

Face to Face with Francis

Spiritual (Re)Start: Reflection inspired by the Canticle of the Creatures

INTRODUCTION: from Sister Death to our calling

After Francis was told that his death was near, although he was suffering more than usual from his pains, he seemed transfigured by a new joy, as if he had suddenly understood the meaning of his entire existence and cried out: *“Welcome, my sister Death!”*

Sister Death... *“Why he says Sister Death?”* asked me Elia, 15 years old, after a spiritual dynamic on the Canticle of Creatures he lived with other youths in August right in the woods below La Verna, whose memory undoubtedly inspired Francis 800 years earlier, when, almost blind, he could only praise through the memory of the heart. He didn’t know to have the same name as the friar, Brother Elia, who in front of Francis’ joy right before his death was concerned that people could have been scandalized by his behavior.

Yes, death is a scandal. Death scares us and makes us uncomfortable; we don’t even want to talk about it. Yet we are surrounded by death... A cold, daily tally to which we quickly grow accustomed: the death counts from pandemics, wars, natural disasters, migrants lost in search of a better future, suicides, and so many young people like us — victims of loneliness and the emptiness of meaning that often dwell within us... These deaths are the result of the intertwined and overlapping crises of our time – crisis in which our economic system is often complicit.

*“Such an economy kills”*¹, Pope Francis warned as early as 2013.

Today, in a world where *“the sweet song of Francis has become a bitter cry”*²: **how can we possibly see Death as a sister?**

Maybe the answer lies in the *Canticle*. Francis speaks about **two types of death**: the bodily death and the second death, a wording used in Book of Revelation...

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,
for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.
And the One seated on the throne said,
“Look — I am making everything new.
Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.*

¹ Evangelii Gaudium n. 53.

² cfr. Pope Francis, Message for The World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, 2022.

*To all who are thirsty,
I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All
who are victorious will inherit these blessings;
I will be their God, and they will be my children. But
the cowardly, the unbelieving, the corrupt, the
immoral, murderers, idol worshipers,
and all liars —
their fate is in the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.
This is the second death.” (Revelation 21:1, 5–8)*

The Revelation Book contrasts two kinds of people: the “liars”, summarizing all those who are destined to the second death, and the “victorious”. And so, who are these liars and who are these winners? **What is the great lie we live in in our time, and what is the truth?**

The Scriptures reveal us that **the great lie of our time** – the one we have clearly seen even in the last “peace” agreements – is the **illusion that the powerful of this world can bring salvation**, that who has the economic and military force makes history, as mentioned in [the speech that Pope Leo sent us](#).

While the truth is what we can easily see if we simply honestly look at the history: **all great revolutions in history began with humble and unknown people... often young people!** They began thanks to women and men who understood that the **new world** announced by the Book of Revelation, “a new earth, a new heaven”, **is possible only if first I change myself**, starting from my personal choices, habits...even “tastes” as happened to Saint Francis:

“That which had appeared bitter to me, was changed into sweetness of soul and body” said Francis after kissing the leper. The deep transformation of the Church — reaching every layer of society and even reshaping the economy — that Francis and his friars brought about would never have happened without that simple but powerful act of gratuitous love, which forever transformed Francis’s understanding of the true source of joy in life.

And so, the “**victorious**”, the real winners, **are those like Francis**, who even **in illness**, even knowing to be about to die are **able to praise life because they recognize that everything around them is a gift!** Francis can sing of Death **because his whole life has been a song, a praise!**

We too can be the “victorious” whenever we hold together these two essential dimensions showed by Francis: **embodying the change we wish to see** in our society and **making space for gratuitousness**.

“Be witnesses”, Pope Francis urged us in his last address in September 2024, words that now echo like a testament. He reminded us that any true transformation of the socioeconomic system — through the models we design and the projects we create — must begin with our own lives. Being a witness, moreover, starts in embracing **gratuitousness**, something going beyond the mere act of giving freely, while being a way of structuring and living life to its fullest. Gratuitousness (this is something we should all remain vigilant about) is the freedom not to cling to our ideas or seek recognition; the capacity to let go for the sake of the common good...

