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THE CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES AND SUSTAINABILITY: LISTENING TO THE CRY OF THE EARTH

The current economy system excels at producing material goods, yet it generates dissatisfaction, threatens the sustainability of the global ecosystem, and widens the gap between the rich and the poor. Economic growth has become the primary objective, reducing nature and workers to mere resources for profit (Boff, 1993, p. 42–43). “These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out” (Francis, 2015, 53).

The cry of the earth is inextricably linked to the cry of the poor and marginalized, who disproportionately suffer the consequences of environmental degradation. In a sense, Francis of Assisi shows this connection between nature and the

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poor by choosing the dialect of the humblest to praise God through all creatures.

In response to these cries, Pope Francis (2019, p. 8) has called for an eco-centric and fraternal economy, oriented toward the common good and “attentive above all to the poor and excluded.” To promote it, he convened an international gathering of young economists (under 35) in Assisi in 2020, titled “*The Economy of Francesco*,” and aimed at replacing the prevailing technocentric paradigm, which is detrimental to life. “This economy kills,” the Pope warns (Tornielli, Galeazzi, 2015).

By organizing that event in Assisi, the Pope acknowledged the significant contribution of the Franciscan tradition to economic thought. In his encyclical *Laudato si’*, he presented Francis of Assisi as a universal brother, fully reconciled with God, others, himself, and creation. He also proposed his *Canticle of the creatures* as the reading key of the entire encyclical. Decades earlier, in 1979, Pope John Paul II (1979, p. 1509–1510) had already proclaimed Saint Francis the patron saint “of those who promote ecology” (*oecologiae cultorum*).

This article explores the ecological challenges posed by the current economic system, which prioritizes material growth and fuels relentless consumerism. Rather than addressing genuine human needs—which are inherently limited—it stimulates unlimited desires, endangering the sustainability of the global ecosystem and amplifying *the cry of the earth* (Part 1). At the root of the harm inflicted on both people and the planet lies a distorted anthropological vision. Indeed, “there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (Francis, 2015, 118). Human beings are portrayed as insatiable consumers, trapped in a perpetual conflict with the world around them. To break free from this cycle of exploitation and self-destruction, we must foster a new relational paradigm inspired by Francis of Assisi (Part 2) and his *Canticle of the Creatures* (Part 3) (Francis of Assisi, 2001b).

1. CRY OF THE EARTH: AN UNSUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC SYSTEM

During the Middle Ages and the mercantilist era, economies were structured primarily around the control of land, natural resources, and trade routes. In the feudal system of the Middle Ages, stability and self-sufficiency were more valued than growth. With the rise of mercantilism (15th-18th centuries), wealth was associated with the accumulation of precious metals like gold and silver, which were seen as key to national power. The primary goal was not economic growth for its own sake, but rather the enrichment of the state to enhance its political and military dominance.

1.1. The shift toward exponential economic growth

The shift toward the modern idea of constant, exponential economic growth emerged around two centuries ago, closely linked to the Industrial Revolution and the development of classical economics in the 18th and 19th centuries. Economists like Adam Smith (1723–1790) laid the intellectual foundations of market economies, though Smith did not explicitly advocate for perpetual growth as an end in itself. The idea gained traction with later economists such as David Ricardo (1772–1823) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). However, even Mill (2001, Book IV, Ch. VI) foresaw a “stationary state” where growth would eventually stabilize.

In the 20th century, particularly after World War II, economic growth became a central policy goal for nations. The Gross Domestic Product index (GDP), developed in the 1930s, became the primary measure of economic activity and national progress, often at the expense of other crucial factors such as environmental sustainability, social equity, and overall well-being.

The ethics of saving was replaced by the “moral” imperative of consumerism, driven by advertising, planned obsolescence, and easy access to credit (Bauman, 2007, p. 44). Products are deliberately designed with short lifespans, so that everyone can be continually seduced by new marketing appeals. As a result, people increasingly buy not out of necessity but for the sake of enjoyment, further straining the planet’s finite resources. As Mahatma Gandhi wisely observed: “The world has enough for everybody’s need, but not enough for everybody’s greed.”²

Nowadays, a defining feature of modern market economies is their dependence on continuous economic growth, which is seen as essential to keeping the system functioning, preventing high unemployment and maintaining investment. Society has become addicted to economic growth, elevating it to the status of a secular religion that permeates everything. People who amass significant wealth are the new idols, as material success takes precedence over values such as compassion, meaningful work, and social responsibility.

