

# ST FRANCIS

AND HIS LOVE

FOR ALL CREATION



**The Animal stories of St Francis**



## THE ST FRANCIS PROJECT

### Explanation of The Logo

The Logo is taken from the great prophecy  
of Universal Harmony and Peace  
of the Prophet Isaiah.

"The Wolf will dwell with the Lamb"  
(Isaiah 11: 6)

In the Logo, St Francis is the child  
Who unites  
the Wolf of Gubbio With the Lamb.

The Image is childlike  
however  
the message is clear:

St Francis is Patron of Animals  
And  
Patron of Ecology.

He is an Icon  
of  
Universal Fraternity  
of  
Harmony and Peace.

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**The St Francis Project**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Among the many titles that St Francis has gathered over the centuries that of Patron of Animals, is the most popular. Yet the actual stories recounted in the ancient Legends of his life are not well known.

This small work, makes available these charming, ancient stories in a way that allows them to be read to children. At the same time references are given for those who might wish to read the original texts.

It has been complexed task. The stories were first gathered together, then told to school children. We became aware that they needed to be rewritten for children and this task was wonderfully done by Margaret Cameron OFS.

The art work was done by 1993 year Grade 8 Students at Mt Alvernia College, Kedron, Qld.

Behind all this effort, begun in 1990, has been the persistent encouragement Marie Ferguson OFS. Her vision of introducing children to St Francis through story and art has proved to be a successful and rewarding project.

These stories have been used to initiate a number of successful mural and poster competitions involving children from primary school. In some instances, whole schools were involved.

It is impossible to thanks all the individuals who have contributed to this project, however this work could not have developed without the ideas, support and encouragement received from so many people. Thank you.

We hope that you enjoy these stories of St Francis and his love for God and all creation.



## INTRODUCTION

*From the moment God touched the life of St Francis in a special way St Francis entered into a constant dialogue with Him about everything. It is said that St Francis' life became a living prayer. He fell in love with God and because of this, he also had a wonderful love for all creation, seeing in it so many tokens of God's love for us.*

*His vision had all the innocence and beauty of Genesis, when God first made the world at the beginning of time. All things on earth spoke to him of the wonder, power, glory and goodness of God: the sun, the moon, the stars of heaven, earth, fire and water, birds of the air, fish of the sea, man, woman, child.*

*St Francis teaches us to see God's loving and creative Spirit everywhere, in all things, so that we would never feel alone. He wants us to be aware of all the beauty around us, because for him it was a reflected image of the beauty of the Creator.*

*St Francis' love of nature was full of tenderness and feeling. As he walked through the woods he was filled with joy and wonder at the strength of the trees, the charming views of the hills and valleys, and all the shades of green of grass and leaf. He rejoiced in the beauty of the wild flowers, herbs and plants. He wondered at the shyness of the wild animals and birds and was thrilled by their response to him. All these things brought joy to St Francis and lifted his heart to heaven.*

*He realised that everything on earth came from the hands of God, the loving Father and so he began to call all things his brother and sister. No matter how small, or lowly, his eyes looked through them into the deepest meaning of all creation. He looked into the heart of every creature and found it loved and precious in the eyes of God.*

*In his excitement he treasured, sticks and stones, rocks and water, good earth and weeds, candle light and fire. He knew that long ago Christ walked on the earth and blessed it with his loving presence.*

*Although he found God in all things his love for animals was special. Towards them he felt a oneness so close and real that it had a magic quality which gave him a wonderful harmony with even the wildest and fiercest creatures.*

*The stories that follow show just how exciting that relationship was.*

*Br John Cooper O.F.M. Cap.*

# THE WOLF OF GUBBIO

(Fioretti 21)

Once a fierce wolf lived in the wood near a little town called Gubbio. He was so strong and fierce and cruel that all the people were terrified of him.

When he was hungry he ate their cattle and he had even killed some of the men and women. No one dared to go out of the town alone. When it was necessary to take a message from Gubbio to another town, or for traders to sell their goods elsewhere men travelled in groups and carried swords as if they were going to war.

One day St Francis came to Gubbio. He wanted to help its people to love God more and to teach them to think often of Heaven. When he heard about the wolf he felt very sorry for the people and promised to help them.

“I will take care of this wolf,” he said, “I will go out at once and meet him.”

St Francis asked God to protect<sup>1</sup> him and then he set out to find the wolf. Some of the men started off with him but when they came near the woods where the wolf lived the men became afraid and would not go any further. So St Francis went on alone.

Suddenly St Francis heard a deep angry growl and there was the savage beast before him. The wolf sprang at St Francis with his sharp white teeth gleaming and its eyes glaring wickedly.

“Stop! In the name of Jesus, you shall not hurt me or anybody else,” St Francis commanded.

As St Francis spoke, he made the sign of the Sign of the Cross over the wolf. The wolf stopped and closed its mouth.

“Come here, Brother Wolf!” Ordered St Francis. The wolf walked slowly up to St Francis and lay down at his feet.

“Brother Wolf,” said St Francis, “You are bad, very, very bad. You have killed men and women made in the image and likeness of God. This is very wicked, Brother Wolf. You should be punished with death!”

