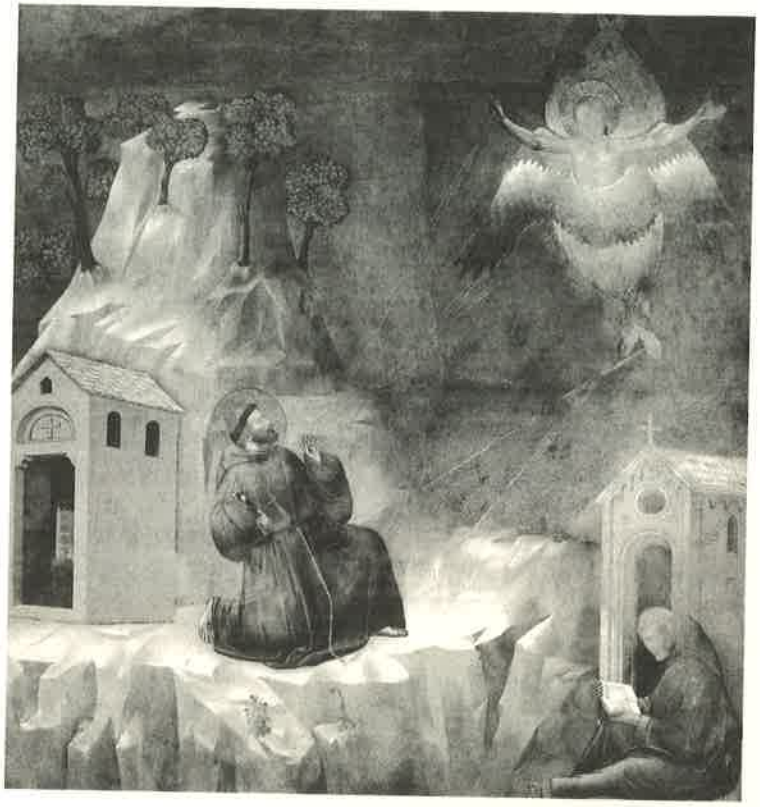

St. Francis receiving the stigmata
The Master of St. Francis Cycle, Upper Church, Assisi
Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

What Brother Elias (putatively) wrote was a description of the condition of the body of Saint Francis at the time of his death. He does not say how these marks were made, when they were made, or anything more specific than the fact that Francis bore these wounds on his body. If we turn to the earliest life of Francis by Thomas of Celano we get further information. Indeed, if the Elias letter does date to a later period, Celano provides the earliest information we possess, since his life was written in less than a decade after the saint's death.

According to Thomas of Celano signs of the nails began to appear on the body of Francis soon after an ecstatic visionary experience he had on LaVerna of a six-winged seraph (see Is 6:2) fixed to a cross. This event took place on September 14, which is the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the traditional beginning of the autumn penitential season for vowed religious. The wounds were similar to those Francis saw on the crucified man hovering over him in the vision. Thomas describes the wounds in this fashion:

> His hands and feet seem to be pierced through the middle by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner part of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, and their points protruding on the opposite sides. These marks on the inside of his hands were round, but rather oblong on the outside; and small pieces of flesh were visible like the points of nails, bent over and flattened, extending beyond the flesh around them. On his feet, the mark of the nails were stamped in the same way and raised above the surrounding flesh. His right side was marked with an oblong scar, as if pierced with a lance,

and this often dripped blood, so that his tunic and undergarments were frequently stained with his holy blood.

Thomas went on to say that Francis almost never spoke of the phenomenon and that during the saint's life he concealed what had happened even from those who were his disciples. It is a commonplace of Franciscan scholarship to note that the event commonly called the "stigmata" of Saint Francis is treated diversely in the early sources. There is an apparent contrast between, say, the relatively brief account in the first life by Thomas of Celano and the more dense (and more overtly theological) rendering found in the thirteenth chapter of the major life by Saint Bonaventure. We also possess, written in his own hand, a brief resume by Brother Leo, inscribed on the side of an autograph blessing of Francis that the saint wrote for Leo, who was one of his companions at LaVerna. That blessing will be discussed later in this chapter. The pertinent words of Leo are, "After the vision and message of the Seraph and the impression of Christ's stigmata upon his body, he composed these praises. . . ." This annotation, of course, was written some time after the actual events on LaVerna.

This extraordinary phenomenon of the stigmata, the subject of much scholarly attention, raises a series of questions that admit of no easy answer. We should note, as a preliminary point, that the fact of the stigmata (that is, visible wounds on a person's body) is not in any sense *ex professo* a miraculous event; it could be only a psychosomatic reaction to intense emotional experience. The Catholic church has never defined the stigmata of Francis as something purely miraculous and, indeed, more generally, has been slow to pronounce in favor of

the many claims of stigmatization either in the contemporary world (such as the recently canonized Padre Pio) or in the historical past. Claims of the stigmata in the history of the church all postdate the experience of Saint Francis with many instances alleged in modern times. These claims are received by church authority with extreme caution and not a little skepticism.

The interventions of church authority in the time of Francis apropos the question of the stigmata of Saint Francis dealt only with the historical issue: did Francis experience the stigmata? Three popes (Gregory IX, Alexander IV, and Nicholas III) between 1237 and 1291 defended the historicity of the stigmata in reaction to widespread doubts originating among those ill-disposed toward the Franciscans, even though the stigmata was not mentioned in the bull of canonization in 1228. The sermons preached by Saint Bonaventure for the feast of Saint Francis in the late 1250s and 1260s take great pains to argue for the truth about the stigmata and, in that emphasis, seem to indicate that many were dubious about it. Bonaventure was, after all, an able apologist against those who were vociferous critics of the Franciscans in general.

In 1924, as part of the celebration honoring the seven hundredth anniversary of the stigmatization, Pope Pius XI accepted as authentic the historic record of the event but was careful not to ascribe it to divine intervention. A feast honoring the imposition of the stigmata on Francis is observed in the Franciscan sanctoral cycle which gives some liturgical support for the historical claim. That feast (on September 17) goes back to the early fourteenth century and may well have been established to give liturgical strength to the Franciscan claims about

the stigmata of the saint against its doubters. The feast was observed for a period in the sanctoral cycle of the universal Roman calendar for periods of time but is not observed today. The Roman martyrology (revised in 2001) has a biographical statement for the feast day (October 4) of the saint but does not mention the stigmata.

About the phenomenon of the stigmata, we should note the following. First, there is no clear consensus about the nature of the wounds that Francis bore. Elias described them as puncture wounds or holes in his hands. Thomas of Celano, by contrast, describes them as looking like protuberances as if they were nails with the heads in the palms and raised indentations like points on the backs of the hands. He also said that the wound in the side of Francis actually bled on a regular basis. In a sense, the description by Elias posits a source of the wounds as coming from outside Francis (from the vision of the Seraph?) while Thomas of Celano seems to indicate that the wounds appeared from within Francis. Both accounts, of course, equate the phenomenon with the intense single-minded attempt of Francis to live as closely to the model of Christ crucified as possible. Since it is quite possible that both men actually saw the body of the dead Francis it is not clear how to resolve what appears to be contrary accounts of what the wounds looked like. One contemporary scholar (Chiara Frugoni) thinks that what Thomas of Celano saw were ulcerated protuberances caused, perhaps, by leprosy or something similar contracted during his ministrations to the poor of Italy. There is no way to know for sure.

Second, whatever we are to make about the complex tradition of the stigmata itself and whether there were earlier exam-

ples of it in medieval spiritual literature is a subject best reserved for the scholars. We do know that before the time of Francis certain medieval mystics inflicted wounds on themselves in imitation of Christ's passion, but no scholar has suggested that Francis did that. Nor is it clear, if, in fact, it is true, that a similar phenomenon among Shi'ite mystics in Islam who exhibited the "wounds of Ali" did so prior to Francis or at all — or even in imitation of the purported stigmata of Francis about which they may have heard.

What is clear is that the event of LaVerna became *the* example of the stigmata in the subsequent tradition and, as such, is always identified with the saint. Furthermore, the very novelty of the idea inflamed the imagination of the Christian world of the West. One can walk into any museum that holds those great Italo-Byzantine crucifixes so characteristic of the period and almost infallibly date them from the second half of the thirteenth century, that is, after the death of Francis, if they focus heavily on depicting the wounds of Christ. The rise of such popular devotions upon the wounds of Christ or the pierced body of Christ testifies to the power of the story of the stigmata. Writing nearly a century after the event, Dante, in the *Paradiso,* says that on the crag between the Tiber and the Arno (that is, LaVerna) Francis, in "tears and joy," "took Christ's final seal, the holy wounds which he bore two years" (xi:107-108).

One cannot read of this great encounter in the life of Saint Francis without thinking back to an autobiographical cry of the apostle Paul writing to the churches of Galatia: "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks (Greek: *stigmata*) of Jesus on my body" (Gal 6:17). The Pauline

emphasis of identification with Christ as well as the gospel theme of the following of Christ is evident in the life of Francis through his desire to follow the poverty of Christ from his poor birth in a stable through his desolation on the cross. It should not be thought odd that the space between the celebration of the Christmas liturgy in Greccio and the experience that Francis had on LaVerna was a period of only about nine months. To separate the celebration of the nativity from the terrible experience on LaVerna would be to give in to the temptation to sentimentalize the Christmas religious experience of Francis.

