

# Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan  
Intellectual Tradition*



**T**hose like ourselves who are immediate heirs of the tradition inspired by the spirituality of Francis [and Clare] might better see ourselves as responsible stewards of a treasure that has much to offer for the healing of humanity and of the world at large.

Zachary Hayes OFM  
Bonaventure Fest, 2003, Aston, PA



## A Franciscan View of Creation: *Learning to Live in a Sacramental World*

By Ilia Delio OSF

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We live in solidarity with every aspect of creation, realizing that creation is incomplete and yearns for its completion in God.

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.  
The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep;  
and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the water. And God said,  
'Let there be light'; and there was light."*

(Genesis)



*Brother Sun*

### A Franciscan View of Creation

Creation is a mystery. How it came into existence, why it is here are questions that scientists struggle to answer today. By exploring the role of creation in the life of Francis, as well as in the theology of Bonaventure and Scotus, we are able to address some of the important questions that confront us today such as: What is our fundamental relationship to nature?

### Francis and His Milieu

Unlike the Neoplatonists who withdrew from the sensual world in order to contemplate God, Francis attained the heights of contemplation through his penetrating vision of creation. He has been described as a nature mystic, one whose mystical experiences involve an appreciation of creation as God's handiwork. Francis' nature mysticism included a consciousness of God, with appropriate religious attitudes of awe and gratitude. He took spontaneous joy in the material world, singing its praises like a troubadour poet. With a disarming sense of immediacy, he felt himself part of the family of creation.

Francis' love of creation was in opposition to the Cathars of his time, a heresy that was immensely popular throughout Italy and southern France. The Cathars maintained a split between matter and spirit. They believed that matter was created by an evil god and spirit by a good god. Through their eyes, one could explain the suffering of this world as a result of an evil god.

The development of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition is based on the fact that Francis' version of creation differed from that of the Neoplatonists and that of the Cathars. While both of these traditions, on popular and mythological levels, led to a depreciation and suspicion of the world of matter, Francis' roots were in popular religiosity. His own conversion story led him to embrace matter as the locus for the encounter with Christ and God. His following the Gospel led not to denial of suffering but to the acceptance of it as the deepest sense of human existence. His conversion was centered on Christ in the crib, Christ on the way, and Christ on the cross. The human suffering of God-with-us explained, illuminated and justified all human suffering.



*Sister Moon*

*“That which was bitter  
became sweet.”*

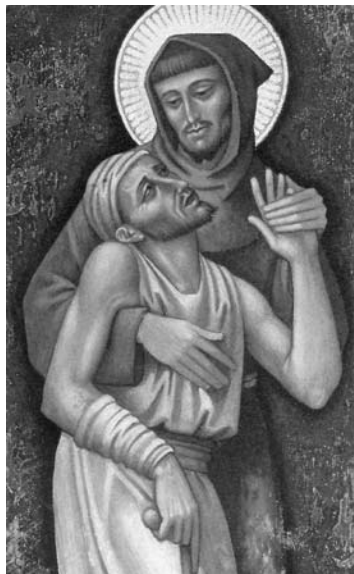
Testament of Saint Francis of Assisi

## The Conversion of Francis: The Biographical Traditions

Francis conversion story in his Testament begins with doing mercy among the lepers. He describes it in this way: “That which was bitter became sweet.” Thereafter, care for the lepers became the center of Francis’ life and continual conversion. The biographical traditions of Celano and Bonaventure focused on this conversion story and its theological meaning through two significant popular images: the encounter with the Crucified at the church of San Damiano and the dramatic meeting with a single leper.

According to the second life of Francis by Celano, Francis encountered the crucified Christ in the church of San Damiano where “the image of Christ spoke to him. ‘Francis, go rebuild my house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.’ At first Francis understood these words literally, since the church was dilapidated. He came to understand, however, that it was not the material building that Christ wanted repaired but rather the Church — his mystical body — and ultimately, we could say today, the body of all creation.

