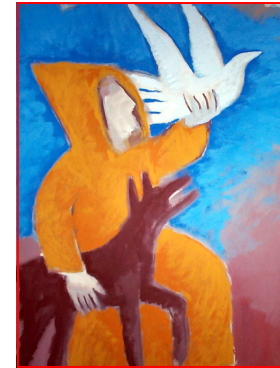


The story of St Francis and the leper reminds us that we are each on a spiritual journey. We are called to see others in a new way as unique and Christ-like, but we are also called to accept—and even cherish—the parts of ourselves that we are afraid of, ashamed of. To embrace the leper within means to acknowledge and grow in response to our own weaknesses and fears, pride, insecurity, need to control people and events; our willingness to respond fully to God—the shadow side of our inner selves. Only when we accept all of ourselves, give all of ourselves to God, can we confront the evil in the world and reach out to others in love.

There are wolves out there—violence in Ruanda, Haiti, Bosnia, Syria; the plight of the homeless in Santa Barbara; the misery of the hungry, sick, elderly, lonely and abandoned—and we are to confront these evils that would destroy the human spirit. We are to confront them in love, and the name of the Lord Jesus. But if we are afraid of the wolf outside, it is because we are afraid of the leper within. We must be engaged in a great balancing act between meeting the wolf out there and embracing the leper within. We will not be able to reach out to others in love and confront evil in the world until we embrace, as St Francis did, the leper within.



THE WOLF WITHOUT
AND
THE LEPER WITHIN

FROM AMERICA BY AN UNKNOWN
AUTHOR



Each of us is on a spiritual journey where we encounter evil and violence in the world and during which we have experiences that have the potential to transform us. There are two stories of St Francis, stories you may know very well, that teach us about these aspects of the spiritual journey. I want to tell you a little of what I have learned from these stories and give you some questions to think about and discuss later on.

THE WOLF OF GUBBIO

The first is the story of Francis and the Wolf, a story that appears in many collections of legends about St Francis, including the *Fioretti* [The Flowers of St Francis]. Gubbio, a small town about twenty five miles north of Assisi, was plagued by a huge, ferocious wolf that had killed sheep and cattle and apparently people. The townsfolk were afraid to venture outside the village walls and tended their fields armed with pitchforks and weapons.

Francis, then about forty years of age, visited Gubbio and went deliberately to meet the wolf. When it attacked him along the road Francis said, "Come with me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I order you not to hurt me or anyone else." The wolf stopped immediately, and sat docile at Francis' feet.

Francis struck a bargain with the wolf: if the wolf would cease hurting and terrifying people, then the people would agree to feed and care for the wolf. As a sign of agreement the wolf placed his paw in Francis' hand. For the remaining two years of his life the people of the town gave the wolf food and shelter.

Francis had compassion for both the people of Gubbio and the for the wolf. After his encounter with the wolf Francis preached to the people, talking about the nature of evil and about repentance. He told them that God would free them from the wolves of this world and from the fires of hell in the

Setting out on his journey of faith had to begin with an inner journey. It meant accepting all the negative parts of himself and embracing the fear of letting go and 'letting God'. Reaching out to the leper and finding a whole person there reminded Francis that he needed to become a *whole person* before he could become a *holy person*. He need to change inside before he could be God's herald outside; he needed to hug the leper inside before he could tame the wolf outside.

This is the true beginning of the 'new life' of Francis—the inner journey before the outer journey. It was a great, unconventional, extravagant act, done in the name of God, done in love, and in the name of the Lord Jesus. Almsgiving was a normal, kind act, the sort any person might do. Kissing the leper was a deeply spiritual act; a transforming act.

This moment was so important to Francis that he mentions it in his *Testament*, dictated as he was dying: "When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure, but God himself led me into their company and I had pity on them...They became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me." Before the year was up, he was a St Lazzaro washing the feet of the lepers and bandaging their sores.



With great courage Francis did two things he had never done before: he looked into the face of the leper, then embraced and kissed him!

When Francis looked into the eyes of the leper he saw a human being, one of the people Jesus had touched and healed, and for whom he had had great compassion. This was someone Christ had lived and died for. The saint knew instantly that God was calling him to reach out to the lepers, care for them, and let himself be changed by them. In hugging and kissing the leper Francis was embracing something within himself that needed to be accepted and loved. For Francis, taking up the way of life he was being led to—the Gospel life, the way of Jesus—meant that he would become like the leper: an outcast, one living in poverty, one expelled from the community, on the edge of necessity, reviled, hated even, by some. Hugging the leper was the first step in his realisation of how he had to change and grow. It was the first hint of what God was going to do in his life. In the face of the leper, Francis saw Jesus in the person of someone who was to be loved. But he also saw himself—someone else he had come to love.



next.

The wolf is a symbol of evil and violence—but only a 'symbol'. The real wolf was inside the people of Gubbio and inside all people who did violence to each other, who hurt one another in their anger, greed, feuds, disputes. It is part of the nature of wolves to act as members of a pack rather than alone. Brother Wolf was, therefore, acting in opposition to his God-given nature. The real crime of people who do evil and are violent is that rather than reveal the image and likeness of God—in which they were created—they show others a distorted image of what God has created.

Francis went out to meet the wolf; he confronted the wolf rather than wait for it to come to him. He didn't set out to conquer the wolf; he didn't attack it or make an effort to defend himself. Rather, he chose to embrace the wolf rather than defeating it or overpowering it. He responded in love and in the name of the Lord Jesus.



In Gubbio they tell the story this way—and there is a church, La Vittoria, said to be on the site of the meeting between Francis and the wolf. During the repairs in 1873, the skull of a wolf was found beneath the flagstones of a chapel dedicated to St Francis. In nearby towns they will tell you that there was no wolf. Brother Wolf was, in fact, a bandit named 'Lupo', famous for his cruelty and wickedness.

Whether the story is true or not, I see the wolf as a symbol of war and how to end war; of evil and how to end evil; of all that separates us from awareness of the presence of God. It tell us that God will free us from evil and violence that endangers us if we seek it out without fear, and confront it in love and in the name of the Lord Jesus.



THE LEPER

In the spring of 1206 or so, when Francis was about twenty four, he was deep in self-examination and self-searching, seeking for the spiritual path he had to follow. He was growing steadily in his identification with the poor. To every beggar who came to the door of his parents' house he would give money, food and clothes. But he knew it was not enough. He father had given up all hope of ever making a businessman of him and tolerated his melancholy behaviour. Francis was searching and God was preparing him.

One day, a week or so before he received the message from the Crucifix at San Damiano, he was riding on the road down from Assisi—probably on the horse his father used to transport textiles. He passed near San Lazzaro, the leper house run by the local bishop, when the horse bolted and he was startled by a leper standing on the road.

St Francis later wrote that at the time he had a particular horror of lepers and would turn aside from the road to avoid looking at them. He was strongly repelled, terrified and nauseated, by their smell and their disfigurement. He couldn't bear to be near them, and his first inclination after this first meeting was to ride past. Yet now, he felt a wave of shame that forced him to turn back, dismount from the horse, and approach the astonished leper.

Lepers were not only social outcasts, they were the most scorned of all human beings. They had to wear distinctive clothing, carry a wooden clapper or a small bell to warn people of their approach; carry water because they could not use public wells or streams; wear gloves because they could not touch any other person or any other thing. They could not live with others, or even walk in the town. With their lumpy, discoloured skin, deformed limbs and sightless eyes they were visible signs of physical decay and death. But even more painful, they were considered by most people to be a symbol of sinfulness and spiritual decay.