place one cannot fail to notice the warm humanity of Francis in his approach. The love and affection that comes naturally towards new born babies is clearly evident here. There is something very fatherly about Francis's attitude to the babe of Bethlehem. The event is not, for him, merely a necessary condition for the salvation of humankind. It is a deeply felt moment in the enlargement and expansion of his heart and mind as he contemplates what this event signifies for every man, woman and child. There is a strong feeling in the account we have that in the birth of this child, a new world has begun (1C 87).

What does it show of Francis's mysticism? The most basic element of it, I think. When I spoke of the nature of mysticism, I was anxious to stress that the full realization of what is given in the Christian life is inherently mystical. If one comes to a deep awareness and realization that one is begotten to a new life in Christ, that Christ is living within oneself and that this life is like a fountain of water, like the sap rising in the true

vine, that Christ is the Bread of Life, then surely one is living mystically. This is the basic call of every Christian. Saint Francis, I believe, lived it to the full.

Sometimes people make a sharp contrast between mysticism and sacramentalism, usually to the detriment of the latter. In Francis the two go hand in hand, as they should. He was deeply aware of this, especially in relation to the Eucharist. But I believe that in the Greccio story, he was touching very closely the mystery of the new birth from on high that is enacted in every Baptism. He was keenly aware of the importance of Baptism as the initiation into the new life of grace (ER 16).

I do not think it necessary to survey all of the stories about Francis's dealings with the animal kingdom. It is quite clear that his sympathies ranged over the whole kingdom and embraced even the lowly worm (1C 80), and the bees for whom he ordered honey and the best wine to be provided (2C 165). Armstrong (1973:148) notes wryly that: "it is very doubtful whether wine, except perhaps in minute traces, is good for bees." Obviously Francis was no apiarist but one cannot doubt his good intentions. He knew enough about bees however, to be aware that drones do not work and he disliked them for that (2C 75).

His attitude to flies was similar since he saw them as rather parasitic, but still he referred to them as brother (2C 75, 77; 2MP 24). He had reservations also about ants, as I already mentioned, but this was because they were rather too industrious and too intent on storing up for the future (Armstrong 1973:154). It is notable however, that in these cases, the disapproval of Francis is more of the people symbolized by the creatures than of the creatures themselves who, after all, can behave in no other way. Medieval people were incorrigibly moralistic in their view of animals but what is most striking about Francis is his wonderful sympathy.

The lowly cicada, still a very familiar sound of an Italian summer was also favored by Francis. One of the well known stories in the early sources is that of a sort of duet between Francis and the cicada with whom he made friends (2C 171). Armstrong remarks that this story of a duet is akin to others in the Franciscan collection, for example, of a duet with the nightingale and other birds, and that such stories have a rich background in the literature about saints who were especially sympathetic to nature. He traces many of these stories to Irish sources (1973:156). I particularly liked a remark of Armstrong because it reflects the relationship between Francis and living creatures: "These duet stories show us a blossoming of sympathy with and tenderness toward nature such as had not hitherto appeared in continental Europe" (:157). It also points out the new inspiration he gave to Western thought.

4.4 Fish

Did Francis's sympathy extend to fish? Since fish live in a medium in which humans cannot dwell, except artificially, it is very difficult to have any fellow-feeling for fish. They are silent, remote, and utterly alien to us in appearance and habits. Furthermore, they have, from time immemorial been regarded as food, and it is difficult to form a sympathetic relationship with what one eats.

However, Francis did not exclude fish from his sympathy. The best-documented story, I think, is that of a fisherman on the Lake of Rieti who presented Francis with a large tench¹² as he sat in the boat. Francis addressed it as brother and at once slipped it over the side to its native element again (1C 61; LMj 8:8).

¹² The Tench is a slow moving fish of the carp family (Encyclopedia Americana 1971 Vol.26).

