

Knowing the Love of God: Retelling by a Plant Enthusiast

Introduction

This retelling was inspired by the book “*Knowing the Love of God*” by Fr. Reginald Garigou-Lagrange, OP (1877-1964). This Dominican friar is one of the great Thomists in the 20th century. His full conversion possibly began by his observations on human pain and suffering. He started to pursue the study of medicine but instead joined the Order of Preachers. He was a professor at the Angelicum and was the academic advisor of Karol Wojtyla (the future St. Pope John Paul II). He is the one of the coadjutors in the proclamation of St. John of the Cross as a doctor of the church. He comments that the principles taught by St. John of the Cross is very much in harmony with that of St. Thomas of Aquinas.

Fr. Lagrange wrote over 50 books and 500 articles. Among those are “*Christian Perfection and Contemplation*”; “*The Three Ages of Interior Life*”. “*Knowing the Love of God*” was previously known as “*The Last Writings of Reginald Garigou Lagrange*”. As his last writing, this book *could* have been the careful distillation of the most important themes of his theological thought and philosophy. After reading “*Knowing the Love of God*”, it was a lot easier for me to understand St. John of the Cross.

On a personal note, I am truly delighted reading this book and many imageries flood my mind while studying the chapters. This retelling attempt to summarize the important concepts from the book using the life cycle of a plant and the laws of nature so I will be able to continue contemplating on these principles as I tend my garden. I rearranged the appearance of the chapters in the book to fit to the natural stages of plant development. The titles in the subsections consist of my botanical insight and then the title used (sometimes with revisions) in the book chapters. The format of my retelling will be to start with a brief description of a scientific fact and then I will try to relate such fact with the principles that I learned from the book chapters. It is a deep honor to embark on this short project as I am received as a lay Dominican novice at the St. Margaret of Castello chapter of the Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus. I am truly standing on the shoulders of this great Thomist and I intend to keep reading his works.

The retelling of the seed/fruit cycle

The seed I am referring to in my insights is the good seed, a seed used in growing agricultural crops. It was indeed Providence that I wrote during the 15th-16th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2026 when the Gospel readings are on the Parable of the Good Sower (Matt 13:1-9), and Parable of Wheat and Tares (Matt 13:24-30), respectively. It is really in season that this analogy must be commented upon.

I. The seed: Called for the goal of glory and grace

The seed is one of the wonders of nature. It contains all the essential information (genes) that will determine the traits (phenotype) of the plant. I had fun in isolating this genetic material when I was an undergraduate i.e. you can spin the genetic component like a spool of thread. The sequences in the gene will determine if the fruit will be sweet, juicy, yellow and so on.

When God created man, God intended man to be a recipient of His love so that the Creator and the creature will share a special bond of companionship. Coded within us is that blueprint and God continually invites us to realize this goal. There is godliness in us waiting to be revealed. This genetic disposition will remain to be latent until it is expressed. The full expression of this original intent will only come with the proper environment. A seed remains as seed until some factors will begin to operate and activate the seed.

II. The seed coat: Sin

In its period of dormancy, a seed is protected by a seed coat. The coat makes the seed impervious, a mechanism for self-preservation. The seed then exists only for itself. Though it contains the information of what it could possibly be, it will never reach its maximum potential or realize what it is designed for: to become a tree and produce seeds in return.

When sin reigns, the original intent of man is thwarted. Instead of living in the delight of God, a person turns to self-gratification and self-service. He will choose to deny God as the Master that he may crown himself as the ruler of his life. He will not seek for any higher good (only worldly goods) and will simply do what is pleasing to his sight.

III. Breaking the seed coat: Mortification

One of the ways to break the seed coat is scarification. The scar in the seed coat allows water to come in to reactivate the seed to enter a transition phase. The once dormant seed starts to look forward to a new beginning, a new life.

Mortification or death-to-self is the process of subduing sinful inclinations and desires. More importantly is an interior type of mortification, when we subject our senses and our hearts for a higher call/purpose. The circumcision of hearts may also be a good analogy for mortification. A person starts to have an epiphany that though sin provides a fleeting pleasure, its consequences lead to the loss of the Creator-creature friendship. Yes, breaking the seed coat requires a lot of courage and sacrifice but it ushers us to something beyond ourselves, something glorious that God has intended when He created us.

