

Saintly Animals

A Semiotic Perspective on Changing Models of Sanctity and Personhood

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Abstract

This paper exposes the results of a research that focuses on the changing thresholds of the notions of sanctity and personhood in Catholic culture, with an emphasis on the contemporary age. In particular, it explores the relationship between saints and animals, thus identifying three main categories, involving an increasing degree of agency attributed to the animals. The first kind of relationship consists in the association of an animal to a saintly character: in this correlation, the animal mainly works as a figure of the saint. The second is the representation of animals with a narrative role in the life story of the saint: in this case, animals play an active part in the story, often as Helpers. The third concerns the representation of animals themselves as saints. This third case is particularly interesting, because animals are not limited to ancillary roles in relation to a human protagonist, but become themselves the protagonists and embody exemplary models, proposed to the imitation of human beings in reason of their moral superiority. These narratives are representative of the fact that in our age the thresholds of the concept of sanctity are shifting under various and relevant aspects. The representations of animals as saints, the growingly shared conviction about their right to be considered as persons, the fact that some individual animals are considered exemplary characters embodying a particular idea of sanctity, are all clear examples of a worldview admitting that moral models and personhood can be found even outside the borders of the human form of life.

Key Words

Sanctity; Personhood; Models; Animals; Agency.

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1. Introduction

In the Christian-Catholic tradition, animals are connected to saints and, more in general, to the concept of sanctity in several respects. In this paper, I will explore different facets of this relationship, mainly on the basis of the criterion constituted by the kind and degree of agency attributed to animals. Even though my attention is focused in particular on today's culture, taking into account the historical background is necessary to understand the contemporary context.¹ The root of this enquiry can be found in the research carried out in the framework of the project NeMoSanctI.² This research has often focused on controversial saints and on the borders of the concept of sanctity itself, which shift across time. If saints are exemplary figures representing the highest ideal of person conceived by the culture in question, then it is evident that the study of the variations in the concepts of sanctity as well as of personhood provide useful touchstones to define how this culture conceives the human being in their relationship with their neighbor and more in general with the other living beings.³ In this framework, the study of how humans perceive their relationship with animals is of great importance. Indeed, at least in the so-called Western world, animals have often been considered as mirrors that allow humans to get a better understanding of themselves, because they provide an effective term of comparison thus being a source of inspiration for the moral discourse (Paravicini Bagliani 2017: X).

In what follows, I will identify three main kinds of relationship between saints and animals, involving an increasing degree of agency attributed to the latter as such. The first consists in the association of an animal to a saintly character: in this kind of relationship, the animal mainly works as a figure of the saint. The second is the representation of animals with a narrative role in the life story of the saint: in this case, animals act, they play an active role in the story, often as Helpers. The third concerns the representation of animals themselves as saints. This third case is particularly relevant for the present purpose, in that animals are not limited to ancillary roles in relation to a human protagonist, but become themselves the protagonists and embody exemplary models, proposed to the imitation of human beings in reason of their moral superiority. The representations of animals as saints can be found both inside and outside the borders of institutional religion, and often constitute an efficacious bridge between the latter and the broader popular and/or secularized culture.

¹ In the field of semiotics, an overview of the hagiographic themes involving saints and animals has been proposed by Gian Paolo Caprettini (1974), in his essay about Saint Francis and the wolf, but Caprettini's attention is centered on the Middle Ages.

² This paper is part of the NeMoSanctI project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 757314 <nemosancti.eu>).

³ For further reflection about the relationship between the notions of personhood and sanctity, cf. Ponzio and Vissio (2021; 2022).

2. Saints as animals

A first relationship between saints and animals, attributing no proper agency to the latter but also entailing a strong identification between the human person and the animal, can be found in the allegorical representations. Umberto Eco (2017: 162, my translation) considers bestiaries among the kinds of texts that most represent the Medieval «universal allegorism», which provides a fabled interpretation of reality, overcoming its appearance to seek for what it could *suggest*. In this framework, animals are considered as «*signs* of a divine language. [...] What they are and what they do become the figure of something else. The lion means the Resurrection by erasing its footprints, the elephant by trying to lift up its fallen companion...» (Eco 2017: 222). Animals are thus “forced” to be figures of something that exceeds their knowledge and their real acts: «They are not observed in their actual behaviors, but in the presumed ones, and they do not do what they do, but what the bestiary imposes them to do, so that they can express, through their behavior, something of which they do not know anything» (Eco 2017: 222).

