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Founders:

John Abela OFM († 2010)

Raymond Camilleri OFM († 2022)

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Editor: Noel Muscat OFM

All correspondence should be addressed to: muscatnoel@yahoo.co.uk

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«CANTICUM FRATRIS SOLIS» THE FRANCISCAN VIEW OF CREATION AND HUMANITY

Noel Muscat OFM

The celebration of the 800 years of the composition of the *Canticum Fratris Solis*, The Canticle of Brother Sun, during the spring months of 1225, but also during the remaining few months of the life of St. Francis, is an occasion to reflect upon the Franciscan view of creation and humanity. This should not just be the view of St. Francis himself, although he is the one who inspired this splendid lyrical composition. It is also the view of the Franciscan family of brothers and sisters who feel that they are part and parcel of this immensely beautiful masterpiece which is God's own creation, and which is not limited to what we might call an ecological view of nature and the world, but also opens its arms wide to embrace the human dimension of creation in the anthropological view of Christianity. Indeed, the Canticle of Brother Sun is more than just a masterpiece of literature, or an artistic expression of the beauty of the entire cosmos and mankind. It is, above all, a theocentric vision of creation and mankind. The centre of attention is not creation in itself, or even the dignity of the human person. It is rather God the Father of

Our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the fountain-source of goodness and beauty in creation, and His masterpiece in the person of the Incarnate Word becomes the reason why mankind perfectly fits in this great project of love which starts from creation and ends with salvation and the return of all reality in the embrace of God.

The Canticle of Brother Sun is an expression of a lay spirituality which is typically mediaeval and Italian, but which succeeds in transcending time, space and culture in order to become a song of universal brotherhood.¹ However, it is important to contextualise the Canticle in its history and in its cultural environment before proceeding to analyse its significance for humanity in our contemporary world. For this reason, we shall first of all speak about the historical context of the Canticle of Brother Sun, and then analyse its theological significance in the Franciscan tradition, in order to arrive at its contemporary significance for today's world and for humanity at large.

¹ A. VAUCHEZ, *La spiritualità dell'Occidente medioevale*, Milano 2006, 135-136: "Il *Cantico delle creature* (o *di frate Sole*), scritto in italiano, costituisce una novità importante. Attraverso questo testo pregevole, Francesco riscatta la componente orale e popolare della cultura laica, rendendola strumento di lode al Creatore, allo stesso titolo del latino liturgico, considerato fin a quel momento il solo veicolo possibile della preghiera. Si realizzò così, sotto l'influenza di Francesco e dei suoi fratelli, una feconda osmosi tra cultura profana e cultura religiosa, grazie alla quale la devozione del popolo italiano, come di altri popoli, ha potuto esprimersi

nel linguaggio dell'esperienza quotidiana, con le sue gioie e le sue pene. Dal varco aperto da san Francesco passarono le confraternite dei Laudesi – autori e cantori delle 'laudi' in onore di Dio e dei santi –, dai Flagellanti e da altri gruppi che associavano preghiera, canto ed espressione teatrale. Una strada sfociata, fin alla metà del XIII secolo, in quella sintesi tra sentimento religioso ed emozione lirica che perdura talvolta ancor oggi nei Paesti mediterranei. Ciò dimostra quanto il linguaggio francescano, umile e diretto, abbia saputo riconciliare un popolo con la sua religione attraverso la parola e il canto."

The historical context of the composition of the *Canticum Fratris Solis*

The historical context in which Francis composed the Cantic of Brother Sun is described in the *Assisi Compilation*² and in the *Mirror of Perfection* [The Sabatier Edition].³

According to the scholar Felice Accrocca, the manuscript tradition of the *Compilatio Assisiensis* can be traced to a codex which was composed in Assisi between 1310 and 1312.⁴ This would place it directly in line with the Ognissanti manuscript of the *Speculum Perfectionis* which bears the date 1318.⁵ The two versions are quite similar. However, the text of the *Speculum* is more developed along the various stages of the same source, in line with the historical facts related to the same composition of the Cantic of Brother Sun. For this reason, we shall follow the text of the *Speculum* in order to contextualise the historical unfolding of the composition of the *Canticum Fratris Solis*.

The *Speculum* begins by describing the time and place: “Two years before his death, while he was staying at San Damiano in a little cell made of mats, he suffered intensely from the disease of his eyes. For more than fifty days, he was unable to bear daylight nor even the light of a fire.”⁶

It was the loving care of Sister Clare and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, who welcomed Francis and prepared for him a little hut in the garden of the monastery, which provides the clue as to where the Cantic was written. Two years before his death refer to the early spring months of

1225. Francis was waiting for the treatment of his eyes, after Cardinal Ugo di Segni had convinced Brother Elias of the need to take Francis to Rieti in order to be attended to by the papal physicians. However, the timing was not right, since it was still very cold for Francis to travel or to receive any treatment. That is why he was invited to rest for a period of fifty days, that is, nearly two months, in the little cell that the Poor Ladies had prepared for him in the garden at San Damiano. Pilgrims can today visit the *Giardino del Cantico*, close to the entrance of San Damiano, which marks the spot where Francis would have stayed.

Francis was suffering from a serious eye disease, which prohibited him from gazing directly at the light of the sun or the light of a fire.⁷ This is an important detail, since it is a proof that, when Francis composed the Cantic of Brother Sun he was unable to see the creatures he describes.

The days of rest that Francis was supposed to spend at San Damiano were ruined by a nasty experience which the author of the *Speculum* describes as “a temptation of the devil.” Since his hut was made of straw and mats, and he was living in the garden, and maybe also because of the onset of spring, when there would be no snow or ice to deter small rodents from scurrying around the garden, and maybe also to seek shelter from the cold nights in the same straw of the hut, Francis had to endure sleepless nights because of the presence of a quantity of mice which were infesting the same hut. According to the *Speculum* they would not let Francis sleep in peace, would disturb him while praying and would also be a

² CA 83-84 [FAED II, 184-188].

³ SPMaj 100-101, 119-120, 123 [FAED III, 346-350, 367-368, 370-371].

⁴ F. ACCROCCA, *Un Santo di Carta. Le Fonti Biografiche di San Francesco d'Assisi*, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 2013, 462: “Il codice vide la luce tra la primavera del 1310 e la prima parte del 1312.”

⁵ F. ACCROCCA, *Un Santo di Carta*, 501: “[Minocchi], fondandosi sul manoscritto conservato nel convento fiorentino di Ognissanti, che egli riteneva un testimone migliore di quelli utilizzati da

Sabatier, rifiutava decisamente la data del 1227, proponendo, con buon fondamento, che la redazione definitiva dell'opera fosse da ricondurre al 1318.”

⁶ SPMaj 100 [FAED III, 346].

⁷ CA 83 [FAED II, 185, footnote a.]: “Francis seems to have suffered from trachoma or contagious conjunctivitis granulosa, which is characterised by abundant teary secretions, progressive corneal complications, sensitivity to light, and consequent impaired vision. In Francis's case, it was aggravated by his frequent malarial fevers and habitual malnutrition.”

menace to his health by climbing on the table when he was trying to have some food. The scene is portrayed in a very graphic and revolting style, which is aimed at showing that the poor and blind *Poverello* was going through an ordeal which was, in fact, a diabolic temptation. It was during this harrowing experience that Francis received the consolation of the Lord during a moment of inspiration at night, precisely when he was praying the Lord to help him overcome this temptation. The *Speculum* speaks about how Francis succeeded in changing this miserable experience into an occasion of joy and celebration:

“The next morning on rising, he said to his companions: [...] ‘I must rejoice greatly in my illnesses and troubles and be consoled in the Lord, giving thanks always to God the Father, to His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit for such a great grace bestowed on me by the Lord, because He has given me, His unworthy little servant still living in the flesh, the promise of His kingdom.’”⁸

These words are a proof of the great ability of Francis to transform a difficult situation into an occasion for praising God. The Canticle of Brother Sun was born in a moment of suffering and abandonment, during a time in which Francis was missing his physical interaction with creation and with fellow human beings because of his eye disease, during long hours of darkness which would also be an expression of the spiritual darkness in his soul. That was precisely the moment in which Francis wakes up one fine morning to become the first Italian poet to express the joy of being alive in the language of the people. This attitude of gratefulness to God and of the will to communicate joy to others is expressed in his own words to the brothers: “Therefore, for His praise, for our consolation and for the edification of our neighbour, I want to write a new *Praise of*

the Lord for His creatures, which we use every day, and without which we cannot live. Through them the human race greatly offends the Creator, and we are continually ungrateful for such great graces and good gifts, and praising because we do not praise, as we should, our Lord the Creator and Giver of all good.”⁹

At this point the *Speculum* states that Francis spontaneously composed the first part of the Canticle of Brother Sun, namely the section which deals about creation as an image of God and which invites all creatures, who are called brothers and sisters, to praise the Lord. Francis not only composed the lyrics for this poem. The *Speculum* states that “he composed a melody for these words and taught it to his companions so that they could recite and sing it.” He even sent for Brother Pacifico, “the King of Verses”, in order to ask him to invite some good singers among the brothers to go out with him in the world and proclaim the Canticle during their preaching tours. “He said that he wanted that one among them who best knew how to preach, to preach first to the people and, after the sermon, all were to sing together the *Praises of the Lord* as minstrels of the Lord. After the praises, he wanted the preacher to tell the people: ‘We are minstrels of the Lord, and this is what we want as payment: that you live in true penance.’”¹⁰

We can therefore state that the first section of the Canticle was composed at San Damiano in the spring of 1225, when Francis was welcomed by Clare and the Poor Ladies while he was waiting for his eye treatment during the summer months in Rieti. The Canticle became for Francis an occasion to invite people to do penance, and therefore it can be seen as part and parcel of the penitential preaching of the friars minor,¹¹ which is described in the *Earlier Rule* and which would be accompanied by the singing of these praises of the Lord.