To sustain this relentless growth, industries encourage consumers to purchase increasing amounts of goods. In 1955, Victor Lebow, one of the leading theorists of overconsumption and the throwaway society, stated bluntly:

“Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in con-

2 “Nature produces enough to meet the needs of all the people but not enough to satisfy the greed of anyone” (Jolly, 2006, p. 327).

sumption [...]. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing rate.” (LEBOW Victor, “Price competition,” in *Journal of Retailing* 31/1 (1955) 5-10, here 7 (in *Internet*: <http://ablemesh.co.uk/PDFs/journal-of-retailing1955.pdf>).)

This leads society to an striking and contradictory paradox: the market economy relies on constant consumer spending to survive, yet endless growth is inherently unsustainable in a world with finite resources (cf. Dryzek, 1987, p. 83–87). Recognizing these contradictions, Pope Francis reminds us that “less is more” (Francis, 2015, 222).

1.2. An economy driven by desires rather than real needs

Natural resources are finite but sufficient if manage wisely. However, by prioritizing GDP growth as the ultimate measure of progress, modern economies have fueled consumerism and chronic dissatisfaction. For the compulsive consumer, resources will never be enough.

Historically, economics was about meeting essential needs with limited resources. Today, it has shifted toward fulfilling endless desires with increasingly scarce resources. Yet, while finite resources can satisfy basic needs—since these are inherently limited—they can never fully satisfy material desires, which, from a consumerist perspective, have no bounds.

This economic rationality is based on the axiom of non-satiation, which asserts that satisfaction is never fully achieved, and that “more is always better than less.” As a result, people internalize the believe that accumulation and consumption equate to greater well-being. They are never sufficiently satisfied to cease wanting more, though their desire may gradually diminish as goods accumulate. As early as 1927, Cowdrick referred to this phenomenon as “the new economic gospel of consumption” (p. 208).

The relentless pursuit of profit should not be the primary goal, even for businesses. Instead, profitability must be a means to fulfill a company’s social function. Economic growth should serve these higher goals rather than being an end in itself. The true aim is to build a world that is a welcoming home for all, where basic needs are met and mutual care flourishes.

Authentic progress reduces social inequalities and enhances happiness, which is always linked to relational goods and meaningful relationships.

1.3. Everything subordinated to material progress

The prevailing technocratic paradigm prioritizes efficiency and elevates material growth as society’s primary objective, often sidelining relational goods or

confining them to the private sphere.³ Individuals strive to maximize their personal well-being, corporations pursue ever-higher profits, and nations focus on advancing their own “common good.”

This mindset permeates all levels of social life and not only in capitalist countries. Since 1979, Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese Communist leaders have frequently claimed that their system is superior due to its ability to generate substantial material wealth for its citizens (*China’s Economic Rise...*, 2019). However, the rising inequalities within China have led authorities to pressure billionaires into keeping a low profile (Thibault, 2024).

Despite these efforts to maintain appearances, the deeply ingrained belief that accumulating wealth leads to greater well-being remains largely unchallenged worldwide. Yet, our planet cannot sustain the relentless extraction of raw materials required to fuel this model of growth.

The market has been elevated to the status of an unquestionable force, endowed with quasi-divine attributes: omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. It is omnipresent because its logic permeates every aspect of life, extending even to personal relationships. It is omnipotent as it dictates rewards and punishments based on adherence to its ‘invisible’ rules. It is omniscient because it is believed to allocate resources efficiently and reveal truths through price mechanisms. Understanding the market is thus perceived as equivalent to understanding everything (Lluch Frechina, 2023).

As a result, human relationships and the natural world have been reduced to mere commodities (Polanyi, 2024), valued solely for their ability to generate economic gain. Moreover, competition is often framed as a ruthless struggle that drives productivity, disregarding its original etymological meaning (*cum-petere*), which implies seeking together the best solution while reinforcing fraternal bonds.

