

The Blessing of Animals

Recently we celebrated the Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi with a Blessing of the Animals Ceremony in the Mercy Partner's Prayer Garden. On this occasion, St Catherine White mfc explained the connection between St Francis and the natural world:

We often see statues of St Francis in gardens. He is the patron saint of the animals and the environment. In recent years there has been a movement to free Francis from the birdbath – from being a decorative feature, or a sort of Dr Doolittle who talks to animals.

The point of conversion in the life of Francis came when he met a leper on the road. In a moment of insight he recognised the leper as a child of God, beloved by God. That moment changed him profoundly.

From that moment he embraced every creature and element of creation as a creation of God and beloved by God. His Canticle of Creatures, written as he neared death, reminds us that all creatures are our brothers and sisters in God's family. His embrace of all creatures was inclusive, radical, and a recognition of God's life in all.

The animal participants in the ceremony were mainly dogs and it was a reminder of the importance of dogs in the lives of so many people. In her book *Phosphorescence* (2020), Julia Baird lists the benefits of dog ownership:

Research shows dogs can prevent us from getting ill, help us heal faster when we are sick, calm children and, according to British researcher Deborah Wells, 'even serve as an early warning system for certain types of underlying ailment including cancer, oncoming seizures and hypoglycaemia...' (p.196).

As we continue to contemplate *Laudato Si* and Pope Francis' call to care for our common home, let's give thanks for the domestic animals with which we live; whether dog, cat, bird, fish or guinea pig. These creatures bless our days,

give companionship and focus and provide unconditional love. In turn we are called to care, nurture and love them in return.

Bless them
who curl themselves around our hearts
who twine themselves through our days
who companion us in our labour
who call us to come and play.

Bless them
who will never be entirely tamed
and so remind us that you love
what is wild, that you rejoice
in what lives close to the earth,
that your heart beats
in the heart of these creatures
you have entrusted
to our care.

(extract from Jan Richardson:
Blessing the Animals)

St Francis' response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. (#11)



Dennis the Dachshund

REFLECTION

We share the world with other species of animals, they deserve to be respected and cared for.

How can we extend this care beyond our own pets?

- REFERENCES: 1. Pope Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si'* [Encyclical Letter]. Retrieved from www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
2. Baird, J. (2019). *Phosphorescence*. Harper Collins: Australia