

Chapter 5

The Canticle of the Creatures

5.0 Introduction

The *Canticle of the Creatures* has always held a pre-eminent place in the writings of Francis of Assisi. My purpose here is to examine it thoroughly from the point of view of my hypothesis about the importance of nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis.

According to the 2 MP100, two years before his death, Francis was staying at San Damiano “in a little cell made of mats”. At this time he was suffering so intensely from an eye disease that he could not bear daylight or the light of a fire. The AC 83 tells us that this lasted more than fifty days. Even at night when he tried to sleep he was troubled by mice running around him and over him. These same sources tell us that the next morning he told his companions that he wished to write a new Praise of the Lord for His creatures. This idea found expression in what is known as *The Canticle of the Creatures*, or *The Canticle of Brother Sun*.

Although the Canticle itself will occupy my attention here, it seems fitting to look briefly at the circumstances of its composition.

5.1 The Circumstances of the Composition of *The Canticle of the creatures*

In order to grasp the significance of the *Canticle* in the life of Francis it is necessary, I think, to follow the events of his later years, beginning with the journey to the Holy Land in 1219. Before his departure for the East, Francis appointed, as his vicars, Matthew of Narni and Gregory of Naples, a nephew of Hugolino (Fortini 1981:437). These two were both staunch members of the party of change¹. Matthew was to remain at the Portiuncula to receive new friars, and Gregory was to travel about the provinces encouraging the friars. According to the ChrJG 11, the two vicars summoned a special Chapter, composed only of a

¹ This term ‘party of change’ is a convenient way of referring to those friars who wanted to change the nature of the Order in the direction of traditional monastic observance.

few senior friars from Italy. This group drew up various additional statutes which “were designed to give the order the prestige of asceticism by adopting monastic forms of abstinence” (Iriarte 1983:20; Moorman 1988:48-49).

One of the brothers, known as Stefano the Simple (Fortini 1981:436), made the journey to the East with the express purpose of informing Francis of the innovations that had been made and that were contrary to evangelical freedom. Francis returned quickly to Italy (ChrJG 12, 13; Moorman 1988: 50).

Besides the turn towards monasticism there had been other developments as well, and Francis realized the seriousness of the situation. The provincial of Bologna had built a house in that university town with a view to establishing a studium; and the town of Assisi had built a house at the Portiuncula to provide accommodation for the central community of the Order. Francis was so distressed that his first reaction was to begin pulling down the house at Assisi. The learned friars confronted him with legal points he had never thought of. The civic magistrates of Assisi informed him that the house belonged to the Commune and that he had no right to destroy it. In Bologna, he threw the brothers out of the house until Hugolino claimed ownership of the property (Iriarte 1983: 20; 2MP 6-7).

Francis did not feel up to a struggle with such shrewd opponents. He requested that the Lord of Ostia (CardinalHugolino) be given to the Order as corrector and protector to hear and decide his problems and those of the Order (ChrJG 14). On the feast of Saint Michael, September 29, 1220, the brothers gathered at the Portiuncula for the “Michaelmas Chapter”. It was during this chapter that Francis resigned from the administrative leadership of the Order and appointed Peter di Catanio as Minister General, promising him obedience:

“From now on [...], I am dead to you. But here is Brother Peter di Catanio: let us all, you and I, obey him” (AC11; 39 ; 2Cel 143).²

Peter had been a trusted friend of Francis and a faithful supporter of his ideals. However, Peter died six months later on March 10th, 1221, and was succeeded by Elias. Iriarte (1983:21) notes that despite Francis’s renunciation of authority, he was still regarded as head of the Order, and on many occasions asserted his rights as founder.

This was a very dark period in Francis’s life when he came in conflict with the Order he founded. I think the famous story about TPJ comes from this period, and it indicates very clearly that Francis felt he was becoming unwelcome, at least among some of the brethren. There is a problem about the story because there are two versions of it. The better known version is found in LFI, the Italian translation of ABF, which may well be the written response of Jerome of Ascoli’s request in 1276 for information about Francis according to the editors of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (Armstrong, Hellmann & Short 2001:429). In this version Francis and Leo are represented as walking to Assisi on a cold, wet day, and Francis was musing aloud about “Perfect Joy”. He imagined a very bad reception for them both, and they are turned away and beaten by the brother at the door. Francis told Leo to write down that if they accepted this treatment humbly, it would be “Perfect Joy”.

Another version of the story was published from a 14th century manuscript by Benvenuto Bughetti (1927). This version is considered to be authentic and was placed by Esser among the “Dictated Writings” of Francis (Armstrong et al 1999:166). Here, Francis was in Saint Mary of the Angels (The Portiuncula) and called Brother Leo to write down “what true joy is” (TPJ 3). Francis is returning from Perugia to Assisi on a cold, wet, wintry

² In volume II of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (142) a footnote describes this chapter as the “Pentecost” chapter, in September 1220. However, this seems to be a mistake, and it should be noted as the “Michaelmas” chapter since it was on the feast of Saint Michael, not the feast of Pentecost that the brothers gathered for this chapter. Furthermore, it could not be that the September 1220 date is wrong for this chapter since Peter di Catanio was appointed and died on March 10, 1221, which would have been before Pentecost.

day and on his arrival he is refused entrance and told to go to the Crosiers, he is not wanted at the Portiuncula. If he accepted this harsh reception with patience and did not become upset, this would be “perfect joy” (TPJ 8-15). Although Armstrong et al say it is impossible to date this incident with any certainty, it seems to me to have all the signs of this time of darkness for Francis. Jansen (1991) views this story as autobiographical and claims that Francis:

felt himself excluded, alienated, exiled, and ostracized from his own Order. He was no longer at home in the Order. Around him it felt cold, ice cold. He felt chilled to the bone. For he was refused admittance to his home and his ideal (Jansen 1991:379).

Another indication that Francis was beginning to feel unwelcome is the story in the AC 109 where Francis speaks to his companion about being a true, lesser brother when insulted:

And he [Francis] said: The brothers come to me with great devotion and veneration, invite me to the chapter, and, touched by their devotion, I go to the chapter with them. After they assemble, they ask me to proclaim the word of God to them and I rise and preach to them as the Holy Spirit instructs me. After the sermon, suppose that they reflect and speak against me: *We do not want you to rule over us.* You are not eloquent and you are too simple. We are very ashamed to have such a simple and contemptible prelate over us. From now on, do not presume to call yourself our prelate.’ And so, with insults they throw me out.

It seems that I am not a Lesser Brother unless I am just as happy when they insult me and throw me out in shame, refusing that I be their prelate, as when they honor and revere me, if in both cases the benefit to them is equal. If I am happy about their benefit and devotion when they praise and honor me, which can be a danger to the soul, it is even more fitting that I should rejoice and be happy at my benefit and the salvation of my soul when they revile me as they throw me out in shame, which is profit for the soul.

The same impression of going through a period of darkness is evoked by the accounts of the struggle over the writing of the Rule. Elias and the ministers objected to the Rule that Francis was writing at Fonte Colombo, fearing that it would be too harsh and stating that they refuse to be bound by it (AC 17).

Cardinal Hugolino was present at the Pentecost chapter, 1221, and the brothers told him that he should persuade Francis to accept the advice of these brothers, be guided by them and accept an already existing Rule:

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 brothers and allow himself to be guided by them for the time being. They cited the *Rule* of blessed Benedict, of blessed 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 in this way: 'My brothers! My brothers! God had 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. And the Lord told me what He wanted: He wanted me to be a new fool in the world. God did not wish to lead us by any way other than this knowledge, but God will confound you by your knowledge and wisdom (AC 18).

It must have cheered Francis a great deal when the Rule, approved by the Pope in 1223, in the Bull *Solet Annuere*, stated that the other friars were bound to obey Brother Francis and his successors (LR 1). Since Francis was not the General of the Order at the time it seems odd that a canonical document should have bound the other friars to obey him.³

5.2 The Stigmata at LaVerna

It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the transformation that took place in Francis, in his companions, and among the brethren after the stigmata of LaVerna. He tried to keep it a secret but it must have become known throughout the Order.⁴

³ This seems to be a legal fiction, based on events that took place fourteen years earlier when Innocent III gave verbal approval of the Rule. An interesting question arises: could Francis have used this 1223 document to assert his authority over the Order he founded. I think the answer would have to be no, since the Rule provided for the election of successors, and a successor was already in place, Elias of Cortona. This is exactly the point that was at issue concerning whether the friars were bound to obey the Testament.

⁴ Schmucki (1991 NY: Franciscan Institute) has meticulously investigated the Stigmata of St. Francis. In his investigation he has given a detailed account of the primitive sources and has examined numerous other scholarly writings on the Stigmata.

In August of 1224 Francis set off with a few companions for LaVerna. Among these companions Brothers Leo can be named with absolute certainty. Later sources name Angelo, and Maseo (ABF 9:23). When they arrived at the foot of the mountain Francis was very weak. The brothers asked a peasant who lived in the area to lend them his donkey to carry Francis up the mountain (2C 46). They made their way up the steep mountain to their little retreat and Francis began his lent of Saint Michael the Archangel.⁵ It seems to have been a time of great spiritual exaltation. Leo came to him once a day with a little bread and water, and at night to recite Matins together, otherwise Francis was on his own (ABF 9:23). It does not seem that Francis was really a gregarious type of man, adapted to living in a large community, or even a small one for long periods. He has been described as one of the greatest hermits of Christianity (Englebert.1965:12), and was, one recalls, strongly tempted to adopt the eremitical life until advised against it by Clare and Sylvester.

