

THE *LIBER NATURÆ* AS A SOURCE OF REVELATION IN THE *SERMONES* OF ANTHONY OF PADOVA

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Biographical outline

Anthony was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1195, according to the most accepted tradition. His parents, Martino de Alfonso and Maria, were of noble blood. They gave their son the name of Fernando in baptism. He received his education at the episcopal school annexed to the Lisbon cathedral. In 1210 Fernando joined the Canons Regular of St. Augustine in their monastery of San Vincenzo de Fora, close to Lisbon. In 1212 he asked to be transferred to the monastery of Santa Cruz at Coimbra. There he received his formation, especially in the study of the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. In 1220 he was ordained priest.

The same year proved to be decisive in Fernando's life. Some time before he met a group of five friars minor, led by a certain frate Berardo, who passed from Coimbra on their way to Morocco. On 16 January 1220 these became the first Franciscan martyrs at Marrakech. When their remains were brought back to Coimbra, Fernando decided to join the new movement initiated by Francis of Assisi. He left the monastery, took the Franciscan habit and changed his name to Anthony. He asked for permission to go to Morocco to evangelize. In 1221 the permission was granted. On arrival upon African soil Anthony became seriously ill with malaria. He had to relinquish his plans and return to his native land. The journey back marked another decisive step in his life. The ship was caught in a storm, and Anthony

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was shipwrecked on the coast of northern Sicily. He was welcomed by the friars at Messina.

In May 1221 he went to Assisi for the General Chapter. There he presented himself to Francis. After the Chapter he was welcomed in the province of Romagna (northern Italy) by frate Graziano, the minister provincial, and sent to the hermitage of Montepaolo, near Forlì. In this same city his fame as a preacher and theologian became known, and he started to travel widely on preaching expeditions. He also became the first lecturer of theology to his Franciscan confreres. Francis even sent him a short letter of approval. In 1224-1225 Anthony was in France, where he preached against the Cathari heresy in Montpellier, Arles, Toulouse, Limoges and Bourges. In 1226 he was appointed "custos" of the friars in France, but soon after Francis died on 3 October, he returned to Italy. In 1227 he was appointed minister provincial of northern Italy. In 1230 Anthony was sent to Rome by the Chapter to meet Pope Gregory IX and discuss the major problems of the Order. At the same time he was engaged in active preaching and composed his *Sermones* for the Sundays, Marian Feasts and Feasts of the year. Anthony preached all during Lent 1231 at Padova. His preaching-catechesis and the long hours he spent hearing confessions were the final blow to his frail health. After a short period of rest and contemplation at Camposampiero, he collapsed on 13 June. He asked to be carried to Padova, but died on the way at Arcella, close to the city. He was buried near the church of Santa Maria Mater Domini. On 30 May 1232 he was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in the cathedral of Spoleto. He was venerated with the title of Doctor of the Church. This title was confirmed by Pope Pius XII in 1946. His liturgical title is *doctor evangelicus*¹.

1. The medieval sources for the life of St. Anthony of Padova include: Anonymous, *Legenda seu Vita prima s. Antonii*, known also as *Assidua* (c. 1232), a cura di V. Gamboso, (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1981); Julian of Speyer, *Officio Ritmico e Legenda seu Vita secunda s. Antonii* (c. 1235-40), a cura di V. Gamboso, (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1985); *Vite "Raymundina" e "Rigaldina"* (1293-1300), a cura di V. Gamboso, (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1992). These medieval *legendae* are included in the "Fonti Agiografiche Italiane", together with the *Vita del "Dialogus" e "Benignitas"* (1246-80), the *Liber miraculorum* and other medieval hagiographical and liturgical texts.

The Sermones Dominicales et Festivi

Anthony's *Sermones* have been critically edited². In a voluminous medieval exegetical commentary, included in a total of seventy-six *sermones*, Anthony presents his profound knowledge of Scriptures, of patristic writings, and of classical poets and philosophers. The *sermones* start from the Sunday of Septuagesima, which was the day on which the new cycle of Scripture readings would begin.

