

(MY) LIFE IN THE GARDEN

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■ ABSTRACT

Our project explores the transformation of a former monoculture field into a biodiverse habitat. Rooted in the spirit of *Laudato si'*, it integrates theological, scientific, practical, and spiritual approaches to sustainable living in our common home. To do this, we must learn to contemplate God in creation, who is the real gardener.

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It started with a forester husband, who wanted to live on a farm. But not an ordinary agro-industrial farm to produce crops or food, but a natural habitat to create a living space where not only humans have a home, but all members of the ecosystem. Perhaps it was a nostalgia for his childhood in a village that seemed to him like Eden. It only touched me during the summers spent at my grandfather's, but I also felt in this vision something of the medieval monasteries, of the Benedictine spirituality: physical work, herb gardens, prayers, studies and spiritual guidance. The peaceful habitation of the human being in God's creation, where he is given everything he needs without taking too much.

We spent years searching for the Garden, looking for the place where it was prepared for us. In 2015, we found our treasure hidden in the field. We have lived here for 7 years, but progress is slow for three reasons: like the Gospel parable, we spent everything we had to buy it. Secondly, to get our systems good we need accurate planning and a lot of observation, and nature's systems are slow to build, but we are not in a hurry, it's a life task, a never-ending project. Thirdly, we need a lot of learning from philosophical-theological foundations to scientific and technological knowledge to practical, craft skills. And apart from some hobby gardening, I knew nothing about living with other creatures or a complex bio-system. So I started learning and researching in my own way to understand what is good, what is the value that we want

to put into practice. These are the sketchy approaches I will now briefly share, illustrated by my experience about transforming a barren agricultural field into a biodiverse habitat. Do we have time for slow execution? The lesson of the Limits to Growth is that our basic systems should have been changed a long time ago (Meadows 1972). On the 50th anniversary, Dennis Meadows said that the question today is no longer whether we will get on the roller coaster, but what do we do as we ride down the wave (Heinberg 2022). The panic and rush seem rightful at first sight, but beyond the human dimension we can see the role of Christianity in this global game: on the one hand, to proclaim the message that without Good Friday (whose pain we ourselves cause) there is no resurrection. On the other hand, to carry the hope of resurrection, to believe that we have a role to play where God has placed us (Pope Francis 2024).

I can accept the responsibility of my ancestors, but there is no reason to stop at blaming. The problem, and when I recognised it, is a fact for me. My task is to recognise my scope and what I can do with my acts and words for the rest of my decades, and then how I can pass the baton. My personal curiosity thus led me to the topic of my research, which requires the participation of the scientific community to solve at a society level. Even if this is not a complex problem that can be solved once and for all, it is rather a journey that affects our personal and professional responses, sometimes giving better or worse answers.

Today, there are too many promises in the field of environmental protection and a huge lack of action: we still believe that we can solve the ecological crisis without changing our behaviour. In order to do what needs to be done, we need to act together, regardless of the fact that we start from different foundations and work with different methods. We need the cooperation of disciplines such as secular environmental philosophy, ecotechnology, natural sciences and agroforestry. We need to „enter into dialogue with all people about our common home” (LS 3).

As private persons, we need to learn from a wide range of knowledge to find solutions that fit our own ways of life, and as scholars, we need a common language for this dialogue, „that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since the book of nature is one and indivisible” (LS 6). The home is common, and we can't be satisfied with partial answers to a complex and interconnected problem.

I present shortly two topics that we are currently working on in the GodGarden. Biodiversity loss (LS 32-42) is clearly happening today at such a rapid rate because of human activity, and recovery is much slower than destruction. In our case, we are directly experiencing „lands converted into cultivated land lose the enormous biodiversity which they formerly hosted” (LS 39). Most of our land (about 2 hectares out of 2.5) was crop field, from which we would like to create a mixed orchard and wooded pasture, because

the long-term goal is to ensure the family's self-sufficiency in meat. We also have some orchards, but due to previous chemical spraying and weed control, the original ground covering grass is poor, and the fruit trees are over-selected varieties that can only survive with intensive care. So, our current activity is the phased replacement of existing trees and planting of wild rootstocks, which can later be grafted with resistant fruit types. Also, the conversion of the field into a species-rich meadow pasture, but here we mostly just let natural succession take its best. Our activities mainly include selective mowing of invasive monoculture species (e.g. Sudan grass, Sorghum Sudanese) before flowering. Sometimes sowing of pollinator-friendly seed mixtures on empty patches. And lots of walking on the sand and praying for rain.

