

Chapter 11: CRITTERS

“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” (Psalm 150:6)

The last verse of the Book of Psalms gives this clear directive. All God’s creatures are to praise Him. Just think what a variety of sizes and colors and shapes that involves!

Over the last thirty years the Mothers have been exceedingly blessed to have encountered many of God’s critters. (Zoos are one of their favorite places to go.) Besides amazement at the variety and intricacy of His creation, they have had much to learn from the animals. In fact, the Mothers told so many stories about animal encounters that many people encouraged them to write a book. Here are a couple of episodes from the book-that-was-never-written:

Vladimir

Vladimir’s story, or rather our story with Vladimir, started in the back of a truck.

Whenever God brings a new critter to the monastery, we name it after the saint whose feast day we happen to be celebrating. On July 15th, the feast day of St. Vladimir of Russia, we were shopping at the Wal-Mart store in a nearby town. When we came out to leave, we noticed a cat jumping from the back of a truck parked in the lot, and we were concerned that the cat would get hit by a passing car. So, we captured the cat and waited until the driver of the truck came from the store. When we tried to return the cat, he informed us he didn’t own a cat. Evidently this cat had hitched a ride from somewhere, and none of us had any idea where that was.

So, the part-Russian Blue cat Vladimir came to live with us. From day one he was an absolute delight – energetic, talkative, and playful. One of the unique things he did was to push dry cat food into his water dish, twirl it around a bit, and then fish it out with his left paw (he was definitely left-pawed). He became an inside/outside cat, coming into the Bloomfield house for several hours at a time.

The chapel in our house was in the end of the house near Mother Pilar’s room. As soon as prayers began in the chapel, Vladimir would wander in and expect to be let into that bedroom so he could be in there while we were praying. He liked that end of the house, but he knew that the chapel was supposed to be off-limits to him.

Because the monastery was small, we did not have a resident priest and would usually travel away for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. On rare occasions a priest would visit who would conduct the Liturgy at the monastery in our chapel. On one such Sunday morning, a priest who was on retreat at the monastery vested and came into the chapel to begin the Liturgy while we and our other visitors stood around him. As the opening prayers began, he made a deep bowing reverence before the altar. Without missing a beat, and without a pause in the chanting of his prayer, the priest turned and extended his hand, palm up, to Mother Pilar. There on his palm was Vladimir’s stuffed mouse, which Vladimir had evidently hidden beneath the altar so he would know where to find it when he wanted it.

What could be learned about God from Vladimir? The animals God created glorify their Creator every day by being fully what He created them to be. They never desire or attempt to be anything

else. If you want to enjoy the diversity of what our Lord has made, surround yourself with His critters. And, oh yes, God DOES have a sense of humor!

Isabel

The monastery has always been out in the country. For the first eight years it was located on Ladoga rental property in Central Indiana before it was moved to its own land in Southern Indiana. On the first property we lived in a 150+ year-old farmhouse that was in various stages of repair.

We had city friends with children who owned the hamster Isabel. We had heard that the children had lost interest in little Izzie and that they were going to turn her loose, so we asked if she could come to live at the monastery. We had a cage just the right size for Izzie since we had had guinea pigs before, so we made her right at home with us.

One night after we were away for the evening, we came home to find Izzie had been resourceful and escaped out the door of her cage. We looked high and low for her for two days and could find no sign of her. Just when we had given up all hope of ever locating her, Mother Pilar remembered that there was a hole in the floor under the cloth on the altar table in the chapel. She went down to the basement and looked below the hole, and there was the body of Izzie where she had fallen from the floor above.

