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Contemporary earth saints

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St. Francis of Assisi's spirit is vibrantly alive within the hearts of compassionate people who advocate for the welfare of animals everywhere on our planet. Allow me to introduce you to four of these contemporary earth saints.

One of them, Sr. Mary Ethel Tinnemann, a Sister of the Holy Names, died three years ago at age 97. The other individuals -- Sr. Mary Liam Brock, Sr. Ann Ronin, and Tony Maurovich -- continue to make the lives of homeless cats free from misery and hunger in the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Areas.

Sr. Mary Ethel Tinnemann

1992: 6:30 a.m. inside Dorocher Hall dormitory: We always knew when it was Monday and Thursday mornings by the inevitable clinking and cascading of bottles and cans. Sister Mary Ethel Tinnemann had arrived. Twice a week, Sr. Tinnemann would patrol our second floor graduate dorm wing, armed with large green garbage bags. Mondays yielded her the most treasures -- evidence from our rounds of impromptu weekend parties.

We were only too glad to help, since her recycling went to an especially good cause -- Sr. Tinnemann, a long-time history teacher at the then-Holy Names College, (It's now Holy Names University) would redeem her findings into cash so she could buy kitty food. An animal lover, she was feeding the ferals who lived in the Oakland Hills behind Holy Names' campus. At any given time there would be about 20 cats and kittens, sheltering within the towering eucalyptus groves that were also home to deer, raccoons, skunks and songbirds. The kitties were refugees from the 1989 fire which had roared through a portion of the Oakland Hills from Berkeley eastward before being contained by firefighters.

Sr. Tinnemann's vow of poverty didn't leave her many options for expendable cash. Cat food was not in the convent budget. So recycling proved to be a fine solution, since she needed all the money she could get. Sometimes drop-in visitors would join the regular feral population for breakfast and dinner.

Her great love for cats were only a part of the story, according to Irene Woodward, retired philosophy professor at Holy Names. "Sr. Mary Ethel was absolutely devoted to saving our earth. She gardened and had a space in the convent patio that was hers to cultivate. And cultivate she did, especially loving roses in her gruff old way."

Sr. Tinnemann's recycling was not limited to the college dorm. She was everywhere on campus, teaching the importance of recycling to students along with her history lessons. Said Woodward, "Not only did she get the students to recycle, but when she didn't think they were thorough enough, she would go through the classrooms, checking in the waste baskets for aluminum cans." While scouting each classroom, the nun would also turn off classroom lights and close windows to save the warm air.

She continued to care for her ferals until a few years ago, when the convent was turned into office space and student dorms. Before leaving the campus, Sr. Tinnemann managed to trap the cats and relocate them to other feral colonies. She found homes for the kittens she was able to tame.

Sisters Mary Liam Brock and Ann Ronin

We'll never know for certain, but perhaps some of the homing instincts of Sr. Tinnemann's furry friends led them down 35th Avenue in Oakland's Flatlands to St. Elizabeth Convent. They would find two human friends there -- Sisters Mary Liam Brock and Ann Ronin, members of the Mission San Jose Dominican community.

They've been taking in ferals for the past 15 years, ever since Sr. Brock, 72, returned to Oakland from another assignment to become the principal of St. Elizabeth High School. Sr. Brock, who grew up in a house across the street from the school, only had hamsters and bunnies as pets as a kid. But her endlessly expansive compassionate heart was large enough to take in the first feral cat who showed up at the convent one day.

She welcomed him and the rest is history. Since then, she and Sr. Ronin, 80, have taken turns feeding their charges when the other is busy with her respective duties -- Sr. Brock, running a small, busy high school in the predominantly Hispanic Fruitvale neighborhood--and Sr. Ronin, 80, coordinating a parish adult ELS program at St. Elizabeth, and serving as a docent for Christ the Light Cathedral in downtown Oakland.

Sr. Ronin never had cats or dogs growing up, but "they've always liked me," she said. When she worked as a cook at a Berkeley convent before coming to St. Elizabeth's "there was this dog who lived next door to us. He belonged to a Jewish family. His name was Bagels. He would stand in the backyard and look through the kitchen window. When I'd get off work, he'd come inside and sleep on my bed."

