

## THE BLESSING OF ANIMALS Background and Development

by Guido Lanfranco

**Preliminary Note** In *Heritage* No.67, Pages 1325 to 1327, published in 1993, there appeared an article entitled "The Blessing of Animals", over my name. It is true that I had written an article entitled "The Blessing of Animals...Background and Development" and sent it, with eight photographs, to the editor of *Heritage* in 1981, but apart from the twelve year delay in publishing it, thus making it outdated in certain parts, whoever edited it arbitrarily changed, modified, deleted important parts and added incorrect statements to it, making some parts unrecognisable as they do not agree with my original, and I never saw any proofs. Only two of my eight photographs were used, and another by someone else was uncalled for, as it was similar to mine. Not only was it drastically tampered with, but outright mistakes were inserted, as for example the assertion that animals are blessed at Wied il-Għasel in Mosta (caption p.1325 and statement p.1327), when I never stated such a thing, as everyone knows that at Mosta the blessing of animals takes place in front of St. Anthony's chapel at St. Anton Street. Since the article was printed over my name, I do not want to accept it as mine, with all the alterations and ridiculous mistakes it has suffered linked to my name, and at the same time does not show my style and intentions. In *The Sunday Times* of 9th May 1993, I wrote an item of correspondence on the same lines as above, besides writing immediately to the editor of *Heritage* to publish corrections, which, to date have not appeared. I wrote also a letter to the editor of *Il-Mosta* similar to that of *The Times*, in May 1993, but it was not published on the August issue. Writing again to *Il-Mosta* editor it was eventually published in the December number, but here again, the editor published only part of it, even if it was short. In the meantime, I sent an article "*L-Iżvilupp tat-Tberik ta' l-Annimali fil-Għejjer Malti*" to the editor of *Il-Pronostku Malti*, and he kindly published it in 1994. I am herewith reproducing the original article as I sent it to *Heritage* in February 1981, and also the eight photographs.

### Blessing of Animals...Background and Development

In modern times, the blessing of animals in Malta has actually increased, but the present aims of this ceremony are not necessarily those of the past. The tradition is quite old, but although its origin is unknown, it was alive in the 16th century, in the time of the Knights of St. John. At that time, however, animals were blessed only on the occasion of the feast of Saint Anthony the Abbot (also known as St. Anthony the Great or The Hermit), on January 17th, and the animals blessed were horses, mules and donkeys, but later they involved also all domestic animals, until lately, pets of all descriptions are eligible, including tortoises, mice, rabbits, hamsters, birds, guineapigs and golfish. The devotion to this saint was widespread in Europe, and in Malta there were many chapels dedicated to him, scattered in towns and countryside, as the apostolic visitor Duzina noted in 1575.

A short reference to the devotion to this saint may justify



the ceremony of the blessing of animals on his feastday, or, as is done since very recently, on the Sunday closest to it. It must be pointed out at this stage, however, that blessing of animals now, is not all done as a devotion to Saint Anthony the Abbot, but also involves another saint and other occasions, as will be shown later.

St. Anthony the Abbot was born c.251 A.D. in middle Egypt, disposed of his inheritance early in life to live as a hermit, forming the first hermit community in 305 A.D., moving to the Gulf of Aqaba later. He died in c.356 A.D., aged 105. His remains found their way to Alexandria and Constantinople, and finally near Vienna in France, in 980 A.D. His relics were an object of devotion and he was invoked especially during hopeless plagues of domestic animals and diseases in humans.

In the middle ages, his intercession was much sought during pestilence of ergotism, which ravaged Europe. then called "St. Anthony's Fire", "Sacred Fire" or "Infernal Fire", *Ignis sacer*, and some Maltese still use the expression "*Fuoco di Sant'Antonio*", but in modern times, the expression does not necessarily refer to the original disease. Ergotism was caused because of the disease of rye, ergot, caused by the fungus *Claviceps purpurea* which also attacks other grain crops. The fungus forms a larger, furrowed grain instead of the original, and if one per cent is included in food, it causes "St. Anthony's Fire", symptomised by hallucinations, burning feeling inside the body, and also madness, constriction of vessels and eventually caused gangrene of limbs; in the middle ages, the condition was often assumed to be possession by the devil. In 1597, the fungus was isolated, and recognised as the cause, and eventually became useful in medicine in constriction of uterine vessels to prevent bleeding after birth. Many other skin conditions were confused with ergotism, including *erisypelas*.

