

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GREG KENNEDY

Besides a handful of anomalies, such as St. Francis of Assisi, the accepted history of Christianity contains little that would associate the faith with the natural world. This is not merely unfortunate, it is, more importantly, false. For it is the Gospels themselves--the compiled heart of her religion--that tells the Christian her God so loved the world that He sent His only son to save it. Christianity, if only we take its scriptures seriously, was evidently born of a divine love for the goodness and beauty of the earth, together with an equally divine desire to preserve these same qualities. The practicing Christian, therefore, necessarily takes pains to keep the earthly inheritance entrusted to her in a state conformable to her God's intention for creation. By acting to save the intended goodness of the world, the Christian participates in God's founding love and concern for that which He has created. She becomes Christian, in other words, insofar as she enters into the divine work of maintaining the beauty of all creation.

For the Christian, work has pre-eminent sanctity, derived from the unconditional holiness of God's own creative action. The universe did not simply appear spontaneously, but rather took shape in the prolonged effort of a beneficent and practical will. If God himself deemed work valuable enough to engage in it Himself, no true Christian can rightfully wish to shirk it. Second only to creation as such, the work of procuring food is primal to the Christian's faith. The Catholic tradition revolves around the Mass, which can be seen as the celebratory ritual of preparing and consuming a sacred and sanctifying meal. During this meal God becomes present in its simple alimentary components. This happens, according to Catholic teaching, not just in some figurative sense. The bread and

wine of the Mass literally embody God. These products made "from the work of human hands" are at the same time God's own creative and sustaining work. This implies that God dwells in the careful cultivation of the earth. Through this in-dwelling He promises to spiritually nourish those who help in his work. Done within this mysterious and sacred context, the practice of agriculture is a fundamental expression of Christian faith.

It is on behalf of this expression that I desire to speak. My spiritual connections to the land of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph are primarily agricultural. I first arrived on what the resident priests call 'the hill' during the autumn harvest of 2005, beckoned, it seemed to me, by a voice that intoned religious vocation. Only three months prior to my arrival I was quite convinced that destiny had arranged my life to quietly pass within a Trappist monastery. The Trappists are a branch of Roman Catholic monks living in the tradition established by St. Benedict approximately fifteen hundred years ago. Benedict understood the monastic way of life as a reliable avenue to approach God, so long as its course ran true to its three orientating directives: prayer, study and manual labor.

Historically, Trappists have distinguished themselves not only as accomplished singers of the Gregorian chant, but also as exceptional farmers. Simple prayerful work, especially in field and forest, work that engages the body in its own humble need for sustenance is essential to the Benedictine vocation. My own attraction to the Trappists grew out of this insightful wisdom.

Unfortunately, time has compelled the Trappists to stray from the straight course of their ideals. Their aging population, which fails to refresh itself with young members, leaves the Order incapable of undertaking the physical rigors of farming. As a result most of the monasteries have had to sell the farm. However, there remains one Canadian Trappist monastery still financed by its agricultural endeavors, located in Rogersville, New Brunswick. There, at Our Lady of Calvary Abbey, I thought I would spend my life in the peaceful pursuits of praying and haying.

For a manifold of reasons I found myself mistaken; my vocation, I discovered, does not reside within the monastic enclosure. One important factor that urged me towards this discovery was an insuppressible discomfort with the style of agriculture operating at Calvary. The high level of mechanization, the dependence of poisonous petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides, and, foremost, the factory method of poultry production all prevented me from tending to the true spiritual essence of farming. It requires an extraordinary strength of soul to encounter God within the industrialized context of what has become known as conventional, agri-business farming. This strength, I must confess, does not yet belong to me. My work on the land in Rogersville, due in part to my own spiritual weaknesses, distanced me from my Creator God.

My quest for religious life and spiritual authenticity diverted me away from the confines of a monastic calling to the cosmopolitan breadth of the Jesuit Order. The Jesuits, contrary to the Trappists, have few historical connections to farming. They are, in fact, predominantly urban in orientation, which may also make them one of the more

progressive Orders within the Catholic Church. A wide variety of ministries and apostolates results from their generally open, progressive and cosmopolitan character.

Prior to my Trappist exploits, I had learned of their ecological work in Guelph, some years before I began to hearken to a religious vocation. Through a family relation who belonged to the Ignatius Farm Community Shared Agriculture (CSA), I knew of their initiatives in organic farming. I also had gleaned a vague notion of their Ecology Project, which, by means of spiritual retreats and education, aims at revealing and celebrating the all-too-often implicit, if not outrightly ignored, significance of nature to Christianity. The Project intends to remind us of our divinely instituted role as stewards of Creation; it reiterates the basic theological truth that in coming to earth as a man for human salvation, God implicated all of creation in His work of redemption. As Christians we must believe that our salvation cannot be separated from the spiritual fulfillment of the inherent goodness and beauty of the earth. Every action perpetrated in opposition to the inalienable worth of nature directly opposes Christ's messianic plan.

Careful, compassionate and generous cultivation of the earth so as to assist with gratitude in the procurement of the daily bread that gives us life is thus one of the most fundamental and concrete of all Christian actions. Christ came to feed the hungry, and although as God He knew that this could not be accomplished by bread alone, his incarnate humanity taught Him that it of necessity included wholesome food that bestows health on the body.

Because my coming to the Ignatius Jesuit Centre was, so I believe, providential, there lies in it more than I can explain or even intuit. Clearly, though, I was drawn in large part by its spiritual disciplines of organic farming. I came with hopes for Jesuit possibilities, but it was the reality of Ignatius Farm that initially invited me and has subsequently continued to welcome me. Fortunate enough to live on the land itself, I have been involved with it since my arrival every day in some capacity or other: as a picker and pruner in its orchards; as a farmhand in its fields; as a grateful guest in its woods during periods of repose. All these activities nurture my spirit, allowing it to strengthen and mature along the lines that God has drafted for it. As an aspirant to the Society of Jesus, I feel specially placed when laboring in the orchards, where before me hundreds of Jesuit novices also reached and plucked the fruits of the land throughout nearly the entire span of the twentieth century. There I experience myself as a bridge, albeit a very small footbridge, for the past.

At the same time, however, I know myself as a conduit to the future, in that the land now, since its specific dedication to organic agriculture five years ago, more closely approximates God's salvific plan for the earth. I cannot exactly predict what effects large-scale commercial encroachment would have on the land and the spiritual practices of agriculture that it supports. Certainly it would benefit neither. The increased noise, commotion, light and ground pollution from the huge proposed parking lots and 'mega-store' would detract from the natural functioning of the land and its species, and by consequence hinder its ability to spiritually nourish me. With the cancer of unchecked consumerism on its border, the land will inevitably suffer in health. Since the depths

of my conscience convince me that this consumerism increases in direct opposition to God's merciful work of salvation, I too suffer from commercial expansion, though in my case most remarkably in spirit.

The grace of spiritual farming and the gluttony of mass market consumerism, which survives on the rapid production and consumption of objects prematurely, copiously and violently torn from the womb of the earth, are incommensurable. The latter, unfortunately, tends first to overshadow, then finally to blot out the former. One needs nature to farm. Consumerism, however, strains to commercialize all of nature through its manufacturing prowess. It is hostile to the humility of spiritual farming. For this humility I will continue to work and pray, hoping it will gather all of us into our proper participation with God in His beautiful creation of salvation.