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<sup>1</sup> St Francis' loving compassion had a wonderful charm. It could bring savage animals into subjection and tame the beasts of the forest. It trained those which were tame already and claimed obedience from those which had rebelled against a fallen world. Loving compassion is the virtue which subjects all creation to itself. (St Bonaventure LM 8:11)

The Wolf got to his feet and stood before St Francis with his head bowed in shame and his tail between his legs.

“I shall not punish you,” St Francis continued. “I wish to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. I want you to promise that you will never harm them again. Promise this and you shall always have enough to eat. Do you promise not to harm these people ever again?”

The wolf wagged his tail and nodded his head to show that he promised and when St Francis held out his hand the Wolf placed his huge right paw in it.

“Very well then,” said St Francis to him. “Now we will go into the town together and tell the people of your promise.”

The men who had waited at the edge of the woods stared in wonder as St Francis and the Wolf walked towards them. They could hardly believe their eyes. Then they hurried to the town to tell the all the people who had gathered there the great news.

St Francis addressed them. “My Brothers and Sisters of Gubbio, here is the Wolf you have feared so much. You need fear him no longer. He has promised not to harm you or any of your animals again. But you must feed him.” He ate your cattle and killed some of your people because he was hungry. If you feed him he will no longer harm you.”

Hearing this the people became very excited. “Yes, we will feed him! We will feed him!” they shouted joyfully. “We promise to feed him as long as he lives here.”

Then St Francis spoke to the Wolf, “ My Brother Wolf, show these people that you promise not to harm them.”

Again the Wolf put his giant hairy paw into St Francis’ hand.

St Francis left the town of Gubbio a few days later, but the Wolf stayed. He lived there among the people until he died of old age. He always had enough food to eat and he never hurt anyone - man or beast. He went about the town like a great big dog, playing with the children, protecting them from danger, and even letting the little ones ride on his back.

When the Wolf died, all the people of Gubbio were very sad at the loss of their friend. He had reminded them of the good and holy St Francis who loved all

God's creatures great and small.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE LITTLE RED-BREASTED BIRDS**

(2Cel 47)

One day after dinner St Francis was sitting at a table with his brothers. Two little robin red-breasts came up, one male and the other female. They had a family of newly-hatched nestlings to feed and they were looking for food to take home to their hungry babies.

So they were glad that the brothers allowed them to pick up the crumbs left on the table and take them home to their hungry brood. They came again the next day, and the next, day after day.

The brothers encouraged the red-breasts to visit their dinner table even keeping tasty little pieces of food for them because they loved the pretty creatures and were glad to welcome them.

After a few weeks the parent birds brought their little family to the Friary. They were now old enough to fend for themselves, but the parents wanted to make sure that they would still be fed. So after presenting their little ones to the brothers they flew away and did not visit the friary again.

The young robins soon grew tame with the brothers and would perch on their hands and upon their heads as though they belonged to the house.

If visitors came the red-breasts kept out of sight until the brothers were by themselves once more. St Francis was astonished at this and he invited the Brothers to rejoice.

“See,” he said, “What our brothers<sup>3</sup> with the red-breasts have done. They trusted us completely because we nourished their babies with our crumbs. The parents have given their family to us and have gone away to a new home.”

So the red-breasts became completely tame with the brothers and they took their food from the friary table. All was peace and harmony.

But the peace was broken at last by one greedy robin who ate more than his share. Bigger and stronger than the others he terrorised the smaller birds. After eating all he wanted he drove the others away from the table pecking at them cruelly.

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<sup>2</sup> Note Wolf: The Appendices No 2 of The Little Flowers of St Francis Omnibus p.1502 gives a review of the history of this legend. There is also a mention in A New Fioretti No 56 Omnibus p.1880.

<sup>3</sup> He called all the things of creation by the name of “Brother” and “Sister” and all creatures therefore, tried to give their love in return to the saint and to reply by their own way of gratitude (2Cel 166)



At this St Francis became sad and angry.

“See what this greedy one is doing. Even though he is full and satisfied he envies his hungry brothers; he will surely come to a bad end. Just wait and see.”

Shortly after this the greedy bird flew up on a big jug of water to drink and he slipped, fell into the water and was drowned.

Greed is surely a horrible evil if it is punished in such a way in a little bird. We should be grateful for all the gift we have and be willing to share with others.

## **THE HARE**

(1Cel 60, LM 8:8)

On another occasion, while St Francis was staying at a small mountain village a man brought him a hare, which had just been caught alive in a trap.

The saint looked at it kindly and gently and said, “My Brother hare, come to me! Why did you allow yourself be caught like that?”<sup>4</sup>

The man who was holding the hare set it free and immediately it ran to St Francis, jumped into his arms and snuggled into his habit, where it felt perfectly safe from all harm.

St Francis stroked its soft fur and cuddled it speaking softly all the while just as a mother fondles her little child. Then he set it down so that it might escape to its home in the woods.

But as soon as he set it down the hare jumped back again into the safety of St Francis’ arms. He did this again and again until St Francis asked the brothers to carry it back to its home in the bushes.

## **WATER**

(LP 51)

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<sup>4</sup> He spoke to creatures with great inner and external joy, as if they had been endowed by God with feeling, and intelligence, and speech. (LP 49)

Our blessed Lord Jesus said, “I will give you living water that will spring up inside to eternal life.” He made water the sign of spiritual cleansing and gave us the sacrament of baptism by which we become born again as a child of God.

