In Their Own Voices: A "Kenotic" Approach to Animal Studies and Ecotheology

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"You are the all and yet are nothing
of what created beings are."
-Gregory of Nazianzus - 4th century[1]

Not long ago, it was reported that Italian fishermen were at war with dolphins, competing over what little fish is left. At hearing the dolphins "snort" and at the sight of their "grin," the fishermen realized that they had once again lost their daily battle for survival.[2] Another gruesome example that comes to mind of the ongoing human-wildlife conflict is the picture, taken a few years ago, of a mother and baby elephant fleeing a crowd of enraged men throwing firecrackers and balls of flaming tar at them on a road in West Bengal, India.[3] If we turn to more recent examples, the tragedy of millions of animals killed in Australia's bushfires is still fresh in our minds, and as I write these words, the world is experiencing one of the worst pandemics in human history. Known as COVID-19, it is most likely caused by virus spillover, which the scientific community has linked to exploitation of wildlife by humans through trade, hunting, urbanization, and habitat destruction.[4]

These occurrences are emblematic of an ongoing ecological crisis and competition for space and resources where human interaction with nonhuman animals is increasingly marked by incomprehension and violence. It thus comes as no surprise that in the Anthropocene – characterized by human-wildlife conflicts, cross-species virus transmission, species extinctions, storm surges, coastal erosion, famine – we are constantly confronted with the suffering of other beings and ever more compelled to listen to their "cries," which in a Christian perspective can be referred to as the "groaning" (Romans 8:22) of the earth.[5]

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[1] *Hymn* 1.1. 29. In J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (Paris: Garnier, 1857–92), vol. 37, cols. 507–08. The English translation is from *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain, A Patristic Breviary*, ed. Thomas Spidlik, trans. Paul Drake (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies Publications, 1994), 406. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own.

[2] Giorgio Ruta, "I pescatori delle Eolie in sciopero contro i delfini: 'O loro o noi'," *Repubblica.it Palermo*, March 21, 2017, https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/03/21/news/pescatori_in_sciopero_contro_i_delfini-161035263/.

[3] The picture, titled "Hell is Here," taken by Biplab Hazra, was the winner of the Sanctuary Wildlife Photography contest in 2017.

[4] See, Christine K. Johnson, Peta L. Hitchens, Pranav S. Pandit, Julie Rushmore, Tierra Smiley Evans, Cristin C. W. Young, Megan M. Doyle, "Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 287, no. 1924 (2020), 10.1098/rspb.2019.2736; and K.G. Andersen, A. Rambaut, W.I. Lipkin, et al., "The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2," *Nat Med* 26, (2020): 450–52, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9.

[5] On the importance of suffering as a way to frame the animal question, see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 26–29. Also, as Celia Deane-Drummond states: "Perhaps some judge concern for human beings should take priority over that of other creatures – yet it is not at all

This particular Pauline passage (Rom. 8:18–24) contains an extraordinary teaching, no doubt one of the most relevant in the New Testament with regard to creation: the groaning of creation implies suffering, but like the pains of childbirth it brings forward new life. Moreover, the passage clearly affirms that both humanity and creation *together* had been unwillingly "subjected to futility," and that *both* will be set free through the redemptive power of Christ. In other words, God cares for creation and has not abandoned it – and neither can we. Linked by a common destiny, as co-groaners awaiting redemption, humanity is called to care for it. One of the underlying questions then is, how does Christian ethics contribute to our understanding of care for nature, multispecies cohabitation, and the advancement of a more ecologically responsible behavior?

Moreover, through the centuries, Paul's eschatological hope for the future of creation has been analyzed in countless interpretations and commentaries, especially in the recent decades with the rise of ecotheological readings of the passage.[6] At the same time, as with many other Scriptural passages, Paul's highly allusive language has opened out onto other fields of investigation and application – and beyond that of biblical exegesis and theology *stricto sensu*. This is particularly true with regard to literature and poetry, and comes as no surprise as new methodological approaches to the study of literature and theology have emerged in recent decades where the disciplinary boundaries between the two fields are seen as more fluid and porous. Thanks to their mutual influence and productive cross-fertilization, scholars have become more aware of the theological insights inherent in literary texts, while literary approaches to Scripture have revealed some important new directions and developments in theological and biblical exegesis.[7] A very good case in point of this fruitful interplay is represented precisely by Paul's passage, on the one hand, and, on the other, by Francis of

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clear that attending to non-human creatures will have deleterious consequences for human beings." In *Creaturely Theology*, eds. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: scm press, 2009), 15. All biblical passages are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.

[6] See in particular, Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Harry Alan Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19–22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Marie Turner, "God's Design: The Death of Creation? An Ecojustice Reading of Romans 8.18–30 in the Light of Wisdom 1–2," in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, vol. 3 of *The Earth Bible*, eds. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 168–78; Brendan Byrne, "Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8.18–22," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth,* ed. Norman Habel, vol. 1 of *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 193–203; C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Observations on Romans 8:19–21," in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology presented to L. L. Morris on his 60th Birthday,* ed. Robert Banks (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 224–30; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971); R. J. Berry, *Ecology and Ethics* (London: IVP, 1972); John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

[7] The bibliography on this topic is vast. For recent treatments, see: Paul Cefalu and Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Introduction to Special Issue of 'Literature and Theology': Thinking With God: Cognition, Religion, and Literature," *Literature and Theology* 28, no. 3 (2014): 249–57; Eric Ziolkowski, "Literature and Theology from a North American Perspective," *Literature and Theology* 26, no. 3 (2012): 273–88; Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology: Five Years On," *Literature and Theology* 6, no. 1 (1992): 1–10; Elisabeth Jay, "What Kind of Discipline is offered in the Study of Theology/Religion and Literature?" *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 2 (2009): 113–18; Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, Peter J. Hampson, and Alison Milbank, eds., *Theology and Literature after Postmodernity* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); David J. Leigh, "Michel Foucault and The Study of Literature and Theology," *Christianity and Literature* 33, no. 1 (1983): 75–85; Gaye Williams Ortiz and Clara A. B. Joseph, *Theology and Literature: Rethinking Reader Responsibility* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Fritz Oehlschlaeger, *Love and Good Reasons: Postliberal Approaches to Christian Ethics and Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures*. Both these texts will be the main focus of my discussion in the following pages, alongside other modern texts inspired by these sources and in relation to our modern ecological concerns.

Since the 1970s, Paul's passage has been seen as a slogan for a positive ecotheological vision of the destiny of human and non-human creation. True, this approach has produced fascinating and valuable insights, but from a biblical exegetical perspective certain details and complexities in the passage have not received the attention they deserve.[8] Thanks instead to a narrative approach to the reading of the text, it becomes evident, for example, that Paul sees the hope for freedom and redemption of non-human creation in a subaltern or secondary position with respect to that of humanity, as if its salvation is primarily dependent on that of "the sons of God" who have "the first fruits of the Spirit."

In turn, Francis' poem, a "harbinger" of Paul's eschatological vision, in Timothy Johnson's words, in its simple poetic structure goes even further than Paul's text.[9] In fact, if in Rom. 8:18–24 humanity and creation are both seen as co-sharers of the same hope for redemption, humanity still remains the main focus of the redemptive process.[10] In Francis' *Canticle* instead, humanity and creation are not only united by a common destiny of salvation, but the text reveals a common and interconnected creatureliness where both humanity and other beings are seen on equals terms, intimately related and gender-specific – a community sharing the most infinitesimal particles. Put simply, the *Canticle* not only goes beyond Paul's hope for humanity and creation, but challenges, arguably among the first texts in Western culture, an anthropocentric vision of creation and humanity's exceptionalism.

In light of these preliminary considerations, what valuable theological insights can be gained from Italian literature, considering its unique role in providing compelling examples of relationships and interactions between humans and nonhuman beings?[11] More to the point, does the Italian literary tradition provide exemplary texts, canonical and non, that reveal what Celia Deane-Drummond has recently called "a multispecies approach to ethics" that situates "our moral life in a broader multispecies framework," or, to use Serenella Iovino's words, a "non-anthropocentric humanism," that is to say, one "no longer based on the assumption that concepts such as 'dignity' and 'value' are exclusively to be related to the human species"?[12]

These are some of the questions I address in the following pages. In order to do so, this article is divided into three parts: first, I present an overview of some issues that have given rise to recent new directions in Christian ecotheology, with particular attention to Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* and responses to it from the scholarly community; I then propose a reading of Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures*, the true inspiration behind Francis' *Laudato Si'* and one of the earliest known Italian vernacular texts, as a model of a Christian ethic

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[8] Cherryl Hunt, David G. Horrell, and Christopher Southgate, "An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19–23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (2008): 546–79.

[9] Timothy Johnson, "Francis and Creation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael Robson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 143.

[10] Hunt et al., "An Environmental Mantra?," 566-70.

[11] On the significant contribution of Italian literature and film to animal studies, see in particular Elena M. Past and Deborah Amberson, eds., *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[12] Celia Deane-Drummond, *Theological Ethics through a Multispecies Lens: the Evolution of Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 251; Serenella Iovino, "Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism," in *Local Natures, Global Responsibilities: Ecocritical Perspectives on the New English Literatures*, ed. Laurenz Volkmann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 29–53; 48.

of *kenosis* – in the sense of self-sacrifice, renunciation, giving up space and making room for the other [13] – that embraces creatureliness of all beings, and multispecies interconnectedness. I then turn to a modern reading of Francis' *Canticle* written by Luigi Santucci (1918-99) in which the author offers a unique attempt to give voice to the voiceless creatures present in the Franciscan hagiographic sources. In so doing, Santucci offers valuable insights and perspectives on rethinking, and reforming, human and nonhuman relations. Finally, I argue throughout that there are important connections to be drawn between a kenotic approach to multispecies cohabitation and new developments in posthumanist theory, feminist theology, and ecofeminism.

