

WITNESS STATEMENT OF FR. BILL CLARKE, S.J.

I first came to this Ignatian farm property in 1956 when I entered what was then St. Stanislaus Novitiate to do a three year formation program as the initial step towards becoming a Jesuit and a priest. Coming from the city of Toronto I did not at that time have much of an appreciation for the land but this gradually changed. As a novice, I walk, worked, played and prayed on this land which gradually revealed itself to me with all its beauty. Jesuit Brothers had been carefully tending these 600 acres since 1913 and I had the privilege of living and working and praying alongside some of these simple, hard-working, down to earth men of faith. It was they who helped me discover what a unique and sacred treasure this property really is.

I returned here in 1980 to join the Ignatius Farm Community, founded four years earlier by a Jesuit priest, Doug McCarthy, with the help of a married couple, Dick and Louise Anstett. Its mission was to welcome men and women unable to find their place in society, often resulting in periodic confinements in prisons or psychiatric hospitals; people wounded by misunderstanding and rejection from a society locked into a culture of competitiveness and greed. It was wonderful to experience how this property was becoming a place of welcome and refuge for people who did not necessarily share my particular religious faith and practice. This openness to others has continued to expand to welcome people from near and far, people of many different faith beliefs and religious practices.

Like me, most of the people who came to the Farm Community had little previous farming experience. I think it is safe to say that their woundedness as well as my own was not unrelated both to the woundedness of the earth and our disconnectedness from it. Whether we knew it or not, we were each in our own way coming back to the land to receive healing and strength from it. Perhaps a little story told to me by a missionary sister working in Brazil will help explain what I am trying to say.

One day a poor Brazilian campesino was conversing with this Canadian missionary. He was telling her how he was trying to scratch out a living for his large family from a small piece of land on a stony hillside. Having shared what a struggle it all was, he concluded by saying with a huge grin, "You know I feel sorry for the rich; they will never know the joy of keeping their children alive by the work of their own hands. I think that's why so many of them are so sad. They seem to receive the grace of God second hand." That fellow was offering us an insight into the suffering of our world today. Many people have chosen to move away from the land and millions more have been driven away from the land, that primary source of God's grace, resulting in terrible confusion about who we really are and why we are here. Furthermore in this alienation and confusion rather than respecting the earth, our source of life and our primary connection with the ultimate Source, we are in the process of threatening the very life of the earth. Thus the vicious circle; our wounded earth has fewer and fewer resources to satisfy our lust and greed and its ill health is making it less and less able to nurture us and mediate to us the grace of God. So we become increasingly alienated from the earth and thus from God, and so from ourselves and from one another. It is paramount for the well-being of the human

family that we protect sacred spaces where we can continue to enter into a life-giving communion with the earth.

Certainly, I did not come here with much conscious awareness of my need for healing. I was aware of a longing and need for community, and I came to help Doug and the others build community among us and for others. It gradually became clear that we were also entering into community with the animals and with the land itself and all that grows on it. The wounded people in the Farm Community helped me acknowledge my own woundedness and the various ways in which my mind and heart are closed. Being drawn into communion with the land and the animals began to draw me out of the alienation from myself that results for a failure to recognize my oneness with all of creation.

As a community of farmers, we began responding to the land's invitation to take better care of it, through such things as composting manure and reducing the use of herbicides and pesticides to the point where now the farm is certified organic. The more we cared for the land the more we discovered how the land was caring for us.

This power of the land to heal and give life I see verified over and over again at Loyola House, a retreat and training centre here on the property, where for several years now I have had the privilege of accompanying people on their spiritual journey. Each year hundreds of people from all over the world come here in search of personal formation, inner healing and growth. This land is a vital part of their experience. Here they have the time and encouragement to contemplate, that is to take a long loving look at the real.

They walk, jog, ski on the trails. They watch the wondrous transformations that take place in fields and woods through the changing seasons of the year. They hear the mysterious conversations of the bull frogs in the marshes, the mournful cooing of doves, the blissful melodies or shrill notes of orioles, cardinals, meadow larks and so many other song birds, the hooting of owls, and the howling of coyotes, the whispering love talk or raucous arguments between the wind and the trees. They take in the rich scents of apple blossoms, primroses and honeysuckle and the more subtle perfumes of plowed earth after a spring rain or of fresh cut hay. They experience the gentle welcome of cedar groves and the comforting solitude of dense bush where, without disturbing or being disturbed by other, they can sing out their joy and thanksgiving or scream out their angers and frustrations. They draw life and healing from the land and all that flourishes on it, offering back their fears and pains, their hopes and thankful praise and blessings. The healing and life-giving energy that they receive here is often linked to a deeper appreciation for the earth; this they carry with them back to their own corners of this precious earth in New Zealand, South Africa, Great Britain, China, Korea and so many other countries, as well as the various provinces and states of North America.

