Animals and the Catholic Church: Past, Present, Future

By Antoine Corbani

Regardless of one's creed, it is undeniable that the Catholic Church plays a large role on the stage of contemporary ethics and helps shape both cultural attitudes and public policy across the globe. Let's take a closer look at how the Church grapples and has grappled with animal welfare issues specifically, and how the faith can be used as a tool for either good or evil towards our fellow creatures.

Antoine Corbani is currently a senior at Loyola Marymount University, where he studies political science, film, and theology. An experienced writer, editor, and researcher but relatively new to the world of advocacy, he is deeply passionate about raising awareness of animal welfare within the Catholic Church, reading poetry, and writing movie reviews.

The road to establishing a strong spiritual and emotional relationship between animals and the Catholic Church—along with its estimated 1.4 billion members—has historically been long and bumpy, and continues to be so today. From anthropocentric bigotry to hermeneutical

disagreements, many seemingly insurmountable obstacles lie in the way of the Catholic animal advocate. And yet, one might be surprised by the centuries of history that many of the world's creatures have shared with some of the Church's most prominent figures. How have the Church and its members positioned themselves vis-à-vis the questions of animal rights and welfare, from their humble beginnings to modern times? How do Catholic institutions promote care for creation to global audiences? What can the Church teach us about the future of caring for animals and the environment?

Catholic Tradition, the Saints, and the Animals

While a consensus on the place of animals within the Early Church was somewhat lacking, the writings of the Church Fathers give us an idea of what was believed at the time. Generally, while great admiration was expressed towards the objectively observable beauty of God's creation, the moral value of animals was frequently belittled by the Fathers, in accordance with ancient theories by which they were indirectly inspired. Indeed, Early Church leaders often built upon the ideas of their philosophical (non-Christian) forefathers, particularly Greek philosophers such as Plato, the neoplatonists (Plotinus, Porphyry of Tyre…), and Aristotle.

We may take St. Augustine of Hippo as a prime example of this, who reconciled his own theology with Aristotle's theory on souls. Aristotle formed a hierarchy of souls, and, by extension, of living beings, by forming three categories: the vegetative soul, the sensitive soul, and the rational soul. According to him, the human soul possessed all three of these qualities, and people were therefore worthy of being attributed moral value. Animal souls, on the other hand, were merely sensitive and vegetative, implying that they lacked reason and were thus undeserving of a moral status equal to that of humans. Lastly, plants were granted nothing but a vegetative soul, holding even lesser importance than animals. In his *Politics*, he writes: "plants exist for the sake of animals and the other animals for the good of man."

Augustine's writings affirm that non-human beings possess souls just as we do, whilst pursuing this idea of human moral superiority resulting from reason, going so far as to downplay and willingly neglect the suffering of animals as a result: "For we see and appreciate from their cries that animals die with pain. But man disregards this in a beast, with
which, as having no rational soul, he is linked by no community of law." Having a soul, then, was not seen as an intrinsic justification for a living being's moral value to some of Antiquity's most prominent Christian thinkers. Furthermore, it is important to note that Church Fathers did not simply emulate or copy Greek teachings verbatim, but instead expanded upon previous, non-Christian discourse by implementing Christian elements into their arguments. For example, Augustine defended the immortality of the human soul, which Aristotle never entirely affirmed or rejected. Christian scripture also, in part, supports the ideas raised by Aristotle and other neoplatonists: the controversial Genesis 1:26 grants man "dominion" over the earth (including animals), and numerous episodes of the Old Testament recount instances of animal sacrifice and exploitation, sometimes mandated by God himself. It is also important to note that, in Genesis,

man alone is made in the image of God: this was used as an argument in the Early Church for the moral inferiority of animals.

Other Church Fathers, of course, have written more positively and felt more warmly about the animals of the world.