In a sense those two moments at Greccio and La Verna were two parentheses that summed up the evangelical vision of Francis. If the later Franciscans were to enter into sterile debates about the meaning of poverty, that all too human fact stands in contrast to how Francis saw poverty: as a self-emptying whose meaning had to be anchored in the reality of the gospel message whose center is the cross. That self-emptying began, of course, when the Word became flesh, when the Son of God was born of Mary in a simple stable in Bethlehem. The seal of the stigmata is crucial as a counterweight to any attempt to romanticize Francis as a medieval doctor Doolittle who innocently hymned the cosmos and its inhabitants in a constant state of felicity.

In fact, the Franciscans of the next generation turned the event of the stigmata into a vehicle for profound mystical meditation. Saint Bonaventure's classic spiritual treatise, *The Soul's Journey to God,* is set within the context of the stigmata. Bonaventure tells us that he wrote his treatise while on retreat at LaVerna under the inspiration of "the miracle that had occurred to blessed Francis in this very place, the vision of the six-winged seraph in the form of the Crucified."

The claims about the stigmata of Saint Francis did more than provide a source for literary tropes for the spiritual literature of the Middle Ages. It provided tacit approval for all kinds of ascetic practices in honor of the passion of Christ many of which would find their way into the iconography of Christian art. It also gave warrant to those who yearned for, made claims about, or experienced the wounds of Christ as a result of their own intense religious experiences. Some saints wrote about intense wounds they bore internally with no external manifestation (the invisible stigmata of Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila) while others in the subsequent history of the church are reported to have external signs. The officials of the Catholic church have been extremely reluctant to judge such claims as supernatural. As early as the seventeenth century great spiritual masters like Saint Francis de Sales have judged such phenomena as more likely coming from intense spiritual experiences.

We have already noted that during their retreat at LaVerna Francis wrote out a blessing for his old companion, Brother Leo. That autograph, one of two that we have from the saint's own hand, contains a blessing that Francis composed for Leo.

On one side of the page Brother Leo wrote that on the other side were praises composed by Saint Francis who "wrote them in his own hand, thanking God for the kindness bestowed on him." On the other side Leo repeats "In a similar way he made with his own hand this sign TAU together with a skull." The actual page is not in good shape with certain illegibilities caused by creases and wear at the edges of the page. The "Praises of God" is a pastiche made up of fragments from the psalms and

certain passages from the New Testament. These are the concluding lines:

You are beauty. You are meekness.
You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender.
You are our strength. You are our refreshment.
You are our hope.
You are our sweetness. You are our eternal life:
Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful savior.

The page ends with a blessing for Brother Leo with the conclusion drawn from the Book of Numbers (6:24-27): "May he turn his countenance to you and give you peace. May the Lord bless you, Brother Leo."

Among the authentic writings of Saint Francis we have some other prayers in the form of salutations composed either from traditional titles in the case of his salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary or his salutation of the holy virtues. What these various prayers have in common is that they are written in strophes of simple pithy lines. Here is an example from the one on the Blessed Virgin:

Hail his palace!
Hail his tabernacle!
Hail his dwelling!
Hail his robe!
Hail his servant!
Hail his mother!

And the opening of the salutation of the virtues:

Hail, Queen Wisdom!
May the Lord protect you!
With your sister, holy pure simplicity!
Lady holy Poverty,
May the Lord protect you
with your sister, holy humility.
Lady Holy Charity,
may the Lord protect you
with your sister, holy obedience. . . .

It is not clear when Francis wrote any of these prayers (or his wonderful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer) with the exception of the Blessing for Brother Leo, which is datable to 1224. Nor are we clear, again with the exception of the Brother Leo text, for whom these prayers were intended or toward what end. It would be a safe guess, however, to think that they were composed for his brothers or for his lay followers. The fact that they are done in simple strophic fashion, redolent with fragments from the scriptures, would lead us to think that they were meant to be easily memorized either for personal devotion or for proclamation when the friars preached. Since books were at a premium and illiteracy high, they were most likely intended to increase the spiritual inventory of those who were committed to the life of prayer and the work of preaching and teaching. Given Francis's predilection for the troubadour tradition it is quite possible that they were also set to music and sung, since we know from the sources that Francis loved to sing as he traveled in the company of his friars.

What is the meaning of the mark of the TAU to which Leo alludes in his notation on the blessing manuscript? The Greek

letter Tau is similar to our capital letter "T." Saint Bonaventure, borrowing from Thomas of Celano's second life, said that Francis "venerated this symbol with great affection, often spoke highly of it, and signed it with his own hand at the end of every letter he sent. . . ." Francis evidently got the idea of using this symbol after Pope Innocent III preached a sermon to open the Fourth Lateran Council on the text from the prophet Ezekiel: "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it" (9:4).

Bonaventure, in his prologue to the major life said that Francis signed his followers "with the cross of penance and clothing them with his habit, which is in the form of a cross." Since the early sources also say that Francis chalked a cross on the clothes he adopted when he returned his finery to his father before Bishop Guido it may well be that Francis saw his new life as an analogue to the crusaders who "took up the cross" to do battle against the Muslims in the Holy Land. Many contemporary Franciscans and those influenced by Franciscan spirituality have adopted a simple wooden TAU cross in honor of the veneration Francis showed toward that symbol he so loved.

Francis reflected his devotion toward the passion of Christ by composing a little office of prayers (composed of lines from the Psalms) that he and his companions would recite from Holy Thursday evening through the vigil for Easter. These prayers were adjunct to the normal recitation of the office for this period and may well have developed into a kind of private prayer that was used beyond the triduum of Holy Week. Commentators on these Psalm pastiches attempt to show that Francis chose his lines from scripture to honor actual moments of

the unfolding passion of Jesus. Thus, for example, the hour of Terce has lines of mockery for it was then, it was thought, that Jesus was scourged; at Sext, lines reflected the actual crucifixion, and so on. The point of such exercises was, of course, to enter into the passion of Christ in some performative fashion — to "dramatize" the passion just as Francis wishes to dramatize the nativity by the setting he chose for the midnight mass at Greccio.

It is not too fanciful to see the Passion Office that Francis wrote as a distant ancestor of those forms of devotion, developed largely by Franciscans, that acted out the events of the life and acts of Jesus. While the fourteen stations of the cross, found in almost all Catholic churches, were stabilized only in the eighteenth century by the Franciscan preacher Leonard of Saint Maurice, the devotional practice goes back to the late middle ages, encouraged by the Franciscans who developed the practice from the even earlier pilgrimage routes of the visitors to Jerusalem who visited in order sites designated as places where Christ was present during his passion. The traditional prayer used in making the stations today ("We adore you O Christ, and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world") is a variation of a prayer that Francis himself composed and cites in his *Testament* saying that he "would pray with simplicity in this fashion."

CHAPTER SIX

Saint Francis and the Love of Creation

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

Psalm 150:6

IF OUR CONTEMPORARIES know anything about Saint Francis it is that he loved animals. He has been adopted by the ecological movement as its patron saint. Many places honor his memory by having animals brought to church to have them blessed on his feast day, October 4. He has been called the "saint of nature" even though he never used the word "nature," and if he heard the word would have recognized it as meaning something quite different from what we mean today. Nonetheless, it is true that Francis did love animals and, further, the beauties of the natural world like the sun, moon, stars, and flowers and fruits of Mother Earth. And it is also true that the earliest stories about him note this fact at some length. In fact, on the wall opposite from where these lines are being written, there is an icon of Francis gently shaking the paw of the wolf of Gubbio; to that incident we shall return. Francis applied in his life that frequent theme in the

Psalms of David that all creation should (and does) praise the Lord.

Elsewhere I have already raised cautions against sentimentalizing the story of Francis. There is a particular danger in isolating Francis's love for the created world from his larger understanding about the Christian faith. That tendency to romanticize has its roots in the romantic rediscovery of the saint in the nineteenth century and continues to this day. The correct way to put the issue of Francis and the world of nature into some kind of balance is to understand the context of his own time, the broader context of Christian hagiography generally, and the theological presuppositions of his biographers. Such contextualization helps us to understand Francis without any denigration of his profound simplicity and his overwhelming sense of love and awe for the created order. Nor should it escape our attention that Francis's great love for creation was a direct rebuke to the then powerful Cathars who denigrated the world of matter as sinful and something from which to escape. In that sense, Francis's love for the natural created world had a polemical edge to it. It was a way of disconfirming some of the pessimistic teachings of the Cathars. While Francis had a healthy respect for the practice of traditional asceticism, he never denigrated the material world; he did not see the gift of creation in any way but gift. He certainly never saw material creation as evil. In that sense — and there is a paradox here — the love that Francis showed for all of creation was an act of resistance against those who would totally "spiritualize" faith.

All of the early biographers mention his love for animals, they recount his preaching to the birds (that incident occurs in some of the earliest visual tributes to the saint like the

Berlingheri altarpiece at Pescia), and they note his simple joy in the beauty of the created order. The twenty-first chapter of Celano's first life of the saint narrates his preaching to the birds and then goes on to say from then on "he carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures to praise and love the Creator, because, daily invoking the name of the Savior, he observed their obedience in his own experience."

The first thing to note about that passage is that Francis "observed their obedience." What does that mean? It does not mean that Francis anthropomorphized the animal and sensate world. What is behind the sentiment expressed by Celano was the root theological conviction, expressed in a more scholarly fashion by the scholastic doctors, that everything in creation is not only good (as the opening chapter of Genesis states emphatically) but also praises God by its very existence. Furthermore, the manner of praise coming from creation derives from the very teleology of their existence: fish praise God by swimming in the sea as birds do by flying in the air. Behind that conviction is not only Aristotle's notion of final causality (that everything has a finality: a rock is meant to be a rock) but the sense that one finds in the scriptures that everything in the world obeys the creative intent of God and manifests the creative wisdom of God. Francis knew by instinctive faith what the psalmist proclaimed: "The heavens proclaim the glory of God/The sky proclaims its builder's craft./One day to the next conveys that message;/one night to the next imparts that knowledge" (Ps 19:1-2). In the generations after Saint Francis, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure would put this ancient truth into formal theological language. "Whoever is

not enlightened by such splendor of creation things is blind/whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf/whoever does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb/Whoever does not discover the First Principle from such clear signs, is a fool" — thus Bonaventure in *The Soul's Journey to God* after he describes the footprints of God in the created order.

