

Spirituality: Source of Spirit and Life

“Feed my Lambs. Tend my Sheep, Feed my Sheep” Shepherding God’s Creation: A Post-Easter Reflection

Adjacent to our Mother House in Angers is Balzac Park. Those who live in Angers and those who have visited the Mother House have had the opportunity to spend time in this beautiful 46 hectare stretch of land reclaimed in the past two decades to host a diversity of flora and fauna in a protected environment. Every part of the park is well signed. One of the signs lets the observant visitor know that the long grass is not a result of neglect but is, rather, a deliberate attempt to provide sustenance and a nurturing environment for all the creatures that inhabit that section of the park. In this part of the world, we have the resources to shepherd God’s creation with an abundance of fresh water and all kinds of food.

Not every part of our planet is as fertile as the Loire Valley and its environs, however. Some of us live in water deprived regions and we know only too well that drought and climate change are affecting many species of the Earth community, including its human inhabitants. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that, in 2010, 925 million people or 13.6 percent of the estimated world population of 6.8 billion were undernourished, with most of the undernourished living in developing countries¹. To shepherd God’s creation means to attend to the pain of the hungry and malnourished of our planet, so that *“all may have life, and have it abundantly.”* Let us open ourselves to a gospel story that has the potential to deepen our commitment to ecological conversion in a way that brings life to all.

The Gospel Story (John 21: 15-17)

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter: ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes... you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him: ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time, Jesus said to him: ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him: ‘Yes...you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him: ‘Tend my sheep’. He said to him the third time: ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him: ‘...you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him: ‘Feed my sheep’ ”.

It is instructive to look at the context of this story. This last chapter of John’s gospel begins with a feeding story. Jesus has been raised from the dead. He appears to his disciples on the lake shore and hosts a meal of fish and bread for his disciples. He takes the bread and gives it to them. He then does the same with the fish. His actions evoke the feeding story in John 6, where Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, distributes it to the seated crowd, and then does the same with the fish. The Earth elements of bread and fish are integral to both stories. The materiality of the bread, fruit of the Earth and work of human hands, and the materiality of the fish, from the water that sustains so much life, reveal the sign that

¹ See <http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>

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Christians came to know as Eucharist². In John 21, the materiality of the bread and fish reveal to the disciples the resurrected Jesus. It is in this context that Jesus asks Peter the three-fold question: 'Do you love me?' At this point, you may like to re-read the passage, attending to every word. Consider the shift from 'feed' to 'tend' and back to 'feed' and the interplay of 'sheep' and 'lambs'. The Greek verb 'to tend' is closely related to the word for 'sheep' and could well be translated as 'to shepherd'. There is more to tending than feeding. Put yourself into the skin of each character in the narrative, including the sheep and the lambs. Identify with each one in turn.

There is layer upon layer of meaning in this story. From one perspective, it is an invitation to Peter to reverse his earlier three-fold denial of Jesus. From another perspective, it is a reminder that all creatures are sustained by the fruits of the Earth, which must be treated with respect: among the echoes from the feeding story of John 6 is Jesus' instruction to the disciples to gather up the fragments, so that nothing will be lost. From yet another perspective, it offers a model of leadership that has to do with both feeding and tending, a model that is inclusive of all, the young and the old (lambs and sheep). While the focus of John's Jesus is on his followers, our emerging ecological consciousness enables us to recognize the source of the symbolism and to extend its embrace beyond the human to the more-than-human Earth community.

SME's Commentary

SME has something to say about this text. We now turn to her ever so brief, but potent commentary on this formative text: "*Jesus doesn't say to Peter: 'Govern, be Master,' but uses the word 'Feed'. This means, 'prepare pasturage, give food to your lambs and your sheep'.*"³

Peter was the recognized leader among the disciples of Jesus. SME makes the point that this does not give him a license to dominate or lord it over others. Once again, her words lead us into the materiality of her experience of growing up in a rural setting, close to nature which was part of her daily life. Her interpretation of Jesus' words to Peter, in John 21, could well form the basis for our approach to the whole of the Earth community. We are called to nurture others and care for them, not to dominate other people or indeed any part of creation. So much of the damage to our planet and the uneven distribution of its resources derive from the mastery of the few over the many, and the mastery of humans over the rest of creation. Ecological conversion calls us to kinship with the rest of creation.

Towards Ecological Conversion

- Let us share stories of feeding and of tending the Earth community (our own stories, or those we have heard).
- Let us share the steps we are taking towards ecological conversion.
- In light of the Eucharistic resonances in John 21, how can we make our Eucharistic celebrations and our Eucharist-centred lives more inclusive of the more-than-human Earth community?

² Recall the words of Thomas Gleb: "*A thing reveals a sign and a sign keeps on revealing other things*" cited in the earlier Ecological Conversion Reflection No. 2.

³ *Conferences*, Ch. 5:8, pp. 55-56.