

Creating a Home for the Word

*Beauty
and the Renewal
of Heart and Culture*

Joshua Elzner

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Those who allow themselves to be apprehended by the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit then experience a real transfiguration of culture. The supreme activity of man is to consent to a marriage with the Word. If our gaze is to liberate the beauty hidden in all things, it must first be bathed with light in him whose gaze sends beauty streaming out. If our words are to express the symphony of the Word, they must first be immersed in the silence and harmony of the Word. If our hands are to fashion the icon of creation, we must first allow ourselves to be fashioned by him who unites our flesh to the splendor of the Father.

It is then that culture bears its promised fruit, as it anticipates the eternal communion in the lowliness of the flesh. It achieves its goal only when in its own mysterious way it moves man toward communion with God and thereby with reconciled humanity and with nature that has become transparent.

- Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*

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Part I

At the Wellspring of Beauty

THE HEART OF CULTURE

I would like to begin these reflections in an unlikely and unusual place. Rather than starting with what is *right*, with the beauty and truth that is the longing of our hearts and our true happiness, I would like to “feel the pulse” of our current culture (at least Western culture), and to empathize with what is *wrong*. I do this because, in this way—when the climate of our world is viscerally felt—we can sense both the profound loss and confusion as well as the longing for a better answer and the yearning for a more beautiful vision. And in this way we can be readied precisely to hear such an answer and to receive such a vision with humility and reverence. Because in our current world, as we are about to see, the answer and the question are tied together. In other words, the things that we believe and our very approach toward believing are inextricably related, and feed into one another. And this is why opening oneself to anything different, or being convinced of it, is so difficult. If I approach the world with doubt and cynicism, with criticism and a materialistic rationalism that sees only what is before my eyes (and even more, accepts the patently false but popular assumptions of our society), then even in hearing the wondrous and beautiful alternative, the message of authentic truth, I cannot *truly* hear it. It falls upon deaf ears, because I have already been conditioned, and have conditioned myself, to *not* hear it. And this is where so many people stand today. Thus it is well to look at the illness, or better, at the heart of our culture and the hearts of our brothers and sisters (and our own hearts as well), so that we can understand where we stand.

But indeed we can recognize that, as a culture, we in large part do not *under-stand* at all, but rather *over-stand*; and yet in this over-standing, we in fact find ourselves crushed under the burden of an incredible weight. We are not freed by all our “liberation” from the bondage of believe, but rather enslaved. To find freedom again let us feel the pulse and open ourselves to the question: “Is this really the way the world is, and how it works? Or is there something more, an answer that is more beautiful, more joyful, and whose beauty is not a deceptive ‘opium of the masses’ but rather a sign of its innate goodness and truth, a goodness and truth accessible to all because universal and all-encompassing?”

So let us do as I said. I shall share a quote from the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline which illustrates quite viscerally, and painfully, the atmosphere of our world in the two ways I mentioned: *what* we believe and the *way* in which we believe. He writes:

Here’s the deal, Wade. You’re something called a ‘human being.’ That’s a really smart kind of animal. Like every other animal on this planet, we’re descended from a single-celled organism that lived millions of years ago. This happened by a process called evolution, and you’ll learn more about it later. But trust me, that’s really how we all got here. There’s proof of it everywhere, buried in the rocks. That story you heard? About how we were all created by a super-powerful dude named God who lives up in the sky? Total bullshit. The whole God thing is actually an ancient fairy tale that people have been

telling one another for thousands of years. We made it all up. Like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

Oh, and by the way there's no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny. Also bullshit. Sorry, kid. Deal with it.

You're probably wondering what happened before you got here. An awful lot of stuff, actually. Once we evolved into humans, things got pretty interesting. We figured out how to grow food and domesticate animals so we didn't have to spend all of our time hunting. Our tribes got much bigger, and we spread across the entire planet like an unstoppable virus. Then, after fighting a bunch of wars with each other over land, resources, and our made-up gods, we eventually got all of our tribes organized into a 'global civilization.' But, honestly, it wasn't all that organized, or civilized, and we continued to fight a lot of wars with each other. But we also figured out how to do science, which helped us develop technology. For a bunch of hairless apes, we've actually managed to invent some pretty incredible things. Computers. Medicine. Lasers. Microwave ovens. Artificial hearts. Atomic bombs. We even sent a few guys to the moon and brought them back. We also created a global communications network that lets us all talk to each other, all around the world, all the time. Pretty impressive, right?

But that's where the bad news comes in. Our global civilization came at a huge cost. We needed a whole bunch of energy to build it, and we got that energy by burning fossil fuels, which came from dead plants and animals buried deep in the ground. We used up most of this fuel before you got here, and now it's pretty much all gone. This means that we no longer have enough energy to keep our civilization running like it was before. So we've had to cut back. Big-time. We call this the Global Energy Crisis, and it's been going on for a while now.

