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Joel Salatin: Taking the Pro-Life Movement to the Pastures

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Joel Salatin, *The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God's Creation* (Faithwords, 2016).

The great Catholic author Flannery O'Connor, who wrote from Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, said that she thought of herself as a “hillbilly Thomist.”^[i] Joel Salatin, who writes from *Polyface Farm* in Swoope, Virginia, could easily appropriate that soubriquet, though he never would; he describes himself as a “Christian libertarian environmentalist capitalist lunatic farmer” (xiii).

As an introduction for those who don't know him, the description is dead-on. He is, in a nutshell, the guru of the natural, entrepreneurial approach to farming and raising animals based on pasturing rather than factory-farm containment; on synergistic and symbiotic relationships between soil, grass, animals, and people; on local markets; and on the home-based business side of the multigenerational family farm—a “non-chemical, compost-centric, free-range chicken, homemade raw milk organic-embracing place” (2). He is also a powerful polemicist against excessive government regulation, exploitative food systems, and Leviathan agribusiness. Salatin was brought to the attention of the wider public by Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and Wendell Berry said that he needs to be read by “everybody interested in the survival of authentic farming and farmers.”^[ii]

As for the word “Christian” in Salatin's self-description: while the Catholic fiction writer and the Protestant farmer might seem to have little in common (though the fiction writer also raised fowl of various kinds, and the farmer authored ten books, including *The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer* and *Everything I Want to Do is Illegal: War Stories from the Local Food Front*), their vocations are strikingly similar. O'Connor began, like Aquinas, with the senses and the concrete, seeking the “transfiguration of the natural,” “the sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, the sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery”^[iii]; for Salatin, “the spiritual mandate to bring glory to God has an object, something physical in which to participate... promoting and protecting the pigness of pigs is the visceral starting point in our mission to the Godness of God—His glory” (32).

Salatin's most recent book, *The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God's Creation*, sums up much of what was said in his earlier books on the practice and philosophy of food and farming, but is his most overtly theological. The title unconsciously channels Aquinas—on the

mysterious and unique essence by which all things are constituted—and three recent popes on the care of creation, but two comments that give Catholic (and Orthodox) readers pause must be dealt with before turning to the book itself.

First, Salatin says that while theologians have written about the stewardship of land and animals, they are lacking when it comes to the Protestant author Francis Schaeffer's question, "How shall we then live?" — that is, the question of practice. But there is a rich history of Catholic work and writing on real-world issues, including agrarian ones, dear to Salatin's heart, from the Distributists and Vincent McNabb to Dorothy Day and Catherine Doherty to the National Catholic Rural Life Conference to the writings of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace on food, farming, genetic modification, deforestation and more—not to mention 15 centuries of monastic farming tradition.

Second, Catholics and the Orthodox, from the very beginning, implicitly and explicitly, through praxis and doctrine, have been sacramental in the sense of employing the physical to make present the spiritual, to meet, as O'Connor put it "the mystery through manners."^[iv] Yet Salatin, in the face of a great cloud of witnesses, remarks of Schaeffer that "of all the great Christian apologists he [alone] dared to wrestle with the physical/spiritual connection" (xiv). Salatin sees as "trappings" those realities — "costumes" (his word for liturgical vestments), "pilgrimages," "cathedrals," "icons," "rites," and "sacrament" (173, 221) — that are the very signs of the Catholic and Orthodox insistence on there being no Manichean "conflict between the physical and the spiritual...[but rather] symbiosis between the two" (xv). Of course, individuals of any, or no, faith can lapse into dualism, and we could all be better encouraged to live out the symbiosis. In the end, not only Catholics and Orthodox, but all readers might keep in mind that, by his own admission, his book is "targeted to...[those] Americans who call themselves evangelicals, the religious right" (xiii), and that might be the best explanation for these apparently discordant comments.

The book covers a great many topics. Bookended by an opening biographical chapter ("Who Am I?") and a closing clarion ("Altar Call"), it consists of 19 chapters of contrasts: "Biological vs. Mechanical," "Pattern vs. Caprice," "Participation vs. Abandonment," "Freedom vs. Bondage," etc. Each chapter begins with Biblical quotes, stories, and parables, and then asks and answers a question that exposes the relationship between the spiritual and practical, variations on "How can I participate in food and farming in a way that exhibits the righteously transformative power of spiritual participation?" (82).