The aim of the *sermones* has been object of study and discussion. We know that Anthony was a great preacher. At the same time he lectured theology in famous centres of study, such as Bologna.³ Indeed, the increasing demands of apostolic initiatives upon the new Franciscan movement, led many friars to dedicate their energies to study in the great universities of Europe, such as Paris, Oxford, Bologna. The great contribution of the mendicant Orders towards learning dates to the mid-thirteenth century, but we can trace its origins to the first generation of friars minor, to which St. Anthony belonged.⁴ In 1220-1221, the same year in which Anthony joined the Franciscan Order, Alexander of Hales became *magister regens* at the university of Paris. In 1236-1237 he was to join the Franciscan Order as well, and introduce the Franciscan *studium* at the university, which was to become a major academic institution together with the Dominican school.

It seems that the *sermones* were not intended as texts of preaching to the crowds, but rather as exegetical commentaries on the Scripture texts, for the theological formation of the friars. Anthony does not seem to have been greatly influenced by

2. S. Antonii Patavini O. Min, Doctoris Evangelici, *Sermones Dominicales et Festivi ad fidem codicum recogniti*, (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1979) in 3 volumes (quoted as *Sermones*). For the most recent translation of the *sermones*: Sant' Antonio di Padova, *I Sermoni*, Traduzione di G. Tollardo OFM Conv., (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1994).
3. Cfr. *Epistola ad S. Antonium*, in K. Esser OFM, *Gli Scritti di S. Francesco d'Assisi. Nuova edizione critica e versione italiana*, (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1982) 177-185. The text of the short note written by Francis does not mention any specific place where Anthony was lecturing, but it is of inestimable value in helping us to understand the true nature of the theological studies in the Franciscan Order: *Fratri Antonio episcopo meo frater Franciscus salutem. Placet mihi quod sacram theologiam legas fratribus, dummodo inter huius studium orationis et devotionis spiritum non exstinguas, sicut in regula continetur.*
4. A. Rigon, "S. Antonio e la Cultura Universitaria nell'Ordine Francescano delle origini", in *Francescanesimo e Cultura Universitaria*. Atti del XVI Convegno della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (13-15 ottobre 1988), (Assisi 1990) 69-92.

the method of the *glossæ* so widely used in Paris in the exposition of the sacred texts. His method is more simple. He prefers to comment the Scriptures with other texts drawn from the Scriptures. In this way the *sermões* would be a helpful tool in the theoretical and practical formation of the friars, many of whom were called to become preachers. That is why Francis of Assisi did not hesitate to approve Anthony's *licentia docendi* for the benefit of the friars.

Anthony's *sermões* have to be studied within the context of the theological tradition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During this period theology passed from the patristic tradition of commenting the *sacra pagina* to speculative problems concerned with the *questiones* linked with the study of the sacred text.⁵ Anthony must have been aware of this change of emphasis. Yet he prefers to remain loyal to the tradition inherited from the Church Fathers, which regards theological reflection as synonymous to knowledge of the Scriptures, through the *lectio divina* and through study considered as an act of veneration and prayer upon the sacred texts.⁶ In this historical perspective the advice given by Francis of Assisi to brother Anthony who lectured theology to the friars, becomes meaningful: "as long as - in the words of the Rule - you do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion with study of this kind".

The book of Scriptures and the book of Nature

To a mediaeval scholar of theology like Anthony, the Scriptures are the prime source of revelation. The method which he follows when commenting the sacred text is that of illustrating the various senses of Scripture, namely the literal or historical sense, and the spiritual sense, in its dimensions of the allegorical, moral and mystical senses.

