

Chapter 6

Gathering the Fruits

6.0 Introduction

My purpose in this chapter is to gather the fruits of this lengthy exploration of the role of nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Saint Francis. The hypothesis I am examining is that nature played a very large part in the spiritual and mystical life of Francis, and I have examined the sources in detail for evidence in relation to this. The evidence came from the early biographies, the reminiscences of Francis's companions and the stories and legends that gathered around his unique personality. Perhaps it would be best to begin with a brief resumé of the journey I have made.

After a brief preamble on Francis's attachment to nature, which so endeared him to the Romantic Movement, I undertook an analysis of the two key terms of my investigation, that is, spirituality and mysticism. This analysis provides the framework of the whole investigation, and it is necessary to have a clear idea of the distinct structure and scope of these two very important areas of experience and life, because they form the armature, as it were, of the whole study. This was followed by a detailed study of the places of Saint Francis and his fascination with certain kinds of landscape, especially mountains, rivers and lakes. It is important to realize that he spent about half or more of every year in such places, and that he was as Omer Englebert (1965:12) has said, "one of the greatest hermits in the history of the church". The impulse that drove this joyful leader of his city's youth out to the wilds must have been extremely powerful.

Next I turned to the heavenly bodies, the sun, moon and stars and to the elements of the world, earth, water, air and fire, and the way Francis related to them. Then I looked at Francis's relation to nature, his affection and kinship with all growing things, plants, flowers, trees and especially his affection for the animal creation, beasts and birds and fish.

After that prolonged survey it was time to turn to what is generally regarded as Francis's poetic masterpiece, *The Canticle of the Creatures*, and to examine in detail the indications and the clues it gives to his outlook on the world.

What has this study revealed of the spirituality and mysticism of Francis? How is one to deal with them? If this work were a biography, it would be sufficient to record and note the various episodes of Francis's relation to nature, and allow them to speak for themselves. But since this is not a biography, but an interpretative study, it is necessary to incorporate the episodes and stories I have examined into an overall account of the spirituality and mysticism of the saint of Assisi. To this I shall now turn, beginning with mysticism.

6.1 The Language of Mysticism

As I mentioned already, mysticism has to do with states of consciousness and is very concerned with what one might call the contours of consciousness. The attempt to describe the conscious states of another person or even one's own state of consciousness is by no means easy. How can one get into another person's mind? There are formidable obstacles, as philosophers of the mind have often pointed out. One of the most striking accounts is given by the famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1963:19), when he compared one's private state of mind to a little box containing a beetle. No one could look into this box except the owner. The owner could not look into anyone else's box. How then could any comparison be made between one person's state of mind and that of another?

The point Wittgenstein was making can be illustrated easily enough by considering the case of color blindness. Many people do not know that they are color blind, and do not find out until a test is carried out. They can deal with most situations quite adequately and use the appropriate color words without arousing any question for the most part. If their problem is the fairly common one of not being able to distinguish red and green, they will nevertheless always refer to blood as red and grass as green, and know that red traffic lights

are on top and green at the bottom. It is only when they are asked to identify the colors when there are no clues from the context that they fail.

Another case in which a radical difference in consciousness can be inferred is the rare case when a person has no feeling of pain. They can endure burns and blows and even broken limbs without feeling pain. It is, of course, a most dangerous condition and those who have it have to be watched very carefully lest dreadful damage be done to them (Melzack 1961:41-48).

These are two striking cases of differences in states of consciousness, that can be identified fairly easily. Is it possible to generalize from these examples? Obviously enough, when we consider the sensorial modes, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching, it is possible to detect defects and variations, usually by noticing differences in behavior. But this does not, by any means, enable us to experience directly another person's states of consciousness.

One might question whether the above examples are really states of consciousness. It is usual to think of intellectual or emotional states when the term is used, for example, states of depression, anxiety, joy, elation and so on. However, it is possible to learn a good deal from considering the sensorial modes, and the lower states of consciousness associated with them. The point is that we cannot directly look into or intuit any states of consciousness, even our own, although that is the dominant picture our language gives us. One talks casually of looking into oneself, into our soul, and also of looking into the minds of others. We cannot do this. What we can do, is observe carefully the language that people use, the language they have been taught and have learned, and make inferences from that about their states of consciousness to the best of one's ability. These inferences will be conditioned, perhaps even determined, by our own states of consciousness.

One might wonder if there are people who are completely insensitive to the dimension of the holy, the sacred. One meets, occasionally, people in whose lives this dimension seems to be missing. It is difficult to decide whether these people are simply lacking a dimension of consciousness or whether they have never had their latent awareness developed.

Wittgenstein's (1963:20) own concern, with the beetle in the box, was to show that a purely private language is impossible, and to reinforce his view that all language is learned and used according to public, interpersonal criteria in a form of life. That form of life or common way of life is basic. It is what has to be accepted.

What is the relevance of this to the question of mystical states of mind? Are we trying to describe purely private and interior phenomena, which we alone can perceive? There is a sense in which our experiences, all of them, are private to us. But the crucial point is that our language does not get its meaning or reference from those experiences primarily. Our language is learned, used and taught according to public criteria used in our particular culture or way of life. Any "private" language is based upon that.

It may be worthwhile to test this for a moment against an example of mystical experience. Take this from the autobiography of Richard Church:

I saw the phrase 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. I felt the hair on head tingling and a curtain of red blood appeared to fall before my eyes. I leaned forward clasping myself close while the world rocked around me. And as this earthquake subsided, I saw a new skyline defined. It was a landscape in which objects and words were fused. All was one with the word as the verbal reality brought to material life by Mind, by man. It was therefore the very obvious, tangible presence of the Creator. [...] Sitting in Surrey Lane School, crouched over my fluttering and burning stomach [...] I received a philosophy which I have never lost, a working faith in the oneness of all life (in Paffard 1976:66).

