

Compassion Toward Animals in Christian Tradition

Biblical passages, historical sources, and prayers

Booklet Christian contributors

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About this booklet

This booklet gathers biblical passages, historical sources, prayers, and examples from Christian tradition concerning compassion toward animals.

It is a documentary and educational work. Each completed section should help readers encounter sources faithfully, understand their historical setting, and reflect without polemics or pressure.

Editorial status: This is the initial project scaffold. Source texts and commentary will be added only after verification and citation.

0.1 How to read it

Chapters distinguish primary texts from editorial context. Citations will point to the most reliable accessible editions available. The project welcomes corrections and documented additions through its public contribution process.

1 Introduction

This chapter will explain the scope of the booklet, the historical range of its sources, and the editorial distinction between quotation, context, and interpretation.

1.1 Planned contents

- Scope and terminology
- Historical and denominational breadth
- Translation and quotation policy
- How sources were selected

2 Biblical Passages

This chapter will present carefully contextualized passages from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Each entry should include:

- the passage and translation used;
- its literary and historical context;
- relevant textual or translation notes;
- a complete citation.

3 Witnesses from Christian Tradition

Over the centuries, a number of figures from Christian tradition left behind a record of a close relationship with animals — birds, bears, horses, and, in particular, dogs. This chapter gathers ten of them, always distinguishing documented history from later tradition. It is not a theological argument: it is an invitation to encounter these lives and texts, and, through them, perhaps to see the animals who share our daily lives a little differently.

3.1 Francis of Assisi

c. 1181–1226 · Italy · founder of the Franciscan order



Figure 3.1: Sassetta, *The Wolf of Gubbio*, c. 1437–1444, National Gallery, London — public domain (Wikimedia Commons).

Francis’s own words about creation survive directly: the *Canticle of the Creatures*, composed around 1225, calls the sun and wind “brother” and the moon, water, and earth “sister,” placing every created thing in one family (Francis of Assisi 1906). In his own medieval Umbrian:

“Laudato si’, mi’ Signore, cum tucte le tue creature.”

— praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures
(translation ours) (Francis of Assisi 1906).

A later tradition — set down nearly a century afterward in the *Fioretti* (“Little Flowers of St. Francis”), and absent from the saint’s official biography — tells how Francis went to meet a wolf, a wild relative of the dog, that had been terrorizing the town of Gubbio, and won from it a promise of peace with the townspeople in exchange for being fed. It is a lovely, much-retold story; it belongs to tradition, not to verified history (*The Little Flowers of St. Francis (i Fioretti)*, Ch. XXI, n.d.; Wikipedia contributors 2026f; *The Wolf of Gubbio* 2025).

3.2 Roch of Montpellier

traditional dates c. 1295–1327, uncertain · France and Italy



Figure 3.2: Cesare da Sesto, detail of the *Polittico di San Rocco*, 1523, Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco, Milan. Photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

Roch's life is known mostly through late hagiographies, with few verifiable facts: he is known to have worked through plague hospitals in several Italian cities, and his cult grew sharply after the 1477–79 plague (Wikipedia contributors 2026e). Tradition holds that, falling ill himself, he withdrew into a forest, and that a dog belonging to a local nobleman brought him bread every day and licked his wound, keeping him alive until he was found. It is why Roch is still invoked today as patron of dogs — one of the most direct saint-and-dog associations in the whole of Christian tradition, even though, like almost everything else in his life, it is tradition rather than historical record (Wikipedia contributors 2026e).

3.3 Hubert of Liège

c. 656–727 · Frankish Ardennes · bishop of Maastricht and Liège



Figure 3.3: Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Vision of Saint Hubert*, 1617–1620 — public domain (Wikimedia Commons).

Hubert was a historically documented bishop who died in 727 and was buried at the Benedictine abbey in the Belgian Ardennes that now bears his name (Wikipedia contributors 2026c). The best-known legend — that, hunting on Good Friday, he saw a glowing cross between a stag’s antlers, and that the encounter turned him to conversion — is a later addition, absent from any record close to his life.

