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Unity through Francis:

Demonstrations of Franciscan Authority in the Animal Stories of the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*

Sara Woodbury, Art 485

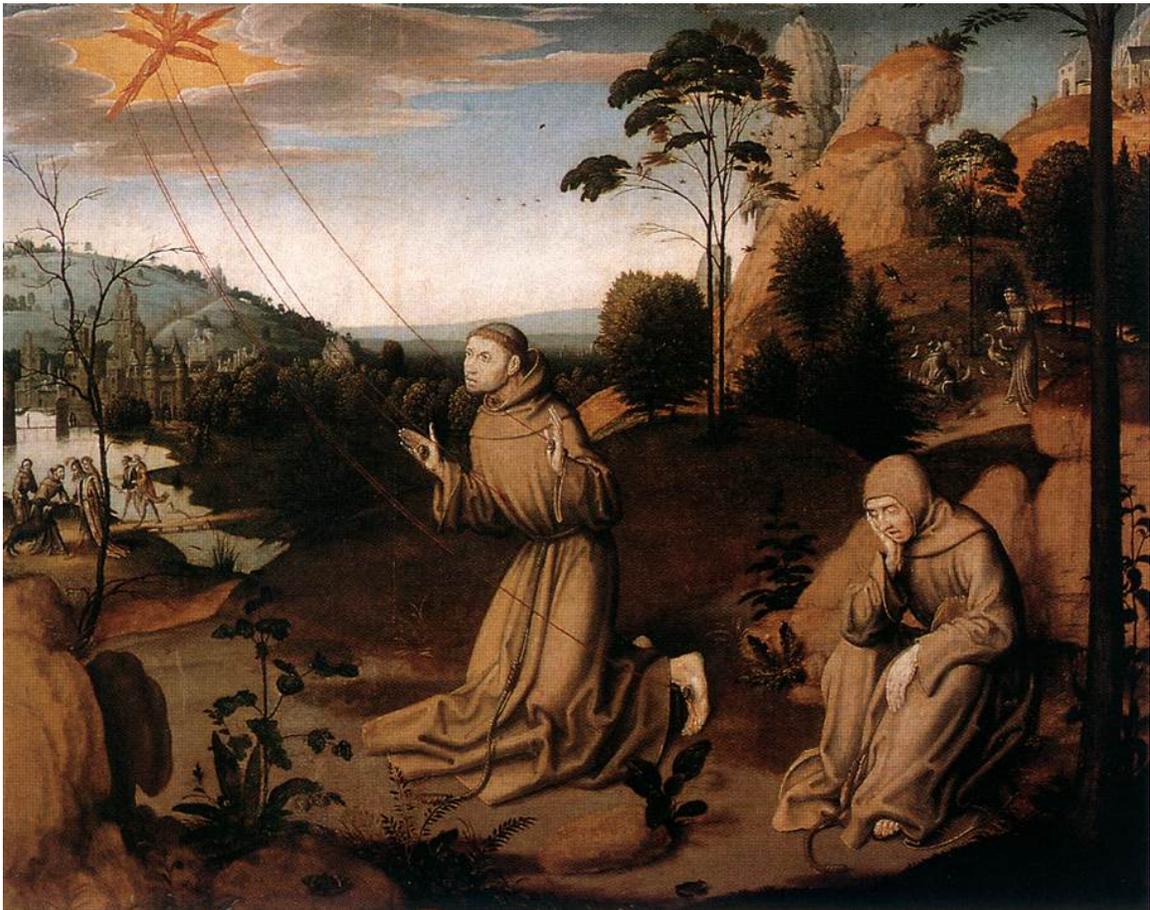


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The animal stories of Francis of Assisi are among the most recognizable images of the saint. Appearing on holy cards and garden statues, these animal narratives have come to represent a romantic, idealized relationship between humanity and nature.¹ Francis's animal stories, however, should not be regarded solely as sentimental, superfluous images. Rather, they should be recognized as a subject matter that has been adapted by artists, patrons, and cultural values to promote different agendas. As our society continues to esteem Francis as a paradigm for environmentalism, it would be constructive to examine these images to determine whether they actually do espouse ecological consciousness.

One work demonstrating the extent to which Francis's animal stories have been adapted to convey different meanings is the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, created in Cologne at the turn of the sixteenth century. Showing both the Sermon to the Birds and the Taming of the Wolf of Gubbio, these two images depart from their literary sources through the insertion of additional figures or changes in setting. From a twenty-first century perspective, such alterations may evoke a society concerned with establishing harmonious relations with nature.² Challenging this view, however, are attitudes toward nature in late medieval and early modern society, developments within the Franciscan Order, and the iconography of the altarpiece itself. Rather than espouse Francis's affinity with nature, the animal stories in the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* are intended to

¹ Edward Armstrong, *Saint Francis, Nature Mystic: The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), Roger Sorrell, *Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

² Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Francis of Assisi as a Catholic Saint," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 9, no.1 (Winter 2006): 55-57, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/logos/v009/9.1cunningham.pdf>; Sorrell, 5.

demonstrate his ability to control it, promoting the unity of the Franciscan Order by underscoring the authority of its founder.

Description of the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*

The *Saint Francis Altarpiece* is a polyptych executed around 1500.³ The central panel measures 132.5 x 163 centimeters, while the two wings each measure 130.3 x 75 centimeters.⁴ Located in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, the work is presently attributed to the Master of Saint Severin and the Master of the Life of Saint Ursula, two anonymous artists active in Cologne during the early sixteenth century.⁵ The provenance of the work is unknown before the nineteenth century, when its separated panels appear in the collection of Ferdinand Franz Wallraf. The panels were reunited in the mid-twentieth century, when it was discovered that they all formed a single altarpiece.⁶ Initially believed to be an Italian work, the panels were later attributed to only the Master of Saint Severin, with the present attribution to the two anonymous Cologne Masters occurring in the late twentieth century.⁷

Franciscan saints form the crux of the altarpiece's iconography. In its closed form, the work depicts Saint Francis standing with five early thirteenth-century Franciscans known as the Moroccan martyrs.⁸ When opened, the wings depict four Franciscan saints flanking a scene of the Stigmatization. The left wing depicts John of Capistrano, a fifteenth-century preacher, and

³ Rheinische Bildarchiv. "Objekt-document: Flügelaltar." *Das Rheinische Bildarchiv Köln*. http://www.bildindex.de/rx/apsisa.d11/popup?sid={5a8569ee-f19a-4f8c-a2d6-19a55c28709b}&cnt=19841&tastr=bilder&no=1&+desc=koeln_

⁴ Rainer Budde et al, *Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne*, trans. Elizabeth Thussu (London: Scala Publications, 1992), 37.