I think it is clear that the experience recorded by Church is certainly mystical, and involved a strongly felt awareness of the presence of God. In that experience he received what he called a philosophy, a working faith in the oneness of all life.

When one looks at the language here, it does not seem particularly arcane or mysterious. It is true that to describe an inner event in terms of the hair on one's head tingling, a curtain of red blood falling before one's eyes, and the world rocking around one is most unusual but the words he uses are quite intelligible in ordinary language. To someone who has never had any such experience, it would probably sound utterly strange or incredible. But to a few others it might, as it were, jump off the page and be an illumination, as the words Church read were an illumination to him.

Does what I have written above apply to all mystical writings? I think it does (Hay 1982:202). Even if the writings in question are very mysterious and baffling, the words and concepts they use come from some linguistic community in which language is learned, used and taught according to common or public criteria. This does not exclude the possibility that some people who write of mystical experience may do it very badly or inadequately, nor does it exclude either the possibility that some mystical writings may be using a sort of code to which we have lost the key. The Jewish mystical literature of the Kabbalah¹ (also Cabbala) has an elaborate mystical code underlying it and a knowledge of the code would be needed to interpret the literature (Woods 1980:154).

So much by way of some comments on the language of mysticism. My basic point is that this language is not a purely private language understood only by those who have mystical experience. It is a common or public language, which nevertheless can be used to communicate, however inadequately, some very private and personal experiences.

¹ In this esoteric method of biblical interpretation even the letters of the biblical text bear a special meaning (Deist 1987:23). According to Wood (1980:154), mystical knowledge is confined to a "small elite of the chosen who impart this knowledge to their disciples".

6.2 Saint Francis of Assisi

The first question to ask is: “Was Saint Francis a mystic?” The definition of mysticism that I adopted was, that mysticism is a felt or experienced awareness and knowledge of the presence of God (cf Section 1.3). For anyone who has consulted the life of Saint Francis the evidence is overwhelming. His biographers report seeing him in ecstasy, rapt in prayer, many times (1C 24; 2C 94-101; LMj 6:6; LMj 9:2). The early scene of Francis in Bernard of Quintavale’s house in Assisi is a very attractive one, with Francis caught up in prayer and repeating over and over “My God and my all” (ABF 20). At the other end of his life, at the time of the Stigmata, Brother Leo saw him in ecstasy repeating over and over “Who are you my most dear God, and who am I, a worm and your little servant” (ABF 37).

It should be noted, by the way, that Francis was strongly averse to anyone seeing him at prayer, even by Brother Leo, or others of the “inner circle”. However, it seems that at times he could not help himself from going into ecstasy.

How far can one go in describing the mysticism of Saint Francis? Descriptive mysticism is a term especially favored by Auguste Poulain (1978:xi) in his pioneering work on *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, and he gave examples in his writings. However, we have no writings from Saint Francis describing his mystical experience. It is possible however, to infer a good deal from his writings of the way he experienced God’s presence. The same words and expressions recur, and one can discern easily enough, I think, some of the salient points of that experience. A summary account will suffice here.

The goodness of God, bountiful, abundant, and overflowing is present everywhere, from the early *Laudes*² and exhortations to the ringing tones of *The Canticle of the Creatures*: “Most high, all powerful, good Lord”.

² According to Sorrell (1988:109) this is an early Latin work written in 1213. It is also known as the San Gemini lauds. The rough and awkward style and the Italianisms show that Francis had not fully mastered Latin.

Another salient attribute for Francis was that God is “Most High”. The obvious source for this is the liturgy, especially the *Gloria in excelsis*, and it seems to have come alive for him, and to have captured his imagination. This is very characteristic of the medieval view of the world arranged in hierarchical order, culminating in the Supreme Lord (Luscombe 1997:25-29; Colish 1998:71).

When Francis turns his attention to the sun, moon and stars, wind and air, fire and water and mother earth, our sister, it is clear that the scope of his outlook is absolutely universal and all embracing. This is quite remarkable since people tend to limit themselves to a favorite corner of the universe, or to regard some element of the universe as especially sacred, for example sun or moon, or mountain or grove, or river or spring (Eliade 1958:38-216).

There is, of course, the whole animal creation. It is clear that Francis had a great love of animals, even though he never kept them as pets. I noted too that they are absent from the CtC. I find this surprising but I do not think any special significance can be read into this. All of the elements and creatures were spring boards, or to use a more modern metaphor, launching pads for Francis to go into ecstasy.

Another element of his mysticism is that he never lost sight of the inherent wretchedness of human beings. Even though he had been raised to great heights he never forgot his lowly and unworthy origins (ABF 9:37). He never forgot that he was a sinner, an unworthy servant who accepted everything gratefully, especially illness and infirmity. Francis never ceased to be a penitent, always in the act of turning towards God. He never regarded himself as one of the perfect, a term frequently used by some of the Cathars (also known as Albigensians) about themselves (Colish 1998:251).

Francis's spirit seems to soar as he pours out his soul. The second half of the last sentence of the chapter is remarkable:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 Creator of all,
 Savior of all
 Who believe and hope in Him,
 and love Him, Who,
 without beginning and end,
 is unchangeable, invisible,
 indescribable, ineffable,
 incomprehensible, unfathomable,
 blessed, praiseworthy,
 glorious, exalted,
 sublime, most high,
 gentle, lovable, delightful,
 and totally desireable above all else
 for ever.

