

St. Francis of Assisi, that delightfully refreshing medieval figure, the virtual embodiment of the light touch in religion, combining openness, simplicity and spontaneity with a deep piety, bids fair to become the Patron Saint of Ecologists, ever since Lynn White in his famous 1966 essay drew our attention to him.

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Francis comes out of one of the two most creative epochs of European (as distinct from Mediterranean) civilisation. Both these cultural renaissances were due to the impact of Eastern influences - the Carolingian Renaissance of the 8th century and as a unique figure in the second of these renaissances, embodying an element that engages our special attention today.

There is one point about this medieval civilisation and its various monastic orders that has been brought to our attention by R.W. Southern, who tells us that the religious communities were a mirror of the world from which they were supposed to be separated, both alike characterized by a duality of motives, i.e., greed for the things of the world and an ardent desire for happiness in the life to come.

"They (i.e. The social conditions) ensured that the communities set apart from the world should become a mirror of the world in which they lived. Above all they stamped on these communities - even the most resistant - two features which are found in every part of medieval life: a strong grasp on the things of this world, and an ardent desire for the rewards of eternity. These two ~~opposite~~ conflicting desires, operating simultaneously in the same people, lie behind many of the most important developments in Western history, and they are most fully exemplified in the medieval religious orders".

It was natural then that the monastic movement as Francis of Assisi knew it was one which had become not only a part of the establishment, but an indolent, powerful, wealthy, privileged, almost domineering, and largely impersonal part of the establishment, an institution to be dreaded and revered as much as the king. The monasteries owned most of the land, often in small or great parcels widely scattered, received as gifts from various feudal barons. The monks had to engage themselves in the management of this property, fighting off usurpers and squatters, poachers and thieves, the monks often went to live in those small patches of land, (for their management on behalf of the divine community), and soon became fully engrossed in the greed and avarice that dominated the secular society.

Even the Cistercians, who consciously revolted against the affluence, pomp and ind⁵cipline of the Benedictine orders, espousing the cause of evangelical poverty, were far from immune to the charges of aggression, arrogance, cupidity and avarice².

It was in this context of avarice and cupidity invading even the citadels of asceticism that Francis dared to reverse the usual adage and hold the view that a bird in the bush is better than two in the hand.

There are probably two sources for this great interest of St. Francis in brother **Sam** and brother **Mony**, in animals and birds, in the whole of nature. One of these probably was a return to the primitive simplicity of Antonine Monasticism. The Philokalia is full of stories of how Antony of Egypt and Paul of Thebes lived in the closest natural friendship with the animals of the wilderness, how lions and wolves behaved in a more than humanly considerate and respectful way towards these simple, unthreatening, loving human beings. If Francis had read St. Athanasius' Life of St. Antony or any other collection of stories about the Egyptian desert fathers, he should have come across many of these stories.

The second source was his own vision of the universe - of nature as the book of God, in which if one learns to read, one soon comes to know of God. The liber naturae tradition insists that the universe is the creation of the Word of God, and reveals its Creator. It is the power of God which holds the universe together, it is in the Word of God that it is manifested, and it is by the spirit of God that it is seen and understood³. The world is a book inscribed by the finger of God. Everything is a letter of God, a communication of God, and transmits the word of God. This is an old tradition in both East and West. Hugo⁷ St. Victor expresses it in his commentary on Dionysius' Celestial Hierarchy; The capacity to read the book of God in nature has been dimmed because of human sin. In Christ it becomes restored; man's eyes are healed of their cataract. Natural theology for the ancient Western tradition⁸ was not independent of the revelation in Christ; only that revelation makes it possible for it to function.

Francis saw God in everything. He felt threatened by nothing⁶, God was at work in all things. Only when one is totally unafraid can one genuinely love. And Francis loved. He loved because God is love, and the love of God is in everything.

2. Southern. op.cit. p. 252.

3. Dominique Gagnan. Francis au livre de la Nature in Etudes Franciscaines, Tom. XXIII. No. 65 (1973, 1st Trim) See esp. p.92.