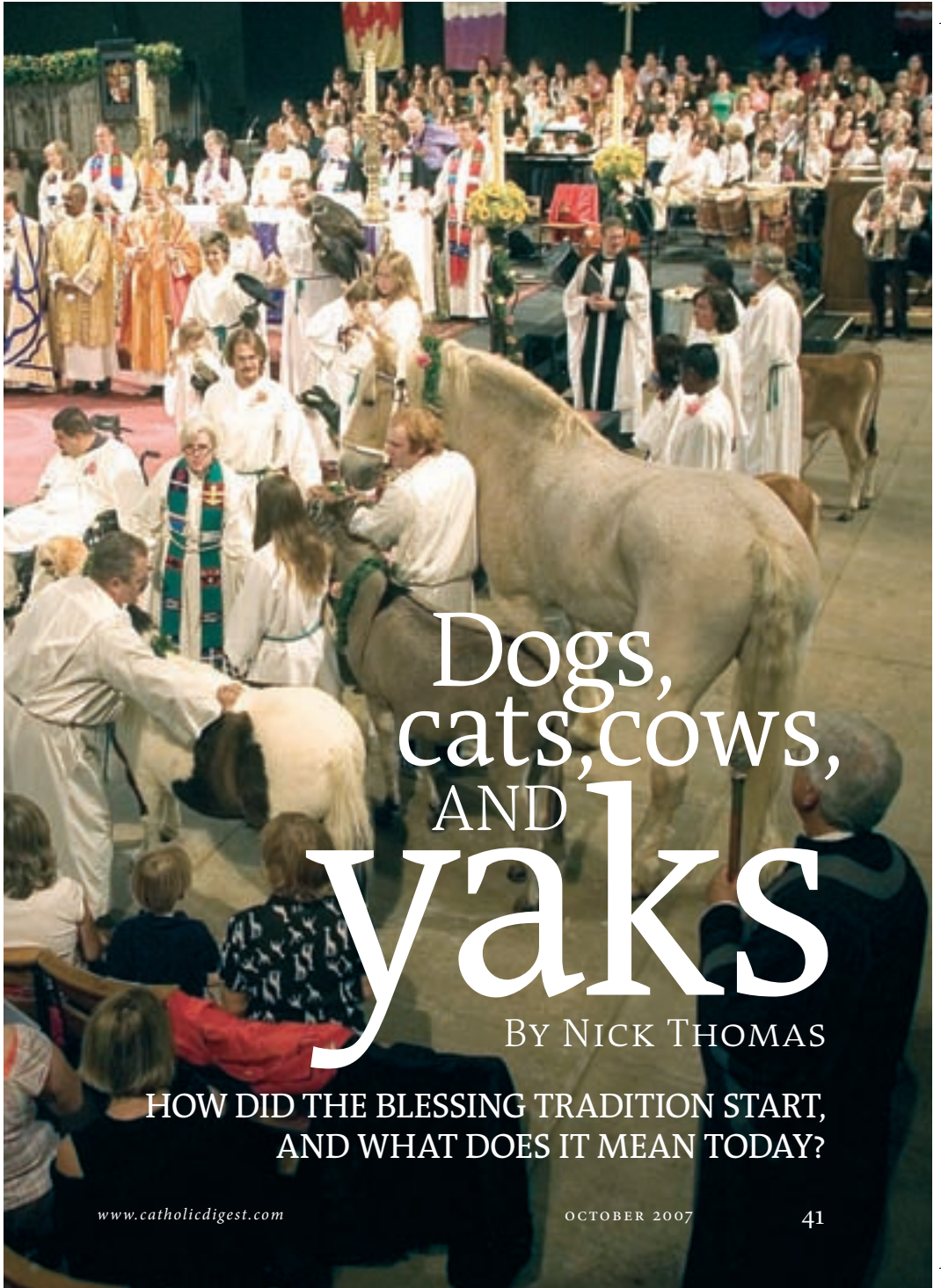


The blessing of animals



Very Reverend James Kowalski (in chasuble with blue piping) and the Right Reverend Mark S. Sisk, Episcopal bishop of New York (wearing mitre), bless the animals at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York

PHOTO BY BERNARDO NUNEZ



Dogs,
cats, cows,
AND
yaks

BY NICK THOMAS

HOW DID THE BLESSING TRADITION START,
AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TODAY?