Francis speaks here to God as three Persons, viewed as Creator and Savior of all who believe, hope and love Him. The attributes of God that Francis dwells on first are the transcendental ones – unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible and unfathomable. These attributes are very much part of the apophatic tradition, from the time of Dionysius's mystical theology (cf Section 2.2). The next attributes are positive. God is blessed above all, worthy of praise, glorious and exalted on high, sublime and most high. The last attribute is a favorite of Francis.

The last four attributes differ from the others. They are essentially conceived in relation to persons. God is gentle, lovable, delightful, and totally desirable. This is a striking change from the remote and abstract character of the preceding attributes. This is the language of the lover, the intimate, the one who takes delight in the beloved. This is truly love-mysticism, to use Scheler's phrase (cf Section 5.5).

6.3 Concluding Remarks on Francis's Mysticism

The term mysticism, as I pointed out earlier leads one to expect hidden, and arcane disclosures, and as I mentioned, some mystical traditions such as the Kabbalah have encouraged these expectations. Such is not the case with the mysticism of Saint Francis.

What I am suggesting is, that if we look for strange, exotic and unfamiliar truths in our study of Franciscan mysticism, we shall be disappointed. What Francis achieved was a profound apprehension of the very core of the Christian faith and gospel that is familiar, all too familiar, to average Christians. He was able to grasp this wild, astonishing message that human persons have been divinized, that bitter suffering is perfect joy, that the scanty meal of a beggar, eaten on a flat stone by a little stream, is really a banquet provided by the Great King (ABF 13:8 ; LFI 13), and that the meanest of creatures has the dignity of belonging to the royal Household, and should be respected as such.

In my earlier discussion of mysticism, I referred to the essay of William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings", in which, with the help of R.L. Stevenson and Walt Whitman, he drew attention to what one might call the mystical element in everyday life. When we seek the mystical we do not need to ascend into the heavens nor do we need to go down into the depths of the earth, or to seek to penetrate the boundaries of life before birth or after death. As another witness I cited, Margaret Prescott Montague, wrote: "Heaven is here and now, before our very eyes, surging up to our very feet, lapping against our hearts; but we, alas, know not how to let it in" (1917:25).

Another odd testimony to the presence of the mystical in the everyday comes from Abraham Maslow (Hjelle & Ziegler 1985:361-397). I call it rather odd, because Maslow, for most of his life was very anti-religious. When he developed his new approach to psychology he devoted himself to the study of what makes human beings flourish. He was particularly interested in what he called "peak" experiences (391), such as some of those I have looked

at in this study. Towards the end of his life he came to realize that peak experiences are part of the everyday fabric of life, and his own experience bore this out.

The mysticism of Saint Francis then, has nothing in common with the esotericism of other mystical traditions such as the cabbala. It is a mysticism of the ordinary, the everyday. If one were to ask whether Francis had mystical experiences, I think I would answer that his whole life, after his conversion, seems to have been lived at a mystical level. It is hard to be certain about the state of consciousness of another person, and we know that Francis endured some very dark and bitter times, especially after his return from the Holy Land. But whatever his disappointments, he never lost his trust in the Lord, and never faltered in his devotion. The “Certain blindness in human beings” that William James referred to was surely never part of Francis’s outlook. As has been seen, all the evidence points to his sense of wonder, of thanksgiving, of joy in the “Most High Omnipotent Good Lord” and all His creation.

I have defined mysticism as a felt or experienced awareness and knowledge of God (cf Section 1.3). The evidence that I have examined in this thesis shows that Francis possessed such an awareness habitually, whether he was contemplating a landscape, or those wild mountainous places he so loved, or gazing at flowers and trees, or preaching to and exhorting the wild animals and birds. Even when he was suffering great pain and discomfort, this basic state of his spirit did not waver, even when he faced the red hot iron that was to cauterize his eyes (AC 86). By that time, his being was so set in his absorption in the Lord that nothing could shake him.

G.K Chesterton (1957:154-157) had a very strong feeling and appreciation for Francis. He portrays Francis as a man who was able to bring to life and vitality an institution that appeared ancient and decrepit. He appeared eccentric to the world of his time and since, but that was because he was so centered in the fountain and source of all life, the creative

redeeming and sanctifying power and energy of God. As Chesterton notes what to other people were trite clichés and outworn platitudes such as the fatherhood of God, the family kinship of all humankind and indeed all creation, became live perceptions and discoveries, living and joyful revelations to Francis and his followers. In his era, the world seemed as if it had entered a new springtime and the freshness and enthusiasm he generated spread an aura that even today seems to cling to the places where he lived and prayed.

6.4 Spirituality

In mysticism, one deals with states of consciousness and how the awareness of God impacts on them. When turning to spirituality the concern is with the organization of life and the management of our relationships with the world around us. This would, of course, include the way of life in which one is involved, the persons with whom one deals and, not least, the management of our own energies, orientations, and even disabilities, or in Schneiders' (1989:692) words: "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms ... of self transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."

Here my main concern is, of course, the spirituality of nature. What that entails is, in the first place, the way in which human beings deal with nature and the natural world. Two extremes are possible, the first is to ignore it so far as this can be done. It seems to be largely a matter of temperament and some people go through life hardly aware of their environment. The other extreme is that of people who are intensely aware of nature and even depend on it. I have already mentioned the poet Wordsworth (Tintern Abbey 107-110) and how he was "well pleased to recognize in nature ... the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul of all my moral being". Such an attitude to nature would seem to make of one who holds it, a sort of instrument on which nature can play whatever tune she pleases.

