Jan of the Ladybird

Gosia Poks introduces the poetry of Jan Twardowski

an Twardowski, who died in Warsaw this year at the age of 91, was a Polish priest and poet, well-beloved by a wide and eclectic reading public: teenagers and adults, believers and non-believers, housewives and intellectuals. The riddle of his popularity is to be explained by the poet's striking humility, simplicity, honesty, and his great sense of humor. As well as a total absence of dogmatism or moralizing. He could speak of essential things in a most unassuming way as a seeker among other seekers and this gave him credibility. He took seriously the Gospel commandment to convert oneself, not others.

Unlike readers, professional critics have always been at a loss with regard to his "unclassifiable" poetry. Childlike but not naïve; colloquial but profound; down-toearth and mystical too. In an interview Twardowski recollected that reviews of his poems were often full of big words, such as: dialectics, antinomies, Pascal, Herakleitos, Hegel, and this scared him. So he opened a volume, read a few lines, and heaved a sigh of relief.

Father Twardowski was a "Franciscan" poet, a poet of wonder who encouraged his readers to wonder with him at the

world and the mysteries of faith, like children do. "To think," he would say with characteristic self-effacing modesty, "is something very wise which I do not understand." God is an artist who uses hints and implications. Rather than explaining, then, Father Jan would marvel at the "otherworldly" beauty of creation seen in the humblest creatures, like insects or wild vine. In his poetic theology ladybirds, field mice, ants-all are expressive of the beauty of God "who creates blueberries" and who himself hides in a piece of white wafer so small that it could easily fit into the hand of a little girl dressed in white. The poet used to say that God is hiding so that the world could be seen; a love that is invisible casts no obscuring veil.

Although he always had time for everyone, he is best remembered for his encouragement to hurry. In his best known poem he urged: "let's hurry to love/others, they depart so fast." It is reported that when he was departing from this world he said to those present at his bedside: "Tell everybody that God is a smiling God and that He has a sense of humour."

The following poems have been translated by Sarah Lawson and Malgorzata Koraszewska and are taken from Serious Angel by Jan Twardowski, published by The Dedalus Press, Dublin, in an edition of 350 copies. Thanks to Pat Boran at Dedalus for permission to reprint these poems in the Merton Journal.

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The World

God went into hiding so that the world could be seen if he were to reveal himself he would be alone who would dare to notice an ant a beautiful wicked wasp bustling around a green drake with yellow legs a lapwing which lays only four eggs a dragonfly's rounded eyes and beans in pods our mother at the table who so recently lifted a cup by its long funny handle a fir which does not cast cones but husks suffering and delight both sources of knowledge secrets not smaller but always different rocks that show travellers the way

an invisible love does not block the view

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Jan Twardowski

Poems

I Am Afraid of Your Love

I am not afraid of a brass band at the end of the world biblical stamping I am afraid of Your love for You love quite differently so close and different like an ant in front of a bear You place crosses like soldiers who are too tall You do not look with my eyes maybe You see like a bee for whom white lilies are blue-green You avoid the questioner as though he were a hedgehog on your stroll You announce that purity is giving away oneself You bring people close together

and constantly teach how to go away You talk too often to those who are alive the dead are going to explain

I am afraid of Your love the one most true and different

At the Tail End

Finally at the tail-end save theologians so they will not eat up all the candles and sit in darkness will not rap a rose on the knuckles will not cut the Gospel into slices will not tug holy words by their nerves will not tug holy words by their nerves will not cut reeds for fishing rods will not quarrel among themselves will not parade on a hippopotamus of Latin so they will not be surprised that a helpless warbling lisp of faith leads to heaven Jan Twardowski

Explanation

I did not come to convert you anyway all the wise sermons escaped from my head for a long time I have been stripped of my glitter like a hero in slow motion I will not badger you asking what you think about Merton I will not hop about during the discussion like a turkey with a red drop on its nose I will not grow beautiful like a drake in October I will not dictate tears admitting everything I will not pour holy theology into your ear with a teaspoon

I will just sit beside you and confide in you my secret that I, a priest believe God like a child.

Next issue out Eastertide 2007

including:

Fred and Michael Herron on A World-Embracing Prophet: the Catholic Imagination and the Transcultural Believer, **Israel Selvanayagam** on Merton's *Gandhi and Non-violence*, and further details about our conference in the spring of 2008.

Remember, if you have an article, poems, a book to recommend, or something else which might be of interest, please get in touch —details on inside front cover.

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