The Saint is also considered to be the protector of butchers, brush makers and grave diggers in some countries, and basket makers by some locals. In holy pictures, the Saint is shown holding or flanked by, fire, probably symbol of love, and not of "his fire", holding the tau cross on his shoulder, representing mortification, carries a bell denoting watchfulness, and accompanied by a hog to represent the passions he suffered. Because of this hog in sacred iconography, in many parts of Europe the Saint is considered to be a protector of hogs, and in Malta he is also called *Sant'Anton tal-Hanzira*.

The blessing of animals used to take place, first at Rabat, Malta, in front of the Augustinian church of St. Mark, where there is also the old confraternity of St. Anthony the Abbot whose confreres organise the only procession with the statue of the Saint. The habit of this confraternity is white with a black shoulder piece, on which is shown the tau cross in white; their standard shows a painting of the Saint in isolated meditation. Formerly, the blessing of animals used to take place in the morning at Rabat, and the animals passed three times to be blessed in front of the church. Nowadays it takes place in the

morning, and blessing takes place once, to the accompaniment of the band of L'Isle Adam. As the prior or his representative blesses the decorated horses, they are given a handful of grain from a basin or tray, as a little donation is given in return by the owner of the animal. The house pets are blessed singly or in groups, but undergo no other formality.

At Xaghra in Gozo, the ceremony takes place in the afternoon with the bishop of Gozo, and is followed by the *Te Deum*. In the olden days it was customary for legacies to be left for the celebration of certain feasts at various chapels and churches, when it was also stipulated that grain or fruit, food or money, be distributed to the poor. Other legacies defined other conditions, but the commonest was the donation of grain. In Gozo, grain and wine were given to those attending the celebration of the feast of the Saint, but later it developed into grain given to animals. If not grain, *biskuttelli*, or some other form of food, is given. At Rabat in Malta, a legacy dating since 1565, took the form of a dowry given to a girl, who had to marry on the feast of St. Anthony the Abbot.

When the Knights settled in Valletta, the Grand Master used to send his horses to be blessed in front of the church of Our Lady of Victories, donating decorated candles to the Saint. The ceremony continued to take place in front of this church, in the afternoon, up to the 1960's, when it was discontinued. This was one of the traditions which had to be continued in this church, when it took on the parochial status once enjoyed by that of St. Anthony the Abbot at Vittoriosa, and since the contents of the old parish, including pictures, relics and traditions were adopted by the church of Our Lady of Victories, the latter continued, for a long time, to be known also as the church of St. Anthony the Abbot.

In 1962, the blessing of animals started to take place at Mosta, and on a different Sunday from that of Rabat, since it takes place in the morning. The archpriest blesses the animals of all types, from race horses, farm horses to pets in front of the small church dedicated to the Saint, after mass and a short sermon. Each animal blessed receives a holy picture of the Saint; the horses, mules and donkeys get a bigger picture and a bag of grain. In 1975, a special prayer was read, on the occasion of the "foot and mouth" disease which destroyed many of the local animals. During the ceremony, a small statue of St. Anthony the Abbot is exposed outside the chapel, as scouts play their band.

Blessing of animals spread to other places in 1981, when on January 11th it took place at Santa Venera at the Regional Road. The innovation on this occasion was that the horses, donkeys and mules were presented with a yellow-blue rosette (*kukkarda*) with the picture of the Saint in the centre; they were also presented with a bag of grain. The blessing was done by the parish priest, but the initiative was that of the Nationalist Party Club.

At Saint Paul's Bay, the animals passed in procession

through three or four streets and were blessed in front of the parish church on January 18th.

