

# Shut your eyes and see

We learn from the *Canticle of Creatures*, composed by St Francis 800 years ago, that it is with the heart, not the eye, that we ‘see’ the world in all its wonder and glory / By **WILLIAM CROZIER**

**WHEN I WALKED** into the Sacro Convento Library in Assisi holding a white cane and asking to handle some of their most precious medieval manuscripts, the reaction of the chief librarian was one of well-disguised fear. After reassurance that this was no joke, he permitted me entry. I was there to study a manuscript written by the Franciscan theologian and mystic St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.

On my last day, the librarian – having watched with bemusement over the past few days as I crouched over one of his manuscripts with industrial-strength magnifiers – asked if I would like to visit the secure room where medieval manuscripts were housed.

With pride, he showed me the 500 or so manuscripts which once made up the medieval Franciscan library in Assisi. The room was guarded by a heavy steel door and illuminated by a single window overlooking the beautiful Umbrian countryside. It housed manuscript copies of rare early Franciscan writings, some of which can be found nowhere else.

The librarian, after pulling numerous volumes from the shelves, pointed to an unimpressive box on top of a little table in the middle of the small room. A big smile on his face, he said: “You know what this is, don’t you?” Inside was a very old manuscript bound in leather with metal clasps: *Assisi Bibl. Comm. Ms. 338*. Collated during the mid-thirteenth century, it is a Franciscan jewel. It contains some of the earliest transcriptions of documents from the origins of the Franciscan Order. Most remarkably, bound within it is the earliest surviving copy of St Francis’ *Canticle of Creatures*.

The transcription of the *Canticle*, which was produced only a few years after the death of St Francis, begins halfway down folio 33r. It was to this that the librarian, lifting the manuscript out of its box, turned. He pointed to the opening line, and, magnifier in hand, I began to read aloud: “*Altissimo, omnipotente bon Signore ...*” (“Most High, Omnipotent, Good Lord ...”). Once I had finished reading the first verse, he continued with the next: “*Ad Te solo, Altissimo, se konfano ...*” and, in front of the window, we made our way through the first quarter of the *Canticle*. Then we fell silent as we took in the view of the sunny countryside outside.

2025 marks the 800th anniversary of Francis’ composition of the *Canticle of Creatures*. Tradition has it that he composed the *Canticle* towards the end of 1225 in a



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small shelter near the Convent of San Damiano which St Clare had ordered to be built for him. It is first mentioned in Thomas of Celano’s *Life of St Francis*. Celano tells us how Francis, “full of the spirit of God”, would praise the Lord “in all the elements and creatures”, calling some “brother” and others “sister”.

Francis’ *Canticle* celebrates Creation as a song of praise to God. It praises “Brother Sun”, “Sister Moon”, as well as the elements of fire, water, air and, of course, “Sister Mother Earth” who “produces varied fruits and coloured flowers and herbs”. Likewise, it praises the virtues of peace and pardon, while remembering God’s love for the poor and those suffering.

Strikingly, the *Canticle* ends with a verse praising “Sister Bodily Death” whose embrace “no living person can escape”. This verse, tradition has it, Francis added last, when he sensed the approach of his own death.

Given its strong visual imagery, what is truly remarkable about the *Canticle* is that when Francis composed it, he was almost completely blind, suffering from an incurable eye disease which left him entirely dependent on the care of others. He could no longer see his beloved “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon”, nor the flowers or the elements which brought him joy.

Francis thus almost certainly composed the text orally, committing it to memory and adding verses to it while confined to his sickbed. The first time the *Canticle* was sung in its entirety – when the final verse praising

Songs of praise: Francis presents the world as a visual hymn to the joy of God’s Creation

“Sister Bodily Death” was added – was when Francis sang it with his close friends Br Leo and Br Angelo as they kept vigil with him in the small hut while his health continued to fail.

**FRANCIS’ DESIRE** to affirm Creation’s beauty and spiritual value, even though he was no longer able to see it, is an image as powerful as it is moving. In the darkness of almost complete blindness, and the emotional isolation which this must have caused him, Francis could still “see” in his heart the creatures which he so fervently believed sang the praises of God. Moreover, even as his life was ending, he felt able to add his own voice joyously to the song of cosmic praise.

What I find striking about the origin of the *Canticle of Creatures* is that it finds deep resonance with Bonaventure’s teaching on how we, as Christians, are called to take up and “read” Creation as a hymn book of divine praise. The natural world, Bonaventure tells us, is a “book” (*liber*) in which we encounter God’s love. Acting as a “vestige”, “image” or “similitude” of the Trinity, each creature, no matter how insignificant it may appear, is a thing of beauty and a “window” (*fenestra*) into the divine.

Our ability to “read” the “book of nature” (*liber naturae*) properly – that is to say, our ability to see each creature not simply as an object of intellectual or scientific study, but

rather as a sacramental word of God's love – is dependent on our ability to value the natural world itself properly. However, Bonaventure tells us, this is not always possible because of the effects of sin. Sin, to put it simply, numbs the soul so that it is no longer able to “see” the world as a hymn book of divine praise.

And yet this intellectual blindness is not incurable. Key here is the theological virtue of love, or, as Bonaventure prefers to call it: charity (*caritas*). An infused “habit” (*habitus*) of grace bestowed upon the soul by the Holy Spirit, charity heals the soul of its spiritual shortsightedness, thereby allowing the soul to read the “book of nature” correctly again, just as Adam – and Christ himself – did.

Charity possesses this power because it restores what Bonaventure calls the “spiritual senses”. In the same way as the body has five senses – hearing, touch, taste, smell and sight – so the soul possesses spiritual versions of these senses, whereby it can “sense” divine truths. While they are deadened through sin, charity awakens them, allowing the soul to see once again beyond a creature's physical properties so as to discover its inner spiritual meaning.

## We as individuals can only discover our place within Creation if we look to the example of St Francis

Although Bonaventure never quotes explicitly from the *Canticum*, it is nonetheless clear that his understanding of how the soul comes to “read” the book of creatures, and use it as a means whereby it can ascend to God in love, is one which is faithful to Francis' spirituality and love for the natural world.

2025 also marked the 10-year anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*. The late Pope's encyclical takes the *Canticum of Creatures* as its point of departure and inspiration. Creation, *Laudato si'* teaches us, is “our common home” and is “like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us”. However, through greed, political folly and a desire for luxury, we have marred our “beautiful mother” and now she “cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted upon her”.

As Pope Francis reminded us, the root of the violence done by us to Creation today is the absence of love – not just for the natural world itself but also for one another.

To value Creation properly, we must learn to value one another properly, particularly the marginalised. We must learn to “see” those who are easily overlooked. “A sense of deep

communion with the rest of nature,” Pope Francis writes, “cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.”

**WHAT** *Laudato si'* reminds us is that we as individuals can only ever rediscover our true place within Creation and the human family if we look to the example of St Francis. We must, in short, learn what St Francis himself lived and what Bonaventure preached: the heart, not the eye, is the true means whereby we “see” the world and discover within it – and in each person – the song which God has inscribed for us to sing in his praise.

Love, and love alone, is the means whereby we – along with “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon” – can see, praise and honour the “Most High, Powerful, Good Lord”.

For me, as someone who is visually impaired, the *Canticum of Creatures* and the story behind its composition holds great meaning. I had gone to Assisi to read Bonaventure's handwriting and I found great joy in this task, but it was the opportunity to see, handle and read aloud the oldest surviving copy of the *Canticum of Creatures* which will stay with me the longest.

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