For everyone water is life, without it we all die. St Francis loved water and called it: “Sister Water, so useful and precious and pure.”

When he washed his hands he was careful to choose a place where the waste water could not be trodden underfoot, so deep was his respect for this precious gift.

## **FISH**

(1Cel 61, LM 8:8)

St Francis was moved also by a tender affection towards fish. When they were caught alive and he had the chance, he would put them back into the water, warning them to be more careful lest they be caught again.

One day on the lake of Rieti he was offered a live fish called a tinca - a type of carp, by a fisherman.

He accepted it joyfully and kindly and he began to call it brother, as usual and talk to it as a friend. Then singing the praises of God he put it back into the water beside the boat.

The fish played about there in front of him, as if it were attracted by his affection, and would not go away while he sang his praised God.

Then he gave it a blessing and his permission to leave and the fish swam away into the deeper water of the lake.

## **THE SWALLOWS**

(1Cel 59, LM 12:4)

One warm and sunny morning, St Francis came to a little village to speak to the people about God, so that they would come to know Him better and to love Him more.

The people gathered around him. So, to make sure they could all see and hear him, St Francis walked a little way to higher ground on the hillside.

Then he held up his hands for silence.

The people at once became quiet and still, and stood about reverently. But hundreds of swallows twittered noisily in the trees above them, and flew all around the listening people. The birds made such a noise, that no one could hear what St Francis was saying.

Did St Francis chase the swallows away by shouting and throwing sticks at them? No!. He turned to the birds and gently said, “My dear Sister Swallows, it is time now for me to speak, you have spoken long enough, listen to the Word of God and be very still and peaceful until my sermon is over.”

Those lively little birds immediately settled themselves quietly on the branches of the trees near to them. They kept perfectly still until his sermon was ended. They waited for him to bless them and at once began to twitter just as noisily as before.

You can imagine how amazed those people were, that the swallows understood St Francis so perfectly and obeyed him so willingly.

## **THE TWO LITTLE LAMBS**

(1Cel 79,)

Another day, St Francis was travelling through the woods when he met a man on the way to the market with two lambs hanging over his shoulders. He had tied their feet tightly together with rope so they could not escape. The little lambs were terrified and in pain and they bleated pitifully.

When St Francis heard their bleating and saw their distress his heart was deeply moved and at once he went to help them.

He greeted the man first and then he stroked the lambs in sympathy just as your mother would comfort you if you were hurt and in tears. Then he talked with the man: “Brother, why are you torturing my little lambs all so tied up and hanging like this?”

The man replied, “I am carrying them to the market to sell them because I need the money.”

St Francis then asked, “And what will become of them?” “The buyers will kill them for food,” was his answer.

“Oh! Never!” said St Francis. “Here, take my coat to sell and give me the lambs.” St Francis now owned the lambs, but he had no place to keep them.

So finally he returned them to the man and made him promise that he would not sell them again, but would keep them and look after them.

## **WORMS**

(1Cel 80,2Cel 165)

Do you think St. Francis could love a wriggly worm crawling in the dirt? Well he did because they reminded him of his beloved Jesus who in great sadness and suffering called out, “I am like a worm, less than a man the scorn of all, and the laughing stock of all the people!” (Psalm 22:6)

So in remembrance of Christ’s sufferings, St Francis would gently lift up little earth worms and place them in a safe place. He was so full of compassion for little creatures that could not save themselves and need great care to survive.

## **THE CRICKET**

(LM 8:9, LP 84)

Once, while St Francis was visiting the chapel of St Mary of the Angels, a cricket sat little heart out in its friendly and cheerful way.

St Francis knew this little creature and loved to hear it sing. This time he stretched out his hand towards it and said, “My little Sister Cricket, come here to me.” And the cricket climbed on to his hand and rested there quietly.

At other times he would say, “Sing, Sister Cricket and praise the Lord your creator with your joyful music.” And at his command the cricket would obey him immediately and chirp its hardest until St Francis joined it in its song of praise.

## **THE DOVES**

(Fioretti No 22)

A young boy from the town of Siena caught a number of doves in a trap, and he was taking them alive to the market to be sold.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> He had so much love and sympathy for creatures that he was greatly disturbed when they were treated without respect. (LP 49)

On the way he met St Francis who said to him. “My good young man, please give those innocent little doves to me, for those innocent little creatures are likened in the Bible to pure souls, full of faith and humility. They should not fall into cruel hands and be killed.”

At once the boy was inspired and gave all the doves to St Francis. He took them into his arms and cradled them there and spoke to them gently, “My Little Sister Doves, so innocent, why did you let yourselves be caught like that? Stay with me and I will care for you and build you nests and if God wills, you may have little ones.”

St Francis kept his word and made nests for them and they settled down and laid eggs and reared their young among the friars. They were so tame and familiar with St Francis and the other friars that they seemed like little chickens that had always been raised by the friars.

When he had given St Francis the doves, the saint had told the boy, “One day, my son, you will become a friar and serve the Lord and his people.” And it happened as he said the boy later joined the friars and lived a life doing good among the people.

## **THE WILD PIG**

(2Cel 111, LM 8:6)

St Francis was filled with love and sympathy for people everywhere who suffered and he had a great sympathy for all animals as well.

