

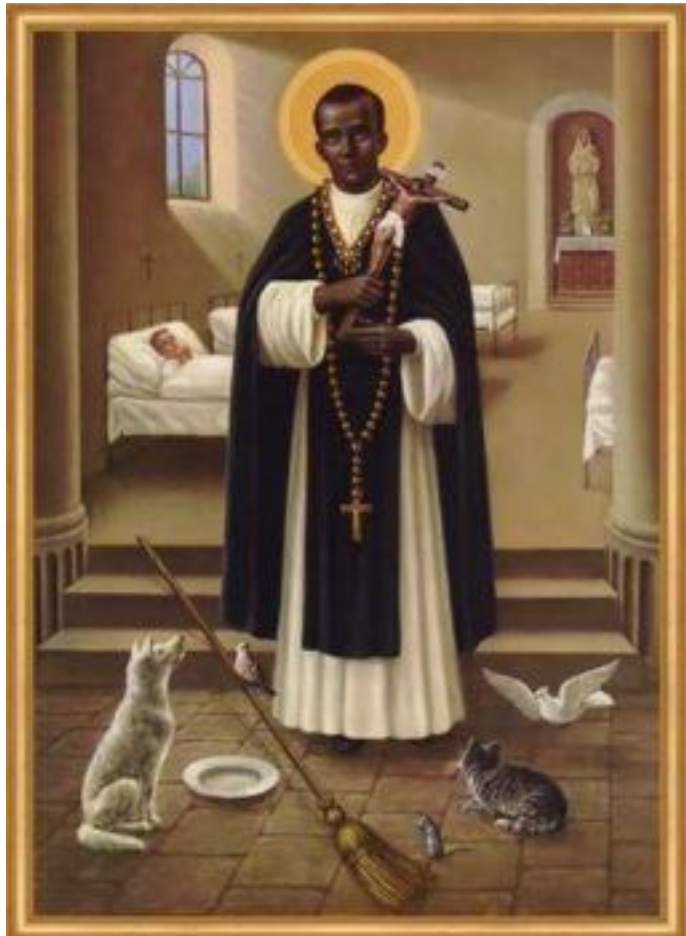
A Short History of Animal Advocacy in the Catholic Church

By [Elaine Hutchison, MVLCE on MainStreetVegan.com](https://www.MainStreetVegan.com)

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The modern definition of advocacy is 'public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.' In the past it had other meanings. In Old French, it was 'the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending,' and in Middle English, the meaning was even more profound—'one who intercedes for another,' and 'protector, champion, patron.'

PART 1



St. Martin de Porres, 1579-1639, image provided by Elaine Hutchison

The modern definition of *advocacy* is “public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.” In the past it had other meanings. In Old French, it was “the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending,” and in Middle English, the meaning was even more profound—“one who intercedes for another,” and “protector, champion, patron.”

It's by this last definition that we'll find the roots of animal advocacy in the Catholic church. Although the history and contemporary face of the church have no conspicuous belief in animal advocacy, there's a

long history of many individuals within the Church who supported animals—sometimes by sacrificing their lives for them.

Early Animal Activists of the Church



Saint Melangell, image provided by Elaine Hutchison

The first Catholic animal activists that we know of may not have been the actual first individuals to act in defense of animals. We know of them only because their acts were recorded and because only certain historical records were preserved through the Dark Ages.

Here are just a few of these early champions of animals—there were many more. Saint Carileff (c. 540) stopped a hunt by protecting a bull from hunters. Saint Melangell (c. 600) saved a hare from a hunter and eventually became the patron saint of rabbits and hares. Saint Godric of Finchal hid a stag from a band of hunters, and Saint Brigid of Ireland gave sanctuary to a wild boar.



