



Lent 2023: Interior Cultivation

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“Listen” - Gardens are attractive by virtue of their beauty and bounty. Gardens delight our senses and ground us in the earth. They are the object of fruitful reflection and hands-on prayer. Gardens can speak to us of promise and hope, of dying/rising. These carefully tended plots of earth can be an expression of God’s lavish abundance, as well as a challenge of trust as unseen seeds take root and grow. Sometimes when we allow the mystery of a garden to enter into us, it yields forth its secrets.

Brothers and sisters, let us do some interior cultivation in the garden of our hearts. The “Lenten spring” is prime time for “interior cultivation.” With the help of the Holy Spirit, let us dig deeper into the place where our relationship with Jesus grows. St Francis helps us acquire needed garden implements: the yellow-green newness of springtime; the fragrant blossoms adorning our Sister Mother Earth; the restorative warmth of Brother Sun.

“Discern”—Our lives are a running towards something or a running away from something. We repel and avoid. We desire and yearn. As gardeners, we till the soil, we break through the hard surface layer: clumps of resentments, hard rocks of indifference, old roots of grievances. What blocks the way when I try to open my heart to Jesus? What stones am I stumbling on in my Franciscan journey? What old roots am I getting tangled up in as I try to nourish the seed of God’s Word in my heart?

One of those mysterious processes that contribute to the growth of gardens is composting. A compost pile—let’s do some interior cultivation with our own compost pile. My prayer and reflection during these Lenten days have brought me to the conscious

recognition of the shadow-side of my personality. I had known for some time that I possess certain personality traits and character flaws that I’d rather not have. I had also been under the illusion that it would be a matter of time before I could eliminate these defects and move on. What I realized was that these pieces and parts of me were integral to who I am, and that I’d never be rid of them. In fact, they are essential to my becoming fully human.

This discovery was depressing, indeed. Also needed for interior cultivation to work in the soil of my heart was my compost pile. What turned things around for me was what I placed on the compost pile that is me: impatience, confusion, doubt with a touch of stubbornness, control, leftover anger, old thinking patterns that don’t work anymore, words spoken in haste without love, unspoken words that contribute to pain and disharmony.

What a compost pile! Humus—of earth, the ground, the soil. Human—an earthly one. I am of earth. My own humus, product of my life’s compost pile, fertilizing the transformation process that allows me to become human. Humus. Human. Humility. I need to remember that I am an earthly one. Yes, I aspire to things of the Spirit. Yes, God chooses to love me and use me—for love, for service, for justice. But God chooses. Like Francis, I am nothing. I am humus. I am human.

Each of us needs to experience the miracle of transformation, especially in these days of Lent, to embrace the pieces and parts that are in need of God’s healing touch. Interior cultivation allows for those personality traits we find most despicable to become integrated, the raw material for personal growth, so that they nourish

our lives. When I think of the shadow elements that I want to reject, wisdom teaches that these are valuable—compostable—because they keep me coming back to God and His healing grace, the

healing that yields a new kind of energy that revitalizes everyday living.

“Go Forth”

Prayer enriches the soul as compost does the soil. And so, I pray:

Come, Lord Jesus, let me feel Your presence, and hear Your voice.
Open the eyes of my heart,
illuminate within it places of eternal Lent where I have not permitted Your love entry.
Help me to open these places.
Root out that which needs to leave, and make room for the joy of Your resurrection.
Open the eyes of my heart to see You
in those with whom I live and work and share fraternity.
Come to those broken places in me,
in those relationships with others, in the world around me,
in need of reconciliation, with the healing of Your resurrection.
Open the eyes of my heart to see You in those whose walk is long and lonely
through their personal Gethsemane.
Allow me to accompany You in them.
Remain with me, remind me, and lift up into the light,
the dormant confidence of hope in the joy of Your resurrection.

“Changed in mind but not in body, Francis was eager to direct his will to God’s will. Thus, he retired for a short time from the tumult and business of the world and was anxious to keep Jesus Christ in his inmost self. Like an experienced merchant, he concealed the pearl he had found from the eyes of mockers and, selling all he had, he tried to buy it secretly.... He acted in such a way that no one would know what was happening within. Wisely taking the occasion of the good to conceal the better, Francis consulted God alone about his holy purpose. He prayed with all his heart that the eternal and true God guide his way and teach him to do God’s will. He endured great suffering in his soul, and was not able to rest until he accomplished in action what he had conceived in his heart.” (1Celano 6)

Let’s make this opportunity “intentional,” to cultivate the soil of the heart, and to keep Jesus in our inmost self. Let us not rest until Christ comes to birth in the heart. Beauty and bounty, then, will live in the garden of our heart.