⁸ SPMaj 100 [FAED III, 347].

⁹ SPMaj 100 [FAED III, 347].

¹⁰ SPMaj 100 [FAED III, 348].

¹¹ *RegNB* c. 21 [FAED I, 78].

The *Speculum* also describes the historical context in which the second section of the Canticle of Brother Sun was composed, namely the section dealing with forgiveness:

“After blessed Francis had composed *The Praises* of the Creatures, which he called *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, a serious misunderstanding arose between the bishop and the *podestà* of the city of Assisi. Thus the bishop excommunicated the *podestà*, and the *podestà* issued an order that no one was to sell anything or buy anything from the bishop, or to draw up any legal document with him.

“Although blessed Francis was very ill when he heard about this, he was moved by piety for them, especially since there was no one intervening to make peace between them. He said to his companions: ‘It is a great shame for us, servants of God, that the bishop and the *podestà* hate one another in this way, and that there is no one intervening for peace and harmony between them.’

“And so, for that reason, he immediately composed one verse for the *Praises*, and he dictated: ‘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, they shall be crowned.’”¹²

The story goes on to say how Francis sent his brothers to invite the bishop and *podestà* to meet in a public place in order to listen to the new song that he had composed. Both of them, out of respect for Francis, complied to his wishes, and when they heard the brothers singing about forgiveness and patience in tribulation they immediately agreed to do away with their mutual differences and to forgive one another. Thus the danger of internal strife and civil war in Assisi was avoided, thanks to the holiness of Francis who evangelised the civil and ecclesiastical authorities by

adding the section regarding forgiveness to the Canticle of Brother Sun.

This section will be analysed at a second stage, but here we can already anticipate a very important aspect of the Canticle, namely that it is not just a poem that praises God for creation, but it is also a poem that deals about the dignity and vocation of the human persons as children of God and part and parcel of His mysterious plan of creation and redemption. It is a grave mistake to forget the human dimension of the Canticle and reduce it simply to a cry for commitment in favour of a sustainable ecology.

We do not know precisely when the event of the reconciliation between the bishop and *podestà* of Assisi took place. The *Speculum* states that Francis was very ill when it happened. This could refer to the period when he was nearing the end of his life, and was led for some weeks by the brothers to reside in the palace of the bishop of Assisi, just before he was transferred to the Portiuncula where he died. In other words, the event probably occurred in the summer months of 1226, after Francis had been brought back from the hills of Bagnara near Nocera Umbra, where Brother Elias took him to enjoy some rest in the cooler air of the mountains between Umbria and Marche.

The last section of the Canticle of Brother Sun deals with the issue of Sister Death. This section was also composed when Francis was residing in the bishop’s palace in Assisi in September 1226, and he came to know from his doctor that the end of his life was approaching:

“The doctor then told him frankly: ‘According to our assessment, your illness is incurable and I believe that you will die either at the end of September or on the fourth day before the Nones of October.’ Then Blessed Francis, lying on his bed sick, with the greatest devotion and reverence stretched out his hands to the Lord and,

¹² SPMaj 101 [FAED III, 349].

with great joy of mind and body, said: 'Welcome, my Sister Death.'"¹³

This was the moment when Francis called again his brothers to help him compose the last section of the Canticum of Brother Sun:

"Then blessed Francis, although in greater pain than usual, seemed to put on a great joy of soul on hearing that Sister Death was imminent. He praised God with great fervour of spirit, telling them: 'If it pleases my Lord that I am to die soon, call Brother Angelo and Brother Leo that they may sing to me about Sister Death.'

"When these two brothers came to him, filled with grief and sorrow and with many tears, they sang the *Canticum of Brother Sun* and the other creatures of the Lord, which the Saint himself had composed. And then, before the last stanza of this canticum he added some verses about Sister Death: '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.'"¹⁴

The *Speculum* also provides us with the full version of the *Canticum Fratris Solis*,¹⁵ which is also found, as we know, in the Codex 338 of Assisi together with an empty space reserved for musical annotation which, unfortunately, was never registered.¹⁶ Had it been, we would be in possession of the original melody that Francis composed together with the lyrics of the Canticum. It must surely have been a melody akin to the mediaeval *laude* that were so popular in religious devotional circles, but which were also part and parcel of the cultural musical tradition of the common people who expressed their sentiments in song during moments of joy and sorrow. We shall now try to analyse the contents of the Canticum in order to understand the message it conveys and

which can transcend time and space to appeal also to our contemporary culture.

The text of the *Canticum Fratris Solis*

The *Canticum Fratris Solis* is a poem written in the Umbrian language of central Italy, and as such is the first poem considered to have been written in what would develop into the modern Italian language. The ancient groups of Umbri who lived in this region of Italy were certainly influenced by the Latin language, since they were under Roman domination for many centuries, and they also experienced the earlier influence of Etruscans and the later influence of the Longobards. Thus, the culture of Umbria has been forged by these linguistic influences that are evident in the so-called "latinisms" of the Canticum, that is, in the words that sound Italian but are basically Latin. An example is the expression *cum tucte*, meaning "with all" (in modern Italian it would sound *con tutte*).

A scholarly synthesis of the text of the Canticum of Brother Sun is that by Carlo Paolazzi, during his *lectio magistralis* at the Pontifical University Antonianum on 15 January 2019.¹⁷

Paolazzi bases his study on the *Compilatio Assisiensis*, since it is the result of the memories of the companions of Francis, who provided the documentary material that served as a basis for the *Memoriale in desiderio animae* of Thomas of Celano, and also of the *Compilatio Assisiensis* and the *Speculum Perfectionis*. In his analysis Paolazzi shows the intimate link between the expressions of praise of God in the Canticum with similar expressions in the other writings of the Saint. He also clarifies the use of the term *cum* (with) stating that it refers to the praise of God **together with**, and **through**, all His Creatures (an instrumental *cum*), and not to a praise of

¹³ SPMaj 122 [FAED III, 370].

¹⁴ SPMaj 123 [FAED III, 371].

¹⁵ SPMaj 120 [FAED III, 367-368].

¹⁶ V. BRANCA, *Il Cantico di frate Sole. Studio delle fonti e testo critico*, Olschki, Firenze 1950.

¹⁷ C. PAOLAZZI, *Lode a Dio Creatore e Cantico di Frate Sole*, in *Antonianum* XCIV (2019) 769-786.

God **and** of His creatures, as it is sometimes interpreted to mean.

Thomas of Celano provides us with a key to understand the contents of the Cantic of Brother Sun. In his *Memoriale* he writes:

“This happy traveller, hurrying to leave the world as the exile of pilgrimage, was helped, and not just a little, by what is in the world. Toward the princes of darkness, he certainly used it as a field of battle. Toward God, however, he used it as the clearest mirror of goodness. In art he praises the Artist; whatever he discovers in creatures he guides to the Creator. He rejoices in all the works of the Lord’s hands, and through their delightful display he gazes on their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things he discerns Beauty itself; all good things cry out to him: ‘The One who made us is the Best.’ Following the footprints imprinted on creatures, he follows his Beloved everywhere; out of them all he makes for himself a ladder by which he might reach the Throne.

“He embraces all things with an intensity of unheard devotion, speaking to them about the Lord and exhorting them to praise Him.”¹⁸

In order to understand this splendid description by Celano, we need to refer to the mediaeval way in which man would look at the world and at nature as vestiges, or images, of God the Father who created them, in such a way that they would become a book of nature, a *liber naturae*. The famous poem by Alain de Lille (c. 1128 – 1203) provides an excellent picture of how mediaeval man looked at nature through the eyes of faith:

“Omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum: / nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis, / nostri status, nostrae sortis / fidele signaculum.”

