

God, Life, and Everything St. Francis Shutdown

I *had* wanted to write about something that happened last week at FDR's homecoming game - a flash mob of teachers and parents (which included my wife and me) dancing at half-time.

However, this week is also the feast of St. Francis, and given the government shutdown and St. Francis' affinity for the poor, that may be a better fit today.

St. Francis, as you probably know, was a rich young man who had been a handful. He was from the privileged class, and he acted like it. Eventually, he went adventuring, got captured in battle, and spent time as a hostage.

That experience changed him, and in that time, he began talking with God. When he came home, it was with a conviction that the life of self-indulgence, of gathering wealth for the sake of wealth, and of ignoring the plight of the poor was sinful. He eventually rejected everything his family stood for, and when his father threatened to disinherit him, he threw off even his clothes and walked away utterly naked.

Francis spent the rest of his life in poverty, getting by physically on begging and receiving donations.

We all know that's not all he did with his life. He preached. He cared and advocated for the poor. He preached and practiced a love for and stewardship of all creation and became one of the inspirations for the environmental movement (even if it's something he could not have anticipated).

This Friday is St. Francis' feast day, and Christians all over the world celebrate it this weekend with the cute and fun Blessing of the Animals. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine has a particularly impressive celebration which includes a procession of animals from the smallest hermit crab to camels and elephants. Inside the cathedral. And of course, they anticipate so many people bringing their pets for a blessing that they have put out a call for priests throughout the diocese to come and help.

It's St. Francis' other - really his predominant concern - that interests me today. We have a government shutdown that closes our "nonessential" government expenses. Without getting too snarky, I notice that Congress will still get paid. Ever notice how easy it is to determine that others are nonessential when it doesn't affect you?

So what does get affected? Well the postal service receives no federal funding (didn't know that, did you?), so it remains open. The military remains operational, but the fighting personnel will face delays in getting paid. Half the civilian employees of the military will be furloughed. Parks and museums are closed. Social security and Medicare will continue, but like the military will face delays. Food and drug inspections will be severely curtailed though not stopped entirely. Food assistance programs (WIC) will slowly shut down. Work safety inspections will cease. You'll still have to pay your taxes but won't have a help line to call if you're confused. On the bright side, no audits either. No new federal loans or mortgages would be approved. Oh, and Head Start will start shutting down - twenty programs immediately, and others following suit depending on how long the shutdown lasts.

Overwhelmingly, the shutdown hits lower and middle class citizens. The wealthiest will either feel nothing or merely an inconvenience. They are so insulated that they have no worries.

But for those who live hand-to-mouth, paycheck-to-paycheck, this will be rough. Somewhere, I hear St. Francis sighing.

Let us remember that this is a shutdown of choice. It is a shutdown because part of the government wants to prevent a law going into effect which it deems to be harmful. But it is a bit like saying to a dog owner, "You are not taking care of your dog, so I'm going to make sure your dog doesn't eat until you change your ways."

Do I have a solution? Sure I do. And if I were a lot more like St. Francis and didn't mind being yelled and screamed at, and didn't worry about spending my days in verbal battle or driving people away, I'd say more. But I have enough coward in me that I just don't want to go there. Not here.

Remember, I just wanted to talk about Homecoming.