The animals may not come in rows, two by two, but come they do — by the thousands. Creatures great and small crowd churches all across America, as these places of worship throw open their doors

extending benedictions to animal congregants is held on or near October 4, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, who was named patron saint of ecology by John Paul II in 1979. The ceremony is also very popular in the Episcopal Church and, to a lesser extent,



PHOTO BY VICTOR ALEMAN, VIDA NUEVA

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles blesses a cow on historic Olvera Street in Los Angeles during that city's annual Holy Saturday blessing of the animals

for their annual Blessing of the Animals ceremonies. In most Catholic churches, this service

with Lutherans and other denominations.

Though St. Anthony the Ab-

bot and others can also be named as patron saints of animals, the ceremony most often is associated with St. Francis. Although St. Francis' respect for nature has led some to call him the first environmentalist, it was spirituality rather than activism that led him to seek unity with God and all creation. His love and respect for animals — as part of that creation — has forever linked him with the Blessing of the Animals ceremony through his words:

“Creatures minister to our needs every day. Without them we could not live, and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator every time we fail to appreciate so great a blessing.”

The exact date on which formal animal blessing ceremonies were first conducted by the Church is open to speculation. Laura Hobgood-Oster, who teaches a popular Animals and Religion course

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at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, offers some insight in her book, *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the History of Christian Tradition*, to be

Animals gone wild

Reverend Richard Laribee, of St. Mark Episcopal Church in Highland, Maryland, has a bone to pick about claims of saintly animal behavior during the Blessing of the Animals ceremony. “I think that’s an urban legend,” he says. “We’ve had to remove some dogs who were barking so loudly we couldn’t hear ourselves sing.”

Reverend Steven Rottgers of Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Trussville, Alabama, acknowledges the ceremonies can often include the odd, unruly heckler. Over the years, Rottgers says he has blessed goats, ducks, gerbils, alligators, pigs, and even a piranha. During one service it was necessary to seek repentance for a very vocal mynah bird. “The previous owners had taught the bird to cuss,” he says.

published in January 2008. “There is some visual evidence depicting early animal blessings,” she says, referring to drawings of medieval manuscripts showing St. Anthony the Abbot performing an animal blessing. “But there is scant written evidence documenting the early history of the ceremony.” She says formal church-organized animal blessings were held in Rome in the early 20th century, while in the United States, the Catholic Church began blessing

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animals in honor of St. Anthony the Abbot in the historic Olvera Street area of downtown Los Angeles in the 1930s.

Diana Guerrero, author of *Blessing of the Animals*, has been a regular visitor to the Olvera Street ceremony, which is organized by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Each year, she says, hundreds of animals and their owners gather for a procession led by a cow, which symbolizes the historical importance of livestock in the early ranching days of California settlers. “Cardinal [Roger] Mahony has been performing the service for over 20 years,” says Guerrero. “He and the other dignitaries follow behind the cow, but sometimes they have to watch

their step — especially if the cow is nervous!”

Guerrero says that the Olvera Street animal blessing has grown so large that Mahony now uses what looks like a large, wooden-handled brush to sprinkle water on the animals during the blessing, although she says “sprinkle” is really an understatement: “He dips the brush into a huge tank of holy water, quickly flips his wrist, and forms a whip-like stream of water that douses the animals — and their owners — as they walk by. You can hear it go *swack*, and everyone gets drenched!” The Olvera Street animal blessing was originally held on January 17, the feast day of St. Anthony the Abbot, but is now held during the

WHO WAS ST. ANTHONY THE ABBOT?