The "Ecological Complaint" and the Rise of Ecotheology

One of the most endearing aspects of the traditional iconography of the incarnation, celebrated in particular on the feast of the Epiphany, is the representation of the Son of God, "emptying" himself and taking on our human condition in the form of a baby, with the ox and the ass next to the child God lying in a manger.[14] Although in the Christian exegetical tradition both animals are laden with rich symbolism, the popular tradition has often emphasized their active role in providing warmth to the child with their breath.[15] It is therefore tempting to see in their presence a theological recognition of multispecies collaboration in salvation history.

However, as we know, this has not been exactly the case, as Christianity has been accused, especially towards the end of the twentieth century, of promoting an anthropocentric worldview, fueled by a certain interpretation of the Scriptures to *subdue* and have dominion over the earth and fellow creatures: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Genesis 1:28).[16]

Already in the late 1960s, Lynn White, in a seminal article for *Science*, blamed Christianity for the ecological crisis and for being the most anthropocentric religion in the world. In the following decades, that picture has not changed much. Peter Singer has made similar accusations against Christianity for being responsible for extinguishing empathy for other animals.[17] It was at this time that "the ecological complaint" against Christianity arose. The accusations stemmed from the belief that the Christian faith was instrumental in causing the global environmental crisis by inculcating in believers the idea that, as God transcends nature, so do humans. Put simply, as creatures created in God's image and likeness, humans are called to dominate nature while nature is left in the subjugated role of serving human needs.

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[13] "Late 19th century: from Greek *kenōsis* 'an emptying,' from *kenoun* 'to empty,' from *kenos* 'empty,' with biblical allusion (Phil. 2:7) to Greek *heauton ekenōse*, 'emptied himself.'" *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 (hereafter OED).

[14] This mystery is well expressed in the antiphon, sung at Vespers on January 1, *O Admirabile Commercium*: "O marvelous exchange! Man's Creator has become man, born of a Virgin. We have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." On this particular antiphon, see Frans Jozef van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology, Vol. 1 Understanding the Christian Faith, 2nd revised edition* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 85–88.

[15] See, for example, Gregory DiPippo, "The Ancient Origins of the Nativity Scene," *New Liturgical Movement*, January 5, 2012, http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2012/01/ancient-origins-of-nativity-scene-part.html#.Wku8y0tG0dk.

[16] See in particular Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–07.

[17] See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1990).

In response to these accusations, the term "ecotheology" was coined.[18] Since then, and already starting from the 1960s, there have been many – and successful – attempts to replace this rhetoric of human dominion with more ecological and ethical approaches to the relationship between human and nonhuman animals as presented in the Scriptures.[19] This is particularly evident, for example, in the Book of Psalms where the entire community of living and elemental beings – sun, stars, moon, trees, rivers, wild animals – all join in a "cry of creation" in praise of God and God's loving relationship with *all* creatures.[20] Moreover, recent directions in theological anthropology further expand the view according to which human beings become more fully themselves not only through their encounter with God, in Christ, and other human beings, but also with nonhuman animals.[21]

Perhaps the most incisive ecotheological Christian response to the current global ecological crisis was offered in 2015 by Pope Francis with his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, the first one ever to deal, in its entirety, with environmental issues.[22] It is also the encyclical in which the pope makes explicit reference to Francis of Assisi (the saint from whom the pope took his papal name) and his *Canticle of the Creatures*. The encyclical is undoubtedly motivated by very noble intentions and feelings. However, we must not forget that, as scholarship on Francis has pointed out, the *Poverello* never spoke of nature in itself, but of creation, and in the specific case of the *Canticle* we are not dealing with a hymn to nature, but with a praise to God the creator. Nonetheless, in the encyclical, the pope manages to go beyond the simplistic and reductive image of Francis as the "patron of ecology" to remind us instead that from Francis' experience of faith, profound lessons can still be drawn today on the world in which we want to live:

> I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. […] Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be

[18] H. Paul Santmire, "Ecotheology," in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 247–51.

[19] See in particular the pioneering work of Protestants Joseph Sittler (1904-1987), who was the first to use the term *ecology* as a theological concept, and Jürgen Moltmann (1926-), whose theology of hope embraces the whole cosmos.

[20] Throughout the book of Psalms, created beings have "voices" to communicate in their own way their praise to God: shouting, singing, or through other forms of rejoicing as in Ps. 65:8, 12, 13. Earth rejoices in Ps. 96:11 and 97:1. The heavens are glad and the seas roar in Ps. 96:11. The trees of the forest sing in Ps 96:12, and the works of creation give thanks to God in Ps. 145:10. In Ps. 148 everything, from the moon, stars, mountains, hills, cattle, snow, frost, birds, and sea monsters are called on to praise God. In these Psalms, therefore, all created beings are considered subjects who use various forms of expression in their response of praise.

[21] As Celia Deane-Drummond states: "[...] theological interpretations of humanity today have generally been too narrow in their interpretation of what it means to be human. Instead of viewing humanity and the image of God in particular in a narrowly individualistic way [...] I am arguing for a much richer and embedded understanding of the human rooted through millennia of evolutionary living in a common creaturely world." In *The Wisdom of the Liminal Space* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

[22] It is also the first one to be titled, in its official version, in a language other than Latin. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

> human. […] He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them "to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason". His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that, "from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of 'brother' or 'sister'". Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behaviour. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled. (nos. 10-11)

Subtitled, "On Care For Our Common Home," thus reclaiming the Greek root "oikos" ("home," or "household"), the question at the core of the document is, "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us?" (no. 160). Throughout the letter, the pope debunks the so-called "myths" associated with utilitarian views of nature as a resource to be exploited and sacrificed on the altar of consumerism and irresponsible economic development, while addressing a universal call to humanity to "hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (no. 49) in order to take "swift and unified global action."

One of the merits of Francis' encyclical is to have established a link between the future of our planet and global poverty, explicitly calling for an "integral" ecology (nos. 53 and 62), one that embraces a holistic approach to environmental and socio-economic issues. By rejecting the current "techno-economic paradigm" based on a means/end logic and built on the power to control and use things, people, and the earth, Francis argues for "a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision" (no. 141). In other words, in the current "techno-economic paradigm" we are increasingly unable to perceive reality as a whole where all things are intimately interconnected, but only as the sum of parts, which ultimately separates humans from their natural and social environments.[23] Instead, embracing a Franciscan theological vision – mainly through Bonaventure's understanding of creation – the pope points out that God is in all things

[23] With regard to these concerns on the future of humanity in our current technological era, feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti lists the pope "supplementing Catholic dogma on Natural Law" among those who express "anxiety bordering on moral panic." In "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities," *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): 31–61; 35. However, regarding posthumanism's technological optimism, biologist and multispecies feminist theorist Donna J. Haraway has been particularly critical of: "a comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious: technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children, or what amounts to the same thing, God will come to the rescue of his disobedient but ever hopeful children." In Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

and all things are in God and praise their maker; once humanity is able to understand this interconnection it will be moved to care for the poor and our common home.[24]

Since its release, the letter has received much attention and has sparked worldwide conversations in particular among scholars in the humanities and environmental sciences. A good example are the nine responses of leading scholars published in the open access online journal *Environmental Humanities*. Among other aspects, these responses praise in particular the pope's decision to address "every person living on this planet" (no.3), thus moving beyond the usual boundaries of the Catholic Church. Another lauded aspect of the letter is the recognition of the intrinsic worth and interdependence of all living creatures, which has been seen by Celia Deane-Drummond as an important first step toward engaging with other critical movements and theories.[25] But perhaps its greatest innovation is, as Michael Northcott writes, the letter's "suggestion that reconnections with nature, with Mother Earth, as well as with the poor are sources of spiritual and ecological transformation and that this reconnection is itself a source of love and care toward other creatures. Recognition of the deeper spiritual relations that underlie the material relations of persons with life on Earth is a valuable corrective to a theological tendency since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation to reduce human relations to nature to purely mechanical and biophysical cause and effect."[26] Moreover, as George Handley points out, the letter's usefulness lies: "not only in reimagining Christianity's relationship to the climate crisis but also in rethinking any lingering assumptions about the secularity of the environmental humanities." Thus, Francis' position "blurs the distinction between the sacred and the secular and thereby redefines and expands the ethical fields of both Christian thought and secular environmentalism. [...] He does not offer theology, in other words, as the one-time 'queen of the sciences' but as a tool and partner in rethinking the meaning of human knowing, human loving, and human being in the natural world."[27]

On the other hand, a few criticisms have been directed at the encyclical's apparent lack of concern for what Beatrice Marovich calls "religious biodiversity": "there is a strain of doctrinal fixity within his encyclical that—if amplified—might mute any religio-spiritual perspective or practice that does not harmonize neatly with his own,"[28] and for imposing, as Bronislaw Szerszynski writes, "onto the cosmos a new unity and hierarchy, one in which the relationship between the human and a particular version of the divine is accorded too much privilege" that "ultimately dims the presence of non-human earth-beings, whether living or elemental, in the congregating of the earth."[29]

The same reference to Francis of Assisi and his *Canticle* does not go unnoticed, with the majority of commentators recognizing the *Poverello* as the pope's model and inspiration; some critical remarks, however, are aimed, for instance, at the saint for being a too zealous missionary

[24] For a detailed account of how the pope was inspired to choose Francis as his papal name after Francis of Assisi as model of "a poor Church and for the poor," see Andrea Tornielli, Giacomo Galeazzi, *This Economy Kills: Pope Francis on Capitalism and Social Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 1–2.

[25] Celia Deane-Drummond, "Pope Francis, Priest and Prophet in the Anthropocene," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 256–62; 260.