The days were spent in prayer and meditation, and at last, around the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Francis received a visitation, which gave him to understand that something portentous was about to happen.

And happen it did on that fateful day when he had the powerful vision of a crucified man, with the wounds on hands, feet and side, and yet having six wings like a seraph and bearing an aspect of glory (LMj 13:3). Francis was in a transport of ecstasy, yet he wondered how this being could be so wounded and yet so glorious. We do not know how long the vision lasted, but when it was over he stared at his own hands and feet and saw and felt there, the marks of crucifixion. He would bear them to the end of his life. It is worth noting that Francis had been praying for two graces to be given him before he died; one of feeling in his body, so far as was possible, the pain and suffering felt by Christ in his passion; and the

⁵ Because of his special devotion to Saint Michael the Archangel, Francis adopted the practice of keeping a special lent from the feast of the Assumption, August 15th to the feast of the Archangel, September 29th.

other, to feel in his heart that great love with which Christ was inflamed in willingly enduring such suffering.

Since his was the first known case of stigmatization in history, he could not have known, or even guessed, that the answer to his prayer would take the form it did. It is difficult for us now, after nearly eight centuries later, which have seen quite a few stigmatics,⁶ to appreciate the shock, the wonder, the astonishment of Francis's contemporaries when they discovered what had happened. To them it must have seemed like a final and definitive stamp of approval on the life, the devotion, and the ideals of Francis. After that amazing event nothing would ever be the same either for Francis, or for his followers.

I have traced in some detail the suffering, even the agony of Francis during the time after his return from the Holy Land, his shock at the way the Order was developing against his wishes, the sense of rejection by some of the influential friars, the bitter struggles over the writing and the re-writing of the Rule, and the rapid decline in his own health. A lesser man might well have lost heart and given up the struggle. Francis endured what might be called the dark night of his soul. It seems to be a law of spiritual development that the road to perfection can never be travelled without suffering. Warning of this was given by the Lord in the famous lines "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). It was averted to also in Acts 14:22: "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God". Among mystical writers, the classic treatment of the dark night of the soul is in the *Writings of St. John of the Cross* (1973:296-389).

Francis was not without help during this dreadful time. Cardinal Hugolino proved to be a faithful friend and a trustworthy mediator between Francis and the group known

⁶ The phenomenon of stigmatization, that is, the appearance of the wounds of Christ's passion in the body of a person, is familiar to people of the present age, especially through the celebrated Capuchin friar, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, who was canonized on Pentecost Sunday, June 16th, 2002.

collectively as the ministers. He also enjoyed the devotion of a small circle of friars, such as Leo, who stayed with him and were utterly loyal to him. We also have the story from this period of darkness that the Lord revealed to him, in prayer, that Francis did not own the Order and should not suppose that it depended on him. It belonged to the Lord who would take care of it (AC 112).

The stigmatization on LaVerna, in spite of the terrible pain of the wounds, must have seemed to Francis as a fulfillment and a vindication of all that he had tried to achieve. No longer could he be dismissed as an over-enthusiastic and unbalanced fanatic, an unlettered simpleton with an exaggerated sense of his own importance, a man with a very poor grasp of the real needs and aspirations of the Church which his ministers understood far better than he could. Now, as if in answer to those who opposed him, and perhaps belittled him, he had the stamp of approval and the marks of recognition of Christ himself. One can easily imagine Francis meeting an objection to something he desired by simply lifting up his hands. I hasten to add that there is no evidence at all that he did this. I do not think the occasion would have arisen.

It had been a long and painful journey, made in darkness and affliction of spirit. Perhaps it seemed to him like struggling through the dense undergrowth and thorny bushes of a dark wood, unsure of the direction, clawing his way upwards in agony and pain. But now, at last, he had reached the sunny uplands, the bright light, and the vision of peace and fulfillment. Nothing would ever be the same again for Francis.

The impact of the stigmata on the followers of Francis seems to have been enormous. The immediate effect on Leo, who was the first to know, was very great. Francis tried to conceal what had happened as best he could but of course the wounds themselves, the constant bleeding, the crippling effect on his body and the need for constant washing of

his clothes could not be concealed. The close circle of those around him could not be unaware of what had happened.

It is not possible to trace, from the sources, how quickly and how widely the news of the stigmata spread among the friars. The superiors of the Order, especially of course, Brother Elias, Minister General, would, in the nature of things, have had to be informed quickly. He did not, however, choose to tell the Order-at-large until the letter in which he announced the death of Francis to the brethren in October 1226. It is also very likely, I think, that word would have spread among the brethren by the usual grapevine that exists in every organization. We do, for instance, have references to brothers being curious about the blood stains and trying to get a glimpse of the wounds (2C 135-138). Such things could not long be concealed and we would expect that the news would have spread far and wide fairly quickly.

The effect on the brethren must have been electrifying. Again, we must remember that stigmatization was a new and unheard of phenomenon. One can imagine the friars hearing of the event for the first time and wondering about it. What does it mean? Who is this Francis that we follow? Nowadays we smile at the image Bonaventure uses about Francis in the prologue of his LMj as “the Angel of the Sixth Seal”. But in those times, when expectations of a new age were high, Francis’s stigmata could very easily be taken as a sign of a new age coming to birth, perhaps even the second coming of Christ.

An immediate result of this must have been an extraordinary strengthening of the authority of Francis. He had become, “the Crucified Seraph of Assisi” and any opposition or denigration of his authority could well be seen as a kind of blasphemy. If God had approved this man, who had the right to oppose him? He was now, virtually, unassailable.

Brother Leo of Assisi was Francis’s chosen and most intimate companion during the forty days fast for the “lent” he spent on La Verna in August and September 1224. On a piece of parchment, (called the “chartula”) given to Brother Leo by Francis and, now

preserved in the Sacro Convento at Assisi, Leo wrote a poignant note about the praises of God written on the parchment:

After the vision and message of the Seraph and the impression of Christ's stigmata on his body, he composed these praises written on the other side of this page and wrote them in his own hand thanking God for the kindness bestowed on him (Chartula).

Francis himself makes no reference in his writings to this event. Although Leo does not tell us exactly when the praises were written, it seems reasonable to assume that they are a kind of first fruits of his response to the stigmata (Schmucki 1991:221). He had prayed so ardently for two graces, that he might share the pain in that Christ experienced in his passion and that he might be filled with the love with which Christ was filled in willingly undergoing his passion. The fulfillment of his prayer astonished him as much as it did everyone else.

The text, of course is in Latin, and is heavily dependent for its vocabulary and phraseology on the psalms and other liturgical writings which Francis knew so well. Perhaps it is best to reproduce this short text first, according to the pattern of Lapsanski (1974:18-37) in which there is a single line, followed by four quasi strophs, the first two with three lines each, the third with five and the fourth with six.

5.3 The Praises of God

You are the holy Lord God Who does wonderful things.

You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.
You are the almighty king. You holy Father,
King of heaven and earth.

You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
You are the good, all good, the highest good,
Lord God living and true.

You are love, charity; You are wisdom, You are humility,
You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are security, You are rest,
You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,
You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.

You are beauty, You are meekness,
 You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,
 You are strength, You are refreshment. You are our hope,
 You are our faith, You are our charity,
 You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:
 Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior.

The first impression I have of the *Praises* is that they are a spontaneous, exuberant outpouring of joy and exultation after the experience of the Stigmata. Of course, one has to beware of first impressions and scrutinize the text carefully to find any hidden structure that may be present. Edith van den Goorbergh and Theodore Zweerman (2001), in the book they co-authored, comment that next to the CtC, the PrsG is “the most important prayer in Francis’s legacy, for it is his prayer of thanksgiving after a most exceptional event in his life” (2001:217).

One of the striking things to notice in the text is a number of repetitions. For example, the two phrases “You are beauty, You are meekness” occur together twice in the last two stanzas. The phrase “You are our hope” also occurs twice in the same two stanzas. And the phrase “You are charity” is repeated in slightly different forms in those stanzas. But what does this tell us about Francis’s spirituality and mysticism? It seems to me that Francis is so taken up with the love of the Lord that he cannot say enough about his goodness and mercy, about all that the Lord is for him.

After searching the text for a principle of organization, I must confess that I could not find one until I turned to the volume by Edith Van den Goorbergh and Theodore Zweerman mentioned above (2001). They give a very ingenious interpretation of the virtues as names of God (:292-302). This interpretation is supported by a most detailed examination of the virtues in the writings of Francis, especially of Admonition 27. Thus they connect humility and poverty with God the Father. The virtues of patience and wisdom are names for the Son, and peace, divine love, joy and rest are names for the Holy Spirit (:294). This set of

identifications of the virtues with the Persons of the Holy Trinity sheds some light on the *Praises of God*. However, while greatly admiring the meticulous scholarship of these authors, I am uneasy with the idea that Francis worked out the construction of the *Praises* in such great detail. The outpouring of ideas is completely characteristic of Francis in its simplicity and directness. The attributes he selects are found over and over again in his writings. For example, the phrases “Holy Lord God; the Most High; Holy Father; the good, all good, the highest good”, resonate with echoes from the penultimate chapter of the *Earlier Rule* of 1221.

If one were to criticize the praises as poetry, the lack of organization of ideas and the rather haphazard repetitions would be a grave defect, and the whole poem would be found disappointing from a formal point of view. However, as a document marking the most intense and dramatic event of Francis’s life, it has its own fascination.

