

## St. Francis and Ecology



St. Francis, of course, was moved more by intuition rather than theological argumentation. Because of his tremendous love for the nature he was proclaimed patron of ecology by Pope John Paul II, in 1980.

As G. K. Chesterton said, St. Francis anticipated all that is most liberal and sympathetic in the modern world, in the love of nature and the love of animals. And as Eric Doyle said in his book, "St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood", the message of St. Francis is vital to the future of humanity and the survival of Planet Earth.

For St. Francis, creation is a vast unity full of mystery and wonder. The world is not an object to be worked on and dominated by us, but a network of cosmic, personal and spiritual relationships to which humanity belongs. He speaks to all those who are concerned about the ecological crisis and recognise that we need a philosophy of life which will cure the excesses of consumerism and selfishness. He speaks to all who believe that humanity is a sisterhood or brotherhood. To those who love the otter, the pied wagtail and the germander speedwell. And to all those who welcome and revere the great positive achievements of science and technology.

In his poetic masterpiece, called "The Canticle of Brother Sun", which St. Francis composed when he was all but totally blind, he takes us on a remarkable voyage and introduces us to Brother Christ, as well as our brothers and sisters - the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Wind, Air, Water, Fire, our Mother the Earth, and to the companion that awaits us all, Sister Bodily Death.

As a prayer of praise to God the creator, the Canticle is a sublime expression of the authentic Christian attitude to creation, which is to accept and love creatures as they are. "Be praised my Lord with all your creatures, especially, Brother Sun, who is day, and by him you shed light upon us. He is beautiful and radiant with great splendour. Of you Most High, he bears the likeness".

There is many a tale and legend about St. Francis' love of nature, animals and birds, that have become popular. It is reported that St. Francis walked reverently over stones, because of Him who was called the rock (reference to Jesus); that he lifted worms from all the pathways so that they would not be trodden underfoot; that he had honey and wine put out for the bees in winter so that they would not perish in the cold. It is also said that swallows fell silent to listen to his words, that the little rabbit he set free from a trap refused to leave him, that the fish he put back into the lake remained beside the boat until his prayer was over.

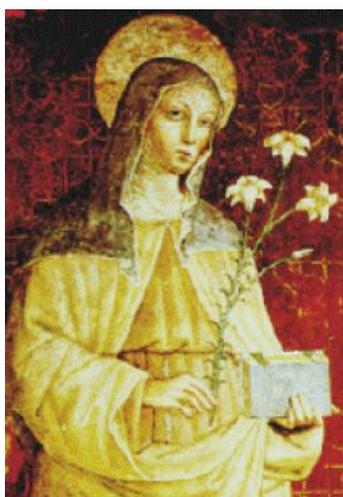
One story that is particularly quaint is of St. Francis' sermon, preached to the birds when he and his companion Brother Masseo were travelling. St. Francis, it is reported, saw a few trees by the side of the road in which there were thousands of birds of every species. He walked up to the birds and began preaching to them. He told the birds, "My very dear brothers, the birds, you are deeply indebted to God, and it is your duty to praise Him and celebrate Him always for He allowed you to fly freely wherever you please; he has clothed you with double or triple coats and given you elegant many coloured finery. There is the beautiful voice he has given

you to sing with. You neither sow nor reap, but God Himself feeds you, and it is He who gives you the brooks to quench your thirst, the mountains, hills, rocks and woods to shelter you, and high trees where you can build your nests".

The story goes that after St Francis had spoken these words all the little birds began to open their beaks, flap their wings, stretch their necks and bow their little heads to the ground in deep respect to show by their songs and their movements that they were truly delighted with what St Francis had said to them. Many such stories are reported about St Francis' love of nature, animals and birds. Even for worms he had a warm love, since he had read this text about the Saviour: I am a worm and not a man (Ps 22:6). That is why he used to pick them up from the road and put them in a safe place so that they would not be crushed by the footsteps of passers-by.

