

FRANCIS of ASSISI

A Model for Human Liberation

Leonardo Boff

Translated by John W. Diercksmeier

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

Founded in 1970, Orbis Books endeavors to publish works that enlighten the mind, nourish the spirit, and challenge the conscience. The publishing arm of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Orbis seeks to explore the global dimensions of the Christian faith and mission, to invite dialogue with diverse cultures and religious traditions, and to serve the cause of reconciliation and peace. The books published reflect the views of their authors and do not represent the official position of the Maryknoll Society. To learn more about Maryknoll and Orbis Books, please visit our website at www.maryknoll.org.

English translation copyright © 1982 by Crossroad Publishing Company
Originally published under the title *São Francisco de Assis: Ternura e Vigor* by
Vozes/Cefepal, Petropolis, Brazil, 1981. Original English title: *Saint Francis*.

This edition published in 2006 by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Queries regarding rights and permissions should be addressed to: Orbis Books,
P.O. Box 308, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Date

Boff, Leonardo.

[São Francisco de Assis. English]

Francis of Assisi : a model for human liberation / Leonardo Boff ; translated by
John W. Diercksmeier.

p. cm.

Originally published: Saint Francis. New York : Crossroad Pub. Co., 1982.

Includes bibliographical references (p.)

ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-680-1 (pbk.)

1. Francis, of Assisi, Saint, 1182–1226. 2. Liberation theology. I. Title.

BX4700.F6B5613 2006
217'.302—dc22

2006049478

Saint Francis

A MODEL OF GENTLENESS AND CARE

On one occasion, Brother Bonaventure, the gardener of the friary at the Portiuncula, climbing Mount Subasio with a brother from a far-away country, was asked what Franciscan spirituality is. Brother Bonaventure, a simple and very spiritual man, in a sweet voice made more so by his Umbrian accent, responded: “Franciscan spirituality is Saint Francis. And who is Saint Francis? It is enough to utter his name and everyone knows who he is. Saint Francis was a man of God. And because he was a man of God, he always lived what is essential. And so he was simple, courteous, and gentle with everyone, like God in His mercy.”

The little old Fiat bounces along the rocky road that leads to the friary at the Carceri. There below, spread out and lit by the pleasant autumn sun, is the peaceful valley of Assisi, like a woven tapestry of houses and farms. Suddenly Brother Bonaventure stops the car and jumps out; but it is not to contemplate the wide panorama before him, from the heights above the cliffs to the valley below. Rather, with his Franciscan eyesight, he has discovered little white flowers among the abundant greenery. “Look at how beautiful they are!” says the brother, rough but with a refined spirit, as he leans over them, like someone leaning over the crib of a newborn child.

The brother from the faraway country discovers some mulberries, green and ripe, and he tastes them. “Why do you take the green mulberries, Brother?” interrupts Brother Bonaventure. “Don’t you see that they suffer? Would you cut someone down in the prime of life? Only when they are older do they offer themselves gladly for our enjoyment.”

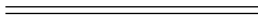
The descent is as slow as the climb. The small car descends the mountain smoothly. “Why don’t we go a bit faster, Brother Bonaventure?” He answers: “There is no reason to abuse the good nature of the car. For eighteen years it has carried me to and fro, and it has always been good to me. Should I not show it some consideration by avoiding rough braking with so many curves?”

Then, back at the Portiuncula, he shows me his garden, full of vegetables, grape vines, fig trees, and many flowers. I also see a disorderly bush, bright green in color. “Brother Bonaventure, what is that?” He says, with an innocent smile: “They are our sisters, the weeds. I let them grow there because they too are daughters of God and they sing of the beauty of God.”

It is Sunday, and there is a celebration in the friary because the new superior of the house begins his term of office. A special wine is served. Brother Bonaventure drinks his wine in silence and with deep respect. He does so as if he were taking part in a ritual of some sort. “What is it, Brother?” And he, in almost a whisper, says: “I must honor Brother Wine. I myself made it, six years ago. And it too is joyful in our joy.”

Brother Francis still lives in his “little poor ones.” All of his penances and foolishness were worth the trouble in order to liberate and allow the birth of a spirit as gentle and brotherly as that of Brother Bonaventure. Francis lives and is among us, hidden within each one of us. I saw him born again in the attitudes of Brother Bonaventure.

I, brother from a faraway country, minor theologian, outcast and sinner—I saw him and I give witness. In praise of Christ. Amen.



The crisis that we are all suffering is structural in nature and concerns the basics of our system of life together.¹ This is the reason for its dramatic and undeniable character. The crisis of the global system derives from the crisis specific to the ruling class, the bourgeois class that has directed our history for the past five centuries. The ethos of this class, that is, its practices and the meaning that is given to them, the forms of relationships that consecrated and gave rise to the rest of the social classes, shows itself more or less incapable of assimilating, within its own structure, new and emerging forms, just as it is incapable of developing from its own resources an alternative that is meaningful for everyone. We find ourselves at the end of one era and at the beginning of a new one. Within this context, the figure of Francis is a highly appealing one.

THE END OF THE ECONOMY OF THE LOGOS

The phenomenological manifestations of this crisis present an awesome specter: emptiness, loneliness, fear, anxiety, aggressiveness without objectives, in a word, general dissatisfaction. Emptiness is born of a feeling of impotence, that there is little we can do to change our own life and that of society, and finally, that nothing is important. Loneliness is expressive of the loss of contact with nature and others in terms of friendship and gentleness; there is the lack of courage to commit ourselves. Fear is the fruit of the objective threats to life, to employment, to the collective survival of humanity in general. Anxiety has its origin in imagined fear, ignorance as to what one ought to do, in whom to trust, and what to expect; when anxiety grips an entire society, it means that the whole society feels threatened and senses its approaching end. Generalized aggressiveness reveals a rupture with the norms of relationship without which a society cannot be built or defended; what results is anonymity and the loss of the meaning of the Self, that is, the worth and sacredness of the human person. From all of this there derives two consequences no less serious: emptiness and the loss of the language of everyday communication, the loss of meaningful personal relationships and the loss of the vital relationship with nature. And to any empty, threatened, anxious, and aggressive individual this same nature appears mute, indifferent, and dead. A similar absence of enthusiasm aids the breakdown of the ecosystems. This adds to, generally, the excesses of irrationality, which reveal the limitations of the system of social integration. The old myths are in agony and the new ones do not yet have sufficient strength to give birth to a new cultural ethos.

This crisis constitutes, as we have said, the crisis of the dominant class. The classes below are not immune to it, but they have other reasons for living and struggling. As we will see, they are the bearers of alternative solutions, capable of teaching and forming a new society.

These few phenomenological facts are symptoms, not causes. The ontological root of this crisis ought to be sought much deeper within reality and much farther back in time.² It is linked to the appearance of the bourgeoisie as a social class, from the heart of the feudal system itself. The development of the world of the artisans creating the market system gave rise to a new meaning for being: the desire for wealth, for goods, for power. Together with this a new ethos was developed, that is, a new way of life with different relationships to nature, to others, to religion, and to God. Science and technology did not arise as pure and free responses to reason but rather as answers demanded by the rise

of production, of the marketplace, and of consumerism. They constitute the decisive contribution of the bourgeoisie to humanity. Because of production, the rationality that was developed to its utmost was analytic-instrumental reason, to the detriment of other forms of reason (dialectic, wisdom, etc.). Knowing has its own defined irrationality: power. Power and knowing go hand in hand for the modern upper class. Because of this, the scientific and technological projects would become the big business of the dominant system of the world as part of the process of production.³

The individual of the modern upper class is above things and no longer with them, because analytical knowledge means the power of control over the mechanisms designed for human enjoyment. Analytical rationality demands a cutting off of the other legitimate avenues to the real, those described as Pathos, sympathy, or Eros, fraternal communication and tenderness. This whole dimension will be marked and even denounced as disturbing to scientific objectivity. Science at the service of the a priori founders (desire for wealth, for realization) organizes its demarche of domination through the projection of models and paradigms of reality that guarantees its operative efficiency. Certainly this pragmatism has its reason for being (to guarantee the production and reproduction of life); but, nevertheless, it is profoundly diminishing in that it categorizes and artificializes reality, and hides the meaningful dimensions for the realization of the human meaning of life. In spite of the enthusiasm surrounding the discoveries at the beginning of the modern revolution, nature was separated from the emotional and archetypal life of people; it stopped being one of the great sources of the symbolic and sacramental dimensions of life, losing its therapeutic and humanizing functions.

Obviously, human beings did not cease to feel, to live, and to relate in other ways. But all of this took place under the rule of reason, installed as the supreme judge before whom all things must render accounts. There were long periods wherein it was thought that science and technology was the only integrating principle of every culture, the redemption for the secular wounds of humanity. The belief in this myth gave way to one sole picture of all known peoples, at great cultural cost.

Today we live beneath this demand: almost everything is organized in view of productivity. Production is geared toward the consumer market. Consumerism is geared toward satisfying real needs, especially those artificially induced by advertising. The upper class, primary bearer of the modern historical project, realized for itself the ideals of its founding fathers: to create a society of plenty. But it did so at an exorbitant social cost, giving rise to inequalities and levels of exploitation

and insufferable poverty, according to humanistic and ethical criteria. The marginated sectors of society do not suffer a crisis of meaning, but rather, on the contrary, find meaning in the struggle for life and in the commitment to the historical improvement of the modern bourgeois system. The dominant system is being corroded from within, without hope and without a future. What does one do after having won the battle of hunger, having satisfied one's needs to the point of nausea? Having reduced the meaning of existence to the satisfying of these needs, once they are met one does not know what else to do. The dominant upper class has accomplished its historical mission, and it must be replaced by some other historical subject, operator of some other hope and agent of some other social meaning.

The ultimate roots of the present impasse of rationality go even farther back: they are found at the dawn of our culture, in the great turn from the pre-Socratics to the Socratics, when the Logos took its own path, overtaking the Mythos, and the concept gained dominion over the symbol. With Aristotle we already practically have the system of reason, with its drive to order, classify, systematize, and dominate. But the historical consequences of the system of reason were only manifested with the emergence of the upper class in the sixteenth century. This class transformed reason into a great system of domination of the world, as well as of social revolution (the French Revolution). Everything points to the fact that we are arriving at the end of this long process, not at the end of reason—that would be absurd—but at the end of its total rule.⁴

The modern postwar critic, conscious of the apocalyptic danger that reason, turned in on itself, can produce, points out the limitations of the whole historical project of science and technology. In the first place, there exists an internal limitation: growth cannot be unlimited, because the universe is finite and nonrenewable energy is reduced. Second, the absolute reign of reason tore to pieces the surrounding world and deeply distorted all social relationships. Reason became more and more antagonistic toward those dimensions of life that were less productive, though more receptive. The Logos accented Eros and Pathos, the values of direct contact, of intimacy and affectivity, of creativity and fantasy, of simplicity and spontaneity. Eros and Techne seem to live in constant battle. "The lover, like the poet, is a threat to assembly-line production. Eros breaks existing molds and creates new molds; and that, naturally, is a threat to technology, which demands regularity, foresight, and is controlled by the clock. Untamed Eros fights against all concepts and limits of time."⁵ The spirit of geometry needs to come to agreement with the spirit of refinement (Pascal); logic needs to live alongside courtesy, because both are expressions of the human.