- St. Jerome writes in his Letter 60 to Heliodorus: “For as we admire the Creator not only as the framer of heaven and earth, of sun and ocean, of elephants, camels, horses, oxen, pards, bears, and lions; but also as the maker of the most tiny creatures, ants, gnats, flies, worms, and the like, whose shapes we know better than their names, and as in all alike we revere the same creative skill; so the mind that is given to Christ shows the same earnestness in things of small as of great importance, knowing that it must render an account of every idle word.”
    - A quote attributed to St. John Chrysostom’s Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans reads: “The saints are exceedingly loving and gentle to mankind, and even to the beasts… Surely, we ought to show them great kindness and gentleness for many reasons, but, above all, because they are of the same origin as ourselves.” ● St. Basil the Great, similarly to Jerome, pointed to animals as expressions of God’s wisdom, love, and beauty: “You have then heaven and earth adorned, earth beautified, the sea peopled with its own creatures, the air filled with birds which scour in every direction. Studious listener, think of all these creations, think of all those which my narration has left out to avoid tediousness; recognize everywhere the wisdom of God; never cease to wonder, and through every creature, to glorify the Creator.”

However, over time, the Church and her intellectuals certainly seemed to favor Augustine’s view on the hierarchy of creation and moral value, and St. Thomas Aquinas, heavily influenced by Aristotelianism, effectively ended any Catholic debate that could take place on the matter for the centuries to come. Aquinas, arguably the most influential theologian of all time (perhaps tied with Augustine), described animals as “less perfect” beings relative to the “more perfect” human beings in his magnum opus *Summa Theologiae*. According to him, humans ought to not be cruel to animals, not out of love or kindness to the animals directly, but purely out of concern for this violence eventually being inflicted on a human subject: “But if man's affection be one of passion, then it is moved also in regard to other animals: for since the passion of pity is caused by the afflictions of others; and since it happens that even irrational animals are sensible to pain, it is possible for the affection of pity to arise in a man
with regard to the sufferings of animals. Now it is evident that if a man practice a pitiful affection for animals, he is all the more disposed to take pity on his fellow-men.” Treating animals well is not a duty of man in itself, but it must be done simply because violence towards animals can also lead to violence towards humans.

Despite this anthropocentric theological-philosophical hegemony, many wondrous stories of the saints and their encounters with animals exist. St. Francis tamed and fed the Wolf of Gubbio. St. Anthony of Padua preached to thousands of fish. St. Anthony Abbot was followed around by a pig after curing its illness. St. Roch, after falling sick, had his wounds licked and

bread brought to him by a dog… The list goes on. Not only did saints express great love for animals and treat them with profound kindness, it has become part of tradition to understand that they acted in such a way for the good of the animal, rather than for their own sake or for the sake of their fellow humans. In a way, these saints countered Aquinas' ideas through their actions, so as to send a clear message to the world: "animals matter too." Clearly, views on animals throughout the history of the Church were not straightforward nor uniform, by any means (though the most influential and popular perspectives were ones which upheld man's moral superiority).

The Second Vatican Council: Pivotal, yet Incomplete

For nearly 2,000 years, ideas and debates concerning the moral status of animals stagnated. Aquinas had proven himself to be the Doctor of the Church *par excellence* and an extremely authoritative theological reference on an array of subjects. Efforts to address the matter were likely futile. And yet, in October 1962, the Second Vatican Council began, bringing in a wave of reforms with an envisioned goal of *aggiornamento*, or "updating." Unbeknownst to many, this would also concern the animal rights movement. An important misconception here must be addressed: while the Church under Pope Francis sought to raise awareness of environmental issues and the importance of animal welfare (to be discussed further below), this did not begin in 2013.

