

Bishop's Institute Interview: With The Rev. Will Brown Continued

AD: You note, interestingly and aptly that Christians should be particularly able to grasp the idea of “you are what you eat”. Might Jung’s concept of “*spiritus contra spiritus*”, when a spiritual encounter serves to counter the bad things that we take into ourselves, in one manner or another, relate to your obvious reverence for the land and waters and the creatures in them?

WB: Peter warns that there is an adversarial spirit at work in the world that prowls around, seeking to devour the unwary (1 Peter 5:8). Peter’s solution is to exhort his readers to resolute fidelity in the God of grace. When we consider that God made the world, and all that therein is, and made it by his grace; and when we consider that his creative work is not arbitrary or capricious, but is rather accomplished by perfect wisdom, then we can see how marinating in God’s works can expose us to a force that countervails the spirit that would corrode or deprecate those works, and us with them. I think Jung was playing with the idea of “spirit” in the sense of alcohol, and the degrading power alcohol can have over people, but obviously alcohol is not the only dehumanizing “spirit” at work in the world.

We need to be in the channel of God’s grace in order to prevail against the forces set against us, which seem to multiply by the hour. I believe the Japanese have a concept of “nature bathing”—just experiencing nature in an unadulterated way. Or in current pop culture one encounters the injunction to “touch grass” as a remedy to getting bound up with ideological abstractions or online contagions. I think this can be helpful, whether it’s hunting or fishing or nature photography or birding or whatever. But it’s even more important for faithful people to spend time marinating in Scripture, having frequent recourse to the Church’s sacraments, and seeking the face of Jesus in private prayer. Jung also talked about the importance of human community, alongside spiritual experience, in resisting the pernicious spirits of the world. The Church needs to get serious about all of this. We need to be marshaling all of the resources God has given us for the sake of our people. I really believe this task is urgent as the days grow ever more spiritually dark.

AD: I was surprised to see your reference that it was not until the 1990’s that more people in the South lived in cities than in the countryside. Do you think that this makes the pain of humankind’s alienation from the Creation, and thus the Creator, fresher and more acute for those of us who are sons and daughters of the South?

WB: I think so. Of course, there are many local and regional cultures throughout our country that have a strong tradition of connectedness to the land in one way or another. I got to fish in Alaska last year, and it’s alive and well there, for example. But the South’s agrarian tradition, which is not too far away generationally, and even still alive in pockets, albeit now critically endangered, marks the South and Southerners as special in this respect. Whether it’s the memory of your grandmother’s cornbread, or stories of older relatives growing up on family farms that are now strip malls, or quail hunting in the piedmont where there are now no longer

any wild quail... I think these kinds of things mark out a peculiarly Southern “eco-consciousness,” the embers of which should be fanned.

I went to elementary school in Atlanta, and we used to pass an old grist mill on the way, with a waterwheel and everything. My dad stopped there on the way home one afternoon when he saw the door open and two pickup trucks parked outside. We went in and there were two old farmers in there grinding corn. That was in the early 80s. I still remember the dust from the cornmeal covering my school uniform when we left. I drove by it a few years ago and not only was the mill gone, but the creek that ran along next to it was gone too! The whole thing had been swallowed up by Atlanta. There was a prison or a school (it’s hard to tell the difference) sitting on top of the site. One word for this is “progress,” but there are other words for it, less fit for print.

AD: As we rush heedlessly towards urbanization worldwide, do you see any places that have struck a balance that gives you Hope for our future, or are we really in deep trouble?

WB: That’s a tricky question. There are certainly bright spots out there. My own hometown is a great example of successful habitat conservation. The model is based on conservation easements on large, privately held tracts of land; and quail hunting is what motivates it. It’s certainly not a perfect model, but we have a relatively prosperous little town, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of acres of relatively intact wildlife habitat. That’s not nothing. And there are plenty of other success stories. There are large (and growing!) populations of elephants and rhinoceros in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and other places. I read recently that there are more whitetail deer in North America now than there have ever been. Other wildlife populations are doing well or recovering from past declines. The same can be said of some fisheries. To a great extent we have wise legislation and regulation to thank for these things: just at the federal level, the Pittman Robertson Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Magnusson-Stevens Act, etc. etc. But there is, and there will continue to be, pressure on fish and wildlife and their habitat, and I do worry that over time that pressure will be overwhelming.

The fundamental problem, as I see it, is avarice. We live under a cultural / political regime, broadly called “liberalism,” that seeks to leverage avarice (and increasingly cupidity) to make good things happen, and this has worked to a remarkable degree! But I am afraid the piper will sooner or later demand payment. Our system is premised on growth—economic growth, population growth—and we simply cannot have infinite growth in a finite world. I suspect this is why I read about smart people in Silicon Valley and such places dreaming of colonizing other planets, digitizing consciousness, etc. But the real solution, the non-fantastical solution, as posited by Scripture, is repentance and conversion of heart. We have to recognize avarice as a sin and root it out. Each of us needs to ask the question: What do I and my family really need? And to answer that we need to be firmly acquainted with what is most important, what is the highest good; that is, so that we can order other goods in relation to the highest good. And that, in turn, is the work of Bible reading, participation in the Church’s sacramental life, and prayer.

