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Simplicity, Sustainability, and a Greening of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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“Simplicity, Sustainability, and a Greening of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition”

I would like to preface my paper by explaining that this essay is in part academic and in part anecdotal, although, from my perspective, the two need not be mutually exclusive. A unique Service Learning experience last May has crystallized my personal reflections on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, as well as clarified my literary scholarship in the field of American environmental writing. Having presented a version of this paper at an interdisciplinary conference, “Global Gateways and Local Foodways,” held at New York University, I continue to develop this paper by preparing it for publication. And so I begin:

One year after I began taking the Presidential Seminar, a group of Sacred Heart University students asked me to accompany them on a week-long mission trip to a sustainable farm in West Virginia. As a young professor who has difficulty saying “no,” I responded with an enthusiastic “yes,” agreeing to spend six days and five nights as a faculty advisor on the very rural Nazareth Farm. Energized by my recent readings about Catholic social teachings and ecological ethics, I figured that this living and learning experience would empower students and me to practice the *Cura Personales* (care of the whole person). The proposed service-learning trip to Nazareth Farm seemed appealing to my teaching and scholarly interests in American literature, spirituality, and the environment. As my work had become focused on farming and food, I concluded that there existed no better way to understand sustainability than to live it.

Founded in 1979 by Bishops Frank Harrison and Joseph Hodges, Nazareth Farm operates according to Four Cornerstone principles of “Community,” “Prayer,” “Service,” and “Simplicity.” I would argue that these ideals correspond nicely to the Common Core questions that students explore through Sacred Heart’s Human Journey curriculum. As a ninety-eight acre

farm located in economically challenged Doddridge County, West Virginia, Nazareth consists of several staff members and numerous volunteers who repair homes, cook meals, and work alongside the larger community to empower the disenfranchised people of Appalachia. Founded on a philosophy of sustainability, Nazareth remains true to its ecologically conscious principles: those inhabiting the farm grow their own food, compost everything, waste next to nothing, and use very little. Conscious of conserving natural resources and spending only that which remains within the limited budget, Nazareth staff and volunteers limit light usage, restrict the use of running water, and avoid alcohol. Through collaborative and clean living, the individuals at Nazareth Farm work together to respect each other, to appreciate the natural world, and to show devotion to God.

This environmentally conscious Catholic community is rooted in the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, a nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist who first sparked my interests in literature and the environment. In *Walden* and other key texts, Thoreau focuses on wilderness, escapism, and self-reliance (a term created by his predecessor, Ralph Waldo Emerson). I had long thought of Thoreau as a staunch individualist, which he is to a certain extent, but Nazareth opened my eyes to how nicely Thoreau's ideals complement the Catholic "emphasis on community and love" (Roche 16). While incorporating Emersonian and Thoreauvian ideas of simplicity, the focus of the farm remains communal. Though the words of Thoreau are inscribed on its walls, Nazareth isn't exactly Walden Pond, or at least one does have a traditionally transcendentalist experience on the farm. Solidarity matters more than self-reliance, I think, as everyone and everything seems interconnected; in this way, Nazareth Farm is very ecological in nature.

Recent scholars of literature, culture, and the environment have sought to locate within Thoreau's writings a proto-ecological ethic; rather than focus on reading the Transcendentalists as detached nature writers who anthropomorphize the nonhuman world, Lawrence Buell and others have reread *Walden* and other seminal texts as works in which the human observer de-centers him or herself in favor of a more earth-centered understanding. William C. French does something similar when he notes that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition looks beyond a "subject-centered orientation" to embrace a "creation-centered paradigm" (133). Shifting focus away from the self leads to an appreciation for the other, both human and nonhuman, which epitomize the message of Christ. Moreover, a pivotal part of humbling oneself before God involves caring for the natural world.

I argue that by promoting Christian humility and Thoreauvian simplicity as pious paths toward ecological sustainability, Nazareth Farm highlights the centrality of environmental ethics to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. At the same time, the farm lacks a fully developed sacramental character, which allows human beings to experience the presence of God and Jesus in all things of this world, including food and drink (Roche 21). Through the excessive restriction of material pleasures like eating and drinking, Nazareth offers an experience that seems more aesthetic than it does sacramental. Although "rigorous fasting" (Clark 207) does not figure into the farm's spiritual exercises or dietary practices, Nazareth does encourage its staff and volunteers to live on as little as possible. Unlike the abundance meals enjoyed in the Presidential Seminar, as well as throughout my week-long experience at Collegium, food is not at all plentiful on the farm where the group shares everything. Nazareth commits itself to the alleviation of local poverty, in particular, and thus encourages its staff to experience this hunger.

I certainly did not starve at Nazareth Farm, and even gained an appreciation for the sacred preparation and service of food. In a 1995 series of Pastoral Letters, the Catholic Bishops of Appalachia wrote extensively about the Christian ethic at play in sustainable agriculture: “[an important first step] is for a community to grow its own food, or at least as much as possible, and to do so in a way which does not harm the land or its people” (*At Home in the Web of Life*, 85). While Nazareth remains true to its sustainable principles, the farm falls short from my perspective of allowing human beings to participate fully in the Sacramental experience so central to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The CIT allows for a coexistence of ascetic and sacramental practices, particularly in relation to food and drink, and a great deal of scholarship exists on the intersections between fasting and feasting. If we look to literature, my field, we see this coexistence: in his prologue to the classic medieval text, *The Canterbury Tales* (1400), Geoffrey Chaucer identifies two types of Christians: the ascetic “Parson” who personifies piety by denying the self of material goods; the sacramental “Franklin” who sees God in all things by relishing food, wine, and earthly pleasures.

