

Listening

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*Dedicated to
Jonathan Edwin Collins*

*And all those who grieve in silence
For their unborn children*

In Cluny¹

A chalice bought by a monk
for the altar
gleams with gems,
its golden form commands
the space.

The revolution in France
chose this place first
to destroy.²
The Abbey's myriad lands,
solemnly sworn
by William³ to be
inviolable
were disbursed.

Now a wooden cup,
cracked,
imperfect,
does the job of prayer,
nothing had changed
and everything.

Rev. Thomas Joseph Holahan
7 Sept. 2019

NOTES

¹"Cluny" - This monastic complex began as a model abbey in the 10th century. It grew into one of the wealthiest monasteries in Christendom by acquiring extensive farmland and hiring managers for these estates. Unlike other monasteries, the monks here were solely involved in prayer and not physical labor.

²"chose this place first to destroy" - Since its founding, Cluny had been free to establish affiliated monasteries in France and England. As the French kings took control in the course of two centuries, Cluny became deeply identified with the monarchy. In 1790, it became a most fitting target for anti-royalists.

³"William" - William I, Duke of Aquitaine (present-day Burgundy) founded the monastery in 910. He uncharacteristically released it from any future obligations to himself or local authorities. Cluny was established to serve the poor and pilgrims.

INTRODUCTION

CATHOLIC ART AFTER CHRISTENDOM

“The Constantinian era has given us the magnificent success of a ‘Christendom’; but Christendom is not the Church. This is certainly a delicate distinction to apply in its doctrinal and institutional frontiers. But such an application is utterly indispensable for a world whose human dimensions extend far beyond the Christianized world of Constantine.”

—Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P.¹

Catholic art witnesses the glory of God, the exquisite love that overcomes every estrangement. Although “beauty is the visible form of the good,”² it cannot be achieved without love, and loving Christ, the supremely beautiful one, also risks the ugliness of the Cross. If our labors genuinely respond to “God’s rule, his living power over the world,”³ rather than formulaic patterns, we can retain all that is good and noble in our tradition while remaining free to experiment; encountering new forms and opportunities in the world redeemed by Christ.

Many beautiful representations of moral worth and reasoning have been produced throughout the Church’s history, but the core of artistic aspiration is not simply catechetical clarity; it is the mystery of existence seen with the eyes of faith. God’s perfect, universal love—intermingled amongst the very tissue of the Trinity—mysteriously touches each precious, precarious, and unrepeatable moment, even amongst the dilapidation of sin. If we fail to grasp this, we miss the true glory of the Incarnation: that fragile and delicate masterpiece born to Mary over two thousand years ago. This child Jesus is also our heavenly Father’s beautiful boy, innocent yet mutilated and put to death. The resurrection makes Jesus whole again and exalts him through this same Father’s love. This is the true pattern of all art as “[l]ove wants everything to be raised up to the same level.”⁴

The contemporary conversation about Catholic art, however, tends to focus on *re*-storing beauty or *re*-claiming the aesthetic traditions of Christendom, rather than the theological merits of art itself. Many venerable traditions have arisen from Christendom, and it is right to preserve and protect them, but the Church is not confined exclusively to any one historical epoch or culture.⁵ Without the “living past” of tradition, no new forms capturing our encounter with the Lord would be possible, but “the glorious traditions of Catholicism should not limit the universality of the church’s language.”⁶ Any cursory

survey of the nearly two thousand year history of Catholic art clearly shows that the Church's aesthetic language is a perpetual "revolution" of new forms and techniques.⁷

Working "backwards" from our divine Father's unfathomable and unconquerable love, consummated in our divine brother Christ, and in-dwelling among us through the Holy Spirit, Catholic artists exercise their vocation "in the world as a kind of heaven."⁸ By identifying the marginalized or ignored territories in our age that surreptitiously communicate with the traditions of the Church, a liminal space is created—beyond the historical forms of Christendom, but drawing strength from its lessons—where we can encounter our ancient living creed, often obscured by the patina of comfortable routine. Such art does not seek to eliminate elements that appear anachronistic or untimely, which also properly belong to the Church's form, but rather strives for "an increase of fidelity to her own calling."⁹

This is accomplished through the incarnational potential of sound, letter, movement, shape, and color, immersed in the particularities of physical reality. "Christianity does not reject matter. Rather, bodiliness is considered in all its value in the liturgical act, whereby the human body is disclosed in its inner nature as a temple of the Spirit and is united with the Lord Jesus, who himself took a body for the world's salvation."¹⁰ Indeed, the task of Catholic artists is "to render visible"¹¹ this "yes" to all matter through Christ, emerging out of the mystery of God's love for the world.

The full panoply of artistic techniques—from literary and musical to less conventional forms of dance, cinema, and installation arts—can express our perennial faith and thereby "add their weight to the play of the philosophers and theologians, and act as mediators of invaluable experiences, structures, contents, forms and materials."¹² Rather than measuring the value of such art exclusively through stylistic or juridical criteria, a truly ecumenical reception of Catholic art will "discern the spiritual truths latent in the artists' own struggles."¹³

The call to continual conversion is not only intended for the culture, but for the Church herself in cultivating and expanding our encounter with the divine. Authentic Catholic art can contribute to this process by challenging the *bureaucracy of the altar*: that God can *only* be encountered through a specific liturgical formula. The sacraments are indispensable to the faithful and a conduit of exceptional grace, but Catholic art becomes possible precisely where we encounter the Trinitarian disclosure of reality out in the world and the studio *as well as* upon the altar. In this sense, "[t]heological reflection on art does not begin with abstract concepts like 'beauty,' but in the tall and dangerous grass of the studio, in the anxiety and pressure of the technical and vocational decisions that confront the artist moment by moment."¹⁴

This anthology contains diverse textual voices from thinkers, practicing artists, and priests—all friends who grapple with the profound loveliness and mystery of the Catholic faith as it transforms our understanding of the arts. To organize these rich discussions, three thematic categories have been introduced: *After Christendom*, *Beyond Evangelization*, and *Extraliturgical Art*, each accompanied by an explanatory quotation. We pray that the contributions herein be guided by the Holy Spirit and not the egos of clever minds; and may Christ lead us to pick the ripened fruit.

Guest Editor
Timothy Matthew Collins

NOTES

¹ M.-D. Chenu, O.P., "End of the Constantinian Era," *Listening* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 1967): 180.

² John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (April 4, 1999), sec. 3, Vatican website, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html, accessed June 28, 2019.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 26.

⁴ Fr. Thomas Holahan, C.S.P., Lecture on the Sacraments of Initiation, the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, New York City, April 20, 2013.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), sec. 58, in *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, ed. Norman Tanner, S.J. (New York: Image Books, 2012), 256–257.

⁶ Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 129.

⁷ "Revolution" is here understood both in the colloquial sense of radical innovation and as the perpetual re-volving of Catholic art around the central tenets of the faith. See for example Rolf Toman, ed., *Ars Sacra: Christian Art and Architecture of the Western World from the very beginning up until today* (Potsdam, Germany: H.F.Ullmann, 2010), 22–795.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (November 18, 1965), sec. 2, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., trans. ed. Joseph Gallagher (New York: America Press, 1966), 492.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), sec. 6, in *Decree on Ecumenism* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1964), 9.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Oriente Lumen* (May 2, 1995), sec. 11, Vatican website, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19950502_orientale-lumen.html, accessed June 28, 2019.

¹¹ For this translation of Paul Klee's aphorism, "Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar," see Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 48. Originally published as Paul Klee, "Schöpferische Konfession," in *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit: Eine Schriftensammlung*, Vol. 13, ed. Kasimir Edschmid (Berlin: Erich Reiß, 1920).

¹² Friedrich Heer, *The Intellectual History of Europe: Volume I, From the Beginnings of Western Thought to Luther*, trans. Jonathan Steinberg (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), xi.

¹³ This insight comes from the work of the Openings Artist Collective, a project of the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle ("The Paulist Fathers"). See Timothy Matthew Collins, "Contemporary art in the Catholic Church," *Paulist Fathers*, October 11, 2015, <https://www.paulist.org/the-conversation/contemporary-art-in-the-catholic-church/>, accessed August 24, 2019.

¹⁴ Daniel A. Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art? Essays on Modern Art & Theology in Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 35.

AFTER CHRISTENDOM

“If we take the autonomy of earthly realities to mean that created things, and societies also, have their own laws and values which are to be gradually discovered, utilized and ordered by us, then it is perfectly proper to claim such autonomy as not only demanded by people today but as in harmony with the will of the Creator. From the fact of being created, everything possesses its own stability, truth and goodness, and its own laws and order, which should be respected by us in recognising the methods which are appropriate to the various sciences and arts.”¹

NOTES

¹Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), sec. 36. in *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, ed. Norman Tanner, S.J. (New York: Image Books, 2012), 227.

CATHOLIC STORYTELLING AS AN ACT OF FAITH

Laura Pittenger

“The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes, there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula.”

—Flannery O’Connor¹

The mission of the twenty-first century Catholic artist lies not in providing proofs for the divine, but rather in engaging honestly with life in a fallen world in which the Divine is known to dwell. In so doing, the artist both evangelizes by opening the heart of the viewer to the possibility of life in the risen Christ, and also produces authentic art, the value of which stretches beyond the pedantic into a higher, unitive act of creation, echoing the artist’s relationship to the Creator as *Imago Dei* (image of God). For God did not create humanity to instruct the angels, but rather because He loves us; so, too must our Catholic art first reflect a love and interest in human life for life’s sake. This artistic philosophy and *modus operandi* may be one path toward rebuilding curiosity and engagement with religion in the secular world, as well as building upon the existing faith of believers.

I work as a playwright and director in New York City, and my engagement with the Catholic artist’s mission concerns the creative act of “storytelling,” broadly defined. As Catholics, we believe that God directly inspired the writers of the stories, songs, poems, and eyewitness accounts we collectively refer to as the Bible. If we believe this, we must acknowledge that storytelling is one of God’s most cherished forms of art, for He has used it to communicate directly with His people throughout millennia.

Last year, during an illuminating course on “Bible as Literature” through the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research,² I encountered the work of Robert Alter, who published his new translation of the Hebrew Bible in 2019.³ At an April 2019 talk hosted by the Center for Jewish History, Prof. Alter spoke about his approach to the ancient texts:⁴ because he is not particularly observant himself, he chose to treat the texts primarily as Hebrew literature—as *stories*—a paradigm which has radically altered my perspective of the responsibilities of the Christian artist. Catholics are not bound by

strictly fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture in all respects; as such, the idea that Genesis could be both a faithful rendering of God's creation of the world, and yet not a scientific treatise, was neither foreign nor frightening to me, but artistically liberating.

Indeed, by studying and incorporating this distinctly Jewish perspective of Old Testament scripture into my religious worldview, I have grown deeper in my Christian faith. Hearing and experiencing the stories and wisdom of the Old Testament as Jesus Himself did, which He later used in His own parables during his years of public ministry, adds further credence to the image of God the Father as storyteller. The late Christian author Rachel Held Evans wrote in her final book *Inspired*: "It is no more beneath God to speak to us using poetry, proverb, letters, and legend than it is for a mother to read storybooks to her daughter at bedtime. This is who God is. This is what God does."⁸ I am inspired by this storytelling God, who desires not merely to teach us, but to illuminate the unique colors and shapes of our lives, in darkness and light.

Why, then, are so many contemporary Christian stories told so badly?⁹ Complaining about the poor quality of "Christian storytelling" has become a tired cliché for both artists and consumers, and in my view, belittles the hard work of fellow artists (however misguided they may be). Broadly, then, the hallmarks of poor Christian storytelling (in film, television, music, theater, and literature) include, but are not limited to: a tedious emphasis on instruction and dogma; a reluctance to depict natural human behavior (i.e. salty language, physical affection beyond chaste marital kisses); a fear of controversial, political, or "heavy" subject matter (unless to show the consequences of a particular lifestyle and subsequent repentance/conversion); and a conclusion that relies upon the acceptance of belief in the fundamentals of Christianity.

It is this final hallmark to which a Catholic ought to object most strenuously, for there is nothing quite so positivist (with a splash of evangelicalism) as an inordinate fixation upon *proofs* of God, while disregarding the deeply Catholic, *mystical exploration* of the interior spiritual life of the Christian. For, as Catholics, we know the faith which was bestowed upon us at baptism. We've grown up hearing about the dogma; we have seen friends and family members drift in and out of faith; perhaps we have even drifted in and out of it ourselves. We know the life of a Catholic does not begin and end with conversion. Most of us do not even recall our own baptisms as infants. Our stories of faith certainly do not conform to what is referred to in mainline Protestantism as a "testimony": the story of one's journey to Christianity, a requisite tool for evangelicals seeking to convert non-believers and convict fellow non-evangelical Christians. A July 16, 2016 *Religion Dispatches* article detailed that testimonies "depend on a three-part structure of *sin*, *repentance*, and *redemption*"¹⁰ and are typically modeled upon the conversion of St. Paul¹¹ or the parable of the Prodigal Son.¹² *Religion Dispatches* cited Campus Crusade for Christ's template for testimony: "My Life Before Christ, How I Came to Christ, My Life After Coming to Christ"¹³—the "before, during, and after" skeleton of the Christian journey.

What would a Protestant "testimony" writer make of someone like St. Teresa of Calcutta, who admitted in private correspondence and journals that she felt "so abandoned by God that she was unable to pray and was convinced, despite her ever-present smile, that she was experiencing the 'tortures of hell.'"¹⁴ Or of St. Therese of Lisieux, who wrote, "It is true that at times a very small ray of the sun comes to illumine

my darkness, and then the trial ceases for an instant, but afterward the memory of this ray, instead of causing me joy, makes my darkness even more dense.”¹²

For both of these saints, their faith stories had barely *begun* with their baptisms, nor would the convention of the “testimony” be suitable for discussing their Christian lives in any manner that might be useful to us. The “testimony” paradigm is not always appropriate for reaching the rag-tag, contemporary pilgrims seeking to understand how to persist in running the good race when the world and our lives can feel so utterly devoid of God’s love. If we are to tell great Christian stories, we must resist the temptation to avoid easy “testimony” tropes when they appear in art and fiction, for we impoverish our souls when we disregard the reality of Christian pain and suffering. We must make our art depict more than just the “before” and the “how” of the Christian life and focus on the “after”—and we must be scrupulously honest in our work about what the “after” entails.

Surely, too, we must remember that the Bible itself—the gold standard of Godly storytelling—defies easy conventions and stereotypes, telling the stories of both pious and impious prostitutes, tax collectors, beggars, thieves, murderers, kings, priests, cowards, and finally good men who nonetheless find themselves baffled, as Job was, by what seemed to be God’s disfavor and the suffering He permitted to overtake Job’s life. When God finally appears to Job, rather than explicating why Job underwent such horrific suffering, God asks him, “Who is this who darkens counsel with words of ignorance? . . . I will question you, and you tell me the answers! Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.”¹³ By the end of God’s ominous line of questioning, Job admits that he had “spoken but did not understand” and chooses to “repent in dust and ashes.”¹⁴ Having received this divine smackdown, Job’s former prosperity is restored—a shockingly dark twist on “happily ever after.”

What I love about the Job story is that it does not revolve around Job’s *lack* of faith or *need for more* faith, but rather around Job’s struggle to find *solace* in his faith amidst his devastating circumstances. When he asks for answers, he receives only more questions. As G.K. Chesterton wrote in *The Everlasting Man*, “the Book of Job avowedly only answers mystery with mystery. Job is comforted with riddles; but he is comforted.”¹⁵ Job is rewarded by God when he acknowledges that there is much more that he *cannot* know about God than he ever *can*. This story defies easy conventions and is graphic in its depiction of Job’s suffering, some version of which most people have experienced by adulthood in seasonal litanies of unending woe.

Singer-songwriter Audrey Assad’s music album “Evergreen”¹⁶ is one of the greatest contemporary examples of authentic Catholic storytelling in its wholesale embrace of suffering. Throughout this 12-track disc, Assad draws the listener across wide swathes of the mature Christian experience, touching on St. Teresa of Calcutta’s spiritual darkness in “Teresa” (“Jesus, I need You / Lover, don’t leave / Did You call my name / Just to plunge me deep into the darkness?”), as well as the saint’s advice for leading a Christian life by doing “Little Things With Great Love.” In an *Aleteia* interview,¹⁷ Assad described her journey away from her fundamentalist upbringing and ideas of an “angry God,” towards a God that priest and author Henri Nouwen described as the “Wounded Healer”¹⁸—incidentally, the title of another song from “Evergreen,” a hymn to the wounded Christ who ministers to His wounded people. In her song “Deliverer,” Assad

engages in a measure of apophatic theology (that is, speaking in terms of what may *not* be said about God): “You are not insistent / You do not force me / You are not controlling / You make me free indeed.” In “River,” the album’s most politically progressive track, Assad (accompanied by hip hop artist Propaganda) sings of a God who liberates the poor and dreams of a justice that rolls “like a river.”