One could raise the question whether Jesus was indifferent to nature. Anyone reading the passages about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air would certainly

recognize that the Lord was indeed closely in sympathy with nature, but also deeply aware that the Father was present throughout nature, adorning it and caring for his tiny creatures (Mt 6:25-34). It seems to me that Francis strikes the same note in regard to creation and creatures. This can come as no surprise in one whose whole aim was to live the Gospel.

In the history of Christian spirituality as represented, for instance, by McGinn, Meyendorff and LeClercq (1985), there is a variety of spiritualities, and they display different attitudes to nature. Gnostics, for instance, “could never accept the notion of a God who actually made the world, took responsibility for it and found it good” (1985:57). All the Christian spiritualities reject Gnosticism, of course, in the light of the scriptural accounts of creation. It would take too much space to summarize the various attitudes to nature in the centuries before Francis. Sorrell (1988:3-8), in his book on St. Francis and nature, devotes his introduction to the myth of the medieval hostility to nature, and shows that its basis has no solid foundation. In fact he assembles several texts in his first chapter that show admiration and sympathy for nature from early and medieval Christian writings (:9-38). Ashworth (1996:82) notes that “Christians have always believed in that divine spark at the center of the universe, that Spirit which hovered over the waters of creation, the Cosmic Christ who is the Alpha and Omega.”

Where is Francis situated in relation to nature? The answer to the question is quite complex. In relation to the extreme of ignoring nature, one must return an emphatic “No” when one considers Francis. Here is a man who spent most of his life out of doors, in close proximity to nature in all her changing moods and variations. He was intensely aware of the sky above him, dominated above all by *Sir Brother Sun*, beautiful, radiant, giving warmth and light to all things. One can sense the enthusiasm of Francis for the lovely and splendid sun, and equally for Sister Moon and the stars, wandering and fixed, that he contemplated so often in his nightly vigils.

I will not repeat the regard and affection he had for the elements, for the trees and the flowers and all plants on the earth; and for all living creatures great and small, from the birds of the air to the beasts of the field and forest and mountain, and even to the fish that swim in the water. He was very aware of them all, and frequently appealed to them to join him in praising their creator. Francis's attitude was very far from indifference.

Could we say then, that he went to the opposite extreme, and became a worshipper of nature, for her to play upon as on an instrument? Here again, the answer must be an emphatic "No". He never, for a moment, forgot the source and origin, the *fons et origo*, of all creation, the Most High Omnipotent Good Lord (AC 10). This is what kept him from any taint of nature worship or pantheism. At times he expressed himself in very extravagant language, as when he says we must be subject to every creature (AC 87). We have seen how far he could push that sentiment in the stories about his reluctance to put out fires and save things from being burnt (2MP 117). Behavior like that might well make one question his sanity, but Francis in his God-centeredness strikes me as one of the sanest and best centered of all people who have ever lived.

It is clear enough, that Francis neither worshipped nor ignored nature (Doyle 1980:40). He loved her in all her varieties and moods, and every manifestation of nature was, for him, a path to the Creator, a bridge to the sovereign Good Lord, a sacrament of the presence of the Most High (:41).

It is here, that we find the most positive and creative element of Francis's nature spirituality. It is not enough to say that Francis was neither this nor that, that he neither worshipped nor despised nature. That is far too negative a characterization, even though it is quite valid as far as it goes.

Here I would like to draw on a personal experience. I used to regard Francis's attitude to nature as something quaintly eccentric, as a rather unimportant feature of a life

that was, in its essence, an unrelenting search for service and union with Jesus the crucified Lord and with God the Father, the Most High. Nature had very little to do with this essential task, which attained its culmination in the stigmatization on LaVerna.

As I reflected on these matters, not least in my work on this thesis, I became aware of the shortcomings of my understanding. I came to believe that nature had a far more important place, indeed a central place, in the spirituality of Francis. Instead of regarding him as a kind of unreflective skylark, living in a sort of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, I realize that Francis was a man of meditation who must have pondered deeply during those months of agonized searching in the caves near Assisi for that path he followed so assiduously. In short it was my attitude that was superficial and unreflective, not that of Francis, I have come to believe that Francis's attitude to nature has a great deal to teach us if we will but attend to it.

In the first place there is a profound respect for nature. We can, of course, smile at his eccentricities. He did not want to trample on water thrown out, or to quench fires as a matter of course. He did not want to destroy trees entirely without leaving a part growing, and he wished to keep a place for flowers in the garden. The reason for this is his great respect for nature as the Lord's work (Doyle 1980:65). Surely this is something we need in our times, when we are ruthlessly destroying the rain forests and polluting the lakes and seas, and exploiting the resources of the earth in our voracious greed (Simsic 1987:101). Francis, in word and example, taught us a lot about what we now see as the care and maintenance of a small planet. Never was that word and example more in need of being followed.

In the second place there is that extraordinary attitude of Francis in which he refers to the elements of creation as his brothers and sisters. This goes far beyond the respect I just mentioned. This implies a claim of kinship. For many people, I dare say, it is no more than a quaint, and perhaps irritating affectation. It is certainly one of the best known elements of

his life and it is no accident that it was chosen as the title of one of the most striking films about him, *Brother Sun and Sister Moon*.

