

serve God. The terms denote affection and especially affinity. Thus, while there is a residual element of hierarchy in the relationship, this does not negate the common creatureliness of humans and other creatures. Francis was a man of the thirteenth century, not the twenty-first, and so the chivalric notion of 'courtesy', current in his time, was one idea that helped Francis to understand the relationship of humans and other creatures in terms not of domination but of mutuality.⁵⁹ Courtesy is the magnanimous, deferential, respectful attitude that enables love to be shown up and down the social hierarchy. In the community of creation, brothers and sisters on different levels of the hierarchy can interact with mutual respect and loving deference. With the chivalric notion of courtesy Francis fused the traditional monastic virtues of obedience and humility,⁶⁰ so that he can say that obedience 'is subject and submissive to everyone in the world, not only 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 them from above by the Lord' (SaIV 14).

Here the hierarchy is virtually subverted by mutuality: the obedience that the creatures owe to humanity is reciprocated by an obedience of humanity to the creatures. What Francis envisages, in the end, is a kind of mutual and humble deference in the common service of the creatures to their Creator. When Boff refers to Francis's view of the world as 'cosmic democracy',⁶¹ the description is too modern to be entirely appropriate, and it does not distinguish a 'democracy' of political rights from one of mutual service, which would be more appropriate for Francis's view. But with all due qualifications it does suggest something of the direction in which Francis characteristically developed the Christian tradition.

⁵⁹ On the relationship of humility (and poverty) to Francis's confraternity with creatures, see Boff, *Saint Francis*, pp. 38–40.

⁶⁰ Boff, *Saint Francis*, p. 34.

⁶¹ The *Benedicite* is the canticle that appears in the Greek version of the book of Daniel as Daniel 3:52–90. This makes it part of the canonical book of Daniel for the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, but, since it is absent from the Hebrew and Aramaic text of Daniel, the Protestant churches assigned it to the Apocrypha, where it occurs among the Additions to Daniel, as the Song of the Three. But White, 'Continuing the Conversation', who remarks that it 'contradicts the historically dominant Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism', is quite wrong in supposing that it shows the influence of hellenism or was ever thought in the least heretical. On the contrary, it merely develops at length the theme of nature's praise of God to be found in the Psalms (especially Ps. 148). See Chapter 7 in this volume.

All Creatures' Praise of God

Francis's exceptionally positive valuation of all his fellow-creatures did not derive simply from his encounters with them. It reflected his profound sense of God as Creator and therefore also of the creatures as each valued by God. He recognized God's generous giving in his provision for all of the animate creation, following Jesus' words about the birds in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25). In relation to the birds, for example, he recognized God's special gifts to them ('noble among His creatures') as constituting their particular worth within the community of creation (1C 58). Another theme with strong biblical and traditional roots Francis made very much his own and fundamental for the way he related to his fellow-creatures and, with them, to God. This is the idea that all creatures praise their Creator and that human worship of God is participation in this worship of the whole creation.

In his own works Francis echoes the main biblical sources of this idea: the *Benedicite* (Daniel 3:52–90 in the Vulgate);⁶² Psalms 69:34; 96:11–12; 103:22; 148;⁶³ Revelation 5:13.⁶⁴ These texts would have been very familiar to Francis, especially since the two most ample in their depiction of the praise of the creatures feature prominently in the daily offices he recited according to his breviary: Psalm 148 was to be said every morning, the *Benedicite* every Sunday and feast day morning.⁶⁵ Most revealing are Francis's own liturgical compositions, which often consist of a collage of texts carefully selected from Scripture, especially the Psalms. One of these (*The Praises to be Said at All the Hours*) was to be used by the friars before each hour of the office. This outpouring of praise to the Trinity is based largely on the heavenly liturgy depicted in Revelation 4–5, and like that liturgy it culminates in the praise of God by every creature in the cosmos. Calls to all the creatures to praise alternate with a refrain ('Let us praise and glorify

⁶² For a valuable study of this theme in the Psalms, see Fretheim, 'Nature's Praise', pp. 16–30.