It is not incidental that Francis exhorts creatures to "praise and love their Creator" since the love that Francis expresses for the world roots itself in a deep theology of creation. The created world is, as it were, a sacrament of the free gift of creation coming from the hand of God: "Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made" (Rom 1:20). When Francis exhorts created beings to give praise to God he enters into their praise as a free and responsive person who praises God by the gratitude he has for that free gift of creation. Saint Bonaventure makes that precise point about Saint Francis when he notes, in his major life of the saint, that "when he considered the primordial source of all things, he was filled with abundant piety, calling creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother and sister, because he knew that they had the same source as himself." Francis also knew that the creative word uttered by God was the Word of God who held all things in his hand (Jn 1:1-3).

However beautiful and various the created world may be, it is also, as Tennyson wrote famously, "red in tooth and claw." Which brings us to the matter of wolves. According to several sources, Francis helped the peasants of Greccio protect themselves from the ravening wolves who attacked both man and beast in winter by taming the wolves. The most famous story of

wolves in relation to Saint Francis is the charming tale recounted in the *Little Flowers of Saint Francis* about the wolf of Gubbio. Gubbio is a small Umbrian town northeast of Assisi where Francis stayed early in his wanderings. According to the story, a ferocious wolf attacked both people and beasts in the Umbrian town of Gubbio. Francis went outside the town, spoke to the wolf who agreed to stop his attacks (Francis shook his paw as a sign of assent) for which, in turn, the people of the town would provide food for the wolf. Brother Wolf observed his part of the bargain for two years; when he died, the townspeople buried him, and according to the guidebooks his burial place is marked to this day at a church aptly named "della pace" ("of peace").

That story may have a historical core with the wolf being, in fact, a pitiless ruler who terrorized the citizenry by his rapacious demands and depredations. A medieval commentator on the story said that the wolf was a symbol of the Italian people! Saint Francis, who made a vocation out of pacification, may have reformed a bellicose warlord. Whatever the origin of the story, there is a fundamental and theological motif within it. After all, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the coming messiah would inaugurate a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb in a peaceful kingdom. The story might well illustrate the common perception that Francis was another Christ — an *alter christus*. In other words, behind the charming folktale recorded in the *Fioretti* may well be a complex theological observation about Francis as an imitator of Christ and Francis as a preacher of peace and reconciliation.

There is more. According to the biblical tradition, in the period before the Fall, the animals were in harmony with human

beings — Adam, according to Genesis, naming the animals. It was only through sin, according to tradition, that this harmony was interrupted. To return to an Edenic simplicity through the cultivation of virtue and the erasure of vice was the mark of those saints who had achieved purity of heart. The ability of Francis to live in peace with the animal world, then, was a sign of his purity and holiness. The stories about his rescue of lambs, the tame pheasant given to him by a nobleman of Siena, the cricket that would perch on his shoulder, the birds who would listen attentively to him as he preached, and the other stories that make the early legends so charming have behind them a theological perception about the state of the soul of Francis.

This Edenic harmony between a sainted figure and the animal world is not peculiar to Saint Francis. Students of hagiography can point to many similar stories told of hermits, monks, and others who lived in harmony with animals as a sign of their recovery of a state of innocence. Celtic hagiography is replete with such instances (as well as a literature of prayers exemplifying the presence of God in the beauty of creation). There is a particularly charming story told of the sixth-century Irish bishop Saint Colman who, according to the legend, would be awakened by a cock each morning for his Vigils; a mouse would scurry about him to keep him from falling asleep at his prayers; and a fly would mark the spot on his psalter he was to read from that day.

Such examples are not restricted to that Celtic strain of Christian spirituality. A few examples, all taken from the calendar of saints for March 5, might make the case. Saint Mark the Hermit (circa 400) healed and tamed a hyena and her whelp.

Saint Gerasimus (died 475) had a lion who was so faithful a companion that it stretched itself out on the saint's tomb and died of grief. The fifth-century abbot and bishop, Saint Cioran, had a whole menagerie of friendly animals around his cell: Brothers Boar, Badger, Fox, Wolf, and Deer. When Brother Fox ate the hermit's sandals out of sheer hunger, the poor animal was put on a three-day fast for penance! All of these stories implicitly link the sanctity of the man of God with a return to the prelapsarian state of innocence and walking with God.

Curiously enough, this harmony with the animal world is not unconnected with the frequency with which Francis is described as stripping himself naked: before bishop Guido, on a preaching tour through a town as a symbol of his humility, or asking to be stripped naked and put on the bare soil at the time of his death. Francis, like Adam, was naked and not ashamed. Already in the early legends this penchant for nakedness is linked explicitly to three biblical themes: the command of God to Isaiah that the prophet preach naked and unshod; the nakedness of Christ when he was crucified ("nakedly following the naked Christ"); and the nakedness of Adam in the garden. Henri of Avanches makes the latter point explicitly when commenting on the incident of Francis naked before the bishop of Assisi. His versified life says that Francis was "like Adam" who was unashamed of his nakedness because of the purity of his soul.

The biblical background of Francis's love for the created world and its creatures was certainly in the mind of his earliest commentators as they reflected on the deeds of Francis. There is, however, one piece of evidence that comes directly from the saint about how he viewed the created world — his famous

"Canticle of Brother Sun." The canticle is recognized as one of the earliest poems written in the vernacular Italian. Written and expanded over the last years of the saint's life it may well have been composed by Francis to give the friars something to sing in the public squares of Italy when on their preaching missions.

Below is a free translation of my own with the added verses indicated either in *italics* or **bold**:

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord
To you alone belongs praise and glory,
Honor and blessing.
No one is worthy to breathe your name.
Be praised, my Lord, for all your creatures.
In the first place for [per] the blessed Brother Sun
who gives us the day and enlightens us through You.
He is beautiful and radiant in his great splendor
Giving witness to You, most omnipotent One.
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars
Formed by You so bright, precious, and beautiful.
Be praised, My Lord, for Brother Wind
and the airy skies so cloudy and serene.
For every weather, be praised because it is life giving.
Be praised, My Lord, for Sister Water
so necessary yet humble, precious, and chaste.
Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire
who lights up the night.
He is beautiful and carefree, robust and fierce.
Be praised, my Lord, for our sister, Mother Earth
who nourishes and watches over us

while bringing forth abundant fruits and colored
flowers and herbs.
Be praised, my Lord, for those who pardon through Your love
and bear witness and trial.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for they will be crowned by You, Most High.
Be praised, my Lord, for our sister, bodily death.
Whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in sin.
Blessed are those who discover Thy holy will.
The second death will do them no harm.
Praise and bless the Lord.
Render Him thanks.
Serve Him with great humility.
Amen.

According to the Assisi compilation (#84) Francis had the italicized verses added to the Canticle and then instructed the entire Canticle to be sung in the presence of the bishop and the mayor *(podestá)*, which triggered a moment of religious zeal in both the authorities so that with "great kindness and love they embraced and kissed each other." While the incident may seem charming to us, in reality, given the place of honor in that society, it was a truly humble and uncharacteristic moment for both powerful men. The italicized lines were Francis's way of healing a civic rift between the mayor and the bishop.

The next section (#85) then tells us how Francis in this same period wrote some verses for the consolation of Saint Clare and the Poor Ladies who lived with her at San Damiano because of their distress at his poor health. Those verses, com-

posed in the Umbrian dialect of Italian like the "Canticle," are dedicated to the sisters with the hope that they will persevere in their chosen life. They read:

Listen, little poor ones, called by the Lord,
Who have come together from many parts and provinces.
Live always in truth that you may die in obedience.
Do not look at life outside for that of the Spirit is better.
I beg you through great love to use with discretion
the alms which the Lord has given you.
Those who are burdened with illness and others
who are wearied because of them,
All of you: bear it in peace.
For you will feel this fatigue for a very high price
And each will be crowned queen in heaven with the
Virgin Mary.

Francis also added some final verses about death to his Canticle in his final days of suffering. They appear in the above translation in bold letters and will be taken up later in this volume.

There is a historic translation crux connected with the Canticle. The crux is such that the Canticle can mean one of several things depending on how one translates one small word. Saint Francis uses the preposition *per* which, as it stands in this poem, can actually have a number of quite different meanings. Does it mean "for" (as this translation gives it) in the sense of thanksgiving for the gifts of God? Does it mean "by" indicating that the sun and the other elements are instruments which give praise to God? Does it mean "through" which also indicates in-

strumentality but also the deeper sense of indicating the presence of God in all of creation as Saint Bonaventure would teach some decades later? Recent scholars have conceded that any of those renderings is legitimate from a theological point of view and could find arguments in medieval piety and theology to defend a given translation. This study, using the privilege of choice, has settled on "for" because of the profound sense of gratitude that shines through the life of Francis — although others take a quite different approach. While my translation emphasizes the spirit of gratitude that permeates the life of Francis, consideration will also be given to Francis's idea that all of creation speaks, in its own way, of God in general and the hidden presence of Christ the Word, through whom the world was created, in particular.