Both Celano and Bonaventure develop the story, according to Armstrong, by introducing a miraculous element saying that the fish, “as though drawn by love”, lingered around the boat until Francis *said a prayer* (1C 61) or *blessed it* (LMj 8:8). The tendency to embellish the lives of saints with stories of miracles was, it seems, almost irresistible to medieval writers, and indeed it is far from extinct.¹³

It will suffice, I think, to deal with the other animals in summary fashion. There are stories of Francis forming a relationship with a hare at Greccio (1C 60), a wolf at Gubbio (ABF 23), a rabbit at Lake Trasimene (LMj 8:8), and being patient and tolerant of the mice that caused him distress when he was tormented with eye disease (AC 83). These stories however, can be connected with a much earlier group of stories of friendship and sympathy with animals which were current on the European Continent and derived mainly from Irish sources. Armstrong (1973:198) has traced in detail the connection of these Franciscan stories which he finds rather trivial and conventional by comparison. His claim that the Franciscan hagiographers, especially Celano and Bonaventure, took over the earlier material and gave themselves a free hand in applying it to Francis who was, quite clearly unquestionably, a great lover of nature. We would be very mistaken, according to Armstrong, if we expected careful distinctions in the early sources between legend, folklore, edifying stories, and factual narrative.

4.5 Birds

It is quite clear from Franciscan legends that Francis had a special relationship to all creatures that fly through the air, and there are many stories that illustrate this relationship.

¹³ In a biography of the saintly Don Luigi Orione, the author, Douglas Hyde, recounts his journey to the place where the holy man had grown up. One of the old men there, who had known him as a child, started to tell him a story of how one day in a field with many little bell-shaped flowers, the flowers began to ring the bells in honor of the saint! (Hyde 1957:7).

Some of the stories indeed, can be taken, I believe, at their face value as accounts of things that really happened, thus, the story in the LFl about a young man who had caught some doves and was carrying them off to sell. Saint Francis saw him and looked at the doves with pity:

O good young man, I beg you to give them to me so that such innocent birds, which are compared in scripture to chaste, humble and faithful souls may not fall into the hands of cruel people who will kill them. The young man, inspired by God, gave them all to Saint Francis, and he, taking them to his breast, began to speak sweetly to them: 'O my sister doves, simple, chaste and innocent, why did you let yourselves be caught? Now, you see, I want to rescue you from death and make nests for you so that you can bear fruit and multiply according to our Creator's command (LFl 22).

I find this story has what one might call the ring of truth. There is nothing miraculous or thaumaturgic about it. It does not represent Francis as a sort of wizard or a super-human wonder worker. It represents instead, a kindhearted, loving man, filled with compassion for the captive creatures, a bit eccentric, no doubt, but there is nothing exaggerated or marvelous about it.

There are some other stories of the same kind. For example, in the 2MP (113), it is explained why he had a special love for the lark:

Of all the birds, he particularly loved a little bird called the lark, commonly called the cowled lark. Concerning these, he used to say 'Sister Lark has a capuche like a religious, and is a humble bird, because she gladly goes along the road looking for some grain. Even if she finds it in manure she pecks it and eats it. While flying, she praises the Lord very sweetly, like good religious looking down on earthly things, whose way of life is always in heaven and intention is always for the praise of God.

The story of the sermon to the birds has caught the popular imagination more effectively perhaps, than any other incident in the life of Francis and it is to be found in several of the sources, for example; 1 C 58; *Bonaventure's* LMj 12:3; and LFl 16. Celano's

account from the *First Life* is surely one of the best since he seems to have built on Francis's well known attitude to creation that all creatures had a duty to love and praise the Lord:

the blessed father Francis was traveling through the Spoleto valley. He reached a place near Bavagna, in which a great multitude of birds of different types gathered, including doves, crows, and others commonly monaclae. When Francis, the most blessed servant of God, saw them, he ran swiftly toward them, leaving his companions on the road. He was a man of great fervor, feeling much sweetness and tenderness even toward lesser creatures. When he was already very close, seeing they awaited him, he greeted them in his usual way. He was quite surprised, however, because the birds did not take flight, as they usually do. Filled with great joy, he humbly requested that they listen to the word of God.

