

**THE CROSS
of
SAN DAMIANO**



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TODAY'S MESSAGE of the CHRIST of SAN DAMIANO, ASSISI

A Biblical, Catechetical Meditation

Introduction to the ICON

For several decades now, it has been the custom at the North American College in Rome to greet the “New Men” each year with a pilgrimage week-end of prayer and reflection, trudging the geographical and ascetical ascents of Assisi. One of the highlights of this annual “Exodus Experience” is to ponder the message and the charism of St. Francis and St. Claire - whose memory is still so very much alive in this ancient hill-side town. Their extraordinary gift to the Church had its beginning from the message St. Francis received from the Crucifix that hung in the Church of San Damiano, Assisi.

The invitation extended by our Lord to St. Francis centuries ago is still a challenging one: “**Go and repair My Church!**” □ The setting of this message is the Glorified Christ, depicted on a Cross, a 12th century Icon, perhaps of Syrian origin - which is still very widely honored throughout the world.

To be a “New Man” in the Church is the constant invitation of the glorified Christ, as presented to us all by St. Paul: ...be intent on things above ... your life is hidden now with Christ in God... you will appear with him in glory ... **put on the New Man**, the one who **grows** in knowledge as he is **formed anew in the Image of his Creator**... [cf. Col 3: 1, ff.].

The ICON [cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*]

[1] # 476 - cited hereafter as: “CCC”]:

This art-form has been variously described through the ages. Some “pray the Icons” as a “Contemplation in Color” [Leonid Ouspensky]. They have been compared to a flower-garden planted upside down - with their roots enmeshed within the Trinity, within the eternal mystery, and their brilliant colors, a wonder-filled explosion of the divinity and the plan of redemption. These master-pieces are produced through the prayer and penance of the human artists, moved by God, in their ascetical contemplation of His Word, over a period of time.

Their colors are “**celestial**” in several senses - on the one hand, they are enshrouded in the mystery of God and His plan of salvation: they have their hope, as an anchor cast above [cf. Heb 6:19], in the mystery manifested to them, as attainable by the divine goodness. They also are endowed with “heavenly” colors, in imitation of the wondrous beauty of creation, the master-piece of the divine wisdom. They try to emulate the colors of the sky and of nature in general. The Icon is also like a rainbow across the clouds of time, promising far more than a pot of gold at the end of the storm.

They are a “theology of beauty” [Paul Evdokimov] and direct the faithful observer into the mystery that is being unfolded by them. They lead ultimately to the

contemplation of the Trinity [Vladimir Lossky], and to a participation in the divine plan of the New Creation.

As a penetrating look into the central mystery of the faith, the Icons do offer **an anticipated beatific vision**. As one prayerfully “looks on” the Icon, the contemplative is inspired to “look up” beyond the storms, to the rainbow [cf. Gn 9:15, f.; Si 43: 11, f.], and the majestic beauty arches high in the clouds, indicating that God will no longer shoot His arrows in anger [cf. Ps 18:13, ff.; 29; 144:6]. Divine peace is the promise forever.

Each Icon is a preview of coming attractions - that of seeing God forever just as He is in Himself, honored in heaven and on earth by the communion of saints, who carry out His will. The Icon is a sign along the side of the road of life, showing the way home to the tired pilgrim. It offers instructions to the “over-night” guest for the journey of life - faintly revealing heaven as it will be our definitive home. [In this sense “parish” comes to be understood in faith as a residence for “aliens”, “way-farers”, on their way home to the Father’s House].

The Icon, then, is like a window into the Trinity - the one who will treasure this manifestation of the Divine Word as “explained” in technicolor in his\her heart, as Mary does [cf. Lk 2:19, 51], will come into ever deeper contact with the Mystery. The Icon also serves as a mirror for Christianity - even though “mirror” and “spectator” might have the same root in Latin, one may begin by merely “looking at” the Icon; but in faith-filled prayer, one looks “through” it, being drawn ever more intensely into the reality of its mystery: being “raised up”, the Lord “draws” all to Himself [cf. Jn 12:32]

The Icons inspire contemplation, and also apostolic action. One stands before each Icon in faith, and “listens” within the heart to a unique “translation” of the divine word. The believer may be ever further drawn into the central sacrament of the faith - the Eucharist, the supreme symbolic reality of the faithful, this “archive” of the divine message. The Icons are a sublime art gallery of the treasures of the divine Heart. They become a “hall of heroes\ heroines”, pointing through their lives, in imitation of Mary, as “Guides”, “Directional Signals” toward the Divine Artist.

The Icon points to a particular “presence” of mystery, depicted in a brilliant display of light and shadow. The Glory of God in the Highest is presented on earth in unique manner, indicating the God of love, constantly reaching out toward humanity, searching for a way into the human mind and heart. The Icon is a light in the tunnel of darkness - like Mary, the Icon shows the way to Jesus Christ and to the Trinity. The Icon is a directional signal in an age of bewildering suggestions, some of which are generically lumped under the noble word, “art.”

The Icon is Symbolic Theology at its height - often it can serve as a “catechism” for the weary mind, solace for eyes blinded so often by images and lesser, and only passing beauty. As St. Paul brought the emptiness of Christ and its paradoxical contrast with His exaltation to the divine glory [cf. Ph 2:5-11], under divine inspiration, he challenges the Church of all time, to “**put on the mind of Christ Jesus**”. The Synoptics emphasize the “following of Christ” - and a classic of spiritual literature,

attributed to Thomas a Kempis moves believers to the “Imitation of Christ.” The Icons reflect this uplifting capacity to the human soul, “naturally capable of God.”

The Icons are very often a pilgrimage through the night toward illumination: *nox illuminatio mea*: night becomes as the light of day - [cf. Ps 139: 12]. They assist in the difficult journey through the Cross into the Light [*per Crucem ad Lucem!*]. The “weary” are inspired by the message of the Suffering Servant of God [cf. Is 50:4], speaking also through images, receiving much inspiration for the journey of life.

[2] **CCC [cf. ## 1159-1162]** offer a beautiful, succinct teaching on sacred images. The Incarnation of God has made possible this new “economy of images”. St. John Damascene is considered to be among the greatest of the theologians of the Divine Images, called the “Icons”. He is the “last” of the great era of the Fathers of the East. His work, and that of many contemplative theologians since his time, offer a moving invitation to look at” the unfolding of the teaching of the Tradition of the Church, from the unique perspective offered by sacred art. To “**pray the Icons**” is comparable to a child who might watch a splendid parade from the shoulders of a trusted elder - as one would ponder Sacred Tradition, as presented during the unique age of the Fathers of the Church, both Eastern and Western. The great Syrian Saint stated: the beauty of the images moves me to contemplation - as a meadow delights the eyes, and subtly infuses the soul, with the glory of God.

The Icons express the same Gospel hope that Sacred Scripture communicates by words - the same Sacred Teaching handed on by the other “Monuments of Tradition” [Yves Congar, OP]. Sacred Art enjoys a special place in this communication of the divine mystery. The contemplation of Icons, the prayerful meditation on God’s word, the singing of liturgical hymns: all harmonize in the symphony of the divine mystery, inspiring both the heart’s memory and imagination. All this needs to be expressed in the “new life” of the faithful. An Ecumenical Council, the 7th, called the IInd Council of Nicea [in 787] was committed to the defense of the sacred images. The Icons help us to look back - to take a good look at the present - and to trust in the future.

The entire doctrine of the Church is a balanced harmony, the total concord of one’s thought stands out like the motif of a symphony [cf. A Sertillanges, OP, *The Intellectual Life*. c. 3]. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger [cf. *The Nature and Mission of Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 83, ff.] offers a number of presentations of this early Church theme of symphonia: it manifests the unity of both Testaments; it is an expression of the unity of Christians among themselves; it is the union of believers with God; the harmony between the human body and soul, unifying and calming inner strife. The late Cardinal-Elect, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, wrote that *Truth is Symphonic* [San Francisco: Ignatius 1987] - great music is always dramatic: there is a continual process of intensification Each Icon is a carefully orchestrated melody and geometry of brilliance, centering on the divine heart. The faithful are invited to “listen” to this chorus of color, this divine melody, in the depths of their hearts.

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A. The Icon of the Glorified Christ of San Damiano, Assisi

Presentation:

[1] The contemplation of this Icon is itself a kind of **pilgrimage in faith** - it can be "looked upon", contemplated, as an "**ascending Ecclesiology**", beginning at the bottom, reflecting on the border: the rock and the shells - leading up to the glorified Christ, returning in triumphant procession in His Ascension [cf. I P 3: 19-20; 4:6] in the small medallion near the top, responding to His Father's blessing, led by the Holy Spirit, depicted on the brow of the Crucified. This Icon may be **prayed from the bottom up**, leading us to the glorified Christ Who is arriving among the angels and the saints. This is also in fulfillment of the joyful proclamation that at Jesus' Name, every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth - and every tongue proclaim Jesus is the Lord to the glory of the Father! [cf. Ph 2:10, ff.]. It seems to be a kind of synopsis of the 4th gospel Crucifixion scene [cf. Jn 19:16, ff.]. The Inscription over Jesus' head is simply "Jesus the Nazarean, the King of the Jews".

[2] The text reads that they crucified Jesus, and divided His garments among them. While only the document to the Hebrews [cf. 4: 14, ff.] actually calls Jesus a "priest" in the New Testament, there is the clear Johannine inference that Jesus "is" Eucharist: God loved the world so much that He offered up His only Son [cf. Jn 3:16] - Jesus is "Some" one the Father has consecrated and sent into this world [cf. Jn 10:36] - for their sake I consecrate myself [cf. Jn 17: 17,f.] - and within God, there is a Holy Communion: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are "One". Holy Week seems like a grandiose Eucharistic Celebration: Palm Sunday is the Entrance Procession; Holy Thursday night, the struggle over the Offertory Gifts; Good Friday, the physical separation of the Body and Blood; and Easter Sunday, Holy Communion in their coming together again in the Resurrection. Jesus seems dressed as a priest - in a high priestly prostration in the Garden of Gethsemane before the awesome sacrifice that is to be offered - He is dressed in a long robe tied at the waste, with a golden girdle [cf. Rv 1:13, f. - - in the Transfiguration, His long white robe seems either the garb of a **king**, **prophet**, or a **priest** [cf. Mk 9:2, ff. - and par.] All the baptized share in this crucified priesthood of Jesus Christ [cf. I P 2: 4, f.], with His Sacred Stigmata opening up the gates of eternal life: only the Lamb that was immolated can open the scrolls [cf. Rv 5: 1, ff.] - the Pierced Side of Christ is compared to the opening of the Scriptures [cf. CCC ## 112; 129]

[3] Near the Cross of Jesus was **His Mother - Mary**, the wife of Clopas, and **Mary Magdalene**. In presenting His own Mother to John, representing all of us, we, too, are invited to make space for Mary in our hearts. To "slake His thirst", which was misunderstood [cf. Ps 69: 21], "they" stuck a sponge soaked in wine, and raised it to his lips. So that the bodies would not be left on the Cross on the Sabbath, it was decided to dispatch, expedite the victims. When they came to Jesus, He was already dead - so, one of the soldiers pierced his side, by thrusting his lance in to it. Immediately, blood and water flowed forth, as an eye-witness noted.

[4] On the evening of the first day of the week, the Risen Christ stood before His beloved Apostles. He strengthened their faith with His message of peace, forgave their

sins, and breathed out the Holy Spirit upon them, in a new act of Creation for their Apostolic Mission of handing on the Divine Mercy they had received. As He healed their sins, we are reminded of the extraordinary story from Luke's gospel [cf. 7: 1, ff.] how the centurion saw his son/ servant healed by the Word of the Savior. The soldier's great faith was expressed in his humility, in the unworthiness that he felt for the Lord to enter under his roof - healing and the New Creation came from the Word of the Lord, as did the initial Creation.

[5] There is the old prophecy from Isaiah [cf. 53:5, ff.] that by the wounds of the Suffering Servant, all of our sins would be healed. Peter took this message up in his baptismal instruction [cf. I P 2:21-25]. The sufferers of all ages are promised: because of His affliction, he shall see the light in the fullness of days... I will give him his portion among the great [cf. Is 53:10, f.].

[6] The Icon then "peaks" in the Ascending Christ: as He blessed them, He left them, and was taken up into heaven - they returned to Jerusalem, in joy, constantly praising God [cf. the Conclusion of Luke's gospel].

Saints Francis and Claire knew well from personal experience that to participate in the **Ascension procession**, it is always necessary to adhere to the Cross - there is no other "way".

B. The ICON as a Pilgrimage of Contemplation

1. In his 7th Chapter of his “Major Life” of St. Francis, the great Doctor of the Church and theologian of the Franciscan charism - St. Bonaventure - describes Francis in this way: “... one Easter Sunday ... Francis remembered our Lord who had appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that very day in the guise of the pilgrim ... Francis spoke to his Friars telling them how they should pass through this world like strangers and pilgrims and celebrate the Lord’s Pasch continually in poverty of spirit...” [n. 9 - cf. *Omnibus of Sources*. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press 1991].

2 All believers are challenged to celebrate the Pasch each day - by making their lives “**spiritual oblations**” [cf. Rm 12: 1, ff.] - offering “**spiritual sacrifices**” [cf. I P 2: 4, f.] acceptable to God through Jesus Christ [cf. 1 P 2:5, f.]. The Priest, with his privilege of daily Eucharist, is called to offer his whole life of struggle in prayer, perseverance, celibacy and apostolic mission, “imitating what he handles.”

3 In the few writings of St. Francis that have survived, one is the Rule of the year 1223. In Chapter 6, the saint wrote: “... the Friars are strangers and pilgrims in this world, who serve God in poverty and humility...” [cf. *Omnibus of Sources*.] - which is St. Peter’s advice [cf. I P 2: 11] - we are visitors and pilgrims.

4 The four Evangelists have each offered a specific portrait of Jesus Christ, from a distinctive point of view, personally adapted to the needs of those for whom the Gospel was intended. St. Luke, with his fascination for the City of God, shows Jesus’ entire public life to be **a constant “going up” to Jerusalem** - an extended pilgrimage from Galilee to Calvary: “... as the time approached when he was to be **taken up to heaven**, he set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem...” [cf. Lk 9: 51].

5. This means that Jesus made a decisive choice to do the Father’s Will, His “food” [cf. Jn 4:34]. There were certainly other times that Jesus “**went up**” to Jerusalem, but, we are presented with the divine paradigm for our own spiritual pilgrimage. There is throughout this reality, the Exodus experience of a spiritual self-discovery and vocational discernment for anyone who wants to “put on the mind of Christ Jesus.” [cf. Ph 2:5]. The “spiritual” Jerusalem is a life of self-giving so that others may be, find their way - the challenge is to take **this pilgrimage experience** [the Ex-odus] from USA to Rome - to Assisi - and eventually to the people we are called to serve. We need to make the pilgrimage hand-in-hand with Jesus Christ [cf. Demetrius Dumm, OSB, *Flowers in the Desert* NY: Mahway: Paulist 1987].

6. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is necessary to **follow, imitate** Him, to “**put on His mind**”. We **set out with the Lord**, share in His Exodus - His **passing over** to the Father. What is special to St. Luke is that he associates the Christian “**Way**” with his “**travel account**” of Jesus Christ. In Luke’s second volume - the Acts of the Apostles - Christians are called “**the Followers of the Way**” [cf. Jerusalem Bible, Ac 9:2 +].

7. Christian discipleship is not only admiration, but is even more identification with the Teacher. Like St. Paul, many sought out the gifted Rabbi, whereas Jesus comes

looking for disciples. He invites all the baptized to a personal and decisive choice, repeated all through life - He calls each priest to live and act in His Person. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, there is the Revelation of this new "Way", to follow Christ through the Church. Jesus Christ is the personified "TORAH" - He is the Way, the Truth and the Life [cf. Jn 14:6] - all are called to put on His mind, which means that taking on of a new mentality, a brand new life-style.

8. The "parish" is the temporary residence for the spiritual pilgrim - an idea that perhaps was abetted by the fact that there were two sets of blood brothers among the Twelve.

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Stepping Stones on the Assisi Ascent
Meditation points on the Prayer Pilgrimage of the ICON

1. **A Border of Shells:** the shell made a useful spoon, or even a cup, for the food and drink for the journey, the necessary "viaticum" for the weary way-farer, for the traveler seeking the waters of salvation {cf. Is 12: 1, ff.} In early rituals, the shell was used to pout the waters of Baptism [cf. C. H. Appleton, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art*. NY: Scribners 1959, pp. 88, f.], as the beginning of the initiation practice into the life of Christ through the Church. In ancient China, the shell served as a symbol of good fortune, and a prosperous journey - found in allegories about royalty - the Exodus people are a royal nation [cf. I P 2:9; Rv 1:6].

The shell is a haven of life, and is deeply associated with surviving and prospering in the depths of the sea, despite the frightening storms above [cf. J.E. Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*. NY: Philosophy Library 1962, pp. 152, f]. The fascination with the sea was also from the fact that it teemed with new and constant life [cf. Gn 1:20] - perhaps the womb of all life. The "deep" was the primordial chaos, and it was often personified. It was under Yahweh's control, yet remained awesome - but the Lord shows His ultimate authority over all insurgent forces [cf. E. R. Follis, "Sea in Symbolic Imagery", in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. NY: Doubleday 1992, Vol. 5, pp. 1058, f.]. New generations come to life as the old passes, like the "evening, then morning" of the creation story [cf. Gn 1: 3, ff.]

The shell is the protector of the precious pearl, for which the believer would sacrifice all to attain: the reign of God is likened to a precious pearl [cf. Mt 13:45]. We are called to give up all just to have a part of it. The slow moving shell-fish offer an example of **the tedious pilgrimage** in the depths of the sea - patiently and ever so slowly, making their way across the sands of time, in the depths of the turbulent sea. There is a hint of the resurrection theme here.

