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## St.Francis, Lover of Nature

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Humility is the guardian and the ornament of all virtues. If the spiritual building does not rest upon it, *it* will fall to ruin, though it seems to be growing. This virtue filled Francis in a more copious abundance, so that nothing should be wanting to a man adorned with so many gifts. In his own opinion, he was nothing but a sinner, despite the fact that he was the ornament and splendor of all sanctity. He tried to build himself up upon this virtue, so that he would lay the foundation he had learned from Christ. Forgetting the things he had gained, he set before his eyes only his failings in the conviction that he lacked more than he had gained. There was no covetousness in him except the desire to become better, and not content with what he had, he sought to add new virtues. He was humble in dress more humble in conviction, most humble in reputation. This prince of God (475) was not known as anyone's superior except by this brightest jewel alone, namely, that among the lesser he was the least. This virtue, this title, this mark indicated that he was the minister general. All lofty speaking was absent from his mouth, all pomp from his gestures, all ostentation from his actions. In many things he had learned his opinion from a revelation; yet, conferring about it, he would set the opinions of others ahead of his own. He considered the advice of his companions safer, and the view of another seemed better than his own. He used to say that a brother had not given up all things for the Lord if he kept the purse of his own opinion. He preferred to hear blame spoken of himself rather than praise, for the former would lead one to amend his life, the latter to a fall.

Once when Francis preached to the people of Terni, the bishop of that city praised him before all at the end of the sermon and said to them: "In this latest hour God has glorified his church in this poor and despised, simple and unlettered man; for this reason we are bound always to praise the Lord, knowing that *he has not done thus for any other nation*. When the saint heard these things, he accepted it with wonderful kindness that the bishop had judged him to be contemptible in such express words. And when they were entering the church, he fell at the feet of the bishop, saying: "In truth, lord Bishop, you have done me a great favor, for you alone kept the things that are mine unharmed, whereas others take them away from me. Like a discerning man, you have separated (476) I say, the precious from the worthless, giving praise to god and ascribing to me my worthlessness. Not only did the man of God show himself humble before his superiors; but also among his equals and those beneath him he was more ready to be admonished and corrected than to give admonitions. Wherefore one day he was riding on an ass, because weak and infirm as he was he could not go by foot, he passed through the field of a peasant ran over to him and asked solicitously if he were Brother Francis. When the man of God humbly replied that he was the man he was asking about, the peasant said: Try to be good as you are said to be by all men, for many put their trust in you. Therefore I admonish you never to be other than you are expected to be." But when the man of god Francis heard this he got down from ass and threw himself before the peasant and humbly kissed his feet, thanking him for being kind enough to give him his admonition. Since therefore he was so famous as to be thought a saint by many, he considered himself lowly before God and men, neither did he feel any pride over his widespread fame or over his sanctity, not even over the many brothers and sons given him as a first reward for his merits (477)

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The saint had a horror of pride, which is the cause of all evil and of disobedience. Which is its worst offspring. On the other hand, he always had a warm welcome for humble repentance. A friar was brought before him one time who had sinned against obedience and merited just Punishment. Looking at him. Francis could see sure signs that he was genuinely sorry and he was so pleased with his humble contrition that he decided to be easy on him. At the same time, he was anxious to avoid encouraging others to revolt by letting him off too lightly and so he ordered his capuche to be taken off and thrown into the fire. That would show all the friars the kind of punishment which disobedience deserved. Then when the capuche had been in the flames for a while, Francis ordered it to be taken out and given back to the penitent. It was taken out and there was not the slightest trace of a burn on it. With one and the same miracle God approved Francis' holiness and the humble contrition of the delinquent. Francis' humility, therefore, is worth imitating; it was honored even on earth, so that God inclined to his slightest wish and the citizens of Arezzo underwent a change of heart. He repulsed the presumptuous attacks of the devils by his command and tempered the heat of a fire at will. This is the humility which exalts those who possess it and is respectful towards all; and consequently it is found worthy to be revered by all.

He would not hesitate to confess his faults even when preaching in public, in order to appear contemptible in the eyes of others. One time when he was very ill, he departed from the rigor of his usual abstinence and took a little meat to regain his strength. Then, when he had only barely recovered, he felt urged to humiliate himself for his weakness in genuine self-contempt. It is not right," he declared, "that everyone should think that I never eat meat, when I really did eat it unknown to them." Inspired with a true spirit of humility, he set out there and then and made his way to the town square in Assisi, where he assembled the whole population. After that he entered the principal church in procession with the friars whom he had brought with him, and there he took off his habit and put a rope around his neck. Then he told one of the friars to lead him to the stone where criminals were punished, in full view of all the people. He mounted the stone and preached vigorously, although it was bitterly cold and he was still weak and feverish. He told them all that they should not regard him as a spiritual man, but as a sinner and a glutton, worthy only of contempt. The onlookers were amazed at the extraordinary spectacle. They knew how austere a life he led and they were deeply moved, but they made no secret of the fact that they thought his humility was rather to be admired than imitated. His action certainly seems to have been, intended rather as an omen reminiscent of the prophet Isaias than as an example.

