

## SAINTS AND ANIMALS

**A**NIMALS play a very prominent part in the Lives of the Saints, and for this reason they have, if useful, been placed under the protection or, if harmful, under the ban of some chosen patron saint. But in charity we must add that the only animal apparently without a heavenly friend is the snake, whose stout enemies are St. Paul, bitten by a viper in Malta, and St. Patrick, who chased all serpents out of Ireland. Another Irish saint, a hermit named Sauman, is invoked against poisonous reptiles, because some time in the seventh century he cured the Duke of Gascony's daughter when bitten by an adder.

Rats and mice, who live in a world of enemies, find saints amongst their friends, particularly Blessed Martin of Porres (+1635), a Dominican Tertiary, who lived in the great convent of Lima. He used to feed the rats and mice at the end of the garden, but forbade them to enter the building; and he was, we are told, obeyed. He used to say that these little creatures would do no harm if they were fed daily as human beings are. Accordingly, though he was their friend, he is invoked against their depredations. Bd. Martin, if he cannot be considered as the best-known animal-lover amongst the saints, deserves to rank as their most practical friend. He made a little hospital for lost dogs and cats, and all sorts of suffering animals till his patients outgrew their accommodation, whereupon he persuaded his wealthy sister to give them lodging in her house, whither he repaired daily to doctor them. Lest we should receive the impression that the saint spent all his time in such duties, we should remember that Bd. Martin founded hospitals for the poor, and rejoiced to do all the hard and

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unpleasant work that he could find in the convent in addition to his own fixed labours.

Of Bd. Bernard of Corleone (+ 1667), a Capuchin lay brother, we read that he had an extraordinary compassion for all animals in pain, and as these were brought to him in great numbers he used to say the *Our Father*, lead them three times round the cross in the churchyard, and then send them away cured. In all this he was a true disciple of his beloved father, St. Francis, the ardent lover of every creature, but if we embarked on stories of *his* tenderness for animals this essay would have to become a book.

St. Philip Neri is another saint well known for his affection for dumb creatures, especially dogs and cats. His cat at San Girolamo was known to all Rome, and he used to humble the noblest of his disciples by sending them to take her food.

This love of animals for which the saints were noted undoubtedly gave them their astonishing power over the most wild and savage beasts, for their very gentleness filled the nervous creatures with confidence. The lion, if not the king, certainly the most terrifying of beasts, plays an honourable part in hagiography, which is full of anecdotes concerning him. We find two lions usefully employed in helping St. Anthony to dig a grave for his friend, St. Paul the Hermit; another makes friends with no less a person than a Doctor of the Church, because St. Jerome helped him get rid of a nasty thorn. St. Ambasius, an Ethiopian saint, is said in Coptic legends, to have ridden a lion, but this amazing story is put quite in the shade by a legend in the Greek Church, which tells of a lioness who, having refused to devour St. Aphrodisius, a martyr, in Cilicia, stood upon her hind legs in the midst of the arena and preached to the people, converting many. A similar fantastic story is told of a snake who spoke to St. Phocas, who is

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numbered with St. Paul and St. Patrick as defender against venomous serpents.<sup>1</sup>

The most thrilling story of a saint and a wild animal is undoubtedly the delightful tale of St. Francis and the wild wolf of Gubbio, so well-known to all readers of the 'Little Flowers,' but another charming anecdote is told in the corresponding Dominican book, *Lives of the Brethren*, wherein it is related of Bd. Jordan of Saxony that one day, passing through a wood, he called a weasel from its lair in order to admire its beauty. The fierce little beast at once trotted out and allowed the saint to caress it, and then retired with his blessing. Accordingly in Christian art Bd. Jordan is commonly represented fondling this small but ferocious animal.

The saints in their lifetime formed themselves into a society for the protection of animals from cruelty. Hares flew for refuge to Saints Cuthbert, Anselm, Francis, and Philip; St. Patrick saved a doe and a fawn, whilst both Saints Hubert and Eustace spared the wonderful deer with a cross between its horns. Many saints, too, earned their living in tending sheep and cattle, some of them being amongst the most venerated saints in the calendar. Thus amongst shepherds we have St. Patrick and St. Pius V, both of whom learned to rule the flock of Christ in an early noviciate spent in looking after sheep.