Originally, the Canticle ended with the strophes praising Mother Earth. Francis added the verses about peace and forgiveness when he mediated an episode of civil strife that agitated the civil and religious authorities of Assisi. The last lines, on sister death (in bold), were added later as Francis, who was dying in Assisi, greeted his own end not as an inexorable fate but as a welcoming presence. We are not certain how the verses for Clare and her sisters fit the canticle but they are written in the same dialect and seem to come from the same period.

Clearly the Canticle has antecedents in sacred scripture. The psalms, of course, come immediately to mind. Psalm 19 begins with the assertion that the heavens "tell" the glory of God and the firmament above "proclaims" God's handiwork. In the same psalm the rising of the sun is compared to a bridegroom coming from the marriage canopy. Psalm 104, a poetic retelling of the creation account of the opening chapter of the

Book of Genesis, is replete with images taken from the created world and its seasons. In places the psalms rise to ecstatic outbursts of praise: "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom You made them all; the earth is full of your creatures!" (v. 24). The psalm comes to a thunderous crescendo: "Praise the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!" (v. 35) Finally, one hears the echo of Psalms 147, 148, and 150. Psalm 148 is most pertinent since the psalmist calls on both animate and inanimate creatures to praise God. Psalm 148 is a kind of cosmic praise in which both the macro world (heavens above the heavens) and the micro world (creeping things and flying birds) hymn God's glory.

The canticle of Saint Francis also has clear echoes of the so-called "Canticle of the Three Young Men" found in the Book of Daniel (3:52-90). This long hymn of praise was a standard feature of Sunday lauds in the liturgical office. It is fruitful to read the canticle in Daniel against the canticle of Saint Francis because the biblical canticle does call on the elements to praise God (as in verses 57-81) as if the entire creation were a kind of symphony of praise; thus giving the hymn a sense of instrumentality, which is how some read the canticle of Saint Francis. God is also blessed by the very presence of creation and its parts in the opening verses of the biblical canticle (verses 53-56). Finally, the biblical canticle, in the final verses, calls on us, echoing a line from the psalms, to give "thanks to the Lord for He is good" thus, finishing the great hymn with an expression of gratitude and adoration: "All who worship the Lord, bless the God of gods/sing praise to Him and give thanks to Him" (3:90). In short, when one parses the canticle in Daniel one finds a complex skein of sentiments that is captured so well in

the layered meaning of the preposition *per* in the Italian text of Francis's beautiful hymn.

The early biographers of Francis paid explicit attention to his love for the created world and read various messages into that love. Thomas of Celano, after describing Francis preaching to the birds (a scene much loved in early Franciscan art), had Francis chiding himself for not doing so more frequently and then added: "From that day on he carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures to praise and love the Creator, because daily, invoking the name of the Savior, he observed their obedience in his own experience." By "obedience" Thomas of Celano refers to the well-known theological truth that all creatures give praise to God by being what they are created for; their very teleology orients them to God; humans, with their free will, are the only creatures who can thwart their (super)natural end, which is to be turned towards God.

In chapter 104 of his Second Life of the saint, Celano returns to a consideration of Francis's love for inanimate and animate creatures. Celano said that in the beauty of created things he saw Beauty itself. He remembered that Francis told the brother gardener to leave the edges of the garden untilled so that wild herbs and flowers may, in their season, "proclaim the Father of us all." He removed worms from pathways so that they would not be crushed and set out wine and honey for the bees so that they would not perish in the winter. A dubiously authentic letter of Francis has him instructing rulers to put out extra seed at Christmastime for the birds. Thomas of Celano, in a text we cited earlier, does say that Francis wanted to tell the emperor to give extra rations for birds on Christmas Day.

Thomas follows that introductory chapter up with a series of vignettes that has done much to crystallize the romantic picture of Francis we have inherited today. A little bird nestles in his hands; a falcon becomes domesticated at one of his hermitages; the bees provide honey for his drinking cup; he domesticates a pheasant that was sent to him for food; he bids "sister cricket" to sing praises to God, which the cricket did as Francis joined its music by singing along himself. The stories have the aura of the "peaceable kingdom" about them.

All of those vignettes (parallels may be found in Celtic hagiography) that seem so "sweet" to us had far more serious points to make for those who first heard them. They indicated that the created world was a good world and, in that affirmation, made a polemical point against the pessimism expressed by the heretical Cathars who saw the material universe as evil. They underscored Francis's idea (systematized later by figures like Saint Bonaventure) that the created world exemplifies and reveals the creative presence of God in the world. His love for animate and inanimate creation was fully in line with the biblical idea that the world was created through the Word (who was made flesh). And looking for the traces of God in the natural world was a way of contacting the cosmic Christ through whom the world was made.

One cannot leave this topic without pointing out what has been noted by scholars since the nineteenth century. The reputation of Francis was such that his emphasis on the beauty of creation in all of its manifestations turned the eyes of people toward this world with new appreciation for its beauty. Was it coincidental that after the death of Francis one sees a shift in Italian art from the somewhat static and hieratic forms of

Italo-Byzantine depictions to a more naturalistic setting for painting? Is there a nexus between not only a more observant depiction of natural settings in panel painting and fresco but also a more intense interest in representations of the nativity of Christ (as a consequence of the Greccio celebration of Christmas in a stable setting) and the human sufferings of Christ in depictions of the crucifixion? It would be difficult to make the shift consequent on the worldview of Francis in some kind of empirical way, but the possible influence of Francis and his followers has been explored since the nineteenth century. Thus, many writers have seen a link between Franciscan incarnationalism and its attendant exemplarism (the created world as a source for realizing the divine) and the shift to Renaissance realism in art.

Henry Thode's *Franz von Assisi und die Anfange der Kunst in Italien*, published in Berlin in 1885, made the argument, as the title of his book indicates, that one must look back to Francis in order to understand the origins of the Renaissance art movement. In a sense, Thode's book was a correction of the highly influential thesis of Walter Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), which argued that the Renaissance sprung forth, almost like a flower in the desert, from the wasteland of the Middle Ages. Thode argued (as would others after him) that the roots of the Renaissance were in the Middle Ages in general and in movements like that initiated by Francis in particular. Such an argument may be a commonplace today but it wasn't in the nineteenth century when everything medieval, in the eyes of many, was summed up in the phrase "Dark Ages." Thode and others like him may have viewed Francis romantically but there is no doubt that they did have an insight:

Francis had provided a fresh eye through which to explore the world.

If Francis and Franciscanism did impact the Renaissance imagination in some substantive fashion it certainly did not happen overnight. Nearly four generations, for example, separate Francis and Giotto's mature work. In between the two is still a body of rather conservative paintings. What seems safe to say, however, is that the Franciscan emphasis on the humanity of Christ in its preaching and the warrant allowed by the life of Francis to emphasize the corporeal did resonate broadly in the culture of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is not accidental that Italy, redolent of the saint's memory and example, broke with the Italo-Byzantine and International gothic styles of painting first.

Both the mendicant movement in general and the Franciscan movement in particular seemed like something new. It is not surprising, after all, that Dante would hail that "newness" in the *Paradiso* where he would devote not one but two cantos to hymn the work of Saint Dominic, founder of the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans), and Saint Francis while warning that their original fervor was already subject to decline. Dante knew firsthand about both of these movements since he had studied theology at the studium of the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella in Florence and, across the city, had (perhaps?) entertained the idea of joining the Franciscans at their church of Santa Croce where Giotto had painted a spectacular fresco cycle on the life of Francis. The imprint of both Dominican and Franciscan thought is patent throughout Dante's *Commedia.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Final Years

When evening comes, you will be examined in love.

Saint John of the Cross

In 1224 Saint Francis had been in retreat on the mountain of La Verna from the feast of the Assumption of Mary (August 15) to Saint Michael's Day, which falls on September 29. On or around the feast of the Exaltation (or Triumph) of the Holy Cross (September 14) is when Francis had the experience of what we now call the stigmata. September 14 is an important day in the life of vowed religious. It is the day that marks the beginning of the season of abstinence and fasting for monks and nuns as an observant anticipation of the joyous days of the Christmas season. The liturgical office of that day is replete with the imagery of the cross and the other elements attendant upon it. The experience of the stigmata cannot be seen apart from the emphases that fill the liturgical offices of that day.

After his retreat on La Verna Francis returned to the Portiuncula below the town of Assisi via towns that still are redolent with the memory of the saint: Borgo San Sepolcro,

Monte Casale, and Città di Castello. By December of that year, Francis undertook another preaching mission in his native Umbria and further north into the Marches of Italy. On that tour, he rode on a donkey — a sign that his health was in decline since he usually traveled on foot. His rule forbade the riding of horses since they were a "luxury" beyond what he allowed for his "Poor Brothers." In his major life of Francis Bonaventure says that he was carried "half dead" through the towns and villages because the pain in his feet from the stigmata did not allow him to walk. Of course, he was also in shockingly bad health in general since, as Bonaventure says, he treated his body as an overworked slave.

In the early spring (sometime in March?) Francis was back in Assisi where he visited Saint Clare at the convent of San Damiano. His eye illness had become much worse, so he stayed for a bit in a small cell near the quarters of the convent chaplain. The quarters must have been rather squalid since the sources tell us that Francis had trouble sleeping both because of the pain in his eyes and because his sleep was interrupted by mice that scurried about the little cell all night long. At the urging of Brother Elias, now the minister general of the Order, he consented to some medical treatment for his increasing blindness, but the treatment was deferred until the weather got warmer.