Scripture, however, was not the only source of revelation for a mediaeval theologian such as Anthony. God can also speak through another book, which one might call the *liber naturæ*. Creation thus becomes a way of revelation. It was a legacy of the writings of Augustine, which found expression in mediaeval theologians who lived only some decades before Anthony. One of them is William of St. Thierry, who died in 1148. His vision of creation is that of a certain similitude

5. M.D. Chenu, *La Teologia come Scienza nel XIII Secolo*, (Milano ²1985) 38.

6. M.M. Davy, *Iniziazione al Medioevo. La Filosofia nel Secolo XII*, Edizione italiana a cura di C. Marabelli, (Milano 1980) 146.

of God. God reveals himself through the visible vestiges of creation, in such a way that these can lead man to the *invisibilia Dei*, or the eternal ideas of God as expressed in the augustinian and platonic tradition.⁷ Anthony is definitely capable of making use of the book of Scriptures and of the book of Creation in such a way as to present the contents of faith, especially in relation to the mystery of the incarnation.⁸

We shall attempt to present some relevant texts from Anthony's *sermones* which refer to the *liber naturæ* as a source of revelation, and to see in them a specific style or approach to theology which has been greatly developed in the Franciscan tradition.

The liber naturæ as a source of revelation in the Sermones

In the general prologue to his *sermones*, Anthony states: "quasdam rerum et animalium naturas et nominum etymologias, moraliter expositas, ipsi operi inseruimus".⁹ In various passages of his *sermones* Anthony cites examples from the world of nature, and from the animal world. The critical edition of his *sermones* mentions the sources from which Anthony took his examples.¹⁰ We shall note the various references to the animal world which characterize Anthony's *sermones*.¹¹

7. Ibid, 143-144.

8. Cfr. *Sant'Antonio di Padova. I sermoni*, 13.

9. *Sermones*, Vol. I, 4.

10. *Sermones*, LXX-LXXI: "Sæculo IX Aristotelis libri *De animalium historia, partibus et generatione* in unum volumen collecti sunt et in linguam arabicam versi, ab Ibn-el-Batric, et vulgati nomine *Liber de animalibus*. Quem librum in latinum sermonem vertit Michael Scotus in Hispania, ante annum 1220 et vulgavit ipse interpres usque in Italiam. Et libro usus est s. Antonius in suis sermonibus componendis, vocans eum *Liber naturalium* vel *Naturalia*."

11. S. Doimi OFM Conv., "Le Scienze Naturali in San Antonio", in AA.VV., *S. Antonio Dottore della Chiesa*. Atti delle settimane antoniane tenute a Roma e a Padova nel 1946, (Città del Vaticano 1947), 437-459. In this study the author lists all the references in the *sermones* to such themes as anatomy, zoology, botany and mineralogy. The long list of references is a proof of the importance of the natural sciences in the writings of the evangelical doctor. The author also explains the methodology followed by Anthony when presenting an example drawn from nature. "Nello sviluppo dei passi scritturali che prende a commentare, ogni volta che incontra un animale o una pianta o un minerale, il Santo si ferma a darne l'etimologia, a descriverne, più o meno a lungo, la fisiologia o l'anatomia e le speciali abitudini; non di rado però Egli stesso si muove alla ricerca di cose e animali. Alla descrizione, immediatamente egli fa seguire l'interpretazione mistica: allegorica o tropologica o anagogica, di preferenza però la seconda, cioè l'interpretazione morale".

One of the most interesting *sermones* is the very first one, namely that on Septuagesima Sunday.¹² The theme is taken from the first words of Genesis: *In principio creavit Deus cælum et terram*. Anthony writes a short treatise upon creation as presented in Scripture, with reference to the principal contents of faith. A more detailed look at the contents of the *sermo* will illustrate the role of creation as a source of revelation.

