

Blessing for the beasts of the Earth

By Zoe Christodoulides Published on October 10, 2010

ALL creatures great and small are gathering at St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Nicosia today as animal loving crowds take their pets along to a special blessing.

Part of a worldwide celebration to mark the recent World Animal Day on October 4, the Saint Francis Blessing of the Animals received a very good response when a similar event was held at the Cathedral a few years back.

World Animal Day was established in 1931 at a convention of ecologists in Florence as a way of highlighting the plight of endangered species. Since then it has grown to encompass all kinds of animal life and is widely celebrated in countries around the world. October 4 was specifically chosen as World Animal Day as it coincides with the Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals.

"St Francis is usually depicted surrounded by and holding various animals," says the St Paul's Cathedral Dean, Father John Tyrrell. "Religious blessings are now very popular in many countries, especially England and North America. People who live on farms out in the country even take their horses down to the nearby chapel."

Today's event at St Paul's will see all animals presented to Father John at the end of the regular Sunday service as they are each given their individual blessing.

"Pets and animals are very much part of the community and this is a special day set aside to honour them," he said.

All pets are welcome, preferably under control either on leashes or in carriers. The last service of its kind saw plenty of animals enter the church; a couple of lizards were even present.

"Most often we get cats and dogs but I've seen plenty of people bring goldfish and hamsters to similar blessings that I've given abroad. The idea is that all animals are part of God's creation and we want to celebrate the fact that people are looking after them," says Father John. "I'm not sure about snakes and things like that but if they're contained then they should surely be greeted warmly."

As for those individuals who have no pets, stuffed animals are also very welcome at the service. "Some people can't have pets if they live in flats. Children are encouraged to bring their stuffed toys," says Father John.

Apart from a few sniffs here and there, last time round the pets entered the Cathedral they were reportedly on their very best behaviour.