



Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

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Interview with Father Frank Mann

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **FATHER FRANK MANN** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview was conducted by telephone on July 26, 2013*

JASMIN: Father Frank Mann is a Roman Catholic priest from Queens, New York. He has served as a parish priest and as the Catholic chaplain at Brooklyn College, and is currently a feature writer for *The Tablet*, a major Catholic newspaper in New York. He also works with DeSales Media, for which he creates and organizes educational forums on topics ranging from human rights issues to spiritually influential individuals. He is the recipient of a 2010 Catholic Press Award for his article on the significance of pet therapy in hospitals and nursing homes.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Father Frank!

FRANK: Thank you. And I'm very pleased to be here and thank you for inviting me.

JASMIN: We've been talking about getting you on for the longest time, and I'm just thrilled that you're finally here. Now, a few of our listeners may have seen a video on YouTube, in which you describe an awakening that you had about animals, when you were on, of all places, the Long Island Expressway. Can you just tell the rest of that story for our listeners?

FRANK: Well, it was very dramatic.

MARIANN: Yeah.

FRANK: To say the least. I was going to visit a friend of mine's father, who was in the hospital. And yeah, I was there, I was on the Long Island Expressway, and my eye caught a billboard, and the billboard, which is actually the work of the imagination of Mercy for Animals, the group. I had never seen it before. It was a picture of a dog, a little puppy, and a pig or piglet, and it said, "Why love one," meaning the puppy, "but eat the other?" meaning the pig. And it was very -- it was so dramatic for me. I actually got off the Expressway and went to the service road to a side street, a residential street. This was in the evening. And I thought and I turned the car, you know, the ignition off. And I just sat in my car for about a half an hour, maybe more, just completely overwhelmed emotionally by what I had seen. And I just sat there thinking, and my eyes closed, and sort of staring into space about this whole thing.

And the next day, when I had gone to the parish house or the church house, we had a cook who came in two or three times a week and the rest of the week we prepared our own food, and that's usually the setup that they have. And there was chicken that she made in the refrigerator, and I actually took it, put some on the plate, and started to chew it, and that was it. I couldn't, I had to spit it out and, overnight, my eating habit was changed from just this particular billboard. So it was very strong emotionally for me.

MARIANN: I can tell from the way you're telling it that it was really a visceral experience that you had. But can you describe -- you said you sat there and thought for a half an hour. Can you describe some of the thoughts that went through your head?

FRANK: Well, I was actually crying, to be very honest with you. I -- tears were just coming down my face because I -- it was a combination of just the power of the image, you know? And also, there was a feeling of disgust I had. I had a real feeling of disgust that, oh my God, for all these years, I'd been eating these creatures. And it was a very confusing time for me in that car, to say the least, because I was always a sort of a carnivore person. I mean, I liked my porterhouse steaks and my chicken cacciatore and all that kind of stuff. I mean, I never had an issue, I never really thought about it before, to be honest with you.

And so it was just -- I think the emotion of it was so intense that it really grabbed me very strongly, and changed me profoundly, within a nighttime, within less than a day. And I was kinda surprised by that. And friends of mine also said they were very surprised, they didn't expect that to happen to me. So I look at it as sort of a moment of grace from above, 'cause I'm sure there are lots of people who were looking at the same billboard, on the Long Island Expressway at the time, and nothing happened. But it certainly affected me. And then I did my own research on animals and -- as sentient creatures and how pigs are -- you know, their intelligence, and they're -- you know, they can be very affectionate, for use of a better word. And then so it opened up a whole door for me, in seeing these farm animals who are used for dietary purposes, for eating primarily, in a whole different light. And I think that's what caused such deep emotion for me, that I saw them in a whole different way that I didn't see before. They were no longer commodities.

JASMIN: Mm, yeah.

FRANK: They were no longer things to be eaten. They were individuals in their own right that deserved protection and respect and that kind of a thing, so...

JASMIN: How would you describe the place of animals in the Catholic life?

FRANK: Well, I think in the Catholic Church tradition, the Catholic tradition, there's a rich tradition of love for and respect for animals, primarily among the Saints of the Church, of the Catholic Church. For example, well first of all, we know Saint Francis of Assisi is known as the great saint for, not only the poor and the outcasts and the downtrodden, as far as his relationship to human beings, to people, but also his relationship to animals. He regularly preached to the birds.

MARIANN: Right.