This section of the short poem shows how the mediaeval mind conceived creation as a kind of book or picture, which would be a mirror for us. This reflection would be enough to make us see God even without

the help of the *liber Scripturae*, as St. Paul would say in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

Alain de Lille continues to say that creatures provide a mirror for us to reflect upon our life, our death, our state as humans, our destiny. In this they are a faithful sign or vestige. In other words, creatures can never err in showing us who we are in the cosmos and in making us understand our specific place in God’s creation. The mediaeval concept of creation was very different from our contemporary concept of scientific analysis of our world and, indeed, of the entire universe. Although such progress is necessary and useful to be able to contextualise our own being and existence, in this post-modern era we tend to forget the theological concept of a *creatio ex nihilo*, a “creation from nothing”, to be understood, however, in its correct biblical perspective, namely as a creation stemming from the infinite love and providence of God.

The Cantic of Brother Sun has to be read and interpreted within this perspective, in order to convey its true message. Unfortunately, there is the tendency to consider St. Francis as a kind of ecological prophet who embodies our contemporary quest for a more sustainable environmental balance which is the result of human achievement. This is not the message of the Cantic of Brother Sun. The Cantic is, first and foremost, a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God. It is a Christian view of creation, and it cannot be interpreted in a syncretistic manner by seeing in creation a kind of inner energy that stems from its own power in order to develop within the human experience as a kind of superior religious feeling without any reference to faith.

Francis is known for his ability to present creation as something good and holy, as the

¹⁸ 2C 165 [FAED II, 353].

open book of God's providence. For him all creatures are the product of God's love, and therefore there can be no stain of impurity or a kind of dualism in creation. Indeed, the message of the Canticle is also a message that goes directly against the heresy of the Cathars, who regarded matter as intrinsically evil. Francis dedicates whole sections of his writings to confronting this heresy, both when he speaks about the human nature of Christ in the Eucharist, as well as in the Canticle of Brother Sun, which shows that all creation is intrinsically good and holy since it descends from the fountain-source of goodness who is God Himself.¹⁹

The Canticle bears the title "of Brother Sun", not only because the Sun is the first creature to be mentioned in it, but also because the Sun is the guarantee of light and life in creation. As we have already stated, the prime subject of the Canticle is God, who Francis addresses with the titles: *Altissimu, onnipotente, bon Signore*, "Most High, all-powerful, good Lord." These titles are also found in other texts of Francis, especially in his prayers. Maybe the best example of this procedure can be found in the prayer of praise of chapter 23 of the *Regula non bullata*: "All-powerful, most holy, Almighty and supreme God, Holy and just Father, Lord King of heaven and earth, we thank You for Yourself, for through Your holy will and through Your only Son with the Holy Spirit You have created everything spiritual and corporal and, after making us in Your own image and likeness, You placed us in paradise."²⁰ It is the infinite *bonitas*, goodness, of God that is the source of creation, and therefore the Canticle is addressed exclusively to God as Creator and becomes the prayer of all those who feel united with God's creation in this song of praise, which is far from being an expression of a kind of

pantheism which sees nature as a kind of divine emanation. All creatures are specifically ordered to stay in their place within the plan of God's loving providence, and to serve God according to the specific role that He assigned to each of them.

In order to better understand this Christian concept of creation, it is important to know how mediaeval culture looked at creation and how cosmology was conceived by mediaeval man. Otherwise we cannot understand the structure of the Canticle of Brother Sun. I will here quote a good summary that explains this concept:

"Mediaeval cosmology was centred around the concept of the Ptolemaic universe, named after the Greek astronomer Ptolemy. In this geocentric (earth-centred) model, the earth was the motionless centre of the universe, with the rest of the universe revolving around it in spheres. Ptolemy's work was based on Aristotle's (385-322 BC) idea of an ordered universe, divided into the sublunary, or earthly region, which was changeable and corruptible, and the heavenly region, which was immutable and perfect. Aristotle posited that the heavens contained 55 spheres, with the *Primum Mobile*, 'Prime Mover' or 'First Moveable', giving motion to all the spheres within it.

"Centremost in this cosmology was the Earth. The sublunary sphere was comprised of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air). Next followed the spheres of the 7 planets (which included the sun and the moon). After these came the Circle of the Fixed Stars (including the signs of the Zodiac). Outermost in this scheme was the *Primum Mobile*, sometimes divided into three spheres of the Crystalline Heaven, the First Moveable, and the Empyrean, or highest heaven.

"While not scientifically supportable, this cosmology was eagerly embraced and

¹⁹ PAOLAZZI, *Lode a Dio Creatore*, 779: "Hanno dunque visto giusto quegli studiosi (come p. Kajetan Esser e Raoul Manselli), secondo i quali il *Cantico* rappresenta un manifesto implicito contro le teorie catare, che attribuivano a Satana la creazione o

l'ordinamento del mondo fisico, coinvolgendo nella condanna anche quegli aspetti di vita ecclesiale e sociale (come l'Eucaristia e il matrimonio) che in forme diverse comportano contatto con la materia."
²⁰ *RegNB* 23,1 [FAED I, 81-82].

adapted to fit Mediaeval theology. The Prime Mover became the Christian God, the outermost sphere became heaven, and the earth was the centre of God's attention. The spheres, moved by the Prime Mover, existed and rotated in perfect harmony, creating the 'music of the spheres'. Man, habitant of the sublunary sphere which was corruptible since Adam's fall, could no longer hear this music. This worldview gave rise to further Mediaeval philosophical explanations of man's place in the universe."²¹

This concept of the ordered nature of the universe and creation is very evident in the Canticum of Brother Sun. The descending order in the hierarchy of creatures corresponds precisely to the description we have just quoted above. At the highest realm of the spheres of creation we find the heavenly bodies, namely Brother Sun, Sister moon and stars. Then we go to the sublunary realm where man lives. The four elements of creation are listed in an orderly fashion beginning with Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire and Sister Mother Earth.

In perfect concordance with the creation account of Genesis 1, Francis places man at the end of the cycle of creation, when he speaks about forgiveness and patience in tribulation and then when he deals with Sister bodily Death. Thus, the second and third sections of the Canticum are the logical sequence of the order of creation as willed by God, an order that proceeds from God's loving goodness and returns to Him in a process of *egressus* and *reditus* reminiscent of the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption.

The Biblical basis of the *Canticum Fratris Solis*

The Canticum of Brother Sun is basically a Christian view of creation as it is presented in Holy Scripture. Francis of Assisi was familiar with the ecclesiastical divine office and he often recommended his brothers to pray according to the form of the Roman Church. The divine office consists of psalms and canticles from Holy Scripture, some of which are directly linked with the praises of God for the work of creation.

In the *Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei* Francis prays in this way: "Heaven and earth, praise Him. All you rivers, praise the Lord. All you children of God, praise the Lord ... All you creatures, bless the Lord. All you birds of heaven, praise the Lord."²²

According to the account by Luke Wadding in *Annales Minorum*, these words were painted on an altar front of the small church of the hermitage of Cesi di Terni in Umbria, dedicated to Saint Mary of the Angels, and it was St. Francis who ordered the painting of this altar front with the praises of God and various representations of creatures in 1213.²³

These verses are quotations from chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel, namely the well-known canticum of the three young men, which is found in the Lauds for Sundays and feast days in the divine office.

The same biblical texts are also found in the *Laudes ad omnes horas dicendae*, the praises that Francis used to pray before the beginning of the hours of the divine office. In these praises we find references to Daniel 3, Apocalypse 4, 5 and 19, and Psalm 68:

"Let heaven and earth praise Him Who is glorious. And let us praise and glorify Him forever. Every creature in heaven, on earth

²¹ www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/medievalcosmology.htm [26.02.2025].

²² *ExhLD* [FAED I, 138].

²³ WADDING, *Annales Minorum seu trium ordinum a s. Francisco institutorum*, Romae 1731, 155-156: "In antependio Altaris [Ecclesiae S. Mariae de Angelis quod locum Eremitae vocant], fecit pingi

varias creaturas, angelos, pueros, aves, arbores et similia; quibus ipse subscripsit varios hos et solutos versiculos creaturas omnes ad Creatoris laudem invitans." Cfr. FRANCESCO D'ASSISI, *Scritti*. Edizione critica a cura di C. PAOLAZZI, Frati Editori di Quaracchi, Collegio S. Bonaventura, Grottaferrata 2009, 36-38.

and under the earth; and in the sea and those which are in it.”²⁴

The biblical-liturgical style of the Cantic of Brother Sun is well documented in the Sources. As we have seen, it resembles the Cantic of the three men in the Book of Daniel, chapter 3, but it is also reminiscent of Psalms and other biblical texts that were used in the liturgy. One has to remember that Francis knew the Bible through the liturgy, particularly through the prayer of the divine office. The Sources show us that Francis prayed the divine office at all times and in all circumstances, even when he was travelling, and even when it rained and he got all soaked while he prayed.²⁵ This is a sign of the bond that existed between the contemplative dimension of Francis and his relationship with God through creation.