Van den Goorbergh and Zweerman (2001:229-230) divide the *Praises* into three main parts. The first consists of eight invocations and Francis uses adjectives here. “He acknowledges God as the Exalted One and at the same time as the most near One” (230). As is usual with Francis, the holiness of God comes first. The next three invocations, “You are strong, You are great, You are the Most High” express the awe of the creature before the strong and mighty one.

The next invocations address God as almighty King, holy Father, King of heaven and earth, three and one, Lord God of gods, all good, living and true. The invocation holy Father comes from the sacerdotal prayer of Jesus (Jn 17:1), and the expression King of heaven and earth evokes Matthew 11:25 (:232).

The last two invocations of this part focus on the God of gods, Three and One, and hails God as the highest good, and in a phrase from the Roman Canon, as Lord God living and true, a phrase much loved by Francis (Adm 1;16).

The second part of the *Praises* consists of twenty-four phrases, “most of them short invocations with nouns, indicating aspects of God’s being and his gifts to human beings” (Van den Goorbergh & Zweerman 2001:230). Van den Goorbergh and Zweerman (2001) treat this part as a sort of elaborate code which requires a very sophisticated mode of interpretation. The obvious objection to this reading of Francis’s *Praises* is that it seems too complicated for the man who described himself as simple and unlettered (2C 145; TPJ 11). The answer to this objection is that although Francis was no scholar he was a prayerful person and could well have devised the elaborate texts that have now been deciphered.⁷

The third part in the division of these authors consists of eight words: Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, merciful Savior. They resume words from the first eight invocations and form a kind of closure to the whole text.

How are we to interpret this work of Francis? Clearly it can well be described as the spontaneous overflowing of powerful feelings. In a casual reading, it does not seem to be very well organized and contains several repetitions. However, van den Goorbergh and Zweerman (2001:230-254) discern a very elaborate structure with a deeply coded content. They believe such codification is in keeping with medieval ways of writing.

Sorrell (1988:108), in his study of Francis and nature, draws on the work of an Italian scholar, A. Vincinelli, on the writing of Francis. This work undertook an intensive stylistic analysis of Francis’s early writings, and examined them in relation to liturgical sources and to the CtC. He arranges Francis’s poetic efforts on a stylistic basis in a succession, moving from the *Exhortation* of 1213, to the *Office*, to the *Salute to the Virtues*, the *Salute to the Virgin Mary*, the *Praises of God*. The *Praises Before the Office* and finally the *Canticle*. According to Sorrell this arrangement is compelling even though it is chronologically unverifiable for the most part. In

⁷ This answer was given during a session of the Franciscan Challenge Course at St. Isidore’s College, Rome in September/October 1999. The same point is made in van den Goorbergh and Zweerman (2001:10).

fact, however, Sorrell has very little to say about the LaVerna *Praises of God*, apart from noting that it has strong rhythms and rhymes like the *Canticle*, according to Vicinelli, and that it is rapturous (Sorrell 1988:111).

One point worth noting about the LaVerna PrsG is that they show no sign whatever of neurosis. There is no self-pity or self centeredness of the kind one would expect if the Stigmata were the product of a psychological illness, or a neurotic self-absorption (Karecki 2002:32-47).

The story of the Stigmata was spread far and wide after the death of Francis, mainly by the writings of Celano and Bonaventure, the Fioretti and the other records of the Franciscan story. When the feast of the Stigmatization of Saint Francis was instituted, the Church's stamp of approval was given definitively to the LaVerna event – the only official recognition ever of such an event.

So much then by way of recounting the circumstances of the composition of the CtC. It was the end of a long, dark and painful night. Francis had made a hard and agonizing journey and now it was dawn. There would be pain and hardship in plenty before him, not least the ever present pain of the wounds on his body. But now he could see his way clearly, now he could see the haven before him and he knew from the evidence of his failing body that his voyage was near its end. He left LaVerna for the last time after the stigmata. The *Addio* to LaVerna is a beautiful imaginative account of the event, although it dates from two centuries later (Fortini 1981:559).

Now, in great pain, and even less able to walk than before, he made the journey with Brother Leo to Assisi. For a time he stayed in a hut near San Damiano (AC 38). As he lay there, the thought came to him that he must find some way of communicating the joy, the splendor and the glory that he had experienced so that all people could be made aware of the splendor of creation and the glory of the Lord.

This inspiration of Francis was not something new in his life. In the early days of his conversion, on an occasion when he was rudely confronted with the question “Who are you?” by a band of robbers, he answered with the words, “I am the herald of the Great King” (1Cel.16). He surprised them, and perhaps even surprised himself with this answer, but it does express something very deep in his awareness of himself. He seems to have entertained the idea that he and his friars would go through the world singing the praises of the *Most High King*, and the Lord of all creation, just as the troubadours of his society would proclaim and celebrate the praises of their lords and princes.

One of the stories about Francis that I find most moving is when Francis arrived at the castle of Montefeltro, where there was a great gathering for the ceremony of knighting one of the young counts of the family. It was May 8th, 1213, and Francis, who happened to be making a journey to Romagna, came to the assembly in the piazza, not out of curiosity, but to tell of the great Lord of heaven. He climbed onto a low wall and began to sing the beautiful love song with the opening lines:

So great the good I have in sight
That every pain I count delight.⁸

What moves me about this is the simplicity, the originality, the freshness and the moral courage of Francis. We have to remember that, in his early days, Francis had been a leader of the kind of people who made up this gathering, and he knew how to touch them. He was deeply aware of the songs and sentiments that inspired them. It was an occasion when he played the role of a troubadour to perfection. And, as we know, his proclamation bore fruit. It was at Montefeltro that he met the Count Orlando of Chiusi who gave him the Mountain of LaVerna (Fortini 1981:550). This occasion was surely strong in his memory as he lay sick at *San Damiano* after the awesome event that occurred at LaVerna.

⁸ *Tanto è il bene ch'io aspeto*

5.4 *The Canticle of the Creatures*

Francis's famous canticle must be one of the most explicated and commented on pieces of literature in the world. A good many books and countless articles have been written on it, so much so that one might well despair of saying anything fresh about it. Nevertheless, it must play a key role in any consideration of the nature mysticism and spirituality of Francis.

Nowhere is Saint Francis's passionate belief in creation found more vividly than in the CtC. It pinpoints creation's unity as fraternal. According to Doyle (1980:40) the CtC gives Francis a sure place among the poet-mystics, and as a prayer of praise to God the Creator, it is a sublime expression of the authentic Christian attitude to creation.

Perhaps it is best to begin with a brief analysis of each of the ten stanzas, omitting for the moment the final two that he composed; one for the great reconciliation in Assisi, and the other to welcome Sister Death.

The text I shall use is the one in ancient Umbrian quoted by Fortini (1981:566-567).

Stanza 1 Most high, all-powerful, all good Lord!
 All praise is yours, all glory, all honor
 And all blessing.⁹

The Canticle opens with the powerful invocation "Most High, all-powerful good Lord" and declares that all praise, glory, honor and blessing are due to Him. The words here are immensely powerful, and an adequate analysis of them would require a book or even an encyclopedia. Here, however, a few explanatory notes must suffice.

The key term is, I think, *Signore*, Lord, or as the text has it *bonsignore*, good Lord. *Signor*, Lord, was a fundamental term in the medieval vocabulary, and had a wide range of meanings. The etymology of the word is not very distinguished. It comes from the Latin

⁹ *Ch'ogni pena m'è diletto*
Altissimu, omnipotente, bonsignore,
tue sono le laude,
la gloria elhonore
et omne benedictione.

Senior which means someone who is older. However, it came to assume very powerful connotations. The ones that come to mind first are in the context of lords and vassals, bound together by ties of service, especially military service, and oaths of fealty. These ties are what held the feudal society together (Colish 1998:345-6). Francis, we know, was very ready to commit himself to such a system when he set out to join Walter of Brienne. As we know, he was stopped at Spoleto by a dream vision that advised him to serve a higher Lord. Given the way his imagination was so fired and enchanted by stories of great lords and ladies, knights and paladins, it seems reasonable to conjecture that this imagery was at the bottom of his understanding of the word “Lord”. In his commitment to his Lord, Francis was open, generous, trusting, intensely loyal and utterly radical. Such words come easily enough to us, in a world too full of words that have become devalued. It was not so for Francis.

The powerful experience of the “Good Lord” at LaVerna, had reinforced the earlier experiences of Francis from the time of his initial conversion and, I would think, long before that. I am thinking of the night he spent in the house of Bernard of Quintavalle, when Bernard heard him praying the words “My God and My All” (ABF 1:15-25). Francis generally avoided any display of his prayer and his deep communion with the Lord, and we have very little evidence of his more mystical prayer. But on LaVerna, it seems that Brother Leo kept a watchful eye on him, and one night when Francis did not answer the call, *Domine, labia mea aperies* (Lord, open my lips), the summons to pray the Divine Office, Leo crossed over and found Francis on his knees, his face and hands raised to the sky praying over and over again: “Who are you my most dear God, and who am I, a worm and your little servant?” (ABF 9:32-42).

Hence, the *bonsignore* (Good Lord) of the Canticle is no remote and abstract concept for Francis, but a present, powerful and dynamic source of energy, of life, of joy and of

blessing. So filled was he with this superabundant life, that it overflowed in him through his words, his actions and his whole manner of living. If any life can be called ‘a praise of glory’, surely it was the life of Francis. It is striking that the qualities Francis attributed to this “Good Lord” are praise and glory, honor and blessing.