A similar figurative function can be detected in the allegorical representation of some saints as animals. In the iconography of the evangelists, for example, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are often represented respectively as a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. The roots of this representation can be found in Ezekiel, who in a vision sees four beings with four faces: «Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle» (Ez 1, 10). The same figure is mentioned in the Revelation (4, 6-7): «In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle». Subsequently, the Fathers of the Church, starting from Irenaeus, identified the four Evangelists with these symbolical figures, and this identification gave rise to the rich teriomorphic iconography of the Evangelists. Another example is provided by the iconographic representation of Jesus as a pelican, due to the association of the legend according to which the pelican feeds its chicks with the blood of its breast with the themes of the sacrifice of Jesus and of the Eucharist.⁴ Based on the same principle, in the sacred art Jesus is often represented as a lamb, symbolizing his innocence and, again, his sacrifice. The fortune of these representations continues to our days: specimens of both the teriomorphic iconography of the Evangelists and the theme of the Agnus Dei can easily be found for instance in churches built in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In some cases, the allegorical identification is not all-encompassing and total, so that the relationship between the saint and the animal can be described

⁴ I wish to thank Massimo Leone who, in a personal communication, brought this relevant example to my attention.

not as an allegory but rather as a simile. For instance, in some Medieval texts, due to the harshness of their life in the wilderness, hermits are described as very similar to beasts: Saint Alban thus *looks like* a dark and monstrous beast to some knights, while Saint John Chrisostom is *mistaken for* a bear, and as such enchained and brought to the city (cf. Caprettini 1974: 25).

In other cases, the inclusion of an animal in the iconic representation of a saint is a fundamental attribute that allows the identification of the saint. Thus, for instance, Saint Anthony is often associated with a pig, while St. Roch with a dog: the sole *presence* of the animal next to them makes their character easily recognizable.⁵ Even though the reason for the association often resides in an episode of the saints' life that is somehow evoked by the presence of the animals, in portraits the animals mainly work as *figures* of the saints. This iconographic tradition associating a saint and their emblematic animal has ancient origins, but is still alive today. A good example is provided by the holy cards which still feature this semiotic dynamics between the human and the animal characters, even in their more recent digital evolutions.⁶

3. Saints and animals

A second kind of relationship between saints and animals is that of friendship. In this case, animals are attributed agency. Sometimes, animals initially play the actantial role of Opponents, but then they make a pact of mutual protection with the saint and his human community, thus reversing their role in that of Helper. The episode of Saint Francis and the wolf constitutes the most famous example of this kind of relationship (cf. Caprettini 1974), which is however quite frequent. In other cases, animals look for the help of the saint. There are many animals, for instance, that saints shelter or save from hunting (see e.g. Roche 1948, 1954). In other occasions, on the contrary, saints are helped and rescued by generous animals, such as the dog who is reported to have saved Saint Roch from starving by bringing him his daily bread during his illness. In other cases, animals just seek the companionship of the saint, and vice-versa, in an exchange characterized by love, empathy and an extraordinary capacity to communicate. Examples of this kind are Saint Claire's cat, «Sora Gattuccia», who «lived and died exemplarily, according to the Poor Clare's rule, leaving a dear and nice memory of herself» (Rossetti 2011: 67), but also Saint Filippo Neri's and Saint Giovanni Bosco's dogs, Capriccio and Il Grigio (Rossetti 2011: 104-121; Roche 1948, 1954).

In all these cases, animals keep their non-human nature, but at the same time they are represented as participating in the exceptional nature of the saint by showing marked behavior. Just like saints are exceptional persons

⁵ See for instance the animals listed in the iconographic dictionary of the saints (Furia 2020).