1.4. The unsustainability of endless material growth

By fueling limitless desires rather than addressing fundamental human needs, the current economic system has fostered chronic dissatisfaction. It relies on continuous and accelerated economic growth to sustain both consumer demand and the mounting debts of individuals and governments. Without this relentless expansion, the system risks collapse. Yet, this pursuit of perpetual growth—now deemed indispensable—is rapidly depleting the planet’s resources.

3 “This suggests the need for an “economic ecology” capable of appealing to a broader vision of reality” (Francis, 2015, 131).

According to the World Bank, the global economy has maintained an average annual growth rate of approximately 3% over the past few decades. At this pace, global GDP doubles roughly every 24 years, leading to a twentyfold increase in output over a century and a fortyfold increase in 125 years. To sustain such exponential growth, resource extraction has more than tripled since 1970, and projections suggest that, by 2060, global material consumption could reach 190 billion metric tonnes—twice the current level— while greenhouse gas emissions could rise by 43%. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) concludes that “we’re gobbling up the Earth’s resources at an unsustainable rate” (*We’re gobbling up...*, 2019).

Indeed, the UNEP and the 2019 International Resource Panel (IRP) report that the global material footprint per capita is currently around 12 tons per year. By 2050, this figure could double, reaching or even exceeding 24 tons per capita annually.⁴

Maintaining the current rate of fossil resource extraction is becoming increasingly unsustainable. While OECD countries claim to have initiated a process of decoupling—producing economic output without a proportional increase in fossil resource consumption—the overall global trend remains alarming. Circular economy principles are frequently discussed as potential solutions, yet economic growth continues to take precedence.

1.5. Artificial Intelligence and sustainability

The rapid development of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers enormous possibilities for progress while also posing challenges to sustainability, as it can have adverse impacts on both the physical and social ecosystems.

On the social realm, information sources are increasingly narrowing, “fostering a single approach, developed on the basis of an algorithm” (Francis, 2024). On the environmental level, AI has a considerable ecological footprint, largely due to the high ecological costs associated with the extraction of rare earth elements, which are essential for producing its technological components. The scarcity of these materials requires complex, slow, and costly extraction processes that significantly contribute to environmental degradation. Although more sustainable alternatives are being explored, these are still in the early stages of development.

Currently, China produces about 70% and processes more than 80% of the world’s rare earth elements. The European Commission has identified 17 of these rare metals, including antimony, beryllium, germanium, graphite, lutetium, prome-

4 In recent years, global material consumption has reached around 100 billion tons annually. By 2025, estimates indicate that global resource use could reach approximately 170 billion tons (*Solid Waste Management*, 2022; cf. United Nations Environment Programme, 2023).

thium, tantalum, vanadium, and tungsten. The extreme scarcity of some of these materials necessitates the removal of vast amounts of earth to extract them. An extreme case is the extraction of one kilogram of lutetium, which typically requires the removal of 200 tons of rock (Kettmayer, 2024).

AI consumes also large amounts of water. It is estimated that, to respond to 20 to 50 questions, ChatGPT-3 uses about half a liter of water for cooling purposes. By 2027, AI's total water consumption could range between 4.2 and 6.6 billion cubic meters, more than four times the current water consumption of Denmark.

AI also requires enormous amounts of electricity. It is estimated that a single search on ChatGPT can consume between three and ten times more energy than a search on Google (*Una consulta en ChatGPT...*, 2023). According to the International Energy Agency's 2024 report, the nearly 8,000 data centers worldwide (33% of them in the USA) will consume over 1,000 terawatt-hours (TWh) by 2026, an amount equivalent to Japan's current electricity consumption. This rising energy demand is contributing to higher greenhouse gas emissions and forcing some countries to regulate AI usage. For example, Singapore had to temporarily restrict the construction of new data centers in 2020, after these facilities accounted for 7% of the nation's total electricity consumption.

On the positive side, AI offers new opportunities for promoting ecosystem sustainability. It can play a crucial role in monitoring methane emissions, a major contributor to the greenhouse effect, and in addressing other facets of the ongoing ecological crisis. Additionally, AI can predict energy consumption patterns, enabling more efficient responses, while optimizing the performance of existing power grids and enhancing renewable energy production. Beyond energy, AI can also improve the management of water resources, waste, and recycling processes. It also provides valuable tools for analyzing environmental data, such as monitoring deforestation, evaluating plastic pollution in oceans, and predicting potential natural disasters.