IV. Germination: Redemptive Power of Christ

Germination is initiated when water infuses into the seed. The seed swells and a tiny root (radicle) appear to anchor the seed to the soil. Also, a seed leaf (or leaves) emerges to provide vital nutrients to the developing plant. The seed leaf also turns green as it must start photosynthesis. After germination, the new entity is entirely different than before (metamorphosis)...from a dormant seed to an active, living organism.

Germination is a powerful symbol that reminds the Resurrection of Christ. In the hidden recesses of the soil (the tomb), something dramatic happens. As Christians, we are called to be co-sharers of Christ Paschal mystery. Our death-to-self leads to a new, triumphant life in Christ. When we undergo an interior mortification, the next thing that will naturally follow is we become a new creature. That dark night in the soil (my poetic rendering of St. John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul) ushers us to rise from the grave of selfishness and begin our ascent.

V. The Soil and the roots: Humility

There are many types of soil, and a fertile soil is characterized by a higher concentration of humus compared to soils that are not arable. Humus is the product of the decomposition of organic matter hence it is nutrient rich i.e. the soil is being enriched by the plants that previously thrived on it. Humus helps retain water especially in soils that have a coarse texture.

Humus is the root word for humility. God loves a humble heart as it is a fertile ground for virtues. The whole edifice of spiritual life has humility as its foundation. The soil is in contact with the roots, the organ for nutrient absorption. The whole plant relies on the roots (even if it is hidden from sight). Though truly essential, the roots do not parade itself. Humility is the virtue that is common to all saints.

VI. Water from the Fountain of Life: Prayer

Without water, it is impossible to sustain botanical life. Without water, the plant will soon wither and die. Water maintains the plant's vascular system and allows the plant to stay turgid and remain upright. Water is the medium by which all nutrients are transported in a plant.

Prayer keeps man in communion with God. It is impossible to obtain graces and virtues without prayer. The water may come from a bucket, well, irrigation system or rain, it does not really matter. But St. Teresa of Avila will argue that rain is the best!

My favorite form of prayer is mental prayer as this type makes someone totally drenched on meditating the various mysteries of Christ's life. Such constant meditation lingers to my thoughts allowing one's day to run in a proper perspective even when the day is full of troubles.

VII. The stimulus of Light: Obedience

Plants are phototropic meaning they follow the source of light. Of course, plants need light to make food (photosynthesis) and it is just natural to look for the light for the plant to stay alive by itself (autotroph).

For me, seeking for the Light can be compared to discerning God's will. St. Gregory Nazianzen exhorts that only when we align our life to God's design, only then can we have peace. By

knowing His will, we will know which way to follow. By following that gentle voice, we will be led ultimately to the Source of Life, the Eternal Sun.

VIII. Behold the wood of the cross: Through the Cross, to the Light

Wood is made up of two polymeric materials: cellulose and lignin. Cellulose makes up fiber while lignin is a polymer that is colored light yellow to brown, depending on the type of plant. As the plant matures, more lignin is made and the wood becomes sturdier. Also, lignin has antibacterial properties and provides a protective barrier for the plant against disease.

During Good Friday, Catholics venerate the cross. Our level of Christian maturity depends on our attitude towards the cross. Do we avoid it? Do we drag to carry it? Do we embrace it? The cross is our only hope, our only bridge to return to God. We must look upon the cross with the gaze of love. Without the cross, we will be forever in darkness.

IX. Vertical Growth: The love of God

How a plant grows is determined by which plant hormone predominates. Hormones, such as auxins and cytokinins, determine the mode of growth. Auxins promote apical/vertical growth i.e. plant grows very tall, seeking to reach the skies. Cytokinins will be described in the next subsection.

The first greatest commandment is to love God with all our faculties: affection, intellect, will and efforts. Loving God requires a conscious effort to know Him by searching Him in everything. As God invites us, He infuses grace to our senses so that we can recognize Him increasingly. Our hearts become tuned and sensitive to His voice (John 10:27).

X. Horizontal Growth: Fraternal Charity

On the other hand, cytokinins promote lateral growth i.e. plant grows with more branches and become broader, providing more shade.

The second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor. Loving neighbor is when we seek the good of our neighbor. True love of God is manifested by how we treat our neighbor (John 13:35). More branches at a lower height means more herbivores/omnivores will have better access to the fruits. This way, the fruits are available for consumption. Vertical and horizontal growth epitomizes the cross, where there is a perfect balance.