Each track on “Evergreen” is an experiment, an attempt to ask the question: “What does it mean to live as a Christian *each day*?” This question is framed by beautifully performed music, with piercing, haunting melodies equipped to bear the weight of such heavy lyrics. Assad’s album demonstrates that a mature Christian may have questions or doubts about the nature or character of the God we worship, and his relationship to and care for our suffering. In the album’s sparse, poetic conclusion, Assad admits that in spite of all her doubts about God, she knows that she is still “Drawn to You.” In her honest, broken assessment of her own faith journey, Assad gives her fellow Christians permission to doubt, to mourn, and to heal.

Witness to an authentic Catholic life may also be discovered in the film *Lady Bird*, a story about non-Catholic Catholic schoolgirl Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson, played by Saoirse Ronan.¹⁹ Like her film’s protagonist, non-Catholic writer and director Greta Gerwig attended a Catholic school and decided to draw upon her experiences there, saying in an interview with *America*: “There’s plenty of stuff to make a joke out of [in Catholic schools], but what if you didn’t? What if you took it seriously and showed all the things that were beautiful about it?”²⁰ *America* sums up the film’s most poignant scene:

Midway through the film, *Lady Bird* reviews her college application with Sister Sarah-Joan . . . at her Catholic high school. When the sister remarks on *Lady Bird*’s affectionate writing about Sacramento, *Lady Bird* shrugs off the compliment, saying she just pays attention. “Don’t you think that might be the same thing?” asks Sister Sarah-Joan. “Love and attention?”²¹

If this is the ultimate lesson the filmmaker wished to impart to a secular film audience from her years at a Catholic school, we must admit that Gerwig has been well-served in her education. *Lady Bird*’s cinematic journey fittingly ends at a church in New York City, which she wanders into after a disastrous first night away from home—and finds herself longing for home. For the Catholic, this scene is reminiscent of a reversion to the faith, perhaps after some time away—no matter where we might travel, we will always have our church, ready to welcome us home.

It can be difficult to even broach the topic of religion in stories for secular audiences. In preparation for his play *The Christians*,²² which debuted at Off-Broadway theater Playwrights Horizons, playwright Lucas Hnath told *The New York Times* that he had “invited a group of nonreligious actors to watch tapes of preachers . . . and to jot down words that made them cringe.” Hnath then created a sermon for his fictional preacher, omitting all such “cringe” words, in order to “talk about Christianity in a way that sidestepped certain preconceptions that made people want to quickly dismiss it.” Hnath expressed frustration with an audience member who wanted to know about the playwright’s relationship to Christianity, “almost immediately, as if answering that question answers a question about the play.”²³ Hnath has publicly refused to answer

questions about his religious beliefs, saying only that a “lack of obvious resolution can be uncomfortable, agitating. But with a lot of practice, we can also learn to take pleasure in the agitation.”²⁴

Several years ago, I was commissioned to write about a significant woman from history, and not knowing much about her, I chose now-Servant of God Dorothy Day.²⁵ The resulting work is a short piece titled “The Drill,” set at a protest of the nuclear bomb drills in New York City led by Day. During the tension of the protest, I envisioned a mystical, embodied encounter with the child Day aborted prior to her conversion to Catholicism. I was aware that the piece was commissioned by theater artists who considered themselves staunchly pro-choice and that I walked the finest of lines in presenting them with a piece where an abortion was considered only as a tragedy. Mercifully, though, my collaborators and I avoided conversations that resemble the tortured polemics one so often sees in social media on the subject. The piece has since been presented at the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in New York City and elsewhere.²⁶

I do not view the piece’s positive reception with secular audiences as a personal failure to take a strong stance against abortion. The piece clearly serves to illustrate how Day’s personal tragedy may have spurred her to an ambitious public witness to Christianity. I believe that I achieved my goals—first, creating a compelling tale; second, inviting the audience to consider the inherent dignity and humanity of the aborted soul, in a setting beyond the messy headlines and badly-crafted “memes” of the internet. In short, I trusted my audience to experience the piece with open minds, without lecturing them about morality. The latter was simply not my task. If an audience can see a production of a play about a woman like Dorothy Day, without flinching at her many apparent contradictions, that audience has the capacity to wonder whether the Catholicism of their youth, or that of their neighbors, is not so worthless and outdated after all.

Every Sunday, Catholics gather together as the physical body of Christ to tell the story of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. We share our prayers, and we greet our neighbors with signs of peace. After Mass has ended, some continue the gatherings, sharing news about our lives and families, and then we part, until the next week rolls around. It’s important to recognize, though, that our stories are ongoing. We do not simply share our personal “testimony” stories with each other over and over again; our lives are in constant flux, with new plotlines and characters worthy of exploration, seasons of joy and sorrow. Shouldn’t Christian art reflect this reality as well? Just as we share our stories with our friends and spouses, our fiction ought to reflect these daily interior struggles, whether they are beautiful and praiseworthy, or ugly and difficult. After all, as Christians our stories are Christian, whether or not we breathe God’s name once in the telling.

Why is it so crucial that we depict the not-so-shiny moments of our lives in our Christian storytelling? Shouldn’t we be trying to “sell” non-Christians on the concept of Christianity, and convince them that our spotless, tremendous, and prosperous lives are reasons to join up? My answer is a resounding “no.” Lying to others is not a sound evangelization strategy, and when we obscure the fact that the Christian life is not devoid of suffering or pain, we lose the opportunity to show non-Christians how believers cope

with those moments, honoring the reality of our pain and drawing ever nearer to God. Furthermore, at a moment when advertising has become ubiquitous, people have wearied of salesmen; they are sick of looking for the catch, the pitch, the moment when they are asked to invest their precious resources into yet another product, lifestyle, or brand. Evangelization is not sales. Evangelization is *telling the truth*. If we want to evangelize with our art, we must tell the unvarnished *truth*, whether or not it results in any “sales” or “success stories.” If “good evangelization” relies upon success, then the efforts of our many Christian martyrs have been in vain. We are obliged to tell the truth, in a pale imitation of their sacrifice.

If Christian storytellers succeed in telling the truth in their art, consumers of that art are granted a marvelous gift. A story can act as a kind of map, into which believers can pinpoint moments of divine grace. For non-believers, these stories can be used to develop the lens to *see* the movements of grace for themselves. Much like spiritual directors, who teach their directees to see the movement of the Holy Spirit in their own lives, artists can teach viewers how to recognize that “still small voice” in their stories—perhaps not as a primary tool for catechesis, but as a supplement to it. We cannot underestimate the power of a good story to move the dial of the heart ever closer to Christ, even if the story contains no explicit references to Him whatsoever.

My dear friend Dr. Cole Matson was led to Catholicism through *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo—no friend of the Catholic Church—and *A Man for All Seasons*, a play about St. Thomas More by Robert Bolt—an atheist.²⁷ Dr. Matson and others have cited the works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as influences on their Christian journeys—stories of witches, lions, and secret worlds. The films of the so-called “Marvel Cinematic Universe,” populated by flawed superheroes with godlike powers, have grossed over \$22.5 billion at the box office internationally.²⁸ It’s not difficult for the modern mind to accept the idea of magic. Is it so surprising, then, that an openness to the idea of magic might pave the way for an openness to grace? If Christian artists heed this call to engage honestly with life in a fallen world, perhaps the lives which consume the art will engage it with equal honesty. For those who do not yet have faith, but who earnestly seek the truth, we must meet them in our stories.

NOTES

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956), xxvii–xxviii.

² Yitzhak Lewis, *The Bible as Literature: Narrative, Politics, and History* (course, Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, Brooklyn, NY, November 13–December 11, 2018), <https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/items/courses/new-york/the-bible-as-literature-narrative-politics-and-history/>, accessed September 16, 2019.

³ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

⁴ Robert Alter, “Translating the Bible,” (lecture, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, April 8, 2019), <https://youtu.be/srjQi6PnUws>, accessed September 16, 2019.

⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 12.

⁶ Brandon Ambrosino, “Why are Christian movies so painfully bad?,” *Vox*, updated April 1, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/15/8038283/christian-movies-bad-old-fashioned-fifty-shades>, accessed September 16, 2019.

⁷ Eric C. Miller, “‘I Was a Wild Man’: How to Decode Evangelical Testimony,” *Religion Dispatches*, July 16, 2015, <http://religiondispatches.org/i-was-a-wild-man-how-to-decode-evangelical-testimony/>, accessed September 16, 2019.

⁸ Acts 9:1–43.

⁹ Luke 15:11–32.

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THE STRUGGLE TO SEE: PAINTING AFTER THE INCARNATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Matthew Kirby

“As when a great king has entered some large city and made his dwelling in one of the houses in it, such a city is certainly made worthy of high honor, and no longer does any enemy or bandit descend upon it, but it is rather reckoned worthy of all care because of the king’s having taken residence in one of its houses; so also does it happen with the King of all. Coming himself into our realm, and dwelling in a body like the others, every design of the enemy against human beings has henceforth ceased, and the corruption of death, which had prevailed formerly against them, perished. For the race of human beings would have been utterly dissolved had not the Master and Savior of all, the Son of God, come for the completion of death.”

—St. Athanasius¹

Painting affirms two natural realities: the basic goodness of matter and the presence of order in all things. To paint is to use one good thing, colorful dust mixed with a binding compound, to illuminate another, the form the artist wishes to make visible, so as to create a new reality: an image cradled in resplendent, interesting matter. This encapsulated image in turn displays the ordering principles of perception by stringing out the correspondence between mind and reality along the shallow plane of the painted surface, making the order of that correspondence subject to analysis, interest, and concern. This is true whether we’re talking about a painting portraying a plate of fish, an exalted human, or a purely geometric schema. Beyond what could be called the natural good of painting, however, when painting after Christ, in the light of the sacraments, it is also possible to detect and participate in the drama of the incarnation—the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—in ordinary visible reality.

In a similar way to how a nuclear disaster like Chernobyl can be picked up by a Geiger counter years after the flora and fauna have returned, this drama of Christ—which stands as the inflection point of human history—is still detectable in observable reality, such as in the way dust or cast shadows pool ambient light on an upward-facing surface.

It is present in the humility of objects, the poverty of forms persisting through time, dependent for their continuation on processes science has not yet fully understood. Yet, instead of a disaster, what faith detects in the observable world after the incarnation is the hope of eternal life and the promise of a future transformation of earthly matter. Painting can speak this language of an apocalyptic conflict hidden in objects resting on a table. That is the secret of its continued power to fascinate despite our easily exhausted visual sense and the multiplication of distractions in the digital age.

In the Christian tradition, it is only the incarnation that provides justification for painting anything; and it provides justification for painting everything, provided it in some way points to Christ. The reason for this is that paintings have a sensibility, they stake out an intellectual position, only in a nonverbal way (not to say that this position can't also be verbalized). The Church has long recognized this symbolic power of painting, situating the painter's art in a tradition that begins with God's creation of man in his own image and develops to include divine conceptual art, such as God's use of a burning bush to depict the Blessed Virgin, before opening up to include the work of Christian artisans². Through the incarnation, not only can Christ be portrayed, but portrayal itself is made theological.

Throughout Christendom, painting flourished in a way that it had not even among the pagan Greeks and Romans. A painting of an idea, an ironic painting, an expressionistic painting, or a political painting today owes its existence to the fact of the incarnation. Of course, this justification is no longer recognized, but it's there in the same way that the date of the incarnation is still there when we say '2019 CE.'

More astonishingly, it is by riffing on the multiple definitions and hierarchical levels of *εἰκὼν/imago*—from the divine image-bearing of the Son, to the creation of man in the image of God, to the age old artistic practice of making a likeness of something three dimensional on a flat plane—that Byzantine iconography still flourishes and finds new resonances with both the inner life and with contemporary practices of art making, both liturgical and profane.



Benedict's Rule, 2016, oil on canvas, 9 x 12 inches.

It was during the period when I returned to practicing the Catholic faith that I began to take painting seriously and began studying the great Christian painting traditions of the past, east and west. I studied painting, drawing, and iconography during the little spare time I had and thought about the meaning and practice of painting almost hourly.

I was fortunate enough to live in New York City, where I was able to study both the French academic tradition of oil painting and the Russo-Byzantine practice of iconography in egg tempera. Both met the criteria I needed of affirming the fundamental goodness of matter and order of reality. The Russian egg-tempera tradition goes further in its insistence on the portrayal of Christ and the saints, and in locating Jesus not just at the end of the painting process, but finding him at the very beginning, in the wooden board that symbolizes his cross, our only hope.

Russo-Byzantine icons, in a straightforward way, express the magnanimity of Jesus Christ, without which his humility cannot be properly understood. It is the overflowing generosity of Christ that caused him to take flesh. According to St. Theodore the Studite, God, through the incarnation, “deigned to be circumscribed.”³ The Son of God lacked nothing, overflowed in everything, and gained nothing by becoming a man. As the quote by St. Athanasius at the beginning of this essay puts it, the city receives a high honor when the king comes to dwell within it. The care taken in making an icon, blessing it, and placing it in a home or church is an expression of the reception of this honor. Christ allows himself to be circumscribed, portrayed by the iconographer, but the artist also descends into the material world of icon making: the colorful mineral pigments, the binder made of egg yolk and wine, the board and chalk gesso. The “city” is thus prepared by man for the arrival of God.



Virgin of the Don, 2015–2019, egg tempera and gold leaf on panel, 11 x 9 inches.

Like the Byzantine iconographical tradition that is one of its sources, western, Renaissance-derived, painting contains traces of care for the order God manifested when creating the universe through the Son. The western style, however, also contains a more pronounced divide between technique, corresponding almost entirely to the material world (empirically observable or mathematical), and content, which can find its source anywhere and often includes a significant concern for human subjectivity. To moderns, it's a familiar space of freedom and science paired together in an often conceptually disjointed relationship; yet it also offers, through persistence in meditation, the possibility of rediscovering the congruity of observable form and human subjectivity as creations of the same Logos.



Gowanus Bay, Winter, 2014, oil on panel, 5 x 7 inches.

Painting outdoors is a kind of crisis in itself. Despite the proliferation of technologies designed to facilitate outdoor painting, such as oil paint in tubes, painting while exposed to the elements is tricky. The search for subject matter becomes more costly in time and effort. I remember wandering in the November chill, driven gradually to the wind-slashed Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn in search of a more isolated place to paint. Techniques learned in the studio are moot when your canvas has become a sail in the knifing wind and your blacks are congealing in the cold. The finished product would often be more like a scar—evidence of a struggle—than an artifact of painterly ingenuity.

My painting sites often followed the route of earlier rosary walks. Sometimes outdoor painting was so subordinate to walking and meditation that what it might look like later was not really a concern in the moment. I was not trying to reproduce the place so much as participate in the experience of being there more actively.

A key theme for me in those days, and one that would turn out to be a recurring one, was solitude. This is a zone where my art practice and faith connect on a deep level. It is still impossible for me to imagine the Christian life without a level of solitude, even if mainly interior. And on the surface, it might seem to some Christians that serious

solitude indulges postmodern alienation and isolation to the point of transgressing the Christian call to community. Yet this solitude is for the sake of communion.

As I wandered through ever more obscure corners of New York's outer boroughs I sometimes wondered if everything I saw and thought was coming to a dead end in me, never to be organized and shared with others. At times it seemed foolish and even anti-philosophical. On the other hand, it was only at the extremity of solitude that I encountered the Church as the body of Christ and could hear the voice of Jesus speaking through the seemingly all too human customs and canons of the Church. It was also where I first really encountered other people in their solitude, and so began to glimpse the deeper meaning of charity towards neighbor. The context of these developments, in addition to my wanderings, was the weekday Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas church in Brooklyn, where the priests had to deal with such humble problems as the heroin addicts who wandered up and down 9th Street using the pews as toilets.

There is a kind of communion of solitaires, without country, party, and sometimes even particular friendships that constitutes not just a part, but the heart of the Church. The capacity for inner solitude might be necessary for living the demands of the Gospel and the moral life in our day. Painting can be a participation in this solitude, and even, at times, exile: being pushed outside, misunderstood, broken, but seeing the light, the joyful solidity of things; rich in the vision of being.

I became conscious of this participation-in-solitude through modern western painting while looking at a pair of snowscapes by American impressionist Everett Warner (1877-1963) at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut: the warmth of the light, the whole quality of vision, all the flotsam of thought put into vision; the silent wonder of standing perfectly still, barely raising your eyelids, and having light, like an angel, instantly translate all visible reality into your mind. This is the *logos* of impressionist painting: contemplating the gift of material vision, conveying the sense of drop-dead amazement at being able to step outside and trace your eyes across the brilliant white banks, fiery orange pine trunks, and drooping blue boughs.

