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Why is Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecologists?

In 1967 the historian Lynn White proposed St. Francis as a patron saint for ecologists. In this article I subject his recommendation to a critical analysis. I set out by reviewing the arguments presented by White in favour of Francis as ecology's patron saint and go on to consider whether White's portrait of St. Francis is accurate. This takes us back to the medieval setting of St. Francis' life and to written sources of that era, and brings us to a consideration of the difference between saints and ecologists/ environmental scientists. My conclusion from this comparison is that this medieval man's outlook on the natural world is realms apart from that held by practitioners of modern ecology and environmental science, but perhaps less far removed from the perspectives of self-styled 'deep ecologists'. Has Francis then rightly become the patron saint of those for whom ecology (in the sense of the environmental issue) has become a new religion, but wrongly for 'ordinary' ecologists and other environmental scientists? Can St. Francis still serve as a source of inspiration for the latter, or are they not in need of a patron? Finally, the question of whether this is more than merely a historical or terminological issue is addressed.

Keywords: St. Francis; patron saint; saints and nature; ecology; environmental scientist; spiritual life.

Introduction

"I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists".

It was with this appeal that the historian Lynn White concluded his controversial article on the historical roots of the 'ecologic crisis'.¹ Significantly, in the context of this paper, White employs the term ecologic(al) crisis as a synonym for environmental crisis and equates 'ecologists' with 'environmentalists'. The essay, published in 1967 in the authoritative, mainly 'hard science' journal *Science*, became a classic.² His main thesis – that the Judaeo-Christian creation narrative of Genesis sets humans above nature, desacralises nature and has, in part through its alliance with western science and technology, paved the way

1 L. White Jr (1967), The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. *Science*, 155, 1203-1207. As a medievalist White focused on the 'historical roots' of the Middle Ages, a period whose importance, even for modern American culture, he had stressed earlier, *inter alia* in *The Legacy of the Middle Ages in the American Wild West*. *Speculum*, 40 (1965), 191-202.

2 It was quite rightly included in N. Nelissen et al. (eds.) (1997), *Classics in Environmental Studies. An Overview of Classic Texts in Environmental Studies*. International Books, Utrecht.

for our exploitation of nature – touched a raw nerve, not only among traditional Christians, but also among scientists of more neutral leanings. A stream of publications followed, the majority of them siding against White's central thesis.³ For Christians it constituted an effrontery that was entirely unfounded and indeed unacceptable, while many a scientist criticised it for being oversimplistic.⁴ There was markedly less criticism, however, when it came to White's advocating, as part of his proposed reorientation, closer consideration of "the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ: Saint Francis of Assisi". On the contrary, this section of the article met general approval and St. Francis soon gained enormous popularity among conservationists and environmentalists. Paul Santmire, to give an example, repeatedly refers to him as "the embodiment of the ecological promise of classical Christianity".⁵ The recommendation with which White concluded his essay was likewise warmly received and in 1979 Francis of Assisi was canonised as the patron saint of ecologists by Pope John Paul II.⁶ Francis died on the evening of 3 October, 1226, so he is commemorated on the same day, 4 October.

In this article I subject White's recommendation to a critical analysis. This takes us back to the medieval setting of Francis' life and to written sources of that era. Two important questions will be addressed: Has Francis rightly become the patron saint for ecologists? How can St. Francis still serve as a source of inspiration?

White on St. Francis

Towards the end of his article, White explores various perspectives for resolving the ecological crisis. To his mind the solution cannot simply be more technology and more science, because both are rooted in "Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature". White sees these attitudes as a defining feature of western culture and "almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Chris-

3 Indignant about such phrases as "Christian arrogance toward nature", in doing so, many of White's detractors failed to address a number of cogent arguments and nuances in White's article.

4 There are several excellent historical studies concerning use of the crucial passages in Genesis: J. Cohen (1989), *Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*, *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca; U. Krolzik (1989), *Die Wirkungsgeschichte von Genesis 1,28*, In: G. Altner (ed.) *Ökologische Theologie, Perspektiven zur Orientierung*, Kreuz Verlag, Stuttgart, 149-163; H.J. van Soest (1996), "Welk is het voortreffelijkste scep-sel op aarde?" *De interpretatie van een omstreden bijbelse voorstelling in het 19^e en 20^e eeuwse Nederland*, Eburon, Delft; P. Harrison (1999), *Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, early modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature*, *J. Religion*, 79, 86-109.

5 P.H. Santmire (1985), *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia.

6 On 13 November 1979, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71, 1509. Francis had in fact already been the patron saint of merchants since 1936. His father Pietro Bernadone was a merchant and wanted his son to be his successor. It is believed that Francis worked for his father, but later on he expressed negative feelings on trade and opposed strongly his upbringing (Nolthenius, 1988, 221-225).

tians". His conclusion: "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one". America's beatniks and hippies are enamoured with Zen Buddhism and although White considers Zen a promising contender, as a philosophy of life for the west he deems it not viable. Religions cannot just be transplanted, interwoven as they are with the culture in which they are rooted: to my mind, a valid observation and conclusion on White's part. And so we must look to "our old one". Fortunately, the quest is successful, leading, as it does, to the ideas and beliefs of St. Francis of Assisi. White's essay thus goes on to elaborate on the historical figure of St. Francis. I reproduce the relevant passage here in full:

"The prime miracle of Saint Francis is the fact that he did not end at the stake, as many of his left-wing followers did. He was so clearly heretical that a General of the Franciscan Order, Saint Bonaventura, a great and perceptive Christian, tried to suppress the early accounts of Franciscanism. The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility – not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his.

Later commentators have said that Francis preached to the birds as a rebuke to men who would not listen. The records do not read so: he urged the little birds to praise God, and in spiritual ecstasy they flapped their wings and chirped rejoicing. Legends of saints, especially the Irish saints, had long told of their dealings with animals but always, I believe, to show their human dominance over creatures. With Francis it is different. The land around Gubbio in the Apennines was being ravaged by a fierce wolf. Saint Francis, says the legend, talked to the wolf and persuaded him of the error of his ways. The wolf repented, died in the odor of sanctity, and was buried in consecrated ground.

What Sir Steven Ruciman calls "the Franciscan doctrine of the animal soul" was quickly stamped out. Quite possibly it was in part inspired, consciously or unconsciously, by the belief in reincarnation held by the Cathar heretics who at that time teemed in Italy and southern France, and who presumably had got it originally from India. It is significant that at just the same moment, about 1200, traces of metempsychosis are found also in western Judaism, in the Provincial Cabbala. But Francis held neither to transmigration of souls nor to pantheism. His view of nature and of man rested on a unique sort of panpsychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator, who, in the ultimate gesture of cosmic humility, assumed flesh, lay helpless in a manger, and hung dying on a scaffold.

I am not suggesting that many contemporary Americans who are concerned about our ecologic crisis will be either able or willing to counsel with wolves or exhort birds. However, the present increasing disruption of the global environment is the product of a dynamic technology and science which were originating in the Western medieval world against which Saint Francis was rebelling in so original a way. Their growth cannot be understood historically apart from distinctive attitudes toward nature which are deeply grounded in Christian dogma. The fact that most people do not think of these attitudes as Christian is irrelevant. No new set of basic values has been accepted in our society to displace those of Christianity. Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.

The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it: he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation. He failed. Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists⁷.

While firmly rooted in the tradition of the Christian saints, Francis distinguished himself by advocating "the equality of all creatures", by speaking of "the spiritual autonomy of nature" and by seeing the whole of creation as imbued with a soul: "a unique sort of panpsychism". This, at least, is White's reading, but how does it bear up to historical scrutiny?