The shells also come together in nuptial harmony to produce new life - a glimpse perhaps into Francis' cosmic nuptials: brother sun/ sister moon and stars; brother wind/ sister water; brother fire/ sister earth [cf. Vincenzo C. Bigi, *IL Cantico delle Creature di Francisco d'Assisi*. Edizioni Portiuncola 1993]. This is so reminiscent of the Canticle of the Sun, honoring the TORAH of the Lord: the sun comes out of his pavilion like a bridegroom! [cf. Ps 19: 5].

The shell is protective of life, which is impossible outside of it - the shell is long-lasting, weathers the years of storms. The Creation story itself seems to be a divine victory over the desert, the darkness and the deep: the Lord sends out His Word and Holy Spirit and the primordial chaos gives way to life. The inherent fear of water by desert people is calmed by the Creator separating the waters above from the waters below [cf. Gn 1: 6, ff.] - the Divine Redeemer does the same in Exodus, dividing the waters to the left from those to the right [cf. Ex 14: 15, ff.]. This was done so that the Chosen People might march through unscathed, to sing the divine praises. The Divine Sanctifier does the same with the Ark of the Covenant that divided the River Jordan, in the very season of the year when the water was at its height! [cf. Jos 3: 14, ff.]. Israel's God dominated the chaos, controlled the storm, calmed the floods: give to the Lord the glory that is due to his name [cf. Ps 29]. The "Bronze Sea", large basins of still water on the high altar of the Temple, might have given some hint of the divine dominion over the deluge [cf. 2 Ch 4: 6, ff.].

After this wondrous performance, the Lord is "disappointed" in those who lose faith in the Bark of Peter, caught in a difficult storm: "... Master, we are lost! He awoke and rebuked the wind and the tumultuous waves... **where is your faith..?** [cf. Lk 8: 22, ff.] .

2. The Tapping of the Stone: the Icon of the Church rests on the Rock of Peter - new life came from the stone, tapped by Moses in the desert. Here the Cross seems to tap the Rock, and **new life** emerges. Moses got water from the stone [cf. Ex 17:1, ff.] - by striking the Rock with his staff, the water flowed to give God's holy people a drink. The waters of salvation poured forth: with joy you will draw water at the fountain of salvation - proclaim how holy is the Lord's Name [cf. Is 12: 1, ff.].

With his own spiritual exegesis, St. Paul explains this image for us: all of God's people drank the same spiritual drink, drawn from the spiritual rock, which was Christ [cf. I Co 10: 3, ff.]. The Pierced One opens the scroll of the Scriptures for us: the Lamb that was slain alone is worthy to break open the seals of the scroll [cf. Rv 5: 1, ff.]. CCC # 112 states: ... the phrase 'the Heart of Christ' can refer to Sacred Scripture, which makes known His heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But, the Scripture has been opened since the Passion..."

A garden in stony ground serves as an image of the Icon. A stream welled up out of the earth [cf. Gn 2: 6, ff.] - the wonderful stream envisioned by Ezechiel [cf. 47: 1, ff.] flowed from the Temple in the desert, which once again becomes the Garden of the Lord.

Jesus is likewise the corner-stone, the one the builders rejected. Peter's message is: come to Him, a living stone, precious in God's eyes. By association with Him, we become living stones, being built as an edifice of the Spirit [cf. I P 2: 4, ff.]

Before He departs, Jesus makes Peter the Rock on which the Church is built, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it [cf. Mt 16: 13, ff.] The Church is not built on sand [cf. Mt 7: 24, ff.]. New Life comes out of the Living Stone, the source of the living water: know that I am with you always, until the end of the world [cf. Mt 28:

20]. Above the stone, some interpreters see the faint outlines of a person who seems to be St. Peter [under the figure of the cock, near Jesus' left knee] - there may be Paul, perhaps an angel, and maybe the patron of Assisi, or the church [cf. *Il Crocifisso di San Damiano*. Roma: Centro Russa Ecumenica].

3. The Cock: by Christ's left knee, there is a rooster. This has long been associated with Peter, and his denial of the Lord three times: ... I tell you truly, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times [cf. Jn 13: 36, ff.; Mk 14:27; Lk 22:33; Mt 26:74].

There may be further possibilities with this image: how often Jesus wished to gather Jerusalem under his wings, as a hen gathers her chicks [cf. Mt 23: 37, f; Lk 13:34, f.]. The crow of the cock here seems no longer the reminder of betrayal - but, the beginning of a brand new day: my soul waits for the Lord, more than sentinels for the dawn [cf. Ps 130:6]. Yours is princely power on the day of your birth, in holy splendor, before the day-star, like the dew, I have begotten you - you are a priest forever [cf. Ps 110], Who is this that comes forth like the dawn, as beautiful as the moon, as resplendent as the Sun, as awe-inspiring as bannered troops [cf. Ct 6:10].

4. Two small figure stepping up imitating Christ in the Medallion: these two personalities seem to be imitating Jesus on the top of the Icon, being attracted by His ascension. The figurine beneath Jesus' right arm seems to be **Longinus** [their names may be deciphered from detailed representations of the Icon] - the unnamed Roman soldier whose lance opened the side of Christ on the Cross. Commentators have seen the Roman lance as a kind of "key" opening that tabernacle door into the sublime secrets of the Divine Heart. From this sanctuary of love, the abundance of Jesus' human heart in union with His divine Person showed His love for all [cf. GS 22]. This opened the flow of the waters of salvation, predicted long before [cf. Is 12: 1, ff.] - and this fulfills the enigmatic saying of Jesus "on the last and greatest day of the festival" of Tabernacles - Sukkot [cf. Jn 7: 37, ff.]: as Scripture says: **from his breast will flow the streams of salvation**. If anyone thirst, let him come to me. This is the celebration of the harvest, In-gathering.

The small figure under Christ's left arm has been understood by some interpreters as the one who attempted to slake the thirst of Jesus Christ in response to His: "I thirst!". There was a jar full of ordinary wine. "Someone" stuck a sponge into it, and by means of a pole raised it up to His lips [cf. Jn 19: 28, ff.] - everything is now finished, He said, and the Scriptures are fulfilled. Like the unprepared married couple of Cana [Jn 2] - and the sinful woman of Samaria [Jn 4], Jesus was not understood: she totally missed the message of His "thirst". Beyond the physical thirst of possible dehydration, there is the divine "thirst", yearning, for the Church- and Jesus' desire to send out His Spirit over humanity in an act of New Creation: if you only knew the Gift of God, and recognized it [Him], you would be asking Him for the living water [cf. Jn 4: 13, ff.]. Jesus' dominion over the waters of salvation was evident in Cana, on that Sabbath Day of His "Inaugural Week" when He changed water into wine.

These small figures seem to have been converted, "drawn" up under the influence of the Ascending Christ. They are stepping up, in imitation of Him: they shall

look on the One they have pierced [cf. Jn 19:37]. For John, “seeing is believing” - by “looking on” the Pierced One, we “look back” on past sins and hurts - to proclaim: “the world of the past is gone!” [cf. Rv 21: 4] This Icon invites all the faithful to “look up” to Him, to lift up their hearts. The philosopher might say: *Cogito - ergo SUM!* The hope-filled believer will respond: *Spero, ergo SURSUM... Corda...!* These minor figures join in the Ascension Procession, led by Jesus: through the resurrection, Jesus Christ has entered heaven and is at God’s right hand [cf. I P 3: 18, ff.]

5. Two Major Figures, the Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple - under Christ’s right arm:

seeing His Mother there with the disciple whom He loved, Jesus said to His mother: Woman, this is your Son. Jesus said to John: this is your Mother [cf. Jn 19: 15, ff.] - [cf. Ignace de la Potterie, SJ, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*. Alba; E. G. Mori, *Figlia di Sion e Serva del Signore*. Bologna: EDB 1988]

a. Mary, the Mother of Jesus: this is the drama of Mary’s “Ecclesial Maternity”, her spiritual motherhood coming to the light of day in great pain: her own soul the sword of God’s word has pierced. In some way, Mary is the personification of the Synagogue, of God’s Holy People - she is the Type of the Church. Mary, the “Woman” is proclaimed “Mother of the Church” in the drama of Calvary, as her nature and mission are now revealed: let it be done to us all according to His will!

b. The Beloved Disciple: the disciple makes a place for Mary in his own home [cf. Jn 19:27]. This is the “Beloved”, representing the Church - Mary assumes her maternity in great pain - and the Beloved Disciple is re-representative of us all, makes room for Mary in his own heart. This is one aspect of the Church’s being born - right here on Calvary.

6. Three Major Figures: Mary Magdalene; His Mother’s Sister, the Wife of Clopas, and the Centurion and His Healed Son, and Family - under Christ’s left arm:

a. Mary Magdalene: with the holy women, Mary Magdalene came to finish anointing Jesus’ body, which had been entombed in great haste. The Sabbath had begun on the evening of Good Friday. To Mary Magdalene - in whom Christ had first risen in her own conversion, is privileged with the first recorded encounter with the Risen One. She is an apostle of hope, proclaiming the Risen Lord to the Church leaders. Jesus calls all to on-going conversion, formation [cf. CCC # 641]: Repent and Believe! Christ’s call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of the faithful. There are two principal conversions in the Church: water [Baptism] and tears [Repentance]. The call to conversion aims at interior transformation, that of the heart. It is a radical reorientation of life, always with firm hope in God’s Mercy. The Spirit begins to lift the sins of humanity, is also their Consoler Who gives the humble of heart graces for repentance and conversion [cf. CCC ## 1427-1439].

The Sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true spiritual resurrection, restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God [cf. CCC # 1468].

b. His Mother's Sister, Mary - the wife of Clopas [cf. Jn 19:25]:

these simple words have challenged interpreters - technically the text reads: "Mary of Clopas". Some interpreters, as early as the 3rd century, have identified "Clopas" and "Cleopas", the masculine for "Cleopatra", one of the disciples Jesus met on the Road to Emmaus [cf. Lk 24:18]. After much reflection, many agree that "Mary of Clopas" is not easily equated to any woman in Mk 15:40 [cf. J.B. Daniels, "Clopas", in: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. NY: Doubleday 1992, Vol. I, p. 1066]. She is simply someone for whom the Mystery of Jesus was central to her life.

c. The Centurion who Son/ Servant was healed by Jesus' Word

[cf. Mt 8: 5, ff.; Lk 7:1-10]: by a strange accident of language, "son" - "servant" and "lamb" are all rendered by *TALYA*. The centurion felt unworthy for the Lord to come under his roof - but, he deeply believed that He could make his loved one well again. Jesus was "amazed" at the man's faith and declared: Go home! It shall be done because you trusted! That very moment the boy got better. The healed lad is perched on his master's/ father's shoulder and is "backed up" by the outlines of the heads of others - his family members, or others who have been healed by the Word of God. All are contemplating the Pierced One in this Icon. These individuals are all personified "Models of the Church". We are all healed through our faith, gazing on the Pierced One in loving contemplation [cf. Is 53:5; 1 P 2:21-24].

7. The Adoring Angels at Jesus' Both Hands: [cf. CCC ## 331-333; 351]: Christ is the center of the angelic world - they are "His" Angels, created through and for Him. He has made them His Messengers in His saving Plan. From the Incarnation to the Ascension, the life of the Word Incarnate is surrounded by the adoration and service of the Angels. Their song of praise at the birth of Christ has not ceased resounding in the Church's praise: Glory to God in the highest. The Angels "evangelize" by proclaiming the Good News of Christ's Incarnation and resurrection. They will be present at His return at the end of time. The Angels surround Christ their Lord - they serve Him especially in the accomplishment of His saving Mission.

8. Being "Drawn" to Jesus Christ: and when I am raised up from the earth, I will draw all to myself [cf. Jn 12:32]. this physical lifting up is followed by His being lifted up to heaven in the resurrection and Ascension [cf. Jn 3: 13, ff.; 6:62; 8:28; 20: 17, f].

All are being called to be "with" Christ, to become one with Him - into this union is the divine call extended to each person [cf. CCC # 542]. The "lifting up" of Jesus Christ on the Cross signifies, and announces His being lifted up in His Ascension into heaven. Jesus Christ is the Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant - where He exercises His Priesthood, for He always lives to make intercession. He is the High Priest of the good things to come [cf. CCC # 662 - Heb 7: 25; 9: 11, 24].

The People of God shares His **priestly, prophetic** and **royal** office - His Kingship is exercised in drawing all to Himself. The Sign of the Cross gives all a share in His royalty, those who are reborn in Christ Jesus by the anointing of the Holy Spirit [cf. CCC # 786]. The contrite heart is always drawn and moved by divine grace to respond to the merciful God [cf. CCC # 1428]. In the Our Father, we profess our homeland, to where we are continually drawn [cf. CCC # 2495].

This mysterious “being drawn” is compared to the love being attracted by the look of the beloved - being moved by the “perfume” of the object of one’s heart. This idea permeates so much of the Song of Songs: the lily among the thorns [cf. 2:1] - fruit sweet to the lover’s mouth [v. 3] - laden with myrrh, frankincense, perfume of every exotic dust [cf. 3:6] - you have ravished my heart [cf. 4:9] - the fragrance of your garments [v. 11].

St. Gaspar Bertoni [1777-1853], a priest of the Diocese of Verona, Italy, founded the Stigmatine Congregation in 1816. He was canonized by Pope John Paul II on November 1, 1989. Fr. Bertoni’s study of spiritual writers led him to offer this commentary on the Latin Vulgate ideal expressed by the words: *trahe me post te....*:

“Many follow Christ because of temporal reward. But, when the mercenary arrives at the door, he is paid and shut outside: ‘You have received your reward.’ [cf. Mt 6:2]. Others follow Jesus as slaves, out of fear: these do indeed follow, but from afar. And since they are so far away, they do not hear the secrets of their master: ‘The slave does not know his master’s business.’ [cf. Jn 15:15]. Some follow Christ as sons, but their love is not without self-interest in the inheritance. Very often sons are more loved than they are loving - at times, they even reject their father, if he should ask of them things that even though they are reasonable and in the long run, good for them, they are difficult and arduous: ‘I reared sons, I brought them up, but they have rebelled against me...’ [cf. Is 1:2].

“A few follow Christ as friends, who base their love on the mutual sharing of goods. If, however, the gentle flow of these goods should cease one day because of the dispositions of Providence, which at times, are not all that clear - but which, however, are always just, and there is suddenly substituted the bitter participation in the hardships of the Friend, then: ‘All left Him and fled’ [cf. Mt 26:56]. Those who fled were the very ones who had been declared ‘friends’ by Christ ‘All the rest seemed more interested in themselves than in Jesus Christ’ [cf. Ph 2:21].

“Very few follow Jesus as lovers - who in the early, immature fire of their tender love, follow Jesus wherever He goes, whether to Tabor or to Calvary - they run after Him in the odor of His perfume, of the internal consolations and inspirations. They literally run behind Him. However, they are not up to running at equal pace with Him, nor can they really keep up with Him - Who does not move by simple steps, but by giant steps, in the course of His path ‘exulting like a hero to run his race...’ [cf. Ps 19:5]

“But the Spouse, the truly adult in the school of love, is not attracted by odor, but by the right hand of the Spouse: ‘**Draw me**’ [cf. Ct 1:3]. Holding on firmly and finding support in His strength, they keep up with Him - and with Him, do not run, but fly: ‘His left arm is under my head and his right embraces me’ [cf. Ct 8:5]

“In this way, we almost become one and the same spirit with Christ, in such a way that we can truly say: ‘And I live not now with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me’ [cf. Ga 2:20] - through an entire, perfect transformation of love. ‘look on everything as so much rubbish, if only I can have Christ and be given a place in Him’ [cf. Ph 3:8].

“Thus, one gives up all else to be found in Christ - so much so that then we will no longer be able to find ourselves, if not with Christ, rather, in Christ. Now will we be able to discern anything other than Christ. This will demand that we demand that the spouse be disdained as Christ was, poor as He was, wounded as He was...” [cf. MSS Bertoni ## 1865-1870].

9. By His Wounds, ours are healed” [cf. Is 53:5; I P 2: 21, ff.]: He was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins...By His wounds, we were healed... [cf. Is 53:5]. Moved by so much human suffering, Jesus Christ not only allows Himself to be touched by those hurting but makes their miseries His own. But, He did not heal all the sick - His healings were the signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through this Passover. Suffering configures us to Him and unites us with His redemptive passion ... By following Him all disciples acquire a new outlook on illness and pain [cf. CCC ## 1505, f.].

In St. Peter’s First Letter, he took up this text: “...by His wounds, you were healed...” [cf. I P 2:24]. This Cross is the unique sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He has united Himself to every human being [cf. GS 22], all are being made partners in ways known only to God, in the Paschal Mystery. Jesus desires to associate every single human being with His redeeming sacrifice. Apart from His Cross, there is no other ladder by which we may go to heaven... [cf. CCC # 618].

10. The Pierced One: [cf. Zc 12: 10, ff.; Jn 9:37; Rv 1:6]: ... Moses made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole. Whenever anyone would look at it, he would recover... [cf. Nb 21:9]. This passage prepared the way for an amazing fulfillment of God’s will. The Prophet Zechariah [cf. 12 and 13] has an unusual array of passages that were realized by Christ on Good Friday and after: “...I will pour out on the House of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, a spirit of grace and petition - and they will look on him whom they have pierced - they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son ... there shall be great mourning in the plain of Megiddo...” [Zc 12:10, f.].

This prophecy refers to young King Josiah who tried to stem the tide of the loss of faith, but was killed in battle: “... King Josiah set out to confront [the opposing armies], but was slain at Megiddo at the first encounter...” [cf. 2 K 23:29, f.; 2 Ch 34].... the archers shot the king...and he died... Jeremiah composed a Lamentation recited to this day [cf. 2 Ch 35:25]. This gifted king gave his young life to restore his people and is beautifully eulogized by Sirach:”... The name Josiah is like blended incense made lasting by a skilled performer, precious is his memory, like honey to the taste, like music at a banquet... He turned to God and with his whole heart...” [cf. Si 48: 1, ff.]

