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## *The Blessing of Animals is The Blessing of Soul!*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**Observing the Feast of St. Francis and the Blessing of Animals**

*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* Matthew 11:28-29

Welcome! Welcome to every one of you today, no matter how young or old you are, no matter how many legs you have, or don't have!

We are here to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis today, and we celebrate his life by blessing animals!

But we are also here to answer a question, a question many of you here today have asked at some point in your lives. Maybe you asked it when you were very young. If children have a pet and they also go to church, it's one of the first things they ask their parents. Maybe you have had the question asked of you.

“Do animals go to heaven?”

The short answer is, “Yes!” But I believe the question was actually answered long ago. It was decided when language itself was being invented. (According to an obscure and unknown alternative text of the first chapters of Genesis—) Our ancient scholarly ancestors were sitting around thinking of names for groups of things. They had a name for dog and cat, and cow and horse. But they had no name for that category of things.

“What should we call all the *group* of all those things?” Dogs and cats and cows and horses and fish and deer and even snakes? And someone, somewhere, had the bright idea to call them “animals.”

Get it? Someone, somewhere, came up with the word “animal.” That person knew that the meaning of *anima* can be “breath.” An animal is something that has breath, that breathes.

Ah! But I think that person knew something else. The meaning of *anima* can also be “soul!” And animal is something that has soul!

Thus, of course! Animals have souls! It's part of the very meaning of their name! And we all know that things with souls do indeed go to heaven! Thus, of course! Animals do go to heaven!

But, today, as we celebrate St. Francis and the blessing of animals, we remember something else. Heaven is not just a place where people go when they die. Heaven is not some place that we simply wait for.

Heaven is the place where soul is. I can't imagine a heaven without animals, because animals help to give us soul. That is why we celebrate animals here this morning, because we are celebrating heaven, the place of soul. The presence of these animals this morning –boisterous and happy and noisy and lively—is a foretaste of the joy and soul of the kingdom of heaven!

Let me give you a quick overview of St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis had soul. The popular, and un-informed image of him sounds a bit like Dr. Doolittle. But Francis the saint was not called, originally, to minister sweetly to docile pets. First he was the rather ostentatious son of a wealthy merchant, and he enjoyed the fine and rich things of life. It was after he experienced war, and deep sickness, that he found soul — in the needs of the poor and the leprous. Compassion struck him. As he was praying in the Church of St. Damian, the call came to him three times. “Francis, go and rebuild my church, which you see is falling down.”

He took that to mean St. Damian’s Church (where he was), but also the catholic church, the church universal, especially by serving the poor. He was not afraid to become poor himself, but to the outrage of his merchant father. At one point, as is well known, Francis renounced his life of privilege by removing the very clothes which his father had given him and laying them down.

The life of St. Francis was a continual learning to give things away. And the more he gave away, the more soul he had. St. Francis had soul. That ministry of St. Francis renewed the whole Christian church. He rebuilt not only St. Damian’s Church, but the entire Christian Church, because he gave it soul.

We enjoy today the pleasant images of St. Francis ministry, and they are good and fun: the warmth of animals, the beauty of creation, the lion playing with the lamb. But for Francis, that ministry came at a cost. He was more, so much more. During the Crusades, Francis miraculously sneaked through enemy battle lines in order to speak with the Moslem sultan about the gospel. Always stubbornly obedient to the pope, he became known later as the first Protestant. He suffered pain and illness, bleeding from his hands and feet, and so finally was able to welcome even death as his dear sister. Yes, he exalted all of creation, the blissful and the painful, the beautiful and the ugly, because he touched the soul of each experience.

I want to follow St. Francis today. By blessing animals in this place today, the Cathedral of St. Philip is blessing soul.

The ministry of the Cathedral of St. Philip is to bless soul. But taking care of animals can be messy. And blessing soul can be messy. We bless soul in tough and messy ways, just like St. Francis did. We touch not only the tame and the docile, but also the deathly ill and the repulsive; we touch not only the desperately poor, but also the comfortably wealthy.

That holy touching is part of the heritage of the Cathedral of St. Philip, and it will always be the call of the Cathedral. Find the wounds of Atlanta and the world, and touch them with soul.

Ultimately, there is only one source of soul. That source was there at creation itself, “when the world was charged with grandeur, brooding over the bent world with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (as Hopkins wrote). Soul is the breath of God.

Jesus said “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” We all carry burdens, we all wear some kind of yoke. We spend money for that which does not satisfy. We put ourselves on leashes and reins just like these animals here this morning. We put ourselves in cages and containers just like these animals.

Jesus offers another kind of yoke. “My yoke is easy; my burden is light,” says Jesus, who is the source of the world’s soul. St. Francis knew that source. We know that source, too. It is the Holy Spirit of Jesus, speaking to us in mystery from these walls, speaking to us in the mottled beauty of these animals (“Glory be to God for dappled things”).

God touches us with holy breath this morning, with soul! That breath is the Holy Spirit of passion and compassion. Take in that breath, take in that soul, and then let it sing out this morning. Let the walls sing out. Let the animals cry out, too. Join them. Let every thing that has breath—Let everything that has soul!—praise the Lord.

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