Finally, in another passage of the Book of Revelation, the “victorious” are **the one who listen to the voice of the Spirit: the one who listens and welcomes a calling**, and, like the **prophets**, by hearing the voice of this Spirit and recognizing it at work, **can interpret the present to generate processes that transform the future.**

THE CANTICLE AND THE ECONOMY OF FRANCESCO

And here we are, for we too have received a calling!

“Go and repair my house, which, as you can see, is falling into ruin.”

Like S. Francis 800 years ago, in 2019 we have been called by Pope Francis to repair the ruins of our time: a **personal calling** we were already experiencing in our life, which thanks to EoF has become a **shared calling**, a common vocation. In fact, EoF is first of all a **place of encounter with other people having our same desire...**

Curiously, this is one of the most powerful messages of the Canticle, too. The Canticle of Creatures tells us that **every song bears a witness**, as when we raise a song is such that others may join us! It’s a way to say that **my joy it’s not complete if does not involve all the human beings, or even more the whole earth**, up to inanimate beings: the sun, the water, the wind...

We have spoken about a new world...

And so how this new world we desire looks like?

Or better yet, as EoF, which is our vision of the world?

If we are heirs of both Saint Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis, the *Canticle of the Creatures*, on the one hand, and the *Laudato Si’* encyclical, on the other hand, offer us both a **guiding program and a vision of reality**. They reveal a world where **fraternity and care** become the hallmark of our relationships, where sustainability is not enough but **ecology needs to be integral**. In short, they point toward **an economy that has rediscovered its soul**.

In this world, each creature’s value is not limited to their usefulness to us, but **she has their own sacred and untouchable dignity...** This is why we read: *“Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures”*, to say that God is praised by Francis’ through the creatures, in communion with them, and because of them. This is the true universal fraternity!

In this world, the **Sun, the Moon and the Stars** are brother and sisters because they remind us even among the ruins of our present, that the night is not endless and that, as “sentinels” in this night, we are called to make our own the *“cry of the Earth and the cries of the poor”* who cry out to us: *“Watchman, what is left of the night? How much longer until the dawn?”* (Isaiah 21:11).

We are the morning coming, our personal and common history, our economic narrative,

our entrepreneurial projects, our social initiatives, our educational commitment, our advocacy actions and policy proposals... **these are all lights shining in the different parts of the world where we are! This is the hope that does not disappoint!**

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

In this word, the **Wind** can be called Brother because no matter which weather, no matter the historic time we are experiencing, there will be always a Wind showing us a possible reason to praise, **a possible direction to change** this economy, by looking at what gives the real substance to life.

And so, what is this Wind? The Canticle seems to whisper: **it is the Spirit...** That is like a wind of which *“You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going”* (Jhon 3: 8). We **cannot see the Wind, the Spirit, but we recognize its effects**, that it moves and revolutionizes everything, as it is not a lasting possession, but a living breath that renews itself each day — just as Love does.

And so, in times of renewal as we are in EoF, having recently become a Foundation, we are invited to recompose the possible **“tension” between structure and spirit**, the need for strong “bones” to grow and the need to preserve our original spirit, by reminding that **it is the Spirit that gives life to the bones** (Ezekiel 37). Therefore, if we all leave room to the Spirit, and renew our actions based on this, we can ensure that the bones—the structure—truly serves the transformation of the system as we envision and desire it.

That’s why in this world, Brother Wind is connected with “Brother **Fire**” that is “playful and robust and strong” because it represents what we feel inside when we desire and choose something great for our life. “Playful”, because it brings us **a deep joy**; “robust and strong”, because it is something **we can always return to, in times of crisis...** Returning to the origins, to **what sparked our choice and helped us in making choices**.

In this world, Sister **Water** is “chaste and humble” because it is a gift: *“To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life”*, we heard before in the Book of Revelation. And so she is **“very useful, and precious”** because, as a gift, it is for all, and it is able to satisfy the thirst of a sense and the void that we could feel: a water that is the “*the water of life*”, the source **of a fullness of life**.

During these days and when we will be at home again, we could ask ourselves:

What is my deepest thirst?

What is my soul really thirsting for?

What and who can give me that water that always satisfies?

How wonderful it would be if, as Eo, we translated **this vision of the world into the mission to give drink to the thirsty**, because we ourselves have already found the water that truly satisfies!