The first day God created light. The symbol of light refers to various texts from Scripture which speak of light as the incarnate wisdom of God:

“Prima die dixit Deus: Fiat lux. Ista lux est sapientia Dei Patris, illuminans omnem hominem venientem in hunc mudum (Io 1,9) et habitans lucem inaccessibilem (1 Tim 6,16), de qua dicit Apostolus ad Hebræos: Qui cum sit splendor et figura substantiæ eius (Hebr 1,3), et de quo Propheta: In lumine tuo videbimus lumen (Ps 33,10), et in libro Sapientiæ: Sapientia est candor lucis æternæ (Sap 7,26). De hac ergo dixit Pater: Fiat lux. Et facta est lux, quod Ioannes apertius glossat dicens: Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis (Io 1,14)... Lux ergo, quæ est inaccessibilis et invisibilis, facta est in carne visibilis”.¹³

The image of light is one of transfiguration of the whole cosmos into a new creation. The mediaeval world expressed this joy in art. Creation was seen to be the celebration of the joy of a new life, as well as the mirror of the invisible God.¹⁴ In the light of revelation, the first day of creation refers to the eternal wisdom of God, which was definitely manifested in the mystery of the incarnation of the Word.

The way in which Anthony looks at creation is also closely akin to the way in which Francis of Assisi regarded the *liber naturæ*. The poverello did not possess the theological preparation of his followers, such as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, who gives us a splendid description of the book of creation.¹⁵ Yet he expresses the

12. *Sermones*, Vol. I, 5-23.

13. *Sermones*, Vol. I, 8.

14. Davy, *Iniziazione al Medioevo*, 30.

15. S. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 2,12, in Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventuræ, *Opera Omnia*, edita studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura, (Ad Claras Aquas [Quaracchi] 1882-1902) Vol. V, 230a: “Creatura mundi est quasi quidem *liber*, in quo relucet, repræsentatur et legitur Trinitas fabricatrix secundum triplicem gradum expressionis, scilicet per modum *vestigii*, *imaginis* et *similitudinis*”.

same concept of revelation through creation in his *Cantico di frate sole*.¹⁶ Indeed, the relation between man and nature is perfect when it is built upon love and respect for creation. Mediaeval thinkers were very much aware of this reality.¹⁷ Contemporary culture has entered into a crisis in this respect. It has lost the sense of loving contemplation and respect for the book of nature. Francis of Assisi and his followers are continual reminders of a respectful approach to creation, of which man is only a part.

The Franciscan spring is not only a theology of the incarnation or humanity of Christ, as is often stated. It is also a theology of creation, which becomes the medium through which we can arrive at the hidden centre of revelation, namely the mystery of the Incarnate Word.

Within this framework, man is presented as the most perfect expression of the art of creation. Anthony speaks in the same *sermo* about the sixth day, in which God created man to His own image and likeness:

“Sexta die dixit Deus: Faciamus hominem. Sextus articulus fidei est Spiritus Sancti missio, in qua imago Dei, in homine deformata et deturpata, per Spiritus Sancti inspirationem, qui inspiravit in faciem hominis spiraculum vitæ (Gen 2,7), reformatur et illuminatur, sicut dicitur in Actibus apostolorum: Et factus est repente de cælo sonus, tamquam advenientis spiritus vehementis (Act 2,2)”¹⁸

16. The opening verses express in a vivid way the goodness of the Creator through brother sun:

“Laudato sie, mi signore, cun tucte le tue creature,
spetialmente messer lo frate sole,
lo qual' è iorno, et allumini noi per loi.
Et ellu è bellu e radiante cun grande splendore,
de te, altissimo, porta significatione.”

For the full text of the “Canticum fratris solis”, cfr. K. Esser OFM, *Gli Scritti di S. Francesco*, 157-158.

17. Davy, *Iniziazione al Medioevo*, 141: “L'uomo può staccarsi dalla Natura e rendersi incapace di discernere i segni e gli appelli che essa contiene. In questo caso, la Natura è simile a un libro scritto in una lingua che l'uomo non è in grado di decifrare. Quando l'uomo è privo di amore nei suoi confronti, la Natura sospende la sua rivelazione. Per avere l'intelligenza della Natura è richiesto di amarla”.

18. *Sermones*, Vol. 1,12.

Anthony links the creation of mankind in the book of Genesis to the new creation as a result of the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In our analysis of this text, we shall note in a specific way Anthony's anthropology, which is wholly Franciscan in its expression.