All of this is being put at risk by the increase development that is taking place in the area. Just last year a man who had been coming here for years told me that he is not going to return because the stillness for which he had been coming is being lost because of the surrounding development and increased traffic on the adjoining highway. He spoke with sadness of the way the sacred stillness of this place is being violated. Further, development would do irreparable damage to the sacred stillness of this place that has

become so important for the nurturing of the faith and religious practice of so many people from all over the world but especially for all those of nearby towns and cities who frequent this land on a regular basis.

On a more personal note, this land has been my place of prayer and spiritual nourishment for the past twenty-five years. One of the joys of living here on this land has been the opportunity to spend time in one of our three hermitages, my favourite being the Old Orchard Hermitage. In the early eighties with two tractors we dragged an abandoned shed from beside the main barn to one of the most isolated and beautiful spots on the farm. There we repaired and winterized it. This location had once been the original homestead of a piece of property recently added to the Ignatius farm. Only the foundations of the house and barn remain along with half a dozen apple trees and a lovely old border of lilacs. It is to this gracious haven that I withdraw for my annual eight days of prayer, rest and inner refreshment. I usually try to do this in mid-May when the lilac and apple trees are in blossom and the song birds are returning. This past spring the blossoms were unusually abundant and beautiful but it was only in early August that I was able to get free for this longed-for time of solitude.

As soon as I stepped through the gateway of the rail fence into the confines of this hermitage I breathed a deep sigh of gratitude. I never want to take for granted the gift of this place and the privilege it is to spend time here. As the week progressed gratitude continued to deepen in me, not just for the hermitage but for the entire farm and all that thrives on it. One still, clear night I happen to awaken about 4am so I went outside to

contemplate the stars. Looking into the sky my joy quickly drained away as I noticed how few stars were actually visible compared to when I began coming here more than twenty years ago; the darkness being bleached out by all the lights from the nearby city. I thought of the great beast of the Book of Revelation –“Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky...” (Rev 12:4). In fact, it is closer to two thirds of the stars that have been swept away by urban encroachment. (I just cannot understand why these commercial and industrial establishments need to leave their lights glaring all night long.) Then, beginning to listen for the crickets and night birds, I was even more shocked by the roar of the trucks moving up and down the highway two or three kilometers away. The constant droning of the traffic and factories has become a kind of white noise that during my busy times I only occasionally attend to. As the day dawned my contemplation turned to other changes that have taken place over these two decades such as the shocking diminishment in the number and species of song birds. At one time the meadows would be bustling with life, waving like hundreds of little flags the lovely black bobolinks with their bright yellow and white trim, and their happy bubbling song. Now one is lucky to see and hear three or four of them in a ten acre field.

These days of solitude could have easily ended in discouragement were it not for those half dozen ancient apple trees. These trees are certainly showing their age, one has its largest branch cracked off. The one that arches over the entrance to the hermitage has its trunk so rotted away that it is a total mystery how it continues to stand, and not only stand but continue to produce. Each one of these trees was laden with fruit and each one a different variety, to be sure very small and with plenty of worms, but beautiful to behold.

I especially enjoy eating from these trees because I taste flavours that remind me of my childhood and not just because of the worms. Several of these varieties like russets, for example, are no longer to be found in our own orchard or in the markets. These courageous trees are refusing to give up. It is as though they sense that with their death a precious heritage will be lost forever. They are noble sentinels of hope witnessing to the enduring victory of life over death; saying to us, "We're not giving up so neither should you". They are also saying, enough is enough; please stop the development while there yet remains some peace and stillness to nourish the many pilgrims who come here to pray and get in touch with themselves and the God within them and around them.

Life is indeed stronger than death. I am also reminded of this truth when I go to the nearby Mary Mount cemetery to pray at the grave of a dear friend whose body was buried there twelve years ago. This cemetery is an important place of stillness where I can be in communion with Byron and other loved ones who have past into the fullness of life. I am always moved and encouraged to see other people there tending the graves of their dear ones. I cannot bear to think of how the stillness of this sacred space would be destroyed if a commercial development such as Wal-Mart were to be established right next to its boundary.