

## THOUGHTS FROM THE RHINELAND

### CHRIST, THE MASTER GARDENER

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When the risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday, she mistook him for a gardener. Many of his disciples, of course, were likewise unable to recognize Jesus in his resurrected state: the disciples on the road to Emmaus mistook him for a fellow traveler; at the seashore, Peter and company saw a man intent on sharing breakfast. In these cases, Jesus was confused with, as it were, “just some guy.” When Mary Magdalene encounters him, on the other hand, she perceives not just some guy: she perceives a gardener. Now, perhaps her mistake is simply the effect of location (John tells us in his gospel that Jesus’ tomb was in a garden), but perhaps there was a plausible similitude between our Lord and the gardener she supposed she saw.

Drawing from the gospels, we have come to ascribe many “professional” titles to Christ: teacher, for example, or physician. By his own self-description, the title of shepherd is particularly notable. The Christian faithful are placed under the care of pastors (literally, shepherds). Indeed, John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation on priestly formation bears the title *Pastores dabo vobis* (“I will give you shepherds”), alluding to a promise God made through the prophet Jeremiah (3:15). We are frequently reminded of Christ’s role as the Good Shepherd, who appoints others to share in his pastoral office so that his flock will always be under watchful and solicitous eyes.

Yet comparatively little attention is paid to Christ's identity as the Master Gardener. This is surprising, given the frequency of horticultural allusions and images in scripture, especially in Jesus' own parables.

#### SOWING THE SEED

Christ tells the parable of the sower who sows his seed. Some of the seed falls on the path, some on rocky soil, some among thorns, and some on good soil. The seed, he tells us, is the word of God, which germinates and grows according to the dispositions of those in whom it is planted. Our Lord is no parsimonious sower. He scatters the seed of his word anywhere and everywhere, in season and out of season.

For an ordinary farmer, prudence would suggest planting the right kind of seed in the right kind of soil at the right time. Anyone who's read the instructions on a package of seeds has been bombarded with instructions: *in Zone 7, plant in well-drained soil in mid-April, spacing seeds four inches apart, one-half inch deep.* Unlike us mere mortal farmers, God, who made the seed and made the soil, has no need for instructions. He scatters his word wherever and whenever he wants, and this is never without effect.

A couple years ago, I was eating an orange and spitting out the seeds when a whim hit me (as whims often do). Why not plant these and see if they grow? Sure enough, after a couple weeks, a few seeds had sprouted. Within a few months, they were large enough and strong enough to transplant into a larger pot. One of them I've since given away (a friar's cell can only house a limited number of plants, after all). The other is still sitting on a windowsill and growing quite happily. Dominican itinerancy generally works against dragging a tree around with me for the rest of my life, though, so I've begun to think about who will take care of it when I am assigned away from the Dominican House of Studies after my



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priestly ordination. It's come a long way in two years, and I would hate to see it perish for lack of attention.

Such as it is, my solicitude for this aspiring orange tree is a shadow of the care Christ has for the word he has sown in each of us. It can take root in the most unlikely places, at the most unlikely times, in the most unlikely people, with the most unlikely results. Sometimes the seed yields a blade of grass, sometimes a tree. Sometimes the growth is vigorous, sometimes it moves in fits and starts. In any case, Christ, the Master Gardener, knows what he's doing.

I used to see in the parable of the sower an exhortation for us to be the "good soil," in which a seed can easily sprout and grow to maturity and bear fruit. Unfortunately, it's not in our power to become fertile soil by a simple act of will. If that were what God expected of us, then the sower in the parable would have been

more judicious about where he planted: rewarding the good soil for its fertility, and forsaking the bad soil for its corruption.

A more hopeful reading is that the Lord is repeatedly casting his seed broadly. Consider the parable closely: nowhere is the seed without effect. Even when it is trampled underfoot, it feeds the birds. Christ himself explains that the birds stand for the devil who “takes away the word from their hearts” (Luke 8:12). Even if his word does not germinate (this time), it still convicts the devil of his own disobedience. Although the seed scattered on rocky ground withers for lack of moisture the decayed remains of the plant will enrich the soil for the next seed that lands there. Nowhere is the seed without effect.

#### TENDING THE VINE

Some plants require the active care of someone with a green thumb. Others seem to grow effortlessly in the wild and require no attention. No plant, however, grows without being provided for in some way. Even the most vigorous plant will perish without the appropriate amount of water and sunlight.

The parable of the sower reminds us that it is not sufficient simply for the seed to sprout where it is sown. Without the necessary attention, even the most promising seedling can wither, but with the proper care, the delicate, too, can be brought to healthy maturity. Christ has come not only to sow the seed, but to care for what is growing. This is the mysterious work of grace.