Francis and nature

The sources

What are the sources of our knowledge of his life and works?⁷ Francis was most likely born in the year 1182 in Assisi, a town in the valley of the Spoleto in the

7 A widely used English translation of all sources is M.A. Habig (ed.) (1973), *Saint Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies, English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago (generally cited as *Omnibus*). This translation of the *Writings* is based on a critical edition of 1904, the so-called Quaracchi edition. More recent: R.J. Armstrong and I. Brady (Translation and Introduction, 1982), *Francis and Clare, The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, New York. This is a translation based on Esser's work (1976) and published in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality*. The secondary literature on Francis is virtually beyond review, but in the present context the following sources are of interest: W. Hansen (1971), *Saint Francis of Assisi: Patron of the Environment*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago; Edward A. Armstrong (1973),

Italian region of Umbria. It was here, too, that he died on 3 October, 1226. There is uncertainty as to his birth date, which may have been 1181, and the same is true of much else about his life. We have no choice but to base ourselves on what others have written about his life and beliefs. In this, St. Francis is by no means exceptional. The earliest sources relating to Pythagoras, for example, date from the 4th century BC, some 200 years after the philosopher's death. With Francis, matters are not quite that bad, for we are lucky to have descriptions of his life penned shortly after his death by men who had known him. These writings are indeed littered with the stereotyped phrase "we, who lived with him" (*nos qui cum eo fuimus*). Thomas of Celano's two *Lives of St. Francis*, written in 1228/1229 (*Vita prima*) and 1247 (*Vita secunda*), are the best known and also most authentic of these writings. Especially the first is held in high esteem by scholars of St. Francis. The oldest surviving copies of these *Vitae* are from the end of the eighteenth century, however, and it was only in 1806 that the first combined edition was published. Other early sources, such as the writings of Brother Leo, an intimate friend of Francis, dating from 1246, have been lost. We are fortunate enough to have the *Legend of Perugia* (*Legenda Perugina*), a narrative that has been convincingly attributed in no small part to Leo. Part of the early material found its way into later compilations such as the *Legend of the Three Companions* (*Legenda Trium Sociorum*), the *Compilation of Assisi* (*Compilatio Assisiensis*) and the *Mirror of Perfection* (*Speculum Perfectionis*)⁸. Thomas of Celano, too, probably based his *Second Life* on the writings of Brother Leo. Under the title of the Italian translation (adaptation?) *I Fioretti di San Francesco* (*The Little Flowers of St. Francis*), an anthology of miracle stories, the *Acts of the Blessed Francis and his Companions* (*Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius*), has become extremely popular.

The loss of the (original copies of the) early sources was no mere accident. In the mid-thirteenth century, the order and spiritual heritage of St. Francis were the source of considerable dispute. This church-political struggle concentrates on the rigorous application of the poverty rule and on the possibility for laymen to preach. Both constitute potentially a threat to the ruling class.⁹ A voice of

Saint Francis: Nature Mystic, The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend, University of California Press, Berkeley; W.J. Short (1983), *Saints in the World of Nature, The Animal Story as Parable in Medieval Hagiography (900-1200)*, Rome; Hélène Nolthenius (1988), *Een man uit het dal van Spoleto, Francis tussen zijn tijdgenoten*, Querido, Amsterdam; Roger D. Sorrell (1988), *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature, Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. A somewhat dated but still useful discussion of his life and work is Paschal Robinson's entry on St. Francis in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), The Encyclopedia Press. For this section on sources I have also made use of the introductions to *De geschriften van Francis van Assisi*, H. Loeffen O.F.M. (ed.), Uitgeverij Gottmer, Haarlem, 1976/1982 and Cousins' introduction to the translated works of Bonaventure (see note 10).

⁸ For a critical edition of these sources see Rosalind B. Brooke ed. *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli Sociorum S. Francisci; The Writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo, Companions of St. Francis*. Oxford Medieval Texts, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970/1990.

⁹ A good description of this struggle and its background is given by A.H. Bredero (2000), *De kerstening der middeleeuwen. Een terugblik op de geschiedenis van twaalf eeuwen christendom*, Agora, Baarn / Pelckmans, Kapellen 261-294.

authority was called for and St. Bonaventura, at the time a leading figure within the Franciscan Order and later canonised, was chosen by the pope to speak. He thus began his *Major Life of St. Francis (Legenda Maior)*, which was completed in 1263.¹⁰ At that time Bonaventura was minister general of the Order. As White reminds us, it was at Bonaventura's behest that it was decreed, in 1266, that all previous biographies of St. Francis be sought out and destroyed. It was an evident policy to make the *Major Life* the accepted standard and steer the debate in a decisive direction. Although the decree was retracted after St. Bonaventura's death in 1274, much damage had already been done. Fortunately, however, copies and new redactions of many writings continued to circulate and thus a copy of Celano's *Lives*, for example, came to light centuries later in 1768.¹¹

Given these circumstances, Celano's *Vitae* and the *Legenda Perugia* are considered by scholars to be the most reliable sources for the life of St. Francis.

What, then, of the saint's own writings? Here too, unfortunately, matters are just as complicated, even more so. The only autographs of St. Francis that have been preserved are a letter to Brother Leo and a blessing and a prayer on a scrap of parchment. The parchment is on display as a relic in the Basilica San Francesco in Assisi. It is indeed debatable whether St. Francis personally authored much else, given his poor writing skills and deficient knowledge of Latin. The letter to Leo is stiff and awkward, with parts of it written in the local dialect. There remain, nonetheless, a reasonable number of texts that may be attributed to Francis, albeit as transcriptions or redactions of his original words. In this category are also to be placed a number of texts which originated within and around the Order and which can justifiably be assumed to bear the stamp of Francis' thought. The biographies make it clear that Francis made use of secretaries. The issue of authorship is rather modern, it may be added. In former eras there was less of an urge to know exactly by whom something had been said or written, and citation leagues were unknown. If a belief or thought was shared, it was often simply included in one's 'own' work. Similarly, a text might later be extended. From the chronicle of Brother Jordan of Giano we learn that Francis asked Brother Caesar to preface a rule of the order with a suitable verse from the Gospels.¹² Some of Francis' works, such as 'his' psalms, run so close to the biblical original that they are more akin to anthologies. This is not to say that Francis attached no value to his own words. On the contrary, we even have his own instructions to transcribe and disseminate his

10 Together with two other works published in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Bonaventura, *The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The life of St. Francis*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1978) with an introduction by Ewert Cousins.

11 The *Vita prima* was published by Constantine Suysken S.J. in *Acta Sanctorum* in 1768. Publication of the two *Vitae* together followed in 1806. More recent: Brother Thomas of Celano *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi and The Treatise of Miracles*, Translated from the Italian by Catherine Bolton, Editrice Minerva, Assisi, 1997.

12 H. Boehmer ed. *Chronica fratris Jordani*, Collection d'Etudes et Documents VI, Paris 1908.

writings. And so it was, and there evolved a fairly substantial corpus of varying authenticity. The oldest extant compilation is Assisi Codex 338, a manuscript preserved in the town library of Assisi and dating from between 1250 and 1260. This is regarded as the earliest collection of his writings. The manuscripts belonged to the friars, whose library was confiscated and then handed to the city library. It comprises 10 works that can with certainty be attributed to St. Francis, including the famed *Canticle of the Creatures* (*Cantico della Creatura* / *Cantico di Frate Sole*). In subsequent centuries an increasing number of texts came to light that were ascribed to Francis and in 1625 these minor works (*opuscula*) were published in book form. The writings had been collected by Lucas Wadding, an Irish Minorite.¹³ The edition was republished many times and translated into several languages, and for nearly three centuries remained the standard source.

The publication of the Frenchman Paul Sabatier's new biography of St. Francis, in 1894, heralded a new era. Conceptions of history-writing were being reappraised and there was a renewed interest in original sources. Previously unknown material came to light and in 1904 the friars of the St. Bonaventura College in Quaracchi published a new, critical edition of the works of St. Francis.¹⁴ There remained a need, and a growing one at that, for a critical review, to establish which sources could be reliably attributed to Francis, and which not. It was with this assignment that the Franciscan Kajetan Esser was charged and after a life of study of the saint and his works, his major critical edition was published in 1976.¹⁵ Although matters have not rested there, this monumental work is still regarded as the cornerstone of our knowledge on the writings of St. Francis.¹⁶

There is, we may thus conclude, on the one hand sufficient, and sufficiently reliable, source material on the life and work of St. Francis for us to form a good idea of the world in which he lived, and of his dealings and his beliefs and, on the other, ample scope for lively Franciscan exegesis. For this article I have only made use of printed editions.

Let us turn, then, to what we know of St. Francis' dealings with nature, first considering the saint's own words on the matter.¹⁷

13 L. Wadding *Annales Minorum*. Lyon 1625-1654 (8 vols), Roma 1731-1745 (19 vols).

14 *Seraphicae Textus Originales*. Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1897/1904. The Quaracchi edition does not contain the Canticle of the Creatures, however. Although the editors do not hold its authenticity in doubt, they include only writings in Latin.

15 Kajetan Esser OFM (1976), *Die Opuskula des Hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, Neue textkritische Edition, Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, Grottaferrata, Romae.

16 See, for example, *Francis and Clare. The Complete Works* (1982) and the Dutch publication *De geschriften van Francis van Assisi*, both cited in note 7 and based on Esser's work. The Dutch edition is supplemented with the *Hymn for Poor Women*, a text discovered in 1976.

17 One of the few studies dealing specifically with St. Francis in relation to natural history and written, moreover, by a person versed in biology as well as theology and history, is Armstrong's *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic* (cf. note 6). Regrettably, he does not discuss St. Francis' own works, nor the question of why these works are so sparse in their reference to nature, and the biographies so rich.

