

VINTAGE

Saints & Sinners

Francis (1182-1226) and Clare (1194-1253) of Assisi

The humble servant of Christ, St Francis, a short time after his conversion, having already assembled and received many brothers, was much troubled and perplexed in his mind as to what he ought to do; whether to give himself entirely to prayer, or now and then to preach the Word. Through his great humility, he had no opinion of himself or of the virtue of his prayers; and, wishing to know the will of God, he sought to learn it through the prayers of others.

So he went to Brother Masseo, and said: "Go to Sister Clare, and bid her from me to set herself with some of the holiest of her sisters to pray that the Lord will show me clearly whether I should preach or only keep to prayer. Then go to Brother Silvester, and ask of him the same favour." Now Brother Silvester ... was so holy, that whatever he asked of God was granted to his prayer, and he was in frequent conversation with the Lord, so that St Francis revered him greatly.

Then Brother Masseo did as St Francis had commanded; carrying the message first to St Clare, and then to Brother Silvester, who immediately set himself to praying. And while praying he quickly had God's answer. He went out at once to Brother Masseo and said: "The Lord says, go and tell Brother Francis that he has called him to this state to save only on his own account but that he may reap a harvest of souls and that many may be saved through him." Then Brother Masseo went to Sister Clare, to ask what she had learnt from God; and she told him that she and all her companions had received from God the same answer as the Lord had given to Brother Silvester.

Then Brother Masseo hurried to St Francis to bring him these answers; and St Francis received him with great charity, washing his feet, and serving him at dinner. After he had eaten, St. Francis called Brother Masseo into the forest. And there he knelt down before Brother Masseo, baring his head and crossing his arms, and asked: "What does my Lord Jesus Christ order me to do?" Brother Masseo replied that Christ had answered both Brother Silvester and Sister Clare and her companion and revealed that "He wants you to go about the world preaching, because God did not call you for yourself alone but also for the salvation of others."

And then the hand of the Lord came over St. Francis. As soon as he heard this answer and thereby knew the will of Christ, he got to his feet, all aflame with divine power and said to Brother Masseo with great fervor; "So let's go—in the name of the Lord!"

And he took his companions Brother Masseo and Brother Angelo, holy men. And he set out like a bolt of lightning in this spiritual ardor, not paying any attention to the road or path.

They arrived at a village called Cannara. And St. Francis began to preach, first ordering the swallows, who were twittering, to keep silence until he had finished preaching; and the swallows obeyed his voice. He preached with such fervour, that the inhabitants of the town wished to follow him out of devotion; but St Francis would not allow them, saying: "Be not in such haste, and leave not your homes. I will tell you what you must do to save your souls." Thereupon he founded the Third Order for the salvation of all; and leaving them much consoled and well disposed to do penance, he departed thence, and reached a spot between Cannaiolo and Bevagno.

And as he went on his way, with great fervour, St Francis lifted up his eyes, and saw on some trees by the wayside a great multitude of birds; and being much surprised, he said to his companions, "Wait for me here by the way, whilst I go and preach to my little sisters the birds"; and entering into the field, he began to preach to the birds which were on the ground, and suddenly all those also on the trees came round him, and all listened while St Francis preached to them, and

did not fly away until he had given them his blessing. And Brother Masseo related afterwards to Brother James of Massa how St Francis went among them and even touched them with his garments, and how none of them moved.

Now the substance of the sermon was this: “My little sisters the birds, ye owe much to God, your Creator, and ye ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places, because he has given you liberty to fly about into all places; and though ye neither spin nor sew, he has given you a twofold and a threefold clothing for yourselves and for your offspring. Two of all your species he sent into the Ark with Noah that you might not be lost to the world; besides which, he feeds you, though you neither sow nor reap. He has given you fountains and rivers to quench your thirst, mountains and valleys in which to take refuge, and trees in which to build your nests; so that your Creator loves you much, having thus favoured you with such bounties. Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.”

As he said these words, all the birds began to open their beaks, to stretch their necks, to spread their wings and reverently to bow their heads to the ground, endeavouring by their motions and by their songs to manifest their joy to St Francis. And the saint rejoiced with them. He wondered to see such a multitude of birds, and was charmed with their beautiful variety, with their attention and familiarity, for all which he devoutly gave thanks to the Creator.

Having finished his sermon, St Francis made the sign of the cross, and gave them leave to fly away. Then all those birds rose up into the air, singing most sweetly; and, following the sign of the cross, which St Francis had made, they divided themselves into four companies. One company flew towards the east, another towards the west, one towards the south, and one towards the north; each company as it went singing most wonderfully; signifying thereby, that as St Francis, the bearer of the Cross of Christ, had preached to them and made upon them the sign of the cross, after which they had divided among themselves the four parts of the world, so the preaching of the Cross of Christ, renewed by St Francis, would be carried by him and by his brethren over all the world, and that the humble friars, like little birds, should possess nothing in this world, but should cast all the care of their lives on the providence of God.

{*The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, chapter 16}

St Clare, a most devout servant of the Cross of Christ, and one of the sweetest flowers of St Francis, was so holy, that not only the Bishops and Cardinals but the Pope himself wished to see and hear her, and went often to visit her in person. One day, amongst others, the holy Father went to her convent to hear her speak of things celestial; and having long reasoned together, St Clare ordered the table to be laid and bread to be placed upon it, in order that the holy Father might bless it.

Their spiritual conclave being at an end, St Clare, kneeling down with great reverence, begged him to bless the bread which had been placed on the table. To whom the holy Father answered: “Most faithful sister, I will that thou bless this bread by the sign of the cross to which thou hast devoted thyself.” St Clare said: “Most holy Father, excuse me. I should indeed be worthy of reproof if I, a miserable woman, should presume to give such a blessing in the presence of the Vicar of Christ.” Then the Pope answered: “In order that such an act be not looked upon as presumptuous, but that it may bear on it the marks of obedience, I command thee, in the name of holy obedience, to make on this bread the sign of the cross, and to bless it in the name of God.”

At this St Clare, like a true daughter of obedience, blessed the loaves most devoutly, making over them the sign of the holy cross; and, wonderful to relate, on all those loaves appeared a cross, most clearly marked; and some of them were eaten, but the rest were put aside, in order to testify of the miracle. And the holy Father, having seen the miracle, thanked God; and taking some of the bread, went away, leaving his blessing with Sister Clare.

At that time Sister Ortolana, mother of St Clare, and Sister Agnes, her sister, were living together in the convent with St Clare, both most virtuous women, full of the Holy Spirit, likewise many other nuns; to whom St Francis sent a great number of sick persons, who were all healed by their prayers and by the sign of the most holy cross.

{*The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, chapter 33}