

Mountain Lines

St. Francis Comes to St. John's

by Lucy Muller, ern@warwick.net

On October 3rd, churches all over the world celebrated the life of a very influential person. Was he a politician, real estate tycoon, movie star or scientist? No. Was he a teacher, writer, builder, and naturalist? Yes. Was he a pope, a cardinal, or a king? No. He was humble, poor, and a simple monk. I am talking of St. Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis (in painting, right, by Giotto called "Preaching to the Birds") was really Giovanni Francesco Bernardone, 1182-1226; he lived in the small town of Assisi, Italy, and was a very privileged child. He spent his youth acting up in many ways until he finally was sent to fight another town with the army. He became ill and, through prayer, decided to change his life. He gave all his goods away, wore only a simple robe, and set about to rebuild the crumbling church of St. Mary of the Angels. Francis also showed kindness to the lepers who were shunned by society. After his death, the monastic order of St. Francis took hold and there are many Franciscan brothers today. They take a vow of poverty, chastity, and kindness to the poor. The order of St. Clare or The Order of Poor Ladies was started by his friend, who was the daughter of a count and countess. Clare heard Francis preach and decided to devote her life to God.

You do not have to be religious or Catholic or in any way spiritual to appreciate the message of St. Francis. He not only cared for the animals of the world, but for the poor and suffering in this universe.


At *St. John's Episcopal Church* in Ellenville we celebrated the Feast of St. Francis in awe of all the wonders of the creation and of each other. We often forget how many, many animals have sacrificed for the good of mankind. Not only as food, but for research, for work, for companionship and just from being. We also forget that any one of us could come down with a horrible, frightening disease. A disease that would make people avoid us. Everyone needs love and touch and care. Remember how Mother Theresa gave her life to the care of the dying? Remember how lovely and kind the beautiful Princess Diana was to the AIDS patients and the victims of land mines? I know we can't all be like that. I can't. But we can each help a neighbor or an animal in some small way, and we should never forget those saints who have been the way God meant them to be.

The priest of *St. John's*, The Reverend Canon Jeffrey Gollhofer, expressed his thoughts in an interview last month. "The day for us, in the church, is the feast of St. Francis. St. Francis was a person who realized the sacredness of creation in every living thing, including people. He felt that, as Christ taught us, our relationship with God is shown by how we live our lives. It teaches the value of goodness. It's important to remember that our pets are sacred. Not only do we bless them, but they bless us by their presence and God blesses us through them. St. Francis believed in the dignity of the lepers. We need to show respect and honor the dignity of all who are living or have lived."

The Rev. Gollhofer is no newcomer to the blessing of the animals. He coordinated the great blessing at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC. At one blessing they had elephants down to amoebas take part. Father Jeff, as he is affectionately known, has an extensive ministry to prisoners as well as to his congregation. He was formerly



working at the United Nations, organized a global Anglican Congress in South Africa on the Stewardship of Creation, has written and edited the presentations of that meeting, and knows Wangari Mathai, Deputy Environmental Minister of Kenya, who formed Green Belt (which planted 30 million trees across Africa), and was the first environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2004.

The blessing this October welcomed about nine dogs, four cats, two birds and a guinea pig. Hopefully, next year will attract even more animals and their guardians to this touching, fun, and holy ceremony. 



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