The writings of Francis

Sabatier observes in his biography that “The writings of Saint Francis of Assisi constitute the best source for learning about the saint”.¹⁸ If our knowledge had been limited to the thirty-plus texts¹⁹ adjudged authentic since Esser, however, I doubt whether Francis would ever have come to be associated with ecology, with nature or even with animals. For on these topics the saint writes all but nothing, and in the indexes to these writings all conceivably pertinent entries are entirely lacking.

There is, of course, little point in looking for the words ‘ecology’ or ‘environment’ in these writings, for these are relatively modern terms that have been used in the current sense since only the mid-19th century (ecology) and mid-20th century (environment).²⁰ Neither should the absence of the abstract concept ‘nature’ surprise us. Francis was not a writer of philosophical treatises, but of religious texts that speak of the manifestations of God’s creation *in concreto*.²¹ In his writings it is therefore references to plants, animals, landscapes, mountains, heavenly bodies, clouds, fire and so on that we should seek, considering what Francis had to note, or have noted, on these matters. Surprisingly enough, these terms are likewise absent in the relevant indexes, although there are certainly references in the text.²² I therefore pursued the matter myself, and the results are shown below in tabular form. Table 1 lists Francis’ ‘own’ writings, Table 2 the sources he quotes.

Table 1

Writing	Entity/ organism	Scope of the text
Earlier Rule (1221)	stones	money no more valuable than dust
	animals	prohibition on keeping animals
Later Rule (1223)	horses	prohibition on riding horses

18 P. Sabatier (1894), *Vie de saint François d’Assise*, Paris, édition définitive, Paris 1931, p.xxxvi; own translation.

19 Esser included a total of 35 works: 27 standard *Opuscula* and 8 dictated, the *Opuscula dictata*.

20 The German biologist Ernst Haeckel introduced the term *oekologie* in 1866 in his *Generelle Morphologie*, describing it as the science concerned with the relationship between organisms and their environment. It was only in the 1960s that the term ‘environment’ (Dutch: *milieu*), originally used solely in reference to the social environment (which is still the case with the French word *milieu*), came to be employed for the total *physical* environment of man and beast. The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed., s.v. *environment*) reflects the same history in its description: “esp. The conditions under which any person lives or is developed; The sum-total of influences which modify and determine the development of life or character, first attestation 1827 (Thomas Carlyle)”. See e.g. David Pepper (1996), *Modern Environmentalism. An Introduction*, Routledge, London.

21 Cf. the Old Testament, which on this point is in stark contrast to classical Greek philosophical texts; see J.J. Boersema (2001), *Torah and the Stoics on Man and Nature*, Brill, Leiden.

22 See M. Habig, 1973, pp. 1763-1780; K. Esser, 1976, pp. 477-485. The Dutch editions (Gottmer, Haarlem, 1976/1982, 196-210 and 230-236) includes only ‘creatures’, ‘flowers’, ‘Lamb (of God)’ and ‘worm’, reflecting not only on Francis but also on the editor.

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Admonitions True and Perfect Joy	creatures icicles, cold	creatures serve God better than man unwavering endurance in winter is real joy
Salutation of the Virtues Canticle of the Creatures (C. of the Sun)	wild animals sun, moon, wind, air, clouds, water, fire, earth, flowers, herbs, death	saint inferior to wild animals? the whole of creation must praise God; natural elements are called brother and sister.

All Francis' references to plants or animals are from biblical sources, as indicated in the table (RSV edition).

Table 2

Writing	Entity/ organism	Scope of the text
Earlier Rule (1221)	doves, snakes	shrewd as snakes, innocent as doves: Matt 10:16
Admonitions	thorns tree worm	parables of the sower, e.g. Matt 13:19-23 tree of knowledge of good and evil: Gen 2 a worm and not a man: Ps 22:7 body eaten by worms: Acts 12:23
Psalm VI	dogs, lion	the unrighteous as dogs, a roaring lion: Ps 22:17,22
Psalm XIV	creatures of the sea	God to be praised by heaven, earth and the creatures of the sea: Ps. 69:35
Various works	sheep lamb (of God)	a good shepherd cares for his flock: e.g. John 10 e.g. Revelations

What conclusions can be drawn from this review? To what extent does it reflect Francis' attitude towards nature? Let us look more closely at the individual references.

In the *Earlier Rule* (chapter 8) Francis writes that no brother may be in possession of coins or other money, nor accept any, whether in person or by proxy. Deviation from the rule is permitted only in a true emergency, if a brother is ill, for "We should have no more use or regard for money in any of its forms than for dust. Those who think it is worth more or who are greedy for it, expose themselves to the danger of being deceived by the devil". From this passage it is difficult to derive any opinion as to dust being part of nature; it is merely serving as a comparison, to warn against attaching undue value to money.

The *Earlier Rule* (15,1) explicitly prohibits the keeping of animals. Although phrased in general terms, the most obvious reference is to livestock like horses and cattle. The rule may also be associated with the Fourth Lateran Council's

recent decree (1215) prohibiting the keeping of dogs and falcons. It is also likely that keeping animals was considered synonymous with ownership, and that this was the reason why such was taboo for members of the order. The ban on horse-riding, in both the *Earlier* (15,2) and *Later Rule* (3,12), most probably has a similar background. Horse-riding was traditionally the prerogative of the noble and the rich; the poor went by foot, or at best on an ass. For the Franciscan community, poverty and humility were the ultimate ideal. No negative feelings towards animals in general, or horses in particular, can be concluded from these words, nor can any 'animal-loving' sentiments or beliefs. This is simply not the issue.

The *Admonitions* (5,2) include an exhortation to guard against arrogance. Although man and woman were created in God's image, "yet every creature under heaven serves and acknowledges and obeys its Creator in its own way better than you do". In this passage, too, the focus is on humans, with other creatures serving as a mirror for comparison, even though a positive one. Once again the issue is humility, a pivotal Franciscan theme.

The treatise *True and Perfect Joy* contains an especially vivid description of the rigours of winter.²³ It seeks an answer to the question of what constitutes real joy. Not the prospect of all the professors of Paris or the kings of France and England joining the order. Nor even that of all the faithless being converted by the friars or of Francis curing the sick and performing all manner of miracles. No everyday occurrences, these, and the reader grows all the more curious as to what 'true and perfect joy' might be. Well, says St. Francis, apparently trawling his memory, I once journeyed here from Perugia in the middle of the night and knocked on the friary gate to be let in. The road is muddy, it is freezing cold and the icicles on my habit are lacerating my legs until they bleed. Thrice I ask to be let in, but each time I am turned away, even when I appeal to the love of God. Quite a plight indeed but, says St. Francis, "if we bear it patiently and take the insults with joy and love in our hearts, oh, brother Leo, write that that is perfect joy!" This not only reflects a scarcely conceivable fascination with suffering and endurance, it may be remarked, but also a notion of joy at apparent odds with the joy engendered in heaven according to the Gospel of Luke (15:7), when not the whole world or the kings of England and France, but merely one sinner repents. All the clearer is the cameo of the deprivations suffered by medieval travellers during the winter, although these are probably exaggerated somewhat in order to bolster up the moral of the story. The story is most likely fiction, for in reality Francis received most of the time a warm welcome wherever he went. Aside from the *Canticum of the Creatures*, this is the only passage in the work of St. Francis in which nature itself is described evocatively. However, this is not in order to preach about the nat-

²³ In the treatise, Brother Leo is relating a story about Francis. The same tale is told in the *Fioretti*. It was probably dictated by Francis to his secretary, who then recorded and possibly elaborated on it. Esser consequently includes it with the 8 *dictata* (Esser, *Die Opuscula*, pp. 459-461).

ural world, but again with a view to explaining his religious convictions to the reader: here, as to the true joy to be found in enduring such gruelling circumstances in resignation, when treated so inhumanely and in such unchristian fashion, and that by his brothers.

The *Salutation of the Virtues* concludes with Francis' thoughts on the virtue of obedience. The person who possesses her "is subject to all persons in the world and not to man only, but even to all beasts and wild animals, so that they do whatever they want with him, inasmuch as it has been given to them from above by the Lord". This virtue of obedience is grand in scope, indeed, transgressing even the species boundary. But is it to be deemed a celebration of the "equality of all creatures" as posited by White? I think not, for there is here no equality envisaged, no democracy, but rather a reversal of perspective whereby humans are taught obedience to the wild beasts (assuming the animals will not hurl themselves immediately on the obedient person) instead of imposing their will on these creatures. Francis is employing a hyperbole, I feel, with obedience to the wild animals standing as an illustration of how far a true man of God should go in pursuit of the virtue of obedience. In the biographies of St. Francis there is perhaps a parallel to be found in the scene towards the end of his life when, ill and almost blind in his cell, he is literally overrun by mice and, according to legend at any rate, suffers his plight in silent resignation.²⁴ As this article proposes to show, what we read here of Francis' attitude towards mice is not characteristic of his active dealings with animals. In the legends, it is God's creatures that obey St. Francis rather than vice versa.