[26] Michael S. Northcott, "Economic Magical Thinking and the Divine Ecology of Love," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 263–69; 267.

[27] George B. Handley, "*Laudato si'* and the Postsecularism of the Environmental Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 277–84; 280.

[28] Beatrice Marovich, "Religious Biodiversity and Our Common Home," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 285–90; 288.

[29] Bronislaw Szerszynski, "Praise Be to You, Earth-Beings," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 291–97; 295.

demanding conversion even from poor flowers,[30] or at the Catholic Church for using Francis' *Canticle* as a fig leaf to cover up for its indifference to "ecological destruction."[31] Yet only Szerszynski offers a close reading of the *Canticle* to conclude that both the pope and the saint of Assisi activate a too closely-knit theocentric community of creatures that ultimately stymies both finite beings' chances "to find their own strange new destinies and meanings" beyond "fraternal and sororal love," and "ways of congregating our planet that go beyond both utility *and* stewardship."[32]

In light of these last comments, I contend that Szerszynski's reading does not do full justice to Francis' mystical vision of creation. As I argue in the following pages, Francis' self-effacement and imitation of Christ's kenosis inspires his radical belief – sustained not only by Scriptures but also by biology and evolutionary science – that all creatures are not only deeply interconnected, but also interdependent. This kinship model opens up a new path to understanding the mystery of life through a deep "descent" into the world where all other animals and life forms have their own dignity and value independent of human beliefs.

Francis of Assisi's *Kenosis*

Kenosis is the term used by Saint Paul in the letter to the Philippians 2:6–11, in what many exegetes believe is a Christological hymn that Paul only cites and which, therefore, is a product of the faith of a Christian community that later Paul places at the center of his letter:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
>
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God
> as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave,
> being born in human likeness.
> And being found in human form,
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death—
> even death on a cross.
>
> Therefore God also highly exalted him
> and gave him the name
> that is above every name,
> so that at the name of Jesus
> every knee should bend,
> in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
> and every tongue should confess

[30] Marovich, "Religious Biodiversity...," 286.
[31] Bruno Latour, "The Immense Cry Channeled by Pope Francis," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 251–55; 252.
[32] Szerszynski, "Praise Be to You...," 296.

that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

In the hymn, we can discern two distinct moments: one in which the incarnation of the Son of God is understood as *descent* to the lowest point in which Christ is seen in the act of "emptying" himself, in the humiliation of one who makes himself the servant of all, and in the lowering of himself to do the will of the Father until the scandal of death on the cross. In the other, instead, the theme of the exaltation of the Son emerges: by lowering himself, the Son can at this point be reintegrated into his pre-existing divine form. Thus, the entire universe, that is to say, the earth, the heavens, and the underworld, must, in turn, lower itself and give way, in a cosmic liturgy of transformation and redemption. This same pattern of initial lowering and final exaltation that characterizes the Pauline hymn is discernible in Francis' *Canticle*.

But before focusing on the theme of kenosis in the fabric of the *Canticle*, it is worth pointing out that it is already noticeable in Francis' radical spiritual vision and, more specifically, in the circumstances of the composition of the text. Christ's kenosis has been aptly seen as the overall inspiration for Francis' strict adherence to the imitation of the life of Christ, who for the sake of others embraced poverty and rejection.[33] The Son of God in fact did not appear on earth in the splendor of his glory, but became "little" (Francis' will call his order of the friars "minor") and powerless. For Francis the mystical marriage with Lady Poverty, superbly rendered by Dante (*Par*. 11.55–75), was not a virtue in and of itself. True, poverty was for Francis the most certain way to understand Jesus' life and message.[34] However, poverty was not only about renouncing material possessions or living without means. It was instead primarily about imitating Christ, who "emptied himself," became a servant, renounced success, wealth, influence, respect, and, finally, abased himself and obediently accepted death on the cross for the salvation of all. Put simply, Francis' embrace of poverty was not dictated by economic concerns, but rather by his christological convictions. This becomes particularly clear throughout his writings where the kenotic act of the Incarnation becomes central to his spiritual vision. For instance drawing from 2 Corinthians 8:9, in his *Later Admonition and Exhortation*, Francis saw Christ's incarnation as an expression of divine humility and poverty: "Though He was rich, He wished, together with the

[33] On Francis' kenosis, see the commentary on "The Canticle of the Sun" in Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1 (New York: New City Press, 1999), 114; Donald P. St. John, "The Symbolic Spirituality of St. Francis," *Franciscan Studies* 39, (1979): 192–205; Paul Rout, "Be Subject to Every Human Creature for God's Sake: St Francis of Assisi and the Experience of Authority," in *Towards a Kenotic Vision of Authority in the Catholic Church*, vol. 8 of *Christian Philosophical* Studies, eds. Anthony J. Carroll, et al. (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 131–45. On Clare of Assisi's kenotic spirituality, see Corné J. Bekker, "Kenotic Mysticism and Servant Leadership in the letters of Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague" (presentation at the Servant Leadership Research Roundtable, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, USA, August 2005).

[34] Giorgio Agamben has recently identified in Francis' call to "altissima paupertas," that is, his simple "use" of things as opposed to ownership, the distinctive trait of Franciscan life. Moreover, he goes on to say that the Franciscan message is not "reproduced in a new doctrine" but "in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world to bring to completion [...] his [i.e. Christ's] life as such." Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty Monastic Rule and Form of Life*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 143. On the challenges to institutionalize Franciscan poverty, see Olivier Boulnois, "Most High Poverty: The Challenge of the Franciscan Experiment"; and John Milbank, "The Franciscan Conundrum"; both are in *Communio International Catholic Review* 42, no. 3 (2015): 448–65 and 466–92. For a valuable study on Francis' voluntary poverty in relation to the involuntary poor of his time, see Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

most Blessed Virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else."[35] And in the *Admonitions* he adapted and combined the Pauline hymn of Phil. 2:6-11, cited earlier, with John's Gospel to show how the Eucharistic sacrifice itself is a continuation of the Incarnation: "Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of a priest."[36]

Franciscan scholars now unanimously agree that the *Canticle* was conceived and composed in the last two years of Francis' life (1225-1226) during a period of great tribulation and physical suffering.[37] It is only in the descent into the "dark night of the soul" that Francis would emerge heartened by the vision of God who promises him eternal bliss – referred to as *certificatio* – in exchange for the patient endurance of the sufferings with which he was afflicted.[38] After surviving that experience of great pain and intimacy with the divine presence, Francis will say to his companions: "Therefore, for His praise, for our consolation and for the edification of our neighbor, I want to write a new Praise of the Lord for his creatures."[39]

From the beginning, Francis conceives this new praise as a song and as a pastoral tool. Although deeply influenced by biblical and liturgical texts that Francis knew by heart, it was intended to be sung by his friars and be an integral part of their preaching to the illiterate.[40] It is therefore in the humility of a *lauda* in Umbrian vernacular that Francis entrusted his most sublime and accomplished praise to God. In so doing, Latin, the official language of the order for twenty years, and also used by Francis to compose his other lauds and prayers, would be abandoned for a return to the humbler vernacular of Francis' *lauda Preghiera davanti a un Crocifisso* composed in the crucial years of his conversion (1205-1206).[41]

We now come to the text. In the earliest and most authoritative manuscript, that is, MS 338 of the Municipal Library of Assisi, the title – attested in the *Assisi Compilation* (ch. 83) as

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[35] In Armstrong et al., eds., "The Latter Admonition and Exhortation," *Francis of Assisi*, vol. I, 46.

[36] In Armstrong et al., eds., "The Admonitions," 1:15-18, *Francis of Assisi*, vol. I, 129.

[37] Among the early Franciscan documents that recount the gestation of the *Canticle*, see the accounts in *The Assisi Compilation*, par. 83, 88, and 99. Francis seems to have suffered from a severe form of conjunctivitis. On the biographical details and circumstances of the writing of the *Canticle*, see in particular Carlo Paolazzi, *Il Cantico di frate Sole* (Genoa: Marietti, 1992), 34–46; Edoardo Fumagalli, *San Francesco, Il Cantico, il Pater Noster* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2002), 35–50; Jacques Dalarun, *The Canticle of Brother Sun* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2016), 25–37. Valuable biographies, among others, are: Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Company, 2004); Jon M. Sweeney, *The Complete Francis of Assisi - His Life, The Complete Writings, and The Little Flowers* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015); and André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[38] Paolazzi, *Il Cantico*, 39–40. Fumagalli, *San Francesco*, 47–48.

[39] "Leggenda perugina" in *Fonti Francescane: scritti e biografie di san Francesco d'Assisi, cronache e altre testimonianze del primo secolo francescano, scritti e biografie di santa Chiara d'Assisi*, 3rd ed., ed. Feliciano Olgiati (Padova; Assisi: Edizioni Messaggero; Movimento Francescano, 1983), 1208–09. The English translation is from Dalarun, *The Canticle*, 32.

[40] "He composed a melody for these words and taught it to his companions so they could repeat it. […] He said that he wanted one of them who knew how to preach, first to preach to the people. After the sermon, they were to sing the *Praise of the Lord* as minstrels of the Lord." English translation from Armstrong et al., eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2 (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1999), 186. On the possible influences of the French troubadour lyrical tradition on the composition of the *Canticle*, see in particular Paolazzi, *Il Cantico*, 28–29; 45–46; and Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Toward the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 105-08.

[41] See Ernesto Caroli, ed., *Fonti Francescane* (Padova: EFR, 2004), 167.

Canticum fratis solis but in other early sources also referred to as *Laudes Domini (de suis creaturis)*, *Canticum creaturis*[42] – in the rubric in red preceding the text is *Laudes creaturarum*:

Altissimu, onnipotente, bon Signore,
tue so' le laude, la gloria e l'honore et onne benedictione.

