

## Plus

### A saint who was one with nature

**World Animal Day celebrated on October 4 is also the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Here Rev. Fr. Claver Perera reflects on the teachings of this patron saint of animals and their relevance to Sri Lanka**

The world has begun to be aware of the importance of the environment. With global warming and changes in climate patterns, humans are being affected by the consequences of their own violation of nature.

St. Francis of Assisi cherished the environment. He did not wish to possess it. He freed himself of all attachments and in this he became like Christ his Master who died dispossessed of everything, even his own clothes.

St. Francis is particularly relevant to us in Sri Lanka. The Franciscan Order when it was first founded by St. Francis had the colour of mud in common with some of our Buddhist monks who wear brown. Franciscans wear robes the colour of the humble soil of the earth. Everything denoted abasement. The begging bowl symbolic of humility and dependence was common to both.

We Catholics or Christians are notorious for harming and killing animals just for pleasure or sport. Little children instead of learning



to love animals, especially as pets, are even allowed with impunity to shoot with catapults at lizards, squirrels and even birds.

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We hardly realize that the earth is God's sacred creation given to man as a gift. Our Buddhist brethren are not supposed to kill even a fly or mosquito and even to avoid treading on ants, the most insignificant creatures imaginable. We may not believe in rebirth but that is hardly a reason to harm animals unnecessarily. God created the environment first and then placed man as the crown of creation.

God asked Adam to name the animals, so that there was a close intimacy between man and other creatures. God entrusted creation to man not to exploit but to protect it. God was pleased, the book of Genesis in the Bible tells us, with His creation which He made in six stages. He found it "very good" and indeed it was very beautiful. Although we are permitted to kill animals for food, we have no right to inflict pain on them. Greed, avarice and uncontrolled desire (Thanha) came as a result of man's turning away from God. St. Francis' detachment recreated in a sense, the balance and the harmony in creation, which was lost as a result of original sin.

Also in the Old Testament of the Bible when the Great Flood was imminent, God instructed Noah to take a couple of each kind of bird and beast and lead them in to the ark to be protected. This showed how much God loved these animals and birds. William Blake, the 18th century poet refers to this in his well-known poem "The Tyger":

"When the stars threw down their spears  
And watered heaven with their tears  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

There are many stories which speak of St. Francis' love for animals and birds. He tamed the wolf that was harassing the township at Gubbio. Francis made an agreement between the wolf and the inhabitants of Gubbio. The wolf was to stop terrorizing the populace and the citizens in turn were to feed and care for the wolf, which in time became so tame that all ( specially children) petted and loved him. When the wolf eventually died, it was buried in the town square amidst great sadness and mourning. To commemorate the wolf, an impressive monument was built over the grave. Even to this day the monument can be seen in the centre of the town's square.

Francis put live oxen and sheep in the first crib ever made in Greccio, because the animals were the first to welcome Jesus at His birth, when there was no room for Him, Mary and Joseph, in the inn. The manger in which Jesus was laid as a new-born baby was the feeding- trough of the animals. So the animals had the right to be there as much as the shepherds. In fact they had a greater right to be there.

The story is related how Francis once met a boy carrying two doves to be sold in the market. Since he had no money, he exchanged his cap for the doves and set them free. We know that Francis preached to the birds just as St Anthony of Padua preached to the fish. To this very day, in the corridors of the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels (Santa Maria degli Angeli ) in Assisi, there is a statue of St. Francis

carrying a basket where doves hatch their young ones. At no time is the basket empty of little doves that fly about the Basilica in complete freedom and safety.

Jesus used animal images to preach the kingdom. They had a place in His vision of the Kingdom. Jesus Himself was called the Lamb of God and the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Sheep and doves symbolized gentleness and humility while the serpent symbolized shrewdness. He said we must be “gentle as doves and wise as serpents”. He also said: “Behold the birds of the air. They do not reap or sow or gather into barns but the heavenly Father feeds them.”

We have got into the habit of calling our fellow human beings “dog” ( balla), “ donkey” ( buruwa), “ haraka”( bull) “ gona” ( also bull). To impose the worst of human traits to animals is indeed an insult to the animals, who have a dignity and beauty of their own. We often hear phrases like “cat and dog life”, when humans, especially husbands and wives, do not get on well and fight with each other. Dogs and cats sometimes get on better and live in peace with each other.

Centuries after Francis, the Red Indian Chief, Seattle asserted that “ the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water” cannot be owned by any one. They belong to all. To quote him further: “Every part of this earth is sacred to my people.... We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle: these are our brothers.... The air is precious to us, for all things share the same breath: the beast, the tree, the man, they all share the same breath.... For what is man without the beast? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For what ever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth....so love it (the earth) as we have loved it, care for it as we have cared for it....Preserve it for your children; love it as God loves us all....the earth is precious to Him”. No one can be “exempt from the common destiny”. This is a re-echo of Francis’ vision of the interaction between man and his environment.

The environment will take it out on us if we exploit it ruthlessly and seek to destroy it. We will have to give an account to God as to how we respected the sacredness of nature and everything it contains. If the earth is our mother, how can we treat her with disrespect and exploit her for our own selfish advantage?The following prayer for animals will help us to realize our responsibility to nature and the environment.

#### **A prayer for animals:**

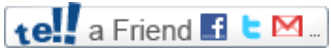
Hear our prayer, O God, for our friends, the animals who are suffering. For all who are overworked and underfed and cruelly treated, for all wistful creatures in captivity that beat against their bars. For any that are hunted or lost, deserted or frightened or hungry, for all that are in pain or dying and for all that must be put to death.

We entreat for them all Thy mercy and pity, and for those who deal with them, we ask for a heart of compassion and gentle hands and kindly words. Make us true friends to animals and share a blessing of the merciful and the tender-hearted Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen



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