Scholars have speculated about the physical condition of Francis but have reached no consensus: did he have some form of tuberculosis of the bone? Leprosy? Was his illness of the eyes chronic conjunctivitis? No one knows. One thing is certain: any "medical" treatment given in his day was at best useless and quite likely dangerous. In fact, what we know about what

was done to him that year seems more like well-meaning torture than treatment. The cauterization of his temples with white hot irons, performed later that year away from Assisi, and a subsequent treatment that consisted of piercing his ears to relieve his eye problems are examples of the state of "medical" care in this period.

However ill he may have been, his pains did not touch his soul. It was near San Damiano in the late spring that he composed his "Canticle of Brother Sun." One finds it hard to fathom how he could have written such beautifully radiant poetry while he was so sick and living in such appalling squalor. But compose he did. It was also in this period (June of 1225?) that he interposed himself in a quarrel between Bishop Guido and the mayor of the town of Assisi. He was close to both of them: Guido had been a staunch supporter of Francis from the time the saint divested himself of his worldly goods twenty years earlier. The mayor had a daughter who was a member of Saint Clare's community at San Damiano. When Francis reconciled these two old friends and ended their feud (which might well have been a bloody vendetta in the city) Francis then added his coda about peace to the Canticle. One sees in his line "Blessed are those who endure in peace/for by You they shall be crowned" both a word of praise for his two old friends and an expression of his hope that reconciliation and not enmity will be maintained between the religious and secular powers of his town.

From late summer of 1225 to early June in 1226 Francis traveled to various places in central Italy either in obedience to ecclesiastical summons or to seek help for his health. By late August or early September of 1226 it was clear that his health was

ebbing and that death was not far away. He returned to Assisi and was housed first in the palace of bishop Guido who was away at the time on pilgrimage. In September, sure that he would soon die, Francis insisted that he be taken from Guido's residence so that he could die among his brothers at the Portiuncula. His final wish was granted and to that place where his movement had begun he moved with less than a month to live. It is in that final period of his life that he appended the new verses to his "Canticle of Brother Sun":

Be praised, My Lord, for our sister, bodily death
Whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in sin!
Blessed are those who discover thy holy will
The second death will do them no harm.

It is worthwhile thinking about those lines for a moment. While Francis embraces death as a "sister" he in no way sentimentalizes death. He sees death as an inevitable finale to life; the fate of every person. His mind, however, immediately turns to something worse than death: dying outside the grace of God. Such a state leads to the second death, which is damnation. One must read those salutary lines against the background of his public life as a man of penitential preaching — a life he undertook when he "left the world." There was no doubt in the mind or heart of Francis that the end of the earthly pilgrimage was to seek the embrace of God. While Francis embraced the Christ of the cross he knew by instinct that the meaning of the cross was salvation: "By thy holy cross you have redeemed the world" was a sentiment on his lips. Death, for

Francis, had an eschatological meaning: it was a transit either to God or away from God. What Saint Francis says in these few verses is a condensed version of what, in the two recensions of his letters to the men and women of penance, he says so urgently: we must die reconciled to God and the church so that the Evil One may not "snatch us away" for all eternity.

In that final month of his life there is a charming moment in which the human side of Francis shines forth clearly. He had a deep friendship with an aristocratic Roman woman, Jacoba of Settesoli, who came to him when he was lingering near death. At his request, she brought some things to prepare his body after death as well as some pastries that he enjoyed. She arrived in time to find him alive (one account says that Francis dispensed with the rule about no women being allowed in the cloister by calling her "Brother" Jacoba) and stayed with him until his death. According to the Franciscan historians Lady Jacoba stayed on in Assisi until her death some years later (1239? 1273?). She was buried in the lower church of the basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. In 1933 her remains were re-interred in an urn, and the urn was placed in the crypt adjacent to the tomb of the saint himself.

When Francis himself was clear in his own mind that his death was imminent, he made his farewell to Saint Clare and her sisters at San Damiano and prepared for death at the Portiuncula. Francis asked that the friars strip off his clothes and place him on the bare earth after his death. He was to rest there, Bonaventure says in the *Legenda Major,* for the space of time it takes to "walk a leisurely mile." We cannot overstate how profoundly that final act of nudity brings certain themes of his life to a fitting conclusion. The idea of nudity is deep in

the consciousness of all of the great Christian mystics. Saint John of the Cross, many centuries later, would say in his "Sayings of Light and Love" that we should follow Jesus Christ "in becoming like Him, imitating his life, actions, and virtues, and the form of his nakedness and purity of spirit."

Francis, lying on the ground in his nakedness, recapitulated his own birth when he came into this world, like Jesus and every child naked to the world. When Francis wished to begin his new life, turning away from the world, he stripped himself naked before his own father, Pietro, and the Bishop of Assisi, Guido, as part of his second birth as a wanderer for Christ. Once, he walked through a town naked with a halter around his neck to show his humility. All of his commentators, as we have seen, linked his nakedness to two ancient themes: the nakedness of Adam before the Fall (emphasizing the innocence of Francis) and the ancient theme of "following the naked Christ nakedly" — a sentiment as old as Saint Jerome.

To these themes we now have Francis, giving away everything including his poor clothes, to be embraced by Mother Earth whom he had hymned so beautifully in his preaching and in his poetry. His nakedness is also a gestural reminder that it is from the clay of the earth we come and it is to the earth we return: "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust." Hidden in that gesture, to be sure, was a rebuke to the Cathars and the others who deprecated the materiality of God's creation. We, like Jesus, are born of the earth into the material world from which shines the beauty of creation.

On his last evening on this world, Francis, surrounded by his faithful friars and "Brother" Jacoba asked for someone to bring a Mass book to him and read from the Gospel of Saint

John appointed for Holy Thursday: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus realized that his hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had loved his own in this world and would show his love for them to the end" (Jn 13:1). Saint Bonaventure, in his *Legenda Major,* says that Francis responded by reciting Psalm 141 (142) from the beginning until the end; the last verse of that psalm reads, "Lead me out of my prison, that I may give thanks to your name./Then the just shall gather around me/because you have been good to me" (142:8).

All the ancient sources say that skylarks flew onto the roof of his cell and sang for him as he died. Brother Elias's letter about the death of Francis says that he died during the first hour of the night (after sunset) on October 3, 1226. Since the new day was reckoned as beginning after sunset his death has been memorialized on October 4, which is when his feast is celebrated unto this day. Elias went on to say that he was buried the next day. He was first buried in the church of San Giorgio, the church where, as a child, he was instructed by the parish priests in whatever formal learning he acquired.

Less than two years later, Pope Gregory IX would come in person to Assisi for the formal canonization of Francis. The solemn ceremonies were carried out on July 16. The solemn Bull of Canonization (*Mira Circa Nos*) was issued from the city of Perugia on August 14, 1228, stipulating October 4 as the feast day of the saint. The process of canonization seems to have happened in a most speedy fashion, but it must be remembered that the pope, who had assumed his office in 1227, had a close relationship to the saint. Gregory's two predecessors, Honorius III (died 1227) and Innocent III (died 1216), had both

given their approval to the Franciscan way of life. Innocent did so after meeting Francis and seeing the now lost primitive rule, and Honorius approved the rule of 1223.

The future pope was born into a noble family in Segni in 1170. Count, later Cardinal, Ugolino (Hugolin) was a blood relative of both Popes Innocent III and Alexander IV. He was made cardinal-bishop of Ostia in 1206 and as such became dean of the college of cardinals. He served the papacy as a legate but, more importantly for the story of Saint Francis, he took a keen interest in the rising importance of the new religious orders that were so much a feature of church reform. Above all, the pope had a close relationship to the early Franciscan *religio.* He was the first cardinal protector of the Franciscan Order. He provided a helping hand in the shaping of the so-called 1223 "sealed rule" *(Regula Bullata)* of the Franciscans. He aided in the adaptation of this rule for the Third Order and was responsible for the rule (1218/1219) for the Poor Clares.

Saint Bonaventure tells us that it was under the pope's initiative that the testimony of miracles performed through the intercession of the saint was gathered and presented to the cardinals who "seemed less favorable to his [that is, Francis's] cause" so that with "the unanimous advice and assent of his confreres and of all the prelates who were then in the curia, he decreed that Francis should be canonized." Whether Bonaventure notes that unanimity as part of his own struggle with those who were not favorably disposed to the Mendicants (as those at the University of Paris who did not like the Mendicants possessing academic chairs surely were) or not is a moot point. What we do know is that six years later, in 1234, Pope Gregory IX did stipulate that all canonizations were under the

sole power and process of the papacy — a decree that went back as early as the papacy of Alexander III at the end of the twelfth century but became normative only in Gregory's day.

One more step in the posthumous honor of the saint occurred in 1230. The friars assembled in Assisi for their general chapter. On May 25 they transferred the saint's body from its resting place at the church of San Giorgio to rebury it in the lower church of the massive basilica being erected in the city of Assisi. Brother Elias of Cortona had started the project in 1228, the year of the canonization, but the church (or, more properly, the churches, since there is both a lower and upper church) was not finished until 1253. Francis is buried in the lower church decorated with some early frescoes including a famous enthroned Madonna with Saint Francis done by Cimabue. Later fourteenth-century frescoes come from the workshop of Giotto and the hand of Pietro Lorenzetti. The fourteenth-century depiction of Saint Martin of Tours was done by Simone Martini. Near the tomb of Francis are buried his four earliest companions, Brothers Leo, Masseo, Rufino, and Angelo. The remains of Lady Jacoba of Settesoli, as we already noted, are enshrined nearby.

It is worthwhile to note in passing that before the actual canonization in 1228 Pope Gregory IX issued another official letter. This was a papal bull asking the Catholic faithful to donate alms in order to construct a church in honor of Saint Francis to be built on donated land in Assisi. A year after the canonization he issued another bull taking the ownership and protection of the basilica under his own person. In a stroke he relieved the friars from "owning" the building. The fact that Gregory started a campaign for alms before the actual canon-

ization harkens back to the ancient custom of enshrining the remains of a saint in a special shrine church while also signaling that he had every intention of canonizing Francis.