THE BEGINNING OF THE REIGN OF EROS AND PATHOS

Everywhere the need is felt to broaden the use of rationality far beyond instrumental-technocratic rationality. This need not be hegemonic, but is indispensable to insure the material basis for the other forms in which the reciprocity of the consciousness, liberty, creativity, sympathy, and tenderness may be articulated. There must be found channels of power that border upon innocence in its literal sense, that is, that do not harm the relationship with others and with nature.⁶ In this sense, at the beginning of a new cultural dawning, we may dream of the beginning of a new reign, that of Eros and Pathos.⁷ On this plane, the figure of Saint Francis shines forth as a reference point and basis for hope. However, before we analyze the cultural significance of the man from Assisi, we must have a greater theoretical clarity about the meaning of this emerging rule of Eros and Pathos.

Before all else, it is necessary to point out some precepts that cause interminable difficulties. Some contrast the rationalism of the modern era and irrationality, as if it were human to live without the integration of the regulating function of reason. Irrationality as lived in the twentieth century, with the tragedies that it caused through racism, nationalism, and other totalitarian ideologies, is as noxious, if not more so, than rationalism itself. Others contrast love and power, linking them in an inverse relationship: the more the power, the less the love, and vice versa. This opposition also takes place on a superficial and psychological level. Love is understood as a subjective emotion and power as compulsion and domination. On an ontological level, power is power to be, a condition for love itself. Love, ontologically, is the power of giving, of surrender, or the capacity to accept the other as other. Love and power are not mutually reducible, but maintain dialectical relationships between each other: "Love needs power in order to be something more than sentimentalism, just as power needs love in order not to end by being manipulated."⁸ The one must be articulated with the other in order to accurately describe reality.

Second, it is necessary to decide what the ultimate base of human existence is. We have already said that the Greek Logos is at the root of our culture, and the Cartesian Cogito at the origin of modernity. With the evolution of reflection, we came to discover that reason does not explain or touch upon everything. There exists the arational and the irrational; it appears that the tragedy lies more in history than in reason itself. Reason, as expressed by the philosopher Jean Ladrière, is not the first or the last moment of human existence.⁹ It is open to what is below and to what is above. From below there emerges something

older, deeper, more elementary and primitive—affectivity. From above, reason is open to the spiritual experience that is the discovery of the totality present in the ego, not as pure contemplation, but rather as an experience that beyond the concrete there are not only structures but gratifying feeling, sympathy, and tenderness.

The base experience is feeling. Not the *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), but the *sentio, ergo sum* (I feel, therefore I am); not Logos, but Pathos, the capacity to be affected and to affect—affectivity. This is the concrete and primary *Lebenswelt* of human beings. Existence is never pure existence; it is an existence felt and affected by joy or sadness, by hope or anguish, strength, repentance, goodness.

The primary relationship is a relationship without distance, of profound active passivity, in the sense of feeling the I, the world, others. It is a being with, not above; it is a coliving, communing in the same reality not yet differentiated; as Heidegger would say, the revelation of existence in its fundamental and constitutive ties, like the world in its totality.¹⁰ The ontological basis for depth psychology (Freud, Jung, Adler, and their disciples) lies in this conviction: the ultimate structure of life is feeling, not only as a movement of the psyche, but as an “existential quality,” the ontic structuring of the human being. Such a being is affectivity, as a mode of being, and not only the human psyche.

It is important to underscore that Pathos (feeling) is not in opposition to Logos (rational comprehension). Feeling is also a form of knowledge, but more comprehensive and enveloping than reason. It embraces reason within itself, releasing it in all directions. The genius who saw this was Pascal, one of the founders of the science of probability, the builder of the calculator, affirming that the primary axioms of thought are intuited by the heart and that it is the heart that determines the premises for all possible knowledge of the real.¹¹ Knowledge by way of Pathos (feeling) is achieved by sympathy, by feeling together with perceived reality, and by empathy, or identification with perceived reality.

Ancient man, before the hegemony of reason, lived a mystic union with all realities, including God; he felt umbilically linked with the surrounding world and with his own intimacy; he participated in the nature of all things and they participated in his nature. This took place because the feeling of belonging and of universal familiarity allowed a harmonious integration of human existence with respect and veneration of all the elements. And this was so because he lived the truly archaic structure of life, that is, in the heart of the principle and the origin of knowledge (the etymological meaning of archaic: from *arche*, principle, origin). The postmodern individual is in search of the lost accord that

survives, especially, in dreams, in regressive and progressive utopias, and in fertile imagination. But this is not enough; one must realize it in a historical project, not through the mere redressing of the old, but by means of a new embracing synthesis of the tradition of the Logos to which we belong. But first we must outline in more detail the structure of the Pathos.

The “Demonic” Strength of Eros

Pathos is not only affectivity, that is, to feel affected by existence itself and by the world in its totality; it is primarily becoming active and taking the initiative of feeling and identifying with perceived reality. To live is to feel, and to feel is to capture the value of things; value is the precious character of things, that which makes them worthy of being and that which makes them appealing. Eros, in the classic sense we give it here, is that force that with enthusiasm, joy, and passion makes us search for union with the things we perceive and appreciate, with our own realization, with the significant persons in our world, with our ideals, with our vocation, with God. An archaic myth from ancient Greece describes it better than any definition: “Eros, the god of love, arose to create the world. Before, everything had been silence, naked and immobile. Now, everything is life, joy, movement.” This is the real essence of Eros: life that searches passionately for life, the joy of existence, the movement that enlivens, widens, deepens, and transforms. The basic dynamic of reality, also human, is constituted by Eros. In the beginning there was not reason but passion (Pathos and Eros). The proper impulse of reason to know, order, and dominate comes through Eros, which resides in it. It is responsible for the mysticism that consumes the scientist in search of the keys to the structure of the real. Eros does not only imply a feeling, but a co-feeling, a consent; not only being conscious of the passion of the world, but having com-passion; it is not a living, but a living together, a sympathizing and an entering into communion. What is proper to Eros is to unite subject with object; but to unite with compassion, with enthusiasm, with desire. There is fire and heat in Eros. Everything that is tied to Eros must see with fantasy, with creativity, bursting forth toward the new, the surprising, the wonderful. Eros produces fascination, attraction, and enchantment. The ancients said that it is a *daimon*: what is hidden within it is a “demonic” force, the vulcanicity of the elements in ferment. The best way of representing the human spirit for us is to consider it as Eros,¹² because the life of the spirit is never represented as something ready-made and finished, but rather as a process and project of execution, deepening, re-

treating and recovering, searching out new molds, and rising above and beyond every determination.

Sex and Eros (whose identification brought so many errors into our culture) are related, but are not the same thing. The great ontologically based psychoanalyst Rollo May affirms rightly: “Sex is a rhythm of stimulus and response, Eros is a state of being. The goal of sex is the gratification and relief of tension, while that of Eros is desire, hope and the eternal search for expansion.”¹³ The supreme expression of Eros is oblation love, which, through communion with the other, surrenders itself in disinterested joy and in service to the loved one or to God. Through the strength of Eros, love maintains its fidelity; the missionary reaffirms his or her commitment to the most backward people in a wild jungle or in the middle of the physical misery of a run-down ghetto. There runs through Eros a permanent push toward the higher, the more beautiful, the more true, the more just, and the more human. Not without reason, the Platonic-Augustinian tradition saw in Eros the push that leads us to God and toward the mystic flight of union with him, and finally, toward ecstasy.¹⁴

Humanized Eros: Gentleness and Care

Because of its irruptive character, Eros always runs the risk of being perverted by *epithymia*, concupiscence. It can degenerate into something orgiastic and other forms of destructive enjoyment. The free rein of impulsiveness without a consciousness of limits, the instinct to celebrate value without discerning what is a just value (all values are valid, but not so for every circumstance), can call forth the depersonalizing demons of existence and culture. It is like a dam that bursts; the dikes break, everything is destruction, and water is spread everywhere until it finds borders that cause it to form a river. Freud clearly saw that a civilization is only built upon the disciplining of Eros.

Within this context, Logos, or reason, enters and plays an irreplaceable role. It is proper to reason to see clearly, to order and discipline. It is proper to reason to confer form and to define the direction of Eros. But it is important to understand the relative character of Logos and Eros. In the beginning is Eros and not Logos. As we have already stated, the latter rises out of the former. And here there arises one of the most difficult and dramatic dialectics in the history of the spirit. Logos, by nature, tends to dominate everything within its path; there exists the risk of subjugating and tripping up Eros, instead of granting it form and discipline. The drama of modern culture lies precisely in its repression of Eros. The ruling of the Logos brought forth repressive ways of life,

stunted creativity, and fantasy; it placed under suspicion all pleasure and feeling; the anima, in its spreading of gentleness, conviviality, and compassion, was entombed by the inflation of the animus. We have already said that coldness, the lack of enthusiasm for life, the feeling that nothing is worth the trouble, and the great mechanisms of repression and control are consequences of the exacerbation of the Logos and of the trampling down of the energies of Eros. For the rest, the monopoly of the system and of order, introduced by reason, never stopped being contested throughout history. Today this tendency is almost universal, which presages the blossoming of a new balance, without the tyranny of reason over the spontaneity of Eros, with the possibility of living together unrepressed and unmarked by anxiety. Herbert Marcuse, dissenting from Freud, made it very clear that the original force that creates culture is not so much repressive sublimation as the free development of Eros, which is dependent on the Logos to regulate itself, without at the same time allowing itself to be subjugated by the Logos's dominating dynamic. The struggle for existence is, originally, a struggle for the reign of Eros. Culture begins when collective forms for its expansion are found. In the past, however, the struggle for existence was organized in the interest of security and domination on the part of the Logos, thus transforming the "erotic" foundation of the culture. "When philosophy conceived of the essence of being as Logos, it is already the Logos of imperative domination, dominant, oriented to reason, to which man and nature must be subject."¹⁵

What happens when Eros is able, at one and the same time, to assure its own rule and yet discipline itself by means of the right use of the Logos? The result is gentleness through the just utilization of the Logos. There arise, then, gentleness and care as the basic elements of a person and of a culture. When Eros remains completely free, as the uncontrolled exuberance of feelings and passions, sentimentalism, the unleashing of the emotions, the delirium of impulses, the orgiastic ecstasy of pleasure is unleashed. When Logos is allowed to impose its dominion, rigidity, and inflexibility, the tyranny of the norm, the domination of order, the rigor of discipline flourish. In the first case, the seed of life is drowned by overwatering; in the second, it dries up for lack of water. In both cases, a dehumanizing of existence is harvested.