So, for example, in "Beauty vs. Ugliness" he asks, "If the hand of the Christian is to touch the world with beautiful artistry that illustrates the creative genius of a magnificent God, what does such a farming and food system look like?" (117), answering that it includes diversity, spontaneity and discovery, and an invitation to beauty. In "Integration vs. Segregation" he asks, "What does an integrated physical life look like that exemplifies an integrated spiritual life?" (107) and answers that integrating plants and animals into our lives "bathes us in object lessons about responsibility, relationship, faithfulness, expectation, perseverance, diligence, and unconditional love" (111). In "Relational vs. Separational" the question is, "If we agree that God wants relationships, both vertically with Him and horizontally with others, what does a farm that exhibits these goals look like?" (186). It would not be, he answers, a person-less industrial or monocrop farm; "by definition, one-dimensional anything is not very relational.... [I]f anything expresses relationships, it's nature. The complexity, synergy, and symbiosis captivate our attention for lifetimes" (189).

In many ways, the book reads like an implementation plan for much of Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'—On the Care for Our Common Home*. Both are inspired by the same Biblical sources, the same underlying vision of each creature bearing a harmonious message of the greatness of the Creator. The two, despite their wildly differing tones, and despite some great differences, could fruitfully be read together.

Pope Francis's "Integral Ecology" refers to the integration of *human ecology*, used by John Paul II and Benedict XVI to include the protection of human life from conception to natural death and everything in between, and *natural ecology*, the care of God's gift of the whole created order. Salatin is a sanctity-of-life Christian opposed to abortion and euthanasia, and the care and healing of creation is his stated vocation.

Laudato Si' draws on the long history of the Catholic critique against mechanical reductionism in general, and that by Romano Guardini against technology in particular. Salatin's own critique of technology and reductionism runs along parallel tracks; he stands against a "reductionist compartmentalized fragmented disconnected democratized individualized systematized parts-oriented culture...great at figuring out the how of things, but not the why" (9). When he rejects "the idea that life is fundamentally mechanical rather than biological... a repair or rework mentality rather than awe and wonder" (224), when he notes that "[i]t's the truth of a beauty that draws people" (128), he could be channeling not only Pope Francis and his predecessors, but Hans Urs von Balthasar and Luigi Giussani, among many others.

Even on more practical grounds there are correspondences. One could draw dozens of parallels between the encyclical (and the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI) and Salatin on economic issues, on environmental degradation, on the web of relationships between "farmers, consumers, civil authorities, scientists, seed producers, people living near fumigated fields, and others."[v] To take just one example, Pope Francis notes that

Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based on the local culture itself.[vi]

Salatin brings this rather dry language to life with his painstakingly detailed and often humorous accounts of his absurd encounters with the government bureaucrats who visit his farm; he rails against blind and counter-productive regulations by distant functionaries, arguing passionately for a Catholic notion of subsidiarity without ever using the term.

In the interest of full disclosure, this reviewer, who is working to implement integral ecology in urban communities through a Catholic understanding of the relation between the person and nature, and who also raises chickens and organic fruits and vegetables, has been immensely enriched by Salatin's books. Especially enlightening is Salatin's view of himself as a "grass farmer" or even a "soil farmer"; he sees soil as a "pulsing, thriving, community of beings (51)" linked at the microscopic level to the level of the grass that thrives on the invisible minerals and organisms to the chickens and cows that eat the grass to

the communities that benefit from the farm products.

Salatin compares himself to Queen Esther, standing as a bridge between two worlds. He knows God could save the Jews with or without Esther, but He wanted her to be faithful to her unique position; he also knows that God doesn't need him to "save the planet" (256). But he "counts it a privilege to bridge the tension between the Christian and the environmentalist" (256). If he sometimes does this with strong or startling language ("greenie weenie commie tree-hugger foolishness" [91]; "Christians marching off to sanctity-of-life rallies send our kids off to college...to go work for multinational corporations dedicated to adulterating God's creation" [68]), and mixing practice with polemics, it is only because, in one of O'Connor's most famous lines: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."^[vii]

Ultimately it comes down to love—of God, of all His creatures, of neighbor:

My heart breaks for the Christian testimony when we're universally perceived as planet destroyers. My heart breaks for gully-scarred hillsides and farmers struggling with antibiotic-resistant super-bugs and herbicide-induced super weeds. My heart breaks for animals confined in fecal particulate quarters, unable to express even their most rudimentary uniqueness. This is not to replace an evangelistic heart toward the lost. It is to augment it, to put feet and hands on it. And to build God's claim to everything—my soul, my food, my vocation, my farm. Ultimately, they're His. (257)

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^[i] Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 81.

^[ii] Wendell Berry, "Letter," in Joel Salatin, *The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer* (Swoope, VA: Polyface Inc., 2010), x.

^[iii] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), 79.

^[iv] *Ibid.*, 153.

^[v] *Laudato Si'*, 135.

^[vi] *Ibid.*, 144.

^[vii] *Mystery and Manners*, 34.

