

**Matthew 6:26** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church, died 1226

Born into the family of a wealthy merchant, Francis gave up his inheritance to serve poor people. He formed the Order of Friars Minor (called Franciscans), who took on poverty and the task of preaching "using words if necessary." Francis had a spirit of gratitude for all of God's creation.

Saint Francis is one of the most "popular" of all the saints. He may be seen in gardens around the world. He is enshrined on bird baths and bird feeders. The prayer that we associate with him, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," is arguably one of the most popular prayers circulated. He is the patron saint of animal lovers, peace-makers, and ecologists. He is associated with cardinal works of mercy to the poor and marginalized.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was born into a wealthy family at Assisi, Italy, the son of a cloth merchant. Francis received little formal education and during his youth was mostly preoccupied with having fun. As a young man, he was popular, charming, enjoyed practical jokes and was usually the life of the party.

Because of his wealth, he generally picked up the tab and thus attracted a following of fun loving, rowdy young men and promiscuous women.

When armed conflict broke out between the men of Assisi and a neighboring city in 1202, Francis eagerly volunteered for the cavalry but wound up getting captured after the first big battle and spent a year in captivity.

Francis returned to Assisi hailed as a hero, but unknown to his friends he had undergone a transformation in his outlook during his captivity. Although he was once again the life of the party, he was now questioning his reason for existence.

After much contemplation, including vivid dreams and mystic visions, he turned away from the pursuit of all worldly pleasures, sold all his property and donated the money to the Church. He then began a lifelong passion of caring for society's castoffs, the sick and poor, including lepers.



His wealthy father reacted to his son's odd new lifestyle by disinheriting him. Thus, Francis lived in utter poverty and even went without shoes. But his humbleness, extraordinary kindness and love for humanity attracted the attention of other young men and they also chose to give up worldly pleasures and follow him to spread the gospel and serve the poor.

Eventually, as the brotherhood grew, its members traveled to other parts of Europe to preach, including France, Germany, Spain and England. A separate order for women was formed, now known as the Franciscan Nuns or Poor Clares.

Francis had much love for animals with special fondness for the birds. He liked to refer to animals as his brothers and sisters. Legend has it that wild animals had no fear of Francis and even came to him seeking refuge from harm.

In 1224, Francis went up onto a mountain and began a 40-day fast. During that time, he is said to have had a miraculous vision and received the marks of the nails and spear exactly as they appeared on the body of Jesus during his crucifixion.

After his death in 1226, Francis was declared a saint by Pope Gregory IX. For several centuries thereafter, his Franciscan order experienced continuous growth and is still active today caring for the poor, educating youth, and performing many other good deeds.

Saint Francis of Assisi preached to the birds:

*My sweet little sisters, birds of the sky," Francis said, "you are bound to heaven, to God, your Creator. In every beat of your wings and every note of your songs, praise him. He has given you the greatest of gifts, the freedom of the air. You neither sow, nor reap, yet God provides for you the most delicious food, rivers, and lakes to quench your thirst, mountains, and valleys for your home, tall trees to build your nests, and the most beautiful clothing: a change of feathers with every season. You and your kind were preserved in Noah's Ark. Clearly, our Creator loves you dearly, since he gives you gifts so abundantly. So please beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and always sing praise to God."*

And, yet another sermon to the creatures God created. It is said that Saint Anthony of Padua (1195-1231), a Franciscan friar was famous for his eloquent preaching.



St. Anthony arrives for his sermon and finds the church empty. He goes to the river to preach to the fishes;

*My brothers the fishes, you are bound, as much as is in your power, to return thanks to your Creator, who has given you so noble an element for your dwelling; for you have at your choice both sweet water and salt; you have many places of refuge from the tempest; you have likewise a pure and transparent element for your nourishment. God, your bountiful and kind Creator, when he made you, ordered you to increase and multiply, and gave you his blessing. In the universal deluge, all other creatures perished; you alone did God preserve from all harm.*

At these words the fish began to open their mouths, and bow their heads, endeavoring as much as was in their power to express their reverence and show forth their praise.

God is speaking to all creatures. He is present and all of us can hear His word and His direction. I pray that you are listening, for His word is good and righteous.

**Do not forget Matthew 6:26**

26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they.

You are of great value to God. Live kindly and live wisely. AMEN