Once the soldier had pierced the side of Christ, St. John applied this sacred memory to Him: “... there is another passage in Scripture that says: ‘They shall look on him whom they have pierced...’ [cf. Jn 19:37]. The human heart is converted by contemplatively looking upon Him Whom our sins have pierced. Let us fix our eyes on Christ’s blood and understand how precious it is to His Father. For, poured out for our

salvation, it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance ... The Holy Spirit ...gives the human heart grace for repentance and conversion [cf. CCC ## 1432, f.].

Calvary was not the spiritual “Armageddon”, or cataclysmic national end of it all that “Megiddo” was: “See, he comes among the clouds! Every eye will see him, even of those who have pierced him... “[cf. R v 1:7] Already in the Old Testament, God permitted images pointing symbolically toward salvation by the Incarnate Word. So it was with the bronze serpent, the ark of the covenant, and the cherubim ... Basing itself on the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the VIIth Ecumenical Council, the IInd Council of Nicea [in 787], justified the veneration of Icons ... Honor paid to sacred images is a “respectful veneration”, not the adoration due to God alone... Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, but as leading us on to God incarnate [cf. CCC ## 2129-2132].

Jesus knew and loved everyone during His life and His Passion and gave Himself up for each one of us. He has loved us all with a human heart - for this reason the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings without exception. The New Catechism quotes Pius XII’s *Mystici Corporis*: [cf. DS # 3812]: “... But such a loving knowledge as the divine Redeemer from the first moment of His Incarnation bestowed upon us surpasses any zealous power of the human mind; since through that beatific vision, which He began to enjoy when He had hardly been conceived in the womb of the Mother of God, He has all the members of His Mystical Body always and constantly present to Him, and He embraces all with His redeeming love...” [cited by CCC # 478].

In the Passover, Jesus opened to all men the fountain of Baptism. The blood and water that flowed from the Pierced Side of the Crucified are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, sacraments of the New Life [cf. CCC #1225]. The human heart is converted by looking upon Him Whom our sins have pierced. Let us fix our eyes on Christ’s blood and understand how precious it is to the Father - for, poured out in salvation, it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance [cf. CCC # 1432].

11. Dressed as a Priest? David was girt with a linen apron, came dancing before the Lord as he and all the Israelites were bringing up the Ark of the Lord with shouts of joy and the sound of the horn...[cf. 2 S 6: 14, ff.] ... Then David offered holocausts and peace offerings... David was clothed in a robe of fine linen...He was also wearing a linen ephod... [cf. 1 Ch 13: 8; 15:27].

This item of priestly apparel appears almost 50 times in the Hebrew Bible, a sacred vestment - variously described in the different texts. It was apron-like, suspended from the waist downward - and its fabric was most elaborate, a golden garment. Jesus seems vested in something similar in the Icon of San Damiano - he seems to be vested as a priest, celebrating the solemn days of awe. [cf. R. I. Paitz, “The Ephod”, in: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. NY: Doubleday 1992. Vol. 2, pp. 550, f.].

12. The Veil over the Crucified Jesus' Head: [cf. C. K. Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant*. Roma: Biblico 1989]. Moses would put the veil until he went into converse with the Lord [cf. ex 34: 27-35]. This is an Old Testament preparation for the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ [cf. Mt 17: 1-9, par.; Jn 12: 28, f.; 1 P 1:17].

St. Paul makes his own application of this scene: in hope, we speak with full confidence - not like Moses who used to hide his face with a veil - we need to remove the veil [here, by our contemplation], by turning toward the Lord [cf. 2 Co 3:12-18]. As the Immolated Lamb breaks the seal of the scrolls [cf. Rv 5: 1, ff.], so, too, the prayerful contemplation of the Glorified Christ and the Cross will lead one eventually to the Beatific Vision, when the Lord will be revealed to us just as He is, as we will see Him face to face [cf. 1 Jn 3:2; 1 Co 13:12; Rv 22:4].

In the Beatific Vision, God opens Himself in an inexhaustible way to the Elect. There will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace and mutual communion [cf. CCC # 1045, f.]. Creation itself waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God [cf. Rm 8:19-23].

Jesus is crucified over a dark back-ground: "... the Light shines in the darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it..." [cf. Jn 1:5]. No sooner had Judas eaten the morsel, than he went out - it was Night! [cf. Jn 13: 30, f.]. Now is the Son of Man glorified - the Light of the World had been betrayed, but the powers of darkness would never overcome the Church [cf. My 16:18].

13. The Dove: on close observation, this may be depicted across Christ's forehead on the Cross. There are clear biblical references to this symbol - Noah sent out a dove to see if the deluge was over ... the dove returned in the evening with the olive branch, a perennial sign of peace [cf. Gn 8: 6, ff.] - of which the rainbow is the cosmic sign [cf. Gn 9: 13, ff.]. The Spirit descended like a dove on Christ [cf. Mt 3:16; Lk 3:15]. John the Baptist came to realize that Jesus must increase, and we decrease [cf. Jn 3:30]. In Is 11: 2, ff., the fullness of the Spirit descends on the Prophet with His gifts - the faithful are called to be as gentle, innocent and faithful as doves. [cf. J. E. Hulme, *Symbolism in Christian Art*. NY: Macmillan 1908, pp. 185, ff.].

Birds were offered as substitutes in sacrificial offerings - but the image here is that of the Holy Spirit remaining with Jesus Christ.

14. The Ascending Christ in the Upper Medallion: Jesus ascends among the Angels and Saints, in response to the Father's blessing [cf. CCC ##659-667]. The veiled character of the Glory of the Risen One during his time is intimated in His mysterious words to Mary Magdalene: ... go to my brother and say to them: I am ascending to My Father and to your Father, to My God and to your God. This final stage stays closely linked to the first, i.e., to His descent from heaven in the Incarnation. The "lifting up" of Jesus on the Cross signifies and announces His being "lifted up" by His Ascension into heaven. Jesus Christ, the one Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, entered - not into a sanctuary made by human hands... but, into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf [cf. Heb 9:24]. A High Priest

of the good things to come, He is the center and the principal actor in the liturgy that honors the Father in heaven [cf. Heb 9:11; Rv 4:6-11].

15. The Communion of Saints and Angels: this is what the Church is called to be: both a sharing of holy realities, as well as a union of believers of all times. This communion of holy persons also means that what each one does, or suffers in and for the Church, bears fruit for all [cf. CCC ## 946-962].

Heaven refers to the Saints and the place of spiritual creatures, the Angels who surround God [cf. CCC # 326]. Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified, live forever with Christ. They are like God forever, for they see Him face to face [cf. CCC # 1023].

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CONCLUSION

[1] This is a rich ICON, like a fruit-tree planted with its roots in heaven, and its good fruit to enjoy for anyone who would try to "contemplate these colors." It presents us with a glorified Christ - and can be prayed from the bottom up, an ascending Christology. Its biblical basis is more than solid: Jesus is the ICON of the Invisible God [cf. Col 1:15]. He is a "window" into the Trinity, and a "mirror" for Christianity. He is the Radiant Light of God's glory, the Perfect Copy of His nature [cf. Heb 1: 1, ff.]. To have seen Jesus - on the Cross, in the Crib, ascending - is to have seen the Father and Holy Spirit [cf. Jn 14:9]. Jesus indeed is the Father's Word, Exegesis, Revelation, Glory.

[2] Francis' Pilgrimage received its direction from the ICON of Jesus Christ in Glory, at San Damiano's Church. When Francis knelt before this ICON, he received the inspiration from the Crucified Christ: Go, Francis, and repair My House! From then on, Francis' Paschal Pilgrimage became his life-long intellectual, moral, psychological and religious conversion, of heart and mind, intellect and will. He literally burned with divine compassion for the Crucified - for His Sacred Stigmata - long before the miracle of LaVerna when the Lord's wounds were imprinted in his own flesh. Before the Stigmata had embedded his body, the Wounds of the Lord had pierced his soul. [cf. St. Bonaventure, "Major Life", c. 2, n. 1].

[3] We all need to be "New Men": our old self was crucified with Him [cf. Rm 6: 6, f.]. If anyone is in Christ, he is **a New Creation**. The old order has passed away [cf. 2 Co 5:17]. We are truly God's Work of Art, His master-pieced, re-created in Christ Jesus [cf. Ep 2:10]. The world of the past is gone! [cf. Rv 21: 1, ff.]

[4] St. Francis' Prayer before the Crucifix: "O sublime and glorious God, illumine my heart. Give me strong faith, hope and charity, perfect humility - knowledge and understanding, so that I might keep your commandments. Amen!

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C. Reflections on *The Canticle of Creatures*

Introduction: Creation in the Franciscan Spirituality [cf. *Secolare Piccola Famiglia Francescana. Linee di spiritualità francescana. Spunti di Riflessione.* OME: Brescia 1980, pp. 49-54]

[1] Before St. Francis:

[a] In the pre-Christian religions and philosophies in general, there seems to have dominated the concept that there is necessary a certain distancing from matter, either through disdain, through fear, or through indifference.

[b] However, with the OT Biblical revelation, we find the goodness of creatures proclaimed exultantly [cf. especially Gn, Ps and Si 42:1-43:57, etc.]. It is true that sin has brought a certain disorder, in confusing the God of the blessings for the blessings of God. Even with this, there was no denying the self-evident goodness and beauty of creatures, nor was there ever removed from human intelligence the ability to enjoy the fruits of the earth: even the heavens sing the glories of God! [cf. Ps 19].

[c] The Gospel, then, reveals the essential goodness of God and affirms that every creature incarnates a divine thought of love. Furthermore, matter is even more blessed from the moment that it is chosen to become a “sacrament” of the divine. St. Paul was convinced of a certain profound solidarity between humanity and the entire created world [cf. Rm 8:19-23] - he is the communicator of a certain “**Cosmic Hope.**”

[d] Nonetheless, a certain diffidence toward creation continues in the teachings of the Docetists, the Gnostics, the Manichaeans - and some of the tenets of these groups would lead to a decided dualistic concept of reality.

[e] Among Orthodox believers, Medieval Mysticism even came to look upon creatures as symbols of spiritual values: the value of creatures stands in their capacity of serving as a symbol or sign of something [One] far greater. Their perfection came to be considered more and more in a relative manner.

[2] St. Francis:

[a] The Poor Man of Assisi was indeed an innovator. He passed from admiration - even to **the Love of Nature**. And this for various reasons:

- First of all, his approach to nature was that he would look at reality in its fontal origin as deriving from God. Therefore, all were “good” - even more so, his “brothers and sisters”. His reasoning was that in creating them, God has exercised toward them also a certain type of Divine Paternity.

- Furthermore, he came more and more to appreciate the fact that all of creation bears the imprint of God. He would be so often inspired by the wonders and

beauties of nature to a certain praise of the Creator - to which they so mightily contribute in a "Cosmic Chorus."

- Francis loved creatures very simply because he came to consider them in their relationship with Christ. This was so for a variety of reasons: in their essential relationship all created goods were re-capitulated in Jesus Christ through their wonderful praise and glory of the Father. Furthermore the Sacred Scriptures and the Liturgy of the Church repeatedly made allusions to creation in reference to Jesus Christ: He was considered to be the "Corner-stone", the Lamb of God, the Flower of the Fields, and even more worm than man!

- An even further motivation is of loving encounter with nature flowed through the re-acquired innocence of St. Francis: what he has lost through sin he believed could be regained through penance. By his innocence, he experienced a kind of return to Eden. When such innocence is re-gained, nature seems to respond through a submission and a confidence that would lead one back to the virginal creation of the origins.

[b] Therefore, the motives for Francis' unique attitude towards nature should not be sought in any pantheistic attitude of nature - nor in any sentimental romanticism concerning it. Francis' love for nature sprang like fresh mountain stream that constantly gained momentum from his faith and religiosity. He did not lack the innocent gaze of childhood - nor was the imagination of the poet denied him. More than all else, he had a heart riveted on God. His love for God served as the feeding fresh streams for his undying love for all of creation.

[c] With regard to creatures, Francis moved in a three-fold direction:

- a descending dynamism: he thought of creatures as proceeding from the hand of God and from His love which they all expressed. Francis therefore looked upon all of creation with the love of fraternity.

- an ascending dynamism: creatures led him back toward God, in so far as each one in its own way, served as a mirror and reflection of the divine goodness, as well as being **a Symbol of Jesus Christ**, God's Son. Through creation, Francis achieved high contemplation of God and Jesus Christ.

- a dynamism of mediation: Francis ever exerted the effort of being moved by creatures, directing his thoughts and ardor heavenward, toward God and to the singing of His praises.

[d] It is in this light that one needs to ponder the Canticum of Creatures composed by St. Francis as the culmination of his life of great pain.

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1. Bonaventurean Theology:

[a] This “new” spirituality lived by St. Francis in response to grace, finds a profound “explanation” in the theology of the great Doctor of the Church, St. Bonaventure. The Franciscan Doctor noted regarding his Founder that he enjoyed a sublimely positive view of creatures, and of matter. Every creature comes into being through an ultimate Efficient Cause - and each created being is in conformity with its Ultimate Exemplar, and is ordained to a specific Ultimate End. For this reason, creation is one, true, authentic, good, modified, beautiful, ordered, measured, distinct and weighed carefully,

[b] From all that has been said thus far, the result is that the world is like a book in which there is resplendent, in which there is represented and in which one might “read” the abiding, the beckoning, up-lifting presence of the Most Blessed Trinity. All that exists is the “shadow”, the “image” and the “similitude” of God Himself one and Three:

- “shadow” is found in all creatures;
- “image” is reserved only for intellectual beings, or rational spirits;
- “similitude” is reserved for those who live in a Godly manner, those who are “deiform”.

These three are “steps” up which the human spirit ascends, gradually, to reach the supreme principle which is God Himself.

[c] All that is created is a participation in the goodness, the beauty and efficiency of God - all visible realities are good, true and beautiful. Everything that has been created is the work of an imaginative, efficient, creative Intelligence. In an ordered and hierarchical manner, the Divine Creator has disposed, ordered all creatures. Therefore, the universe is truly the “**Poem of Order.**”

[d] Every creature has a being analogous to that of God, a being that is made in imitation of God Himself, tending toward His image. Creation is not only a sign, or symbol, but each is also a being which has its own positive consistency, its own specific metaphysical goodness and truth. All creation then is open to a genuine scientific knowledge. However, as creation, essential is its relationship as “image” and of “copy” with which it remains in harmony with its eternal model. Thus, creation can never really be known other than through its ultimate significance, or without this aspect of its inherent exemplarity. The relationship between the divine realm and the created universe needs to be pondered and always defended.

[e] It is not possible to read the “**Book of Creation**” without its Interpretative Key, which is **Jesus Christ**. The ultimate truth of reality, their mystery of light is always the Divine Savior. All creatures are like words without limit which in their totality express Jesus Christ. One might understand their significance comparing them to Jesus Christ, through whom all was created and by means of Whom all are to be brought back to God.

[e] Unhappily, the innate transparency of creation has been darkened by sin: creatures now present themselves as somewhat lessened, bent down over themselves, shrouded, wounded and suffering - all in expectancy of the **New Creation**: the whole universe is groaning in one great act of giving new birth [cf. Rm 8: 22, ff.]. It can be said that the imprinted image of God in creation has been disfigured and crucified.

[f] In order that this Book of Creation, enshrouded by sin, might again become legible, God has given to humanity the **Book of Sacred Scripture**, which become legible only in the light of the Crucified Christ: "... the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, [the Immolated Lamb] has triumphed, and he will open the scroll and the seven seals of it.." [cf. Rv 5:1, ff.]. As the Crucified is the Revelation of Trinitarian Love, so creation - that "obscured similitude" - is a revelation of the salvific love of God.

[g] The damage has not only afflicted other creatures but it is especially damaging in human beings, the perpetrators of disordered sin. Humanity has not only become obscured, but even hardened in its position, incapable as a result of opening itself by itself to the praise and contemplation of the goodness and truth of God. It is only when the tip of the Cross touches it, a spark is struck that feeds the flames of contemplation and enkindles the effects of the purifying sacrifice, illuminating and rendering pure the image of God in humans, which had become besmirched as with a dusty carbon.

[h] So it is that the only pathway available to creatures is that of following the arduous Way of the Cross to reach the Crucified. This is the highway of the most ardent love of the Crucified. The Cross sheds light on the mystery of creation and also reveals something of the most inner depths of the mystery of the merciful God Himself, thus offering the most sublime source of contemplation. The disorder provoked by sin is re-ordained in accord with the sapiential lines that compose the Cross. In it, God unites the sublime to the lowliest, the most high with the most abject, the First with the total Last. This "re-centers" humanity in that remarkable unity of divinity and humanity in which man and God are so closely one on the Cross, that all human beings are invited to become truly inseparable in eternal glory. **Creation is assumed by God as His Spouse** and is united to Him in an eternal love, conformed to the image of His glory.

2. The Concrete Relationship with Creation

[a] In the Franciscan spirit, there can be no exclusion of creatures - there is assumed a certain attitude of "hierarchicization" - i.e., to give to all creation its just place and value. This needs to be accompanied always by a personal purification that would consent to understanding all of creation in its relationship with God. There is always required a meeting with creation within the boundaries of its finality and its ordinary employment, in accord with nature.

[b] Creation is not an obstacle but rather an instrument of elevation. Therefore, creatures should not be looked upon with diffidence, or only in assuming a guarded attitude. Spiritually, of course, one does need some cautions, but the problem

is not in nature itself - but, in the fallen human beings. All creation is good - but, due to the original disorientation of human beings, a bad use may always be made of it.

[c] The created universe is much like a wedding gift, a dowry, offered by the Divine Spouse to His spouse. The world has also been compared to the wedding ring given by the Spouse to His spouse. St. Bonaventure notes that the spouse can love this ring in two ways: i.e., with a chaste love, or with adulterous attachment to love His gifts more than Himself. The chaste love is that with which one loves the ring as a reminder of His love, and by a love for the Spouse - and this can never be displeasing to Him. Love is likewise two-fold - as is hatred, or disdain. The disdain of the wedding ring, as if it were a small, or vile gift, is returned to its Giver - but, that disdain of the ring in so far as it is seen as nothing in comparison with the authentic love of the Spouse - this, then, would ultimately return to the Glory of the Divine Spouse.

