



Dean's List

BY IRV DEAN

Celebrating the larger circle of life

Francis of Assisi, revered as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, is remembered around his feast day of Oct. 4 by a variety of ceremonies in which animals — household pets of every kind — are brought to church to be blessed.

It's a tradition that extends beyond the Catholics to include their Anglican brethren and other denominations that revere Francis for his humble embrace of all God's creatures.

"All praise to you, Oh Lord, for all these brother and sister creatures," he wrote in an ode on all God's living things.

On Sunday, St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady's Stockade neighborhood hosted one such event. It drew perhaps 20 dogs, a few cats and at least one snake, an albino corn snake, along with various human caretakers.

The Rev. Paul Blanch, rector of the church, delivered a homily in which he admonished us to be ethical in considering animal life when we make decisions about what we eat.

He also reminded us of our place in the great pecking order by quoting part of what Old Major said about mankind in George Orwell's allegorical "Animal Farm."

"Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving and the rest he keeps for himself."

Man is also the only animal capable of malice, Father Paul noted.

To those of us who love our cat and dog companions, it was a moving experience. Each of the dogs, cats and, yes, the snake, was brought forward and received a sprinkling of holy water and a personal blessing from Father Paul. "May you and your guardian enjoy life together and find joy with the God who created you," he said to each.

Our Cairn Terrier, Maggie, sporting a jaunty purple bow, was among those so honored, and she seemed to understand that something special was going on, though I'm sure the more scientific among you will say, "There he goes anthropomorphizing again."

Pets recognized and blessed individually included two Maggies, a Billy, a Sherman, a Harley, a Wilson and a Dexter.

Along with Father Paul's homily and prayers, there were hymns, with accompaniment provided by the church's musical director, Andrew Kristopolski, on an accordion.

No doubt the cynics among us would view such a ritual as silly. But I'm with the Rev. Kevin E. Mackin, O.F.M., who says of such events, "who knows what spiritual benefits may result?"

Mackin, a Franciscan who is president emeritus of Siena College and now president of Mount

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Saint Mary College in Newburgh, writes, "The bond between person and pet is like no other relationship, because the communication between fellow creatures is at its most basic. Eye-to-eye, a man and his dog, or a woman and her cat, are two creatures of love.

"No wonder people enjoy the opportunity to take their animal companions to church for a special blessing. Church is the place where the bond of creation is celebrated."

In an essay written for St. Francis' feast day, Mackin acknowledged that some people criticize how much money we spend on our animals and say we should "care for poor people instead of poodles."

And he answers of course our needy fellow humans should not be neglected.

"However, I believe every creature is important. The love we give to a pet, and receive from a pet, can draw us more deeply into the larger circle of life, into the wonder of our common relationship to our Creator."

I'd read his words earlier in the day but they came back to me as I stood with Beverly and Maggie outside St. George's where the ceremony concluded with the singing of a hymn. You'll recognize the refrain:

*"All things bright and beautiful
all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful
the Lord God made them all."*

As for Father Paul, he was



BEVERLY M. ELANDER/FOR THE DAILY GAZETTE

The Rev. Paul Blanch, rector of St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady's Stockade neighborhood, blesses a poodle named Sherwood on Sunday at a special service to mark "St. Francis Day" with the Blessing of the Animals.

pleased with the turnout and the inordinately well-behaved animals, even though one dog when brought forward did promptly slurp down some of the holy water. He noted that someone had

mentioned more variety among the animals would be a good thing. Perhaps an emu next year, he said. Or a horse.

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