

800 Years of Musical Joy

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm



Yes, this year the Franciscan world celebrates with joy the 800th anniversary of the *Canticle of the Creatures* that Francis of Assisi wrote in 1225-26. Behind the Canticle, however, is a legacy that he left the Order and is carried on to this day. His gift was musical preaching. *The Assisi Compilation* [1244-60] has a passage in which the Latin verbs for *speak* and *sing* are used to explain how Francis and the earliest friars would share not only his *Canticle of the Creatures* but all their sermons by using both forms of communication. Francis was definitely musical and a writer, combining both to deliver God's Word in a new and captivating form.

Francis' words in *Mirror of Perfection*: "What are the servants of God if not His jongleurs, who must lift people's hearts and move them up to spiritual joy. And he said this to the Lesser Brothers who have been given to the people of God for their salvation." A *jongleur* was a medieval entertainer who was renowned for singing and storytelling. Our founder wanted friars to learn how to use songs to lead their audiences to similar mystical experiences in prayer. *The mission seems clear: the principles of Franciscan spirituality were to be transmitted to all people through divine speech, chant and songs.* " [Music in Early Franciscan Thought by Peter V. Loewen]

Musicologists have discovered 13th century friars renowned for how they taught young friars how to incorporate music into other fields of study. William of Middleton taught at the University of Paris and in Cambridge. Bartholomaeus Anglicus enriched students in Magdeburg, David von Augsburg (1200-1272) worked in Regensburg. Anyone familiar with German music knows those cities as centers of musical learning; the friars were right there from the beginning of our fraternity. There were other famous music teachers known throughout England, France, Spain and Germany. Von Augsburg is perhaps the most well-known among music historians because he notated what he taught. There are over four hundred copies of his music books that are filled with prayer texts with marking to show where intervals occur in the words for singing. In 1990 I was gifted with an afternoon with *The Breviary of St. Clare* at San Damiano in Assisi; it is filled with texts with similar musical markings and later developments of 1- or 2-line staves. These are just glimpses into the profound impact Franciscans had on liturgical music that touched the entire Church of the 13th century and beyond!

Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253) was an English bishop and, from what I've read, a genius among whose pupils was Roger Bacon. Multi-lingual scholar, he taught philosophy, science and like many scholars, had his enemies. But he loved music and wrote songs in French, played the harp and helped form the musical education of the first friars in England. He accepted the responsibility to form the young friars for the ministry of preaching the Gospel and prepare these itinerant preachers who would instruct the masses." Many of the older friars in our Province walked in the shadows of these giants.

Many of you know I grew up in Quincy, IL, in St. Francis Parish. When I was in elementary school in the '50's it was the place where every newly ordained friar came for their first year of ordained ministry – the whole class! My brothers and I served endless Masses and often it was while the friar community was chanting the office. I was enthralled with the sounds. Woven into the hours of early morning musical prayer, awe while serving at the six altars in our Prairie Gothic church, this little boy was swept up in the joy of Franciscans singing. I wanted to share their joy. I wanted to wear brown. I wanted what they had.



I entered the minor seminary at 13 – yes, I did. But we had a different world, a different Church in 1962. From day one we 300+ seminarians made music in chapel numerous times every day. We sang at seemingly every service. And I owe most of my musical self and career to Fr. Tarsicius Fischer. He taught every seminarian music for years. I joined band and choir to continue what I learned in Quincy. I began organ lessons with him, studied music history and composed my first song, a setting of seven lines from *Pippa Passes* by Robert Browning when I was a sophomore. Under his direction our choir sang Gregorian chant, of course, but we learned a vast repertoire of choral works from Palestrina to Stravinsky and Flor Peeters. “Tars” taught me how to love classical music, even taking us to see *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Aida* at the Lyric Opera. After that performance of *Aida*, this humble friar took us backstage and we met the incomparable Leontyne Price, a moment I will never forget! I was thrilled to be a part of my first recording in 1964, *Sing With Joy!* What memories and what JOY in making music in the spirit of Francis we were given. Believe me, I could write a book about my life with music, because it continues to this day.

