

“To what purpose is this waste?” by Christina Rossetti (at age 22)

And other eyes than ours
Were made to look on flowers,
Eyes of small birds and insects small:
The deep sun-blushing rose
Round which the prickles close
Opens her bosom to them all.
The tiniest living thing
That soars of feathered wing,
Or crawls among the long grass out of sight
Has just as good a right
To its appointed portion of delight
As any King.



THE WISDOM OF ANIMALS: FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1181-1226, Italy)

On one occasion, at a village called Alviano, Francis was about to preach to a crowd:

1| But a large number of swallows nesting there were shrieking and chirping. Since the people could not hear Francis, he said to the noisy birds: 'My sister swallows, now it is time for me to speak, since you have already said enough. Listen to the word of the Lord and stay quiet and calm.' Immediately those little birds fell silent, to the amazement and surprise of all present, and they did not move from that place until the sermon was over.

2| The wild beasts harmed by others used to flee to him and they found in his presence solace amidst their trials...He often freed lambs and sheep from the threat of slaughter because of the graciousness he felt towards the simplicity of their nature; he even picked worms out of the roadway so that they would not be harmed by passersby...All creatures tried to return the saint's love and to respond to his kindness with their gratitude. They smiled when he petted them, they granted his requests and they obeyed when he commanded them...He called all animals by the name of brother and sister, although he preferred the gentle kinds [of animals] above all others.

3| A cricket lived in a fig tree by [Francis's] cell 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.

4| St Francis lifted up his eyes, and saw on some trees by the wayside a great multitude of birds, including doves, crows and magpies; and being much surprised, he said to his companions, "Wait for me here by the way, whilst I go and preach to my little sisters the birds"; and entering into the field, he began to preach to the birds which were on the ground, and suddenly all those also on the trees came round him, and all listened while St Francis preached to them, and did not fly away until he had given them his blessing....St Francis went among them and even touched them with his garments, and none of them moved. Now the substance of the sermon was this:

“My little sisters the birds, ye owe much to God, your Creator, and ye ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places, because he has given you liberty to fly about into all places; and though ye neither spin nor sew, he has given you a twofold and a threefold clothing for yourselves and for your offspring. Two of all your species he sent into the Ark with Noah that you might not be lost to the world; besides which, he feeds you, though ye neither sow nor reap. He has given you fountains and rivers to quench your thirst, mountains and valleys in which to take refuge, and trees in which to build your nests; so that your Creator loves you much, having thus favored you with such bounties. Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.”

As he said these words, all the birds began to open their beaks, to stretch their necks, to spread their wings and reverently to bow their heads to the ground, endeavoring by their motions and by their songs to manifest their joy to St Francis. And the saint rejoiced with them. He wondered to see such a multitude of birds, and was charmed with their beautiful variety, with their attention and familiarity, for all which he devoutly gave thanks to the Creator. Having finished his sermon, St Francis made the sign of the cross, and gave them leave to fly away.... (*Little Flowers, XVI*)



5/ Rather than asking, ‘Did this happen as it is described?’ it would be more valuable to consider, ‘What significance did birds have for Francis’s world, for his chroniclers and for him?’ In the 14th century...doves, crows and magpies—precisely the birds whom Francis is said to have addressed—are symbols of those who do manual labor. ...Birds were often used to represent souls, because they can fly up to God. They were also potent symbols of freedom. In the feudal system, the majority of people were tied to the land and almost no one was mobile. But birds were unfettered, cheerful, singing, hopeful—everything workers aspired to be....It may be that in his preaching and in his fraternity, Francis often had more success with the lowest level of society—the poor and disenfranchised manual workers, poetically symbolized by birds—than with the rich and powerful (the clergy and nobility)...And is it not far more compelling to know that besides loving all creatures, he communicated with the marginalized and downtrodden and delivered a message that they took to heart? Donald Spoto (*Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*)

6/ If I were to speak to the Emperor, I would, supplicating and persuading him tell him for the love of God and me to make a special law that no man should take or kill sister Larks, nor do them any harm. Likewise that all the Podestas of the towns, and the Lords of castles and villages, should be bound every year on Christmas day to compel men to throw wheat and other grains outside the cities and castles, that our sister Larks may have something to eat, and also the other birds, on a day of such solemnity. And

that for the reverence of the Son of God, Who rested on that night with the Most Blessed Virgin Mary between an Ox and an Ass in the manger, whoever shall have an Ox or an Ass shall be bound to provide for them on that night the best of good fodder. Likewise on that day, all poor men should be satisfied by the rich with good food. (*The Mirror of Perfection*)

CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES | Francis of Assisi

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, & all blessing,
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
& no human is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
& bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon & the
stars in heaven,
You formed them clear, precious & beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
& through the air, cloudy and serene,
& every kind of weather,
Through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful, humble, precious & chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,

through whom You light the night,
& he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us, & who produces various
fruit with colored flowers and herbs.
Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
& bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.
Praised 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 & bless my Lord & give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.

Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly, more and more every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.

Love the animals – God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Do not trouble them – don’t harass them, don’t deprive them of their happiness, don’t work against God’s intent. Do not pride yourself on superiority to the animals; they are without sin, while you with your greatness defile the earth by your appearance on it and leave the traces of your foulness after you – alas, it is true of almost every one of us!...Always decide to use humble love. If you resolve on that once and for all, you may subdue the whole world. Loving humility is marvelously strong, the strongest of all things, and there is nothing else like it. – **Fyodor Mikhail Dostoevsky** (*The Gospel in Dostoyevsky: Selections from His Works*)