However, the greatest risk lies in the fact that AI is largely controlled by a small number of profit-driven multinational corporations. This concentration of power in the hands of a few threatens democratic life, the sustainability of ecosystems, and integral human development.

2. EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED: TOWARD A RELATIONAL PARADIGM

The globalized economic system often separates economic activity from environmental considerations (cf. Carabajo Núñez, 2021). Neoclassical economic theory has historically overlooked the long-term consequences on ecosystems of the individualis-

tic pursuit of immediate profit (cf. Jevons, 2013 [1871]). Even today, GDP calculations largely ignore critical data on resource depletion and environmental degradation.

At best, polluting companies might face financial penalties proportional to the environmental damage they cause. However, these measures fail to prevent further ecological harm, as people are easily misled into believing that short-term benefits will outweigh long-term damage. Such fragmented approach fails to enhance the population's "well-being" and poses a threat to sustainability.

2.1. Promoting an ecocentric economy

We can no longer sustain an economic system that depletes natural resources and exacerbates social inequalities. True development cannot be measured solely by economic growth indicators or the amount of profit generated; it must be evaluated based on the collective well-being of all people and the health of our planet.

"For new models of progress to arise, there is a need to change "models of global development;" [...]. It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress" (Francis, 2015, 194).

The planet's finite resources are being consumed at an unsustainable rate, rapidly turning into waste and polluting the environment. This relentless pursuit of material growth undermines sustainability, making reuse and recycling insufficient solutions. Endless economic growth is impossible within the limits of a finite world.⁵

To build a truly sustainable future, we must move beyond the technocentric economic approach and adopt an ecocentric perspective, one that prioritizes the integrity of natural ecosystems over their exploitation and respects the inherent limitations of our planet's resources. This shift would ensure that economic activity aligns with the fundamental laws governing the global ecosystem rather than subordinating nature to short-term resource management strategies (cf. Georgescu-Roegen, Bonaiuti, 2013; Costanza et al., 2015).

2.2. Francis of Assisi, an inspiration and model

At the time of St. Francis, the understanding of the cosmos was very different from ours and the environmental degradation that daunts us today was not a pressing concern. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to speak of an ecological awareness in his *Canticle of creatures* in the modern sense of the term. Yet, de-

5 "If economic growth cannot be continued indefinitely, economic theories geared to growth need to be re-examined" (Birch, Cobb, 1984, 294).

spite these historical and cultural differences, it is evident that Francis' vital attitude stands in stark contrast to the dominant anthropocentrism that, in later times, reduced nature to mere neutral matter justifying its exploitation for human interest.

Francis also transcends the perspective that regards humans merely as stewards of creation, responsible for its care yet fundamentally separated from it. In this view, people protect nature primarily because it has been entrusted to them by God, but without a true sense of belonging. They fulfill this responsibility out of obligation, seeing it as a heteronomous duty rather than an inherent connection. Creation remains external, something to be managed rather than embraced as an integral part of their own being. The stewards act much like a tenant fulfilling a contractual agreement, rather than someone who feels a deep bond of kinship and unity with the natural world.

Francis goes far beyond this. He does not see himself as an absolute lord or a mere caretaker, but as a brother. He loves all creatures because he recognizes himself as part of them, bound by deep ties of kinship. He does not need external encouragement to care for creation; rather, he does so naturally, joyfully, and wholeheartedly. This ecology of kinship is much more profound and transformative than one based merely on management and obligation.

At the beginning of his conversion, he had joyfully discovered "*Our Father, who art in heaven*" and detached himself from the mercantilist mindset embodied by his father Pietro Bernardone. Shortly afterward, he left his paternal home to repair the Church, house of our heavenly Father.

In the *Canticle*, he continues to rejoice in this newfound sense of divine filiation, which makes him a brother to all "creatures;" that is, to all sons and daughters of God the Father.⁶ Therefore, he sees himself neither as an absolute lord nor as a mere caretaker, but as a brother. He loves all creatures because, through them, he discovers the goodness and mercy of the common heavenly father and thus he feels himself a part of them, bound by deep ties of kinship.⁷ He needs no external encouragement to care for creation; he does so spontaneously, joyfully, and wholeheartedly. This ecology of kinship and empathy⁸ is far deeper and more transformative than an approach based solely on rational stewardship and moral obligation.

