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## All Things Praise the Lord

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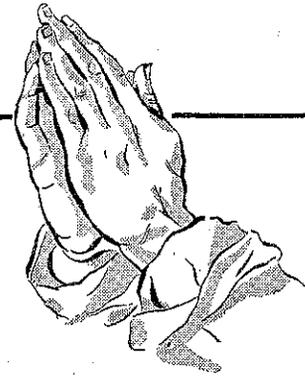
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## "All Things Praise the Lord"

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

WE all remember our school days and our study of poetry. Perhaps we thought that the poets, especially the nature poets, were a frantic lot. We were driven to study Shelley's "Ode to a Sky-lark," Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," and we found them not completely understandable. We, no less than they, loved nature. Love of nature was understandable. But what we could not grasp was this cult of nature, this bowing down to the beauty of a bird in flight or song. It was not that we were cold to beauty. But we thought that the poets' "wild ecstasy" in the presence of larks, Grecian urns, and nightingales was a little overwrought. They were burning incense before the gods of nature, and this far we refused to go. We would go as far as love of nature, but not to making of it a graven image. We would not worship.

Chesterton once said, "The world is full of Christian truths run wild." In some of the nature poets we have the perversion of something very Christian. The love of nature which Shelley and Keats had is, in reality, both a love and truth run wild. Nature is a reflection, a symbol, a sign. What these poets worship is a reflection of God's beauty, the symbol of His majesty, the sign of His presence. They never went beyond the reflection of God to God Himself. They sank to their knees before the symbol of God, but God Himself they did not worship. They saw all the signs of His presence, but not God Himself. Though they perverted a truth, this perversion does not destroy the truth itself: nature is a reflection of God.

All through the Christian ages there has been a great love of nature. Take the mountain, for instance. In both the Jewish and Christian tradition the mountain has seemed to have something specifically religious about it. Some instinct in man has sensed that in the massiveness of the mountain there is a suggestion of the divine, that in the threat of its cliffs there is a declaration

of God's power, that in the thrust of its peak there is an invitation to prayer.

Mountains are often the place where man and God meet. God invites Moses to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and abide with me there.'" Jerusalem was called Mount Zion, and as the Jewish pilgrims marched toward the Holy City they used to sing: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains to find there my deliverance." From the side of a mountain near Capharnaum Our Lord delivered His famous Sermon on the Mount. When Our Lord wanted to pray, He climbed a mountain: "When he had dismissed the crowd, he went up the mountain by himself to pray." He was transfigured on a mountain, crucified on a mountain, and ascended into heaven from a mountain. When Saint Benedict founded his famous monastery he was on the very top of Monte Cassino. Saint Francis received the stigmata on Mount La Verna. The mountain has been the holy ground where the creature talked to his Creator, where the finite touched the Infinite.

There is a special reason why mountains speak to us of God. Way back in the Middle Ages the learned men used to say that anything God created bore the stamp of His divinity. They used a technical Latin term, *vestigia*, which is best translated "footprints." Whenever God created something, wherever God manifested His power, or His wisdom, or His beauty, He left His footprints. In the force of the mountain's presence, in the assertion of its strength, they saw the footprints of God.

Where God goes, He leaves His footprints. However, there is always something a little different about the traces of His presence in various things. In the last century a famous Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was struck by the beauty peculiar to each creature. He said that each blade of grass, stone, tree, and mountain has its own unique kind

of beauty. In each mountain there is a beauty which is different from the beauty of any other mountain. Each creature has a grandeur which is not found in any other creature. Each creature has a beauty which happens only once, which is unrepeatable, irreplaceable. God touches each creature in a different way. The touch of God has left on every creature a unique imprint of His beauty, power, tenderness.

All of this has importance for our prayer life. There is in man a certain impotence, an inadequacy. Praise God he must. But to praise God as he ought, he cannot. In the days before Christ, King David was faced with the poverty of his praise. He wanted to praise God, but David could not praise Him as he deserved. Since creatures come from God and carry in them the footprints of His beauty, each in its unique way, David made up for what was wanting in his own praise by calling on all creatures to praise God. In Psalm 148 David prayed: "Give praise to the Lord in heaven; praise him, all that dwells on high. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, every star that shines. Give praise to the Lord on earth, monsters of the sea and all its depths; fire and hail, snow and mist, and the storm-wind that executes his decree; all you mountains and hills, all you fruit trees and cedars; all you wild beasts and cattle, creeping things and birds that fly in air; all you kings and peoples of the world, all you that are princes and judges on earth; young men and maids, old men and boys together; let them all give praise to the Lord's name."

The attitude we take toward the mountains, trees, birds, snow has been summed up by Pascal: "Nature has some perfections to show that it is the reflection of God, and some imperfections to show that it is only God's reflection." We do not worship the beauty of nature as did the nature poets. We enjoy the beauty of nature and use it, like David, to praise and worship God.