St. Bobo or (in French) St. Beuvon, a nobleman of Provence, who in the eighth century fought valiantly against the Saracens, has the patronage of cattle assigned to him, perhaps by way of a pun, as his name means ox. He is invoked against diseases of cattle, especially the murrain, as rife in the Middle Ages as the foot and mouth plague of our present day. St. Bobo has as helpers in this extensive pat-

<sup>1</sup> Holweck: *A Biographical Dictionary of the Saints*. (Herder, 1924; pp. 94, 815.)

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ronage St. Hermeland, Abbot of Aindre, near Nantes, who died in 720 and is the Breton patron of cows, St. Engelmar, a German hermit (d. 1100), and St. Winthir, an Englishman of the eighth century, who settled at Neuhaussen, where he died, and is patron of the parish church. Winthir is also patron saint of mule-drivers, having been one himself.

The horse is protected by St. George, St. Lewis IX of France, St. Eusebius, and St. Eloy (Eligijs). Probably the first-named two owe their patronage to the fact that in art they are usually mounted, St. George, in particular, on a particularly mettlesome steed. St. Eusebius, a Roman priest, who died in 371, has a beautiful church dedicated to him, in which horses used to be blessed; and St. Eloy, a most celebrated French saint, who died as Bishop of Noyon in 659, was formerly a goldsmith, and according to an amazing legend, a blacksmith to whom one day a possessed horse was brought to be shod. Finding no other way possible, Eloy cut off its leg, shod the severed member, and then miraculously replaced it. We read of St. Mordeyrn, a Welshman, that he was called the Sovereign of the Sea, because he rode over to Bardsey Island without his horse's hoofs being wetted.

The care of pigs is assigned to St. Anthony the Great, St. Wendelin, a hermit of the sixth century, also patron of shepherds, St. Oda (died about 720), aunt of St. Hubert. Her nephew, St. Hubert, is the well-known patron of deer, and also protector against dog-bite, in which protection he is associated with St. Edren of Pembroke, father of St. Mordeyrn, the friend of horses mentioned above. The grass in his churchyard was formerly applied to those suffering from hydrophobia. St. Walburga, too, is patron against this calamity. Dogs, however, as is only to be expected, are the common companions of saints,

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notably of Saints Philip and Roch. The latter perhaps the most renowned patron in all sickness, is always depicted with the faithful dog that licked his wounds when he was shunned and an outcast. A sheep-dog guarded the body of the martyr, St. Dulas, which had been thrown into a ditch.

Donkeys do not seem to have a regularly chosen patron, but St. Anthony the Great is patron against the depredations of animals, because one day, finding some wild asses in his little garden eating his corn and vegetables, he gently took hold of one of the beautiful creatures and said: 'Why do you eat what you have not sown, and why do you injure one who never did you any harm? Go in the name of God and return no more.' From that time they troubled his garden no more. That most celebrated Bishop, St. Germanus of Auxerre, surely deserves to rank as the patron of the donkey, seeing that he so preferred his own humble beast to the splendid horse offered him by the Empress Placida, that, though it was in a dying condition, he raised it again to perfect health. Of St. Francis de Paula, founder of the Order of Minims, we are told an equally extraordinary story. A smith had shod his ass, but finding the saint had no money wherewith to pay him he took it so ill that he cursed and swore, whereupon Francis ordered his donkey to cast off the shoes, which the animal accordingly did.

The winged creation, too, has its patrons and friends amongst the saints, notably St. Francis of Assisi, who preached to his beloved birds. St. Agricola, Bishop of Avignon, in the seventh century, is the patron of storks, but Aaron, reckoned a saint amongst the schismatic Copts, was apparently a lover of birds in another sense, seeing that, according to his legend, he, when he was ill, caused some roasted pigeons to fly into his mouth.

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Saints Ambrose and Bernard are patrons of bee-keepers, the former because a swarm of bees settled on his mouth when he was a babe in the cradle, and the latter because of his 'honeyed' words, which gained him the title of Mellifluous or Honeyed Doctor. Against the ravages of locusts St. Gregory, Cardinal Bishop of Ostra (d. 1257), and St. Robert Cistercian abbot of Mataplan in Spain (d. 1185), are invoked as protectors, whilst Saint Tryphon, Martyr, a gooseherd, beheaded under the Emperor Decius, A.D. 251, is invoked against poisonous insects.

Of saints and fishes stories abound, a frequent one being the case of a saint, such as Peter Gonzalez (+ 1246), requiring food for others and commanding the fish to come and be caught.

Stories such as those we have enumerated, though they may seem to a more prosaic generation wildly incredible, do however show a belief in the love of the saints for dumb animals, faith in their power over them, and lastly the great truth that animals are made for the glory of God and the benefit of mankind.

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