

Catholics present pets for blessing

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Barbara Smullen, pastoral associate at Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Greece, fondly recalls bringing her cat, Companero, to their first pet blessing at Rochester's Holy Apostles Parish in 1991. Parishioners gathered on the parish lawn, sang the prayer of St. Francis and presented their pets for sprinkling with holy water.

"The only unfortunate part of the experience was that Companero — 'Compi' — was totally overwhelmed by the size of a police officer's horse and had to be returned to his carrying case for a sense of security," Smullen reminisced. "One thing I really liked at Holy Apostles was that we stressed we blessed not only household pets, but also honored animals who worked in service to humankind."

Smullen's parish, Holy Name of Jesus, is one of more than two dozen diocesan parishes and schools that planned to hold a pet blessing to celebrate the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi on Oct. 4. For the past decade, longtime Holy Apostles organist Arthur Hammer has invited the Rochester Police Department to take part in the blessing, and each year the department has brought one police horse and one dog. Police animals were also invited to a blessing at St. Mary's Parish in Geneseo.

Father Patrick Connor, pastor of St. Peter and Paul Parish in Elmira, celebrates an annual pet blessing and said the blessings help people gain a deeper understanding of St. Francis.

"We always try in a short prayer service to connect Francis' love of animals with his deeper love for all people, even people considered 'wild' in his time. Francis had a gift for being able to approach the meanest and the most criminal with a sense of respect, which often converted them," Father Connor said. "We try to keep Francis as a prophetic voice for social justice and not diminish him by just seeing him as a person kind to cats and dogs and birds. His love of nature flowed from his sense of seeing his creator in everything."

Parish pet blessings have generally been well-received, according to Mary Ann Noto, religious-education administrator at St. Cecilia's Parish in Irondequoit. Father Kevin McKenna, pastor, celebrated the parish's first pet blessing last year and drew quite a crowd, even though the humans and animals gathered were doused not only with sprinkles of holy water but also with driving



File photo

Father Adam Ogorzaly presides over a pet blessing and prayer service Oct. 5, 2002, on the grounds of St. Stanislaus Church in Rochester.

rain.

Prayers and sprinkling rites are staples of pet blessings throughout the diocese, but each blessing is unique. Children have been very involved in the blessings at St. John the Evangelist School in Spencerport, Immaculate Conception School in Ithaca and St. Patrick's Parish in Macedon.

"Every child has a special relationship with their pet, feeding them and taking care of them. Because they are so special, we ask God to bless them and keep them healthy and safe," said Elaine Doyle, religious-education coordinator at St. Patrick's.

Goats, snakes, birds, iguanas, rabbits and gerbils have been spotted at various pet blessings, although the most common species found there are dogs and cats. The annual blessing at St. Louis Parish in Pittsford is even hosted by three dachshunds belonging to Father James Schwartz, pastor, and Stephanie Honz, pastoral associate for liturgy and liturgical music. The three canine hosts, assisted by Honz, pass out treats after the blessing.

Father Brian Cool, chaplain of the Newman Community at the University of Rochester, commemorates the feast day of St. Francis by blessing during Mass his dog and the community's mascot — a chocolate Labrador retriever named Newman. He began this tradition last year as a way of introducing the dog to the community and to allow people who have dogs to connect spiritually with their own pets.

"Many students love having an animal on campus because it does remind them of their own at home,"

Father Cool said.

One of the golden rules of pet blessing is "never use a sprinkler," because the animals think you're going to throw something at them, advised Father Lance Gonyo, pastor of Church of the Epiphany in Sodus.

"Fortunately I have never been bit, although some of the animals would cringe in fear when this heavyset man in a white robe approached them with what looked like a weapon, but was just the holy water sprinkler," Father Connor confirmed.

Father Connor remembers that a sick gerbil recovered the day after he blessed it, but he also remembers blessing another pet, only to have it die the next day. Many pet owners, including Smullen — whose cat, Compi, later died of a brain tumor — take comfort in the knowledge that their pets went to their heavenly homes as blessed creatures.

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