6 "In Old Italian, 'creature' is a word with a filial meaning; it designates not only creatures in general but also children" (Pereira Lamelas, 2024, 6).

7 "All creatures, therefore, strive to return the saint's love" (Thomas of Celano, 2001b, 166).

8 "Nuestra actitud es de conquista y de posesión [...]. La de Francisco, por el contrario, se despliega enteramente bajo el signo de la simpatía" (Leclerc, 1977, 69; cf. Thomas of Celano, 2001a, 80).

3. THE CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES: A COUNTERPOINT TO MATERIALISTIC LOGIC

The *Canticle of the Creatures*⁹ contrasts sharply with the materialistic logic of the prevailing economic system, which prioritizes endless material growth and reduces nature to a mere resource for profit. Through its poetic beauty, the *Canticle* calls for a profound shift from exploitation to contemplation and from dominance to a deep and reverent harmony with creation.

The *Canticle's* poetic beauty reveals that Francis of Assisi lived religion as poetry and poetry as religion.¹⁰ It also invites us to move from exploitation to contemplation. Composed to be accompanied by music (cf. The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 83; The Mirror of Perfection, 2001, 100),¹¹ the *Canticle* reflects Francis's deep awareness of the evocative power of beauty. His primary reason for praising God is precisely the beauty of creatures. In fact, "in beautiful thing, he discovers Beauty itself" (Thomas of Celano, 2001b, 165; 2001a, 80) and recognizes that they are not only beautiful but also inherently good; for example, he describes water as humble.

As both an artist and a mystic, Francis perceived the profound unity of all creation, recognizing nature not as a mere resource but as a family. The same qualities he attributes to creatures in his *Canticle*, he also applies to the Creator in his *Praises of the Most High God* (Francis of Assisi, 2001e).

Many scholars regard the *Canticle* as Francis's most distinctive and personal work, as it vividly reflects his personality (Leclerc, 1970, 4) and deep appreciation for the rich diversity of creation. In fact, "the manner in which Francis here looks at the created world is a key to his inner self."¹²

The *Canticle* faithfully conveys the core of his evangelizing message: an invitation for all creatures to praise the Most High ("Praise and bless"), a call to conversion ("Woe to those who die in mortal sin!"), and an exhortation to forgiveness and peace ("those who give pardon... and endure in peace") (Vaiani, 2014, 10-11). Francis also conceived the *Canticle* as an evangelizing catechesis in poetic form, "for the edification of our neighbor." Indeed, he wished that, after the friars' sermon, "they were to sing the *Praises of the Lord* as minstrels of the Lord" (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 83).

9 The author had previously developed part of the content of this third section in his book (Carbajo Núñez, 2017, p. 73-79; cf. Piron, 2024).

10 "François d'Assise paraît comme l'Orphée du moyen âge, domptant la férocité des bêtes et la dureté des hommes" (Ozanam, 1913, 64).

11 Celano confirms that the *Canticle* was also intoned while he was in agony.

12 "Much of St. Francis could be reconstructed from that work alone [...]. There is a delicate instinct of differentiation in it" (Chesterton, 1924, 82).

The *Canticle* serves as a key to the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, where it is quoted almost in its entirety in number 87. Over the centuries, it has been widely admired, translated into many languages, and recognized as one of the most significant texts in Christian literature (cf. Lehmann, 2015, 153). Although earlier documents in the Italian vernacular exist, the *Canticle of the Creatures*, written in the Umbrian dialect, is often considered the foundational text of Italian literature,¹³ not only for its linguistic value, but especially for its profound spiritual and cultural significance. Yet, many who appreciate it only from a secular perspective tend to forget that it is first and foremost a prayer.

3.1. Song of love and praise

The *Canticle* is not merely an expression of aesthetic admiration but a profound act of faith, a true song of love and praise. God is both its source and its ultimate destination. At its core, the *Canticle* is a prayer, a hymn to the Most High. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Francis, who was led him to see reality with new eyes (*Test* 3), perceiving in the beauty of creatures a reflection of divine glory. He composed it when he could no longer see physically, but had received the grace to contemplate the beauty of creation through the eyes of faith.

