

Creation, Christology and Beauty within the Franciscan Tradition

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What image comes to mind when you consider St. Francis of Assisi in relation to creation care?





St. Francis of Assisi

St Francis of Assisi, by Małgorzata Wrochna

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St. Francis of Assisi: “Patron Saint for Ecologists”?



- Lynn White Jr., “The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis”. *Science*, Vol 155, March 1967, pp.1203-1207.
- “The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and [humanity’s] relation to it: he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including [humans], for the idea of humanity’s limitless rule of creation.
- ...I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.”





- The title “Patron saint of ecologists” was also assigned to St. Francis of Assisi by Pope John Paul II in 1979.



Francis and Nature

Many positive examples...



Thomas of Celano's *Life of Saint Francis*

“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.”

(FA:ED 1, 1C 80-81)



Preaching to the Birds

- Accounts in the early biographies of Francis preaching to the birds in the Spoleto Valley:
- “He was a man of great fervour, feeling much sweetness and tenderness even toward lesser, irrational creatures.”
- (FA:ED 1, 1C p.234ff).



Freeing animals from traps



- Letting free a rabbit caught in a trap:
- “As soon as the brother holding it let go, the rabbit, without any prompting, took shelter with the holy man, as in a most secure place, resting in his bosom. After it had rested there for a little while, the holy father, caressing it with motherly affection, let it go...” (1C, FA:ED 1, p.234ff).





Leaving strips of land uncultivated

- Francis's early biographer, Thomas of Celano reports that Francis urged those who farmed land to leave strips uncultivated so that flowers and wild grasses could grow there:
- "He commands the gardener to leave the edges of the garden undisturbed, so that in their season the green of herbs and the beauty of flowers may proclaim the beautiful Father of all."
- (FA:ED II, 2C, p.354; III, 366)





However...

(Caution needed)

Stories relating to Francis and nature are not exclusively positive (from a modern perspective)



- Mice in Francis' cell
- A sow killing a lamb



Not “Nature”, but “Creation”: For Francis, a reflection its Creator



- “Francis sought occasion to love God in everything. He delighted in all the work of God’s hands and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source and cause of all.”
(Bonaventure, ML 9:1)

The centrality of Incarnation in Francis' worldview



- For Francis, the value of creatures and the created world in general was in their revelation of God as Creator, **and the incarnate Christ.**
- Speaking of Francis in relation to “ecology” can only be done from this Christian perspective.

Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures" and Ecology



The Canticle of the Creatures



...Praised be you, my Lord
with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom
you bring us light.

And he is lovely, shining
with great splendor,
for he heralds you, Most High.

Praised be you, my Lord,
through Sister Moon and Stars.
In heaven you have formed them,
lightsome and precious and fair. ...

Praised be you, my Lord,
through Sister Water,
so very useful and humble,
precious and chaste.

...

Praised be you, my Lord,
by our Sister, Mother Earth,
who sustains us and directs us
bringing forth all kinds of fruits
and colored flowers and herbs. ...



The Ecology of the Canticle

- Timothy Johnson on the Canticle:
- “What Francis proposes in the Canticle of the Creatures is quite breath-taking. First of all, the creatures of the world surrounding the brothers are not objects but subjects in a wide-ranging network of relationships, marked by gendered equality and a shared, mutual source of vitality and life.” (Johnson, 2021, pp.145-6)

The Canticle and Christology?



- It has been suggested that the Canticle is in fact not simply a hymn of praise to God as Creator, but also a specifically Christological hymn – with “Sir Brother Sun” in particular used as a symbol of Christ.
- “The light that shines through the world is Christ, the centre of the universe.”
- (Mulholland, 2022, p.199)
- “The Canticle is a song of praise and glory for ‘Sir Brother Sun’... and for the creation whose centre he is.” (Ibid., p.205)



St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274)

Peter Paul Rubens,
San Bonaventura, c.1620

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Peter_paul_rubens,_san_bonaventura,_1620_ca.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_paul_rubens,_san_bonaventura,_1620_ca.jpg)





1) How do creatures reflect God?



i) The world as a book – written by God



“From all we have said, we may gather that the created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity...”

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio,
Beviloquium, II, 12, 1.



ii) The Person of Christ - and Creation as expressions of God

It is the nature of the Good [of God] to be self-diffusive, to express itself.