Painting has always been in part about looking. Late in painting's long history, a certain type of painting, which might be called perceptual, unburdened of narrative duties, has come to focus almost solely on the act and drama of looking. Rather than simply circumscribing what is seen, perceptual painting enacts the process of coming to see within the medium of paint. A glance, earned. Like the blind man partially healed by mud formed of Jesus' spit, this type of painting often sees "men as it were trees, walking."¹ Rather than simply taming unruly paint—essentially colored mud—via technique in order to elevate it and make it a vehicle of the artist's vision, perceptual painting plants a seed of the original vision in the world of paint-mud and develops it according to the rules of that world, from within, back towards the original animating vision. Everything has to become mud before it can become vision.

There are two basic pitfalls for this type of painting. The first is that it can succumb permanently to the entropic pull of colored mud. The spiritual, rational seed is forgotten completely and the artist becomes mesmerized by the physicality of the medium. The result is either that the work remains on the level of "men as it were trees" or that it devolves entirely into the illusion of prime matter: paintings of paint. The second pitfall is to in some way lose faith in the adequacy of paint to transmit the rational, spiritual

seed. This is partly warranted: paint itself is totally inadequate, and man as a craftsman is often incapable of realizing fully what was once glimpsed in inspiration. This leads, if not to the abandonment of the project, to some form of falsification or cynical betrayal of the purity of the originating quest.

It is only really the love of the artist struggling to achieve the vision and his mercy with himself and his materials that constitute the maturation of the spiritual seed that has been planted in the mud of paint. In one sense, the painting fails to become the mature version of the seed that was intended. At least, as a material, nonverbal thing, it can't reliably transmit the spiritual idea originally envisioned. This is beyond the power of the artist. But the painting now bears the marks of a struggle to love that has persevered to its limit. Importantly, this is the best thing that the painting could have been. By incorporating the changed heart of the artist in this way, the painting is a better, truer realization of the spiritual seed than is possible to achieve otherwise. And yet, this failure cannot be willed or even permitted, because this would be another lapse into cynicism of the worse kind—counterfeit mercy. An artist who loves his medium will not allow its inadequacy to be publicly paraded in order even to demonstrate the surpassing glory of a spiritual idea. It is not even really proper to call it inadequate: the transformation of the surface of the painting into the site of a struggle to love only comes from perseverance in both the original vision and the chosen medium.

Perception is demanding and its rewards are limited, but within those limitations there is a kind freedom: the freedom to work and make progress. The highest reward of perception is the most limited: the miracle of seeing. Anyone who has ever experienced the correspondence between paint and specific visible reality, whether as a painter or a viewer of paintings, finds something unaccountable there, which is why God used miracles of sight to indicate the arrival of the God-Man, the singular Messiah who founded the Catholic Church to teach the nations.⁵ There are multiple reasons why we see, but our enjoyment of seemingly inconsequential moments of sight is gratuitous, a flame-like expansion of focus when something is revealed to be just as it is.

NOTES

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CULTURE AND CHRIST: REFLECTIONS THROUGH RECENT PAPAL WRITINGS

V.J. Tarantino

“Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.”

—Pope Francis¹

This year, I attended the Easter Vigil at the cathedral of *Sacred Beauty’s* home diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. All of us, from our ordinary and celebrant, Bishop Frank Caggiano, to my Mesoamerican immigrant friends who served as ushers, to the African, Caribbean, and Vietnamese congregants in all parts of the cathedral, lit candles from the one Easter flame. The liturgy included all seven readings, which afforded the opportunity for sacred Scripture to be heard in many languages. Many beautiful musical interventions, including antiphons and psalm settings newly written for the occasion, were interspersed throughout the service—all chant and polyphony, the cultural inheritance of over a millennium of European Catholicism. Yet the living voice of the Church on earth may be speaking to us in other tongues, as the burnt-out nave of Notre Dame offers an apt metaphor for the practice of the faith in Europe today.²

Having spent years immersed in the thought and writings of Joseph Ratzinger, I found my experience at the Vigil corresponding with an insight derived from his writings, which has guided my life’s work and vocation: Christ is “the integrating space in which the ‘we’ of human beings gathers itself toward the ‘you’ of God,”³ a God who Himself is unity-in-diversity. “[N]ot even God can be seen as the pure and simple ‘I.’” Indeed, “[i]n Christianity there is not simply a dialogical principle in the modern sense of a pure ‘I-thou’ relationship;”⁴ humanity is integrated into a greater “we,” analogous to the Triune Divinity itself.

The resurrected Christ stands as the living Paradigm in which all human beauty and all human wisdom is redeemed. God is pure Being and, as such, abhors death: “God did not make death, ... he fashioned all things that they might have being.”⁵ If one believes that Christ is the gravitational center of all being, then his specific mode of relatedness to things becomes a question of prime importance. This is particularly so

regarding human culture, not excluding pre- and non-Christian culture throughout the earth and throughout the centuries.

Taking cognizance of the work of recent popes, I assert that the mind of the Church:

- Deeply values all that is good and noble in humanity.
- Affirms the innate capacity for mutual exchange and enrichment among cultures and traditions.
- Seeks therein the path of her own purification.

In 1939, as the Nazi menace hovered over Europe, Pope Pius XII wrote in his first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, of the Church's unequivocal rejection of totalitarian and authoritarian anthropologies:

[T]he nations, despite a difference of development due to diverse conditions of life and of culture, are not destined to break the unity of the human race, but rather to enrich and embellish it by the sharing of their own peculiar gifts and by that reciprocal interchange of goods which can be possible and efficacious only when a mutual love and a lively sense of charity unite all the sons of the same Father and all those redeemed by the same Divine Blood.⁶

Pius XII's vision rests upon a Christocentric understanding of human solidarity, which nonetheless has considerable appeal from the standpoint of unaided natural reason: "In the light of this unity of all mankind [in the Redemption], which exists in law and in fact, individuals do not feel themselves isolated units, like grains of sand, but united by the very force of their nature and by their internal destiny, into an organic, harmonious mutual relationship which varies with the changing of times."⁷

This last clause is of exceptional importance, pointing out that human interrelation in community and solidarity is *organic*, rather than an artificial product of social engineering, and *varies* over time, rather than forming a fixed pattern. More recently, Pope St. John Paul II wrote in *Ut Unum Sint* that:

[b]ecause by its nature the content of faith is meant for all humanity, it must be translated into all cultures. Indeed, the element which determines communion in truth is *the meaning of truth*. The expression of truth can take different forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning.⁸

In another encyclical, *Slavorum Apostoli*, he was even more direct: "Perfect communion in love preserves the Church from all forms of particularism, ethnic exclusivism or racial prejudice, and from any nationalistic arrogance. This communion must elevate and sublimate every purely natural legitimate sentiment of the human heart."⁹

Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* calls the Church to an ever-greater humility and flexibility in response to the cultural diversity and dynamism of today's global village:

[T]he task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances. It constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring whenever perfection is not possible. A missionary heart is aware of these limits and makes itself “weak with the weak... everything for everyone” (1 Cor 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.¹⁰

CULTURE AND INTERCULTURALITY

To treat the tenets of faith as if they formed an a-cultural, disembodied, abstract construct, is neither Catholic nor Christian, but a Cartesian error, more characteristic of the weaknesses of Enlightenment rationalism than of any genuine religious sentiment, however erroneous or deluded. Faith, a substantially supernatural grace, is had by the human person. The *personal* life of a *personal* God alights on living flesh and blood with a particular history, a particular mission, grown up in a particular set of circumstances—a set of circumstances perceived, evaluated, and responded to as conditioned by innumerable pre-given factors. The very language of an individual is a primal shaping of reality.

Thus, Christianity is never reducible to a system of tenets and dogmas but is rather a living organism embodied in individual human hearts. The Christian faith is bound up with a specific history and develops through time. This orientation to progress necessarily entails a striving toward that fullness which is humanity perfected. Ratzinger writes that “[t]he tension of many active entities within a single entity is an essential part of the unfinished drama of the Son's Incarnation.”¹¹ He further holds that “[o]nly in the interrelating of all great works of culture can man approach the unity and wholeness of his true nature.”¹² I define culture here as *the way of being which springs up within a social group, via mutual influence*.

Christianity is a historical religion; we speak of progress throughout salvation history. The People of God has a history and a culture. Yet this membership in the universal Church does not and cannot nullify the pre-given cultural traits of individuals. As Ratzinger puts it, the Christian has a “double cultural identity.”¹³

Ratzinger introduces the critical term “interculturality,” writing of how “we should talk, no longer about ‘inculturation,’ but about a meeting of cultures, or—if we have to use a technical term—about ‘interculturality.’” As he goes on to explain, “one cannot see how two organisms that are in themselves totally alien to each other should, through a transplantation that starts by mutilating them both, suddenly become a single living whole.”¹⁴ Were culture incommunicable in this way, interculturality would be fruitless—yet as Ratzinger rightly points out, “exclusion of what is different is contrary to human nature.”¹⁵ As a sixth-century African Christian wrote:

Therefore if somebody should say to one of us, “You have received the Holy Spirit, why do you not speak in tongues?” his reply should be, “I do indeed speak in the tongues of all men, because I belong to the body of Christ, that is, the Church, and

she speaks all languages. What else did the presence of the Holy Spirit indicate at Pentecost, except that God's Church was to speak the language of every people?"¹⁶

Thus the Lord's command to "[g]o, therefore, and make disciples of all nations"¹⁷ is not a command to proselytism nor even to mere evangelization; it is a filling out of the Body of Christ in the (ultimately universal) multifariousness of its members.

This is possible inasmuch as "the relationship between the Christian faith and the respective other religion[s] together with [their] living culture is not one of absolute foreignness, if there is, rather, a certain inner openness, each to the other, within them; or, to put it another way, if the tendency to move toward each other and to unite is in any case a part of their nature."¹⁸ Both the ontological backdrop of the created universe and certain basic shared human experiences support this, as does the evidence of human cultural interactions over the centuries. While it is easy to point out examples of religious strife and conflict, the very fluidity of world religions and the degree to which cultures have taken on new religious identities over time speaks to the truth of the aforementioned perspective.

Religion, and especially Christianity, can neither be quarantined from nor assimilated into any culture. We know well how easily small groups or intentional communities can fall into the trap of cordoning themselves off from the "crooked and perverse generation"¹⁹ from which they would dissociate themselves, while all too often clinging to some romantic imagination of a past culture, a putative Golden Age that never was. Such an isolated, non-integrated Catholicism affords no room to breathe; in fact, Ratzinger points out the absurdity of "declar[ing] some people to be living in a kind of 'nature conservation park' for religious and cultural history."²⁰ It is not a living organism. Conversely, the oft-seen attempt to adapt the Church to "present-day sensibilities" generally seems to be referencing the present-day sensibilities prevalent in the wealthier countries of Europe and North America.

Even in a purely secular understanding, interculturality shows greater potential than monocultural hegemony, multiculturalism, and attempts at mere inculturation. Monoculturality is obviously alienating for cultural minorities. Yet multiculturalism is alienating in another way, as if the only way to protect subcultures from domination by the majority were enforced mutual lateral alienation, a system of high walls ghettoizing everyone from everyone else. We should consider the wisdom of St. Paul in Romans 11, juxtaposing the unbelief of the Jews to salvation for the Gentiles as a dynamic brought about by God to win the salvation of all: "[I]f some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place and have come to share in the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. If you do boast, consider that you do not support the root; the root supports you. ... So do not become haughty, but stand in awe."²¹ As Paul makes clear, to be grafted while we presume our own independent wholeness is an exercise in arrogance.

The German philosopher Josef Pieper wrote of historic scholasticism as the adaptation of Greek pagan philosophy to the service of the Gospel. He followed with a brilliant (and as yet unexplored) contemporary "scholasticism" to draw on the thought of "the non-European—above all the Far Eastern cultures. Can this vast wealth of knowledge of man and of philosophical interpretation of reality be assimilated ... in

anything but a ‘scholastic’ manner?”²² This exemplifies the “interculturality” Ratzinger lauds; rather than locking the Church into any paradigm, be it medieval or contemporary, Eurocentric or otherwise, such a vision seeks through genuine intercultural engagement to, as Pope St. John Paul II famously put it, “[o]pen wide the doors for Christ.”²³

ONE BODY IN CHRIST

The Christian tradition is *Trinitarian*; relationship—*περιχώρησις*, *circumincession*²⁴—is prior to the individuality of solitude. The Enlightenment’s anthropological prejudice, which attributed to the “savage” an original solitude—a prejudice common both to the optimist Rousseau and the pessimist Hobbes—is, besides being wrong, utterly foreign to Christianity.

St. Paul saw things more clearly. To the Corinthians he wrote: “[Y]ou are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it;”²⁵ to the Colossians: “[I]n my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ;”²⁶ and to the Romans: “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.” This testifies to a deep truth of our faith: *We are one body in Christ*.

To be one body in Christ is to live as community; to love genuinely; to experience or to offer an empathy so deep as to take on the suffering of another and make it completely your own; to bear in abandonment and to the bitterest dregs alienation, pain, solitude, and rejection (as the Lord Himself says, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.”²⁸); and above all to “live, no longer I, but Christ ... in me.”²⁹

All of this rests in an existential radicality infinitely greater than anything to which the atheist existentialists of the 20th Century would dare to venture. For to declare oneself irrevocably free and responsible for one’s freedom is one thing, but to bear freedom and responsibility in the knowledge that your independence both encloses and is enclosed by the freedom of others, and that the ultimate meaning of the freedom you invest and the responsibility you bear (and which remains yours in any case) will be actualized or frustrated only in the community of persons is quite another.

Yet to live your own suffering and the sufferings of others with equal urgency, to take up radical freedom and bear full responsibility in a realm where you do not have ultimate control, is something more than human. We cannot do this on our own. We must look to Christ as the “directional arrow”³⁰ incorporating all of humanity. If we are working out our salvation in fear and trembling as one body, we can do so only as the Body of Christ, for in Him we are incorporated not only into one another’s lives, but also into the life of God, with whom all things are possible. Any art, beauty, or achievement—however “Catholic”—which fails in solidarity and orientation toward the whole is a mere speaking with “angelic tongues.”³¹

With the Incarnation and the Passion, Christ took in the brackish waters of sin and abandonment and, through obedience, in utter conformity with the Divine Will, opened an abyss of inner purification, such that clean, life-giving water and Blood flowed forth. We hear these words in the *Vidi Aquam*: “I saw water flowing out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the front of the temple faced east. The water flowed out toward the right side of the temple to the south of the altar. ... Where these waters flow they refresh; everything lives where the river goes.”³²

This is the true sense of expiation: rather than a penal substitution by which the divine wrath is transferred from us onto Jesus, Christ incorporates us into Himself.³³ This is how we are healed and purified. This incorporation into Himself, however, can take place only through His entering into everything in us that it is possible for Him to enter into—thus “he had to become like his brothers in every way, ... [b]ecause he himself was tested through what he suffered;”³⁴ “one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.”³⁵ And even there: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”³⁶ It is in His blood, His assuming of our common humanity, sharing in our flesh and our blood, that the sufferings of His passion and death lead us across the waters of sin and death and become righteousness for us. It is only through the work of exodus, purification, and renewal that all of the particulars of humanity will come to their true stature.

This can be extended analogously: as the individual stands having an inherited, pre-given set of determinants of his existence, the “exodus” forth of the People of God ideally allows for an inner purification *in micro*, albeit always through grace and in union with the Cross. It is precisely this meeting point, and its co-necessary tension, which is productive. If a truly Christian life and witness emerges from a society in which the abomination of slavery is a foregone conclusion, for example, his rejection of that sin against the human person constitutes a real exodus, and visits on him, at least in that regard, alienation from his peers. This is an irreducible and indispensable suffering. Yet the authentic goods of the culture remain, though as purified from a serious blight. This is blood, pain, and witness. And rivers of living water will flow from him.

CONCLUSION

“Christ, the one, is here the ‘we’ into which Love, namely the Holy Spirit, gathers us and which means simultaneously being bound to each other and being directed toward the common ‘you’ of the one Father.”³⁷ In the risen Christ, all human art, beauty, and achievement is redeemed, perfected, and recapitulated. In the one and undivided Spirit, alienation is overcome, giving way to a universal song of praise as fluent as the tongues of Pentecost, in which no individual spark of glory is dimmed by the splendor of the whole.