These attributes are central to the Christian awareness, and worship of the most high, and must always hold a fundamental place there. I have spoken already of Francis’s love for the term “Most High”, and suggested that it was probably inspired by the Gloria of the Mass (cf Section 3.1 n3).

The next attribute, all powerful, is utterly classical when used of God. Francis’s awareness of this power must surely be connected with his intimate familiarity with nature. When the powerful forces of nature are contemplated in the mountains, the plains and seas, or encountered in the thunder and lightening of the great storms, one cannot help being overwhelmed by this power, and Francis was very familiar with it.

The PrsG sum up a great deal of Francis’s gospel life. An early story tells of the occasion when he was singing in the snowy woods. He was seized by robbers who demanded to know who he was. He had been singing praises to the Lord in French, and he told them that he was the “herald of the Great King” (1C 16). One could say of Francis that his whole life was, in Saint Paul’s phrase, a praise of God’s glory (Eph 1:6).

The next attributes, glory, honor and blessing, are found together especially in the hymns of the book of Revelation (4:11; 5:12; 7:12). There is something about praising and giving glory, honor and blessing to the Lord that fulfils a profound exigency of the human spirit, and lifts it above the petty concerns, anxieties and fears of mundane living.

Stanza 2

To you, alone, Most High, do they belong.
 No mortal lips are worthy
 To pronounce your name.¹⁰

The second stanza forms a kind of pendant to the first. It amplifies the invocation by reminding the hearers that the attributes of praise, glory, honor, and blessing belong only to the Most High, and that no mortal is worthy even to pronounce His name.

Te mentovare, translated here as ‘to pronounce’ his name, evokes an ancient, strong and deep connection between names and what or whom they name. One may ask why Francis says that “no one is worthy to pronounce your name”. This links into what the scriptures have to say about names, and especially about names of God in the Old Testament. Professor Martin Rose, at the University of Neuchâtel, in Switzerland, says that the name is a distinguishing mark which makes it possible to differentiate, to structure and to order. He quotes the beginning of the famous Babylonian epic of creation, *Enuma Eliš*: “When on high the heavens had not been named ... when no gods whatever had been brought into being, uncalled by name”, to show the crucial importance of having a name (Rose 1992:1001). He then points out the significance of God allowing the human being to name the living creatures God formed out of the ground. It gives him/her a share in creation, and access to fellowship and communication. If one knows the name of a god or a human being, one can appeal to them. It gives a certain power to try to manipulate what is named, a power which may be misused in magic or incantation.

In the book of Deuteronomy, one reads “the place” which Yahweh shall choose to put his name there” (Deut 12:5; 11; 21). The name is seen as the presence dwelling there, and thus assures the legitimacy of the cult. The name of Yahweh did not tolerate any foreign divine name (Deut 12:2-3).

¹⁰ *Ad te solo, Altissimo, se konfano
 et nullu homo enne dignu
 te mentovare*

In later times in the history of Israel, when other gods are no longer a challenge, it becomes unnecessary to have a name to distinguish one's own God from others. There is only one God, and the name Yahweh is not found at all in some Biblical books, for example, Esther, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Then, as Rose points out, out of a certain scrupulosity, it was forbidden to use the special name, Yahweh, at all, even in the cultic texts where *Adonai* (my Lord) was used and in the Septuagint the *Kyrios* was used (Rose 1992: 1010-1011).

From this one can see that Francis's reverence for the name of the Most High is deeply and firmly rooted in the scriptures that he loved. The prayer which he was heard to utter "Who are you my most dear God, and who am I, a worm and your little servant" (ABF 9: 37-42), testifies to the awe and reverence he felt for the Lord. This makes it very clear why no one is worthy to pronounce his name. Since however, the Lord Has placed his name among us (Jer 14:9) and allowed us to call on his name, we have communion and fellowship with him. In the New Testament, John, in particular, emphasizes the power of the name of God in the prayer of Jesus where he says "I have made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17:26). It is very difficult for us today to appreciate what one might call the ontological weight of the name, but I think it can be felt in the sentence I have quoted.

I think it is clear that Francis, a man who prayed and meditated incessantly, did feel and recognize the power and weight of the name, and this is what he expressed when he said that no one is worthy to pronounce it.

We know that he spent a large portion of every year in solitude and prayer in the various 'lents' he undertook (AC 81;87;226; 2C 130-131; 3C 52; LMj 9:3). But even apart from these times given over wholly to prayer, he prayed incessantly at other times. Celano says that he himself "became a prayer" (2C 95).

As I mentioned earlier, he was very careful, in accordance with the Gospel not to make a display of his prayer (Mt.6: 5), but we have a glimpse when he was observed, more or less by accident, as at the time when Bernard of Quintavalle saw him at prayer in his house (ABF 9:20), and again when Leo observed him on LaVerna before the Stigmata (ABF 9:37). There can be no doubt that Francis was a God-intoxicated man, and this second stanza of the canticle evokes those vigils, retreats and contemplations of his whole life.

Stanza 3 All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,
 And first my lord, Brother Sun,
 Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.¹¹

After the invocation comes the body of the Canticle. Now, Francis addresses the Lord with the more familiar term “*misignore*”, my Lord. “All praise be yours my Lord with all your creatures.” This is the line from which the title CtC derived, an appropriate title indeed, because he speaks of the *Sun* only as one of these creatures even though the title *Canticle of Brother Sun* has the most ancient authority in the manuscript tradition (Assisi Codex 338).

More than all creatures lacking reason, he most affectionately loved the sun and fire. For he used to say: “At dawn, when the sun rises, everyone should praise God, who created it for our use, because through it our eyes are lighted by day. And in the evening, when it becomes night, everyone should praise God for another creature, Brother Fire through whom the eyes are lighted at night. For we are all almost blind, and the Lord lights up our eyes through these two brothers of ours. And, therefore, we should always give special praise to the glorious Creator for these and for His other creatures which we use every day.”

He always did this until the day of his death. Indeed, when his illness grew more serious, he himself began to sing the *Praises of the Lord* that he had composed about creatures, and afterwards had his companions sing it, so that in reflecting on the praise of the Lord, he could forget the sharpness of his pains and illnesses.

And because he considered and said that the sun is more beautiful than other creatures, and could more easily be compared

¹¹ *Laudato sie, misignore, cum tucte le tue creature
 spetialmente messor lo frate sole,
 loquale iorno et allumini noi par loi.*

to God, especially since, in Scripture, the Lord Himself is called *the sun of justice*; he therefore called those *Praises* he composed for creatures when the Lord assured him of His kingdom the “*Canticle of Brother Sun*” (2MP 119).

The phrase “with all your creatures” (*cum tucte le tue creature*) sounds somewhat strange. It is as if Francis regards both the Lord and his creatures as forming an ensemble, all of which are to be praised. It seems that the creatures are not to praise the Lord but to be praised with Him. The oddity of this is accentuated by the fact that some of the translations speak of praising the Lord through his creatures (Doyle 1980:39). But this is not the original form of the text.

Are we to detect, in the phrase “with all your creatures” an overtone of pantheism? By no means! The use of the word *creatures* rules this out because creation as “total causality” excludes any independence or autonomy on the part of creatures.

“Especially Sir Brother Sun who is the day and through whom you give us light”. Here one finds the reference to the first of what might be called Francis’s cosmic relations. It is one of his best known characteristics, this air of familiarity with which he addresses the elements of the cosmos. He speaks of the sun in a rather elaborate courtly fashion, *messor lo frate sole*, which has been translated as Sir Brother Sun, or my lord Brother Sun. This courtly way of speaking seems to have been a habit of Francis, at least occasionally.

Here one must remember the great vogue of courtliness in the time of Francis. It seems to have spread from Provence, a place with which Francis seems to have been familiar, and a place and culture that aroused his enthusiasm. We know of his enthusiasm for knightly glory (1C 6), and it is very striking that his courting of Lady Poverty has distinct echoes of courtly love (1C 7). His courtly manners are explicitly referred to in the description of his early days (2C 7).

What exactly is implied in the cult of courtly culture? It was a culture rooted firmly in feudal society around Francis's time. But it was a society that was becoming more aware of the arts of civilization, of poetry and music, of the refinements of human life. It was a society in which women were coming to play a greater role, and in which love, admiration and gallantry were acknowledged and displayed (Colish 1997:183-190).

The ideals of the troubadour and courtly love deeply influenced Francis (Warner 1998:80). One of the best known elements of courtly culture was that of courtly love. A main theme in the literature of courtly love is the devotion and service of his lady by the one who had fallen in love with her (Colish 1997:190; Fortini 1981:180). It is clear that Francis was well aware of this theme from the way he spoke of a lady to whom he was devoted (1C 7).

Warner (1998:80) notes that the Italian word *cortesia* is a far stronger term than the English word courtesy. "*Cortesia* implies the notion of honorable deference, respect, largesse, special and personal consideration of the needs of others, especially the poor and vulnerable" (:80). In Francis, this courtesy was embodied in his respect for all of creation.

Another example of Francis's courtly manners occurs when Brother Stefano arrived in the Holy Land to inform him of the new constitutions imposed by his vicars. Francis was sitting at table with Peter di Catanio. And, as it was a day on which meat was forbidden by the new constitutions, Francis addressed Peter: "My lord Peter, what shall we do?" (ChrJG 12). It seems to me, from a few hints to be found in the sources, that Francis was quite capable of what we might call clowning around, and could be quite funny at times. This fits in quite well with his popularity with the youth of Assisi before his conversion. He could hardly have been so popular if he had not a ready gift of *repartee* and the ability to act a part.

