

common with Bonaventure's. Whether he also was articulating the vision of Francis, as both he and Bonaventure thought of themselves as doing, in different ways, is another question.

THE LIFE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI: THE EMBRACE OF NATURE

St. Francis is a challenge to the interpreter in many ways. He is the hero of a thousand points of view. His image is easily portrayed so as to reflect the face of the investigator's ideals. Hence we are turning to the meaning of this simple but highly complex man of faith only after we have reviewed his theological context thoroughly. We will attempt to assess his concrete theological meaning with a view to twelfth-century naturalism behind him and the theological constructions of Thomas, Bonaventure, and Dante yet to come, as well as against the background of the religious and social context of his own world.

Clearly, Francis was no schoolman, nor a writing poet. He left us no *Summa*, no *Divine Comedy*. Therefore, in order to ascertain his theology of nature we cannot simply read what he wrote. But we can venture to read his life, which is rich with theological meaning and has a kind of poetry all its own.

Therefore, we must be prepared to use a more synthetic, less analytical interpretive method than we have hitherto employed. For Francis's deeds are at least as important as his words. His theology is evident at that primary level, as was Jesus', whom he sought to imitate throughout his life. Jesus' eating with publicans and sinners, for example, was a living parabolic act, theologically as pregnant with meaning as was the verbal communication of his message in the story of the shepherd and the lost sheep. So we must attend to both the words and the deeds of Francis, if we are to understand him aright.

Further, we will not want to be overly attentive to which words and deeds seem to belong to Francis himself, and which have apparently been added by his followers and interpreters. Our synthetic method of interpretation will allow us to bypass, with due caution, a whole range of critical questions such as those. For our purposes here, a "search of the historical Francis" need not be our chief concern. Which of the historical materials at our disposal stem from Francis himself? Which stem from his disciples and interpreters? While we will surely want to be aware of such questions, we can readily focus our attention on a broader field of theological meaning, which can be called the "Francis event." We can raise this general but pointed question of theological significance: what view of nature comes to expression in this process of human interaction, in the words and deeds of Francis himself, on the one hand, and in the minds and hearts of those who were so overwhelmed by his influence, on the other? We can leave most of the detailed historical questions—that is, which meanings belong

to Francis and which to the responding minds of his followers and interpreters—to other investigators.

Francis as a Representative Figure

Francis is best known, perhaps understandably, for his captivating *Canicle of the Sun*. But viewed in context, that remarkable song of thanksgiving stands in a certain visible kind of continuity with the—not nearly so well known—theological naturalism of the twelfth century. When Francis praises God on high for all his creative works, most of his praises apparently refer to the way those works serve human creatures: the sun for the light by which we see, the wind for the air we breathe, the water for its usefulness, the fire for illuminating the night, the earth for giving us food and fodder. On the other hand, if the Italian is translated differently, as it legitimately may be, something else comes into view. In this case we hear Francis calling to the whole creation to join in praising the Creator, reminiscent of the ancient psalmists: "Be praised, my Lord, by sister moon and the stars . . .," instead of "for sister moon and the stars. . . ." We will return to this point presently.

Francis is also much celebrated for his perfect attunement with other creatures and for their responsiveness to him. But this also is familiar to us from the preceding tradition. Francis's perceived contemplative mastery over the animals—so much so that he is seen as frequently commanding them to do his bidding—is very much reminiscent of the reported lives of the wandering Irish saints, which we considered previously.³⁵ One can think of Francis's famous "stilling of the swallows," which may be one of those instances of evident elaboration by his followers,³⁶ but which, in any case, shows his sublime attunement to the animals, and his judicious mastery over them, akin to the traditional image of Adam and Eve in the Garden. His reported encounter with the ravaging wolf at Gubio, commanding the wolf to lie down, which the animal then did "gentle as a lamb," is another such instance.³⁷ This account has many parallels in earlier saints' lives.

Francis's preaching and teaching is also replete with symbolic allusions to the spiritual life or the events of salvation, a motif which has its roots in the moralizing exemplarism of the early medieval bestiaries, and which would later be developed systematically and with great sophistication by Bonaventure. The lark, say Francis, "is like a good Religious, flying she praises God most sweetly . . . , condemning earthly things, always intent on praising God."³⁸ He is said to have cared for worms, likewise, because the Savior said "I am a worm and no man,"³⁹ and to have seen the sign of the cross in the interlacing of twigs in a hedge.⁴⁰ But, notwithstanding the luminous power of Francis's own spirit, such motifs were not unprecedented.