[d] Creation constitutes a place of revelation, a sacrament of salvation. Therefore, it is necessary to follow through to the end of the pathway leading to the Holy Mount Zion, to that Mountain of the Transfiguration, to contemplate there the infinite beauty that shines through the poverty of sensible signs. To do this, one needs to go through Gethsemane, Calvary, the Sacred Stigmata.

[e] In everyone's relationship to the finality of creation, each believer is entrusted with a priestly character through baptism, an empowerment to lead all things back to God, by making spiritual oblations of all [cf. Rm12:1,ff.; 1 P 2:2, ff.]. Sharing in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ, and in His regality, each believer ought to experience some sense of this responsibility that makes of each one the intelligent and free executor of God's Last Will and Testament, of that unconscious but innate yearning for God, inherent in all creatures. Contact with creation ought to feed in all a continuous praise of God.

[f] All creation has been divinely ordained to the service of humanity, provided that each person keeps clearly in mind the instrumental function of creation. All reality is ordained for the good of humanity, but human beings need to approach created goods with a certain humility, in order to hear in them the voice of appeal to the power, to the wisdom, to the goodness and truth of God. Each person should approach creation being delivered from that base desire of egotistical and selfish possession. Otherwise, creatures cannot speak to human beings of God, but they delude, wound and become hostile. Creatures should be used, and not abused. They cannot be imprisoned by the superior creation, which is humanity. Human beings may not be unbridled in the use made of creation. The created universe needs to be handled with a certain respectful gentility, as there are also other treasures beyond the visible created universe, such as God's grace and vocation. Creation ought not lead one away from these supreme gifts. One needs to approach all gifts with a certain detachment and to make use of this world as so many stepping stones leading to God.

[g] Thus, there is an inherent "sacredness" to all of creation. This needs to be respected in order to discover in all created goods **the traces of Jesus Christ**, and all should be loved as a gift that leads back to the Divine Giver of all gifts, with that desire of passing over them and through them, in order to arrive one day at their Source.

Creation should be accepted with a certain reverence and love, and contemplated with devotion, so that it might be revealed in the universe of goods the divine mystery which hides jealously in their message of goodness, truth, beauty and grace. Even in our deformity creation cries out to be honored so that there might shine forth from it the vestige, the image and likeness of God.

[h] This manner of dealing with creation will imply the insertion of the Cross between the believer and the created universe. The “cross” will always mean mortification, dominion over oneself, purification of one’s thoughts, detachment. Then, realities will be seen with an innocent eye - all goods will be accepted in their inherent, God-given goodness, truth and beauty. Creation might then be safely approached with a sense of genuine friendship, fraternity, or grateful recognition for the help that the wonders of the universe offer **in life’s itinerary toward God**.

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D. THE HYMN TO GOD'S CREATION

[I] The Canticle of Brother Son

[cf. Leonhard LEHMAN, *Francesco, Maestro di Preghiera*. Roma: Cappuccini 1993, pp.326-352]

Presentation

[1] The "Canticle of Brother Son" surely constitutes the best known work of the Saint from Assisi. The Canticle, which is indeed one of the first known "whimpers" of the Italian language, was written in that "vulgar" language employed by Francis himself in dictating the greater part of his works, before they were translated into Latin by some one of his learned Friars. The prayerful listening to this composition permits one to perceive the sonorous power of the encounter of Francis with God through His creatures.

[2] Philosophers as well as theologians have dedicated themselves to this short work. In fact, this brief poem pertains to world literature and could even be considered as "the most beautiful passage of religious poetry outside of the Gospel" [E. Renan]. Because of its key position in Italian literature, and thanks to its artistic value, and above all because of its profound religious content, *The Canticle of Brother Son* has become today the object of broad research and meditation.

[3] Musicians, for their part, over the centuries, have endeavored continuously to interpret it and to ponder its content through music. Numerous compositions have been dedicated to it: there have been organ compositions of great artistic value, as well as popular renditions of it. In each and every case, precisely because of its inherent simplicity, for many it seems as though the guitar accompaniment [that of the wandering bard] might be the most adapted and suited to this text. This fact has given rise to almost endless melodies very popular among groups of young people.

[4] It is almost impossible even to list the many artists who have put their masterful hands to depicting this beautiful composition. There are countless frescoes, mosaics, sculpturing, plastic renditions - those brought about in glass and ceramics - all of which have as their theme *The Canticle of Brother Son*. There are in like manner almost endless literary interpretations that would contrast Francis' simple praise offered for creatures, and a lamentation chant for our threatened world.

[5] While suspending any and all judgment on these diverse cases of applying this composition to the modern world scene, these continuing attempts do at least prove one fact: the *Canticle* still fascinates endless souls. Francis' text calls out, invites, challenges. It almost seems as though the composition ignites the creativity of many who would listen to it, carry it in their hearts. Consequently, many have been inspired to prolong its application across the centuries in offering praise to creation by those who would make use of this Poem. Within the text there lie hidden those forces and stimuli capable of enchanting and almost bonding both the listener and the reader of the Canticle. Furthermore, there needs to be pointed out that its radiating power is

absolutely not limited solely to Christian culture. There are many testimonies among Jews, Mohammedans and Hindus who find sublime inspiration in listening to *The Canticle of Brother Sun* - many look upon it as a genuinely possible point of entry into Christianity.

[6] African culture, too, which already possesses a highly developed sense for the sacred and the symbolic, and which interprets in this sense, the passages of nature, feels itself particularly close to this Franciscan sense of the world. This is so true that there are many intelligent observers who are convinced that a Canticle of such a sublime nature, could indeed serve as a base of departure for the Christian Evangelization of the continent. There are also further reasons that would explain the enthusiasm for this composition and for St Francis among the Japanese - in particular for those who have enjoyed a broader cultural formation.

[7] *The Canticle of Brother Sun* would offer sufficient material for an entire book - as well as collections of photographs of nature inspired by this *Canticle*. However, for our purposes here, there will be offered just a few indications that might serve for a deeper contemplation of the composition.

...

1. Prose with Rhyme and Rhythm!

a. The most ancient manuscript of the *Canticle* is contained in Code # 338 - written perhaps in the year 1250, or thereabouts. Just a few years ago, this famous manuscript was brought back to its original place, which is the archives of the ancient sacred Convent of Assisi. During the Napoleonic suppression, the precious manuscript was taken from the Convent and brought to the Communal Library of Assisi. Between the first and second line of the manuscript there may be noted an inter-linear space, apparently left there for the eventual addition of musical notes. Unfortunately, these are not present in the manuscript as we now have it - and therefore, its original melody remains un- known to us. It would seem to have been a type of Psalmodic melody that would remain the same for all the rest of the verses of the entire composition.

b. The actual writing of this ancient manuscript containing *The Canticle of Brother Sun* coincides with the flourishing period of the Laudatory Poetry that became well known in Umbria around 1260. Since the *Canticle* came to life before that date, one may conclude that St. Francis not only can be placed at the head of the Laudatory Poetry of Italy - but even further, he would have strongly influenced it with his own composition. Furthermore, the belonging of this *Canticle* to the literary genus of "praise" is confirmed also by its title: "The Praises of Creatures" or, in accord with another source, "The Praises of the Lord from His Creatures." The repetition eight times of the Italian expression: *Laudate si* in the central strophes reconfirms its laudatory character. From the very first strophe and until the final one, we find respectively "praise" [as a noun] and "praise" as a verbal imperative. Therefore, the underlying motivation behind *The Canticle of Brother Sun* is the praise of God to thank Him for His creation.

c. As for that which pertains to its literary form, the *Canticle*, while certainly re-echoing the sacred Latin texts of old, possesses a synthesis and a construction that might be respectively called “vulgar”, in the technical meaning of that term. It pertains, therefore, to the rhythmed prose of the Middle Ages, i.e., it is to be placed between the classical lyrical rhythm and simple prose. The metric quantity and the rhythm are irregular. If one pays heed to the conclusion of some of the lines, there might be discovered a certain rhyme, among the lines, [e.g. 10-11; 12-14; 20-22; 29-30] as well as between the lines somewhat separated from each other [e.g. 1/8 ad 2/9]. In addition to the final rhymes, there are also internal rhymes [as within lines 4, 7, 8, 16, 19]. Furthermore, in some lines there are presented more words with final vowels that are similar [in line 11, all the adjectives finish in “e”].

2. A Canticle Born of Suffering:

a. In Manuscript # 338, the text is preceded by an introduction which states: “Here begins the Canticle of Praise of Creatures, composed by the blessed Francis for the praise and glory of God, when he was lying ill in San Damiano.”

b. Friar Thomas of Celano, in his Prior Life [1128/29] places very significantly *The Canticle of Brother Sun* in connection with the *Canticle of the Three Young Men* in the blazing furnace [cf. **Dn 3:57-90**]. As once the three young men had been thrown into the blazing furnace, they nonetheless invited all of creation to glorify and to bless the Creator of the universe. In like manner, this man, Francis, full of the spirit of God, never tired in glorifying God, praising and blessing him, in all the elements and in all creatures. He adored Him as the Creator and Governor of all things.

c. In his Second Life [1246/1247] of St. Francis, Friar Thomas of Celano speaks again and much more in detail about the many illnesses that St. Francis had to endure - to which he referred as his “sisters.” From his youth, he had been infected with a chronic malaria that brought to him often spells of sudden chills, nausea, achy limbs and headaches. He also suffered from anemia, from ulcers of the stomach and of the intestine. To all of these struggles, the autumn of 1224 brought him the impression of the stigmata, that kept him from walking. Along with these physical sufferings, he also had to confront very strong tensions within the Order, where there began to be manifested ever more powerfully a rejection of that original style of life that had been proposed by Francis. Evidently, the accumulation of all these difficulties had truly negative repercussions on his resistance that had already been weakened by his poor state of health. He experienced a kind of collapse into a state of abject prostration, made up of a profound physical and moral exhaustion.

d. In this state, he lay in a small mud hut near San Damiano, and experienced the hand of God, in that he heard the divine promise renewed to him: ‘...rejoice because your infirmity is a pledge of my realm and for the merit of patience, you must await surely and certainly to be a part of this reign!’...In that circumstance, St. Francis composed a few praises of creatures in which he invited them all to give glory to the Creator, to the extent possible to them [2 Cel. 213: FF 802].

e. The *Perugine Compilation*, or the *Perugine Legend*, make reference to this situation of his at San Damiano in an even more extended and detailed manner, noting among other things, his being invaded by rats!

1.] Two years prior to his death when he was already quite ill, and suffering acutely also from an eye malady, he was residing near San Damiano in a little cell made of mud. The Minister General, seeing him in such straits and suffering terribly from his eye malady, gave the obedience that he should allow himself to be given medical assistance. The superior stated that he wanted to be present himself personally when the doctor would begin the treatment, so that he could be sure that it was being done and also that he personally might be of some assistance, to comfort his founder in his terrible suffering. It was already quite cold then, and it was agreed that the season was favorable for the cure.

2.] Francis had been residing there at San Damiano for about 50 days or more. As he was not able to bear the light of day, nor could he even bear the light from the fire at night - he remained all that time in the darkness of his cell. He also suffered major discomfort from this eye disease that made it very difficult for him to rest, or sleep - and all of this worked together to make his other maladies more serious.

3.] As if this did not suffice, the lowly condition of the little cell that had been put up there in an area infested with mice and rats, these continued to torment him - and this too made it all the more difficult for any real rest. These animals tormented him even in his prayer, and even while he ate, they were his constant companions.... [cf. LegPer 42-43: FF 1590-91].

f. As in the text recorded by Celano, so, too, the account found in the *Perugine Legend* narrates the truly piteous state in which Francis found himself. It was a state of soul that moved him to invoke from the depths of his misery, the divine assistance. The mercy of God revealed itself to him anew, promising him a great and precious treasure. This was his inspiration:

1.] 'So, brother, be happy and exultant in your infirmities and tribulations. From now on, you will live in serenity, as if you were already in my Kingdom...' Arising one morning, he said to his companions: if the emperor were to offer a realm to his servant, would not such a person profoundly rejoice? But, what if he were to make an offering of his entire kingdom, would the servant not rejoice even more? And the saint added: And so it is that I must rejoice now in the midst of my many troubles and sufferings, and find comfort in the Lord, and render thanks always to God the Father, and to His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit, for such great grace and benediction that He has bestowed on me. He, in fact, has designed in His mercy to give me, his unworthy servant, while still in this life, the certainty of possessing one day His Kingdom.

2.] Therefore, I want to praise Him, and for my consolation and for the edification of my fellow human beings, I would like to compose a new Praise of the Lord through His creatures. Every day, we make use of creatures and without them, we cannot live. In them, human beings also gravely offend their Creator. And each day, we

show in gratitude for this great benefit of His, and we do not praise Him for it, as we ought to do - we need to glorify our Creator and the Giver of every good.

3.] Sitting up, he concentrated in his reflections, and then he said: 'O Most High, omnipotent, good Lord...' Francis also composed a melody to go along with this, which he taught to his companions. His spirit was thus immersed in such a great sweetness and consolation, that he sent for Friar Pacifico. This man was already known in this world to be "the King of Verses", as he was a most refined master of chant. He assigned to him good and spiritual Friars so that they would go out through the world preaching and praising God [cf. LegPer 43: FF 1591-92].

g. The account of all this drew to a close with the notion that Francis praised God in sickness as well as in health, and he exhorted others to do the same. Even in those moments when he was the most tormented by his maladies, he would intone the Praises of the Lord, and then had them sung by his companions, that he might forget for a while the true bitterness of his sufferings, meditations on the Praises of the Lord. And this was the way he lived right up to the very moment of his death [cf. Leg Per 43: FF 1592].

h. According to this source, *The Canticle of Brother Sun* saw the light of day during the winter of 1224-25, near the Monastery of the Sisters of St. Clare at San Damiano. Only the strophes regarding peace and death would have been added at a later time. Still according to this same source, the verses regarding pardon and remaining in peace were composed to placate the struggle going on then between the bishop and the mayor of the city. While the strophe dedicated to Sister Death would have been added by Francis just prior to his death.

i. It is not possible, however, to know now with certainty whether it was such a gradual process of composition as noted by the *Perugine Legend* was truly the manner of the composition of this classic - as this is not confirmed by the other Franciscan fonts - and truly corresponds to history. However, the resolution of this particular might not have great importance at least as far as the content and sublime meaning of the chant are concerned. What is important is that *The Canticle of Brother Sun* was not written in a moment of high sentimental excitement as might come to one on a beautiful spring day in one's life. This would be all the more easy to imagine if one ever has visited Assisi! Rather, as all the sources agree, this was composed in the very dark of winter, and in the dregs of terrible illness and tribulation.

j. Therefore, notwithstanding Francis' extraordinary mystical experience of LaVerna, he was not spared further internal afflictions. This situation of profound spiritual difficulty simply meant for Francis the possibility of experiencing anew the action of the Lord's grace. All of this is important for believers to ponder and to find in this story of the Poor Man of Assisi a source of great consolation and hope. It needs to be remembered that all who **strive to put on the mind of Christ Jesus** will continue to experience right up through death the spiritual struggle, as well as the ever--abiding goodness of the Lord.

[II] The Structure of The Canticle of Brother Sun

Presentation: The structure of the *Canticle* is clear and precise. It is made up of 10 strophes of varying length: the first and the second, as also the 8th and 9th, are longer than the others. For this reason, some scholars [e.g., K. Esser] divide them, and end up with 14 strophes. However, since the strophes have their inner-connection through their content, we will leave them as they are, with 10 strophes - more or less, something like the psalms or the liturgical chants. This style of praying was Francis' daily fare.

1. **The First [4 lines] and Last [2 lines] Verses:** these serve as kind of frame for the entire Canticle, and characterize it as an offering of Lauds to God: 'to the Most High, omnipotent and good Lord, all praise is due!' The insignificance of a human being draws near to the greatness of God: no one is worthy even just to say His Name! Notwithstanding all this, no human being is ever annihilated by God, but all may present themselves before Him. Human existence is meant to be in the praise and service of the Lord, and therefore the Canticle ends with **inviting all to praise and serve God**. The first and the last strophe constitute respectively a kind of initial greeting and praise, qualifying the entire Canticle as an offering of Lauds to God. If this basic characteristic is forgotten, one would risk interpreting the entire *Canticle of Brother Sun* in a unilateral and mistaken manner.

2. **The Refrain:** Between the beginning and the final accord there are 8 strophes that always open with the same expression: **Praise, yes, my Lord!** These words constitute a kind of Refrain to which all are invited to join in. In the exclamation: "**My Lord**" there is perceived the depths of the personal reverence with which Francis turned toward his beloved Giver of all gifts. Another permanent repetition is the recurrence of the preposition "**per**". In Francis' text, this implies two nuances of meaning: he praises God "**through**" creatures - and thanks God "**for**" their beauty, usefulness and variety.

3. **Variations on the Theme:** the refrain: "**Praise, Yes!**" and the "**per**" are the strong points of the entire Canticle and characterize it as Praise offered to God. In the strophes, this theme of praise is continuously varied through the insertion of ever new creatures. Through these, and with these, Francis wishes to praise his Lord. Thus, the prayerful reader, or listener, will note these different scenes, in which there appear each time new and different "personalities". However, their appearance takes place within a most precise order.

