

Expanding our Friendship within the Animal Kingdom October 1, 2023

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Friendship is a state of enduring affection, esteem, intimacy, and trust, usually between two people. But for those of you who have had the privilege of living with a beloved pet, you may have experienced that special relationship as 'friends.' Even though it was a bond between two different species of animals, this 'friendship' increased your happiness, reduced your stress, improved your confidence, and diminished your loneliness.

During the pandemic of 2020, when I was isolated from my friends and my wider circle, I turned to the community of wildlife along the coastline of Morro Bay. There I became more intimate with the many different kinds of shore birds whose posture, flying, eating habits, boundaries, and pecking order all differed from one another. As I observed them and delighted in them, these birds became my friends. Like St. Francis before me, I would greet them and smile at them and give thanks to God for their presence in my life.

Today, we are not only blessing the animals but we are also celebrating the life of St. Francis who had great compassion and respect for the animal world. Francis felt a deep kinship with all of creation, addressing the creatures and planets as a "brother" or "sister," firmly believing that everything came from the same creative Source. He is the patron saint of the environment and animals because he loved all creatures and allegedly preached to even the birds. Supposedly, there was a time when Francis quieted a flock of noisy birds that were interrupting a religious ceremony!

There are basically two distinct schools of Christian thought when it comes to animals.* The first school (Aristotelian-Thomistic) teaches that animals are here for our pleasure — they have no independent purpose. We can eat them; torture them in laboratories — whatever we feel is necessary for our survival. This becomes most obvious in our current practice of factory farming. At its core, factory farming is a form of intensive agriculture designed to maximize profits using as few resources as possible. On factory farms, large numbers of animals are confined in small spaces, which often means keeping animals indoors for the duration of their lives under horrendous conditions. Unfortunately, most modern Christians embrace this form of their religion.

The second school of thought is the Augustinian-Franciscan school which teaches that all living beings are brothers and sisters under God's fatherhood. Based largely on the teachings of St. Francis, this worldview fits neatly within the vegetarian perspective. Francis' love of creatures was not simply a soft

sentimental disposition towards animals. It arose from a deep and abiding sense of the presence of God in their very being. You see, the heart that has learned to love, feels compassion for every living creature!

According to St. Francis, a lack of compassion for animals leads to a lack of mercy towards humans. He said: If you have people who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have people who will deal likewise with their fellow human beings. These wise words ring true in a modern world that kills tens of billions of animals annually to satisfy our cravings and appetites. "It appears that a nonchalant attitude towards animals could indeed be the root cause of an indifference to the fact that nearly one billion humans go hungry every day." (*Paul R. Turner)

When we come face to face with our own suffering and have compassion for ourselves, it becomes easier to have mercy on others who are in pain. Enzo Mallorca, an Italian diver, was swimming next his boat in the sea of Syracuse when he felt something slightly hit his back. He turned and saw a dolphin who was trying to express something. When the dolphin dove, Enzo followed him. 12 meters below, he saw another dolphin trapped in an abandoned net. He quickly surfaced, grabbed his daughter and diving knives, and returned.

Soon, the two of them managed to free the dolphin who issued an almost human cry at the end of the ordeal. In another 10 minutes, the dolphin would have died from a lack of oxygen. The released dolphin was helped to the surface when the surprise came: she was pregnant! The male dolphin circled them, and then stopped in front of Enzo, touched his cheek (like a kiss), in a gesture of gratitude. Then they both swam off.

Many of the saints in history were also distinguished by their love for animals. St. John Zedazneli made friends with bears near his hermitage; St. Shio befriended a wolf; St. David of Garesja protected deer and birds from hunters. Many of the early Celtic saints went to great pains for their animal friends, healing them and praying for them as well.

So, following in the footsteps of these saints, we come together today to bless our pets and remember those whom we have loved and lost. And in that spirit of compassion, we pray: "Blessed are you, Lord God, maker of all living creatures. You called forth fish in the sea, birds in the air and animals on the land. You inspired Saint Francis to call all of them his brothers and sisters. We ask you now to fill us with compassion for all the creatures of the earth. By the power of your love, enable them to live according to your plan. May we always praise you for all your beauty in creation. Amen."