Also, it turns out that burning all of those fossil fuels had some nasty side effects, like raising the temperature of our planet and screwing up the environment. So now the polar ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising, and the weather is all messed up. Plants and animals are dying off in record numbers, and lots of people are starving and homeless. And we're still fighting wars with each other, mostly over the few resources we have left.

Basically, kid, what this all means is that life is a lot tougher than it used to be, in the Good Old Days, back before you were born. Things used to be awesome, but now they're kinda terrifying. To be honest, the future doesn't look too bright. You were born at a pretty crappy time in history. And it looks like things are only gonna get worse from here on out. Human civilization is in 'decline.' Some people even say it's 'collapsing.'

You're probably wondering what's going to happen to you. That's easy. The same thing is going to happen to you that has happened to every other human being who has ever lived. You're going to die. We all die. That's just how it is.

What happens when you die? Well, we're not completely sure. But the evidence seems to suggest that nothing happens. You're just dead, your brain stops working, and then you're not around to ask annoying questions anymore. Those stories you heard? About going to a wonderful place called 'heaven' where there is no more pain or death and you live forever in a state of perpetual happiness? Also total bullshit. Just like all that God stuff. There's no evidence of a heaven and there never was. We made that up too. Wishful thinking. So now you have to live the rest of your life knowing you're going to die someday and disappear forever.

Sorry.

And the response he gives? It is this:

OK, on second thought, maybe honesty isn't the best policy after all. Maybe it isn't a good idea to tell a newly arrived human being that he's been born into a world of chaos, pain, and poverty just in time to watch everything fall to pieces. I discovered all of that gradually over several years, and it still made me feel like jumping off a bridge.¹

I will not go into detail here concerning all the faulty assumptions in this text, whether that be the belief that evolution is a proven fact rather than a simple theory, or global warming, or the assertion that God (and heaven and all spiritual truth) is a fairy tale we made up with no evidence. It is not our place here to argue with these atheistic, materialistic assumptions, but rather to point out a simple fact. What is the tone of this text? Is it not the tone, the atmosphere, in which so many beautiful and well-intentioned people live in our world today? This is the heritage of a world that has rejected the Gospel and all the heritage of wisdom, truth, and goodness that was entrusted to us by our forefathers, and has boldly marked out its own path into the future. This is why our future may look grim, and why so many people indeed, in the recesses of their hearts, feel and believe precisely as this passage expresses. When the gift that precedes me, sustains me, and carries me at every moment—indeed carries all of humanity—from beginning to end, is reduced to a random evolution of atoms, and when the universe narrows to a pin-point, all things crumbling until the human animal alone remains, forging his way ahead, there is really nothing more to look forward to.

Only in hearing anew the voice of the Love who made the world, and who stands behind, underneath, and in all that exists, and whose presence is ceaselessly revealing itself to us and giving us evidence more sure than anything else, can we find the path to life again. And our world needs to hear this voice again! Our world needs to see his Beauty! Our world needs to recognize again his Truth! This is truth that is not enslaving or burdensome but liberating and free, marking out for us the path to true maturity in the flourishing of our humanity and in the communion of life and love for which our hearts long. Thus we come to the importance of culture. The above quote showed quite vividly the fruits of our contemporary culture. These are the fruits it bears: an abiding sense of futility, of defeat, of randomness and meaninglessness, and the division of man from his inmost self as well as from

his fellow men, from his environment, and from his Creator. But man lives in his culture and never apart from it, even as he is not a mere victim of his culture, a mere product, but also a producer, a fashioner and molder of culture. And thus we find the small focus and task of this book: to gesture toward the renewal of culture, and, through culture, the renewal of human hearts (and the renewal of human hearts and thus of culture), which will allow light to shine again in our contemporary darkness. For this light—which is Beauty, Goodness, and Truth—alone can mark out a path toward the life for which we all thirst, and which even the most lost and cynical heart can never entirely exclude from the horizon, since it holds us at every moment whether we know it or not.

The foundation of authentic culture is the common pursuit of beauty, goodness, and truth, that is, the one single reality that unites all persons, whoever and wherever they may be. Whether it be in political or philosophical dialogue, in all forms of art, music, and storytelling, or in the daily living of human life, the foundation of all things on the creative love of God is the source from which all order, harmony, and beauty in society flows. Culture itself is a rich reality, many-layered and multifaceted, and it is God's wish that it is so. For culture is, as it were, the incarnate manifestation of the inner dispositions in the heart and mind of man and woman—and of the human community—in the contours of their existence and in the concrete works of their hands.

God has given us the world to be our own—he has given *his* world to be *our* world. And that itself is an amazing fact! He does not desire mere blind submission or purely passive acceptance of the gift of existence. He desires free, spontaneous, personal, and creative cooperation. He desires playfulness in the playground of the universe that he has given for no other reason than that he loves us, loves us tenderly and ardently. Thus we are called to create as we ourselves have first been created, indeed to look upon all things and all persons with a gaze of cherishing tenderness and creative generosity just as God ceaselessly looks upon us, and in this look gives us ever-anew the very gift of existence and life.