⁵ Frank Günter Zehnder, *Katalog der Altkölner Malerei* (Köln: Druck und Verlagshaus, 1990), 520-522.

⁶ Rheinische Bildarchiv, "Objekt-document," *Das Rheinische Bildarchiv Köln*.

⁷ Zehnder, 526-528.

⁸ James D. Ryan, "Missionary Saints of the High Middle Ages: Martyrdom, Popular Veneration, and Canonization," *Catholic Historical Review* 90, vol. 1 (2004): 8, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/catholic_historical_review/v090/90.1ryan.html.

Bonaventure, Minister General of the Franciscan Order during the thirteenth century.⁹ The right wing shows bishop Louis of Toulouse, the older brother of Robert of Anjou, and Bernardino, a fifteenth-century preacher who founded the cult of the Name of Jesus.¹⁰

The central panel represents the Stigmatization of Francis in an expansive landscape. Behind Francis is the sleeping friar traditionally presumed to be Leo, one of the saint's earliest and closest followers.¹¹ Francis kneels with both knees on the ground and looks to his right at a small red seraph piercing his hands, feet, and side, recalling Netherlandish representations of the saint by Jan van Eyck and Gerard David.¹² Francis's back is turned to a landscape featuring fantastic outcroppings of rocks and mountains with several small building located at their summits, suggesting his eremitic retreat at La Verna. The landscape on the other side of the panel features a city nestled in a lush, green setting.¹³

The two animal stories are represented in the background. The Sermon to the Birds occurs at the base of the mountainous side of the landscape, while the Wolf of Gubbio is depicted outside the cityscape. In the former story, Francis preaches to a flock of birds that does not fly away at his approach. During the sermon, the saint exhorts the animals to praise God for having created them. After his sermon, Francis decides to include all of creation in his evangelical mission, with animal relationships becoming a more prominent feature of his life.¹⁴

The latter account describes Francis's encounter with a wolf while preaching at the city of

⁹ Budde et al, 37; John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: from its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 108, 374, 461, 466.

¹⁰ Zehnder, 520.

¹¹ Moorman, 108, 374; Zehnder, 521.

¹² James Snyder, "Observations on the Iconography of Jan van Eyck's 'Saint Francis Receiving The Stigmata,'" in *Jan van Eyck: Two Paintings of Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmat*, ed. by Jane Watkins and Curtis Scott (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1997), 75-87.

¹³ Zehnder, 522.

¹⁴ T.W. Arnold, trans. *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi*, (New York: Duffield and Company, 1908), 46-47; Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1998), 624; Thomas of Celano *The Life of Saint Francis* in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1998), 234; Sorrell, 60, 67.

Gubbio. Learning that the wolf has been attacking both humans and livestock, Francis confronts the animal, admonishing it to cease its destructive acts. The wolf renounces its former behavior and becomes dependent on the charity of the villagers for food, imitating mendicants such as Francis himself.¹⁵

Of the two animal stories, the Sermon to the Birds has the longest visual tradition, first appearing in a panel by Bonaventura Berlinghieri in 1235.¹⁶ The incident is also firmly established in Franciscan literature, with a written account appearing as early as 1228 in the *First Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano, published two years after the death of Francis in 1226.¹⁷ The account also appears in the writings of Bonaventure, including the *Major Legend*, declared the official biography of Francis by the Franciscan Order after 1263.¹⁸ The Wolf of Gubbio, by contrast, does not appear in Francis's official biography, but belongs to a compilation of popular stories known as the *Fioretti*, or *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*. Believed to have been compiled in the early fourteenth century, the *Fioretti* is an Italian translation of a Latin work.¹⁹ Although many of the *Fioretti* stories can also be found in the official biographies, including the Sermon to the Birds, other accounts, such as the Wolf of Gubbio, appear to have originated from different, unknown sources.²⁰ At the same time, however, the *Major Legend* by Bonaventure describes Francis halting wolf attacks as well as hailstorms at a city called Greccio, suggesting that the official biographies may have influenced the story of the Wolf of Gubbio.²¹

¹⁵ Arnold, *Little Flowers*, 60-64.

¹⁶ Gregory Ahlquist and William R. Cook, "The Representation of Posthumous Miracles of St. Francis of Assisi in Thirteenth-Century Italian Painting," in *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, ed. William R. Cook (Boston: Brill, 2005), 211.

¹⁷ Rosalind Brooke, *The Image of St. Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 38-41; Celano 234.

¹⁸ Brooke, 183.

¹⁹ Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, 288.

²⁰ Moorman, 288.

²¹ Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, 594.

On the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* itself, both animal stories depart from Franciscan literature, beginning with the Sermon to the Birds. Initially, the image appears to conform to traditional representations of the subject. Francis stands in front of several different species of birds, recalling images by Berlinghieri or Giotto.²² Most of the birds have likely been added at the artists' discretion, a common practice during this period.²³ Other birds descend from the sky, a detail mentioned in the *Fioretti*, while Francis points authoritatively at the birds on the ground.²⁴ A second friar is included in the scene, a tradition instigated by the Berlinghieri panel of 1235.²⁵ The friar in the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, however, is anomalous. Whereas most representations show Francis's companion standing behind the saint, this particular friar actually sits on the ground with the birds. One bird even perches on his shoulder, while an owl sits on his head, a close physical contact not seen in earlier representations of the subject.