Bonaventure, in his Major Life of Saint Francis, dramatizes Francis’ conversion as narrated in the Testament by describing his encounter with a single leper. Up until his conversion, Francis had complete disdain for lepers and loathed the very sight of them. Around the time of his conversion, Francis met a leper one day along the road and, instead of turning away in disgust; he dismounted his horse, gave the leper alms and kissed his hand.<sup>1</sup> Through this image, Bonaventure communicates something very similar to what Celano had written about and Francis himself had described as an experience of sweetness. Just as Francis realized that God has humbly bent over in love to embrace us in the humility of the Incarnation and in the charity of the passion, so too he realized that the suffering of humanity and all of creation could only be pain and suffering lifted up through solidarity in love. The God of Francis of Assisi was the God of compassionate love, whom Francis encountered in the person of Jesus Christ. Face to face with the crucified and glorified Christ in the broken down church of San Damiano, Francis sought to respond to that love. He had discovered “sweetness” in the face of a creature composed of matter, and, by meeting the God of overflowing goodness in the person of Jesus Christ, Francis came eventually to realize God’s goodness at the heart of all matter. He came to “see” that all creation is filled with the abundant goodness of God.



*Pain and Suffering*



*Brother Wind*

Coming to an awareness of God’s presence in creation was not an immediate experience for Francis but required growth in love. Conversion is a slow, lifelong process. It is a constant effort of moving away from sin-centered attitudes and behaviors toward God-centered relationships.

With this movement from sin toward God, there is a gradual change in one’s consciousness or awareness of others and in one’s relationship to others, not only to humans but to all of creation. It took Francis a lifetime to realize that he was truly brother to the whole cosmos.

According to Thomas of Celano, Francis aspired to be a knight but was wounded in battle and afterwards showed little appreciation for creation. How did he come to realize his intimate relationship to creation? Both Celano and Bonaventure claim that such a relationship came about through his loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Francis came to realize that the Incarnation sanctifies all creation. He came to understand that all creation, like himself, is called to give praise to God. He lived in love and by loving other creatures, let them be, encouraging them to grow in their uniqueness, sharing with them their very being.<sup>2</sup> Everything spoke to Francis of the infinite love of God.





*Brother Fire*

## The Family of Creation

In his Major Legend, Bonaventure describes Francis' relationship with Christ as one of deepening piety. "True piety", Bonaventure writes, "had so filled Francis' heart and penetrated its depths that it seemed to have claimed the man of God completely into its dominion. This is what

- through devotion, lifted him up to God;
- through compassion, transformed him into Christ;
- through self-emptying, turned him to his neighbor;
- through universal reconciliation with each thing, refashioned him into a state of innocence.<sup>3</sup>

Francis' respect for creation was not a duty or obligation but arose out of an inner love by which creation and the source of creation, namely God, were intimately united. All of creation was a means to contemplate the power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator.

## Incarnation and the Holiness of Creation

In and through his relationship with Jesus Christ, Francis came to realize that the entire creation is holy. Celano highlights this idea in his account of Francis' Christmas celebration in Greccio. Francis wanted to show how God entered into our everyday world of creation through the Incarnation. As Greccio became a new Bethlehem, Francis embraced the good things of creation as a brother embraces the

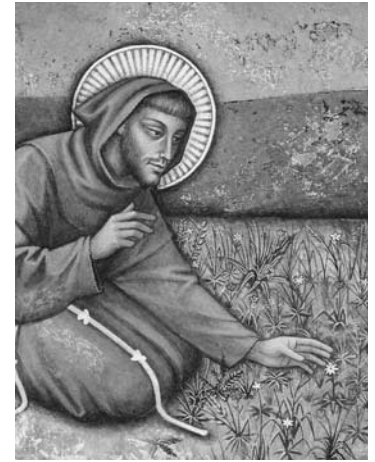


*Sister Water*

members of his family. The intimate link between creation and Incarnation revealed to Francis that the whole of creation is a place to encounter God.