We are thus co-creators, or sub-creators, who in our activity, whatever its nature, participate in the nature of the Creator himself, and extend his presence and activity in the world and into the lives of others who do not yet know him. Our very sharing with one another becomes mutual enrichment, our dialogue and witness words shared in the atmosphere of the Word, ways of ministering to one another in our poverty and need as we all strive together toward the Beauty for which our hearts long, and in which alone we shall find definite and everlasting rest and fulfillment.

Art, writing, music, film, interactive media, and so much more—these are all part of the “communication” that flows between human hearts in this world, extending and perpetuating, even at a distance of both time and space, the communication that we share while we are together. And in our contemporary world, with the advances in technology and all the modes of communication, specifically the internet, this “communication through art” has become more global than it has any other time in the history of the world. Now it is possible, not only to communicate and share with someone

on the other side of the world, and to receive from them the same, but also to do so instantaneously. Our world is progressing more and more, through technology, toward becoming a “global” society.

But this also raises the important question, and touches upon the deep desire: if the means of communication are becoming global, and have already created, as it were, a “worldwide society,” what can allow this society to be not only global but *universal*, that is, not only a cacophony of various voices speaking of their own cultures or ideas or perspectives, but rather an authentic *communion* in which life is shared and beauty affirmed among all alike? The only answer to this is the very one that our world, out of boredom or despair or a deadening of the sense of wonder and primal trust, has most begun to doubt. It is the reality and the pursuit of *a universal truth*. It is the firm belief that the universe is knowable, intelligible, and that the questions about *what is*, about the true nature of things—not only scientific truth, but rational, emotional, ethical, and religious truth—is an important question, and can truly lead to definitive and satisfying answers.

Yes, the names that we give to the things that exist are not merely names; the world is not a hidden face that we merely try to capture in a fleeting image by giving it paltry and arbitrary names. Rather, the universe stands before us like a loving mother offering herself to us to be received, known, and understood, and in being understood, to be loved. And through all things and beyond them all, stands before us *God*, the very Thinker who thought the world into being, and whose intelligence has made the universe intelligible, whose very naming of all things has instilled into created realities their essence—their being as a participation in his Being—and has also instilled into us, human persons who are fashioned in the likeness of God as Person, the ability to recognize these essences, to cherish them, and to name them. In other words, it is God who has given to us the ability and the calling to come to true *knowledge*, to an understanding of the world as it actually is. And in this understanding—which, as Thomas Aquinas expressed so beautifully, is a kind of “wedding” between myself and reality and the coming-to-live-in-me of the reality that I welcome and receive—in this understanding is found joy, enrichment, and life. And indeed in this understanding lies the path of the true meeting of human hearts with one another, and the way of their authentic communion in mutual belonging and reciprocal care.

Truth is our home. The real is our home. And the path before us, by which a society ever more deeply joined by technology while ever more radically fractured and divided in all else, can at last become a world of true encounter, communication, and communion, is the path of *honest dialogue in the conviction that the truth can be both found and lived, and that this truth, while manifested uniquely in the life of each person, is one and universal, the same for all*. Yes, and this dialogue, this communication, occurs not only in words, in argument or conversation, but in all the contours of life and in all the artifacts of culture. By all that we are and all that we do, by all that we create and all that we share, we speak a word of our hearts, of our beliefs and our desires, and of our very humanity as it stands in primal wonder and desire, in fear and anguish, in faith and hope and love, before the world and before the very Author of the world.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO THE DEPTHS OF THE HEART

Through all the ages of history, two currents flow like threads, one seemingly all-powerful and all-too-evident, and yet ultimately weak and destined to pass away, and the other seemingly weak and frail, even absent and invisible, and yet destined to everlasting victory and eternal fulfillment. The first thread is that of human brokenness and sin passing on and causing harm from day to day, from person to person, from age to age, and the second is the current of grace pouring from the heart of God and weaving itself into all of the universe in order to heal the wounds of sin and to make all things new in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And grace meets us precisely in the brokenness, pouring itself out, *evangelizing* us and our world, so that the seeds of goodness always present in creation, and yet unable to blossom freely for all the negative influences opposing them, can truly be what they were created to be, and can indeed find fulfillment in the embrace of God himself.