The other issue is the problem of water (LS 27-31), which, unlike in other parts of the world, is not yet a problem of lack of safe drinking water. The weather in Hungary has changed in recent years, so that even if annual rain falls, it is not distributed regularly, but alternates between periods of droughts and intense rains. Water storage has become a key issue at both national and local level, and long-term solutions require a good level of planning. The first of our three current responses is closely linked to biodiversity, as the best storage site for rainwater is the soil itself. So higher humus content, more coverplants and their roots weaving through the soil means more water it can store. Plant life and rich soil life

is represented here too. (Manuring pasture animals on site would also contribute, but in our case, this will be a later step in the lack of funds for fencing.) As there is no sewage system in our area, we installed a biological purifier a few years ago, which converts the wastewater from our house into humus and irrigation water¹ using bacteria. The aim is still to reduce the use of running water, but water which is used once is recycled locally. The pipeline system to pump the water to the end of the orchard behind the house has been completed, and now the distribution trenches are being constructed in the area, where the gentle slope will allow gravity to bring the water to as many trees and bushes as possible. The rainwater that falls on the roof surface is already collected in a smaller container, but much more could be collected, so we have started to build an underground rainwater cistern of 40 cubic metres. This will be used to irrigate the kitchen garden during the dry periods, and above it will be a planter house, whose thermal balance will be controlled by the water mass below.

Beyond the practical and scientific curiosity and enthusiasm, I am also driven by a desire for real wisdom, to find an answer to the question: how should I live in this problem of the times. This is not a purely intellectual or moral question, but literally existential. It is a question of our existence. „Being a philosopher means solving some of life’s problems, not just in theory, but in practice” (Thoreau 2015). This will lead us to the pursuit of a sim-

pler life, where we can learn to distinguish needs from demands. To use creatively what we already have, and to develop a lifestyle that doesn’t require going on holiday from our life to rest.

Then we can welcome less, discovering the joy of simplicity rather than rigorous sacrifice, when we do not become the property of the things we own or the slaves of a seemingly higher status of living.

Kneeling theology also means contemplating and getting to know God in creation. “If you are a theologian, you pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian” (Evagrius Pontikos 1860). Creation protection or ecotheology is not only the active response of the Christian to God’s call (moral theology), but also a specific realisation of the Church’s mission (applied theology). That’s why it is closely related to applied domains such as social theology, pastoral theology and spiritual theology. Moreover, it is especially suited to the theological practice of ecumenism, since it does not affect classical differences and can be a sign of unity. The time perspective of our task is quite wide. Not only because of the mentioned ecological slowness and life-long challenge. In human dimensions, we are working for the future: for our children, grandchildren, or our descendants in any sense. The full scope of this is the salvation history, and a story that has been spoiled: „so that God may be all in all.” (1Corinthians 15,28) But to arrive there, we must find our place in the redeemed creation, because „creation itself eagerly awaits

the revelation of the children of God. [And] the entire creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Romans 8:19,22), so we are not alone in this, we just need to learn to cooperate with the other beings of creation. And with the Creator. Mary Magdalene did not immediately recognize Jesus on the mor-

ning of the resurrection, and thought she was talking to the gardener (John 20:15). But she was not far wrong. The story from creation to redemption goes from garden to garden (and from tree to tree). To find our own place and life in the garden of creation, we have one thing to do: become disciples of the Real Gardener.

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^[1] This water is suitable for watering trees and indirectly food-producing plants such as berry bushes. It should not be used for watering root vegetables or for watering the soil surface where it could splash on the leaves or crops to be eaten.