⁶ Digital and augmented versions of the holy cards can be found on the Internet (just to mention two examples: <<https://www.skylabstudios.it/holy-card-i-santini-interattivi-di-watican/>>; <<https://www.santodelgiorno.it/>>), but also on the web apps devoted to saints (see in this respect Ponzio 2023).

because they practice Christian virtues to an extraordinary degree of perfection, so their animal friends are often outstanding individuals in the practice of the virtues that this culture considers as the best virtues that animals can achieve, such as mildness, generosity, fidelity, and empathy. We cannot say that in these cases animals are considered as persons, but at least they are attributed moral virtues and understanding that in many cases exceed the ones displayed by human beings, who are often selfish, blind and indifferent to spiritual truths and centered on earthly interests and goods. Moreover, in the discourse of the saints involved in this kind of friendship with animals, the latter often are considered as *peers* to humans, so that their subjectivity and their personhood, their right to live a decent life and to be respected are fully recognized. This is evident for instance in the franciscan discourse, in which animals and the other elements of the creation are connected to the human person by a bond of brotherhood and sisterhood. This idea is particularly developed in today's catholic culture, in the so-called "ecological" discourse implemented at least since the 1970 by the Church but significantly developed and definitively brought to the public attention by Pope Francis.⁷

4. Animals as saints

In other cases, animals themselves are considered, represented, and in some cases even venerated as saints. This of course entails the attribution of agency to animals, to a degree that often exceeds the human capacity and moral quality of action.

The representation of animals as saints is often connected to the theme of martyrdom. In consideration of the above-mentioned high degree of agency attributed to animals, the role of victim and the passivity that are quite frequently associated with the basic narrative program of martyrdom may seem paradoxical. This paradox is however only apparent. The meaning of martyrdom as the general culture conceives it today originates from the first centuries of the Christian history and culture, and, in the framework of Catholicism, it was progressively codified as a specific case for sainthood in the jurisprudence regulating the canonization process. Nevertheless, at least in the late modernity and contemporary culture, the term and the figures of martyrdom have overcome the borders of institutional religion and their traditional religious meaning and have entered other contexts of the culture.⁸ What is particularly relevant for the present purpose is that contemporary culture displays a quite articulated martyrological discourse concerning animals. In this discourse, which is gaining more and more importance in our semiosphere, animals are considered as persons as far as they should be recognized basic rights, which are unfortunately often still underestimated in the contemporary social and

⁷ Cf. in particular the 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato si'*, in which Pope Francis proposes an idea of «integral ecology» (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html>). For semiotic reflections on Pope Francis' communication, see Lorusso and Peverini (2017), Marrone (2024: 215-218).

⁸ On this subject, see Ponzio (2018).

economical systems.⁹ This martyrological discourse tends to attack the idea of animals as totally Other and to show that suffering, sorrow and pain make humans and animals equal.¹⁰ At the same time, these representations tend to depict animals as passive – or rather helpless and innocent – victims of human violence.

In the Catholic codification, however, martyrdom entails a voluntary – and therefore *actively accepted* even though not deliberately provoked¹¹ – self-sacrifice based on faith. The standard narrative program associated with martyrdom presents indeed two standard thematic roles: on one hand, the martyr, a subject acting according to Christian values and accepting to lose their life in order to bear testimony and defend their faith; on the other, a persecutor killing the martyr precisely “in odium fidei”, namely because of their faith (cf. Ponzio and Rai 2019). The martyrdom of animals in the mainstream contemporary animalist discourse does not display this narrative program: animals are not properly Subjects in the Greimasian sense, because they do not act in order to realize some values, but are simply victims killed by human agents acting in the name of purely material values. Therefore, in this kind of secular discourse defending animals’ rights, animals represented as martyrs are actually deprived of agency, which is however a fundamental characteristic of the religious idea of martyrdom. As a consequence, we can say that the use of martyrological themes and figures has in this case a rhetorical nature: it can be thought of as a sort of hyperbolic application of the religious idea of martyrdom: this rhetorical discourse uses the figure of the martyr by applying it to animals which are however reduced to the status of non-subjects, because they are deprived of agency.

There is however a further kind of representation of animals as saints, in which, on the contrary, animals are attributed an agency which equates or overcomes that attributed to human beings and represent the most perfect level of personhood and sanctity, demonstrating a clear superiority over human beings. This idea is quite widespread in contemporary culture, but has actually ancient roots.

