

THE YOUNG FRANCISCAN

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Ecology

Let's begin with a quiz!

Q. Saint Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of:

- A. Cub Scouts
- B. Stowaways
- C. Merchants
- D. Italy
- E. Ecology

If you answered, A. Cub Scouts, well done – you are correct!

Although, if you answered, B, C, D or E, you are also correct!

That's right, St Francis has many patronages attributed to his name and each of them holds significance to St Francis and the Franciscan spirit.

Today, most people associate Saint Francis as the patron of ecology, the environment and animals. This patronage is in fact relatively new and was only attributed to Francis forty years ago in 1979, when Pope John Paul II declared him as the patron of ecology.

Today, the word 'ecology' is a hot-button topic, and rightly so; it is our responsibility to care for the world that God has given us. Yet, with the urgency of environmental matters that face our world, it seems that St Francis' connection to ecology has reinvented the Franciscans as nothing more than environmental warriors as if Francis was an ecological hippy whose sole mission was to save the planet!

The Church assigns patron saints as intercessors to pray on behalf of a particular need. It may be associated with one aspect of a saint's life, and often represents a particular characteristic of their spirituality, but not necessarily the full extent of who they were as followers of Christ. In many cases, the patronage may only depict one small detail of a saint's life, such as Saint Clare, who is the patron saint of television (who lived 700 years before the TV was invented!), or Saint Teresa of Avila who is the patron saint of headaches! To say

that Saint Clare followed Christ by watching TV, that St Teresa went to heaven with a headache, or that St Francis' mission in life was to guide the Cub Scouts, is plainly wrong!

However, for Saint Francis, the environment, the animals, and all of creation, do in fact hold significant importance, and, to a large extent build upon Francis' unique spirituality. But it must be properly understood.

Francis was not 'eco-centric', in which the ecosystem represented his central outlook on life. He was 'Christo-centric', in which Jesus Christ was his whole purpose for existing. Throughout his life, Francis embraced many virtues that developed the fullness of his spirit, such as poverty, humility, charity, and of course – his love for creation. Not one of these characteristics defined his entire spirituality, but rather, brought Francis closer to God and to living the fullness of the Christian way of life.

A Franciscan Ecology

Ecology is the study of organisms within their environment. It is a science. Yet, when Pope John Paul II declared St Francis the patron of ecology, it was not for any scientific reason, but rather, because when Francis “*deeply felt the universal work of the Creator... he offered fitting praise, glory, honour and all blessing to the most high, all-powerful, good Lord.*”

Writings such as ‘*The Canticle of Creatures*’ give us a deep insight into the genius of Francis’ unique mystical theology. Unlike other Christian spiritualities up until that time, Francis recognised the ‘sacramental’ nature of creation, in the sense that everything that has ever been created in some way makes visible the hidden mystery of God.

All of creation, the planets, animals, plants, and of course, us humans, were designed and moulded by God’s own hands; and just as any work of art reveals something of the artist, creation too reveals something of the mystery of God — the Divine Artist.

In the book of Genesis, we read, that after having created the world, God looked at everything he had made and saw that it was “very good.” Francis recognised that same goodness within all creation

and witnessed the hidden mystery of God in all things created.

“Completely absorbed in the love of God, blessed Francis perfectly discerned the goodness of God not only in his own soul...but also in any creature. Because of this... he was moved towards creatures, especially to those in which he saw some figure of the things relating to God.”
(St Bonaventure).

In no way, however, did Francis ever worship creation; he was not a pantheist (one who believes that God and the universe are the same thing). Rather, through this sacramental mystery, Francis saw all created things as a means of moving closer to the Divine Creator and praising God.

Francis’ relationship with nature and the universe went even deeper. In recognising that everything in all of creation belonged to the one holy family of the Father in heaven, Francis was able to call all things his “brother” and “sister”, from “brother sun”, “sister water”, “brother worm”, and even our “sister death”!

Francis saw the world as an expression of heaven, in which he could live in peace with even the most vicious of creatures. He was able to tap into that heavenly truth of ‘the beginning’ in which Adam

and Eve lived in perfection within the Garden of Eden.

Yet, he did not consider himself an equal to the animals and the environment but demanded a certain authority over them, just as did Adam when he named all the animals. Francis commanded the animals, and they obeyed, as we read in the well-known story, *The Wolf of Gubbio*.

Francis’ dominion over other created beings was simply a reflection of God’s divinely ordered plan for creation, in which humans were the only creatures created in the image of God, and therefore the crown of all creation. Thus, in his care for creation, Francis saw the need to care for the lepers, to wash their wounds, and to feed the poor, as greater importance than caring for the animals and the ecosystem.

St Francis did not ‘study’ ecology from a scientific perspective, but rather, through the eyes of God. He was in love with the environment because, first and foremost, he was in love with God. His relationship with all created things was simply a reflection of his total absorption in God, to understand God, and to live, as perfectly as possible in this life the original relationship between God and creatures as had been intended from the beginning.