Indeed, some scholars estimate that a sort of radical Catholic environmentalist awakening (reawakening?) began as Vatican II took place. Georgetown University's Fr. Christopher Steck from the Society of Jesus argues that "Vatican II initiated the environmental revolution, so to speak, and successive popes have furthered it. Not without reason did PETA deem Pope John Paul II a saint to animals or environmentalists nickname Pope Benedict XVI the 'green pope.'" Yet even John Paul II occasionally seemed to be on the fence as to how to approach such an issue, tiptoeing the line between appeasing Catholic animal advocates and maintaining a traditional sense of anthropocentrism reminiscent of the Church's earlier years. During his address to the members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on the 23rd of October, 1982, he proclaimed the following: "It is certain that animals are at the service of man and can hence be the object of experimentation. Nevertheless, they must be treated as creatures of God which are destined to serve man's good, but not to be abused by him. Hence the diminution of experimentation on animals, which has progressively been made ever less necessary, corresponds to the plan and well-being of all creation." Why not outright condemn animal experimentation? Is not all experimentation, which carries significant (and often unpredictable) risks, a potential assault on God's creation? While he indeed promulgated the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1992 which states that "men owe [animals] kindness," it is oftentimes observable that Church leaders and documents employ rather vague language and rhetoric when discussing the welfare, value, and rights of animals.

Pope Francis, the Jesuits, *Laudato Si'*: A New Hope?

Enter Pope Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio. While the effectiveness of his papacy regarding the promotion of animal welfare across the world is still being debated, it is undeniable that he was most fervent on issues of environmentalism (which, to a certain extent, encompasses the animal kingdom), particularly following the publication of his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. Two initial clues were given to us on the day of his election which foreshadowed this very attribute of his: his chosen papal name and the Catholic order to which he belonged, the Society of Jesus. By naming himself after St. Francis of Assisi, the first pope to ever do so, Bergoglio was telling the whole world that environmentalism and humility would be two core tenets of his papacy. This also must have given substantial hope to Catholic animal advocates, due to St. Francis' renowned affinity for and devotion to creation (and animals specifically), unlike any other prominent Church figure.

Furthermore, his identity as a Jesuit was sure to shape the ways in which he would lead the Church: the Society of Jesus, a Catholic order founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1540, has dedicated itself to the promotion of social justice and change on a global scale. St. Ignatius himself said: "go forth and set the world on fire." In a post-Vatican II era, a primary social question of interest concerned the environment—how to prevent its exploitation, call for ecological awareness, and support activism and advocacy—which the Jesuits have consistently sought to answer.

In 2015, Pope Francis published his second encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, subtitled "on care for our common home." The text has revolutionized the way in which the Catholic Church approaches ecology and the climate crisis. Yet, many advocates, Catholic or not, have expressed disappointment in the lack of directness and specifics within Pope Francis' language regarding the place of animals within the Church. Charles Camosy, writing for *Catholic Moral Theology*, laments the lack of explicit limits set on animal experimentation (much like John Paul II), as well as an entirely absent critique of factory farming and distinction between different created beings: "at times it appears that "creation" unnecessarily collapses into one big undifferentiated mass of stuff." The Catholic Concern for Animals' Gary Steiner sounds the alarm on anthropocentric motifs to be found within the text which echo the theory of Aristotle and Aquinas: "A number of times in the encyclical, the Pope appeals to a notion of 'universal communion', but when he does so he is at pains to stress 'the pre-eminence of the human person.'" Unfortunately, the Catholic animal advocate will indeed find shortcomings within the text (despite the praise it has received for its alleged ambition) and encounter traditional theological anthropocentrism that can be frustrating to digest. While *Laudato Si'* certainly opens grander pathways to dialogue on Catholic-animal relations, much work is left to be done to truly give a voice to the voiceless.

Now, one question remains on everyone's minds: what's next for the Church? On July 9th, 2025, Pope Leo celebrated a "Mass for the Care of Creation," the newest addition to the Roman Missal, whilst reiterating the urgency of *Laudato Si*'s message: it is essential to care and protect our "common home." Indeed, given Leo's warm personal relationship with his late predecessor and their close ideological alignment on other socio-political issues such as immigration, poverty, workers' rights, and climate change, it would have been rather surprising if this

particular matter were to be missing from his future homilies, encyclicals, etc… The speed at which attention was brought to this issue is promising to the world's Catholic animal advocates: one can only hope for the Vatican to maintain this enthusiasm, as well as eventually learn to refine its language in order to explicitly proclaim animals as worthy of protection and ensoulment.