The Taming of the Wolf of Gubbio also departs from its literary source. According to the *Fioretti* account, Francis leaves the city to order to confront the wolf in the wilderness. After the wolf agrees to submit to Francis's demands, it rests its paw in the saint's hand to demonstrate its fealty. The wolf then follows the saint back to the gates of Gubbio in order to repeat the symbolic handshake for the city officials.²⁶ In the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, however, the city's mayor meets Francis and the wolf out in the wilderness, away from the safety of Gubbio.²⁷ Moreover, Francis does not shake hands with the wolf. Instead, the saint holds both the wolf's foreleg and the mayor's wrist, and is about to place the wolf's paw into the latter's hand. The

²² Ahlquist and Cook, 211.

²³ Brooke, 194, 207; F.D. Klingender, "St. Francis and the Birds of the Apocalypse," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1953): 16, 18, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00754390%281953%2916%3A1%2F2%3C13%3ASFATBO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>; Brundson Yapp, *Birds in Medieval Manuscripts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 13.

²⁴ Arnold, *Little Flowers*, 46.

²⁵ Ahlquist and Cook, 211.

²⁶ Arnold, *Little Flowers*, 62-64.

²⁷ Zehnder, 525.

alteration emphasizes Francis's role as a mediator orchestrating the reconciliation between two enemies.²⁸

While the alterations in the two animal stories may suggest a lack of familiarity with Franciscan texts, the altarpiece's representation of the Stigmatization questions this possibility. Unlike many depictions of the Stigmatization, which show only Francis's wounds, the central panel of the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* depicts nails protruding through the saint's hands and feet, a detail that early Franciscan texts mention.²⁹ When describing the Stigmatization in his *Major Legend*, for example, Bonaventure writes that Francis's "hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the center by nails, with the heads appearing on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides."³⁰ The inclusion of the nails in the central panel demonstrates a familiarity with Franciscan texts, implying that the two animal stories were altered intentionally.

From a twenty-first century perspective, these alterations may evoke an ecologically-conscious attitude toward the environment. The friar sitting among the birds, for instance, could represent a more democratic view of humanity's relationship with nature, with animals and humans listening to Francis as equals. The mayor shaking hands with the Wolf of Gubbio, in turn, could suggest the forging of a cooperative partnership between humanity and nature. These interpretations, however, are more indicative of a twenty-first century perspective toward nature than a sixteenth-century one. In order to discover why these two images were altered, they must be considered within their original social and religious context. What should first be established,

²⁸ Malcolm Drew Donalson, *The History of the Wolf in Western Civilization: from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 127.

²⁹ Arnold, *Little Flowers*, 186-187; Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, 633; Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, "The Minor Legend of Saint Francis," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1998), 710; Celano, *The Life of St. Francis*, 264.

³⁰ Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, 633.

however, is why these two particular stories were selected in the first place by examining of Francis's entire oeuvre of animal narratives.

Attitudes toward animals in Franciscan literature, society, and saints' lives

Francis's lesser-known animal stories appear in the biographies by both Bonaventure and Celano as well as in compilations such as the *Fioretti*. Although Franciscan literature itself does not classify these stories into specific groups, these accounts have been organized into five categories here for analytical purposes, with each category correlating to the degree of Francis's authority over the animal. In the first category, Francis exerts the most direct power over animals. The Sermon to the Birds and the Wolf of Gubbio both belong to this category, but other accounts include a cicada singing at Francis's will, and the saint's curse of a gluttonous sow for devouring a lamb, causing her ultimate demise.³¹ The second category concerns Francis either rescuing or befriending animals that have been rescued by another individual. Among these stories are accounts of Francis bartering for sheep to prevent their slaughter, removing worms from the roadside, and petting a rabbit that a fellow companion had recovered from a snare.³²

While animals are primarily passive characters in the first two categories, they assume more active roles in other stories. In the third category, Francis and animals praise God together. One example from this group describes Francis and a nightingale singing antiphonally, with the nightingale outlasting the saint.³³ The active role of animals becomes even more prominent in the fourth group, which concerns animals helping Francis or his companions. An example from this category includes a falcon that venerates Francis by waking him for his prayers with its call. Observing that the saint is ill, the falcon intentionally rouses him at a later hour than the other

³¹ Armstrong, *Saint Francis, Nature Mystic*, 113; Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, 593, 590-591.

³² Bonaventure 592; Celano, *The Life of St. Francis*, 235, 249-250.

³³ Armstrong, 68.

friars in order to allow him to rest.³⁴ In the final category, animals induce spiritual contemplation for Francis. The saint experiences meditative ecstasy holding a duck, for example, while another account describes him falling into prayer after blessing a fish.³⁵ Just as the Sermon to the Birds describes animals recognizing Francis's sanctity by listening to him preach, in these stories Francis expresses his own awe of God's creation by meditating over its beauty or goodness.

What these categories demonstrate is that a variety of animal stories could have been used for the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, requiring the artists and patrons to select the narratives that they believed were most appropriate for their purposes. The legibility or recognizability of the animal stories would have been crucial, as they were to be situated in the background. A preference for narrative also seems to have influenced the selection; most representations of Francis before the Council of Trent depict episodes from his biographies.³⁶ Even the Stigmatization itself, which occurred while Francis contemplated the Passion, was a specific event in his life. The theme of Francis in meditation with no overt narrative reference would not become popular until the seventeenth century, with the saint contemplating skulls or crucifixes rather than animals, designating traditional themes such as the Passion or mortality as the subject of meditation. Moreover, if Francis has any companions in these contemplative images, they are angels, reinforcing his affinity with the divine rather than his reverence for nature.³⁷

For the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* in particular, however, a third determinant is the extent to which the animal stories demonstrate Francis's authority, as both the Wolf of Gubbio and the Sermon to the Birds show animals submitting to the saint. In this regard, the Wolf of Gubbio,

³⁴ Bonaventure, 594.

³⁵ Bonaventure, 592; Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, 236.

