

Celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Canticle of the Creatures of Saint Francis

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St. Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, Caravaggio, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

An article by Prof. Martín Carbajo-Núñez OFM, published on the Blog of the Alphonsian Academy.

In 2025 we will celebrate the 800th anniversary of the *Canticle of the Creatures* [1], a text that constitutes a fundamental source of inspiration for the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Over the centuries it has been recognized as one of the most significant works of Christian literature. Although earlier documents exist in the Italian vernacular, the *Canticle of the Creatures* (CtC), written in the Umbrian dialect, is often considered the founding text of Italian literature not only for its linguistic value, but above all for its profound spiritual and cultural meaning.

Many scholars consider the *Canticle* to be Francis's most distinctive and personal work, as it vividly reflects his personality and his deep appreciation for the rich diversity of creation. It faithfully conveys the core of his evangelizing message: an invitation to all creatures to praise the Most High ("Praise and bless"), a call to conversion ("Woe to those who die in mortal sin!"), and an exhortation to forgiveness and peace ("Those who forgive... and persevere in peace").

Francis also conceived the *Canticle* as an evangelizing catechesis in poetic form, written "for the edification of others". He wanted the friars to "sing the *Praises of the Lord* like minstrels of the Lord" [2]. His biographers tell that "When his illness became more serious, he himself began to recite the *Praises of the Lord* and then had his companions sing them" (CAss 83). In fact, the *Canticle* was composed to be accompanied by music.

Song of love and praise

Francis composed it in the spring of 1225, a few months before his death, during a period of deep physical and spiritual suffering. He was blind, sick, and afflicted by pain. Yet, in the midst of so much darkness, he trusts in the promise of eternal salvation that he has just received in a vision, strengthens his faith, and begins to sing his song of praise.

The *Song* is not just an expression of aesthetic admiration, but a profound act of faith, a true song of love and praise. God is both its source and its ultimate destination. At its core, the *Song* is a prayer, a hymn to the Most High.

He highlights what, according to the conception of his time, were considered the four fundamental elements of the sublunary world: earth, water, air and fire. Concentrating on the very essence of things, he emphasizes the divine wisdom that orchestrates the harmony of all that exists.

A holistic vision

As an artist and mystic, Francis perceived the profound unity of all creation, recognizing nature not as a mere resource, but as a family. The same qualities he attributes to creatures in his *Canticle*, he also applies to the Creator in his *Praises to the Most High God*.

His vision is holistic and inclusive. He also embraces those elements that are often perceived as negative, recognizing them as part of a larger design. Even physical death becomes a *sister* to him, because it opens the doors of eternal life.

A Counterpoint to Materialistic Logic

The *Canticle of the Creatures* is a profound critique of an economic system that commodifies every aspect of reality, favors infinite material growth, and reduces nature to a mere resource of profit. It invites us to move from a paradigm of domination to one of fraternity, from a world driven by greed to one animated by gratitude and care. For Francis, creatures are not simple objects of economic gain, but brothers and sisters, who "bear the image of God" and join humanity in a common song of praise. Each of them has a face and a role in the cosmic web of life.

Francis of Assisi does not see nature as a simple set of resources to be exploited, but as a great family, where the sun, the moon, water and fire are our brothers and sisters, who join us in praising the Creator. His praise is not based on the usefulness of creatures for humanity, but on their intrinsic dignity. Each, in its own way, "bears within itself the image of the Most High" (CtC 4). They are not passive elements in the background of human activity, but active participants in the great symphony of creation, who join humanity in a harmonious song of praise to God.

A family where everyone is appreciated and needed

Francis humbly recognizes his need for the help that creatures provide him. By joining in their praise, he overcomes his own limitations and sense of unworthiness, because "no man is worthy to mention your name" (CtC 2). In fact, "all of us, miserable and sinful, are not worthy to pronounce your name" [3], while "all creatures under heaven serve, know and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you" [4]. Francis knows that only "our Lord Jesus Christ, [...] together with the Holy Spirit" can give thanks to the Father for us, "as pleases you and him" (ER 23, 5). In this dynamic, Francis praises the Father "with" all creatures (CtC 3) and "through" them (CtC 5-9).

As he prepares to meet Sister Bodily Death, he lies naked on the bare earth, awaiting the final embrace of his heavenly Father.

(original English text)

[1] These paragraphs are taken from the article: Carbajo-Núñez Martín, «The Canticle of the Creatures and Sustainability: Listening to the Cry of the Earth», in *Warszawskie Studia*

Teologiczne 38/1 (2025).

[2] «Compilation of Assisi» [CAss] 83.

[3] Francis of Assisi, «Primitive Rule» [ER] 23,5.

[4] Francis of Assisi, «Admonitions, 5,2.