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “The saints are oases around which life sprouts up and something of the lost paradise returns.”³⁸ If we, as artists and as Catholics, let God overcome and overwhelm the sin and darkness in us, who can forbid us building a civilization of love, a culture of love, fired by love, directed by the Holy Spirit, rooted in the sacraments? It would seem that little else has the authority truly to elevate the pre-existing culture, transform it in holiness, locate its inner goodness and beauty, and offer it (however vicariously) ennobled and consecrated.

In revisiting my experience of this year’s Easter Vigil, I can identify the possibilities inherent in that multicultural communal gathering around the Light of Christ: mutuality at the service of worship is itself the “healing Pasch for a culture, which through an apparent death comes to new life and becomes then for the first time truly itself.”³⁹ And it is the power of human freedom to instantiate eternally enduring dynamics here and now. The culture of the very New Jerusalem is as we determine it now. It is ours, as denizens of our world here and now, to establish this cultural legacy.

NOTES

¹Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), sec. 115, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, accessed September 27, 2019.

²See for example Thomas Reese, "Notre Dame, long a symbol of Catholicism in Europe, becomes a picture of its collapse," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/signs-times/notre-dame-long-symbol-catholicism-europe-becomes-picture-its-collapse>, accessed September 22, 2019.

³Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Concerning the notion of person in theology," *Communio* 17 (Fall 1990): 453.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Wisdom 1:13–14. All Scriptural citations are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, <http://uscbb.org/bible>, accessed September 14, 2019.

⁶Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus* (October 20, 1939), sec. 43, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20101939_summi-pontificatus.html, accessed September 22, 2019.

⁷Ibid., sec. 42.

⁸John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (May 25, 1995), sec. 19, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html, accessed September 22, 2019.

⁹John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli* (June 2, 1985), sec. 11, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli.html, accessed September 22, 2019.

¹⁰Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, sec. 45.

¹¹Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 71.

¹²Ibid., 65.

¹³Ibid., 68.

¹⁴Ibid., 64.

¹⁵Ibid., 60.

¹⁶"Sermon by a Sixth-Century African Author," for Saturday of the Seventh Week of Easter, in Milton Walsh, *Witness of the Saints: Patristic Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 359.

¹⁷Matt. 28:19.

¹⁸Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 59.

¹⁹Phil. 2:15.

²⁰Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 75.

²¹Rom. 11:17–18, 20.

²²Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1960), 153.

²³John Paul II, "Homily of His Holiness John Paul II for the Inauguration of His Pontificate" (October 22, 1978), sec. 5, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19781022_inizio-pontificato.html, accessed September 14, 2019.

²⁴For a fuller treatment of these terms, including finer distinctions, variations, and subtle differences in meaning between the two terms and among various usages, see Slobodan Stamatović, "The Meaning of *Perichoresis*," *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 303–323, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2016-0026>.

²⁵1 Cor. 12:27.

²⁶Col. 1:24.

²⁷Rom. 14:7.

²⁸Matt. 26:38.

²⁹Gal. 2:20.

³⁰Ratzinger, "Concerning the notion of person in theology," 452.

³¹1 Cor. 13:1.

³²Ezek. 47:1, 9.

³³The concept of expiation derives from the *kapporet*, the covering of the Ark of the Covenant, sprinkled with the blood of the sin-offering. The slain animal receives all of humanity's darkness and is purified in its contact and exchange with the Divine. A deeper elucidation of these thoughts is found in Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week, from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 39–40.

³⁴Heb. 2:17–18.

³⁵Heb. 4:15.

³⁶2 Cor. 5:21.

³⁷Ratzinger, "Concerning the notion of person in theology," 453.

³⁸Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 248.

³⁹Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 63.

BEYOND EVANGELIZATION

“The Christian has the duty, as well as the opportunity, of freeing the God-created nucleus which stands at the center of non-Christian thought and of diverting this hard core from its harmful developments. But the Christian can do this only if, believing and trusting profoundly in God, he is persuaded that no important body of thought is essentially evil, diabolical or damned.”¹

NOTES

¹M.-D. Chenu and Friedrich Heer, “Is the Modern World Atheist? A discussion-interview on The Contemporary Mind,” *Cross Currents* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1961): 16.

GRACE AND THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS

Cole Matson

The first appearance of grace in Stephen Adly Guirgis' inaugural published work, *Den of Thieves*, is explosive:

Hey, I thank my Higher Power every day for that SNIB [Spontaneous Nerve-Induced Bowel Movement] 'cuz I gotta tell you: I was afraid to reach out just like you; I wanted to hold it all in, and my Higher Power, he knew that, and so "He did for me what I could not do for myself." He forced me to let it out, and believe me, I "let it out" ... God has a plan for us all, Maggie. For me, it was that I should defecate in my favorite pair of slacks. For you, it's that you're here, right now, with me ... So ... Here we go, the big moment of truth! Are you ready?¹

These words of Paul to his Kleptomaniacs Anonymous sponsee, Maggie, are the power of God's grace in a nutshell, as seen throughout Guirgis' plays: God reaches deep inside you, even down to your bowels, and pulls out of you all the self-deceiving crap you have been holding in, so that your sin, shame, and brokenness are undeniably and palpably present to you and the audience. So that you can see yourself, standing in front of God and everybody, soiled with the stains of your lies still running out of you, and experience the big moment of truth: You are forgiven, and you are clean.

Stephen Adly Guirgis is a Catholic playwright who won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his 2014 play *Between Riverside and Crazy*.² His 2000 play, *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*,³ is perhaps the most commonly-produced of his works and received a 2017 major Off-Broadway revival at the Signature Theatre. In this play, grace is similarly explosive. The play takes its title from an image in the second act, when the protagonist, Angel Cruz, a bike messenger on trial for first-degree murder, recalls a memory of him and his friend Joey playing in the subway tunnels under New York City:

[I]t would always surprise us when we saw The Lights ... even though we could feel the train coming, but it was the Lights ... The closer those Lights came, rumble of the tracks, sound a the conductor's horn blarin' at us, We'd get so excited we'd freeze—two seconds of freezin' cold ... hypnotized ... holdin' hands, waitin', waitin', then: Bang ... We'd jump off the rails, hug the wall, climb back up the platform, start runnin', runnin', tearin' ass clear across town back to Riverside or Cherry Park ... One time ... one particular time, when we was holdin' hands right before we jumped off the rails, somethin'

happened, and we couldn't let go, couldn't untangle ourself from each other, and we were inside that Light, and we both saw skeletons and radiation, and we was paralyzed in a way that I juss can't explain, 'till somethin' blew us apart, juss blew us, and we landed safe. ... We didn't move for a long time ... We was cryin' and Joey ripped his brother's coat ... We wasn't speakin' till we got to our block and Joey said that it was The Light that ripped us apart and saved our lives ... Joey said, "Jesus hopped the "A" train to see us safe to bed" ...⁴

The play is bookended by two other explosions. The first is the instigating event of the plot: Angel's shooting of Reverend Kim, a cult leader who has brainwashed Angel's friend Joey. As Angel puts it, "He stole my friend. I shot him in the ass."⁵ Reverend Kim unexpectedly dies due to a heart attack on the operating table, leading to Angel's murder charge. Throughout the play, Angel claims innocence, arguing that he did not mean to kill Reverend Kim, only "shoot him in the ass." Angel's public defender, Mary Jane Hanrahan, believes that it would be unjust for Angel to suffer life in prison without the possibility of parole, the likely sentence for a first-degree murder conviction. Therefore, she convinces Angel to lie on the witness stand and claim he did not shoot Reverend Kim at all. She argues that the jury will empathize with Angel, understand that he was trying to save his friend, and, if given a reason, will refuse to convict "not because they necessarily believed he was technically 'innocent,' but because they would agree that the 'great right' outweighed the 'little wrong.'"⁶ The final explosion takes place offstage: Angel, when placed on the witness stand, sells the lie "masterfully," but then, at the last moment, confesses, not only to the shooting, but also to lying under oath.⁷ This ejaculation of truth sends him to prison for at least 30 years, gets his lawyer disbarred—and turns out to be Angel's moment of redemption.

In Guirgis' *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, the grace of God works both through explosive events and through the ensuing conflict between characters to challenge its target to full confession of, repentance for, and penance for his sins, leading to his spiritual freedom. Honesty, before oneself, others, and God, is caused by grace and is a necessary condition for living in the full freedom of forgiveness.

The standard movement of grace in a Guirgis play is as follows: An inciting event forces a character to confront the aspect of himself he is most unable to face truthfully. His defensive coping mechanisms immediately engage. Someone else is at fault, not him. He is a victim of circumstance. Even if he is involved in whatever has gone wrong, he bears no guilt, because he is only trying to survive a scenario in which someone else trapped him, and his actions are justified as a means of surviving. Even if he bears some blame, his past environment saddled him with problems that reduce his ability to choose differently, and therefore reduce or eliminate his culpability. He does not bear responsibility. And even if he does acknowledge the responsibility he bears, such acknowledgement should be enough to be forgiven and have the whole thing go away. He certainly does not deserve to be punished for it.

One by one, these defenses are challenged, by other characters or by the situation, until the protagonist reaches a point of ultimate decision: he can either admit his culpability and take full responsibility for it, including suffering the full consequences of his actions, or he can finally deny his culpability and agency, leading to his own ultimate self-destruction. If he chooses to take responsibility, he may suffer severe consequences,

but he also receives mercy, finds freedom from his prison of lies, and becomes a mature human being living into his full integrity as a person made in the image of God.

The story of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* is the story of a boy becoming a man through the explosive power of grace, that is, the challenge and the ability to admit the truth about himself, unbearable as it may seem, and take responsibility for his own actions. Confessing the truth sets Angel free.

In order to see how the grace of freedom is tied to the assumption of responsibility, it is helpful to take a look at how the five characters of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*—the guards Valdez and D'Amico, the lawyer Mary Jane Hanrahan, and the inmates Lucius Jenkins and Angel Cruz—serve as foils for one another. One scriptural pair of foils that serves as a useful tool to categorize the characters in Guirgis' corpus is the Pharisee and the sinner (or "tax collector") of Luke 18:9-14.⁸ Guirgis' pharisaical characters appear respectable and decent on the surface, but use their contempt for public sinners to deflect attention away from their own failings. Guirgis' sinners may or may not have insight into their own value, but they at least have some awareness of their sinfulness. One character may play either role depending on the person with whom he is interacting, and all Guirgis' characters, like all people, have aspects of both sinner and Pharisee.

There are three types of Pharisee-sinner pairs in Guirgis' work. The first is the *social role* pair: the Pharisees are those characters who live outwardly respectable lives, and are mostly part of the prison system as cops, correctional officers, judges, or lawyers; and the sinners—the majority of Guirgis' play population—are those characters who are the targets of that system, including low-level drug dealers and users, prostitutes, and the poor. Guirgis does not provide us with a simplistic split between corrupt cops and hookers with hearts of gold: self-deception runs through both classes. The difference is the type and degree of self-deception to which each is tempted, and the shape of the "other" which they are tempted to condemn. In *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, the four *social role* Pharisees are Mary Jane Hanrahan, the lawyer, and Valdez and D'Amico, the correctional officers. The *social role* sinners are Angel Cruz and Lucius Jenkins, both inmates. An example of the thought process of a *social role* Pharisee is Valdez' absolutely secure sense of his own righteousness over against his inmates' worthlessness: "I am a good man because I choose to be! End of story! Not because I fear God. ... I go to work, I pay my taxes, I observe the law. I didn't kill eight people! I don't need to be 'saved.'"⁹ Whereas Lucius the inmate preaches God's love to whomever will listen, Valdez the corrections officer tells Lucius, "God hates you."¹⁰

The second pairing is that of the *external responsibility-taker* versus the *external responsibility-denier*. The Pharisees in this pairing are those characters who externally claim responsibility for their actions, and the sinners are those characters who are still denying their culpability in any kind of sin—whose favorite phrase is, "I've done nothing wrong." The former type of character often serves as a challenge to the latter type to admit responsibility and "grow up," whether it is the hardened but reformed Lucius mentoring the new inmate Angel in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* or Paul mentoring his sponsee Maggie in the aforementioned passage from *Den of Thieves*. However, this "taking responsibility" is yet another tactic for defining oneself as one of the "good

people,” when it has become clear that pretending not to have done anything wrong is no longer going to work.

The strongest example of this close-but-not-quite-there-yet figure in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* is Lucius Jenkins. A serial killer who has murdered eight people but found God in prison—evidently sincerely—he is the character who challenges Angel Cruz to acknowledge that he is the cause of Reverend Kim’s death and to come to Jesus to find healing and forgiveness. We see as the play goes on, however, that Lucius is still relying to an extent on “cheap grace,” to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s phrase.¹¹ He thinks his embrace of God excuses him from doing penance for his crime, namely, accepting his death sentence. He is fighting extradition from New York to Florida, where he will be executed for his crimes. At one point he brings up his own history of childhood sexual abuse, drug use, and untreated mental illness as a contributing factor in his murder of eight innocent people, including mutilating and killing a child. Angel counters by reminding Lucius, “A lotta people been raped and beat on, a lotta people been fucked over in this life, and somehow, Lucius, they managed to avoid killin’ eight people!”¹² Lucius responds to this reminder by asserting that he has God and therefore is “right as rain.”¹³ Yet we learn that when Lucius is finally sent to Florida and executed, he does not face his execution like a man with a clear conscience. He gets a guard to sneak in heroin and cocaine, and goes to his death “high as a kite.”¹⁴ He has been a real source of grace to others—D’Amico, the guard who witnesses his execution, enumerates the ways Lucius positively influenced him when he was guarding Lucius, such as helping him quit drinking and start a business—but Lucius himself does not reach before his death the final place that he challenges Angel to reach: complete acceptance of his sins and the just penance for them.

Yet even though Lucius may secretly still be struggling with his own fears about dying and facing God with his sins on his conscience, his arguments about the need to take responsibility do have a saving effect on Angel. The penultimate scene of the play is the last conversation between Lucius and Angel, just before Lucius is extradited to Florida for execution. In this scene, Lucius is still trying to hold on to his sense of himself as a “good person,” and model to Angel that the right thing to do is to “accept God’s Will.”¹⁵ When Angel questions whether Lucius’ execution is in fact God’s will, Lucius replies, “A lesser man might raise dat question.”¹⁶ That dig at Angel’s moral character revives the question of who is better than whom. They both desperately need to feel morally superior to the other, Lucius because he has God and Angel does not, and Angel because he has only accidentally killed one person, whereas Lucius has deliberately and sadistically killed eight. The ensuing argument, which rises in intensity over the course of the scene, climaxes with back-and-forth statements about Angel’s goodness:

LUCIUS. I got my sobriety and my forgiveness! Whatchu got ’cept excuses and “maybe’s”?! You ain’t nuttin’ but a pigeon-hearted little bitch!

ANGEL. I’m not—

LUCIUS. —Had a built in compass and chose the way of the minefield anyway! Dass bad!! Arrogant and willful!

ANGEL. I know who I am! I’m good!

LUCIUS. Now how’s that?

ANGEL. I’m good!!

LUCIUS. You ain't good!
 ANGEL. I am too good!
 LUCIUS. 'Cuz what?
 ANGEL. 'Cuz I am.
 LUCIUS. No ya ain't—
 ANGEL. 'Cuz I got—
 LUCIUS. You got what?
 ANGEL. I got ... (To Valdez.) Valdez!¹⁷

Angel cannot give a final answer as to why he is good, and calls out to Valdez to end the conversation. Lucius shows that he still has not reached the state of humility and repentance because he is lording his status as “good” over Angel, who is “not good.” Lucius makes an extra dig at Angel’s sense of himself as a good person by saying that Angel claims he “[h]ad a built in [moral] compass,” yet still “chose the way of the minefield”—chose to become a murderer.¹⁸ *Because* Angel claims to be “good,” it makes his killing of a man even worse. Unlike Lucius, Angel cannot point to a psychotic mental state caused by abuse, drugs, or mental illness as a reason for his actions. But Lucius does truly care about Angel, and tells him how to choose the way of responsibility:

Get on your knees right now, ask the Lord’s forgiveness, I dare ya! ... God say, “Come to Me and Be Free”! People wait on faith like it’s some kinda gift! Ain’t nuttin’ like that! Faith is like a little blade a grass fights it way through the concrete tryin’ a get hisself a little drink a water! Faith ain’t a gift, it’s a decision!”

That advice will be pivotal to Angel’s redemption.

For most of the play, Lucius is the one who seems to take responsibility, while Angel takes no responsibility for his actions. However, in the final turn of the play, they switch places, becoming examples of the third Pharisee-sinner pair common in a Guirgis play: the *internal responsibility-denier* versus the *internal responsibility-taker*. The Pharisee is the internal denier, who continues in his self-deception and reliance on “cheap grace,” even if he outwardly claims to take responsibility for his actions. The sinner is the internal responsibility-taker, who actually confesses his culpability *and takes upon himself its consequences*. *Confession*, *repentance*, and *penance* are the three conditions necessary to take true responsibility for one’s actions, and therefore find the freedom that truth allows. In the final scene of the play, Angel becomes this truly repentant sinner.

