

Gratia Plena

By

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For years now, many friends have told me about the simple beauty of the chapel of St. Ignatius at Seattle University. After a recent meeting on SU's campus, I decided it was high time to visit this house of worship. Alone inside, I slowly explored the chapel's nooks and sacred art, until I found myself drawn toward an impressive sculpture. The sculpture—carved from a rough, single block of marble—appeared to have a stream of milk cascading down its face. Its sculptor (I reasoned) must have found a milk-colored ribbon within the marble, then smoothed and polished it so that it appeared wonderfully liquid and lactescent. The “milk” flowed from a bowl that the sculptor had carved out of the top of the marble block then covered with gold leaf.



This tilted bowl seemed almost like a halo hovering above the sculpture. I sat for quite some time, drinking in the soothing sense that the sculpture evoked.

And then, “she” began to emerge. Vaguely at first, then with increasing vividness, the outline of a life-sized, female human figure took shape within the milky ribbon. I grew increasingly entranced by the ghost-like figure. Whispering voices from the back of the chapel broke my trance, and I over-heard bits of a conversation between recently arrived visitors: “a single piece of marble . . . wow,” “do you see her silhouette? . . . oh yes, I can see it now,” and “it’s called *Gratia Plena*; that means ‘full of grace.’”

I instantly remembered the words “Hail Mary, full of grace,” from the prayer based on Elizabeth’s joyful exclamation as she greeted the pregnant mother of Jesus. The female figure before me seemed full of the milk of loving kindness; brimming with the Sustainer’s life-giving grace poured out for all creation. For me, this sculpture also seemed to celebrate one of our first tastes of God’s nourishment as newborns, as mammals. When we drank our mothers’ milk, every cell of our bodies was flooded with its life-giving mystery: sun, water, plants, and animals converted through one body to be food for another. As infants we were “filled with good things [Luke 1:53]” necessary for growth. We too were filled with grace.

Over the two weeks since delighting in *Gratia Plena*, I must admit that “she” has largely been out of my thoughts. She reentered my mind when in mid-November I visited S&S Homestead, a farm on Lopez Island just north of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. As with the chapel, for years I had heard glowing descriptions of Henning Sehmsdorf and Elizabeth Simpson’s Homestead but had never taken the time to visit. However, I found it hard to resist Henning’s recent invitation to come stay on the farm for several days and “eat food

that will make you never want to return to Seattle.” Upon reaching the farm, Henning, Elizabeth, and two German shepherds greeted me. After dropping off my gear in their straw bale guesthouse, we met up again in their dimly lit milking barn. I sat silently beside the couple as they hand milked a Jersey cow named Loveday—four hands working in harmony with her udder. I listened to the rhythmic sound of small streams of milk rushing into a stainless steel bucket, one stream after another. This twice-a-day, hour-long ritual determined the pace at which everything else on the farm could move. This ritual also helped to determine the contents of each day’s meal for Elizabeth, Henning, and eighteen other families on the island who relied upon Loveday. I found myself entranced by Loveday’s seemingly endless flow of milk. At this point, my thoughts flashed back to *Gratia Plena*: milk flowing, God’s love and sustenance made manifest through an earthy being, the hungry being filled. Elizabeth gently broke my trance as she handed me a wine glass filled with Loveday’s warm, fragrantly pungent milk. As with my reflections around *Gratia Plena*, I felt awe in this earthy mystery that flooded my own cells, in this conversion of life through Loveday’s body to become life for my own.

Over the course of my days on their farm, Henning and Elizabeth spoke of the “members” of their farm—chickens, pigs, sheep, cattle, dogs, a cat, the land itself, and each other—as “co-workers.” They explained that every member contributed to making the farm work. Rather than being expendable farm “assets” and “resources,” each animal received a name and the level of respect due to them as co-workers. Likewise, Elizabeth and Henning did not treat Loveday as a resource, chattel, or a machine. Rather, because of Loveday’s great responsibilities (supplying more than fifty people with milk every week; generating substantial financial income for the farm; replenishing the ground with her manure; and providing constancy and much joy), it seemed that she enjoyed a proportionally high level of respect. She grazed freely on acres of pesticide-free grass, which were “rotated” to allow the land time to recycle her manure. Raised chemical-free as a calf (by Dominican Sisters on a neighboring island), her body continued to remain free of synthetic hormones, antibiotics, and other medicines. She ate organic, hay, greens and vegetables from the garden, alfalfa and barley, all grown on the farm. She also received grooming and large amounts of affection every day. All of this attention, Henning commented, helped her to view her human co-workers as she viewed her own calf. As a result, she willingly “let down her milk” to them. She was neither a machine, nor a coddled pet. Instead, she was the heart of the working organism that was the farm. She was full of the tangible graces of God, and these graces flowed out of her body to be food for many.

With the little that I know about the dairy industry in our country, I realized how unique it is for a cow to be treated as a co-worker rather than a machine—or, more accurately, a dispensable cog in a larger industrial machine. This industrial dairy machine works to produce the greatest quantities of milk with the smallest input costs (e.g., feed, acreage, buildings, etc.). For decades, farm policies in our country have supported and subsidized this mechanistic model, which requires placing large numbers of cows on as little land as possible. Most cows in our country (over 85 percent) now live in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, or “CAFOs.” But such a mechanistic system is actually “too” productive: milk quantities far exceed consumer need. Our current oversupply of milk floods the national economy and threatens to supplant remaining small-scale, sustainable

milk production here and around the world. The problem of overproduction is so great that, for example, in 1985 our government paid over fourteen thousand dairy farmers to kill their cows and get out of the dairy business. These cows were “dispensable cogs” and their milk a waste product.

CAFO cows don’t live like Loveday. Loveday produces a quantity of milk that’s natural to her body (about twelve pounds a day); after receiving stress/disease-producing (e.g., mastitis, uterine disorders, enlarged internal organs) injections of recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH), her CAFO sisters can produce a painful forty-nine pounds of milk. Loveday grazes freely and eats food that her body was created to consume; CAFO cows typically never taste fresh grass—they’re confined to small areas and fed a highly concentrated diet that is foreign and stressful to their bodies. Loveday’s manure is a blessing to the land; the enormous quantity of CAFO cow manure is almost always an air/water-pollutant, and environmental curse. Loveday is respectfully treated as a co-worker and source of God’s grace; CAFO cows are treated like expendable chattel, and their abundant milk like a problem to be solved. Loveday can expect to produce her rich milk for at least twelve years; her CAFO counterparts usually “wear out,” cease milk production, and are slaughtered within two years.

During my stay at S&S Homestead, *Gratia Plena* came to mind frequently as I reflected on these contrasts. Elizabeth and Henning’s honoring of the land and animals as co-workers felt reminiscent of the way the Holy Spirit worked with and through Mary. Although Mary considered herself the “lowliest” of servants, she was the Spirit’s honored co-worker; and through her, all generations could taste God’s loving kindness. Indeed, Mary was a beloved partner in an act that could radically feed the world’s deepest hungers. It feels blasphemous to even consider the idea that the Holy Spirit might have treated Mary as a resource or machine. For me, *Gratia Plena* and Loveday both provide hopeful antidotes to viewing each other, animals, or any member of creation as mere resources. Both invite a rediscovery of the sources of God’s daily grace. Both evoke an honor for all members of creation as co-workers of God. It’s a choice between cheapened “gifts” and the fullness of grace. I hunger for the latter.

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Source: The Humane Farming Association, www.hfa.org.