Among many other things, he said to them, My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, and love Him always. He gave you feathers to wear, wings to fly, and whatever you need. God made you noble among his creatures and gave you a home in the purity of the air, so that though you neither sow nor reap, He nevertheless protects and governs you without your least care'. He himself, and those brothers who were with him, used to say that, at these words, the birds rejoiced in a wonderful way according to their nature. They stretched their necks, and spread their wings, opened their beaks, and looked at him. He passed through their midst, coming and going, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic. Then he blessed them, and having made the sign of the cross gave them permission to fly off to another place (1C 58).

How is one to interpret this story? Is one to see it as a literal description of an event that happened just as it is told? It is very striking and very charming, and seems to show that Francis had an extraordinary and almost miraculous power over birds.

However, an awareness of the traditions concerning the intimacy and friendship between saints and birds makes one cautious. The Irish tradition, in particular, is extraordinarily rich in stories of saints and birds, and other creatures. Armstrong shows

that stories of friendship between saints and the animal world were well known on the continent of Europe at the time of Francis. He argues that while Francis's sympathy with all creatures is beyond any shadow of doubt, the biographers and hagiographers allowed themselves a free hand in embellishing the stories of Francis and the animals.

Bonaventure, in particular, seems to have been quite cavalier in his treatment of such incidents as we have seen a few times already, for example, in the story of the fish Francis returned to the lake. There seems to be no reason to doubt the story of Francis feeling sympathy for the fish and allowing it to go free; that is entirely in character. But the addition of miraculous elements seems quite gratuitous, that is, the story that the fish lingered around the boat as though drawn by love. This story seems to be aimed at portraying Francis as a sort of wonder worker in whom the paradisaic state of humankind, before the fall, was somehow prefigured (LMj 12:3-6).

It is interesting to note that Celano, immediately after telling of this incident, goes on to amplify the miraculous element by telling how Francis turned water into wine when he was sick:

Water was changed to wine for him once at the hermitage of Sant'Urbano when he was suffering from a severe illness. Once he tasted it, he recovered so easily that everyone believed it was a divine miracle, as it indeed was (1C 61).

He concludes the story with the sentence: "He is truly a saint, whom creatures obey in this way: at his wish the very elements convert themselves to other uses". This pushing of the agenda is even stronger in Bonaventure when it comes to giving Francis control over nature:

Consider that, at his nod, that man of admirable purity and great virtue tempered the heat of fire, changed the taste of water, brought comfort with angelic melody and was led by divine light, so that, in this way, it might be proved that the

entire fabric of the universe came to the service of the sanctified senses of the holy man (LMj 5:12).

Armstrong (1973:162) has the wry comment, “High praise indeed, but the humble saint has become a wizard”.¹⁴

There is a curious addition, if one may call it that, to the story of the sermon to the birds. It is attributed to Brother Masseo of Marignano. Masseo recorded this story describing how Francis, rapt in devotion, noticed a flock of birds by the roadside and turned aside to preach to them as he had done on the other occasion. They all flew away! Francis immediately reproached himself bitterly: “What effrontery you have, you impertinent son of Pietro Bernadone!” it is explained that he did so because he realized that he was expecting the birds to obey him as if he, and not God, was their creator (Bughetti 1927:546-7). It may well be as Armstrong suggests that this story is meant to correct some of the hagiographical exaggerations of Celano and Bonaventure which stress too much Francis’s miraculous power over nature rather than his all embracing compassion.

4.6 Reflection on the Nature Stories

After this examination of what the sources have to say about Francis and his relationship with the cosmic family, it is time to question their relevance to the theme of nature mysticism and spirituality.

