

St Francis was no theologian. If we were to ask him what God was, our hope for a learned answer would be dashed. Francis was a witness to the living God. All we can require of such a witness is that he should describe what he experienced, what he heard, saw and felt, assuring us that his experience was not merely fantasy, but a reality that had turned his life around.

So, Francis is a witness when he stands before us as an example of what God can do in us. At the



same time, Francis is an acute reminder of God's richness and goodness, for which we hunger. When we make a conscious effort to respond to God, I believe that our lives, too, would be turned around. In this way, Francis shows us clearly that God is present among us, recovering the joy of feeling we are loved with an infinite love. By the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives of faith, we see living proof that authentic humanity flourishes when we are one with God's

creation reflecting God's richness and goodness in our lives [Julio Mico, OFM Cap, "The Spirituality of St Francis: Francis' Image of God"].

Approaching the God Francis knew, we touch what is fundamental as we journey through life. Life, in fact all of creation, reflects the presence of God. God is to be praised through all of creation, and is expressed most clearly in "*The Canticle of Brother Sun.*" The sun gives light, and its radiant beauty is for Francis a likeness of God. This sun which shines on the good and bad alike reflects the love and fidelity of God's reconciling love.

Francis sees himself—as a brother—in union with all of creation, and expresses this communion in terms of brother and sister. Francis manifested by his very being, and by his behavior what was inside him and made him alive. He communicated meaning. His body language, his attitudes and actions are amplified by the spoken and written word, accessible to us through witnesses. Our only access to the "language" of Francis is through two sources of written texts: stories from those who knew him, influenced by him, interpreted him; and writings of Francis himself, centered not on his person or behavior, but on that which inspired him.

And so, let us consider *The Canticle* that constitutes the strongest and most authentic "speech,"—the vocabulary, syntax, the various styles used, and the manner of address—coming in contact with the language of Francis that is both puzzling and vivid, speech he identifies with that of God. Francis' mother tongue was the Italian Umbrian dialect, close to Latin. He knew the songs of the French troubadours, expressing himself in his moments of enthusiasm. The son of a rich merchant, he learned to read and write Latin, the principal language of communication at the time. All of Francis' writings, including the two autographs (*The Praises of God* and the *Letter to Brother Leo*) were written in Latin, except for *The Canticle of Brother Sun* in Italian, for the edification of the laity [Thadee Matura, OFM, The "Language" of Francis in His Writings].

*The Canticle* is a song of faith, more theological than poetical, written not in admiration of creation, but in adoration of the Creator. Francis wrote it during his last illness, when he was close to death, to express his faith that God's plan of salvation extended far beyond this earthly life. In it, Francis lists the most obvious works of the Creator, the things that we see and feel all around us all our lives. Yet he does not make explicit mention of Christ and His redeeming death.

Nevertheless, Francis teaches us that, by coming on earth, Christ has given everything and everyone in history a radically new orientation, which is a profound insight of faith by Francis into the real nature of all creation. The sacrifice of his own will entailed an even more radical surrender to God's will. And the result of this new and extremely painful growth process may have been the crisis during the night in the cell of mats at San Damiano, with the tribulation of the mice. It seems that Francis finished this canticle just before his death by adding the verses on peace and death. He was suffering greatly, (his illness, dissention of the friars, stigmatization), but the Lord consoled him by allowing him to see that he was being called to eternal life [Raoul Manselli, "Francis of Assisi and Lay People Living in the World"].