In fact, the most known example of an animal represented as a saint is the greyhound Guinefort, the dog of a 13-century knight. According to the legend, this man one day went hunting, and left Guinefort in his castle to protect his baby. But when he returned home, the man found the cradle overturned and empty. Thinking that the dog had killed the baby, the knight slew Guinefort. Then, he heard the baby crying and found him safe and sound, next to a dead viper showing the traces of the dog’s bites. When he understood that Guinefort had saved the baby’s life, regretfully he buried the dog in a tomb, which

⁹ For a semiotic discussion about the delicate issues concerning the juridical recognition of animals’ rights and the relative debates, cf. Bassano (2019).

¹⁰ Ventura Bordenca (2018), for instance, has provided an efficacious semiotic analysis of this theme in advertising multimodal texts.

¹¹ On this subject, cf. Rai (2018).

soon became a shrine visited by pilgrims, especially mothers with sick children in search of a grace.¹² The cult of Saint Guinefort knew a wide diffusion in Europe. Despite the numerous attempts of the Catholic Church to abolish it, the veneration for the saint greyhound survived until the 20th century, when the Church definitively rejected it together with many others connected to legends based on insufficient historical evidence (cf. Ponzio and Marino 2021).¹³

The history of the worship of the saint dog demonstrates that in the Middle Ages and in the modernity this culture – especially in its popular manifestations – admitted that sanctity is not an exclusive quality of human beings, but can also interest animals, despite the old theological debate about the animals having or not a soul. In the case of Saint Guinefort, the virtue of the animal (its generosity and fidelity) are surely a central feature, which is also demonstrated by the appellation of “martyr dog” due to the unjust Sanction of the knight killing the dog, but the thaumaturgic aspect is also relevant.

Even though it was banned from martyrologies, this figure still remains part of the culture in question, which displays traces of the persistence of the curiosity, admiration and interest (if not real veneration) raised by the figure of Saint Guinefort even in our times. Contemporary culture tends however to reinterpret the story and the character of Saint Guinefort according to its sensibility. It is particularly interesting to note that the Medieval iconography tended to represent saint Guinefort in an anthropomorphic shape, namely as a character with the muzzle of a dog, but dressed up like a clerk and with an upright human posture. On the contrary, contemporary culture mainly represents this figure as a proper dog, with few conventional attributes evoking its sanctity, such as the nimbus. This could indicate that this culture does not feel a strong need to humanize animals to recognize their sanctity and personhood, but rather tends to broaden these ideas so as to include animals as such, without trying to underplay the differences between humans and non-humans. Moreover, the rediscovery of Saint Guinefort tends to get rid of the thaumaturgic component, in favor of the more successful discourse about the fact that animals are touchstones to evaluate the morality of human beings.

The same ideas are evident for instance in the Italian narrative literature featuring religious themes and representing animals. The most relevant animal is perhaps the dog, due to its close cohabitation with humans.¹⁴ Indeed, there are several dogs represented as saints in Italian literature. One of the more interesting examples is Dino Buzzati’s tale «Il cane che ha visto Dio»

¹² This story has variants in different cultures. On Guinefort’s cult, see Schmitt (1979).

¹³ For instance on the Internet: <<https://www.thegreyhoundsaint.com/>>; <<http://www.ilru-moredellutto.com/?s=guinefort>>.

¹⁴ Cf. Anselmi (2010). Eco (2017: 202) also devotes special attention to the dog: when he looks into the history of the ideas about animal languages from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages, due to the width of the matter, he chooses to focus on the dog only, recognized by many thinkers as the animal with the highest degree of intelligence. A further proof of the close relationship between dogs and sanctity is the fact that dogs often appear as attributes of the saints: the iconographic dictionary of saints by Furia (2020) associates the dog to 14 saints.

(The dog who saw God), in the collection *La Boutique del mistero*, first published in 1968.

