

## CCA Chair's Response to Pope Francis' Comments on the Family and Companion Animals

From [Chris Fegan, CEO, Catholic Concern for Animals](#)

January 2022

For many Catholics who love animals, 2022 started in an unexpected way as we were taken back by the remarks Pope Francis made on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January during his catechesis on Saint Joseph, when he stated that choosing not to have children and having cats and dogs instead, or to have only one child and multiple cats and dogs, is selfish and a denial of parenthood that diminishes us and takes away our humanity; he added that those who do not develop a sense of fatherhood or motherhood are lacking something important.

In response to these comments, CCA issued a statement expressing its concern that such remarks could discourage people from caring for animals as well as its support for those who dedicate their life to helping animals in need and open their homes to them. I am proud of the fact that CCA stood up for animals, as we always do; at the same time, I think Pope Francis' statement warrants further reflection.

Writing in *The Tablet*, the international Catholic news weekly paper, [Christopher Lamb](#) admitted that Pope Francis might have worded his statement "*in a more judicious manner*" but defended the message behind the words, arguing that it questioned "*a lifestyle of consumerist materialism that leaves no space for the sacrifice required in raising children*". As with many other aspects of life, animal guardianship may indeed reflect a lifestyle of consumeristic materialism, as exemplified by the commerce of fancy dog breeds, whose purpose is merely to satisfy anthropocentric requirements.

The first victims of such consumeristic materialism are the animals themselves, often bred, traded and kept like mere commodities, condemned to a life of deprivation that denies them the dignity of their species and the expression of their individuality.

However, for many humans, animal guardianship is chosen out of love, grounded in the recognition of animals' intrinsic value and dignity. Those who choose animal guardianship on these grounds usually adopt from rescue organisations, which often pick up the pieces of a society that is quick to discard animals who do not satisfy anthropocentric requirements. Particularly in the case of rescued animals, who have often suffered abuse and neglect at the hand of humans, anyone who believes that caring for them does not require sacrifice is under serious misapprehension.

As the guardian of a 12-year-old rescue dog with dementia, I know first-hand that loving and caring for an animal may require significant sacrifice and constant work to renew our commitment to them each day. This is not to say that the sacrifice involved in caring for an animal is greater or equal to that involved in raising a child, but it is to stress that sacrifice is indeed involved, as required by all caring relationships.

As [Lamb](#) reminds us, Cardinal Bergoglio once lamented that in developed countries people spend a lot of money on their animals, while in underdeveloped countries children die of hunger. In this regard, the question we perhaps ought to ask ourselves is why, in developed countries, some humans and animals alike live in utter luxury, while in underdeveloped countries many humans and animals alike do not even have the means to survive. Furthermore, we ought to consider that, in many developed countries, those who have children receive significant child support from the state, including various financial benefits, free education and healthcare. On the other hand, animal guardians receive no such support and, even when they adopt from shelters, they incur significant financial costs just to cover their animals' basic

needs, such as the food (typically derived from produce remanence humans do not want to consume) and the veterinary care that they are legally required to provide.

Financial costs aside, caring for an animal with complex needs also costs time, work and dedication, which many guardians commit to through thick and thin. Many even pay the ultimate price for their commitment to the animals in their care. This was the case for Angela Glover, co-founder of [Tonga Animal Welfare Society](#), who was recently swept away by a wave as she was trying to save her shelter dogs from the tsunami that hit the island following an under-water volcanic eruption. Arguably, there is no better example of how selfless animal guardianship can be...indeed *“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (John 15:13).

Just as animal guardianship is not necessarily an expression of consumerist materialism and can instead demonstrate selfless love for the other, even to the ultimate sacrifice, conversely the choice of human parenthood is not necessarily an entirely selfless one. In [his remarks](#), Pope Francis reminds us that *“...as one humorously said, ‘and now who will pay the taxes for my pension, that there are no children? Who will take care of me?’ He laughed, but it’s the truth...those who live in the world and get married must think about having children...because they will be the ones who will close their eyes, who will think about their future”*.

Nevertheless, many who choose to have children are certainly motivated by selfless love and will do all they can to ensure that their children can thrive, but tragically far too many children are the victims of maternal or paternal abuse and neglect. For example, in the UK, the ongoing pandemic has highlighted how rife domestic abuse is, and it is well known that both children and animals are especially vulnerable targets of such cruelty, suffering alone in compassionless prisons, their cries unheard beyond walls of indifference. Thus, rather than being dichotomous, the love for children and the love for animals both require the capacity of the human heart to care for those who are most vulnerable and utterly at our mercy, and who depend on us to live and thrive.

[Lamb](#) stresses that Pope Francis’ remarks aim to question *“why birth rates are so low, and what might be done to change things”*. In this regard, we ought to consider that the overall human population is continuing to rise and that humans, particularly those from the developed world where birth rates are lowest, are causing the mass extinction of thousands of other species. Extinction is not a painless process, it involves the immense suffering of unimaginable numbers of sentient being who starve to death, succumb to disease or are deliberately expropriated or exterminated by humans.

Thus, perhaps we ought to ponder the damage that the growth of humanity has caused to our planet and to countless nonhuman individuals as much as we ponder the repercussions that the slowing down of such growth might have. Indeed, based on these considerations, many choose not to generate children and consider adopting them instead. Pope Francis himself [stated](#) that adoption is *“among the highest forms of love and fatherhood and motherhood”* and, indeed, it is hard to imagine a higher form of love than taking care of a child who is not one’s own. He stressed *“how many children in the world are waiting for someone to take care of them...”*. Likewise, countless animals wait for someone to care for them, who find themselves in desperate need because of humans’ recklessness. Choosing to care for them may not be as challenging, and as rewarding, as caring for a child but it is not valueless.

Of course, companion animals are not more important than children, but they are not objects of consumerist materialism either. The love given to them is not wasted, they are not less worthy of love. Pope Francis exhorted us to be open to life, but is that of animals not also life? For sure, those who choose to share their life with animals instead of sharing it with children are missing something important: the experience of human parenthood and all that it can bring. But equally those who choose

to share their life with children instead of sharing it with animals are missing something important: the experience of animal guardianship and all that it can teach us about love and compassion for those who are 'other' from us. When we choose to care for animals, we know that they will never be able to take care of us in our old age, as children might do; and we destine ourselves for the excruciating pain of their eventual passing, which children's parents hope never to experience. Arguably, though, I believe this is precisely why animal guardianship cannot be dismissed as a selfish choice and why it elevates, rather than take away, our humanity.

## References

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- Ruth Gledhill (2022). Childless society gone to the dogs, warns Pope. *The Tablet*, 05 Jan 2022. <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/14873/childless-society-gone-to-the-dogs-warns-pope> (accessed 24.01.22)