The spirituality inherent in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh is close to that of Laudato Si'

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Kavanagh's poems suggest a man fascinated by God. He found God in the fields, in the hedgerows, "in the swamps and marshes…", in short: "in the bits and pieces of every day." Few writers, secular or sacred, have more persistently engaged in figuring God out.

He had learned his Reilly Catechism at school, and over a lifetime, had mulled continually over its meaning. The mysteries of the Catholic faith and the unfolding liturgical seasons are liberally interwoven throughout his writing. References to the Holy Ghost and to Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter abound.

The reluctance of critics to recognise the spiritual dimension of his work may come from a reluctance to let go of the image of Kavanagh as a gauche country farmer, often boorish and drunk. Yet, Kavanagh insists that the "angel" and the "clay" are one, both within himself and in the world at large. The-Christ-who-comes-among-us appears in "a January flower", in the heart of a primrose and in the riot of colour "in a cut-away bog". Creation, even its most commonplace aspects, reflects a sacramental aura. Throughout his writing, Kavanagh sees creation as a marriage between the sacred and the earthy. He deliberately finds "pockets of God" in what might be considered unseemly places: "where the sow roots and the hen scratches". His spirituality is intrinsically holistic.

Kavanagh sorely wanted to explode the impression given by the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 1950s that God was reserved exclusively in the locked tabernacle, and that without attendance at Mass, there was no worship. In his vision, the things of heaven and the things of earth are inseparable. He sees a mystical meaning in flowers and weeds, he is astonished at "the spirit-shocking wonder in a black slanted Ulster hill" and surprised by fields that are "part of no earthly estate".

The spirituality implicit in Kavanagh's poetry is remarkably close to that of *Laudato Si*'. His instinctive ecological awareness promotes a love and respect for the earth that inspires the sense of responsibility we need to care for creation and ensure its well-being (LS 216-226). As a poet-farmer, Kavanagh finds God present in a "dark sod" of earth. As ploughman, he prayerfully "turns the lea-green down" and "paints the meadow brown with his plough" while he watches the March trees "in suspense" as they await the call to life by "the Word, that in the beginning stirred." His theology is profoundly Incarnational.

His poetry reflects further that the earth is alive with God. “The spirit of God”, he writes, “broods over the harrowed fields”, coaxing the earth back to life in spring, while the “the rising sap” is the breath of the Spirit forecasting Christ’s coming “in the green leaves at Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.” Kavanagh foresees a complete spiritual transformation of earth occurring in April, when “in the green meadows / The maiden of Spring is with Child by the Holy Ghost.” For Kavanagh, the earth is virginal and fruitful; its “unworn” beauty, a constant source of wonder, gratitude, and sacramental insight. How could we fail to be sensitive to its fragile beauty?

Kavanagh’s spirituality is both local and universal. He sees miracles of God’s artistry in stones, streams, weeds, and hedges, throughout the little fields of Mucker and Shancoduff in South Monaghan. Each season brings its own marvels: “the wafer-ice on the potholes” at Christmas, the dancing whitethorn hedges in April, and, in summer, crowds of unloved dandelions basking in “a lazy veil of woven sun.” Miracles of God’s artistry, he realises, exist in every clime and culture. He would heartily agree with Laudato Si’s contention that ‘external deserts are growing because internal spiritual deserts have become so vast. (LS 217)