This tale, which is probably reminiscent of Saint Roch's legend, narrates the story of Galeone, the dog of a hermit. The latter survives in the wilderness, ignored by the people of the nearby village and fed by his dog, who daily goes to the village and brings him bread. The two seem to be frequently visited by the deity in the form of luminous rays that are well visible from the village. After the death of the hermit, on a cold winter night, the dog starts living in the village. The villagers, however, despising religion and living according to a mean and hypocritical conduct, feel uneasy with the dog, who seems to be present and to observe them every time they act immorally. The villagers feel as the "saint" dog, with its silent presence, is judging them; in the night, they fear that its phosphorescent eyes bring their sins to light, and so they are ashamed, angry, and worried:

... They are afraid of a dog, not of being bitten, they are simply afraid that the dog will judge them badly. [...] It was slavery. Even at night you couldn't breathe. What a burden, the presence of God for those who do not desire it. And God was not here an uncertain fairy tale, he did not sit in the church among candles and incense, but went up and down the houses, carried, so to speak, by a dog. A tiny piece of the Creator, the slightest breath, had penetrated Galeone, and through Galeone's eyes he saw, judged, and counted.¹⁵

Even though the inhabitants of the village detest the dog, each one, in secret, starts hypocritically to feed and flatter the animal. When the dog dies, its body is brought back by all the villagers in procession to the hermit's shelter, but there the community discovers the skeleton of a dog that died next to the hermit's, thus making the mystery of the presence of Galeone even more disquieting. When they come back to the village, despite an apparent relief for the death of this supernatural dog, the villagers are upset, and they do not come back to the old habits, since in the meantime the silent gaze of the animal had led them to change their behavior and become better.

In this case, the dog undoubtedly represents a higher degree of perfection, and he takes up the actantial role of Sender, since he apparently sanctions the actions of the human beings in force of its spiritual and moral superiority, which are also connected to its being closer to the deity, which it, as the tale's title suggests, has "seen" together with the holy hermit.

¹⁵ In order to give the reader the possibility to appreciate the original language of the quoted passages from literary works, I provide my translation into English but also the original text in the footnotes. «... hanno paura di un cane, non di essere addentati, semplicemente hanno paura che il cane li giudichi male. [...] Era una schiavitù. Neanche di notte si riusciva a respirare. Che peso, la presenza di Dio per chi non la desidera. E Dio non era qui una favola incerta, non se ne stava appartato in chiesa fra ceri e incenso, ma girava su e giù per le case, trasportato, per dir così, da un cane. Un pezzettino piccolissimo di Creatore, un minimo fiato, era penetrato in Galeone, e attraverso gli occhi di Galeone vedeva, giudicava, segnava in conto» (Buzzati 1991: 94).

Other works of contemporary Italian literature make a less explicit reference to the religious imagery, but nonetheless describe animals, and in particular dogs, as saints or at least as examples of positive virtues, such as innocence, purity, or at least vitality, triggering the human beings they love to express their affection, and to be better persons. This feature is present in a number of literary works, for instance in Radi (1993) and Matteucci (2016), but is particularly well developed and expressed by Carlo Coccioli, in *Requiem per un cane* (Requiem for a dog). This novel, written in first person, has a strong autobiographical connotation, and expresses the author's sorrow and grief for the death of his beloved dog Fiorello, a white poodle. The following two passages are representative of this sensibility:

Yet I am convinced, and will not cease to be, that my dead dog was a splendid form of life: grave, noble, loving, and pure. I am convinced, and I will not cease to be, that few purities in this world, without knowing it yearning for innocence, equal that which is seen in the meek and sweet eyes of an animal.¹⁶

[Fiorello] did not give up for a moment that incredible dignity of his: the secret realm of his innocence, the purity. He has given me more than most human beings. To the extent that he gave me kindness, he did not distance me from my fellows, but drew me closer to them. And he taught me [...] a way of living in balance with the essential: a limpid embodiment of nature, my dog communicated to me more spirit of love, paradoxically, than the wise men of this world with whom, living or dead, I have been and am in contact.¹⁷

Another author particularly relevant for the present purpose is Anna Maria Ortese, journalist and novelist, very active in writing in defense of the animals' rights. Ortese's thought in this respect is based on the idea that animals are *persons*. Indeed, she claims:

I consider Animals to be Small Persons, 'different' brothers of man, creatures with a *f a c e* [sic.], beautiful and good eyes that express a thought, and a *closed* sensibility, but of the same value as human sensibility and thought, only they express it outside of reason, for which we are known, and incense each other.¹⁸

¹⁶ «Tuttavia son convinto, e non smetterò d'esserlo, che il mio cane morto era una forma splendida della vita: grave, nobile, amorosa, e pura. Son convinto, e non smetterò d'esserlo, che poche purezze in questo mondo, senza saperlo anelante all'innocenza, eguagliano quella che si scorge nei mansueti e soavi occhi d'un animale» (Coccioli 1977: 7).