³⁶ Pamela Askew, "The Angelic Consolation of St. Francis of Assisi in Post-Tridentine Italian Painting," *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 281-283, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0075-4390%281969%2932%3C280%3AATACOSF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I>

³⁷ Askew, 284.

despite the fact that it does not appear in Francis's official biography, would have been particularly striking to its audience, as the scene shows the saint controlling a dangerous animal without resorting to violence. Wolves threatened livestock, and theological writings equated them to heresy and the devil, with their ferocity symbolizing unbridled sexuality and avarice.³⁸ As a consequence of their negative reputation with society, wolves often became the victims of human violence, and were commonly hanged as a warning to their fellow pack members.³⁹ Francis's rebuke to the wolf in the *Fioretti* reflects this practice, with the saint admonishing the animal that it "hast dared to slay men, made in the image of God; for the which cause thou art deserving of the gibbet as a thief and a most base murderer."⁴⁰ The wolf is spared because he agrees to behave like a dog rather than a feral, independent animal. Moreover, when the wolf eventually dies, "the townsfolk sorely grieved, sith marking him pass so gently through the city, they minded the better the virtue and the sanctity of St. Francis."⁴¹ The wolf is beloved because his behavior reminds the community of the human who tamed him.

Society's negative attitude toward the wolf reflects a general ambivalence toward nature. Although the wolf was viewed more negatively than other wild animals, society believed that the natural environment in general was dangerous and unpredictable. Nature was the opposite of civilized order and human progress, and animals were considered irrational creatures lacking both humanity's intellect and eternal soul.⁴² Francis's biographies frequently invoke the irrationality of nature in order to emphasize his sanctity. For example, Bonaventure writes in the sixth lesson of the *Minor Legend*, a condensed version of Francis's biography used in the liturgy,

³⁸ Armstrong, 204; Donalson, 4, 32, 130, 137; Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15, 25, 33.

³⁹ Armstrong, 203; Peter Dinzelbacher, "Animal Trials: A Multidisciplinary Approach," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2002): 414, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_interdisciplinary_history/v032/32.3dinzelbacher.pdf.

⁴⁰ Arnold, *Little Flowers*, 62.

⁴¹ Arnold, 64.

⁴² Salisbury, 43, Donalson, 57.

that when Francis preached to the birds they “looked attentively at him, as if they were trying to experience the marvelous power of his words. It was only proper that this man, full of God, was led by a humane and tender affection to such irrational creatures.”⁴³ Bonaventure never states whether the birds successfully comprehend Francis’s sermon. Rather, he stresses Francis’s sanctity by emphasizing his ability to extend his compassion to animals.

The irrationality of nature elicited different responses from Christians throughout the ancient and medieval periods. For eremitic saints, nature offered an opportunity to cultivate spiritual endurance, with figures such as Jerome and Anthony retreating to the desert to pursue an ascetic lifestyle.⁴⁴ The Cistercians in the eleventh century, advocating a more stringent version of Benedictine monasticism, deliberately invoked the desert tradition when founding their monastery at Citeaux.⁴⁵ Francis himself meditated in the wilderness, experiencing the Stigmatization during his contemplation at La Verna.⁴⁶ Yet, although many saints valued the challenges of irrational nature, Christianity argued that nature’s purpose was to serve humanity. People were expected, through reason and morality, to control and adapt the environment in order to make it productive.⁴⁷

The *Saint Francis Altarpiece* reflects society’s desire to successfully control nature by choosing animal stories that clearly articulate Francis’s power over animals. An image of Francis singing with a nightingale, for instance, might have questioned Francis’s authority by showing him participating in the same activity with an irrational creature, suggesting that the animal itself

⁴³ Bonaventure, “The Minor Legend,” 706.

⁴⁴ Armstrong, 14; Sorrell, *Francis of Assisi and Nature* 16.

⁴⁵ Sorrell, 28; Benedicta Ward, “The Desert Myth: Reflections on the Desert Ideal in Early Cistercian Monasticism,” in *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition East and West*, ed. M. Basil Pennington, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 184-187, 191, 194-7.

⁴⁶ Armstrong, 10; Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, 630-633; Bonaventure, “The Minor Legend,” 709; Celano, *The Life of St. Francis*, 263-264; Cunningham, 61; Sorrell, 39, 57-58.

⁴⁷ Donalson, 57; Heidi Ilona Frich; “‘Even the Sea Served Him...’ The Soliders of Christ and the Restoration of Nature in Some Works of the Venerable Bede,” in *In Quest of the Kingdom: Ten Papers on Monastic Spirituality*, ed. Alf Härdelin (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiskell International, 1991), 71-74; Salisbury, 43.

may have a soul.⁴⁸ The Sermon to the Birds and the Wolf of Gubbio, however, remove any doubt regarding Francis's dominance. Whether through listening attentively to the saint's preaching or yielding to his demands to cease attacking humans, the animals in both stories defer to Francis. Nature recognizes its submission to humanity and obediently complies.

In addition to invoking society's attitudes toward nature, the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* recalls traditional representations of saintly interaction with animals.⁴⁹ Saints and animals had been companions for centuries, with Celtic saints such as Cuthbert, who let otters dry his feet after devoting a night to prayer, being particularly well-known for their animal acquaintanceships.⁵⁰ The hagiography of Giles, a seventh-century Greek living in France as a hermit, describes the saint sharing a cave with a hind and being nourished with its milk.⁵¹ Yet, although certain hagiographical accounts describe a symbiotic relationship between saints and animals, visual representations of the animal-saint relationship tend to emphasize the animal's dependence on the saint, while its human companion maintains his or her autonomy.⁵² Representations of Giles, for instance, show him placing a wounded hand over the hind rather than feeding off of it, recalling an arrow wound he sustained while defending it from a king's hunting party.⁵³ Such images depict Giles's charity toward the animal, but do not indicate his dependence on it for nourishment.

⁴⁸ Armstrong, 68.

⁴⁹ Laura Hobgood-Oster, "Holy Dogs and Asses: Stories Told Through Animal Saints," in *What are the Animals to Us? Approaches from Science, Religion, Folklore, Literature, and Art*, ed. Dave Aftandilian (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 198.

⁵⁰ Dominic Marnier, *St Cuthbert: His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 44; Bede, "Life of Cuthbert," in *The Age of Bede*, trans. J.F. Webb, edited by D.H. Farmer, (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 55-56.

⁵¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 517.

⁵² Bede, 58-59; Donalson, 46-47.

⁵³ De Voragine, 517-518; K.B. McFarlane, *Hans Memling* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971), 87.