Francis and the Animals



Francis and the Animals; Lambert deHondt. Wikimedia Commons

Among the vast collection of Early Documents of St Francis, *'The Major Legends of St Francis'*, by St Bonaventure, recalls many remarkable accounts of Francis' relationship with the environment, in which he calls irrational animals to give praise to God.

The Flock of Birds

Francis came upon a large flock of birds singing among the reeds. When he saw them, he said to his companion: "Our Sister Birds are praising their Creator; So, we should go in among them and chant the Lord's praises." When they had entered among them, the birds did not move from the place; and on account of the noise the birds were making, they could not hear each other saying their prayers. The saint turned to the birds and said: "Sister Birds, stop singing until we have done our duty of praising God!" At once they were silent and remained in silence as long

as it took the brothers to say their prayers and finish their praises. Francis then gave them permission to sing again. When the man of God gave them permission, they immediately resumed singing in their usual way.

The Cricket

There was once a cricket living and singing on a fig tree. One day, after Francis called it, it flew upon his hand. He said to it: "Sing, my Sister Cricket, and with your joyful song praise the Lord Creator!" Obeying without delay, it began to chirp; nor did it stop until at the father's command it flew back to its own place...as if it did not dare to disobey his command in the slightest way.

Surprisingly, Francis did not love all animals equally. At times he found the need to discipline them, even to the point of death, in order to demonstrate gospel virtues.

The Ants

Brother Giles said that St. Francis loved the ants less than any other animal, because of the great care they take in the summer to gather and lay up a store of grain against the winter. He also said that Francis loved the birds far better, because they gathered nothing one day for another. (*From the Little Flowers of St Francis*)

The Greedy Robin

One day, several young birds came to live with Francis and his brothers. The chicks grew tame with the brothers and used to perch on their hands. They stayed in the house, not as guests but as members of the family. The young birds became completely tame with the brothers, and all ate together peacefully. But greed broke up this harmony, for a bigger one grew arrogant and harassed the smaller ones. When the big one had already eaten his fill, he still pushed the others away from the food. "Look now," said the father, "at what this greedy one is doing! He's full to bursting, but he's still jealous of his hungry brothers. He will die an evil death." The punishment followed soon after the saint's word. The one who disturbed his brothers climbed on the edge of a water pitcher to take a drink, and suddenly fell into it and drowned. (*From the Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*)

Secular Franciscan Saints



St Bernard of Baden

1428-1458

Born a prince, Bernard lived an exemplary life of holiness in the royal court of Charles VII of France, as well as abroad as a soldier and diplomat. He had vowed a life of chastity for God, and as such, refused marriage to the daughter of the king. As a military officer and ambassador, Bernard was accompanied on all his journeys by a Franciscan friar who had the prince received into the Third Order of St Francis. Bernard fulfilled his missions so well, that the emperor entrusted him with the most delicate missions, especially in the crusade against the Turks. Such worldly affairs, however, never prevented Bernard from leading the life of a saint. Despite the tempting frivolous amusements of courtly life, he was often found isolated in prayer and contemplation, or attending Mass, where he received communion twice a week, a rare practice in those days. During one of his journeys from Italy to France, Bernard died in the Franciscan monastery at Moncalieri, aged thirty years old. His body was taken back to Baden where he was buried in the parish church.

St Elzear of Sabran

1285-1323

(Husband of Bl Delphina of Glandeves) Elzear was born into a noble family. Having been raised in holiness, particularly by his mother, Elzear developed many pious virtues; gentleness, modesty, and was friendly towards everyone, especially the poor. While still a young man, Elzear married the Countess Delphina of the Glandeves family. On their wedding day both spouses vowed perpetual virginity, and lived like brother and sister until their death. Having had inherited his father's titles, the twenty-three-year-old served his people with gentleness and charity, providing for their material and spiritual needs. Even his enemies came to call him their father. Every day he would invite twelve poor citizens to dine with him and his wife. Both Elzear and Delphina joined the Third Order of St Francis to unite their lives more intimately to God. Elzear was granted the gift of miracles with which he cured lepers, and accurately prophesied the election of his godchild as the future Pope. Elzear prepared for death by receiving the last sacraments with angelic devotion.

Bl Delphina of Glandeves 1284-1358

(Wife of St Elzear of Sabran) Delphina was the only daughter of a wealthy Count in southern France. After the death of both her parents at the age of seven, she was taken in by her aunty, who was the abbess at a convent school. There she received a pious education. Having had desired perpetual virginity, Delphina was anxious about her engagement to Elzear of Sabran. She put her trust in the Virgin Mary who appeared to her and calmed her fears. Delphina and Elzear then married with great solemnity in the presence of the king and archbishop of Aix. Elzear was filled with love for the holy purity of his wife that he acted as the protector of her virginity. Throughout their marriage they encouraged one another in living a more intense love for God. Delphina devoted herself to the household, and instructed her servants in holiness while loving them as if they were her own children. Delphina wept bitterly when she heard the news of Elzear's death, yet she prayed, "My God, may thy holy will be done!" Having then embraced a life of poverty, she died a saintly death at the age of seventy-four.

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'Secular Franciscan Saints' are adapted from the Franciscan Book of Saints, by Marion A. Habig OFM