Even Francis's dedication to poverty, the life lived in the forests, and his commitment to live on the basis of the generosity of the people, had numerous precedents,⁴¹ although the repudiation of communal as well as individual property by monastic and semimonastic groups was not common. Likewise, Francis's self-consciously chosen role as a troubadour of Christ obviously has its roots, however far removed, in the ethos of courtly love which flourished in his time and in the preceding century.

Precedented or not, however, Francis's life would have been remarkable enough in the foregoing terms. But we have yet to see Francis in terms of his own (and his circle's) particular creativity.

*Francis's Theological Creativity: Love for All the
Creatures of God*

Dante, we have seen, was captivated by the prospect of ascent. He told a story of being drawn up the scale of beings, from the very moment that he emerged from the Inferno, toward his true home in heaven, guided by a woman of radiant heavenly beauty. Alan of Lille, in contrast, showed us the alluring goddess Natura. The theological imagination of the twelfth century was in no hurry to climb the scale of being to its apex. It came to a certain kind of rest, indeed, with the experience of the overflowing, descending goodness of God, perceived in the visible, accessible world of nature. Although we have no reason to doubt that the vision of ascent to God shaped Francis's spirituality in significant ways, it seems clear that in accent he was much closer to Alan in the twelfth century, in this respect, than to Dante after him. Nothing illustrates this more forcefully than his persistent habit of calling all the creatures of God brother and sister, and his accompanying expression of care and affection for them.

"He overflowed with the spirit of charity," his biographer Celano states in his first edition, "pitying not only men who were suffering need, but even the dumb brutes, reptiles, birds, and other creatures without sensation."⁴² As this record indicates, there was much more in Francis's relationship to the creatures of nature than an aesthetic delight and a theocentric devotion, although those elements were certainly there. Francis *loved* those lowly creatures as brothers and sisters. At this point he stands apart from the theological naturalism of the twelfth century, as well as at a distance from the cosmic exemplarism and the fascination with the ascent familiar to us in the works of Bonaventure and Dante. Francis's love for the creatures was something different from either the cooperative or the contemplative mastery over nature that came to expression in the twelfth century.

Moreover, Francis did not merely use the creatures of nature as an instrument for his own and his fellows' ascent to God, as Bonaventure tended to do. He

rested his affection in them. They were for him, in a certain sense, centers of value in their own right. So the worm, for example, did remind him of the humiliated Savior, but he did not use the worm merely as an occasion to enhance his own or others' relationship with Christ, or to rise higher in the scale of being to a more perfect communion with God. He loved the worm, Celano tells us, "he glowed with exceeding love . . . , wherefore he used to pick them up in the way and put them in a safe place, that they might not be crushed by the feet of passers-by." Nor, as this instance shows, did he focus his attention chiefly on the popularly "more spiritual" or ethereal creatures such as the birds, although he is most remembered for that. He cared for fish⁴³ and insects, even though that kind of "going the extra mile" with love for all the creatures, we may say, did not always suit his tastes. "He ordered honey and the best wine," says Celano, "to be provided for the bees that they might not perish from want in the cold of winter. He called by the name of brother all animals, though in all their kinds the gentle were his favorites."⁴⁴

Indeed, Francis became a kind of advocate for the creatures, as one might imagine a prophet becoming an advocate of the poor and the oppressed within the human community. "Nor is it strange," one of our sources tells us, "if the fire and the other creatures were obedient to him and venerated him, for, as we who were with him have very often seen, he was so much drawn to them, and rejoiced in them so much, and his spirit was moved with so much pity and compassion for them that he would not see them badly treated and he used to speak with them with inward gladness, as if they had reason, whence by these occasions, he was often times wrapt up in God."⁴⁵

This loving, self-giving relationship with the creatures reached perhaps its most vivid expression in the reports of Francis's duet with the nightingale. He and brother Leo were enjoying a meal together when Francis proposed that they "sing the praise of God antiphonally with this bird."⁴⁶ Leo declined, but Francis and the nightingale, we are told, continued singing antiphonally from vespers until lauds, until at last Francis was forced to stop due to exhaustion. Then the bird fluttered to his hand, where he fed it, praised it enthusiastically, and gave it his blessing. At that moment, the songful creature flew away.