Another saint-animal relationship that likely influenced the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* was that of Jerome and his lion, depicted in Italian, Flemish, as well as German altarpieces.⁵⁴ According to Jerome's hagiography, the lion became the saint's companion after he had removed a thorn from its paw.⁵⁵ In the visual arts, the lion usually stands beside the saint or lies on the ground with his paws under his head, disarming his threatening qualities.⁵⁶ The lion may also raise its paw to Jerome to have the thorn removed, providing a reference to the legend as well as demonstrating his dependence on the saint. Jerome, by contrast, never seeks the lion's assistance, nor does he ever appear emotionally attached to it. The saint never pets the animal or seeks its assurance during periods of carnal temptation; the lion functions as an attribute rather than a companion. Jerome's dominance is also suggested by his physical position with the lion, as the saint is usually shown standing over the animal. While the vertical orientation of many altarpieces influenced this design choice, it also adds a physical distance between the two companions, emphasizing Jerome's autonomy.

The two animal stories in the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, despite their initially unconventional interpretations of the two narratives, continue the conservative visual tradition of animal-saint relationships. In the Sermon to the Birds, Francis stands above the birds and does not make physical contact with them, recalling the earliest representations of the subject.⁵⁷ Moreover, Francis's gestures, particularly his pointing hand, are commanding and assertive, while the birds, with closed beaks and wings tucked into their sides, behave as attentive subjects. Even the friar sitting on the ground, who might suggest equality and intimacy with nature,

⁵⁴ Budde et al, *Wallraf-Richartz Museum*, 34; Otto H. Förster, *Das Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Köln* (Köln, Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1961), pl. 69; Max J. Friedlander and Jakob Rosenberg, *The Paintings of Lucas Cranach* (Secaucus, Wellfleet Press, 1978), 66, 41, 103, 106-107.

⁵⁵ Jacobus de Voraigne, 589-590.

⁵⁶ Friedlander and Rosenberg, *Lucas Cranach*, 66, 41, 103, 106-107.

⁵⁷ Ahlquist and Cook, "The Posthumous Miracles of Francis," 210-215.

becomes distanced from the birds when examined more closely. With his head lowered and his hands resting on his knees, the friar does not actively engage with any of the birds, including the ones perching on his body. Rather, his position on the ground emphasizes his own obedience to Francis as well as his absorption in the sermon; he is too occupied to notice the birds settling on him. The Wolf of Gubbio also demonstrates Francis's superiority over the wolf. Although Francis holds the wolf's paw, the gesture suggests control rather than companionship. Francis looks at the mayor rather than the animal, and holds the wolf in order to place its paw into the mayor's hand. Moreover, Francis holds the mayor's wrist, further underscoring his control over both parties.

When analyzed in the context of Francis's oeuvre of animal stories, society's stance toward nature, and the visual tradition of saintly interaction with animals, the two stories in the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* become conservative demonstrations of the saint's authority rather than images espousing ecological consciousness. A more complete interpretation, however, should also consider the stories' relationship with the entire *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, as the altarpiece addresses a specifically Franciscan audience. Before the altarpiece can be analyzed, however, the division occurring within Franciscan Order between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries warrants discussion.

An Overview of the Development of Conventual and Observant Franciscans

The initial catalyst for the division of the Franciscan Order was the issue of poverty and its role in the mission of the Friars Minor, an issue that had concerned the Order even before the death of Francis in 1226.⁵⁸ Francis derived his lifestyle from the Gospels, arguing that his followers should abstain from all property, including permanent dwellings.⁵⁹ Total poverty,

⁵⁸ Brooke, 31.

⁵⁹ Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, 277.

however, proved impractical as the order expanded; society could not support a large mendicant population.⁶⁰ Moreover, many Franciscans believed that obedience and service to ecclesiastical authorities superseded absolute poverty. Friars supporting the use of property argued that the practice was acceptable because it ensured the Franciscan's self-sufficiency, making them more serviceable to the needs of the Church.⁶¹ Many friars also advocated stability in order to pursue formal education in theology, considered necessary for orthodox preaching.⁶² With papal permission, Franciscans acquired property such as monasteries without technically owning it, allowing them to practice a form of communal poverty.⁶³ These monastic friars would become known as the Conventuals, after the convents in which they dwelled.⁶⁴

As early as the thirteenth century, however, certain Franciscans resisted the shift toward monasticism. The Spiritual Franciscans were among the earliest of these revivalist groups, although they were declared heretical.⁶⁵ Other reformed groups would also appear during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the most powerful and influential of these groups were known as the Observants. Initiated as a more eremitical branch of Conventualism, the Observants claimed to more closely adhere to Francis's apostolic lifestyle.⁶⁶ Yet, although the Observants followed Francis's asceticism more rigorously than the Conventuals, they were a relatively moderate reform movement, opposing more radical factions such as the Fraticelli.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Brooke, 31; Moorman, 148; Sergius Wroblewski, *Sons of Saint Francis Get Together: A Short History about the Three Franciscan Families* (Pulaski: Franciscan Publishers, 1980), 22.

⁶¹ Moorman, 192.

⁶² Christopher M. Cullen, *Bonaventure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12; Lazaro Iriarte, *Franciscan History: The Three Orders of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Patricia Ross (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982), 45; Moorman, 99, 105.

⁶³ Moorman, 151-152; 185

⁶⁴ Moorman, 148.

⁶⁵ Stanko Andrić, *The Miracles of St. John of Capistran* (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 11; Moorman, 110-111, 192; Wroblewski, 36-37.

⁶⁶ Iriarte, *Franciscan History*, 70; Moorman, 382.