Let us turn, finally, to the *Canticle of the Creatures*, undoubtedly the most renowned, cited and studied of all St. Francis' works. The *Canticle* has a cosmic dimension, with "Brother sun, fire and wind, and Sister moon, water and earth", heaven and earth being exhorted to sing God's praise. In conclusion, even Sister Death is likewise exhorted. There is an ambiguity in the text, however. Since the Italian preposition *per* can mean both 'for' and 'by', it is not immediately clear whether God is to be praised 'by' the creation, or that we are to praise Him 'for' it. To my mind the arguments for the 'by' reading are utterly convincing. In the first place, the *Canticle* echoes a number of biblical texts, such as Psalm 19, which likewise describe the heavens and the firmament praising the Lord. The notion that the whole of creation should glorify and serve God is, moreover, a common theme of the writings of St. Francis. Examples include the aforementioned passage from the *Admonitions* (5,2) and his *Psalm XIV* (6), in which St. Francis cites the biblical Psalm 69:35 "Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and everything that moves therein". This is also the reading followed by his biographers. Thomas of Celano (*Vita Secunda*, 217)

²⁴ *Speculum Perfectionis*, 100. The narrative bears some resemblance to the tale of Job. God allows the mice into the cell and while Francis is kept even from praying and eating, he regards it as a temptation by the devil and consequently, and in contrast to the biblical Job, does not rise up in protest.

reminds us that in a hymn composed on an earlier occasion (the reference is to the *Canticle of the Creatures*), St. Francis had called on all creatures to praise God and exhorted them to love Him. The theme of praise *by* all creatures is thus both 'Franciscan' and entirely biblical.²⁵

This is not to deny that God is to be praised *for* His creation, however. That the workings of the heavenly bodies and the elements are to be praised, and the Creator exalted for His gift of creation to mankind, also fully accords with the Genesis creation narrative. In the first creation story, the heavenly bodies are described as lights in the firmament, lights which are themselves not divine, but part of the Lord's work of creation. This functional motif is also found explicitly in connection with the *Canticle of the Creatures* in *Speculum Perfectionis*, where it has an unambiguous though indirect human focus: "For every creature proclaims, 'God made me for your sake, O man'"²⁶ This is not the kind of remark one would expect from the St. Francis posited by White and others. In the modern literature on the saint this passage is quoted remarkably rarely.

Edward Armstrong notes, quite rightly, that the dual connotation of 'per' does not necessarily imply a division of meaning and that the two connotations should certainly not be opposed to one another as an exercise in academic hair-splitting.²⁷

The engagement of the whole of creation in praising the Lord and the fraternal charity of St. Francis towards all creatures and natural phenomena, earthly and heavenly, are reflected nowhere more strongly than in the *Canticle*, the original melody of which has unfortunately not been preserved. We have here a religious conception of universal brotherhood and solidarity, with the whole of creation being addressed in a liturgical homily and called upon to fulfil its appointed task: to praise, glorify and give thanks to God. While this notion of fraternity and the emphasis on praise are indeed characteristic of St. Francis, they do not constitute a specifically 'Franciscan', let alone unorthodox creed.

A second point to be considered in reference to the *Canticle of the Creatures* is the question of whether we have here sufficient grounds, particularly in St. Francis' use of the terms brother and sister, for presuming White's supposed "equality of all creatures". This is not the case, I suggest, as the quotation from *Speculum* indeed already illustrates. The *motif* here is solidarity and communion rather than equality. That it was St. Francis' wont to address non-

25 The notion of direct contact (in the form of praise or a covenant) between God(s) and non-human creatures, with no involvement by man, is not encountered in classical Greek philosophy or religion; see J.J. Boersema, *op cit.*, pp. 172, 209; W. Burkert (1985), *Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

26 *Speculum Perfectionis*, 118. Quotation from Habig, *Omnibus*, p. 1257.

27 E.A. Armstrong, *op cit.*, p. 230.

human creatures as brother and sister is no reason for postulating an ideal of equality.²⁸ In the *Canticle of the Creatures* even physical death is referred to as 'sister'. It is humility and communion with God's works with which Francis' whole being is infused. There is little that points to him placing non-human nature on an equal footing with man. He was, indeed, most certainly convinced of the unique status of humans among God's works, as illustrated below by a number of 'legends'.

The references in the second table add little to this basic vignette. St. Francis is to be situated fairly and squarely within a biblical context, in which plants and animals fulfil a metaphorical role. Certain allusions recur several times in his writings. He likes the image of the good shepherd and his flock, and the lamb of God is another image used in several of his works. The inference, I would say, is that St. Francis held the qualities of pastoral care, innocence and patient endurance in high esteem. There are here no grounds for concluding that St. Francis possessed a unique outlook on nature, though, nor for supposing any radical departure from allegory, as White suggests. As an illustration, the reference to dogs and a lion in St. Francis' *Psalm VI* is from the biblical Psalm 22, where the wicked men around the psalmist are likened to dogs and their mouths to the jaws of a lion ravishing its prey. Over the ages, certain traits in these animals' behaviour have evidently served as popular metaphors. But, equally evidently, such imagery says more about the wicked and the distress felt by the poet than about the natural world. In the context of the present discussion, then, these passages hold little relevance. The metaphor employed by St. Francis does not exemplify his attitude towards dogs or lions and if we are to draw any conclusions regarding the animals themselves, in this case they would not be particularly positive.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn is indeed that, in terms of both the creatures and aspects referred to and the substance of the references, nature as such is not a particularly prominent motif in the writings of St. Francis. This is reflected not only in the review of references in the two tables above. Reading through the saint's own works, on no occasion does one have the impression that Francis is concerned specifically with nature, that he has some unique relationship with the natural world or advocates some specific attitude towards nature. To the extent that Francis alludes to animals, plants or natural phenomena, it is to illustrate the human lessons to be learned from them, or to exhort the whole of creation to praise their maker. In this he is not adopting an unorthodox stance, but stands entirely within the biblical tradition.

28 Conveniently overlooking 'Sister Death', it has also been concluded from the 'fact' that Francis mentions three male and three female elements that he was advocating equality and complementarity of the sexes. This is then held to stand over and against Francis' 'misogynist' leanings, expressed, *inter alia*, in 2 *Celano* 114 (the female of the species as "an object of dread and horror"). Armstrong holds, probably correctly, that the source here is not Francis but Celano himself (E.A. Armstrong, *op cit.*, p.231).

In his writings St. Francis is concerned with following in the steps of Christ.²⁹ It was Francis' deliberate choice to live a life of poverty, and in his day he was known as *Il Poverello*. He preached humility and taught the whole of creation of its duty to praise and glorify its maker. What he did *not* preach, though, was the equality of all creatures, let alone some form of 'ecocentrism'. What does emerge from the *Canticle of the Creatures* is a profound sense of solidarity and communion with the whole of creation.

The works of St. Francis

St. Francis was an exceptionally charismatic figure. His whole appearance, his mode of speech and his deeds must have made a profound impression on his contemporaries and followers. Even today, after Jesus and his mother Mary, he is still the most venerated figure in the Christian church.³⁰ His voluntary poverty, the powers he possessed, the authority of his words and the many wonders he performed made him a legend of his time.³¹ His conduct towards nature in general, and animals in particular, was certainly an important part of all this. The reticence of Francis' own writings with regard to nature is matched only by the exuberance of his biographers on this point, and the stories and legends concerning his dealings with animals, as in the 'Sermon to the birds', for example, soon became a source of inspiration for painters throughout Europe.³²

What picture of Francis and his dealings with nature emerges from the biographies, or 'legends'? It is beyond the scope of the present article to cite individually all those passages containing references to animals, plants and so on, let alone discuss them. I shall therefore apply broad brush strokes in filling in my outline of St. Francis, adding illustrative examples as appropriate and duly addressing the suggestions made by White in his article.

29 Nolthenius is very outspoken on this point: "Francis chose to be poor for the sake of Christ and chose for the poor because he saw Christ in them", (Nolthenius, 1988, p. 236 translation JJB).

30 The (Catholic) church's procedure for canonisation has been in place since the tenth century. Prior to that, a tradition that began with the New Testament, the desert fathers and the Christian church's first martyrs, it was through 'public opinion' that a person was deemed a saint. An important condition was evidence of a miracle. An official *Vita* is part of the canonisation. It is remarkable that with Francis, his biography (Celano I) was completed after his canonisation (see A.H. Bredero, 2000, pp. 261-294). Canonisation does not make of a person a saint but, according to *Catholic Online Saints* (www.catholic.org/saints), simply recognises "what God already has done". Francis became a saint soon after his death in 1226: on July 16, 1228, he was canonised by Pope Gregory IX.