However, it is a lesson in true humility and shows the true follower of Christ true he is bound to disregard all earthly praise and subdue the displays of bloated pride, while renouncing all lying pretence. Francis often behaved like this, so that others might regard him as something worthless, fit only to be cast aside, and he might preserve true holiness of heart full to conceal the gifts which God showered upon him at closely guarded secrets and refused to expose them to the praise of others, which might lead to a fall. When he was acclaimed as a saint by the crowds, he would say, "I might have sons and daughters yet. Don't praise me as if I were safe. You should never praise anyone

until you see how he turned out in the end." That was what he said to others and then, addressing himself, he would add, "If almighty God had done so much for a criminal, he would be more thankful than you, Francis." He used to often tell the friars, "No one should flatter himself for anything a sinner is capable of doing. A sinner can fast, pray. Weep, and do physical penance. The one thing he cannot do is to remain faithful to God. Anyone who gives back to God the praise which belongs to him really has something to boast about, if he serves him faithfully and attributes to, him the gifts he bestows.

Meanwhile, while many were joining the brothers, as was said, the most blessed father Francis was making a trip through the Spoleto valley. He came to a certain place near Bevagna where a very great number of birds of various kinds had congregated, namely, doves. Crows, and some others popularly called daws. When when the most blessed servant of God, Francis, saw them, being a man of very great tenor and great tenderness toward lower and irrational creatures, he left his companions in the road and ran eagerly toward the birds. When he was close enough to them, seeing that they were waiting expectantly for him, he greeted them in his usual way. But, not a little surprised that the birds did not rise in flight, as they usually do, he was filled with great (277) joy and humbly begged them to listen to the Word of God. Among the many things he spoke to them were these words that he added: "My brothers, birds, you should praise your Creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble among his creatures, and he gave you a home in the purity of the air; though you neither sow nor reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part." At these words, as Francis himself used to say and those too who were with him. The birds, rejoicing in a wonderful way according to their nature, began to stretch their necks, extend their Wings, open their mouths and gaze at him. And Francis, Passing through their midst, went on his way and returned, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic. Finally he blessed them, and then, after he had made the sign of the cross over them, he gave them permission to fly away to some other place. But the blessed father went his way with his companions, rejoicing and giving thanks to God, whom all creatures venerate with humble acknowledgement.

But now that he had become simple by grace, not by nature, he began to blame himself for negligence in not having preached to the birds before, seeing that they had listened to the word of God with such great reverence. And so it happened that, from that day on, he solicitously admonished all birds, all animals and reptiles, and even creatures that have no feeling, to praise and love their Creator, for daily, when the name of the Saviour had been invoked, he saw their obedience by personal experience. When he came one day to a city called Alviano to preach the word of God, he went up to a higher place so that he could be seen by all and he began to ask for silence. But when all the (278). People had fallen silent and were standing reverently at attention, a flock of swallows, chattering and making a loud noise, were building nests in that same Place. Since the blessed Francis could not be heard by the people over the chattering of the birds, his, spoke to them saying: "My sisters, swallows, it is now time for me to speak, for you have already spoken enough.

Listen to the word of the Lord and be silent and quiet until the word of the Lord is finished." And those little birds, to the astonishment and wonder of the people standing by, immediately fell silent, and they did not move from that place until the sermon was finished.

When these men therefore saw this miracle, they were filled with the greatest admiration and said: "Truly this man is a saint and a friend of the Most High." And they hastened with the greatest devotion to at least touch his clothing, praising and blessing God. It is indeed wonderful how even irrational creatures recognized his affection for them and felt his tender love for them. Once when he was staying at the town of Greccio, a little rabbit that had been caught in a trap was brought alive to him by a certain brother. When the most blessed man saw it, he was moved to pity and said: "Brother Rabbit, come to me. Why did you allow yourself to be deceived like this?" And as soon as the rabbit had been let go by the brother who held it, it fled to the saint, and, without being forced by anyone, it lay quiet in his bosom as the safest place possible. After he had rested there a little while, the Holy Father, caressing it with motherly affection, released it so it could return free to the Woods. But when it had been placed upon the ground several times and had returned each time to the Saint's bosom, he finally commanded it to be carried by the brothers to the nearby woods. Something similar happened with a certain rabbit, by nature a very wild creature, when he was on an island in the lake of Perugia. (280)

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