Thus Francis was perceived as knowing how to apply some of the most subtle canons of human friendship to the creatures of nature, to this extent: that he could readily give up his own sense of mastery, his own power to control, in order to join in a cooperative relationship, and finally defer to the other.

The Theology of Descent and the Kenotic Christ

When Francis approached nature, we may say, he saw first neither a goddess Natura, nor yet a Beatrice, but rather—Lady Poverty. His piety surely in-

cluded an element of ascent. This was memorably enacted in his climbing to the top of Mt. La Verna. But we should remember here that the metaphor of fecundity also contains within it the nuance of climbing to the mountaintop. In this case, however, the purpose of the climbing is not to leave the material conditions of this world behind, but better to stand in solidarity with that world. Indeed, the movement of the Divine which typically emerges in thought shaped by the metaphor of fecundity is the movement of *descent*. It is apparent, then, that we can see in the life of Francis an inversion of the characteristic piety of his time, even as that piety was later to come to expression in Bonaventure and Dante. The image of Lady Poverty, for him, signals that inversion. Harkening back to the paradoxical richness of biblical images—to become rich, one must become poor; to gain one's life, one must lose it—Francis seems to envision the way of spiritual ascent as in fact being the way of spiritual descent. "A man must be naked and free of every burden," we hear him saying in the *Sacrum commercium* regarding Lady Poverty, "if he would attain the mountain top where she has taken refuge. Take also with you companions who will help you in your painful ascent."⁴⁷

But why does the idea of descent appear in Francis's life and thought instead of the more familiar singular accent on ascending to the spiritual heights above and leaving the earth behind? To answer this question, we may first recall the familiar twelfth-century theological emphasis on the overflowing, descending goodness of God, and imagine that Francis saw that fecund divine benevolence all around him, with peculiar clarity and intensity. Indeed, as he loved all the creatures, so he readily understood the overflowing goodness of God as *God's love* and caring for all the creatures. This is from his memorable sermon to the birds:

My little sisters, the birds, many are the bonds that unite us to God. And your duty is to praise Him everywhere and always. . . . Praise Him likewise for the food He provides you without your working for it, for the songs He has taught you, for your numbers that His blessing has multiplied, for your species which He preserved in the ark of olden time, and for the realm of the air He has reserved for you.

God sustains you without having to sow or reap. He gives you fountains and streams to drink from, mountains and hills in which to take refuge, and tall trees in which to build your nests. Although you do not know how to sew or spin, He gives you and your little ones the clothing you need.

How the Creator must love you to grant you such favors! So, my sister birds, do not be ungrateful, but continually praise Him who showers blessings upon you.⁴⁸

The theology of divine goodness is thus vivid, even overwhelming, in Francis's thinking. But it does not stand alone, by any means. And this is Francis's pecu-

liar genius or, better, his inspiration. He joined the image of the divine goodness with a concrete christocentric devotion of radical proportions.

"Many a time," Celano tells us, "as he was walking on his way, meditating and singing of Jesus, did he forget where he was going, and invite all the elements to praise Jesus."⁴⁹ This relationship with Jesus—with whose wounds he was to be stigmatized—lay at the heart of what modern interpreters sometimes unfelicitously think of as his "nature mysticism." Francis espoused Lady Poverty—the theme of descent—because she had been "the inseparable companion of the Most High Son of God" and because for twelve centuries, it appeared to Francis, she had wandered about forsaken.⁵⁰ Francis's "nature mysticism" is, in fact, more adequately thought of, if the term is to be used at all, as a "Christ mysticism."

"Have this mind among yourselves," the apostle Paul had written, "which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5–8). Francis petitions Lady Poverty with virtually the same christological confession:

We beseech you to join us and become our way leading to the King of Glory, as you were the way for Him when He came to help those sitting in the shadow of death.

For, leaving His royal abode, the Son of the Most High sought you whom all men fear. Enamoured by your beauty, it was you alone whom He descended to wed on earth. You had prepared for Him a fitting throne within a poor Virgin; from which He came forth to manifest Himself to the world. It was you again who provided Him an abode in that miserable stable when at His birth there was no place for Him in the inn. There you became His whole lifelong, His inseparable companion. For the foxes have holes and the birds of the air their nests, but He had no place to lay his head.⁵¹

Francis's relationship with nature had a *cruciform* character. He became the Christ-like servant of nature. He impoverished himself in order that he might give himself to others, both to human and to natural creatures. So in his life and thought (and in the meanings that resonated in the hearts and minds of some of his followers) he, in effect, united two grand theological themes: on the one hand, the vision of the descending goodness of God, which makes all things good and worthy of respect in their own right, since they are indeed of God and for God; on the other hand, the vision of the descending love of God in Christ, the self-giving, self-humiliating Savior, who, in turn, mandated sacrificial love for the world.

