



In The News

With June 18th as the target date for the “official” release of Pope Francis’s Encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si*, our brother **Regis Armstrong** was contacted by the HUFFINGTON POST, requesting an article that he wrote, *Laudato Si: With All Your Creatures*. CNN’s Religion Chief has also requested an interview with Regis.

Laudato Si: With All Your Creatures

It was John Paul II who, at the urging of an international society called “Planning Environmental and Ecological Institute for Quality of Life”, named Francis of Assisi patron of ecology. His proclamation was short and to the point: “Among the holy and admirable men who have revered nature as a wonderful gift of God to the human race, St Francis of Assisi deserves special consideration. For he, in a special way, deeply sensed the universal works of the Creator and, filled with a certain divine spirit, sang that very beautiful ‘Canticle of the Creatures’. Through them, Brother Sun most powerful and Sister Moon and the stars of heaven, he offered fitting praise, glory, honor and all blessing to the most high, all-powerful, good Lord.” Now his successor, who providentially took the name of the “ecological saint,” is about go much further by issuing an encyclical that he entitles *Laudato si*, the Italian phrase that appears eight times in the saint’s praise of God’s creations.

G.K. Chesterton wrote of Francis’s *Canticle of Brother Sun*: “It is a supremely characteristic work and much of Saint Francis could be reconstructed from that work alone.” Others have written of it as supremely characteristic of his Gospel vision, as a key to his inner self, a window into his soul, as revelatory of his entire personality. His early followers provide the details of the tempestuous circumstances in which the dying poet at three different moments sang God’s praises: the first coming from his own struggle of faith, the second from the political struggles of Assisi, and the third from his struggle with his imminent death.

This is the song of a man who, toward the end of life, is losing his sight, whose eyes burn at the sight of light, and whose body and spirit ache with fatigue and discouragement. In the middle of the night, he twists and turns, and, the next morning, tells his companions what was taking place.

“Feeling sorry for himself, he said: ‘Lord, help me in my infirmities so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently!’ He then heard: ‘Tell me, brother: if, in compensation for your suffering and tribulations you were given an immense and precious treasure: the whole mass of the earth changed into pure gold, pebbles into precious stones, and the water of the rivers into perfume, would you not regard the pebbles and the waters as nothing compared to such a treasure? Would you not rejoice?’ ‘Lord,’ he replied, ‘it would be a very great, very precious, and inestimable treasure beyond all that one can love and desire!’ ‘Well, brother,’ the voice said, ‘be glad and joyful in the midst of your infirmities and tribulations. As of now, live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom.’”

With that Francis burst into his medieval Umbrian Italian singing “*Altissimu, onnipotente, bon Signore* [Most High, all-powerful, good Lord]” and encouraging each of the companions, his “brothers and sisters”, who had accompanied his life’s journey—the sun, moon and stars, the wind, water, and fire—to proclaim to the Creator and Lord *laudato si* [May You be Praised]:

*Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing,
to You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light,
and He is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them bright and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.
Praise and bless my Lord
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.*

The Fabric of Creation

Francis’s vision flows ultimately from the realization that, in the words of the Jewish Scriptures, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The “most high, all-powerful Lord” is above all “good”: a truth Francis never tires of repeating. It is this that liberates him from the petty

moments of life enabling him to rise above human frailty and to trust in God alone. It is this simple faith that impels him to struggle with his all too human temptation to reach out for what in reality belongs only to God: praise, glory, and honor, and blessing. Without uttering a word the poetry of God's creation reminds Francis of his own poor performance and of his need for penance to re-enter into its beauty and radiance. "No human is worthy to mention your name..." The words introduce a shadow that hovers over him as a reminder of the indictment and punishment of the first inhabitants of paradise. It is as if he were crying out with Jeremiah: "*How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered? Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished*" (Jer 12:4); or with Paul: For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now (Rom 8:22).

Immediately, however, the cloud passes. The brilliance of the sun, of the day resumes the hymn of praise gently reminding him of the words of the psalmist: "*in your light we see light*" (Ps 36:9): "Praise be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures..." The God Who is beauty shines radiantly on creatures evoking from them nothing but praise, a praise that is the Lord's as well as theirs. "Sir Brother Sun, who is the day..." hold primacy of place, followed by "Sister Moon and the stars..." Once more the poet emerges who contrasts the One who "is beautiful and radiant with great splendor, and bears a likeness of You, Most High One," with those he describes as "formed *clarite* [faint/tenuous], precious, and beautiful." Before turning from the heavens to "Sister Mother Earth who sustains, governs, and produces fruits, flowers, and herbs", Francis turns his attention to "Brother Wind", "Sister Water", and "Brother Fire": in each instance highlighting their gifts – providing sustenance, offering itself humbly, selflessly, joyfully, and humbly.