FRANK: He had tremendous -- he rescued animals. Animals followed him, and for use of a better word, obeyed him. And it's been recorded in so many instances and places that they, these animals, were said to instinctively surround him. And they became so attached to Saint Francis that they would repeatedly hop in his lap. And there's a story I know of a rabbit who would not leave him, who would not leave his side, was always with him. I mean, some of these are probably storytelling or anecdotal perhaps. But I -- it's a fact because many images of Francis in Italy show him surrounded by birds and deer and all kinds of different animals. And Saint Gerard, who is a saint of our Church, had the ability to communicate with animals.

Saint Martin, also known as Saint Martin of Tours, there's a very interesting story, if I can share it with your listeners, which I love. The most famous story connected with Saint Martin had to do with a group of mice that infested the monastery, and actually they infested the collection of the robes that the priests would wear for the religious services. And Martin had resisted the plans of the other monks. There were monks who wanted to put poison out to kill the mice. So one day Martin called them out, and this is all recorded, and he said, in this one particular rendering, documented by an individual, he said to the mice, "Little brothers, why are you and your companions doing so much harm to the things that belong to the church or to the sick or to the priests?" And he said, "Look, I shall not kill you, but you're to assemble all your friends and lead them to the far end of the garden, and every day I'll bring you food if you leave the wardrobe alone," whereupon Saint Martin apparently led a kind of pied-piper like mouse parade toward a small little den for them. And both the mice and Martin kept their word, and the infestation was solved.

MARIANN: That's a great -- I'm gonna try that next time, next time we get mice, see what happens.

FRANK: Yeah, you've gotta get pictures of that.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think I might.

FRANK: But it's a cute little story.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's a lovely story.

FRANK: But there are so many others. Many of the saints and the mystics of the church, many of the monks. One of my favorite stories was a contemporary monk and Catholic priest by the name of Father Thomas Merton. And Thomas Merton was an incredible individual, a profoundly deep individual, and he became a hermit. And actually he grew up in Douglaston in Queens, New York.

And what happened with him, you know, he recorded this himself. He was in the hermitage, and he saw a deer that was limping and in terrible pain right outside the hermitage. And he felt such compassion for this animal that he says that he wept bitterly in compassion for the pain that this deer was experiencing. And the deer looked at him in such a way that it was almost like it was communicating, or she or he was communicating with the monk. And the deer walked away without any limp, and would come up to the hermitage to visit Merton every day. And so Merton felt that that compassion that he had for the

creature was healing in a very profound and deep and mystical way. It's a very beautiful story of connectivity with another being.

MARIANN: Absolutely, and a number of these stories are new to me, even though I was raised Catholic. And it kinds of brings up an interesting issue. I think a lot of people in the animal rights movement feel that religion has not done well by animals, that there are many, many people who are religious, no matter what the religion, but -- and their religion may give some kind of lip service to not being cruel to animals, but it doesn't really take hold. Why do you think it is that religion has not had more, and these kind of stories have not had more of an impact on people's actual behavior?

FRANK: Well that's a very good question. I don't know the exact answer, but I think... we have put such an emphasis on -- and I'm not saying this is a bad thing. We've certainly -- people have companion animals, you know, whether it be dogs or cats mostly, in their homes. And for the most part, I would think most people take good care of these particular creatures and they're companions to them in a very special way. But when it comes to other animals, specifically farm animals and factory farm animals, like chickens and pigs and your rabbits or whatever, or cows, you know, cows or calves, they're seen as commodities for consuming, for eating.

So from the earliest day that we grow up or come into the world, we think nothing of it. I mean, Mom makes chicken parmesan, she makes -- everybody eats the -- well, not everybody, but you know, most people put the turkey out for Thanksgiving. People -- veal cutlet -- I mean, I was in a restaurant the other day and I was like, oh my God, all these people around me I could hear ordering, you know, veal marsala and veal parmesan and veal this and veal that, and I was like cringing. But people don't -- I don't think they're -- I don't think people are aware of what these animals are subjected to, what they go through. I think we just take it for granted that part of our diet is, we eat meat. It's as simple as that. The Catholic Church is not -- *no* church is going to proclaim it's a sin to eat meat. Certainly I wouldn't get up before a congregation and tell them that, you know, on this Thanksgiving if you eat a turkey you're committing a grave sin. I would never do that. That would be absurd.

But I think it's part of our dietary custom, and the church doesn't think of speaking out. The Church does have like, say on the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, on October 4, most churches have, especially in the Catholic tradition and even in the Episcopal churches, they have the blessing of the animals. So people bring out their dogs and their cats. You're not gonna see people bring out a turkey or a pig or a cow or a calf. It just doesn't happen. Maybe in the country it might, but they're not seen as pets. They're seen as commodities for consumption. And I think that's part of the problem. I think that's where -- I know I have this problem. I try to share my thoughts about my choices not eating meat, but what am I to do if I go out to a restaurant with friends and I have something different and they all order chicken, fish, and pork and whatever it may be? It's hard. It's -- so I think that's part of the problem.