A final testimony of his regard for courtesy appears in the LR (3:10-11) when he speaks of how the friars should behave in the world. They are to speak courteously to everyone as is becoming.

And why is Sir Brother Sun, that most distinguished member of Francis's cosmic family, singled out for praise? The answer, in the phrase *loquale iorno*, is in rather primitive language, literally, *the which day*. The translation in the *Early Documents* is 'who is the day' (line 3), and in Fortini, (1981:568) 'who brings the day'. The following phrase *et allumini noi par loi* can be translated literally as: 'and illuminates us through him'. The one who illuminates us by him, that is, gives us light by the sun is, of course, the Lord, *misignore*.

Stanza 4. The following two lines are rather rhapsodic.

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.¹²

Francis's enthusiasm for Sir Brother Sun truly overflows in the phrase *et ellu ebellu*, and it carries on in his admiration for the pouring out of the light in splendor and glory, a fitting symbol and representation of the outpouring abundance of the Most High Himself. When it is remembered that Francis was composing this in the mice infested shelter near San Damiano (AC 83), he was nearly blind and the slightest ray of sunlight was unbearable to him, we cannot but be in awe of his enthusiasm for Brother Sun, pouring out light and heat upon the earth below, and giving us a glorious image of the Most High.

Stanza 5.

As a pendant to the stanzas on Brother Sun, we have stanza five on Sister Moon and the Stars.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;
In the heavens you have made them, bright
And precious and fair.¹³

¹² *Et ellu ebellu eradiante cum grande splendore:
de te, Altissimo, porta significatione.*

¹³ *Laudato si, misignore, per sora luna ele stelle:
in celu lai formate clarite
et pretiose et belle.*

This is a convenient place to deal with one of the problems of interpreting the Canticle, i.e. the meaning of *per* in the text of Francis. Is it to be translated as *through*, or *by*, or *for*? According to Fortini (1981: 568n) what Francis meant by the Italian word *per* has never been determined. 2 MP 92 tells us that Francis wanted people to praise the Lord for His creatures so perhaps the proper word is *for*.

It may well be that the exact translation of *per* is not all that important. Sometimes a certain ambiguity in a poetic word or phrase adds to its power and scope, and I think that is the case here.

Another question that arises is whether Francis is praising God for all these creatures he has made, or is calling for God to be praised through, for or by them, or is calling on them to praise God. In the text we have, it is clear that he does not call on them directly to praise God, unlike the *Benedicite*, *The Canticle of the Three Young Men* in the Book of Daniel (Ch 3), the most direct biblical parallel to the Canticle of Francis. In his Canticle, Francis directly praises the Lord in the first stanzas, but then he asks that God be praised through, by or for his creatures. It is clear that in the sermon to the birds he calls on them directly to praise the Lord, and this is in accord with Celano's saying that Francis invited the elements and flowers (1C 80-81), and all creation to praise God (2C 217). But in the Canticle this is not what he does. Instead he asks that God be praised in his creatures, and with his creatures, not that the creatures praise God.

Sorrell (1988:115-124) has given a great deal of attention to the problem of Francis's intention in the CtC. He sees two main interpretations. The first is that favored by Celano (1C 81) and Bonaventure (LMj9:1) according to which Francis calls creatures to praise God. From the sources, we know that he often did this, for example, in his sermon to the birds (1C 58) and in various exhortations (ExhP 5-6; 11-12).

The second interpretation which Sorrell favors sees the CtC as thanksgiving for and appreciation of creatures. Sorrell's (1988:119) view is that it implies a forceful accusation by Francis that "medieval society does not appreciate creation, and is not grateful for creatures benefits to humanity". He claims that this criticism coupled with a positive injunction is unique for Francis's time, and perhaps unparalleled in medieval history before him.

Sorrell argues that his interpretation derives from three accounts of the "inner circle" around Francis (:119) as recorded in the *Legend of Perugia*, now generally identified as the AC. He quotes the passage about the vision in which Francis received the assurance of heaven and his response:

The next morning [...]he said to them 'I must rejoice greatly in my illnesses and troubles and be consoled in the Lord, giving thanks always to God the Father, to His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit for such a great grace and blessing. In His mercy He has given me, His unworthy little servant still living in the flesh, the promise of His kingdom.

Therefore for His praise, for our consolation and for the edification of our neighbor, I want to write a new *Praise of the Lord* for his creatures, which we use every day, and without which we cannot live. Through them the human race greatly offends the Creator, and every day we are ungrateful for such great graces, because we do not praise, as we should, our Creator and the Giver of all good.'

Sitting down, he began to meditate and them said: 'Most High, all powerful, good Lord' (AC 83).

The 2MP (100-101) has an almost identical account and a later chapter (119) has a few details.

Sorrel (1988:120-121) adds several other arguments in favor of his interpretation of the CtC as an exhortation not to creatures but to human beings to praise God for the creatures he has made. It helps to explain why Francis flatters the creatures and draws attention to their usefulness. And finally it explains why he wrote in his native language – because he wanted as many people as possible to praise the Lord and his creation.

I must say that I find Sorrell's interpretation both enlightening and convincing, and I believe it is a good contribution to the literature on the CtC.

While there is no evidence that Francis had any scientific interest in the movement of the stars, of the planets, or other heavenly bodies, the night sky must have been very familiar to him indeed, and above all, Sister Moon as she made her monthly journey around the earth. The moon, of course, is celebrated in religious history and ceremony and has often played a great part in worship, often indeed as a goddess (Eliade 1958:154-185).¹⁴

In treating of the sun, moon and stars in his Canticle it seems clear that the primary source for Francis is the Breviary, and especially the Canticle of the Three Young Men and Psalm 148 that were prescribed for recitation very frequently.¹⁵

Francis would also have been very familiar with the story of the six days of creation and the poetic account of the work of the third day when the creator hung up the lamps as it were to give light; the sun to illumine the day and the moon and stars the night. One might have expected Francis to address the moon as Lady, Sister Moon, to parallel his address to the sun. However, he avoided that and was contented with Sister. Nevertheless his praise of Sister Moon and the stars is enthusiastic: "In heaven you formed them, clear and precious and beautiful." One might ask why precious? It was common belief that the heavenly bodies were formed from a sort of divine substance or quintessence, which was pure and imperishable. Such opinions about heavenly bodies would, of course, have been widely known.

¹⁴ 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 treatises on the History of Religion by Mircea Eliade, published in English under the title *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) gives abundant evidence of this.

¹⁵ One of the Franciscan treasures that has come down to us is the Breviary Francis used from the 1223, according to an inscription Brother Leo wrote in it. Sorrell notes that Psalm 148 and the Canticle would have been recited very frequently by Francis (Sorrell 1988:99).

6. The Air Stanza

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Wind and Air,
 And fair and Stormy, all the weather's moods,
 By which you cherish all that you have made.¹⁶

It seems to be the case that the only element addressed as brother here is the wind. One could argue that air is included in the appellation, and some translators have done this, for example, in the translation in Fortini (1981:568). I suppose that that the wind, often noisy and boisterous would suggest a more masculine attribute. But would the air not be feminine and a sister? But then is the weather in its various moods masculine or feminine? The gender of the Italian word *tempo* is masculine, but it is derived from the word *tempus* in Latin, which is neuter and means time. It is one of the oddities of the development of language that the word *tempus* came to mean weather.

It is easy for us to forget that Francis was very much a man of the 'open air'. Early in his life he hesitated for a long time between choosing the life of a hermit or an apostolic life in the brotherhood. He chose the latter, of course, but he had no liking for large houses (AC 9; 24) or monasteries which was the course his brotherhood took as it developed, particularly for the education and formation of brothers (Iriarte 1983:149-154). Francis's own preference was for small places, rough and ready structures, open to the woods and the fields, and the environment of nature. The Portiuncula, near Assisi, a tiny abandoned chapel in the woods, with a few huts around it, remained his ideal. His closeness to nature and its changing moods and weather must be seen as underlying this stanza. He recalls especially, cloudy and serene weather. He does not mention particularly the wet weather that soaks one

¹⁶

*Laudato si, misignore, per frate vento,
 et per aere et nubilo
 et sereno et omne tempo
 per loquale a le tue creature
 dai sustentamento.*

to the skin, or the bitterly cold weather of an Italian *tramontana*, the wind from the mountains, or the *sirocco* from the south that everyone complains of. He would remember particularly the weather of LaVerna – scene of the culminating experience of his life – the clear air, the immense vistas, the spectacular thunder storms and the bitter cold of nights on that mountain. Francis was intimately acquainted with all kinds of weather, and for them all he gave thanks.

The last two lines of the stanza evoke a prayer with which Francis would have been very familiar, that is, “The eyes of all creatures look to you O Lord, and you give them their food in due season” (Psalm 104). This was used among the Franciscans throughout the world as a refectory prayer until the middle of the twentieth century. Francis was always aware of the bountiful providence of God and never ceased in his thanksgiving for this.

7. The Water Stanza

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious and pure.¹⁷

We have ample record in the life of Francis of his great love of water. We find that he sometimes went to places surrounded by water where he retired to pray, for example, Lake Trasimene and San Francesco nel Deserto in the Venetian lagoon. The AC 88 records that he was very careful with water and did not like water to be thrown out carelessly, but treated with respect. For Francis, water was one of the four elements and it was a powerful symbol of the creator who made it, and of Christ the Saviour, who promised living water to his followers and even to become a fountain of water springing up to eternal life within them (John 4:7).