Was it an affectation? I used to assume it was. Doyle (1980:53) states that it may be easy for us to admire Francis's sentiments, but "easier still to dismiss them winsomely as just a little too idyllic to be shared by us." I now believe that Francis's deep respect for all creation, and calling all creatures *brother* and *sister* expresses a very profound element of his spirituality and mysticism. I believe that when Francis claimed kinship with the whole universe in using this language, he was expressing something very deeply felt. It was not that he was talking in exuberant, poetic metaphor, as people sometimes do about animals and other living things. I believe that in those long and lonely vigils, those days and weeks and months he spent in prayer and meditation, he came to recognize how much he had in common with this universe about him, how he shared with it a common source in the Creator Father, and the Word through whom and in whom, and with whom all things are created. His great love for creatures and all creation spilled over into his relationship with them because he perceived their intrinsic worth and sacredness.

The philosopher Wittgenstein (1961), in his early masterpiece, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (6.45) referred to "feeling the world as a limited whole" as an experience he called mystical. Why? Because to apprehend the world in this fashion implies that one is somehow 'outside' it, and in Wittgenstein's philosophy this is impossible.

But among the mystics (Julian of Norwich 1978:183), and indeed in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, this understanding of the world as something small and dear to the Lord is not uncommon: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance" (Isaiah 40:12).

In his endless prayer and meditation, mostly in places open to the world of nature, Francis was so deeply absorbed in the Lord God that he saw himself and the whole world as small and vulnerable and precious in God's hands.

The words spoken when Francis was totally absorbed in prayer on LaVerna "Who are you my most dear God, and who am I, a worm and your little servant?" (ABF 9:37) convey the same apprehension of himself and the world as small and lowly and unworthy of the presence of the Most High.

When therefore, Francis refers to the sun and moon and the rest of creation as his brothers and sisters, I believe he is speaking out a deep mystical awareness. It is not the casual flight of fancy of a poetical spirit but the confession and proclamation of one who has ascended to the source and origin of the universe, and has realized, not by his own efforts but by the gift of the Creator, his kinship with all creation (Doyle 1980:41).

What is decisive in mysticism is the felt awareness of the presence of God, when the conviction of faith overflows, I will not say into the senses, but into the whole person. In this experience one is, as it were, breathing a new air and nourished by another energy and life from beyond the horizons of one's mortal existence.

If I am right in saying that mysticism is implicit in Francis's communing with nature, it follows that love dominates his experience (:41). In the texts I have examined, love always comes to the fore, and creation is seen as a great outpouring of love by the creator. This is why Francis is always calling on creatures, inanimate, animate and rational, to pour out their gratitude and rejoicing to the one who has poured them out in excess of his love. One of the great adages of Neo-Platonism is that the good pours itself out. Francis seems to have been deeply aware of this perennial outpouring of the Most High, Creator Lord, and he wanted all creation to return that love, not as a cold duty grudgingly performed but, as a wholehearted enthusiastic response to the wonderful love that is the source of all.

What has this then to tell us about Francis's spirituality, taking spirituality to mean a way to God, a way of consecrating one's life, one's environment and one's culture to God? It seems to me that Francis found a way to deliberately treat the world as a sacrament, a sacred sign somehow accomplishing what it signifies. I mentioned earlier that nature is a natural source of mystical or quasi-mystical experiences for many people. I have quoted several instances of these. For Francis too, nature seems to have played this role in great abundance, and I believe that he found in nature a wonderful and overflowing source of inspiration and nourishment.

It should be pointed out that this element of Francis's spirituality is intimately bound up with his love of the open air, rustic retreats and the countryside of his beloved Italy. He was, as I have already mentioned, one of the greatest hermits of Christianity (Englebert 1965:12). This stream of eremitical life has not died out in the Order he founded, but in the main, his followers opted for an indoor life, serving churches and shrines, often in large cities and in great monasteries where nature has very little place. Perhaps it can be said that Francis's followers neglected and forgot this crucial element of his spirituality when they opted for a very different way of life, sheltered from nature.

I would suggest that there is room for a new reevaluation of Francis's nature spirituality. It tends, I believe, to be treated as an eccentricity. But if Francis found such nourishment and inspiration in nature, then I believe we should take very seriously the ways in which that love of nature worked in him.

It might be in order to make some suggestions on how a nature spirituality might be fostered in our world according to the spirit of Francis. My impression is that most of our prayers and devotions tend to be rather remote from nature and to focus instead on books and thoughts, on intellectual exercises and on arousing internal feelings. It strikes me that we have made our spirituality very "bookish" and introverted.

This is understandable, of course, since we are, after all, a people of the Book, and the Bible is, and must remain a key element of our spirituality, as indeed it was for Francis. But unless this spirituality is open to the air and the sky, to the weather and the climate, to the wonders of the sun and the moon, stars and planets, comets and meteors, the splendor of the dawn and the glories of a beautiful sunset, the sound of streams and rivers, the singing of the birds, the lightning and the thunder and the whole of creation, then it is neglecting one of the most powerful sources of life and creativity (Simsic 1987:100-108).

Did Francis himself neglect this source? In the light of our study of CtC the answer has to be a resounding “No”! In that poem, Francis shows himself intensely aware of the world around him. His saying that “the world is our cloister” shows his attitude plainly enough, and all the elements of the world are close and intimate to him in the CtC. Certainly the CtC is the clearest and most powerful manifestation of his nature spirituality.

It can be said too, that the CtC is the only composition of Francis that reveals his nature spirituality. There can be no doubt about his care, respect and love for God’s creation, but it makes no strong appearance in his writings except in the CtC. How then are we so sure about his attitude to nature? His respect and love comes across, above all, in that primary source, the Franciscan tradition, the wonderful collection of stories about him on which I have drawn so copiously in this work.

