

A SONG OF GRATITUDE

By Jean-François Godet-Calogeras

A couple of years before he died, Francis composed his beautiful and world-famous *Canticle of Brother Sun*, an exquisite piece of poetry, the oldest known in Italian, so lyrical and musical, even though only the words were saved and the music got lost. What gave Francis such inspiration, such enthusiasm, such joy? He was then in his mid-forties. He had gone through a lot, and was still going through a lot. As a young adult he had taken part in his father's business and experienced what damage money can do to the soul and to relationships. He had taken part in armed conflict and tasted the bitter fruit of violence. He had turned to the Church to find support for the way he wanted to live according to the Gospel of Jesus, and found himself struggling with ecclesiastical structures and regulations. He had traveled long distances with the hope of being an instrument of peace between the West and the Middle East, between Christianity and Islam, but could not put an end to hatred and killing. In his own movement, a tension had been growing between those in the early movement and an increasing number of new members who were more concerned with the expansion of the Church than with service to the lepers. And on top of it all, he was now dealing with illness, suffering in his body as well as in his spirit. All that, and probably less, would be sufficient to lead anybody into depression, anger or bitterness. So what prompted Francis to sing such a loving and grateful song?

Altissimu onnipotente bon Signore
Most high, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention your name.

Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially **Sir Brother Sun**,
who is the day and through whom you give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
of you, Most High, he bears significance.

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

Praised be you, my Lord, through **Brother Wind**,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather
through which you give sustenance to your creatures.

Praised be you, my Lord, through **Sister Water**,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

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

Praised be you, my Lord, through our **Sister Mother Earth**,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces varied fruits
with colored flowers and herbs.

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

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

Praise and bless my Lord and give him thanks
 and serve him with great humility.
*Laudate et benedicete mi' signore, e rengratiate
 e seruiteli cum grande humilitate.*



The very first word of the Canticle is *Altissimu*, Most High: the poem is addressed to the one who is the highest, the only real highness, and, at the same time, all-powerful and good.

The very last word of the Canticle is *humilitate*, humility, which has the same root as “human” and “humus.” It has to do with what is on the surface of the earth. In contrast to “most high,” what is humble is most low, which does not mean submissive. Human beings are by nature humble: they belong to the earth; that is precisely the essence of humility. In the use of two terms, *Altissimu* and *humilitate*, Francis sets the distinction between God and us.

Francis acknowledges the existence of a Most High who is the one, and only one that owns and rules the universe. Thus, Francis uses the word “Lord” to address that Most High One. Other than those two, Francis does not use any other title. To give a name is to define, to limit. Francis wants to praise, not to define the Most High.

To praise is the translation of the Italian *lodare* (or the Latin *laudare*), which means to exalt, to think and speak highly of, to admire, to appreciate: how great, how precious. It expresses at the same time warm and respectful esteem, and heartfelt gratitude. Don't we say “I appreciate it” meaning, “I thank you”?

Francis appreciates the elements of the living world, of creation: sun, moon and stars, wind, water, fire, earth and all they bring to us. (Notice how Francis starts with the sun, a symbol of the Most High, to come gradually to the earth, the humus where we belong.) And rather than taking things for granted, Francis expresses his gratitude to their source. He gives thanks for the gifts. He says “grace.” He is truly eucharistic, thankful.

All the elements are personified as either brother or sister. Francis acknowledges not only that we are part of creation, but moreover that we have a fraternal relationship with all creatures because we all take part in the same source of life.

The alternation of brother and sister reminds us that masculine and feminine are complementary in expressing the wholeness of creation as God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27).

The elements bring us all the essentials we need. The first two are light givers. Brother Sun brings us the day, with light and heat; he also is a splendid symbol of the Most High. Sister Moon and the stars give us beauty and clarity.

The second pair are life givers. Brother Wind in all kinds of weather provides us sustenance: we need to breathe air to be alive. Sister Water, pure and humble (from the earth) is useful and precious: without fluid life would cease. Life emerged through the combination of air and water: “In the beginning ... a divine wind was sweeping over the waters” (Gen 1:2).

Brother Fire, besides bringing light into darkness, buoys our spirit. He is a source of joy and strength.

Sister Earth is our mother. We come from her and will go back to her. Human, we belong to the earth. She feeds and holds us, producing all kinds of fruits and vegetation. We do not maintain the earth, the earth maintains us.

Then Francis adds the inevitable realities of human life: forgiveness of offenses, peaceful endurance of suffering—physical or mental—and acceptance of bodily death. Life is movement, and it moves in cycles. “For everything there is a season” (Qo 3:1). Life dances on. Everything is transition, passage to another stage. Life is always before us.

To compose his *Canticle of Brother Sun* Francis must have realized that everything is present, everything we need is given (and the rest is not really needed), and he became grateful, he truly enjoyed life as a gift, everything as a gift. He found true happiness and joy.