

## SAINTS AND BIRDS

THOSE fortunate enough to live in the country in early spring know well the pleasure that is to be found in watching and listening to the birds. Now legends grow in the country, and when towns were only houses collected together in the country they grew there also. Legends are amongst life's most precious gifts, telling us, as they do in story-shape how God is love, and how the saints were his friends. Perhaps it is in legends that we get nearest to the real man in the saint. The saints loved God, and therefore all his creatures—a solid fact, not a beautiful phrase. They spent their days helping others to come with them to God, a work which made them the busiest of the busy, and yet gave them leisure to thank God for all He had made and to admire His handiwork. Their love overflowed to the animal creation, the beauties of which inspired them to sing such canticles as we find in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, wherein God is thanked for the beauty He has given to His creatures. No more beautiful legends exist than those which tell us of saints and birds, and even Our Lord's life became in the middle ages a centre of bird-lore. The wren was placed in the stable at Bethlehem, and the robin got his little red-breast from staunching the Precious Blood, so that 'Robins and wrens are God Almighty's friends.'<sup>1</sup> The swallows plucked out thorns from the Sacred Head, the stork flew round and round the Cross, encouraging the Saviour by its cries, whilst the owl, we are told, became so sad at Our Lord's death, that his voice, till then the most beautiful amongst all the bird-singers, broke from grief

<sup>1</sup> R. L. Gales, *Studies in Arcady*, I, 192.

and became a mournful croak, so that he has ever since shunned the light of day. The crossbill for his part strove to wrench out the terrible nails, and twisted his poor little beak. The peacock, a bad bird and a proud, is liturgically a good bird, and is held as a type of the Risen Lord because of the old tradition which made its flesh incorruptible. The pelican in her piety, the *Pie Pelicane* of the Divine Office, has for many centuries been honoured as a type of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, because with its red-tipped beak it feeds its young. The eagle also is a type of Christ, and the dove of the Holy Ghost. The eagle, too, is the symbol of St. John the Evangelist, the Beloved Disciple.

St. Francis of Assisi is naturally pre-eminent in legends of beasts and birds, and of all the stories in the *Fioretti* the most delightful is that of his preaching to his sisters the birds, and telling them to praise God their Wondrous Creator. 'And as St. Francis spoke to them, all the multitude of these birds opened their beaks and stretched out their necks, and opened their wings, and reverently bowing their heads to the earth, by their acts and by their songs they showed that the words of the holy father gave them the greatest delight.'<sup>2</sup> Preaching to birds is not unknown in the biographies of other saints. Blessed Nicholas of Palea (1255), a contemporary of St. Francis, was early received into the Order of Preachers by the holy founder, St. Dominic, and became Provincial of the Roman Province. It is related of him that one day when he was preaching in the Cathedral at Brescia, for he was a great orator, some dissolute men so disturbed his sermon by their profane and wicked conduct that he left the church, ascended the neighbouring hillside, and, since men refused to listen to the word of

<sup>2</sup> Translation. London; Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd, 1899 (pp. 52-53).

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God, he called upon the birds to listen to it. As they did to St. Francis, so did the birds to the Blessed Nicholas, and by arranging themselves in rows and keeping great silence, gave an excellent example to the unruly congregation. They waited whilst the saint spoke to them for a space and then, receiving his blessing, flew cheerfully away.<sup>3</sup> A much earlier example of a bird audience is found in the life of the great Welsh saint, Hydultus or Illtyd, who, according to tradition, had been a Knight of King Arthur's Round Table, but he was by no means a legendary person himself, for he was a founder of many monasteries and a great trainer of saints. At his monastery in the island of Caldey many celebrated saints worked out their vocation, the best known being St. Paul Aurelian or Pol de Leon, who became a bishop in Brittany and left his name to the diocese of St. Pol de Leon. When a novice at Caldey it is told of him that he summoned the birds ravaging the monastic crops to appear before the Abbot, St. Illtyd, to receive correction for their fault. They obeyed and came in thousands, and perched themselves in the trees near the monastery gate, at which were also gathered the poor, the blind, and the lame waiting to be fed. St. Illtyd, not wishing to correct the marauding birds too harshly, begged them not to waste the corn, lest he and his monks and these poor (pointing to the beggars by the gate) should fall into want. He then blessed his now penitent congregation, who joyfully sang as they flew away and never again laid waste his fields.<sup>4</sup> St. Milburga, Abbess of Wenlock in Shropshire (722), was commonly credited with power over birds, and accordingly invoked by farmers suffering from their depredations.