(Bonaventure, *Hexaemeron*, Collation 1, no. 17)

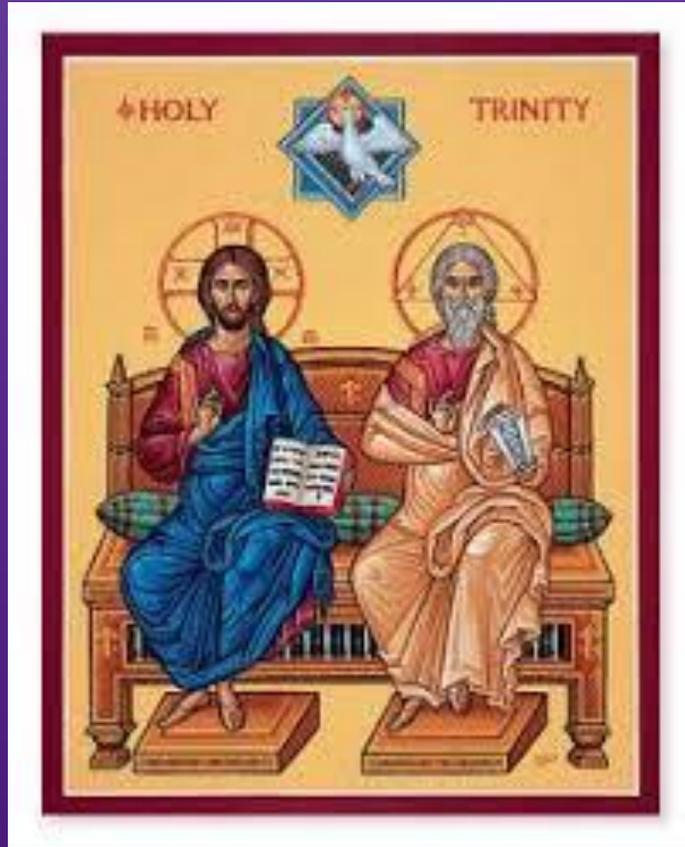


God's complete and perfect self-diffusion and expression is not **first of all** the created world but the inner life of the Trinity.





- The Son is the representation/ likeness of the Father - the self-expression of the Father.
- In the Son, the Father expresses the totality of his being and the totality of what he can produce. (The Word of the Father).
- Since the Son expresses the infinite creative power of the Father, he also represents all possible things: the infinite variety of things is given unified expression in him.



iii) Bonaventure: What is Beauty?



- Bonaventure's concept of the beauty of a thing relates to a proportionality in the coming together of its different parts - a “unity in multiplicity” - the complementary interrelationship of these parts in relation to the whole.
- The model for unity in multiplicity is the unity of three persons in the Trinity.
- The world partially reflects this absolute beauty in the multiplicity and variety of its creatures.



Blessed Duns Scotus

Picture: James Denham

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Duns_Scotus_-_geograph.org.uk_-_1178460.jpg





1) The Primacy of Christ



- For Scotus, the incarnation is not an afterthought, or *only* a response to human choices/ sin.
- Christ is the “blueprint” of creation; the incarnation is part of God’s eternal plan.
- While Scotus does not question the necessity of redemption, he places the incarnation in a broader context than that of human sin.
- All creation is willed for Christ and in Christ.



John 1:1-3, 14

- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...
- And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