What follows, then, is a paradoxically unified hymn of opposites in which the Creative Spirit and created being, the heavens and earth, the masculine and feminine join in one stanza after another. What is precious, playful, serene, radiant, humble takes on qualities enshrined in Beauty itself prompting nothing but praise for the goodness of the most high, all-powerful Lord of all. If it is true that the source of poetic genius is the deepest inner self, then this section of Francis's *Canticle* reflects the Trinitarian contours of his spiritual life: the Father whom elsewhere he describes dwelling "in inaccessible light," the Son and the saints—precious, clear, and beautiful—shining like the moon and the stars in the night of sin, and the Spirit stirring the air and the clouds, bringing life humbly and without cost like water, burning with warmth and light like fire. Here too the *Canticle* suggests the Marian underpinnings of Francis's vision of the Church as does Assisi's cathedral, San Rufino, originally a Roman temple called "Mother Earth, sustaining, governing, and producing fruit as elsewhere he sings of "the virgin made church."

The Tranquility of Love

Acrimony and a struggle for power prompted the second section of the *Canticle*: hostility that was probably brooding for a long while between Assisi's ecclesial and civil leaders. When he learned that it had erupted, Francis's companions tell us that he them to go to Assisi, to sing the verses he had just composed, and to add these:

Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.

There is no evidence that the bishop, *podestà* [mayor], and people had heard the first section of the *Canticle* before this, nor is there any indication that Francis had asked his brothers to read any other message of peace to them. The combination of both segments, however, may well inspired the two sides to come to peace as they did. For with these verses Francis envisions the human person now gently and unassumingly entering into the hymn of the universe. Those who give pardon out of love, bear infirmity and tribulation, and endure in peace are those who take on the qualities of the Word made flesh. They bring to the pursuit of peace more than "the tranquility of order" reflected in the first segment of the *Canticle*; they bring "the tranquility of love," as Bonaventure would later refine Augustine's concept of peace, the love shown by Jesus.

The Blessed Hope

Just before his death, Francis asked the brothers to sing once again the *Canticle* and the two segments he had already composed. Now, however, he added yet another:

*Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.*

The canticle of creation and of reconciliation now becomes one of hope, of the certain hope for which he had prayed from his earliest years. Living a life without anything of one's own, that is, a life of radical poverty, teaches the assurances hope as time after time the gifts of creation teaches that God is never outdone in generosity.

More than anything else, however, these verses chant the praises of the Gospel call Francis envisions: that of the Baptized life. It is Baptism that enables one to welcome bodily death as a sister, not as something to be dreaded but as a necessary phase of life, as one's who embrace can be longed-for. While there is sadness in the thought of greeting it mired in sin, there is an echo of how simply Francis all of created life: Baptism brings about a new creation through which the first death, frees one to love without fear and to be assured in hope.

Laudato si: *The Wisdom of Simplicity*

The earliest manuscripts of Francis's *Canticle* come from the mid-thirteenth century; all others follow it almost exactly. None of them, however, indicates whether Francis intended the following refrain to be sung after each verse or after each section. It appears without any directions at the very end but, in so many ways, summarizes the entire Canticle, each its sections, as well as of its verses. Indeed, it captures the depths of the Franciscan spirit:

*Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.*

In the wisdom of his simple Gospel vision, the least of the lesser brothers, Francis, saw these as the operative verbs of his life: praise, blessing, giving thanks, and serving the Lord. It is as if his vision recognized these as the only ones that matter as they can only come from one who knows that everything comes from God and enable all his brothers and sisters to cooperate with the plan of God.

An all-embracing sacramental mysticism takes hold of Francis in the last days of his life as his awareness of his call sharpens to move from the visible to the invisible. It would take more thirty years before Bonaventure of Bagnoreggio would compose what might be seen as the most articulate commentary on Francis's *Canticle*. His *Journey of the Mind into God* followed that precise journey: from the visible to the invisible, and in doing so challenged his readers to re-think how they view and use created beings. After reading both texts, Francis's *Canticle* and Bonaventure's *Journey*, some readers might require, with Thoureau, that "all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable" and conclude with him that "we can never have enough of nature." Others might become more reverential toward the world of Hopkins "charged with the grandeur of God", and, from the perspective of a poet, agree with Yeats that "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."

“If you want to cultivate peace,” Pope Benedict XVI, declared on the 2010 World Day of Peace, “protect creation.” His statement quotes *Gaudium et Spes* 69 of the Second Vatican Council, the *Catechism*, and his predecessors Leo XIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. It lead him to conclude: “Respect for creation is of immense consequence, not least because ‘creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God’s works’, and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind.”

Francis’s *Laudato si* challenges, as the pope who took his name signals he will do, the rhetoricians, poets, world leaders and, in our own country politicians, all peoples, to come to grips with the realities of the inter-connectedness of the created, human, and divine family.

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