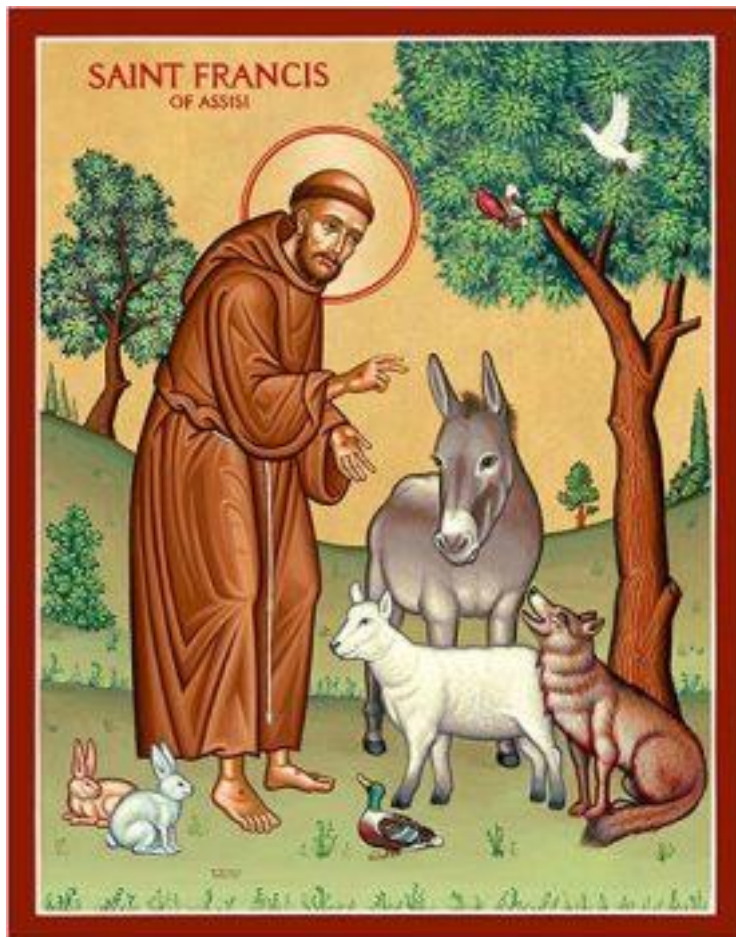
Saint Brigid, image provided by Elaine Hutchison

Other saints, also numerous, are notable for showing mercy to less welcome creatures:

- Saint Martin de Porres (c. 1579-1639) would not eat animals, nor would he use them for profit or as beasts of burden. He had an unusual compassion for the most despised creatures, believing that mice and rats behaved as scavengers because they were forced to live with so little food.
- Saint Marianus (d. 473) was a shepherd monk who saved a wild boar from hunters. He also had a special talent in communicating with animals. After hearing him speak, the wolves and bears left pastures where sheep grazed, leaving the herds unharmed.
- Saint Stephen of Mar Sabe (c. 710-784) extended his care to all creatures, including insects. He would save the worms he found on the ground and transport them to a place where they would be safe.

Saint Francis

Of course, there is the well-known Saint Francis (c. 1181/82-1226). Although some scholars argue that he was not an animal advocate, there are more than a few stories told by his brethren that substantiate his role as a protector of animals.



Saint Francis, image provided by Elaine Hutchison

The famous story of him interceding to save a wolf that threatened the village of Gubbio is part of his legend, but there are several lesser-known stories as well. He saved rabbits from traps, paid for market sheep and freed them so they would not be slaughtered, threw fish that had been caught back into the water, and moved worms to the side of the road so they would not be stepped upon.

Although he saw God in all creation and all humans, the love he had for mankind was not a blind love. He also saw the evil in man's treatment of animals. In his Admonitions, he writes, "Be conscious, O man, of the wondrous state in which the Lord God has placed you. He created you and formed you to the image of His beloved son—and [yet] all creatures under heaven, each according to its own nature, serve, know, and obey their Creator better than you."

The great irony of St. Francis's legend of animal compassion is the way it is celebrated in today's churches, by performing a *Blessing for the Animals* on his feast day for animals that are almost always pets.

Francis never advocated the keeping of pets—they were not allowed in his group of monks. During his time, only rich people kept pets and because his band of monks had taken vows of poverty, he would not let them adopt the habits of the wealthy.