At the beginning of the final scene, we hear from Mary Jane Hanrahan, Angel’s lawyer, that Angel broke down on the stand, admitted that he was lying, asked the judge not to blame Mary Jane for trying to help him, and confessed to the shooting. In return he received what is implied to be a life sentence, but with mercy for his honesty—the possibility of parole, in almost 30 years. The scene cuts to Angel in his cell, post-sentence. His entire monologue and last few lines of dialogue are a confession and a plea:

I juss ... I juss wanna be good ... I wanna be, I wanna be a good man, Mary, I wanna be a man ... Saint Anthony?! ... Saint Anthony! “Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, please come around, somethin’ is lost and cannot be— (*Pause*.) I juss ... it’s ‘cuz ... I stole John Hameric’s jacket, God! I know you know that, but I stole it and I’m sorry and I didn’t

mean it even though I did mean it 'cuz I was jealous that he had that jacket and I didn't and he cried and cried and I threw that shit in the Hudson and I never tol' him and I blamed Sidney Betincourt and then Sidney Betincourt kicked John's ass and I never said shit and I am so fuckin' sorry! ... I am so fuckin' sorry God, and please do somethin' good for John Hameric wherever he is, make somethin' good happen to him, please, let him hit the number or find some money or get a new jacket, God! Somethin'! Make him have a good life 'cuz he loved that fuckin' jacket, God, that fuckin' stupid Spiderman Jacket ... I can't believe—I wish—I'm so sorry. I am—Tell his mothah, God, 'cuz I know she's with you, please tell Miss Hameric I'm sorry 'cuz I am sorry;— ... I am so sorry, I am so so sorry— ... I am a man, God! I am a man that is sorry. ... I am a man and I am so so sorry.²⁰

Angel, challenged by Lucius to repent and by Mary Jane to feign innocence, chooses the way of truth, and frees himself from his self-deception. His confession of his own culpability sets him free to be a good man instead of a self-excusing boy—he is a man *because* he is sorry.

One could read the ending of the play as tragic and hopeless: because Angel could not keep himself together on the stand, he was convicted, and now he is unjustly going to rot in prison until at least middle-age, stuck in his own sense of guilt and despair. However, the last words of the play indicate that the playwright intends for us to read this result not as a hopeless injustice, but as a source of grace for Angel and the beginning of his freedom:

ANGEL. I'm, I'm sorry, ya know, Valdez. Valdez: I'm sorry.

VALDEZ. Quite all right.

ANGEL. I—

VALDEZ. Yes ... Yes ... Away from the cage (*Angel assumes the position. Valdez enters, cuffs Angel and leads him out of his cage.*)²¹

End of play. Angel's confession leads him out of his cage of self-deception, into the freedom of truth. "[T]he truth will make you free"²² is the theme of this play, and, among all of the play's characters, it is the transformation of Angel Cruz that most clearly illustrates the movement of grace in the human soul in the Gospel according to Stephen Adly Guirgis: from vigorously defending one's status as good, to acknowledging responsibility for bad actions but trying to escape their consequences, to accepting both responsibility and the penance that comes with it—and finding, through this repentance, the true goodness that has been there all along, as a human being bearing the image of God.

At the end of the play, Angel's foil is no longer Lucius, who is out of the picture, but Mary Jane Hanrahan, who has been the narrator throughout the play. At the end of the first act, we learn that her sense of her own righteousness—as a virtuous public defender who actually cares about her clients—led her to turn down the offer of a plea deal from the district attorney, who would have given Angel only eight years in prison in return for pleading guilty to manslaughter. She states that she “never consulted Angel in the matter, never even mentioned it. I was focused completely on the ‘greater right’: acquittal, redemption ... release.”²³ At the end of the play, Mary Jane admits that she has been disbarred because of her role in convincing Angel to commit perjury. When he

successfully defends his innocence during the first part of his testimony, she admits, “I was proud of him. I was prouder of myself ... And why not? ... It was my defining moment and ... I held on to it a split second too long.”²¹ She sees that she was guilty of the sin of pride. But she has not yet admitted that her dishonesty, both to the court and to Angel himself, was also a sin for which she must repent. Mary Jane is the tragic figure at the end of the play, as we wonder whether she will ever find the way of confession, repentance, and penance that Angel has taken and which has set him free.

The contrast between Mary Jane Hanrahan’s self-pitying dishonesty and Angel Cruz’s honest repentance at the end of the play presents the audience with a challenge: When asked to choose between dishonesty in the cause of righteousness or honesty in the cause of truth, even though the latter may mean publicly displaying the soil of our own sins, which path will we take? The play is itself the explosive act of grace which can strengthen us to choose the truth, and let it set us free.

NOTES

¹Stephen Adly Guirgis, *Den of Thieves* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2004), 8.

²Stephen Adly Guirgis, *Between Riverside and Crazy* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2015).

³Stephen Adly Guirgis, *Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2002).

⁴*Ibid.*, 55.

⁵*Ibid.*, 29.

⁶*Ibid.*, 30.

⁷*Ibid.*, 65.

⁸“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Luke 18:9–14 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁹Guirgis, *Jesus*, 39–40.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 43.

¹²Guirgis, *Jesus*, 63.

¹³*Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 66.

²¹*Ibid.* (emphasis added).

²²John 8:32 (New Revised Standard Version).

²³Guirgis, *Jesus*, 36.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 65.

WOUNDS FOR THE ESCHATON

Timothy Matthew Collins

Time is snowing on the cathedral; the soot of centuries. In this, even the atheist grasps enormity beyond the cleverness of doubt.

—Stephansdom, Vienna
06.20.2019 — Feast of Corpus Christi

The mystery of our precarious passing away is amplified in the disposable material artifacts our society produces and celebrates. The ephemeral is not to be detested or jeered at merely as some defect of a decadent culture, however, for Christ answers this precariousness through His death and resurrection. In such an age, Catholic artists wrestle with the transitory by interrogating the language of decay to determine if Christ might ultimately be discovered among the ruins, secretly working toward their fulfillment. This “[h]iddenness creates the tension of time and belongs to the essence of the Kingdom preached by Jesus.”¹

The modern art form of collage is capable of proleptically visualizing this hidden fulfillment by capturing the “passing-away-ness” of physical reality as it addresses *ho eschatos* (the last), not just in the glory of celestially mirrored vaults, but in the scars and mud of fleshy reality as well. (Image One) Addressing the impermanence of time and matter, the Church can be reminded of its own “eschatological provisionality,”² surrendering any aspirations for self-enthronement by remembering that the “eschatological coming could be accomplished at any moment, even if both it and the final trial that will precede it are ‘delayed.’”³ Rather than wallowing in the relative or transitory, the poverty of fleeting matter paradoxically calls for eternity as the answer to its innermost meaning, which only God who became a delicate creature can provide.

Through the Incarnation, collage asks if the historicity of matter might contain within itself a Trinitarian key. That which is most vulnerable, such as stones, debris, and dirt, can teach us through their absolute openness-in-humility to God. These wandering fragments find solidarity and fulfillment in the particles of the blessed sacrament. The Eucharist is the hermeneutic key to understanding the eschatological potential of collage: *the poverty of matter is redeemed in a particle of matter*. Ephemeral bread and wine,

made in time through human industry, are transubstantiated into the very life of God. “Every Eucharist is Parousia, the Lord’s coming,” perpetuating His encounter with the world. “The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours.”⁵

The eschaton acknowledges matter and time through the Eucharist, who calls all fragments secret brethren. Collage can use the ephemerality of its materials to address the time of the end precisely in the eschatological horizon opened by the Eucharist. A eucharistic approach to collage detects the “potential building blocks, or ‘obediential potencies’”⁶ of the fragments themselves: their capacity for grace as they groan under sin and death, awaiting their integration into the mystical body of Christ. By promoting a sacramental contact with things, all of creation can be radically loved. In this way collage can depict “a provisional manifestation and reflection of a future consummation”⁷ accomplished at the end of time.

In modern art, however, collage has often denied the inherent dignity of its materials, fixating instead on their mutability. One such example is the work of the German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948). Using scraps of labels, bus tickets, buttons, and other *abfall* (rubbish) combined with paint, Schwitters crafted pictures from juxtaposed found objects, attempted to merge them into a unified visual field.⁸ Collecting and caring for these ruins contains a great truth fulfilled in Christ, but Schwitters arguably developed a kind of anti-incarnational theory of collage using the term “Merz:” “By means of *Wertung* and *Entformung*, composition and de-formation, material was severed from what Schwitters called its *Eigengift*, its ‘own particular poison.’”⁹ Each artifact was treated as an abstract pictorial element. “Anything that could yield a desired color, line, or plane was just as appropriate as another. Hence, *Merz* also explicitly denied the historical specificity of its materials and insisted upon their subjugation to the compositional ambitions envisioned by the artist.”¹⁰

Merz endeavored to defeat the stubborn personalities of objects, but the “eigengift” or “particular poison” of matter in time is precisely what Christ redeems. Rather than melting down individuality into a gnostic unity, the resurrection preserves and fulfills the unique creature, redeeming the fragment *as fragment*. Christ’s glorified wounds are a perfect icon of this sublimated historicity and provides collage with a meaning beyond mere composition. In fact, the Church has historically been a laboratory for thinking through this relation between materiality and Parousia, presenting its eschatological vision in miniature drafts of the heavenly kingdom, especially in monstresances and reliquaries.¹¹

Collage cannot become intoxicated with the particularities of things, however much physical matter will be glorified in the resurrection. It must also be a witness to the truth of the one God, Lord of Israel and the Church, revealed in history. The moral potential of collage rests on imitating God through a love for the broken, the forgotten, and the marginalized; not just in the physical objects themselves, but in the remembrance of people and events associated with those artifacts. Artists engage a suffering world and “often attempt to unearth thoughts that might be easier left dormant and ignored.”¹² Catholic artists in particular can exercise a prophetic vocation that “belongs to the whole

Church, not to Church officers alone”¹³ when such memory includes an examination of conscience (Image Two).

The unbearable history of past transgressions, for which there is no proper amelioration or recompense, is confronted in the confessional. There we encounter God’s mercy, healing “that dead body of sin we bear within ourselves.”¹⁴ “In confession the break-through to community takes place”¹⁵ as we visibly strengthen our fellowship by acknowledging personal sins. We should also recognize that in structures of sin our national and institutional “bodies still bear the scars of wounds suffered centuries ago, scars liable to reopen in times of crisis and turn into festering sores.”¹⁶ The Church is a forest of history, from the trials of Israel to the lives of the saints, containing the necessary ingredients to patiently address these scars, but only if we *repent*—from “the Greek imperative verb *metanoeite*, which literally translates as ‘change your mind’ or ‘go beyond your mind’”¹⁷;—both individually *and* collectively as a pilgrim church, allowing the divine head to wash, bind, and heal these wounds of history through the Holy Spirit. (Image Three)

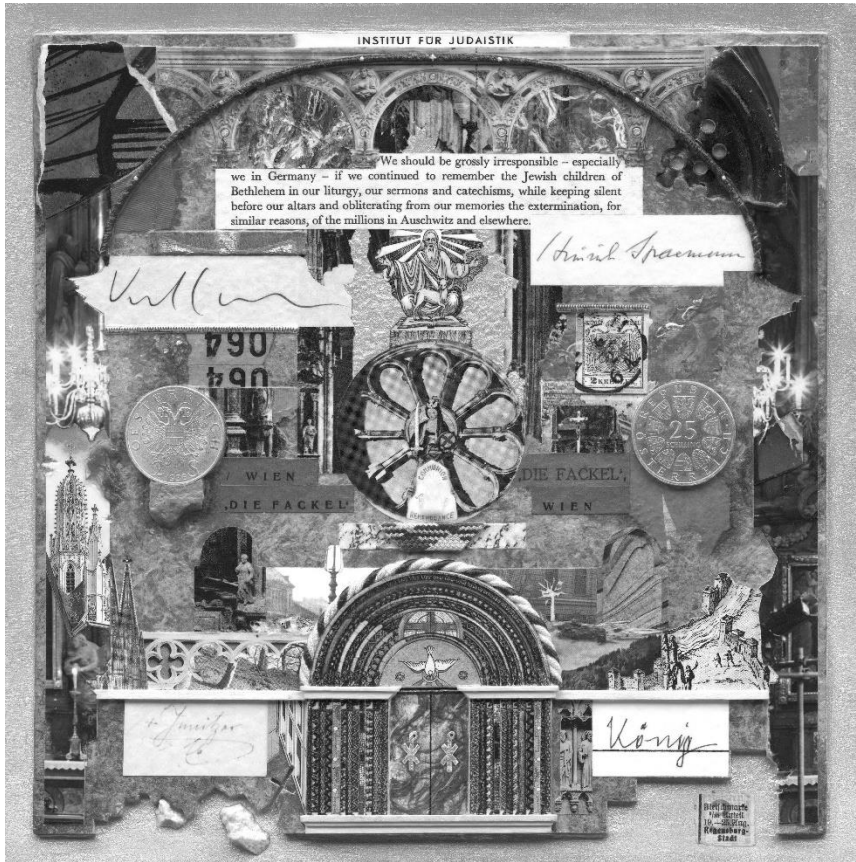
By engaging the world outside the Church’s doors, in the actual products and detritus of the broader culture, collage can cautiously critique clerical isolation while eucharistically elevating the poverty of matter: the victim, the “memory lapse” (*gedächtnislücke*), and the fallible—all cherished by our heavenly Father. Pope Francis has used “the image of a field hospital” that “exists where there is combat”¹⁸ to describe a model for an open Church in touch with the woundedness of creation, refusing to “surrender the World to the squire’s hounds for the manhunt.”¹⁹ The Catholic artist in this age is also commissioned to gather up the wounded, “taking the world with him to man’s absolute future, God himself” so that all of history may participate in the life of the Trinity. Perhaps then collage can be a fitting instrument to celebrate God’s love for this imperfect world, showered with glimpses of His eternity.



A Murdered Jew, 2019, assemblage of papers, fabric, wood, metal, stone, cut signatures, altar bread, charcoal, watercolor, oil, and acrylic on board, 12 x 20 inches.

“My dear child,” he simply told the messenger, “in peace and at war, Mass is always said *in the presence of the enemy.*”

Léon Bloy, *Sweating Blood*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2016), 30. Originally published as *Sueur de sang*, 1893.



Institut Für Judaistik (Institute for Judaic Studies), 2019, assemblage of papers, photographs, fabric, wood, metal, stone, cut signatures, altar bread, colored pencil, and acrylic on board, 10 x 10 inches.

“We should be grossly irresponsible—especially we in Germany—if we continued to remember the Jewish children of Bethlehem in our liturgy, our sermons and catechisms, while keeping silent before our altars and obliterating from our memories the extermination, for similar reasons, of the millions in Auschwitz and elsewhere. If we were not to remember these victims, it would make it appallingly clear how liturgy can

become an end in itself, a harmless ritual drained of any appeal to the conscience, a mere glorification of its own existence.”

Heinrich Spaemann, *Die Christen und das Volk der Juden* (Munich, Germany: Kösel-Verlag, 1966), 33, as translated in Friedrich Heer, *God's First Love: Christians and Jews over Two Thousand Years*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (London: Phoenix Giant, 1999), 420.



Beichtkirche (Confession church), 2018, assemblage of papers, photographs, fabric, wood, metal, stone, cut signatures, altar bread, and acrylic on board, 9 x 9 inches.

“The great potential of inner powers—the real armament which is needed within the Church and throughout Christendom—will be released only when the daily confession of sins is in the best sense of the term politicized, actualized, concretized.”

Friedrich Heer, “The Need for Confession,” in *The Storm over The Deputy*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 169.

