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We need St Francis now

by Joan Chittister

From Where I Stand

Some things never go way. The best ones, in fact, come back to us in whole new ways. Saints are like that.

The church calendar that formed me, for instance, provided the Catholic community one feast day after another designed to remind us of the heroes of the Catholic community. On those days, congregations held special masses, sang special songs, prayed special prayers and blessed special statues.

On St. Joseph's Day, for instance, the Italians had street fairs in which they spread a family feast from one end of the country to the other in honor of Joseph, the just one, who protected the Virgin and raised the child Jesus in a holy family. And so that Holy Family became a model for us all. For committed children and faithful fathers and strong mothers.

On St. Patrick's Day, the Irish carried shamrocks to remind us of Patrick's exegesis of the Trinity which, we were told, converted the pagans of Ireland and were still a clear icon to us of the God whose presence is "three in one." It was the articulation of a 'mystery' that became clearer as we got older.

On Halloween, all the saints of the church were honored for their faithful lives and their models of goodness. We dressed up to look like Therese of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola and the Children of Fatima rather than Peter Pan and The Terminator and a vampire or two on Halloween.

We named our children for saints. We dedicated our churches to their memory. We presented them as icons and heroes to our children long before celebrities and rock bands and rappers and reality shows conquered the airwaves and took their place. Long before Brittany and DeShaun and Darcy and Travis replaced Peter and Mary and John and Theresa as baptismal names.

In that period, we lived immersed in a veritable "communion of saints," surrounded by signs and images of those whose lives were themselves meant to be templates for our own.

We don't do those things anymore. For many good reasons, both liturgical and theological. At the same time, the stories and the figures go on stirring in my memory, raising old ideals, provoking old memories of beauty and fidelity and awareness and commitment. Only now those figures and those stories ring in strong new ways.

For instance, Oct. 4 is the Feast of Francis of Assisi, *il poverello*, the poor one, whose voice in the newly emerging mercantile class of the 13th century warned of the greed and corruption and destitution that would come when the world was run more on profit for the rich than it was on a prophetic commitment to the poor. And he was right.

But Francis was known for more than protests.

Francis loved animals, too. He was a walking apostle for ecology and the protection of woodlands which having been destroyed for parking lots and housing estates leave animals who once lived in caves and forests spilling over into our largest cities. He talked to the animals. He understood them. He knew their place in creation.

Francis talked to the birds about their call to the unceasing singing of the praises of God. When the birds surrounded him, he told them, "My sister birds, you owe much to God, and you must always and in every place give praise to Him; for He has given you freedom to wing through the sky and He has clothed you ...

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He calmed the wild. The wolf Gubbio who had been ravaging animals and people alike lay down at his feet like a puppy when Francis scolded him for his violence: "All these people accuse you and curse you ... But Brother Wolf, I would like to make peace between you and the people."

Then Francis led the wolf into the town, and surrounded by startled citizens made a pact between them and the wolf. Because the wolf had "done evil out of hunger", the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly, and in return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks. In this manner Gubbio was freed from the menace of the predator."

No doubt about it. In a world where species after species is disappearing under the rubric of "progress," where animals are being used for research on materials and cosmetics, where the boundaries between forests and cities are fast disappearing, where bears show up in shopping districts of major cities and crocodiles show up on people's front lawns, we need St Francis now.

It is also becoming clear that Francis knew what we are only now discovering.

In our time, the science that separated us from nature is now declaring that animals, too, have intelligence, have emotions, have needs like ours. Research by Dr. Filippo Aureli, professor of animal behavior and co-director of the Research Centre in Evolutionary Anthropology and Palaeoecology in Liverpool, England, indicates that the study of animal emotions, particularly in birds and primates is providing new insight and information on the emotions of humans, as well as the feelings of animals.

Well, I am an animal lover, too. And I have been threatening for years now that my last book would be *Two Dogs and a Parrot: The Spiritual Lessons I Have Learned From My Pets*

. The parrot, named "Bennie" for obvious Benedictine reasons, is the most obvious educator of them all.

From Bennie I am learning persistence and emotional sensitivity. Both of which are needed in this world of invisible women and neglected children.

Persistence is a very good thing for a woman to know in a man's church. If Bennie needs something, she simply refuses to give up trying to get it. She will knock at her hopper until it gets filled, until the door gets opened, until you put her on your shoulder and make her a real part of the community.

Emotional sensitivity, the awareness of the needs of needy others, is her forte. She stretches herself out on the top of her cage, thin as a pencil, rigid as a piece of steel and stares at you until you stop work and give her the loving she seeks, for her sake and yours. She teaches us to be very aware of very small signals in life.

No wonder that churches to this day bless animals on October 4, the Feast of St. Francis.

St. Francis would find it all very normal, very necessary.

From where I stand, we need to take another look at what animals have to teach us today, yes, but we have to take another look at what the saints have to say to us today, too. Somehow or other, the models we have put in their stead have not, as a class, managed to fill the gaps.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web columns, From Where I Stand, are found on the NCR Web site, NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand.]

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