In contrast, the majority of the modern *Blessings for Animals* do not include all animals, which is how St. Francis blessed and praised them, but only animals who share our homes. Animals in fur farms, the farmed animal industry, fish hatcheries, zoos, and wild animals are usually never mentioned.

The effect that St. Francis had on the world was immense and long-lasting, but his legacy of seeing God in all beings and in all nature was lauded in The Catholic church but not practiced. And it never became doctrine.

PART 2



The Official Church View in Modern Times

It should be noted that all the actions on behalf of animals by those who were commemorated in the Catholic church were committed by individuals—not a bishopric, not an archdiocese, not even a monastery or a nunnery. Although others might have emulated the actions of these early animal activists, there has never been a group of Catholics who featured animal advocacy as part of their religious practice.



Photo credit: [pixabay](#)

Throughout the centuries following St. Francis, various popes would specifically deny the truths that he held so dear. Several would hold with the Descartes's philosophy of animals as "meat machines" and Catholic doctrine would caution multiple times against establishing moral duties towards animals, a principle which continues to this day.

For example, the 1948 edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* cautioned, "Societies for the protection of animals may be approved insofar as their objective is to the elimination of cruelty to beasts. Not, however, insofar as they base their activities, as they sometimes do, on false principles (attributing rights to animals...or alleging a duty of charity, which in the Christian sense of that phrase, cannot obtain)." Animals would fare no better in the 1965 *Second Vatican Council* which stated the human person is "the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake" and the subsequent 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which said that animals are "by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity."

But even with the stern admonitions of the Church, a few recent popes made some extraordinary statements on the topics of animals having souls and going to heaven.

Pope Paul VI, whose papacy ended in 1978, reportedly comforted a young boy whose dog had died by saying, "One day we will see our animals in the eternity of Christ."

In 1990 during a private audience, Pope John Paul II said that animals do have souls and are "as near to God as men are." The Vatican did not publicize this, possibly because it was in direct opposition to Pope Pius IX. During his 19th century papacy, Pope Pius IX was the first pope to declare that animals had no souls or consciousness, and the first pope to establish the doctrine of papal infallibility.



Pope Francis, image provided by Elaine Hutchison

In 2014, animal lovers applauded Pope Francis when he was quoted as saying that animals go to heaven. However, soon after this story appeared worldwide in all forms of media, it proved to be false. An Italian newspaper misquoted him and the translation into English distorted the story even more, resulting in an apocryphal quote that is still getting press today.

But only a year later, the hearts of both Catholic and non-Catholic animal advocates leapt with hope after the release of Pope Francis's second encyclical, the [*Laudato Si'*](#) on May 24, 2015. In addition to his commentary on taking care of the Earth, Pope Francis mentioned animals repeatedly, saying "...our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is 'contrary to human dignity.'" Elsewhere in the document he said, "Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect."

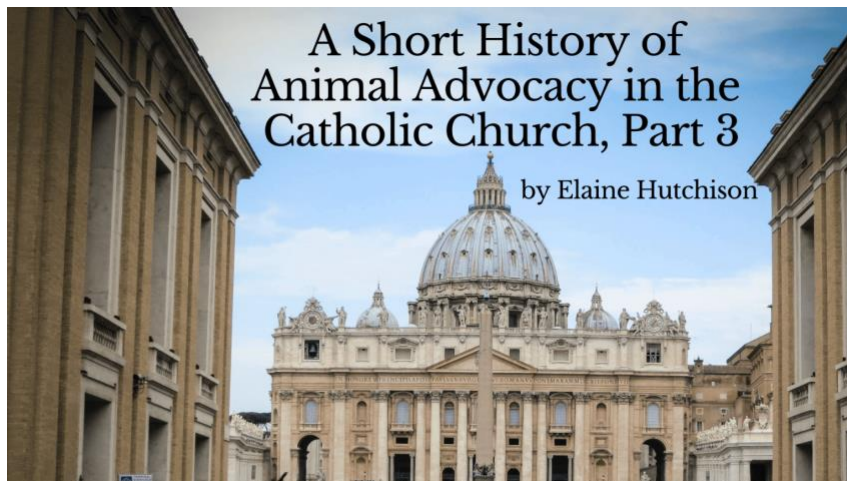
The *Laudato Si'* also includes a stunning bit of text that seem to contradict the Vatican's denial of Pope Francis's do-animals-go-to-heaven comment. In paragraph 243, he writes, "Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all."