The qualities he selects are significant. She is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. Most of the translators use the word ‘pure’ for *casta* (e.g. Doyle 1980:39; Fortini

¹⁷ *Laudato si, misignore, per sor acqua
laquale e multo utile et humile
et pretiosa et casta.*

1981:568; Armstrong 1973:228; Sorrell 1988:101). I would have thought ‘chaste’ a more adequate translation, because I think Francis was aware of a virginal element in water.

One final point is that he uses *pretiosa* here of water, the same word he used earlier for the moon and stars. It is a term, I think, that he could have used of any element and of any creature. The world, for him, was a place filled with wonder, and from his perspective anything in it would look small and very dear in the light of the vast immensities of the Universe.

8. The Fire Stanza:

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night.
How beautiful is he, how gay! Full of power and
strength.¹⁸

I have already spoken of Francis’s attitude to fire, and indeed of the extraordinary lengths he was prepared to go in his veneration of this element. Francis extraordinary devotion to fire came from his recognition of it as a symbol of God (Doyle 1980:109). For example, in the Old Testament God is seen as a devouring fire (Deut 4:24), as accompanying God’s appearance to humans (Ex 3:2), and as a sign of God’s favor and acceptance as fire came down to consume a sacrifice (Gen 4:4). There are several examples in the New Testament also where fire is seen as a symbol for God (e.g. Heb 12:29; 2 Thess 1:7; Acts 2:4).

There was the incident when fire broke out in the cell where Francis ate. He did not want to help his companion extinguish it, but he took the hide that he used to cover himself at night, and went into the forest. Later he rebuked himself and told his companion “From now on, I don’t want this hide over me since, because of my avarice, I did not want Brother Fire to consume it.”(AC 87).

¹⁸ *Laudato si, misignore, per frate focu,
Per loquale ennalumini la nocte:
Edello ebello et iocundo
Et robustoso et forte.*

In relation to this stanza, I cannot forbear to mention the episode of the cauterization of his eyes. The papal surgeon was asked to try to heal Francis's eyes and he decided to apply a hot iron. It was a terrifying and, of course, a useless operation. Francis accepted the ordeal and prayed Brother Fire to be gentle and merciful. According to Celano, he did not feel the hot iron, and was surprised when the operation was over (2C 166; AC 86).

What is the significance of fire in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis? From the earliest times, fire has fascinated human beings and has been the subject of myth and philosophical speculation. Francis's whole attitude was one of humble gratitude and service of the Most High (2MP 116). His reluctance to extinguish a fire and his self-reproach for saving something the fire wanted to consume show his respect for Brother Fire (2MP 117), as does his prayer to Brother Fire to be gentle and merciful when having an operation (2C 166).

One may ask if Francis really regarded fire as a proper object of petition as one would petition a powerful patron. It seems to me that Francis's mysticism allows him to penetrate very deeply into the non-rational world. Francis's vision of nature harks back to a primitive paradisaic state as Celano says clearly when he wrote:

As the teachings of the gospel had declined seriously in practice – not just in some cases but in general everywhere – this man was sent from God so that everywhere, throughout the whole world, after the example of the Apostles, he might bear witness to the truth. [...] in these last times, a new evangelist, like one of the rivers of Paradise, has poured out the streams of the gospel in a holy flood over the whole world. [...] In him and through him an unexpected joy and a holy newness came into the world. A shoot of the ancient religion suddenly renewed the old and decrepit. A new spirit was placed in the hearts of the elect. [...] the ancient miracles have been renewed through him. In the desert of this world a fruitful vine has been planted in a new Order in an ancient way (1C 89).

Bonaventure was to amplify this theme later when he wrote:

It came to pass by a supernatural influx of power that the nature of brute animals was moved in some gracious manner toward him. Even inanimate things obeyed his command, as if this same holy man, so simple and upright, had already returned to the state of innocence (LMn 3:6).

There is an eschatological element in Francis's attitude to nature. I am reminded of the great passage in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans (8:22) about the whole creation groaning in labor pains while it and we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Although there is no reference by Francis to this passage in the sources now available, an awareness of the end of the world is very much a part of the Christian world-view, and is brilliantly depicted in the famous *Dies Irae*, credibly attributed to Francis's disciple and biographer Thomas of Celano. Francis himself shows his eschatological awareness in the final stanzas of the CtC. It is hardly necessary to emphasize the role of fire in the end-times.

In conclusion, the element of fire impressed Francis deeply and aroused his admiration for its beauty, its power and strength, and the way it imaged God.

9. The Earth Stanza

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,
Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces
Various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.¹⁹

“One of the first theophanies of the earth as such, and particularly of the earth as soil was its ‘motherhood’, its inexhaustible power of fruitfulness” (Eliade 1958:245). Before becoming a mother goddess or divinity of fertility, the earth presented itself to humanity as a mother *Tellus Mater* (:245). These lines from Eliade express very clearly the basic relations of humankind to the earth. Eliade speaks of it as one of the first theophanies, that is, manifestations of the Divine in the aspect of motherhood. Human beings who are close to

¹⁹ *Laudato si, misignore, per sora nostra matre terra,
laquale ne sustenta et governa,
et produce diversi fructi con coloriti fiori et herba.*

the earth and its fruitfulness are usually aware of the wonderful fertility and fruitfulness of the earth, as she brings forth season after season fruits, colored flowers and herbs.

This maternal aspect of the earth seems to be prior to the development of a mother goddess or divinity of fertility as Eliade indicates. In fact the cult of mother goddess was very widespread in the ancient world among the Greeks (:239), Romans, Middle East Civilizations and others (:239-264).

What happened to the cult of the Mother Earth goddess in her various forms? The answer to this question would require a close investigation of the history of religions, a realm of knowledge beyond my scope. When I think of the God of the Hebrews, Yahweh, the dominant images are of storms and thunder, a God of power and might who crushes his enemies like a potter's jar (Ps.2). However, as Eliade (1958:94) points out "Yahweh's personality and religious history are far too complex to be summed up in a few lines."

Perhaps the earth goddess aspect of the divinity, so prevalent in ancient times, was driven into obscurity, into the shadow by the powerful, aggressive imagery of the God of armies favored by the Hebrew religion and taken over by Christianity and Islam. It is notable that when Christian states and empires became powerful and aggressive, they did not hesitate to involve the Lord of armies, the God of power and might, to give them success in their wars and conquests, their slaughters and annexations.

Underneath this image of God, however, there is present the other image of the fertile caring mother. Jung surprised many people in 1950 by hailing the dogma of the assumption of the Blessed Mother as a great and significant event because it recognized the importance of the feminine, maternal element in Christian religious doctrine, a recognition long overdue (Jung 1989:41-44).

There is no suggestion in the CtC that Francis had any notion of an earth divinity, independent of the Most High. Since he was vividly aware that the Most High created the

earth, it does not strain the imagination to think of the Lord as a producer and mother of creation.

Francis did not go to the extreme of the Native American prophet, Smoholla, who said to his followers: “You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom? ... You ask me to cut the grass, but how dare I cut off my mother’s hair?” (Eliade 1958:246). Eliade cites several other instances of this extreme reverence for Mother Earth on the same page, and in subsequent pages.

Of great interest is the belief that children come from the earth. Saint Augustine mentions a Latin goddess called *Levana* who raised children from the earth (City of God 4:11). This accords with the Genesis account of the creation of the first man from the earth (Gen 2:7). Therefore Mother Earth deserves great reverence since she is, in these views, a mother of all things that live.

Eliade (1958:247) mentions a custom practices in the Abruzzi in Italy, and also among several other peoples, of placing a new born child on the earth as soon as it is washed and swaddled, perhaps to dedicate the child to the earth or to make a contact with the powers of the earth.

Is there an echo of this custom in that curious detail in the account of Francis’s death, when he asked to be laid on the earth completely naked? Is it an acknowledgement of the maternity of Mother Earth? According to Eliade, this was sometimes done with people who were sick or dying (247). It is hard to be certain about Francis’s intention to be laid naked on the ground. Being like his master, Christ would certainly have been part of it, but it seems reasonable to see it as a sign of reverence for Mother Earth.

Talk of Francis’s reverence for Mother Earth leads one to inquire about what one might call the maternal aspect in his personality. In examining this, one thinks first about his own relationship with his parents. The relationship with his father, who had indulged him

generously as a young man, turned very sour when Francis adopted his Gospel life. There is no evidence that they were ever reconciled. His relationship with his mother seems to have been better. One knows, at least, that when he was locked up at home by his father, his mother released him (1C 13). But that tells us very little about Francis.

5.5 Maternal Qualities of Francis

When followers began to gather around Francis he was willing to receive them, and by implication to take responsibility for them, even though some of them were older than him. A revealing indication of how he conceived this role is given in the parable he told Pope Innocent:

The Lord spoke figuratively to him in spirit: “There was a little, poor and beautiful woman in a desert, whose beauty fascinated a great king. He wanted to take her as his wife, because he thought that, from her, he would have handsome sons. After the marriage was celebrated and consummated, there were many sons born and raised. Their mother spoke to them in this way: ‘My sons, do not be ashamed, for you are sons of the king. Therefore, go to his court and he will provide for all your needs.’ When they went to see the king, he was struck by their good looks, and noticing a resemblance of himself in them, he asked them: ‘Whose sons are you?’ When they answered that they were the sons of the little poor woman living in the desert, the king embraced them with great joy. ‘Do not be afraid,’ he said, ‘for you are my sons. If strangers are fed at my table, how much more will you who are my lawful sons.’ He then ordered the woman to send to his court all of the children she had borne to be fed.”