Of all the animals he loved little woolly lambs best because they reminded him of Christ who was called “The lamb of God.” The lambs reminded him of the gentleness and lowliness of Jesus because he suffered so much for us with never a word of complaint.

At one time St Francis was staying at a friary near the town of Gubbio. During the night a sheep gave birth to a lamb, which was promptly killed and eaten by a vicious wild pig.

When St Francis heard this terrible news he felt extremely sorry for the little lamb and its sad mother, especially because at once he thought of the spotless Lamb of God who suffered so much for love of all of us.

In great distress St Francis cried aloud, “O my Brother Lamb, My Brother Lamb,

innocent little creature, who reminds us of Christ. Cursed be the wild beast that ate you.”

Amazingly, three days later, the wild pig sickened and died and its body was found in a ditch near by.

## **THE SHEEP OF OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS**

(LM 8:7)

Another time when St Francis was at the little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels, he was offered a sheep as a gift.

He accepted it gladly in his love of innocence and simplicity, the two virtues, which the image of a sheep naturally recalls.

St Francis set about training the sheep, which became very devoted to him. He taught the animal to give praise to God and avoid offending the friars in any way, and the sheep was careful to follow his instructions, just as if it realised the affection he had for it.

If it was entering the chapel and heard the friars singing in the choir, it would go down on one knee all by itself and bleat before the altar of our Lady the Mother of the Lamb of God, as if it were trying to greet her image. The brothers were very surprised by this and they were impressed that St Francis could teach a sheep to have such devotion, but St Francis gave thanks to God for this miracle.

During Mass, at the Elevation of the Host, the sheep would bow profoundly on bended knees and amaze those who were not so devout by its very reverence and respect for the Blessed Sacrament

## **PREACHING TO THE BIRDS**

(1Cel 58, LM 12:3)

One day St Francis was passing through the valley of Spoleto when he came to a place where there was a large flock of birds: Pigeons, Crows, Larks, Jackdaws and many other small birds.

He went over to them and greeted them as his Sisters, saying, “Peace be with

you.”

To his great surprise and delight the birds did not become alarmed and fly away, but instead they seemed filled with happiness and excitement to see him. So he began to speak about God to them and it seemed as if they actually wanted to hear his message.

So he told them, “My feathered Sisters, you certainly should praise your Creator, since he has supplied you with all the things you need. Among all his creatures he has created you most wonderfully and beautifully.<sup>6</sup> You do not have to grow your food and yet your Heavenly Father protects you and guides you without the least care on your part”

Hearing these words the birds began to show their delight in their own special way: twittering, stretching their necks and spreading their wings.

St Francis walked up and down among them, and stroked them gently on their heads and backs with his hands and the hem of his habit brushed lightly against them. Even the smallest and most timid birds felt no fear, but waited for his gentle touch.

They all waited until he had blessed them with the Sign of the Cross, then they lifted their wings and flew away into the blue sky above.

## **THE PHEASANT**

(2Cel 170, LM 8:10)

Once when St Francis was very ill in the town of Siena, a nobleman sent a pheasant, which had just been caught alive, to him.

The very moment it saw the saint and heard his voice,<sup>7</sup> the pheasant ran to him and showed so much affection for him that it wanted to stay with him all the time. It utterly refused to be separated from him. St Francis said to the pheasant, “May our Creator be praised, brother pheasant!” Then to the brothers he said. “Let us see if brother pheasant will truly stay with us or go back to the woods.”

So one of the brothers took it outside the friary to the vineyard, to let it go, but it ran back to the saint, as if it had lived with him all its life. Again the brother took

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<sup>6</sup> In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself; all things were to him good. “He who made us is the best!” they cried out to him. (2Cel 165)

<sup>7</sup> The brothers who lived with St Francis saw many wonderful things and marvelled at his devotion to all created things. (Legend of Perugia 49)

it away further from the friary, but it came back again at great speed to the cell of St Francis and forced its way under the habits of the friars standing at the door of the cell. The saint ordered it to be fed and then he embraced it and caressed it and spoke softly to it and allowed it to stay with him.

The friars conspired to give the pheasant to the physician who often came to see St Francis while he was ill, but immediately he took it home the bird stopped eating its food, as if it did not like to be out of the sight of St Francis. So the physician had to bring the bird back to the saint. When it saw St Francis, it gave every sign of being delighted to be in his company again and began to eat again.

Eventually St Francis became well enough to leave that friary and he said goodbye to the friars and left the friary, but before he left he had to instruct the pheasant to stay with the friars, who for love of the saint promised to look after it. And that precious bird was a special joy to the brothers because it reminded them of the blessed Francis.

## **THE LAMB AMONG THE GOATS**

(1Cel 77)

Among all the various kinds of animals Saint Francis loved little lambs with special affection.<sup>8</sup>

He did so because in the Sacred Scriptures the humility of our Lord Jesus Christ is often likened to that of a lamb and St John the Baptist also called Jesus the Lamb of God.

So when St Francis saw little lambs he was overcome with devotion for Jesus.

Once, when he went on a long journey, with a certain Brother Paul, he found a shepherd feeding a herd of she-goats and he-goats in a field beside the road.

Among all the great number of these goats there was one little lamb going along and feeding humbly and quietly.