In one of his admonitions, Francis of Assisi reminds us of our dignity as God's creatures.¹⁹ Francis' vision of man is new not only with reference to the incarnation, but also to man's intrinsic dignity in harmony with all creatures. If there is harmony in the cosmos, this is a sign of the perfect harmony which God created for the sake of mankind. This is a very positive view of man, who is reconciled once more to all creation, in a kind of primeval innocence.

Anthony is heir of this humanistic approach. We could continue tracing its subsequent development in the writings of Bonaventure, who sees man as a *minor mundus* in the created universe.²⁰ The Seraphic Doctor also notes man's creation on the sixth day, and values the symbolic significance of this number.²¹

The book of creation is, therefore, the ladder leading to divine revelation. Man, created on the sixth day, in the image and likeness of God, is a concrete sign of the intrinsic life of his Creator. This life is the presence of the Spirit of God, the same Spirit which God breathes into the human soul and which Christ sent upon the apostles on Pentecost.

The vision of the world in the writings of Anthony of Padova is the result of

19. *Admonitiones*, V,1-2, in K. Esser OFM, *Gli Scritti di S. Francesco*, 127: "Attende, o homo, in quanta excellentia posuerit te Dominus Deus, quia creavit et formavit te ad imaginem dilecti Filii sui secundum corpus et similitudinem secundum spiritum (cf Gen 1,26). Et omnes creaturæ, quæ sub cælo sunt, secundum se serviunt, cognoscunt et obediunt Creatori suo melius quam tu".
20. *Itinerarium Mensis in Deum*, 2,2, in *Opera Omnia*, V, 300a: "iste mundus, qui dicitur macrocosmus, intrat ad animam nostram, quæ dicitur minor mundus, per portas quinque sensuum. Homo igitur, qui dicitur minor mundus, habet quinque sensus quasi quinque portas, per quas intrat cognitio omnium, quæ sunt in mundo sensibili, in animam ipsius".
21. *Collationes in Hexæmeron*, 15,17, in *Opera Omnia*, V, 400b: 'Sexta die factus est homo princeps bestiarum; et respondet senio, quæ ætas est matura et apta sapientiæ; et respondet sextæ ætati, quæ est a Christo usque ad finem mundi; et in sextaetate Christus natus est, sexta die crucifixus, sexto mense conceptus post conceptionem Ioannis. Sapientia ergo sexta ætate incarnata est".

the mediaeval way in which man looked at the cosmos. In this text, taken from his writings, we can notice the harmony which exists between the created world and the position of man in this world of motion:

“Mundus dictus, quia semper est in motu; nulla enim requies eius elementis concessa est. Mundus græce *cosmos*, homo vero *microcosmos*, idest minor mundus, nominatur”.²²

The Christian vision of man is not fragmented. Man is not alienated from the reality which surrounds him. Rather he expresses this same reality in his own person. Although he seems insignificant in front of the greatness of the world around him, man reveals the mystery of creation in his own nature. In this way the *liber naturæ* can be deciphered through the medium of the human person. The text which follows is a further explanation of this view in Anthony's *sermones*:

“Mundus dictus, quia semper est in motu. Nulla enim requies eius elementis concessa est, cuius quattuor sunt partes: orientalis, occidentalis, meridionalis, septemtrionalis. Sicut mundus ex quattuor constat elementis, ita hominem, qui minor mundus dicitur, ex quatuor constare humoribus, uno temperamento commistum”.²³

As a world in miniature, man is capable of probing into all the secrets of created reality. Every creature is a book in which man reflects his own nature and, above all, arrives at the knowledge of the invisible truths in Scripture. That is why, as has already been noted, Anthony prefers to illustrate moral truths from the natural sciences. The list of creatures which he mentions in his *sermones* is interesting in its abundance and variety of descriptions.²⁴

As an example of how Anthony made use of the animal world to illustrate the book of Scriptures, let it suffice to quote some sections of the second *sermo* of the feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. Anthony quotes the book of Ecclesiasticus 11,3 to give the example of the bee:

22. *Dominica IV post Pascha*, 8, in *Sermones*, Vol. I, 318.

