

***The Origin of Species and Other Poems***  
**Presentation by Father Ernesto Cardenal**

Monday April 18, 2011  
Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH) Auditorium  
Michigan State University

**Introduction**

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It is an honor and a privilege to present this afternoon Father Ernesto Cardenal to this audience at Michigan State University.

This event is made possible thanks to many sponsors: The Residential College for Arts and Humanities, The College of Arts and Letters, The Department of Romance and Classical Studies, The Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, James Madison College, The Creative Initiative, Justice and Peace Studies, The Comunidad Latina. I want to give special thanks to the director of the poetry center, Anita Skeen who made possible this reading in this theater venue as part of the poetry month activities of the Residential College.

Ernesto Cardenal is referred to as the greatest living poet of Latin America. Furthermore, Cardenal has been an inspiration to more than three generations as a visionary, artist and activist in what I consider his main venture--the search for UTOPIA. Utopia defined in simple terms, is a place where no one lacks opportunities and where everybody shares the same privileges.

As he recounts in his *memoir*, ever since he was a young student in Nicaragua, he has searched for something different to respond to the needs of his native country, Nicaragua, oppressed at that time by the dictatorial regime of Somoza.

Born in Granada, Nicaragua, he later studied at the UNAM in Mexico where he obtained a Licenciatura in Letters and met many vanguard Mexican writers and politicians, (including Rosario Castellanos). In 1957 he joined the Trappist monastery in Gethsemany, Kentucky, where he met the spiritual leader, Thomas Merton. The teachings of Merton resonated with his spiritual and political convictions. But, Father Cardenal was not suited for a contemplative life. He was commissioned by the Trappists to start an order in Central America. Created in 1966 in the Nicaraguan Lake, Nuestra Señora de Solentiname became the utopian community he had envisioned, an egalitarian community where all had equal opportunities with responsibilities. It was there that Cardenal adapted the Gospel to people's needs and realities in Latin America, "The Gospel of Solentiname."

The Gospel of Solentiname was born from each Sunday's Church services, on the Island of Solentiname, where Cardenal would hold discussions with campesinos instead of a sermon on the Gospel. Cardenal realized that "*Campesinos' comments were usually more incisive than those of many theologians. This is not odd, he said, the Gospel, or "good news" was written for and by people similar to them.*"

Some friends advised Cardenal not to let these commentaries fade away, but to collect and publish them in a book, a book that was later published and translated to several languages conveying a message of true spirituality and social inclusion, a principle that became the inspiration of the Theology of Liberation in Latin America.

For Cardenal, liberation theology was not merely another way of reading the Bible, but a call to action, an action that he carried out when he joined the Sandinistas for the liberation of Nicaragua of the tyrannical regime of the Somozas. After the triumph of the Sandinistas in 1979, he participated actively in the reconstruction of the country as Minister of Education and other positions with the new government.

Ernesto Cardenal has written more than 40 books including poetry, memoirs and essays. His poetry conveys multiple messages from the lyrical and love poetry (his famous epigramas/*Epigrams*), to the political and revolutionary (*Hora Zero/Zero Hour*). Or the famous counter capitalistic *Oda a Marilyn Monroe y otros poemas (Marilyn Monroe and Other Poems)* published in 1965. The Monroe poem is probably his most famous and anthologized, a sharp criticism of consumerism, capitalism and the Hollywood system. Also, in his *Psalms*, published in 1965 he questions issues of oppression, social injustice, and political tyranny in a dialogue that is at the same time a questioning of God. Cardenal also turns to the painful history of the Spanish conquest in America in his epic poem, *El estrecho dudoso (The Doubtful Strait)* published in 1966.

His most recent poetry focuses less in the political and more in his mystical side. One is *Vida en el amor (To Live is to Love)*, published in 1970 with a prologue by Thomas Merton and *Cántico cósmico (Cosmic Canticle)* published in 1989. *Cántico cósmico* is a philosophical poem that attempts to unite religion, science and poetry. "Cardenal finds God in neutrons, sees a Pythagorean miracle in the cosmic dance of the music of the spheres, and feels the divine breath in all living creatures." (Alan West-Durán).

The book he is presenting today, *The Origin of Species and Other poems*, was written to commemorate the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin. In this collection composed of 29 poems, Cardenal addresses issues of natural selection, existence and purpose. As in all his poetry and art, I believe Ernesto Cardenal continues a profound search beyond easy categorization. It is the search for UTOPIA where anyone and everyone can achieve peace and harmony in a communal existence despite religious, beliefs or ideological imposition.

Please, join me in welcoming Father Ernesto Cardenal.