NOTES

- ¹Bernard Przewozny, O.F.M.Conv., *Church as the Sacrament of the Unity of All Mankind* in "Lumen Gentium" and "Gaudium et Spes" and in *Semmelroth, Schillebeeckx and Rahner* (Rome: Miscellanea Franciscana, 1979), 139.
- ²Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 135.
- ³*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), sec. 673.
- ⁴Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 203. Ratzinger continues: "and yet the Eucharist is even more truly the tensed yearning that he would reveal his hidden Glory."
- ⁵Francis, On Care for Our Common Home, *Laudato si'* (May 24, 2015), sec. 236, in *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 143.
- ⁶M.-D. Chenu, O.P., "The Signs of the Times," in *The Church Today: Commentaries on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, ed. Group 2000 (New York: Newman Press, 1968), 56. Chenu is referencing St. Thomas Aquinas, *De virtutibus in communi*, art. 10, ad 13.
- ⁷Hans Küng, *Art and the Question of Meaning*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 51.
- ⁸For an introduction to the work of Kurt Schwitters and his relation to the Dada art movement, see Dorothea Dietrich, "Hannover," in *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: National Gallery of Art, Washington and D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2005), 154-179.
- ⁹Megan R. Luke, *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 18.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹¹For a historical perspective on the Catholic Church's eschatological experimentation in small ecclesial objects, see François Bucher, "Micro-Architecture as the 'Idea' of Gothic Theory and Style," *Gesta* 15, no. 1/2 (1976): 71-89.
- ¹²Robyn O'Neil, foreword to *Who's Afraid of Modern Art? Essays on Modern Art & Theology in Conversation*, by Daniel A. Siedell (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), xi.
- ¹³John L. McKenzie, S.J., *Authority in the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 153.
- ¹⁴Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 41.
- ¹⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 112.
- ¹⁶Friedrich Heer, "The Catholic Church and the Jews Today," *Midstream: A Monthly Jewish Review* 17, no. 5 (May 1971): 21.
- ¹⁷Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 92.
- ¹⁸Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, trans. Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), 52.
- ¹⁹For Friedrich Heer's original quotation, "Die geschlossene Kirche überläßt die Welt den Herrenhunden zur Menschenjagd," see Kurt Wimmer, "Fritz Heer: Christ und Utopist in Österreich," *Kleine Zeitung*, September 20, 1983, 3. A very special thanks to Dr. Christopher Frey of Antiquariat Inlibris Gilhofer Nfg. GmbH, Vienna for his assistance with the translation.
- ²⁰Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., "Christian Faith and the Future of the World," in *The Church Today: Commentaries on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, ed. Group 2000 (New York: Newman Press, 1968), 94.

EXPANDING THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION: CHASTE PERCEPTION

Paul Joseph Chu

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” These words, likely an extrapolation from Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, have been attributed variously to Bertolt Brecht and Vladimir Mayakovsky, and widely quoted.¹ Yesterday’s revolutionary artist might, however, be surprised and frustrated at contemporary reality; a hammer is no instrument for working with Silly Putty.

Today’s technology provides us with fresh toys and fresh cravings daily. In particular, the symbiotic dynamo of social media and the smartphone is the philosopher’s stone, bending time and transcending matter. Temporal and spatial constraints are essentially overcome, rendered irrelevant. The supersaturation of society with media is complete—continuous, instantaneous, uninterrupted, and ubiquitous.

Under these prevailing conditions, shaping and reshaping have largely overtaken reality (or so-called reality) and become ends in themselves.² The first wonder of contemporary information technology was the instantaneous accessibility of *answers to all possible questions*. Its second and more ambiguous wonder was the instantaneous accessibility of *all possible* answers to all possible questions. Multiple identities—serial or simultaneous, stable or fluid, virtual or otherwise—are coming to be seen as a right, a path of self-discovery or of self-creation, or even as a necessity in the defense of privacy. Already at the turn of the last century, G.K. Chesterton wrote that “behind the art and philosophy of our time, there is a considerable element of ... bottomless ambition and unnatural hunger ... not crying for the moon, which is a definite and therefore a defensible desire [but] crying for the world; and when they had it, they would want another one.”³

At its contemporary extreme, this desire has become explicit in transhumanism and futurism, seen for example in the utopian speculations of novelist, popular intellectual, and transhumanist guru FM-2030 (*né* Fereidoun M. Esfandiary) in the 1970s⁴ and inventor-futurist Ray Kurzweil’s 2005 bestseller, *The Singularity is Near*. Going beyond the psychologically disembodiment effects of virtual living and instantaneous information overload, transhumanists and futurists seek in a multitude of ways to liberate human consciousness from the constraints of terrestrial life (and death), ranging from wetware AI brain enhancements to the digitizing of human consciousnesses—ideas which Kurzweil and other scientists propose as plausible.⁵ The prospect of escaping

temporality and materiality, not merely in experience but in fact, of unlimited life extension, of conscious life experience continuing indefinitely inside a mainframe, of retinal-projected virtual reality indistinguishable from the “real thing,” is being seriously entertained by respected scientists.

All of this can be enticing, even for many of those skeptical about transhumanist and futurist claims.⁶ Whatever their scientific or philosophical merits, such claims offer themselves as paths of concrete realization for a postmodern world which subordinates time, space, and matter to unmoored imagination. Such a world has nothing to do with the liberal subjectivism which embraced the validity of different or even contradictory understandings of reality; rather, reality itself is cast into question, redrawn as infinitely malleable, and (perhaps) ultimately optional⁷—much like what Allan Bloom described as “nihilism with a happy ending.”⁸

For many of the rest of us, however, matter matters, and time is of the essence. The Catholic tradition is specifically built upon physical and material sacramentality,⁹ and the liturgical as exemplifying the temporal.¹⁰ Thus, Catholicism takes a diametrically opposite approach to transhumanism regarding matter and time. As sociologist and popular novelist Andrew Greeley wrote: “Catholic imagination ... sees created reality as a “sacrament,” that is, a revelation of the presence of God.”¹¹—a friendship and bond to matter and to the world of things, a commitment to the goodness of being. In coining the term *Catholic imagination*, Greeley frankly acknowledges his debt to theologian and priest David Tracy, whom Greeley characterizes as distinguishing a predominantly Catholic *analogical imagination*, which emphasizes God’s presence in the world, from a predominantly Protestant *dialectical imagination*, which emphasizes God’s absence from the world.¹²

For a postmodern sensibility suspicious of God and the world alike, seeing everything as texts to be deconstructed or simply as optional lifestyle choices, a Catholic imagination becomes more than an incarnational spirituality; the materiality of sacramentality serves as a sort of ballast for a culture on the verge of going wholly virtual. The Catholic imagination is taking up, as it were, the weight of the world. Is it up to the task? Yes—and no.

Yes, inasmuch as the real world of the living and the non-living, of humans, animals, plants, and all this planet entails is living under the shadow of mortality, of poverty, of gross economic inequalities, of environmental degradation and exploitation, of war and the threat of war, and cannot be ignored. Yes, inasmuch as anyone with eyes to see is astonished by life, dazzled by beauty, and ultimately incapable of being as unfazed by existence as the postmodernist, the transhumanist, or even the common citizen blindly walking the streets lost in a smartphone screen would seem to be. And yes, inasmuch as one who truly believes there is a God who loves and dwells in being down to the smallest subatomic particle, who created all things and whose delight is to be with the children of men, cannot utterly be dead to the world.

The Catholic imagination is necessary to preserve us from angelism—or rather from angelism/bestialism, the peculiar contemporary malady so astutely diagnosed by Walker Percy through his fictional surrogate, Dr. Tom More, in the novel *Love in the Ruins*.¹³ This insouciant hemispheric disconnect between speculative and practical intellect lets us dwell indefinitely in ethereal speculation, without refining or disciplining our appetites

and passions in the least. Think of the social media image sculptor updating his profile in his squalid bedroom—or the eminent philosopher who, distracted from his reflections by a neighbor gossiping in the stairwell of his residence, allegedly threw her down a flight of stairs.¹⁴ Where the Catholic imagination is alive and operative, time and matter continually awaken us to real life, remind us of who we are, of the world around us, of the God above us.

But the Catholic imagination is *not sufficient* to carry us forward on its own. The virtual world and the postmodern world and the drives and longings they embody and draw out are here to stay. Barring a cataclysm in the real world,¹⁵ this genie will not go back into its bottle anytime soon. Indeed, to destroy the leisure, technological development, and material prosperity on which postmodernity rests would be an atrocity, and to keep that leisure, technological development, and material prosperity bottled up in a few wealthy countries, mostly in the northern half of the Western Hemisphere, would arguably be an even greater atrocity.

Yet more importantly, this genie *should not* go back into its bottle, and we as Catholics and as artists should not be trying to bottle it up. The infinite longings which virtuality and transhumanism express are valid, indeed indispensable expressions of the human spirit, and the reason the Catholic imagination should not be content to carry the weight of the world along an endless *Via Dolorosa* is quite simple: *The world is not enough*.

This was the point Chesterton missed. We are crying for the world, both in the sense that he meant it, and in the sense that this valley of tears imposes on us. And when we had it, we would want another one. *And we would be perfectly right*.

In saying this, we speak of the world to come. But we do not thereby speak exclusively of the beatific vision, of Heaven in union with God or the New Jerusalem we await at the end of time. The world we live in, the real world of the living and the non-living, of humans, animals, plants, and all this planet entails, has yet to become what in the fulness of time it is meant to be and made to be. A world created in original innocence and redeemed by the blood of a God cannot simply stall out with us as we are now. To paraphrase Amy Adams' line from the movie *Junebug*, God loves us the way we are, but He loves us too much to let us stay that way.¹⁶ As 19th Century Protestant divine Alexander Maclaren put it, "Man's course begins in a garden, but it ends in a city"¹⁷ ... and a city means human superdetermination.

But *this* city, the city of God, requires a model of human superdetermination which is purer, deeper, more loving and more sacrificial than any which the world—or the Church!—has seen to date.¹⁸ I do not claim to know what it will look like; I will not venture to fill in details. Ecotheology, liberation theology, feminist theology, theologies of the racially oppressed—not to mention encyclicals of recent popes, from *Rerum Novarum* to *Pacem in Terris* to *Laudato si'*—have all been proposed in this regard. For my part, I do not feel so much a need to know what the world to come will look like, as to know in my own small way how to *embody* the world to come. This will require more than sacramental imagination; it means a sacramentalized cosmos.

This calls to mind the Church's own futurist and (arguably) transhumanist, the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. While I have great reservations about Teilhard's concrete vision of the future—perhaps greater than I would have regarding any of the proposals

cited above—elements in his methodology have great promise.¹⁹ Teilhard's words raise the stakes and the hopes associated with the Catholic imagination: *by means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us.*²⁰ This means that we cannot merely take comfort in the nearness of God to the everyday world; we need, as it were, to buckle our seatbelts, for the everyday world is always ready to give us a far wilder ride towards God than we are generally open to noticing. If, as St. Augustine says, God in our Eucharistic food reverses the usual process by which what we eat becomes us, and makes us rather become Him,²¹ it should not be totally surprising that God in creation is launching us on a similar journey.

Teilhard also deserves great credit for an insight that has attracted the suspicion of theologians and the derision of physical scientists: the *Noösphere*, the web of human social, cultural, and technological constructs which envelop the planet.²² As scientists begin to accept the idea that contemporary human activities and technological developments have launched Earth into a new geological age—the *Anthropocene*—Teilhard's term may be ready for a new life.²³ The genius of Teilhard's idea is the rejection of the Cartesian as an arbitrary and absolute barrier between thought and things, between the knower and the known. As quantum mechanics has shown us, the universe can be astonishingly responsive to how it is perceived; what Teilhard shows us is that our perception is itself *something*.

This indirectly points to the ancient Christian concept of *custodia oculorum*, the custody of the eyes. Often misunderstood (even by those attempting to practice it) as a ritual purity practice, the problem of unchaste perception²⁴ is the pollution of the *perceived*, a violation of people or things—after all, “[t]o the pure all things are pure.”²⁵ Teilhard's insight recasts this truth with greater urgency, showing how our seeing takes on its own reality: a human person becomes a “slave,” by being perceived as such; a natural object becomes a “resource” by being seen as such. Thus, to perceive *everything* indiscriminately—the apparent goal of the postmodern new media culture—seems to be the ultimate imperialism, an imperialism of *being*. Rather, as Ratzinger put it, we must “minister to the earth by transcending it. ... We must throw its doors open so that the true energies by which it lives ... can be present in it.”²⁶

Perhaps the most important realization of this lies in the concept of the *cosmic liturgy*, expressed best through Teilhard's long prose poem, *The Mass on the World*.²⁷ This vision, taken up by the last three popes,²⁸ has powerful implications; if the destiny of the cosmos is *liturgy*—to “become a living host” as Benedict XVI summarized the thought²⁹—then time and matter are not only sacramental, but actually *sacred*. They are not so much signs of a greater reality, as *seeds*. As Benedict XVI wrote before his papacy, “the message of the Resurrection is not only a hymn to God but a hymn to the power of his love and hence a hymn to man, to the earth and to matter.”³⁰

What does this say for art? First, it explodes the dichotomy left behind by the revolutionary artists of the 19th and 20th centuries. Art is neither a mirror nor a hammer; it is perhaps a lens, at once something ontic and a potentially privileged, even blessed vision of God-created being. As Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his *Letter to Artists*: “[e]very genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world.”³¹ Thus, no ideology (including religious ideology), no conceptual provocation, and no prelapsarianist airbrushing will help us here. We are at once seeing

through a lens of love (another of Teilhard's insights: *love* as the elemental force of true understanding) and bringing, with fear and trembling, a being into being.

What disposition are we to bring to this act of creation? I would like to say a chaste one; after all, to see creation as revelatory of God is to treat it with respect. To see the divine in the world, one must first see the world as it is, perceiving God in things as they actually are. I believe that is the truest answer, although it would doubtless be wildly misunderstood and widely rejected. While I continue to consider chastity the supreme virtue in art, one could use the Pali word *sati* from the Buddhist tradition—normally translated as “mindfulness,” the seventh element of the Eightfold Path. While the term has been popularized in the West as “bare attention,” historical Buddhism emphasizes an awareness that is moral and transtemporal, as well as material.³² In this sense, rather than in the Western therapeutic sense, a mindful encounter with being, a mindful spirit, would seem to me a tenable path for the contemporary Catholic artist.

NOTES

¹Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 121. The original quote reads: “Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes.” For disputed attribution, see https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht#Disputed, accessed September 10, 2019.

²See for example Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 91: “People sometimes say that the way things happen in the movies is unreal, but actually it’s the way things happen to you in life that’s unreal. The movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen to you, it’s like watching television—you don’t feel anything. Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television. The channels switch, but it’s all television.”

³G.K. Chesterton, *The Superstition of Divorce* (New York: John Lane Co., 1920), 149–150. On the same impulse and topic, considered more sympathetically, see Edward Hoagland, “Other Lives,” *Harper’s*, July 1973: “We have other lives to lead, we say to ourselves, casting about for more freedom or erotic sizzle, more simplicity, leisure, integrity at work or money or whatever. Many divorces ... involve a desire ... to shatter the setup, start out from scratch alone and make life work for them all over again.”

⁴For an account of FM-2030’s remarkable personal history, see Benjamin Tiven, “The Future Takes Forever,” *Bidoun*, Winter 2010, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/the-future-takes-forever>, accessed September 10, 2019. Something of the flavor of his views can be found in FM-2030, *Are You a Transhuman?: Monitoring and Stimulating Your Personal Rate of Growth in a Rapidly Changing World* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), available online at <https://www.scribd.com/document/37767409/FM-2030-Are-You-a-Transhuman>, accessed September 10, 2019.

⁵Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Viking Press, 2005), 163–169, 234–245. See also Charles Platt’s interview with pioneering roboticist Hans Moravec, “Superhumanism,” Primitivism, <http://www.primitivism.com/superhumanism.html>, accessed September 10, 2019.

⁶See for example the eminent philosopher of consciousness John Searle: “I think the Singularity is demonstrably B.S. But that doesn’t alter the fact that it’s very thrilling,” in David Kushner, “When Man and Machine Merge,” *Rolling Stone*, February 18, 2009, 60.

⁷Such a condition is obviously a luxury; the decadent *imaginarium* I describe is limited to a small number of disproportionately influential people (many themselves entertainers, artists, or popular intellectuals) in affluent, technologically advantaged societies.

⁸Allan Bloom, “How Nietzsche conquered America,” *Wilson Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 85.

⁹In Catholic ecclesial practice, the essential importance of materiality is vividly confirmed in the years of effort invested devising gluten-free hosts made from wheat, because only wheat is considered valid matter for consecration; or that at the point of death, a penitent may receive absolution from a suspended or laicized priest, but not over the telephone.

¹⁰Both in the sense of time as experienced and governed in the liturgy and in the cycle of the liturgical calendar.

¹¹Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

¹²David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). Greeley’s personal interpretation of Tracy’s distinction crystallizes Catholic and Protestant, cataphatic and apophatic, spiritualities into two basic worldviews well-adapted to sociological analysis. Tracy’s own take is more rarified and textured, although it is safe to assume that Greeley (a close friend of Tracy and—through the largesse made possible by dozens of best-selling mass-market paperback novels—endower of the chair at the University of Chicago which Tracy held) was operating in a spirit which Tracy could endorse.