23. *In Ascensione Domini*, 5, in *Sermones*, Vol. III, 240.

24. The index at the end of the Italian translation of the *sermones* gives the following list of creatures, which we should quote in Italian: “agnello, api, aquila, avvoltoio, asino, bruco, bue, camaleonte, cammello, cane, cavallo, cervo, cicogna, cigno, colomba, corvo, (draghi), elefanti, gallina, giovenca, gru, gufo, iena, leone, leopardo, locusta, lupo, onagro, orso, pantera, passero, pavone, pecora, pellicano, pernice, pesce, pipistrello, ragno, rana, riccio, rinoceronte, rondini, salamandra, scarabeo, scimmia, scorpione, serpente, sparviero, struzzo, talpa, tigre, tortura, verme, vitello, volpe”.

“*Brevis in volatilibus est apis, et initium habet fructus illius dulcoris. Hæc auctoritas Ecclesiastico XI. Dicitur in Naturalibus, quod apis sine coitu generat, quoniam in ea est virtus generans. Et apis bona est parva, rotunda, densa, constricta. Et apis est mundior ceteris volatilibus vel animalibus, et propter hoc foetidus odor eam gravat, et odor dulcis delectat. Nullum animal fugit, et, cum volat, flores diversos non intendit neque unum florem dimittit et ad alium vadit, sed ex uno, quo indiget, colligit et ad alvear redit. Et cibus eius est mel, quia vivit ex eo quod operatur. Et facit domum, in qua stet rex; et incipit ædificare super parietibus alvearis supra, et non cessat descendere paulatim paulatim donec perveniat ad imum alvearis.*

“Sic domina nostra, beata Maria, Dei Filium sine corruptione generavit, quoniam Spiritus Sanctus supervenit in ea, et virtus Altissimi obumbravit ei (cf. Lc 1,35). Hæc bona apis fuit parva humilitate, rotunda contemplatione cælestis gloriæ, quæ caret principio et fine, densa caritate... constricta paupertate, mundior ceteris virginitate...

“Beatæ Mariæ cibus, suus filius, mel angelorum, dulcedo omnium sanctorum. Ex illo vivebat, quem nutriebat: cui lac propinabat sibi vitam dabat...

“In favo, mel et cera; in puero Iesu, divinitas et humanitas. Dicitur in *Naturalibus*, quod bonum mel est ex nova cera; et bonum mel est simile auro. Nova cera, Christi caro, ex carne mundissima gloriosæ Virginis assumpta; in qua, mel divinitatis, quæ in auro designatur. Unde Canticis V: *Caput dilecti, aurum optimum* (Cant 5,11).”²⁵

The elegance of the Latin description of the bee’s activity, as compared to the mystery of the Incarnation, is a superb example of Anthony’s use of the book of creation in illustrating divine truths. He begins by giving a definition of the bee from Scripture: “Small among winged creatures is the bee but her produce is the sweetest of the sweet” (Ecclesiasticus 11,3). Anthony then presents an allegorical explanation of the bee’s activity with reference to the Incarnation. From the book of nature he observes the bee as a simple, pure creature, and compares its activity to the virtues of the Virgin Mary in the mystery of the Incarnation (virginity, humility, contemplation, charity). The end product of the bee’s activity, honey, from which pure wax is made, becomes an eloquent example of the human nature of Christ. Note the reference to the Canticle of Canticles, which is often quoted by Anthony in his *sermones*.

This example alone illustrates not only Anthony's theological insight, or his contemplative attitude, but is above all a proof of his genuine Franciscan spirit. The joy of simplicity in nature is a mystery to be discovered, but only in the light of the mystery of the humanity of Christ. Within the context of the evangelical movement of renewal, which characterized the culture of the XIIIth century, and which was to bring an ecclesiastical and social upheaval, the Franciscan spring became a proposal to come to terms with God by reconciling oneself with creation.