Bonaventure claims that everything in creation "spoke" to Francis of God. He came to "see" God's goodness in every aspect of creation, so that everything ultimately led him to Christ. That Francis came to "see" God in creation points to the idea that Francis contemplated God in the things of creation. Bonaventure describes the contemplative vision of Francis as "contuition" that is, seeing things for what they truly are in God.<sup>4</sup> These footprints of God impressed on the things of creation enabled Francis to find God wherever he went in the world and finding God in the things of creation led him to embrace Jesus Christ, for Christ is the Word of God made visible in the world.

What Francis attained in his life was a true sense of justice in creation. As he continued to move more deeply into the mystery of God through his relationship with Christ, he came to realize his familial relationship to creation. This realization enabled him to establish peaceful relationships with all creatures. For Francis the kingdom of God is not in the future but already here and now through participation in it. His life shows us that the justice and peace we hope and long for will not come about unless we are converted and strive for transformation in Christ. Peace is the fruit of justice. The Edenic relationships Francis came to share with all creatures emerged from his sense of justice. They



*Mother Earth*

signify that justice and peace are related to poverty, compassion, contemplation and on-going conversion by which we realize our familial bonds with all living creatures, joining with them on the journey.

## The Canticle of Creatures

Through their biographies, both Celano and Bonaventure communicate in images and stories the sense of family that Francis attained with creation. The Canticle of the Creatures is a hymn of praise that recapitulates Francis' journey to God in and through the beautiful things of creation. For Francis all creation became a theophany, a manifestation of the goodness of God. Francis praises God "through" (per) the elements of creation, for the Canticle discloses Francis' view of nature as a sacramental expression of God's generous love. This love binds us together in a family of relationships, "brother" and "sister". Through his love of Christ crucified, he came to see that nothing exists autonomously and independently; rather everything is related to everything else. As the final song of his life, the Canticle reveals to us Francis' deep reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation. It is the Incarnation that gives insight into the goodness of the created world as the sacrament of God. While it is Christ who enabled Francis to see that everything is imbued with the goodness of God; it is how Francis lived in Christ that shaped his relationship to creation. Penance, poverty, humility and compassion were the values that forged Francis into a

“cosmic brother”, one who was related to all creatures and to the elements of creation.

- Through penance he recognized his sinfulness and need for conversion.
- Through poverty he became aware of the human tendency to possess, as he realized his radical dependency on all things.
- Through humility he realized his solidarity with all creatures.
- Through compassion he came to have deep feelings for the things of the earth, including the tiniest of creatures.



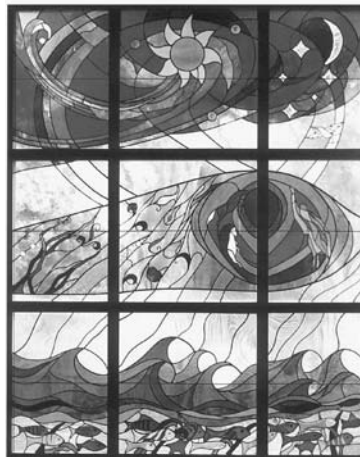
*Sister Death*

He came to realize the world is the cloister, the place to find God, the One who is both present in every detail of the universe and, yet, infinitely transcendent and ineffable.

## Bonaventure's Theology of Creation

While Francis entered into the heart of creation by entering into the heart of Christ, Bonaventure reflected on the experience of Francis and developed a theology of creation that is both faithful to Francis' intuitions and to the Christian theological tradition itself.

As a friar Bonaventure, like Francis, recited the psalms that praised God for the work of his hands and the wonders of creation. As a Franciscan and a theologian, he translated Francis' vernacular theology into scholastic theology without losing the distinct characteristics of Francis' spirituality.<sup>5</sup>



*Australian stained glass window:  
Canticle of the Sun*

He distilled the essence of Francis' intuitions into a theological vision that holds immense relevance for us today.