This is the profound significance of the famous Christmas tableau that Fran-

cis created. Its meaning has often been obscured by later sentimentalities. But this was in truth an enacted parable of Francis's faith in the kenotic or self-emptying Christ, in the midst of the overflowing goodness of God. Two weeks before Christmas he asked his friend, the Lord of Grecco, for his aid in making that place "a new Bethlehem."³² A crib was set in place, lined with hay, and an ox and ass were brought in. Mass was celebrated above the manger, beside which the animals were standing. "The night was lit up as the day," we are told by Celano, "and was delightful to men and beasts . . . the woodland rang with voices, the rocks made answer to the jubilant throng."³³

Theologically speaking, the implication of Francis's action seems clear. Identification with the kenotic Christ restores one, in an otherwise sinful world, to perfect communion with the overflowing goodness of God in the whole creation. Identification with the kenotic Christ, then, is not the occasion for dying to this world in order to ascend above to a world-transcending union with God. Identification with the kenotic Christ is the occasion for living in this world, imitating that Christ, yes, but at the same time imitating the Father of the same Christ, who is constantly descending to care for and to bless all of his creatures.

For this reason Francis can stand in solidarity with all the creatures of God and can call on them to share in his joy in the event of the divine descent in the stable of Bethlehem. "Sing joyfully to God our helper . . .," we hear Francis saying in his *Office of the Lord's Passion*, which he apparently used regularly in addition to the offices of the canonical hours:

Sing joyfully to God our helper. . . . For the Lord is terrible and great, the Great King over all the earth. Because the most high Father in heaven, our King before all ages, has sent His beloved Son from on high; and He has been born of the Blessed Virgin, Holy Mary. . . .

For the most holy and beloved Child is given us and born for us on the way and laid for us in a manger; because He found no place in the inn. Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice: let the sea be moved, and the fulness thereof; the fields and all things that are in them shall be joyful. . . .³⁴

These words are reminiscent of the *Cantic of the Sun*, when it is more properly translated to accent the theocentric, rather than the anthropocentric meanings: "Be praised, my Lord, by sister moon and the stars." Identified with the kenotic Christ, Francis sees the descending goodness of the Creator everywhere, blessing all things, and therefore he calls on all things, human and natural, to praise the Creator.

To see all this, according to this Franciscan way of thinking, one must indeed be identified with the kenotic Christ. In this sense, Francis was not a romantic.

He did not go directly to nature, at least at first. At first he went directly to Christ. This meant that the only way to see nature as it truly is, as universally blessed and cared for by the Creator, was the way of *humility* again, the way of Lady Poverty. So, in his *Office on the Lord's Passion*, after having called all things to praise their Creator, he turns to the nations of the world and prays: "Offer your bodies in sacrifice and carry His Holy Cross: and follow unto the end His most holy commandments."³⁵

Here a colloquialism is instructive: the kenotic Christ brought Francis's piety "down to earth." That is to say: the self-giving, descending Christ, Son of the Creator who is overflowing goodness, brought Francis's piety down to earth. And on the earth it stays. From thence it never ascends.

Living the Life of "Last Things"

But we must still ask a key question in this respect. For Francis, who is this kenotic Christ who binds him in humility to imitate the universal goodness of God? This question points us to an aspect of Francis's life and thought which is missing from most popular presentations of the saint, nor does it play a visible role in many scholarly interpretations: Francis's eschatological consciousness.