Although, Pope Benedict, you know, before Pope Francis there, he did state something very powerful. He did say, "Animals are God's creatures," and he addressed the whole issue of geese or ducks being fed, with regard to the foie gras. And he did address it, but it wasn't publicized. You didn't see it on the news. It was sort of quiet.

JASMIN: Yeah. No, I remember that. But speaking of bringing things to new light involving animals, a lot of people in the animal protection movement were very pleased when the new pope took the name Francis, since as you just mentioned, Saint Francis was of course known for his love of animals. Do you believe that Pope Francis might bring new light to these issues?

FRANK: I would hope so, but I don't know. I can't say for certain. That would be a great thing. He has given clues. When he was first elected, he did say, and he repeatedly said on a couple of occasions, about how we're called to -- everyone is called to protect and respect all of God's creatures and the environment. Now that's definitely a Franciscan mentality, even though of course he's a Jesuit priest, he's not Franciscan, but he did choose the name Francis after Saint Francis of Assisi.

So that has a lot of food for thought, when you're saying you have to be an agent of mercy. That's another quote of the pope. To be an agent of mercy for God's creatures, I think does open a window or door to what it means to be a unique guardian for animals, who Saint Francis, by the way, called "our brothers and our sisters." And I -- that's very powerful because if they're beings of -- if they're beings and not just commodities, that takes on a whole different dimension. They're not things. They're creatures who are deserving of our love, our compassion, our guardianship. So when you talk about being a guardian versus being an owner, there's a whole different dimension there. So, I think that Pope Francis -- I don't want to get off track here -- but I think that Pope Francis may move in that direction. I don't know. I would hope he would. That would be fantastic.

MARIANN: Yeah, that would certainly be a huge game changer.

FRANK: Oh, definitely. I think it's -- but the Catholic Church, when I was a kid, we -- the church had a regulation where you could not eat meat on Fridays, every Friday, throughout the whole year. And -- but I'd like to see that return. But maybe for a different, you know, with a different perspective, to protest, as an act of protest toward the, toward what's been happening towards these factory farm animals, the abuse and the horrors and the suffering that they go through, and also as a way of being compassionate, eating compassionately, and identifying with them as beings, not things to be eaten, but *beings*, creatures to be nurtured and to be cared for. So whether the Holy Father does that, who knows? It's anybody's guess.

MARIANN: I love that idea. I think you need to start that project, except not fish on Fridays. No more fish on Fridays.

FRANK: That's right, we were able to eat the fish but we couldn't eat the meat. But see, it had a different--

MARIANN: All I remember ever eating is fish. It's not like we ever ate, I ever ate peas or lettuce. I ate fish.

FRANK: Yeah, right, exactly.

MARIANN: Because it was Friday. One of the things you mentioned in that video as well was your relationship with your cats. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you think it's informed your relationship with animals as a whole?

FRANK: Well, when I used to be -- I was assigned -- I was a chaplain, a Catholic chaplain, at Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York. And one day, this little kitten just came into my life. And I actually really didn't want the kitten. Actually when it was in my care -- once again, let me correct myself here. I don't like to -- it's a bad habit, I don't like to use the word "it" because we talk about animals as "it." It's either "he" or "she." I don't like the word "it" because it connotes a thing, and that's not good. But when this particular creature, kitten, came into my life, I tried to call a number of people for possible adoption and nobody was really interested, so he became part of my life. And subsequently, four more came along, and I have -- I guess like anybody else who has companion animals, we see that there's something unique about them, that they have emotion, they have intelligence.

They also have a spirit, you know, they have a spirit. I really believe that animals have spirits, that there's part -- just as humans, I believe that we're part -- not part, but, you know, we have a spiritual body, we have a human body, so too all of these creatures are expressions of God's life and created by Him, you know, not as, not like a rock or a thing, but as a being, creature. And a relationship develops, you know? I mean, when my mom died back in 1994 and stuff, the cat jumped right up on the bed and was there with me and knew. You know, he knew. He knew what I was going through. So there's a great source of comfort and unique spiritual connectedness with these creatures.

And I think what happened is through the cats that I have adopted, I guess the best way to say it is that my heart opened. I became more compassionate a person, not only to other animals, but to humans as well, who are hurting especially. And so they did open the door for me, in a very powerful way.