## Creation: A River and Song of the Trinity

Bonaventure's theology of creation takes as its starting point the Trinity of love. He describes creation as a sharing in the mystery of the generation of the Word from the Father. It is a limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love between the Father and Son. It emerges out of this relationship and explodes into “a thousand forms” in the universe.

There is nothing that compels God to create. Rather creation is simply the finite loving outflow of an infinitely loving God. God desires to create because God is love, and perfect love can never be self-contained but must be shared freely with one another. The world exists, Bonaventure indicates, by virtue of the free creative power of divine love. Creation is a free act of divine goodness spilling forth from the infinite divine community of love.

## The Order and Harmony of Creation

The beauty, order and harmony of creation signified to Bonaventure that this created world is not simply a stage for human activity or a backdrop to human longings, but that the whole of creation has meaning and purpose. It comes from God, reflects the glory of God and is intended to return to God.<sup>6</sup>

## Creation as Dynamic

For Bonaventure, the meaning of creation is summed up in the word “relationship” The basis of creation is the Trinity, a community of relationships out of which creation emerges.<sup>7</sup> Because the material world is created by God, it is like the Trinity itself, dynamic and relational.

## Freedom in Creation

Bonaventure maintains that God creates freely. God grants freedom to creation without disrupting the divine intention to which creation is ordered. The fact that the human person emerges in creation, fit for receiving the divine into him/herself is the unfolding of the artist's plan. God could have created the world as it was intended to be; however, God chose to create it in such a way that it would be perfected only gradually. God created in such a way that there would be one in creation (human person) who would freely choose God and in choosing God, become like God—perfect in love. God created in such a way as to persuade humans, by teaching, moving and delighting them, to seek final perfection. The human person stands at the center of creation not to dominate it but to lead it to perfection. Humanity and creation cannot exist apart from each other and attain true relationship with God. Only in mutual relationship is God's love fully expressed.



## The Exemplary World

The divine Word is the dynamic expression of the Father's goodness. In this one Word is everything that has ever existed, that presently exists, that will ever exist or that could possibly have existed. The Word is the center of Divine ideas; the Word is the model or exemplar of all things.

## Creation as Mirror and Book

Bonaventure used two images to describe creation. As a **mirror**, creation reflects the power, wisdom and goodness of the Trinity precisely by the way things express themselves,<sup>8</sup> and as a **book** in which the Maker, the Trinity shines forth and is represented at three levels of expression:

- **Trace:** (vestige) most distant reflection of God and is found in all creatures. Everything that exists reflects the power, wisdom and goodness of the Trinity.
- **Image:** Found only in intellectual (human) beings. Reflects the fact that the human person is not only structured according to the image of the Trinity, but as image, is an apt receptacle for the divine.
- **Likeness;** humans conformed to God by grace as likeness (similitude) since through grace; they bear a likeness to God.

## Sacramental Creation

*To be a person is based not on what we do but who we are in relation to God and others.*

Every creature is an aspect of God's self-expression in the world, and since every creature has its foundation in the Word, each is equally close to God (although the mode of relationship differs). Since the Word of God is expressed in the manifold variety of creation, Bonaventure views the world as sacramental — a symbolic world full of signs of God's presence.

Bonaventure highlights

- Francis as the exemplary Christ-mystic. Francis is the one who saw divine beauty in the beautiful things of creation because he saw that beauty first in Christ, crucified and glorified upon the cross.
- Francis identified each and every creature as a brother and sister because he recognized that they had the same primordial source (or goodness) as himself. Bonaventure describes this ability to see the reality of things in relation to God as "contuitio."

