

Today, the Sunday nearest October 4, is the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi. And it's the day when we traditionally give thanks for our animal friends.

St. Francis is one in a long line of saints who are associated with animals. St. Kevin of Glendalough is said to have been kneeling in his monastic cell with his arms stretched out, praying. Because his cell was so small, one hand stuck out a window. Suddenly a blackbird landed and laid an egg. And, so the legend goes, St. Kevin stayed in that position until the egg hatched. St. Brigid is said to have given sanctuary to a wild boar, turned a fox into a loving pet for the king, and was followed by a cow. St. Hugh of Lincoln had a friendship with a swan, and was protected by it while he slept.

But it is St. Francis that most often comes to mind when we think of saints and animals. And the legends about him are numerous. Francis is said to have made a pact with a savage wolf not to harm the people of a town in exchange for food and the wolf offered its paw as a sign of agreement. He supposedly quieted a flock of birds and preached to them – they were a good audience and didn't leave until he said they could.

He was careful not to step on an ant, and tried to have laws made to provide a "bounteous meal" for all animals on Christmas Day. Animals were said to "instinctively surround" him, becoming so attached to him that they would repeatedly hop into his lap. Those are the legends.

But do you know the story behind them?

Francis was likely born in late 1181 or early 1182. He was one of seven children of the prosperous silk merchant, Pietro di Bernardino, and his wife, a noblewoman called Pica de Bourlemont, who lived in Assisi. Pietro was away on business in France at the time, so Pica named the baby Giovanni, but when Pietro returned to Assisi, he began calling the baby Francesco, which means, "the Frenchman" perhaps in honor of his trip to France.

Growing up, Francis helped his father in his business, which probably accounts for stories of his love of rich clothing. Apparently he became interested in troubadours, the musicians and composers who sang about chivalry and courtly love, and reveled in the lifestyle of his wealthy peers.

In 1201, he joined a military expedition, and ended up being taken prisoner and held captive for a year. But when he got back to Assisi, he continued his previous life. It wasn't until a serious illness a year or so later that he had a spiritual crisis, and soon afterwards, on his way to join another military expedition, he had a strange vision and returned home.

There, in spite of his father's opposition, he began to explore religion, spending time in prayer, nursing lepers, and, on a pilgrimage to Rome, joining the poor begging at the doors of churches. He then had a mystical vision of Jesus Christ in the country chapel of San Damiano, just outside of Assisi, in which he heard Christ say "Francis, Francis, go and repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." He took this to mean the ruined church that he was praying in, and so he sold some cloth from his father's store to pay for the repairs. His father was not happy.

After threats, beatings, and legal proceedings, Francis renounced his father and his inheritance, and lived as a beggar. He spent time restoring other ruined chapels in the country around Assisi, and in early 1209 heard a sermon that changed his life. It was from Matthew, chapter 10, where Jesus tells his followers to go and proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven was upon them, and to take nothing with them, not money or even shoes. And Francis was inspired to devote himself to a life of preaching and poverty.

He began preaching, and soon attracted a number of followers. In 1210 the Pope confirmed the simple Rule for the Order of Friars Minor, and the order grew rapidly, and soon attracted women as well, and so the order of Poor Clares was formed.

In the early 1220s, Francis is said to have celebrated Christmas by setting up the first known Nativity scene, using a straw filled manger, an ox and a donkey. And not long before his death, during a retreat, he had a vision and received the stigmata, the marks of Christ's death in his hands and feet. He died in late 1226, and within two years was pronounced a saint.

One of the hallmarks of Francis' preaching was his emphasis on creation as God's good and beautiful gift. He called on all creation to praise God, and all people to protect and enjoy nature as stewards of God's creation and as creatures ourselves.

Today, as we celebrate his feast day, I'd invite you to think about where you see God's blessings around you. Then find someone near you – preferably not a family member – try the seat in front of or behind you, and share some blessing you've experienced from God and how you might thank God in response.

Go ahead! Right now! Do it... (*allow time*)

And finally, as our service ends, join us, even if you don't have a pet here today – and rejoice in God's creative love as we Bless the Animals in memory of Blessed Francis.