

Pets can unleash the power of love

By Father Joseph Breighner

On the front of the card was the picture of a cat. The cat was saying, “You and I will get along just fine as long as you remember one line: “I’m not yours. You’re mine!”

I was reminded of a sign I had seen in a veterinarian’s office long ago which read: “Dogs have owners. Cats have staff!”

I know the pope loves cats. I know an archbishop who loves dogs. What’s this attraction all about?

On a personal level, dogs were my first love in life. “King” was king of my childhood, and will always hold first place in my heart. Cats are an acquired taste.

To me animals are direct sources of contact with God. When I have a cat on my lap no other meditation technique is required. I’m in the present moment. All thoughts are stilled. “Be still and know that I am God.” We have to be still to know God. Cats can lead us to the stillness.

Dogs are a bit noisier. Meditation is not their strong suit – at least, they don’t always induce meditative states in me. I no longer have a dog. A good friend allows me frequent access to her dog, and I understand always why dog is God spelled backwards. Dogs are pure unconditional love. If cats lead us to contemplation, dogs lead us to love in action.

There are multiple benefits to having pets. One research study that the Christophers pointed out in their 2011 “Three Minutes A Day” volume, had the following conclusion: “It’s in the brain. That’s the reason humans are drawn to cats and dogs – and the answer to why they return the attachment. Of all the brain chemicals, one turns out to be more important than others. Oxytocin is the main ingredient in the complex chemistry of attraction between men and women. This chemical in all mammals’ brains also factors into our connections with our pets.”

The study pointed out that petting a cat, for example, raises the level of oxytocin in both parties. "The person feels less stressed and the pet more trusting," the study said, "and that same brain chemical has been found to help lower heart rate and blood pressure, thus helping to ward off heart attack and stroke. Demonstrating care and concern for animals as well as for family and friends is also soothing to the soul."

So, the reason we love cats and dogs is that love is the answer. Love is the answer to every problem in life. Jesus defined God as love. Any time we love we are most like God. Any time we withhold love, we are that much less like God.

Yes, I know that not everyone is attracted to dogs or cats. Early life experiences, past experiences, all condition our reactions in life. However, we can still love even if we don't touch. We get benefit from it.

The reason why St. Francis of Assisi is so beloved is that he loved all creatures and all of creation. When we love all creatures, including all humans, and love all of creation, we benefit ourselves. Resentment, unforgiveness, fear, blame, shame, anger, judging and on and on, only create negative energy in us. We hurt ourselves when we don't love others. Jesus taught us to love our enemies, not just for their sake, but for our sake! Lack of love only hurts us. Loving transforms us. Even if the other person or animal doesn't return the love, we are better for giving it.

Dogs and cats instinctively know the power of love. One day you and I might discover it as well.

Copyright May 31, 2012 CatholicReview.org