It is not by chance that Francis names the creatures in descending order, starting with the celestial bodies, as if tracing a movement from heaven to earth. In his vision, prayer and thanksgiving replace the logic of possession and domination that permeates modern economic systems. The encyclical *Laudato Si'* reminds us that “whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise” (Francis, 2015, 11).

Francis also composed the music for his *Canticle*, echoing the words of prophet Isaiah: “Now let me sing of my friend, my beloved’s song about his vineyard” (Is 5:1). His hymn is not a song of possession but of love, not of exploitation but of communion. His praise is not based on the usefulness of creatures to humanity but on their inherent dignity. Each, in its own way, “bears a likeness of You, Most High One” (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 4)¹⁴.

Unlike the dominant economic logic of today, Francis recognizes the intrinsic worth of all created beings. He does not see them merely as resources to be exploited but as companions and members of a shared cosmic family. They are not

13 “La letteratura italiana comincia solo nel 1220 con il Cantico delle creature di S. Francesco” (Curtius, as cited in Goff, 2002, sec. 3). However, only belatedly it was appreciated as a poetic work (Bartoli, 2023). “Il più antico componimento poetico in volgare italiano” (Roselli, 2012, 12).

14 The fact of attributing three qualities to the three heavenly creatures is a sign of his Trinitarian vision (cf. Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 4-5).

passive elements in the background of human activity but active participants in the great symphony of creation, joining humanity in a harmonious song of praise to God.

According to Thomas of Celano (2001b, 213), Francis composed his *Canticle*¹⁵ in the spring of 1225, only a few months before his death, at a time of profound physical and spiritual suffering. The harmony, typical of messianic times, that God had allowed him to experience in his encounters with the wolf of Gubbio, the fish, and the animals, who listened meekly to his sermons, now seemed distant. In the preceding years (1222-1224), he had endured deep struggles and tensions within his Order, which he managed to overcome completely only shortly before receiving the stigmata.¹⁶ Now he finds himself blind, sick, and grieving. Even the night brought no relief, as he was tormented by suffering and disturbed by rats.

Yet, amid so much darkness, he trusts in the promise of eternal salvation he has just received in vision,¹⁷ strengthens his faith, and begins to sing his song of praise. With the *Canticle*, he expresses the “consolation” he has just received, seeks “the edification of our neighbor” (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 83), and, above all, praises the Creator. His biographers relate that “when his illness grew more serious, he himself began to say the *Praises of the Lord*, and afterwards had his companions sing it” (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 83). In doing so, he is not moved by the care-free optimism of his youthful years but by the mature and serene hope of one who knows in whom he has placed his faith (cf. 2Tim 1:12).

3.2. A new cosmic and integral harmony

Moved by the Holy Spirit, Francis of Assisi can grasp the deep meaning of all that exists. Consequently, in his *Canticle of the Creatures*, he highlights what, according to the understanding of his time, were considered the four fundamental elements of the sublunary world: earth, water, air, and fire. By focusing on the very essence of things, he emphasizes the divine wisdom that orchestrates the harmony of all that exists.

This pursuit for profundity may explain why animals and angels are not explicitly mentioned in the *Canticle*, despite their significant presence in his biographies and in verses 78-81 of the *Canticle of Daniel* (or *Benedicite*: Dan 3:51-89), from

15 Many scholars argue that the *Canticle* was composed in three stages: with an initial addition on forgiveness (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 84) and another on death (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 7). The structure of the text, however, seems to support only one redaction, as Thomas of Celano states (cf. Horowski, in press).

16 Francis had already begun to overcome this temptation while at the Portiuncula (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 63; The Mirror of Perfection, 2001, 99).

17 The vision reports a new world, similar to a garden where “the whole earth were changed to pure gold, all stones to precious stones, and all water to balsam” (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 83).

which he certainly draws inspiration¹⁸ along with Genesis 1. It could be said that his praise focuses not so much on individual creatures, but rather on the luminous heavenly bodies and the fundamental “energies that, in their interplay, shape the visible world” (Pozzi, 1990).