If we consider the growth of a plant over its entire lifetime, we’re apt to imagine a neat, seamless trajectory of growth and development—from seed to seedling to sapling to tree. It is easy to miss the many changes and crises the plant weathers as it continues to grow: enduring extreme temperatures, surviving drought, shedding leaves, growing new buds, losing branches to high winds, and so on. Plants survive difficulties to which we are largely oblivious, thanks to the providential care of God who

clothes each one with its proper beauty. And as Christ reminds us, if this his how God cares for mere plants, how much more does he care for us.

God's providential care does not guarantee a trouble-free existence, for us no less than for plants. Christ the Master Gardener sometimes shapes us by means of the most trying experiences. We may experience long periods of dryness in prayer. We may have to tolerate dark nights and cold winters in the soul. We may experience the pain of loss when something to which we had become attached is pruned from us. Our good works may wither like leaves on a tree. Our best efforts may yield meager fruit, or none at all.

None of these difficulties that we might encounter is wasted. It could be that God is preparing us for something greater. Just as the plant that is pruned grows more vigorously and more fully, so too the Master Gardener can withhold something from us for a time to make us more receptive to his gifts when he bestows them. If aridity in prayer makes us seek God with greater resolve; if consciousness of our sins makes us more desirous of God's mercy; if the failure of our own efforts makes us more dependent on God's grace, then the difficulties we endure are not for naught.

It's a little known fact that the red and white poinsettias that adorn our churches and homes at Christmas time are not flowers, properly speaking, but differently colored leaves (or "bracts"). During my first year at the Dominican House of Studies, I was responsible for arranging flowers in the main chapel on Sundays and feast days. While cleaning up after the Christmas season that year, a whim hit me (as, I mentioned, they often do). It seemed a shame to throw these perfectly good poinsettias out. So I took several pots up to my cell. Within a few weeks, a majority of the leaves had shed, and I realized why most people promptly dispose of them after Christmas. But they were still alive. Not terribly beautiful, but alive. A little trimming brought them back to a manageable size, and in time, new leaves started to sprout.

When the fall came around, another problem presented itself. You see, those brightly colored bracts don't just happen spontaneously.

They only emerge as a response on the plant's part when it receives diminishing sunlight. It requires several consecutive weeks of long, dark nights before the green leaves give way to white and red bracts (this is why poinsettias "flower" at Christmas time, when the nights are longest). In their natural habitat, nearer the equator, nature provides the long nights. In Washington, the night has to be imposed somewhat artificially. I constructed a large cardboard box to place over the plants in the evening and would remove it some twelve hours later. After several weeks of this routine, sure enough, the new leaves came out red rather than green.

It's something of a mystery why long, dark nights would give way to something so remarkable and beautiful, but that's just the way it is with these plants. Master Gardener that he is, Christ knows that's the way it is with us sometimes, too. Sometimes to attain what God has in store for us, it's necessary to endure lengthy periods of darkness and difficulty. He hasn't abandoned us in these times. Indeed, he may be the one casting the darkness over us, but only because he knows the beauty that will eventually be manifested.

#### LABORERS FOR THE HARVEST

Priests and those aspiring to the priesthood are frequently reminded of their duty to shepherd those entrusted to their care. After the resurrection, Christ told Peter three times: "Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed by sheep" (John 21:15-17). Peter gave much the same exhortation to the elders (the *presbyteroi*, or priests) of his day: "Tend the flock of God in your midst, overseeing it not by constraint, but willingly, as God would have it" (1 Peter 5:2). The sheep belong to Christ, the Chief Shepherd, but he has entrusted their care to others.

This is well and good, but today few of us have firsthand knowledge of what it is to be a shepherd. We would do well, from

time to time, to think of ourselves as apprentices to the Master Gardener.

*We sow the seed we've been given to sow.* The seed, which is the saving word of God, is not of our making, but it's the seed we've been given to sow. It has infinite potential to transform lives when it takes root, and so it deserves to be scattered liberally. In speaking of the office of preaching, the *Code of Canon Law* reminds us that "the people of God are first brought together by the word of the living God, which it is certainly right to require from the mouth of priests" (CIC 762).

*We nourish the seed and wait for growth.* It can take the seed a long time to germinate. As the parable of the sower reminds us, some seedlings don't survive to maturity, but that's no cause for despair, because new seeds are constantly being sown. Eventually, the right kind of seed meets the right kind of soil, and a vigorous plant emerges. From our view of the landscape, we can be surprised by which seeds thrive, and which ones don't, but it only goes to show that the Master Gardener has a plan for his garden that we can't fathom.

*We tend the plant.* This side of heaven, no plant leads a trouble-free existence. Priests take on the role of caring for what has been planted—watering, feeding, and pruning. The sacraments, of course, are the principal means of tending the plant. But priests should not neglect to intercede with the Master Gardener by their own prayers. We are reminded of the gardener who pleaded with his master on behalf of the languishing fig tree: "Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future" (Luke 13:8-9).

May Christ, the Master Gardener, grant his priests the grace and strength to be diligent apprentices in his garden.

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