⁶³ The allusions are in Regis J. Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, *Francis of Assisi, Exhortation to the Praise of God*, p. 138 (Ps. 69:35; Dan. 3:78; Ps. 103:22; Dan. 3:80); Francis of Assisi, *Second Letter* (Rev. 5:13); *The Praises to be Said at All the Hours* (Dan. 3:57; Ps. 69:35; Rev. 5:13); Francis of Assisi, *The Office of the Passion*, pp. 139–57, 7:4 (Ps. 96:10–11); Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Creatures*, pp. 113–14 (Ps. 148; *Benedicite*). On the relationship of *The Canticle of the Creatures* to Psalm 148 and the *Benedicite*, see Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 99, 102–5.

⁶⁴ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 99.

Him forever') based on that in the *Benedicite*. The *Exhortation to the Praise of God* calls on all the creatures, including both general references and specific references to rivers and birds, to praise God. In these liturgies of creation there is no hierarchy, not even an order of importance in calls to praise. Before God, as his creatures, humans stand alongside other creatures, and are united with all other creatures in a harmony formed by their common praise of the one Creator. Expressed here is not only a 'living cosmology' (Fox) in which humanity finds its place, but a wholly theocentric cosmology in which the transcendent Creator is distinguished from his creation in the praise that unites his creatures. The ideal harmony and interdependence of creation are most fully realized when humans join other creatures in praise of the Creator.

Characteristically and originally, Francis also translated this liturgical usage into an actual practice of addressing the creatures themselves.⁶⁵ This began with the famous sermon to the birds (1C 58; LF 1:16), which initiated a regular practice: 'From that day on, he carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to praise and love their Creator, because daily, invoking the name of the Savior, he observed their obedience in his own experience' (1C 58; cf. 81).

The reference to 'the name of the Savior' is significant, because it relates creation and salvation in a way that is rarely explicit in the material about creation's praise of God (see also 1C 115, quoted below), but is surely often implicit. Since salvation entails the restoration of creation to its proper harmony and order in relation to God, the praise of the creatures is directed to Christ as Saviour as well as to God as Creator. This is what occurs at the end of the great cosmic liturgy in Revelation 4–5, which Francis evidently knew well: when the slaughtered Lamb is enthroned in heaven, every creature in the cosmos joins in the doxology addressed to God and the Lamb. This eschatological goal of all worship Francis anticipated whenever he invoked the name of Jesus and called on creatures to praise their Creator.

We should also remember Francis's habit of singing along with cicadas or birds in what he understood as their praise of their Creator (2C 171; KNi 8:9).⁶⁶ In this way he translated the sentiments of the

⁶⁵ It is typical of Francis to put biblical passages into practice in a way that might seem naively literal, but really constituted a particularly potent expression of a biblical theme.

⁶⁶ See also (for the nightingale) Moorman, *A New Fioretti* 57, in Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 1881–2.

Benedicite into a real human solidarity with the rest of creation understood as a theocentric community existing for the praise and service of God. There is no trace in Francis of the idea that the creatures need humans to voice their praise of God for them. On the contrary, the cicadas and the birds are already singing to God's glory; Francis joins their song.

The Canticle of the Creatures

In the famous *Canticle of Brother Sun* or *Canticle of the Creatures*, written at the end of his life, Francis summed up much of his attitude to creation. It is important to appreciate fully the opening two stanzas that praise God before reference is made to the creatures:

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

That God surpasses the creatures in such a way as to be the only praiseworthy one could not be clearer. So, when the next stanza continues: 'Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures', the praising of the creatures can only be a way of praising their Creator, from whom their praiseworthy features derive. This praise of God *with the* creatures (stanza 3–4) is a transition from the praise of God without the creatures (stanzas 1–2) to the praises of God *for* the creatures, which occupy stanzas 5–13. In these stanzas the various qualities of the creatures are lovingly detailed, so that God may be praised for them. Each of these stanzas begins (in Francis's Italian original): '*Laudato si, mi Signore, per . . .*' followed by reference to one or more of the creatures. There has been controversy over whether the meaning is 'Be praised, my Lord, by . . .', 'Be praised, my Lord, through . . .' or 'Be praised, my Lord, for . . .' Divergent interpretations of the phrase go back to soon after Francis's death,⁶⁷ and any would be consistent with his thinking about the creation. But the latest detailed study by Roger Sorrell argues very convincingly for the translation: 'Be praised, my Lord, for . . .'⁶⁸ In that case the canticle does not call on

⁶⁷ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 116–17, 119.

