

The Patron Saint of Animals

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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St. Francis was a medieval man with modern ideas

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While surfing the Humane Society of the United States website, I found a page devoted entirely to a saint. Our nation's largest animal protection organization, a secular group, has reserved a section among important advocacy and educational information for St. Francis of Assisi, who lived in Italy 800 years ago. Who was Francis, and why has he earned a venerable place in the present-day animal rights community?

Born in 1182 into a wealthy cloth merchant family, young Francis became a soldier and prisoner of war, triggering a lifelong compassion for those who suffer. Soon he was preaching the Gospels, and he and his followers in Umbria gave up all their possessions, focusing on caring for the poor and sick. They lived a Spartan lifestyle, sleeping in huts and caves, wearing only plain tunics. This was the birth of the Franciscan Order of the Catholic Church, and by 1210 it was authorized by Pope Innocent III.

As amenities downsized, Francis's reputation grew, even though he was never ordained a priest. According to the biographer Bonaventure (who was himself later canonized) in the *Life of*

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, Francis healed a leper simply by washing him and praying for him, becoming one of several miracles attributed to him.

During the Fifth Crusade in 1219, he tried unsuccessfully to negotiate peace with the Sultan of Egypt, yet he gained the ruler's admiration and was granted permission to preach throughout the Holy Land. Back home, Francis wanted common people to connect on an emotional level with the New Testament Christmas story of the birth of Jesus. Church music, however, was formal and sung in Latin, so he began the tradition of caroling by putting new lyrics to popular melodies, bringing joyous songs about Christmas to the streets.

He furthered this idea of bringing biblical stories to the masses when he set up the first known nativity scene on Christmas 1223 near Assisi. He took a trough of straw and a borrowed donkey and ox into a cave, as well as a wax baby Jesus and real people to portray parents Mary and Joseph. It was a living, breathing Gospel lesson that all could understand, and led to another miracle associated with Francis: in the Bonaventure biography, it's written that the hay from first nativity scene was later fed to diseased cows and they were cured.

Today Francis is best known for preaching sermons to animals, especially birds, that he called his brothers and sisters. He preached to them to praise God, and preached to men the necessity to protect nature. According to legend, he commanded an aggressive wolf to peacefully live with the people of Gubbio; in turn he instructed citizens to keep the wolf well fed, and it grew tame.

Most artistic depictions show him with birds in his hands and four-legged creatures at his feet. When he died, it was said that a flock of larks flew down around him to sing. His "Canticle of the Creatures" is considered an early expression of environmental appreciation.

Two years before his death, Francis became the first recorded person to show the wounds of Christ -- the stigmata -- on his hands, feet, and side. This, along with other miracles performed through him, solidified his being declared a saint by Pope Gregory IX in 1228: St. Francis of Assisi.

Since then, Francis has been appointed a patron saint or special guardian. First it was Patron

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Saint of Animals; in 1939 he was named Patron Saint of Italy; and, Pope John Paul II gave him the modern-day distinction of Patron Saint of Ecology in 1979. He said Francis inspires us “not to behave like dissident predators where nature is concerned, but to assume responsibility for it.”

Every year he’s remembered on October 4 with the Feast of St. Francis. The Blessing of the Animals is given around this time, when pet owners take their charges to church for special prayers of protection, plus drops of holy water administered by priests. Offerings are taken and donated to local animal shelters.

Three million people a year visit his tomb and millions more with sick or lost pets ask for his prayers. Untold numbers of birdbaths, bird feeders, and garden statues bear his likeness. He doesn’t “belong” to only Catholics, either. Lutherans and Anglicans have Franciscan Orders, and people of all religions -- even atheists -- look to Francis as a role model for human-animal relationships. Francis himself had said of animals: “Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission -- to be of service to them wherever they require it.”

Saint or no saint, this is why the Humane Society admires St. Francis of Assisi -- our first animal rights advocate.

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