4. **From the "Macrocosm" to the "Microcosm", from on high, to what lies below:**

a. The order of appearance proceeds from the heavens above, down to earth, eventually arriving at humanity. There may be noted in this the "macrocosm" and then, through human beings, the "microcosm." Heaven is represented by the sun, the moon and the stars - while the Earth is considered to be made up of four elements: Wind, Water, Fire and Earth. According to the view of the ancients, these were the original elements from which all else is derived. These four elements permitted other

associations to be made, as proposed, for example by St. Isidore of Seville [+ 633] in his work, *Etymologies*, which then were developed later in an imaginary synthesis:

Wind	Spring	Sanguinary
Water	Winter	Phlegmatic
Fire	Summer	Choleric
Earth	Autumn	Melancholic

b. After the Macrocosm, the Microcosm appears: humanity. However, here the emphasis given is not so much the strength of human beings, nor their beauty, and dominion over nature. What is emphasized is the capacity of enduring, suffering and creating peace. In the dominion of oneself there is manifested for Francis the greatness, the force, the glory of human beings. These are qualities for which it is truly necessary to praise God. Even though Francis, at this time, was prostrate in multiple maladies, he was able even to praise his approaching death, calling it his “sister”: for it is death that opens the gates to eternal life.

c. However, the saint also realized the possibility of human beings failing for eternity. The “benediction” [“blessed are...”] and “malediction” [“woe to you...!”] place themselves side by side, as two extremes and ultimate judgments that will be meted out to human beings. Those who would live according to the counsels of the Sermon on the Mount will be crowned by the Most High. Whoever dies in mortal sin will fall into what Scripture and theology call the “second death”. In the symbolism of the Apocalypse of John, the “Second Death” represents the malediction of the final judgment, i.e., hell: this is the second death, a pit of fire. And whoever is not written in the **Book of Life** will be cast into the pit of fire [cf. Rv 20:6, 15]. The conqueror will not be struck by the Second Death [cf. Rv 2:11]. The eye, mouth and heart of Francis were already opened up to the mystery of God to sing His praises forever: **You are our eternal Life!** [cf. Praises 7].

d. In this manner, the Poet of Assisi succeeded truly in including all in the Canticle of Praise. Nothing is excluded from this. Sin, death, illness and all human needs are sung on an equal level with the most beautiful aspects of this present world and the one still to come. Everything is placed in harmony, one with the other, being united in a circle of praise to the glory of the One Who is present in all things.

e. The Structure of *The Canticle of the Sun* with its 10 strophes and **33** lines might be analyzed as follows:

<u>Strophe I:</u>	[1-4]	Opening Strophe	
<u>Strophe II:</u>	[5-9]	Strophe of the Sun	HEAVEN
<u>Strophe III:</u>	[19-11]	The Moon and Stars	
<u>Strophe IV:</u>	[12-14]	The Wind	ELEMENTS
<u>Strophe V:</u>	[15-16]	Water	
<u>Strophe VI:</u>	[17-19]	Fire	
<u>Strophe VII:</u>	[20-22]	Earth	
<u>Strophe VIII:</u>	[23-26]	Peace	HUMANITY
<u>Strophe IX:</u>	[27-31]	Death	
<u>Strophe X:</u>	[32-33]	Concluding Strophe	

[III] Themes in the Canticle

1. The Cosmos as a Great Family

a. If attention is given to **the symbolic relationship** between the various elements, there is discovered in *The Canticle of Brother Sun* an interesting hidden structure: the masculine genus of the sun is bound then to the feminine genus of the moon - the first is the active principle, while the second is passive because it receives the light of the sun. This relationship between brother and sister is then extended by Francis to the other elements, placing in evidence a very powerful internal harmony between the elements of the universe, that makes of it all one large extended family:

- brother sun and sister moon;
- brother wind and sister water;
- brother fire and mother earth.

b. The entire cosmos, therefore, is ordained according to three couples of brothers and sisters in which the sun and the earth - the first and last mentioned - are as the older siblings who protect and envelop in their embrace the other smaller, weaker creatures. Furthermore it seems that Francis had chosen knowingly the coupling order of the four elements. In fact, the succession given to them by the ancient physicists followed the order of their weight, i.e., earth, water, wind and fire.

2. The Change of Colors and Clear and Obscure Tones

a. The clear and serene colors and tones exchange then for those that are more obscure and serious. This alternating in style confers on the Canticle a certain tonality and fullness, all-inclusive. In the first part, there is the clear light of the sun, joy because of its splendor, for its rays, and greatness. There is compared with this the brilliance of the moon and the fascination of the stars. With the wind come the clouds

alternating with the serene sky. The night is enlightened by the festive and strong light of fire. For its fecundity and its own caring love, the earth is invoked as both “mother” and “sister”, and its multiform and varied colors the eyes rejoice and with the generosity of a loving mother, the earth prepares a rich table.

b. In the second part, the obscure colors dominate: illness, suffering, tribulation and death, all of which can be transformed into eternal death. Thus, in the **Hymn of Joy** there lies hidden a powerful appeal to penance and conversion. The point of arrival of *The Canticle of Brother Sun* is not blocked in a satisfying contemplation of nature - but rather in the challenging praise and service of God. It is for this reason, that the *Canticle* comes to a close with four imperatives.

3. Universal Reconciliation:

a. Behind the blended cosmic fullness and the multiform stairway of colors and tonalities of *The Canticle of Creatures*, there lies hidden the presence of a man fully reconciled with himself, with God and with the world. This aspect has been brought forth by the Franciscan scholar, E. Leclercq, [cf. *Il Cantico delle creature, ovvero i simboli dell'unione*. Torino: 1971] through the employment of the History of Religion and the Psychology of E. Jung. In the interpretation of the Canticle, the manner in which the Cantor unites and fraternizes the natural elements among themselves shows the power of Francis in giving life to inanimate realities and of communicating to them a soul, his own!

b. Therefore, for Francis the natural elements of the universe praised by him are not simple created objects, but they are **symbols**. By accepting even Death as his “Sister”, he manifests himself perfectly in harmony with everything in life, without fearing again even those unknown forces of this world. The Saint of Assisi is a man reconciled with all and with everyone. As notes Fr. Leclercq, in the Canticle of the Bard and Minstrel of Assisi, there corresponds the fullness of the cosmic dimension with his own interior psychological factors.

c. A reconciliation of this depth with all the elements of nature is clear in the most expressive manner in his recurring to the words “brothers”/“sisters” in reference to the universe around him. These qualifiers, in this composition, are used for the first time, so explicitly, in all of Christian literature. Flowing from the broadened NT idea of the “brothers and sisters of the Lord”, this develops a much deeper appreciation of God’s word. Every creature in the Canticles of Francis achieves a fraternal countenance. Through an attitude of tenderness and reverence, there is united with all that has been created by God and which is consequently “good.” [cf. I Tm 4:4: “...Everything God has created is good...”]

d. However, notwithstanding his apparently total immersion in this cosmic fullness, there is not lacking in his Canticle his very personal touch. The Cantor does not lose himself in the cosmos, nor is he “absorbed”, “de-personalized” in it, or in the multitude of creatures does he disappear. But, thanks to the ever-present qualifying “brother/sister”, all is familiarly close to him. It is to precisely this **fraternal connection**

with the created universe that *The Canticle of Brother Sun* owes its uniqueness and its particular efficacy.

4. Good Friday and Paschal Jubilee:

a. The question has long been asked: what is the source in Francis of his reconciliation with himself and with every aspect of life, even with that of death? The general response is that most likely, his various serious maladies supported for such a long time, were his great teacher. He also referred to them as his “**sisters**.” In those days of autumn and winter [1224-25], St. Francis was undergoing suffering almost without limit, including the sensation that he had been abandoned by God, and was lost in an unimaginable emptiness. Much like **Job**, he felt nailed by his sufferings, with the difference, perhaps, that the thought of cursing God had never crossed his mind.

b. In his own extended “**Good Friday Night**”, immersed in the depths of his darkness, he was able to perceive in a most extraordinary manner that God was indeed with him. He was convinced that the divine love was upon him. Suffused with joy and animated with a supra-human strength and an irresistible inspiration, he explodes in his chant: “O Most High, omnipotent, good Lord...!” In his situation, to call God *good* requires force and courage, and above all it is necessary to possess the same spirit of **total self-giving** that Jesus manifested: Father, not what I will but that which You will! [cf. Mk 14:36].

c. *The Canticle of Brother Sun* resulted from a lived situation of grave illness, and the end result would not be obvious to anyone not knowing Francis’ life story. In fact, in such terrible afflictions, generally one is preoccupied and totally distracted with oneself. In the normal course of events one’s attention to, or interest in nature is greatly diminished, if not totally eliminated. This was not the way it was with Francis, who was nearly blind. Notwithstanding the light which made him suffer, he was able to praise God from the depths of his own sincere and jubilant faith for having given us Brother Sun. Even though he was no longer able to keep anything on his stomach, he thanked mother earth profusely for the benefit of her fruit. Leaving aside the dangerous and tragic side of nature, not bringing up the destructive possibilities of both fire and water, Francis exulted only the wondrous works within the created universe. And it is for this same attitude that regarding time, he praises God not only for the good times and pleasant weather but also for the stormy days, and for all times as coming from the hand of God.

d. The *Canticle* sings of the universe already immersed in its final fulfillment: in this, it is not unlike those “Victory” Psalms, sung even before the battle ensued, as a hope of victory [cf. Ps 98; Rv 15:3, f.]]. This kind of hope-filled faith anticipates the future and eternal Lordship of God Himself, as flowing from His love of creatures.

e. In Francis’ composition, there may be heard the jubilant echoes of an anticipated Easter. In his ailing body, his worn out state, almost completely “done in”, along with the sufferings that came from the privilege of the stigmata, there appeared in his heart **a reflection of the risen Christ**. In him emerged the force of the one who

said: You will have tribulations in this world, but have confidence: I have overcome the world! [cf. Jn 16:33].

5. A Mysticism centered on Jesus Christ:

a. In the notes above, there is reference to the profound spiritual background out of which *The Canticle of the Sun* develops. Without any doubt, this composition is a mystical Canticle, born of a profound and lived relationship with Jesus Christ. In Francis, this was rendered visible - in that his wondrous interior union with Jesus Christ could be “seen” in the gift of the stigmata impressed in his fragile body. Even though the words “Jesus Christ” do not appear in any of the strophes, this unique relationship of his with the Savior is truly evident. This is quite different from so many other texts of the Saint’s prayers. In the Canticle, there is no express naming of the Father, or of the Son, or of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, at the basis of this composition it is possible to see there a **subtle allusion to Jesus Christ**, and this is not only the case in the strophe of the Sun, but also is evident in the overall context of the Canticle.

b. Many would look on this composition as a kind of cryptogram: there is throughout a kind of **integrating polarity** that dominates between the creatures among themselves, and their Creator. There is likewise a contrast between the “blessed” and those to whom “woe” is addressed. In addition to these evident facts there exists a kind of arch that extends from the very first word until the last: “Most High...Humility”! The other words, too, of the first and the last lines seem to be connected among themselves. There may be contrasted the “height” of God and the “humility, lowliness” of human beings - the words “omnipotence” is connected with “to serve” - the word “thank” corresponds to the “good God.”

c. If one would draw a line between the various concepts, as they have been placed here in relationship, there would result a kind of *monogram* of Christ. Without any artistic pretexts, it might be configured this way:

Most High God	Omnipotent	Good Lord
Thank	Serve Him	Great Humility

Furthermore, observing the initial letters of the first two words of the Canticle [“Altissimo: Omnipotent”] some have noted that these are the two letters used in art to indicate the monogram of Jesus Christ, with the Greek Letters: **Alpha** and **Omega**, the first and the last [cf. Rv 1:8; 21:6; 22:13].

d. Furthermore, in counting the actual number of the lines - at least according to the critical edition [the original did not have such a division] - one ends up with **33 lines** - leaving for each one’s speculation of the probability of the intention of indicating the years of Christ’s life, according to popular tradition.

e. In accord with the style of the Middle Ages, the numbers were more there mere mathematical signs, but offered their own symbolism. The number “**33**” had a

value that was quite special, because for many, it would call to mind the years of Jesus' life on earth. Thus, the combination of this number **33** - along with the **Alpha and the Omega** - we would be in the presence of a very special - albeit hidden - monogram of Jesus Christ.

f. It needs to be admitted that there is not any convincing proof of this within the text itself. However, these indications are at least as convincing as the interpretation of the initial words: "Brother Sun" as a veiled reference to Jesus ~Christ. In the ancient Christian Hymns, Christ is very often described as the "**Sun of Justice**" - "**the unconquered Sun**" - the "**Splendor of the Father**". So, with regard to the strophe regarding the sun, it is possible that the initial reference to "Brother Sun" is already thought of by Francis as a symbol of Jesus Christ, as this would have ancient roots in the long Christian tradition of hymnody.

g. It is useful to keep in mind in this regard the great extent that Francis would go to find Jesus in symbolic presence: he even felt a great affection for the worms, since the Scriptures refer thus to the Lord: 'I am a worm, and not a man' [cf. Ps 21:6]. Therefore, St. Francis would pick them up off the sidewalk and place them where they would not be crushed under foot.

1.] He would go into ecstasy at the sight of beautiful flowers, and would admire the variety of their forms, and would breathe in their delicate fragrance! They would recall to his mind immediately the beauty of that other Flower of the Field: this sprang through the frozen ground in the dead of Israel's spiritual winter, as the Shoot of Jesse - by **His sweet perfume**, He revived thousands and thousands of those already dead! [1 Cel 81: FF 460].

2.] He admired the flickering lamps, and he never wanted to blow out candles - as their splendor reminded him of the **Eternal Light**. He would walk reverently over stones, and they always reminded Him of the first Stone, **the Cornerstone** Who has come to life. When the Friars would cut wood, he would ask them not to ruin the trees, in the hopes that they would spring to life once again. He also would ask the gardeners to allow the edges of the cultivated part grow wild - as the mixture of the green grass and the wild flowers were always a reminder of how beautiful is the Father of the created world [cf. 2 Cel: FF 750].

h. To comprehend his order of not totally destroying the trees, it would suffice to think not only of Is 11:1: ["... A **shoot** springs from the stock of Jesse, a **scion** thrusts from his roots..."] - but also of the fact that the trees made Francis think of **the Wood of the Cross**. This thought inspired him often even to embrace the majestic trees.

i. In creatures - and in particular, the lamb and the worm, in the wood and the stones, in the flowers and trees, the Saint would very easily rise up to **living reminiscences of Jesus Christ**. These wondrous creatures made him think of precise events in the Life of the Son of God made man. This direct symbolic experience of Jesus Christ became readily compassion in the presence of the suffering **Lord**. Even

the animals would remind him of Jesus Christ, which perhaps in the history of spirituality might be something of a unique case. **This Christ-centered mysticism**, which rendered all reality transparent for him, permitted him to see in the Canticle the presence of a monogram of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the composition arose in Francis as a response of thanksgiving for the mystical experience in which God promised him the reign of heaven through his sufferings.

j. *The Canticle of Brother Sun* is not a simple lyric regarding nature - nor, is it only a mysticism of nature. It is rather **a hymn directed to God**, Whose divine beauty is reflected in creation, and Whose **mercy for the world is manifested in the redemption achieved by Jesus Christ**. Like St. Paul's Christological Hymn to the Colossians, Francis, too, was conscious of the central position of Jesus Christ in creation: all things have been created through Him and in view of Him. He is the First of all things. Since it pleased God to have dwell within Him all fullness and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things [cf. Col 1:16-17, 19].

k. Through the work of reconciliation of the Word made man, all has been reunited in a **cosmic fraternity**. All things of children of the one Father. As the brother of all creatures, Francis, within the Cosmic Liturgy, chose to praise and thank God with them, through them and for them. The Cantor of Assisi took note in his heart of the cross over the universe, as that sign through which the world was saved and blessed for all times.

6. A Sermon suited for All Seasons

a. St. Francis' brand of mysticism in no way was extraneous to this world. His intimate relationship with God made him sensitive to both the good and the agony of human beings. In his praise of the Creator through His creatures, there is hidden also an appeal for penance for all persons. For those who extend pardon out of love for God and support infirmities and tribulation, Francis announces the beatitudes of Jesus Christ [cf. Mt 5:9-10]. For those in danger of dying in mortal sin, he would launch his threatening "woe to you!" - but closing the strophe dedicated to death in a form of confidence: blessed are all they who die in accord with the will of God and with His commandments - since the "second death", the judgment of damnation, will do them no harm. This was pronounced by Francis at the same time as promise and admonition, depending on the situation in which the listener found himself. There, *The Canticle of Brother Sun* became an incitement to preaching.

b. The *Perugine Legend* recounts the origin of the composition, and confirms that it was thought of as a **Canticle of a Sermon**: Francis did compose also the melody which he taught to his companions His spirit was immersed in such a great sweetness and consolation, that he wished to send Brother Pacifico - who was known in this world as "the king of verses", and who was a most gentle master of chant - and to assign to him certain Friars who were good and spiritual men, so that they might go throughout the world to preach and praise God.

1.] He wished that one of them, a gifted speaker, would preach a sermon to the people. When this was concluded, all would sing together the Praises of the Lord, as His minstrels. When the Praises would be terminated, the preacher ought then say to the people: **We are the Lord's minstrels**, and the reward we want from you is this: that you live a life of true penance.

2.] He then added: What are the servants of God if not His Bards, Heralds, who ought to move the hearts of their listeners and elevate them to spiritual joy? He would say this with reference especially to the Friars Minor who had been invited by the people to save them [cf. LegPer 43: FF 1592]

c. According to this account, the *Canticle* was born as praise of God and simultaneously, as an appeal addressed to the human heart. It was meant to accompany the Friars in their preaching as they traversed the world. Singing followed by the preaching of the hymn composed by Francis - led the Friars in their preaching not only to praise God, but to place before them their responsibility for decisions that would touch their social conduct and their humble service before God. Pardon, putting up with discomfort, working for peace, committing oneself to God in death: these are the attitudes that are essential to our Christian existence and to our social relationships.

d. As a result, *The Canticle of Brother Sun* remains applicable in all times and in a particular way, **in our own times**. This is a period of history threatened by an ecological crisis of world proportions. The uncontrolled abuse of the fonts of prime materials, the unfair distribution of the goods of this earth and the nuclear threat place in grave danger the survival of humanity itself. The future is uncertain. Peace cannot be assured through any "just war", but only through disarmament and the re-conversion of military might, using it in behalf of human beings, for the defense and protection of creation. Such a plan would **greatly alleviate the cosmic death threat**.

e. All these problems implore a **Franciscan response**, that offered in *The Canticle of Brother Sun* Francis' Hymn remains today a fascinating and appealing gift - but also an urgent commitment to which all men of good will are being called today.