⁶⁷ Cynthia L. Polecristi, *Preaching Peace in Renaissance Italy: Bernardino of Siena and his Audience* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 11; Andrić

Distinguishing the Observants from the Conventuals was not an exceptionally rigorous, eremitic asceticism, but a return to an evangelical lifestyle emphasizing preaching.⁶⁸

As the Observants became more popular, they became increasingly autonomous, threatening the dominance of the Conventuals.⁶⁹ The Council of Constance in 1415, for example, allowed the Observants to elect their own vicars, leaders who were distinct from the Minister Generals of the Conventuals.⁷⁰ By the turn of the sixteenth century, the approximate date of execution for the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, the two branches were regarded as separate Orders.⁷¹ In 1517, the separation became official when Pope Leo X, during a convention of both Conventuals and Observants, issued his bull *Ite Vos*, originally intended as an ultimatum to reconcile the Order.⁷² When the Conventuals insisted on maintaining their papal permission to use property, Leo organized all reformed Franciscans, including non-Observant branches, into the official Friars Minor, while the Conventuals were regarded as a separate order.⁷³ Initially a small group, Observant Franciscans formed the majority of the friar population by the time of the official separation in 1517, although Conventuals remained influential in certain areas, including Cologne, where the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* was executed.⁷⁴

Although the Observants and Conventuals eventually separated, there also was a desire to keep the two branches united.⁷⁵ John of Capistrano, the second Vicar-General of the Observants, briefly succeeded in reuniting the two branches in 1429, although his efforts ultimately failed

⁶⁸ Andrić; Duncan Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Medieval Franciscan Order: from Saint Francis to the Foundation of the Capuchins* (Rome: Capuchin Historical Institute, 1987), 585, 610.

⁶⁹ Andrić, 89; Moorman, 569; Nimmo, 594.

⁷⁰ Moorman, 380-383.

⁷¹ Moorman, 450.

⁷² Moorman, 582-585.

⁷³ Iriarte, 73-75; Moorman, 585.

⁷⁴ Zehnder, 527.

⁷⁵ Wroblewski, 44.

because his reforms favored the Observants.⁷⁶ The Conventuals also attempted to prevent permanent separation by allowing the Observants to practice their stricter lifestyle while remaining under Conventual authority. The Observants, however, would only submit to the Conventuals when they agreed to relinquish their rights to property as well as accept other reforms. The Conventuals, for their part, believed that their ministry was more effective when they were self-sufficient, and refused to submit.⁷⁷ Ultimately, the two branches would not be reconciled, but until the official separation in 1517, attempts were made to reunite them, a desire that emerges in the iconography of the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*.

Themes of Franciscan Unity and Authority in the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*

When considered within the context of the disputes between the Conventuals and Observants, the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* becomes an espousal of Franciscan unity by reminding all friars of their allegiance to the authority of Francis. The exterior wings begin the altarpiece's program by depicting Francis standing with five representatives from the Order's early history. Sent to Morocco at Francis's order in 1219, a predominantly Muslim region, these five missionaries were killed in 1220 after publicly preaching their Christian beliefs.⁷⁸ Canonized in 1481, approximately twenty years before the execution of the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, the five Franciscans were the first missionary martyrs to have been canonized since the thirteenth century.⁷⁹ On the altarpiece itself, the slender, elegantly poised friars address one another as though in conversation, providing a tranquil contrast to their bloody swords and head wounds. Francis, standing on the left-hand panel, holds up a long crucifix in lieu of a sword and points to his side wound, indicating his Stigmatization.

⁷⁶ Nimmo, 606, 610.

⁷⁷ Iriarte, 72; Moorman, 153, 585; Nimmo, 594-595; Wroblewski, 48-50.

⁷⁸ Iriarte, 134, 543; Ryan, "Missionary Saints," 8; Moorman, 229; F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), 216.

⁷⁹ Ryan, "Missionary Saints," 8-10.

Francis's inclusion among the Moroccan martyrs is not coincidental. Although the saint was never martyred himself, his biographers describe his intense desire for it.⁸⁰ Moreover, the Stigmatization was posited as a form of martyrdom because Francis's complete absorption in Christ's mission and Passion allowed his body to physically manifest the perfection of his faith.⁸¹ By including Francis among the five Moroccan missionaries, the altarpiece gives the saint a martyr's authority. The martyrs themselves, however, are also indebted to Francis because it was his lifestyle and teachings that allowed them to achieve their holy deaths. Consequently, the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* recognizes Francis as both an honorary martyr and the founder of an Order that produces martyrs.

While the exterior panels depict the earliest followers of the Franciscan Order, the two outermost panels of the interior wings portray two of their fifteenth-century successors, Bernardino of Siena and John of Capistrano. Standing in profile with lowered eyelids, Bernardino holds his standard attribute, a golden disk inscribed with the letters IHS, symbolizing of the cult of the sacred name of Jesus.⁸² John of Capistrano, standing in a three-quarter view, holds a crucifix and a walking stick, a standard attribute of a hermit or pilgrim.⁸³

John and Bernardino, however, evoke more than the continuation of Franciscan preaching. While the Moroccan martyrs on the exterior may recall a period when the Order was not yet divided, Bernardino and John reflect decidedly Observant sympathies. Both preachers were Observants who were crucial to the movement's popularization during the fifteenth century, and Bernardino's canonization in 1450, only six years after his death in 1444, testifies to

⁸⁰ Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, 600-603.

⁸¹ Bonaventure, 631-633; Brooke, 32; Moorman, 286.

⁸² Polecristti, 86, 105.

⁸³ James Hall, *The Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, revised edition (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), 289.

his popularity.⁸⁴ Bernardino particularly disapproved of factionalism, employing visual and ceremonial devices to underscore communal unity.⁸⁵ One tactic was the presentation of the name of Jesus, symbolized by the letters IHS, during critical points during sermons, but another method was the peacemaking ritual.⁸⁶ Acting as a mediator, Bernardino would ceremonially settle conflicts to promote unity.⁸⁷ Although Bernardino's peacemaking ceremonies were restricted to Italy, it is possible that these accounts were known in other parts of Europe, particularly since Bernardino was a crucial saint for the Observants. Consequently, these ceremonies may have influenced the *Saint Francis Altarpiece's* depiction of the Wolf of Gubbio.

