

This photo is available in
the print version of *Mysticism*.

A mystic's relationship with God is very difficult to articulate in words. From Francis's words Bellini paints an image that becomes yet another way we attempt to come closer to God—the goal we share with the mystics.

Giovanni Bellini (c. 1431-1516). ST. FRANCIS IN ECSTASY, c.1485. Oil and tempera on panel, 49" x 55 7/8". The Frick Collection, New York. Photo: © The Frick Collection, New York. Used by permission.

Radiant with Great Splendor

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Notice that St. Francis's feet are bare. Giovanni Bellini, in his intensely religious works of art, is meticulous about the details of the biblical narrative or religious event he depicts. In his masterpiece *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, he elevates the importance of the saint's mystical experience by portraying him as barefoot, like Moses was before the burning bush. Francis is standing on holy ground and in the presence of God.

Some historians say the painting shows Francis receiving the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, on the feast of the Holy Cross in 1224 on Mount Alverna. Yet the wounds are barely visible and the crucified seraph who brought the stigmata to Francis from God is not shown. A recent interpretation suggests the painting depicts the *Hymn of the Sun* that the saint wrote in 1225 after his annual fast in Assisi. The fast had been particularly difficult as he could not bear the sight of light and was plagued by mice. Francis emerged from his cell only after God convinced him that he would enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Francis addresses "Brother Sun, who gives the day...[and] is beautiful and radiant with great splendor," yet Bellini does not paint the sun in his composition. The Venetian artist invites us to imagine Brother Sun and God, its creator of whom it is a symbol, beyond the tree on the left that bends away from God's magnificent presence. In the background the heavenly Jerusalem rises majestically beyond the river, prepared for the souls of the blessed who will arrive on judgment day.

The cave in the right foreground symbolizes the saint's hope to receive salvation through an ascetic life, and because Francis refers to his body as "Brother Ass," a donkey stands in the meadow. The figure of Francis is a small presence within the wideness of nature, expressing the saint's belief that God created humanity to enjoy and be blessed by the world.

Bellini may have been inspired by these words from the *Hymn of the Sun*:

Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures,
 above all Brother Sun,
 who gives the day and by whom you shed light on us.
 And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor.
 Of thee, Most High, he is a symbol.