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[IV] REFLECTIONS FROM ASSISI

A Biblical Meditation on the Stigmata and the Vulnerability in the Apostolic Mission

"... [The Lord] said to me: You are My servant ... the Light of the Nations ...the Lord has given me a disciple's tongue ... by his wounds, we are healed..." [Suffering Servant in Is 42; 49; 50; 53].

"... We are strangers in your sight, and wayfarers like our fathers before us..." [cf. I Ch 29:15].

“... He was bearing our faults in his body on the cross ... through his wounds, you have been healed...” [cf. 2 P 1:21-25].

“... Jesus went up into the hills and he summoned those he wanted. So, they came to him, and he appointed the Twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to preach...” [cf. Mk 3]

Introduction

[1] Among the classics of Franciscan literature St. Bonaventure’s *The Mind’s Road [Itinerarium] to God* [cf. Boas Translation. NY: Macmillan] would rank high on that list. We are indeed pilgrims, over-night guests, on our way to the Father’s home. Any visit to Assisi would seem to bring the pilgrim back over the 7 centuries that separate us from the times of Francis and Claire - and they would lead us to Christ, by helping to lead us forward in hope to everlasting life.

[2] St. Bonaventure tells us in his writings on Francis that the great miracle of the “Poverello of Assisi” was not so much the imprint of the stigmata on his flesh - as his intimate union with the Lord. This is the true wonder of grace - the more one is emptied of self, the more can such a person be full of Jesus Christ. The poverty of Francis allowed much opportunity for the Lord Jesus to in-form his heart and mind.

[3] A recent document from the Holy See [Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Pilgrims, *The Pilgrimage into the Great Jubilee of 2000*, April 25, 1988] speaks of the “Adamic Pilgrimage” - the universal history of pilgrimage - conversion to the pathway of life, the way of truth and fidelity, the road of integrity and perfection. This is followed by the Pilgrimage of Abraham, dwelling in a Bedouin’s tent, by faith a stranger and wanderer, even a vagabond. The Exodus Migration needs to be remembered, re-presented, promised anew and lived perennially by God’s Holy People - the spirituality of the Passover, is to pass over the desert, the darkness and the deep of time, to the Promised Land. There will be a New Creation, New Heavens and a New Earth -all lending their spirit to the New Millennium.

[4] The Lord Himself is a Pilgrim, not remaining on Sinai, but accompanying His wandering People. The Tent of the Desert Sanctuary was the continuing Holy Mountain: come let us all go to the mountain of the Lord, to His Temple [cf. Is 2:2, ff.] Jesus Christ is a Pilgrim - even as an Infant, God’s Son is brought up out of Egypt to the Father’s House. The following of Christ is a life-long journey, a pilgrimage. He Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life - invites all to become members of the “Way” [cf. Ac 2:28; 9:2 +, etc.]

[5] Some would see the spiritual life as climbing Jacob’s Ladder - in the great Franciscan Doctor’s writings, life is a pilgrimage of the soul, an Itinerary of the Mind and Heart, a life-long tension toward the Lord. This interior spiritual journey subordinates all of one’s activities to the ultimate goal.

[6] In some ways, the stigmata of Francis would remind one of Mary, whose very soul was pierced with the Word of God - her entire role is to lead the believer to Jesus Christ. The stigmata of Francis would lead the believers across the centuries back to Jesus Christ, and through His wounds, we have all been healed [cf. I P 2: 24]. The

entire mystery of salvation is steeped in the reality of the poverty, the pain of Jesus Christ to remove the sins of the world. Francis' relatively short life sheds a particular light, opens out on the even shorter human existence of Jesus Christ. It is in this context that the stigmata of Francis bring us to the Sacred Stigmata of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[7] Only the immolated Lamb can open for us the scrolls of God's Word [cf. Rv 5:2, ff.]. The new Catechism uses the Stigmata as a model for the opening up of God's Word for our understanding:

[a] The phrase 'the heart of Christ' can refer to Sacred Scripture, which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But, the Scripture has been opened since the Passion, since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted [cf. CCC # 112].

[b] Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart, rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture [according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church [cf. CCC # 113].

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1. **Dimensions of Sin:** while there has been a loss of the consciousness of sin, for the believer at least five dimensions of it may be noticed in any careful pondering of God's Word:

a. **Theological:** "To try to understand what sin is, one must first recognize the profound relation of man to God, for only in this relationship is the evil of sin unmasked in its true identity as humanity's rejection of God and opposition to him, even as it continues to weigh heavy on human life and history." [cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 386]. Sin has been described as "the disobedience of a person who, by a free act, does not acknowledge God's sovereignty over his, or her life, at least at that particular moment in which he, or she, transgresses God's law." [cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, Dec. 2, 1984, # 14].

b. **Cosmic:** through sin, the world is "shattered" - there are deep divisions in the relationships between individuals and groups, nations, north and south, in a headlong quest for domination. There is a fearful growing disproportion between groups, social classes, countries, ideological rivalries - the trampling on the basic rights of the human person to a quality of life - hidden attacks against the freedom of individuals and groups - various forms of discrimination, violence and terrorism, the stock-piling of conventional and atomic weapons, an unfair distribution. [cf. John Paul II, *RR* # 2]. There is a potential for the destruction of the inhabited universe. The consumption of the world's goods by the more powerful is less controlled than that of the weaker peoples.

c. Social: In the biblical narratives, the rupture with God leads to divisions within humanity. The 'first sin' breaks the bond of friendship that had united the human family. Man and woman began accusing each other; the first death in scripture is a fratricide [cf. Gn 4; 2-16] [cf. RR # 15]. To speak of "social sin" means in the first place to recognize that by virtue of a human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete each individual's sin in some way affects others [RR # 16]

d. Ecclesial: Even the Roman Pontiff himself has seen the risk of separating power [and, in particular, the primacy] from ministry [cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ut Unum Sint*. May 25, 1995]. The ruptures that wound the unity of Christ's Body - here we must distinguish heresy, apostasy and schism - do not occur without sin [cf. CCC # 817]. The children of God are scattered and led astray by sin [cf. CCC # 845]. Every sin harms the communion of saints [cf. CCC #953].

e. Personal: sin, in the proper sense, is always a personal act. In some cases, external factors and subjective tendencies, defects and habits, may attenuate to a greater or lesser degree, a person's freedom and therefore one's responsibility [cf. CCC # 1735]. As a personal act, sin has its first and most important consequences in the sinner - i.e., in one's relationship with God, who is the very foundation of human life, and also in one's spirit, weakening one's will, clouding one's intellect. [cf. RR # 16].

2. The Dimensions of Reconciliation: however great the number of sins committed, grace is always even greater [cf. Rm 5:21]: the happy fault that has merited such a redeemer! This is noted in the paragraph headings of the new Catechism [cf. CCC # 387] - to do its work, however, grace must uncover sin to convert our hearts and bestow on us righteousness to eternal life. Like a physician who probes the wound before treating it, God, by His Word, and by His Spirit, casts a living light on sin [cf. CCC # 1848]. There are the parallel dimensions of reconciliation:

a. Personal: the whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship. [cf. CCC # 1468]. The sinner places himself before the judgment of God, anticipates the judgment to which each will be subjected at the end of earthly life. [# 1470]. There is only one thing that matters: that each one become a new creation in Jesus Christ [cf. 2 Co 5:17].

b. Ecclesial: This sacrament reconciles us with the Church. It does not simply heal the sinner, by restoring each penitent to ecclesial communion, but revitalizes the life of the Church which has suffered from one's personal sin. Sinners are re-established and strengthened in the communion of saints, and are made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the members of the Body of Christ.

c. Social: When solidarity on a religious level is developed in the mysteries and profound communion of saints, every sinner who rises above himself, raises up the world. Situations of sins throughout the world are rectified by the multiplicity of personal sinners who seek reconciliation [cf. RR #16].

d. Cosmic: Love is more powerful than sin and stronger than death [cf. RR # 22; *Dives in Misericordia* ## 8; 15]. Reconciliation is a kind of judicial action, but in a Tribunal of Mercy [cf. RR # 31]. Even though threatened by fear and despair, the people of today can feel uplifted by the divine promise. There will be a New Heaven and a New Earth - the world of the past is gone! [cf. Is 51: 16; 65:17; 66:12; Rv 21:1, ff.]. The whole world is groaning in one great act of giving birth [cf. Rm 8:19 +].

3. The Mystery of Pain: with the God of Love, why is there so much human misery? Why do such difficulties plague the lives of so many good people? Why does the slaughter of the innocents go on? Is there any answer to: "Why me?" So many of our experiences of suffering, injustice and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation. We need to turn to the witnesses of faith [cf. CCC ## 164, f.]. Believers need to ponder, to pray over the mystery of Providence and the Scandal of Evil [cf. CCC ## 309-314]. The Sacred Stigmata offer their own special insight: the blood and water that flowed from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments of new life. From then on, it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit. See where Baptism comes from, if not from the cross of Christ, from his death [CCC # 1225]. The mystery of suffering in the world is presented in God's Word with sublime hope:

a. Punishment: after the first sin, the Creator said to Adam: because you have sinned, with suffering shall you get your food - for dust you are, and unto dust you shall return [cf. Gn 3: 14, ff.]. Child-bearing became associated with pain and the daily wage can only be had through the sweat on the laborers' brow. As there is a world of human agony - Sacred Scripture is the great book on suffering! [cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, Feb. 11, 1984, ## 5, ff.]. This is always meant as a "discipline" [2 M 6:12] - having always in that it may create the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the one who suffers [cf. DM # 12].

b. Purification: as gold and silver in the fire, so is the heart and soul of the just purified. [cf. Si 2:5]. The heart of God's holy People was "proven" in their desert journey [cf. Dt 8:2, ff.]

c. Pedagogy: The Lord brought Israel the "round about way" across the fiery desert, too, that they might come understand that one does not live on bread alone but on everything that comes from the mouth of God [cf. Dt 8: 3; Mt 4:4. p].

d. Redemptive: from the mysterious servant of the Lord Israel learned that through the sufferings of this mysterious messianic figure Israel's wounds would be healed and that thus many would be justified [cf. Is 53]. We know the Redeemer lives, and that through suffering, one comes to see God [cf. Jb 19: 25, f.].

e. Eschatological: we do not have here a lasting home [cf. Heb 13:14] - the world as we know it is passing away [1 Co 7:31].

f. Jesus Christ: believing in Him, will lead to eternal life [cf. Jn 3:16] - as a result of Christ's salvific oblation, human life can exist on earth with the hope of eternal

life and happiness [cf. DM ## 14, ff. - c. 4]. The Christian vocation is to share life with Jesus Christ - to put on His mind [cf. Ph 2:5, ff.] - [cf. D in M c. 5, ## 19, ff.].

4. An Extension of the "Christological Constellation": A widely read book of about 25 years ago is Fr. Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* [1974]. In the explanation of his use of images, or models in Ecclesiology Fr. Dulles, S.J. maintains that this is only in the effort to obtain a better understanding of the terms of the mystery of the faith. "Model" is a term borrowed from the physical or social sciences. The "models" suggested were the Church as Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, Servant. Fr. Dulles went on to develop other reflections on "models", as *Models of Revelation* [Maryknoll: ORBIS 1983, 1992] and "models of priesthood."

As is clear, none of the models for the Church is "personal", such as Mary is a model, or type of the Church [cf. LG 63]. The late Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar has presented a very challenging ideal in what he calls "**The Christological Constellation**" [cf. *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* San Francisco: Ignatius 1986, pp. 131-172].

The old clichés, like "no man is an island" would apply here - by the very fact of His Incarnation, being true God and true man, eternally Jesus is inter-related with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Throughout His earthly sojourn, He associated with His Mother Mary, His apostles, and the more vague term, His "People". As the divine relationships constitute His personality [whether this is seen as loving obedience, commitment to prayer, Jesus revealed His constitutional filiation. Analogically, His quite human relationships and deep contacts in some profound manner, inwardly shaped Him.

More than any human being, Mary was indeed "with" Him from the beginning - His Apostles, close to Him in His *incarnational* relationships, are now shining like stars for all eternity [cf. Dn 12: 1., ff.]. As Jesus' relationship with His Father establishes His personality, the faithful disciple is called to follow Jesus Christ, to imitate Him like Paul or "to put on His mind" One way of grasping this "Christological Constellation" is to ponder Jesus life as depicted in the gospels: from Mary and Joseph who in their loving and virginal espousals were totally committed to Jesus Christ in their innocence - to the ascetic, John the Baptist - who truly decreased so that the Lord Himself could increase [cf. Jn 3:30], martyred in the prime of his life to prepare the way for Him.

The "columns" of the Church, meant to be its support - often wavered in their fear. The Rock, meant to be in imitation of the Corner-stone, fell into cursing and betraying the Lord with three well documented betrayals. While on the one hand, these Apostles were meant to be almost beacon lights - like stars in the heavens, the vault of the Church proclaiming His master-piece. Their voice goes out all over the earth - still - and their message to the far reaches of the world. The Church is one in its diversity - holy in its Founder, means and goal, yet imperfect in its membership - universal with a long way yet to go - and apostolic: encouraged by the example of those who failed the Lord, but who then who came back and sealed their faithful Witness with their blood.

Some wonderful combinations might be conjured up: in the Apostolic College, there were two sets of blood brothers. There would be Andrew and Peter, James and

John - this sense of fraternity was meant to permeate this community of friendship. In some way, the 'parish' receives this inspiration by striving to become a residence for way-farers, journeying toward their Heavenly Father's home. Despite the jealousies and the weaknesses and inner rivalries - anger with one another, as well as the wondering about the other in the Lord's plan [cf. Jn 21: 21] - these competitors were forged into an Apostolic College.

The off-shoot of all this would be the "summaries" noted in the Acts of the Apostles [cf. 2:42, ff.; 4:32-35] - they were one in heart and mind, shared all in common - the apostles continued in their witness to the Risen Lord to the far corners of the world: Peter and Paul would come to Rome; Thomas is believed to have reached India; St. James made it to Campostella, Spain. The Lord Who washed their feet prepared them for the apostolic mission of making disciples of all the nations [cf. Mt 21: 19] - witnesses to Jerusalem [cf. Ac 1:8], and to the world.

In dying for them, through His Precious Blood they came to be re-generated into His family - the washing of the feet was in preparation for the cleansing of their souls in His precious blood to have a part with Him. By breathing on them, they shared in His Person and power to forgive sins [cf. Jn 20:22]. By showing them His Sacred Stigmata, He spoke about His own Mission and sent them to accomplish it: in showing His hands and side He explained to them that theirs was His Mission, the same one He had received from His Father [cf. Jn 20:21]. It involves teaching about God and His Plan, to make disciples, and witnesses of the resurrection, like themselves. By being close to the Divine Corner-stone, they share in His being, and hand this on to others [cf. I P 2:4, ff.]. The Woman of Samaria - as will be true of anyone who "drinks" of the waters of salvation [cf. Is 12:1, ff.] will likewise become a spring, welling up to everlasting life [cf. Jn 4: 13, ff.]. Baptism opens the door to eternal union with the Trinity - and challenges each one to bring the Good News to the far ends of the world.

The authority of the Risen Lord, breathed upon them in an act of new creation, gave them power to be, to act, to teach, to heal. While John was thought to be the "Beloved Disciple", he is recorded twice as having leaned on the breast of the Lord [cf. Jn 13:25; 21:20] - a special pre-eminence was bestowed on Peter [cf. Mt 16: 13, ff.]. They were not simply His "servants" they were indeed His 'friends' [cf. Jn 15:15].

5. Personal "Models" of the Paschal Church: various combinations of this "Christological Constellation" of the Apostolic College and the early women of Christ's life shed their own light. The "College" of the Apostles was established in view of the "Community" of the Church. No one is in isolation: Peter is the Rock, the Infallible, the "Institution" - Mary is the Queen of Apostles, the Immaculate, of loyal interiority. John is the 'beloved' resting on the side of Christ, pondering the Apostolic Missionary dimensions of the Sacred Stigmata, is the ultimate "charismatic", deeply devoted to the Body of the Lord and His Word, who made room for Mary in his home - Paul is the great Missionary to the Gentiles, converted from overly zealous religious fanaticism, to total dedication to the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, Whose 'slave' he wanted to be. Literally knocked down from his pride, he exchanged the blinding light of faith in the Resurrected, for his short-sighted self-assured and terrifying religious zealotism. Thomas is converted by the sight of the wound in the side where he thrust his hand,

and the pierced hands, where he placed his fingers. He was converted by the touch - yet, always blessed will be those who believe without seeing [cf. Jn 20:24, ff.].

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, 'full of grace' [cf. Lk 1:28], the most blessed among women [v. 42], shares her maternity also with the Church, and its redeemed members. Mary of Magdala, out of whom the Lord had cast seven devils [cf. Lk 8:2], is a most important Model of this Church - she is the great realization of the "happy sin" that has merited such a Redeemer, as the Church prays in her Holy Saturday Liturgy. She is the first to bring the Good News from the Risen Lord to the Church [cf. Jn 20:18]. Undaunted she remained, even though the initial response to her message was less than enthusiastic!

The Apostolic College received the Trinitarian AGAPE' and shared this in the early Church through the Word of God and the Sacraments of the New Covenant. The "Way" to live is described in the Acts of the Apostles [cf. Ac 9:2 +]: it will always mean to follow the "Christological Constellation", as the Magi of old were led by the star to Christ [cf. Mt 2:1, ff.] - there is need to be directed by the star to be drawn into the "Christological Constellation", and to do Him homage in one's faith and apostolic commitment. The challenge is Paschal Faith, to be Witnesses of the Resurrection to the far ends of the globe [cf. Ac 1:8], in all dimensions of life.

