

# Franciscan Love

a brief,  
affectionate  
glance

Robert Steiner



## 'No one showed me what I ought to do.' (Francis)

There is a poetic quality to the life of Francis of Assisi. Our hearts are encouraged to connect with creation in a fresh way. The stories of his encounters with animals and nature evoke a renewed desire for walking "barefoot". For to feel the 'humus' (Latin for 'earth') beneath our feet, to consider air, fire, water and earth our brothers and sisters, is to return to a place of 'humilitas' (Latin for 'humility'). We are part of a bigger family, taken from the same earth to which we will return. We need to bow down low enough to die into life.





It is rather ironic that we celebrate St Francis Day with having our pets blessed. Not a single story of the 50 anecdotes about Francis and the animals encourage the ownership of animals. To the contrary, in most cases we encounter a saint who is determined to set the captives free: A fish is returned to the water and a rabbit to the forest. In line with his fundamental rejection of any kind of

possessions, animals should not be treated as objects, but as subjects, entitled to freedom and equality. On the other hand, if some of them should choose to stay, then we are to cherish them as friends, who have a right to exist in themselves. Their value and dignity should never be reduced to what they can be for us. It is a radical break with our culture's mentality of consumption and entitlement.



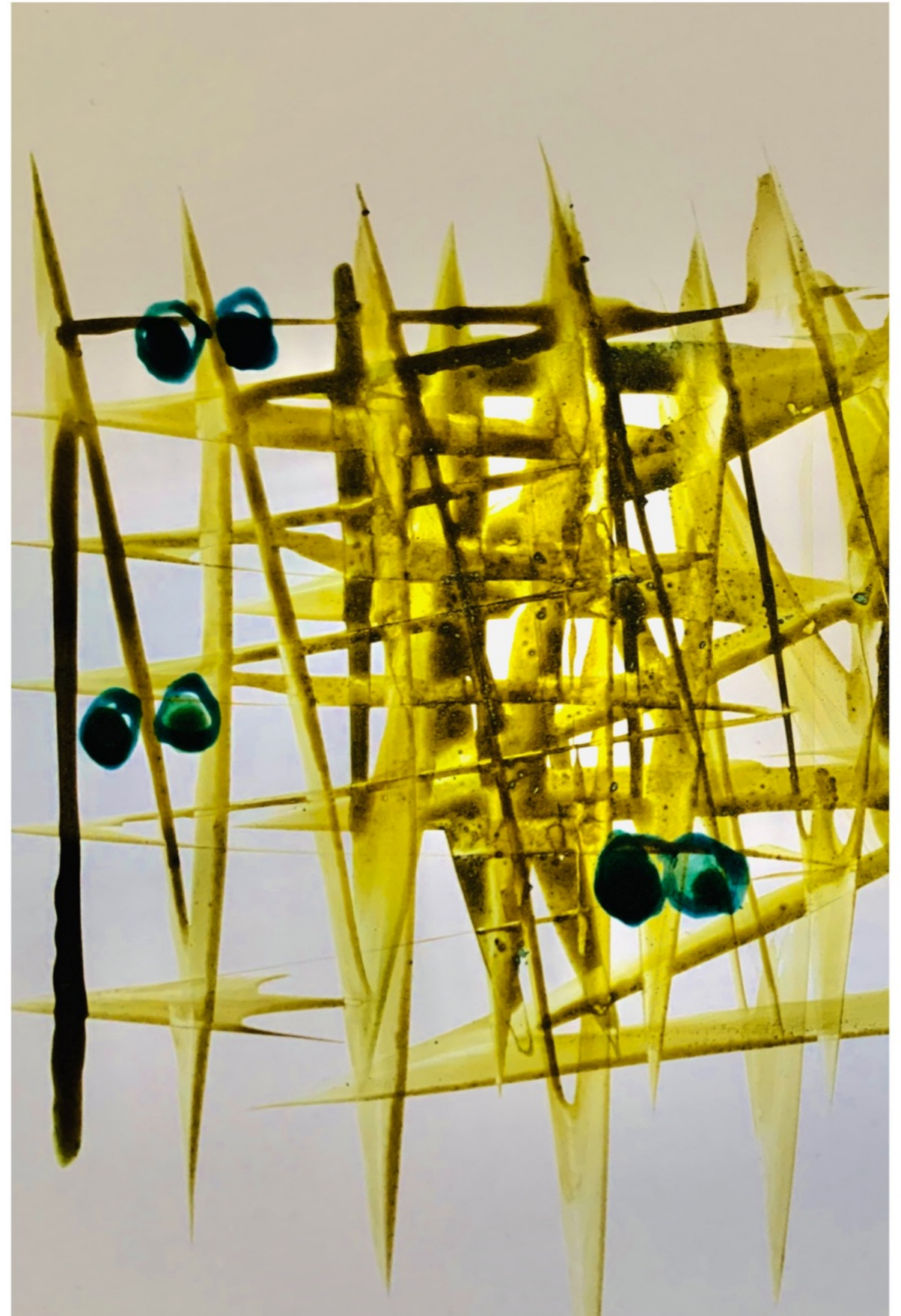
'I have done what is mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours!'(Francis)