JASMIN: What advice would you have to offer to people who might be struggling with this issue and aren't finding others in their church community who share the same point of view about animals?

FRANK: Well, there's plenty of places on the internet where you can connect with people. And not only there, but there are organizations and groups. My first response would be that individuals should try to volunteer in a no-kill shelter or at an animal sanctuary, if one is near one. Or you can start an animal sanctuary, if one can afford to do that or garnish enough, get enough people together.

There are so many ways that we can -- in your own neighborhoods, in our own neighborhoods, there are so many feral cats, for example. And there are lots of people -- you have no -- it's *amazing* how many people I've met, I mean, not just from YouTube, from my little interview there on YouTube, but just from my interest in rescuing and neutering and spaying and then releasing, or perhaps rescuing these animals for adoption, I met so many new people that I never knew before, never met before. And I've developed wonderful friendships. I think there is lots of connectedness that can be made, and you should never have, nobody should ever have to feel alone because there are plenty of people out there who are very supportive of animal issues, and involved in rescue and involved in adoption. So I would say a start would be to explore on the internet and find different places and reach out to people, like-minded people.

MARIANN: Yeah, I totally agree with you that there are a lot of ways that if you really start thinking about it to connect with people. But I do think that people do, especially people of faith, have trouble -- really feel bad because they don't seem to find these connections within their church. And I think, you know, it's something you said before, and I'm not meaning to put you on the spot, but something that you said before stuck in my mind, and you said, "To preach that it would be a sin to eat a turkey on Thanksgiving would be absurd." And I agree that almost everybody in that church would think that was absurd, but to tell you the truth, I kind of think it is sinful to eat a turkey on Thanksgiving, given what those turkeys go through.

FRANK: Well, that's you and I, and a lot of other people, because we've reached -- we've been, we've gone through a certain transformation or an enlightenment of sorts. Not everybody's at that level. I mean, for me personally, as a priest, I can only speak as a priest, I preach about this all the time. I don't make people try to feel guilty or anything, but what I do is I teach about, especially with young people, how to respect and protect these creatures. But I do.

It's amazing, one night, one time, I talked, I preached about, I gave a talk to a group of people about animal abuse, specifically factory farm animals. And then I organized this gathering to show *Peaceable Kingdom: A Journey Home*, which is a powerful film, a very powerful film. And a couple of hundred people came to the event. And many of these people, they were not aware of all of this abuse, and all of the horrors. A lot of stuff, a lot of this, a lot of what happens in, with regard to animal abuse, is kept hidden from the eyes of people. I just think people don't realize what goes on.

And also too, a lot of people don't have contact with some animals on a deeper level. I was amazed at this pig that I met, the pig jumped right into my lap and started licking me all over the face, and I was like laughing hysterically. I couldn't believe this. And it was just, it was so, it was like having a little puppy there. When I went to this particular farm, I was completely amazed. Most people just see, the pig is, that's your bacon for breakfast. That's your pork. So I think there's a lot of, a lot of things that people aren't aware of for whatever reason. Maybe the meat industry keeps these things hidden from people's eyes or something.

MARIANN: Well that's for sure, and I'm so glad to hear that you do preach about this issue and try to do it in a way that doesn't make people feel guilty, 'cause that's a hard line to toe, and I'm glad you're trying to do it.

JASMIN: And as for me, I'm Jewish, so we kind of thrive on the whole guilt thing, it's like part of the religion.

MARIANN: Oh, believe me, the Catholics got plenty of that. Don't worry about that.

FRANK: That's understood.

MARIANN: But given how hard it is to get this message across, tell me where you find hope. And I'm sure you do because, come on, you're a priest, so you've gotta give us some reason to find hope. Where do you find hope?

FRANK: Well, I'll tell you one thing. I met Mother Teresa once. And she said two things to me. Actually, she actually wrote one down on a photograph of herself which I have. I asked her to sign this photograph. And she wrote something besides signing her name, and on it she wrote, "Be a cause of joy to all you meet by your love in your actions." And I find hope in that, that to me hope is found in action, so compassion, compassionate action. And she also said something else, equally as powerful. She said, "I can't--" she said to me, "Father, I can't love." I did a little interview with her, and she says, "I can't love every --" No, she said, "I cannot save the world. I can't save everyone, but I can make a world of difference for that one person that I'm attentive to."

