Creation and Community Consciousness: Il Poverello’s Intercultural and Intergenerational Insights and Inspiration*

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St. Francis provides for twenty-first-century Christians—and for all reflective people across generations, cultures, and beliefs—insights into how people should relate to each other, to all living beings, and to their shared Earth home. Francis lived simply: he owned no personal property and consumed little except what was necessary to live; he left a light footprint on Earth’s earth. Francis’s perspective might well be appropriated in our time, where ecological devastation and rampant consumerism harm our planet. Francis loved sincerely: his well-known affection for people and all life confront the contemporary lack of compassion for the poor and the thoughtless extinction of biota. The insights of Il Poverello could inspire concrete actions: people would tread lightly on and care for the Earth, living simply so that others might simply live; people would provide for the common good of humans and all creation, with whom they are interdependent and interrelated, having shared a common origin in a cosmic cradle eons ago and co-evolved over millennia.

People who hear about Francis of Assisi and then come to know his life and work often become his admirers, if not at first, then over time. Adherents of a particular faith tradition, those who consider themselves “not religious but spiritual,” agnostics and secular humanists have recognized his affinity for all beings, living or nonliving, his simplicity of life, and his compassion for those who suffer. Some of these characteristics are described in anecdotes about his

* William R. Cook, Distinguished Teaching Professor of History, Emeritus, at the State University of New York, Geneseo, whom we celebrate through this Festschrift, is one who both admires St. Francis and embodies, in a personalized way and as a teaching scholar—and “tour guide”—Francis’s salient attributes. I came to know Bill as a friend, professor, and scholar with complementary interests and ideas, during the 2003 National Endowment for the Humanities six-week seminar he led, “St. Francis of Assisi in the Thirteenth Century.” Now, more than a decade later, I celebrate with Bill the exemplary life and thought of St. Francis, so needed for our times; and I celebrate Bill himself for the extent to which he enthusiastically, expertly, and convincingly conveyed the spirit of Francis and instilled it among us. He imparted, sincerely and simply, creatively and clearly, his scholarly knowledge and wisdom about the life, times, and teachings of Francis. In addition to enjoying and profiting from Bill’s lectures, we experienced
relationships with diverse living creatures, from birds in the air, through a prowling aggressive wolf, to fish in the water. He worked with the most egregiously outcast people of his time, the lepers whom villagers exiled from their home and hearth to wander alone and forage for themselves—usually having to ring a bell to warn anyone approaching to keep their distance in order to avoid affliction from leprosy—or gather periodically in settled or spontaneous communities comprised solely of themselves. William Cook observes that of the sick people of Francis's age, the “most horrible of all were the lepers. Their grotesqueness and smell brought disgust to many who saw them, and it was commonly believed that the disease was God’s punishment of its victims.”

Assisi, in fact, was home to three leprosaria in which the more fortunate could find refuge and be cared for, usually by members of Catholic religious orders, generally religious sisters. Francis's economic simplicity was evidenced by his personal poverty and the rule he established for his friars, and his personal simplicity was expressed in a joyful appreciation of life and of the people he encountered in his travels and who accompanied him as his followers, and the respectful humility with which he engaged them all.

Francis's extraordinary song, the “Canticle of the Creatures” presents his mystical relationship with all that exists in creation, who he calls his brothers and sisters; anecdotes about his wandering and his engagement with diverse types of people portray his sincere solicitude for all. From the thirteenth century through the twenty-first, laity as well as clergy have become his followers, to the extent that their personal and professional lives permit them, a remarkable phenomenon because almost a millennium has passed since he wandered cheerfully at home and abroad, dedicated to spreading the Christian message as he understood it. His affinity for and sense of kinship with birds and

firsthand the places Francis lived and through which he traveled. Through Bill’s comments on our journeys, and the books he assigned and suggested for the seminar, we discovered in depth Francis's life and work as expressed over centuries: in accounts from his era as described in works by his friars, and in subsequent centuries by scholars the world over. Professor Cook appreciatively analyzed also the extensive art, in multiple media, that embodied love and admiration for Francis as it developed over the centuries, and shared his expertise and enthusiasm with us. Our travels throughout the same regions of Italy walked by St. Francis, as well as our seminar sessions, and the history and art surrounding Francis that we came to understand through Bill’s inspired (and inspiring) teaching and reflective comments, left us with stimulating memories, new and enhanced knowledge about Francis, and enlightened understanding that remain with us long after our seminar.