

Father Breighner's column goes to the dogs

By Father Joseph Breighner

Over the last several years, I have been assisting an older lady as she slowly develops dementia. With the assistance of her doctors and lawyer, I have assumed Power of Attorney and Medical Power of Attorney as she has slowly been less and less able to function cognitively.

Of all the important tasks these responsibilities involve, by far the most important, in my mind at least, is daily walking her dog. Or, at least, walking her dog as often as possible, since Retreats and Parish Missions do take me out of town and out of the state.

Sometimes faithful readers of my column over these past 40 years have accused me of writing more about cats than about dogs. This column, hopefully, will help to add balance to my columns.

Dogs are my first love. I grew up in Mars Estates Apartments with my faithful dog, King. King was a pretty mangy mutt to be perfectly honest, but he was the love of my young life. Brea, Miss Bree as I like to call her, is at the other end of breeding kennel. She is a West Highland Terrier, with papers to prove it! It's humbling walking a dog with a pedigree beyond my own. But, as I tell everyone I encounter, I don't walk the dog, the dog walks me. Other than not allowing her to pull me in front of cars or off of high cliffs, I just hold one end of the leash while she leads the way. She likes it that way.

In these moments I'm reminded of an earlier time in my ministerial life. I was assigned in 1970, my deacon year, to St. Joseph's Parish in Fullerton (actually Perry Hall). The pastor, (God rest his soul.) was Father Ray Gribbin. Father Ray was a Vatican II Priest and leader, adviser and consultant to the late Cardinal Shehan and Bishop Frank Murphy. Had Ray not died so young, I have no doubt that he would be a bishop today, perhaps in the running for pope, as a cardinal. But I digress.

Every morning, unbeknownst to me, Ray would spend some time with Shalom, his black dog - collie and poodle mix - training her to 'heel' and 'sit' and 'follow' commands. I, without knowing it, would undo all of his work in the afternoon, as I would jog with Shalom up the hill through the cemetery behind the church. I would let Shalom do whatever she wanted. Ray finally realized "that deacon" was undoing all of his hard work.

There is nothing like being greeted by a dog. Brea literally 'explodes with joy' as I enter the house. I get down on the floor, to her eye-level, and she licks and licks and

wags her tail, and barks for joy - and, of course, barks for treats. Brea has gained more than a few pounds as a result of my many visits. But, while I feel a bit guilty over-feeding her, I tell people that the church is opposed to girth control.

There are various opinions about dog licks. Some people, like Lucy in the Peanuts Cartoon, think dog licks spread germs. I prefer to think that dog licks are like flu shots - they prevent you from getting sick. To look at it slightly differently, even if they do pass on bacteria, that helps your body to build up immunity to such bacteria. Brea is my physician's assistant, or nurse practitioner. And I haven't had another stroke, or pulmonary embolism, since having her in my life.

A quick story in closing. One night while walking Brea, I met another lady walking her dog. She said: "Did you see that cartoon? It showed God in heaven talking to an angel. God is pointing toward the earth and saying: 'I would have destroyed the whole thing years ago, if it weren't for dogs.'" Now we know why God spelled backwards is dog! However, I would have liked the cartoon even more if God had mentioned by dogs AND cats.

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