

Francis, the wolf, a war and terror

by [Julia Spicher Kasdorf](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

Once there came a wolf so fierce he devoured not only lambs but goats and children.

The villagers armed themselves as if going to war but even their weapons could not save them from his teeth, so fear fell like a shadow upon Gubbio and sealed the village gates. Enter the saint: once a dandy, once a soldier, once a prisoner of war and war wounded, who embarked on the Fourth Crusade but on the way gave his sword and supplies to a beggar. *Who can take you farther, the lord or the servant?*

Saint whose father beat him and dragged him away in chains, saint who kissed a leper's stinking hand and set out to embrace Syrian warriors, saint who negotiated an exchange with Sultan Melek-el-Kamel of Egypt during the Fifth Crusade. That saint sought and found the wolf's hiding place, and there said, *Brother, do not hurt me. You have committed crimes. You deserve to die. This town hates you, but Brother, I want to make peace between you and them, so they won't be harmed, and when they have forgiven you, men and dogs will never chase you again. Brother, I know the evil you have done came only from hunger. If the people feed you, will you pledge never to harm a living thing?* The wolf put his paw in the saint's hand, then curled at his feet like a hound.

O friends, if beasts hold us in such terror, how much more do we fear the fires of hell? Turn to the One who frees you from wolves in this world and flames in the next!

For two years, the wolf wandered from kitchen door to door. No dog barked. No hand rose against him. Not one child ran from his gaze. When he died of old age, the villagers of Gubbio missed his kind patience. *Who can take you farther, the lord or the servant?*

Welcome Sister Death, said the saint when his own time had come and taking her hand into his palm, he drew her famished fist to his lips and slowly kissed her knuckles one by one. *O, who can take you farther?*