When blessed Francis saw the little lamb he stopped, and touched inwardly with sorrow of heart and groaning deeply, he said to the brother who was with him:

“Do you not see this sheep that walks so meekly among the goats? I tell you that

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<sup>8</sup> Among all kinds of animals he preferred the gentle. They were glad when he caressed them, they agreed when he requested anything, they obeyed when he commanded anything. (2Cel 166)



our Lord Jesus Christ walked the same way meekly and humbly among evil men. Therefore, I ask you, my son, for love of Jesus to have pity with me on this little lamb. Let us buy it from the shepherd and lead it away from all these goats.”

Brother Paul, was amazed at the grief of St Francis and then began himself to be filled with sorrow at St Francis’ words. However since they had nothing but their poor clothes they could not purchase the lamb.

They were worrying about how much it would cost when a merchant on a journey came along just then and St Francis spoke to him about his concern for the little lamb that reminded him so much of Jesus and the merchant touched by grace generously paid the price that the shepherd asked and gave the lamb to St Francis and Br Paul.

So filled with joy they took the lamb with them to the next town. There, entering the house of the Bishop, they were received by him with great reverence. But the bishop wondered why the man of God was leading about a little lamb and was amazed by his affection for it.

However when the servant of God had recounted the long story of the Lamb of the Gospel, our Lord Jesus Christ and how he suffered and died for us, the bishop was touched to the heart, and gave thanks for the purity of heart of St Francis.

The next day when they were leaving the town St Francis was wondering what he should do with the lamb, so he discussed it with Br Paul and he took the advice of his companion and gave it over to a monastery<sup>9</sup> of Poor Ladies of the Order of St Clare.

The sisters accepted the lamb with great joy as a wonderful gift to them from God through his servant Francis. They watched over it carefully for a long time, and they made a habit out of its wool and sent it to St Francis who they loved as their spiritual father.

At the time he was at the little church of Our Lady of the Angels where he had gathered many of his friars for a great meeting. When the habit was given to him the holy man of God took the habit with great reverence and joy of spirit, and embracing it, he kissed it, remembering the little lamb he had saved from among all the goats and he invited all the brothers who stood by to share his happiness.

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<sup>9</sup> The Monastery of Poor Clares, San Salvatore in Colpersito, was close to San Severino, about 31 miles Southwest of Ancona. This Monastery was founded in 1223, but today it is a Capuchin Franciscan friary. (Footnote 243 Omnibus of Sources p.575)

## **THE SHEEP OF SIENA**

(LM 8:7)

When he was travelling near Siena, St Francis came upon a large flock of sheep grazing in a field.

He went over and greeted them lovingly, as usual, and immediately they stopped eating the grass and ran to him, standing there with their heads erect and their eyes fastened on him.

They showed their appreciation of him so clearly that the shepherds and the other friars were amazed to see the young sheep and even the rams jumping excitedly about St Francis.

## **STONES**

(2Cel 165, LP 51)

For St Francis creation was like a great book that spoke of God. He looked upon stones with great reverence because the scriptures called Christ the stone rejected by the builders and cast away and he loved rocks because they reminded him of St Peter who was called the “Rock” by Christ himself.

## **THE LAMB OF LADY JACOBA**

(LM 8:7)

When St Francis was in Rome, he had a lamb with him, which he kept out of reverence for the lamb of God; and when he was leaving the city he gave it to Lady Jacoba di Settesoli to keep.

The Lady Jacoba was very noble and gracious and she had a great devotion to St Francis and so she kept the lamb as a pet.

The lamb accompanied her to church and stayed there with her, refusing to leave until she left. It was as if St Francis had trained it to say its prayers.

When she was late getting up in the morning, the lamb nudged her with its head

and roused her with its bleats, urging her to hurry up and get ready to go to the Mass. Lady Jacoba was amazed and became very fond of the animal which had been a friend of St Francis and was now a teacher of the religious life.

## **THE DEER**

(St Bonaventure's Opera Omnia Vol.ix,p.583.)

Saint Francis had a mystical power not only over men, who listen to his simple wisdom, but also over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.

Once going from one place to another his path lay through a certain wood of tall trees, where there was a herd of deer grazing on the soft green grass. When the deer noticed him and his companion they all fled instantly.

However, to one of them that paused for a moment, the Saint cried out: "Why do you run away? Stand still."

And at the words of the Saint the stag stood perfectly still, although it trembled slightly and Francis went up and put his hands upon it and caressed it and it stood calmly under his touch.

Then he said: "Now go, and praise God" and the stag dashed brightly off into the woods.

## **THE NIGHTINGALE**

(Wadding, Annales Minorum, Vol. II. pp.24-25)

Once when St Francis was about to eat with Brother Leo, his friend, he was greatly delighted to hear a nightingale singing.<sup>10</sup> So he suggested to his companion that they also should sing praise to God alternately with the bird.

While Brother Leo was pleading that he was not a very good singer, St Francis lifted up his voice and, began to sing a duet with the nightingale.

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<sup>10</sup> He embraced all things with a rapture of unheard of devotion, speaking to them of the Lord and admonishing them to praise God. (2Cel 165)

First the nightingale would sing and then St Francis and then the nightingale again. Thus they continued for many hours until the Saint had to admit himself beaten by the bird.