This meeting between God and creation, between nature and grace, between brokenness and beauty, between the seeds of beauty and the fullness of Beauty, is ongoing and occurs ever anew, and we are part of it, participants in it. So too it shall be renewed in our world today, and is already being renewed. In our world so estranged from God, so long in the shadows and darkness of atheistic humanism, Nietzschean will-to-power, Kantian subjectivism, and cynical doubt, not to mention all the innumerable traumas and tragedies that occur all over the face of the earth every day, *we need the outpouring of the light and the love of God!* We need a renewed evangelization, of our culture and of our hearts. Yes, even in our media-saturated world, in which the imaginative life of so many people is permeated by the constant feed of images, words, and sounds given in film, social media, and the internet, it is particularly important for *an evangelization of the heart* to occur. Yes, this is true simply because, even prior to any influences of our given culture or milieu, we bear in us a humanity that is fractured as a result of original sin, and which can only be fully healed and restored through a gift given from the outside. All of our wounds, whether in our intellectual, volitional, or affective life, our relations with our senses and sensory objects, or in any other sphere of our rich and multilayered humanity, ultimately effect, and in turn are effected by, our *heart*. This inner repository of all thought, feeling, and desire, the wellspring of deepest choice and the home of our unique “I,” the heart, is the place addressed by the Gospel and the locus toward which and from which all healing occurs. And the term “evangelization” means bringing the light and truth of the Gospel—the good news of God’s love in Christ—to places where it has not yet been fully received and allowed to permeate. Thus this is what I mean by the term “evangelization of the heart.” It is the healing of our wounded nature, of our minds, emotions, choices, desires, and whole life experience, by the light pouring through the redeeming Heart of Jesus Christ from the bosom of the Trinity.

This is a “preaching of the Gospel” into the inner repository of our being

where all lines converge, and from which our truest choices and actions spring, those that manifest in the deepest way who we are and what we truly value. Thus this preaching is not a merely intellectual matter, a matter only of thought; nor is it only a re-education of our imagination or our senses, or a training of our will. It is all of these things, yes, and it must be so, for all of these things are important, essential for the full living of our humanity in the image and likeness of God. But before all and in all this evangelization is an *encounter*. It is a personal encounter with God himself. It is an encounter with the living God manifested at the heart of our visible creation, an encounter the nature of which we shall be exploring in depth in coming reflections.

In all the “mediation” in which we find ourselves immersed today—whether technological mediation of internet, social media, and popular culture, or the cultural prejudices and biases that color our perceptions of reality—we are invited to return to a pristine, childlike contact with the *real* as it presents itself to us directly, sacramentally, as God’s gift to each and every human heart. And this childlike wonder, while cherishing in a special way the real material, bodily reality in which we find ourselves—and the true, unique history of each individual life, of my own life—can also live and permeate wholly all of our relations with the artifacts of culture, of art, and of technology. Nonetheless such media are not always transparent, and much in them militates against the disposition that God desires to give to us in his great love.

The noise of our world—both audible and visible noise—makes it very difficult to descend back to our original state, our sacramental and incarnate state, where in the full meaning and beauty of the present moment I allow God to communicate himself to me and to draw me into a relation of reciprocal openness to him. But this is the premise for such an evangelization, such an encounter, to occur, even as such an evangelization enables us to enter into this state of healthy and true relationship with all of reality more and more. Indeed, this “preaching” of the Gospel to us in our heart’s openness to the real also deepens more and more, from the lived-experience of God’s own self-communication in any number of ways that it approaches me, to gradually become *total permeation*. Here, God’s self, his truth and love, becomes the very atmosphere of my whole life, like the light in which I see and experience all things, and the air in which I breathe the breath of life. In other words, through this process of the evangelization of the heart, God’s love and truth seek to permeate my whole being, in all that I am, and to transform me in the Love that alone can set me free, until for me his Love is everything and in everything, and everything is in him.

In this book, after some simple but profound reflections upon the central realities pertaining to an evangelization of the heart—and a prolonged wonder-filled gaze on the themes of beauty, of art, of culture, and other central topics—I will also look a bit at places in our contemporary milieu in which such an evangelization is particularly pertinent. There are four which play a large role in coming reflections: *image*, *sound*, *interactivity*, and *story-telling*. First, the *image*.

We live in a culture that has in many ways abused and pornified the *image*.

By this I mean not only visually prostituting the human body in art and media, but also presenting even non-personal realities and events in both a titillating and a possessive manner that betrays the innate sobriety, harmony, and radiant simplicity of reality as created by God. The sexual analogy here is illustrative, but not exclusive. Yes, we do indeed live in a sexualized world that is much permeated by the fostering of lust and objectification of the human body, but this “pornification” of which I speak is far more than sexual: it is a hedonistic, materialistic approach to life as a whole. Here the visible manifestation of reality, the beauty of the body and of nature, of art and of all visible representation, becomes opaque, for no longer is it understood that God shines through it. Rather, the danger is that the image tends to become self-enclosed, whether that be the illicit ownership of statements such as “this is *my* body, and I can do with it what I want,” to ones such as “art is an expression of my worldview; I want people to see *me* in it.” We will explore this more thoroughly, and more positively, soon, but let us take a glance at the other things I mentioned.