When, on the other hand, Eros releases the torrent of its enthusiasm¹⁶ by means of the disciplinary force of the Logos, then there arises the concomitance of two characteristics: gentleness and strength. Gentleness, or also care, is the compassionate Eros, capable of feeling and communing with the other, which is not detained in the enjoyment of its own desires, but rather rests in the other with tenderness and love.

Because of this, gentleness and care must pay attention to the other, being attentive to the other's structure, showing solicitude, growing with the other.

Gentleness and care are something very different from sentimentality. Sentimentality is a problem of subjectivity: the subject who is centered in his own feeling, beginning and ending with himself. Gentleness and care, on the contrary, imply the decentralization of the subject from himself and concentration on the object of the relationship. Through gentleness and care the object is perceived in itself; the person senses the other person as other and loves him or her; the person goes out to the other and is fascinated by the other. The object occupies and determines the subject. The subject allows passion and compassion to arise from the object. He lingers in the other, not because of the sensation the other evokes in him, but because of the other as other, because of the fascination that the other causes. In gentleness, fascination is not troubling, because there is neither the struggle for power nor the will for domination or for self-gratification, but rather serenity and strength. There is a brilliance that is not blinding but that fits the circumstance and the person. Gentleness and care are Eros in its balance and rule.

Gentleness is gentleness because it contains strength within itself. Strength is the presence of the Logos within Eros, but at the service of the manifestation of Eros. Strength is contention without domination, law without legalism, defined direction without intolerance, development without enslavement. The Logos is for Eros what the retaining wall is for the immensity of waters behind a dam. Only because of that wall can the waters move the turbines and generate energy, lighting the cities of men.

Gentleness and care create the universe of excellences, existential meanings, all that is of value and importance and because of which it is worth sacrificing one's time, energies, and life itself. The basic root of our cultural crisis resides in the terrifying lack of gentleness and care of each other, of nature, and of our own future.

It is not without reason that a philosopher as wise as Martin Heidegger defines gentleness (*Fürsorge*) and care (*Sorge*) as the structural phenomena of existence,¹⁷ as was already related in the old Greek myth, according to which the god Care brought existence into being.¹⁸

Blaise Pascal calls gentleness and care *the spirit of kindness* as counterposed to *the spirit of geometry*: "This has a slow, hard, and inflexible way of seeing; the former has a flexibility of thought that is applied at one and the same time to the many parts of that which is loved."¹⁹ The heart (the dimension of the heart) is the organ of the

spirit of kindness; it produces cordiality, which is the synonym of gentleness and care. Heart, for Pascal, does not mean the expression of emotion in a psychological sense, as opposed to logic; it is not feeling as opposed to intellect; but, in an ontological sense, it is the capacity of the spirit to capture the axiological character of being, its fascination and brilliance. It is Eros in the ontological language of the Greeks (not totally reducible to the Freudian Eros), and because of this, the primary constitutive element of human existence. The heart and the spirit of kindness constitute the central reality of the human being and of a humanizing culture.

Toward a Civilization of Conviviality

The great postwar search is one for alternatives to the dominant culture produced by science and technology, which put the reality of the Apocalypse within our reach. We cannot continue on this path: it has already given all it can give. Necrophilic dimensions are being manifested today. A new rooting is being sought. This does not mean that we may avoid science and technology. What is in question is not science and technology, but their tyranny, the monopoly that they hold on the organization of human interaction. We need these tools to organize the collective satisfaction of our basic needs. But the cultural operation of guaranteeing the production and reproduction of life must be housed within some other system of reference, in which science and technology may be liberated from their dominating and hegemonic character.

What are these alternatives? The great debate is found precisely in this search for viable alternatives. It is not enough to review the historical path of Logos that produced science and technology. Philosophical, anthropological, psychoanalytical, and theological reflection have practically exhausted this phase. It is important to move from the anticulture to a development of elements of an alternative culture. This is the urgent question before us: Under the reign of what dimension (value, choice, structure, etc.) are the rest of the elements organized (primarily science and technology) that are unavoidable for the stage of development in which we find ourselves? Is it possible to create a new cultural unit? If it does not seem possible to create anything more than an integration, at least the space is given for a composite unity,²⁰ whose coherence comes through action. Institutions (such as science, technology, or any other) are maintained, developed, and continually recreate a meaning for being through action. Action is instituting not instituted; in spite of any previous conditioning, the originating creativity of human existence is achieved. Through action, the diverse pieces of a cul-

ture, no matter how far apart they may be, enter into contact and interaction. Action is, in itself, the creator of culture.

What type of action is imperative for the postmodern individual? The conscious action of respect, care, gentleness, cordiality, and conviviality. However, this will only be possible if modern man radically questions the meaning of life and being that has been a given for the last few centuries. He will not yet be able, without the most serious risk of self-destruction, to understand the meaning of being as domination and being-over-things. His existence is not summed up only by this manner of speaking. One can also co-live, be open with respect to confraternization, adding dimensions of gentleness and cordiality with all things. But this is only possible if life and culture are organized beneath the rule of Eros, and no longer that of the Logos. This is not only a question of a collective decision to be made, but of a conscious practice and education. It is necessary to let blossom the archaic structures of life that are constituted, as we have already said, by Eros, by feeling, by the ordering of the heart. Ivan Illich used the expression *conviviality*.²¹ Through conviviality, a different use is made of the immense scientific and technical tools placed at our disposal, not primarily for accumulation, unchecked and selfish satisfaction, and the activation of the principle of ownership, but rather the primacy of gift, liberty, and incentive to the meaning of being.

Giving more room to Eros—that is, to creative spontaneity, freedom, fantasy, the ability to demonstrate gentleness and care—there will arise a multidimensional balance able to guarantee a more human and integrated form of life, with nature and with others.

The strength of movements that search for a new meaning for living linked to earthly roots, to simplicity, to respect, to gentleness with others and the care of nature will take on a world-wide dimension. A new hegemony will begin: that of Eros and Pathos.

Who is the principal channel for this way of being? The most visible representatives are youth, children of the modern era, offshoots of the Enlightenment, descendants of the masters of suspicion (Nietzsche, Marx, Freud). They do not want to continue to be the agents of the rationalistic system of domination. But there is an entire social class, a new and emerging historical subject, the peoples and worker strata, the decisive channels of the new cultural model. The struggle for life, work, exploitation made the popular masses the guardians of those values we so often miss: hospitality, cordiality, collaboration, solidarity, the sense of respect for the sacredness of God and of natural things, especially life. It does not cease to be symptomatic that one of the greatest revolutionaries of our time, Ché Guevara, adopted this slogan for his actions: “One

must be hard, but without losing tenderness.” The same gentleness is apparent in many of the attitudes of union leaders,²² sensitive to small symbolic gestures, yet filled with historical import because they preserve the secret of all transforming power: the mystique, the desire, and the enthusiasm for change.

FRANCIS, POSTMODERN BROTHER: THE TRIUMPH OF COMPASSION AND GENTLENESS

In this context of the crisis of the dominant culture and of the search for alternative paths, the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi shines forth as highly significant and desirable. Every search needs reference points and archetypes that inspire it. A culture needs historical personalities who serve as mirrors in which that culture may see itself and be convinced of the values that give meaning to being. For our age, Francis is more than a saint of the Catholic Church and founder of the Franciscan family. He is the purest figure (gestalt) of Western history, of the dreams, the utopias, and of the way of relating panfraternally that we are all searching for today. He speaks to the most archaic depths of the modern soul, because there is a Francis of Assisi hidden within each one of us, struggling to emerge and expand freely among the moles of the modern age.

What most impresses modern humanity when faced with the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi is his innocence, his enthusiasm for nature, his gentleness with all beings, his capacity for compassion for the poor and of confraternization with all the elements, and even with death itself. Rollo May states: “Innocence is the preservation of an infantile clarity at an adult age. Everything retains its freshness, its purity, its newness and color. It leads to spirituality; it is the innocence of Saint Francis of Assisi in his preaching to the birds.”²³ And here is where all of the fascination with Saint Francis is found. Max Scheler called him the Western world’s most characteristic representative of the way of relating with empathy and sympathy:

It deals with a unique encounter between Eros and Agape (an Agape deeply penetrated by amor Dei and amor in Deo), in an especially holy and genial soul; it deals with an interpretation of both (Eros and Agape) so perfect that it is the greatest and most sublime example of a spirituality of matter, and at the same time, of a materialization of spirit that I have ever been given to know. Never again in the history of the West does there emerge a figure marked with such a strength of sympathy and of universal emo-

tion as that of Saint Francis. No one has better achieved the unity and integrity of all elements than did Saint Francis in the realm of the religious, the erotic, social relations, art, and knowledge. Better yet, the proper characteristic of all previous time is in that the strong unity lived by Saint Francis was diluted in a growing multiplicity of figures, also marked by emotion and heart in the most diverse movements, but articulated in a unilateral way.²⁴

Essentially, Francis liberated the springs of the heart and the outpouring of Eros. He is the sun of Assisi, as Dante called him.²⁵ He achieved an admirable accord between Logos and Pathos, between Logos and Eros. He demonstrated with his life that, to be a saint, it is necessary to be human. And to be human, it is necessary to be sensitive and gentle. With the poor man from Assisi fell the veils that covered reality. When this happens, it remains evident that human reality is not a rigid structure, not a concept, but rather it is sympathy, capacity for compassion and gentleness.²⁶ Because in this way, one can laugh and cry at almost the same time, and even facing death it is possible to sing *cantilenae amatoriae*. In other words, the sinner Adam and the innocent Job are assumed by him with infinite compassion and tenderness.²⁷ Sigmund Freud would have recognized that Francis was perhaps someone who carried the expression of love the farthest, who was able to relate to the strangest beings.²⁸ In effect, in Francis one can see the sovereign rule of Eros over Logos, a communion and confraternization with all of reality such as has never been seen since. We will outline a little better the basic experience of Saint Francis.

