This morning we gather to offer prayers in celebration of World Week of Prayer for Animals.

Our Lord Jesus was born in a manger surrounded by animals. Their presence at His birth was not accidental. The animal and human witnesses who gathered around Mary and the Holy Child highlighted the oneness of our Creation.

Where is that oneness today? We live in a society at war with nature, Mother Earth and her bounty plundered unmercifully, humankind abusing, using and depleting the animal kingdom as though it was an infinite resource, ignoring extinctions and the dreadful cruelty involved in this mass exploitation.

In 1982, I covered the infamous Canadian seal hunt for my newspaper, the Sun. It was the first time I witnessed anything of the cruelty inflicted upon the animal kingdom.

The Gulf of St. Lawrence was almost frozen solid that year. The seal herds were difficult to find. Daily we went out in light aircraft searching the floes for seals.

On the fourth day we found them. Thousands of magnificent shining seals nursing their day old pups. The ice stained with the blood of afterbirth. Tiny white pups sheltered in rough igloos built by their mothers to shelter them from the fierce winds.

We watched as these exquisite creatures humped along the ice following their mothers. It was a wondrous sight, Nature's nursery on the big screen in full glorious technicolour.

Three days later the sealing boats found the herds. This time the ice was stained with the blood of thousands of dead and dying pups. Many were skinned alive as the sealers moved in with their hakipiks, crushing the tiny skulls, skinning the magnificent white coats off the animals, leaving their mutilated remains on the ice to bear silent testimony to their fate.

200,000 seal pups were killed that year. Over the previous 20 years millions of pups had been slaughtered to meet the demands of a luxury fur market for souvenirs, bottle openers, fur coats.

On the ice the seal mothers keen for their young, they cry. Some females sit over the bloody remains of their pup for days.
As a mother and a Christian, I was deeply moved by this massacre. Sleep eluded me for nights. I knew I had borne witness to a slaughter of the innocents, a slaughter which desecrated my soul, my very existence. I remembered the birth of my own four children, remembered their soft warm bodies, their perfume, the wonder of their life.

How could I satisfy myself that my maternal feelings were any different from a seal's maternal feelings? There was an impossible logic gap which I could not surmount.

I asked myself if I could continue to live out my life and ignore what I had seen? Over the next 12 months I witnessed things that changed the course of not only my life, but the lives of other people. I learned the meaning of the words...to acquiesce is to condone.

I saw heavily pregnant mares trucked thousands of kilometers to abattoirs where they were slaughtered for the export market. Some of these pitiful creatures gave birth on the slaughter yard floor just before being killed.

I saw very young foals dragged away from their mothers who were to be killed for pet food. The foals met a similar fate.

I watched kangaroos shot dead or wounded with young joeys in their pouches. It has been estimated that 500,000 joeys die each year as part of the incidental kill of 3 million kangaroos and wallabies a year.

In Queensland I met a blind koala mother who managed to care for two cubs, her own and an orphan. The koala had been blinded when a bulldozer struck down her tree, knocking the marsupial and her cub to the ground.

Hundreds of koalas and their cubs die every year as their trees continue to be decimated. Disease is rife in their colonies.

I saw birds unable to fly, their wings clipped, their tiny limbs paralyzed from years of sitting in cages.

I saw the slaughter of dogs in the Philippines and Hong Kong for the human food table.

Eating meat became an impossibility as I was made aware of the dreadful conditions in abattoirs, the inhumanity of killing day old calves to satisfy consumer demand for veal. Baby lamb assumed a different meaning.

We rarely look at the gifts of the animal kingdom in this technological age where science, materialism and the promise of immortality are the Gods that we are asked to worship.

Daily we are cautioned not to feel, to deaden our hearts to the suffering of starving millions, the abuse of children in our society, the terrible violence that sweeps our streets.

Compassion, understanding and love of one another are not attributes we are encouraged to seek.