In the Biblical account of Creation, from which Francis drew inspiration, God does not eliminate aspects that might seem negative in the human condition but instead places them in the right perspective. For example, God “separated the light from the darkness” “and called the light ‘day’ and the darkness he called ‘night’” (Gn 1:4-5). Similarly, Francis prefers to highlight the positive elements of nature while acknowledging their complexity. He knows that water, though humble and precious, can become impetuous and destructive; that the wind, with its force, can knock down everything it encounters (cf. *True and Perfect Joy*, 2001, 8). Though his illness prevents him from seeing the sun and fire, he continues to regard them as his brothers.¹⁹

His vision is not reductive but holistic. He embraces even those elements that are often perceived as negative. Rather than excluding the wolf of Gubbio, he reintegrates it into the community. Likewise, he does not reject illness or flee from death but recognizes them as part of a larger design. His perspective is global and harmonious: everything finds meaning within the whole of creation, and nothing, not even suffering or death, can disrupt the harmony and beauty of the *Canticle*.

3.3. Synthesis of interior and exterior ecology

In the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, Francis reveals himself as a mystic who perceives the entire universe as a harmonious family—his own family—with which he feels deeply united. This profound sense of unity with all creation moves him to joyful and grateful praise of God (cf. Leclerc, 1970).

His choice of words and the adjectives he employs reflect a profoundly positive view of the material world, standing in stark contrast to the medieval prejudices of his time, particularly those of Gnostic or Manichean movements like the Cathars, who attributed the physical realm to Satan. Francis, instead, experiences divine fatherhood in such profound a way that he sees the world not as a collection of inert or alien objects but as a web of fraternal relationships, where every creature is a brother or sister.

18 “Once the three young men in the furnace of burning fire invited all the elements to praise and glorify the Creator of all things, so this man” (Thomas of Celano, 2001a, 80). Francis includes angels and animals in praising the Most High in (Francis of Assisi, 2001c, 23,6).

19 During the cauterization, he had also turned to brother fire: “Be gracious to me in this hour; be courteous!” (Thomas of Celano, 2001b, 166; *The Assisi Compilation*, 2001, 86).

Before his conversion, Francis instinctively avoided anything that could cause him pain or discomfort. For example, in his Testament, he recalls that “it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers.” (*Test* 1) Yet, the night before composing the *Canticle*, he hears an inner voice urging him to a new perspective: “Be glad and rejoice in your illnesses and troubles” (The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 83). This experience brings him true peace; that is, a profound integration of both inner and outer ecology: The universal fraternity that binds him to creation and moves him to urge reconciliation among his brothers finds its counterpart in his inner harmony, enabling him to embrace illness, physical suffering, and even death; everything that, from a human perspective, might otherwise bring distress.

In the *Canticle*, in fact, there is no separation between the macrocosm and the microcosm, between the order of the universe and that of the heart. Francis does not fall into a disembodied spiritualism, as evidenced by his request, in the final moments of his life, to once again taste the delicious sweets prepared for him by Jacopa of Settesogli (The Mirror of Perfection, 2001, 112).

Francis does not complain about the suffering he endures, nor does he seek revenge or retribution toward those who may have hurt him. He does not ignore the existence of evil, but he recognizes that Christ’s forgiveness and mercy can “re-create” cosmic harmony, restoring each element to its rightful place and purpose. With a vision grounded in faith, Francis praises God “through those who give pardon for Your love, and bear infirmity and tribulation” (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 10). In other words, he exalts the Most High because He enables us to find meaning even in what seems senseless or painful. Even bodily death becomes a sister to him, because it opens for us the door to eternal life (cf. The Assisi Compilation, 2001, 7).²⁰

CONCLUSION

The reflection conducted has highlighted the unsustainability of the current economic system, which is driven by unbridled consumerism and the pursuit of endless growth, an impossibility on a world with finite resources. To achieve true development, we must move beyond the technocentric approach and adopt an ecocentric perspective, where the sustainability of natural ecosystems takes precedence over mere economic utility. This shift requires that the principles governing nature’s delicate balance guide the management of human resources, rather than being subordinated to the logic of profit (cf. Georgescu-Roegen, Bonaiuti,

20 “Dio si manifesta sia nell’ordine e nella bellezza del mondo, sia nell’oscurità della notte umana, quando è accettata” (Matura, 1996, 162).

