

Learning the Gospel from the Animals

- brother Daniel

I GREW UP IN A BIG CITY WHERE TRAFFIC JAMS ARE COMMON, pollution is a serious issue, and asphalt covers the ground for miles. Can you imagine my chances for a life in the midst of nature deeply involved in the care of animals?

The grace of working with the sheep, the llama, and the bees in the context of our community life has been truly a blessing and an invitation to observe, to be attentive and to reflect on the meaning of life. I have grown to love my four and six legged friends. At times I simply laugh when I clean after the animals, and even carry their aroma with me. I ask also how I would have viewed such work before coming to the monastery.

I often tell the brothers that work feels like play, even in those occasions when the animals escape through the fence, and we have to corral and chase them back to the pasture. There is genuine delight in their simply being, the spontaneity in their playfulness, and earthiness of their ways. They know how to live life as gift! These are real openings to learn not to take ourselves so seriously. Do we care to learn? Life is every now and then full of grit, there is bucking at times; at other times a bee stings; but above all there is beauty, mystery and a humble joy!

Usually when guests offer to work I invite them to help with the animal chores. There are college students, executives from Boston, Hartford or New York, as well as teachers, policemen, housewives and religious sisters.



Our llama, Noël, guarding our sheep and lambs.

It is amazing to see how these persons seem to change and become more friendly and relaxed in the company of these peaceful creatures. One man who helped me cut the llama's nails seemed very intimidated by the size of "the beast". After we were done, he kept telling the llama "Thank you" and "I love you" as he wept with delight. People ask for their picture to be taken with the sheep, as they remark "I wonder what my grandchildren will say about this!" Another guest, a business executive, simply commented how soothing these chores were for him. Some former guests have even become beekeepers themselves!

What kind of magic is happening here? As I reflect on it, these simple creatures never nurse resentments and are always ready to frolic. They are not preoccupied with their self-image. They do not strive to achieve, compete, or win, which can be painful struggles for us. They don't hide their weaknesses, they trust! Spiritual change happens with a vulnerable heart that is willing to risk and to forgive. Our own nature is pregnant with this capacity for the new! Do you see how animals can be great spiritual teachers?

A heart that can cry at the death of bees to winter-kill and can rejoice in a dancing llama, a newborn lamb, or fresh honey on a comb full of bees has the potential to be truly brother and sister to all creation. I am grateful for the opportunity to explore with these innocent creatures how spiritual change is always accessible in our shared flesh! ■