¹⁷ «[Fiorello] Non rinunciò un istante a quell'incredibile dignità sua: il segreto reame della sua innocenza, la purezza. M'ha dato più che la maggioranza degli esseri umani. Nella misura in cui mi trasmise benevolenza, non m'allontanò dai miei simili: m'avvicinò ad essi. E m'ha insegnato [...] un modo di vivere in equilibrio con l'essenziale: limpida incarnazione della natura, il mio cane mi comunicò più spirito d'amore, paradossalmente, che i savi di questo mondo con cui, vivi o morti, sono stato e sono in contatto» (Coccioli 1977: 10).

¹⁸ «Ritengo gli Animali Piccole Persone, fratelli 'diversi' dell'uomo, creature con una *f a c c i a*, occhi belli e buoni che esprimono un pensiero, e una sensibilità *chiusa*, ma dello stesso valore della sensibilità e il pensiero umano, soltanto lo esprimono al di fuori del raziocinio, per cui noi andiamo noti, e ci incensiamo tra noi» (Ortese 2016: 114).

The fact of having a face, instead of a “muzzle” is a key feature in the definition of the animals as persons. A same argument, based on etymology, semantics, and philosophy reinterpreted from a semiotic perspective, is proposed by Massimo Leone (2022: 1297), according to which «human animals constitute their visages because they destitute the visages of non-human animals into muzzles»: admitting that animals have a face too (not just a mouth, representing instincts and aggressiveness, but also a gaze, and a language) is intrinsically connected to the fact of recognizing them as subjects and persons, which is a conviction that has to fight against a long lasting and widespread prejudice. Leone indeed concludes that «A new myth of liberation is, therefore, required: one in which Abraham not only substitutes his son Isaac with a ram but then also realizes, unlike in the original biblical tale, that this ram [...] shows not a muzzle but a face, and that this face is above all two eyes, and a gaze, and a cry from the depth of being silently affirming: I am not only being, I am language, please respond to me. Please spare me. Please let me live» (Leone 2022: 1297).

In light of this sensibility, it does not appear surprising that in Ortese’s discourse animals are quite often represented in martyrological terms. In this author’s imagery, the moral wretchedness of humans becomes patent in comparison to the virtues of the animals, unjustly considered and treated as objects. Animals are therefore represented as embodying a sort of universal sanctity, denied and destroyed by humans:

We have become, with time and progress and all the pride of a greedy and unnatural life, real demons, we seem to have come out of the total denial of that holiness – weak or strong – which understands the language of life wherever it speaks, groans or recommends itself. Life is good. Trees and beasts are good, they are creatures, perfect works. Only those—children, old people, women—who receive the friendship and affection of a dog because they are kind, know what a dog, or who, really is. A dog is an angel. His little mind knows only worship.¹⁹

The parallelism between angels and animals is by the way a relevant theme in theology. From a hierarchic perspective, humans are placed between animals and angels: the firsts are of course in an inferior position compared to angels, but at the same time they have a symmetrical role. Moreover, the hagiographic tradition features angelical apparition in the form of animals.²⁰

¹⁹ «Siamo diventati, col tempo e il progresso e tutto l’orgoglio di un vivere avido e innaturale, dei veri demoni, sembriamo usciti dalla negazione totale di quella santità – debole o forte che sia – che intende il linguaggio della vita dovunque parli, gema o si raccomandi. La vita è buona. Alberi e bestie sono buoni, sono creature, opere perfette. Solo coloro – bambini vecchi anche donne – che ricevono – perché gentili – l’amicizia e l’affetto di un cane, sanno cosa – o chi – sia veramente un cane. Un cane è un angelo. La sua piccola mente conosce solo l’adorazione» (Ortese 2016: 178).