For example, there is the lovely story of Francis and Masseo (LF1 13; ABF 13:8-14) sitting by a beautiful spring with the food they had begged spread on a stone before them. Francis broke into enthusiastic praise of God for such a great treasure. Masseo demurs, pointing out that they have no table-cloth, no knife, no dishes, no bowls, no house, no table, no waiter, no maid. In reply to this Saint Francis states that the treasure is that what they have, the bread they received, “the beautiful table of rock and such a clear spring” has been prepared by divine providence and not by human skill. This story reveals the transforming

vision of the mystic in action. Francis sees the world as a gift from God, full of splendor and glory, as the CtC shows so clearly.

Martin Buber, (1977; 1978) the great Jewish philosopher, collector and editor of *The Tales of the Hasadim*,³ was very strongly aware of the great treasure of the stories about Saint Francis. He counted them among the few great collections of stories similar to the stories of Zen Buddhism and to his own Hasidim collection. The Franciscan stories, exaggerated and fictitious as they sometimes are, are an immensely powerful medium for transmitting the Franciscan spirit. That is why I have used them extensively in this work.

However, apart from the *Canticle*, which shows very clearly Francis's love and appreciation of nature, and the stories which reveal that same love, the Franciscan tradition is not rich in using nature in its prayer formulations. When one compares it with Celtic Christian spiritual tradition one becomes aware of the great possibilities of a spirituality of people who lived mostly in the open air and whose lives were spent exposed to the splendors and the glories, but also to the harshness and dangers of the elements. A very accessible selection was published in the series of the Classics of Western Spirituality. Its title is simply *Celtic Spirituality* (McGinn:1999), and it is drawn from the main Celtic cultures.

As an example of the way in which Celtic prayers draw upon nature, I would like to dwell briefly on the famous *Breastplate of Saint Patrick*. The translation is taken from *Celtic Spirituality* (:118-120). It represents a remarkable fusion of Christian elements with an experience of nature, or perhaps it would be better to say that the nature experience is sublimated very beautifully into the Christian vision. The passage I have in mind goes like this:

³ The Hasidim (Chasidim) were a pious group of Jewish people. They were of the "intertestamental" period and were mostly clergymen. They stood for the preservation of the traditional Jewish faith and were opposed to the Hellenistic influence on their faith (Deist 1987:27).

I rise today:
 in Heaven's might
 in Sun's brightness,
 in Moon's radiance,
 in Fire's glory
 in Lightning's quickness,
 in Wind's swiftness,
 in Sea's depth
 in Earth's stability,
 in Rock's fixity.

It requires no great effort to see the similarities between this and the CtC of Francis. Sun and Moon, Fire and Wind, Sea and Earth are common to both. One striking difference is that the *Breastplate* invokes the elements to help and protect whereas Francis calls on them to praise the Lord and for the Lord to be praised in them.

Another culture that lived mainly in the open air was that of the Native Americans, my own ancestors. Their spirituality is imbued with images of the great plains, the mighty rivers, the awesome mountains, the forests, the lakes, the moods of the weather, the changes of the seasons, the starry skies of night and the "Great Spirit" (as my father used to call him), presiding and brooding over all. A collection of text of Native American Spirituality was made and published in the admirable series *The Classics of Western Spirituality* under the title *Native American Spirituality of the Eastern Woodlands* (1979), edited by Elisabeth Tooker. Particularly impressive is the text entitled "A Seneca Thanksgiving Address" (58-68). In this speech, which is quite long, the leader gives thanks to the one who fashioned the lives of the people for all the blessings they have received. Thanks is given for the earth who "supports our feet and provides for our needs"; for the plants that produce medicine and heal people; for brooks and rivers, ponds and lakes, for the maple tree that gives sugar and sweetness, and for the animals, described as providing "amusement for the warriors" and also food. They give thanks for the birds with outspread wings and for the helpers in the sky, "our Grandparents, the thunderers", who carry fresh water and sprinkle the gardens, and for "our

elder brother the sun” who gives beautiful daylight. And thanks are offered for “our grandmother, the moon,” and the stars arrayed in the sky when it is dark.

This great hymn of Thanksgiving reflects the spirit of a deeply religious people, living in close proximity to nature with all its moods and vagaries. They are deeply aware of how blessed they are in their world, and the note of gratitude and thanksgiving to the creator is paramount among them. In Christian terms we would say their spirituality is profoundly eucharistic in the original sense of that term, that is, thanksgiving rather than memorial of the last supper.

The parallels here with Saint Francis’s *Canticle* are quite striking and, I think, Saint Francis would have found it easy to resonate with their spirituality thus expressed.

Obviously I cannot attempt a comparative study of nature spiritualities in this work. These references to Celtic and Native American spirituality are inserted only to provide a context and contrast for the nature spirituality of Francis.

In all this discourse about the spirituality of Francis and its kinship with other spiritualities such as Celtic Christian spirituality and Native North American spirituality, which is, of course, non Christian, one is reminded again and again that Francis’s whole spirituality is grounded in the central mystery of Christ, the savior. Nature mystic he surely was, but his heart and mind were centered on the incarnation and the suffering and death of his Lord. A defining characteristic of Franciscanism has always been Christocentrism. This is based on Francis’s mandate to follow the “teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ” (ER 1:1). Francis was once found weeping disconsolately near the Portiuncula, and when asked why he was crying he exclaimed that he was crying because of the passion of the Lord (L3C 5:14). It is evident that Francis was able to identify profoundly with Christ to the point of imploring Him to allow him to share as far as possible in the sufferings of his passion (LFl 1973:1448). His deepest wish was granted on LaVerna in September, 1224.

