

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Reflection

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AUTUMN WONDERS

Autumn is a favorite season for some of us. It is for me. Autumn is an in-between time, a bridge from heat to cold. It says to us: Get ready for winter, but be sure to enjoy everything I have to offer. And it offers so much. The summer fun is over. Good-bye, refreshing swims in water that does not freeze our bodies. The daylight hours shorten, but in their lessening something beautiful occurs. A quieting down takes hold of our world, and our Creator God offers us a breathtaking spectacle of beauty, especially in the state of Maine. "Give to the Lord the glory due God's name. Bow down before the Lord's holy splendor" (Ps 29:2). We still see loons on the lake but rarely hear them call. Their job of presenting new life to the world is over until they return to our part of it next spring.

The fall color of leaves brings many visitors to our state. They join us in expressing wonder at the vistas offered. "All your works give you thanks, O Lord, and your faithful bless You. They sing of the glory of Your reign and tell of Your great works" (Ps 145:10,11). The scientific name for such color emergence is photoperiodism, the process by which many hardwood trees prepare for winter. Usually within a particular area, the variation in reds, oranges, and yellows will take place at the same time among the majority of trees there. But the light and shade of its situation, the health of the tree, and the amount of cloud cover during a season all determine its hue.

Looking at that process, who can doubt the existence of One who has designed this transition of a living creature from one stage to another? The philosophers of ancient Greece recognized a movement in nature which is not just random, but carefully plotted, as proof of God's existence. Bright sunlight calls forth redness in leaves. If a black covering is placed on a section of a leaf destined for redness, that part will emerge in yellow while the part open to the sun's rays will be red. All you skeptics, pause and listen to God speaking to you in the conversation of autumn.

Now is a time of gathering in. The crops we harvest will take us through the winter and beyond. Apples and squash importune us to pick them, to enjoy their special flavor. They promise us they will stay with us for a while, especially if we put them in a root cellar. Keat's poem *To Autumn* describes it as a "season of mellow fruitfulness, close bosom-friend of the maturing sun." We also call it "fall," a term not based on the falling leaves but derived from Middle English. As applied to the season, fall is used mostly in America.

Human living has its own seasons of autumn. After a lively chapter of activity and warm sunshine, a quietness may set in when we are invited to reflect on the measure of our days. We hear the words of Christ to the multitude, "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky" (12:56). Nature tells us what will take place. And then we consider what follows when Jesus takes his listeners to task for not understanding what the present time is saying to them. We ask ourselves what harvest we are reaping. What is the outcome of our endeavors? Are we like "a tree

planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in due season?" (Ps 1:3) Have we sown barren seed? Have we taken good seed but neglected its soil and watering? Are we prepared for a stretch of winter struggle? The autumn pondering releases its own special grace to our spirit. We look back and understand more clearly what has been taking place as we poured out our energy. We want to learn from all that has happened in the earlier seasons. "Does not wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice?" (Pr 8:1) In our autumnal reflection, we listen attentively. We thank God for our successes and regret where we have failed ourselves and others. All of this takes place in a calm appraisal that does not push us into paralyzing self-blame.

Part of what we have accomplished will shine in wondrous color for a while and then drop like a falling leaf. This is not all loss. The shining in its own special time communicated the value of its message. In our memory we rejoice in all the springtimes and summers of our lives, but we also cherish the autumns. We see how we were prepared for the coming winters.

So as we grow older, the season takes on a special character. We view it as a stage of life. We look at the aging process as an ongoing opening up of opportunity. Now in the autumn of our years, we are nourished differently. The Epistle to the Hebrews says to us, "Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (5:14). The autumn of life does mean some doors are closed to us. We won't win our former athletic trophies. But other doors open up. Our perceptions are fine-tuned so that we understand what is valuable and what deserves less attention. Time becomes more precious, something we don't want to waste. Many of the longings we had when we were younger have been fulfilled. Some have not. We look at the years behind us and see how God's providence shaped them to lead us to the present moment. We move forward in confidence, trusting in that same unfailing mercy for all that lies ahead. "I will hope continually and will praise You yet more and more" (Ps 71:14). Especially when autumn loveliness lifts my heart high.

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