Finally, in this world, **Peace** is not negotiated, but as Pope Leo reminds us, it always begins with everyday gestures of patience and courage, listening and action. The first act of peace

is again answering a personal calling, a **calling to forgiveness**. A small and daily calling that can become something greater involving socio-politics relationships, as the story of the second-to-last stanza of the Canticle tells us.

Initially, the Canticle finished with the praise to the creatures, but when Francis knew that the bishop and the civil authority of Assisi were in conflict with one another, he added another stanza and he planned a performance, making sure both attended. And when his friars sang:

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

The words, the melody, and the circumstances deeply moved the two who mutually forgave each other.

A change starting from love, as Pope Francis asked us to implement:

“The world of economics is in need of change. You will not change it only by becoming ministers, Nobel Prize winners or great economists. (...)

*Rather you will change it **above all by loving it** (...). Love the economy, concretely love the workers, the poor, prioritizing the situations of greatest suffering”*

This is neither sentimental or utopian, but is right the way S. Francis historically regulated many peace processes, from the wolf of Gubbio to the Sultan in the Middle East, and still today is at the basis of reconciliation experiences like the parents circles among Israelis and Palestinians, and the restorative justice among terrorists and the victims’ relatives, just to name a few.

This is probably a longer process but is more effective because it is **integral** - as love does not allow for anyone to be left behind - and **more enduring** because it follows the logic of the Gospel - from the “smallest of all seeds” to “the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree” (Mt 13:32) – triggering a process beginning from the small to reach all sectors, levels, and actors of the society.

THE JUBILEE AND THE CANTICLE

It is exactly here, in this triple connection with God, the human being, and the other creatures that the **Canticle and the Jubilee come together**.

If the Land is a mother — Mother Earth — and no longer a sister, as the only one co-generating life, then “*I can only receive it, as a gift and a promise*” (cf. L. Bruni): this is the principle underlying the jubilee directives in the Book of Leviticus.

If the Land **is not mine**, I'll make rest the land, as a deep respect of its timing, and I'll return it, so that also the foreigners, the poor and even the animals can use it. In fact, as the people of biblical Israel knew for their history: one day, **I might be that poor**, that foreigner, that slave... *How different things would be, if they could remember it even today!*

Similarly, **if the time is not mine but a gift**, then there is a time to work and a time to rest; otherwise, I end up living like a slave. As slavery is not only exploitation, but it also means

depending on something or someone... *How many times are we slaves without being aware of it?*

In a few words, **the Jewish Jubilee meaning was avoiding that inequalities and poverties would become structural** as they are today, so that each law against the universal destination of goods becomes a law against God, the other and the creatures, right for that dignity of each one that we find in the Canticle.

In fact, this social transformation - this restoration of justice envisioned in Leviticus – do not derive by legal obligations to fulfill. Both the Christian and Jewish Jubilees view **spiritual renewal**—personal conversion—as the true starting point, the one that leads to concrete choices. Once again, **changing the system begins with changing myself!**

Faced with all of this, we might be tempted to say: “This is not possible.” Yet in the Revelation, we heard: *“Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.”*

And so, three years after Assisi, even in a world that often seems the opposite of what we have just described, we can once again say—loudly and clearly—that **this is not a utopia, as we are already building this change!**

CONCLUSION

To conclude, following the remarkable insight found in Bishop Sorrentino’s latest book, we can return to the ending of the Canticle. As in our own lives, it is the end that reveals the deeper meaning of everything. And so, we can finally answer Elia’s question: **Why Sister Death?**

Death is a sister because she is the one **making evident what really matters**, that clarify priorities.

Death is a sister because she makes us experience **powerlessness and humility**. These two precious friends, along with gratitude, can protect us from what Pope Francis has called the *“dangerous delusion of omnipotence”*, the belief that everything depends on us—a risk any of us can fall into.

Death is a sister because she teaches us that **who really dies is who does not love**, who does not turn the life into an instrument of service to others, as we read in the Scriptures: *“We have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death”* (1 Jhon 3:14)

So we can understand the invitation Francis wrote at the end of the *Canticle*, and make it our own in EoF and in our territories and communities, seeing it as a horizon to aspire to, a guiding framework for our lives: ***“All of you, praise and bless the Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility”.***