⁶⁸ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 118–22.

Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water and the rest to praise God, even though Francis, as we have seen, could well have done this. Rather the canticle takes up Francis's conviction, which we have also noticed, that human beings should praise God for their fellow-creatures. The creatures are appreciated in three ways: for their practical usefulness in making human life possible and good, for their beauty, and for the way their distinctive qualities reflect the divine being (in particular 'Sir Brother Sun', in his beauty and radiance, resembles God). This is an appreciation of the God-given value of creation that goes far beyond a purely utilitarian, anthropocentric view. It celebrates the interdependent harmony of creation. The canticle is designed to teach people to think of creation with gratitude, appreciation and respect.⁶⁹

Differently from Francis's earlier hymns of liturgical praise, the closing stanzas of the canticle,⁷⁰ praising God for 'those who give pardon for your love and bear infirmity and tribulation' and 'for Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape', make reference to negative aspects of the world and the painful reconciliation they require to make all good: forgiveness of injuries, endurance of suffering, acceptance of death. The canticle thus moves through the ideal harmony of the creatures, reflecting God's goodness in creation, through the painful healing of the negative, reflecting God's patient and forgiving love in salvation, to the final stanza which calls on its hearers to praise:

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

In the light of Francis's earlier compositions and practice, this is surely addressed not only to humans but to all the creatures.

Murray Bodo's comment on the Canticle is apt:

[T]he final poem of [Francis's] life reveals what happened to that man for whom the love of God was everything. And the surprise is that when God is everything, then everything else becomes more important and holy. The whole creature world is enhanced instead of being neglected and de-emphasized for some spirit world, as so often happens in pseudo-spirituality. For Francis, whatever demeans and devalues the creature demeans the Creator, so that reverence

⁶⁹ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 124.

⁷⁰ These sections were added later, the one on Sister Death shortly before his death.

for and joy over every thing and every person becomes *the* sign of the love of God.⁷¹

Thus we see in Francis that the alternative to a spirituality that despises the created world does not have to be one that divinizes the created world (as Fox tends to imply). It can be one in which the created world is sacred and valued for love of its Creator who always surpasses it. Love of the Creator can include the creation without being reduced to love of the creation.

The whole canticle is a hymn to the Creator and Saviour of all, a theocentric celebration of creation, stemming both from Francis's own intense nature mysticism and also, in the closing stanzas, from his christological mysticism of identification with Jesus Christ, that climaxed in his receiving the stigmata. It is the only text from Francis himself in which these two aspects of his mystical awareness of God and creation clearly come together, no doubt because it was written during the painful and dark days of the last two years of his life. We turn to consider each briefly.

Creation Mysticism

We have considered various aspects of Francis's attitude to and relationships with the non-human creation, but we have still to register the intensity of delight in the creatures that frequently raised Francis to ecstatic rejoicing in their Creator. Some comments from his early biographers will illustrate this:

He used to extol the artistry of [the bees'] 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 (IC 80).

He had so much love and sympathy for [the creatures] that he was disturbed when they were treated without respect. He spoke to them with a great inner and exterior joy, as if they had been endowed by God with

feeling, intelligence, and speech. Very often it was for him the occasion to become enraptured in God (AP 49).

⁷¹ Bodo, *Way of St Francis*, p. 150.

[H]e caressed and contemplated [the creatures] with delight, so much so that his spirit seemed to live in heaven and not on earth (AP 51).

Christ Mysticism

Equal to the intensity of Francis's glorification of God the Creator with and for the creatures was the intensity of his identification with the human Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Just as there is no loss of transcendence in Francis's adoration of the Creator of all things, so there is no loss of particularity in his devotion to the Saviour in his humanity. Francis was christocentric in his praxis, following as fully as possible the humility and poverty of Jesus and his confraternity with the poor and the marginalized. He was christocentric also in his communion with God through intense meditation on Jesus and identification with his passion.