In view of this central orientation of his life and the overwhelming culmination of his stigmatization, it might sound superfluous to talk about the Christocentric nature of Francis's spirituality. There is nothing merely theoretical about Christocentrism in Francis. He lived it to the full, and he was able to draw all of nature and all its elements into that vision.

6.5 Ecology

The last theme I wish to discuss is that of ecology, the study of the environment, of which, of course, Saint Francis is the patron. The theme itself is far too vast and complex to be dealt with extensively. All I can do is offer a few remarks about it.

It seems to me that the key to ecology is reverence and respect for nature. Francis of Assisi is far more relevant for us today than perhaps he was to his own age. It is not Francis's life of poverty and itinerancy that makes him relevant today, but rather his sense of brotherhood to all of creation (Delio 1999:305). Through the mystery of the incarnation Francis "had a profound sense of God's presence in the world" (:305). Every person, every created thing, all the elements of the universe spoke to Francis of the presence of God because of Jesus Christ (:305). It is notable that this reverence and respect has been greatly lacking in the modern world. In officially atheistic regimes, like the Soviet Union and China the disregard for ecology was and is notorious. But it has also been greatly lacking in regimes dominated by Capitalists, to whom almost any deprivation of natural resources seems permissible in the task of gaining wealth.

The main features of this destruction are all too familiar, and have often been rehearsed. The pollution of lakes, rivers, and even the seas is one factor. Another is the ruthless destruction of the rain forests and of other natural resources. Then there is the destruction of the Ozone layer, and the pollution of the atmosphere by the emission of carbon monoxide and other human made gasses. There are also the appalling disasters of

enormous oil spills and nuclear accidents, such as that of Chernobyl. Experts in natural history warn us that we are losing hundreds of species of wild life each year. The result of all these factors seems to be that our planet is in a state of crisis. It remains to be seen whether the political establishments that control the world will have enough vision and self-discipline to take concrete action on all these matters (Doyle 1980:43-52).

Can the vision of Francis, who saw the whole world as his cloister, and as his family, give us any help in regard to these ecological problems? Francis never gave any indication that he thought the world belonged to him. The value and dignity with which everything was endowed forbade him to even think of dominating anything (:53), but he certainly acknowledged that he had a responsibility to respect and care for the world. The man who did not like to cut down a tree completely without leaving some part growing, or who did not want flowers to be rooted out completely in order to grow useful crops, was certainly one who respected growing things. His gentle, considerate respect for *Sister Water*, *Brother Wind* and *Brother Fire* clearly shows his respect for the elements. If we could renew the respect and care for our world that was so evident in Francis, surely we could handle the ecological crisis. At least we can try to make the voice and attitude of Francis heard again in our own time. Never was it needed so much.

It would obviously go far beyond the scope of this work to try to suggest a program for the ecological movement. However, I would like to conclude with a few suggestions about ways in which nature spirituality might be renewed in the world today.

I pointed out earlier that Saint Francis's own life was lived very much outdoors, whereas his followers, in the Order he founded, mainly live indoors, sheltered from the elements. If we are to recapture something of Francis's spirituality it is necessary to become much more aware of the natural world, and allow ourselves to draw strength and nourishment from those sources that so enriched the life of Francis.

How does one go about this? The strictness of a community observance could be made to accommodate at least an occasional vigil to watch the sunrise, as Francis must have done day after day, year after year. I believe that taking time for sunrises and sunsets could be a very practical approach to nature spirituality.

A Franciscan friar, Lester Bach, wrote a book with the title *Take Time for Sunsets* (1975). In it he was clearly aware of the role of nature in the Franciscan way of life, although he made no attempt at scientific investigation of nature spirituality. But he recognized that the contemplative attitude toward nature and in particular to sunsets is extremely important. It seems to me, that rather than living our lives according to timetables, determined by schedules, meetings, programs and deadlines, we should make room for nature and the contemplation of nature.

The Franciscans have often chosen, with great care, the places in which they built their houses, making sure that nature was given a prominent place. LaVerna, Greccio, Fonte Colombo, San Damiano and the Carceri are still places that are wide open to nature and able to nourish the spirit with its presence. At times one meets people who hold that places open to the beauty and splendor of nature are only for rich people and that such luxuries are at variance with the spirit of poverty. Closeness to nature was so important to Francis that I do not think he could have done without it. Should his followers in the Franciscan movement deny themselves that source of energy and life?

More than once I have referred to the sacramental approach of Francis to nature. Nature seems to have functioned in his life as a kind of vast sacramental system, not only in purely natural terms, but in a very strong Christological way. He saw his beloved Christ everywhere he looked, in every place he visited and in all that he encountered. Francis viewed nature as a sacramental expression of God's generous love, and had a profound insight into that love expressed through creation (Warner 1998:79). Warner (:75) points out

that Franciscans, as followers of the patron saint of ecology have a responsibility “to devote at least part of our life’s effort to imitating his example of love for creation.” Belief in the goodness of creation has always been present in the Franciscan tradition. However, we need to give this belief greater prominence in the social situation in which we find ourselves today (:76).

Eric Doyle (1980) was certainly aware of the need for bringing this spirituality down to the level of praxis. I should like to quote a few lines from *The Song of the Brotherhood*. This is offered as one of his suggestions to help solve the ecological crisis:

Education at every level – primary, secondary, and tertiary – should make it one of its basic aims to restore the sense of wonder at the beauty, mystery and fascinating intricacy of nature. [...] It will require communication by shared experiences of the pure enjoyment of nature (:71).

