

II.
“Homily 11th Sunday”
16 June 1991

by **John Eudes Bamberger**, O.C.S.O.

When we listen to the parables in the Gospel, we hear the authentic voice of Jesus communicating to his people something of the mystery of the Kingdom of God. And the parable of the sower is surely among the more vivid of all of his stories. This description of the man who goes out to sow grain in a well prepared field has a particular force for Trappists who live so close to the earth. At Genesee we still grow wheat and corn. In a few weeks, in fact, the winter wheat will be harvested in the Genesee Valley, so that even now, “night and day,” as Jesus puts it in today’s gospel (Mark 4: 26034), “while we sleep or go about our daily work, the seed germinates and grows and we do not know how. The earth of itself produces the sprout, then the ear appears, and finally the ripe grain.”

The point Jesus seems to make here is how there is a mysterious working of providence operating once the sower initiates the process. The farmer can prepare the ground and plant the seed-grain, but the growth is not under his control. Rather it is subject to a will and a purpose that he cannot determine. This growth takes place in silence, sometimes in the light of day, when all is clear, but also in the quiet and darkness of deep night. Yet the sower does share in the process and somehow communicates in the hidden mystery of this divine operation. One cannot plant seeds, watch them grow and care for them without becoming involved oneself in the growth.

This parable speaks not only to monks and farmers but to all Christians. Very early, in fact, it was understood that this seed was a metaphor for the activity of God in His world. When Jesus told this parable he was focused on the idea of hidden and quiet and sure growth subject to God’s loving care, not on the fruit of human activity. In another parable recorded in this same chapter of St. Mark (4: 26-34), however, this seed is interpreted to be a symbol of the word of God, germinating in various kinds of soil and yielding much or little, even withering away in some conditions according to the attitude of heart of the recipients. Each of us is addressed by this

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parable and invited to cultivate this hidden word, assuring that it gets careful attention and grows in favorable conditions so that we yield abundant grain for the Lord of the harvest. Preachers, teachers and parents all have good reason to identify with the sower of this Matthean version of Jesus' parable.

Thomas Merton, being both a Trappist and a teacher, was particularly sensitive to the symbol of the seed and of the word itself, which is, after all, also a symbol. He took up and developed these images in one of his most influential books, *Seeds of Contemplation*. In his introductory reflections, he artfully presents his image in strangely moving language that suggests a kind of longing, a nostalgia for a purer world and which, I believe, accounts for much of the appeal of his writing. His own words convey something of the passion that gives life to his writing.

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of invisible and visible winged seeds, so the stream of time brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them; for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of liberty and desire If they would take root in my liberty, and if His will would grow from freedom, I would become the love that He is, and my harvest would be His glory and my own joy.

While Jesus speaks in this parable of seeds and their quiet and sure growth to ripe grain, ready for harvest, elsewhere he focuses on the bread that is produced from the grain. We know what depths of significance he attached to the bread that he multiplied in the wilderness and then, on the night before he died, to the bread that he blessed, broke and gave to his disciples to eat as his body and blood. As St. Irenaeus put it: "Just as the bread which is produced by the earth hears the invocation of the Holy Spirit and ceases to be bread in order to become the Eucharist . . . so too our bodies, receiving the Eucharist are now no longer corruptible, for they possess the hope of the resurrection."

These two images of the word as a seed that takes root in the soul and the bread that gives eternal life come together in today's liturgy. Both remind us of Merton's work for he conceived of the spiritual life not only as growing from *Seeds of Contemplation* but as producing *Bread in the Wilderness* and *The Living Bread* that gives life to the whole world.

More importantly, both of these signs speak to us today in the same language used by Christ Jesus as he taught and handed over the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to his church. May we receive them into our hearts with a loving faith. May the hope they impart grow in us so that our words also become seeds of life in the hearts of those with whom we speak and live, until the day comes when the divisions that separate Christians cease so that we might all be free to share the one Eucharist at this altar. Then will be realized in us that prayer of the Didache which expressed the ardent desire of the primitive church:

Just as this bread that is broken, at first scattered over the hills,
having been gathered in, was made a single loaf,
so also may your Church be assembled
from the ends of the earth
into your Kingdom.