Cassandra M. Giangrasso blesses a golden retriever named Cooper during a prayer service and animal blessing ceremony at The Spiritual Connection Center in Patchogue on Sunday, Oct. 11, 2015. (Credit: Steve Pfost)

A group of pets were on their best behavior at an outdoor religious service Sunday afternoon in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals.

Seven dogs and one cat attended The Spiritual Connection Center's first prayer and blessing ceremony in Patchogue.

Cassandra M. Giangrasso, who identifies as a Catholic minister, delivered a service in which she delivered the Lord's Prayer and asked God to grant the pets both health and peace. The animals were tethered on leashes, either in their owners' arms or basking in the day's sunshine, and they stayed calm during the service.

After the ceremony, Giangrasso blessed each pet individually, whispering a few words of encouragement and also offering the pets' owners blessings with holy water. She also passed out metal medallions engraved with the likeness of St. Francis.

Jessica Zerbo, 32, of West Babylon, said she found out about the event online and that she thought it was great when people opened their doors to animals. Her 6-month-old French bulldog, Max, was blessed for the first time.

"It's nice to know your dog is being watched over," Zerbo said. "You care about them as much as family."

Some owners in attendance had previous experience with pet blessings. Laura and Bill Linss, of Miller Place, said since they began blessing their five pets, the animals haven't fallen ill. Sunday, they brought their year-old Pomeranians, siblings Jupiter and Juno, to be blessed for the first time.

"I just want them to be protected from all kinds of sicknesses," said Laura Linss, 60. "I guess it is part of my religion. A blessing couldn't hurt, right?"

Giangrasso, founder of the Spiritual Connection Center, said she also is an intuitive counselor and metaphysician. Though the center has been open for two years, this is the first time it has held an animal blessing. Giangrasso said she greatly admired St. Francis, and was prompted by a spirit to hold the service a few months ago.

"I believe pets have souls. They're the closest things to God," Giangrasso said. "The compassion, the love, the loyalty they show for us is remarkable."

Donna Miano, of Holbrook, brought Dana, her 5-year-old black Labrador, to be blessed for the fifth year. Miano said she believes the blessings provide Dana with security.
"I know that she is one of God's creatures," said Miano. "By default, she [Dana] is religious. If I could take her to church every weekend, I would."