Ad te solo, Altissimo, se konfano,
e nullu homo ène dignu te mentovare.

Laudato sie, mi' Signore, cum tucte le tue creature,
spetialmente messor lo frate sole,
lo qual' è iorno et allumini noie per luie.
Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore:
de Te, Altissimo, porta significatione.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora luna e le stelle:
in celu l'ài formate clarite et pretiose et belle.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate vento
et per aere et nubilo et sereno et onne tempo,
per lo quale a le tue creature dài sustentamento.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sor'aqua,
la quale è multo utile et humile et pretiosa et casta.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate focu,
per lo quale ennallumini la nocte:
ed ello è bello et iocundo et robustoso et forte.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra matre terra,
la quale ne sustenta et governa,
et produce diversi fructi con coloriti flori et herba.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per quelli ke perdonano per lo tuo amore
et sostengo infirmitate et tribulatione.

Beati quelli ke 'l sosterrano in pace,
ka da te, Altissimo, sirano incoronati.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra morte corporale,

[42] On the title, see Vittore Branca, *Il Cantico di Frate Sole: studio delle fonti e testo critico* (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 4–5; Giovanni Pozzi, *Sul Cantico di Frate Sole* (Bigorio: Convento di Santa Maria, 1985), 2–3. Worthy of note is the use of both *Cantica* and *Laudes* for the title, which refers directly to the biblical tradition of the Psalms of praise.

da la quale nullu homo vivente pò skappare:
guai a·cquelli ke morrano ne le peccata mortali;
beati quelli ke trovarà ne le tue sanctissime voluntati,
ka la morte secunda no 'l farrà male.

Laudate e benedicete mi' Signore et rengratiate
e serviateli cum grande humilitate.[43]

(Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing,
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.

Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.

[43] The edition used is Contini's, which is based on MS 338 of the Municipal Library of Assisi. Contini's edition is preferred as it retains the evident Umbrian linguistic patina (e.g. the endings in 'u' and 'o'; the forms *messor* and *iorno*). Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, vol. 2 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1960), I, 33–34.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.)[44]

As in the Pauline hymn, Francis' *Canticle* reveals a clear descending movement: from the first word *Altissimu* (most high) to the last word *humilitate* (humility), we move from the highest point to the lowest: from the firmament of eternal life to the here below and death, with all the "brother" and "sister" creatures in between. More specifically, the first section of the poem (vv. 1–22) gradually evokes God's kenotic act of creation of the universe with all its elements and creatures, and in the final part of the poem (vv. 23–33), two other descending trajectories which in a Christian perspective revolve around the final word *humilitate*: Adam's fall into sin, banished with Eve from the garden of Eden, and Christ's kenosis.[45] The Son of God in fact "emptied" and "humbled himself"[46] to take "the form of a slave" to redeem humanity after Adam's fall. By willing to become "obedient to the point of death–even death on a cross," Christ becomes in the *Canticle* the model for those who like him "pardon" (v.23) for love, bear "infirmity and tribulation" (v.24), endure "in peace" (v.25) and who finally are "crowned" (v.26). In other words, Christ, the most high, becomes the lowest, the new "Adam," whose second descent redeems the first. [47]

That this "lessening" in the *Canticle* is also an "increasing" of *all* involved is made clear through another important theme: that of a voice that by the end of the text is able to sing the praises of the Creator *through* all creatures.[48] The first stanza in fact presents a paradox: "no human is worthy to mention" God's name to whom, however, all praises and honor should be given. This impasse is ultimately resolved by Francis, the *alter Christus*, who, in his humility and self-emptying act of recognition of all creatures as part of one interconnected reality, thanks

[44] The English translation is from Dalarun, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, 2–3.
[45] The name Adam most likely derives from the Hebrew *Adamah*, i.e. "ground, earth" related to *'aḏamāh* earth, ground (compare the juxtaposition of *'āḏām* and *'aḏamāh* in Genesis 2:7, where God forms man out of earth), thus very close in meaning to the word "humility": "Latin *humil-em* low, lowly, small, slight, mean, insignificant, base, from *humus* ground, earth" (OED). See also Jean Koulagna, "Adam, dust of the Earth: A Paradise received and incomplete in the Biblical accounts of creation. Some philological observations on the creation accounts," *Consensus* 41, no. 1 (2020): 1–7; 5.
[46] Phil. 2:7–9.
[47] "Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all [Adam], so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all [Jesus]. For just as by the one man's disobedience [Adam's] the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [Jesus'] the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:18–19).
[48] The "terribili preposizioni" (in Gianfranco Folena's words) "per" and "cum" have long been fodder for debate among Italian philologists and literary critics. The preposition "per" can have the meaning of a cause ("for," "because of"), of an agent ("by"), of an occasion ("in," "in connection with") or, more in line with our kenotic reading, of an instrument ("through," "by means of"). For a thorough survey of this thorny issue, see Barbara Degl'Innocenti, "Una crux lessicografica: la preposizione 'per' nelle 'Laudes creaturarum'," in *Studi di filologia medievale offerti a D'Arco Silvio Avalle*, eds. Lino Leonardi and Sandro Orlando (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1996), 147–67; and Sorrell, *St. Francis and Nature*, 115–24.

to its transformation after Christ's presence in the world, can then lend his voice to embody the "cry of creation."

In the following stanzas, the addressing of creatures as "brother" and "sister" marks an extraordinary shift from the psalmic and liturgical language adopted and adapted by Francis for the *Canticle*.[49] The familial expressions and the gendered Italian nouns alternating between three masculine and three feminine (*messer lo frate Sole, sora luna e le stelle, frate vento, sor acqua, frate foco, and sora nostra matre terra*) recall the passage in Genesis 1:27 where male and female are seen together and on equal terms: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This is the first time that, in a Christian hymn of praise to God for creation, inanimate creatures are addressed as "brother" and "sister": Francis' creatures not only form a community of equals, but challenge traditional gender roles and hierarchies.[50] In addition, the adjectives used to describe creatures all have gender-specific qualities and virtues that reflect those of God: through the beauty of creation we can perceive the beauty and goodness of the Creator. Notice also how at the two far ends of the *Canticle*'s universe we have two creatures in preeminent position, signaled by double epithets, and honored as "sir brother sun," in first position (*spetialmente*, *messor*, v.6) and "our sister mother earth," who in turn "sustains and governs us" (v.21).What we have here is a truly Franciscan revolution: no longer in the position of those who dominate on earth and over other beings, the *Canticle* reminds us that humans are actually on the receiving end, the ones who, like all other creatures, are kept and sustained.[51]

With the risk of oversimplification, before Francis, the Christian tradition – from patristic literature, especially Augustine, to the theology of medieval thinkers, above all Aquinas – had stressed the ontological divide between humans and other beings, thus consolidating their standing as God's primary interlocutor and only created beings worthy of God's grace. True, the early Christian tradition and medieval theologians saw creation as good, valuable, filled with God's beauty, and part of God's plan for salvation, but human language, rationality, and being created as the *imago Dei* became soon the main components of a logic (based on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic doctrines) of humans (read the learned male elite) as exceptional creatures and at the top of a hierarchical system (and food chain) which relegated nonhuman animals to inferior and

[49] Scholars have identified the main biblical sources for Francis' praise of creation in Psalm 148 and Daniel 3:52–90 (The Song of the Three Young Men). For a detailed analysis and comparison of these three hymns of praise, see: Pozzi, *Sul Cantico*, 2–8; and Sorrell, *St. Francis and Nature*, 99–108.

[50] Frances Biscoglio, "Cantico di Frate Sole: Signature of the Saint," *The Cord* 58, no. 1 (2008): 3–15; 7.

[51] Dalarun, *The Canticle*, 49. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff has stated, Francis' "communion and confraternalization with all reality" has not been seen since Jesus. In Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis a Model for Human Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 19.

serviceable/consumable status.[52] In line with the traditional biblical exegesis, humans were essentially called, as mentioned earlier, to dominate the earth and make it fruitful (Gen. 1:28).[53]

By contrast, Francis' christological vision, marked by a strict adherence to the person of the poor and humble Christ, allowed him to see clearly that Christ did not come to save humanity only, but the entire world (John 12:47) as "the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), therefore not of "man" only. The *Canticle* and the early Franciscan documents, for the first time in Christian history, show an interrelated world of created beings, one of encounter and dialogue along horizontal lines where creatures are linked at an affective and emotional level.[54] The earth, as a mother, "sustains" or nourishes all; she "governs us" not in the sense of dominating us, but regulating or "taking care" of us, such as with the four seasons. It is also a "maternal governance" as opposed to a "paternal dominance."[55] Hence, the *Canticle* presents a universe where there is no one particular being dominating over others, but a circular harmony of creatures contributing to the praise of God the creator.

In turning the rhetoric of human dominion upside-down, Francis' *Canticle* reveals a world where there is no one creature ruling over others. The human ability to lower oneself to become a voice for all creatures to sing God's praise can derive only from the selfless act of acknowledging the connection, the relationship, the solidarity and kinship with all creatures who are fundamentally like us, that is to say, simple finite beings.[56] Moreover, the creatures and elements in the *Canticle* are not the ones who praise God directly – they do that already, as seen

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[52] In the *De civitate dei* (1.20), Augustine writes that the injunction not to kill does not apply to: "non rational animals which fly, swim, walk or crawl, for these do not share the use of reason with us. It is not given to them to have it in common with us, and for that reason, by the most just ordinance of their Creator, both their life and death are subject to our needs." Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33. Citing Augustine, Aquinas writes: "Dumb animals and plants are devoid of the life of reason whereby to set themselves in motion; they are moved, as it were by another, by a kind of natural impulse, a sign of which is that they are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the uses of others." Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province ([1920] 2017), *New Advent*, accessed August 16, 2020, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3064.htm.