31 Comparing Francis with other 13th-century saints, Hélène Nolthenius refers to him as 'Santissimo Francesco' (H. Nolthenius, *Duecento, zwerftocht door Italië's late Middeleeuwen*. Het Spectrum, Utrecht/Antwerp, 1977, p. 110).

32 The best known works are the frescos in the nave of the upper church of St. Francesco te Assisi, attributed to Giotto, and of Cimabue in the lower church. Armstrong (1973, p. 148 *et seq.*) cites seven other representations of the Sermon to the Birds, including an English drawing dating from 1244.

The first thing to strike one is the vast number of stories that have been handed down to us. Although such legends are associated with a great many saints, never have they been as numerous or varied as in the case of Francis. There are narratives involving just about every class of the animal kingdom, and a sizeable selection of Umbria's fauna makes an appearance in the tales told.³³ It is entirely probable, however, that certain stories originating elsewhere also later came to be attributed to Francis because of his acclaim as a saint.³⁴ Although this may account for the sheer number of stories and their enormous variety, it does not explain why they should be ascribed precisely to Francis, however. The most logical conclusion to be drawn is that in his case there must have been a remarkable affinity with nature. In the light of his own writings, the question is then how the presumed affinity is to be interpreted.

The second point to be considered is the *nature* of the stories. In the legends of the saints, reference to their dealings with animals is common, but according to White this is always "to show their human dominance over creatures"; "with Francis it is different", however, he continues. With the Irish saints, in particular, there is said to be a relationship of inequality, which Francis endeavours to replace by "the equality of all creatures". On this crucial point White is in complete error, I hold. In the first place the suggestion that other saints were concerned with demonstrating their 'dominance' over their fellow creatures is simply untenable, a suggestion that for White also has a clearly negative undertone. Secondly, the assumed contrast between Francis and the other saints is counterfactual. There are, precisely, surprisingly many points of convergence in the legends of other saints and the accounts we have of Francis' life. What, then, can be deduced from these narratives?³⁵

33 Armstrong (*op cit.*) has drawn up a fairly complete list, with species from most zoological classes (of the vertebrates: mammals, birds, reptiles and fishes; of the invertebrates: molluscs and insects).

34 Besides the more general motifs discernible in the miracle stories and elaborated in countless variations, there is a discernible influence by Irish and English saints such as the Bishop of Lindisfarne, St. Cuthbert (ca 635-687), who had a reputation as a 'friend of the animals'. See R.H. Bremner (1990), Two Early Vernacular Names for the *Aves Beati Cuthberti*, English Studies, 71, pp. 486-495.

35 The most extensive hagiographic oeuvre is that of the 'Bollandists', started by Johannes Bolland in 1643 and finally completed in 1925, *Acta Sanctorum*, 64 Vols., Antwerp; see also Butler's *Lives of the Saints* (1756-59/1985), Concise Edition, edited by Michael Walsh, Harper & Row, San Francisco/New York; W.E.H. Lecky (1877), *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 3rd ed., Longmans Green and Co., London; Charles Plummer (1910), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 Vols., Oxford; H. Waddell (1934), *Beasts and Saints*, Constable and Company, London; C.G. Loomis (1948), *White Magic. An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend.*, The Mediaeval Academy of America, Cambridge, Mass. pp. 58-70; Three encyclopaedia are to be mentioned: D. Attwater (1965), *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England; D. Hughes Farmer (1987), *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York and finally, Stijn van der Linden's Encyclopaedia *De Heiligen* with over 9000 short biographies of saints and published in 1999 by Contact, Amsterdam; W.J. Short (1988), Hagiographical Method in reading Franciscan Sources. Stories of Francis and Creatures in Thomas of Celano's 'Vita Prima' (21:58-61). *Laurentianum*, 29, 462-495; *De Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (Woestijn, begeerte en geloof) translated from the Greek and elucidated by P.W. van der Horst, Kok, Kampen, 1995; L.

A defining feature of the Christian saints is the special relationship in which they stand vis-à-vis their maker. In a sense they stand between God and 'mere mortals' and are blessed with unusual powers. Consequently, they are able to live a life that accords with the Gospels, a life 'in the footsteps of Christ'. Many saints were able to endure their suffering in submission, like Christ, and on their hands and feet several of them even bore stigmata – marks resembling the wounds on Christ's crucified body – and at times the miracle stories told of them echo the events recorded in the Gospels remarkably closely. Merely by touching a saint's cloak the sick and lame are said to be cured, and on occasion 'multiplication' of food is even performed. This *imitatio Christi* is indeed their explicit aim and in this respect Francis is unparalleled.

A large proportion of the miracle stories attributed to the saints relate to wonders performed on the natural world, a tradition founded by the Desert Fathers.³⁶ The desert setting is generally described as representing a rejection of urban life and the corruption associated with human society, with all its temptations and wealth, and an affirmation of a life of simplicity, detachment and contemplation.³⁷ In a sense, though, the self-imposed exile in the desert can just as well be taken as a conscious choice *pro* nature, in this case the wilderness. By withdrawing into such a barren, gruelling place, they demonstrated their ability, in part at least, to heal the divide between humanity and nature and restore the original relationship of harmony. Here too, however, there may be biblical motives at work and a desire to follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist and Christ. At the beginning of Mark's gospel (1:9-13) it is related how Jesus, after being baptised by John, is tempted in the wilderness by Satan for forty days. "And he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him," so ends Mark's pericope. The Greek for 'with the wild beasts' implies that Jesus was 'with the animals' as one is 'with friends' and not merely in an area also inhabited by wild beasts.³⁸ This preparation for His earthly work links Jesus to Moses and Elijah, the two major prophets of the Old Tes-

Jongen (1998), *Heiligenlevens in Nederland en Vlaanderen*, Bert Bakker, Amsterdam; *The Desert Fathers* (sections of *Vitae Patrum* compiled and published in Antwerp in 1628 by H. Rosweyde), translation from the Latin by Helen Waddell with a Preface by Basil Pennington, Vintage Spiritual Classics, Vintage Books / Random House, New York, 1998.

36 Helen Waddell (*The Desert Fathers*, *op cit.*, p. xxv) defines this era as starting in 150 BC (the Qûmran community) and concluding in 400 AD. The latter date is rather arbitrary. The Edict of Milan (313 AD) marks a growing incidence of Christian recluses and the foundation of monasteries in remote desert regions. With the advent of the Islamitic era in the 8th century a decline sets in (P.R. Anson 1973, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, SPCK, London; A. Jones 1985, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality*, Harper and Row, San Francisco; K.J.H. Vriezen, *Vroeg christelijk kloosterleven in de woestijn van Judea*. In: G.C. den Hertog & H.M. van der Vergt eds. 1996, *Woestijn en openbaring. Bijbelse wortels, Joodse en christelijke interpretaties*, Kok, Kampen, pp. 89-110).

37 H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, *op cit.*, pp. 3-29; G.C. den Hertog & H.M. van der Vergt (eds.), *op cit.*, pp. 89-115; Susan Power Bratton (1988), *The Original Desert Solitaire: Early Christian Monasticism and Wilderness*, *Environmental Ethics*, 10, pp. 31-53.

38 Cf. W.A. Schulze (1955), *Die Heiligen und die Wilde Tiere. Zur Exegese von Mc 1:13b*, *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentische Wissenschaft* 46, pp. 280-283.

tament.³⁹ Both these prophets sojourned in the desert and it was there that they were instructed to lead (Moses) or continue to lead (Elijah) the people of Israel.⁴⁰ In a sense, the great leaders of the people of Israel, with Moses representing the Torah and Elijah the Prophets, and the two consequently representing the OT as a whole, prove themselves more powerful than the wilderness. They defy the desert, that symbol of the forces in God's creation that are hostile to humanity and the dwelling-place of devils and demons. It is for this reason that they do not die as normal mortals. At the time of his death, the power of Moses remains unbroken. His grave was never found and he was buried by God himself. Elijah is 'taken up' after his death, and Jesus is resurrected. In terms of the New Testament narrative, Jesus conquers death once and for all. For this and for other reasons, he is seen as completing the unfinished work of his two predecessors.

Elsewhere in the New Testament we also find the notion that by 'defying' nature, saints stand at one remove from other men, the most familiar tale being that of the apostle Paul's visit to Malta. Having been shipwrecked on this island, the ship's crew are warming themselves around a fire when Paul is bitten by an adder that appears from the firewood. The local inhabitants take him for a common criminal, viewing the snake's bite as a punishment by the gods. Paul shakes off the adder, however, and when after some time nothing untoward has occurred, "they changed their minds and said that he was a god" (Acts 28:1-6).

