

WHITHER EDEN?

Integrity of Creation Series #6

By Paul Pisano

Fr. Tim often asks us to live our faith fully. How we live our faith once we're outside is as important as our time at Mass. I've still got a long way to go when it comes to loving all my brothers and sisters, but I've never had a problem appreciating creation. For as long as I remember, I've been fascinated with nature, especially birds. And I have always marveled at nature's diversity and interconnectivity. The long, evolutionary path that both plants and animals have followed over the eons is astounding, and I consistently see God everywhere I look.

I was fortunate to grow up in a family that appreciated the outdoors, in a house that abutted a wonderful, mature hardwood forest in Rockville, MD. Family vacations meant camping at Chincoteague or along Skyline Drive. At a young age I was encouraged to explore, and using binoculars, I quickly honed in on the birds – from the Wood Thrush nesting in our backyard to the hordes of sandpipers and other shorebirds along the coast. This was over 40 years ago, and what I remember most about those times is the abundance of birds. Spring migration was always the highlight, especially the overwhelming songs and color that I could hear and see right outside our back windows. In the movie, *The Big Year*, the Jack Black character pleaded with his boss for time off to witness the “fall out” of spring migrants on the gulf coast of Texas. I didn't have to go to such extremes, the “fall out” came to us, right here in the DC metropolitan area.

Forty years later, I still get a rush when I see my first Indigo Bunting of the year, but now it's with a strong dose of consternation. That's because I have seen a steady decline in the number of birds and it alarms me. Forty years is not even a nanosecond in the grand scheme of our natural world. Consider the millennia of evolution that are packed inside the genes of that songbird – genes that enable it to make its annual migration between Panama and Quebec. Yet within these forty years I have witnessed the undoing of God's great work.

So what has caused that decline? It's a combination of many anthropogenic (i.e., human influenced) factors, with habitat loss and pesticide and fertilizer use arguably topping that list. But looking forward we see a new and significantly bigger impact – climate change. Before I go all “doom and gloom”, let me tell you about two birds that I often see on my commute to work – the Peregrine Falcon and Osprey. I get to see these two magnificent raptors perched on the same bridge over the Potomac River (they are nesting on the railroad bridge that parallels the Metro bridge). Both of these species were in sharp decline in the 1950s and '60s due to the use of DDT. By banning its use, we've seen the birds' amazing resilience as they bounced back to healthy population levels.



When the environment is healthy, bird populations can withstand occasional pressures. But when there are multiple pressures that result in an unhealthy environment, the birds are unable to bounce back. It's just like people – we're more susceptible to getting sick when we're stressed, lack sleep and good nutrition. While we're able to recover when we get rest and eat well, there's no rest for the birds. We may no longer have DDT, but we now have neonicotinoids¹. And these compounds aren't just killing birds, they're also killing many good insects that aid our food supply, such as bees. A pesticide-stressed bird population has a hard time surviving. Adding climate change impacts such as drought and rising sea level increases the risk. Reversing these changes is no longer as "simple" as banning a pesticide. All efforts to save bird populations are important, but the fact remains that it is already too late for some species.

So, what can we do to prevent the loss of our valuable birds? We can start by looking closely at the world around us to see the impact we have. Once we better understand our impacts, we can take action. It's not because we have "dominion over the animals," but because our own lives depend on it. In other words, we have a duty to respect God's creation, and the longer we wait the harder it will be.

For up-to-date information on that status of birds today, refer to the detailed report released on September 9 entitled "The State of the Birds" (www.stateofthebirds.org). While highlighting some environmental successes, the report warns of grim results if rising CO2 levels and climate change continues on its current course.

1. Second Silent Spring? Bird Declines Linked to Popular Pesticides,
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/07/140709-birds-insects-pesticides-insecticides-neonicotinoids-silent-spring/>

PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH is happening on September 21 in New York City. It precedes a United Nations climate meeting and is supported by thousands of environmental, faith, and social justice organizations. If you can go, you can learn more about it here: <http://peoplesclimate.org/march/>

If you cannot go, the OLQP Integrity of Creation Team will be holding our own observance after the Masses that weekend.

We will offer an opportunity to sign the Faith Climate Petition (http://salsa4.salsalabs.com/o/51086/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=11529).

In addition, we will have comment cards available for submitting comments to the Environmental Protection Agency supporting the proposed new carbon emissions regulations.

HOME ENERGY WORKSHOP: September 28 at 11:30 in the Founders' Room. Learn how you can reduce energy usage in your home and make a difference in your own carbon emissions!