

Monks in the Wilderness

It is early April in Vermont, and gentle fluffy snow is still falling on a landscape that has been covered with white since early November. Yet if we pay attention, under the snow we can hear water running where the old streams had frozen, and something in the air is already announcing a new season: swallow scouts, a few hardy robins, and other wild creatures begin to appear after months of quiet cold in the northern woods. We brothers are outside too!!

We are gathering maple sap in one of the Priory's sugar bushes. Later, we will be boiling down the sap until it becomes maple syrup. There is always an excitement as we smell the sweet scent, and see the hot steam pouring out of the sugar-house! Our hearts are happy and we smile. We love this land that we call home. It is for us a sacred ridge nestled in the Green Mountain National Forest.

Since we live a simple monastic life, without external ministries or apostolates, our life is interwoven with this rugged landscape. Our life flows with the rhythms of her seasons; and our spirituality is strongly marked by her gifts and challenges. We also have a part to play –as in every relationship- with how her wonders flourish, and in how her beauty and health remain precisely beautiful and healthy.

Some of our older brothers still remember people who came by in the early years of the monastery. When they beheld the swamps surrounding the old farmhouse where the monks lived, they remarked: “Why did you ever come to such a God forsaken place?” Now after many years of work and respectful care, visitors cast their eyes on the simple wooden monastery between two ponds, gracefully reflecting the mountains across the valley, and they exclaim: “How beautiful! This place is a blessing!” And we agree.

For several decades we have been a “Tree Farm” with the brothers engaged in forestry work. A professional forester has accompanied this journey over the years, as we have taken old or diseased trees, made room to encourage certain species to grow, tried to enhance animal life, and continue to follow a Forestry Management Plan to keep our woods young, healthy and thriving. This is simply an attempt, as monks, to heed the Gospel call to risk the adventure to love the “other,” and in that “other” to recognize the presence of Christ.

During our morning prayer, every so often we listen to the poignant and yet empowering words of the 19th century Native American Chief Seattle: “If we sell you our land, love it like a newborn child loves his mother's heartbeat!” It is only through abiding in this love which honors the mutuality of our belonging to our environment, that geography becomes a sacrament. Then our hearts, and our very selves can recognize the grace of God flowing through the forests, fields, meadows, and waters of this wilderness. Our vow of stability, which offers the opportunity for rooting ourselves in one another's life and love as a monastic brotherhood, also gifts us with a very privileged space that we call home. As we begin this 21st century, it is an essential spiritual practice to perceive the blessing of life and creation as a dynamic epiphany of joy and mystery. It is our God aching to become present in our midst.

As springtime approaches and we anticipate with enthusiasm the riot of color in our flowerbeds, as well as the gentle and shy apparitions of our “wild” neighbors in their furs, feathers, or scales, we are aware that they also have hearts. Our life as monastics can also be grounded in a purity of heart that becomes an alternative to a culture where both people and nature have become disposable commodities, or 'collateral damage' of our insatiable addiction to consume. The war we are waging in the Middle East is not that separate from the gutting of our environmental legislation and our unilateral withdrawal from International Agreements to protect the Environment; both are insane

expressions of our violence and our destructive drives.

Last week we celebrated the Feast of the Annunciation, and later this month we will be celebrating the Resurrection of Christ. The buds in the treetops are eloquent carriers of New Life, and the Liturgy will reassure us that our God is the God of Easter. In face of such tragic events as the waging of war in our name, and its destruction of life, (both human life, created in the image and likeness of God, and also the fragile ecosystems of life in Iraq) the words of the book of Deuteronomy echo within us: 'I set before you this day both life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live, loving your God, listening to the One who calls you, and cleaving to the One who made you. Then I will bless you in the land that you are entering to live in.' (Deut. 30)

It is in this land of blessing, our home, that we hope to nurture life: among ourselves as brothers; with our guests, who as Saint Benedict says, 'are never lacking in the monastery' (RB 53); and with a few chickens, lambs, rabbits, pigs, a llama, a donkey, and apple orchards. We are trying to listen deeply to what these creatures teach us about life and about God. We will be growing vegetables in our garden, and we will be planting flowers in the flowerbeds. And as we plant these seeds, we want to be sowing the seeds of hope and peace. May we become that seed that has to fall into the ground and die, with our God risking the gift of life, in order to sprout and blossom beyond the winter of our times.

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Brothers Michael, Richard and Columba bringing in the harvest

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