The second aspect of our contemporary world that I mentioned above is *noise*: we live in a culture of noise, in which so many frequencies fill our ears. Much of this can be good, such as a sharing in the riches of others in music and dialogue. But much of it can also be harmful, deafening our heart’s receptivity such that we no longer have space to hear the voice of God, or even to listen to the voice of another person, or even, for that matter, to hear the cry of my own heart as it aches for something more. After all, even the atmosphere of music, as the atmosphere of speech, is silence, and in silence the melody and the harmony of both music and of truth sound most deeply and expansively. The truest things are heard not in noise but in silence. The beauty of sound—whether nature, music, the human voice, or the voice of God—is heard not when our ears are filled with noises, but when the sobriety of sound makes way for true hearing. A sign of the healing of our culture shall be when *noise* begins to give way to *sound*, and when silence again becomes the atmosphere of listening, both inside and out.

The third thing that I mentioned is *interactivity*. This is a particular gift and capacity of technology in our time: that it can engage us and awaken our interaction in a particularly vivid way. There are certainly beautiful capacities here to allow the beauty of reality to be harnessed in art and communication. Yes, here there are many opportunities for the Word to incarnate itself, to manifest itself in image, sound, and interactivity. But in this too lie certain dangers, all the more vivid because of the unhealthy movements that have been present in our approach to technology from the beginning. For the danger—or one of the dangers—is that the interactivity of modern technologies will dull us to the primal interactivity of the universe itself as fashioned by God, to the meaningful activity that presents itself to us each day, far more profound than that offered by technology, but also more sober, further beyond our grasp, and calling for a response that stretches itself out across time and space quite differently than the so-often-enclosed world of technology.

Fourth: story-telling. We live in a world that is filled with all kinds of fiction, whether in books, television series, movies, or games, and yet under-

neath this one often gets the sense (particularly in the secular West) that *we have lost our story, and thus have lost the deepest foundation also for the stories that we tell*. In other words, severed as we are from the wellsprings of meaning found in the creative intentions of God, in the belief in objective truth and an aspiration toward universal, world-cradling beauty—including the drama of a truly ethical universe, in conflict of good and evil, light and darkness—our stories so often ring hollow, empty. Indeed, they very often conceal under a thin veil of beauty an abyss of absurdity and a heart plagued by depression or despair. Unlike the pagan world (and certain cultures even today in the East) which have not yet had a full meeting with the Gospel, and thus bear an “advent” character of advancing toward Christ—bearing their own “words” as they march out with longing and hope to meet *the Word*—the secular West is explicitly “post-Christian,” even anti-Christian. And thus the tone that it bears, the atmosphere, is far different.

It is a sense of loss rather than a sense of longing, though many persons can no longer remember what we have lost, and our culture itself (as a general atmosphere which so many of the most popular “voices” in our world advocate) insists on forgetting and leaving the most beautiful, the truly liberating and saving message, as something in the past. It is seen to be either a private fancy of certain individuals or a superstitious myth now to be forgotten in the dawning of a rational age. All of this shows just how much we have forgotten in the last five-hundred years, since the painful rupture of the Protestant Revolt and the succeeding Enlightenment and birth of the modern age. We have in large part lost our story, our story as human beings, and we are longing to find it again. And invented, co-created stories can be part of rediscovering and consolidating this great Story, this Story that is truly the evangelical mystery, the great mystery of salvation history from creation, through fall, covenants, incarnation, and redemption, unto the final and definitive consummation that awaits us at the end of time.

We long for truth, goodness, and beauty, and these four particular forms of artistic expression—indeed of simple human life and culture—manifest this longing. But what if our hearts have become blind, deaf, numb, and mute? Then what is needed is an evangelization of the heart, a rediscovery of the wellspring of beauty that gives meaning to human life, and thus also to all of these forms of art and experience. The heart: the heart is the place of longing. It is the place of the eros that is but the voice of our longing for our heavenly homeland, for eternal rest in the embrace of God and the joy of universal communion that we shall discover there.

And this longing of the heart, this voice of the heart, seeks to speak in each and every fiber of our created being, in thought and feeling and choice and act, as well as to be open to God’s approach in everything that we experience, that we welcome into ourselves through the openness of the senses and the drawn veil of our spirit. For example, imagination, as the inner repository of images in our mind, influences so much of our thought and action, and is a prime gateway to our hearts. Thus the evangelization of the imagination is an essential part of the evangelization of the heart. So too is the evangelization of the mind, of the will, and of all the aspects of our humanity, in spirit and in body. And so too, this evangelization, this pouring forth of the beau-

tiful light of God, can truly shine into every aspect of modern life, every moment of our life in this world—all of our actions, words, experiences, and relationships, all that we hear and see and consume, everything in us flowing from and returning to the inner convergence-point of our heart, our inmost “I.” And in this sanctuary to which God leads us in his love, a sanctuary cradling and sanctifying every moment of life, he draws us into his embrace and consummates with us a union that is inexpressible in the depth of its closeness and in the joy of its happiness and fulfillment.

