

Saint Francis of Assisi

Patron saint of ecologists

I have read a lot about Saint Francis of Assisi. In 2004, I participated in a four-month pilgrimage to Italy, and the pilgrimage finished in the town of Assisi. When I came into the town, I had the impression I had traveled through time, back about 800 years.

On the first day, I was impressed by how everything in the city was made of stone: the streets were made of cobblestone, the houses, the fort, the churches, the sidewalks and the fountains were all made from stone... It's funny, because I had always imagined the Middle Ages as a time when people were close to agriculture, close to the forest. But there wasn't even a tree in the city. I didn't even see a plant in a pot. When I looked around, I felt like I was in downtown Montreal: asphalt is a kind of stone, concrete is as hard as stone, cement is like stone, bricks are made of stone. So Francesco, in the year 1205, was simply fed up of living in an artificial environment. He wanted to seek out the harmony of what God had created.

At the beginning of the year 1205, Francesco got into an argument with his father. He was brought to court. The bishop was there, in front of the cathedral, and many of the townspeople witnessed the scene. During the hearing, Francesco hid behind a wall, took off all his clothes and made a bundle with them (including his jewellery and money) and threw it at his father. "Until now, I called you father; today, I will truthfully say: Our Father who art in heaven!"

And he left the city, naked, singing as he walked through the forest. He felt freedom for the first time in his life. A gardener gave him his first robe, full of holes.

For Francesco, his creed wasn't just a monotone recitation, a magic formula said during mass on Sunday. His creed was when he finally recognised the beauty and greatness of creation. All of nature extended in front of him and was a symphony. And I personally understand him. I was doing Youth Ministry in my church for 7 years and I would ask teenagers when was their heart filled with the most peace, the most happiness. They always answered that it was when they were in nature, when their feet were in the grass, when they saw a sunset, when they listened to birds singing. After asking the question hundreds of times, the answer was always the same: I met God in nature. Why? Since we can recognize an artist through his work of art, we can recognise the creator through his creations.

There are so many little stories where Francesco acts like a protector of the animals: for example, a wolf was frightening a village called Gubbio. The wolf had killed and eaten an ox, a chicken and badly hurt a man. Francesco, full of love, decided to take care of this matter. He called out to the wolf: "Brother wolf, come here. In the name of Christ, I command you not to hurt me or the other villagers." The wolf came closer. People were staring through the branches. Francesco bent down in front of the wolf: « Brother wolf, you made a huge mistake, you hurt people and many creatures of God. You deserve to be judged as an assassin. I wish for peace to come back to this town, between you and all these people." Francesco understood that the wolf was lost and hungry. He asked the villagers if they were willing to feed him occasionally. The wolf showed sign of submission and even lifted his paw in agreement.

Another time when Francesco was walking with two brothers (Angelo and Massea) near Cannara, he told them: "Stay here while I go preach to those birds." There were birds of many different species and they were at the foot of a tree, as if waiting for Francesco to come. He said: "Brother birds be thankful to God who has done so much for you! Praise Him for your freedom and your feathers. Praise Him for the food He gives you, for the songs you know, for the air that sustains your flight. The Creator must love you very much to give you all that! Brother birds do not be ungrateful and give praise to the One that gives you so much." While Francesco was talking, they were silent, but as soon as he was finished, the birds started to sing, each using his own talents. Then, he blessed them with the sign of the cross and they flew away.

Once more, while Francesco was walking on the road, he saw a young man who had two doves in a cage. The young man was going to sell them. Francesco simply asked: "My boy, would you give them to me?" Won over by Francesco's caring voice, he gave them away for free. And Francesco said: "Oh, sister doves, simple and innocent, why did you get caught? I come and take you away from certain death. I would like to build you a nest."

On an Easter day, a shepherd gave a lamb to Francesco as a gift. I don't really need to convince you that he took great care of it. The sheep followed Francesco faithfully everywhere he went. The sheep lived for many years. It was there during meals, work and prayers.

Francesco loved every creature, the colourful and the grey, the tall and the small. When he would see a worm on the road, he would pick it up and bring it to the side just to make sure it wouldn't get stepped on.

So this is a little insight about who Francis of Assisi was, a brother of Creation. I am so surprised that he acted like that, even if people of that period were disconnected from nature, just as much as our society today is still disconnected from nature. I think it is our responsibility, as Christians, to look at creation with love and to think about our daily actions.

Being a guardian of Creation

What is my opinion, as a Christian, when it comes to the present day ecological crisis?

Since I understand Saint Francis' way of thinking and since I have a fairly good comprehension of the Bible, the way I formulate ecological questions is quite different.

An ecologist will say:

What happens to water out of the hose when I let it run for nothing while washing my car?

A guardian of creation will say:

Why waste sister water, who is so humble, precious and useful?

An ecologist will say:

What are the consequences of air pollution?

A guardian of creation will say:

Why poison my brother air who sustains life for all creatures?

An ecologist will say:

What is the result of the disappearance of a species to its ecosystem?

A guardian of creation will say:

How can I make my brothers and sisters suffer, those who are created with the same elements as I am?

How would saint Francis of Assisi react to seeing us mow our lawns with a noisy lawnmower, or throwing a battery in the trash can, or throwing out paper as opposed to recycling it?

I don't have an answer to that question, but my feeling is that he would react very passionately. In conclusion I would like to share some resources so you can go forth and act in your local church, so eventually the universal Church will be much greener.

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The Cantic of the Creatures

Saint Francis of Assisi (1223)

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.

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 our Sister,
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

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