

## Chapter 10

# *Francis of Assisi*



One of the most popular saints in the whole world, who is honored by people of all faiths, Francis of Assisi is called the *Poverello*, or the “Little Poor Man.” Born in Assisi, Italy, in 1181 or 1182, Francis gave up his inheritance and social position when he was 20 or 21 and embraced the lifestyle that he believed Christ commanded of his followers. Most people know that Francis repaired Saint Damiano and the Portiuncula — a Benedictine shrine given to Francis and his followers. Most know about the great Franciscan Order, and that Francis received the stigmata (the wounds of Christ). The “Little Poor Man” remains a bright memory for men and women everywhere because he explodes like a beautiful star in the horizon of history.

Something not well known or understood is Francis’ closeness to nature and all living creatures. As he is honored for his embrace of poverty, for his refusal to accept the world’s terms in living out his spiritual life, so should he be honored for understanding God’s creatures and the natural wonders of creation.

This is particularly important for people today, who may live in cement buildings, walk on sidewalks, and never hear a bird singing or a cricket chirping on the hearth (an old word for fireplace). Few people in this day and age have a chance to take a walk in the country each evening, and fewer understand how animals and other wild creatures live and serve God.

Francis knew that the wild creatures of the earth and nature itself shared a great secret, one that had been given to him in prayer. All living beings give praise to God by being perfect. A tree is perfect when it does all that it was created to do, and as a created perfect thing, it gives praise to God. People should be aware that they are called to the same high standards in their own lifetimes. Wise men and women honor nature, because they know that humans are part of nature, and that all were created by God.

Francis of Assisi is known for his way with wild creatures, and this is part of his lasting charm. In the region of Gubbio, Italy, for example, he heard the local people were hunting a wild wolf. The villagers claimed that the wolf was eating their flocks and soon would start eating their children. Francis, after listening to their complaints, walked out into the nearby woods and called the wolf to his side. The beautiful animal came willingly, sitting and listening to what Francis had to say.

The animal then accompanied Francis back to the village, where the locals screamed and prepared themselves for an attack. The wolf stayed beside Francis, who asked the villagers to start sharing their food with the creatures of the wild, which were starving because of the cold and bad weather. The people argued for a while but finally agreed, and one man put out his shaking hand to pet the wolf. The wolf of Gubbio was never hunted again, and the animal protected the village, which began to boast about the wild creature and Francis' visit.

Wild birds would perch in nearby trees when Francis spoke, and once, when they started twittering during a sermon, he asked them to please remain silent until he was finished. The birds stopped their noise immediately, much to the surprise of the people gathered about.

Half-frozen bees crawled to his side during the winter, seeking warmth and food, and he cared for them. Nightingales came to sing him lullabies. Even birds flew to Francis for protection against hunters.

All of this sounds strange to city people, but it does make us stop to wonder and think about past times, when men and women understood the earth and its creatures. Francis was a human being who understood that men and women are part of a circle of existence on the earth, the pattern of creation established by God.

The next time our beautiful planet earth is shown on TV from the space shuttle, notice how fragile this blue ball appears against the darkness of space. Think about Francis, who understood that all created beings on our blue ball were made by God for perfection and for giving praise. His feast day is October 4th.