The *Officium Rhythmicum Sancti Francisci* by Julian of Speyer, celebrates this union with creation in the act of praising God on the part of Francis. The fifth antiphon of the first Vespers for the feast of St. Francis recites thus: “Over creatures this man held sway, / Yet wholly did the will obey / Of the God who creatures made; / The delight found in every thing / He stored as an offering / To its Maker’s glory paid.”²⁶

The fifth antiphon of Lauds also sings the same tune: “He bade us praise as praise he did, / For praise was ever on his lips, / The praise of his dear Saviour; / And he invited bird and beast / And every other creature, too, / To praise their Lord and Maker.”²⁷

The Cantic of Brother Sun can, therefore, be considered as a kind of para-liturgical

praise of God in the style of the mediaeval *lauda*. The Roman liturgy has conserved examples of these lyrical compositions, particularly in the famous Sequences of the Roman Missal, namely the *Victimae Paschalis* (Easter), *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* (Pentecost), *Stabat Mater* (Feast of the Sorrowful Virgin) and *Dies irae* (Commemoration of the Faithful Departed). The last two are attributed respectively to two Franciscan authors, namely Jacopone da Todi and Thomas of Celano. This goes to show that, although the Cantic of Brother Sun has not been used as a liturgical text, it nevertheless was inspired by the liturgy and consequently by the Word of God, and it reflects the Christian view of creation which Francis shared with the *christianitas* of the Middle Ages.

Seen in this light, the Cantic of Brother Sun is truly an expression of faith and contemplative prayer, and goes to show the sense of wonder and reverence that Francis had in the face of God’s creation, and which he shared with his own culture. Thus the Cantic conveys a perennial message, namely that creation is the work of God, and that man’s relationship with creation can never forget its original fountain-source of goodness from where it came, namely the creative act of God in Genesis. This is the only hermeneutic approach that one can have when one reads the Cantic of Brother Sun. Francis and creation without the God of Jesus Christ are meaningless

²⁴ *LaudHor* 7-8 [FAED I, 161]. Latin text in PAOLAZZI, 62-64.

²⁵ 2C 96 [FAED II, 311]: “He celebrated the canonical hours with no less awe than devotion. Although he was suffering from diseases of the eyes, stomach, spleen, and liver, he did not want to lean against a wall or partition when he was chanting the psalms. He always fulfilled his hours standing up straight and without a hood, without letting his eyes wander and without dropping syllables. When he was travelling the world on foot, he always would stop walking in order to say the Hours, and when he was on horseback he would dismount to be on the ground. So, one day, when he was returning from Rome and it was raining constantly, he got off his

horse to say the Office, and, standing for quite a while, he became completely soaked.”

²⁶ JULIAN OF SPEYER, *Officium Rhythmicum S. Francisci*, 5 Antiphon of First Vespers. Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 375: “Hic creaturis imperat, / Qui nutui subiecerat / Se totum Creatoris; / Quidquid in rebus reperit / Delectamenti, regeat / In gloriam Factoris.”

²⁷ JULIAN OF SPEYER, *Officium Rhythmicum S. Francisci*, 5 Antiphon of Lauds. Latin text in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 383: “Laudans laudare monuit, / Laus illi semper affuit, / Laus, inquam, Salvatoris; / Invitat aves, bestias / Et creaturas alias / Ad laudem Conditoris.”

expressions of a New Age culture that has nothing to do with Christianity.

Fraternity among creatures in the *Canticum Fratris Solis*

The structure of the Canticle of Brother Sun is built upon the theme of a cosmic fraternity. This fraternity is the result of the creative work of God who is the Most High, the all-powerful and the good Lord. The first stanza of the Canticle is all centred upon the praise of God, but at the same time it expresses man's inability to find words that can even reflect the beauty and goodness of God Himself.²⁸

Since it seems impossible to praise God in His ineffable mystery and transcendence, Francis opens the book of creation, in order to find God in the *vestigia Dei*, in His own footprints. That is why he praises the Lord together with His creatures. Francis envisages creation as a kind of big family of brothers and sisters. It is interesting to note how, for Francis, even inanimate creatures are not neutral in their being, but assume the contours of their specific gender according to the name with which they are known. Obviously, such a gender specification depends upon the unique meaning of the names of creatures in the Umbrian expressions of the Canticle. Thus, the sun is *frate Sole*, the moon is *sora Luna*, wind is *frate Vento*, water is *sora Acqua*, fire is *frate Focu*, the earth is *sora nostra matre Terra*. The order is based upon a couple of creatures in the heavenly sphere,

and two couples of creatures in the sublunary or earthly sphere.

The first couple is that of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. The reference to *messor lo frate Sole* shows that Francis regards the sun as the most important among God's creatures. The title *messor* was used to address nobles and persons of rank, or even persons who were worthy of reverence in the family, in civil society or in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The sun therefore appears to be a kind of feudal lord with the privilege of governing the entire universe in the name of God, and it does so through its power to be *bellu e radiante cum grande splendore*, beautiful and radiant with great splendour. The sun is the source of light and heat, and the mediaeval man saw in this the origin of life. The radiant splendour of the sun is capable of blinding all those who look directly towards it, just as the radiant splendour of God cannot be seen by human eyes.²⁹ That is why the sun is presented as bearing the likeness of God, *de Te, Altissimo, porta significazione*.

God enlightens man with the radiant splendour of the sun. This means that man needs divine illumination in order to read the vestiges of God in creation. The sun is a symbol of this divine illumination which proceeds from the Father of Lights and descends upon all creatures. Bonaventure bases all his theology upon this principle of divine illumination, which he draws from Neo-Platonism and from the Augustinian school, and without which it is not possible

²⁸ M. LEONARDI, *Benedicite Apocalypsim: Varietà e Unità nel Cantico di Frate Sole*, in *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, Anno LVII – 2021 – n. 1, 60: “Il Cantico è inaugurato e concluso dal trionfo del Dio pantokrator, che l'uomo non è neppure degno di nominare (v. 4), innanzi al quale non si può altro che farsi servi cum grande humilitate. Francesco nei suoi scritti latini esprime una viva consapevolezza dell'insufficienza della parola umana, incapax Dei, preferendo lasciare che sia la parola di Dio a parlare di Dio e costituendo articolati centoni biblici.”

²⁹ BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, c. 5, 4, in BONAVENTURE, *The Souls Journey into God*.

The Tree of Life. The Life of Saint Francis, Translation and Introduction by E. COUSINS, Paulist Press, New York 1978, 96-97: “Hence it is most truly apparent that ‘as the eye of the bat is in regard to light so is the eye of our mind in regard to the most evident things of nature’ (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*). Thus our mind, accustomed to the darkness of beings and the images of the things of sense, when it glimpses the light of the Supreme Being, seems to itself to see nothing. It does not realise that this very darkness is the supreme illumination of our mind, just as when the eye sees pure light, it seems to itself to see nothing.” Latin text in S. BONAVENTURAE *Opera Omnia* V, 309.

to read the footprints of God in His creatures.

That is why Brother Sun is the highest among the hierarchy of creatures, since it is the most similar to God Himself. This view is, obviously, the result of the mediaeval concept of cosmology, to which we have already referred, and bears no connection to the scientific analysis of the universe and of the sun as the centre of our solar system and of the planets which orbit it. Nevertheless, even from a scientific point of view, it cannot be denied that the sun is the source of light and life on earth, and therefore the theological approach of the Cantic of Brother Sun, which is also based upon Scripture, is very relevant even to our contemporary knowledge of the universe.

Sister Moon reflects upon it the light of the sun and thus enlightens the earth, especially at night. Together with the stars, it is the heavenly body that is placed by God to enlighten the firmament of heaven, and is thus both precious for life and beautiful to behold.

The Book of Genesis 1:16 states: "God made the two great lights; the greater light to govern the day, the smaller light to govern the night, and the stars." It is in the context of this biblical description of creation that we can understand the two stanzas of the Cantic which praise God for having created Brother Sun and Sister Moon and the stars in the heavenly sphere. The praises of God for His creatures in the Book of Ecclesiasticus can also be taken as a biblical source for the praises of Francis in the Cantic of Brother Sun. When we read chapter 43:1-11, which speaks about the heavenly bodies, we cannot fail to see the striking resemblance with the Cantic: "Pride of the heights, shining vault, so, in a glorious spectacle, the sky appears. The sun, as he emerges, proclaims at his rising, 'A thing of wonder is the work of the Most High!' At his zenith he parches the land, who can withstand his blaze? A man must blow a furnace to produce any heat, the sun

burns the mountains three times as such; breathing out blasts of fire, flashing his rays he dazzles the eyes. Great is the Lord who made him, and whose word speeds him on his course.

"And then the moon, always punctual, to mark the months and make division of time: the moon it is that signals the feasts, a luminary that wanes after her full. The month derives its name from hers, she waxes wonderfully in her phases, banner of the hosts on high, shining in the vault of heaven.