Francis and the Eruption of Eros and Desire

Eros constitutes the basic dynamic and the main force of human existence. As Freud excellently showed, the manifestation of Eros is principally given by way of desire. Desire, for its part, as Aristotle taught,²⁹ is by nature unlimited (*apeiron*). All actions try to satisfy it, fundamentally, without doing so. Because of this, the human search is revealed as insatiable and full of anxiety, because desire remains ever present and ever new. Francis emerges as one of the most prodigious manifestations of Eros and desire.³⁰ Through the force of Eros and insatiable desire everything seems new in him; everything is begun anew with the same initial enthusiasm.³¹ What has been assumed is achieved through total surrender. The *Legend of the Three Companions* says candidly: "He suffered great perplexity of spirit, and did not rest until he had achieved the dreamed-of ideal; he was racked by diverse thoughts that harshly disturbed him. Divine fire burned, completely,

within him.”³² What was the desire that burned in his heart? The first biographers are in agreement about this: “This was his supreme philosophy, this the most vivid desire while he lived: to ask of wise and simple men, perfect and imperfect, small and great alike, how one might best arrive at the height of perfection.”³³ And when he discovers in the gospel of commission the will of God for him, he exclaims: “This is what I most desire, to this do I aspire with all my soul. . . . This is what I want to put into practice with all of my strength.”³⁴ Giving up everything led him to identify with the poor and with the poor Christ, because “above all things he desired to dissolve and unite himself with Christ.”³⁵ The desire to be united with all things led to the mysticism of the cosmic fraternity and in the unity with the All, expressed in the “Canticle of Brother Sun.” Finally, on Mount Alverna, his desire for union with the Crucified burst forth in his own body in the form of five wounds.

Only those who desire the impossible achieve what is possible within human limits. Francis was taken by the desire for radicalness. What he understood and what he proposed he lived out to its logical conclusion. There did not exist for him theory on the one hand and practice on the other.³⁶ Both coexist in him in an impressive manner. And so, his axiom is: “Man knows as much as he does.”³⁷ The vigorous strength of his Eros explains the mysterious coherence that there was between what he said and the constancy with which he lived the radicalness of poverty with passion and gentleness. He incarnated the myth, visibly reproduced the archetype of the perfect imitation of Christ made human. The fascination that he exercised among his generation and over all persons even today is owed to the bursting eruption of his Eros and desire, awakening the Eros of every individual who comes into contact with his figure. Saint Bonaventure says graciously: “The desire that inspired so many activities (preaching the Gospel to the sultan in Morocco) was so powerful that, despite his bodily weakness, he went ahead of his companion on the pilgrimage, and as if drunk with the spirit, flew in haste to reach his goal.”³⁸ This is a reference to the powerful energy of Eros that boiled within him.³⁹ Without that Eros there is no ascent to God, nor a decided search for human perfection. Francis is the one who overcomes the instinct for compromise and the law of least resistance. He is the one who “endemonizes” existence to try new paths in the direction of an ever greater utopia.

Penance, the Price of Gentleness

With Eros as the basic operator of existence, Francis opened the gates of freedom, drive, and spontaneous expansion of personal experience. Essentially, one can perceive in his entire practice the valuation

of his personal Pathos, as well as that of every one of the brothers that the Lord gave to him. As long as Eros, upon which we have already reflected, turns in on itself, it has a tendency toward orgiastic behavior and the unleashing of the passions of the body and of the spirit. Eros demands discipline in order to become fruitful and to be able to expand in a humanizing way. Thus, the formidable abundance of Francis's Eros demanded of him a careful channelization. His balance of Eros was achieved by means of a terrible asceticism. There are many who are scandalized by the inhuman aspects of his austerity. How is it possible that a man so gentle with larks, locusts, the wolf of Gubbio, and all of the creatures of creation could have been so cruel to himself? Saint Bonaventure recounts that "he curbed the stimulus of the senses with a discipline so rigorous that at great pains did he accept what was necessary for his sustenance."⁴⁰ He understood his life as a "life of penance" and his order as the Order of Penitents.⁴¹ The meaning of penance should not be sought so much in the extravagances of austerity as in the search for the new man, according to the perspective of *metanoia* in the New Testament. Mortification, as the etymological meaning of the word suggests, lies in the activity of putting to death the overflowing of the passions so that their creative power may be directed toward holiness and humanization. This was the meaning that Francis gave to privations: the subjugation of the body so that it might be faithful to his plan to serve God in a full and radical way. Francis understands very well that the difficulty of the penances constituted the adequate measure of his inner Eros.⁴² Because of this, he was very relentless with himself. He was not so with his brothers; on the contrary, "he rejected excessive severity that was not, at the heart, clothed in mercy, nor sprinkled with the salt of discretion."⁴³ His gestures of acceptance and gentleness with the brothers who were not able to submit themselves to the rigors of penance are well known; he interrupts his fast and eats with the brother who cried from hunger.⁴⁴ He himself establishes norms as to the way to treat the body: "One must discreetly attend to Brother Body so as not to provoke the storms of laziness. Keep from him any occasion of protest, regardless of whether he begins to feel exhausted from staying awake and persevering in reverent prayer. Brother Body might say: 'I am dying of hunger. I can no longer stand the weight of your sacrifice.' But, if he protests in this way after having eaten, realize that the lazy ass needs to be beaten with the rod."⁴⁵ One who speaks in this way is free and is beyond penance. Because of this, he has mercy on his own body and speaks to it tenderly: "Cheer up, Brother Ass, and forgive me, because from now on I am going to try to please you, giving ear to your complaints."⁴⁶

Because of this, the penances are at the service of achieving discretion and discipline, without which there cannot be a mature personality. Those who surrender to Eros ought to also apply themselves, like Francis, to the obtaining of discipline with regard to the passions. Francis recognizes that penances carried him to that complete accord between spirit and body, between the desire to ascend and obedience to passionateness. To the little brother who asked him how diligently his body had obeyed him, the saint answered: "Son, I can give witness that it has obeyed me in every way . . . doing what I commanded. . . . We have always been in agreement in this: in following without resistance Christ the Lord."⁴⁷ Eros overcomes itself by expanding within the context of some project accepted in total radicalness. The result of the orientation of the passionateness of Eros is gentleness, compassion, the capacity to transcend and live the liberty that is found in the joy of self-determination. Francis achieved, with tremendous effort, this freedom and the splendor of life at its birth, thanks to the rigor of penitence. Here is the secret of the fascination that radiates from his Pathos for life. Francis's penance, apparently so inhuman, was the price he had to pay for his profound humanity. True gentleness is born of strength. This binomial is contained in a small formula at the beginning of the founding text: "The rule and life of the Friars Minor is this. . . ." Life marks the presence of Eros, the explosion of energy, and rule, its ordering and integration. Rule is not meant to substitute for life, but rather to give it strength and form.

Gentleness and Care with the Poor

Francis's gentleness is demonstrated especially in his human relationships. He breaks the rigidity of the feudal hierarchy and calls all persons "brothers and sisters." He himself is called "little brother" (*fratello*).⁴⁸ "He wanted to unite great and small, to treat the wise and simple with brotherly affection, to bind with ties of love those who were held at a distance."⁴⁹ These are not theoretical expressions, but affective. He treated everyone with utmost courtesy, even Saracens, infidels, and thieves: "Come, brother robbers, we are all brothers and we have some good wine."⁵⁰ Thomas of Celano, Francis's first biographer, returns over and over again to the theme of gentleness and affability in Francis's relationships:⁵¹ "He was enchanting . . . in fraternal charity . . . in affection . . . very wise when he gave counsel, always faithful to his obligations."⁵² He listened to each person as if he were listening to a great crowd.

He was especially gentle with the poor and the poorest of the poor, the lepers. The biographers are unanimous in stating that Francis's first

conversion was toward the poor and crucified, and from them toward the poor and crucified Christ. In his youth, he saved cloth from his father's store for them.⁵³ Still in the world, "many times, stripping himself of his garments, he dressed the poor with them, those who, if not in fact, in his heart he wanted to be like."⁵⁴ After his conversion, the poor and the poor Christ were for him one and the same passion. "The spirit of Francis moved him to the level of the poor, and those he could not help, he showed them his affection."⁵⁵ He could not stand for anyone to be poorer than he; he gave away his mantle, a part of his habit, and even all of his clothes, leaving himself naked and exposed to the derision of everyone. The biographer explains the meaning of these gestures: "He suffered to meet someone poorer than he, not because of vainglory, but because of a feeling of true compassion."⁵⁶ As is readily seen, tenderness and compassion are at the root of his fundamentally human relations.

However, he was affectionate and gentle in a special way with the least of persons, the lepers. Nothing seemed to him more abominable than the misery of the lepers. His conversion meant a penetration, each time more profound, into this inhuman reality. "The Lord took me among the lepers, and I resorted to mercy among them,"⁵⁷ he says in his Testament. He began to live with the lepers, caring for them, healing their wounds, feeding them, denying himself so to serve them, even to the point of kissing them on the mouth.⁵⁸ The first companions lived among the lepers, dedicated to their service.⁵⁹ At the end of his life, in the middle of the crisis in the order, he went back to the affectionate service of these brothers, who constantly made present the suffering servant, Jesus Christ.⁶⁰

His gentleness and care with the poor was so great that he never even permitted himself to think ill of them. For example, we are reminded of the punishment imposed by Francis upon the brother who spoke ill of a poor man. A brother had said to Francis, in front of a poor man, that "his compassion was changed to heartfelt affection." Francis answered him, exasperated: "Brother, it is true that he is a poor man, but there is perhaps no one in the whole region richer than he in desire." And he commanded him to ask forgiveness: "Go right now and removing your tunic, and lying at his feet, beg pardon of him. And not only this, but beg him to pray for you."⁶¹

This attitude of gentleness and tenderness beyond the pleasure principle is the spring that feeds the truth of human relationships. We do not live only by the bread necessary for survival. We want to live humanly. And to live humanly means to feel the warmth of someone who says to us, in spite of our physical and moral misery: "It is good that you

exist, Brother. You are welcome. The sun is also yours, the air is everybody's, and love can unite our hearts." Francis understood very well, with accurate intuition, that transcendence is not enough, that is, the striving upward in search of the ultimate mystery that is called the Father. Transcendence alone does not reveal the total truth of the human being, because it only finds light, the splendor of goodness, absolute positivity, God. It is certainly fullness, but it is not yet integration.