ישוע

THE BODY AS SACRAMENT

Culture influences us, in all the faculties of our being, in ways that are either positive or negative, fostering a health and wholeness in our being, or twisting and corrupting us where we need education the most. But when we look at our contemporary culture, at least in the West, we see that not only is our world saturated with images of all kinds, from the memes on our phones to the ads on our billboards, but it is, sadly, saturated with images that it seems almost without exception *sexualize* the human body and sever it from its authentic meaning. They also portray the human person in a materialistic, atheistic way that cuts him or her off from the depth dimension of reality, from mystery, from God. These two portrayals are in fact deeply related, as the impersonal sexualization of the body has only progressed to this degree because it is rooted in a deeper un-rooting of the human person, and human interpersonal communion, from God.

This is true of our culture in so many, many ways, and it influences our intellectual life, our emotional experiences, our relations with family, friends, acquaintances, and others; it is true of our relation to ourselves, to God, to others, and of the concrete living of our own bodies. Indeed, the spiritual illness in our world is becoming *distilled*, as it were, in a profound way in our bodies. Whether this is the licentiousness of our cultural acceptance of sexual sins, or the terrible practice and justification of the murder of children in their mother’s womb (the sanctuary of her body!), or the gender dysphoria and LGBTQ+ movements, all of these are distillations of a deep spiritual illness made manifest in our relations with our bodies, and with the bodies of others. Severed from the fatherhood of God, from his goodness and his gift, we have lost the ability also to see and understand ourselves, our own unique existence, as a gift—our bodies as a gift, our gender as a gift, and every moment of our life in all its rich fabric as a gift. “A world charged with the grandeur of God” has become instead a world that is hardly more than the domain of “individual rights” and “causes” where every person is fighting to create and defend his own reality against others, and demanding the institutionalization of these rights (for institutional approval is the “last step” on the road of redefining reality). Only when we can see the body again as it truly is, as belovedness and as capacity for love, can we heal from the wounds that afflict us. And we can only rediscover this truth if we rediscover God and his love.

The body has become opaque because the spirit has become anemic. The body is gorged because the spirit is starved, or the body is starved because the

spirit is insecure, lost, and afraid. And this rupture of the body, of relation to the body, and of our beholding of the body—whether in art, in media, or in person—is not an accidental and side problem. Rather, it is central. Why is this? Because the body is the locus in which all the questions of human life are ultimately asked, and in which they play out. Even abstract thought is first of all born from concrete, bodily experience, and should remain rooted in the concreteness and singularity of *what is*, of material, bodily reality. So too holiness and wholeness cannot be merely in the mind or the spirit. Rather, the fullness of our humanity comes about when body and spirit are united together in complete harmony once again, such that the inmost truth of our spirit lives in every act and experience of the body, and the body participates fully and freely in everything pertaining to the spirit. There is something more primary, and in which this reconciliation within ourselves (and also with other created persons and the whole created order) can occur: namely reconciliation with God, healing from the rupture caused by sin and admittance back into communion with God who is Love. Thus the heart of all holiness is not self-enclosed perfection, but *atonement*, in its literal meaning as at-one-ment, the making one of Lover and Beloved in a single embrace of mutual belonging. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The points made above pave the way for the following reflections. They provide us a clear and fitting place to start. This place is as follows: by looking at our bodies and contemplating their meaning, we can find a “doorway” back into the meaning of the entire universe itself, and of our own humanity within it. We can indeed discover ourselves as “dialogue-partners” of the divine, of God, who has created us as we are precisely to stand before him as child before Father, bride before Bridegroom, creature before Creator. He has created us for *prayer*, and not just to *pray*, but to *be prayer*, living prayer incarnate, a prayer springing from the indivisible unity of our entire being—body and spirit—as “a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, our spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1), consummated in intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What then is the meaning of the body? The body is *gift*, a gift oriented towards the communion of persons in mutual self-giving, bathed in reverence and tenderness. My body is *me*, and what I do in my body I do as me, just as the way that I see, respond to, and treat the bodies of others is done to *them*.

This is an essential truth: the body is the incarnation of the person. It is not an external appendage, a tool, a mere accident that can be traded out for another body or for a wholly body-less existence. Rather, my own spiritual identity as a person, while transcending the mere body, nonetheless lives *in* and *as* the body, as my fully in-the-flesh self that I experience each day, with all of its desires, feelings, aches, pains, limitations, and longings. And this is not a regrettable truth, nor a state that is temporary, eventually to pass away when I cast off this external prison and take flight into the purely spiritual realm. Rather, this is a positive plan on the part of God, his gift to me. The body is gift first of all because it is God’s gift to me, the gift of my being, of this embodied spirit who I am, in which I enter into relationship with him, with other persons, and with the whole of the visible creation. The body is the locus of *belovedness*, where I experience anew every day the concrete gift

of my existence as a human being.