²⁰ For a recent overview and reformulation of this theme, cf. Stanzione and Raimondo (2021). It should however be considered that, in Catholic tradition, animals can also provide a manifestation or an embodiment to evil spirits. It is notorious the Evangelical episode in which, obeying to Jesus’ order, demons take possession of a herd of pigs that throw themselves from a cliff. Very frequent in the sacred iconography is the killing of the snake as the embodiment of the devil. This iconography of the snake as a sign of the devil and of the evil to be fought, of course reminiscent of the biblical episode of Adam and Eve, characterizes the representation of many saints, cf. Furia (2020: 125-126).

5. Conclusion

Models of sanctity undergo continuous changes, especially in the contemporary age, in which the Church has promoted an inclusive policy of canonization, entailing an exponential multiplication of saints and consequently of models of perfection that they embody. Relevant innovations are for instance the integration of a growing number of lay people among saints, but also the introduction in 2017 of a new case for canonization in addition to the traditional ones (mainly martyrdom and heroicity of virtues), namely the “offering of life”, consisting in sacrificing one’s life in favor of someone else for a reason that can be ascribed to Christian charity (cf. Ponzio 2023). This opening of Catholic culture is paralleled by a growing tendency to use figures, themes and iconographic models traditionally associated with the representation of saints in the religious context outside the borders of the institutional religion, in the so-called secular culture. All these innovations can be interpreted as signs of the fact that in our age the thresholds of the concept of sanctity are shifting under various and relevant aspects. The representations of animals as saints, the growingly shared conviction about their right to be considered as persons, the fact that some individual animals are considered exemplary characters embodying a particular idea of sanctity, are all clear examples of this kind of perspective.

Taking the cue from of the theories problematizing the relationship between nature and culture as a key topic for zoosemiotics,²¹ we can observe that in the culture under consideration different discourses about animals and sainthood coexist. These discourses entail different perspectives on the status of animals (here I focused on the differences in the kind and degree of agency), but find a common feature in the fact that they challenge a static definition of the border between nature and culture, animal and human, as well as the fact of considering the Catholic culture as a whole as “naturalistic”.²² If this component is surely present, and even dominant, the discourses we analyzed show that different perspectives are present as well in this complex and multifaceted culture. Indeed, the discourses about animals and/as saints postulate a moral similarity between humans and animals, as far as some virtues are concerned. In other words, in the axiology of this culture, there is a core of important values – that we can identify with moral virtues, such as fidelity, generosity, etc. – that are recognized to be the prerogative not only of human beings, but of some animals too.²³ This perspective is interesting from a semiotic point of view: if human sciences and zoosemiotics have mainly tried to define the differences (and similarities) between humans and animals in cognitive, physiological, linguistic and even pathemic terms, the culture under consideration offers an alternative perspective, namely a moral one. The

²¹ Cf. in particular Sebeok (1990), Martinelli (2010), Marrone and Mangano (2018).

²² I use this term in the sense proposed by Descola (2005). On the western (and Catholic) tendency to naturalism, see Marrone (2024: 215-218).

²³ Parallely, in this tradition, other animals are considered to embody and allegorically represent vices as well.

discourses about the morality of animals and humans constitute today a fertile ground for semiotic research, also because this perspective allows the comparative study of further ideas of moral perfection. For instance, a similar comparison appears very diffused in science-fiction narratives, in which the moral quality of non-human forms of life both forms a continuum with respect to the human one and serves as a touchstone to evaluate the latter.²⁴ It is perhaps not surprising that traces of an imaginary representing artificial forms of life with hagiographic traits can be found in different discourses circulating even in mainstream culture.²⁵ The study of these emerging representations surely provides a parallel that sheds new light on the reevaluation of animals, contributing to frame the latter in a highly dynamic context, characterized by rapid change and broadness of views.

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²⁴ See in this regard Bernardelli (2024).

²⁵ Some examples of iconographic hybridization of technological and religious imagery about saints can be found on the Internet, among which: <<https://www.brothers-brick.com/2017/12/23/robot-saints-go-marching/>>; <<https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/santo-il-robot-che-aiuta-a-pregaregabriele-trovato>>.

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