

Monastic Scribe XXXVII: October 14, 2022

AUTUMN LEAVES (AND COMES)

Here in the northern part of the country, we are accustomed to having four seasons of the year, each characterized by different weather patterns. We are now in Autumn (or Fall) with customary mild temperatures and a dramatic shedding of the tree leaves after changing many colors. Some people say this is their favorite time of the year. I have many mixed feelings. The weather is usually pleasant unless a hurricane comes by. And there is great beauty in the foliage change, though summers of drought, as this year, may impede a real color show. But, for me, this season also has a melancholy feeling to it. The beautiful flowers of summer are shriveling up. The trees begin to shed their leaves. All of this is a form of death.

I do not question death. It is really part of life. It is found throughout the cosmos. Stars must die to bring forth new stars. We proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus, and our future resurrection, as life through death, and not just life after death. Saint Benedict, in his Rule, advises us to keep death daily before our eyes. At my age this is not difficult to do. I hope I am ready to die – tomorrow, next week, next year. When the moment comes, perhaps I will be fearful but, right now, I tell God (and myself) that I am ready. In my mind, and sometimes in my heart, I am convinced that this sets me free to live more fully, strive to be more loving and compassionate, recognize my follies, be my true self, and give of myself as much as I can, blessed with both a lifetime of experience and now with a dearth of energy.

With nature I can learn how to die but also learn how to live. With all the technological tools we have, this sometimes is not clear to us. Nature teaches us so much if we allow ourselves to be open to it. I love to go on a walk and then sit and, at times, just look at the trees. They are our partners in life, fellow living creatures on this earth. Trees have much to teach us. We now know that they are not individuals but relate to each other in a forest. They feed each other.

Animals are, of course, our closest creatures full of life, warmth, love, kindness. Hildegard of Bingen tells us that it is God whom a human knows in every living thing. Every being is another Christ, sacred and revealing God to us. Meister Eckhart says that every creature is a word of God and a book about God. Saint Francis supposedly talked to the animals. So do I as I try to see them as subjects and not objects. Animals teach us to be open and sensitive. If you have a pet dog or cat, you know this already. Merton wrote that we are, first of all, part of nature, not apart from it, though we are a special part, that which is conscious of

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God. In solitude, he said, one is entirely surrounded by beings who perfectly obey God.

Nature brings healing through beauty. God is the source of beauty and is reflected in the creation. We instinctively know this as we see a hawk or eagle in flight. We see animals play with each other and teach us to be more playful too. The singing of birds delights us and lightens up our hearts. The graceful giants that we witness as whales in the sea are incredibly majestic. And all animals are sensuous and teach us that sensuality and spirituality are present together. Julian of Norwich said that “God is in our sensuality”.

We have to stop hurrying past all of this. We need to be present to the trees, to animals, to birds. Let them be and we just can just be with them. They will give us so much if we open our minds and hearts to their presence.

I am presently being inspired by a book I am reading, called “Backpacking with the Saints” by Belden C. Lane. The author describes his hiking, with his dog named Desert, in the Ozark mountains. As a former professor of theology at Saint Louis University he always takes along something to read. The readings he shares are largely from the Desert Fathers and Mothers but also from people like Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, mystics such as Hildegard and Julian, Rumi, Teilhard, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, and others. For me, Lane has brought these meditations, largely from the monastic tradition, to life as they corroborate what he perceives in nature. For him the mountains are his monastery which provides both a sense of community in the interdependence of all beings of life and a sense of solitude as he sits in quiet presence to God in creation. I wish I were younger to backpack in the mountains. But now I try to get out often and walk in the many large parks we have in Hingham and be open to my brother and sister creatures, including the trees. There is also the nearby ocean, ponds, bays and rivers to refresh me.

Do you think it is important to be close to nature? Have you experienced some noteworthy times and places that open you up to know the presence of God in your life? You can drop me a line at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.