Also known as St. Anthony the Great and St. Anthony of Egypt, this desert father and patron of the animal kingdom spent his early adulthood helping to care for his younger sister after his parents’ deaths. When she was grown, he sold all he had and gave the money to the poor. St. Anthony then headed for the desert, intent on leading an ascetic life. He lived alone for many years, but as word of his holiness spread, the number of visitors increased. He founded two monasteries, and was thought to be a great healer. One story tells of the many animals St. Anthony encountered during his travels — including a wolf that led him to St. Paul, a raven that brought them food, and later, a lion that helped to dig St. Paul’s grave.



milder spring, around Easter.

On the East Coast, another well-established ceremony is conducted during the fall at the Episcopal Cathedral of New York's St. John the Divine. This Blessing of the Animals ceremony has been part of St. John's annual services since 1985 and, like most of today's blessings, it honors St. Francis. According to Jonathan Korzen, communications director of the cathedral, the service was originally a vision of the late John-Michael Tebelak, creator of the 1970s pop-culture musical "Godspell." Tebelak, a lifelong Episcopalian, later became the cathedral's artist-in-residence until his untimely death from a heart attack at the age of 35, six months before the first animal blessing service at St. John the Divine.

"Thousands of people, along with animals of myriad shapes, sizes, and colors, pack the world's largest Gothic cathedral for a joy-

ous and solemn religious service that celebrates all living things," says Korzen. "The procession has included camels, oxen, horses,

and most recently, a golden eagle." During his 14 years at St. John the Divine, Canon Charles Pridemore presided over some big services and recalls his biggest visitors were elephants. When Pridemore became rector at the smaller Trinity Episcopal Church in Ossining, New York, in 1993, he introduced the animal blessing service to his parish and, not surprisingly, noticed that the animals were more diminutive as well. "The most interesting attendee was a man with pet ferrets all over his coat," he recalls.

Director of Liturgy Johan van Parys at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis has seen the blessing of some larger-than-life creatures. "Several years ago, we had a yak walk down the center aisle of the church during the parade of animals," he says.

For many churches, the service is also a way to reach out to local communities. Pastor Doug



"Several years ago, we had a yak walk down the center aisle of the church during the parade of animals."

Ryniewicz's service at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Falls Church, Virginia, is typical of many. He gives thanks and praise over the animals and asks for their health and well-being, and each gets sprinkled with water from a bowl with a pine branch. Ryniewicz recalls heading off to his first animal blessing service five years ago convinced that "only one guy with a dog" would show up. Instead, he was greeted with a happy, diverse crowd, and serenaded with a "wondrous cacophony of animal songs." Father Tim Goldrick of St. Bernard Catholic Church in Freetown, Massachusetts, says his ceremony is intended to reconnect people with the importance of animals in their lives and in God's plan of creation. "Besides," he says, "It's fun!" In addition to asking blessings for beloved pets, the service is also a timely reminder of the less fortunate animals in the com-



Children report that dogs have taught them to be happy and forgiving, and that cats have taught them patience — and, of course, how to climb trees.

munity. At Olivet Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia, this concern is addressed by taking up a collection for a local animal shelter.

“Yes, dogs will be barking, cats will be hissing,” says Deacon Roger Klaas from Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Wadsworth, Ohio, but “start opening prayer, and it becomes silent — like the Good Lord is reminding them to listen.” Klaas says he often asks the younger children to explain what they have learned from their pets. They report that dogs have taught them to be happy and forgiving, and that cats have taught them patience — and, of course, how to climb trees. One young goldfish owner bragged his fish taught him “how to swim with my eyes open.”

Most critters seem to put their best paw, hoof, or claw forward as they receive their blessings, and most ministers say they see the service gaining popularity in their communities. “I hope we are