It is where I experience my own *solitude*, not merely as an aloneness, an isolation, but as the capacity and openness—and therefore longing—of my heart to reach out beyond itself in order to receive another and to give myself. And thus the body is gift also in the sense of being the *locus of encounter*, the space in which I make contact with others, with all things, and am invited to receive them into the sanctuary of my heart, made a home of reverent tenderness, as well as to entrust myself into the welcoming embrace of others. Through this encounter, solitude is opened to solitude, heart speaks to heart through the body, and *unity* is born.

But unity can come about only when the body is seen, not as an object of use, whether for my own hedonistic or pragmatic purposes, but rather as a *living person deserving of love*. Indeed, true love welcomes others in all of their bodiliness, not merely as “other,” as a “you” standing before my “I.” Rather, love is also *empathy*; it is the ability to feel with and for the other person the resonance of their own subjective experience, and in this feeling to reverence them there, in the sacred space of their own solitude. Of course, in the limitations of this mortal life I cannot ordinarily experience the subjectivity of another person (namely their own inner experience of their own life), but I can draw near, I can welcome, and I can taste with the eyes of love something of their own sacred inner mystery and experience. What a beautiful truth, but also how vulnerable! Through my body I am *exposed*, I am as it were opened to the gaze and approach of another person, and they to me. The body, after all, always speaks a language of gift, and invites to relationship, to unlock the doors to the solitude of the heart. Thus the body is always also *nakedness*.

And to the degree that this mystery of nakedness is lived by persons in mutual beholding, this vulnerability by which they share themselves with each other and allow themselves to be seen, unity is born. Intimacy is birthed from the sharing of nakedness in love. Of course there are many forms of nakedness, and many degrees of sharing. The innermost sanctum of our solitude, for example, is only shared with those most deserving of our trust, just as we should hope to receive others in this sacred solitude of their hearts only if we are trustworthy, and also hear from God his own word of entrustment giving us permission to enter into this holy space.

From solitude through nakedness to unity. This is the trajectory of human life incarnate within the body. In fact, these are the primal experiences that lie at the foundation of all experience, the fabric that makes up—even unconsciously—every experience that we have within this world. The body is solitude oriented through nakedness to unity. It is, thus, a vessel of encounter and of love. It is, to speak most clearly, a *sacrament*. In other words, the body is the making-visible-of-the-invisible so that it may become a gift between persons for the establishment of unity. This is what all the Sacraments of the Church exist for, in forging and deepening the relationship of covenant-union between God and ourselves and also our unity as members of his single mystical Body. But the Sacraments themselves can only be sacraments because the human body is first a sacrament. John Paul understood this well when he wrote, as the “thesis statement” to his own *Theology of the Body*:

The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it. (TOB 19.4)

We see here that the visibility of the human body—and also, of course, the visibility of the entire created universe, beheld and received in the body—is a true sacrament that grants us access to the sphere of what is not visible. We cannot see the heart of another person; we cannot see God; we cannot see the angelic realm or, indeed, the inner essence of anything that God has made. It is, as it were, concealed from our eyes. And yet, through the body, through materiality, it is made manifest, made naked, to be received, loved, cherished, affirmed, and cared for. But the body is a sacrament, materiality is a sacrament, because it *veils* even as it *reveals*; in other words, it protects even as it communicates. The body is like a doorway to the heart, and yet also more than a mere doorway. It is the heart spread out into the visible world, in order to enter into communication with other hearts and with the essence of all things as created and sustained by God. But the body can be opaque, proving a locked door, if the heart of the beholder is not *pure*. The impure heart corrupts what it sees just as it pollutes what it touches. It cannot see through the body to the inner meaning. It does not understand; and worse, it usually twists and distorts the image, the sacrament, in the very process of receiving it.

As Jesus made so clear, only the pure of heart can see: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). Indeed, whenever the twisting tendencies of our fallen nature due to original and personal sin are purged and healed, what before was a stumbling-block becomes transparent and radiant with pure light. For the temptation lies not in created things, not in the body, but in the impurity of our own hearts. “God created all things that they might exist, and the creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them; and the dominion of Hades is not on earth” (Wis 1:14). Thus, whenever our hearts are truly made pure by grace, everything is pure. “To the pure all things are pure” (Tit 1:15).