While Bernardino is primarily known as a preacher, his student and contemporary, John of Capistrano, held a variety of positions, including that of inquisitor.⁸⁸ Especially opposed to heresy, Capistrano was more widely traveled than Bernardino, and journeyed throughout Europe to preach, experiencing significant popularity in Germany and Hungary.⁸⁹ Capistrano also stressed unity, briefly reuniting the Observants and Conventuals in 1429.⁹⁰ Unlike Bernardino, however, Capistrano, who died in 1456, would not be canonized until 1690.⁹¹ Consequently, he would not have been officially regarded as a saint when the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* was executed. His presence, however, may be attributed to the altarpiece's Observant sympathies. If the Observants wanted to assert themselves as the heirs of Francis's preaching and martyrdom tradition, the inclusion of their preachers, even if one of them had not yet been canonized, confirms their argument. Moreover, by including Capistrano among Franciscan saints, the altarpiece supports the campaign for Capistrano's canonization.

⁸⁴ Arcin, 12, 15, 89; Polecritti, 72.

⁸⁵ Polecritti, 72, 86.

⁸⁶ Polecritti, 86, 102.

⁸⁷ Polecritti, 86, 105.

⁸⁸ Arcin, 16; Moorman, 466.

⁸⁹ Arcin, 22.

⁹⁰ Nimmo, 606.

⁹¹ Arcin, 89; Zehnder, 523.

If the outer panels of the wings reflect Observant interests and the Franciscan call to preaching, the inner panels remind Franciscans of their obedience to ecclesiastical powers by presenting two thirteenth-century bishop saints, Louis of Toulouse and Bonaventure. Unlike the other saints featured on the altarpiece, Louis came from a royal background. He was the older brother of Robert of Anjou, the future king of Naples, and his great-uncle was Saint Louis IX of France, a member of the secular, or Third Order, of Franciscans.⁹² Paralleling Francis's example, Louis officially renounced his rights to primogeniture in 1296.⁹³ While Louis's father, Charles II, initially opposed this decision, he recognized his son's value as a connection within the Church, acquiring for him the bishopric of Toulouse.⁹⁴ Louis reluctantly accepted it under the condition that he be ordained a Franciscan, but died from exhaustion within a few months of his ordination.⁹⁵ Aware of Louis's political value as a saint, Charles then promoted his canonization, which would eventually be granted in 1317.⁹⁶ Although Louis's recognition would diminish after the sixteenth century, he experienced significant popularity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with his cult extending to Germany.⁹⁷

While Louis's presence evokes royal authority, Bonaventure recalls the Franciscan intellectual tradition. Educated at the University of Paris during the reign of Louis IX, Bonaventure was a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas.⁹⁸ He was elected Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1254, maintaining the position until 1273.⁹⁹ His ecclesiastic offices included the bishopric of Albano, which he held from 1273 until his death in 1274, and a cardinalate, also

⁹² Julian Gardner, "Saint Louis of Toulouse, Robert of Anjou, and Simone Martini," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 39, no 1 (1976): 17; Margaret Toynbee, *Saint Louis of Toulouse and the Process of Canonization in the Fourteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1929), 30-31.

⁹³ Garner, 17; Toynbee, 101-102.

⁹⁴ Garner, 17-18; Toynbee, 100-101.

⁹⁵ Gardner, 18; Toynbee, 126-132.

⁹⁶ Gardner, 18.

⁹⁷ Toynbee, 212, 231-232.

⁹⁸ Cullen, 14.

⁹⁹ Cullen, 8, 14.

awarded in 1273.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the *Major Legend*, which became the official biography of Francis after 1263, Bonaventure composed the *Minor Legend*, specifically intended for the liturgy, as well as several theological treatises.¹⁰¹ He was canonized in 1482, one year after the Moroccan martyrs.¹⁰²

While John of Capistrano and Bernardino of Siena evoke Observant sympathies, Bonaventure's presence is intended to elicit Conventual support. As Minister General, Bonaventure had argued that papal interpretations of the Rule carried the most authority, supporting the Franciscan ideal of obedience to the Church.¹⁰³ He also supported a stable, grounded way of life that permitted intellectual study, which the Conventuals claimed to follow.¹⁰⁴ The Conventuals had promoted Bonaventure's canonization, and Sixtus IV, the pope who canonized him, had been a Conventual friar.¹⁰⁵ The Observants, by contrast, actively opposed Sixtus's campaign to canonize Bonaventure because they disapproved of the Pope's Conventual sympathies and believed that Bonaventure's moderate policies had encouraged spiritual laxity.¹⁰⁶

Although Louis and Bonaventure were bishops for relatively brief periods in their lives, they are both represented as ecclesiastical princes on the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* to underscore the Franciscans' alliance with Church authority. Coat-of-arms are depicted with the two saints, invoking royal connotations. Louis's shield, along with his cope, features the fleur-de-lis against

¹⁰⁰ Cullen, 14; Iriarte, *Franciscan History*, 46.

¹⁰¹ Introduction to "The Legends and Sermons About Saint Francis by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio," from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1998), 502-503; Cullen 13.

¹⁰² Cullen, 21.

¹⁰³ Iriarte, 44.

¹⁰⁴ Iriarte, 44-45; Moorman, 90, 154.

¹⁰⁵ Rona Goffen, "Friar Sixtus IV and the Sistine Chapel," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 218, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0034-4338%28198622%2939%3A2%3C218%3AFSIATS%3E2.0.C%3B2-Y>.

¹⁰⁶ Rosalind B. Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government: From Elias to Bonaventure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 284; Goffen, 225-227.

a blue background, asserting his royal pedigree. A crown is also placed atop the shield, further accentuating his heritage. Bonaventure holds a book, presumably one of his writings, while a cardinal's hat, symbolizing his other ecclesiastical office, rests on his coat-of-arms. Displayed on the shield itself is the insignia of the Friars Minor, featuring a pair of clasped hands with nails protruding through them.¹⁰⁷ By placing Franciscan heraldry next to Bonaventure, the altarpiece underscores his affiliation with the Order while visually according the saint with a royal status similar to Louis of Toulouse.