Giving a practical suggestion he says that this would mean that: school outings would have to include “visits to lakes, woodlands, farms, hills, moors and rivers and occasional outings to see the sunset” rather than restricting school outings to places such as science exhibitions, libraries, and art galleries and museums (:71).

6.6 Conclusion

With these few words on ecology it is time to bring this chapter to an end. In it I have been concerned to gather the fruits of this study of the place of nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis. I believe that the evidence I have gathered from a careful and prolonged study of the sources has given a solid foundation to my hypothesis that nature was extremely important in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis. This will be developed briefly in my conclusion.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

It was quite an adventure for me to embark on this study of Nature Mysticism and Spirituality in the Early Franciscan Tradition, and at times, I must confess that I had my doubts about the enterprise. In fact, when I consulted a friend expert in Franciscan Matters, he said that he could not quite see where it was going. Now that the work is nearly finished, I can see its course much more clearly. I will not give another résumé of the journey since I have already done that at the beginning of Chapter Six.

It is time to conclude this work. One may ask what has been achieved. Have I managed to sustain my hypothesis that nature played a very large role in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis? I believe that I have shown, from the sources, that nature was indeed extremely important in his spirituality and in his mysticism. In the spirituality, because he lived in very close proximity to nature for nearly all his life, and found in the book of nature a constant source of inspiration and light. This was due to his profound sense of God's presence in the world through the mystery of the incarnation (Delio 1999:305). Francis's life-long spiritual journey was "an ever deepening relationship with Christ" (306). In Francis's mysticism, nature was like a great sacramental ensemble which continually lifted him up and encouraged him to wonder, praise and thanksgiving. Doyle (1980:39) states that Francis's *Canticle* gives him a sure place among the poet-mystics. It reveals his experience of the fundamental unity and coherence of reality, and therefore is a prime example of mystic poetry. In his life and in the CtC Francis articulated a mystical vision of the harmonious relationship of all creation (Warner 1998:79).

In relation to this hypothesis I have shown also the importance of the eremitical element in the life of Francis, who was one of the greatest hermits in the history of the Church (Englebert 1965:12). And I have made it quite clear that Francis was neither a worshipper of nature, nor a despiser of nature like the Gnostics. Francis's vision of the world is also in clear contrast to the heretical Cathars of his time. Here, Manselli (1988) can help us to understand Francis in his own era:

Francis's repeated affirmation of deep devotion to the Eucharist and to the permanent presence of Christ on earth that it signified was directed in turn against the Cathars. Similarly, the *Canticle's* praise of God as Creator and for what he had created strikes at the heart of one of the basic tenets of Catharism, according to which the Creator, or at least the ruler, of the physical world is Satan, as portrayed in the heresy's many and varying myths.

Against these ideas Francis did not resort to theological argumentation that would have been foreign to his temperament and, frankly, to his level of education. Rather, he brings our two aspects of the world: the omnipotence of God and the positive quality of creation as a work of beauty, implying as well its goodness....The universe, therefore, cannot be evil: this is the conclusion contained in Francis's *Canticle*. Nor is it hell within which angels are imprisoned. Rather, it is the work and the result of an extraordinary, almighty goodness that, in the creation of the universe, reveals itself to be beauty as well (316-317).

Even though Francis is considered the prime example of a nature mystic in the history of Christianity (Cousins 1983:167-168), his mysticism is by no means confined to nature. It is intensely personal, Christocentric and Theocentric. It is personal because Francis was engaged personally in a most profound relationship with the Lord. It is Christocentric because it is filled with an overwhelming love and sympathy for the Lord Jesus, the Babe from Bethlehem (1C 86) the crucified victim, the Lord of Glory. It is Theocentric because it is centered wholly in the Most High, Omnipotent Good Lord who is good, all good, the highest good.

It has been a long journey through the highways and byways of legend and history, spirituality and mysticism. The main theme has been the life and thought of that wonderful seminal figure of the thirteenth century, Francis Bernadone, as he engaged with the world around him and found in it the “dearest freshness, deep down things” (Hopkins. “God’s Grandeur”: line 10). From my investigation I have emerged with a firm conviction that Francis’s prophetic role is far from exhausted. I believe, like the German Jesuit, Mario Von Galli (1972), that he is still a harbinger of a new age, not, I hasten to add the strange rag bag of beliefs and techniques that goes by this name today. Rather, he is someone who reaches across the ages and can still teach us what it means to be human in the fullest, deepest and richest sense of the word.

I was intrigued to read, in the study by Von Galli (1972:172-189), that he considered Francis to be a man of the future. His main idea seems to be that Francis, in refusing the attempts of his ministers and his great friend Hugolino to make him adopt a conventional rule like that of Saint Benedict, or Saint Augustine, he was opening up possibilities of a spirituality and life style that were freely chosen and adopting freely chosen bonds of love. Von Galli quotes his Jesuit confrere, Peter Lippert to the effect that Francis:

moved in the direction of a life that operates through the spontaneous initiative of the self rather than through great constructs of the will; in the direction of a truly living and individual personality shaped by its own inner laws and standards. If God should someday reveal the Order of the future to his Church ...it will surely bear the stamp of Francis’s soul and spirit (in Von Galli 1972:172).

The prophetic teaching of Francis will, I believe, show itself especially in the nature spirituality and mysticism which played such a powerful and central role in his life, and which he managed to express in such a striking way in *The Canticle of the Creatures*.