In order to arrive at a fullness of integration it is necessary to have the experience of "trans-descendence," an experience we all fear and reject because we fear facing emptiness, solitude, suffering, and death. And so we do not find full human realization as Christ lived it in his paschal mystery of death and resurrection. Through transcendence, the individual is open to what is below, thrust toward the shadow of the stigmatized poverty of the bodies of the exploited and leprous. Accepting them with gentleness and tenderness, they are integrated through human sharing, especially by the most intimate sharing, which is the compassionate heart. The individual feels cured of her own pain, because she feels accepted in the human universe. Whoever makes her own the totality of this experience of transcendence and transdescendence, like Francis, will be able, from the depths of her heart, to sing the hymn to all creatures, because she has leaned over them, as over a spring, and has heard them singing.

Gentleness and Compassion through the Passion of God

The discovery by Francis of those crucified throughout history led him to discover the God of the original experience of Christianity, of the crucified Absolute. Only after years of living with the poor and lepers did he hear the voice of the Crucified in San Damiano. His personal charism consisted in his proposing to live with all his soul the way of the Holy Gospel.⁶² For Francis, the Gospel is Christ. Christ is its *vestiges* (words and gestures) in its concrete historical condition, *poverty*. Because of this, the expression that crosses all of the first Franciscan writings is *sequi vestigial et paupertatem eius*.⁶³ The novelty of the Poverello is not in trying to radically live the Gospel. Historical investigations⁶⁴ have proven that that ideal was common to the principal spiritual groups of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Nor does his newness reside in the following of Jesus (to live based on the experience and central attitudes of Jesus), or in his imitation (reproducing his historical gestures). All of this had been and was being lived by past and contemporary evangelical movements. Francis wanted to reproduce and re-present the life of Jesus. This is the root of his insistence on the literal and the rejection of each and every gloss of the Gospel that was the marrow of

his concern. Throughout his life he demonstrated a visible desire to dramatize the mystery of Jesus. Within this context, the calling of his disciples, the celebration of the covenant meal with his own at the end of his life,⁶⁵ and the stigmata on Alverna find their adequate expression. Essentially, the imitation is not purely exterior, though this is decisive. The exterior is at the service of an experience of identification with Christ in his humanity.⁶⁶ The drama ceases to be only that, and begins to become a life in conformity with the way of Jesus.

And here is where the dimension of compassion and gentleness blossoms in the experience of Francis. In him, as in few Christian mystics, the typical experience of the God of the New Testament blossoms in a most original manner. It does not deal with experiencing the God of mystery, beyond any representation, and so, of the Most High. However, this experience common to religions, to biblical Judaism and all monotheism, is also found, admirably attested to by Saint Francis.⁶⁷ But this is not his originality; it is best understood in the mystery of the Incarnation, understood as *kenosis*, the humbling and identification by God with the most despised. Francis rightly intuited that, from the downtrodden and the presence of God in them,⁶⁸ one finds the intimate and secret heart of Christianity. What moved him and “made him drunk with love and compassion for Christ”⁶⁹ is the fact that God made Himself our brother in poverty and humility: “Oh, how holy and lovely to have such a brother, so pleasant, humble, peaceful, sweet, friendly, and more than anything else, desirable. He gave his life for his sheep and prayed to the Father for us!”⁷⁰ As one can see, the adjectives used embrace a powerful mixture of gentleness and cordiality.

Francis’s personal experience consists of the encounter with God in the humility of the Incarnation. For him, the mystery of the Incarnation is not represented in the metaphysical formulas of the great christological Councils of Ephesus (325 A.D.) and Chalcedon (451 A.D.), in terms of nature and spirit. The abstract formulations, though correct, do not move anyone, owing to the fact that only the intellect is attracted by them. As we have already said, citing the observations of Pascal and Saint-Exupery: “It is the heart that knows God, not reason”; and “One only sees rightly with the heart; the essential is invisible to the eye.” The Incarnation is, for Francis, a mystery of divine sympathy and empathy, as the Greek fathers said. God feels passionately attracted to the interior of human nature. Thus, for Francis, to say God Incarnate is to say God the child who cries, who is nursed, who smiles. It is to concretely represent the life of Jesus in the dusty roads of Palestine; his diatribes against the Pharisees; his sharing with the apostles; his hunger; his thirst; his love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus; his

agony in the Garden of Olives; his surrender on the cross.

What is the human attitude, colored by faith, faced by such a divine reality molded by our insignificance? It is gentleness and compassion. And this is what Saint Francis lived, intensely. Let us listen to what Thomas of Celano says: “Of all the solemnities, he preferred to celebrate with ineffable joy the birth of the child Jesus; he called it the feast of feasts, in which God became a tiny baby, nursed at the breast of a human mother.”⁷¹

Understand, he knows that, in this child, divine and human nature form the unique person of the Word; but what moves him is that the Word was nursed and did everything a child does. God took the breast of Mary, whimpered, was caressed, and fell asleep. This is for Francis an object of compassion and gentleness. When he wanted to recreate the crib, in Greccio, for the first time in history, he said: “I desire to celebrate the memory of the child who was born in Bethlehem, and I want to contemplate in some way with my eyes what he suffered in his infant weakness, how he lay in the manger, and how he was placed between the ox and the ass.”⁷² And even more, in his desire to recreate, on that day he wanted everyone who owned a donkey or an ox to give them an extra ration, that the brothers eat meat, that even the walls eat meat, but since that is not possible, that they be smeared with meat, as homage to the one who became flesh.⁷³

Celano, appealing to the testimony of the friars, states: “The brothers who lived together with him know with what gentleness and tenderness, each and every day, he spoke of Jesus. His mouth spoke from the fullness of his heart, the fountain of illuminated love that filled his whole being bubbling forth.”⁷⁴

He thought of the Passion of Jesus Christ with particular gentleness: “He wept bitterly because of the Passion of Christ, which he almost always had before his eyes. Remembering the wounds of Christ, he filled the roads with laments, without finding consolation.”⁷⁵ A basic experience happened to him while “he was praying, deeply moved,”⁷⁶ before the crucifix of San Damiano. When he understood that his mission was to rebuild the Church, which was in a ruinous state, his biographer says: “From then on, a holy compassion for the Crucified was fixed in his soul. And the stigmata were stamped deeply on his heart.”⁷⁷ Meditation on the Passion of Jesus brought out in him a tender compassion; as Saint Bonaventure says very well, summarizing the basic attitude of the holy founder: “A gentle feeling of compassion transformed him into the one who wanted to be crucified.”⁷⁸

As we have already said, compassion ought not be confused with masochism, by which a person is satisfied with the feeling of pain itself.

By compassion, identification with the pain of another is sought; it is to feel together with, to suffer in communion. This desire to go out to the interior of the other is characteristic of Eros and Pathos, lived intensely by Francis. He is a cordial man, a man of the heart. That heart, which was under suspicion by his culture and by official Christianity, finds its place in Saint Francis. That heart feels, sings, praises, vibrates, cries, is moved. That heart feels the wound of the other heart. This volcanic force, domesticated nevertheless by penance and the cross, is sensed in everything.

This compassion found its highest expression in the mystic experience of Mount Alverna, three years before the death of Francis. He fasted forty days in the silence of a cave. He desired a radical identification with the Crucified. He asked for two graces, pain and love: "My Lord, Jesus Christ, two graces I ask that you grant me before my death: the first that I experience in my life, in my soul, and in my body that pain that you suffered in the hour of your bitter Passion; the second that I experience in my heart, as much as possible, that measureless love with which you, Son of God, burned when you offered yourself to suffer so much for us sinners."⁷⁹ His meditation of the Passion was so intense that "Francis was completely transformed in Jesus through love and compassion."⁸⁰ And upon seeing the Crucified in the form of the Seraph, Saint Bonaventure comments: "Francis experienced such compassion that a sword pierced his heart."⁸¹ Through a "mental fire," as the Fioretti say, there was produced in Francis the copy of the crucified Christ.⁸² And it was then that the whole mountain, according to the symbolic story, also caught fire and "seemed to burn among bright flames that illuminated all of the mountains and valleys around as if the sun shone over the land."⁸³ In this *beata passio et compassio* the greatest identification of a man with his prototype took place. "Oh, truly Christian gentleman! In his life he tried to conform himself in everything to the living Christ, and in his death he wanted to imitate the dead Christ, and after his death he seemed like the dead Christ. How well he deserved to be honored with such an explicit likeness."⁸⁴

Francis achieved in a magnificent way this ideal of sanctity that comes from "ecstatic emotionality,"⁸⁵ from the desire to identify with the other, especially the lesser and most suffering, by way of gentleness and compassion.

Gentleness toward Saint Clare: Integration of the Feminine

Whoever seems to possess a bubbling spring of gentleness will have to extend it to the loved one. How did Francis integrate the feminine in his life? Every man grows and matures beneath the gaze of woman

and every woman approaches her adult identity beneath the gaze of man.⁸⁶ Within this dialectical relationship the possibilities of gentleness and care are nurtured, without which human life is weakened or hardened. The paths of this integration are the most torturous and dramatic of the human adventure. It was the same way with Francis.

The feminine and the masculine are ontological determinations of every human being, in such a way that each individual carries something of both within him or her self. Man and woman form the difference within human unity, but this difference is not capsulized against the other, but rather is opened in a profound reciprocity. The male must integrate the anima that gives him strength, that is, the dimension of gentleness, of care, of attraction, of intuition, of all that is linked to the mystery of life and generation. The female must integrate the animus that is found within her existence, that is, objectivity of the world, rationality, ordering, and direction—everything that is linked to history. In the difficult balance of these two poles, the one solar and the other lunar, the profile of each human person and the wealth of their depth is built. We find in Francis one of the most joyful syntheses that has been developed in Western Christian culture. There is in him all of the strength of the animus, and at the same time, an extraordinary expansion of the anima. Without machismo or feminism, without fragility or rigidity, there blossoms in him, harmoniously, a gentle strength and a strong gentleness that are the brilliance and archetypal enchantment of his personality.

Francis has a clear consciousness that this liberty to love is not bought without a price. We live in a decadent situation. Passionateness, the seductive power of Eros, illusions of imagination (the person loved is always the person imagined)—all exist. Because of this, a special vigilance and asceticism in the attitudes of Saint Francis come into play. The effort of discipline tries to maintain human stature in a reality that, if on the one hand it ceases to push Eros to the utmost expression of Agape, on the other, it may turn into depravations in the form of domination and obsession.