One of the very ways in which saints generally stand out among other mortals is thus their 'special' relationship with the natural world. In a certain sense there is a reinstatement of the original bond between humanity and nature. Once, in the primeval paradise, there was still a harmony, with man holding a natural authority over the animals. That authority was not associated with exploitation, but was exercised in an atmosphere of mutual consent. With the Fall and expulsion from paradise all this changed, and as a result nature was also imbued with 'hostile' characteristics, not only with regard to humans, but also for God's creatures themselves, as it were. From this perspective, phenomena and behaviour we are accustomed to term 'natural' – as when a predator kills and devours its prey – were regarded as signs of moral decay. While the fall from paradise encompasses the whole of nature, in the legends it is the animals that bear the brunt, being addressed and treated as subjects bearing individual responsibility. The longing for restoration of the original harmony, and the idea that such is indeed possible, have been part and par-

39 The link is also reflected in the meeting Jesus is said to have had with Moses and Elijah according to the Gospel of Matthew (17:3).

40 Moses: Exod 3:1-22; Elijah: 1 Kgs 19. In both narratives there is a mountain of God (Horeb) and in the story of Elijah the period of forty days and forty nights is the same as in Mark's pericope. In his wanderings in the desert Moses likewise spends forty days and forty nights on Mount Horeb (Exod 24:18).

cel of the Christian tradition from its very birth.⁴¹

It is against this background that the acts of the saints should be viewed. It was not 'for their own sake' that wonders were performed, and there was certainly no wish to exercise 'dominion' over nature in any negative sense. These men and women sought to restore the original harmony of God's creation, thus showing how it had been intended. There is a distinctly moral message in their works: they reprimand humans and beasts and do so with such authority that even the wild animals obey and refrain from immoral conduct. These kind of stories appeal hugely to our imagination. Of the Egyptian desert monk Benus (or Abba Bes), who is said to have lived in the 3rd century AD, it is written that peasants asked him to do something about a hippopotamus that was ravaging their fields. The saint went to the scene of the devastation, saw the animal and commanded it to desist in the name of Jesus Christ. The animal obeyed forthwith, as did a crocodile addressed by the monk in similar fashion.⁴²

St. Anthony, a contemporary of Benus, once had to bury a body in the desert, but was without a spade. Two lions approach him, apparently in search of a meal, but – after a prayer – Anthony looks them in the eye, unflinchingly, as if they were doves. The lions come over to the corpse and begin to howl, apparently in mourning. With their sturdy paws they then proceed to dig a grave and when the work is done they lick St. Anthony's hands and feet. The saint, in turn, sees they wish to be blessed by him, and he praises the Lord for the fact that even these animals let it be known that God exists on high. He asks the Lord to give the blessing and then instructs the animals to leave so he can lay the body to rest.⁴³

St. Cuthbert, the English Bishop of Lindisfarne, is said to have once given two ravens a severe reprimand for not heeding his request to stop ravaging the straw roof of the guesthouse. The ravens obeyed and after three days one returned to make clear to the bishop that they regretted what they had done and were ready to pay penance. Cuthbert allowed them to return and the ravens brought back a piece of lard with which guests might polish their shoes.⁴⁴

Amandus, the apostle of Flanders (ca. 594-675), grew up in a Benedictine abbey on the island of Yeu, off the coast of Aquitaine. The island was plagued by a dragon that consumed men, eating them every scrap, and the monks scarcely dared leave the abbey. Amandus was searching the island one day when suddenly the dragon appeared, spitting fire. He made the sign of the

41 See, for example, the Church Father Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* V, 33, 3-4. This was a strong belief of Luther's, too; cf. J. Pelikan (1961), *Cosmos and Creation: Science and Technology in Reformation Thought. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 105, 5, pp. 464-469.

42 H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers, op cit.*, pp. 50,51. The legend is also related in *Woestijn, begeerte en geloof, op cit.*, p. 49, where Benus is called Abba Bes.

43 *Op cit.*, p. 43.

44 H. Waddell, *Beasts and Saints, op cit.*, pp. 62-67. R.H. Bremmer, *op cit.*, p. 486.

cross and prayed fervently to God and the dragon retreated with its tail between its legs, never to be seen again.⁴⁵

That powers of this kind are to be encountered not only among men of God is proved by St. Gertrude of Nivelles, the patron saint of travellers (628-659). A woman of letters, she once sent envoys to Rome and Ireland to fetch some biblical commentaries. On one of these expeditions the ship was attacked by a sea monster. The envoys prayed to Gertrude, for she had promised them a safe passage. Scarcely had they ended their invocation when the sea monster disappeared and the sea fell calm once more.⁴⁶

One characteristic motif of these examples of relevance to our investigation is the morally reprehensible conduct of the animals concerned, which is successfully 'corrected' by the saint. There are other legends in which nature is shielded from the immoral conduct of humans, but however spectacular such events may sound to us, they are nonetheless more readily conceivable.⁴⁷

St. Francis follows wholly within this tradition; in absolutely no respect does he constitute an exception. He has a natural authority over the whole of creation and employs these powers for the well-being of humanity and beast and, above all, to honour the Lord. All these elements are present in the three most familiar legends that have come down through the ages: the 'Sermon to the birds', the punishment of the sow, and the conversion of the wolf of Gubbio.

There are several versions of the 'Sermon to the birds', some of which have blended with the legend of the 'Stilling of the birds', in which Francis does not preach explicitly to the birds but asks them to be silent during his sermon to a human congregation.⁴⁸ In Celano's version, Francis even seeks out the birds when near Bevagna one day: the doves, the crows and the jackdaws. They do not fly away as they are wont to and Francis asks them to listen to his words. The saint then holds a sermon, based largely on Matthew 6, and the birds listen attentively, necks outstretched and beaks held open, after which Francis blesses them and, moved, asks himself why he has not preached to them before. Henceforth, not only all the birds of the sky, but also the reptiles and other beasts and even "creatures that have no feeling", were exhorted by Francis to praise and love their creator.⁴⁹

45 L. Jongen, *Heiligenlevens*, p. 29.

46 L. Jongen, *Heiligenlevens*, p. 36.

47 The Flemish saint Veerle, patroness of abused women (mid 7th century) was once feeding bustards in the middle of a harsh winter. When poachers succeeded in catching and consuming a bustard, St. Veerle gathered the bones, laid them in a pile and sank in prayer. And behold: the next morning the bustard was back on its feet again, cackling all the time (L. Jongen, *Heiligenlevens*, p.13). A virtually identical miracle is attributed to the English saint Cuthbert: he, too, revived a bird from its dead remains. Such 'reanimation' is a common saintly motif occurring in numerous variations (see E.A. Armstrong, *op cit.*, for an extensive review of the various motifs with reference to the legends of St. Francis).

48 Armstrong considers the 'stilling of the birds' motif to be of Irish origin because many of this country's monasteries and hermitages lie on the coast, near noisy seabirds (*op cit.*, p.76).

49 Celano, *Vita Prima* 58. In the *Omnibus*, pp. 277-279.

Celano's tale of the pig is short, but contains a salient detail: a curse. The event is said to have taken place in the monastery of St. Verecundus, where a malicious sow had killed a new born lamb with its vicious muzzle. When Francis heard of the lamb's death, he was reminded of the lamb of God and was extremely moved. Mourning for the lamb he spoke to it thus: "Alas, brother Lamb, innocent animal, you represent what is useful to all mankind! Cursed be that evil beast that killed you; let no man eat of it, or any beast either". The sow immediately fell ill and when it died several days later, its body did not serve as food for any hungry creature.⁵⁰

The legend of the wolf of Gubbio is one of a large cluster of 'wolf legends', in almost all of which the wolf figures as a symbol of evil and savagery, generally in opposition to a lamb or child, representing innocence.⁵¹ It is a tale of conversion *pur sang* about a wolf that is terrorising the entire district of Gubbio. When St. Francis encounters the wolf outside the town walls the beast approaches him, jaws wide open, ready for the attack. Francis makes the sign of the cross and commands the wolf in the name of Christ to cease its evil ways. The moment Francis makes the sign, the wolf closes its jaws, bows its head and lies down before the saint. There follows an exchange between Francis and the wolf concerning the beast's future ways. Such is the ruthlessness of your crimes, says Francis, that death is what you deserve, and the wolf signals its agreement. However, Francis wishes to make peace with this beast of prey. He tells the wolf that the citizens of Gubbio are prepared to feed it for the rest of its life if it solemnly pledges never again to cause any suffering to man or beast. Bowing its head, the wolf shows its acceptance of the proposal, but Francis wants the animal to repeat the gesture before the town's populace. And so it is, with the wolf repenting publicly in the marketplace and being converted to Christ in the presence of the entire population. The wolf lives on for another two years, receiving food as it wanders from door to door. All trace of fear is gone, no longer do the dogs bark as it passes through the town, and after its death the wolf of Gubbio is buried in consecrated ground. To the townsfolk, its endurance and peacefulness are a permanent reminder of the saintliness of Francis.⁵² The legends of St. Francis mention several conversions: elsewhere we read of three bandits, a sultan and – of course – a prostitute, but the conversion of the wolf of Gubbio leaves the deepest impression.⁵³

50 The legend is recorded in Celano's *Vita Secunda* 111. The quotation is my own translation from the *Omnibus* p. 454. Armstrong (*op cit.* p. 114) holds the view that the 'pig legend' is to be traced back to St. Cuthbert and suspects that Celano exaggerated Francis' reaction to give the tale extra moral import. While Nolthenius (*op cit.*, p. 93) gives Celano as its source, her version is slightly different: she has the event occurring in the monastery of Vallingegno and has the sow consume the lamb.