- Francis was able to apprehend the real depth of creation because he had entered deeply into the Word incarnate. Through his relationship with Christ, Francis experienced a transformation of consciousness through grace. His awareness of the created world, every aspect of it spoke to Francis of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Through the life of Francis we can appreciate the mystery of Jesus Christ as the mystery of the divine Word made flesh by which we come to know the depths of all reality. Bonaventure described how Jesus is born within the human soul that is prayerful, humble and dedicated to God. When one finds Jesus within oneself, then one may find Jesus in the structures of the created universe. Creation as the "expressed word" of the divine Word is directed in its inner core to fulfillment and completion in God.

The goal (fulfillment and completion in God) is attained through the human person who like Francis is conformed to God through grace. Such a person recognizes the divine signs of creation and offers to God praise and thanksgiving. To be a person is based not on what we do but who we are in relation to God and others.



## John Duns Scotus' Theology of Creation

John Duns Scotus viewed the goodness of creation through the lens of the primacy of Christ, the freedom of God and the contingency of the world. It imparts to creation a profound dignity that reflects Francis' fidelity to the world as the cloister in which we seek God.

Scotus like Francis and Bonaventure, saw an intimate connection between creation and Incarnation, a connection that he grounded in the infinite love of God. God is Trinity and Trinity for Scotus is three divine persons in a communion of love.

God became human in Jesus out of love (rather than because of human sin) because God wanted to express God's self in a creature who would be a masterpiece and who would love God perfectly in return. This is Scotus' doctrine of the primacy of Christ.

Christ is the first in God's intention of love. Creation is not an independent act of love that was, incidentally, followed up by divine self-revelation in the covenant. Divine desire to become incarnate was part of the overall plan or order of intention. Incarnation is placed in context of creation not human sin.

## Christ: The Blueprint of Creation

Christ is the meaning and model of creation and every creature is made in the image of Christ. When Jesus comes as the Incarnation of God, there is a "perfect fit" because everything has been made to resemble Jesus Christ.



## Univocity of Being

How we know God in and through the created world takes on deeper meaning through Scotus' notion of Univocity, the concept of God's way of being and created being related through one concept of being.<sup>9</sup> God's being and created being are not identical. God's being and created being are two distinct modes of being: infinite and finite. Uncreated, necessary being is infinite. Created, contingent beings are finite.

The Univocity of being means that each created thing in its own way, tells us something about God. Univocity of being imparts to the things of creation a tremendous dignity, as well as a sense of mystery and awe.

Scotus maintains that the created order is endowed with its own light that shines from within. Creation is a lamp, and each unique being radiates the light of God.

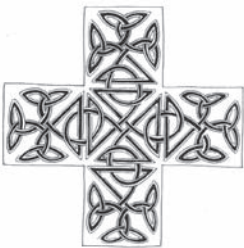


## The Unique Love of God and the Doctrine of *Haecceitas*

*Each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is of infinite value because it images God in its own unique being.*

Scotus placed great emphasis on the inherent dignity of each and everything that exists. He calls our attention to the “thisness” of each thing. Scotus’ notion of essential “thisness” is known as the doctrine of *haecceitas* and relates to essential individuation. The notion of *haecceitas* points to the individuality at the core of each thing — its very being. In view of the primacy of Christ, *haecceitas* signifies that Jesus is the model on which God models every aspect of creation.

Scotus’ theology of creation is one on which grace and nature intertwine. Nothing in creation is accidental or excessive, nothing is worthless or trivial. Each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is of infinite value because it images God in its own unique being.



### A Christ-Centered Universe

Our lives in union with Christ must help to sacramentalize the universe. For Scotus the beauty of the present moment expresses the perfection of the eternal; however beauty is revealed when we humans strive to make the right choices that correspond to a God who is infinite love. Moral loving does not involve finding objects worthy of love (since all reality is good) but rather working out the manner by which we can love reality as it deserves.<sup>10</sup>

Like Francis, Scotus maintains that relationship is the key to the beauty of the universe. Since all reality is good, my relationships with others, human and non-human ought to promote goodness. This is what justice is for Scotus — the orientation of rational beings towards right loving and right action. It involves treating everything in creation as it deserves. It calls us to attend to the “thisness”, the inherent dignity, of each and everything that exists.