¹³Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1971), 27, 83, 383–390 *passim*.

¹⁴Artur Schopenhauer. The disputed incident is recounted in David E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 403–410 *passim*.

¹⁵As global warming has overtaken nuclear proliferation on the average Doomsday list, however, we might not be in such fanciful territory here as we would like.

¹⁶*Junebug*, directed by Phil Morrison (United States: Sony Pictures Classics, 2005). See <https://www.quotes.net/mquote/117880>, accessed September 10, 2019.

¹⁷Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1910), 113. See <https://www.quotes.net/quote/58772>, accessed September 10, 2019.

¹⁸While Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly cited beauty and the lives of the saints as the best substantiation for the truth of the Catholic faith, neither the world nor the Church seem at present to be reflecting to us artistic beauty and sanctity exclusively, or even primarily. See for example Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Message to the Communion and Liberation (CL) Meeting at Rimini: "The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty"* (August 24–30, 2002), Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_rattinger-cl-rimini_en.html, accessed September 21, 2019.

¹⁹A reasoned exposition of the problematic issues in Teilhard de Chardin's thought can be found in John P. Slattery, "Dangerous Tendencies of Cosmic Theology," *Philosophy and Theology* 29, no. 1 (2017): 69–82.

²⁰Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, cited in Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Random House, 1999), 133.

²¹St. Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church: Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney, R.S.M. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), Sermon 227.

²²Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (New York and London: Harvest / Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 29–39.

²³For example, historian of science David Christian proposed the *Noösphere* as a lost term worthy of restoration, albeit with the caveat of dismissing Teilhard and his compatriot, mathematician Edouard Le Roy, as tainted by the "vitalism" of Henri Bergson, in favor of their third interlocutor, Russian geologist Vladimir Vernadsky who "[a]s a geologist working in the Soviet Union ... seems to have been a committed materialist." See David Christian, "2017: What Scientific Term Or Concept Ought To Be More Widely Known?: The Noösphere," *Edge*, <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27068>, accessed September 10, 2019. Historically, these three men shared credit for the concept, with the term having stemmed from Teilhard. For Christian's misunderstanding of Bergson, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Deleuze, Bergson and the Concept of Life," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 61, no. 241 (3) (September 2007): 287–300.

²⁴For a broader sense of the term, see Ron Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), 56–57: "The fear today is not that one might distort experience by being unchaste, but that one might miss out on an experience by being uptight."

²⁵Titus 1:15 (New American Standard Bible).

²⁶Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Seek That Which is Above*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 38.

²⁷Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Mass on the World," in *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 19–37.

²⁸John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (April 17, 2003), sec. 8, Vatican website, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_eccle-de-euch.html; Benedict XVI, "Celebration of Vespers with the Faithful of Aosta (Italy)" (July 24, 2009), Vatican website, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090724_vespri-aosta.html; Francis, *Laudato si'* (May 24, 2015), sec. 236, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, accessed September 21, 2019.

²⁹Benedict XVI, "Celebration of Vespers with the Faithful of Aosta (Italy)," accessed September 25, 2019.

³⁰Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Seek That Which is Above*, 36.

³¹John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (April 4, 1999), sec. 6, Vatican website, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html, accessed September 21, 2019.

³²For a detailed discussion on the distinction between *sati* and Western theories of mindfulness, see "Sati," Encyclopedia of Buddhism, last modified August 27, 2019, <https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Sati>, accessed September 27, 2019.

EXTRALITURGICAL ART

“If there is any downside to the Catholic channeling of attention to worship space, liturgical furnishings, and liturgical objects, it is the lack of corresponding attention to all the other ways in which the visual arts serve in Catholic worship and life. Certainly, Catholics have not been alone in decrying, downplaying, or ignoring the role that extraliturgical images and objects play in religious life.”ⁱ

NOTES

ⁱLisa J. DeBoer, *Visual Arts in the Worshiping Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 107.

THE DARK NIGHT AND THE BUSY HAND:
PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS ON MAKING AS AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH

Anthony Santella

“If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence, the Mystery of which we are part; from this Mystery we can draw fullness, happiness, the passion to engage with it every day.”

—Pope Benedict XVI¹

The tradition of grand Catholic liturgical art meant as a tool for collective worship is often contrasted unfavorably with modern, secular modes of art making, dominated (in myth and to some extent reality) by individualistic pride and hollow pretensions of radicalism. This dichotomy ignores modes of making that are personal, even private, while being unequivocally expressions of faith, like home shrines, retablos, and *ex-voto* offerings. I would argue that “mainstream” art objects can be undertaken in the same spirit and function in the same way. They can simultaneously be intensely personal and reach out toward shared expressions of Catholic faith.

I want to look at this idea of “secular Catholic art” informally through my own experience and art practice. Alongside my academic work as a Computer Scientist, I have spent my adult life as an artist in a largely secular context. The work I do is shown in secular galleries and I typically speak about it in terms appropriate to that context, describing resonances with historical forms as well as political and psychological themes. Despite this, I believe my work reflects Catholic faith in what I would loosely define as its fundamentals: a practice rooted in belief that redemption comes through Christ in his brokenness and a faith in the goodness of creation and the value of community. I would also argue my work reflects Christian ritual, not only in external form, but in function as the focus of a personal meditative process during its creation and as a collective call to contemplation when shared. Though the analogy between art practice and prayer can sometimes be exaggerated, the comparison does accurately reflect that even in the isolation of an artist’s studio, like a contemplative’s cell, the goal is not to distance oneself from the realities of life, but to better love and serve God and others.

The underpinning of faith in my work is most visible in times of darkness, where I am driven by the need to anchor myself spiritually and mentally against disintegration. This thread can be followed through work from a difficult period between 2013 and 2019. I dislike a biographical focus in discussions of art, but don't think I can speak intelligibly without noting that the period encompasses the end of my marriage, and years of struggling to understand and accept my wife's silent, sudden disappearance. The objects I created during this period served as votive offerings for the intention of surviving the tumult and moral danger of the modern world, and the process of their creation and exhibition served to navigate and build community amidst rootlessness and abandonment. In part, art becomes a way of attempting to examine and transcend tragedies using a Christian lens that sees and identifies with God who wears the face of the battered other. I see a resonance between this kind of work—faith driven, but in a way compulsive, undertaken out of need, not desire—and the dark night of the soul as described by St. John of the Cross.² The analogy is cautiously made, but both involve a stripping away of apparent agency and sensible pleasure, a processes of growth driven by grace and faithful persistence rather than pursuit of perceived reward.

“Why is the Divine light (which as we say, illumines and purges the soul from its ignorances) here called by the soul a dark night? To this the answer is that for two reasons this Divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul but is likewise affliction and torment. The first is because of the height of Divine Wisdom, which transcends the talent of the soul, and in this way is darkness to it; the second, because of its vileness and impurity, in which respect it is painful and afflictive to it, and is also dark.”

—St. John of the Cross³

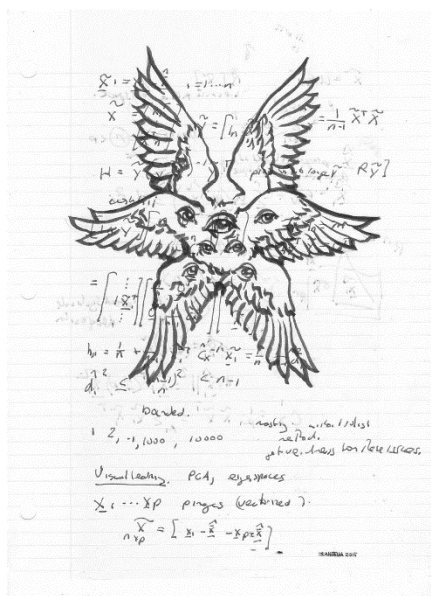


Untitled Vigil: The Day Before, 2013, photo. (left)

Untitled Vigil: Day365, 2014, photo. (right)

Two long term projects from this period have particular resonance with these themes. Each was a daily practice, not intentionally faith-based, that over time took on elements of sustaining daily prayer in impossible circumstances. Between 2013 and 2014, I took a picture every day of the stump of a historic tree in Teaneck, New Jersey (purportedly the 4th largest red oak in the state)⁴ cut down after extended local protests in which I participated. I never planned for this to become a project. The day it was

removed I went to take a few pictures and, instead of going to work, spent the whole day photographing the removal. Feeling frustrated and helpless in the face of the removal and personally isolated, I started taking a picture of the stump every day as an ongoing protest against the useless destruction and, in retrospect, my own loneliness in my failing marriage. (Image One and Two) There was something comforting about the ritual and commitment of the project, the certainty of the day's picture—whether taken at noon or 2AM. I persisted in spite of universal advice to give it up (and once being surrounded by four police cars after being reported as a suspicious character casing the synagogue next door). I was surprised that it never got boring. Every day in the same spot there was something new to observe. Other events came out of the work as well. I organized a community project to distribute salvaged wood from the tree to local woodworkers and built monuments housing cross-sections of the tree for the Puffin Foundation and the Teaneck Public Library.⁵ There was a promise of redemption in the continual renewal of beauty at the site of tragedy. By the end of the year the photos had become a meditative practice and an act of faith which was difficult to give up. The compulsive repetition of return to the site of violence became a steadying assertion that in spite of seeming hopelessness there was a point to enduring, seen in the beauty that came with faithfulness.



Day 281: Vision: Without Robust Methods Get Weirdness from These Issues, 2015, ink on paper, 8.8 x 11 inches.

Soon after, in 2015 a new daily practice emerged as I committed to creating a finished piece of art every day. Alone, and in denial that my wife was truly gone, I again found a solidity of purpose and sense of accomplishment in completing each day's drawing. The work became a place to slowly come to acceptance of the changed world

in which I found myself. The resulting imagery is diverse but a number of themes repeat: solitary figures, black suns in a white sky, eyes, sprouting tendrils. Many images took an unconventional approach to religious themes intermixing them with personal preoccupations. The limits of vision was a theme I returned to frequently that year as I struggled with my blindness to my marriage's failing and my incomprehension of the situation. In *Vision...* the angel from the visions of Revelations and Ezekiel floats over a page of linear algebra, notes from a graduate computer vision class, a doubled image of the limits of human sight and understanding. (Image Three) The repetitive contemplation of my lack of understanding through drawing was ultimately helpful in accepting the reality of the situation. Like the dark night St. John describes, I could come to see the experience as more about the limits of human understanding, rather than the ultimate despair of rejection by loved ones or by God. The repetition slowly became less about mourning and more like a repeated prayer for understanding and survival, the faithful effort itself becoming a process of healing.

"Rivers of blood have flowed, columns of smoke have obscured the sky, but surviving all these dooms, the tradition has remained inviolate down to our own time. According to it, the world reposes upon thirty-six Just Men, the Lamed-Vov, indistinguishable from simple mortals; often they are unaware of their station. But if just one of them were lacking, the sufferings of mankind would poison even the souls of the newborn, and humanity would suffocate with a single cry. For the Lamed-Vov are the hearts of the world multiplied, and into them, as into one receptacle, pour all our griefs."

—Andre Schwarz-Bart⁶

This wound and its slow healing is also evident in another piece from 2015 entitled *Unknown Just*, an explicitly but unconventionally religious piece. (Image Four) It references a non-Christian tradition, Congolese *Nkisi Nkondi*: animistic power figures that are pieced with a nail or blade as a witness to vows or to mark prayer requests.⁷ The piece's European features and pierced palms reference images of Christ and St. Sebastian. The title identifies the figure with the "Unknown Just" or hidden holy men of Jewish folklore. It draws connections between traditions that share an *image of power in woundedness* and plays off the duality implicit in the *Nkisi* tradition in which the nails are both *ex-voto* offerings and an act of violence.

The creation of this piece itself became a moving and complex exploration of this tension. I completed the piece at a weeklong artist's residency. The final step was to drive nails into it, "destroying" months of careful work. This became a collective ritual when a friend suggested that all the artists present participate. Each artist took turns over the course of the week adding nails, some reluctant or unable to participate in what seemed an act of desecration and violence, others enthusiastic when the piece resonated with their own work, personal wounds, and preoccupations. It was a powerful event unifying a group of artists from a variety of faiths and touchingly recapitulating aspects of how *Nkisi*, and Catholic *ex-voto* offerings were used as the shared focus of a community's hopes, desires, prayers, and pain.



Unknown Just, 2015, oak and nails, 25 x 9 x 7 inches

“I walked a bit and made a little garden in a glass dish of mosses and tiny plants. C. S. Lewis in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* describes just such a tiny garden ... ‘Beauty will save the world,’ Dostoyevsky wrote. ... Actually I was trying as I began writing about my little terrarium, to comfort myself, because of the horror of our times, these times of savagery, lies, greed.”

—Dorothy Day⁸



Reliquary for a Found Object: a Semantic Disagreement Regarding Love, 2014, oak, glass, and condom, 4 x 4 x 8 inches.

A range of reliquary projects over this same period walk the edge between alluding to traditional forms and actually being devotional art. The reliquary, a vessel for relics that are often a focal point for encountering God's healing, is a particularly evocative place to explore personal visions of woundedness and prayers for healing.

Reliquary for a Found Object... is the darkest and most problematic of these pieces. (Image Five) Built entirely from discarded materials: broken furniture, an inverted votive candle holder, and a piece from the oak tree cut down in 2013, it is in a way an anti-reliquary housing a condom found among my ex-wife's belongings. The gesture of enshrining a symbol of distance and betrayal is fraught and could appear desecratory. Catholic Medieval reliquary figures and African power figures share the placement of artifacts in a chamber in the chest. In the Catholic form, the windows are crystal or glass to allow the faithful to visually access the saint's relic. In African figures, the seal is usually opaque or mirrored to keep the figure's power safely preserved inside. In this piece the frosted glass conceals the object reflecting the inversion of the reliquary form and adding to the tension between revelation and concealment implicit in the piece. The question the piece poses remains a troubling one with no answer: is the desire to preserve mementos of one's wounding always a perverse and self-destructive one? Or can locking items of powerful darkness in a fixed place help us and support us in letting go, and placing the wounds we suffer in God's hand?

A protective, preserving instinct is implicit in reliquaries. The *Promise Keeping Machine* series of sculptures emerged from reliquary forms developed during my daily drawing practice in 2015. (Image Six) A somewhat menacing spider-like reliquary form

houses and guards living moss. On one level this piece functions on the incongruity of enshrining a prosaic object. However, for me the combination of tenderness and menace in the form is a poignant expression of the troubled nature of the urge to protect and to guard. This protective instinct is both a ward against and a temptation to use violence. The tiny garden, like Day's and Lewis', is a miniature threatened Eden, and the work reflects the irony that its protection is beyond our capabilities as well as those of our machines, and in God's hands alone.



Promise Keeping Machine, 2016, oak, glass, and moss, 6 x 6 10 inches. (left)
Shrine of Our Lady of Tides, 2017-2018, driftwood and viewer-contributed objects, 16 x 16 x 33 inches. (right)

In contrast to these more subtle religious themes, *Shrine of Our Lady of Tides* functions essentially as public liturgical art embedded in a gallery context. (Image Seven) In December of 2017, I curated the exhibit *A New World* at the Sheen Center in lower Manhattan. Sponsored by the Guild for Catholic activist Dorothy Day's canonization, the exhibit explored her legacy of activism and faith by juxtaposing her writings with work by contemporary artists addressing social justice themes.⁹ For the centerpiece of the exhibit I built a Shinto style shrine from driftwood collected along the beaches around the former site of Spanish Camp in Staten Island, the location of Day's cabin and site of her conversion, illegally demolished in 2001.¹⁰ This piece also has a personal resonance. My aunt lived just a few miles from Spanish Camp and I collected the wood over several visits to the area toward the end of her life. My aunt shared two geographical poles with Day: the south shore of Staten Island and the Jewish Lower East Side. The exhibit was dedicated to her memory. The connection seemed even more appropriate

while sorting through relics of my aunt's 1960s student activism after her death. The shrine, influenced by my experiences with *Unknown Just*, was an attempt to directly involve gallery visitors and make the exhibit not "just" art, but to give it an explicit element of collective prayer. A sign invited visitors to contribute small votive objects and to leave notes and prayers that spoke of their vision or hopes for faith and justice. Many left poignant notes and prayers, and several even left small objects. Within the larger traditional gallery space, the shrine became a shared focus for the prayers and hopes of the visitors that passed through transcending both the piece's personal meaning for me, and its role as "art."

"He falls and gets up, falls again,
floundering on the sharp reed-ends.
People come and find him dead, the ground
wet with blood and written on every reed-tip,
the word Allah. This is the way one must
listen to the reed flute. Be killed
in it and lie down in the blood."