XI. Nutrient Translocation: Poverty and Chastity

Have you ever wondered why some older leaves start to appear slightly yellow? In the absence of sufficient nutrient in the soil, the more mature leaves start to translocate their nutrients to rapidly growing parts, especially younger shoots and buds.

Poverty and chastity are the disposal of our possessions and body to do God's work, respectively. It is the use of our external goods for the love of God. As Christians, we must steward our possessions for God. A line from the Suscipe prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola says, "All things I own and all I hold are thine". We should be content of what is sufficient and stay away from the lure of luxury. Just like the mature leaves, they know the principle of self-donation.

XII. Vine and the Branches: Union with God

The plant's vascular system is the network where all nutrients are transported. In this system, the sap (a nutrient dense solution) flows and provides the nourishment a plant requires. The sap vivifies the botanical organism.

The sap represents our union with God. Apart from God and the Mystical Body of Christ, it is impossible to be nourished. The same Spirit that conceived and raised Christ is the same Spirit working in us. Without God, an isolated soul will soon wither and eventually thrown to the fire.

XIII. Where the wind blows: Docility to the Holy Spirit

Wind blows in any direction, in any given speed, in any given time. The branches in a tree must learn how to sway with the wind. Any resistance by the branch might cause the branch to break.

The best example I could think of to illustrate this principle is the bamboo, which sways gracefully in the wind. Bamboo is very pliant and I have rarely seen broken branches during a strong wind. We must be ready to be taught by the Spirit, even if it bends our stubborn will.

XIV. Fragile yet Fragrant Flowers: Being Meek

Flowers are very fragile and when crushed, essential oils come out to reveal a sweet aroma. In lieu of fragrance, a flower could be brightly colored. Both fragrance and color will attract pollinators such bees and butterflies. Pollination is the beginning of fruit formation.

Meekness is not a sign of weakness but rather it is strength under control. When Christ was mocked as the King of the Jews, Christ mustered enough control, not to send an angel to punish His persecutors. Having a meekness of heart is being configured to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

XV. Bearing Fruit: Zeal for God and Salvation of Souls

The ultimate purpose of the plant is to bear fruit and to regenerate itself. A viable seed inside a fruit can populate an entire garden. This sustainability and continuity are indeed a miracle.

The Carmelite motto “With zeal, I have been zealous for the Lord” (1 Kings 19:10) captures undivided affection to God. Being zealous for God will prompt us to ask “What is God zealous for?” God is zealous for us. The salvation of souls is one of the chief reasons why St. Dominic de Guzman founded the Order of Preachers. The highest act of charity is leading someone to truth as truth ultimately leads to the knowledge of God. May we be truly zealous for God and the object of His zeal, humanity. Even if we are as small as a matchstick, we can still set the world on fire, as St. Catherine of Siena will exhort us.

XVI. Anatomy of the Fruit: Devotion to the Lady

A fruit does not just contain pericarp (flesh) but a repository for the seed. The pericarp is the vessel that contains the seed that will later germinate to a new plant. After the flesh of the fruit is consumed, the seeds fall to the soil...the cycle repeats.

Dominicans have an ardent devotion to Our Lady of Expectation, the pregnant Theotokos carrying the Incarnate Word. We must be like Mary during the Visitation, carrying Christ and hence, capturing the essence of the Ark of the Covenant. The Blessed Mother has been foreshadowed in the Jewish Torah portion “*Tazria*” (She bears seed) from Lev 12:1-13. This portion encapsulates the mysteries of Annunciation to the Presentation in the Temple.

In the book, Fr. Lagrange mentioned the devotion of St. Louis de Montfort (Through Mary, to Jesus). While reading, the other saint that immediately comes to my mind is St. Maximilian Kolbe, the knight of the Immaculata. St. Maximilian once commented that we can not love the Lady more than Jesus loved her. Yes, the Star of the Sea will lead us to the Homeland.

Closing Remarks

I was wondering why the book was titled “*Knowing the Love of God*”? It seems to be an enumeration of one virtue to another. Collectively, these virtues cultivate the love of God and this love leads us to life, that we may have life abundantly (John 10:10). Life is more than attaining our goals and obtaining things. This temporal life is too short compared to eternal life. We must use this life to prepare us for the next.

Postscript

This work was completed to commemorate the feast day of St. Mary Magdalene, the First Preacher of the Resurrection.

Bro. Terence Canisius of the Visitation (the sprouted Chester Dabalos)