To understand the gentle relationship between Francis and Clare, it is important to consider the specific meaning of purity that is found in their writings.⁸⁷ Evidently, life totally consecrated to God in celibacy and chastity is part of the following of Jesus. There is more to chastity than renouncing marital relationships. For Francis, purity is a synonym for liberty. The only one who is pure is the one who is free of the very attachments of the false absolutes of life: self-promotion, accumulation of prestige, fame, wealth, power, holiness as a personal gain, etc.⁸⁸ For Francis, only God is the Highest Good and All Good; He does not allow for any competition of any kind. To find substitutes for God is

impurity. To be pure is to be free for the absolute of God. This does not mean that the search for this world's values is deprived of any meaning. It has a finite meaning, and as such, is loved and joyfully sung by Francis. In terms of relationship, man-woman does not mean a split in gentleness and love, but rather their orientation toward a greater love. The man, or the woman, cannot be absolute for the human heart; if it were otherwise, God would not be the first and only. Purity in the mind of Francis is that brothers and sisters love each other in such a way that the love of God grows and may be enjoyed in this world. Only then will the pure see God, especially present in all brothers and sisters.

In the relationship between Francis and Clare, this purity shines in a special way. Between them there is love and relationship of extraordinary gentleness, but, at the same time, a clarity of intentions and a convergence in the love of God, free of any type of suspicion.⁸⁹ There is something here of the mysterious, of Eros and Agape, of fascination and transfiguration.⁹⁰

In the legend of Saint Clare, there are explicit references to the mutual attraction between the two while they were still young: Francis already converted and Clare still living in her parents' house.⁹¹ Clare, knowing the reputation of the converted youth, "wanted very much to see him and listen to him."⁹² The story continues: "Francis's desire to meet her and speak with her was no less, owing to the prestige of such a gracious girl."⁹³ Clare visited Francis more often, and "they located the encounters such that their divine friendship was not noted by anyone, nor were they the gossip of the people."⁹⁴ Clandestinely, and accompanied by a friend, Clare met Francis. His words "seemed to her to be flaming and his conduct superhuman," language, as can be seen, proper to those in love.

An old legend makes reference to the freshness of this gentle and pure love:

On one occasion there arose some murmurings about the mystic relationship between Francis and Clare. Francis listened to some of these commentaries. He then said to Clare: "Did you hear, Sister, what they are saying about us?" Clare did not answer. She felt as if her heart had been paralyzed and that if she said a word she would begin to cry. "We ought to stay apart," Francis added. "You go ahead and before night falls you will be at the convent. I will go alone, following you, as the Lord has led me to understand." Clare knelt down in the middle of the road. A little while later she recovered, and getting up, she continued on her way, without looking back. The road led into a forest. Suddenly, Clare

felt herself fail, without consolation or hope, not being able to say a single word of goodbye to Francis. She waited a few moments and then said: “Father, when shall we see each other again?” “When summer comes again, when the roses bloom,” Francis answered. Then something marvelous happened. It was as if over the fields covered with snow there had suddenly opened thousands of multicolored flowers. Overcoming her initial perplexity, Clare leaned over, made a bouquet of roses, and gave it to Francis.

And the legend adds: “And from then on, Francis and Clare were never separated.”⁹⁵

We are involved in the symbolic language of legends. But they are what contain the magnificence of the primordial faces of the heart.⁹⁶ “Francis and Clare were never separated” means that both were so united in the same evangelical endeavor, so strongly tied to a third reality above and beyond them, the poor Christ, his Gospel, and the service of the poor, that essentially nothing would distance the one from the heart of the other. Both had their heart anchored in God. Because of this, space and time did not count for them. Essentially, as is said in one of the testimonies for the canonization of Clare, Francis communicated to her the very substance of life. “He seemed to her to be gold so clear and brilliant that in him all was reflected as in a mirror.”⁹⁷

We know the story. At Francis’s request, the young Clare, adorned like a bride, fled her house at night. Francis and his companions waited for her with lighted torches near the Portiuncula. They cut her long blond hair, preserved even today, and “as before the nuptial bed of this virgin, the humble servant was married to Christ” at the hands of Francis.⁹⁸ Clare would then, affectionately, call herself “the little plant of the blessed Francis” (*plantula, plantuncula*).⁹⁹ Clare was “in love with poverty,”¹⁰⁰ like Francis. He “promised to care for Clare and her sisters as he did his own brothers,”¹⁰¹ as Clare records in her rule.

The love that they had for each other, always excelled by the love of both for the poor and for Christ, made them spiritual twins. When Francis had doubts about his own vocation, he charged Clare and her sisters to pray to God for light.¹⁰² And when she suffered pressures because of the “privilege of radical poverty” (which excluded goods and inheritances) from the pope, Francis also worried with his whole heart.¹⁰³ “On one occasion, tired, he came upon a bubbling spring. He sat for a long while, looking at the water. Then he got up, and said to brother Leo: ‘Brother Leo, little lamb of God, do you know what I have seen in the depths of the water?’ ‘The moon, Father, that is reflected there!’ ‘No, Brother Leo, it was not the moon; by the grace of God I

have seen the clear image of our Sister Clare, shining with joy, in such a way that all of my doubts have disappeared.’”

On another occasion, Francis and Clare were eating together at Saint Mary of the Angels, seated on the ground. Suddenly they felt their hearts burning with the love of God. It was then that the inhabitants of the region saw a great light over the house, the church, and the forest, as if they were burning, and ran hastily to put out the flames. Were they not surprised to see Francis and Clare and the brothers in ecstasy, with arms raised toward the sky!¹⁰⁴ We are again within the realm of symbolic language: love of the one for the other bursts toward the heavens, toward God, without ceasing to be, in everything, a profoundly human love.

When Francis was close to death, Clare also fell gravely ill. Fearing she would die before him, “she cried inconsolably because she would not be able to see once more her only father after God.” And she let Francis know of her affliction. He “was very moved, because he had a father’s love for Clare and her sisters.”¹⁰⁵ He sent her a note with his blessing, which Clare would include later in chapter six of her rule. Before finishing his famous canticle in praise of all the creatures, “he also dictated a canticle, words and music, to console” Clare and her sisters, because he was filled with “sentiments of piety and love for them.”

We know, at the same time, of the affection of Francis for Jacoba de Settesoli, a rich Roman widow, whom he called “Brother Jacoba.” Francis liked the honey cakes that she prepared for him very much. He was her guest while in Rome, and he wanted to see her at his death.¹⁰⁶

This gentle love of Francis, which does not fear the heart, was a realistic and vigilant love, as is seen in the rule,¹⁰⁷ which asks the avoidance of suspicious friendships and vain words in relationships with women. He himself put this into practice. He stopped visiting Clare and her sisters, “not because the affection he felt for them had diminished,” but to give an example that “the service to the sisters ought to be exercised only by those who, after much experience, demonstrated that they possessed the Spirit of the Lord.”¹⁰⁸

For Francis, the woman is the path for the love of God and the revelation, in human love, of the very love of God toward humanity. She is not to be a motive for flight or for obsession. With a clean gaze, which dispels the seductions of the imagination, he can look at Clare with chaste love, enriching both of them mutually on the path of their own essential identity.¹⁰⁹

Gentleness toward the Brothers: Mothers among Themselves

The biographies of his time do not tire of pointing out the gentleness of Francis toward his brothers: “He loved his own brothers in a

special way, deeply and with all his heart.”¹¹⁰ In his writings, the word *brother* is used more than any other (242 times), almost always accompanied by an adjective of affection: “my most beloved brothers,” “my blessed brothers,” “my brothers.” His care and tenderness were so intense that he was loved like a “most loved mother.”¹¹¹ And essentially that is how he acted. Upon seeing Brother Sylvester sick with hunger, he thought to himself: “A few ripe grapes would do this brother a lot of good. And he got up very early in the morning, while the rest were asleep,” and he invited him to eat a breakfast of bunches of ripe grapes from a nearby vine.¹¹² He did the same with Brother Leo, weakened by hunger on the road. He took a few grapes from a vine close to the road and offered them to him, which cost him a few blows from the owner. But the brother was revived.¹¹³

He asked in his rule that the brothers have the same tenderness and care for the others: “Each one love and feed his brother like a mother loves and cares for her child.”¹¹⁴ In the Rule for Hermitages he says that the brothers who live in the hermitages should not number more than three or, at most, four: “Two are to be mothers, and have two children, or at least, one,” and “the children at times will take the office of mothers.”¹¹⁵ “Admirable compassion and gentleness”¹¹⁶ he showed to the sick, and in a special way he had “unique patience and gentleness”¹¹⁷ with those in anguish (we would say neurotic), considering them to be as fragile as babies. The brothers were not only brothers; Francis wanted them to be “lesser brothers,” that is, “subject to all,”¹¹⁸ at the service of one and all, “centering all their affection on the community.”¹¹⁹

This attitude of care causes the energies of humanization to overcome the tendencies toward smallness and isolation that also play a part in human life together. Life together aids the expansion of Eros, as Celano reflects admirably and in an idealized way: “When they were found together in some place, or when, as happened, they were found on the road, worthy of poetry was the spiritual love that blossomed between them, and now they displayed a true affection, superior to any other love. Love that was manifested in chaste embraces, in gentle affections, in holy kisses, in pleasant conversation, in modest smiles, in festive faces, in simple gazes, in humble attitudes, in guarded tongues, in calm answers; they were united in the ideal, diligent in service, untiring in works.”¹²⁰

Confraternization with Nature: The Cosmic Democracy

All of the oldest biographies of Saint Francis are in agreement in affirming “the friendly union that he established with all things.”¹²¹ The first of the biographers, Thomas of Celano (1229), testifies:

Who can explain the joy that arose in his spirit from the beauty of the flowers, contemplating the gallantry of their shapes and the breathing of the fragrance of their aromas? And finding himself in the presence of many flowers, he preached to them, inviting them to praise the Lord, as if they enjoyed the gift of reason. And he did the same thing with fields and vineyards, with rocks and forests, and with all of the beauty of the countryside, the waters of the springs, the fruits of the orchards, land and fire, air and wind, inviting them with genuine purity to divine love and to joyful fidelity. Finally, he called all creatures his brothers and sisters, like one who had arrived at the glorious freedom of the children of God.¹²²

The whole universe surrounding Saint Francis is surrounded by infinite gentleness and of “the most gentle feeling of devotion toward all things”;¹²³ “he felt as if transported by a heartfelt love by all creatures.”¹²⁴ Because of this, he walked with reverence over rocks, in considerations of the One who Himself is called Rock; he gathered the worms in the road so that they would not be stepped on by the travelers; he provided the bees with honey and wine in the winter so that they would not perish from hunger and cold.¹²⁵

Here is made clear a distinct way of being-in-the-world, not over things, but together with them, like brothers and sisters of the same family. To his own agonies and sufferings “he gave not the name of pains but of brothers.”¹²⁶ Death itself was for him a friend and a sister. Because of this, the Franciscan world is full of magic, of reverence, of respect. It is not a dead and inanimate universe; things are not tossed here, within the reach of possessive appetites of hunger; nor are they placed one beside another. They are alive and have their own personality; they have blood ties with humanity; they live in the same Father’s house as humanity. And because they are brothers and sisters, they cannot be violated, but rather must be respected. It is from this that Saint Francis, surprisingly, but consistent with his nature, prohibits the brothers from cutting any tree at the roots, that they might bud again. He commanded the gardeners to leave a plot of uncultivated land so that all types of grasses might grow (including weeds), because “they too proclaim the beauty of the Father in all things.”¹²⁷ He also wanted, in the orchards, together with the vegetables and fruit trees, flowers and aromatic herbs to be grown “so that all who contemplate them may be drawn to eternal sweetness.”¹²⁸

The Marriage of Eros and Agape

How did Saint Francis arrive at this intimate sympathy with all things? In the first place, because he was a great poet, not romantic but ontological, that is, a poet capable of capturing the transcendent and sacramental message that all things send out. In his youth he was influenced by the erotic Provençal movement.¹²⁹ He sang songs of love and admiration for the beauty of the ladies. As we have already said, Eros is at the root of the Franciscan experience of universal fraternity. But it is an Eros purified of the weight of the material and of all ambiguity of the French gallantries aimed at enchanting women, by its interpenetration by Agape. Agape, Christian love, does not crush Eros; nor does it sublimate it; rather, it radicalizes its basic impulse until it reaches the foundation and fascination of all love, which is God giving Himself in and through all things.