[53] For a more thorough study of early and medieval Christian views on animals, see in particular: Elizabeth Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans,* eds. D. T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), 3–21; Sorrell's chapter, "The Ascetic Tradition and the Early Franciscan Outlook," in *St. Francis and Nature*, 9–35; C. W. Steck, *All God's Animals: a Catholic Theological Framework for Animal Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2019); E. D. Meyer, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), especially the first two chapters on Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa.

[54] Compared to other medieval hagiographic sources recounting the encounters between saintly figures and nonhuman animals, quite common at the time to convey power and control over nature, the stories of Francis' interactions are characterized by expressions of love and affection. On this topic, see in particular William J. Short, OFM, *Saints in the World of Nature: The Animal Story as Spiritual Parable in Medieval Hagiography (900-1200)* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1983); William J. Short, OFM, "Hagiographic Method in Reading Franciscan Sources: Stories of Francis and Creatures in Thomas of Celano's First Life (58-61)," *Greyfriars Review* 4, no. 3 (1990): 33–50.

[55] Dalarun, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, 49–52.

[56] As St. Augustine points out, in commenting on Psalm 148, from which Francis of Assisi appears to have drawn inspiration for his *Canticle*: "Heaven and earth glorify God. All the creatures proclaim his existence. The heaven *cries* to God: 'You it was who made me: I did not make myself.' And the earth *cries*: 'You are my creator: you it was who made me.' But when and how do they proclaim this truth? When humankind reflects on them and on this truth, therein precisely is the answer. It is thanks to your careful examination of them, it is thanks to *your voice* that they *have a voice*." In "Sermons, (148-183) on the New Testament," in *The Works of Saint Augustine (4th Release)*, vol. III/5 (New York: New City Press, 1990), ebook. Italics mine.

earlier in the Psalms, without the need of human intervention – but it is Francis, *vox poetica*, who in his own emptying of self can recognize all creatures as "brothers" and "sisters," and lend his voice to intone the "song of praise of creation." Seen in this light, the *Canticle* ultimately represents a cosmic hymn of a creatural community that finds the ontological root of each being in one common source.

The scholarly response to Francis' unprecedented familial language has been largely twofold. On the one hand, lest Francis is turned into a medieval bird whisperer or garden statue, inspiring pious naïve thoughts and devotional kitsch, some have stressed – perhaps too overzealously – that Francis is "far from the naturalistic and sentimental aestheticisms that certain modern literature attributes to him," and that the *Canticle* is ultimately a hymn of praise to God, not to nature. Simply put, any ecological concerns related to the reading of the *Canticle* are out of place.[57] According to this current of thought, the expressions "brother" and "sister" do not have any affective connotation, but imply that the relationship, based exclusively on rationality, is only between the creatures and humanity, and does not apply to the creatures among themselves, thus averting any form of cosmic pantheism, or animism.[58] On the other hand, there has been an ardent embrace of Francis as patron saint of ecology to the point that Eric Doyle famously quipped, "I will be forgiven the rather gross anachronism in saying that the ecological problem had its influence on the composition of the Canticle."[59] Roger Sorrell's seminal work has also revealed how "Francis looked beyond others of his time to envision a world in which humankind shared a concern for the whole community of creatures, and he expressed his concern and love in such original and moving ways that they may still give us inspiration today."[60] More recently, scholars – and Franciscan friars – Daniel Horan and Keith Warner have both proposed valid correctives to Christian environmental theology and ethics by proposing a Franciscan environmental ethics that draws on Francis' vision of creation, but also on the Franciscan theological tradition that he inspired, in particular that of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and John Duns Scotus.[61] As Horan aptly writes: "We are part of a family, whether we *want* to acknowledge that or not. The question isn't: *are we related* to the rest of the family of creation? The question is: *what kind of sister or brother am I to my creaturely siblings?*"[62]

In this light, Francis' familial language reflects a vision of creation where the true secret of life is to be found in a kenotic act of making space, welcoming and serving others, recognizing humanity's inherent kinship with all species. A more contemporary understanding of this interconnected, multispecies familial existence has been reached by recent developments in ecocritical and posthumanist thought, which offer new perspectives and insights into the

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[57] Paolazzi, *Il Cantico*, 23.

[58] I am abridging here Pozzi's influential, but also inherently anthropocentric, position. Pozzi, *Sul Cantico*, 14.

[59] See also Eric Doyle, "Ecology and the *Canticle of Brother Sun*," *New Blackfriars* 55, no. 652 (1974): 397–98.

[60] Sorrell, *St. Francis and Nature*, 144–45.

[61] Keith Warner, OFM, "Franciscan Environmental Ethics: Imagining Creation as a Community of Care," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 143–60; Daniel P. Horan, OFM, "Beyond *Laudato Si'*: The Challenge of Franciscan Eco-Spirituality in the Age of Pope Francis" (paper presented at Franciscan Legacy Conference, Durham University, November 2019). Although praising its importance and timeliness, Horan offers in his paper a cogent and pointed critique of *Laudato Si'*, which "falls well short of where the church's magisterial teaching ought to stand in light of scripture, the tradition, and contemporary scientific discoveries. […] Despite the pope's best efforts to call out the dangers of anthropocentrism, he ironically reinscribes the same problematic precisely by asserting a stewardship model of creation" (1–2). See also Horan's *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (New York: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2018), in particular chapter six, "Franciscan Resources for a Community of Creation Theology," 143–80.

[62] Horan, "Beyond *Laudato Si'*," 5.

Canticle, especially in our era of ongoing ecological devastation.[63] The work of Donna J. Haraway is a good case in point. Francis' fraternal and sororal language runs parallel to Haraway's *sympoiesis*, or "making-with."[64] In Haraway's vision, an alternative to the Anthropocene is the Chthulucene, "a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth." In this new era humanity's superiority and arrogance is brought down and replaced by humbly "making kin" with the "critters" (Haraway's equivalent for creatures): "we have a mammalian job to do […]. We need to make kin symchthonically, sympoetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound." The goal is ultimately to make "kin," that is, to reconfigure life as an interconnected and symbiotic mode of living with all other species—human and nonhuman alike: "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, […] we become-with each other or not at all."[65]

Another important concept developed by Haraway is that of the refiguration of personhood starting from matter, better yet, soil or "terra."[66] Breaking free from any association or alignment with posthumanist or new materialist positions, Haraway states: "We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding."[67] Haraways' compostist approach is an invitation for us to reread the *Canticle* no longer from the top down but from the bottom up. In this way we see that the "humus" in humility (the final word of the *Canticle*) is the ethical lens through which we embrace "sora nostra morte corporale" ("sister bodily death") as a return to what we earthly creatures ultimately are, that is, humus, ground, soil – or, as in the traditional Lenten liturgical formula, "dust to dust." It is this kenotic "grounding," described and put in practice by Francis, that allows us to forgive and yield to others while seeing with "new" eyes the beauty and possibilities of an interconnected world. But perhaps more importantly it allows us to see that all creatures have intrinsic value and dignity, and are our next of kin "all the way to the shared sub-particle reality of our material existence."[68]

In the context of this cosmic kinship of creation emerging from the *Canticle*, worth mentioning is a *Vita* of St. Francis rediscovered in 2015 and recently published in Italian and English by Jacques Dalarun.[69] Entitled *Vita del beato padre nostro Francesco*, it was written by Tommaso da Celano between 1235 and 1260 at the request of Fra' Elia, then general minister of

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[63] On this topic see especially Rosi Braidotti, "The Critical Posthumanities; Or, is Medianatures to Naturecultures as *Zoe* is to *Bios*?" *Cultural Politics* 12, no. 3 (2016): 380–90.
[64] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 58.
[65] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2, 102, 4.
[66] Terra, with its many "rootlets" (terraforming, terran, Terrapolis, terra-yet-to-come) appear throughout *Staying with the Trouble*, and recalls "sora nostra matre terra" ("Sister Mother Earth") of the *Canticle*. As pointed out by Dalarun, the word is the only one highlighted in red in MS 338. As such, it occupies a central position; Cristiana Garzena observes: "The folly of terrestrial 'government' is inscribed in the sublime folly of the Christian paradox: the Son of God, born of a woman, has incorporated his divine nature into the humility of human flesh, made of earth, to show us in his passion and humiliation the way to the Father, the Most High." In *Terra fidelis manet: humilitas e servitium nel "Cantico di frate sole"* (Florence: Olschki, 1997), 162.
[67] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 97
[68] Horan, "Beyond *Laudato Si'*," 4.
[69] Jacques Dalarun, *La vita ritrovata del beatissimo Francesco* (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 2015); and *The Rediscovered Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Timothy J. Johnson (St. Bonaventure NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2016).

the Franciscan order and among Francis' first companions. The miscellaneous codex which contains the text is very small in size (120x82 mm), without cover, and consisting of 122 sheets of poor-quality parchment. Copied near Assisi, for use by the Friars Minor, the codex is a treasure trove of unknown texts including sermons, homilies, *florilegia*, even an unedited commentary on the Pauline letters. The *Vita* in question is a comprehensive revision of Celano's *Vita prima del beato Francesco*; it is also shorter, but still includes more than half of the original text. As Dalarun points out, the rediscovered *Vita* has helped to reconstruct the genealogy of the various legends, still a contentious topic among scholars and commonly referred to as the "Franciscan question," that is to say, how to sift through and relate the various biographies to the "historical Francis."[70] Celano's text, which the order considered too long, was at Fra' Elia's request – the pope (Gregory IX) had requested a shorter version earlier for *La vita prima* – abridged. The title, *Vita del beato padre nostro Francesco*, also specifies the recipients of the new *Vita*, namely, the Friars Minor. As Dalarun points out, the new abridged version was written to create a liturgical office of nine *lectiones* for the founder of the order at a time when Francis' feast did not yet have an octave.[71]

