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## BEFORE NATURE: A Christian Spiritual Paul Santmire

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**BEFORE NATURE: A Christian Spirituality.** By H. Paul Santmire. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. 272 pages. Paper. \$39.00.

H. Paul Santmire's latest book *Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality* follows the similar theme of many of his previous works in an exploration of the relationship between nature and theology. For the past forty years Santmire has been contemplating nature, what he calls a theology of nature, from within the classical Christian tradition. In other words, Santmire wants to reclaim Christian themes and re-envision them in light of nature with an eye focused on what he believes has now become a global environmental crisis. In his previous works, Santmire explored a theology of nature historically, he devoted an entire book to outlining his theology of nature, and he has explored nature in relationship to Christian worship. In *Before Nature*, Santmire claims that this book now brings him full circle in his spiritual journey with nature. This book is for him a spiritual testament. Now he asks other spiritual seekers, Christian and non-Christian alike, to attempt the impossible, to stand in two places at one time, in other words to be bifocal. He is not referring to eyeglasses but to the root meaning of the word, having two foci. Santmire asks, "What if we were to imagine the cathedral of the great outdoors engulfing, surrounding, embracing the cathedral of Christian practices, and imagine ourselves standing at the entrance of that Christian cathedral, contemplating the vastness and the mystery and beauty of the world of nature before and all around us in the cathedral of

the great outdoors" (xv). In this book, as with many of his others, Santmire leans heavily upon his understanding of St. Francis of Assisi whom he believed ultimately taught a true bifocal view of Christian spirituality.

Early in his book, Santmire sets the groundwork by defining his two key terms, nature and spirituality. Nature is to be understood as "all things visible," configured theologically in light of the Christian church's Trinitarian and creedal traditions. In other words, everything that is tangible in the world around him or the material aspects of God's good creation. Santmire emphasizes two main parts in his working definition, material human artifacts and the human body. Santmire also clearly defines what nature is not. It is not some romantic notion of past poets and philosophers, nor is it a self-enclosed universe as defined by many natural scientists, nor the alleged world of "resources" as defined by capitalists. This definition, with a few additions, has remained consistent throughout all his previous works. The term spirituality, for Santmire is a different kind of construct. He defines it as a religious experience; religious being a more popular cultural understanding as opposed to Christian spirituality, yet spirituality is an experience that is both powerful and that which transforms one's life. Here Santmire is clear that his definition is not in opposition to religion, but its meaning could swing in both directions of the pendulum, which includes the practices of any religious tradition, from Hinduism to Buddhism, and back to Christian. His definitions, whether one agrees or disagrees, allow Santmire to include discussions of Christian baptism, which for him is the

heart of his own spiritual journey.

Throughout the book Santmire ties his and the reader's spiritual journey together with what he calls the "the Trinity Prayer." He uses the prayer not only as a way to structure the book's chapters, but also as a way in which to engage the reader into a deeper knowledge of the Triune God. He claims that by speaking the prayer throughout the day and throughout the week, one's spiritual journey grows in spiritual knowledge of the Triune God and more importantly the ability to envision the Trinity through the lens of nature. There is no doubt that Santmire uses his book as a way to divulge his own personal spiritual journey, which may encourage others to do the same. But that is jarred about a third of the way into the book when he makes the claim that he has never actually "taken" a spiritual journey, but has only lived his journey through the lives of those who have, Martin Luther, Jürgen Moltmann, Celtic monks, and Henry Thoreau, to name a few. He states, "As I have reflected about my life, I have realized that, to date, I have never really encountered that 'dark night of the soul' that masters of the spritual life talk about . . . I have not sought out spiritual trials . . . I have never aspired to be a spiritual child of the wilderness. I traveled once to edges of a desert in Namibia, but I did not venture any further. I have pondered the mysteries of the ocean from the Maine and Cape Cod coastlines but I have never gone sailing on the open sea"

(72–73). Instead he claims that he has been inspired, if not more so, by what he calls the spirituality of ordinary places, for him this pertains mainly to marriage.

Santmire's personal journey of life, more than just his spiritual journey, is deeply felt in the pages of the book as he wrestles with questions of theodicy, theology of facts, and who he really is. As he wanders in and out through various stories, many carried forward from past works, he at times wanders away from what he had originally set out to do, to engage the reader into a deeper knowledge of the Triune God. Yet, he does help the reader see that prayer, in this case the Trinity Prayer, reinforces what one sees with one's owns eyes, the beauty of nature.

Santmire's work is richly devotional; his writing is honest and vulnerable. He opens himself up by exposing his life's trials and tribulations along with his many blessings. He uses familiar "Lutheran" language that will comfort many readers. The three main parts of the book unfold the three petitions of the Trinity prayer, which asks the reader to contemplate one's own life, to open oneself up to the same vulnerability and honest reflection. This is well done and brings value to his book. He asks the reader to seriously consider one's spiritual journey, and to ask the tough questions of one's own life along the way.

Beth Hoeltke