The upper church (badly damaged in the recent earthquake of 1997) contains a famous cycle of frescoes depicting the life and miracles of Saint Francis. That cycle, once attributed to Giotto, is now attributed to an anonymous "Master of the Saint Francis Cycle." It is quite likely that the work was done under the patronage of Pope Nicholas IV (died 1292) who himself was a Franciscan.

That Francis's body should have ended up in such a massive edifice has long irritated some who love the Poor Little Man of Assisi, since the church itself seems surrounded by a redoubtable complex of buildings that cluster around it: a huge convent ("Sacro Convento") and old papal residence (1300); a cloister built in 1476; and an ugly eighteenth-century refectory. Be that as it may, the pilgrims still come to look at the church with its art and pray at the massive but plain tomb of the saint, which was restored in 1925.

The Franciscan charisma turned into monument did not stop with the building of the basilica of Saint Francis. The basilica of Saint Clare, built to house her body in 1257, stands above the foundations of the old church of San Giorgio which was Francis's parish church. Within that church is the oratory of the crucifix that contains the great painted crucifix that "spoke" to Francis; it once hung in the church of San Damiano. Above the city on the flanks of Monte Subasio is the hermitage of the Carceri (literally: the "prison cells"), enlarged by the redoubtable fifteenth-century Observant Franciscan preacher, Saint Bernardine of Siena, where Saint Francis retired for con-

templative meditation. The hermitage is now a small friary and one of the most beautiful spots in the area. Below the town is the beautiful church and convent of San Damiano where Saint Clare once lived. Near that spot is the place purported to be where Saint Francis composed the larger part of his "Canticle of Brother Sun." Below the town in the valley is the ugliest church in the entire environs: the massive baroque basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels, finished in the seventeenth century and rebuilt in the nineteenth century, which houses a rare treasure: a tiny romanesque chapel that stood in the days of Saint Francis — the "Little Portion" where he would gather his brethren. It was in that tiny chapel that the great mystic Simone Weil first felt compelled to kneel down and pray.

One of the things that makes Assisi such an attractive place is that the old city has managed to retain much of its medieval character. The civic buildings around the main square are still there; the cathedral of San Rufino may still be visited as can the Benedictine house, which reminds visitors of the monastic presence that existed long before the lifetime of the saint and whose generosity helped him in his earliest days.

Apart from the clogs of day trippers, Assisi is enhanced by the serious pilgrims who come not only for the natural beauty of the area (and beautiful it is) but for the places made sacred by the presence of the saint. It is a place of both ecumenical and interreligious pilgrimage. Once while staying in Assisi a pilgrim, a Swiss Protestant, said to me that Francis was her saint also. She was, of course, right. It was fitting that Pope John Paul II, in 1986, called for a meeting of the world's religious leaders to come to Assisi to pray for peace, as John Paul II did again in 2001. It was Assisi, after all, where Francis first

tried to bring peace to a torn world. At those papal meetings Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, as well as peoples representing other religious traditions met and prayed. Somehow the image of Francis and the caliph meeting together in peace hovers over such gatherings.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Francis Reconsidered

Saints should be judged guilty until proven innocent.

George Orwell

THAT FRANCIS IS ONE of the most loveable of the saints in the entire historical panoply of Christian holiness tempts very little in the way of argument. Within his own lifetime he exhibited a powerful charismatic influence on people best exemplified by the numbers who flocked to join him and his poor brothers, to say nothing of the social classes who felt that attraction. What had started out as an experiment in gospel living became before his death a large movement numbering, within the first order itself, in the thousands.

The literature about the saint began within a few years of his death and continued for some generations. The massive compilation of the stories of Francis extant in Latin from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries fills a huge book of nearly 800 pages in the *Analecta Franciscana* (volume 10) compiled by Franciscan scholars in the first half of the twentieth century. As those who are most familiar with that literature well know,

many of the early legends were written not as charmingly simple examples of hagiography but as works that had a definite point of view about who Francis was and what his intentions were. There is a whole school of studies, not unlike that of New Testament scholarship which seeks to recapture the "historical Jesus," that has debated the meaning of Francis for well over a century.

This extended debate has its origins in a book published by the French Protestant scholar, Paul Sabatier, in the late nineteenth century. His *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (English translation, 1894) depicted Francis as a kind of proto-evangelical whose simple life of gospel living was betrayed by the institutional church, which forced his simple vision into the procrustean bed of canonical legislation and papal supervision. To paraphrase Renan: Francis preached the gospel and we ended up with the Franciscan Order. Rome paid Sabatier a backhanded compliment for the audacity of his claim: they put his work on the index of forbidden books.

Nobody today defends Sabatier's thesis in its entirety. Like many classic theories about the nature of history or a moment in history (think of Jacob Burckhardt on the Renaissance) it is a sounding board against which thinkers play. As a consequence, a good deal of Franciscan historiography is done with Sabatier's ghost as an offstage presence. To what degree were Francis and his ideals betrayed by the institutionalization of his insights? How explain the anguished cry of Francis at the end of his *Testament* about not putting glosses on his rule or saying that there was another one? Was the admission of scholars to his *religio* a slippery slope toward a class structure? What happened to the ideal of absolute poverty? In the generations

after Francis, did not the fight about the character of poverty always look back to the figure of Francis himself for justification? Was the clericalization of the Order consonant with Francis's aims even if he himself held the priesthood in the highest esteem? Is the whole subsequent history of the Franciscan Order(s) merely a proof of the Weberian thesis about the routinization of charisma?

Those questions are still discussed, but the recent trend toward a close reading of Francis's own writings and away from a too single-minded gaze on the early writings about him has helped to frame issues more crisply. As these pages have earlier argued, any close examination of his writings, *pace* Sabatier, show unambiguously that Francis was an orthodox Catholic believer who clearly and persistently incorporated the reforming spirit of Lateran Council IV into his teaching. Francis had nothing in common with those movements of his day that veered toward heterodox claims of autonomy from either episcopal or papal control. In fact, one could make the case that his very success — apart from the persuasive power of his own charismatic personality — derived from the confidence that both bishops and popes (as well as future popes) had in him and what he was trying to do. In order to survive, in short, the Franciscan *religio* had to make its peace with the regnant realities of medieval Catholicism.

One of the ironies of the story of Francis is that a good many problems derived from the simple fact that he was a charismatic and compellingly holy figure. After all — and here I merely gloss some titles taken from Bonaventure's major legend of the saint — a "leader" and a "herald" and a "practitioner" of gospel perfection, a "hierarchic man," the angel of the

sixth seal, the "perfect follower of Christ" who bore the "seal of the likeness of the crucified Christ" upon his body was someone to be reckoned with. One could multiply such sentiments from earlier sources, culminating in the extravagant book by Bartholomew of Pisa who complied a tedious list of conformities between the life of Francis and the life of Christ; a book, by the way, that would later irritate Martin Luther intensely.

The net result of this focus on Francis is that the meaning of his order was intimately tied to his own meaning. By contrast, the other mendicant orders of the time — the Dominicans, the Carmelites, and the Augustinians to name the major ones — did not focus with such exactitude on their founders but on the particular charisms of the order itself. Thus, for example, while the Dominicans certainly and zealously honored their founder, Dominic Guzman (1170?-1221; canonized 1234), the preaching friars kept their main focus on study and preaching and not on the person of Dominic himself. For their rule of life they adopted the Rule of Saint Augustine.

The Order of Friars Hermits of Saint Augustine were formally organized in the mid-thirteenth century from various small communities that had adopted Augustine's rule — a rule that had already been in use among the regular canons and other monastic movements instituted in the wake of the Gregorian reform. Even though the medieval Augustinians tried to link their order historically to the great bishop of Hippo, in fact they did so only because they wanted to have the authority of Augustine as their founder. The Carmelites, likewise, had a long and complicated history. Their origins can be traced back to hermits living on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land who, when they migrated to Europe, underwent a series of permuta-

tions before taking up the mendicant life. It was only with difficulty that they could point to a single founder, so their history was less concerned with a charismatic person. Despite this, like the Augustinians, the Carmelites needed some figure of authority, so they loved to invoke the figure of Elijah the Prophet who had lived on Mount Carmel before the Christian dispensation.

The Franciscans, by contrast, were centrally concerned with the person and the ideals of a single person, Francis of Assisi. The main lines of his vision were clear enough. Francis wanted his followers to live in poverty after the example of the Poor Christ. He wanted them to preach the gospel and he wanted them to be makers of peace and missionaries of goodness. Clearly, he wanted them to remain within, and be exemplars of, Catholic Christianity. He saw them (as did the popes who encouraged them) as Catholic reformers who would carry out the ideals stipulated by the reforming councils held at the Lateran. Their devotional focus would be intensely christological and their missionary strategy would be to preach the gospel everywhere and to all who had not heard of Christ. To shape the movement into a coherent community Francis gave them a Rule.

That the early Franciscans upheld that ideal is beyond question. They filled the cities of Christendom with churches designed to attract people who could hear the gospel. They expanded their efforts not only in Europe but outside the traditional confines of Christian influence. The missionary movement of the period had a deep Franciscan influence. As we have seen, Franciscans were already active in areas of Islamic influence during the lifetime of the saint and the history

of the Holy Land, from the time of Francis down to the present day, has been marked by a persistent Franciscan presence. In time the mendicant followers of Francis would make their way east even into China.