51 On the wolf motif in medieval times see: Gherardo Ortalli (1997), *Lupi genti culture. Uomo e ambiente nel medioevo*. Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino, pp. 57-154.

52 *Fioretti* 21, pp. 1348-1351 of the *Omnibus*.

53 The legend of the Sultan and the prostitute is in *Fioretti* 24, that of the conversion of the three bandits in *Fioretti* 26. An early precursor of a 'wolf conversion' tale is the legend of 'The Penitent Wolf' in H. Waddell, *Beasts and Saints*, pp. 6,7.

Francis: a synopsis

Francis was every bit a man of the Middle Ages, an era riddled with religion in which everyday life was still very much rooted in the spiritual and the supernatural. From the saint's own writings and his preaching, no real beliefs regarding the natural world can be gleaned, with the exception of the already noted communion expressed in the *Canticle of the Creatures*. In his conduct, too, he is more of a saint than a medieval 'theologian of nature'. Mysticism and spiritual rapture are the defining features of his religious fervour. He was a radical disciple of Christ, above all in his choosing a life of poverty, endurance and resignation. In his dealings and his relationship with nature, Francis follows entirely in the tradition of the early Christian saints. We see in him a longing for paradise to be restored, for man to regain his 'natural' authority over the forces of nature and over the animals and plants.⁵⁴ This relationship of authority is very much coloured by contemporaneous morals. It is 'immoral' conduct that the saints seek to correct, thus to restore the original designs of the Creator. If we are to honour St. Francis in style on the 4th of October, World Animal Day, we should therefore not only express our love of animals, but also give a bird of prey or pit bull terrier a suitably severe reprimand!

With Francis there is anything but equality among the creatures of the earth: he addresses them with authority, and they obey. He feels at one with the whole of creation, but there is an anthropocentric ring about it all. The classical, hierarchical *scala naturae*, with humans at the apex, followed first by those creatures that are of benefit to humans or tame, and then by a tapering series of other organisms, remains all too recognisable. In his words to the dead lamb, these elements are all reflected. The tame animals enjoy a clear preference, because they serve humanity, but in his praise of the Lord he is communing with the whole of creation, which is thus precisely what he summons the creation to do. Over and against White, we can say that "with Francis *nothing* is different": in absolutely no way does he deviate from our conventional image of a saint. With respect to the natural world he is also "Santissimo". The life of St. Francis is a textbook example of how the ideal relationship between humanity and nature was conceived within the classic Christian tradition.

Ecologists and nature

The traditional image of St. Francis has little in common with that of the classic ecologist. The chief differences concern the supposed moral character of the natural world. Modern scientists, among them biologists and ecologists, tend to

54 "Francis is obedient to the Creator; he is 'innocent', one in whom Paradise is restored", in the words of W.J. Short (1988, *Laurentianum*, 29, p.495). For a similar view: S. Verhey (1979), *Ursprüngliche Unschuld. Franziskus spricht mit den Vögeln und mit anderen Tieren, Wissenschaft und Weisheit*, 42, 87-106.

view nature as amoral.⁵⁵ Since Ernst Haeckel in 1866 first gave the discipline of ecology its name, this branch of biology has proceeded from the premise that nature is to be observed and studied as it presents itself to us. A scientist's ideas concerning the most desirable relationship between human beings and animals, or among animals and plants, are of no importance. What is studied is the actual relationship between organisms and their environment, no more and no less. There is no place for moral judgement, nor should there be in science. It is therefore something of an effrontery to canonise Francis as patron saint of 'these' ecologists.

Nor was this probably the intention, either. At the time White made his recommendation, ecology was already far more than just a branch of biology⁵⁶. The environmental problem had become a major public issue and was approached by many from the perspective of 'human ecology'. From being a topic of scientific study, humankind's interaction with the natural environment became a focus of ethical, normative reflection. This 'new ecology' grew into a philosophy of life, going far beyond any study of the relationship between the biological genus *Homo* in its natural surroundings. Normative elements came into play and soon took centre stage; ideotypes were formed and soon the professed aim of environmental policy was to ensure that human activity was 'ecologically compatible'. Everyone was to live 'the ecological life' and the prefix 'eco-' proved all too readily stickable.⁵⁷ In everyday parlance, 'thinking ecologically' has become a calling and a way of life.

The scientific discipline did not vanish, of course, and so the term 'ecology' became a hybrid beast with none of its former clarity. On the continent of Europe there were scientists who protested and continued doggedly to write *oecologie*/*Ökologie* when referring to the formal discipline, but it was a rear-guard action.⁵⁸ Others, particularly philosophers, took the lead in successfully

55 See e.g. S.J. Gould (1985), *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*. Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, and his *Rocks of Ages Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. Ballantine New York, 1999.

56 In the Netherlands and Germany this development was also reflected in linguistic usage. Following Ernst Haeckel, biologists in these two countries spoke of *oecologie*/*Ökologie*. 'Oecology' was first attested in English in a translation of Haeckel's work (1873), in 1879 followed by 'oekology' and in 1893 'ecology', all meaning: "The science of the economy of animals and plants; That branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life, etc. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. ecology 1; see note 18). But in the course of the 1970s the philosophical, hybrid form *ecology/ecologie* made inroads via the USA and has since then replaced the classical term *oecologie/oecology*. This change of terminology parallels a shift and hybridisation of meaning.

57 For a review of this trend, see Mohan K. Wali (1999), *Ecology Today: beyond the Bounds of Science*. *Nature and Resources*, 35/2, 38-50. Wali distinguishes eight fields of usage (ecobusiness, ecosport, ecoreligion, etc.), for each of which he gives dozens of 'eco-' terms.

58 The debate is still going on. See Robert P. McIntosh *The Myth of Community as Organism*. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 41: 426-438, 1998 esp. p.434. In a recently published textbook on Ecology the author states: "Perhaps it is surprising to you that I am separating ecology from environmentalism. Despite their almost interchangeable use by the media and in common parlance, a true distinction does exist between them. Ecology is a science; environmentalism is a concern." (M. B. Bush (1999), *Ecology of a Changing Planet*, 2nd ed., Prentice-Hall, London, p.5)

interweaving philosophical elements into the classic biological approach. Although the normative, philosophical point of departure was of primary importance, this new direction was explicitly related to and backed up by hard science, which was seen as one means of understanding the human organism on ecosystem Earth. This modern, hybrid form held great appeal for environmentalists and soon became the conventional wisdom of the green movement. It embodied a renaissance of the ancient ideal of the Greek philosophers, 'living according to nature'.⁵⁹ Human society was to remodel its ways in conformity with "the natural social order".⁶⁰ Within this overall trend, there was also scope for a new relationship between humanity and nature, with greater emphasis on mutual solidarity. Objective distance made way for subjective experience, with, at its most extreme, the claim to communication with animals and with trees.⁶¹ On this point there is a certain resonance with the world of St. Francis and a revival of elements already discernible in the earliest Christian traditions.

There is, however, a striking difference between this philosophical ecology, or 'deep ecology', and the traditional Christian outlook on nature. The former takes nature as the norm ('nature knows best'), with scientific ecology providing valuable support, by analysing nature in such a manner as to 'show us the way'. And even if there is communication with nature, the main purpose is to listen to what nature has to tell us or, at most, to 'exchange feelings'. For deep ecologists too, though, the notion of nature being immoral or of a wild boar, wolf or killer whale being addressed authoritatively and corrected by particular people is beyond the pale.⁶² This point is indeed also made by Lynn White.