<sup>3</sup> *Short Lives of Dominican Saints*. (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd.; 1901; p. 33.)

<sup>4</sup> See article by E. Raymond-Barker in *Merry England Magazine*, December 1887 (p. 538).

Of many saints it is told that they were constantly in the company of birds, or rather that birds frequently sought their company. St. Bartholomew, the Hermit of Farne Island (A.D. 1193), found much joy in his solitude in studying the habits of the sea birds, more especially noticing the eider ducks. He tamed one of these latter, but his beautiful little pet was ruthlessly slain in the saint's own chapel by a murderous hawk, whom Nemesis overtook, for he could not escape sanctuary, and was caught red-clawed and red-billed by Bartholomew, who punished him with prison and complete fasting for two days, but then, feeling sorry for the culprit, let him out of the window.<sup>5</sup> St. Bega, or Bees, who died Abbess of Hartlepool, lived a recluse on a promontory in Cumberland, which has since borne her name, and here she lived in supernatural familiarity with the sea birds and the wolves, only withdrawing to Northumberland when the savage Danes appeared on the coast.<sup>6</sup> When Blessed Bernard of Scammaca (+1486), a Sicilian Dominican noted for his ecstasies, used to pray in the garden the birds came and perched on his head and outstretched arms.<sup>7</sup> Blessed Giles of Lorenzana (+1518), a Franciscan, spent most of his time in prayer attended by birds and beasts.<sup>8</sup> Birds fluttered round the head of another Franciscan, Blessed Conrad of Piacenza (+1351),<sup>9</sup> and often while the celebrated Dominican theologian Blessed Ambrose of Siena (+1286) was preaching, a nimbus of birds of varied coloured plumage was seen surrounding him.<sup>10</sup> Blessed Joseph Mary

<sup>5</sup> *Lives of the Hermit Saints of England*, 1844 (p. 20).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> *Dominican Saints*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Butler's Lives*, ed. Thurston, II, 277.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, I, 361.

<sup>10</sup> *Dominican Saints*, 77.

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Tommasi (+ 1713), a Theatine and Cardinal Priest of Saint Martin, was a very great scholar who was not too preoccupied with his archaeological studies to feed little birds.<sup>11</sup>

A truly Franciscan saint, Blessed Andrew Conti (+ 1302), is said to have shown his love for birds in an entirely practical if extraordinary way, for when a friend sent him when ill some little birds roasted to tempt the saint's appetite, Blessed Andrew was so sad at the sight that he refused to eat them, but making over them the sign of the Cross, ordered them to resume their feathers and fly away. He was instantly obeyed, and the birds being restored to life flew chirping away.<sup>12</sup> A very different story is told of a monk Aaron, venerated as a saint amongst the schismatical Copts, for 'when he was sick he made roasted pigeons fly into his mouth.'<sup>13</sup> Miracles similar to that worked by Blessed Andrew Conti are attributed to St. Werburg, Abbess of Ely in the seventh century, and St. Pharaildis of Ghent, who was living in 740. In each case the fortunate bird was a goose already plucked and roasted. The Ghent saint is usually represented in Christian art with a goose in her arms.<sup>14</sup>

The eagle, as we have seen, is the principal symbol of St. John the Evangelist, but it is also associated in painting and sculpture with other saints. St. Medard, Bishop of Noyon in the sixth century, was one of France's most popular saints, and of him are told many extraordinary legends, perhaps the most astonishing one being of an eagle who kept the rain off the saint by spreading over him his wings. The same story is related of St. Bardolf (Bertulf or Ber-

<sup>11</sup> *Butler's Lives*, Thurston, I, 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, II, 235.

