



## Animals and Pets

I was walking through Campo Rojo the other day when three big hefty cows ambled across my path. It's one of our barrios bordering the Caroni River, and the cows were heading to the bottomlands to gorge themselves on the thick grass and foliage. I was more curious, however, about where they were coming from than to where they were going. After all, Campo Rojo is a densely populated neighborhood in the middle of the city, not the country where you would expect to see such a sight. Some resourceful family keeps the cows in their yard and takes advantage of all the free feed Mother Nature provides in this hot, rain-soaked Garden of Eden.



Biking down Dalla Costa, our local main street, is literally biking *down* in the direction of the river. With little or no effort I can hit 25 mph, but at times I have to be careful not to hit any goats. That's right...goats! Some fellow in Barrio Guayana came by a few goats a couple years ago and started an urban herd. They are Creole goats, a large sturdy breed well-adapted to our hot climate and, evidently, to traffic as well, although *oblivious* might be the better word. When set loose in the morning to wander as they please, the goats gravitate to the unkempt weed patches along the busy avenue and meander unconcerned back and forth across the roadway from one clump

to another. Goats multiply fast, and the herd has grown considerably, inspiring a few more families to become urban goat herders. Surprisingly, the goats, as with those cows, are afforded much respect. Drivers having to slow down for them don't blow their horns (those goats probably wouldn't pay any attention anyway), and none have been stolen and butchered as has been the case with livestock in our rural areas.

Raising chickens has become quite popular in the Twin Cities. Although it is obviously cheaper to acquire some chicks than to buy a cow or a couple goats, there are certain expenses which make raising chickens less attractive here. You need pens secure enough to protect them from snakes and other predators, and you have to purchase feed which, at current prices, makes raising chickens particularly unattractive. There are actually fewer families in our city raising chickens than when I lived here in the 1990s...better for sleeping with fewer roosters competing to wake me and the neighbors in the morning. Many who still have chickens do not raise them for eggs and chicken dinners but for cockfighting. Although illegal, the brutal combat, often to the death, draws men to clandestine matches as both spectators and owners. Passions, enhanced by booze and betting, run high. A lot of money can change hands as, I am told, several thousands of dollars might be wagered on a single match. I doubt that any parishioners who raise fighting cocks are in that league, but the chance to win fifty dollars or a small pig in one afternoon provides sufficient motivation for those who do.

Pets can be expensive. I haven't seen any hamsters or gerbils here, no fish tanks, either. Parrots are less common than before. Cats, other than those kept to reduce the mouse population, are relatively rare. Many people raise morrocoy, a kind of tortoise that can grow to 14 inches or more. These sedentary creatures require next to no care and cost nothing, living on the bruised, over-ripe fruit that falls from the many trees.

As in Minnesota, dogs are the most common domesticated animal here. As house pets, they are afforded love and care as in Minnesota, but in this country where homes are frequently broken into and plundered, most are raised for a more utilitarian purpose as guard dogs. Unfortunately, when a little puppy is no longer cute and cuddly and kids lose interest, when finances make it difficult to even feed one's family, and when a dog seems worthless as a home defender, it is often abandoned, turned out to join the ranks of the many mangy, emaciated street dogs who search for their meal in the piles of garbage that accumulate around the city.

The number, kind, and care of animals people keep in any locality reflect the economy of the folks who live there. The Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) calculates that a medium-sized dog in the United States costs over \$1,500 the first year and \$695 each year thereafter. That's more money than the average family in our parish earns in a year. From cows and goats to dogs, chickens and tortoises, the animals and pets here in San Felix tell a far different economic story.

### Points to ponder

Do you have any pets? How do you care for them? What animals would you raise if you lived in Venezuela?

*These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at [ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*