

Sunday, July 11, 2021



*As the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest to settle her young, my home is by your altars,
LORD of hosts, my king and my God! (Psalm 84:4)*

Greetings!

Birds are utterly fascinating when you take time to look at them.

The most colorful ones are like **flashes of natural radiance and personality** that remind us in a certain way of the holy angels: speed, wings, delicacy, industriousness, and music exuding from them for no apparent reason other than to fill our dull world with grace and beauty.

On a retreat in New York one snowy winter I looked out the large window of the dining room and saw three full-grown cardinals in their **ravishing red robes, pointy crests, and brilliant yellow beaks** suddenly burst into the snow-covered area around the bird-feeder.

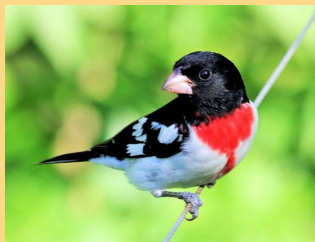
The shock of red and white, framed perfectly in the picture window, was like a mini stage upon which the actors strutted their beauty! Then, one of the New Yorkers in the group broke the silence when he quipped, "Cardinal Dolan, Cardinal O'Connor, and Cardinal Cooke are dining with us today!"

The room erupted in laughter – and, of course, **the birds immediately flew the coop!**

[In most emails you can click on the pictures to enlarge]



Scarlet Tanager



Rose-Breasted Grosbeak



Painted Bunting

Perching and Singing Birds

Did you know that cardinals are close cousins to *finches*? Yep. They're members of quite a **large order of birds, the perching birds** (Latin: *Passeriformes* or Passerines), which encompasses half of all bird species.

Breaking the diverse perching order down into "families" is where we find the resemblances between cardinals and finches and other close cousins like the canaries and sparrows. **Let's call them family**

traits. Here are just a few:

- Small to medium sized (usually under six inches);
- Spindly legs with three toes facing forward and one facing backward (for grabbing onto limbs and perching);
- Stubby, conical beak (perfect for cracking open all kinds of nuts and seeds, their main food);
- Colorful plumage (in some cases shockingly brilliant);
- Pleasant sing-song or chirping voices; and
- Stable (non-migratory) habitats.

A Diverse and Colorful Family

Regarding finches specifically, the proper name for their family is “Fringillidae”, the Latin term from which we somehow get the name finch. In all, there are **over 230 species of finches**, in addition to eighteen species that are extinct.



The **American Goldfinch** with its brilliant yellow plumage, black head, black-and-white striped wings is something of a celebrity in its own right: it's the state bird of New Jersey, Washington, and Iowa.

But the diversity of this sprightly family is amazing, starting with *their unique names*: bullfinches, euphonias, bramblings, buntings, tanagers, grosbeaks, crossbills, redpoles, linnets, serins, siskins, trumpeters, honeycreepers (Hawaiian) and even the pyrhhuloxia (a Greek name that means, roughly, “fiery-oblique-billed” bird!), among others.

And color?! You might have noticed the **Gouldian Finch on the feature panel** at the top of this email. That guy is clearly the king of the Finch family in terms of color! But finches come decked out in virtually every color of the rainbow: some in single sheaths of rich hues; others in brilliant patterns; yet others whose subtle blendings could put the greatest Impressionist artists to shame.

It's as if, on the fifth day of creation when God made the birds, He couldn't decide what color to paint the tiny species, so He emptied out His whole artist's pallet on the finches (and some spilled over to those amazing hummingbirds, too)!

I think **the image the Divine Artist** captures the essence of the finch experience: they are little works of natural art that flit in and out of our lives as pure gifts to behold and enjoy.

I've placed a link to the “All About Birds” website at the end of the email which includes short audio recordings of their bird calls – they are just incredible!



The Finch's Christian Symbolism

These little beauties are not just nice garnishes of nature, though. They also have a lot to tell us about God's sovereignty over the world.

When the Lord Jesus pointed out that the “birds of the air do not sow or reap” (Matthew 6:26), He was using the tiny creatures as a metaphor for God's providential care. Later, He singled out the humble *sparrow* to speak to us about the worth of the human person in God's eyes, did He not? (See Matthew 10:29.)

Given their beauty and celebrity, it's not surprising that **artists since the Renaissance** have been fascinated by the finch family and have featured it in a number of famous paintings. Christian iconography enters into play here based on a rather imaginative tradition:

One pious legend, probably dating from medieval times, has it that **the red feathers covering the goldfinch's head were a gift from Christ**. Finches easily move in and out of thorn bushes to get their brambles, nuts, and berries. So the legend maintained that a goldfinch was present at Christ's Way of the Cross and was alarmed when he saw Christ wearing a crown of thorns. The bird flew to Christ and tried to remove the thorns from His sacred head to alleviate His suffering.

It was not the Savior's will to be free of His passion, so **Christ rewarded the generous little bird** by allowing a drop of His Precious Blood to fall upon the forehead of the finch and permanently dye its feathers red. Such a touching story!

The legend's larger spiritual message was that the merits of Christ's crucifixion extend to all of creation.

Four Famous Finches

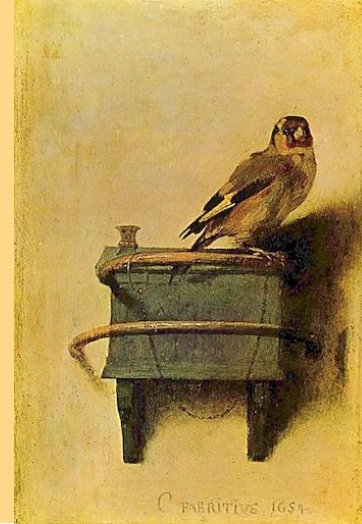
Numerous artists since Renaissance times took up this finch fascination and ran with it. Back in the forties, ornithologist Herbert Friedmann studied the history of classical art and determined that there were 486 paintings that featured the goldfinch, **some 254 in specifically Christian paintings.**

Here are just four famous finches in works of art from the Spanish, Italian, and Dutch schools, three of which are explicitly religious. The painting by Carel Fabritius (a student of Rembrandt) was the subject of a novel entitled, *The Goldfinch*, by Donna Tartt and a film (2019) of the same name based on the book:

Raphael (Madonna of the Goldfinch, 1506)



Carel Fabritius (The Goldfinch, 1654)



Francisco de Zurbarán (Madonna and Child with Infant Baptist, 1658)



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (Madonna of the Goldfinch, 1760)



Feature Articles

Most artists prior to the modern age believed that fine art should reflect in some way the innate beauty of nature.

The work of the artist is to re-present and magnify the work of the greatest Artist whose creation speaks of eternity and appeals to our souls as well

The Divine Prodigality of Beauty (Part 1 - Nature)

as our eyes. This is a central theme of our *Sacred Windows* mission.

Our feature articles (click the titles or pictures at right) take up this theme through a more detailed examination of the wonders of the natural universe on several levels. The first feature article deals with the beauty of nature; the second feature is about the beauty of our vast universe.

I owe a great deal to Fr. Thomas Dubay whose book *The Evidential Power of Beauty* is the focus of the articles. Take a few minutes today to read these relatively short articles and drink in God's created beauty in a more profound way.



[The Divine Prodigality of Beauty \(Part 2 – The Universe\)](#)



Thank you! God bless you and your loved ones,

Here is the link to learn more about these fascinating gifts of God. Enjoy !

[All About Birds / Finches](#)

Also, you can access back issues of the newsletter archived on the *Sacred Windows* website. Please feel free to download the PDFs and forward them to others. We're building the email list one soul at a time:

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