<sup>13</sup> Holweck, *Biographical Dictionary of Saints*, Herder, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Thurston, I, 62.

non), Abbot of Renescure in Artois, who died at the beginning of the eighth century; whilst a similar legend is told of Belgium's great saint, Bishop Servatius of Tongres, who lived in the fourth century. He was, according to the legend, taken prisoner by the Huns, and whilst a captive in their hands was one day sleeping in the sun when an eagle flew down and sheltered him from the burning rays with its outstretched wings, a prodigy which so scared the barbarians that they straightway set him free.<sup>15</sup> An eagle is said to have guarded the body of St. Adalbert, Archbishop of Gnesen, slain in 997 by the pagan Prussians, and another watched over the remains of the martyr St. Priscus.<sup>16</sup>

Another bird with an excellent record in defence of the saints is the raven. One is said to have kept at bay the wild animals that came to devour the body of St. Vincent, Spain's greatest martyr. The two ravens connected with the legend of St. Meinrad were equally extraordinary. This well known German hermit was murdered in 881 by some robbers who suspected him of possessing hidden treasure, but the two ravens pursued the villains and betrayed their whereabouts by their cries, so that the murderers were discovered and justly hanged for their crime.<sup>17</sup> As a raven fed Elias in the wilderness so did another feed the Patriarch of hermits, St. Paul, who was provided with half a loaf of bread a day for fifty years, and on the day that St. Paul was discovered in his hermitage by St. Anthony the Great the winged benefactor brought them a whole loaf. But the raven is also a bird of ill omen, and St. Benedict is usually represented with one at his feet

<sup>15</sup> Cahier, S.J., *Les caractéristiques des Saints dans l'Art populaire*; 2 vols., Paris, 1867; Vol. I, 23, 25, 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Saints and their Symbols*, by E.A.G.; 2nd ed., London, 1882.

<sup>17</sup> Holweck, 699.

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because the devil in the guise of a black bird kept hopping round the saint when he was saying his prayers, in order to distract him. In like manner the devil, disguised as a sparrow, tried to distract the Dominican sisters at San Sisto in Rome when St. Dominic was preaching to them. He even managed to upset the sanctuary lamp, but by a miracle the oil did not spill. This is told us by the Blessed Cecilia Cesarini, one of the nuns present on the occasion.<sup>18</sup> We read also of two Friar-Preachers of Magdeburg in Germany travelling to Coblenz, who lost their way, and whilst sitting on the roadside talking the matter over, the elder noticed a kite hovering in mid-air and addressed it as follows: 'Brother kite, in the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I bid you show us the way.' The bird immediately came down and flying low in front of them turned to the right from where they had been sitting, and there lay before them the right road, which they had not noticed owing to the height of the hedges.<sup>19</sup>

Few of such legends as are here related would obtain credence at the present day; perhaps the authors who quote them believed no more than the truth underlying them, namely that saints loved God's creatures more than anyone else has done. We may notice, however, that many strange facts concerning holy men and brute beasts are related in the Sacred Scriptures, and many of the legends given above deal with the early Church. Not all strange legends date from the Middle or not very dark Ages. The author of the Life of St. Bega quoted above says of such stories of saints and beasts: 'the patterns of all these things are in the scripture histories. This is one of

<sup>18</sup> *Lives of the Brethren*. Trans. by P. Conway, O.P., p. 280, 291 (Mawson, Swan & Morgan, Newcastle, 1896).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

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the ways in which from time to time sanctity is permitted to retrieve portions of that state in which man was in Eden.'

WALTER GUMBLEY, O.P.

*VERBUM MUTUM*

*(But He held his peace. Mk. xiv, 61.)*

**W**HEN specious lies my mind enmesh  
And lures of sin my will o'ercome,  
Yield me Thy truth, O Word made Flesh;  
Yet more, Thy strength, O Word made dumb.

VINCENT MCNABB, O.P.