For our purposes, the text presents a novelty of particular importance in the section dedicated to Francis' love for all creatures; an expression jumps to the eye that was not present in *La vita prima*. Where in *La vita prima* Celano writes: "Finally, he called all creatures *brother*, and in a most extraordinary manner, a manner never experienced by others, he discerned the hidden things of nature with his sensitive heart," in the new and abridged version we read: "Finally, on account of their *single principle* [*unum principium*], he called all creatures by a fraternal name."[72] The presence of the *unum principium*, that is to say, one divine source common to all creatures, which makes all beings brothers and sisters, is a significant novelty. Apparently, for this abridged version Celano had the opportunity to deepen his theological understanding of divine filiation in a more horizontal rather than vertical perspective: God emerges as the source of all and is the foundation of all creaturely relationships.[73] Thus, Celano clearly anticipates Bonaventure, who in the *Legenda Maior* – cited in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, as seen earlier – identifies God as the single principle and the foundation of everything: "The realization that everything comes from the same source filled Francis with greater affection than ever and he called even the most insignificant creatures his brothers and sisters, because he knew they had the same origin as himself."[74] What emerges here is Bonaventure's exemplarism, which can be defined as "the doctrine of the relations of expression between God and creatures."[75] In other words, God is the exemplar, or prototype, of all that exists; thus each and every creature expresses the divine essence. The world can therefore be read like a book, and such reading can

[70] The most exhaustive treatment of the topic to date is Augustine Thompson's chapter, "On the 'Franciscan Question'," in *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 153–70. See also Raoul Manselli, *Nos Qui Cum Eo Fuimus: Contributo alla Questione Francescana*, Bibliotheca Seraphico-Capuccina, 28 (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1980); Jacques Dalarun, *Vers une résolution de la question franciscaine: La Légende ombrienne de Thomas de Celano* (Paris: Fayard, 2007); and the articles by Michael F. Cusato, Timothy J. Johnson, Giles Constable, and Michael W. Blastic discussing Dalarun's book in *Franciscan Studies* 66 (2008).

[71] See Dalarun, *The Rediscovered Life*, xii. "Octave" here means an eight-day celebration.

[72] English translations are respectively from St. Francis of Assisi, *Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. Marion A. Habig, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 297; Dalarun, *The Rediscovered Life*, 24. Italics mine.

[73] I draw here on Dalarun's insights in *The Rediscovered Life*, xix–xxi.

[74] Habig, *Writings and Early Biographies*, 692.

[75] See Leonard Bowman's "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure," *The Journal of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1975): 181–198. See also Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences*, book I, 35.1.2 ad 2. In *Opera omnia* (Mansfield, Massachusetts, USA: The Franciscan Archive, 2014).

lead back to God.[76] As Bonaventure himself writes in the *Breviloquium*: "The First Principle made this sensible world to make itself known, so that, as through a mirror or vestige, man would be taken back to love and praise God the Creator."[77] In this perspective, the world becomes a united and harmonious cosmos: all levels of creation and the creatures themselves are linked to each other by participation in the same source.

In addition, what the emphasis on the same source helps to disclose is that we are all, human and nonhuman animals, united by what scientist Carolyn Porco has recently defined as the same "bio-chemical recipe" for which life, beyond the various forms in which it can manifest itself, needs only the same bioorganic compounds in order to reproduce itself – possibly also on other planets.[78] Thus we are only one of the many manifestations that life can assume in the universe. In this sense, Giovanni Pozzi was certainly right when he observed that Francis in the *Canticle* used cosmological notions that were current in his time, but for us it is as if he were actually talking about "elementary particles, atoms, molecules, cells."[79] Moreover, the creatural community united in the one principle emerging from the *Canticle* has been rightly seen as one of the central tenets of the "kenotic-kinetic" theory recently advanced in the field of ecotheological anthropology. According to this theory, the evolution of the universe is seen according to the two dynamics of divine kenosis, characterized by the renunciation of one's being-in-itself, to unfold out-of-oneself, and of kinetics, theologically understood as the dynamism inherent in the Trinitarian communion as well as the divine, creative, and unceasing activity, inherent in the expansion / contraction of the universe.[80]

Through these ecological perspectives Francis' *Canticle* reveals a new horizon as regards the relationship between God, humanity, and nonhuman beings. In Francis' creaturely vision, humanity's ascent to God occurs only through a profound kenotic descent and immersion in the humus of this world modeled on the incarnation of the *obedient* Christ. In his *A Salutation of the Virtues*, Francis reveals in fact a descent and submissiveness to God's will that reaches depths never contemplated before – at least in a Christian perspective:

> Holy Obedience confounds
> every corporal and carnal wish,
> binds its mortified body
> to obedience of the Spirit
> and obedience to one's brother,

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[76] See *Laudato Si'* (no. 12): "What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness." "Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker" (Wis. 13:5); indeed, "his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world" (Rom. 1:20).

[77] *Breviloquium*, pt. II, ch. 11. 2. In *Opera omnia*.

[78] Porco, at the end of the digital short *Second Genesis - The Quest for Life beyond Earth*, says: "the chances are excellent that there is life somewhere else, and finding it elsewhere, anywhere, just once, in any form, would finally be proof that we are but one of many manifestations that life can take in the cosmos." See Carolyn Porco, "Second Genesis – The Quest for Life beyond Earth," PBS, accessed February 27, 2020, 17:06, http://www.pbs.org/the-farthest/second-genesis/. See also, the following interview with paleontologist Andrew Knoll: "How Did Life Begin?," interview by Joe McMaster, *NOVA*, June 30, 2004, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/evolution/how-did-life-begin.html.

[79] Pozzi, *Sul Cantico*, 7.

[80] See Catherine Wright, "We are Stardust: Toward an Ecotheological Anthropology," *The Other Journal* 28 (2017): https://theotherjournal.com/2017/08/28/stardust-toward-ecotheological-anthropology/; and *Creation, God, and Humanity: Engaging the Mystery of Suffering Within the Sacred Cosmos* (New York: Paulist Press, 2017), 111–15.

so that it is
subject and submissive
to everyone in the world,
not only to people
but to every beast and wild animal as well
that they may do whatever they want with it
insofar as it has been given to them
from above by the Lord.[81]

It is through the recognition of our "fleshy vulnerability" – as consumable creatures for worms, insects and bacteria, and sometimes for larger predators – and the deep bond that unites us to other creatures that the "Altissimo's" mysterious plan for the universe can unfold.[82]

Luigi Santucci's Rereading of the *Canticle of the Creatures*

Let us now turn to Italian author Luigi Santucci, who, in his book *La lode degli animali* (1981), recently translated as *The Canticle of the Creatures for Saint Francis of Assisi* (2017), lends his voice to the nonhuman animals who appear in the early Franciscan sources, so that they can voice their experience, in a reversal of sorts of Francis' *Canticle*.

As Santucci has been unfairly neglected in recent decades, a brief biographical sketch is in order. Born in Milan in 1918, he had been a pupil, and later assistant, of Mario Apollonio at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, and later taught in high schools. For his anti-fascist activism, he expatriated to Switzerland in 1944, and returned to Milan a few months later actively participating in the Resistance. During those years he was among the founding members of the clandestine journal *L'Uomo*, alongside poet David Maria Turoldo, Mario Apollonio, and others. It was Leonardo Sciascia who in 1952 mentioned Santucci, along with Pier Paolo Pasolini and a few others, as one of the most promising writers of his generation.[83] Throughout his literary career he was close with a group of Catholic writers which included, among others: Carlo Bo, Ernesto Balducci, Primo Mazzolari, Nicola Lisi, Cesare Angelini, and Franciscan friar Nazareno Fabbretti. Their collective work is now considered a significant embodiment of the protagonism of the Catholic laity of the 1940s that paved the way for the season of reform launched by Vatican II. However, Santucci always disclaimed the label of "Catholic writer," in favor of "Catholic writer of dissent." In 1967 he received the Campiello Prize for his novel *Orfeo in Paradiso* (Milan, Mondadori, 1967), and after a long and prolific career as a writer and playwright, he died in Milan in 1999 shortly after the release of his latest novel, *Éschaton. Traguardo di un'anima*, a modern rereading of Dante's *Comedy*.[84]

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[81] Armstrong et al., eds., *Francis of Assisi*, vol. I, 165. Italics mine. Sorrell aptly considers Francis' proclamation "almost Buddhist." In Sorrell, *St. Francis and Nature*, 74.

[82] Erika Murphy, "Devouring the Human: Digestion of a Corporeal Soteriology," in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology,* eds. Stephen D. Moore and Laurel Kearns (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 51.

[83] Demetrio S. Yocum, "La diffusione di Santucci in ambiente anglofono," *Humanitas* 74, no. 5 (2019): 957–67; 959.