The expectation of the end of the world was very much alive in Francis's time, in popular circles, if not among the theologians. It was a constant source of "human tension and social upheaval," as Ray Petry has observed.³⁶ Francis shared in this popular eschatological consciousness. Ernst Benz has highlighted Francis's exposition of the Lord's Prayer, in this connection, in particular his interpretation of the petition for daily bread.³⁷ Francis identified this bread, for which he was praying, with the Christ who is to come.³⁸ With that identification, Benz points out, Francis gave expression to two themes, which were characteristic of his life and thought. First there is Francis's burning anticipation of the coming consummation, the coming of the kingdom, which for Francis is so real and so near that he undertakes the impossible, to live in terms of the laws of the coming kingdom—humility, love, self-giving, poverty, chastity, obedience—already in the midst of the realities of this world. The second element Benz sees implicit in Francis's identification of "daily bread" with the coming Christ is the affirmation of the meaningfulness of the life of the church in this world, above all its sacraments.³⁹ The latter means that Francis, notwithstanding his intense and overwhelming eschatological consciousness, did not break with the church in order to enter into the coming age, which he so vividly envisioned as the context for his own life.

This means further that Francis stands with and against another medieval figure who was well known for his particular kind of eschatological consciousness, the Cistercian abbot, Joachim of Fiore (1145–1202). Scholars debate the ex-

tent of Joachim's direct influence on Francis, but Joachimite ideas were surely widely known in Francis's time, and beyond. The saintly John of Parma, for example, Minister General of the Franciscan Order before Bonaventure, was thoroughly influenced by Joachim.⁶⁰ A comparison of Joachim and Francis, in any case, is revealing.

Joachim projected a vision of three successive ages, during which different aspects of the Trinity would be manifest: the age of the Father, the Old Testament; the age of the Son, the church; and the age of the Spirit.⁶¹ The last, as Joachim depicts it, is akin to some of the eschatological ideas we have already seen in Irenaeus. Joachim envisions this age of the Spirit as a time of voluntary poverty and peace on earth, when a new race of children of God would inherit the earth, love one another and all the creatures of nature, and give praise to God in all things. Joachim apparently thought of himself and his followers as harbingers of the new age. So, once, in a paradigmatic action, when the clouds cleared away from over the church in which he was officiating, he saluted the sun, sang the "Veni Creator"—the hymn of invocation to the Creator Spirit—and led the congregation forth to contemplate the shining landscape.⁶²

Now Francis was an obedient son of the church all his days. As Benz indicates, Francis's petition for his daily bread presupposes his acceptance and affirmation of the sacraments of the church. He never thought of leaving the church and its ordinances behind, as Joachim did, in order to enter into some new age where there would be no church. But it is surely not imagining too much at this point to think of him as sharing in the kind of penchant for realized eschatology current in Joachimite circles, in other respects: living a life of childlike simplicity, loving all the creatures of the earth, being transfixed with joy in the presence of the God who is, in some sense, already "all in all," living at peace with the world of nature, in short, living the life of the new heavens and new earth already in this world.

This brings us to an answer to our question about the kenotic Christ who so captivated Francis's soul. Was not this humble Christ, in Francis's eyes, already the Christ who was to come? In particular, was not Francis's creation of the Christmas tableau an act of eschatological piety? Was this not in some sense intended to be a parabolic enactment of the "peaceable kingdom" of the end time, a realized eschatology, a partial but tangible manifestation of life in the future world of God, promised by God throughout the ages?

The Isaianic vision of peace entailed the lamb lying down with the lion, and a little child leading them (Isa. 11:16), but it also included a vision of the *mountain* where the Temple stands being established as the highest of all mountains, whereto the nations of the world would flow, and beat their swords into plow-

shares (Isa. 2:1-4; 11:9). Later, in the same book, we are shown a vision of the Lord "on this mountain" making for all peoples "a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees . . . And we will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples . . ." (Isa. 25:6-8).

What we see emerging here is the influence of yet another metaphor in Francis's life and thought, mediated to him by the eschatological consciousness of his time, and not really shared by the likes of Alan, Bonaventure, and Dante: the metaphor of migration to a good land. Christ has brought Francis's piety down to earth, in this eschatological sense. He has introduced Francis, as it were, to the fecundity of the divine characteristic of the end times, and called Francis to embody the life of childlike innocence and peace with nature, among other things. Francis's ascent to the mountain, which for him is really a descent, following the example of Christ and then living in imitation of the descending goodness of God throughout the creation, was in fact for him his descent to the promised land.

It is possible to read the story of the famous "welcoming of the birds" with such biblical nuances in mind. One day with a company of close friends, Francis set out for La Verna, the mountain donated by the Lord of Chiusi, where some huts and a small chapel served as a devotional center for the brothers.⁶³ This was where his final ecstasy and stigmatization were to take place. Here, in his ascent, we are told, Francis chose to rest and to look back at all the country about him. Then the famous avian friends of the saint arrived—knowing, indeed, we may imagine, from the mind's eye of the narrator of this story, that this holy man was their friend—and they showed great joy.