What is history, not legend, is what happened afterward: the monks of the Abbey of Saint-Hubert bred a keen-scented hunting hound in his honour — the *chien de Saint-Hubert* — which they sent as an annual tribute to the King of France, and which is recognized today as the direct ancestor of the Bloodhound. Few saints have such a concrete, verifiable link to a dog breed that still exists (Wikipedia contributors 2026a, 2026b; *St. Hubert’s Hound*, n.d.).

3.4 Anthony the Great

c. 251–356 · Egypt · father of Christian monasticism

Anthony's life is known through a near-contemporary text: the *Life of Antony*, written by Athanasius of Alexandria shortly after his death, by someone who had known him. It describes the twenty years Anthony spent alone in an abandoned desert fort, surrounded by wild animals — jackals, snakes — without harming them or being harmed by them: a sign, for Athanasius, of an inner peace that extended to the creation around him (Athanasius of Alexandria 1892).

3.5 Cuthbert of Lindisfarne

c. 634–687 · Northumbria

Cuthbert, too, is known through an account close to his life: the *Life of Cuthbert*, written by the Venerable Bede about thirty years after his death, drawing on people who had known him. He is said to have prayed standing all night in the cold sea, after which two otters came up and dried and warmed his feet with their fur before leaving with his blessing. Cuthbert is also remembered for establishing, around 676, one of the earliest recorded bird-protection laws in Europe, to protect the eider ducks nesting on the Farne Islands — still known locally today as “Cuddy’s ducks” (*How a Catholic Monk Created One of the First Ever Bird Protection Laws*, n.d.; *St Cuthbert’s Ducks*, n.d.).

3.6 Kevin of Glendalough

c. 498–618 · Ireland

According to tradition recorded in the *Vita Sancti Coemgeni*, written some five hundred years after his death, a blackbird once landed in Kevin's open hand while he prayed, and built its nest there. Tradition holds that Kevin kept his arm still through the whole nesting season, until the chicks had fledged — an image that has carried through the centuries as a picture of patience and attentiveness to the smallest creatures (Wikipedia contributors 2026d; "*The Boy with the Blackbird in His Hand*" (*Saint Kevin of Glendalough*), n.d.).

3.7 Seraphim of Sarov

1754–1833 · Russia

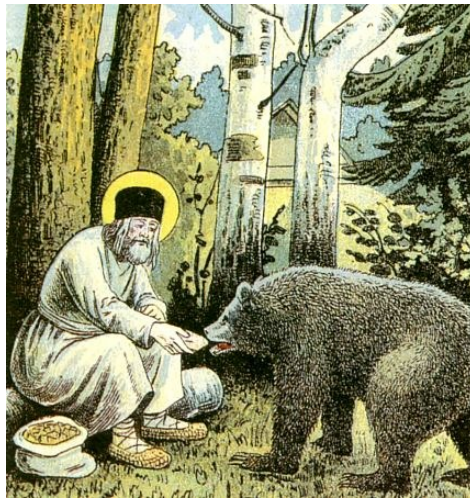


Figure 3.4: *Seraphim of Sarov feeds a bear* (detail), anonymous lithograph, 1903 — public domain (Wikimedia Commons).

Unlike the medieval legends above, the best-known episode of Seraphim's relationship with animals has direct witnesses: nuns from the nearby Diveyevo convent and a fellow monk, Father Joseph, left written accounts, still in the 19th century, of a bear that regularly visited Seraphim's forest hermitage and that he fed by hand, without fear. The accounts are not a critical edition of primary sources, but they converge consistently, coming from several people who knew him (*St. Seraphim of Sarov and the Bear "Misha"* 2021; *St Seraphim and the Bear* 2004).

3.8 Martin de Porres

1579–1639 · Peru · Dominican lay brother

Martin, put in charge of the infirmary at the Dominican convent of the Rosary in Lima, is consistently remembered, in biographical sources and in his canonization process, for his care of sick or stray animals — dogs, cats, even mice he refused to have poisoned. The traditional image of him with a dog, a cat, and a mouse eating peacefully from the same dish sums up that care: not a one-off exception, but a pattern of life (*Martín de Porres*, n.d.; *St. Martín de Porres*, n.d.).