Thereupon the nightingale flew on to his hand, where he praised it greatly and fed it. Then he gave it his blessing and it flew away.

## **THE ASS**

(Archivum Franciscanum Historicum, Vol.xii,p.153)

Brother Tebaldo once told a story that he had seen with his own eyes. One day when Saint Francis was preaching to the people of the little town of Trevi, which is a beautiful little hill town not far from Assisi where the saint was born, a noisy and uncontrollable ass went charging about the town square, frightening the people out of their wits.

And when it became clear that no one could catch it or restrain it, Saint Francis said to it: “Brother ass, please be quiet and allow me to preach to the people”.

When the donkey heard this it immediately stopped, bowed its head and, to everyone’s astonishment, stood perfectly quiet.

And Blessed Francis, fearing that the people might take too much notice of this astonishing miracle, began saying funny things to make them laugh.

## **FRIGHTENING THE BIRDS**

(Archivum Franciscanum Historicum, Vol.xx,pp.546-7)

We have seen how Saint Francis had a wonderful relationship with birds and animals. Br Masseo was present with Blessed Francis when he preached to the birds and they listened as he walked among them. And Br Masseo was completely amazed. However it did not always turn out that way.

One day when St Francis was walking along a road, he was rapt in prayer and

devotion when he was distracted by a large flock of birds along the roadside. He immediately turned aside to preach to them as he had done before with the birds at another place.

But when the birds saw him approaching them they all panicked and flew away at the very sight of him.

Then St Francis came back to the road and walking along he began to accuse himself most bitterly, saying: “Who do you think you are Brother Francesco? Why should you expect those poor little creatures to obey you?”

Thus we see that St Francis’ power over animals was a special gift from God that worked when God wished it, but it was not a magic power that worked all the time.

## **THE WATER BIRD**

(2Cel 167, LM 8:8)

Once, when St Francis was in a boat going across the Lake of Rieti, a fisherman offered him a waterfowl.

The saint took it gladly and then opened his hands to let it fly off, but it would not go and preferred to rest in his hands as if it were sitting in a nest.

The saint lifted his eyes to heaven and remained in prayer for a long time.<sup>11</sup>

Then he came back to himself once more and encouraged the bird to go and praise God. And when he had given it his blessing the bird show its joy by dancing on his hands and bowing and then it flew off over the lake.

## **BEEES**

(1Cel 80, 2Cel 165.)

St Francis was courteous and filled with gratitude to the Bees because they shared they honey so generously with everyone in the summer. So in the depth of winter he ordered that honey and the best wine be set outside for the Bees, lest they perish from want in the cold of winter when there were no flowers because of the snow. In this way he showed a great sensitivity to the creatures of God.

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<sup>11</sup> Very often his meetings with creatures were the occasion for him to become enraptured in God. (LP 49)

## **THE GARDEN**

(2Cel 165, LM 51)

He commanded the gardener to leave the border around the garden undug, so that in their proper time the greenness of the grass and the beauty of the flowers might announce the beauty of the Father of all things

He commanded that a little place be set aside in the garden for sweet-smelling and flowering plants, so that they would bring those who looked upon them to the memory of the Eternal Sweetness.

## **TREES**

(2Cel 165, LP 51)

When they went to cut wood and could not find any on the ground he forbade the brothers to cut down a whole tree, so that the tree might have hope of sprouting again.

## **WATER FROM A ROCK**

(2Cel 46, LM 7:12)

One day, St Francis went to a certain hermitage where he planned to devote himself to prayer. He was travelling on an ass, because he was sick and weak and the owner of the ass was walking behind.

It was summertime and they were ascending slowly into the mountains and the man was exhausted by the long and gruelling journey. Faint with thirst, he suddenly cried out after the saint, "I'll die of thirst if I don't get a drink of water immediately."

St Francis dismounted there and then and knelt on the ground with his hands stretched to out to heaven. There he stayed until he knew he had been heard.

Then he said to the man who had been so kind to him in lending him the ass, "Go to that rock and you will find running water, Christ in his mercy has made it flow for you just now."

Water had never been found at that spot before and none could ever be found there afterwards, although a careful search was made for the miraculous spring. \

# **THE WOLVES AND HAIL OF GRECCIO**

(2Cel 35.LM 8:11)

St Francis liked to stay in the friary at Greccio, because he could give himself more freely to contemplation in a more secluded cell hewn from a projecting rock.

It was here that he had brought back to memory the Child of Bethlehem by making a Christmas Crib.

However, at one time the people came to St Francis for help because they were plagued by Wolves that were known to have attacked livestock and even people.

Also every year there were terrible storms which brought hail and destroyed all their crops of corn and their vineyards too.

So after talking to God in prayer, the saint preached to the people saying:

“For the honour and glory of almighty God, I promise that all these calamities will come to an end and God will shower his blessings on you all, if you trust me and show that you love God by making a good confession and doing good works as a penance.

But if you are ungrateful and go back to doing bad things, God’s anger will be terrible.”

The townspeople went to confession and changed their ways and the wolves went away and the hail storms either stopped or changed their course before they came to that area.

# **THE CHRISTMAS CRIB**

(1Cel 84-87, LM 10:7)

Did you know that St Francis gave to the world its very first Christmas Crib. It happened this way in the little village of Greccio.