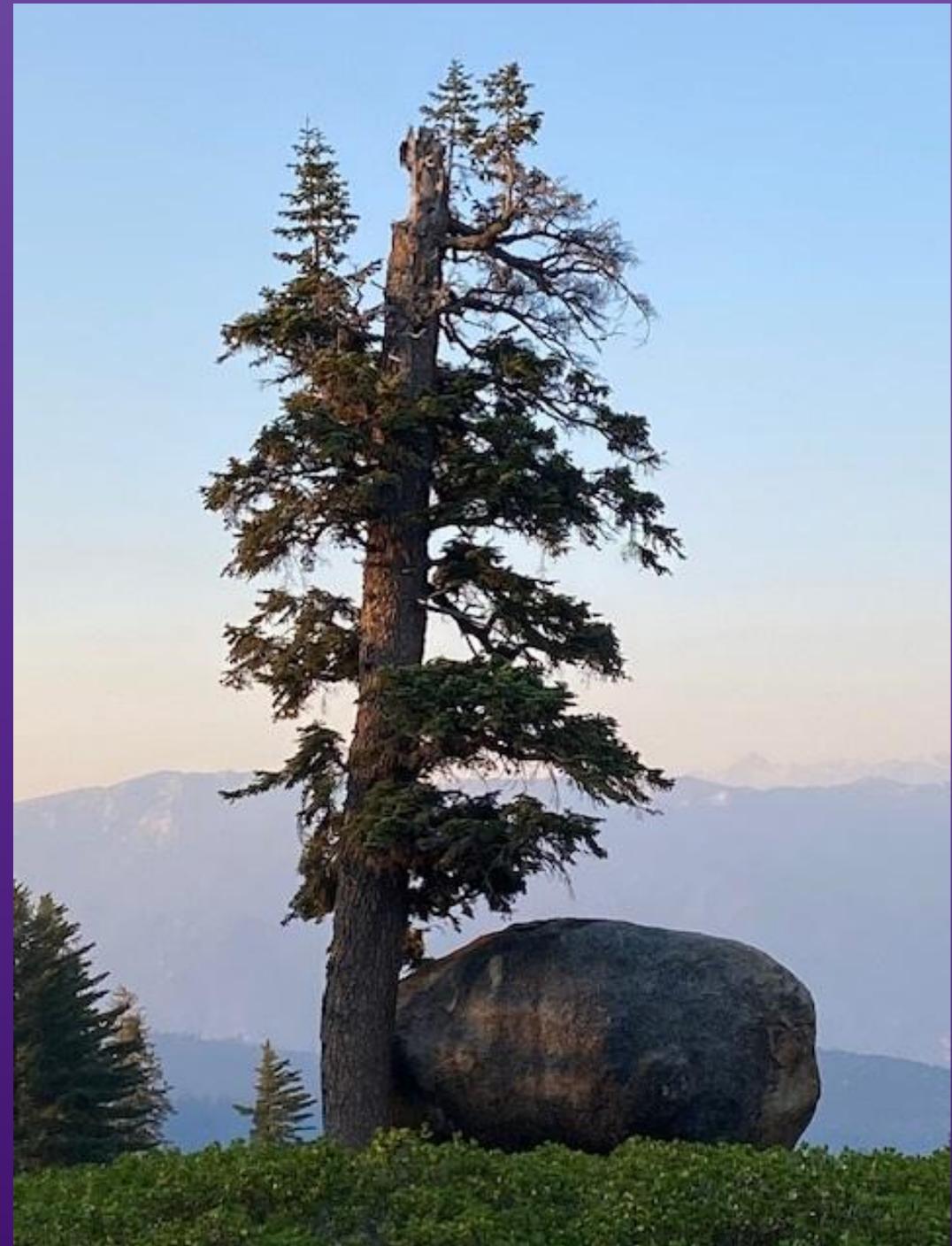


Colossians 1:15-20

- “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together....
- in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,”

2) *Haecceity*

- The principle of individuation – the unrepeatable/ unique identity of every creature.
- This goes beyond simply belonging to a group (e.g. a tree being identified by its “treeness”.)
- A specific tree, for example, has more being than the common nature (treeness) of which it is an instance.





- “*Haecceitas* allows us to see not just the uniqueness of every existing thing, but its place in the totality of creation...
- Not a place that is lost or swallowed up in the vastness of...the universe..., but the immediate presence that each individual thing has to us. ...”
- “...*haecceitas* can be used to explore the beauty and the truth of [each element of] creation as it exists in and of itself as ‘this thing’.” (Mulholland, 2022, p.187)

Bringing Primacy and *Haecceity* Together - An optimistic vision of the world:



Haecceity

- A focus on the dignity (and beauty) of each individual person (and non-human element of creation) in its uniqueness.

Primacy

- The world is a place where God *chooses* from all eternity to become incarnate and to dwell amongst us.
- God loves the world.



Questions?



What do we see as beautiful – and why?

- What *makes* a creature beautiful within the Franciscan tradition?
- What are the implications of the ideas of Francis, Bonaventure and Scotus for Christian environmental ethics?