This is the First Community, this "Christological Constellation" - the individuals among whom the Incarnation had placed the Divine Son of God in the carrying out of His Father's Mission, through confirmation in the Holy Spirit - is now the Paradigm, the Model of the Paschal Church. As the Sacred Stigmata led the Apostles to recognize the risen Lord - and as Mary treasured in her heart [cf. Lk 2:19, 52] the words and signs leading up to Him Whom she had conceived at the word of the Angel by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit: this is the vocation of the Church of our own time, and her Ministers and Missionaries, all. We might take a line from the classic Scholastic theologians: the Exemplary Cause also provides the means to reach the Model proposed to us. The grace of God continues its flow - the Lord has been raised up, and in every age continually "draws" [cf. Jn 12:32] believers to His Sacred Wounds to be His Apostles, His Missionaries. To respond to His question: "What do you want?" [cf. Jn 1:38] - the call is to "come and see!"

Some of the "Models" of Paschal Faith, Hope and Love are these:

a. **Peter, the Rock**: [cf. Mt 16:18]: almost "ironically" the weak one is chosen to support the others - the Lord's Prayer is directed toward his lovable, but weak person [cf. Lk 22:31, ff.] - always generous, ever willing to go the extra mile, often stumbles, misunderstands, literally get in over his head [cf. Mt 14:30]. Denying the Lord three times [cf. Lk 22:34, par.], his "penance" is to confess his love for the Lord - three times [cf. Jn 21:15, ff.], and to be a committed Pope. This is not unlike the "penance" received by the grand penitent of the *Miserere*: who vows to teach sinners like himself to follow the 'way' to the Lord, offering his own broken spirit as his holocaust, his crushed and broken heart becomes the oblation, the spiritual sacrifice offered [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.; 1 P 2: 3, ff.] to the Merciful and Compassionate God, always slow to anger, rich in mercy - as the "Exodus Antiphon" reminds us all [cf. Ex 34:6] - This is Paul's

great dream for the early Church, presented in nuptial terms, the great mystery of Christ's union with His Church [cf. Ep 2:4; 5: 32].

The sin of this good shepherd was to place himself {down below", "outside". "at a distance" [cf. Mk 14: 66, ff., par.] from the divine Good Shepherd. This sinful man is entrusted with the keys of mercy - he is simply remarkable as *Peter: Disciple, Apostle and Martyr* [cf. Oscar Cullmann, Philadelphia: Westminster 1953]. This is in real contrast with some views of *Peter in Matthew: Discipleship, Diplomacy and Dispraise* [cf. Arlo J. Nau, Collegeville: Glazier/Liturgical 1992], restricting his appointment as "Vicar" to "irony", and that there really is no primacy at all. The belief of the Church remains that Peter is appointed by the Lord as the first among the Apostles. Like the Woman of Samaria, it is clear that Peter had hardly any idea of what God had offered him [cf. Jn 4:10] - with all the Apostles, Peter will have to be baptized with Christ's own baptism, and drink His chalice to the ultimate dregs [cf. Mt 20:22, f., par.]. The "Rock" vacillated, and needed to be opposed by Paul to his very face, as "he was manifestly in the wrong" [cf. Ga 2:11, ff.].

In the priesthood, the challenge still is "Character, Celibacy and Collegiality" - papal primacy is a service of love, "institution" is a charism of the Holy Spirit - independence from the power of Satan will always depend on one's relationship to Christ. Peter's terrible mistake is simply that he was following at a "distance" [cf. Mk 14:54] - Peter's vocation came with the Lord looking "hard" at him for a long time [cf. Jn 1:42]. This is the way Peter's conversion came as well: the Lord turned around and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered..." [cf. Lk 22: 60, ff.]. This is the "paradoxical" Peter: he prays that the Lord depart from him, knowing that he was a sinful man [cf. Lk 5:8] - and yet, when sinking he knew enough to plead to the Lord Jesus: to save him [cf. Mt 14:31].

With the Third Millennium of the Church's life dawning, Peter teaches us about the thousand years: perhaps quoting Ps 90, he instructs the Church of all the millennia that a thousand years are like a day in the sight of the Lord [cf. 2 P3:8, ff.]. Peter is attributed with the great definition of grace as a share in God's own nature [cf. 2 P 1:4]. All is passing [cf. 2 P 3:11], we are waiting for the new heavens and the new earth [cf. v. 13].

Peter's Mission of Mercy is most convincing: doxology helps to respond to doubt. Praise be the Most Blessed Trinity - in great mercy, we have a new birth in hope! [cf. I P 1:3, ff.]. He encourages modern day faith - we can rejoice in his view that believing is already a kind of "seeing." [cf. v. 8]. We are God's People of Mercy [cf. 1 P 2:10, 17]. The Church is challenged to the hidden character of gentleness [cf. 1 P 3:4]. Blessing is the "correct" response for insult [cf., vv. 8, ff.]. The Church has been much endowed by the Spirit and these gifts must be at the service of one another. The Apostles are called to be Good Shepherds, modeled on the divine Good Shepherd [cf. Jn 10; I P 5: 1, ff.] - be steadfast in the grace of God [cf. v. 12].

Charism is within the institutional Church - power is apostolic service - the Law is permeated by love. Hierarchy presupposes the great principle that the "first are last",

the servant of all - when you are a guest, go and take the lowest place [cf. Lk 14: 7, ff.]. This is the paradox of the Church.

b. The Holy Spouses, Mary and Joseph: Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is the Mother of the Church, Queen of the Apostles - immaculate, and yet not in the office of infallibility. Fr. Balthasar's theology of priesthood notes the paradox of the "institutional frailty", Petrine visibility and Marian interiority [cf. Dermot Power, *A Spiritual Theology of the Priesthood. The Mystery of Christ and the Mission of the Priest*. Edinburgh: T & T. Clark 1998, pp. 55-66]. The office has been humiliated, and Mary is "magnified" from the depths of her soul by the merciful omnipotence of the Most High. The more "empty" one is of self, the more is the believer exalted [cf. Ph 2:6-11] - this is the true "mind" of Christ Jesus. In giving Himself over into the hands of His Father, Jesus is the Model of Mary's lowly state, the basis of her exaltation [cf. Lk 1: 46, ff.].

The "FIAT" of Mary is lived out in her nuptial self-giving, as is likewise true of Joseph [cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptoris Custos*, August 15, 1989]. This Model of Jesus' total self-giving is experienced uniquely in the lives of the Holy Spouses. When Mary responds to the Angel: 'I am the Handmaid of the Lord', Joseph does the same wordlessly in his "annunciation": the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. So, he got up, took the child and his mother and left that night... [cf. Mt 2:13, ff.]. In their total self-giving to the child Jesus, they offer to the Church the best "translation", the best "exegesis" the Church has ever received of the Incarnate Word of God.

"Joseph is the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God, and that in doing so he supports his spouse in the faith of the divine annunciation. He is also the first to be placed by God on the path of Mary's 'pilgrimage of faith'..." [cf. RC # 6]. Mary's graces flow from her Divine Maternity - Joseph's fatherhood juridically depends on his Espousals to Mary. His fatherhood is expressed in his life of service, a sacrifice to the Incarnation. This gave him the authority to make that total gift of himself, the oblation of his heart and all his abilities into love placed at the service of Jesus Christ [# 8].

Mary is celebrated as united to Joseph the just man, by a bond of marital and virginal love - through his complete self-sacrifice Joseph expressed his generous love for the Mother of God and offered his sponsal 'gift of self.' [# 20]. This total self-sacrifice, surrendering one's whole existence to the Mission of the Messiah is understandable only in the light of the interior life [# 25]. The key in this Holy Espousals of the Mother of God and Patron of the Universal Church - is the absolute readiness to serve faithfully God's salvific will, revealed in Jesus [cf. # 30]. May this example serve exceptionally to teach the entire Church total self-giving to the service of the saving mission of Jesus Christ.

Immediately after the Ascension, the Mother Church of Jerusalem is described as the group of the Apostles, several women, including the Mother of Jesus, His brothers: all joined in continuous prayer. The Apostles set about to the election of Matthias, and the central qualifications as described for the choice was: someone who has been with us from the beginning, all the time of Jesus' earthly mission. While no one would have filled that qualification better than Mary, her entire vocation and its

graces are her Divine Maternity, her painful Motherhood of the Church -not hierarchical service.

c. John, Representative of the Entire Church: he made room for Mary in his heart and home [cf. Jn 20:27]: “Woman behold your son...This is your Mother...” [cf. v. 26]. John begins as does Genesis: “In the Beginning” - the New Creation has come, the New Heavens and the New Earth are being inaugurated [cf. Rv 21:1, ff.]. Jesus, Who ex-spired”, He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit [cf. Jn 20:30]. As the Father so loved the world that He gave up His only Son - He did not spare Him, but handed Him over [cf. Jn 3:16; Rm 8:32] - this is the Model of Discipleship, total self-giving for the sake of God and His Plan. To be in the “Christological Constellation”, one remains in Jesus’ ”orbit” - finding life, light and apostolic energy from the Risen Lord.

The First Creation was the raising up [cf. Gn 1] of the darkness, the desert and the deep, through a kind of seven day Liturgy, beginning in the Vigil and then the dawn of each day. This is wondrously achieved by the Light of the World, through the Garden of Paradise and the transformation of the chaos into the streams of Salvation [cf. Is 12:1, ff.]. The unruly primordial confusion is separated, the waters above from the waters below, controlling the flow of life-giving water [cf. Gn 2: 5, ff.]. In a later act of redemptive creation, the Almighty Creator separated the waters from the left from the waters to the right [cf. Ex 14:15, ff.], allowing the chosen people to process through the chaos, to sing His praises and providing them a drink from the waters the Lord chose to give . The same phenomenon is done with the Ark of the Covenant - as soon as the feet of the priests bearing the Ark touched the Jordan [cf. Jos 3:14, ff.], in that precise season when the waters were the most abundant - as a pre-vision of the washing of the Apostles’ feet [cf. Jn 13].

The Second Creation will be out of the chaos of sin and separation from God - Paul will teach us this: the whole creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth [cf. Rm 8: 22] - to be in Christ Jesus makes of one a New Creation [cf. 2 Co 5:17] - All are being re-created in Christ Jesus [cf. Ep 1:15-20] - Christ is the Heart of this New Creation [cf. Ga 6:15].

John speaks of a kind of New Creation - with Christ breathing the power of Mercy over His Apostles [cf. Jn 20:22], the Breath of Jesus is a symbol, with the fresh water so prevalent in Jn [cf. c. 2 - Cana; c. 4 - Samaria; c. 7 - the Last and Greatest Day of the Festival; c. 19 - from the Pierced Side] - of the Spirit Creator, Lord and Giver of Life [cf. Ezk 37: 9; Ws 15:11].

Being a Prophet of the ”Pierced One”, John learned the Wisdom of the Paschal Mystery, leaning on the side of Christ from the Sacred Heart of Jesus [cf. Jn 13:25; 21:20]. The Way, the Truth and the Life [cf. Jn 14:6], the Word, the Light, the Love - Eternal Glory, all flow from Paschal Faith, Hope and Love. The Fourth Gospel offers central principles for the “quest for the absolute”, the “principle of totality”:

- He must grow greater, and I must grow smaller [cf. 3:30];
- My food is to do the will of the One Who sent Me, and to complete His work [cf. 4:34];

- the Son can do nothing of Himself, but only what He sees the Father doing [cf. 5:19];
- I can do nothing by myself [cf. 5: 30];
- the Father Who sent Me bears witness to Me [cf. v. 37];
- on the Son, God Himself has set His seal [cf. 6:27];
- I have come from heaven not to do My own will, but that of Him Who sent Me [cf. v. 38];
- My teaching is not from Myself but from the One Who sent Me [cf. 7: 16];
- the One Who sent Me is with Me [cf. 8:16];
- I do nothing of Myself - what the Father has taught Me is what I preach - He Who sent Me is with Me and has not left Me to Myself - I always do what pleases Him [cf. 28, f.]
- what I speak of is what I have seen with My Father [cf. v. 38];
- I tell you the truth as I learnt it from God [cf. v. 40];
- I was sent, and by him [cf. v. 42];
- I care not for My own glory - it is conferred by My Father [cf. vv. 50, ff.];
- As the Father sent Me, I send you..." [cf. 20:21, ff.]

d. Apostles in a Closed Room: [cf. Jn 20:19. f.]: the doors were closed out of fear and the Lord came offering them His Peace. Perhaps this is normal enough in the light of the recent death of the Lord. Yet, it seems uncharacteristic of Apostles to remain behind closed doors. One author sees this as 'Preserving appearances behind Closed Doors' [cf. Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom. A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1995, pp. 339, ff.].

The appeal is for a conversion to Paschal Faith - as the doors of the room are opened in the resurrection, the Risen Lord opens the enclosures confining His Apostles. Sadness, regret - are transformed into apostolic joy, authority, power, missionary boldness, over death-dealing sin. The Risen Lord brings peace to their troubled hearts and along with that the commission to share this through forgiveness. As no one gives what one does not have - the Apostles are bountifully endowed with the Holy Spirit of mercy, and need to share this in their Apostolic Mission.

The Covenant of Peace was noted long ago in the rainbow: lightning and thunder demonstrate the power of the Lord. The fearsome thunder was thought to be the "voice" of the Lord and the lightning, His arrows: He thundered from heaven, and let His arrows scatter the unfaithful [cf. Ps 18]. As a sign of Hope, He hung his bow high in the clouds - the "rainbow" is "out of reach", no more arrows will fly in anger against His People. The bow in the clouds is a sign of the Covenant of Peace [cf. Gn 9: 12, ff.]. It is in the peace of the Lord that the Apostles find their courage for the Mission entrusted to them by the Lord.

The Sacred Stigmata of the Lord become the sign of His Resurrection and the source of the Apostolate of these first missionaries. Only the Immolated Lamb can open the Scriptures [cf. Rv 5 & 6] - the Heart of Jesus opens up the Word of God for all to grasp [cf. CCC # 112]. It is through the openings in the Sacred Stigmata of the Lord that the mysteries of the Divine Heart flow forth.

Already the angelic choirs on Christmas night singing of their Glory to God gave some hint of the “Lord” - perhaps more of an Easter word. Jesus going through the total self-emptying of the Paschal Mystery becomes the Lord of all - overcomes death by life, fear by courage; sadness by joy, despair by hope. The Apostles become “New Men” in the best sense of the term; they indeed are the New Creation in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps Mark best shows us how the “Community of Disciples” is called to the following of the Crucified Lord - failure in discipleship is to abandon the Lord. There is need with the help of the Holy Spirit of Wisdom to seek to remove the veil of the Messianic Secret - to seek the Lord, to adhere to Him, and to follow Him faithfully through to the end. In his various Commissioning of the Apostles [cf. cc. 1; 3; 6], Mark does note that people were “closed” to His miracles [cf. Mk 3: 5] - Even the representatives of His ‘very own special treasure’, His Apostles, are described as having their “minds closed” [cf. Mk 6: 52]. How very often what many think was the first gospel notes the fact that His closest ones were not able to understand Him [cf. Mk 4:13; 6:52; 7:18; 8: 17, f., 21, 33; 9:10, 32; 10:38]. The disciples are “closed” to the whole idea of the Suffering Jesus - they are quite scattered and it is the courageous women who bring them the first news of the resurrection. All the inner circle of the Apostles run away on Calvary but the courageous women remain. The scholars will refer to Mark’s Gospel also as “A Mission Book” [cf. Donald Senior, CP - Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP: *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis 1983].

Matthew comes to an end with the consigning of the Apostolic Mission - to go out into the whole world, making disciples of all, baptizing, teaching the Trinity [the Mystery of God] and the keeping of His commandments [His Plan]. The promise is that He will be with His own through to the end. The Mission had already been conferred on the Apostles much earlier on in Matthew’s gospel [cf. 10:1- 36] - every disciple needs to grow and be like the Master, the Teacher. The Lord will abide with His down the Apostolic Mission.

St. Luke asks the Apostles to be men of poverty, prayer and perseverance. Genuine discipleship will mean dependence on the Lord God, through detachment from earthly obstacles; it will ask for the commitment of mind and heart to the Word of God, like Mary who treasured the message in her heart [cf. Lk 2:19, 51]. The power of the Holy Spirit will endow the Apostles with Missionary Boldness [cf. Lk 24:49]. The “New Israel” will follow the Lord anointed by the Spirit [cf. Lk 4; 18] - this is the only evangelist that speaks of the sweat like the drops of blood in Gethsemane [cf. Lk 22:44], the total out pouring of a life in the service of God and His Plan. Luke continues this theme in the community’s universal Mission in the Acts of the Apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit.

With John, the Lord breathes new life into His own - what was dead, a field of dry bones [cf. Ezk 37] - now becomes the mission-field of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver. Since the Fourth Gospel begins with the same words as does Genesis [and as also would John’s First Letter], many think of the breathing of new life into the Apostles as the real “beginning”, the new creation. The theme of life peaks here - with Paschal faith, resurrection. Life comes for those open to it. By the blood and water flowing through the Sacred Wounds, Israel of old is regenerated in water and the Holy Spirit - is

nourished in the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus, and by concomitance, the Father and the Spirit come into the heart of every recipient of the Eucharist. The Hope of the Church is the Spirit-accompanied Apostolic Mission. The Apostolic Mission is a gift of the Holy Spirit [cf. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John, XIII-XXI*. The Anchor Bible. Vol. 29 A. New York: Doubleday 1970, pp. 1036, ff.].

