

DO CATS GO TO HEAVEN?

By **Stephen Roney** - May 4, 2020



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(The Church in her official capacity does not speak much of animals, except in their relation to us humans. They don't have intrinsic 'rights', but only in relation to us – that we should treat them with respect and care. Many saints – Francis, Philip Neri, Padre Pio – demonstrated a great love for God's lesser creatures, in that wonderful hierarchical panoply of creation that signifies in some way – albeit limited – the Almighty's infinite glory. Hence, 'tis good to ponder at times what happens to these creatures when they die – might they, in some mysterious way, be with us in heaven, even if not quite in the same way? What does the 'new heaven and new earth' really mean, a question to which Pope Benedict alludes in Spe Salvi. It is easier to envisage hell and the lurid effects of sin, than heaven, and infinite culmination of a life of virtue. Hence Dante's Inferno is more read than his Paradiso, even if heaven is more real, and far more interesting, than hell. So, back to animals, and their place in the former: We may not all agree with all that is said in the following brief reflections by Stephen Roney, his words do provide food for thought and discussion on the light of Good Shepherd Sunday and its subsequent readings from John chapter ten, celebrating the one who laid down His life for His sheep...Editor)

My sister's husband had just come out of open-heart surgery, with coronavirus raging across the land. She had recently noticed lumps in both breasts, and was awaiting the results of a biopsy. Our father had died two months ago. And her question for me was desperate.

Do cats go to heaven?

Her two cats had just died. That was what, in all this, most troubled her.

St. Thomas Aquinas says no.

Although animals have souls, Aquinas held their souls cease to be at death. Some animals seem self-aware and clearly feel emotions; but they lack a moral sense. Therefore they cannot merit either salvation or damnation.

This idea of the animal soul comes from Aristotle.

I dare to think it is illogical. Physical things die. We have no evidence that spiritual things ever die, and that would include animal souls.

All things endure in memory. Memory is the spiritual form of a thing. Unlike their physical forms, memories persist; are in principle eternal.

There is a distinction here between the storehouse memory, and active memory. Forgotten things can later be remembered. As Proust observed, suddenly, something as simple as the taste of a madeleine can bring it flooding back.

You might say: but our memories die with us when we die. That is tautological: it is already assuming a soul can die. Memories are our evidence that it cannot.

Second objection: animals can obviously suffer. This truth most troubled my sister. Would a loving God permit this without some ultimate consolation? We believe all suffering is redemptive. This is true for humans; why would it not be true for animals?

If animals cannot merit heaven through their acts, neither can we. All have fallen short.

In the Bible, the Apocalypse speaks of nature being finally redeemed: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!'" Every creature on earth. It also mentions fruit trees. Why would there be plants, yet no animals?

Isaiah too sees animals in heaven: "Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them." "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

You might object that this is merely metaphor; perhaps. You might object that it describes the end of time, after the general judgement. Animals may rise with a new heaven and a new earth, but not before.

Yet in eternity, is there really still a chasm between present and future? Or are all times present? Even if animal souls sleep for a few millennia, as do our physical bodies, does this make much difference in relation to eternity?

There were also animals in Eden. God apparently made them to enjoy paradise. They lost this due to man's sin.

It follows that, if man is now redeemed, they are too.

Another common argument is that, if a man who has loved an animal goes to heaven, he would be happier if that animal were there. The happiness of the man would require that animal to be in heaven.

There is another intriguing bit of evidence: in "near-death experiences," people are usually greeted by departed relatives.

But some see departed pets.

Pope Francis has recently weighed in. In *Laudato Si*, he writes:

"Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all."

I told my sister good cats do go to heaven. They may not be aware of the eternal presence. But it will be at least for them a perfectly happy place, full of open fields, food, toys, and warm resting places.

Stephen Roney

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