



An invitation to celebrate St. Francis Day outside the church walls

Over the years, the Feast of St. Francis has become a popular day for congregations to celebrate and bless pets. As such, this day give us time to appreciate the joy and companionship that our pets offer us in our daily lives. Nearly 62% of Americans have a pet, so this type of celebration is a wonderful invitation to include more creatures into our church community.

Why this invitation?

The Feast of St. Francis is an opportunity to reflect on the sacredness of creation as we consider how others animals in our world are also part of God's beloved goodness. This year your congregation may be interested in doing something different to help animals in your community by extending support to local groups that take care of strays and other lost animals. The Humane Society estimates that between 6-8 million cats and dogs are put in shelters every year with about 2.3 million euthanized annually. These animals are an often unseen part of God's good creation, and by offering ourselves to

their service we are reminded that God's natural order is often hidden from our view, but still in need of our loving care. Additionally, many people on a limited budget find it difficult to pay for food for their pets, so this pet food collection can be extended to donations to local food pantries.

If the St. Francis Day Blessing of the Animals is an important tradition in the congregation's life, this is not a suggestion to abandon that joyous practice, but rather a complementary concern for other beings who live on this fragile island home. During announcements and in printed materials, it may be helpful to also remind people that this effort does not diminish or lessen our committed ministry to people, but rather is an invitation to offer an additional helping hand to more of God's creatures.

Who should participate?

Everyone! This project is an ideal intergenerational, youth group or children's formation initiative. Additionally, it may make sense to form a small team to work on this short-term project to coordinate church announcements, collection of donations and publicity. Consider asking people who are not normally involved in food drives but may consider this for a short period of time.

When should we launch this?

Two options are suggested. Start the food collection and announcements in September and deliver the food on or near St. Francis Day (October 4, 2014). Alternatively, begin the donation drive on Sunday, October 4, 2014 as the start of the Season of Creation which is celebrated by some communities from St. Francis Day through to the first

Sunday of Advent. (More details about Season of Creation can be found below.) The Season of Creation can be a time for deeper and sustained reflection and consideration of our call to love and care for of all God's creation.

What do we need to do?

The following are 10 easy steps to launch a new Feast of St. Francis project in your church.

- 1) Contact the local animal shelter or rescue center to discuss what needs they may have including pet food, shampoos and bedding. Ask if you may be able to bring a group from your church to deliver these supplies. You may want to ask if you can bless the animals in the shelter when you are delivering the donations.
- 2) Contact local food pantries to see if they have regular clients who ask for food for their pets. Sometimes those on a limited budget find it very challenging to feed their beloved pets.
- 3) Invite the young children in the congregation to draw posters to put up around the church asking for food and other donations for the animal shelters and food pantries.
- 4) Put in parish newsletter and have regular announcements about the collection of donations and a short explanation about why St. Francis Day will be different this year.
- 5) Bring forth these donations at your regular Sunday offerings. Stack the offerings in the Parish Hall to see how the donation pile grows each week.
- 6) Add to the Prayers of the People concerns about animal life including extinct species, animals in shelters and pets. Using specific biblical language for these

prayers from Genesis 1:20-25 reminds us that God blessed and celebrated all creatures. Several websites (listed below) have helpful language for these prayers.

- 7) As possible, organize a group to go to the animal shelter to deliver the food and donations. Again, if it has been agreed on by the shelter staff, bless the animals.. Also, track the amount of pet food collected for the food pantry.
- 8) Don't forget to take pictures for the bulletin boards, newsletters, websites, Instagram and Facebook. Tweet about the amount of food collected and delivered to the shelter.
- 9) Send a press release to the local media about your efforts.
- 10) Afterward, gather your organizing team together to reflect on what went right and what should be improved for next year's Feast of St. Francis celebration.

Additional resources

Prayer ideas

<http://www.textweek.com/festivals/francis.htm>

<http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith>

Season of Creation

<http://www.diomass.org/creation-care-season>

<http://www.letallcreationpraise.org/season-of-creation>

For comments or suggestions, please be in touch with revstephaniejohnson@gmail.com,

Province 1 Environmental Missioner.