Conversion does not repress the erotic movement, but rather purifies it. Francis's love for Clare maintained all of the intensity of love, though free of the strings of the libido; it is a love transfigured by the fascination for the mystery that resides in each person. This interior movement led Francis to personify all of his relationships: poverty is not poverty but Lady Poverty; the virtues are not virtues but Queen Wisdom, her holy sister Pure Simplicity; the lark is not a lark but Sister Lark; similarly, Brother Wolf, Lord Brother Sun, Mother and Sister Earth. Because he was able to purify love of all inner evil, he could, until the end of his life and even in the hour of his death, sing the songs of love he learned in his childhood. He liked to call himself God's troubador.

However, recourse to the poetic soul of Francis does not explain adequately the depth of his experience of being-with-things as brothers and sisters of the same household. At the root of it all, there is the religious experience of the universal fatherhood of God. The paternity of God was not for Francis a cold dogma and a conclusion of the rationalist as to the contingency of creatures. It was a profound emotional experience; it meant a cosmic identification with all the elements. The truth of the universal fatherhood of God is the nucleus of the message of Jesus. The Christian tradition always proclaimed this truth; but the first to live it with this dimension of emotion, with all creatures felt as brothers and sisters, was without a doubt Francis of Assisi.

Until Saint Francis, God the Father was traditionally considered the great lord of the cosmos. The creatures were thought of in terms of their radical dependence on this one principle. He lived the filial character of all beings, not only of humanity and much less of only the baptized. The individual, as child in the Son Jesus Christ, shared in the cosmic lordship of the Great Father. Humanity was considered lord of creation,

above all things, without being subject to any of them. It was the landlord of God the Father. It prolonged within the world the vertical relationship that was born in God, passed through humanity, and reached the creatures. The mysticism of universal sonship was thus lived out.

The novelty of Francis consists in the living of the horizontal dimension: if all are children of God, all are brothers and sisters to one another. All live in the same Great House of the Father. All acquire a deep intimacy with all things. Enemies do not exist. No one threatens us. We are enveloped in an atmosphere of love for brothers and sisters. The two movements are found in Saint Francis: horizontal and vertical. Thomas of Celano and Saint Bonaventure emphasize this very well: "He admired in every thing its Author and in all events he recognized the Creator. . . . In all things beautiful he recognized the One who is Beauty and whatever was good caused him to shout: 'The one who has made us is the best.' He followed the Beloved everywhere with the footprints imprinted in all things, and with all things he made a stairway by which he ascended to His throne." But he did not remain only in that dimension: "He was filled with a greater gentleness when he thought of the first and common origin of all beings, and he called all creatures, no matter how small they were, by the name of brother or sister, because he knew that they all had in common with him the same beginning."¹³⁰

With what emotion do we read Francis's scolding of Brother Fire when, almost blind, he needed to be operated on, or rather, cauterized with a red-hot iron from the ear to the eyebrow: "Fire, my brother, the Most High has created you strong, beautiful, and useful, giving you a dazzling presence, which all other creatures envy. Be kind and courteous to me in this trance. I beg the Lord to cause you to temper your strength, so that by burning me gently I may tolerate you."¹³¹ And Brother Fire, the story adds, had mercy on Francis.

That fraternity places Francis on the same level as the creatures. He does not define himself as distinct from them, by emphasizing what makes him different and so distancing himself from the brothers.

When he sings, he does it with all creatures, as is said in his wonderful "Canticle of Brother Sun." He does not sing alone through the creatures. It would be selfish to become deaf to the hymn that they themselves sing to the Creator. He sings with them, with the cricket,¹³² and with the lark: "The sister larks praise their Creator. Let us go among them and sing ourselves to the Lord, reciting his praises and the canonical hours."¹³³

Modern humanity has difficulty singing along with things because we are not with them. Because of this, we cannot hear their essential ballad. Saint Francis is closer to a Cézanne or a Van Gogh than to a Picasso or

a Di Cavalcanti. These project their subjectivity onto things that reflect human feelings. The “dead” things of nature—the table, the bowl of fruit, the water pitcher—are there, in their own light, in great humility, without any human projection. They sing to God for the fact of being what they are. Saint Francis, archaic and unmodern man, unites himself with this silent song, letting things be what they are, brothers and sisters too adorable to be manipulated by brother humanity.

The Nonromanticism of Saint Francis

A great deal of the fascination about Saint Francis today comes from his love for nature. It was during the European age of romanticism that the singular figure of Saint Francis was discovered. But he is not an *avant la lettre* romantic.¹³⁴ Romanticism is characterized by modern subjectivity; it is the projection onto the world of feelings themselves. For the modern romantic, nature points consciousness back toward itself, to its feelings, but not toward the hearing of the message that arises from nature, which points to something beyond consciousness: the mystery of God. In romanticism, the *I* remains in its own universe, rich, with varied emotions, but closed in on itself. In an archaic way of thinking like that of Saint Francis, the *I* is urged to rise above itself, to open its closed circle, and to become a brother or sister with all things to sing together a hymn of praise to the Great Father of us all.¹³⁵ But this is only possible by means of a profound asceticism and an interrupted effort at purification and denial of the desire for the possession and domination of things.

We have previously reflected upon the poetic structure of the soul of Saint Francis and his religious experience of the universal fatherhood of God, source of the fraternity of all beings. The analysis would be insufficient if we did not insist on another aspect, perhaps the most essential of all: Francis’s radical poverty.¹³⁶

His experience of universal fraternity, as we have already said and continue to underscore, was not the result of a rational argument about the fatherhood of God. It was a basic and vital experience. How does one articulate this experience within which universal fraternity was manifested? We believe that in the answer to this question is the intimate secret of Saint Francis’s archaic way of being. The poetic structure of the Franciscan soul and of Christian faith are indispensable ways of understanding his way of being; the key, however, is not to be found there, but rather in a new praxis of Saint Francis. At a definite moment in his youth he is converted. As in every authentic conversion, a *conversio morum* takes place, a change in the way of behaving and relating.¹³⁷ A break occurs. One world dies and another is born. Francis

began to identify himself with the poor and to do difficult penances. A painful process of interior purification was begun. He retired to the caves; long vigils; fasts and penances so rigorous that he had to be merciful to his own body, which he tenderly called Brother Ass. The core of this effort at interiorization centered around the theme of poverty. Poverty, fundamentally, does not only consist in not having things, because individuals always have things: their body, their intelligence, their clothes, their being-in-the-world. Poverty is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them the objects of the will to power. One refuses to be over them in order to be with them. This demands an immense asceticism of the renunciation of the instinct to power, to the dominion over things, and to the satisfaction of human desires. Poverty is the essential path of Saint Francis, realized in the physical place of the poor. The poorer he was, the freer and more fraternal he felt. Possession is what engenders the obstacles to communication between human beings themselves and between persons and things. Interests, selfishness, and exclusive possessions interfere between the individual and the world. They are placed at a distance and a well of alienating objectifications is sunk between them. The more radical the poverty, the closer the individual comes to reality, and the easier it is to commune with all things, respecting and reverencing their differences and distinctions. Universal fraternity is the result of the way-of-being-poor of Saint Francis. He truly felt a brother because he could gather all things devoid of the interest in possessions, riches, and efficiency. Poverty is thus a synonym for humility; this is not another virtue, but an attitude by which the individual is on the ground, in the earth, at the side of all things. Converting oneself to this way of being, and in the measure of its realization, one is rewarded with the transparency of all things to the divine and transcendent reality. In this way, universal reconciliation and a cosmic democracy is achieved.

Saint Bonaventure came to affirm that Saint Francis, “through the friendly union that he established with all things, seemed to have returned to the primitive state of original innocence.”¹³⁸ This was the result of his complete disownment, after a long and demanding novitiate. Finally, he revived in his heart the earthly paradise in the calm brotherhood of all beings, children of the same Father and brothers and sisters to each other. Only through a process of interior purification and denial of the world could he regain the world, in a truly fraternal way.

Whoever tries to romantically imitate Saint Francis in his love for nature without passing through asceticism, denial, penitence, and the cross

falls into a deep illusion. The world will soon discover the individual's sadness and will show him or her their contradictions. Only he or she is able, without falling into empty words, to call fire one's brother destroyer, water a humble and chaste sister, the agony of illness and death one's sister who, by means of an arduous penance and a profound stripping, has removed all of the obstacles placed between the individual and all creatures. It was at the end and not at the beginning of his life that Francis composed the hymn to Brother Sun. To begin where Francis ended is a disastrous illusion. Making the effort to retrace the path, in great humility, trying to become one with things, especially the smallest, is to feed the hope that perhaps our world may also be transformed and may reveal its fraternal and filial character.

The Synthesis of Interior Archaeology and Exterior Ecology

Saint Francis's way-of-being-with-things resulted in a total reconciliation of a man with his universe. There exists in the human heart a secret and persistent call to a fullness of salvation and life, to complete fraternization with all things and universal unity with the most distant and different realities, such as God and death.

