

St Francis of Assisi (1181/2 – 1226) 4th October – prepared by Dr Sophia Errey

Francis was christened Giovanni, but nicknamed Francesco (The French one) by his silk merchant father after a business trip to France. Although as a young man he delighted in fine clothes and amusements he is also recorded as giving substantial alms to beggars. A year's captivity after he was engaged in a military operation, and a period of illness seem to have helped to turn him away from his former pursuits and in 1205 he began going on pilgrimage and seeking for spiritual guidance. The definitive change in his life is linked to his vision before the crucifix in the little semi-ruined church of San Damiano. A copy of this crucifix hangs in the chapel of St Peters.

In 1208 he devoted his life to poverty, and preaching the gospel. Within a year he had 11 followers, and in 2011 the "Lesser Brothers" Order was officially recognized by the Church, and grew rapidly after that. Francis himself withdrew from governance in 1220, continuing on missionary voyages and times of retreat. He died in 1226, and was canonized just two years later.

From a compilation of stories about Francis' life, the *Fioretti* (Little Flowers) began to circulate. As well as his insistence on poverty, care for the sick, and love of the Eucharist, these accounts note his concern for creation, including animals. This is reflected in his "Canticle of the Creatures" (below). In declaring Francis the Patron of ecology and the environment in 1982, Pope John Paul II noted Saint Francis' love and care for creation was a reminder "not to behave like dissident predators where nature is concerned, but to assume responsibility for it, taking all care so that everything stays healthy and integrated, so as to offer a welcoming and friendly environment even to those who succeed us."



The oldest surviving depiction of Saint Francis is a fresco near the entrance of the Benedictine abbey of Subiaco, painted between March 1228 and March 1229.

One of the *Fioretti* concerns a wolf which had been preying on the town of Gubbio, attacking both animals and humans. Francis went up into the hills and found the wolf, commanding it in the sign of the cross to no longer hurt anyone. He then led the wolf back into the town, and asked the citizens to feed the wolf regularly, explaining that it had only acted out of hunger.

Between 1437 and 1444 the leading Siennese artist of his time, Sassetta, painted a monumental altarpiece for the church of San Francesco in Borgo San Sepolcro. About 6 by 5 metres, comprising 60 scenes painted on both sides, the altarpiece was broken up in 1752, and panels are now dispersed among many collections. It included eight scenes from St Francis' life, one of which is The Wolf of Gubbio



The other well-known story is that of Francis preaching to birds. He had been wrestling with what activities God wished him to continue pursuing and was given assurance that he should preach. In the account of his early biographer, St Bonaventure

He came to a spot where a large flock of birds of various kinds had come together. When God's saint saw them, he quickly ran to the spot and greeted them as if they were endowed with reason...

He went right up to them and solicitously urged them to listen to the word of God, saying, 'Oh birds, my brothers and sisters, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator, who clothed you in feathers and gave you wings to fly with, provided you with pure air and cares for you without any worry on your part.'...The birds showed their joy in a remarkable fashion: They began to stretch their necks, extend their wings, open their beaks and gaze at him attentively.

He went through their midst with amazing fervor of spirit, brushing against them with his tunic. Yet none of them moved from the spot until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to leave; then they all flew away together. His companions waiting on the road saw all these things. When he returned to them, that pure and simple man began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to the birds before.



Less than 10 years after Francis' death (around 1235) Bonaventura Berlinghieri of Lucca painted an altarpiece of the saint, including this scene.



But the best known image of the story is that by Giotto on the entrance wall in the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi, painted in 1299.

"Canticle of the sun" or "Canticle of creatures" was composed by Francis, probably around 1224 in the Umbrian dialect. While based on the *Te Deum* (c 400) it is much more particular about aspects of creation. William Draper wrote "All Creatures of Our God and King", based on Francis' Canticle, around 1900, for a children's festival.

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and all blessing.
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those who will
find Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord,
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.