

## **Francis and Creation**

Francis is associated with nature probably more than any other saint. Almost everyone who knows a little about him will know that he is the saint who spoke to animals, or on whose feast day household pets receive blessings, or whose statue we so often see in gardens. Those who enjoy outdoor hiking or camping might admire Francis's affinity for nature. However, Francis's relationship to nature and creation goes beyond birdbaths and nature walks. Francis's view of creation was incarnational, even sacramental.

Francis' admiration of creation began with the words from Genesis. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth... God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good." (Genesis 1, 1-31) Francis loved creation because God created it, and it was good. But his admiration goes further than the Old Testament. Francis was a Christian and he believed in the primacy of Christ – that all creation was formed through Christ – the Eternal Word. The Word existed before all creation, and all creation was made through Him. "All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be..." (John 1, 2-3) "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible." (Colossians 1, 15-20) The Nicene Creed says, "Through him [the Word] all things were made..." Francis, therefore, saw the reflection of Christ within all creation.

Thus, Francis's worldview of creation was profoundly incarnational. He had to love creation because that is where he saw God reflected. He very much believed in

Christ's Incarnation – that the second Person of the Trinity, the Word, the God-man, came down to Earth and redeemed it. So everywhere he looked, he saw Christ reflected.

This theology stands in stark contrast to that of the Cathars (a heretical group that lived alongside Francis). They held to dualistic beliefs; i.e. they believed in two gods – a good god of the spirit, and a bad god of matter. Therefore, they saw in creation the rotten fruit of the evil god of matter. Thus, they rejected material things and embraced poverty. Francis, on the other hand, saw creation as good. It had to be good, since it was created by the one good God. Further, Francis saw Christ in all creation, since everything was created through the Son.

Francis saw Christ especially in other human beings. As a matter of fact, he saw Christ especially in other human beings, since people, more than all of creation, were made in the image of God (Gen. 1, 27). Therefore, in the highest order of all created things, human beings were on top. Further, since Francis saw himself as a part of creation, he considered things his brother and sister. If we call God “Our Father”, we are declaring that everything around us, not just people, but animals and even inanimate objects, are fraternal. They are our brothers and sisters. This is most evident in Francis' prayer/poem, “The Canticle of the Creatures”. In it he sings out praises to Brother Sun, Wind, and Fire, and Sister Moon, Water, Earth, and even Death. (On a side note, one should not wonder why he chose the feminine for some, and masculine for other, since in Italian, words are gendered. In Italian, the words *Sole*, *Vento*, and *Fuoco* are masculine, while *Luna*, *Acqua*, *Terra*, and *Morte* are feminine.)

But Francis did not limit his love of creation to beautiful things. Although Francis would certainly have marveled at a sunset, the seashore, or mountains, he also loved little

worms and beasts. In the *Fioretti* the story is told how Francis went to the town of Gubbio and tamed a ferocious wolf that had been terrorizing the people. The story recounts that Francis treated the wolf with courtesy and dignity, calling him Brother, and he was 'converted'. Here he dealt with the beast as he treated human 'sinners' – by showing them love and helping them to realize Christ within and that they are one of God's creatures. He saved worms by picking them off the road and gently moving them to safety (Cel I, chap XXIX). Here one can surmise that Francis perceived the disfigured Christ – the Passion of Christ. He knew that Christ's life was not limited to his glorification, and that he passed through horrendous suffering. Perhaps this is why he was so devoted to lepers – in them he saw Christ's distorted and broken face on the cross. In Celano 1, chapter 28, Francis comes across a little lamb surrounded by goats while returning from the Holy Land. He compassionately takes the lamb from among the malevolent goats and brings it with him to Osimo. Celano describes how Francis identifies the lamb with Christ and reflects how Christ walked in a similar manner among the Pharisees and Chief Priests. Thus, we can see how Francis still saw Christ in the more unattractive parts of nature.

Francis's vision of nature and creation reverberated throughout Italian culture even affecting art. Art historians note how St. Francis was instrumental in the artistic transition from medieval art to the Renaissance. He so strongly influenced people's spiritual lives, that artists, impacted by the movement, began representing art differently. Previously, medieval art was characterized by its flat, iconographic, other-worldly style. But after Francis introduced Christendom to a new way of perceiving God – within nature and creation – artists began depicting paintings and frescoes in art in a natural,

realistic setting. Thus, scenes of nature began to appear in the painting's background. Further, in a move away from the flat icons, artists added the third dimension of depth, symbolic of the new spiritual dimension Francis added to his culture. This artistic transition, or more aptly, revolution, is evident in the upper church of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi where Giotto painted a series of frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Francis, which are considered the forerunner of Renaissance art.

St. Francis's understanding of creation influenced the theology of later friars. John Duns Scotus took Francis's ideas on Incarnation and creation further saying that the Incarnation of Jesus was not an afterthought on the part of God as a response to man's sin; but, rather, Scotus opined that even had Adam never sinned, the Father would still have sent His Son anyway. The pre-eminent theologian of the high Middle Ages was the Dominican Thomas Aquinas who taught that the primary reason for Christ's coming was to redeem humans from sin. Scotus believed that the Incarnation had been planned from all eternity, before creation, before sin entered the world. The reason, Scotus believed, was that God is good and goodness naturally flows out of Him (like creation itself) and since all creation exists through Christ, it only follows that the Word would come in Person on Earth to be with and fulfill all of creation.

This theology has the potential to transform our understanding of the Incarnation from exclusively a Redemption-based theology, i.e. Jesus came to save sinners as a response to sin, to a more creation-based theology – the Franciscan idea that Christ came to fulfill creation, since it was created through him. Therefore, Jesus did not come just to save us from sin, but to be present with us because He loves us. This can influence our

own ministries from trying to 'save' people to just desiring to be with them and bring a loving Christ to them, as they reflect God's presence through His creation.

In conclusion, Francis is much more than the saint who preached to the birds. His views on creation were influenced by his intense religious experience. His relationship with God was not limited to the cloister, as he lived his spirituality in the open outdoors. Since most people today live indoors and appreciate nature when they can, i.e. through a hiking or camping trip, it is natural to project that on the life of Francis and the early friars. In reality they lived an opposite experience. Francis and the early friars lived in the open outdoors and ministered within the towns and cities. Their lives were spent outside in nature, where they found and worshiped God.

By Bret Thoman, SFO

Copyright, 2009