

St. Francis of Assisi - Nature and the Environment

Many of the stories that surround the life of St. Francis deal with his love for animals. Perhaps the most famous incident that illustrates the Saint's humility towards nature is recounted in the "Fioretti" ("Little Flowers"), a collection of [legends](#) and folklore that sprang up after the Saint's death. It is said that, one day, while Francis was traveling with some companions, they happened upon a place in the road where birds filled the trees on either side. Francis told his companions to "wait for me while I go to preach to my sisters the birds". The birds surrounded him, drawn by the power of his voice, and not one of them flew away. Francis spoke to them:

My sister birds, you owe much to God, and you must always and in everyplace give praise to Him; for He has given you freedom to wing through the sky and He has clothed you... you neither sow nor reap, and God feeds you and gives you rivers and fountains for your thirst, and mountains and valleys for shelter, and tall trees for your nests. And although you neither know how to spin or weave, God dresses you and your children, for the Creator loves you greatly and He blesses you abundantly. Therefore... always seek to praise God.

Another legend from the [Fioretti](#) tells that in the city of [Gubbio](#), where Francis lived for some time, was a [wolf](#) "terrifying and ferocious, who devoured men as well as animals". Francis had compassion upon the townsfolk, and went up into the hills to find the wolf. Soon, fear of the animal had caused all his companions to flee, though the saint pressed on. When he found the wolf, he made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to come to him and hurt no one. Miraculously the wolf closed his jaws and lay down at the feet of St. Francis. "Brother Wolf, you do much harm in these parts and you have done great evil...", said Francis. "All these people accuse you and curse you... But brother wolf, I would like to make peace between you and the people". Then Francis led the wolf into the town, and surrounded by startled citizens made a pact between them and the wolf. Because the wolf had "done evil out of hunger", the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly, and in return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks. In this manner Gubbio was freed from the menace of the predator. Francis, ever the lover of animals, even made a pact on behalf of the town dogs, that they would not bother the wolf again. It is also said that Francis, to show the townspeople that they would not be harmed, baptized the wolf.

These legends exemplify the Franciscan mode of charity and poverty as well as the saint's love of the natural world. Part of his appreciation of the environment is expressed in his [Canticle of the Sun](#), a poem written in Umbrian Italian in perhaps 1224 which expresses a love and appreciation of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Mother Earth, Brother Fire, etc. and all of God's creations personified in their fundamental forms. In "Canticle of the Creatures," he wrote: "All praise to you, Oh Lord, for all these brother and sister creatures."

Francis's attitude towards the natural world, while poetically expressed, was conventionally Christian. He believed that the world was created good and beautiful by God but suffers a need for redemption because of the primordial sin of man. He preached to man and beast the universal ability and duty of all creatures to praise God (a common theme in the Psalms) and the duty of men to protect and enjoy nature as both the stewards of God's creation and as creatures ourselves. Legend has it that St. Francis on his deathbed thanked his [donkey](#) for carrying and helping him throughout his life, and his donkey wept.

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