"The glory of the stars makes the beauty of the sky, a brilliant decoration to the heights of the Lord. At the words of the Holy One they stand as he decrees, and never grow slack at their watch."

Thomas of Celano also speaks about this part of the Cantic in his *Vita beati Francisci*:

"Who could ever express the deep affection he bore for all things that belong to God? Or who would be able to tell of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator? From this reflection he often overflowed with amazing, unspeakable joy as he looked at the sun, gazed at the moon, or observed the stars in the sky."³⁰

Although the Cantic of Brother Sun makes no mention of the angelic hierarchy, which is part and parcel of the heavenly sphere, one can conclude that Francis had in mind also the praise which God receives from His angels and saints in heaven, since they also are luminaries guiding the Church in the light of faith. Maybe we can find a link between this concept and the event of stigmatisation of Francis on La Verna, since the Crucified Seraph which appeared to him was radiant with a fiery glow and filled the entire countryside of Casentino with its brilliance, even though the sun had not yet risen. The same image of light and fiery radiance will be seen in the case of *frate Focu*, since brother Fire was, for

³⁰ 1C 80 [FAED I, 250].

Francis, a very special creature to which he showed reverence, knowing that it also signified the piercing power of Christ's love in His glorious Passion.

The Canticum then proceeds to describe the four elements which, for the mediaeval mind, were the components of the universe in which we live, namely air, water, fire and earth.

Francis praises God for *frate Vento*, Brother Wind. The air is the ethereal substance which relates to the heavens, and therefore in the mediaeval mind, it is closest to God among the four elements. Note that Francis sees the air as a moving and dynamic force, which is expressed in the wind, and which can change from stormy and cloudy to serene. There is no kind of weather that is not an occasion to praise God, since it is this kind of dynamic change in the weather pattern that gives nourishment to creatures and makes them breathe and live. Although there is no explicit reference in the Canticum to the Spirit of God that is symbolised in the wind, one cannot help feeling that Francis was also thinking of the Holy Spirit, who nourishes and gives life to creatures since It is the breath of God and the fountain of life. The second element of nature is *Sora Acqua*, Sister Water. Francis praises God for this creature because it is useful, humble, precious and chaste. These four adjectives that describe the properties of water are the most vivid expression of the importance of water for life. First of all, water is useful, since without it no life can flourish on earth. It is humble, in the Latin sense of the expression *humilis*, since it gushes forth from the ground, it is born underground in subterranean springs in the mountains. At the same time water comes down from heaven, from the clouds, and is therefore intimately linked with Brother Wind. Water is then precious. Although Francis was living in central Italy, where water is plentiful in the Apennine chain, he nevertheless realises that it is a precious element, since the intense summer heat can

render rivers and springs a rare occurrence even in this region of Italy, and it is not the first time that water courses virtually die out during the summer months. Water is therefore precious since it has to be used with extreme prudence and channelled precisely to where it is most needed. Finally, water is chaste. In his writings Francis rarely speaks about the virtue of chastity, but he does speak about purity of heart.³¹ Water becomes a symbol of purity, since it cleanses and purifies all that comes into contact with it. Once again, although Francis does not make any explicit reference to the sacrament of baptism, one cannot help noticing in this praise of God for Sister Water a reference to the spiritual cleansing with which we are born in water and the Holy Spirit.

The first couple, namely Brother Wind and Sister Water, are elements associated with the heavens and they are humid and cold, and thus can be a source of life and nourishment. The second couple, namely Brother Fire and Sister Earth, are dry and warm, and they are associated with the earthly environment in which God created man and placed him in a garden to till the land and produce food.

Frater Foculus was a very dear creature for Francis. It resembled Brother Sun, since it is glowing with heat and radiance. Indeed, Francis speaks lovingly about Brother Fire which enlightens the darkness of the night. Even fire has four properties. It is beautiful, joyful, robust and strong. Francis might have enjoyed many evenings huddled with the brothers close to a fire on cold winter nights, hearing the flames crackle and spit sparks, and seeing the shadows dancing with the movement of the same flames. The beauty of fire consists for Francis in its reddish glow, while its joy is expressed in its vibrant and ever-youthful movements and in its ability to unite people together in friendly company. Above all, fire is robust and strong. It is nearly a fearful creature that can wreak havoc when it gets out of

³¹ *Adm* 16 [FAED I, 134]; *RegB* 10,9 [FAED I, 105].

control, but which is also a symbol of the power of God's love shown in the Holy Spirit, who is often depicted as tongues of fire.

There are some touching episodes in the life of Saint Francis, which show the intense love that he showed towards Brother Fire. The *Assisi Compilation* mentions the episode of Francis who had to undergo the painful and terrible operation of the cauterisation of his eyes in the hermitage of Fonte Colombo in 1225. To Brother Fire Francis addresses these touching words: "My Brother Fire, noble and useful among all the creatures the Most High created, be courtly to me in this hour. For a long time I have loved you and I still love you for the love of that Lord who created you. I pray our Creator who made you, to temper your heat now, so that I may bear it."³²

The other episode, also found in the same paragraph of the *Assisi Compilation*, refers to the moment when Francis, who was blind and could only feel the heat of the fire, noticed that the flame was burning his clothing, and rebuked the brother guardian who tried to extinguish it with the words: "No, dearest brother, do not hurt Brother Fire."³³ He did the same thing when his own cell caught fire and the brothers ran to extinguish the flames. He did not offer his help, but told them to let the flames eat up his cell, or otherwise he would appear not to be generous with Brother Fire.

Francis calls the earth with the name *sora nostra matre Terra*, our Sister and Mother Earth. This last element of creation has a double role for Francis. It is a sister, but also a mother. The image of the earth as a mother is as old as humanity itself. Primitive man revered the earth as a mother goddess, since it is the earth that produces food and nourishes us.³⁴ Francis says that Sister Mother Earth "sustains and governs

us." She, therefore, assumes the role of a true mother, since she nourishes and protects at the same time. The maternal aspect of the earth is seen in the production of all kinds of fruit, flowers and grass, which serve for the enjoyment and nourishment of creatures.

In the *Assisi Compilation* we find a striking example of how Francis revered Sister Mother Earth and the natural beauty that it reveals: "He used to tell the brother who took care of the garden not to cultivate all the ground in the garden for vegetables, but to leave a piece of ground that would produce wild plants that in their season would produce 'Brother Flowers'. Moreover, he used to tell the brother gardener that he should make a beautiful flower bed in some part of the garden, planting and cultivating every variety of fragrant plants and those producing beautiful flowers. Thus, in their time they would invite all who saw the beautiful flowers to praise God, for every creature announces and proclaims: 'God made me for you, o people!'

"We who were with him saw him always in such joy, inwardly and outwardly, over all creatures, touching and looking at them, so that it seemed his spirit was no longer on earth but in heaven. This is evident and true, because of the many consolations he had and continued to have in God's creatures. Thus, shortly before his death, he composed the *Praises of the Lord* by His creatures to move the hearts of his listeners to the praise of God, and that in His creatures the Lord might be praised by everyone."³⁵

This first section of the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, which is centred upon the praise of God in His creation, is followed by the section on forgiveness and on the patient acceptance of tribulation, which has as its focal point the human person.

³² CA 86 [FAED II, 190].

³³ CA 86 [FAED II, 191].

³⁴ In Malta the cult of mother earth was very evident during Neolithic times. The presence of temples built according to a plan portraying, possibly, a pregnant woman, as well as the statues of a reclining

fat woman, known as "the goddess of Malta", possibly associated with the same cult of mother earth, are a sign that the image of the earth as a mother was present in the Mediterranean culture from primitive times.

³⁵ CA 88 [FAED II, 192].

Theocentric approach to man and human life in the *Canticum Fratris Solis*

The second part of the Canticle of Brother Sun was composed during the time when Francis was staying in San Damiano, or maybe in the Bishop's palace in Assisi, some weeks before he asked to be taken down to the Portiuncula, where he wanted to die. The historical context has already been mentioned, namely the bitter quarrel between Bishop Guido of Assisi and the *podestà* of the town, Oportulo di Bernardo.³⁶

The quarrel regarded, as usual, commercial interests between the seemingly greedy Bishop Guido and the *podestà* who represented the emerging class of merchants in the commune of Assisi. The strife between the bishop, who regarded himself as a feudal lord, and the commoners of the city who were by now in charge of the government and economy, degenerated into a mutual excommunication, a religious one on the bishop's part, and an economic one on the part of the commune. Times had indeed changed, and a new socio-economic and political order was taking root in the minds and hearts of the Assisi citizens. The tension was so great that there was, once again, the danger of civil strife in the town, between the *maiores* who were siding with the bishop, and the *minores* who had, by now, assumed power and strength because of the wealth accumulated through business transactions. As usual, the ones who would ultimately suffer would have been the innocent and impoverished masses of peasants, who had passed from a servitude under the feudal system to a new servitude under a market economy which excluded them from profit. It is very striking how the world has not changed much in 8 centuries, and how Francis would find himself in a

similar situation even if he were to live again in our contemporary world!