### Summary

#### *Francis, Bonaventure and Scotus . . . Themes for the doctrine of creation*

##### Goodness of Creation

The life of Francis affirms the overflowing goodness of the triune God as the source of creation. Creation flows out of the heart of an infinitely loving creator. Franciscan theology of creation without Christ is incomplete.



##### Integral Relationship between Christ and Creation

Francis came to realize that everything bears enormous dignity because of its relationship to Christ and he related to each and every thing as singularly loved by God.



##### Sacramentality of Creation

Bonaventure drew an integral relationship between the Trinity of self-diffusive goodness and the goodness of creation. The whole of creation emerging out of the fecundity of divine goodness is oriented to God as its source and goal.



##### Integral relationship between the human and non-human aspects of creation

Bonaventure and Scotus concede that the richness of the divine mystery of love provides a basis for explaining the richness and diversity of the created world. Bonaventure conceived of God in terms of divine simplicity and boundless fertility. Scotus affirms that creation is good precisely in the diversity of everything that exists. The primacy of



Christ imparts an inherent dignity to everything that exists in creation, and he develops this through the doctrine of *haecceitas*. That is everything in its unique being; its thisness is related to Christ, who is the blueprint of the universe.

For Scotus and Bonaventure, the Incarnation involves the whole created order whereby Christ is the purpose and the goal of the universe.

The fundamental relationship between Incarnation and creation leads to the central idea that each and every aspect of creation has absolute dignity because everything is created specifically and uniquely through the Word of God.

### Conclusion

#### *What is Ours to do?*

- Recognize our interconnectedness to creation. Pay attention to the details of creation and gaze contemplatively on nature.
- Contact with nature needs to be fundamental component of our Franciscan way of life.
- Realize that our sinful actions are at the root of our present ecological crisis and thus our need for ongoing conversion and penance, acknowledging our brokenness.
- Belief in the inherent goodness of creation and the dignity of each created thing should lead to a stance of environmental justice
- Awareness of biological diversity as an expression of the goodness of God means addressing the interdependence of the many forms of life on our planet.
- Have awareness that our actions can help move the universe toward its fulfillment in Christ or may thwart this goal.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, vol. 2, The Founder, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 2000) 533. Hereafter this volume will be referred to as FA; ED 2 followed by page numbers.
- <sup>2</sup> Eric Doyle, *St. Francis and the Song of the Brotherhood* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 41.
- <sup>3</sup> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, in FA: ED 2, 531.
- <sup>4</sup> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, in FA: ED2, 596-597
- <sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn first introduced the concept of vernacular theology in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 4-14 and further developed it in *The Flowering Mysticism*, vol 3, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism* (New York: Crossroads, 1998), 8-24. Jen Leclercq summarizes the relation between monastic and scholastic theology in "The Renewal of Theology," *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Robert Benson and Giles Constable (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 68-87
- <sup>6</sup> Bonaventure, *Commentarius in librum Ecclesiastes 1.7* (V, 13b); Bonaventure, *Breviloquium (Brev.) 2.11.2* Engl. Trans. Jose de Vinck, *Breviloquium*, vol 2, *Works of Bonaventure* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 101.
- <sup>7</sup> Alexander Schaeffer, "The Position and Function of Man in the Created World According to Bonaventure," *Franciscan Studies* 20 (1960): 266-67; Leonard Bowman, "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure," *Journal of Religion* 55 (1975): 183.
- <sup>8</sup> Bowman, "Cosmic Exemplarism," Hayes, "Incarnation and Creation," 314.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33-9; Cyril L. Shircel, *The Univocity of the Concept of Being in the Philosophy of John Duns Scotus* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1942).
- <sup>10</sup> Marybeth Ingham, "A Certain Affection for Justice," *The Cord* 45.3 (1995): 17.

## A Franciscan View of Creation: *Learning to Live in a Sacramental World*

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