Mother Paula was working out in the yard when Mother Pilar came out with Izzie, cold and stiff laid out on the palm of her hand. We were trying to decide if a small box we had would be a fitting thing to bury her in, when Mother Pilar said, "Did you see that? I thought she moved!" We both stared down at the inert little body and there was no movement. The longer we stared, we thought the movement had been imagined. Just as we were going in to find the box we had in mind, Izzie did stir. Then she was still again. The weather was quite cool outside, so Mother Pilar rushed into the house to get Izzie near the oil heater. She sweetened some tea and found an eye dropper to force some of the tea into Izzie's mouth. Then we took turns holding her in our hands above the heater, rubbing her fur and talking to her.

It was like watching Lazarus come to life. If she hadn't been female, we would have renamed her on the spot! Slowly Izzie began to squirm, then move her legs, then finally open her eyes. We were absolutely dumbfounded. When she seemed to be back to her old self, we gave her more sweetened tea and put her back in her cage (with a more secure fastener). Then we called the vet we knew who worked on small animals.

The vet told us that Izzie had gone into hibernation. Hibernating would have been her natural way of dealing with extreme conditions, so that is what she had done. We had just had the rare privilege of being there to see her come out of it. However, Izzie's fall into the cold darkness had been so unexpected that she had not had time to prepare appropriately. He said that because she had been plunged into the hibernation unprepared, she would have not survived much longer in the basement because she did not have the nutritional reserves and gradually slowed body responses meant to keep her alive in hibernation.

As the days went by Izzie seemed to feel fine, but her toes and the tip of her tail began to turn black. We called the vet again, and he said the rapidity of her going in and out of hibernation had injured the circulation to her extremities, and that she would probably lose the affected areas. And that is what happened. Portions of her feet and tail wasted away and dropped off.

Izzie was such a trooper. She had a ledge in her cage where she had always like to climb, and she taught herself to haul her body up there, as crippled as she was. She would eat by holding her food between the stumps at the end of her front legs. Mother Paula had a real problem with this since she is herself crippled in her legs. “What was the point of God’s bringing her back if she was going to end up a cripple?”

Even though it was heartbreaking for us to watch her struggles, Izzie lived without any further health problems for many more months, and eventually died of old age. She did end up buried in that box.

Izabel was a potent reminder that God is sovereign. He has already told us in Psalm 115:3 “...*He does whatever He pleases.*” Who are we to complain about His methods? We let the awe of seeing her resurrection be clouded by what He required of Izzie afterward, putting our focus in the wrong place. We should have taken a hint from Izzie. She rejoiced in the life returned to her and lived it to the fullest as long as she had breath.

Other Critters

The menagerie started with a parakeet, cats, dogs, and a guinea pig. As animals were found, dumped on the property, rescued, adopted, or born, each was invited into the Holy Redeemer ark. Over the years inside critters have also included abandoned piglets (including Coleman who was brought through pneumonia in a mist tent in the Ladoga kitchen), baby rabbits, a neighbor’s calf with spina bifida, Isabel the hamster, turtles, and many bottle lambs.

Dogs included the chihuahua Ami, who Mother Pilar brought with her, and the terrier mutt Josey, who, found in Indianapolis before the move to Ladoga, lived with them all the way to Bloomfield. Josey was particularly sensitive to any visitor who needed comforting. For a time in Ladoga there was also the beagle Lawrence, who friends sent to live out his senior days at the monastery.



The most populace of pets have always been cats, both in the house (a maximum of two at a time) and outside. Over 30+ years cats have included Aaron, Bashful, Basil, Benedict, Clement, Damian, Dio, Dwarf, Elza, Felix, Francey, Job, Jonah, Jude, Melanie, Moses, Scarf, Sleepy, and Vladimir. You can guess which were the two kittens from Dwarf (who was named after St. John the Dwarf, a 4th Century monk). Two of her other kittens, Happy and Doc, found homes away from the monastery.

Wild creatures are a special wonder. Living on farms in two Indiana counties, the Mothers encountered snakes, turkeys, beavers, coyotes, birds, deer, foxes, a wolf (escaped from captivity) and – perhaps the most wondrous of all -- a family of bald eagles in Bloomfield.