

Why doesn't Pope Francis like pets?



Dear Father Kerper: I like Pope Francis but am somewhat annoyed by his comments about people giving too much attention to their pets. I mean, he took the name Francis, who loved animals so much. Why is he so down on pets?

Pope Francis is definitely not urging people to get rid of their pets. Not at all. Rather, the Holy Father has simply suggested that people think carefully about the fundamental differences between animals and human beings. The elevation of pets to equality with humans may actually cause lonely people to turn their affections away from people toward animals, thereby deepening their isolation.

In an interview given last May, Pope Francis said: “Care for pets is like programmed love. I can program the loving response of a dog or a cat, and I don’t need the experience of a human, reciprocal love.” The danger here, of course, is that excessive “love” for the pet may actually be a form of manipulation, even cruel imprisonment of the animal.

Some have criticized the Holy Father for not imitating Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals whose name the Pope took when elected. However, the views of Pope Francis

and Saint Francis stand in perfect agreement. To see this, we must retrieve the true attitudes of Saint Francis toward pets.

We find the beloved saint’s surprising views about animals well documented by Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), the greatest of all Franciscan theologians. His *The Life of Saint Francis* has a chapter entitled “On His Affectionate Piety and How Irrational Creatures were Affectionate toward Him.”

Saint Bonaventure wrote that Saint Francis cared about animals mainly because they reminded him of God, their true origin, not because of “cuteness” or friendliness toward humans. Saint Francis viewed animals as “sacramentals,” whose mere existence innocently and unconsciously pointed toward God. Saint Bonaventure put it this way: “When [Saint Francis] considered the primordial source of all things, he was filled with even more abundant

piety, calling creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother and sister, because he knew they had the same source as himself.”

Notice that Saint Francis had no interest in animals as outlets for his own affections, nor did he desire “love” from them.

Saint Francis, according to Saint Bonaventure, had a special interest in lambs. Whenever he saw a little lamb he immediately thought of Christ, the Lamb of God sacrificed for the salvation of all humanity. Seeing a lamb inevitably became an inspiration for prayer and contemplation. His concern for lambs was so intense that Saint Francis once cursed a vicious old sow who killed a new-born lamb. After grieving for the dead lamb, Saint Francis said, “Alas, brother lamb, innocent animal, you represent Christ to me. A curse on that impious beast that killed you; may no man or beast ever eat of her!” Saint Bonaventure reported that the sow died three days

later after an excruciating illness. Even Saint Francis had clear favorites – and disliked nasty animals.

Though Saint Francis is the patron saint of pets, he never kept animals as personal possessions; his strict vow of poverty precluded ownership of anything, including pets.

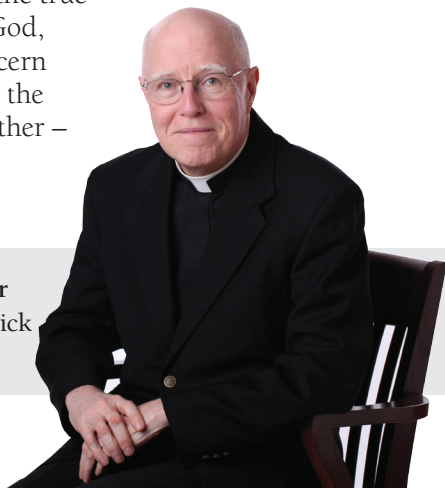
Indeed, he included a very strict precept in the First Rule for the Friars Minor: “I command all of the brothers...that they never have animals with them, or entrust an animal to the care of others, or in any other way keep one.”

By using the singular personal pronoun “I” to introduce his ban on pets, Saint Francis clearly indicated that he regarded the issue as very important and expected to be obeyed. (He used “I” in only one other place in his First Rule.)

Saint Francis, of course, always kept his “no pets” rule. Saint Bonaventure noted that people often presented animals to Saint Francis as gifts. After spending some time with them, Saint Francis inevitably encouraged them to return to their natural habitat.

Saint Bonaventure recounted the touching story of a captured wild rabbit presented to Saint Francis by an admirer, perhaps as a potential entrée for his dinner. After the gift-giver had departed, Saint Francis discreetly spoke to the rabbit, warning him not to become ensnared by hunters again. He then turned the rabbit loose, but amazingly the rabbit kept returning to Saint Francis who, Saint Bonaventure says, “fondled it with warm affection and seemed to pity it like a mother.” Finally, Saint Francis enlisted some friars to take the rabbit far away so that he could live freely and be unable to seek out Saint Francis again. The rabbit lived out his life in peace, spared from the unnatural ordeal of being a pet in the hands of a group of friars.

In keeping with authentic Franciscan spirituality, which Pope Francis certainly shares, we must always respect and cherish animals, large and small, cute and ugly, as wondrous – yet only as reflections of God’s loving and creative power. We must also recognize that our responsibility to human beings, who alone among worldly creatures bear the true image and likeness of God, always trumps our concern for any animals. This is the message of the Holy Father – and Saint Francis. ■



■ **Father Michael Kerper** is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.



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