It is very clear from the sources that they are conscious of the great importance of Francis’s sympathy for nature. But they do, at times, interpret that sympathy as indicating that Francis had power over nature, and here difficulties arise. For example, when they represent wild animals as being subject to Francis, or birds as listening to his

¹⁴ Wizard is probably not the most appropriate word to describe Francis. Bonaventure was surely thinking of Francis as a precursor of a new age in which nature and humanity would be entirely in harmony and love.

sermons and approving of them, and even fish deferring to him, one begins to wonder if they have not let their enthusiasm run away with them. They even have irrational elements subject to the holy man so that water is made to spring from a rock, as happened for Moses, or is transformed into wine. They say that fire changed its nature for Francis.

Why do the authors of the early sources take this approach? I think they were so impressed with Francis's likeness, or conformity to Christ, exemplified above all in the shattering and unprecedented stigmatization on La Verna, that they were ready to find other parallels to the life of Jesus in the life of Francis. Thus, the story of changing water into wine recalls Cana in Galilee, and power over fish recalls the miraculous catch of fishes. It was an age that accepted miracles quite freely and was very interested in them, as can be seen in Celano's *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* (3C). When one examines the treatise carefully, one has the impression that the criteria for accepting the miracles are far from rigorous. But we must be careful about imposing present day criteria on the medievals.

Another factor about the stories of Francis's sympathy and power over animals and the elements is that the sources are heirs to a long hagiographical tradition of such stories. Armstrong (1973:31-41) has shown this very comprehensively and skillfully, displaying from his extensive knowledge of folklore how such stories migrate from one tradition to another, and how they are transformed in the migration. Those stories are rich in wonders and marvels. The Franciscan stories, by contrast, are generally more restrained, but sometimes I have the impression that they have allowed themselves a very free hand. That is especially true of the LFl, which have a strong folkloric element, for example, the taming of the fierce wolf of Gubbio (LFl 21).

Armstrong (84-85) is very critical of the tendency to exaggerate the power of Saint Francis over the elements and the animals, and he comments on a particular passage of Bonaventure, quoted above, that Saint Francis has been turned into a wizard. Is this a fair assessment? I do not think so. The stories about wizards who can wave their wands and make marvels happen belong to another genre of narrative, quite alien to Franciscan legends. I accept that the hagiographic tradition of Saint Francis has exaggerated the stories of Francis's wonder-working powers, but not that they have made him into a wizard.

What about the suggestion that Francis was a pantheist? It is worth dwelling on this a moment. What exactly is meant by pantheism? The etymology (pan – meaning all; theos – meaning God) suggests the basic meaning that everything in the universe is divine, part of the all inclusive divine substance or nature. It seems to follow from this that any part of the universe is divine and fit for worship, whether it be the earth beneath us, or the plants that grow in it, or the lowly creatures of the earth, or the ones that are regarded as more noble, or the elements of the universe; the starry skies, the sun and moon or anything else, including of course, the human being that is aware of all these things. All are part of the Divine whole (Sorrell 1988:128).

It is worth noting that a great many of the elements of the universe have been deemed worthy of worship in the course of history. The treatise on the *History of religions* by Mircea Eliade, published in English under the title *Patterns in comparative religion* (1958), gives abundant evidence of this. Here a few indications must suffice.

The sun, of course, is the prime candidate for worship, so important in its role in human life. Eliade surveys sun worship as found throughout the world from ancient Egypt to the classical East and the Mediterranean world, and in Africa and Indonesia

(Eliade :124 – 153). The cult of the moon comes next and the rites and the animals associated with it especially snakes, frogs, and dogs (160-9). This author also charts the way in which water and springs have been the center of worship and also sacred stones and the earth and its vegetation (188-366). Thus there is no lack of evidence for the “sacralization” of the elements of the world, from the heavenly bodies to inanimate objects. All of these at various times and in various places have been objects of worship.

It would be entirely natural for a nature mystic to find that communion with the divine is mediated and, as it were, concentrated in a particular element of the world. It seems reasonable to assume that this is what happens when a natural object or animal becomes the focus of a numinous experience. This is evidently what happened in many religions as Eliade’s work shows.