Nonetheless, the power of Francis's own life was such that it would fuel various ways of understanding fidelity to the saint. Foremost was the issue of Francis's attitude toward learning and scholarship. Francis had welcomed the Portuguese canon, Anthony of Padua, into his order but warned that his studies should not be undertaken at the expense of "holy poverty." Francis feared that study inevitably demanded the owning of books, life among an educated elite, and all of the infrastructure that study demanded.

Whatever fears Francis may have had, the Franciscan movement attracted brilliant men to the order who have become familiar names among those who study theology. In the century following the death of Francis we need only recall the names Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Peter John Olivi, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. Some of these figures were professors at the University of Paris, which was the center of academic learning in the thirteenth century. That they became professors was, of course, a paradox, since holding chairs at prestigious centers like Paris was exactly what Francis did not have in mind for his companions.

Not all the followers of Francis were pleased or edified by the luminaries of academic learning who called themselves Franciscans. The most vehement protest against academic learning as a corrosive influence on Franciscan poverty came from the pen of the poet Jacopone of Todi (died 1306), who became a Franciscan after the death of his wife sometime in the

1270s. Jacopone belonged to the radical wing of the Franciscans who espoused a severe dedication to poverty and self-denial. In one of his "lauds" he wrote a tercet that summed up a certain disdain for learning:

> That's the way it is — not a shred left of the spirit
> of the Rule!
> In sorrow and grief I see Paris destroy Assisi stone
> by stone.
> With all their theology they've led the Order down
> a crooked path.

Friars like Jacopone emphasized withdrawal from the world, simple poverty, identification with the poor, and so on. Some of them were drawn into the contemplative withdrawal of hermit life. Some of their numbers caused fissures in the Franciscan Order itself so that by the fourteenth century there were small conventicles who were not only in rebellion against authorities within the Order but against episcopal and papal authority. The story of those Spiritual Franciscans is a complicated one and beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that despite the suppression of some of these groups (a few even went to the stake in the fourteenth century) that radical strain of otherworldliness, rejection of wealth, and literal if eccentric views of gospel living would never die out; it would reappear in other forms in the sixteenth century in strains of the Radical Reformation after Luther.

The various branches of the Franciscan Order, both male and female, would persist down to the present day. The various orders of friars, contemplative nuns (the Poor Clares), sisters,

and laypersons who follow the Third Order rules of the Franciscan family still enrich the life of the church. But the spirit and teachings of Francis do not reside solely within the confines of the Franciscan Orders. One could argue that radical lay groups like the Catholic Workers reflect to a large degree the simple ideal of the Franciscan *religio*.

We could think of Francis as a kind of spiritual classic in the sense that he should be understood in his own terms as a historical person who lived in a precise historical period but whose meaning is available for other generations to learn about as a source of Christian wisdom. That Francis was a medieval person is beyond dispute. Not to understand him against everything that was going on in his age — the rise of urban life, the birth of the universities, the crusades, the reforming councils, the culture of mercantilism — is not to understand him at all. But to assert his social location is not the same thing as saying that he represents only a medieval type.

What, broadly speaking, does Francis teach the generations that followed beyond him?

First, when we view Francis in the context of his own life we see a person who sought to live the gospel life by a series of experiments which he undertook by drawing on the models available to him. We see in his life a kind of evolution in his own spiritual journey in which he makes use of the ways of Christian living available to him. For a period in his life he lived as a man of penance by withdrawing from the world, serving the poor, the sick, and the lepers while spending his time in prayer and retreat. For a period he even took up the life of the traditional hermit, complete with the traditional garb of the hermit: the staff, the leather shoes, the rough tunic, and the

belt. After hearing the gospel challenge of living completely poorly he decided that was the life for him, but even then he fashioned himself in a model that was available to him: he fancied himself a knight errant, not bearing arms but bearing the cross and serving his ideal woman, Lady Poverty. In other words, Francis replicated in his own life aspects of Christian reform that were abroad in the culture.

In that sense, Francis drew upon the hagiographical memory of the Christian tradition to find a way of life that was compatible with the intuitions that he had received as a person who wished to follow the gospel. Neither his life nor his strategies, in short, were born without reference to the currents abroad in the times in which he lived. It is true that he did not find his place in the traditional options open to him. He did not enter monastic life; he did not seek out ordination and join the canons regular; he did not satisfy himself with one of the traditional "rules of life" that were already approved by the church. In fact, insisting upon and actually obtaining a new rule was a rather singular fact about his life. Nonetheless he did draw on the tradition in his search for a life appropriate for him.

To understand Francis, then, one must understand him against the background from which he came and against the sources available to him. The great lesson is that while Francis did do something new, his newness cannot be detached from the tradition that made his originality possible. Further, his newness was also an attempt not to replicate the mistakes others had made. He fought hard to keep his life and that of his followers within the Catholic tradition — to live, as he said, *more catholico,* "after the Catholic manner." He did not want to

end up as one of those marginal heretical groups who so reacted against the abuses within the church that they found themselves totally alienated from the great church itself, as did, for example, the Poor Men of Lyons or the Patarines of Milan.

What was the major insight of Francis that made him an original? Basically, the answer is his understanding of evangelical poverty. Francis did not understand religious poverty as the "sharing of goods" as did the monastic tradition. What Francis wanted to do was to be a person of non-possession: no lands, no income, no saving up "for a rainy day," no possessions beyond what was needed for daily life. This was hardly a new idea in itself but Francis had a deeply realized Christian motive for living in this way. He thought that to live a life of radical poverty was to actually perform the gospel command of Jesus to give up everything for his sake. In that sense, Francis was a biblical literalist.

Furthermore, Francis linked his idea of poverty to his fuller understanding of christology. He saw, among other things, the poverty of Christ's birth, his wandering life in Galilee, and, above all, his passion and death on the cross as the model for his own poverty. He would be as poor as the poor Christ. Beyond that he understood the Incarnation itself as an act of self-giving, as a self-emptying embodied in the simple statement of John that the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14).

While it is true that his emphasis on poverty had a prophetic edge to it in that it was a rebuke to the worldliness of the church and its ministers and as a protest against the commercial rapaciousness of the rising mercantile class (like that of his own father) and the greed of the aristocratic class, his basic motive was christological: he would be poor because Christ was poor.

This insight into the significance of Christ as a person of poverty who is the model to be imitated yields a fuller picture of Francis's own understanding of the gospel. Poverty was the hermeneutical lens through which he read the gospel. It also created the neuralgic point that would create so much tension once his own life led others to him. Discussions about the practice of poverty troubled Francis's fraternity in his own lifetime and in the growth of the order after his death. It is not difficult to see how the tensions arose. For Francis, living a life of poverty was a simple imperative deriving from his conversion — his hearing the gospel. Others may have felt the same call.

The problem arose, however, when one had to face the practical issues that were thrown up on almost a daily basis: what about the need for books for the celebration of the liturgy? How to care for a friar who was sick? How to feed and house friars when they began to increase in numbers? What about the support of learned men who could contribute to the preaching mission of the church — were they to be denied books? One is reminded of a quip made by a follower of Mohandas Gandhi who was another man zealous to live poorly: "If the old man only knew how expensive it is to keep him in his life of poverty!"

The practice of evangelical poverty can be understood under the rubric of traditional asceticism that has had a long and honorable history in the Christian spiritual tradition. Francis did add another note to the practice: that living poorly was a *joy.* One element that can be detected in the early stories of Francis is that his life was characterized by a certain joy. While one can exaggerate this idea (and it has been overblown by some more romantically inclined admirers of the saint), there

is in the early legends a joy that Francis expresses in his love for music, his eye for beauty, his reaction to the wonders of creation, his tenderness to dumb animals, his concern for the poor, the sentiments he expresses in his prayers, in his lauds, and, above all, in his famous canticle. It is almost as if by dispossessing himself of his worldly goods he took on a new eye for the beauties of the world and those who inhabit it. Speaking to his own brothers in one of his admonitions (#20) Francis said "Blessed is that religious who takes no pleasure and joy except in the most holy words and deeds of the Lord and with these leads people to the love of God in joy and gladness."

Francis himself, if a story remembered by one of his early friars is correct, underscored the concept of joy in the form of a story. Francis said that perfect joy would not come from hearing that all of the professors of Paris had become friars along with all the prelates and the kings of England. Perfect joy would not come if news arrived that all unbelievers came to the true faith. Perfect joy comes when, rebuffed and left in the darkness of the night, when one seeks shelter, some food, and a place to sleep and is called a stupid beggar to boot, if one might still have "patience and did not become upset, there would be perfect joy in this and true virtue and the salvation of the soul." One has to read that simple story against the picture of Christ who demands that one turn the other cheek as he did when struck and rebuffed while in the hands of Pilate and his soldiers. Behind that story is a whole complex intuition about detachment, forgiveness, humility, and the other virtues that make up the deepest following of Christ.

One cannot understand Francis's following of the poor way

of Christ as an exercise designed only for his own salvation or his own search for spiritual perfection. Francis saw his life as a gift to others. Francis marked his own conversion from the time he resisted his own natural repugnance and turned toward the lepers whom he had until then avoided. In his search to imitate Christ he identified himself with the *minores* — those who were on the bottom of the economic and social scale. In the Rule of 1221 Francis urged his brethren to beg alms because the right to alms was a legacy for the poor guaranteed by Jesus. At the same time, later in that same Rule, he told his friars that when things were asked of them they were to be given without thought of repayment. This was just a variation on his desire to minister to the poor.