The principle of hope and the dimension of the utopic that structurally mark the spirit have populated the human mind, in all ages, with dreams of a reconciliation like this one. In Saint Francis, the utopic became topic, made history of the actuality of the sweetness of the fraternity with all things. The intimate archaeology was reconciled with exterior ecology by means of a deep diving into the mystery of God. In the "Canticle of Brother Sun" we find the testimony to this precious synthesis.¹³⁹

THE ARCHETYPAL SACRAMENTALITY OF THE CANTICLE ELEMENTS

There are many ways of reading the "Canticle of Brother Sun." The first and most common takes into account the poetic character of the text; it relies on the named elements, such as the sun, the earth, the stars, fire, water, and death. Through them, the mystic Francis is elevated toward God. This tendency is inscribed in the writings of the great poet mystics, from the psalms to John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and also Teilhard de Chardin.¹⁴⁰ This interpretation is valid, but does it reveal all of the richness contained in the canticle?

There is another type of reading that descends to a deeper and more structural level, plumbing the archetypal subconsciousness of the psyche of the poet-mystic. The elements of the canticle preserve their material reality, are not allegorized, but acquire for the mystic a symbolic value, expressive of a state of the soul. They are the vehicle by which

the poet tries to express what happens in the intimacy of his being: the religious-mystic union of everything with God. This is the path we propose to follow, briefly, to analyze the poem of Saint Francis.

The knowledge of the context within which this text arose will help us to understand better the advantage of this archeological and archetypal analysis. The legend of Perugia¹⁴¹ has given us the most detailed account. Close to twenty years had passed since his conversion and two years since the stigmatization on Alverna. The saint was being consumed by seraphic love, “an undying dying,”¹⁴² to use Saint Bonaventure’s expression, and he was visited by every kind of internal and external suffering. He was almost blind. He saw that the order he had founded was following paths that threatened the living out of radical poverty; the Church had organized Crusades against the Saracens, whom he himself had visited in the Orient, becoming scandalized at the barbarity of the Christians. It was the autumn of 1225. Saint Clare and the rest of the sisters were living at San Damiano, the little chapel where everything had begun. The suffering gave Francis no relief. Fifty days passed, according to the legend, closed in a dark cell, not able to see the sun during the day or the fire at night. His suffering did not allow him to sleep or even rest. “One night when he felt more weighed down than usual by many painful troubles, he began to feel sorry for himself within his heart.” Celano adds that, then, Francis faced a fierce struggle to overcome his pains and impatience. “*Orans . . . sic positus in agone . . .*”: thus praying, he entered into agony. In that trance, he heard in his spirit a voice that said to him: “Tell me, Brother, would you not be happy were someone to give you as a recompense for your sufferings and tribulations a treasure so great and precious that neither the entire earth turned into gold, nor rocks into precious stones, nor water into balsam would be of comparable value?” And the blessed Francis answered: “Lord, it would be a priceless treasure, and greatly desirable.” “Well then,” said the voice, “be happy, Brother, and joyful in the midst of your tribulations and illness, because they are gifts of my kingdom, and you may be assured you are destined for it.”¹⁴³

In that moment, Francis’s spirit overflowed with joy. His dark night was transformed into day, feeling already within the Kingdom of God, which is the symbol of total reconciliation, of the overcoming of all contradictions, and the greatest realization of humanity with the cosmos and with God. He got up, meditated a few moments, and began to sing the hymn of all creatures: *Altissimu, omnipotente, bon Signore. . .* He called the brothers and sang with them the hymn he had just composed. This canticle of light arose in the midst of a dark night of the body and soul. It emerged from the depths of an existence that was blossoming,

though suffering and troubled, like a shoot that untiringly searches from within the trunk the light of the sun. It is the expression of a reconciled universe that was taking shape within the heart of Francis.

It does not deal only with a poetic-religious discourse on all things: the things themselves seem to be involved in a much deeper discourse. The cosmic praise unveiled the subconscious symbolic language of an interior itinerary, an unveiling of the depths of the soul; it was presented, more exactly, like a poetic reconciliation of the man with his archeology, an opening of himself to the totality of an existence in the light of being.¹⁴⁴ The sun continues to be the sun; fire, fire; water, water. But beyond their objective value, these elements also have a symbolic worth. Humanity expresses by means of these elements its interior world. And what does that interior world express? It expresses the emergence of universal reconciliation, the fusion between the cosmic mysticism, oriented toward fraternity with nature, and evangelical mysticism, oriented toward love for the person of Christ. The elements praised in the canticle gain an archetypal sacramentality, communicating this fusion.

Canticle of Brother Sun

*Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord!
All praise is yours, all glory, all honor
And all blessing.*

*To you alone, Most High, do they belong.
No mortal lips are worthy
To pronounce your name.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,
And first my lord Brother Sun,
Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.*

*How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;
In the heavens you have made them, bright
And precious and fair.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,
By which you cherish all that you have made.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious, and pure.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night.
How beautiful he is, how gay! Full of power and strength.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,
Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces
Various fruits and colored flowers and herbs.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon
For love of you; through those who endure
Sickness and trial.*

*Happy those who endure in peace,
By you, Most High, they will be crowned.*

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death,
From whose embrace no mortal can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy those She finds doing your will!
The second death can do no harm to them.*

*Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks,
And serve him with great humility.*

—*St. Francis of Assisi*

THE COSMIC MARRIAGE THAT IT INSPIRES

It takes a great modern scholar of Saint Francis, Eloi Leclerc,¹⁴⁵ to demonstrate with the resources of the depth of psychologist C. G. Jung, the method of poetic analysis of Gaston Bachelard, and the hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur how all of the elements of the hymn to Brother Sun possess a rich archetypal content in order to express the experience of total reconciliation achieved by the saint.

The structure of the canticle reveals this archetypal expression of unity. The seventh strophe unconsciously discovers this search. Seven is formed by adding three and four, which are the greatest symbols of totality and unity. In the number seven, two lines cross—the vertical and the horizontal—which together also form a recognized symbol of totality. The first movement is directed vertically toward God: “Most high, all powerful and good Lord . . .” Francis immediately realizes that he cannot sing to God, because “no one is worthy of making mention of You.” But he does not become bitter over this. He returns, horizontally, to the creatures: “Praise to you, my Lord, for all your creatures.” He opens himself to universal fraternity and sings to the creatures, not

in themselves, but as marked by the experience of the Most High who made it possible to see them as sacraments of God: “Because from You, Most High, they are meaningful.”

Another archetypal symbol of the psychic totality of the human person runs throughout the hymn: the masculine and the feminine. All of the elements are ordered in pairs, which combine the masculine and the feminine: sun-moon, wind-water, fire-earth. All of these pairs appear to surround the great marriage of Earth-Sun, from whose cosmic union are born the other couples. He begins by singing to Lord and Brother Sun, archetypal symbol of virility and all paternity, and he concludes with the praise for Mother and Sister Earth, archetype of the feminine and all fecundity. This representation does not translate the objective order of the world, but rather the order of profound meaning. Through it, the most radical subconscious, in its thirst for unity and totality, finds adequate expression.

The hymn also contains two stanzas that were added afterward by the saint. In one of them, the peace attained by Saint Francis between the bishop of Assisi and the mayor is celebrated. The other was inspired shortly before the *transitus* of Saint Francis, in the first days of October of 1226. In both, it is not the material cosmos that is chanted, but the human cosmos, inserted in the grand universal fraternity, attained through tension and suffering. Saint Francis wanted to add them to the original canticle. The truth is that they were born from the same fundamental inspiration. The hymn tries to celebrate the mystical irruption of unity and fraternity with all things and with God. He could not leave out humanity, in its tribulation. The individual is reconciled with other persons. He is reconciled, also, with death, accepting mortal existence. He integrates death with life, accepting it as a sister, or better yet, Francis becomes a brother to death. She thus becomes a symbol of new life and of greater love.¹⁴⁶

The splendor of humanity and its tragedy—its desire to ascend and its rooting in the earth, its uranic (heavenly) dimension and its telluric (earthly) dimension—find a privileged interpreter in the poor man of Assisi.

The Celebration of the Reconciled Man

Saint Francis’s way of being together with his being-with led him to a confraternization with all strata of reality: superior (the Most High God), interior (intimate archeology), and exterior (ecological reality). What unfolds is praise to mystery. Modern humanity, with its being-over is not simply condemned to relate in a dominative way with nature; there is no doubt that we must organize the systematic satisfaction of our basic

needs and humanize the world. But we will have to learn a use of our technical power that will be capable of opening us to the deeper and more archetypal dimension of nature. To cultivate the land and experience the fact that she is a generous mother is one thing; to treat her without respect and veneration is quite another. It is one thing to extract her riches and taste her fertility; it is another to abuse and waste her. It is one thing to use the forest; it is another to tear it down indiscriminately.¹⁴⁷

Modern humanity has forgotten that in our activity with nature we must deal not only with things, but also with something that affects us at our deepest level. We do not simply live in the world. We colive; we become lovers or enemies; we accept or reject. A give and take develops between the interior world and the exterior. We cannot achieve our identity while denying a friendly and fraternal relationship with our natural world. This does not mean an anachronistic romanticism, but rather a right understanding of the basic structure of humanity, to-be-in-the-world-with-all-things, as we have said, in a cosmic democracy.

The Franciscan experience is the historicizing of this truth-reality. In spite of the ruptures that trials may introduce, despite the ultimate solitude that is the meaning of death, it is capable of opening one to universal fraternity, and to singing, not just calling, to all creatures as brothers and sisters. “The mystery of the earth is one with the mystery of the stars.” Human praise is one with the essential praise that all things chant to our Creator. Finally, the reconciled individual celebrates the world as a paradise, because he himself or she herself was transformed: “Bless and praise my Lord, and give Him thanks, serving Him in great humility.”

CONCLUSION: THE EXEMPLARY QUALITY OF THE SOUL'S EXPANSION

As can be seen from this reflection, our present-day culture finds in Francis a great deal of that for which we hunger and thirst. The expansion of the dimension of the anima in terms of gentleness, care, and living together answers a collective demand of our age in agony. A clear path is left where Francis directed his attention, a path strewn with affection, enthusiasm, and tremendous goodness toward all creatures, especially toward the disinherited of society. For Francis, the small happiness of our troubled existence sinks its roots in the heart of the Father of infinite goodness, but also in a human heart capable of compassion and emotion. Nourished by these two roots, existence is made happy with a finite joy, foretasting already what the Father has

prepared for all in His Kingdom. If we do not approach the Father, life becomes empty and existence insupportable. If we do not give ear to the heart and its needs, everything remains sterile and dark. Without the Father, the heart remains barren. Without the heart, the Father has no warmth.