If it is questioned whether Francis was ever tempted to take the road of nature worship or even pantheism, it is necessary to go to the sources. From the survey, brief as it is, of the sources, made in the above pages, I think it is clear that there is no trace of animal worship in Francis’s sympathetic dealing with them. There is no shred of evidence that he ever mistook them for their Creator. And the same can be said of the elements of the world and even the heavenly bodies. He was willing to call them brothers and sisters, children, like himself, of the One Great Heavenly Father, but he never dreamt, as far as I can ascertain, of worshipping them. Rather, he encouraged and exhorted them all to worship and praise their creator, the source from which they sprang (Hayes 1996:5).

I would like to ask if these stories have any real value. I think there is a strong temptation to regard them as merely charming episodes, quaint and amusing, from the life of an eccentric and beloved saint. They have been painted and sculpted and told as stories to entertain and edify for so long that their significance has generally been

overlooked. What do they really tell us about Francis and his approach to the whole world around him? To treat them as mere fables, as many do, misses their meaning. I think it can be claimed that Francis, far from being merely a charming eccentric, was a harbinger of a new kind of consciousness.¹⁵

What exactly does this mean? In our ordinary awareness of the world we tend to allow things and current events and official views or accounts of a person's life to dominate and form our consciousness. The world, as it were, sets the agenda in terms of which we behave. Sometimes one's inability to control the agenda is painfully obvious, for example, in people who are caught in a cycle of depression, loss of hope and even loss of meaning. Often too, the approach is set by factors of what might be called temperament or basic disposition. The medieval world distinguished four temperaments, sanguine, melancholic, choleric and phlegmatic, on the basis of a very inadequate theory of humors (Empereur 1993:736). But they were on the track of a very important element of human experience, that is, that certain internal factors affect our experience of the world so that we have a distorted vision and consciousness. And when this happens, we are, nearly always, unable to see what has gone wrong much less extricate ourselves from the malaise into which we have fallen. Depression is probably the most common of these malaises.

If one goes for help for depression, the helper would use a variety of techniques. Among them would be an attempt to make the client aware of certain external conditions that may be affecting them adversely, for example, work conditions, too much pressure, depressive associates, trouble with spouses or children if they are married. There might also be a need to reach awareness of one's personal temperament or basic attitude and its

¹⁵ I would like to mention here a book by a German Jesuit, Mario Von Galli on "*Living our Future: Francis of Assisi and the Church Tomorrow*" (Von Galli 1972) in which he presents Francis as a prophetic figure for the new world emerging around us.

limitations, for example, fear, anger, anxiety etc. but above all, one would need to have one's consciousness enlarged to see life whole (Kelly 1985:354).

What does this have to do with the nature stories of Saint Francis? The point I am trying to make is that the nature stories, far from being merely quaint episodes, actually reflect a wholeness and integrity of awareness of nature that is new. We might find ourselves irritated or amused by the allusions to Brother Sun and Sister Moon, but is it not possible that there is an enlargement of consciousness here, and that Francis had a vibrant and dynamic awareness of this excitement and surprise of the universe in which we live? And the stories about the animals and birds and the elements of the world remind us that "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things" (Hopkins 1986:128).

One might express the radical change in awareness of the world this way. Many philosophers and devout people, especially under the influence of Neo-Platonism, have tended to see the world as a place of shadows, as unreal, unstable and evanescent, as a place of imprisonment, a dead end. Francis, on the contrary, sees the world in Hopkin's phrase, as "charged with the grandeur of God" (:128). Even though, when he was dying, Francis recited the psalm with the line "lead my soul out of this prison", that did not really reflect his view of the world. The world was not an end point for him, but rather an approach to eternal life. It was not a place of vain and deceitful shadows impeding our vision and frustrating our sight. It was rather, a vast sacramental ensemble, inspiring us and leading us to the vision of the Most High God.

If one were looking for a general name for Francis's approach, I think it would be fair to say that it was creation centered, rooted in the Incarnation of Jesus who came, not as a spirit or transient divine epiphany, but as fully embodied in our flesh and blood, our temporality, our vulnerability, our mortality.