Ewert Cousins calls this 'the mysticism of the historical event': 'In this type of consciousness, one recalls a significant event in the past, enters into its drama and draws from it spiritual energy, eventually moving beyond the event towards union with God.' The Christian form of this mysticism, which in Cousins' view began with Francis, consists in contemplation of the events of the story of Jesus.⁷² It was to facilitate spiritual participation in such an event that Francis, famously, created the first Christmas crib (with live animals) (ie 84-86). (Christmas was his beloved festival because it recalled the humility of Christ in undergoing birth as a human being and in poverty.) But Cousins' characterization of Francis's Christ mysticism perhaps misses the intensity of his devotion to the person of Jesus that accompanies his desire to participate in Jesus' story. Again we may rely on comments from the early biographers:

[Of the period soon after his conversion:] Every day he meditated on the humility and example of the Son of God; he experienced much compassion and much sweetness from this, and in the end, what was bitter to his body,

was changed into sweetness. The sufferings and bitterness which Christ endured for us were a constant subject of affliction to him and a cause for interior and exterior mortification; consequently, he was totally unconcerned with his own sufferings (AP 37).

The brothers who lived with him know that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips, sweet and pleasant conversations about Him, kind words full of love . . . Often he sat down to dinner but on hearing or saying or even thinking 'Jesus' he forgot bodily food . . . Often as he walked along a road, thinking and singing of Jesus, he would forget his destination and start inviting all the elements to praise Jesus (1C 115).

Francis's desire to identify with his Saviour was granted finally when he received the stigmata.

The two different aspects of Francis's mysticism – his nature mysticism and his Christ mysticism – could be said to correspond to creation and redemption. This may be broadly true, but we have already noticed that it was not characteristic of Francis to hold creation and redemption apart. The last sentence just quoted (from 1C 115) illustrates how easily they could come together. Another example derives from the way Francis, following the medieval practice of seeing religious allegories in nature but as always making something characteristically his own out of it, used to be moved to praise or reflection by features of nature that recalled scriptural images of God, Christ or humanity. Especially he loved lambs, because they symbolized the humility of Jesus. In one story, Francis came upon a flock of goats:

There was one little sheep walking humbly and grazing calmly among these many goats. When blessed Francis saw it, he stopped in his tracks, and touched with sorrow in his heart, he groaned loudly, and said to the brother accompanying him: 'Do you see that sheep walking so meekly among those goats? I tell you, in the same way our Lord Jesus Christ, meek and humble, walked among the Pharisees and chief priests. So I ask you, my son, in your love for him to share my compassion for this little sheep. After we have paid for it, let us lead this little one from the midst of the goats' (1C 77).

Spontaneously compassionate though they were, incidents like this functioned as acted parables, conveying something of Francis's deepest apprehensions of God to his brothers.

⁷² Cousins, 'Francis of Assisi', p. 166.

Conclusion

There are aspects of Francis, such as this last example, which doubtless seem alien to our time and place. But there is much in Francis to be appreciated and retrieved. His is a creation mysticism thoroughly rooted in and coherent with the orthodox mainstream of Christian belief and life. Essentially it was the biblical understanding of creation that Francis lived more profoundly and intensely perhaps than any other Christian has done.

10.

Biodiversity – a Biblical-Theological Perspective

Living in an Age of Mass Extinction

In a recent book Heather Rogers describes a scene in Indonesia (now the world's third largest emitter of carbon dioxide, after China and the USA):

Imagine millions of acres of dense rain forest teeming with the world's most diverse flora and fauna. A crew armed with chain saws and bulldozers forges a narrow path through the trees. The workers begin to rip away and flatten the forest, as wildlife, including endangered species such as orangutans, flee for their lives. A bulldozer shoves innumerable splintered trees into tangled piles that stretch for miles, and crews set them alight. Ferocious fires blast through what was once a dynamic web of life, leaving behind a carbon dioxide-filled haze and a silent, charred wasteland. After the forest has been erased it's almost impossible to imagine what was done there.¹

These huge clearances are to make way for oil palm plantations, which are grown partly to be used as vegetable oil in all sorts of processed food, but also to a considerable extent to produce biofuels, the allegedly green fuels that it was hoped would cut the level of carbon dioxide emissions from cars. In fact, burning the forests releases massive amounts of CO₂ and the palm oil plantations themselves cannot absorb nearly as much CO₂ as the rain forests they replace.

¹ Heather Rogers, *Green Gone Wrong: How Our Economy is Undermining the Environmental Revolution* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 2.