

Why blessing animals has become popular in recent decades

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Shortly after Pope Francis visited the United States in September, many churches invoked his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, in services of blessing animals. From the spectacular event at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan to small gatherings of pets and pet owners on church lawns, Americans around the country marked Francis's feast day, October 4, by blessing the animals.

They may not have realized that blessing the animals is a recent and very American development. Not only does it meet a very contemporary set of needs, but it represents a sea change in the way we practice religion.

There are some precedents for the contemporary celebrations. Roman Catholics, particularly in southern Europe and Latin America, had well-established traditions of blessing animals, but the blessings were associated with St. Anthony Abbot, not with Francis, and they were oriented toward working animals, not pets.

In the 1950s Protestants began having a few scattered experiments with animal-blessing ceremonies, and many non-Catholics began exploring wider practices of blessing in the 1980s. But the precipitating event seems to have been the first blessing of the animals at St. John the Divine in 1985. With its "Earth Mass" dedicated to the global ecosystem, and its [procession of animals exotic and domestic](#), it was (and still is) extraordinary, well-publicized, and well attended. By 1990, animal blessings were starting to catch on around the country. By now, they are a fixture in many Protestant calendars. Some Jewish and Eastern Orthodox congregations, and secular organizations, hold animal blessings too.

Why have blessings of the animals caught on? Mostly because they meet several needs: they are a way to sanctify our changing relationships with animals, a way to reflect an ecological sensibility in religion, and a way to give and receive divine blessing without formal membership in organized religious bodies.

In developed nations, human relationships with other kinds of animals have changed drastically in the last century. Most people who live in cities and suburbs have very

little contact with animals other than pets. Yet we need food animals and working animals, and we often fear wild creatures. As scholars have pointed out, animal blessings provide a ritual space in which to work through these tensions.

At the same time, many people are deeply attached to their pets and long to have this relationship acknowledged. As human families become smaller, animals often become significant sources of affection and intimacy. Some people feel a spiritual dimension in this bond—one that religion has traditionally not recognized. Animal blessings provide a way to affirm and sanctify this experience.

Religious groups also need, increasingly, to say something about environmental issues. Religious leaders did this forcefully in the 1970s, but the movement lost momentum in the era that followed. It's no accident that animal blessings are largely a practice of mainline Protestants and religious liberals. When animal blessings address environmental concerns or animal rights, they fit with the legacy of social action in such communities.

Above all, blessings fit with a new kind of religious engagement. Increasing numbers of people are avoiding organized religion, although many identify themselves as spiritual. When religious groups hold blessing services, they are offering a welcome and a spiritual benefit without asking for commitment. Official membership is long-term and perhaps vague, but a blessing is immediate and circumscribed.

In that sense, blessings fit well with our consumerist culture. A blessing is a transaction, a single act at a specific moment. This is not to say that these blessings aren't meaningful. Many people who give and receive them testify to their emotional power. But they look and act like many of the nonreligious things we do.

It's widely suggested that evangelicals have adapted to contemporary culture with consumer-friendly worship services that aren't too challenging, and with popular music and media. Blessing services are ways in which moderate-to-liberal mainliners—and, sometimes, the moderate-to-liberal part of the spectrum in other communities—have made that adaptation. Good for them.

My only caveat is this: be careful what you bless. Americans' spending on pets has tripled in the past 20 years. While some of this goes toward food and veterinary care, much of it is for things that animals don't need, like pajamas and jewelry. Pope Francis has reminded us of the connection between climate change and consumption; between the excesses of wealthy nations, the hazards to poor people,

and the threats to nonhuman species. When we bless the animals, we should bless them for their own sake and for their benefit. We should be careful that we aren't just lending religious sanction to our own worst habits.

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