

Animals are a Blessing



Christopher News Notes

“God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind...and God saw that it was good.” —Gen. 1:25

IT WAS ON THE SIXTH DAY OF CREATION THAT GOD GIFTED OUR WORLD WITH ANIMALS, including all the furry, feathered, and scaly friends that we humans now call pets. Whether their antics make us belly laugh—or their loyalty and devotion make us cry—there is no doubt that the world is a fuller and more joyful place because of animals. In fact, many will attest that animals can

even help us on our path to holiness, bringing us closer to God and to each other.

A Guide Through Life

Animals have a long history of helping people to deal with physical, mental, or emotional challenges. The Seeing Eye, the world's oldest existing guide dog school, outlines the inspiring story of its founding on its website. In 1927, Morris Frank, a young man who had become blind by the age of 16, learned about an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* written by a woman named Dorothy Eustis. She trained German shepherds in Switzerland as "seeing eye" dogs for blind World War One veterans.

Impressed and intrigued, Frank, then 19, reached out to Eustis in a letter, expressing his deep gratitude for her work. He also asked if she could help him with resources to bring the program to the United States because it could bring a renewed sense of dignity to the blind community.

Eustis agreed, so Frank traveled to Switzerland to work with her. In 1928, he returned to the U.S. with his own seeing eye dog, a handsome German shepherd named Buddy. Soon after, Frank arranged a publicity stunt in which "throng of news reporters" watched Buddy lead him across a busy New York City street without assistance from anyone else. Afterward, Frank telegraphed one word to Eustis: "Success." In 1929, The Seeing Eye program was incorporated. Today, an estimated 2,100 active guide dogs are carrying on Buddy's legacy in North America.

Dogs have also helped those suffering from other serious ailments. On the website *Aleteia*, Maria Paola Daud wrote about a young Colorado Springs woman named Janaye Kearns, who suffered a brain injury that impacted her life. "From that moment on," Daud explained, "any other injuries, however small, can have terrible consequences. She now suffers from seizures and her probabilities of having an accident are quite high."

Fortunately, Janaye's dog Colt has been trained to be a protective daily presence in her life. He keeps

When you hear the words "Catholic," "saint," and "animal," it's automatic to think about St. Francis of Assisi, the much-loved patron saint of animals. But there are plenty of other heavenly friends who had four-legged companions on their earthly journeys. In a 2011 roundup on their website, the Diocese of Green Bay researched some other lesser-known saints from *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, *Saints.SQPN*, and *fish eaters.com*.

- **St. Philip Neri** was a 16th century saint known for traveling around Rome with his pet cat in a basket.
- **St. Francis of Paola** had a "pet lamb and a pet trout (named Martinello and Antonello), that were accidentally killed for food. However, the saint raised both pets from the dead — one of many resurrection legends associated with Francis."
- **St. Anthony of Padua** made a wager with an Italian merchant about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Anthony said the man's donkey, if starved for three days, would still prefer the Eucharist to a pail of food. "Of course, the saint won and the merchant was converted by the faith of his donkey."
- **St. Felix of Nola**, according to legend, "had to hide in a vacant building from Roman soldiers who were persecuting Christians. The soldiers avoided searching the building because spiders had spun webs over the entry as soon as Felix was inside to make it appear uninhabited."

her head safe during seizures and even does some of the housework. "I am so blessed to have him," said Janaye. "I can lead an almost normal life thanks to my dog."

If you're a cat lover, there are plenty of stories for you, too. For instance, consider adding *A Streetcat Named Bob* to your movie viewing list. The film is based on the true story of James Bowen, who became a homeless heroin addict on the streets of London after a childhood riddled with trauma. The movie begins as he starts working with a case worker to get clean.

As part of James' journey, the case manager arranges for him to stay in a modest apartment through a rehabilitation program, in an effort to give him some stability. To earn money, James wanders the streets playing his guitar. One night, he is startled by a noise! Upon investigation, he discovers a stray, ginger-colored cat strolling around his kitchen counter.

