We love your dog…. However.

Over the last year, we have seen a steady increase in attendance at St. Paul's. We are getting close to pre-covid attendance levels. Thanks be to God! One of the areas in which we have seen a real spike in attendance is in the number of dogs people are bringing with them to Mass. At first, people would bring their small dogs discretely in a carrying bag; now at some masses it feels like the church is becoming like the park in the morning. At times, the situation has bordered on the unmanageable.

I do get it. Ours can be a very lonely town and a pet can provide the companionship that is urgently needed. Pets provide comfort and a sense of peace, wellbeing and joy to their owners. They are a gift from God. During COVID, pet ownership skyrocketed for obvious reasons. Yes, here at St. Paul's we love your pet. We look forward to blessing them on St. Francis' Day in October. We love meeting your dog outside on the sidewalk or in Central Park.

As for bringing your dog to Church, it is a delicate subject that we need to address. Understandably owners can be very attached to their pets. Sensing this, parishioners are afraid to share their concerns with owners for fear of getting into an uncomfortable conversation. There are also many parishioners who love seeing and petting dogs at Church. This issue could put our congregation on a collision course if we don't have a come to Jesus moment on this.

The Archdiocese of New York does not have a stated policy on animals in church. A recent inquiry among local pastors revealed different approaches, from a clear "no" (except for guide dogs), to hand wringing by others, and everything in between. I confess that I vacillate in my response. However, I have received letters from parishioners upset about pets in Church. One person wrote to say they were disturbed all through Mass by a dog scratching at the back of their pew. A religious sister shared with me that because a childhood trauma involving a dog, she is afraid of all dogs, no matter the size or shape or demeanor. I know of more than a few parishioners who have allergic reactions. And, yes, our maintenance staff has had to clean up after a dog or two…

One way to start this conversation is to ask: why do we come to Mass in the first place? I would submit, as your pastor, that we come *together* as the baptized to deepen our relationship with God who is the source of all comfort and strength through Word, Sacrament, and community. This relationship calls us to love God with all our being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Thus we have a duty to attend to the well-being of our fellow parishioners and be mindful that having our dog with us may be a negative distraction, especially if the pet barks, makes a mess, or disrupts others who are allergic or fearful. I would add that bringing a pet to Mass might distract the pet owner in giving their full attention to what the Lord wants to say, even during a boring homily.

I hope that this note will prompt thoughtful reflection and conversation that will help us as a parish discern what the proper approach to pets in the Church ought to be. [Please note, that if your pet's behavior becomes disruptive, you will be asked to take your dog outside.] For now, I urge pet owners to seriously consider leaving your dog at home for the good of your fellow parishioner and for yourself. Allow yourself to better focus on God's love so you can become a more loving caretaker. Who knows? Your dog might enjoy some alone time and/or earnestly desire that you take some time for yourself to grow in your relationship with God, who created all creatures great and small!

Thanks so much for your consideration of this sensitive issue and please share any feedback you might have.

God Bless,
Fr. Eric.