The solution to this impasse lay in trying to reconcile the bishop and *podestà*. Francis and the brothers had no power to do so, and they could only trust upon God's mercy. However, there was one thing that played in favour of the friars' endeavour to bring peace, and this was the fame of sanctity of Francis and the great respect that he enjoyed from both ecclesiastical and civil authorities. That is why Francis took a good advantage of this situation and came up with a genial initiative, namely that of adding a section to the Canticle which speaks about mutual forgiveness and also about enduring tribulation with patience and inner peace.

Once more, the Canticle presents us with a section in which the protagonist is God and God alone. He is the true author of peace and forgiveness. Francis sent the brothers to sing the Canticle of Brother Sun and the addition of these words on forgiveness and invited the bishop and *podestà* to listen reverently to the message that he wanted to give them:

"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."³⁷

Francis unites the theme of forgiveness with that of patience in infirmity and tribulation. The anthropological view of Francis is centred upon the capacity to forgive for the love of God, Who is Incarnate love. It is centred upon the person of Jesus Christ, whose life was a struggle to bear up with infirmity and tribulation on the cross. Seen in this perspective, man becomes a superior being in the ecological pattern of creation, not only because, like all the other creatures, he is capable of

³⁶ A. FORTINI, *Francis of Assisi*, Translation of the original *Nova Vita di San Francesco* by H. MOAK, Crossroad, New York 1981, 574-575: "Oportulo di Bernardo was then *podestà* of the commune, a man of great spirit and of much authority among his

fellow citizens. A perusal of Assisi records permits us to reconstruct the strong and extensive family ... The family had its house on the piazza."

³⁷ *CantSol* [FAED I, 114].

obeying God's will imprinted in his natural faculties, but also because he is endowed with reason and will, and is therefore capable of looking at reality with the eyes of God.

The bond between man and creation is built essentially upon the ability to forgive and to build fraternity. Francis understood that, whenever there is strife and hatred among human beings, the whole creation feels the repercussions, and reacts by becoming hostile to the same beings that God created to take care of it.

The attitude of Bishop Guido and Oportulo di Bernardo is a typical example of how human greed can degenerate into an ecological disaster. The ability to make a responsible use of the earth's resources for the benefit of all depends upon man's effort at sharing in a just manner the good things that God provides for him in creation without harming the same source of these material goods and exploiting nature for his own ends. The link between the first part of the Cantic of Brother Sun and this section regarding forgiveness and patience in infirmity and tribulation is thus evident even if we apply it to different contexts from the one which prompted it in the first place.

The fifth *Admonition* of St. Francis provides us with a profound insight on this link between man and nature, between sustainable development and human ecology:

"Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His likeness according to the Spirit.

And all creatures under heaven serve, know, and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you. And even the demons did not crucify Him, but you, together with them, have crucified Him and are still crucifying Him by delighting in vices and sins."³⁸

³⁸ *Adm 5* [FAED I, 131].

The last section of the Cantic of Brother Sun regards Sister bodily Death, *sora Morte corporale*.

Whereas in other sections of his writings, such as in the *Letter to the Faithful*, Francis regards death as the moment of judgment upon those who do God's will by doing penance, or else refuse to do penance and are eternally lost, here Francis regards death with an attitude of welcoming and gentleness which is totally unexpected from human nature which abhors death. First of all, Francis accepts death as a natural occurrence in one's life, so much so that no mortal being can escape death. However, he does not speak about death in a general way, but insists that it is *sora Morte corporale*, namely, sister corporal death. It is the death of the body, not of the soul. Francis takes a cue from Apocalypse 20:14-15: "Death and Hades were emptied of the dead that were in them; and every one was judged as his deeds deserved. Then Death and Hades were hurled into the burning lake. This burning lake is the second death; and anybody whose name could not be found written in the book of life was hurled into the burning lake."

In other words, Francis attitude to death is positive, since he regards true death as the death of the spirit of those who die in mortal sin, that is, those who do not do penance and live a carnal way of life. The death of the body is the passage to eternal life, and therefore Francis calls it by the affectionate name of "our sister".³⁹

Celano shows us how Francis accepted sister Death with complete confidence in the Lord, as a passage which would unite him to Christ once and for all:

"He invited all creatures to the praise of God, and exhorted them to love by some words which he had composed earlier. Even death itself, terrible and hateful to everyone, he exhorted to praise, and going to meet her joyfully, invited her to be his

³⁹ P. MARANESI, *La Morte di un Uomo Cristiano. Gli ultimi anni di vita di Francesco di Assisi*, in *Miscellanea Francescana* 112 (2012), 581-599.

guest, saying: ‘Welcome, my Sister Death!’”⁴⁰

In the *Vita beati Francisci*, the same Celano had already described the dead body of Francis as a transfigured body. His description underlines the positive aspect of death as a moment of intimate communion with the paschal mystery of Christ, a moment in which the whole universe is gathered to praise God for the gift of true life which never ends:

“[The brothers] looked at his skin which was black before but now shining white in its beauty, promising the rewards of the blessed resurrection. They saw his face like the face of an angel, as if he were not dead, but alive. All his limbs had become as soft and moveable as in childhood innocence.”⁴¹

The dead body of Francis becomes a relic which speaks of resurrection and life.⁴² The participation of creation at his *transitus*, as is evident in the episode of the larks praising God after sunset on the evening of his death, is a sign of the true significance of creation in the mind of Francis, a significance which is expressed so eloquently in the Canticum of Brother Sun, where we are called to praise God for his creatures, but especially for the dignity of the human person created in His image and likeness, and capable of loving and forgiving and facing tribulation like Christ did in His paschal mystery, in order to unite itself with Him in his glory together with all creatures.

We shall now see how the Canticum of Brother Sun can be very meaningful for a culture of peace and respect for creation in a world experiencing so many ecological problems created by human greed.

The *Canticum Fratris Solis* as the ideal of a contemporary culture of peace and care of our common home

The celebration of the 800 years since the composition of the *Canticum fratris Solis* is an occasion to reflect upon the contemporary significance of this song of praise both for the Christian community as well as for the entire world. The Canticum has been the occasion for the teachings of the Church regarding the need to take care of our common home, and Saint Francis is often seen as the embodiment of an ecological conscience which is not only a Christian value, but a human one as well, and which can be a bridge for a genuine dialogue with our contemporary world.

It was Pope Saint John Paul II who declared Saint Francis of Assisi as the Patron Saint of Ecology on 29 November 1979, in the Apostolic Letter *Inter sanctos praeclarosque viros*.⁴³ The occasion for the publication of this Apostolic Letter was born out of a desire by a group of experts interested in environmental and ecological issues to have a spiritual guide in the quest for a truly authentic care of the earth and its resources. The international sensibility towards ecological issues was already growing at the time, since scientific data already showed that there were anomalies in the climatic patterns and that development was being made at a speed that was not sustainable for the environment.

It was the first time that the Pope spoke officially in favour of ecological issues by indicating Saint Francis as a model of a man who respected creation and invited all creatures to praise God.

⁴⁰ 2C 217 [FAED II, 388].

⁴¹ 1C 112 [FAED I, 280].

⁴² M. GUIDA, *Storia di un corpo: Francesco d'Assisi in processione*, in *Reliquie in processione nell'Europa medievale*, a cura di V. LUCHERINI, Viella, Roma 2018, 111-129.

⁴³ POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Littera Apostolica Inter sanctos praeclarosque viros* (29 Novembris 1979) [www.vatican.va]: “Inter sanctos praeclarosque viros qui rerum naturam veluti mirificum donum a

Deo humano generi datum coluerunt, Sanctus Franciscus Assisiensis merito recensetur. Namque universa Conditoris opera singulariter ille persensit ac, divino quodam spiritu inflatus, pulcherrimum illud cecinit, «Creaturarum Canticum» per quas, fratrem solem potissimum ac sororem lunam caelique stellas, altissimo, omnipotenti bonoque Domino debitam tribuit laudem, gloriam, honorem et omnem benedictionem.”

The turn of events during these last 45 years has now brought the ecological issue at the forefront of world attention. Global warming and the lack of sustainable development in many countries, plus the reluctance of governments to impose restrictions on greenhouse emissions has led to many efforts to come to grips with the ecological disaster that is affecting most of our planet.

The Church also lends its voice in favour of a Christian view of respect for creation. In particular, Pope Francis has been very active in this field. We shall consider two of his encyclicals which deal specifically with ecological issues, namely the *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*. It was Pope Francis who introduced the notion of the care of our "common home", which includes not only creation, but even mankind, not only ecological issues and sustainable development, but also the quest for justice and peace, since no peace is possible if injustice continues to thrive and people continue to suffer because of the selfishness of a select few who want to control the earth's resources for their own political aims. The Pope begins his encyclical letter by quoting Pope Saint John XIII's encyclical *Pacem in terris* (11 April 1963), which was written during a very tense moment of world history, and which shows that the fate of creation depends upon human reasoning and the quest for a genuine peace.

The encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, published on 24 May 2015, speaks in detail about ecological issues, but dedicates ample space to Saint Francis' role as one who praised God for creation, particularly in paragraphs 11 and 12 of the same Letter:

"Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he

burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them 'to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason' [1C 81]. His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that, 'from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of 'brother' or 'sister' [*Legenda Maior* 8,6]. Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behaviour. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.

"What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. 'Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker' (Wis 13:5); indeed, 'his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world' (Rom 1:20). For this reason, Francis asked that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator

of such beauty [2C 165]. Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”⁴⁴

This reference to Saint Francis and the Canticum of Brother Sun underlines the style of *Laudato si'* since it contextualises the care of our common home in a Christian perspective, which finds in the *Poverello* of Assisi its most significant representative. Although ecological issues are currently a source of problems and preoccupation, and unfortunately are bringing with them an increase in social injustice, and in spite of the seemingly incredible denial of the danger of an ecological disaster on the part of powerful world leaders, the Christian message of care for creation remains highly positive. This is so because the Christian view of ecology is not fixated upon a calculated political agreement as to the reduction of greenhouse emissions and consequently a reduction of the process of global warming. Even if such an effort is praiseworthy and necessary, by itself it will never solve the problems relating to our common home, for the simple reason that one cannot forget that it is human ecology that can create the balance between sustainable development and ecological well-being in creation.

Human ecology is basically linked with the issues of justice and peace, and therefore it touches upon the social, political and economic spheres. We have seen how Francis does not separate the need for reconciliation and mutual forgiveness from the need to praise God with His creatures by taking care of our common home.

Ever since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972, the international community has tried countless times to come to grips with the issue of sustainable development and the ecological crisis. Most of these times it has failed to arrive at a consensus that can spell concrete

action in the immediate future. In the meantime, time is running out. The ecological disaster which many fear may be just round the corner. Nevertheless, there are still world leaders and world technocrats who categorically deny that the problem exists at all, and plough on in their endeavour to support the economic machine at all costs. They are totally insensible to the gross injustice of the arms race, of social inequality, of proxy wars, of human induced famine, of uncontrollable waves of immigrants, of climate change and natural disasters that could be avoided if more effort is placed on a sustainable environment in which all human beings can live in peace and harmony.

Pope Francis often reminds us that, what we need is a contemplative look at our common home. Contemporary culture has failed in its ability to contemplate beauty without the need to appropriate the same beauty for egoistic ends. Francis of Assisi wrote the Canticum of Brother Sun in order to underline just this reality, namely, that creation and human fraternity are means that can make us relate to God in a contemplative spirit. Francis insists that there cannot be a true ecological movement without a Christian perspective, namely, without a reference to God. This does not mean that one has to be a Christian in order to take care of our common home. What is meant is that one has to have contemplative eyes, because contemplation is the ladder that ascends from physical reality to its source. For us Christians, this beauty and goodness is called Jesus Christ, since He is the expression of God's infinite love in creation, which was modelled upon Him as the archetype of creation.

Since, as we have seen, human ecology is the basis for a genuine sustainable ecological balance in creation, we can also see what Pope Francis states in the other encyclical Letter, namely, *Fratelli tutti*, which deals specifically with the role of the

⁴⁴ FRANCISCUS, *Litterae Ecylicae Laudato si' de comuni domo colenda*, 11 (24 May 2105), in *Acta*

Apostolicae Sedis, An. et vol. CVII (4 Septembris 2015) N. 9, 851. English version in www.vatican.va

human person in its relation with God, with fellow human beings and with creation.

The Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* (3 October 2020) is also inspired by the figure and message of Francis of Assisi. The figure of the saint appears from the very first paragraphs of the letter:

“*FRATELLI TUTTI*. With these words, Saint Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel. Of the counsels Francis offered, I would like to select the one in which he calls for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance, and declares blessed all those who love their brother ‘as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him’ [*Adm* 6]. In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives.

“This saint of fraternal love, simplicity and joy, who inspired me to write the Encyclical *Laudato Si*’, prompts me once more to devote this new Encyclical to fraternity and social friendship. Francis felt himself a brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, yet he knew that he was even closer to those of his own flesh. Wherever he went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters.

“There is an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt, which entailed considerable hardship, given Francis’ poverty, his scarce resources, the great distances to be travelled and their differences of language, culture and

religion. That journey, undertaken at the time of the Crusades, further demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone. Francis’ fidelity to his Lord was commensurate with his love for his brothers and sisters. Unconcerned for the hardships and dangers involved, Francis went to meet the Sultan with the same attitude that he instilled in his disciples: if they found themselves ‘among the Saracens and other nonbelievers’, without renouncing their own identity they were not to ‘engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake’ [*RegNB* 16]. In the context of the times, this was an extraordinary recommendation. We are impressed that some eight hundred years ago Saint Francis urged that all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided and that a humble and fraternal ‘subjection’ be shown to those who did not share his faith.

“Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God. He understood that ‘God is love and those who abide in love abide in God’ [1 Jn 4:16]. In this way, he became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society. Indeed, ‘only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father’ [Eloi Leclerc OFM, *Exile et tendresse*, Éd. Franciscaines, Paris 1962, 205]. In the world of that time, bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls, cities were a theatre of brutal wars between powerful families, even as poverty was spreading through the countryside. Yet there Francis was able to welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor and sought to live in harmony with all.”⁴⁵

Being in harmony with creation means being able to construct a culture of peace and fraternity. Unfortunately, our

⁴⁵ FRANCISCUS, *Litterae Encyclicae Fratres omnes de fraternitate et sociali amicitia*, 1-4 (3 Octobris 2020), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, An. et vol. CXII (6

Novembris 2020) N. 11, 969-970. English text in www.vatican.va

contemporary culture tends to give importance to our quest for ecological sustainability, but at the same time we assist at a growing tension on an unprecedented scale. The arms race which produces billions worth of lethal weapons to destroy entire nations is in stark contrast with the need to alleviate hunger and invest in the protection of biological diversity and food production. The building of walls and fences to keep out mass immigration is a sign of a deep-seated fear of being overwhelmed by problems that have been created by a greedy economy based on profit and not on the promotion of human well-being and social justice. The cry of the earth is the cry of a suffering humanity, which has lost its focus. Francis of Assisi is still a prophetic voice to face up to these challenges in a humane and Christian way, offering the possibility of a better world in which we can truly live in peace with one another and with creation.

Some reflections taken from the Minister General's speech at the inauguration of the Centenary of the *Canticum fratris Solis*

On Saturday 11 January 2025 the 8th centenary of the Canticum of Brother Sun was inaugurated in Assisi. During the first session, held at the Sanctuary of San Damiano, the place where Francis composed the first part of the Canticum, the Minister General Br. Massimo Fusarelli OFM presented some insights into the significance of this celebration and the message of the Canticum in our contemporary world.

He began by stating that Saint Francis recognised the vivifying presence of the Creator in all reality. This is so evident especially in the Canticum of Brother Sun, which he described as “a dance of praise”. The Canticum is a dance because it presents creatures in pairs, each having a masculine and feminine gender, with the specific name of brother and sister. In this way Francis attributes a wholesome value to

created reality, and through his way of presenting creation which praises God Francis rejects the notion of dualism in creation, a notion that the Cathars had embraced and which placed the principle of evil in matter, thus denying its intrinsic holiness and beauty as a result of God's creative action.

This positive attitude towards creation pervades all aspects of Francis' life, even in the point of death, which for him is “sister bodily death”. In this way the entire human life, from conception to natural death, becomes a welcoming of God's creative action which transforms human life into the loving embrace of God's own life.

A contemporary reading of the Canticum of Brother Sun asks also for an existential rendering of its significance in our contemporary world. It becomes a cry of hope and praise in the face of the great challenges that humanity is facing. These include the global situation of war and conflicts, which Pope Francis, in September 2014, on the plane returning from Seoul, has called “a world war fought in bits and pieces.” They include the global phenomenon of immigration, which is the direct result of conflicts and of injustice. The ecological crisis we face due to climate change is also contributing to the increase of homeless people and immigrants, who are systematically barred from reaching safer countries, with the building of walls and fences in many parts of the so-called free world. Our cosmopolitan societies are now facing ever-increasing problems of new forms of poverty and exclusion, to the detriment of the impoverished masses and to the advantage of the few select multi-billionaire tycoons who hold the economy and politics of entire countries in sway.