It does not take much reflection to see how Francis was a living example of what would become, in modern theological parlance, the "preferential option for the poor." Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that his whole life was shaped by a conscious decision to be on the side of the poor after the example of the poor Christ. Although it would be a bit tendentious to retroject his life and his identification with the poor into some kind of early liberation theology, it is possible to see his life from the perspective of liberationist thinking in this sense: Francis had a radical vision of the equality of all persons who, after all, were icons of Christ and, as such, had an inherent dignity which demanded that they be treated with justice and out of a sense of love. There is in any radical adoption of this deep christological truth a certain way in which class and social distinctions are deconstructed and relativized. Francis was not one, despite his scrupulous observance of the social norms of the day, who saw more merit in a pope than in a peasant.

One particular form of human solidarity in which Francis took a keen interest was the nurturance of peace among those who were divided by contention. He did that, as we have already seen, by reconciling people in his own hometown, by preaching peace in the towns and villages he visited, and when he even crossed hostile battle lines to speak to the caliph who warred against his fellow Christians. It should not surprise us that his habitual greeting was "Peace" or that the word "peace" and "peacemaker" occurs with some frequency in his writings.

Perhaps the most important reason that Saint Francis caught the imagination of future generations so vividly had more to do with his persona than with anything he wrote or said. The vast majority of people have no imaginary picture of a Saint Augustine (was he befittingly dark skinned?) or an Anselm of Canterbury or Bernard of Clairvaux in their head. Others may have a completely imaginary picture of a Saint Antony of the desert due to the vivid artistic representations in the tradition or they know that Saint Jerome translated the Bible into Latin and had a sharp tongue. But in the case of Francis we think we know what he looked like, how he dressed, what his interests were, and the most popular stories about him. To put it simply: we can imagine Saint Francis even if that image has been shaped in part by the huge artistic reservoir we have at our disposal.

There was keen interest in the person and gestures of Francis both in his lifetime and within a few years of his death. When Elias of Cortona began immediately to erect a fitting basilica to honor the saint and his tomb he had the shrewd good sense to know that this was not just one more saint — this was a person who would attract crowds of pilgrims and visitors in vast numbers.

Thomas of Celano sketched out a portrait of the saint in his first life of the saint in a highly stylized fashion (borrowing from a hagiographical portrait of Bernard of Clairvaux), describing him as short, thin, with fine teeth and a small beard on an elongated face — a portrait that may have inspired the one drawn by Berlingheri for the Pescia altarpiece which was done in 1235, only a decade after the saint's death. That altarpiece, and the famous fresco of the saint in the *Sacro Specchio* at the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco (early thirteenth century?), mark the beginning of a huge artistic tradition that would run from that time down through the baroque into the rococo period. The various representations of the saint, especially Saint Francis receiving the stigmata, are set pieces in the history of art. They are also, of course, highly idealized and imaginatively constructed attempts to grasp the meaning of the saint.

There is another way of thinking about the persona of Francis. One could say that his life (and, to a real extent, his body) was a kind of exegesis of the scriptures and an attempt to live out the imitation of Christ. While it is true that Francis is depicted in the sources as an intuitive explicator of the scriptures and while it is equally true that his writings are saturated with excerpts from the Bible, it is even more true — and more important — to understand that Francis was more a performer of the Word of God than a commentator upon it. In a certain sense, Francis was a scriptural literalist in that he saw the gospels as giving him precise instructions about how to live his life. It would not be too audacious to say that the stigmata were a kind of writing on the body of Francis — a kind of reversal or mirror image of the passion story.

If the gospel says that a follower of Jesus should go abroad

preaching and teaching without goods or that he should leave everything and follow Christ, Francis saw those dicta as precise instructions about how to live one's life. The gospel, for Francis, was not a book for meditation but marching orders for living. Such an approach to the call of the gospel is certainly not peculiar to Francis, but what was singular about his reaction to the gospel, as Bernard McGinn and others have pointed out, was his ability to combine into a single whole the demands for repentance, preaching, and service to the poor with the absolute centrality of the cross. In that sense, Francis's understanding of the emptying of the Word in the incarnation, the solidarity of all men and women because of the incarnation, and the self-emptying on the cross are all part of the same seamless fabric.

Francis understood that preaching meant communication. He also understood that the way one lives, the fashion in which a person interacts with others, the picture one presents to the world — these are all forms of communication. He put this theory of communication succinctly in instructions he once gave to some of his brothers as they were about to enter a town: "Preach and, if necessary, use words."

The striking singularity of Francis did get lost over the centuries when Francis himself faded into the background while the friars and their struggles to define themselves came to the fore. By the dawn of the sixteenth century it was the friars who felt the lash of the pen of Erasmus. In the Reformation the mendicants were swept away in those countries most affected by the reformers. The Enlightenment had scorn for Francis and his followers (see the indifference of Goethe or the vitriol of Voltaire), only to see them rediscovered in the age of the Romantics. Alas, many of the portraits of Francis in the nine-

teenth and twentieth centuries projected onto Francis all of the artists' love for Umbrian countrysides, Italian sunshine, and quaint animals.

Others, however, caught a glimpse of Francis the radical. Gandhi understood the persuasive power of his poverty, his love for peace, and his identification with the poor. Simone Weil grasped his self-abandonment and the lure of the cross. She said that entering the little chapel of the Portiuncula forced her, for the first time in her life, to go to her knees in prayer. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, founders of that most Franciscan of movements, the Catholic Workers, captured his spirit of generous attention to the poor in whom he saw Christ and his life of disciplined prayer.

Buoyed by the success of the earlier interreligious meeting, Pope John Paul II called for a second meeting to be held in Assisi under the rubric of an "Interreligious Day of Prayer for Peace in the World" on January 24, 2002. The papal invitation went to two hundred leaders of twenty-four different religions. In his opening address to these religious leaders John Paul said that the meeting at Assisi was significant because everything in Assisi "speaks of a singular prophet of peace known as Francis. He is loved not only by Christians but by many other believers and by people, far removed from religion, who identify with his ideals of justice, reconciliation, and peace."

At the conclusion of the day of prayer the representatives gave each other the kiss of peace while the "Canticle of the Creatures" of Saint Francis was sung. A document entitled "The Assisi Decalogue for Peace," composed for the occasion, was sent to all leaders and heads of governments on March 4 of the same year.

The charismatic power of Saint Francis draws quite different people for quite different reasons. The devoutly religious composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) premiered his opera *Saint Francois d'Assise* in Paris in 1983. Divided into eight tableaux, the libretto is not a retelling of the saint's life but rather a series of way stations on the road to God. The justly famous sixth tableau is Francis's "Sermon to the Birds" (Messiaen was a keen bird-watcher and ornithologist) in which Francis "hears" the presence of God in creation. It stands as a contrast to the final two scenes where, against the background of a powerful chorus, Francis receives the stigmata and finally, in the final death scene, he is stretched out like his crucified Lord and is sent upward by the chorus bathed in the light of God.

The publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000) is light miles away in spirit from Messiaen's opera. Negri, an unrepentant communist militant, issued the book as a manifesto for the possibilities of communism on the cusp of the new millennium, a sort of counterpoint to Marx's *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. Negri is convinced that the moment for a communist revolution may be more possible now given the looming oppression of superpowers and the hegemony of multinational corporations. His book has received little attention outside of the hothouse atmosphere of left-wing intellectuals.

What is startling, however, is the epilogue of the book. The militants of the future must work within the vast somewhat amorphous world which, de facto, is. The task of the militant is to shape affective networks within the set of social structures with no illusion of the possibility of transcending them. Who might model such a form of life? In a startling final paragraph

Negri says: consider the work of Francis of Assisi. Francis who opposed "nascent capitalism" not by world-denying forms of asceticism but by a "joyous life, including all of being and nature, the animals, sister moon, brother sun, the birds of the field, the poor and exploited humans, together against the will of power and corruption." This is the kind of revolution Negri wishes to model and hence his final sentence: "This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist."

European romanticism has come full circle in little more than a century. The nineteenth-century *bien pensants* wanted a Francis who communed with nature untrammeled by the constrictive power of the church and its dogma. They were quite willing, as Paul Sabatier said in the preface of his 1893 biography of the saint, to leave the shrine, the relics, and the cult of the saint to the Catholic Church; they saw a Francis who was evangelical, a lover and composer of poetry, and the incarnation of the best of Mediterranean sun-loving culture. A generation later, that most cynical of Mediterraneans, Benito Mussolini, would call Francis the "most Italian of saints; the most saintly of the Italians." At the end of the century, the same romantic figure of Francis shows up as a joyful militant who is a paradigm for those who lead the vanguard of activists toward a communist utopia.

What the romantic and communist visions of Francis have in common is a Francis outside the world in which he lived and apart from the sources that nourished his life and his vision. He was neither a lover of nature nor a utopian (although some of his followers, the Spiritual Franciscans, may well have been). He was simply a little Umbrian touched by the mysterious power of grace who had a revolutionary idea: to live the life of

the Christ of the gospels as closely and as literally as he could. In that sense, Francis was a radical fundamentalist. Francis performed the gospel so perfectly that he became the saint whom we recognize so well today.

Some years ago Frances Young, the Methodist theologian from Great Britain, wrote a little book called *Virtuoso Theology.* She likened the Christian life to the performance of music. The Word of God is like a musical score. It may be studied and there may be great efforts to establish a clear text and the intention of the text (the work, respectively, of the exegete or theologian and, by parallel, the musicologist) but the full meaning of the text appears only when it is performed. Fidelity to the text is the bottom line, but there is a difference between a beginner plunking away at Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and the same piece at the hands of a seasoned performer. Some read so deeply into the mind of the composer that we honor such a person as a musical virtuoso. It is safe to say that Francis was such a virtuoso whose music is still heard today and enriches us in the hearing.