Both sisters have gradually turned the convent backyard into a feral cat colony. Off to the side of the laundry room outside, eight large covered kitty litter pans, filled with old towels, serve as shelters and sleeping areas for their guests. The sisters regularly launder the bedding, especially during Oakland's winter rainy weather, so the cats stay dry and warm. Both sisters have managed to tame some of the kittens who frequently show up -- the most docile being a sister and a brother -- Princess and Prince -- "the royal court," says Sr. Ronin.

Although the cats are not allowed inside the convent, there is no absence of other critters. Several sisters have hamsters as pets. "They're OK," opines Sr. Ronin, "but since they only live for two years, you have to spend all your time saying goodbye to them."

Sr. Brock has two lovebirds and a parakeet. During the day, their cheerful singing fills the convent's second floor.

The sisters are fortunate enough not to have to do the recycling routine to pay for cat food. One of Sr. Brock's brothers supplies it. Thanks to her connections with a nearby animal shelter, where she once volunteered on weekends, she has access to live humane traps to take newcomers to the vet for spaying and neutering.

"There is both a human and cat overpopulation problem," observes Sister Ann Ronin. (One national humane association puts the number of feral cats in the United States at over 50 million.)"We can do something about our own numbers but the cats depend upon us to help them with theirs," she said.

The cat overpopulation problem is due to pet owners who allow their animals to run wild and don't have them fixed, said Sr. Brock. So one of the most compassionate deeds owners can do is to see that their animals are spayed or neutered and then kept inside.

She supports "trap and release" programs which involves sterilizing cats and then returning them to their colonies. "But once done, you can't just then forget about them," she reminds us. "There is a definite need to have humans feed them."

St. Elizabeth's kitty colony has become the inspiration which is leading to a retirement career for Sr. Brock. She is now taking an on-line certification course from The Animal Behavior Institute in Durham, North Carolina. Perhaps she will use her training to do animal-assisted therapy at her community's retirement center in nearby Fremont, California, or else in teaching programs with children, she says.

Meanwhile, both sisters celebrated the recent feast of St. Francis the way they always do. They attended the Franciscan's Transition ceremony across the street at St. Elizabeth church to mark his death. Sr. Brock especially loves the part of the legend, where Francis asks his friends to lie him down outside, naked on the ground, so he can send his spirit back to the earth from which it came.

For those naysayers who don't believe that caring for animals or the Earth matters, Sr. Brock offers this message: "I firmly believe that we are in kinship with all of creation. We must care for everything in it -- creatures, the mountains, and the ocean and the rivers as well as ourselves Our future depends upon it."

Sr. Ronin adds, "The Lord presented Adam with all the animals to bless. So they are our children."

Tony Maurovich

Tony Maurovich has taken some of these four-legged children home with him --- the feral cats who live in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Sometimes they stay and live out the rest of their lives in Maurovich's home on the Avenues. Little Zippo, the kitty with the runny nose, did. He turned out to be diabetic and died six months later, but those six months for the little guy were free of hunger, cold and pain. For that, Maurovich rejoices.

Others felines pause at the door of Maurovich's cat carrying case, case, take one look around, then scurry back across busy Anza and Balboa streets to their familiar surroundings in Speedway Meadow.

Maurovich, who is in his 80s and is a long-time assistant editor for the Oakland Catholic Voice across the Bay, alternates feeding the cats with two other self-proclaimed Golden Gate cat lovers. They take over the days he is working.

"I started feeding the cats one day about 20 years ago when I was walking my dog in the park. I noticed a little black cat digging for food in a garbage can, and thought to myself, "Aw criminey, what a shame." He went back home for some food wrapped in tin foil. Days later Maurovich had graduated to feeding the cats from old TV dinner dishes.

Some are quite tame, he says, perhaps because they once lived in someone's house before ending up in the park.

He's become attached to some of these animals, -- like the two orange and black colored litter mates, Jimmy and Timmy. One day about five years ago a coyote showed up. "He started following us. I threw a pine cone at him."

It did not discourage the wily one. "I went back the next day and Jimmy was gone." Timmy disappeared soon afterwards.

But there are always more cats who show up needing food, and if tame enough, going home with Tony Maurovich. Whether they stay or not, though, he keeps supplying the food for whoever needs it.

"They are God's creatures. They are our silent community who give us unconditional love."

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