Despite the diverse backgrounds of the figures on the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, they share a mission involving contact with the secular world. The Moroccan martyrs represent the earliest preaching and missionary tradition of the Franciscan Order, the two Observants continue the tradition of public preaching, while the bishops represent the pastoral care associated with ecclesiastical authority. On the altarpiece itself, visual repetition underscores the commonality between the saints. John of Capistrano's crucifix, for example, recalls Francis's crucifix on the exterior, while his slightly hunched pose resembles one of the Moroccan martyrs. Louis of Toulouse raises his right hand while turning toward Bernardino, a pose that is almost identical to the martyr standing in his place on the exterior. Bonaventure's nearly frontal pose, as well as the bending of his right arm at the elbow to support a book, correlates to a martyr bending his arm to raise a sword. While this repetition may have been practical, with the artists copying certain poses for convenience, it also establishes a visual connection between the figures. These saints pursued different vocations within the Franciscan Order, but they all achieved their sanctity through their benevolent engagement with the world rather than their withdrawal from it. The altarpiece reminds all Franciscans of their duty to public ministry.

¹⁰⁷ Nimmo, 1.

Uniting all of these saints is Francis himself, receiving his Stigmatization in the central panel. Yet, the central panel represents more than the apex of Francis's spiritual ecstasy. It also depicts two episodes from an evangelical lifestyle demonstrating Francis's complete imitation of Christ, the Sermon to the Birds and the Taming of the Wolf of Gubbio. If the foreground portrays Francis's spiritual reward, then the two animal stories represent steps in the process that allowed him to attain that spiritual perfection. Moreover, they demonstrate the ways in which Franciscans should interact with society, beginning with the Wolf of Gubbio.

The Wolf of Gubbio portrays the necessity of Franciscan involvement in the world by illustrating a compromise between two disputing parties. Situated within the unpredictability of the wilderness rather than the safety of the city, Francis's intervention becomes more dramatic. He demonstrates his complete control of the situation by holding the limbs of both the mayor and the wolf; through his guidance, the danger of nature is dispelled and a peaceful existence assured. As the followers of Francis, all friars should recognize the necessity of their benevolent interference with the world. Their spiritual lifestyle liberates them from the temptations of worldly desires, allowing them to lead society through the dangers and uncertainties of life.¹⁰⁸

The Wolf of Gubbio, however, also espouses compromise and reconciliation within the Order itself. Although the image does not represent a literal compromise between friars, it is not coincidental that the image is surrounded by saints supported by different factions of the Franciscan Order. Moreover, these saints tried to maintain the unity of the friars. Bernardino, in addition to his peacemaking ceremonies and initiation of the sacred Name of Jesus, participated with John of Capistrano in conferences that attempted to reunite the two Orders.¹⁰⁹

Bonaventure's reforms, while they would later be associated with Conventualism, were

¹⁰⁸ Polecritti, 102-105.

¹⁰⁹ Nimmo, 606; 628-630.

originally intended to reconcile moderate Franciscans with the more Spiritual extremists.¹¹⁰ Although they shared differing views regarding the ideal interpretation of the Franciscan mission, these saints can be associated with compromise and peacemaking. Indirectly then, the Wolf of Gubbio implies the necessity of compromise within the Order itself, with the vow to Francis becoming the mediator. In order to successfully guide society toward reconciliation, the Franciscans must first remember their vow to Francis and reconcile themselves.

If the Wolf of Gubbio demonstrates the necessity of Franciscan unity and involvement with the world, the Sermon to the Birds offers preaching as one of the means by which to accomplish it. The image confirms both Francis's authority and the prerogative of the Franciscans to preach, a message conveyed in the earliest representations of the subject.¹¹¹ In the altarpiece itself, Francis stands in a path leading down from the mountains. The image emphasizes that the saint has decided to leave his solitary, contemplative life in order to minister to society, exhorting all its inhabitants to praise God. Enforcing the benevolence of Francis's decision is the demeanor of the birds themselves. Their calm attentiveness evokes a world restored to harmony through Francis's intervention. His moral perfection encourages nature to obediently remember its duty to serve humanity because it recognizes, if only on an instinctual level, that his motives reflect divine will.¹¹²

The vision of obedience in the Sermon to the Birds, however, also concerns the Franciscan Order itself by reminding all friars of their vow to Francis. Articulating this obedience is the submissive friar on the ground listening to his superior's sermon. Just as the friar appears oblivious to the birds perching on his body, the image prompts all Franciscans, regardless of whether they are Observants or Conventuals, to concentrate their attention on the

¹¹⁰ Moorman, 154.

¹¹¹ Ahlquist and Cook, "The Posthumous Miracles of Saint Francis," 235.

¹¹² Frich, " 'Even the Sea Served Him...' " 72-74.

mission of Francis as the source of their spiritual life. As the eventual division of the Conventuals and Observants demonstrates, however, the two branches interpreted Francis's intentions differently.

Ultimately, the two animal stories represent a world rectified by the ministry of the Franciscans. As the spiritual descendants of Francis, Christ's perfect imitator, it is the Franciscans' duty to bring peace to the world. Before the Franciscans can reconcile the world, however, they must first reconcile themselves. Remembering their vow to Francis as the source of their authority, all Franciscans must remember that they ultimately share the same objective, to ameliorate the condition of humanity. What concerns the altarpiece is not a reverence toward nature, but a confirmation of the sanctity of the Franciscan ministry. Nature becomes the backdrop through which the Franciscans articulate their unity and authority.

Yet, attitudes and concerns evolve over time, and many of the concerns influencing the creation of the *Saint Francis Altarpiece* have changed. The Conventuals and Observants have been separated for nearly five centuries, and it is unlikely that they will ever reunite. Moreover, attitudes toward nature itself are changing as society acknowledges the scope of the environmental crisis. Just as sixteenth-century Franciscans utilized the divinity of their patron saint to legitimize their own values, our society seeks divine models in order to confirm the sanctity of a new attitude toward nature, and Francis has become that model. Unlike some of his later followers such as Louis of Toulouse, Francis has retained his popularity over the centuries because his life and character seem timeless and transcendent.

If our society has decided to adopt Francis as a paradigm for promoting a new environmental ethic, however, it must also recognize that his image was initially developed in a culture that considered nature's subservience to humanity to be axiomatic. If anything is to be

learned from examining images such as the *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, it is that our society must exercise the same level of awareness with regards to its values and beliefs when approaching Francis and his animal stories. Only then can his image assume any significant meaning for us.

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