2013; Costanza et al. 2015). We must reciprocate the care that *Sister Mother Earth* provides, for she “sustains and governs us” with motherly love (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 31).²¹ Like a nurturing mother, she does not dominate but rather supports, educates, and protects.²²

Initiatives like the United Nations’ “Global Compact” network, which promotes corporate social responsibility in environmental protection, are a significant step in the right direction (cf. Rasche, Kell, 2010; www.unglobalcompact.org). However, true progress requires a deeper alliance between science and religion, whose “distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both” (Francis, 2015, 62).

The free and fraternal economy proposed by the Franciscan tradition avoids paternalistic welfarism, strengthens community bonds, and transforms the market into a relational space. Material goods are beneficial, but without relational goods, they cannot lead to true happiness.²³ Economic capital can increase material wealth, but without social capital, it cannot enrich the community.

Francis of Assisi does not see nature as a mere collection of resources to be exploited, but as a great family, where the sun, moon, water, and fire are our brothers and sisters, joining us in praising the Creator. He rejects the logic of power²⁴ and domination²⁵ in order to be poor, humble and lesser, thus becoming a universal brother.²⁶

Ultimately, the *Canticle of the Creatures* serves as a profound critique of an economic system that commodifies every aspect of reality. It invites us to shift from a paradigm of domination to one of fraternity, from a world driven by greed to one animated by gratitude and care. Creatures are not mere objects for economic gain, but brothers and sisters, who “bear a likeness of God” and join humanity in a common song of praise. Each of them has a face and a role in the cosmic web of life.

21 The earth is sister because it is a creature like us, but it is also mother because it was created first (“God created the heavens and the earth” Gen 1:1). Then all other creatures flow from it (“Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature” Gen 1:24) and finally “God formed the man out of the dust of the ground.” Gen 2:7.

22 Even today, in Italian dialects “govern” (“governare.” In Trentino “guernar” and in Sicily “gubernari”) means precisely “to feed the animals” (Paolazzi, 2019, 781-782; Piron, 2024, 70). Guardians must also exercise her authority in a motherly way, as the earth does (Francis of Assisi, 2001d, 1-2).

23 Aristotle (2007) states that happiness has two dimensions: the material or acquisitive (having) and the expressive, that is, the network of relationships that binds people together.

24 “Serve Him with great humility” (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 14).

25 “Subject to every human creature” (Francis of Assisi, 2001c, 16.6). “Subject and submissive to everyone in the world, no only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well” (Francis of Assisi, 2001e).

26 This is how he explains it to Bishop Guido: (The Legend of the Three Companions, 2001, 35). In his Rule he does not provide for the construction of dwellings for the friars, as was then customary in religious life, and seeks to tear down the first house the friars inhabited (Thomas of Celano, 2001b, 57).

At the same time, Francis humbly acknowledges that he needs the help that creatures provide. By joining in their praise, he rises above his own limitations and sense of unworthiness, for “no human is worthy to mention Your name” (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 2). Indeed, “all of us, wretches and sinners, are not worthy to pronounce Your name,” (Francis of Assisi, 2001c, 23,5) whereas “all creatures under heaven serve, know, and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you” (Francis of Assisi, 2001a, 5,2).

Francis knows that only “our Lord Jesus Christ, [...] together with the Holy Spirit” can give thanks to the Father for us, “as it pleases You and Him” (Francis of Assisi, 2001c, 23:5). Within this dynamic, Francis praises the Father “*with*” all creatures (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 3) and “*through*” them (Francis of Assisi, 2001b, 5-9).

As he prepares to meet Sister Bodily Death, he lies naked upon the bare earth (Thomas of Celano, 2001b, 217), awaiting the ultimate embrace of his heavenly Father.

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THE CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES AND SUSTAINABILITY: LISTENING TO THE CRY OF THE EARTH

SUMMARY

Recognizing that “everything is interconnected,” this article explores the ecological challenges posed by the current economic system, which prioritizes material growth and fuels relentless consumerism. Rather than addressing genuine human needs—which are naturally limited—it stimulates unlimited desires, endangering the sustainability of the global ecosystem and amplifying the cry of the earth (Part 1). The Human being is portrayed as an insatiable consumer, locked in constant conflict with the world around him (Part 2). To overcome this cycle of struggle and self-destruction, we must foster a new relational paradigm inspired by Francis of Assisi and his *Canticle of the Creatures* (Part 3).

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