His love for other lesser creatures was as vivid! In the winter he had honey or the best wine put out for the bees so that they would not perish from the cold. He used to extol the artistry of their work and their remarkable ingenuity, giving glory to the Lord. With such an outpouring, he often used up an entire day or more in praise of them and other creatures. As the three young men in the furnace of burning fire invited all the elements to praise and glorify the Creator of all things [Daniel 3, 51-90], so Francis, full of the spirit of God never stopped glorifying, praising and blessing the Creator and Ruler of all things in all the elements and creatures. Great was the delight the beauty of flowers brought to Francis' soul whenever he saw their lovely form and noticed their sweet fragrance? He would immediately turn his gaze to the beauty of that flower, brilliant in springtime, sprouting from the root of Jesse. Whenever he found an abundance of flowers, he used to preach to them and invite them to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.

St Francis' life and example which were interwoven with simplicity and love of man and nature are a reminder to us that we are all creatures bound together with Mother Earth in a universal network of relationships with God's entire creation. In valuing all things in their unique beauty and in paying homage to creation we are paying homage to the Creator of us all.



St. Clare walked the same path as St. Francis, and indeed defines herself as the "little plant of the most blessed father Francis". She sees Francis as the farmer who planted and cultivated her and as the root through which she is nourished.

When Clare gazes on creation, it is not a gaze from on high, but rather the gaze of a 'sister', of esteem, sympathy and solidarity. She invites her sisters to gaze upon all that lives around them, seeing that they are in a vital relationship with the trees, with human beings and with all other creatures, and that this relationship is a mutual giving and receiving, and provides for the necessities of life. All participate together in the gift of life, allowing each creature to be authentic, to be seen and to be accepted in its uniqueness. There should be no question of trying to take control but rather a glorious celebration of life.

Clare speaks of praise as a fitting way for creating right relations with other creatures. Her praise joins with the praise that exists in every living being by the simple fact of its existence, of having received the creative breath. Aware of her own place in the cosmos, and grateful for it, Clare is content that the tree is a tree, that the human is a human, and that each creature is that creature! Clare lived for 42 years in the monastery at San Damiano where her community of sisters declined any property from which to gain an income. She recommends that her sisters do not accept land "except for the smallest parcel needed for a garden to cultivate vegetables." She is not interested in maximising economic benefit but in guaranteeing the community of all creatures called, each according to its own species, to praise the Creator.

***The Canticle of Brother Sun***

*(by St. Francis of Assisi)*

Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord!  
All praise is yours, all glory,  
all honour and all blessing.

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

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.

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

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

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,  
And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,  
by which you cherish all  
you have made.

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

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

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

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.

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.

***An Extract from the Letter to the Faithful***

*(by St. Francis of Assisi c. 1220 A.D.)*

Let every creature  
in heaven, on earth,  
in the sea and in the depths,  
give praise, glory, honour, and blessing  
To Him Who suffered so much

Who has given and will give in the future every good,  
for He is our power and strength

Who alone is good,  
Who alone is almighty,  
Who alone is omnipotent,  
wonderful, glorious  
and Who alone is holy

worthy of praise and blessing  
through endless ages.

Amen.

***Exhortation to the Praise of God***

*(A prayer by St. Francis of Assisi)*

Fear the Lord and give Him honour.  
Worthy is the Lord to receive praise and honour.  
All you who fear the Lord praise Him.  
Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Heaven and earth, praise Him.  
All you rivers, praise the Lord.  
All you children of God, praise the Lord.  
This is the day the Lord has made,  
let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! The King of Israel!

Let every spirit praise the Lord.  
Praise the Lord because He is good;  
all you who read this,  
bless the Lord.  
All you creatures, bless the Lord.

All you birds of heaven, praise the Lord.  
All you children, praise the Lord.  
Young men and virgins, praise the Lord.  
Worthy is the Lamb Who was slain  
to receive praise, glory, and honour.  
Blessed be the Holy Trinity and Undivided Unity.  
Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle.

***Extract from "A Salutation of the Virtues"***  
*(by St. Francis of Assisi)*

Holy Obedience confounds  
every corporal and carnal wish,  
binds its mortified body  
to obedience of the Spirit  
and to obedience to one's brother,  
so that it is  
subject and submissive  
to everyone in the world,  
not just to people  
but to every beast and wild animal as well  
that they may do whatever they want with it  
insofar as it has been given to them  
from above by the Lord.