The Franciscan approach to life breathes Protestant freedom. We are accountable to our conscience. Francis and his followers were not vegetarians. They relied on people's offerings and could not afford to be picky. In fact, it is recorded that Francis often ate poultry, as it was considered to protect one from malaria. One wonders, of course, how Francis would have responded to the often cruel and inhumane conditions of today's mass livestock farming. He was convinced that Christ calls each one of us into responsibility, affirming our ability to respond. It is a gift, not a burden, to be discovered anew by each generation.

# 'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace ...' (Francis)

Francis knew that consumption can become all consuming, robbing the world of its beauty and mystery. There should always be plants in the garden that do not serve a particular purpose and are not 'useful' as such.

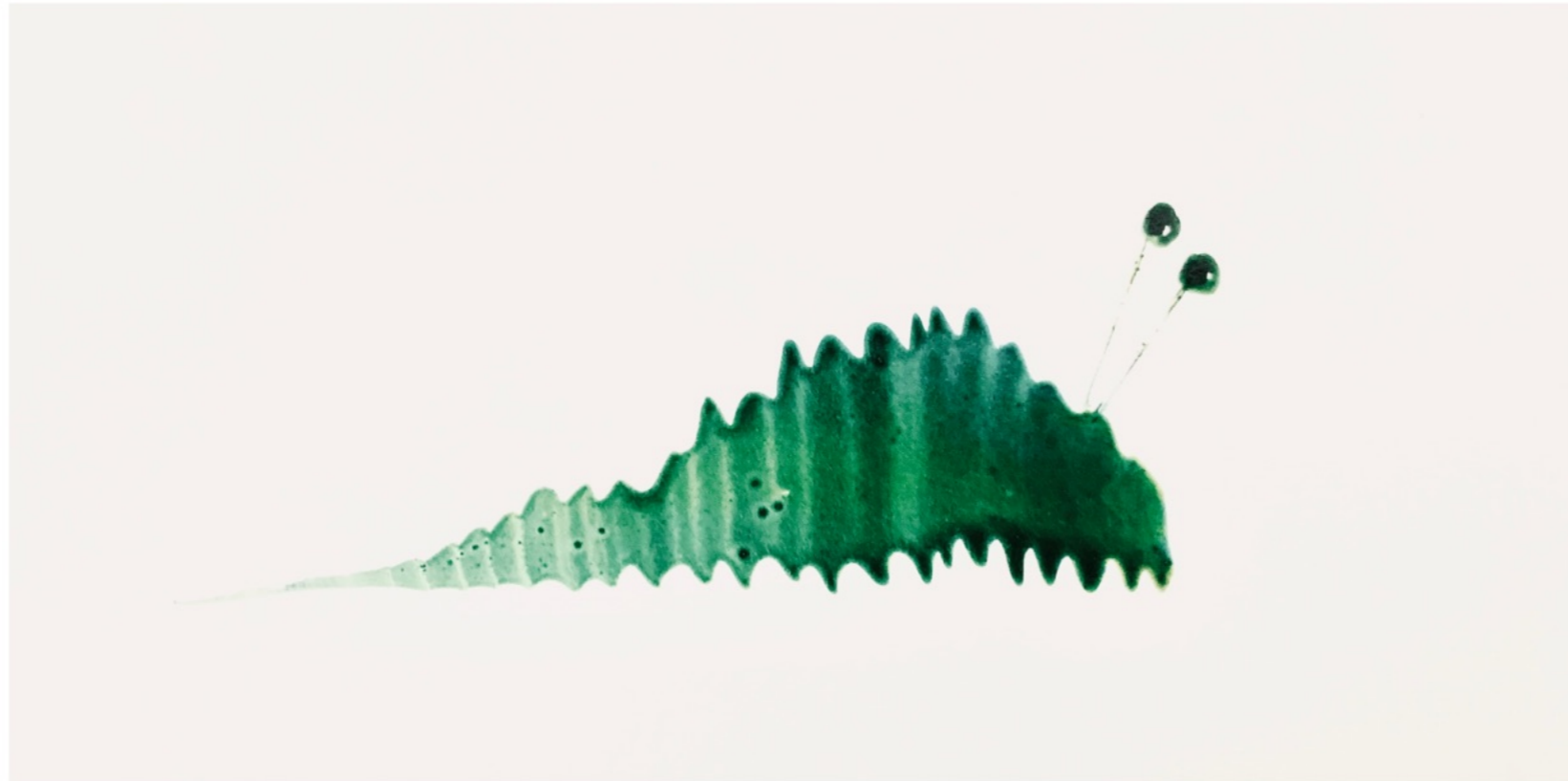
And why cut off a whole tree, if you can break off a few branches to make a fire?





## 'Praised be You, my Lord, through sister moon and the stars ...' (Francis)

The famous Canticle of the Sun, one of the most beautiful praises of creation, was written by Francis at a dark hour in his life. He was 43 years old, very frail, and almost blind. While seeking the help of doctors in San Fabiano, he lived in a cave like shelter below a dwelling. There, in the darkness, his eyes were protected from sunlight and the smoke from fires. But his vision was clearer and brighter than ever, finding poetic expression in a song that presents us with a theological imagination that was