[84] Luigi Santucci, *Éschaton. Traguardo di un'anima* (Novara: Interlinea, 1999). This novel is currently being translated into English by the present author. Recent volumes on Santucci's works and poetics include: *Luigi Santucci - La libertà e la fede,* eds. Marco Beck, Enrico Elli et al. (Panzano in Chianti: Edizioni Feeria, 2018) and *Luigi Santucci Educatore, scrittore, testimone*, special issue of *Humanitas* 5, eds. Enrico Elli and Elena Rondena (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2019); the latter contains the proceedings of the conference "Il testimone della gioia. Luigi

A common thread that united several of these writers, who in many ways were all "Catholic writers of dissent" or inconvenient prophets trying to bring the Catholic Church up to pace with the modern world, was the radical vision of Francis of Asissi as one who ushered in a new era of kindness and mercy, but also radically transformed the Church of his time by denouncing its clericalism, corruption, power grabbing, and hypocrisy, while challenging injustice of all kinds, especially of the social and economic type. For Ernesto Balducci, author of *Francesco d'Assisi*, a biography of the *Poverello* but also a re-reading of his story in light of humanity's condition at the beginning of the third millennium, Francis not only belonged to believers but to all humanity as his life embodied a message for the future of humanity, therefore, a message always valid. In Balducci's vision, Francis' life was, on the one hand, inspiration for a new model of church, society, human relations, and relation with nature that ultimately would lead toward a new planetary civilization. On the other, his life is the aspiration for new forms of political and ecclesial organizations dedicated to service, peace, justice, and not driven by power, wealth, and self-interest. Writing with a prophetic vision, Balducci stated: "Humanity knows that, exposed today to the risk of ultimate catastrophe, the biosphere is not the space of its dominion; it is instead the organism within which its spiritual life pulsates. The love for water, fire, sun, moon, plants, animals is a condition of its love for itself."[85]

It is precisely to this Franciscan love for creation and all its creatures that in 1981 Balducci's fellow writer and close friend, Santucci, turned his attention.[86] In Santucci's literary output we can discern several elements that recall the *Poverello*'s spirituality: first and foremost, his poetics of joy. For Santucci, aptly considered the greatest "poet of joy" of twentieth-century Italian literature, joy is not to be found in its modern pseudo-synonyms such as "pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction, thrill," but "under the chin of our cats who for centuries express it with their delicate but confident purr."[87] Santucci's spirituality of the ordinary, as Puleo points out, echoes Francis' "perfect joy," which in Santucci's view corresponds to "that disposition of man to carve out joy even from distress and tribulation."[88] Facing life's uncertainties and tragedies, we are called to distill joy not from "great things. From encounters, lasting feelings, passions, conquests, generous fortunes. That is heresy. [...] there is a joy that is always possible ... within the beat of our every hour."[89] Santucci is referring here to those almost imperceptible joys of ordinary things: "yesterday I found it reading a book while waiting for a friend's visit. Today it's in the simmering of the polenta that my wife is stirring after announcing it to me, thus giving fragrance to this gray and pre-winter day. But by now I have been able to distill it from more insignificant events: the gentle turning of the key in the lock coming home from a day of heavy snow, the steaming bathtub welcoming me […] and in these trifles I am able to perceive a widespread alliance of things, the possibility of receiving a gift from what usually surrounds me."[90]

Santucci e il ministero della parola," held at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, November 7–8, 2018, to commemorate the first centenary of Santucci's birth. See also, Valentina Puleo, "Luigi Santucci," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 90 (2017): http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigi-santucci_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

[85] Ernesto Balducci, *Francesco d'Assisi* (Florence: Giunti, 2014), 177.

[86] On the long-lasting friendship between Santucci and Balducci, see *Carteggio 1955-1991*, eds. Andrea Cecconi and Emma Santucci (Fiesole: Fondazione Ernesto Balducci, 2011).

[87] Valentina Puleo, "Umiltà e piccolezza," *Humanitas* 74, no. 5 (2019): 946–56; 946.

[88] Puleo, "Umiltà e piccolezza," 949.

[89] Luigi Santucci, *Éschaton Traguardo di un'anima* (Novara: Interlinea, 1999), 41.

[90] Cited in Puleo, "Umiltà e piccolezza," 949.

Among the joys of everyday life that surround us there are also many nonhuman companions who are a constant presence in Santucci's life and work. In the Manzonian novel il *Velocifero* (1963), the family cats are an elusive yet poetic presence embodying an almost sacramental function of peace and domestic warmth.[91] In *Misteri Gaudiosi* (1946), the simultaneous pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth cause a miraculous "tide of milk" even in farm animals "who were struck by a strange epidemic, causing their udders to fill up with a speed and frequency that was tenfold the usual."[92] Moreover, the cows' smell often has an almost therapeutic effect: "A sharp and healthy smell emanated from the animals, with their long and well-rounded backs. Had it taken a dusty consistency, I would have taken them, all haloed in their outlines, for holy animals."[93]

If in Santucci's other works nonhuman animals appear to have a meaningful presence within the narrative structure, they are never center stage nor do they speak in the first person. This changes in *La lode degli animali* where Santucci lends his voice to the nonhuman animals who appear in this collection of stories based on the early Franciscan sources.[94] In Santucci's version of these encounters, each chapter has at its center the various creatures who inhabited the life of Francis: birds, fish, rabbits, lambs, cicadas, bees, cats, wolves, and worms. The link with the early Franciscan sources is maintained in each chapter through an initial citation serving as a cue from which Santucci can then reimagine and expand on the dialogue between Francis and the animals in question. In fact, if in the hagiographic sources the encounters between Francis and the animals are often observed and then commented upon by various bystanders, in Santucci's version the creatures are not only the main characters of the narrative, but also the main narrators who reframe each encounter with Francis from their own point of view. In Santucci's text, these encounters are no longer viewed merely as miracles and part of a general narrative to legitimize Francis' status as an extraordinary saintly man to whom even nature obeys, thus mirroring

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[91] Santucci's very first memory is associated with the warmth and softness of a cat's fur. On nonhuman animals in Santucci's life, see Puleo, "Umiltà e piccolezza," 950–51.

[92] Luigi Santucci, *Tales of Grace* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015), 48.

[93] Santucci, *Tales of Grace*, 62

[94] The volume was published in 1981 to commemorate the eighth centenary of Francis' birth, as Nazareno Fabbretti recalls in the preface to the volume (included in the English edition). Only a few years after, Fabbretti, Santucci's intimate friend, soon followed suit with the publication of his own *Caro Uomo* (1988), a collection of letters (dedicated to "Konrad Lorenz and Francis of Assisi, friends also of men" and written in the first person by nonhuman animals) in which Fabbretti deals with ecological issues, animal ethics, and environmental theology. As Fabbretti writes in the preface, titled "Mea Culpa": "Ho cercato di udire e di capire che cosa pensano gli animali [...]. Anche se Elsa Morante ha scritto che 'non c'è parola nel linguaggio umano per consolare le cavie' mi sono ostinato ad interrogare sia quel mio amore dell'infanzia per tutti gli animali, sia l'evoluzione del loro linguaggio rivolto a noi, un linguaggio che certamente esiste e ci manda a dire molte cose. So d'aver presunto troppo 'antropomorfizzando' gli autori ipotetici di queste lettere, avendoli umanizzati forse più del possibile. Ma in un discorso come questo era l'unico modo di rendermi conto, almeno con la fantasia – che è la forma più alta della vera fede – di questi messaggi, di questi *ultimatum*. Un atto di stima, oltre che d'amore, verso creature che sono a loro volta, come noi, anche loro educatori e maestri di vita per tutti. Così, a forza di scrivere, mi sono trovato ad ascoltare. 'Caro uomo...'" ("I tried to hear and understand what animals think [...]. Although Elsa Morante wrote that 'there are no words in human language to console lab animals,' I have persisted in questioning both my childhood love for all animals, and the evolution of their language addressed to us, a language that certainly exists and communicates many things to us. I know that I have presumed too much by 'anthropomorphizing' the hypothetical authors of these letters, having humanized them perhaps more than necessary. But in a dialogue like this it was the only way I could put in words, at least with my imagination – which is the highest form of true faith – these messages, these *ultimatums*. An act of esteem, as well as love, towards creatures who are themselves, like us, educators and teachers of life for all. So, by dint of writing, I found myself listening. 'Dear man ...'"). In *Caro Uomo* (Cinisello Balsamo, MI: Edizioni Paoline, 1988), 17.

Christ's own command of natural phenomena (as in Mark 4:35–41 or Luke 8:22–25). Each encounter becomes instead the space for a dialogic encounter in which Francis "makes kin and kind," to use Haraway's words, by addressing the creatures with affective and familial language. After being caught by a fisherman and released by Francis, the fish says: "On the boat, looking down from one of the sides, Francis' face, with its scant beard, was smiling at me. It was a mischievous laugh of complicity, and I realized that he was telling me: 'Sister fish, run away, and don't get caught again.'[95] Similarly, the cicada says of Francis: "But it felt completely natural to glide onto the open hand of that man when he said, 'Sister cicada, come here.'"[96] These transformative interspecies encounters restore worth, beauty, and function, to human and nonhuman animals alike. This is made possible mainly because the encounters are based on what feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuthers has called responding to a "thou-ness" in all beings: "we respond not just as 'I to it,' but as 'I to thou'. […] The 'brotherhood of man' needs to be widened to embrace not only women but also the whole community of life."[97]

In order to re-establish such kinship of equals, Santucci often incorporates in his stories the painful events that have brought the creatures to Francis in the first place. These events are often characterized by violent and cruel objectifying encounters with other humans. The cicada compares Francis' hand to that of a child: "Francis's hand was smooth as that of a child. I can testify to it because a child once caught me from a branch. I had a tremendous scare in that closed fist—certain it would soon crush me. I do not remember how long my fear lasted; I only remember the child saying to his companions, 'Now it will sing, you'll see,' and then angrily to me: 'Come on, sing, you stupid thing.'"[98] In recalling the instinct of fear that more than others guides its every move and emotion, the little rabbit states: "But more than anything else, we fear humans. At times, a dog or a bird of prey, after breathless pursuits, gives up and decides to let us go, almost—if not out of mercy—as reward and recognition of our ability to outrun them. But not humans. They never give up their pride and the satisfaction in finally capturing us and bringing us to their homes hanging and bleeding from hooks, or stuffed in their game bags."[99] Speaking about humans, the worm says: "For you, punishing us for our sordid existence under your feet while walking might be pleasing, if only that act did not evoke a shudder of revulsion in all of you. After all, even the soles of your shoes demand more respect."[100]

