

HOW WE LOVE OUR DOGS

Giving Comfort When Pets Depart

**A Stamford Priest Provides Spiritual
Sendoffs For Animals And Guidance
For Grieving Owners**

By ANN MARIE SOMMA

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The Rev. Gill Babeu isn't sure if dogs go to heaven.

But he knows that when they die, he'll be there for the grieving families left behind.

"I'm there to comfort the family with prayers," said Babeu, a parish priest at St. Bridget of Ireland in Stamford. "You comfort them, just like you comfort anyone who has lost part of their family."

Babeu has presided over backyard burials for dogs. And he's prayed the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi at pet memorial services.

Babeu said he is not acting as a Catholic priest when he asks God to bless a deceased pet - the church does not condone Masses or burials for animals.

"I say the prayer of Saint Francis. Saint Francis called all animals his brothers and sisters," Babeu said. "I don't know if there is a doggy heaven. I've never been there, but I bet it's probably a nice place."

As American's devotion to their pets grows, more and more people are turning to religious leaders like Babeu for comfort when the time comes to bid farewell to a faithful companion.

When Angela Sirico's dog died in her arms in February, she was grief-stricken.

After she returned from the crematorium with Foxalina Louise's ashes, she invited Babeu and several friends to her Norwalk home to bid farewell to Foxalina at a memorial service.

"We scattered some of her ashes in the backyard near a patch of daffodils she loved," said Sirico. "We lit candles and Father Gill prayed a simple prayer."

Sirico said Babeu's presence helped her cope with the loss.

"It put a stamp on it, made it official," Sirico said.

Babeu knows the pain of losing a dog. Earlier this year, he went into a deep depression when Louise Frances, his pet poodle and companion of 10 years, died.

"I was beside myself, devastated," Babeu said. "She was my friend, my companion." He has since adopted another pooch.

Babeu is also the on-call chaplain for All Pets Crematory & Remembrances in Stamford. He's counseled dozens of families and small children who found it difficult to cremate a dog.

Years ago, pet owners had few options but to leave their deceased animals with the veterinarian or bury it in the back yard.

In her poem "The Blue Bowl," Jane Kenyon describes burying a pet and how ritual helps the living cope with grief:

*Like primitives we buried the cat
with his bowl. Bare-handed
we scraped sand and gravel
back into the hole.*

Today, American's changing attitude toward their animal companions has fueled a multi-billion dollar industry that caters to pet loss and grieving pet owners.

There are pet cemeteries and pet funeral homes and crematoriums, elaborate pet coffins and urns, pet sympathy cards, virtual pet cemeteries and pet-loss support groups and books.

The International Cemetery and Funeral Association dedicated a three-hour session on pet loss at its annual convention in March in Nevada.

"Instead of digging a hole in the back yard, people are choosing to honor their pets, and the funeral industry is meeting the public's needs," said Brian Fells, president of the association.

Mourning and memorializing helps the bereavement process, but some people are shy to admit their grief, said Kate Nicoll, the president of Soul Friends, a non-profit organization that promotes the healing benefits of the human-animal bond for children and at-risk teens.

"Some people think it's just a pet that's died. What people don't understand is the relationship people had with the animal," Nicoll said.

After losing three of the organization's therapy dogs and listening to people talk about their pet grief, Nicoll in April organized a memorial service dedicated to the life of deceased pets at the Cheshire Public Library.

Babeu said he'll pray at a memorial service for all God's creations - except reptiles.

"I'm frightened of reptiles," Babeu said.