We may conclude by saying that on the one hand, there are significant obstacles, both theological and personal, that the Catholic Church must overcome in order to acknowledge the intrinsic moral value of non-human beings. On the other hand, however, it seems as though this process has already been initiated, albeit at a slow pace. In other words, progress is being made, and this is wonderful news for both the Church and the world. Let us hope for dialogue between man and his environment to continue in this direction, for the good of all animals and the people that dedicate their life to fighting for them.

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To better understand how the Society of Jesus and the Catholic Church stand on issues of animal welfare and environmentalism, I interviewed Fr. Christopher Steck, S.J. in July 2025. Fr. Steck is a Jesuit priest, Healey Family Distinguished Professor in Ethical Issues, and an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University. He is the author of A*ll God's Animals: A Catholic Theological Framework for Animal Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 2019) and the upcoming *A Heaven for Animals: A Catholic Case and Why It Matters* (Georgetown University Press, 2025).

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

As a Jesuit priest, are there any elements or aspects of Ignatian spirituality, such as the idea of "finding God in all things," which inspire you to care for creation?

Some have suggested that the traditional interpretation of Jesuit spirituality is very anthropocentric. The "First Principle and Foundation" from St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises opens with: "God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls. God created all other things on the face of the earth to help fulfill this purpose." It then goes on to say that we should use the things of the world to the extent that they help us to praise, reverence, and serve God. Some give a merely instrumental interpretation of the First Principle and Foundation: everything is here for our benefit, and we should use it in order to serve and praise God. That's one possible interpretation.

That's one possible interpretation. However, another one is possible: that this whole prayer is very God-centered. It's not about my well-being, it's not about your well-being, it's not about creation's well-being per se; it's about our relationship with God. And once you allow that [the prayer] has a *theocentric* focus, that the prayer is not anthropocentric, the question arises: "What

does it mean to praise, reverence, and serve God? What are our responsibilities to the natural world, the created world, in light of our fundamental requirement to praise and reverence God?" That opens up to the theme you mentioned already, "finding God in all things." We believe the created world is reflective and expressive of God, and one could argue that there is a responsibility to make sure that our world continues to praise God and reflect His glory and beauty. Instead of just using things, using non-human creatures, which some interpretations might suggest, our responsibility is actually to help creation flourish because our praise of God is then expanded because now creation also praises God with us.

Is there any particular meaning or hermeneutic that is unique to the Society of Jesus when it comes to the term "dominion" in Genesis 1:26?

I would say, no, there is no interpretation distinctive to the Society [of Jesus]. I think the language of stewardship has become a common way of understanding dominion both within the Jesuit circles and without, but that is not any official approach. This term though has become important for understanding what kind of dominion we have—one that is not just that of an autocrat imposing his will on the natural world but one that entails the responsibility to care for creation.

While the two are closely tied, the environment and animals often get grouped together under the umbrella term "creation," which Charles Camosy describes as "unnecessarily [collapsing] into one big undifferentiated mass of stuff." Is this seen in *Laudato Si'* at all? Are there any distinctions that you or the Society of Jesus make between your care for the environment and your care for animals?

Let me first push back a little against what Camosy says. I was surprised to see it, but someone else said the same thing and now I understand what they're getting at. When Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* talks about our *ethical* responsibilities to non-humans, his focus is on creation in general, not the creatures within it. But at the same time, Francis repeatedly speaks about *individual* creatures. It's stunning how much he emphasizes God's care for the individual creature. However, it is true that he does not make a jump from God caring for the individual creature to our ethical responsibilities for that creature, so that's where I think Camosy is onto something. Still, the foundation is there in *Laudato Si'*, for such an ethics since individual creatures matter to God.