I am not claiming that Francis invented creational or incarnational spirituality. That was there in Christianity from the beginning (Kannengiesser 1985:64). But Francis reactualized it and revitalized it in his own time in ways that were new and powerful and spoke deeply to the human heart. And I believe that the nature stories express that.

Can we say that there is something prophetic about Francis in this? I think we can. Francis became very popular in the romantic age and his approach to the world struck a deep chord in the sensibility of the romantics. No doubt they missed a great deal of what was important to him, but they sympathized with the lover of fields and woods, of elements and birds, and of the whole earth on which we live. Perhaps it has always been Francis's fate to be admired for what he was not.

I referred earlier to William James' remarkable essay on "*A Certain Blindness in Human Beings*" (1943: 1-21). There he was concerned to draw attention to our often neglected capacity to see deeply into the heart of nature, and to become aware of the splendor and glory that is present there. When James was writing that essay, he was strongly influenced by Walt Whitman, and he quotes him extensively (:13-14). Undoubtedly Whitman had a great gift for seeing the splendor of nature. His poems can be tedious and prolix, sometimes leaving themselves open to satirization as "laundry lists", but if one is patient in sifting through the soil, one finds the diamonds gleaming and glittering there. He is a true poet of the splendor of nature, and exercised a strong influence on many whose ears were attuned to him.¹⁶

¹⁶ G.K. Chesterton, in England, was deeply influenced by him, as was Gerard Manley Hopkins who once wrote that one of those who were aware of his way of seeing the world was the American, Walt Whitman.

I quoted another treatment of nature by another American writer, Margaret Prescott Montague, “*Twenty Minutes of Reality*” (in Paffard 1976: 48-9) In that work she maintained that in a particular, vivid experience she had, it was not a matter of being transported to another world for a brief period and seeing things that never were. It was, rather, a matter of having her eyes opened and seeing things as they always are. For the most part we do not see them in that way because we are too pre-occupied with other things, and the business of coping with the agenda this world sets us. But the wonder and the glory are always there.

I wonder if this gives us the decisive clue to the new consciousness and awareness of Saint Francis. He was attuned in an extraordinary way to the world around him, and it is very important to note that he organized his life-style in such a way that apprehending the beauty and glory of the world could become habitual with him. Celano tells us that he could stay entranced for a whole day and more looking at bees and other creatures (1C 70).

4.7 Conclusion

I think it is clear that this way of interpreting Francis’s awareness of the world has far reaching consequences. In the first place, it helps us to understand better his insistence on going to nature to pray and nourish his spirit. The main Western monastic tradition encouraged the monk to withdraw to his cell or chapel and there seek God in an artificially constructed ambiance. Francis seems to have sought nature to nourish and awaken his spirit. In my chapter on the places of Saint Francis in which I discussed the Carceri, Lake Trasimene, the island in the Venetian Lagoon, and LaVerna, this was quite evident.

In the second place, it throws light on that remark of Celano that Francis seemed to be “like a man from another world”, so much so that when he arrived at a place, the people would act as if it were a holiday (1C 62).

In the third place, I believe that Francis in his approach to nature found a very practical approach to the attainment of perfection and fulfillment. One should not think of this veneration for flowers and plants and nature as a whole as merely incidental to his life. They were stepping stones to contemplation and paths to reminding him of the ever present Lord of Glory all about him. In short, nature became an instrument, a location and ultimately a presence in which Francis saw the Lord in His glory (Doyle 1980:67-68).

Have these considerations of the world of nature advanced my hypothesis about the importance of nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis? The answer, I believe, is very decidedly in the affirmative. The detailed account in the stories and the theological reflections on the life of Francis show how well he drew on nature and its elements to reach a profoundly mystical and sacramental vision of the world. Thus this chapter has served to amplify and extend the range of the chapter on the places that were special to him.

I think these stories and reflections help us to understand better the last great outpouring of Francis’s spirit, *The Canticle of the Creatures*. It is to that work that I shall now turn my attention.