Going back to Grosseteste ~ in his work *Templum Dei* this master wrote: “In the hands of a learned minister, music can move the soul toward good and expel unwanted feelings and states of mind. Music and melodies can cure illnesses that afflict the soul and they can even heal physical ailments.” So true. I know other harpists who train in hospital music therapy, playing in hospice rooms to ease patients into another phase of life with sonorous beauty. There can be joy in the middle of pain and mystery.

When I take these memory trips of my own musical background as a man, as a friar and as a priest, I sense an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I am so blessed, as is every single friar and member of our Franciscan family with the legacy flowing from the heart and preaching style of Francis of Assisi. I cannot preside at Eucharist without singing at least two acclamations. Mass or other devotions are rather lifeless, in my mind, without the gift of melody. People go nuts at Wrigley Field at the 7th inning stretch. How can we celebrate birthdays or anniversaries without those universal songs? Even silent movies had background music! So when we give ourselves to the Presence of the Most High, “how can we keep from singing?”

In October 1990 I began a three year period of research in medieval music manuscripts in the libraries of Assisi, looking for the oldest hymn texts about Francis and Clare. On my first day in the precious library of Sacro Convento I bravely asked for Codex 338...and the friar brought it to me, no questions asked. The small leather-bound tome is probably the most precious record of all Franciscana and as I opened it, there was the first-ever printed copy of *Il Cantico delle Creature*! I stared in silence and almost cried because – who was I to be so privileged as to hold this manuscript? (You see it here with the space left for his original melody but it was lost. That moment began a whole new phase of my own life as a friar composer and I can only rejoice at the events of the past thirty five years!



Last summer the friars of the Assisi Seraphic Province invited me to compose a new setting of this splendid text that expresses the apex of Francis' appreciation for the unity of all God's creation. I was honored and challenged and began in earnest August 2024; I finished the score for soloist, chorus and chamber orchestra in June 2025, sent the score to my friend, Paolo Castellani, for a final proof. That done, I created every single instrument and vocal part to be sent to the musicians. We confirmed the world premiere will be on 17 September in the Basilica di San Pietro in Perugia, with the same program performed 20 September in the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi. As you can imagine the year of detailed work has led to an exciting experience to celebrate the 800th anniversary *Il Cantico delle Creature*. I am honored and humbled by this gift, supported as it is by many generous donors who continue to support our efforts.

But you don't have to come all the way to Italy to experience this new work. As part of our **Franciscan Festival 2025** St. Peter's is hosting a special concert on the Solemnity of Francis, **October 4, at 7:30 p.m.** here in our church. 40 musicians will praise God in our **Concert for Creation**, celebrating many aspects of God's work all around us. Consult our web site or bulletins for details. And we friars of St. Peter's community also conclude not only **the 800th anniversary of *Il Cantico*** but the **150th anniversary of Franciscan presence and service at St. Peter's Church**. And believe me, this concert will offer everyone the opportunity to listen, yes, but to also join in singing God's praise! How can a Franciscan celebration of any kind not include music for all? You now know more about the musical legacy that Francis left us. Please join us for the events every day of the Festival week, culminating with a beautiful paean of musical praise for all of Creation! Because of your constant care and support for us and our ministry, we wish you all good things through music and myriad ways to be touched by God's goodness and as always ~ may God give you peace.

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, OFM



Franciscan Festival 2025

Monday, Sept. 29, 12:15 pm Stories of Friars who served at St. Peter's

Tuesday, Sept. 20 , 12:15 pm *The Canticle of Creatures* - a lecture given by
scholar Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzales, OFM

Wednesday, Oct. 1, 12:15 pm A Serenade of Strings ~ concert with guitar, violin and piano

Thursday, Oct. 2, 11 am-2pm Treasures of St. Peter's ~ art exhibit of our Liturgical vessels and sacred art

Friday, Oct. 3, 5:00 pm Transitus of St. Francis, remember his
death

Saturday, Oct. 4, 5:00 pm Solemn Eucharist of the Feast of
St. Francis
7:30 pm Concert for Creation

Sunday, Oct. 5, 12:30 pm Blessing of Animals in front of
St. Peter's