And I believe the same thing has to do with whether it's human or animal, that I think that, if I can rescue one feline or -- for example, we had by the church a feline who had a broken femur, turns out it was a broken femur. And I would not have known that cat existed if another cat, who almost got killed by a car, didn't lead me to the other group of felines. And we rescued all of them. I rescued, with the help of other people, we rescued all of them, they were all adopted. And one woman came forward, and she paid for the veterinary cost to "fix," quote unquote, for the surgery for that broken femur. And she adopted that cat, and that cat is doing an amazing, is just amazing, and has completely healed. And she made a difference to that one particular cat, and to me that's hope, that it doesn't -- I don't think in terms of numbers anymore. I can't save the world, you can't save the world, nobody can. But if I can make a difference in changing the mentality of one person, to, for example, not consume meat or animal products, that's fantastic. And then we don't know what effect that person has on another person. Or if I just am able to be compassionate and save the life of that one animal, whether it be domestic or factory farmed, whatever it may be, it's one step at a time. To me, that's hope. To me, that's really, that's hope.

JASMIN: Wow, that story really resonates so much. And you honestly, you give us hope, and I'm so grateful to you for all that you're doing. And you've got such an incredible way of communicating, and I can't imagine not being moved by your words, so I'm just, it's thrilling for me that you're out there fighting the good fight and speaking up for those who are less lucky. So thank you so much, Father Frank, for joining us today on Our Hen House and for being an ambassador for animals, all animals human and non, and we hope that you'll stay in touch with us and keep us posted.

FRANK: Oh, definitely, I'm very grateful and I love your website. It's very informative and I've let some friends know about it. I just would like to add two things, if I may.

JASMIN: Oh, absolutely.

FRANK: Before I go, and I'll be very quick.

JASMIN: Of course.

FRANK: I think we -- first of all, I mentioned this before, and this is the key. The key is we have to get away from the language of ownership and talking about these creatures as things. I own my car. I can own a house. I can own this or own that. I don't own these creatures. I'm called to be the guardian to these creatures, to nurture them, and to protect them, and to respect them. So that to me is so

important, that we have to educate people, especially younger people too, on the whole issue of guardianship rather than ownership. That's so important.

The other thing, too, is one of my dreams before I exit this world, and I know this is a tall order, but I pray -- I hope that some of your listeners might help in this regard -- in the New York City area, I would like to see a unique sanctuary, specifically for felines but not exclusively so, which would have a no-kill adoption center and can be a lifelong sanctuary for certain cats that may not be adoptable or people don't want or whatever in terms of guardianship. But most importantly, this sanctuary, in the New York area specifically, would have, would place heavy emphasis on education for young people, because I think we need to do tremendous outreach toward young, for young people, to teach them what it means to, in the words of Pope Francis, "protect and respect these creatures." And maybe we can teach young people, too, what it means to be compassionate in eating, and to not consume animal flesh, and teach them about abuse, animal abuse, and what it means and the horror that... And I think through that, they will learn to respect more so their fellow human beings, their, other boys and girls or whatever it may be. So that's my dream, that's my, before I exit the world that's all I want. I'd love to see something like that happen in New York. But who knows? That's my prayer.

JASMIN: You're speaking -- I mean, what you're saying is so important. You're talking about the power of language, and that is something that we can nip in the bud now. We just have to change our habits and our behaviors, and it's all a process, and you're right. There is a lot of power in language.

FRANK: Yup.

JASMIN: And language has changed as society has changed, and it's kind of like, which came first?

FRANK: That's true, yeah.

JASMIN: So you're right, and also the importance of humane education and reaching young people and fostering compassion. And I think that you're saying that's your prayer, but you're doing all of that already. Maybe you don't have, we don't have the cat sanctuary yet that you have in your head, but I have no doubt that that will be able to manifest with all of the other work that's going on, and everything else you're doing. And I look forward to that and to, you were saying, "you can't save the world." Well, you can change the world, and you're certainly doing that.

FRANK: Thank you.

JASMIN: So thank you so much for shining light on Our Hen House today.

FRANK: Thank you.

JASMIN: And for being such a role model to so many of us. We look forward to staying in touch with you, Father Frank.

FRANK: I appreciate it. Thanks a lot. Bye-bye.

JASMIN: Bye. I *loved* that interview! I know that for so long, you have been saying, “When is Father Frank coming on our podcast? When is Father Frank coming on our podcast?” Are you happy?

MARIANN: It’s absolutely true, having grown up Catholic, and actually, as I mentioned before in the podcast, though I’m not particularly religious myself, I find religions so interesting and so important. And I know it’s really important in many people’s lives. And it’s just so refreshing to see somebody who comes from a religious perspective who is not giving himself or herself a pass on the animal issue, who is confronting and thinking about it seriously. And how much more serious can you get than Father Frank’s experience?

JASMIN: Yeah, I’m so excited about it.