

Jan of the Ladybird

Gosia Poks introduces
the poetry of Jan Twardowski

Jan 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-to-earth 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.

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

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

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the Catholic Imagination and the Transcultural Believer,
Israel Selvanayagam on Merton's *Gandhi and Non-violence*,
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