

Some Reflections on the Canticle of Brother Sun

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Summary

These few reflections on the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, about which much has already been written by many who are far more knowledgeable than myself, divide up as follows:

1. Brief background to the composition of the *Canticle*
2. Some thoughts on the use of the words 'Brother' and 'Sister'
3. Some thoughts on the significance of the *Canticle* for eco-theology

In addition, when the paper is presented, there will be an invitation to use illustrations of the *Canticle* by Piero Casentini as an aid to further meditation on St Francis' prayer-poem.

1. Composition of the *Canticle of Brother Sun*

The *Canticle of Brother Sun*, written in the Umbrian dialect, is the earliest Italian poem we know of (with the exception of the *Canticle of Exhortation to St Clare and her Sisters*, Francis' other works are in fairly simple Latin) and numerous manuscript copies of it exist in France and Italy. The poem in its original language is rhythmic and uses assonance rather than rhyme. Often referred to as the *Canticle of the Creatures*, I have chosen to use the title *Canticle of Brother Sun* (*Cantico di Frate Sole*) which Francis himself is reported to have given his work.

It is remarkable that St Francis composed this great prayer-poem of praise to God at a point when he was suffering immense physical torments and mental agonies. Returning from La Verna in 1225, weakened by and in pain from the stigmata, and possibly also tuberculosis, he was brought to San Damiano and installed by St Clare in a darkened hut next to the convent.

'For fifty days and more,' says the *Legend of Perugia*, 'blessed Francis could not bear the light of the sun during the day or the light of the fire at night. His eyes caused him so much pain that he could neither lie down nor sleep.'ⁱ

Francis was also deeply distressed by divisions within his beloved Order, and the abandonment by many Friars of the life of poverty and simplicity. He was tortured by his sense of sin and failure. The *Legend of Perugia* records that, at this his moment of greatest need, God's voice came to him with the assurance of the treasures that would one day be his to share in the Kingdom of Heaven. We can never know truly what Francis experienced, but

It is out of this terrible darkness that the *Canticle* breaks forth from Francis' soul. No sugary piety here, no ecstatic response to a rainbow, but a celebration of what he himself can only dimly feel in his brokenness, a poem of faith, hope, and love.ⁱⁱ

Although most of the *Canticle* was composed at this time, some lines (23-26 in the original Italian version) on reconciliation were written slightly later. Profoundly upset by news of a

bitter quarrel between the Bishop of Assisi and the town's Mayor, Francis added this new strophe and despatched Brother Pacifico with a message of love and concern to sing the *Canticle* to the two opponents. So moved were both men that pardon was begged and forgiveness received each from the other.

Finally, a few days before he died in 1226, Francis was laid, at his request, naked himself upon the naked earth. Once more he sang the praises of God in the words of the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, this time adding an address to Sister Death (lines 27-31) as he recognised and accepted her approach. **The Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood**ⁱⁱⁱ

For me, the most significant feature of the *Canticle of Brother Sun* is the way in which it expresses, through the use of the titles 'Sister' and 'Brother', Francis' perception of his own – and all others' – relationships at the deepest level with all 'creatures', that is everything that is created whether animate or inanimate. He saw plainly the inter-dependence of those creaturely sibling relationships, and how that inter-dependence was part of the all-embracing love of God who relates both to the whole family of creation and also to each individual member.

Though physically blind, he was able to see more clearly than ever with the inner eye of his mind. With unparalleled clarity he perceived the basic unity of all creation and his own place as a friar in the midst of God's creatures. His unqualified love of all creatures, great and small, had grown into unity in his own heart. He was so open to reality that it found a place to be at home in his heart and he was at home everywhere and anywhere. He was a centre of communion with all creatures.^{iv}

In earlier writing, Francis had used terms denoting family ties to describe the relationships between God and Christ and 'all those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with their whole strength and love their neighbours as themselves.'

They are children of the heavenly Father whose works they do, and they are spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.....Oh, how holy and how loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all things to have such a Brother and such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ.^v

Now, in the *Canticle*, he extends these precious familial bonds to all creation.

Herein lies Francis' true humility, that all living creatures, the air they breathe, the water they drink, the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars, are regarded by him as brothers and sisters. All creation is precious and valued, all elements and beings are sibling children of the loving Father God, and no one creature is superior to others.

Remembering again that the *Canticle* was composed out of the depths of pain and distress, we might marvel that there is no protest here, no sense of injustice that other creatures are 'radiant', 'beautiful', 'precious', 'playful', 'robust', 'strong' etc. whilst Francis, the loyal and deserving servant, is allowed to struggle and suffer. But that was not the essence of Francis the Poverello. In his humility he accepted the suffering, even in some way welcomed it as uniting him more closely with his Brother Christ, and having embraced poverty, he made no distinction of value or status amongst God's creatures. From the very pit of misery, he was able to discern the loving and beloved sisterhood and

brotherhood of all creation, and from that to draw joy and express it in this poetic prayer of praise.