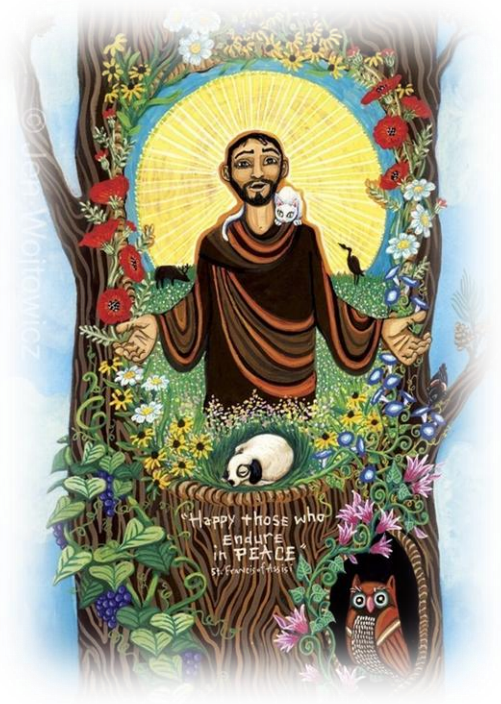
From this standpoint *The Canticle* acquires a deeper meaning as prayer. Although Francis does not interpret the mice as a temptation of the devil, in the end his interpretation is not all that different, and it is to his words that we must turn once again. We can easily reconstruct them if we reflect on the circumstances in which *The Canticle* was composed. One morning, after a night of extreme suffering caused by his eye sickness and the mice running through his cell of mats, he was consoled toward dawn by a heavenly vision assuring him of his eternal salvation. Many of us have experienced nights of sickness and insomnia. The mice that were tormenting him must have seemed to him a symbol of that evil, elusive but relentless, which eats away at creation. The wolf, which had become gentle at his prayer, had deluded him into believing that he had escaped into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. But now it took only a tiny and treacherous creature, one he could not tame, to serve as a cruel reminder of evil's overwhelming power over people. The darkness of the night, together with that of his own painful blindness, joined with the darkness of his spirit to form a single sad and gloomy image [Giovanni Pozzi, "The Canticle of Brother Sun"].

But suddenly with the external clarity of dawn came the inner clarity of grace, reassuring him of his final destiny. This gave a different meaning to his suffering. The usual image of a harmonious world, the vehicle of divine praise, overcomes the confusion brought on by evil [Pozzi].

From grammar to prayer, I would like to think that we who encounter the text of the Canticle must not do so on the level of sentimentality, but rather on the level of a relentless probing into the essence of things, in order to touch there the presence of God [Pozzi].

As a prayer of praise to God the Creator, *The Canticle* is an expression of our attitude toward creation, which is to accept and love creatures as they are. Francis believed that the entire universe—the self and the environment to which the self belongs—is the work of the highest creative power, the creativity of Transcendent Love. By creation, God brings to being what did not exist, and then in love, lets it be itself. Like the Creator, Francis loved creatures by letting them be themselves, by encouraging them to grow in their uniqueness and by sharing with them their being themselves. Human beings, we proclaim, are made in God's image. Not only did God create all creatures, He made a covenant with them (Gen 9). God knows and loves the sea otter as the sea otter, the scarlet pimpernel as the scarlet pimpernel, grains of sand as grains of sand. As images of God, it is our privilege to do the same.

The experience which gave birth to the *Canticle* is mystical, a creative encounter with reality, when it brings about new being by an increase of being. It causes to be what did not exist prior to the encounter—the self becomes more truly the self, reality becomes more truly reality [Eric Doyle, OFM, "St Francis, The Song of Brotherhood"].



The remarkable circumstance about the composition of the *Canticle* is that Francis, being almost totally blind, was able to compose a song about the beauty and unity of creation, because he was already one with himself and with the world, and the world was one with him. I believe these beautiful words come from the inner depths of his heart. To “see with the eyes of the heart” is to see what is essential, invisible to the eye. The sun, the moon and the stars, the wind and the earth, and the fire and water were within him. By the light of the inner sun, Francis saw the loveliness of everything.

St Francis is full of surprises: he calls poverty his Lady; death as sister; bitterness becomes sweet; dispossession, a sign of possession of oneself by communion with reality other than the self; ecological problems reflect the inner human problem of alienation and selfishness; integration, a remedy to alienation; prayer reveals that we belong to the world, not separate from it. And above all, for Francis washing the suffering and disfigured bodies of lepers, is now for us to establish justice and peace at the local and international levels.