3.9 Columba of Iona

c. 521–597 · Ireland and Scotland

Adomnán, ninth abbot of Iona, wrote the *Life of Columba* about a century after his death, drawing on the written and oral memory of the community Columba himself had founded. Near the end of Columba's life, an old horse that had carried the monastery's milk pails for years came up to him, laid its head on his chest and, according to Adomnán, wept. When a monk tried to lead the animal away, Columba stopped him, saying that the Creator had revealed

to the horse, in his own way, that its master was about to leave (Adomnán of Iona 1857).

3.10 Modestus of Jerusalem

d. 634 · Patriarch of Jerusalem

Modestus was a historically documented Patriarch of Jerusalem, who rebuilt churches there after the Persian sack of 614. His veneration as a protector of domestic animals, and the prayer still said in his name in Greek and Cypriot Orthodox tradition — asking for the health of the animals families depended on — is a later devotional tradition: its authorship by Modestus is attributed, not confirmed by any 7th-century document. Even so, it remains, thirteen centuries on, one of the rare examples of a Christian prayer devoted specifically to the well-being of animals (Sanidopoulos 2015).

A note on dog behaviour

The stories above show dogs as companions, protectors, and instruments of care. It is worth remembering that a dog's behaviour is shaped, above all, by experience, environment, and the human care it receives. An aggressive dog carries no moral stain, and it proves nothing about dogs being impure or dangerous by nature — it is behaviour, with causes, not a fate.

4 Prayers

This chapter will collect prayers from identifiable Christian traditions and historical sources.

Each prayer should state its source, date or period when known, tradition, translation, and attribution status. Newly written prayers should be labeled as original contributions.

5 Dogs in Service Today

Editorial note: This chapter differs from those before it. It does not draw on Christian primary sources or hagiographic tradition; it documents present-day, secular examples of trained dogs assisting people, included to extend the historical thread of the previous chapter into living practice. Claims here rest on organizational and scientific sources, not devotional material.

The relationship between people and animals did not stay in the past. Today, trained dogs help people in concrete, well-studied ways — always as working partners, with their own training and welfare, not as mere tools.

5.1 Guide and assistance work

Organizations under Assistance Dogs International have, since 1986, brought together more than 140 programs across five continents training guide dogs, mobility assistance dogs, medical-alert dogs, and psychiatric service dogs under demanding accreditation standards (*Who We Are*, n.d.).

5.2 Search and rescue

In the United States, the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation recruits dogs from shelters, trains them for eight to ten months, and certifies them, alongside firefighters and emergency crews, to locate people alive under rubble after disasters (*Canine Training Program*, n.d.; *FAQs*, n.d.).

5.3 Medical detection

Peer-reviewed studies have explored whether trained dogs can identify, by scent, signals associated with certain diseases, including some cancers. Results are promising but uneven across studies, and these dogs are treated as a complementary research tool, not a substitute for clinical diagnosis (Bauër et al. 2022).

5.4 Well-being and therapy

Recent clinical trials, funded by bodies such as the Human Animal Bond Research Institute, have found that therapy dog visits measurably reduce loneliness in hospitalized patients (*New Pilot Study to Examine the Impact of a Therapy Dog Intervention on Loneliness and Related Health Outcomes in Vulnerable Populations* 2021; *Empirical Support for Therapy Animal Interventions*, n.d.).

5.5 Science and conservation

Scent-detection dog teams also take part in conservation work, locating nests or traces of rare species — always as a handler-and-dog team, held to the same welfare standards as any other working dog (McKeague et al. 2024).

6 Further Reading

This chapter will provide an annotated selection of reliable primary editions, historical studies, and reference works for readers who want to investigate further.

Entries should explain their relevance and distinguish scholarly resources from devotional or popular works.

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