When they were come right to the foot of the very rock of La Verna, it pleased St.

Francis to rest awhile under the oak tree that stood by the way, and there standeth to this day [is this at some level a figure for "the tree of the cross"?]; and retiring beneath it St. Francis began to consider the lay of the place and of the country round about. And lo, while he was thus pondering, there came a great multitude of birds from diverse parts that, with singing and fluttering of their wings, showed forth great joy and gladness, and surrounded St. Francis, in such wise that some settled on his head, some on his shoulders, and some on his arms, some on his bosom, and some around his feet. His companions . . . beholding this marvelled greatly, and St. Francis rejoiced in spirit, and spake thus: "I do believe dearest brothers, that it is pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ that we abide on this solitary mountain, since our sisters and brothers, the birds, show such joy at our coming."⁶⁴

Is it accidental that Celano should think of Francis in terms of the eschatological vision of Paul in Romans 8, the theme of the whole creation groaning in travail, waiting for the revelation of the children of God? "He discerned the hidden

things of creation," Celano says, "with the eye of the heart, as one who had already escaped into the glorious liberty of the children of God."⁶⁵

If these suggestions for an approach to Francis's life and theology in terms of realized eschatology have merit, then we are in a position to understand his celebrated preaching to the birds and the flowers as events of theological significance, not merely matters of personal genius or idiosyncrasy. This preaching seems to be very much more than sentimental rhetoric, exaggerated hagiography, or some unfortunate pathetic fallacy. It is rather an expression of Francis's position of living in this world, in terms of the next, when all things are to be renewed.

Renewal of the whole creation—that is surely good news for all those creatures! It was in this spirit, a spirit of hope for a fully renewed creation, that the ancient psalmist called to all creatures to praise the Lord, for his coming salvation would be a blessing for them too. So on the basis of such a hope, which for Francis would include eschatological brotherliness and sisterliness, Francis could then speak in the present to the creatures as brothers and sisters. Again the testimony of Celano is illuminating, once more with reference to the eschatological theme of the groaning of the whole creation:

When he found many flowers growing together, it might happen that he would speak to them and encourage them, as though they could understand, to praise the Lord. It was the same with the fields of corn and the vineyards, the stones in the earth and in the woods, all the beauteous meadows, the tinkling brooks, the sprouting gardens, earth, fire, air and wind—all these he exhorted in his pure childlike spirit to love God and to serve Him joyfully.

He was wont to call all created things his brothers and sisters, and in a wonderful manner inaccessible to others he would enter into the secret things as one to whom "the glorious liberty of the children of God" had been given.⁶⁶

In light of this eschatological horizon of his life and thought, we can understand, finally, why he was able to relate to death and suffering in the world so forthrightly and with such an inner peace. When he had but a short time to live, he is said to have stretched out his hands and cried, "then be welcome sister death."⁶⁷ He knew the world into which he was about to enter. He had been living in that world, by anticipation. Therefore he was not afraid. Therefore he welcomed it.

The actual scene of Francis's dying, as we see it in the sources we have, is remarkable in many ways, not the least of which is pertinent to our concerns here. We do not see Francis ecstatically transfixed in ethereal glory, in immaterial luminescence, as Bonaventure and Dante were to imagine such a final state of union with god. It is reported that as Francis lay dying, he again and again re-

turned to sing the hymn for which he is still most famous, the *Canticle of the Sun*.⁶⁸ Here, at the very end, as throughout his life, Francis lives and dies in solidarity with all the creatures of God. He lives and dies surrounded by the fecundity of God, partaking of the ecstasies of the promised land.