Before leaving St. Anthony the Abbot, it must be pointed out, that collection boxes bearing the title *Hobż ta' Sant'Antonin*, at the entrance of churches, especially those of the Franciscan Order, have nothing to do with Sant' Anton Abbati, but are meant to collect funds to provide alms for the poor, and the Saint in question is Saint Anthony of Padua.

St. Francis of Assisi is well known as a lover of animals, and this urged the Franciscan fathers of the parish of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart at Sliema, to organise a ceremony for the blessing of animals in front of the church on 12th October 1980 in the morning. The statue of Saint Francis was brought out in front of the church and owners of animals blessed, were given a holy picture of Saint Francis. In this case the animals consisted only of domestic ones and pets.

On other occasions there are sporadic ceremonies involving blessing of animals, as for example, since 1973, the Farmers' Centre at Siggiewi bless farm animals and tools, but has nothing to do with the original devotions to the saints.

However, the strongest roots in the ceremonies of blessing of animals lie in the traditions of St. Anthony the Abbot, and it may be of interest to know that a Hospitaller Order of Friars of St. Anthony the Abbot was set up in France in 1095, also known as the Antonians, formed to alleviate the suffering of victims of St. Anthony's Fire and other diseases. When the Antonians were disbanded in 1775, some joined the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in Malta in 1781, little knowing that they proved a burden to the host order which was destined to be expelled by Napoleon before the turn of the century.

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**Note** Since I wrote the original article in 1981, many other localities have organised ceremonies for the blessing of animals, not only to coincide with the feast of St. Anthony the Abbot, but mostly to form part of a week of festivities leading to the town or village *fešta* in honour of the parish patron saint.

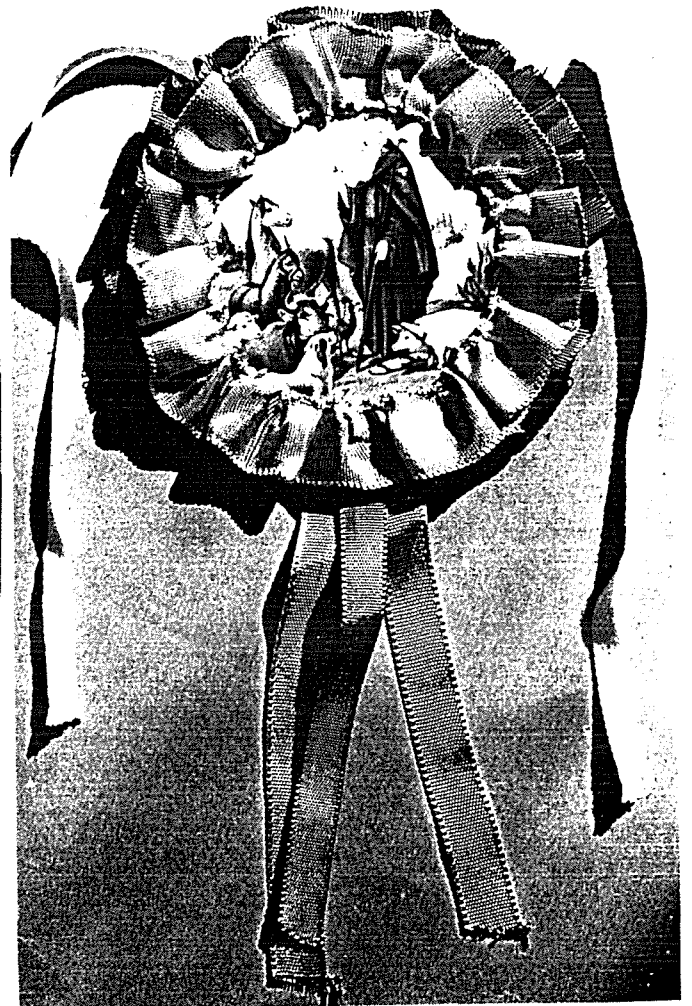
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See captions to the photographs on page 97

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