It was Christmas Eve, in the year 1223. Snow lay deep on the ground for it was mid winter. All was peaceful and white and candles in the village homes cast dancing shadows on the snow outside. High up on the mountain in a cave St

Francis and his brothers were assisting at the Christmas Mid-night Mass.

St Francis had always loved the Feast of Christmas. He was filled with joy that the Son of God became a tiny human baby so that we could all love him. The God of all glory took the form of a little child whose first bed was a cold manger filled with straw.

Over and over St Francis marvelled at God's tremendous love for us his creatures and he wanted the people to realise how much God loved them too.

So early on that Christmas Eve St Francis and the Brothers had arranged to have an ox, a donkey, some smaller animals and some hay placed around a small altar. They had gone to a lot of trouble because St Francis has said, "I want to see with my own eyes the poverty of the Christ Child King who was born in a stable long ago."

Toward midnight all the friars were assembled at Mass and also a great crowd of people.

The forest echoed and re-echoed with their voices and the night was lit up with a multitude of lights from their lamps and torches, while the beautiful music of the hymns added to the power of the occasion.

As the mass continued, something strange and wonderful began to happen on the hay beneath the altar. Suddenly, a baby lived and breathed there!

The congregation knelt in stunned silence. St Francis walked the few steps to the manger and kneeling reverently whispered, "Are you really there? Is it you?"

The Saint knelt before the crib in adoration and his heart overflowed with joy and tender pity. He smiled lovingly at the tiny infant and behold! The infant smiled back at him.

Not a shadow of doubt remained in St Francis' mind. This really and truly was the Christ Child. He bent down, picked the infant up and cradled him in his arms. His whole body seemed to glow with love for God. The people were lost in wonder and amazement.

That is how the first Christmas crib was made. St Francis wanted to bring the people closer to God by making them realise how tremendous God's love for them was and God worked a wonderful miracle.

St Francis certainly succeeded in impressing the people. They reverently took wisps of straw from that crib and kept them in their homes. God rewarded their



faith by curing any of their family and even their animals if they were blessed with the straw or ate some of it.

## **THE LARKS AND CHRISTMAS**

(2Cel 200, LP 110)

St Francis used to say: “ If I could talk to the Emperor, I would beg him, for the love of God, to grant my prayer and to publish an edict forbidding anyone from trapping our sisters the larks or from inflicting any harm on them.

Furthermore, all the Mayors of the cities, all the lords of castles and of villages ought to oblige their subjects every year on Christmas Day to throw wheat or other grain on the roads outside the cities and towns so that on this great day the birds and especially our sisters the larks would have plenty of food.

Our sister Lark wears a hood like a religious. It is a humble bird that goes freely along the roads in search of a little grain. Even if she finds some in horse dung, she pecks at them and eats them and so is not too proud to find food where she can.

As she flies, she praises the Lord, like those good religious who despise earthly things and whose life is in heaven.

In addition, her clothes, that is her plumage, is earth-colored. In this way she gives good example to religious who ought not to wear garish and choice garments, but dark colored like the ground “

For all these reasons, blessed Francis dearly loved and freely contemplated our sisters the larks.

“I would also like, out of respect for the child Jesus, that on this great night a statue of the blessed Virgin mary would be placed at the manger between the ox and the ass, and that everyone be obliged to give our brothers the oxen and the asses a generous amount of feed.

On Christmas day, finally, all the poor ought to be invited by the rich to a lavish meal.”

## **THE FALCON OF LA VERNA**

When St Francis arrived at the hermitage on Mount La Verna to keep the fast in honour of St Michael the Archangel, a flock of birds of all kinds flew all around the little hut where he stayed. They sang and showed their joy that he had arrived there. They seemed to be inviting the saint to stay with them.

When he saw them, St Francis remarked to his companion, “I see that it is God’s will that we should stay here, for our sisters the birds are so glad to see us.”<sup>12</sup>

During his stay there on the mountain a falcon, which was making a nest near the spot where St Francis slept, became a great friend of his and woke him every night with its song just at the time he used to rise to say his prayers. The Saint was delighted because, by its anxious care for him, it allowed him no time for laziness.

However when he needed a longer rest than usual, because he was not well the falcon had pity on him and did not wake him up so early. It was as if it had been instructed by God for it would always call him about dawn with its bell-like song.

The joy shown by the flock of birds and the falcon’s song seemed to have been a divine sign that God was happy that St Francis was spending time praying on the mountain.

For St Francis who was dedicated to the praise and worship of God was raised aloft on the wings of contemplation.

He was honoured with a vision of a Seraphic Angel, who appeared in the form of the Crucified Jesus and it marked him with the sacred stigmata. The wounds of Christ appeared in his hands, feet and side.

## **LIGHTS, LAMPS AND CANDLES**

(2Cel 165)

Our Lord Jesus was called, “The Light of the World” and said that he had come to cast fire on the earth (Lk 12:49) so great was his enthusiasm for his message of love to spread over the earth.

Fire and light are so beautiful in themselves and so useful that they reflect very clearly the beauty and love of God. St Francis rejoiced in light and fire and loved the warmth and beauty they revealed in the world.

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<sup>12</sup> He rejoiced in all the works of the Lord and saw behind things pleasing to behold their life-giving reason and cause. (2Cel 165)

He hesitated to put out a lighted candle or a lamp or a burning fire. He wanted them to go on burning because they reminded him of his Lord Jesus who was the Light of the World.