2. **The *Canticle of Brother Sun* and Eco-theology**

In the *Canticle of Brother Sun* St Francis articulated in words the theology which determined how he lived, in loving relationship to God the Creator, the incarnate Son - his Brother Christ, the creation and its creatures. James Nash, arguing that Francis was by no means an isolated example, before or since, of a Christian with a sense of ecological responsibility, nevertheless says that he 'probably should be regarded as the epitome of Christian love in an ecological context, since his life was a radical demonstration that humanity should concern itself with the welfare of all creatures.'^{vi} By his use of the titles Brother and Sister, Francis gave literary expression to that belief in the unity and equality of all creation which impelled him to live in such a way that he would be forever remembered for his love and compassion shown to wolves, birds and even, according to stories in the *Mirror of Perfection* compiled in 1318, wild flowers, trees and stones.^{vii}

In case it should appear that today's environmentally conscious followers of Francis are reading their own eco-theology back into the *Canticle*, we find these words attributed to the saint in the *Assisi Compilation*:

Therefore for His praise, for our consolation and for the edification of our neighbour, 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 graces, because we do not praise, as we should, our Creator and the Giver of all good.^{viii}

So Francis himself did indeed intend the *Canticle* to be read, not only as a prayer and song of praise, but also as a sermon on the essential place within Christian theology for human responsibility to act in love and reverence towards all creation.

Eric Doyle OFM takes a further logical step, applying the theology of the *Canticle* to the Lord's Prayer.

Humanity is creation become conscious of itself. The human voice, therefore, speaks on behalf of all that is created.....when we say "our" we are saying brothers and sisters, and when we say "Father," we are saying sons and daughters. The *Our Father*, then, becomes the prayer of all creatures in the universe to their Creator and Father in the sounds produced in the respiratory tract which we call words. Whatever God may have to forgive the rocks, the leaves, the flowers, the swallows, the foxes, earth, air, fire and water, there is no doubt how much they have to forgive us when we pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."^{ix}

Most modern writers on eco-theology and Christian concern for the environment mention Francis who 'should', according to James Nash, 'be the patron saint of ecologists'.^x Each time we hear or read the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, we perhaps understand a little more, as we dig deeper into the many possible layers of meaning, of why Francis lived as he did and of how we should be living now.

At the end of his chapter on *Brother Sun*, Eric Doyle OFM quotes the final lines of D H Lawrence's book *Apocalypse*. I reproduce them here, as an introduction to an opportunity to reflect on the *Canticle of Brother Sun* with the aid of the well-known illustrations by Pietro Casentini. After

Lawrence's words, the *Canticle* itself will be read aloud, and then I invite you (if you wish) to choose which illustration appeals to you most and to say something about what it conveys to you.

We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos. I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. My soul knows that I am part of the human race, my soul is an organic part of the great human soul, as my spirit is part of my nation. In my own very self, I am part of my family. There is nothing of me that is alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall find that the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surface of the waters.

So that my individualism is really an illusion. I am a part of the great whole, and I can never escape. But I *can* deny my connections, break them, and become a fragment. Then I am wretched.

What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and the earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen.^{xi}

- ⁱ *Legend of Perugia* 43 from *Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, ed. Marion A. Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973) as quoted by Brother Ramon SSF, *Franciscan Spirituality: Following St Francis Today* (London: SPCK, 1994) p.140
- ⁱⁱ Murray Bodo, *The Way of St Francis* (Glasgow: Collins, 1984) p.151
- ⁱⁱⁱ Section title taken from Eric Doyle OFM, *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood* (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997)
- ^{iv} Eric Doyle OFM, *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood* (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997) p.84
- ^v *The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, 1, 7, 13. *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Translation & Introduction, Regis J Armstrong OFM CAP & Ignatius C Brady OFM (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) p.63
- ^{vi} James A Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) p.84
- ^{vii} Stories summarised in James A Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) p.86
- ^{viii} *Assisi Compilation* 83 (II, 185-86) quoted in *Francis of Assisi: History, Hagiography and hermeneutics in the Early Documents*, ed. Jay M. Hammond (New York: New City Press, 2004) p.139
- ^{ix} Eric Doyle OFM, *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood* (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997) p.77
- ^x James A Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) p.71
- ^{xi} D H Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, with an introduction by Richard Aldington (Penguin Books, 1974) p.126, quoted in Eric Doyle OFM, *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood* (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997) pp.87-8

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