Assessment: The Triumph of the Ecological Motif

Francis's life and his death, we may therefore conclude, were shaped by the ecological motif of Western theology. In this respect we may view Francis and Augustine side by side. Both looked forward to a good land, to the final consummation of the cosmos as a whole, as well as to the consummation of human history. Both looked forward to a time when God would be all in all and when the whole universe would be transfigured with divine glory. Both, in turn, viewed existence in this world as a pilgrimage, as a life-and-death migration to that ultimate world of divine glory. At the same time, both saints maximized the potential of the metaphor of fecundity, with regard to this world as well as the next. The theme of the created world as a rich and variegated expression of God's overflowing goodness permeated their thinking and their piety. Both also shaped their thought and spirituality in response to the self-giving love of God manifest in the Christ figure, the humiliated, humble Son of God. Both Augustine and Francis were, in this sense, champions of the grace of God, which they perceived, in their own ways, as constantly overflowing, constantly descending to this earth, throughout the whole created order as well as in the specific context of the history of human salvation, mediated through the sacramental ministries of the church.

The differences between the two, as far as their approaches to nature are concerned, are mainly differences between a man of thought and a man of action. With the African doctor we witness a flowering of Christianity's ecological promise expressed in terms of an articulate, panoramic theological vision. With the Poverello from Assisi we witness a flowering of Christianity's ecological promise in terms of a vivid, personal engagement with the world of nature. Augustine reflected about nature. Francis embraced nature. Francis, indeed, shows in this respect the impassioned existential possibilities latent in Augustine's sometimes dispassionate theological discourse. Francis, we may say, is an embodiment of Christianity's ecological promise.

To say this much, however, is not yet to begin to project a systematic theology or to design an ethical program. This has not been the purpose of any of these explorations. The intent here, and throughout, has consistently been historical, not systematic. This perhaps needs to be underlined at this point, in view of the immense popularity of Francis in our day, and with particular reference to the discussion of Francis and Benedict initiated by René Dubos. Dubos

has recommended Benedict as his patron saint of ecology, as it were, rather than Francis, because Dubos attributes a certain passivity before nature to Francis, whereas he sees in Benedict, as we already have had occasion to note, a spirit of "creative intervention in the earth." Dubos argues, moreover, that that ecologically sensitive, but activist spirit is what the human race needs today, more than what he considers to be the contemplative Franciscan spirit.⁴⁹

Dubos surely deserves a hearing at this point. It may be that the Benedictine spirit, as he interprets it, needs to be seen as a valuable theological resource in its own right, alongside the Franciscan spirit. One obviously cannot discern any "theology of technology," for example, surely not explicitly, in the Francis event. And such a theology is undoubtedly called for in our own era. At the same time, a reading of Francis more sympathetic than Dubos's would probably show that Francis's life incorporates many "Benedictine" nuances, as a matter of fact, in particular the Benedictine emphasis on cooperative mastery. Also, a closer comparison of Francis and Benedict might well uncover elements in Francis's life which are missing from the theology implicit in the Benedictine spirit, Francis's eschewing of private property, for example, or his love for the poor and his commitment to serve them rather than, let us say, simply committing himself to his own community and to the contemplative life.

In any case, this point needs to be stressed here: to suggest that Francis embodies the ecological promise of the classical Christian tradition is not to suggest that he represents everything that must be affirmed today by a responsible "ecological theology." It is to suggest, however, that Francis's vision of the descending, universal goodness of God, his obedience to the kenotic Christ, his hope for the consummation of all things, and his childlike love of all the creatures of God commend themselves to us today, probably more than the contributions of any other single individual who stands within the context of the classical theological tradition, as compelling data for our own theological reflection.

If we see Francis in this light, moreover, as an embodiment of the ecological promise of classical Christianity, it is also possible to think of his life and thought instructively in terms of some of the questions raised at the beginning of these historical explorations, in our review of Kaufman's analysis of Western theology generally. As we have acknowledged that Kaufman's analysis makes sense when we are considering Origen's thought, we may also allow, when sufficient qualifications have been made, that it has some applicability to Alan, Thomas, Bonaventure, and Dante also, all of whom finally think in terms of the spiritual motif. But as Kaufman's analysis does not readily apply to Irenaeus or to Augustine, both of whom thought in terms of the ecological motif, neither does it apply, surely, to the theological meaning given in the Francis event.

Here are the rudiments for a theology that has indeed a special vocabulary for nature, the vocabulary of friendship; that envisions a close ontological bond between God and humans, on the one hand, and nature, on the other; that presupposes an understanding of God which readily highlights those qualities of the divine life which show God as immanent in, and as befriending all creatures; and that, accordingly, encourages humans to do the same, by an *imitatio Christi* and an *imitatio Dei*, by following the example of the Son of God who emptied himself in order to minister to all the creatures of God, especially the least of them, even as his Father was already ministering to them.