Once St Francis sat too close to a fireplace and the edge of his habit caught alight. One of the brothers hurried to smother the flames but St Francis begged him, “Dear Brother, do not injure Brother Fire.” Amazingly the fire went out of its own accord and St Francis was not injured nor was his habit burnt at all.

He would never allow a burning coal or partly burned wood to be simply thrown away. They had to be carefully laid on the ground out of reverence for God whose creatures they were.

From these strange stories we may think that St Francis was only a wandering lover of nature, who loved to talk to birds and wild animals, but St Francis was a mystic who loved to go to quiet place in the woods to pray, because he found that there in the midst of nature God spoke to him more clearly and he received deep spiritual consolation.

Nature became a spiritual ladder<sup>13</sup> by which St Francis climbed up to God. He praised God for the beauty of creation and saw the glory of God shining through the warmth of the sun and the light of the moon, through fire and water and wind and the stars at night and the flowers of the earth. For him nature was like a sacrament and God pours his love down to us through the sacraments. In the same way St Francis saw that all of creation gives praise to God and he wanted to give voice to creation in singing God’s praise. So St Francis wrote a beautiful song about creation called the Cantic of the Creatures.

## **ST FRANCIS COMPOSES A CANTICLE OF PRAISE FOR ALL CREATURES**

(2Cel 213,LP 43)

Two years before his death after he had received the stigmata, St Francis had gone to live in a cell made of mats near San Damiano where St Clare lived.

St Francis was suffering badly and was almost blind. He could not bear the light of the sun or the light of the fire so much did his eyes hurt.

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<sup>13</sup> He made all things a ladder by which he climbed up to God by the mystic art of contemplation. (2Cel 165)

A few times he was on the point of resting and sleeping, but there was a plague of mice there and they kept running around here and there and even crawled on him and disturbed him at prayer. They annoyed him not only at night, but also during the day. When he ate, they even climbed on the table. St Francis did not want to hurt them, but his companions thought that it was a diabolical thing that there were so many mice about and because they gave St Francis no rest.

One night St Francis was feeling very sorry for himself because he was in so much pain and he could not get any sleep so he began to pray, “Lord help me in my sufferings so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently.”

And suddenly he heard a voice in spirit: “Tell me, Brother, if in compensation for your sufferings and tribulations you were given an immense and precious treasure, the whole earth turned to gold, pebbles turned to precious stones, and the water of the rivers into perfume, would you not rejoice?”

“Lord, it would be beyond all that one could love and desire.” Blessed Francis answered. “Well, Brother, be glad and joyful in the midst of all your sufferings and be at peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom.”

That night the mice all disappeared and St Francis slept peacefully and the next morning on rising he was filled with joy and told the brothers that he wished to compose a song of praises to the Lord for all his creatures. He asked them to write it down so that they could sing it everywhere throughout the world.

## THE CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES

(Assisi Manuscript 338)

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 speak your name.

Praise be you, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun,  
who is the day and through whom you give us light.  
He is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;  
and bears a likeness of you,  
O Most High One.

Praise be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and stars,  
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praise to 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.

Praise be you, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
which is very useful and humble and precious and pure.

Praise be you, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom you light up the night  
for he is beautiful and playful and lively and strong.

Praise be you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us,  
and who produces varied fruits and coloured flowers and herbs.

Praise 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, O Most High, they shall be crowned.

Praise be you, my Lord, through our sister bodily death,  
from whom no one living can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

Blessed are those whom death will find in 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.

## **THE LARKS FAREWELL**

(Cel Miracles 32, LM 14:6)

The larks are birds that love the noonday light and shun the darkness of twilight.

However, on the night that St Francis died, they came to the roof of the little house where he lay suffering.

And although it was already deep twilight, for the sun had long gone to rest, they flew about the house for a long time making a great noise.

Whether by their singing they showed their joy that St Francis was going to the Creator or their sadness at losing a friend, we do not know.

The city watchmen who guarded the place with great care, were filled with great astonishment and called out to others to witness the wonder.

## CONCLUSION

With reverence and respect St Francis realised that everything he possessed - every single thing - had been given to him by God.

So he looked upon all creatures as the work of God who made them and loved them all.

To prove how much God meant to him St Francis gave away all his possessions and kept nothing at all for himself. He gave himself totally to God and so the saving grace of Christ could fully and freely unfold itself in him.

He discovered that because he owned nothing he had room in his life for the consoling love of creatures. And so he treated everything and everyone with a great respect, calling them "Brother" and "Sister".

People, light and fire, trees and animals were all brothers and sisters to him; a part of one great fraternity.

St Francis praised God for them all because he saw all creation as an image of God's love, made by the will of the Father, through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In suffering things he saw the image of the suffering Christ on the cross and he wished to console both the creature and the creator. In this he often had to be commanded not to give away everything he had and having nothing material to give in his anguish he gave himself in love and service.

## SPECIAL FOOTNOTES:

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THE LAMB AMONG THE GOATS Celano, First Life No 77.  
p. 293.

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THE LARKS FAREWELL Celano, Miracles No 32. p. 548., Bonaventure, Major Life Ch 14 No 6. pp. 740-741.