

“Look at the birds of the air”

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? (Matthew 6:26)



Of all God’s creatures, perhaps those we most readily associate with St. Francis of Assisi are the birds. Francis is forever linked to them because of an episode that occurred in 1213 when he was experiencing something of a vocation crisis. Although the sources offer other moments of interaction between Francis and birds, this one was seminal. Endeavoring to discern if he was being called to a contemplative life or if he should pursue an evangelical life of prayer and itinerant preaching, he was encouraged by Brother Silvester and Sister Clare to continue the latter. Reassured, Francis set out joyfully, and encountering a field with birds, he began anew by preaching to them.

From the early biographers to present day commentators, much has been written about this incident. Of central importance is what Francis actually said. His earliest biographer, Thomas of

Celano, writes that he exhorted the birds, saying, “My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, and love Him always. He gave you feathers to wear, wings to fly, and whatever you need. God made you noble among his creatures and gave you a home in the purity of the air, so that though you neither *sow nor reap*, He nevertheless protects and governs you without your least care.”¹ Celano recounts that he blessed them with the sign of the cross and gave them permission to fly off.

As always, Francis had the gospel in mind—in this instance the words of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus’ urged the people to “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap.”² However, Francis also employed an innovation: he addressed the birds as “my brothers.” This became the paradigm he would employ throughout his ministry—all creatures would be seen as brother or sister. The Franciscan concept that today we call “universal kinship” was present in the saint’s outlook and view of nature. Roger Sorrell adds that Francis’ preaching to the birds “reveals the new feelings of mutual love and respect between the saint and creatures.”³ Mutuality implies the encounter went both ways, and Sorrell suggests that while Francis had a message for the birds, he also saw the “creature as teacher.”⁴ Later he would bluntly remind the friars of the powerful lesson the creatures teach: “All creatures under heaven serve, know, and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you.”⁵

As Secular Franciscans, an immediate way to grow in universal kinship is by taking time to “look at the birds of the air” and in so doing develop a relationship with them and increase our love and understanding of God.

In an essay titled, “The Birds Preach Back,” Daniel Barica, OFM, a friar, birder and nature photographer, writes that “Francis practiced and promoted a truly incarnational spirituality, experiencing God in the entire created world.” Fr. Barica believes that taking time to observe birds can teach us patience, acceptance and understanding, awe, and intimacy with God.⁶ Of course, when we listen to Jesus and look at the birds of the air (and the lilies of the field) we are also instructed in gospel poverty, total dependence on God, and authentic praise of our Creator.

The key is actually to *look*. Thinking about the natural world or watching nature shows on television is not the same as physical interaction, as going to a window or stepping outside. To sit motionless in a yard or park or garden and *look* at the birds is to know God’s grace and beauty in a direct and joyful way. To rise at dawn on a summer morning and listen to what ornithologists call the “morning chorus” is to hear a Gloria sung in voices not our own. As Franciscans, we should stop, look, and pray. For St. Francis, universal kinship was not a theological idea or mental construct. It was a physical, lived, spiritual reality. Let us follow his example. There is no easier way to begin than to “look at the birds of the air.”

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- Moreover they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which “bear the imprint of the Most High,” and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship. [Rule, 18]
- Following the example of Francis, patron of ecologists, they should actively put forward initiatives that care for creation and should work with others in efforts that both put a stop to polluting and degrading nature and also establish circumstances of living and environment which would not be a threat to the human person. [Constitutions, 18.4]

For discussion or reflection

- In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis says, “nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.” (139). Reflect on a time in your life when the creature was teacher—when interaction with creation, animate or inanimate, moved you to praise or to a deeper love, understanding, or knowledge of God.

¹ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., et al., editors, *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Volume I, The Saint* (New City Press, 1999), 234.

² Matthew 6:26, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, The New Testament* (Ignatius Press, 2010).

³ Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature, Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 68.

⁴ Sorrell, 46.

⁵ Armstrong, 131.

⁶ Daniel Barica, OFM, “The Birds Preach Back,” Franciscans for Justice, www.franciscansforjustice.org/2012/02/10/the-birds-preach-back-by-fr-daniel-barica. Accessed July 6, 2019.

Image: Giotto, *San Francesco predica agli uccelli*, 1297-99. Wikiart.org, public domain.