James feeds the cat, dubs him Bob, and even seeks out veterinary care for its wounds. Because he is in the middle of a difficult rehab process, James doesn't want the responsibility of a pet. He tries to find the cat's owner, and when that fails, tries to give

him away. But without fail, Bob always returns to his doorstep, purring for his new friend. Through thick and thin, the orange tabby becomes his constant companion, perching on James' guitar while he plays on street corners. As the pair grow more visible to the locals, they become the subject of newspaper articles, and a social media sensation. Ultimately, James conquers his addiction, and writes a successful series of books about Bob (who plays himself in the movie).

Pets Can Increase Human Connections

An evening walk with her new rescue dog brought Mary face-to-face with a suffering neighbor. Mary recalled, "My dog, named Bacon, pulled me from the sidewalk toward some women sitting in their driveway. They swooned and fussed over him, giggling at his rather unusual name." It soon became apparent that one of the women was emotionally weighed down. While Mary sat and chatted with the group, the woman eventually shared that her daughter had committed suicide the week before. "I started crying," admitted Mary, "she started crying, we all started to hug. We talked about the struggles of depression and how loved her daughter is still."

Mary had not thought much about owning a pet before the 2020 pandemic hit, but she says it's little instances like this that leave her in awe of a God who can use a lovable, goofy dog to bring relief, however small, to a wounded heart. She notes, "It's so humbling that it took a dog to show me how to be a good neighbor. Since I've adopted Bacon, I've gotten to know pretty much everyone in my neighborhood because of his eagerness to give love. The interaction with that woman would never have happened to me, pre-Bacon."

God's Instruments of Love

Among the canines profiled in John Schlimm and Liz Stavrinides' book *Extraordinary Dogs* is Hannah, a golden retriever who is part of Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog ministry. Hannah's handler is Barb Granado, and the two traveled to Boston following the Marathon bombings in 2013.

Word spread that Hannah and other Comfort Dogs were at First Lutheran Church so people could simply hug them and interact with them. Barb recalled, "Those affected by the bombing arrived at the church in tears and left with a smile. Then they came back again and again just to hug Hannah and all the other Comfort Dogs who were there...They felt love from us and the dogs...We call these experiences God Moments. God uses us and our dogs as instruments of His love. The dogs are the bridge. We are a presence, and it's very special. We don't preach, and we pray if people want to, but what we are more than anything else

is a presence. And in those moments, God reveals His love and compassion."

Michael, an ardent dog lover, explains how his own dogs have helped his faith. "The relationship a dog has with humans reminds me, in many ways, of our relationship with God," he remarked. "Ultimately, they've helped me realize that God will take care of me, even if I don't always understand what is happening or why."

God's Endless Creativity

Valerie, a young mom from Texas, remembers a childhood full of outdoor adventures and loving "the little things in nature—toads, frogs, caterpillars, fireflies, snails...[These] creatures [make] me pause and stand in awe of God's endless creativity... I recently experienced an extremely challenging time, when I was struggling to find purpose and meaning in my faith and life. It was a lizard who broke through and gave me an unexpected assurance of God's love for me. As some friends prayed with me, I glanced out the window into the leaves of a nearby tree and spotted a green anole [lizard] looking back at me."

The prayers that Valerie's friends recited referenced her as a precious princess of God. Valerie didn't connect with this ultra-feminine image because of her tomboy nature. "But that little lizard was, in that moment, a message that God *knew* the kind of daughter I was," she observed, "the kind who delights in these critters—and that He rejoiced in sending me these little signs of His love."

Whatever kinds of animals you prefer, remember to look at them as reflections of the Creator's love that can make your earthly journey a little more divine.


**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

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Christopher News Note 639

ISBN: 8755-69601

"Animals are the bridge between us and the beauty of all that is natural. They show us what's missing in our lives, and how to love ourselves more completely and unconditionally. They connect us back to who we are, and to the purpose of why we're here."

—Trisha McCagh
Stories from the Animal Whisperer