The Canticum of Brother Sun shows the need to celebrate the beauty of creation and to praise God through poetry and universal prayer. In the face of a drab technocratic society where individual talents do not matter in the face of global competition, we need the freshness of the poetic heart of Francis. His Canticum makes culture. It is

the expression of true culture in which the human person stands at the centre in the reflection of God's loving radiance stamped upon each and every creature.

The need to reach out for an integral ecology, which includes human ecology, has been expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*. There is a connection between environmental and social degradation, because many social problems are the result of our incapacity to come to peaceful terms with mother nature.

The care of Mother Earth calls for an integral conversion of hearts and minds. It is not correct to consider the Cantic of Brother Sun simply as a hymn to nature. The centre of the Cantic is the Most High and Most Powerful Lord, Creator of all. Without this profound conversion we can never understand the profound intuition of Francis when he composed the Cantic.

The Cantic also speaks about reconciliation and forgiveness. In other words, it is an appeal to the construction of a culture of non-violence. It is the exact opposite of what we are experiencing at this moment in history, when it seems that many wars are being legitimised by invoking God. This is blasphemy, because God has never approved of wars and hatred. He is peace and love.

The Minister General also spoke about three key factors in interpreting the Cantic of Brother Sun. The first one is that of a vision of universal fraternity. All creation is inter-connected in the provident plan of God. The cry of Mother Earth is the same cry of the poor who invoke justice.

The second key factor is the ability of looking at divine beauty even in situations of suffering. The face of suffering persons is the face of Christ on the cross, Who never ceased to be the most beautiful among the sons of men, and whose radiance and beauty remain intact in the face of all the innocent who suffer injustice from the haughty attitude of cruelty of the powerful. The Cantic emanates a new ray of hope which speaks of solidarity and dialogue among peoples and cultures, which

promotes inter-religious dialogue among different faiths, which creates a network of common good within the world economy, resulting in an economy of solidarity.

The third key factor to interpret the Cantic is that of the link between contemplation and action. Although the Cantic is a prayer of praise and appeals to the contemplative spirit, it also leads us to act in a responsible and pro-active way for the good quality of our life as humans in relationship with one another and with God. It becomes a concrete commitment in favour of justice and reconciliation.

The Minister concluded his reflection by pin-pointing five concrete proposals that we, as Franciscans, can try to realise during this centenary year.

1. We need to rediscover and re-propose the thoughts and writings of our great Franciscan masters who speak about creation in their philosophical, theological or mystical works. We have splendid examples in our cultural tradition.

2. We need to prioritise the themes of justice, peace and integrity of creation in the initial and ongoing formation of the brothers. This also calls for an integration of the contemplative dimension with concrete actions which speak for themselves and become a witness of our commitment in favour of an integral ecology.

3. We need to reinforce networks of collaboration within our great Franciscan family and also beyond, in the issue of the care of our common home.

4. We need to promote the theology of the Cantic also in a secularised world and among other religions, since its appeal goes well beyond the purely religious and Christian perspective to include all forms of goodwill among people of different faiths and cultures.

5. We need to develop our action in favour of an integral ecology in a more efficient manner, starting with small and concrete gestures in our own fraternities.

In this way we give witness of a fraternity built upon gratitude and praise.

Concluding remarks

Our reflections on the *Canticum fratris Solis* are just a short presentation of its contents and message, which might be of interest to those who are not familiar with Saint Francis' writings, but which are clearly evident to all the rest. This effort is an invitation to continue to deepen our reflections on the theme of creation in the life and teachings of Francis, also through the writings and teachings of the Franciscan masters of philosophy, theology and mysticism.

Our Franciscan intellectual tradition is very rich in its reference to God's creative work and to the role of the human person in God's plan of creation. It is important that we Franciscans promote a style of integral ecology based upon a Christian perspective that has Jesus Christ as its centre, since He is the cosmic centre of the entire universe. Our Franciscan tradition has always insisted upon the humanity of Jesus as the model or archetype upon which God the Father modelled the entire universe.

The centenary we are celebrating should also be an occasion to understand Francis' role as a lover of God's creation in its concrete perspective. There is a tendency to relegate Francis to the realm of ecology, but without any reference to its Christian dimension and especially to the human dimension of an integral ecology. Indeed, it is easy to present Francis as a lover of creation and a defender of ecological movements, but it is much harder to see in his message the intimate link that has to exist between nature and mankind, between the care of our common home and the issues of justice and peace. As Franciscans we are called to fill this missing link with the help of our intellectual tradition and with our own witness of life.

We have seen how the mediaeval way of looking at creation, albeit its lack of scientific professionalism, remains meaningful also in our contemporary

world. Mediaeval man saw creation as the masterpiece of God's love, in which the human person is part and parcel and not just a wealthy landlord who can dispose of natural resources as he deems fit for his own selfish motives. The respect for creation and the rhythms of nature was a sign of the wisdom of mediaeval man in the face of the contemporary danger of a development which many would call "sustainable" only to suit their own economic greed. Sustainable development does not depend upon human calculations as how to cut greenhouse emissions or provide green lungs for the ever menacing encroachment of concrete forests in our large cities. These efforts of diplomacy and scientific research are necessary and useful, but they will never render any concrete results without good will on all those who are involved, namely the entire global community.

The Canticle of Brother Sun is an efficient instrument of evangelisation and mission in our world. The cry of creation is the cry for help in the face of a monstrous invasive action on the part of those who consider man as the owner of creation, and who consider creatures as part of an economic pattern of exploitation that justifies a situation of injustice in which the powerful dominate upon the poor and defenceless creatures, among which stand millions of human persons created to the image and likeness of God.

Pope Francis writes: "Today, however, we have to realise that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."⁴⁶

These words remind us of the specific vocation of Francis, who dedicated his entire life to the poor and to creation. Indeed, that is where Francis discovered the face of God, namely in the disfigured face of the leper, in the dilapidated chapel of San

⁴⁶ FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, 49.

Damiano, in the painful experience of La Verna, where the beauty of creation became one with the suffering of the poor and crucified Lord stamped in the signs of the stigmata on Francis' body.

Human frailty and praise of God for creation go together in Francis' life experience. He composed the Canticle after a night of intense tribulation, in a moment of his life when he lost his eyesight. He pleaded with the bishop and *podestà* to come to reconciliation and peace by inserting in the Canticle a song of praise for those who forgive. He welcomed death like a loving sister, without taking anything away from its cruelty in snatching him from the beauty of this earth. He was convinced that even beauty of creation and beauty of life is transient, and that creation is simply a ladder which leads us to journey towards the source of beauty Who is God.

Our aim is to continue reflecting upon this theme through the rich tradition of our Franciscan masters who created a unique synthesis of a *theologia pulchritudinis* (a theology of beauty) from the poetic dance of creation composed by Francis in San Damiano precisely 800 years ago.

Latin Abbreviations

Writings of St. Francis

CantAudPov	Canticle Audite Poverelle
CantSol	Canticum fratris Solis
LaudDei	Laudes Dei Altissimi
BenLeo	Benedictio fratri Leoni data
EpAnt	Epistola ad S. Antonium
EpClerI	Epistola ad Clericos
EpCust	Epistola ad Custodes
EpFid	Epistola ad Fideles
EpLeo	Epistola ad fratrem Leonem
EpMin	Epistola ad Ministrum
EpOrd	Epistola toti Ordini missa
EpRect	Epistola ad rectores
ExhLD	Exhortatio ad Laudem Dei
ExpPat	Expositio in Pater noster
FormViv	Forma vivendi S. Claræ
Fragm	Fragmenta alterius Regulæ
LaudHor	Laudes ad omnes horas
OffPass	Officium Passionis Domini
OrCruc	Oratio ante Crucifixum
RegB	Regula bullata
RegNB	Regular non bullata
RegEr	Regula pro eremotoriis
SalBVM	Salutatio Beatæ Mariæ Virg
SalVirt	Salutatio Virtutum
Test	Testamentum
UltVol	Ultima voluntas S. Claræ

Sources for the Life of St. Francis

FAED I *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Saint*
 FAED II *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Founder*

FAED III *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. Prophet*

1C	Celano, <i>Vita beati Francisci</i>
LCh	Celano, <i>Legenda ad usum chori</i>
VB	Celano, <i>Vita brevior S. Francisci</i>
2C	Celano, <i>Memoriale in desiderio animæ</i>
3C	Celano, <i>Tractatus miraculorum</i>
LJS	Julian of Speyer, <i>Vita S. Francisci</i>
OR	<i>Officium Rhythmicum</i>
AP	<i>Anonymus Perusinus (De Inceptione)</i>
L3C	<i>Legenda trium sociorum</i>
CA	<i>Compilatio Assisiensis</i>
LMj	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Maior</i>
LMn	S. Bonaventura, <i>Legenda Minor</i>
SPMaj	<i>Speculum Perfectionis</i> (Sabatier)
SPMin	<i>Speculum Perfectionis</i> (Lemmens)
ABF	<i>Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius</i>
Fior	<i>Fioretti di San Francesco</i>