When these things had been shown to Blessed Francis while he was praying, the man of God understood that the poor woman signified him.

After he completed his prayer, he presented himself to the Supreme Pontiff and narrated point-by-point the story that the Lord had revealed to him. “My Lord,” he said, “I am that little poor woman whom the loving Lord, in his mercy, has adorned, and through whom He has been pleased to give birth to legitimate sons. The King of kings has told me that He will nourish all the sons born to me, because, if He feeds strangers, He must provide for His own (L3C 50; AP 35).

This story is quite amazing, it seems to me. If one follows the imagery, Francis is presenting himself as a poor woman who is very fertile producing many children through the power of the Great King. She looks after them as best she can and then sends them to the king who recognizes them as his own and pledges to provide for them. For Francis then, the Great King is, of course, the Most High. The Pope is the one who has responsibility for Mother Church, all over the world; and Mother Church is the one who has the care and responsibility for providing for all her children. But what is very striking is that Francis himself shares, according to the imagery he uses, in the maternal nature of the Church, giving birth to a host of children.

This understanding of himself, as a mother, is developed in the crisis he endured in his later years. He was in agony over the way some of his sons were behaving. The Lord spoke to him in his torment and told him that it was He, the Lord, who had given him sons and He would care for them (AC 112; 2C 158; 2MP 81). This assurance consoled Francis and he returned to it whenever he heard of some bad example among the brothers: “From that time on he used to say that the virtue of a single holy person overwhelms a great crowd of the imperfect, just as the deepest darkness disappears at a single ray of light” (2C 158). I think it would be entirely right to say that God, the Most High, is both father and mother of the Orders that Francis founded.

The earth stanza in the CtC draws attention to the fertility of the earth who nourishes and sustains us. Francis’s intention in the CtC was to remind the people of his time of the great bounty of the Most High and to urge them to praise and thank the Lord for all the elements. Oddly enough, Francis does not mention animals, either wild or tame, although, as we have seen, he loved them too. There is no talk of cattle, sheep, pigs, fowl, or even his beloved birds of the air. This omission strikes me as curious, particularly since the biblical models he knew so well were very much aware of the animals, the birds and the fish (Pss

8;104). Francis does not mention a single animal. Nevertheless, of all the saints he is perhaps the one most loved and venerated for his care and affection for animals, as is evident from so many pictures and statues.

Stanza 10.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks,
And serve him with great humility.²⁰

In this final stanza of the Canticle as it was originally composed the focus shifts. In the previous stanzas he is addressing the Most High Lord and asking that He be praised by his people for all his creatures, and of course through and by them. Here, he addresses his listeners and asks them to praise and bless, to give thanks, and serve the Lord with great humility.

Eric Doyle (1980:177) has written an eloquent chapter on these few words which encapsulate much of Francis's spirituality. He begins by stressing that virtue so dear to Francis, humility. The humble person has learned to live without illusions, and can see the world and the self as they are, with the kind of transparency which offers no obstacle to truth (:178). Thus humility recognizes the whole universe as God's creation. Everything is gift from the overflowing generosity of God.

This recognition of everything as gift leads to the other great theme in this stanza, thanksgiving, which goes to the very heart of Christian spirituality. It is the theme of eucharist, and it is at the very center of Francis's own spirituality. Doyle (1980:179) develops the theme, pointing out that in the element of the sacramental eucharist there is a kind of microcosm of the universe and the life of the universe. The grains of wheat and vines sown in the earth are transformed into bread and wine and then in the sacramental rite into the

²⁰ *Laudate et benedicite, misignore,
et rengratiate et serviate li
cum grande humilitate.*

body and blood of the Savior-creator, thus enabling human beings to become incorporated into the mystical body of Christ.

The final theme of this stanza is service – to serve the Lord. Doyle (:181), points out the importance of practical service of the Lord by working. In his Test Francis wrote: “And I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all the brothers to give themselves to honest work” (:20). In working, however, the brothers must not “extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer” (LR 2).

This last stanza of the original CtC brings the poem to a fitting conclusion with a kind of coda, resuming the opening theme.

What about the last two stanzas of the Canticle? The first thing to remark is that they are extraneous to the main theme of the poem and hardly concern the main topic of my work. They were written in view of special circumstances. The first, in an effort to reconcile warring factions in Assisi, and the second, a response to the arrival of Sister Death. For the sake of completeness however, I shall include them here.

Stanza 11. All praise be yours, my Lord,
 through those who grant pardon
 For love of you; through those who endure
 Sickness and trial
 Happy those who endure in peace,
 By you, Most High, they will be crowned.²¹

Fortini (1981:577) has an eloquent and moving account of the way this verse of the CtC affected the Podestà of Assisi. An immediate reconciliation was brought about between the Bishop and the Podestà, and the spirit of the poor, helpless, suffering Francis, brought them together in a peaceful accord. Francis, their fellow citizen, had staked his life on the

²¹ *Laudato si, misignore, per quelli ke perdonano,
 per lo tuo amore
 et sostengo infirmitate
 et tribulatione.
Beati quelli kel sosterranno in pace,
ka da te, Altissimo sirano incoronati.*

love and mercy of God. Could they now continue in enmity and hatred after his eloquent appeal? They were reconciled.

Stanza 12. Welcome! Sister Death

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death
From whose embrace no mortal can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy those she finds doing your will!
The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks,
And serve him with great humility.²²

It is clear from the sources that the occasion of this last stanza on Sister Death was the episode when Francis asked his doctor if his illness was fatal, and was told that, barring a miracle, he had not long to live (2MP 123). It was then that he added the stanza on Sister Death, the longest in the CtC.

In copies of the Canticle that include the two additional stanzas, the stanza that ended the original version is transposed to the end to round off and complete the work.

5.6 Reflections on the Canticle

The Canticle has always enjoyed a great measure of praise for its freshness, its originality and its spontaneity. It is also very significant for its place in the inspiring life of Francis as I pointed out above. It comes like a burst of sunlight after a long period of heavy clouds, ominous thunder and stormy weather. The AC 83 and the 2MP 120 mention that

²² *Laudato si, misignore, per sora nostra
Morte corporale,
Da laquale nullu homo
Vivente poskappare.
Gai acqueli ke morano
Ne le peccata mortali!
Beati quelli ke trovarane
le tue sanctissime voluntati
ka la morte secunda
nol farra male.
Laudate et benedicte, misignore,
et rengratiate et serviate li*

Francis commenced it after receiving the assurance of eternal life, (the so-called *confirmatio*), and one cannot fail to be impressed by the confidence and serenity reflected in the *Canticle*.

Why did he compose the *Canticle*? His intention was that a band of the friars would go about the world singing the *Canticle* (AC 83) and thus draw the people of the world to recognize the splendor and glory of the “Most High King” of heaven in all his works. This was to lead to a conversion of minds and hearts and a renewal of the face of the earth.

Francis even managed to introduce what might be called a catechetical note in the last stanza about “*sora nostra morte corporale*”. “Woe to those who die in mortal sin”, and “blessed are those whom death will find in your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm.”

It is time to look at the *Canticle* and its significance in the larger picture of the Franciscan vision of the universe. It has often been regarded as the jewel and the crown, as it were, of Franciscan literature (Doyle 1980:39). But it is not merely a spontaneous outpouring of Francis’s spirit. It has a deeper signification.

I would like to quote a passage from the German philosopher, Max Scheler: (1954:87)

It was left to one of the great artificers of the spirit in European history to make the memorable attempt of uniting and harnessing this [a non-cosmic personal love-mysticism of universal compassion] within a single life-stream to the animistic sense of union with the being and life of nature. This was a very remarkable achievement of the saint of Assisi.

What this means, I think, is that Francis, in his own lifetime, united two different kinds of mysticism. The first, Scheler²³ calls “a non-cosmic personal love-mysticism of universal compassion”, by which is meant personal union reaching out in compassion to the whole realm of persons. The second is what I am calling nature mysticism, that is, a union

cum grande humilitate.

²³ According to Armstrong (1973:14-15) Professor Zaehner and D. Knowles “find it difficult to accommodate nature mysticism within theistic categories” but he adds that they have not seriously considered the evidence.

which Scheler calls animistic with the being and life of nature. In other words, Scheler believes that Francis was the first in the history of Europe to combine these two kinds of mysticism.

Scheler invites one to see the CtC as a breakthrough to a new synthesis. This synthesis is achieved by Francis in a great cosmic and trans-cosmic vision of the universe flowing from its source, the Most High, and living in that source. It is utterly Theocentric from the first line to the last and there is no hiatus between the creatures and their creator. In the vision of the CtC, creatures are already in the divine and the divine in them. It is not a matter of an inferential leap, but rather of a sacramental union and presence.

This impression is confirmed for me by the way in which Francis speaks of the creatures as members of his family, or rather as brothers and sisters in one great divine family. This implies that one takes Francis's language of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Fire and Sister Water, as much more than a quaint ornament. That is justified, I think, when one considers the great reverence with which Francis treated creatures. He is quite serious about his cosmic family, and its place in the creative source of all things.