—Fariduddin Attar¹¹

Creating work of the sort I have been describing, there is a natural temptation to focus on the forms of ritual objects and the logic of their physical use. However, the purpose of religious objects is to shape our relationship with God and others. The germ of *Our Lady of the Reeds* lay in November 2013 when, in a near dissociative state, I wandered into a phragmites swamp in a park in Northern New Jersey. (Image Eight and Nine) My wife hadn't come home for a few days, one of many preludes to her final disappearance. As I walked, I had an overwhelming sense of detachment and of some significance hidden beneath everything I saw. I knelt and prayed for my marriage in a fairy ring-like circle of bushes on a tiny patch of raised ground in the swamp, feeling like a miracle could occur in that moment. I returned to pushing my way through the reeds, reminded of the poem *Listening to the Reed Flute* by the Persian mystic Attar; I eyed the reeds uneasily. Ultimately, I was surprised to find myself back on the trail, which I'd forgotten was a circle around the swamp. Years later an image coalesced around this experience: a black crow over the reeds and an unconventional Mary holding a pool of blood in one hand and a lily, a symbol of purity, in the other. Her surroundings conflate the devastated New Jersey Meadowlands and its oil refineries with the yet more devastated marshes of Iraq and the images of well fires I remembered from the first Gulf War. The painting is neither a purely personal work nor a traditional religious image. I believe it is a prayer of gratitude, an *ex-voto* offering for survival of the period, that seeks to unify the personal and the political in an expression of faith.

It is this approach to art which is most interesting to me right now. It blends the methods of contemporary art driven by personal, social, and political resonances with that of *ex-voto* paintings that provide a literal record of graces received. I believe this space has been fruitful for me, personally and artistically, and might also serve other artists of faith as well. Though inherently idiosyncratic, my hope is that my experiences could be useful to others trying to feel out the relationship between their art practice and

their faith, particularly in the face of overwhelming personal circumstances. The church may need the flexibility of visual language as it confronts a changing world and needs to communicate hard messages with nuance. Art certainly needs a strong link, provided by faith, to the fundamental ground of making—the struggle to make sense of life in all its difficult complexity. In contrast to the reputation of being selfishly detached from reality, artists experience a constant disjoint between their inner vision and the limits of their skill. This can make them attuned to the nuances of living in the darkness experienced by limited beings with a distorted view of reality. Like the spiritual dark night of the soul, this practice may serve to strip away the illusion of control and create a focus on the workings of grace in that darkness. Struggling artists of faith may take comfort in the idea that adversities, both personal and artistic, may be a useful apprenticeship in the creation of new forms that are—for their unconventional nature—no less necessary a living expression of our timeless faith.



Our Lady of the Reeds, 2017-2019, oil on canvas in artist-built frame, 24 x 36 inches.

NOTES

¹Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Artists* (November 21, 2009), Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.html, accessed August 18, 2019.

²St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959). Online digitized edition, <http://www.carmelitemonks.org/Vocation/DarkNight-StJohnoftheCross.pdf>, accessed August 26, 2019.

³Ibid., 51.

⁴Noah Cohen, "Centuries-Old Tree Cut Down in Teaneck," *Patch*, June 10, 2013, <https://patch.com/new-jersey/teaneck/cedar-lane-blocked-as-crews-cut-down-centuries-old-tree>, accessed September 26, 2019.

⁵Jay Waitkus, "Teaneck Library Installs Slab of Town's Historic Oak Tree in Courtyard," *Daily Voice*, December 22, 2015, <https://dailyvoice.com/new-jersey/teaneck/neighbors/teaneck-library-installs-slab-of-towns-historic-oak-tree-in-courtyard/612176/>, accessed August 18, 2019.

⁶Andre Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961), 4-5.

⁷"Nkisi," Wikipedia, last modified September 24, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nkisi>, accessed September 27, 2019.

⁸Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage - January 1973," *The Catholic Worker*, January 1973, <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/527-plain.htm>, accessed August 26, 2019.

⁹Anthony Santella, "Curating Dorothy Day," Benedict XVI Institute for Sacred Music and Divine Worship, February 11, 2018, <https://www.benedictinstitute.org/2018/02/anthony-santella-curating-dorothy-day/>, accessed September 22, 2019.

¹⁰Wayne Barrett, "Sacking a Saint," *The Village Voice*, May 1, 2001, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2001/05/01/sacking-a-saint/>, accessed August 26, 2019.

¹¹Fariduddin Attar, "Listening to the Reed Flute," in *The Hand of Poetry: Five Mystic Poets of Persia*, trans. Coleman Barks (New Lebanon, NY: Omega

A BEAUTIFUL MINDFULNESS

Rev. Michael J. Lynch

“In every new situation we must start all over again like children, cultivate a passionate interest in things and events, and begin by taking delight in externals, until we have the good fortune to grasp the substance.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹

This Goethe quote, presented as the epigraph of Balthasar Fischer’s seminal work on The Roman Liturgy, *Signs, Words & Gestures*, has been a jumping-off point for my own understanding of the appeal of Catholic art and architecture since an early age. Growing up in a busy northeastern metropolis in the United States, I was surrounded by houses of worship. I was curious about the outsides and the insides of these prominent structures located all over New York City. Any chance I had, I would duck into a building and marvel at the soaring ceilings, the huge doors, the polished marbles and metals, the paintings, the statues, and the stained glass.

My own parish church, informally dubbed by local residents “the cathedral of the north,” held a special place in my universe of fascination. Not only did I attend Sunday Mass there with my family, but had occasion to enter during the weekdays as a student of the attached parochial school. An altar server from the earliest possible moment of eligibility, I was often on deck to serve at Mass and funerals because we lived around the corner from the church and it was a short trip to the sacristy. Later, I would be a part-time sacristan and caretaker, shutting the doors to the sacred each evening after the last Mass. It was here, in these moments when I was alone in the quiet, beautiful stillness of this neo-Gothic wonderland for the imagination, that I found my first appreciation for the signs and symbols that were the roots of a theology I was just beginning to glimpse in minor Seminary.

“The beauty of the world is Christ’s tender smile for us coming through matter.”

—Simone Weil²

I am what is colloquially referred to as “a lifer,” having entered seminary at 13 years of age and followed the course through College-Seminary to the Theologate and ordination. These years of my formation, in the period following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962–1965), were years full of inquiry, exploration, and innovation. The Fathers (and Mothers) of the Council laid the groundwork for great studies in liturgy and the liturgical environment (i.e. art, music, and furnishings). Formal training in Theology during my studies in Rome (1984–1989) opened my mind’s eye to the meaning and message of so many of the symbols and forms used and encountered in worship. Studies of ancient, modern, and contemporary iterations of liturgical vessels, vestments, and sacred objects inform my own interest in the collection and display of non-liturgical art pieces.

“During their philosophical and theological studies, clerics are to be taught about the history and development of sacred art, and about the sound principles underlying the production of its works. As a result, they will be able to appreciate and preserve the Church’s venerable monuments, and be in a position to aid, by good advice, artists who are engaged in producing works of art.”

—Sacrosanctum Concilium³

An “aha” moment in my appreciation for things beautiful, good, and true came when I was a graduate student in Rome at the local Dominican University, The Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas. It was in a class on the Theology of Aesthetics that I was first introduced to the mind and wonder of the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar through the deft hands of Fr. Robert Christian, O.P. (Auxiliary Bishop of San Francisco, CA, recently deceased on July 11, 2019). Here I first encountered the mythical understanding of the world which:

sees the whole world as a sacred theophany. In an eschatological sense, this is also what the world is for Christian faith. If the cosmos as a whole has been created in the image of God that appears—in the First-Born of creation, through him and for him—and if this First-Born indwells the world as its Head through the Church, then in the last analysis the world is a ‘body’ of God, who represents and expresses himself in this body, on the basis of the principle not of pantheistic but of hypostatic union.⁴

I was also introduced to a seminal text for the study of Aesthetics that has been on my bookshelf for more than 30 years in active ministry: *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona.⁵ This book opened doors to deeper thinking and praying about all things beautiful in the Kingdom of God. The collection of essays in this work served as a sort of travel guide while I was abroad. I would go from church to church, holy place to holy place, seeking and being sought by beauty. Any open door was an open book; and I read.

Together with the writings of Mircea Eliade, Wassily Kandinsky, and Langdon Gilkey, the contribution by Doug Adams lends terrific insight into the place of art in the sanctuary. His essay entitled “Theological Expressions Through Visual Art Forms” has played a key role in my appreciating artists’ quests to expose the beautiful, the good, and the true to the viewer.⁶

Adams explores the “unitive” and “communitive” categories of visual form as found in the work of Joshua Taylor. As a clergyman deeply involved in interreligious studies, I was drawn to Taylor’s ideas of art as both “unitive” (corresponding to the Eastern religious concern for unity with the eternal ideal and absorption into immortality and oneness) and “communitive” (corresponding to a Western religious concern for community and resurrection of the body, with each individual persisting as a distinct part in the world).⁷ Both of these aspects are engaged in my church’s setting for the purpose of enhancing the spiritual experience of the members of my own community. With art pieces situated in the Chapel of the Tabernacle, which is a room set apart, but visible and accessible to all in the main space of the church, they offer a moment of beautiful mindfulness. There is an immediate call-and-response, an invitation to the individual to be in communion with the divine presence, *and* the response of the whole community-at-prayer in the celebration of the sacraments.

“The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due honor and reverence. It will thereby be enabled to contribute its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise in honor of the Catholic faith sung by great men in times gone by.”

—Sacrosanctum Concilium⁸

The process of ‘introducing’ a work into the sanctuary area is grounded in my understanding and application of von Balthasar’s methodology in *Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*. Throughout this book, the theologian points us back toward the classical constructs of Saint Bonaventure: “let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the Supreme Craftsman. ... The Creator’s supreme power, wisdom and benevolence shine forth in created things.” Reflecting on Bonaventure’s thoughts about the path to Christian knowledge of life with God, Ilia Delio beautifully sums up this move toward contemplation:

We discover the truth of our being, and in this truth is our freedom to be. Hence, our interior liberation becomes a freedom to contemplate God. This freedom opens up the spiritual vision of the heart, and we begin to see the life of the universe and our own lives with new eyes. To contemplate God is to contemplate the beauty of the universe, the unique details of every living being; it is to love. Nothing in creation is accidental or excessive; nothing is worthless or trivial. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. Each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is of infinite value because it images God in its own unique being.¹⁰

“Art opens up the truth hidden behind and within the ordinary; it provides a new entrance into reality and pushes us through that entrance.”

—Langdon B. Gilkey¹¹

Traveling in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2016, I happened into a gallery on the main square and came upon the works of Father Bill Moore, a Religious Order priest of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. His abstract canvases, brightly colored and complex in composition, caught my mind's eye. I knew in a moment that one of the pieces before me, entitled "Soaking Up The Silence," would be right for the Chapel of the Tabernacle in our parish church of Our Lady of the Cenacle in Richmond Hill, NY. (Image One) This would serve as a contemplation point for an exchange, an understanding of incarnation and redemption often found in the common *picta*. Joshua Taylor, in writing about works created in the twentieth century, captures my sentiments towards Fr. Moore's work: "This is a kind of contemplative art which, in focusing our thoughts and feelings, shuts out for a moment the rampant extension of both sense and imagination."¹²

Later during the season of Lent, in the same Chapel of the Tabernacle, I used a contemporary work by John Gleason (of Scottsdale, AZ) fashioned from copper wire entitled "Hermit," which is meant here to evoke the image of the Holy Face. (Image Two) With subdued lighting and darker colors, which move the heart to the stillness of this penitential season, this work helped call to mind the Gospel story of the agony in the garden.

"This is not to say that the 'sacred' has completely disappeared in modern art. But it has become unrecognizable; it is camouflaged in forms, purposes and meanings which are apparently 'profane.' The sacred is not obvious, as it was for example in the art of the Middle Ages. One does not recognize it immediately and easily, because it is no longer expressed in a conventional religious language."

—Mircea Eliade¹⁴

Father Moore's non-conventional painting and Gleason's profane sculpture are two instances of art inviting a response in a place of the holy. Doug Adams' treatment of Joshua Taylor helps me to see how the use of non-traditional (or extralitururgical) art in a sacred place could help others have a face-to-face encounter with The Holy. Thomas Merton, the contemplative Trappist monk, offers an inspiring thought: "Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."¹⁵

These pieces, along with others that I have been displaying over the years, have drawn people into a moment of conversation with the Divine. Sometimes a whisper, sometimes a shriek, most times a kind of stop-and-listen.

"Art can be jarring or dissonant, offensive or haphazard. It disrupts the dominant paradigm and unloosens the chains of conventionality."

—Mirabai Starr¹⁶

I have continued to explore using different media and non-traditional treatments of common theological themes in the exposition of paintings and sculptures displayed in the sanctuaries where I have been privileged to work and pray. I recognize that I have an uncanny knack for envisioning the right piece in the right place at the right time, what my friend Tim Collins calls "the simultaneous levity and precision with which you are able to integrate artwork into the sanctuary."¹⁷ From years of curating extralitururgical art,

I have developed a kind of *process of discernment* to help guide my integration of artwork into the sanctuary:

PRAYER — When I chance upon a piece of art that speaks of the holy to me, I take time to pray in its presence. I often take a photo of the work, have it with me in situ in church, and “live with it” for a while in my morning meditations.

PLACEMENT — It’s usually at an angle that catches the viewer off-guard when it is encountered. There is little that is obvious in the placement of the piece. It is meant to invite “contemplation.”

PROMPTINGS of the Holy Spirit — At its root, “contemplation” calls one into a space set apart to encounter with the holy. Any number of dictionaries will have us delve into the meaning of “temple” as a seed for listening to and understanding auguries, seeking to increase knowledge of the unknown.¹⁸

PASTORAL CARE — Once a piece has been positioned and observed by parishioners in the sacred space, I will seize the moment to publish some information about the piece (such as author, title, and collector) in the weekly bulletin. I will try to engage in conversation with those who have bothered to seek out the piece, and I will ask them to tell me what they see, feel, or hear. The responses always tell me that my gut was right and this was a moment of grace waiting to happen, a transference from the gallery to the sanctuary.

“But earth is not a training ground for heaven. It is, rather, the very place where heaven unfolds. Even Saint Francis of Assisi knew that heaven is not a place above earth but God’s indwelling love that enlightens and inflames, opening up one’s vision to the truth of this world in God. Heaven, therefore, is not another world but this world clearly seen.”

— Ilia Delio¹⁹



Father Bill Moore. *Soaking Up The Silence*, 2015, mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Used with permission of the artist / photo by the author. For more information, see the Father Bill Moore Foundation for the Arts - fatherbill.art

“My art has made me a better priest, and my faith has made me a better artist. We live in hurried times and are inundated with countless images. We have the capacity to immediately access a staggering wealth of information. Through my art, I am asking myself and those that would explore it, to slow down, look, touch and consider the essential colors, shapes and textures that can feed our souls.”

—Father Bill Moore, SS.CC.



John L. Gleason. *Hermit*, 2018, woven copper wire, 15 x 24 inches. Used with permission of the artist / photo by the author. For more information, see Quan'tum Art, Inc. - quantumartinc.com

“That artists of our time, through their ingenuity, may help everyone discover the beauty of creation.”

—Pope Francis²⁰

NOTES

¹Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre I*, 3 (1829), in Balthasar Fischer, *Signs, Words & Gestures: Short Homilies on the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

²Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Routledge, 1951), 60.

³Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), sec. 129, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., trans. ed. Joseph Gallagher (New York: America Press, 1966), 176. Special attention should be given to footnote 63 on page 176: “This regulation ... will make all the difference. If it is observed, and priests receive the required training, our churches and other sacred art and music can be expected to be relevant for our time. ... *For the Church possesses no divine guarantee of infallibility in matters of art.*” (emphasis added).

⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. 1: Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 659.

⁵Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001).

⁶Doug Adams, “Theological Expressions Through Visual Art Forms,” in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001), 313–318.

⁷*Ibid.*, 313.

⁹*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, sec. 123.

¹⁰Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God* 1.9–10, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 63.

¹¹Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 129.

¹²Langdon B. Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001), 180.

¹³Joshua C. Taylor, *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 151.

¹⁴See for example Luke 22:44–46.

¹⁵Mircea Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001), 180.

¹⁶Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Image Books, 1974), 387.

¹⁷Mirabai Starr, *Wild Mercy* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2019), 165.

¹⁸Timothy Matthew Collins, email message to the author, March 19, 2019.

¹⁹For a standard definition of "temple," see for example <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/temple>, accessed September 16, 2019.

²⁰Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 75.

²¹Francis, "Prayer Intentions for August 2017," *Salt and Light Media*, August 1, 2017, <https://saltandlighttv.org/blogfeed/getpost.php?id=7674>

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