



Stories about St. Francis and Animals

The earliest books about Saint Francis were written by Thomas of Celano, a member of Francis' religious order who knew the saint personally. Thomas' books reveal Francis' love for animals and his conviction that religious faith and care for God's creatures go hand-in-hand.

Preaching to the Birds

"One time as [Francis] was passing through the Spoleto valley, he came upon a place near Bevagna, in which a great multitude of birds of various kinds had assembled. When the holy one of God saw them, because of the outstanding love of the Creator with which he loved all creatures, he ran swiftly to the place. He greeted them in his usual way, as if they shared in reason. As the birds did not take flight, he went to them, going to and fro among them, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic.

"Meanwhile his joy and wonder increased as he carefully admonished them to listen to the Word of God: 'My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator and love Him always. He clothed you with feathers and gave you wings for flying. Among all His creatures He made you free and gave you the purity of the air. You neither sow nor reap, He nevertheless governs you without your least care.'

"At these words, the birds gestured a great deal, in their own way. They stretched their necks, spread their wings, opened their beaks and looked at him. They did not leave the place until, having made the sign of the cross, he blessed them and gave them permission. On returning to the brothers he began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to the birds before. From that day on, he carefully exhorted birds and beasts and even insensible creatures to praise and love the Creator.

Swallows and Waterbirds

"Once he went to a village called Alviano to preach. The people gathered and he called for silence. But some swallows nesting there were shrieking so much that he could not be heard at all. In the hearing of all, he spoke to them: 'My sister swallows, now it is time for me also to speak, since you have already said enough. Hear the word of God and stay quiet until the word of the Lord is completed.' As if capable of reason, they immediately fell silent, and did not leave from the place until the whole sermon was over. All who saw this were filled with amazement and gave glory to God.

"Heading to the hermitage of Greccio, blessed Francis was crossing the lake of Rieti in a small boat. A fisherman offered him a little water-bird so he might rejoice in the Lord over it. The blessed Father received it gladly, and with open hands, gently invited it to fly away freely. But the bird did not want to leave: instead it settled down in his hands as in a nest, and the saint, his eyes lifted up to heaven, remained in prayer. Returning to himself as if after a long stay in another place, he sweetly told the little bird to return to its original freedom. And so the bird, having received permission with a blessing, flew away expressing its joy with the movement of its body.

Fish and Falcons

"Another time he was travelling by boat on the same lake. When he arrived at the port, someone offered him a large fish that was still alive. Calling it 'brother' in his usual way, he put it back next to the boat. The fish kept playing in the water in front of the saint, which made him very happy, and he praised Christ the Lord. The fish did not leave the spot until it was commanded by the saint.

"When blessed Francis, fleeing, as was his custom, from the sight of human company, came to stay in a certain hermitage, a falcon nesting there bound itself to him in a great covenant of friendship. At nighttime with its calling and noise, it anticipated the hour when the saint would usually rise for the divine praises. The holy one of God was very grateful for this because the falcon's great concern for him shook him out of any lazy sleeping-in. But when the saint was burdened more than usual by some illness, the falcon would spare him, and would not announce such early vigils. As if instructed by God, it would ring the bell of its voice with a light touch about dawn.

Brother Pheasant

"A nobleman from the area of Siena sent a pheasant to blessed Francis while he was sick. He received it gladly, not with the desire to eat it, but because it was his custom to rejoice in such creatures out of love for their Creator. He said to the pheasant: 'Praised be our Creator, Brother Pheasant!' And to the brothers he said: 'Let's make a test now to see if Brother Pheasant wants to remain with us, or if he'd rather return to his usual places, which are more fit for him.' At the saint's command a brother carried the pheasant away and put him down in a vineyard far away. Immediately the pheasant returned at a brisk pace to the father's cell.

"The saint ordered it to be carried out again, and even further away, but with great stubbornness it returned to the door of the cell, and as if forcing its way, it entered under the tunics of the brothers who were in the doorway. And so the saint commanded that it should be lovingly cared for, caressing and stroking it with gentle words.

"A doctor who was very devoted to the holy one of God saw this, and asked the brothers to give it to him, not because he wanted to eat it, but wanting rather to care for it out of reverence for the saint.

"What else? The doctor took it home with him, but when separated from the saint it seemed hurt, and while away from his presence it absolutely refused to eat. The doctor was amazed, and at once carried the pheasant back to the saint, telling him in order all that happened. As soon as it was placed on the ground, and saw its father, it threw off its sadness and began to eat with joy."

Sister Cricket

"A cricket lived in a fig tree by the cell of the holy one of God at the Portiuncula, and it would sing frequently with its usual sweetness. Once the blessed father stretched out his hand to it and gently called it to him: 'My Sister Cricket, come to me!' And the cricket, as if it had reason, immediately climbed onto his hand. He said to it: 'Sing, my sister cricket, and with joyful song praise the Lord your Creator!' The cricket, obeying without delay, began to chirp, and did not stop singing until the man of God, mixing his own songs with its praise, told it to return to its usual place.

There it remained constantly for eight days, as if tied to the spot. Whenever the saint would come down from the cell he would always touch it with his hands and command it to sing, and it was always eager to obey his commands. And the saint said to his companions: 'Let us give permission to our sister cricket to leave, who has up to now made us so happy with her praises, so that our flesh may not boast vainly in any way.' And as soon as it had received permission, the cricket went away and never appeared there again. On seeing all this, the brothers were quite amazed."

Bees and Rabbits

"While he was staying in a poor place the holy man used to drink from a clay cup. After his departure, with wonderful skill bees had constructed the little cells of their honeycomb in it, wonderfully indicating the divine contemplation he drank in at that place.

"In Greccio a little hare, live and unharmed, was given to Saint Francis. When it was put down, free to run away where it pleased, at the saint's call it leapt quickly into his lap. The saint gently took it and kindly warned it not to let itself be caught again. He then gave it his blessing and ordered it to return to the woods.

"Something similar happened with another little rabbit, a wild one, when he was on the island in the Lake of Perugia."

A Friend of Their Creator

"Once when the man of God was on a journey from Siena to the valley of Spoleto he passed a field where a sizeable flock of sheep were grazing. He greeted them kindly as he usually did, and they all ran to him, raised their heads and returned his friendly greeting with loud bleating. His vicar took careful note of what the sheep had done and, following at a slower pace

with the other companions, said to the rest, 'Did you see what these sheep did for the holy father? He is truly great whom the dumb animals revere as their father, and those lacking reason recognize as a friend of their Creator.'

“Larks are birds that are the friends of light and dread the shadows of dusk. But in the evening when Saint Francis passed from this world to Christ, when it was already twilight of nightfall, they gathered above the roof of the house, where they circled about noisily for a long while. Whether they were showing their joy or their sadness with their song, we do not know. They sang with tearful joy and joyful tears, either to mourn the orphaned children, or to indicate the father’s approach to eternal glory. The city watchmen who were guarding the place with great care were amazed and called others to admire this.”

--From Thomas of Celano, *The Treatise on the Miracle of Saint Francis*, (1250-1252), ed. Regis J. Armstorng, OFM Cap, J.A. Wayne Hellmoann, OFM Cov, William J. Short, OFM, *The Francis Trilogy of Thomas of Celano* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2004), 329-333.

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