On January 6, 1983, Pope John Paul issued an Apostolic Letter, entitled *Aperite Portas Redemptori* [Jan. 6, 1983] - convoking a special Holy Year commemorating the 19th century of the Passion and Death of the Lord Jesus Christ. This appeal of opening all doors to the Redeemer has been exemplified through these two decades of his Pontificate, living out his motto: All Thine! The Paschal Mystery is the high point of the Paschal Mystery and the supreme fulfillment of divine mercy. The entire apostolic mission of the Church is at the service of this mystery.

e. St. Thomas, the Apostle [cf. Jn 20:24-29]: there is a real contrast here with the beloved disciple for whom "believing is seeing" - but, Thomas is surprisingly "absent" from the Apostolic Assembly on Easter night, and would not believe the ecclesial witness: he had to see for himself. One redeeming feature of his doubt is that believers are enabled to have some understanding of the horror of the Sorrowful Stigmata: Thomas' hand could fit in the side of Christ, rudely lacerated by the lance. In Thomas' conversion through his contact with the Sacred Stigmata the Church learned a new prayer: My Lord and My God! There is also indicated the Formula of Canonization for later believers: blessed are those who have not seen and still believe! St. Peter will use this in his First Encyclical Letter to the early Church, preparing them for the "ordeals" of life: these early spiritual "foreigners" did not see the Lord, yet believe in Him - faith gives assurance of what is hoped for [cf. I P 1:8; Heb 11: 1, ff.].

As always, the Lord is slow to anger, rich in kindness, pardoning through the generations - the "Exodus Antiphon", composed by the Lord Himself sung repeatedly throughout the OT centuries [cf. Ex 34:6 +] - peaks in the NT [cf. Ep 2:4, f.] - and became the background for the first Encyclical Letter in history totally dedicated to God's Mercy [cf. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, Nov. 30, 1980].

The People of God are called to faith in the Apostolic Witness - Thomas failed here by doubting it. The Risen Lord met him and thoroughly convinced him - as God's People hopefully will be convinced by meeting the Risen Lord in the Eucharist. The overwhelming majority of the most committed believers never experience the "praeter-natural" -but, remain convinced of the "supernatural", the Scriptures, the sacraments, the Divine Tradition mediated through the Church, offering their whole lives to the Lord as an oblation to His mercy [cf. Rm12:1, ff.] in this way. The "Apostolic" Church offers an unbroken line of witnesses with the sure charism of the truth from the Lord's commissioning of the Apostles in His Resurrection, and their confirmation of Pentecost.

To St. Ignatius of Loyola is attributed the principle that only God knows what He would accomplish in His servants if He were not impeded by them. The modern theologian Jurgen Moltmann has written that perhaps the "original" among the actual sins of believers might not be so much the titanic desire to be like God - but, the limiting refusal to be all that God likes! Paschal Faith opens the mind and heart of believers -

that their hearts, too, will be pierced with the Word of God as Mary's was pierced with the sword [cf. Lk 2: 35]. Every personal encounter with the Risen Lord will ask of the beneficiary a greater openness to one's fellow human beings - a greater capacity to answer the lord's question that echoes down through the years: where is your brother/sister? [cf. Gn 4:9] - who is your neighbor? [cf. Lk 10:29, ff.] - life is an "oblation", a "spiritual sacrifice" [cf. I P 2:3, ff.].

f. **St. Paul: from closed-minded Zealot, to Missionary to the Gentiles:** Paul was smug in the depth of his knowledge of the traditions of his people [cf. Ac 8:1, ff.; Ga 1:13-24] - but was totally closed to the fuller sense of the Tradition of their God. In the depths of his specialized and deep knowledge, he had lost touch with the sublimity of God's Word: the Paschal Lamb would be the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, and that the Church herself is a kind of extended incarnation. The least of the membership is identified with Jesus Himself [cf. Mt 25:40, ff.]. Luke notes Paul's conversion three separate times [Ac 9:1, ff.; 22:5-16; 26:10-18]. While breathing threats against the Lord's Disciples, he long persecuted "the Way" to the death, often casting his vote for the death penalty - the man closed in by his many proud words and his own conceited view, is knocked to the ground, rendered speechless - and the process of opening up to true conversion to the God of His People was underway. This "expert" in the scriptures needed "on-going formation, conversion" - and comes to the Church with the sword of God's Word forever afterwards a symbol associated with Paul.

Mission begins with conversion; the evangelizers will always need evangelization, in accord with the initial announcement of Jesus Christ Himself that the Reign of God is at hand: the time has come! Repent and believe the Good News [cf. Mk 1: 14, ff.] - these are Jesus' first words in what might have been the first Gospel. In Paul's case the erstwhile "persecutor" comes to imitate the pre-cursor. John the Baptist proclaimed that the Lord Jesus must increase, and the Apostle needs to decrease [cf. Jn 3:30, ff.].

Of the many "marvels" of Paul's teaching, his presentation of the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ needs special prayer: put on the mind of Jesus Christ - He did not cling to His equality with God - but, He emptied Himself, both in the Incarnation, and by bleeding together in a sacrificial death for the redemption of the world. In the end, the Lord would raise Him up for the glory of the Trinity [cf. Ph 2:5-11]. This is the third Psalm of most Saturday afternoons of "Evening Prayer I on Sundays". This is the Church's liturgical preparation for the Lord's Day - this is the believer's preparation for eternal Day of the Lord. In some way, the "theology of vocation" is in not clinging to what might be rightfully one's own among the blessings of God - these are handed back to the God of the Blessings for a greater share in His nature [cf. 2 P 1:4], in Christ's Mission. Christian vocation can never be "doing one's own thing" - and even just "self-realization". It really means, "putting on the Lord Jesus" [cf. Rm 13:14; Ga 3:27], "emptying oneself" [cf. Ph 2: 6, ff.], being closely associated with the corner stone who has come to life [cf. I P2: 2, ff.]; this means remaining united as a branch to the vine [cf. Jn 15:5, ff.] - this means living as a part of the Church to which Christ is espoused, this sacrament of great mystery [cf. Ep 5: 29, ff.] - the Church is a body, Christ is its head [cf. Ep 1:22], the Head of Christ is His Father [cf. I Co 11:3], we are His members [cf. Ep 3:6; 4:16, ff; 5:30].

The life that we live is not ours, but His [cf. Ga 2:20] - being immersed INTO Christ Jesus [cf. Rm 6: 1, ff.] is a life-long process, as more and more the graces of Baptism are lived and intensified as long as one lives and responds. The marks of the “bad things that happen to good people” are truly the living of the life of Jesus Christ [cf. **Ga 6:17**].

This is the only NT text that has the Greek word *stigmata*. The “thorn of the Flesh” noted by Paul [cf. 2 Co 12:7] seems to be part of this in Paul’s apostolic mission. There is some discussion regarding the nature of Paul’s *stigmata*. At Philippi Paul did receive a rather severe beating [cf. Ac 16:22, ff.]. In one of his own Epistles, Paul relates the times he was scourged, beaten, ship-wrecked, and the like, for the reign of God [cf. 2 Co 11:24, ff.]. In some interpretations, these violent experiences are the reason why Paul used the graphic word *stigmata* to express what he personally experienced in the Apostolic Mission.

There have been some recent scholars who thought that Paul actually was a “stigmatist”. However, the prevailing view seems to be that what Paul refers to here is his general commitment to the Lord Jesus, and that by what he personally suffered for the sake of the Lord were an indication of his special “belonging” to Jesus Christ, whose “slave” he wanted to be. He was deeply convinced that the life of the Lord Jesus had come alive in his own existence [cf. 2 Co 4:11]. The power of the Lord’s resurrection remains active in all who will serve the Church [cf. Ph 3:10, ff.]. Paul was accustomed to seeing his life as an “oblation” [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.], and that he was “making up in his own body for whatever was lacking to the sufferings of Jesus Christ. [cf. Col 1:24]. Considered in itself, nothing was lacking to the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ - simply, for Paul, through his share in the Apostolic Mission conferred by Jesus Christ in His Apostles [cf. Jn 20:21, ff.], he was bringing these merits of Christ to the people he served. Baptism unites one to Christ, enabling each to become a “new creature” [cf. Ga 5:15] - each of the baptized is literally baptized INTO Christ Jesus, becoming one person with Him by sacramental configuration, conformation. [cf. Rm 6:1, ff.].

Paul is drawn into the “orbit” of Christ Jesus in the fulfillment of the Savior’s own words: when He would be raised up on the Cross and in the resurrection, He would “draw” all to Himself [cf. Jn 12:32]. This is the fascination of being drawn by the Beloved - the mysterious sway that the Lord Jesus has over those who believe in Him, that render all of their loving sacrifices “connatural” with those of Jesus Himself. The message of Paul is the Wisdom of the Cross [cf. I Co 1: 17, ff.] - the Mission of Paul is loyalty to the Cross. Yet, it is the Risen Christ Whose voice is heard through the proclamation of His Word [cf. 2 Co 5:20; Ep 2:17]. The means with which Paul writes his Letters is the Holy Spirit [cf. 2 Co 3:13].

g. St. Mary Magdalene [cf. Jn 20:11-18]: for a part of her life, she was closed in on herself in a life of sin. Christ came into her life and showed her another way - she was one out of whom He would expel seven devils. [cf. Mk16:9, f.]. This is the opening verse of the so-called ‘long ending’ of Mark. Perhaps she is the first one to be invited to give witness to the resurrection was Jesus had first risen within her. By freeing her from the bonds of Satan, Mary Magdalene becomes a great witness to hope.

Dutifully, she goes and tells what she knows to be true. This is almost the prophetic: "Go and tell it on the mountain!" However, her apostolic mission does not meet with success: they did not believe her when they heard her speak of Him alive. She is not alone in this apostolic "failure" - the verses continue that He showed Himself to others, and they did as she did, and they were not believed either.

Yet, Mary is ultimately sure of her "Christophany" - this appearance of the Lord Jesus, as she had earlier been drawn into His "orbit". There is some mystery why she did not recognize Jesus in the Gospel of John - the commentators offer one explanation, that the body transforms into a "spiritual" body in the resurrection [cf. I Co 15:42, ff.]. Another possibility is that Paschal Faith is more than simple recognition - those "who have not seen" will have the Eucharist - she is called by name and then she recognizes the Risen Lord.

The love of Mary being drawn by her "Beloved" is also a Cantic of Canticles theme [cf. Ct 3: 1, ff.]. Mary is a Model of the Church ardently looking for the Lord Jesus - the "quest" for the Lord is a stance of the People of God of all times. This is one of the themes of the Psalms: whoever seeks the Lord will praise Him [cf. 22:27] - one thing I ask of the Lord and this I seek [cf. 27:4] - you are the God I seek [cf. 63:2]. Jeremiah paraphrases the first commandment: seek the Lord with all your heart [cf. Jr 29:13]. This carries over into the NT: seek the Lord and His reign, and all else will be added to you [cf. Mt 6:33] - seek and you will find [cf. Mt 7:7] - seek peace and follow it [cf. I P 3:11]. Mary did seek the Lord and she found Him Whom her heart always sought: she was forgiven much because she loved much! [cf. Lk 7: 47. ff.].

Conclusion

To understand St. Francis' view of Jesus Christ, and His Stigmata, we do well to follow St. Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor: if you should ask how these all came about, question grace, not instruction - desire, not intellect - the cry of prayer, and not just the pursuit of study - the spouse, not just the teacher - God, and not man - darkness, not clarity - not just the light, but the flaming fire, the burning Passion of Jesus Christ [cf. Charles Andre Bernard, SJ, *Le Dieu des mystiques*, Paris: du Cerf 1994, Vol. I, pp. 316-362, *passim*]. The revealed Truth of faith is not an abstraction, but an attraction, an enkindled reality of the Trinity, inclining one to love - a tendency is instilled in the believer, leading through the doors of the Stigmata to eternal union. The believer becomes child, spouse, friend of God, one of His members, sharing in the divine Filiation, co-heirs with His Son, Temples of the Holy Spirit. The contemplative believer is called from the interior to the superior - far greater is the affective experience than rational consideration - this all leads to God, in Whom the depths and the summit are one and the same.

St. Francis of Assisi was drawn into the Christological Constellation through his living of poverty and through his admiration of the suffering Christ. All goodness is diffusive of itself - and the greater the Goodness, the more the diffusion. When this Good is infinite, it is personified in a Self-giving Truth and Goodness. When applied to the Creator, creation itself is assumed by God as His Spouse. There is an inherent

sacredness to all of creation, as in all created goods may be found traces of the Image of the Creator. The interpretative key of all creation is the greatest of Divine Benefits, the Divine Son Himself. In the Canticle of Brother Sun, all of nature is espoused - reflecting the inner bonding of the Trinity in truth and love. This Canticle - born in the suffering of the Author on what was his death-bed, is made up of 33 verses, one for each year that tradition gives for the years of the earthly sojourn of Jesus. The magnificent cosmos is the dowry of the King's Son. The Flower of the Field, pushing its way up through the frozen ground, is a reminder of the Shoot of Jesse, pushing away the stone of the sepulcher - the humblest of creatures, as the lowly worm [cf. Ps 22:7], the meek Lamb [cf. Jn1: 29], are reminders of Jesus Christ. We are the Lord's minstrels, His bards, His heralds - the symphony of the universe is the score: look out at the rainbow and praise its Maker! [cf. Si 43:11, f.]: Sing to the Lord a New Song! [cf. Ps 33:3; 40:4; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1]

Like the woman of Samaria drinking of the Streams of Salvation [cf. Is 12:1, ff.], she becomes a fountain of living water for her own people who came to accept Jesus Christ, who really is the Savior of the world [cf. Jn 4: 13, ff.]. The Apostolic Mission is to share this living water that it will become a spring inside that wells up to eternal life. This same idea is found with Peter who thought of Jesus as the rejected, seemingly abandoned Corner-stone Who has come to life in the Resurrection. Each of the baptized is meant to rest on the Corner-stone, share in His energizing life, and hand this on, down through the ages [cf. 1 P 2: 4, ff.].

In the new priesthood, taught by Peter, each believer shares in the Apostolic Mission and is called to become living stones, building up a spiritual house. When St. Francis was directed to re-build the House of the Lord, he eventually came to see that this meant the universal Church. The Eucharist is the great sign of the real presence - this is the Self-giving of God. One can only follow Christ by carrying with Him the Cross - and will only be recognized by the Father by the heart that is pierced by the Lord's Word. Re-building the Lord's House is a costly enterprise!

From the "root" of the word *stigmata*, one comes to see the Sacred Wounds of the Lord as the healing remedy for the sting of sin, a thorn in the flesh, and become that which distinguishes the risen Lord - these distinct marks indicate that one belongs to the Lord Jesus in a special way - these wounds instigate the new gateway to the Lord's heart. The Stigmata become a kind of "character" of recognition, the "seal" of approval of Francis' internal union with the Lord, or of the Letter of one's whole life [cf. 2 Co 3:2] to the Lord; the Stigmata are the mark that the Suffering Servant belongs totally to the Lord. The Stigmata are the resplendent sign of God among His creatures - this is the physical expression of the interior love of Francis for Jesus Christ.

In the Franciscan spirit, the Word of God reaches out to believers as ever creative, revealed, incarnate, paschal, Eucharistic, eschatological - handed on and continued in the Church until the end of time. The wounds on his body are a design of Jesus Christ - not unlike the designs traced on a piece of baked bread for the Eucharist, Francis understood himself to be totally set aside for the Lord in His unique poverty, dependence on the Father. They are the seal on a soldier's, or a servant's soul,

indicating total ownership, a belonging to Jesus Christ. The Stigmata are the doors that open up the wisdom of the Heart of the Trinity.

As St. Ignatius dreamed of an ever “greater” glory of God - in apostolic zeal, academic excellence, missionaries in contemplation - so, St. Francis used the ascetic comparative of the ever “lesser” Friars. The poorer one is, the more does one rely on the Lord. The more one has, the reality is that one becomes more interested in **having** over **being**. Fewer material goods make way for greater spiritual wealth. With Jesus Christ, St. Francis “emptied himself” - this is the true “mind” of Jesus Christ. The inverse ratio is that the less one “has”, the more one hopes, “is.”

“Slaves [servants] forever” were marked with a sign in the ear [cf. Gn 17: 9, ff., 23, ff.] - the ancient prophets of Canaan were marked with scars to indicate their belonging to their gods [cf. 1 K 18:28; 20:40; Zc 13:6]. The early Israelites had strange funeral rites of gashing themselves to honor the dead, perhaps by a kind of compassion [cf. Jr 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37]. Isaiah tried to encourage the people to “belong” to Yahweh [cf. Is 44:5] - the Lord Himself has us all written on the palms of His hand [cf. Is 49:16]. [cf. L. Randellini, *Fondamenti biblici e valori teologico-esistenziali delle stimmate di S. Francesco*, in: *Studi Francescani. 1974, n. 1-4. VII Centenario di S. Bonaventura 1274-1974. 750° anniversario delle stimmate di S. Francesco.* pp. 123, ff.]. The **TAU** has become associated with Francis - noted in Ezechiel [cf. 9:4], it was a sign imprinted on the foreheads of the faithful. Some see the hint of it again in the Apocalypse [cf. 7:2; 14:1-7]: the elect are marked with the seal of the immolate lamb. For Francis, the **TAU** restored hope - it indicates salvation through the Cross - it requires penance and promises redemption. [cf. *Dizionario Francescano.* Padova: EMP 1983]

Willingly drawn high from his ever greater “poverty” into the alluring “Christological Constellation”, St. Francis felt the gravity pull upward - like the anchor cast above toward the Risen Christ [cf. Heb 6:18] - in response to His challenging invitation to follow Him, to be drawn above [cf. Jn 12:32]. Like the woman of Samaria, St. Francis has become a spring of living water for all devoted to him, welling up into eternal life [cf. Jn 4: 14]. St. Francis drew close to the living corner-stone, and has become through the more than seven centuries since his death an inspiring, life-sharing stone, rebuilding the spiritual house of the universal Church.

The Stigmata of Christ resulted from His loving obedience to the Father’s Plan. For the Poor Man of Assisi, it is the result of a special divine grace of union with which he cooperated in the depths of his heart. The true miracle was not so much the Stigmata themselves - but much more the external sign of Francis’ internal union with Jesus Christ, in His Sorrowful and Glorious Stigmata. “Through the wounds of the suffering Servant, all of ours will be healed” [cf. Is 53:5; 1 P 2: 21-25]. This is the undying appeal of St. Francis of Assisi across the hills of Umbria, across the seasons of life - into eternal union with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

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