The term sacramental has come up more than once in this thesis. Francis's devotion to the sacrament of the Eucharist, is well known (*Exhortation to the Clergy; Letters to the Custodians; A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*), and attested to over and over again. In his *Testament* he spoke movingly of the great reverence the Lord gave him for the Eucharist and for priests who administer the Eucharist:

I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which they [priests] receive and they alone administer to others. I want to have these most holy mysteries honoured and venerated above all things and I want to reserve them in precious places (10-12).

Could it be that he saw all creatures as having a quasi sacramental role in representing the Most High, and in making the presence of the Lord felt throughout the universe? I can

find no text which states exactly that but I think this view is entirely in accord with Francis's outlook: "Aroused by everything to divine love, he rejoiced in all the works of the Lord's hands and through their delightful display he rose into their life-giving reason and cause" (LMj 9:1).

In his study of the Canticle, Doyle (1980:40) writes:

While reading it I have felt myself to be a part of a total unity. It is an affirmation of being and so it confirms one's sense of the value of one's own existence. It brings reality to a fine point at which it is revealed that all beings are held in unity through a vast and intricate work of relationships. And because the potency to love all creation is in every one of us, so too is the power to create. By love and creativity the self and the world blend into ever finer unity. In loving we create and by creating we discover pathways to the future.

I think that this captures the inter-relatedness of creator and creation in the CtC, and supports, at least implicitly, the sacramentality of creation. One can listen to Bonaventure:

In beautiful things he contuited Beauty itself and through the footprints impressed in things he followed his Beloved everywhere, out of them all making for himself a ladder through which he could climb up to lay hold of him who is utterly desirable. With an intensity of unheard devotion he savored in each and every creature – as in so many rivulets – that fontal Goodness, and discerned an almost celestial choir in chords of power and activity given to them by God, and, like the prophet David, he sweetly encouraged them to praise the Lord (LMj 9:1).

The CtC is Theocentric through and through with a powerful ardor and fervor. Francis lived in God and God lived in him. Is the CtC also Christocentric? According to Delio (1999:305) even though the CtC does not mention Christ, it is permeated by the mystery of Christ. Through the mystery of the Incarnation Francis had a profound sense of God's presence in the world. Every person, every created thing, including the elements of the universe, spoke to Francis of the presence of God because of Jesus Christ (:305). Francis's life-long journey was an ever deepening relationship with Christ. One could recall the image of Greccio where Francis poured out his love of the Babe from Bethlehem, the infant Christ

who was the center of his life (1C 86). By the fire of divine love, Francis was formed into the likeness of Christ. On La Verna his life culminated in a great union and identification with Christ, his Lord. It would, in my view, be impossible to understand Francis's life as other than Christocentric. Based on Francis's mandate to follow "the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ" Christocentrism has always been a characteristic of Franciscanism (Warner 1998:76).

The culminating event at La Verna was an antecedent of the composition of the CtC, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The memory of the event could not have faded because his bleeding wounds constantly reminded him of what had happened. Why then is the name of Christ not mentioned in the poem? Why is it that a man whose life and identity were so bound up with Christ does not mention the name of Christ in his great poem at the end of his final years?

It seems to me that the vision of the CtC is concentrated on the glory of the Most High revealed in his creation. Francis's intention, as we seen, and as Sorrell (1988:118-124) in particular has clarified, was to remind the people of the lavish bounty of God in providing for their needs by his creation, and to encourage and exhort them to gratitude for God's gifts. This is the whole thrust of the main part of the CtC, leaving aside the later editions about pardoning injuries, enduring sufferings and welcoming Sister Death. One should not be surprised that he did not try to include an account of the saving mystery of Christ in the CtC. As has been pointed out, the later editions to the CtC disrupt somewhat the unity of the CtC (Sorrell 1988:118-124). However, the new themes can be seen as a development of the main theme rather than as a disruption (:135).

Can it be said that the CtC is implicitly Christological? I believe it can, because in the New Testament creation is often spoken of as happening in Christ who is seen as the apex of creation (Jn 1:1-3; 1:14). There is also the famous passage in Ephesians in which God is

called blessed because he has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens; because he chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him. Christ is there described as the image of the living God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth visible and invisible (Eph 1:3-14; Col 1:15-20). A similar perspective is presented in John (1:1-3), that is, that all things were created through the Word who is with God and who is God. Francis, who was so devoted to prayer that Celano says he became a prayer (2C 95), knew these passages intimately and there can be no doubt that his vision of creation was deeply Christocentric and Trinitarian.

It would be a mistake, I think, to expect to find a comprehensive account of Francis's world vision in this poem. It is there implicitly, I believe, and I have tried to discern and present its main themes. But the vision of Francis requires, for its understanding, his whole life and the stories and legends that grew up around him. Hayes (1996:3) notes, that regardless of when and how they appeared there are a number of crucial insights to be found in the spirituality of Francis, and it is possible to see a significant relationship between them. In claiming that the CtC is both Christocentric and Theocentric, I think that, three of the insights to be determined in Francis's spirituality which are mentioned by Hayes: the focus of Francis on the humanity of Christ, his sense of God as a loving Father and his view of creation as a mirror and image of God, are very relevant (:3-4).

Was Francis's intention, in writing the Canticle, ever fulfilled? There was one dramatic instance in which it was more than abundantly fulfilled. In the famous reconciliation between the podestà and the Bishop of Assisi which Fortini (1981: 578-80) has described so well. Were there other instances of the Canticle being successfully used in evangelization? I cannot find any evidence that there were. The expectation that it would work as Francis hoped was always unrealistic, I think. The singing of the Canticle might have proved to be

very powerful if Francis himself were present, as he was implicitly on the occasion of the reconciliation in Assisi when everybody knew he was dying. But fine words, unsupported by actions and lives, can have an effect opposite to what was intended.

The Franciscans did indeed play a great role in bringing peace and mediating between warring parties at various times in their history, especially in the earlier centuries of the movement. One outstanding peacemaker was Blessed Peter of Mogliano who was very famous in his time for bringing reconciliation among warring parties (Habig 1979:560). Saint Elizabeth of Portugal was another Franciscan who brought peace (:487-488).

In the history of Franciscan evangelization, I cannot find that the Canticle has played any central part. Nevertheless, it has won a very respectable place in the Christian hymnology of the Christian movement. There have been quite a number of settings of the Canticle throughout the ages and it is still popular in our own days. One often hears *Laudato Si Misignore*. It has also been translated and set to music in other languages.

One very poignant account is to be found in Eloi LeClerc when he tells of a terrible journey of a mass of men under SS guards who treated them with the utmost brutality. LeClerc was one of five Franciscans on that journey of starving, dying men. When at last one of the five died, what rose from their hearts was not a cry of despair but the song of Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Creatures* (LeClerc 1977:233-234).

How is Francis to be rated as a poet on the basis of the Canticle? Sorrell (1988:137) has made a detailed study of Francis's poetical work from the evidence available to us. He is able to trace improvements in style and technique in Francis's work. According to Sorrell, the CtC is the crowning achievement of Francis, and is greatly respected in the early vernacular poetry of Italy (:137).

The CtC is the highest expression of Francis's nature spirituality and it requires no great leap of the imagination to discern the mystical element underlying it. That Francis was a

nature mystic is abundantly clear (Doyle 1980:39), and I have mentioned Scheler's view that Francis combined in himself two streams of mysticism, the "non-cosmic personal love-mysticism of universal compassion, and the sense of union with the being and life of nature" (cf Section 5.5.). Cousins (1983:165), in a very important article, speaks of Francis representing "a watershed in the history of Western Christianity". He seems to think that the two currents divided after Francis, the speculative Neo-Platonic mysticism and the devotional current flowing from Francis, but he insists that Francis combined the two. In this he seems to agree with Scheler's view. Cousins mentions that Francis is considered "the prime example of a nature mystic in the history of Christianity" (:167-168).

5.7 Conclusion

It seems to me that the writings of Francis, including the CtC are a very precious gift to us, enabling us to discern the spirit of this great man, if they are studied carefully. It is well to remember that they do not stand on their own. The Franciscan tradition flows also in the great body of stories and anecdotes that have come down to us in works like the AC, MP, and LFI. These stories, in their inimitable charm and naiveté have, like the Gospel parables, great influence and power to transform. The Franciscan collection is one of the great collections of its kind.

At the end of this long chapter on the CtC, it is time to ask if this study has advanced the hypothesis I am examining, that is, that nature has an extremely important role in the mysticism and spirituality of Francis. Francis's great poem, especially when studied together with his life, shows that there is no conflict or even tension between nature mysticism and what Scheler calls "personal love-mysticism" (cf Section 5.5).

Some nature mystics have not been religious, and have indeed been opposed to conventional religion. One example is Richard Jefferies (Hay 1982:149). Another is the British writer Marghanita Laski who wrote a book on mystical experience and was keen to

reclaim mysticism from religious believers in favor of non-religious believers like herself (Laski 1961).

I think this study of the CtC has advanced and deepened my hypothesis that nature is of paramount importance in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis. The CtC is filled with a sense of the presence and the power, the benevolence and the generosity of the Creator. It is integrated into a vision of reality that is fundamentally and thoroughly Theocentric, and by implication, Christocentric. It shows no kind of hiatus between Neo-Platonic nature mysticism and devotional personal mysticism of union with God (love-mysticism as Scheler called it).

The purpose of my next chapter will be to gather the fruits of my exploration of the role of nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis and to discuss the question of ecology, the study of the environment, of which, Saint Francis is the patron.