We can say that Anthony is not the simple friar of the first generation of brothers who walked barefoot with the Poverello of Assisi. His years of formation in a monastic environment were surely to leave an indelible mark upon his teaching. His preparation as a biblical scholar was an enormous asset in his evangelical vocation as a Minorite. It set the course for the great development of the Franciscan movement during the same century. It was a proof that the innovative spirit of the Gospel as conceived by Francis of Assisi was, in fact, a new way of creating dialogue between God and creation, with man as the mediator.

Conclusion

1. Anthony of Padova has been called *doctor evangelicus*, because of his profound meditations upon the Scriptures, coupled with an evangelical life upon the Franciscan model. His long years of formation led him to a profound knowledge of the *sacra pagina*, the Scriptures and the exegetical commentaries of the Fathers and ecclesiastical writers. In his *sermones* we can find a compendium of this vast knowledge of the book of Scriptures, which Anthony shared with his confreres as a lecturer and which he generously explained to the crowds as a popular preacher. Anthony is part and parcel of the evangelical movement of the mendicant Orders of the XIII century, in which the assiduous study of philosophy and theology was in harmony with the spirit of *devotio*, and in which the university chair was in harmony with the pulpit and the confessional.

2. As a genuine Franciscan, Anthony draws upon the *liber naturæ* as a source of revelation. He grew up in a culture which was very much aware of the importance of creation as a vestige of the invisible. Mediaeval man saw himself and all creation in harmony within a global framework of natural laws designed by divine providence. Every reality was seen to be a reference to God's act in creation, and to the subsequent unfolding of the history of salvation. In this way the *liber naturæ* is a source of revelation together with the Scriptures. Anthony was familiar with the

mediaeval framework of cosmology, as drawn up by natural philosophy and patristic writings centuries before him. Yet his spirit also seems to have been familiar with the new humanistic approach at reality, as introduced by Francis of Assisi. This new approach reconciled created reality with the human person. Man stands at the centre of creation, but not above it. In Christ, the incarnate Word, not only human nature, but all creation, finds its lost centre of gravity. The *Cantico delle creature* is probably the most clear expression of this concept.

3. In his *sermones*, Anthony often mentions the book of creation. Not only does he speak about God's act of creation as described in the Genesis account, but he draws innumerable examples from nature in order to illustrate the truths of faith which he expounds in his writings. His descriptions of the animate world of creation are sometimes fantastic and highly imaginative and sound naïve in our culture based upon scientific analysis of natural phenomena. These limitations, which are an obvious result of the age in which Anthony lived, do not hinder us from expressing wonder at the keen interest in nature which this mediaeval theologian possessed. This is a further proof of the harmony which existed between visible reality and the divine reality in the mediaeval world. Artistic expressions in this age have this feature in common: from visible reality man is led to the knowledge of eternal truths - the *liber naturæ* is a source of revelation.

4. One would ask: what is the relevance of Anthony's writings in our contemporary culture, in which the sphere of scientific knowledge is so distinct from that of faith? Probably Anthony's message can be summed up in the humanistic message of hope which is characteristic of the Franciscan tradition. It is a message of reconciliation between mankind and creation. A Christian humanistic interpretation of man is of great help for a bond of brotherhood between man and nature.

5. "In his sermons, Anthony spoke about man in humanistic terms, an interpretation he had inherited from his scholastic studies of man and one into which he delved more deeply in his own journey of Christian conversion. There is an optimism in Anthony's anthropology which recaptures the old image of man as "microcosm, i.e. little world", splendid yet fragile, brilliant yet ambiguous, virtuous yet sinful, made in God's image and likeness yet able to make radical choices".²⁶

26. *Anthony Man of the Gospel*. Letter of the Ministers General of the Franciscan Family on the occasion of the eighth centenary of the birth of Saint Anthony of Padova, English-Speaking Conference, Order of Friars Minor, (Wisconsin 1994) 16.

The radical choice for harmony between mankind and creation is now more urgent than ever before.

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