In the Christian tradition ethical standards are derived from 'above', that is to say from concrete revelations of how God intended creation. Epistemologically, we are on thin ice here of course, for the existence of an 'above' and of divine revelation may also be regarded as earthly, human projections. In normative terms, modern 'eco-faiths' and religions of nature are not in fact dissimilar to classical religions of revelation, even though the former derive their ethics from the natural world and the latter from the revelations of the Bible. In a practical sense, though, there remains a world of difference. For many

59 On this point, see J.J. Boersema, *op cit.*, pp. 188-193.

60 E. Goldsmith (1996), *The Way: An Ecological World-View*. Themis Books, London, p. 62

61 When it comes to man's relationship with nature, there is a connection between participation and communication, a theme explored in Barbara Noske's fascinating study *Huilen met de wolven. Een interdisciplinaire benadering van de mens-dier relatie*, Van Gennep, Amsterdam (1998). Communication with trees, animals and so on is not one of the defining features of 'deep ecology', however. See, for example, W. Zweers (2000), *Participation with Nature*, J. van Arkel, Utrecht, p. 150 *et seq.*

62 It may be queried, though, how much longer the characterisation of nature as wholly amoral will hold up. In California 'animal jurisdiction' was recently reintroduced in response to the (evidently morally and legally reprehensible) conduct of aggressive dogs. Previously, the dog's owner was held legally responsible. In scientific circles, too, there is a debate emerging on (the) morality of and in nature. See, for example, Frans de Waal (1996), *Good Natured. The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and other Animals*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.

Christians, this earthly life is not the ultimate measure of all things, for it is their conviction that this world has been corrupted by the Fall and must also be redeemed.

With the Enlightenment, the notion that particular mortals can restore the original harmony with nature rapidly lost currency with Christians, too. Latter-day saints are still held to perform miracles – it is indeed a precondition for canonisation – but in their legends there is no mention of wolves, snakes or killer whales being converted.

In conclusion, the attitude of St. Francis towards nature is not only worlds apart from the outlook of traditional ecologists, but also very different from that of deep ecologists. For ecologists of whatever variety, then, Francis is not an appropriate patron.

Francis as the patron saint of environmental scientists?

Although Francis may perhaps not be a suitable patron for ecologists, this is certainly not to say that he now lacks all relevance for us today in this area. It is on this note, then, that I give three final thoughts on which to reflect.

In the first place, the question arises whether St. Francis has not acquired a cultural significance all of his own, now far divorced from the historical figure, and if so, whether there is in fact anything wrong with this. For postmodernists this is a non-issue: in their analysis, there is no such thing as *the* (historical) truth, and all that remains, and indeed matters, is the ‘constructed’ truth. Everyone creates their own image, their own representation, of the figure of Francis and this then serves as their ‘truth’ about the historical person. A weaker variant of this position is that while there may exist a truth about Francis, we should abandon all pretence of ever being able to lay it bare. All representation is subjective, and necessarily so. On those living such a perspective, any attempt to let ‘the real St. Francis’ speak, will obviously make little impression, for all that matters is their ‘own’ (representation of) St. Francis and the inspiration it gives them. It is a position that is to be contested, while at the same time meriting a certain respect.

It is to be contested, I hold, because excessive relativism and subjectivism ultimately spell the death of serious historical research and smother healthy endeavours to confront one’s own beliefs with the facts, to actively seek out those facts, and thus make progress. Causality and falsification will always remain extremely problematical, and possibly wholly nebulous, aspects of historical reconstruction, but this does not mean that no progression can be discerned, nor that all interpretations are equally tenable.

At the same time it is a position that commands respect, because permanent scepticism vis-à-vis historical ‘truth’ is always healthy. Anyone undertaking a serious comparison of the images of Christ and of St. Francis held in the minds of believers and non-believers is more than likely to discern many similarities

in the degree of *différence*. In this sense, the quest for a reliable historical representation is legitimate, but any pretence of having finally found such a beast is, to my mind, dangerous.

My second remark brings us back a little closer to the historical figure of St. Francis and more specifically to his ideal of poverty. His rigorous pursuance of this virtue in all likelihood caused him and his order far more trouble than his dealings with nature or his presumed beliefs regarding the equality of all beings. The medieval church was well-endowed, and although comparisons about wealth in different periods are not easy to substantiate, we may safely assume that the societal chasm between wealthy rich people and the poor majority was far greater than in the contemporary West. White's characterisation of Francis as 'clearly heretical' is certainly defensible, but not in the form of theological deviance. The reason undoubtedly lies more in his relentless offensive against material wealth and thus, implicitly, against the opulence of the ecclesiastical and worldly leaders of his day than in his 'ecological', 'animal-loving' beliefs. This immediately recommends him as the patron saint of environmental scientists, for the relevance of Francis' plea for material poverty to the contemporary environmental issue is evident – all the more because the ideal was accompanied by a call to practise simple handicrafts.⁶³ There is a substantial correlation between our material prosperity and pressure on the environment. For good reason, the Dutch environmental economists Goudzwaard and De Lange advocate greater austerity and 'an economy of sufficiency'. That Francis can here readily serve as a source of inspiration is historically defensible. However, it is to be queried whether (his) 'poverty' does not go far beyond prudent austerity and whether observance of the Franciscan ideal would not cause us serious problems – and not only because of the highly negative connotation of 'austerity' in our progress-oriented culture, and the resistance that any appeal to 'sufficiency' will engender in a society geared to material growth. I also fear that it would have unwanted and very adverse (side-)effects, for if there is no change in the structure of our economy, self-imposed poverty or austerity on any major scale will give rise to far more than a reduction in the pressure on (non-renewable) energy and raw materials. In all likelihood, it will also impede the evolution of society in a broad sense, for improvements in education, health care, science and the arts appear only to be feasible in a climate of economic growth. Too forceful a plea for austerity may lead to social and cultural stagnation or even regression. An incentive for

63 It is no coincidence that the cover of Hansen's book (*Saint Francis of Assisi: Patron of the Environment*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1971) shows a photo of two Amish farmers. Hansen apparently sees these American Mennonites (from German/Swiss origin), with their austere and spiritual lifestyle, as heirs to the Franciscan heritage.

change and innovation is lacking; there is no challenge.⁶⁴ At the same time, this is precisely what is required from the perspective of nature and the environment. Which brings me to my third and final point.

It is absolutely essential for the human race to develop a new and sustainable relationship with the natural environment, characterised by considerably less pollution, resource depletion and loss of natural values, to be achieved through a switch to renewable energy sources, alternative raw materials and wiser use of physical space. This will probably also require a different kind of economy, rooted less in material throughput (amount of material circulating in the economy per unit of time or place). In theory such an economy is feasible. By making wise use of direct and indirect solar energy, an 'ecological economy' can also grow. A number of interesting initiatives have indeed been taken in this direction, in both the technological and organisational realm.⁶⁵ Whatever the case, a change is also required at the deeper level of our *Weltanschauung*. Reduced to its essence, the 'quality of life' we are after should be sought more in activities requiring less energy, nature and raw materials: not so much in pursuance of an ideal of poverty, but ultimately because we sincerely experience that this leads to greater quality. That quality must be derived less from matters (goods and services) embodying high environmental pressure and more from activities having little impact on the environment and nature. Such activities do not necessarily have to be purely 'spiritual'; there are numerous more homely alternatives. Nature should be valued more as a defining factor of our well-being. More music and less Formula 1, an inspiring work of art in the garden instead of a new kitchen suite. Rather than going to the tropical swimming pool, have a conjuror come to the children's party, things like that. Instead of speeding down a dry ski slope with a group of friends, join the amateur theatre group or enjoy a good glass of wine.

All too clearly, these are endeavours in which St. Francis may serve as a source of inspiration, albeit from afar. From his insanely austere lifestyle he derived a high quality of life. His asceticism was no doubt one of the reasons for his balance and reintegration. Rather than giving rise to ridicule or pity, the material 'sacrifices' he made gave Francis' life splendour and appeal. He gained followers, his way of life had charisma. Less at the material level meant more in terms of quality: by pursuing a path of material poverty, humility and contemplation, the life of Francis was enriched.

64 In a sense, the aforementioned Amish culture, which in many respects can be termed sustainable, appears to stand still. They reject (higher) education as 'vanity', themselves merely passing on the knowledge and experience with which former generations lived. Looking less superficially, they certainly show specific signs of adaptation and modernization in their belief and conduct (see John A. Hostetler 1993 *Amish Society*, fourth edition, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 255-384)

65 See, for example, E.U. von Weiszäcker, Amory B. Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins (1997), *Factor Four: Doubling Wealth, Halving Resource Use. A Report to the Club of Rome*, Earthscan Publications, London; H.E. Daly (1996), *Beyond Growth*, Beacon Press, Boston Mass.

From his medieval setting, which in many respects will always remain alien⁶⁶, it is this spiritual, dematerialised outlook on the quality of earthly life that Francis has passed on to us as a source of lasting inspiration.

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66 Excellent overviews are given by: M Stoffers (red.) (1994), *De middeleeuwse ideëenwereld 1000-1300*, Open Universiteit, Heerlen / Verloren, Hilversum, On the subject of nature and the environment: chapter 6 (Jozef Janssens, *De natuurlijke omgeving*, pp. 171-201) and by Jaques Le Goff (1990) *Medieval Civilization 400-1500*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.

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