unheard of until then. The primal elements of fire, air, water and earth are capable of adoration. Francis goes beyond a mere pragmatic or utilitarian view of nature. Nature is alive, carries subjectivity and responds to the invitation to praise the creator. It is a joyful breaking free from an anthropocentric worldview. Sisterhood and brotherhood is extended to the non-human elements of our universe. It is a bold vision, both from a theological and an ecological perspective.



Francis developed what could be coined a theological zoology. Some animals become a screen onto which we project our capacity for both greed and innocence, violence and gentleness. The story of the wolf of Gubbio illustrates the former.

Other animals are affirmed in their immediacy towards God, their creator. Their devotion is seen to be purer and more innocent than the one of humans, who are corrupted by a desire to possess and control. In the story of the nightingale it is the bird that invites Francis to a duet in praise of God.

Two animals enjoyed a particular sanctity, respect and protection: The lamb and the worm. They were seen to reflect the vulnerability and suffering of Jesus. Their presence almost gained a sacramental status, becoming themselves an object of worship and adoration. The *agnus dei* was joined by the *vermis dei* from Psalm 22, where the worm symbolizes the debasement and rejection Jesus suffered. But Francis thinks beyond metaphor and symbol. To behold a worm in the dust is to be in the presence of the suffering Jesus. To lift the worm from the sand to green pastures is to save and show respect to the son of God.

