

TELLING THE BEES



Photo credit: Kay Hamrick



Telling the bees is a medieval Western European tradition in which bees are told of important events, particularly deaths. If the custom was omitted or forgotten and the bees were not "put into mourning" then it was believed a bad bee behavior would follow. Celtic mythology has always held that bees were the link between our world and the spirit world. They could shepherd the dead into the afterlife. If you wanted anyone to stay informed, that had already passed, you could tell the bees and they would pass along the information.

The custom is best known in England, and received media attention last year when the Queen's Beekeeper informed Her Majesty's bees of her death. The custom has also been recorded in Ireland, Wales, Germany, Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Bohemia (now Czechia), and in the United States following wide 19th century immigration from Europe. Closer to home, Nora Bonesteel is a recurring character in the Appalachian novels of Sharyn

McCrum. Nora-- as well as being the community's healer, herbalist, and seer-- is a "beespeaker."

In mythology, Zeus was said to have been raised by bees and was sometimes called *Melissaios*, or "bee man." Bees had fed nectar to Dionysus and bestowed upon Apollo the gift of prophecy. Especially aligned with bees was Demeter, goddess of the harvest, who went everywhere with an entourage of priestesses known as the *Melissae*, the "bee-maidens."

Beekeeping is an ancient Christian tradition. Patrons of the apiary include Saints. Benedict, Ambrose, Valentine, Abigail, Dominic, David, Kharlamii, and Bernard of Clairvaux, to name a few. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "The cooperation of the living community of believers in the Church in some way resembles the activity of bees. It builds up the community of light." Honey is seen as a symbol for the Eucharist, and was also used at baptism.



Beehives have often been kept on monastery grounds so honey could be used medicinally and as food and to make mead, and for the wax. Only beeswax candles can be used as the Paschal candle.

A Rite of Bee Speaking

Let us pray:

O God, you promised us a land flowing with milk and honey. You fed us honey from the rock, and gave us your Word in flesh that we may have life and have it abundantly. Even in our grief, help us to care for your creation, following in the way that you care for us. Amen.

The beekeeper's wyfe speaks to the bees the following:

Sweet bees, _____, your master is dead. He has taken the journey to eternity which you know well. He loved and cared for you and those who came before.

Grieve not too long, but return to your chores, and gather the pollen and nectar in. You are essential to God's creation and the food we eat.

All is well in God's world. Be content, lovely ladies, you are in good hands.

We bring you fare of food and drink out of respect for you, that you may share with us in showing our grateful thanks to _____.

A black sash is placed in the apiary. Food and drink is left for the bees.

Heavenly Father, may your holy blessing descend upon these bees and these hives; so that they may multiply, be fruitful and preserved from all ills and that the fruits coming forth from them may be distributed for your praise and that of your Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.