Often the creatures reach Francis completely devoid of any dignity or value – if not of a transactional or monetary type. Drawing on Haraway and Mary Louise Pratt, Brandon Alakas and Day Bulger have aptly argued that Francis' encounters with nonhuman animals in the early Franciscan sources create "contact zones" that "reconfigure hierarchies and divisions between species. […] orthodox ontologies are overturned and replaced by new ways of seeing both the nonhuman animal subject and our own place within creation."[101] This recognition of animal subjectivity and establishment of egalitarian interspecies relationships is emphasized in Santucci's stories as well. The lamb recounts how he ended up living with Jacoba di Settesoli, one of Francis' lay devotees: "She never caressed me from the day when Francis—after

[95] Luigi Santucci, *The Canticle of the Creatures for Saint Francis of Assisi* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017), 38.
[96] Ibid., 56.
[97] Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 87.
[98] Santucci, *The Canticle*, 56.
[99] Ibid., 43.
[100] Ibid., 80.
[101] Brandon Alakas and Day Bulger, "Francis's Animal Brotherhood in Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima*," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 23–32; 30.

redeeming me at the animal market with some of the friars' meagre savings, so I could escape the butcher's knife (my innocent eyes and what seemed to him my likeness to the mystical Lamb of Calvary moved him almost to tears)—handed me to her. […] The grace that I received from Francis that day—on the verge of being slain—I had the good fortune while I lived to repay, in some way, through the warmth of the soft cloth that came from my body."[102] The pheasant recalls its first encounter with Francis: "When that noble man of Siena sent me as a gift to our blessed saint, so he could taste my delicious flesh, Francis greeted me as a brother and immediately said to his companions: 'Let's make a test now to see if Brother Pheasant wants to remain with us, or if he'd rather return to his usual places, which are more fit for him.'"[103] In both examples nonhuman animals are given the chance to offer their version of the story, which allows them to refashion their own identity: from mere consumable products to equal givers who can now repay, in wool and friendship, the one human who has recognized them as equals.

Perhaps the most illuminating example of how the "contact zone" between Francis and nonhuman animals challenges traditional ontological divides and envisions egalitarian interspecies relationships is Santucci's retelling the story of the bees, which is worth citing at length. The citation from the Franciscan source that opens Santucci's chapter reads:

> While he was staying in a poor place the holy man used to drink from a clay cup. After his departure, with wonderful skill bees had constructed little cells of their honeycomb in it, wonderfully indicating the divine contemplation he drank in at that place.[104]

Using this passage as his cue, Santucci, in turn, writes:

> It was our own Queen who guided our work in that clay cup. It was a common, rugged mug, and we, common-minded workers. We did not immediately understand the reason for building our honeycomb in there, filling it with symmetrical cells. […] However, crammed into Francis's cup, we poor workers were overwhelmed with a sense of what to do. All of a sudden, we had the intelligence of our Queen—who knows all there is to know. We say intelligence, but perhaps this is not quite correct; we might better call it a sort of unswerving joy, of instinctive inventiveness. […] Joyful about what? you may ask. Well, by condensing and placing our honey in that rugged mug, we felt we participated in the contemplation our brother Francis tasted, and in which he found relief when he was alive and dwelt among us here on earth. For surely his sips from the mug, to drink his "humble, precious, and chaste" water were moments not only of sustenance, but of innocent, intense, blissful contemplation—and of praise, from his wet lips and his refreshed tongue, to the One who created water, who created the mouth, thirst, and the wonder of uniting these things in a miracle that is not only of the senses but of the soul.
>
> We bees make honey: from the flowers of the fields and trees, we know how to synthesize every pleasure and every sustenance for humans. Perhaps brother honey, with its varied and imaginative but also vigorous sweetness, is the

[102] Santucci, *The Canticle*, 50.
[103] Ibid., 28.
[104] *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, ch. 4; in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi*, vol. 2, 414.

> masterpiece God has given to his creatures to produce. And that great Bee that was Francis, after flying during his short life over all the flowers of creation, imitated us with an incomparable honey of words when before his death he sang the "Canticle of the Creatures." Yet, in that clay cup, he probably drank nothing but water. For that reason, our Queen wanted us to pay homage to him with our exquisite product, transforming that vessel that usually quenched his thirst with a comb full of savory sweetness that we alone are capable of producing.
> And we bees can tell you that, among the thousands and thousands of flowers from which we usually go picking and choosing in order to obtain the most extraordinary nectar, no one has ever allowed us to enjoy a sweeter taste, a more sublime exaltation, than that humble cup where many times he had put his mouth. Never before have we felt more wonderfully the privilege, the mission, and the grace of being bees.[105]

In a unique turning of the gaze around on Francis, and with clear metaliterary references to Francis' *Canticle*, the bees in the passage see Francis as a "great Bee." The relationship between species has thus become horizontal and distinctions between species no longer compromise mutual collaboration, respect, and love. Thanks to Francis' simplicity and humility, represented by his "rugged, common mug" from which he drank "nothing but water," in Santucci's text there emerges the dialogic space of an encounter among equals who find their mission in serving each other, each producing their own type of honey, which, in turn, is seen as the ultimate realization of one's identity, the awareness of one's ontological uniqueness and, at the same time, profound connection with others.

Finally, throughout Santucci's rereading of the *Canticle*, a message emerges clearly and unambiguously: nonhuman animals remind us that they also have moral agency and are destined to eternal life on the same terms as humans. After all, the same word "animal" (living creature) is from the Latin "anima" ("soul"),[106] and as the nightingale says in the first chapter: "What is the soul? it Something that 'loves' and does not die and does not die 'precisely' because it loves ... Like you, in some mysterious way, we will live forever; and the eternal paradise that awaits you we will share one day together."[107]

With Santucci's *Canticle*, no doubt, we enter into the disputed territory of anthropomorphism, that is to say, the process of humanizing nonhuman animals, thus perpetuating forms of mistreatment and exploitation. However, Santucci, while showing hints of domestication and humanization, ultimately avoids falling prey to anthropocentric bias as he not only allows nonhuman animals to "look at us" – as Derrida puts it[108] – or *speak back* at us, but in so doing he also raises important ethical questions of fairness and awareness towards other species. In several passages, in fact, the animals give voice to the suffering of other nonhuman species, in an ethic of recognition of creaturely suffering:

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[105] Santucci, *The Canticle*, 61–63.
[106] "Etymon from classical Latin *animal*, i.e. living creature (including man)" (OED).
[107] Santucci, *The Canticle*, 4.
[108] "[the cat] can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next(-door) than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat." "The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there." Derrida, *The Animal*, 11, 29.

> Our main virtue is perhaps to have no memory. That day, in fact, as I said, we will ask forgiveness for you because we will have forgotten all the beatings and the suffering that you inflicted upon us: the firing of the hunters in the bushes; the cruel traps that have seen us in agony for endless hours under the moon; the explosions battering the seabed and forcing our dead bodies to come to the surface effortlessly. All this we will have forgotten […][109]

Santucci goes even further in advancing a theological vision in which animals not only have souls, but are also an integral part of the redemptive mission of Christ. In fact, pushing this vision to the limits, Santucci recognizes in nonhuman animals a christological mission of forgiveness and intercession:

> I am the nightingale, the most beautiful voice in nature. Pray, listen carefully, during full moon nights, to my joyful and desperate song among the branches. It is an intoxicating melody, yes, but listen more attentively; it is more. It is a mysterious liturgical litany. I am saying to my fellow animals: "In the name of St. Francis, let us intercede for them […]"[110]

Advances in a variety of fields, including the humanities, dealing with nonhuman animal studies continue to bridge the gap and shrink the distance between "us," humans, and "them," nonhuman animals. As seen through three rereadings of one of Italian literature's foundational texts, an ethic of self-emptying emerges that ultimately urges us to become and have *less*, to *make room* and reconnect with the other – human and nonhuman alike.[111] A kenotic approach to multispecies relationships on our planet has much to offer, if only as a first gesture to move beyond the dichotomy of "utility and stewardship" and, perhaps, even to explore a more "kinotic" ("making kin and making kind") approach for the advancement of "the multispecies ecojustice" envisioned by Haraway in the new era of the "Chthulucene—past, present, and to come."[112] After all, what we – and life – will be is a mystery still waiting to be unfolded.[113]

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[109] Santucci, *The Canticle*, 7.

[110] Santucci, *The Canticle*, 8.

[111] On this topic, see Mick Pope, "The Self-Emptying Godhead: Perichoresis, Kenosis, and an Ethic for the Anthropocene," in *Ecotheology and Nonhuman Ethics in Society*, ed. Melissa J. Brotton (New York: Lexington Books, 2017), 81–98. As Celia Deane-Drummond states: "[...] human beings are still cast, wrongly in my view, in terms of a *separation from* other creatures, rather than in consideration of what *links them* with other creatures [...]" In *The Wisdom*, 13.

[112] Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, (2015): 159–65; 161. I am indebted here to Lidia Curti and her article "Convivenza Tentacolare: Femminismo speculativo e immaginario fantascientifico," *Leggendaria*, 124 (2017): 13–16.

[113] See, for example, 1 John 3:2. A kenotic approach may also help new materialism's attempts to move past the same hierarchical ontologies that they inevitably seem to replicate. As Matthew A. Taylor has recently observed: "the recognition of a shared vitality does not produce a shared, egalitarian life. […] once universal life is conceded to be unequally distributed, it is functionally indistinguishable from the traditional living/nonliving divide, and it does nothing to disturb the privilege, coherence, and supremacy historically accorded to the human (one of new materialism's stated objectives)." In "Life's Returns: Hylozoism, Again," *PMLA* 135, no. 3 (2020): 474–91; 485.