Some of us have asked Christian ministers and priests to pray for the animal kingdom who suffer most dreadfully in this age of emotional paralysis.

In several churches I have been told...“we don't pray for animals, we pray for humans.” The Christian church stands accused of hypocrisy, of practicing apartheid against the animal kingdom.

If the church will not speak out to protect God's creation, who will? Who will speak for those who cannot? Who will prevent humankind from sullying the sanctity of motherhood? Is there anything more sacred in our cycle of birth and death than the giving of life?

One needs to search for clues over the centuries to understand society's present death wish. It is easy to trace the diminishing influence of the feminine energies. For centuries women have been and are denied access to the most important arenas of society.

But perhaps the discrimination goes back to the concept of Mother Earth. Nature must be conquered, raped, plundered, tamed. Her explosion of life controlled to satisfy our so-called Divine right of dominion over the species.

Is mankind, and I use the word deliberately, afraid of the feminine influence? Does fear thrust away the beauty of the female gifts, nurturing, compassionate unselfish love? Does fear cause a turning away from the dark side of femininity, the sheer sexuality and life giving pulse of our energies?

Have women been denied equal status with men in the majority of Christian churches because of an unconscious male fear of our influence and its
Is there a link between the destruction of Mother Earth, her creatures and the suppression of the feminine?

If Jesus Christ walked the Earth today, what would He say when He saw the way we treat His Creation? Would He condone the silence of the Christian church and its congregations? Would He approve of the churches who only pray for humans?

Would anyone here, for example, take Christ on a tour through the Bosch animal house where 10,000 animals are imprisoned? Would they demonstrate to the Son of God the experiments carried out on the pitiful animals incarcerated in laboratories, caged, restrained for the term of their short, painful, pitiful life?

Shall we pause a moment and imagine the face of Christ as He witnessed a cat locked into a stereotaxic device, unable to move, imprisoned, mutilated, subjected to unspeakable misery. Sacrificed in the name of humanity.

Will we take Him into the places of solitary confinement where animals are locked away, driven mad with loneliness and deprivation of their emotional and social needs.

Would Christ agree that the human kingdom can only advance by using, abusing and torturing the other members of His precious Creation?

Would the man who gave up His life on the cross for the sins of humankind say it was okay to ignore His example and force the animal kingdom to pay the price of humanity's misguided and scientifically fraudulent quest for health and immortality?

How we have been taught to fear death! A human life is sacred, life at any cost, we dare not look through the glass darkly. For we would see reflected in the mirror the face of an uncivilized species, a cruel rapacious race of people frightened to speak out for a better world, a peaceful life, a chance to learn to love and take part in the oneness of our Creation.

This morning I ask you to remember the beauty of a bird flying free; the spirit of horses running wild; the comfort and love of your dog and cat; the loyalty and love shown by animals to their brother human.

I ask you to remember the sea creatures, dolphins surfing the ocean waves, whales playing in the ocean with their young, the humpbacks singing their wondrous songs.

Spend a moment thinking of the comfort that animals bring to the blind, the crippled, the lonely. Of the love that animals bring to children; let us think of the Capuchine monkeys who are trained to help the severely physically handicapped.

Can we give thanks for the love that animals show to one another, the dolphins who help each other give birth, the joy of a social group of monkeys, their gift of intelligence?

Let us give thanks for the tiger, the eagle, the wild creatures of all the continents and countries where they now exist in increasingly threatened habitats.

This morning we cannot forget the people throughout the Earth who work for a better world for animals and humans; for the people who care for the sick, abandoned and injured creatures; for the organizations and the members of the general public who have accepted their responsibilities and are helping to create a better world for all creatures.

Let us give thanks for Andrew and his ministry; for his courage and love of Mother Earth; for his congregation.

I pray for the mercy of God's love for the animal kingdom; for an end to their suffering; and I pray that the hearts of humankind will be opened to the beauty, the immeasurable magnificent beauty of the oneness and unity of His Creation.