Scholars of Early Christian culture, history, and literature have long expressed interest in sacred rituals that involve both feasting and fasting; however, ever since the 1985 publication of Carolyn Bynum’s book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, the fascination with food has flourished. In his study of *Feasting, Fasting, and the Discovery of the New World*, Brian Fagan examines Judeo-Christian dietary principles and practices. He argues that local fisherman played a more pivotal, though less acknowledged, role in founding the New World and the discovery of the Americas than did those grand explorers and colonialists who often receive the credit (xii). Fish functioned not only as a key food for their livelihood, but also as a crucial Christian symbol, for early explorers; as far back as

Christ's life, fish held a sacred space (4). Fagan focuses on how fasting became, for Jews and Christians, an act through which worshippers "atoned for their sins" following the Fall of Adam and Eve in *Genesis* and the Garden of Eden (13).

Material pleasures like eating, drinking, and sexual activity were forbidden on Nazareth Farm, as the staff trained volunteers to practice disciplined dieting and real self-restraint. On one particular occasion, I happened to indulge in an apple, which I didn't fully realize at the time had been reserved for a community pile. Nobody caught me eating the forbidden fruit, but I feared that my indulgence would somehow be met with punishment. In this instance and at other moments throughout the week, I felt much like Eve sinning in the Garden. Fagan looks at an Early Christian belief that fasting gave the body more lightness and energy, increased the strength of the soul, calmed the mind, as well as inhibited sexual activity (16). Similar to other scholars, like Gillian Clark, Fagan finds parallels between the disciplined behaviors of Early Christian fasters and elite athletes (14). His book goes on to examine the growth of "Meatless diets," especially in the Benedictine Christian communities (22). This area interests me not only in relation to Nazareth Farm, as some there encouraged vegetarianism, but also in relation to my own scholarship on vegetable diets and raw foods.

Over the past year or so, my thinking about these dynamics has surely shaped my current project, "Fasting & Feasting in the Garden of American Naturalism," which has three goals: 1.) to rethink the traditional construction of American naturalism as a predominantly urban genre of fiction by using ecology to enrich our readings of this period's nonfiction and poetry; 2.) to reconcile a counter-narrative of culturally disordered eating and self-restraint on the one hand with the ecological ethics so central to naturalism's politically radical sentiments on the other; 3.) to illustrate how the often overlooked tradition of African American naturalism

challenges the masculine white rhetoric of supreme physical conditioning and bodily fitness inherent in the culture and politics of Progressive era America.

Too often viewed as aesthetically inferior to Realism, the movement that precedes it, American literary naturalism refers to the period of writing produced during the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; in fact, many would trace the movement back to the 1870s and well into the 1960s. Though naturalism started in France with famed novelist Emile Zola, authors like Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Frank Norris, and of course Upton Sinclair played pivotal roles in Americanizing the movement. Influenced heavily by Social Darwinism, naturalist narratives often depict individuals subject to forces beyond their control, or determined by insatiable desires.

As with the Catholic Intellectual writings, there exist two contrasting, but complimentary strands to American naturalist narratives about hunger and food: starvation as an eccentric or experimental temperance in early twentieth-century Progressive era writings by Upton Sinclair and others; urban agriculture as a platform for political and social change. Excessive fasting, or aestheticism, contributed to Monastic life in a sometimes counter-cultural way (Fagan 19), also similar to the counter-discourse that emerges surrounding naturalist appetite. Counterculture movements of the second century became more prevalent during the fourth century with "communal monasticism" began to flourish as well (20).

Readers of naturalist novels have become accustomed to gluttony, but in a slightly different sense: overeating or excessive sex often emerge in the work of London, Norris, Wright, Petry, and others as unsuccessful efforts to quiet insatiable appetites for social success, financial fortune, cultural respect, or romantic love. During the early 1900s when Macfadden's magazine gained force, the social striving occurring in Dreiser's naturalist novels, for instance, related to a

conspicuous obsession with skinniness; we see these culturally constructed values present in *Physical Culture's* advertisements, articles, and images. So, while naturalist authors voiced their socialist sentiments, progressive politics, and environmental ethics, a portion of the upwardly mobile society that they depicted equated strength with extreme fitness and bare-bones survival.

Paradoxically, the fasting fads of Sinclair in particular that evoke a progressive-era obsession with cleanliness and strength, mobilize the authors' determination to eradicate hunger, both local and global. Likewise, Nazareth Farm promotes an ascetic lifestyle (little food, no alcohol, composting, restricted water access, limited electricity), which allows for service to the local community; in essence, the fewer natural resources consumed on the farm, the more remain for the people of Appalachia. At the close of my dissertation, I had one lingering question: how reconcile this counter-narrative of culturally disordered eating and self-restraint on the one hand with the ecological ethics so central to naturalism's politically radical sentiments on the other? The Catholic Intellectual Tradition has gotten me closer to an answer.

I began this Presidential Seminar by introducing myself as the "secular Jew who constantly finds [herself] in intellectual Catholic environments." Having completed my doctoral work at Fordham University, I now feel privileged to teach at Sacred Heart, where I have connected perhaps more deeply than ever before to my Jewish roots. As I prepare to fast next Wednesday for Yom Kippur, I find myself reflecting on how my food scholarship has influenced me both personally and professionally. The Presidential Seminar, through its intensely intellectual and deeply spiritual nature, has enlivened and enriched my journey.

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