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By Mark Hinson

Quick, somebody throw some holy water on that cat

St. Francis of Assisi is looking down on the dachshunds.

The fur-lined little frankfurters are raising a ruckus during the Blessing of the Animals at Mission San Luis, where a large painting of pet-friendly St. Frank hangs over the doorway. When I look up at it from this angle, Frankie has got a slightly disapproving look on his face.

The dogs are also freaking out my Russian Blue cat, Pinko, who is shifting around in his pet carrier like a condemned prisoner. Or maybe it's because this is Pinko's first time inside a church. He's worried that he will become collateral damage when the lightning bolt with my name on it comes crackling down from on high.

My wife, Amy, thought it would be a good idea to bring our high-dollar, indoor-only, designer cat down to the old Spanish mission to get him a holy water spritzer. Pinko's been acting mighty bossy lately and having impure thoughts about hummingbirds.

Amy originally wanted to bring our other two cats — a matching pair of sullen 15-year-old Himalayans named Kato and Clouseau — but we feared they might burst into flames like fuzzy little vampires if they crossed the threshold into sacred ground. Kato and Clouseau are the ones who could really benefit in the blessing department.

As I wait in line, and the priest anoints several slobbery dogs, I figure now is as good a time as any to put in some good words at the Head Office concerning my cranky cats. I figure that I will address my concerns to St. Bonaventure, whose painting also hangs in the church. St. Bonaventure is known as "The Doctor of the Church" and he accepts Blue Shield. So I start my silent prayer:

"Dear Bono Ventura,

"Blessed are the sneezy for that is the way my leaky-headed cat Clouseau chooses to wake me each morning before mine alarm clock hath chimed. If you could send a large dose of holy antihistamines his way, that sure would make the sleepy people in my house as happy as otters on an oyster bed.

"And blessed are the furry of haunches for they are the ones who snarl and snap whenever the pet hairbrush of doom is fetched from the closet. I'm also tired, St. Bono, of visitors eyeballing my unkempt Himalayans like they are bad weaves snatched from the heads of drunken reality-show hoochie-mamas on 'Rock of Love.'

"And blessed are those prone to slow digestion and who do not wolf down their Tuna-riffic Snoot Snacks only to use them as ammo during a projectile-horking contest that always, always, St. Bono, starts the minute we sit down to eat dinner. Do cats really know how to read the digital clock on the stove?

"And blessed are the tuxedo kitties, even the one named Pinky — not Pinko — who buzz-sawed into Amy's wrist one Christmas when she tried to pet him. Granted, the arterial spray was most impressive but thank you for not letting Amy bleed to death on Christmas Eve.

"Well, that about wraps it up, Ventura Highway. The dachshunds are acting up and the line is starting to move, so tell everyone up there we said howdy. Amen. Over and out."

Amy and I approach the priest, Father Robert Young, and I put my burden down. Pinko really could skip a few meals judging from the weight of the crate. He does not want to come out of his box for his blessing.

I reach in and try to extricate the rattled Russian Blue. Pinko digs in his heels. His green eyes are wild and dilated, just like mine were on that unfortunate day in the late '70s when I discovered that pre-mixed Tequila sunrise cocktails were available in conveniently portable miniature bottles. The poor cat must think he's about to get a good dunking. I try to tell him this is not a Baptist church as I drag him out and quickly hand him to Amy.

Father Young, who is very mellow around all the animals, takes a look at Pinko and says: "You're a pretty cat. What kind of cat is she?"

I want to say: "Uh, *he* is a mentally unstable one." But I don't.

"He's a Russian Blue and his name is Pinko Commie ...," I start to say and stop myself. In honor of our cat's proud Russian heritage, we named him Pinko Commie You-Know-What. Sorta rhymes with "plastered." Or "alabaster."

St. Frank looks down on me as if to say, "Just shut up, dude, and get the cat washed."

The priest dips his hand in the large baptismal bowl, which is filled with holy water that's been scented with sprigs of rosemary. He touches Pinko's forehead with his wet thumb and, thankfully, the cat's dark gray fur does not begin to smolder or smoke.

I quickly shove Pinko back into his ventilated luggage before he impresses the priest with his patented I'm-being-attacked-by-invisible-crows dance. Hey, didn't St. Francis do a crazy naked dance around Assisi after he gave up all his worldly possessions?

Then I notice a young woman in line holding a large cat that's the size of The March Hare in her arms. Even though the cat is surrounded by lick-happy Labradors and a four-legged critter that may be a warthog, the feline is cool-headed and content.

Outside the church, I put the heavy carrier down beneath the shade of a tree. I need to rest up before I tote my freshly blessed kitty down the hill. We begin talking with Brent Newman, who works at Mission San Luis and is dressed as a Franciscan friar from the late 1600s.

The knowledgeable Newman is telling me all about the saints and angels on the walls in the church when his cell phone goes off — breaking the whole 17th-century vibe.

"This is work, trust me," he says. "I gotta take this. Excuse me."

Was St. Francis calling because Pinko needs a booster shot of holy water? Or was St. Frank warning us that he was about to unleash his army of attack Chihuahuas on the heretics with the chicken-hearted commie cat?

While Friar Newman takes the call, the woman carrying the giant, chilled-out cat comes up to us. Turns out, she's married to the faux friar. Her name is Brooke Newman and the cat is called Luna. The long-haired, blue-gray Luna appears unimpressed by the parade of pooches coming to church. Meanwhile, Pinko is not coming out of his cage until Groundhog Day.

"She's an outdoor cat; she's not really impressed too much by dogs," Brooke says. "She can take care of herself."

Blessed are the self-sufficient, for they will calmly kick your butt.

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Caption: Pinko the Russian Blue keeps a cautious eye on Father Robert Young as the priest makes the sign of the cross during the Blessing of the Animals at Mission San Luis. Amy Hinson holds tight to make sure Pinko does not freak out and perform his famed crazy dance for the priest.

Glenn Beil/Democrat