But regarding the outlook of Jesuits, individually or collectively, I would say the emphasis is on creation in general, not on individual creatures. Nonetheless, it's complicated in that we begin with general principles and then apply them to our particular context and the apostolic work we're engaged in (e.g., parishes, schools, and retreat houses). It's within these particular locations that individuals, Jesuits and their collaborators, will discern how the general principles might be best applied. People apply them in varied ways—sometimes leading to a concern for individual animals but sometimes not.

Catholic and secular critics alike have expressed their disappointment regarding *Laudato Si*'s apparent restraint and lack of precision regarding issues such as factory farming and animal experimentation. Are there ways in which you think the text could have been improved or adjusted?

Two things: first, the document does not go from God's care for specific individual creatures to the ethical implications of that care, and that's frustrating. As far as I know, Francis never addresses the issue in his other writings or homilies, and I don't think his idea that God cares for individual creatures ever translates into a concern for factory farming or animal experimentation or any other kind of problems there might be. I think this is just part of where he was, part of his generation's outlook perhaps, and so it wasn't on his radar.

Second, and on a more positive note: Francis comes very close to suggesting that animals of the present world will be somehow restored in the age to come. If there's any pope that has expressed support for the idea of animals being resurrected along with humans, Francis is the one, but his statements are pretty vague and different interpretations are possible. Some doubt that he actually embraces the idea of animals in heaven, and so I wish he had clarified that more and been more specific. But unlike the first problem I mentioned, which could be a matter of his consciousness not being there on the issues of animal suffering, I think in this case, it is more a matter of a theological hesitation in deciding something that the Church has not had time to discern. He's not going to say, all of sudden, that "all dogs go to heaven," since that would be a new Catholic teaching. I think he was just being appropriately cautious of stating too much about that issue.

How do Jesuit institutions today promote care for creation?

I can only speak about what's happening at Georgetown, and I think it reflects the tensions that I discussed earlier. So, what does Georgetown do? It tries to go green, it invests in green companies, we've moved away from fossil fuel industries as far as our investments go, our buildings try to use green technology… We're putting in a new utility system that will use green energy, we try to make our buses green… So, yes, we have a number of developments that are all really about caring for creation by lowering our carbon footprint, but those don't translate into care for individual animals—say, for example, what students eat, what is served in the dining hall. There are vegetarian options, but a care for individual creatures is not reflected by what is served on campus. It just doesn't seem to be part of the language yet—I think it will be, but such concern is not where people are. Our focus is mostly on our carbon footprint, rather than caring for individual creatures.

Data shows that Jesuit membership has been in sharp decline since the 1960's, which Pope Francis positively referred to as a "humiliation." Does this mean anything for

environmentalism or animal advocacy within the Catholic Church, when considering the decline in membership of other creation-friendly orders such as the Franciscans?

I think the leadership is there with Pope Leo and his recent introduction of the Mass for the Care of Creation. He certainly is not going to let go of environmental issues. In a sense, the environmental train has already left the station. It's not going to depend on whether there are more Jesuits or less Jesuits or more priests or more nuns or whatever. Right now, it's part of the Catholic worldview, and it just needs to percolate more, develop more. I don't see it going away anytime in the near future. It won't depend on whether the Jesuits are there or others, it's going to continue to develop, in part because it's a growing concern for Americans and other people in general. Even if you're not a religious—a brother, sister, or priest—you're still going to be concerned about it and be taking actions for it. This is an issue that is attractive to non-Catholics, to the degree that there are opportunities to build bridges and synergy. This is one place that has arisen, developed as a key area where our voices can join with others. That has been important for Francis. Pope Leo said something similar when addressing the college of cardinals, stating that "courageous and trusting dialogue with the contemporary world in its various components and realities" is one of his main priorities.

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