Pope Francis, image provided by Elaine Hutchison

There was another startling reference to animals going to heaven in the comments in paragraph 83. “Here we can add yet another argument for rejecting every tyrannical and irresponsible domination of human beings over other creatures. The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.”

PART 3



Pope Francis and the Future of Catholic Animal Advocacy

Is it possible that Pope Francis would be the first pope to actively advocate on behalf of animals? After all, he was the first pope to take St. Francis's name as his regnal name on his accession to the papacy.



Pope Francis and a cat, photo credit: Korea.net and Pixabay

Was his defense of animals and exhortations to treat both them and their environment well, a sign of even better things to come?

At the time of this article, that hasn't happened. There were no subsequent comments regarding animals and the importance of protecting them in the months following the publication of the *Laudato Si'*. But there was one landmark comment that astonished the world. Pope Francis [earned some backlash in January 2022](#) when he said that not having children and living with dogs and cats were selfish acts.

With all the uproar that followed, one wonders if perhaps in hindsight, the pope wished that he had phrased that comment differently.

In his most recent encyclical, the [Laudate Deum](#) released October 4, 2023, Pope Francis barely mentioned animals. While writing about protecting the environment, he wrote about the creatures that inhabit it, but nowhere did he mention the appalling daily suffering and pain of trillions of farmed animals, nor did he mention how the farmed animal industry is a pivotal factor in the accelerated growth of global warming. Because global warming was the main theme of this encyclical, the omission was glaring—it's as if he had chosen to ignore the issue completely.



Cow and Pope Francis, image credit: [In Defense of Animals](#)

But why? One can think of a dozen reasons, but the *why* doesn't matter as much as the deed itself. In omitting farmed animals from his pleas for protection and preservation of the earth, Pope Francis turned the spotlight away from the core cause of the condition he wants to see cured.

His omission resembled the streetlight effect—the idea of searching only for something where it is easiest to look but usually not where it will be found. We can only wish that Pope Francis will someday stand under a taller street lamp, with a much brighter light that shines over all the animals in the world, including the ones on his plate.

To create a better world for animals, we cannot depend on Pope Francis or another Vatican Council to hand down the long-awaited doctrine that pro-animal Catholics and secular animal supporters have been wishing for. Individuals must make that effort. Within the Catholic church, that effort is coming from the church members themselves.

The group [Catholic Action for Animals](#) is asking that Catholics petition their bishops to instruct priests to bring the treatment of animals into their sermons. They believe the Pope “has made it clear that by receiving the Holy Spirit in Baptism all Catholics have the right to be involved in the decision-making processes of the Church.” They’ve begun a campaign to change the Church within the Church by forming *Laudauto Si'* groups, which advocate the principles of animal rights within local parishes.

[Catholic Concern for Animals](#) spreads their message by “by informing and educating on the issues of Animal Advocacy among the Catholic world population at all levels, from the Vatican as the Catholic Church’s highest institution to individual Catholics throughout the world.” This group also works with secular animal advocacy groups and individuals.

Just like the animal advocates of the early Church, it seems that today’s Catholic laypersons and animal advocates will have to rely on their own actions and campaign on behalf of the animals to effect any change in how the Church views them and treats them.

And as they have always done, the animals will once more show both the Catholic church and the world that we are all one.

“Ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air they shall teach thee. Or speak to the earth and it shall teach thee, and the fishes of the earth will declare unto thee. Who knoweth not that in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?” (Job 12: 7-10)