Loving Animals and Loving People!

An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler

What a grand St. Francis Day we had this past Sunday! Throughout the day, we remembered a special saint, who showed the world love by loving and appreciating all of God's creation. At the 8:45 service, we brought lovely animals into the service. They were loud at times! They were boisterous! The dogs, especially, pulled us all over the church.

It was great fun, and it was a lively celebration of life in the midst of our ordinary routines. Yes, it was good to acknowledge animal life among us. It was good to appreciate the Spirit of God in the natural world around us. It was good to let ourselves love on animals!

However, did anyone notice the Old Testament lesson that was appointed for the Feast of St. Francis? On a day that we specifically noted how animals bless us, the first lesson went like this:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

> *"This at last is bone of my bones*
> *and flesh of my flesh;*
> *this one shall be called Woman,*
> *for out of Man this one was taken."* (Genesis 2:18–23)

Yes, it looks like the Book of Genesis takes us another step, a step beyond our love and need for animals. The way Genesis tells it, God tried to create various partners and companions for Adam, and God tested various animals to be those companions. But, ultimately, no animal was able to provide for the man what Genesis calls "a helper as his partner." Thus,

according to Genesis 2, Woman is created, to be the partner and companion and Man.

There are many ways to interpret that wonderful story, but one meaning may be this: As wonderful as animals are, there is also a special relationship between two people that can, and should, bring us gratification and joy. We human beings are meant for human relationship.

For some of us, animals and pets really are our primary daily companions. Perhaps our loved one has died, or perhaps we are single, and our pet truly serves as our faithful companion. That is excellent!

But for a great many of us, we are also created for human companionship; and we do well to be in relationship with other human beings – not just with the natural world. I have known people, for instance, who claimed such a connection with nature, and with animals, that they had almost a disdain for human beings! Surely that is not the way of God.

God creates us for relationship. Those of us in true and healthy relationships with pets and animals are probably those of us who also know how to have true and healthy relationships with people. Human relationship, after all, is difficult. The people we love, and with whom we are in relationship, do things differently from us. They disagree with us. We sometimes argue and have conflicts. But in those relationships are also the people who show us the tremendous truth and love of God.

Ultimately, like St. Francis, we are meant for healthy relationships with both animals and people. Apparently, St. Francis was a tremendous extrovert. He did not let his mystical connection with the natural world dissuade him from a true love and enjoyment of people, too. The Feast of St. Francis, then, is a day not just to enjoy the presence of God in nature and in animals; but it is day to enjoy the presence of God in human relationships, too.

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