In fact, the human body itself is not a temptation, not a near occasion of sin. It remains as it was in the beginning: the gift of the person radiant with the light of God and bathed in his love, the sacrament of encounter between persons where intimacy is born. Yes, it is marked by suffering, illness, mortal limitation, and destined for death, and the radiance of God through the human body is dimmed. But this dimming is not an eradication; the integrity of the body remains, and its beauty, and its capacity both to reveal the person as well as to be seen and cherished as the person. But even further, the body is not only the manifestation of the person whose body it is; it is not only a sacrament of encounter between persons. As the above quotes make clear: *the body is a revelation of the mystery of God, of the inner life of the Most Blessed Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” God, and not merely man, not merely creation. The pure, indeed, see God in and through all things, tapping back into the sacramentality that marks the whole visible universe. So too they are able to begin to behold the human body, even in all

of its frailty, in the light of eternity, to begin to see it again with *virginal eyes* that look beyond the temporal sexual capacity (which shall pass away) and to the chaste capacity for interpersonal relationship, to the radiant mystery of the inner person manifest in the body. And they see God in the body, God's image manifest through the orientation of the person from solitude, through nakedness, to unity. For God's eternal life is nothing but Love, the Love that is the origin of the whole universe, of human heart and body. And this Love has fashioned us to live according to love, to relate to one another, to all things, and to God himself, in the way that the divine Persons relate to one another for all eternity.

For the Father unveils himself before his Son without reserve, in breathtaking tenderness bestowing his very self upon his Beloved as a gift, and in this process giving the Son the gift of his own being and identity. And the Son welcomes the gift of the Father totally, accepting and cherishing the gift of his own self in intimacy with the Father, and allows this gift to flow back to the Father with an equal tenderness, bathed in immeasurable delight born of a gaze of cherishing love. Yes, in this movement of mutual self-giving between the Father and the Son, in which the depths of the beauty of each is beheld by the other in the very process of being given, and is received and sheltered in the very process of being received, *the deepest and most perfect intimacy is consummated*. And this energy of love binding the Father and the Son together, this kiss of unity that they share, the radiant fruit of their intimacy as well as the seal of their mutual belonging, is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, born of the love of the Father and the Son, is also seen and loved uniquely in himself, welcoming the gift of the Father and the Son and letting himself flow back as gift into each of them. This threefold unity, this triple belonging in a single life of love, makes the three divine Persons truly *One*, One God in three Persons, and three Persons in One God. For the Love they share is One; the life they live is One; they are distinguished from one another not by what separates them (for nothing separates them!), but rather by the *fullness of relationship in which they exist*, which totally permeates all that they are such they are defined by their very relationships: the Father is the Father because he is the One who begets the Son and births the Spirit; and the Son is the Son because he is the One begotten of and united to the Father and the One who, with the Father, breathes forth the Spirit of their union; and the Spirit is the common bond of the Father and Son, the gift of love that they share as well as the fruit of their love, cherished by both and sealing their union.

How amazing this is! This is the reality from which and for which God created us. In our very bodies we are meant to share in the inner life of the Trinity. But because of sin we have fallen far from our destiny, and experience agonizing fracture from our identity as God's beloved. This is why God the Father sent his Beloved Son into the world, taking to himself a body of flesh as the Sacrament of union between God and humanity. Yes, in his Incarnation, the Son of God, taking humanity unto himself, wedded every single human person, every single human body, lifting us up in nuptial union into himself and carrying us into the joy of his own filial intimacy with the Father in the Spirit. And through this union he has permeated our being

with the light and grace of God anew, to heal what was wounded by sin, to unseal the beauty that was blocked by darkness, and to join all the energies of heart, mind, will, and body to his own eternal love, such that we can love with the very love with which he has first loved us.

In the Paschal Mystery of his Eucharist, Passion, and Resurrection the Son has met us at the heart of our *solitude*, at the innermost sanctuary of our hearts wounded by sin and yet longing for redemption. He has met us and has unveiled himself to us in complete, vulnerable *nakedness*. He has laid bare his own Heart and his own Body upon the Cross. He has given it as a sacramental gift in the Eucharist, which makes present, fully and truly, throughout time and space the reality of his gift of self on the Cross. And the One we receive in the Eucharist is the Risen One. For the gift of himself in the most vulnerable place of suffering and death, meeting us where we need him the most, did not end here, but carried us across the chasm of ruptured relationship, across the fear of definitive aloneness, and into the joy of everlasting communion at the heart of the Trinity's embrace. In the Resurrection Christ carries humanity definitively into the innermost life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in the Eucharist he gives himself to us in the fullness of this glorious life, victorious over all suffering and death.

By welcoming him in faith and Sacrament, and letting the energies of healing and transfiguring grace permeate our being and our life, we are little by little prepared for our own definitive resurrection, our own passage beyond the boundary of death and into the endless life of God. Indeed, the redemption wrought in Christ has already permeated the entire universe like a hidden seed, present and at work, germinating in the heart of every created thing and every human life, making it new, until the definitive renewal comes at the end of time. Then Jesus will return to bring about a new heavens and a new earth, irradiating all things with the unmediated light of the Trinity and lifting it up into the heart of the Trinitarian embrace.

Indeed, there the obscurity of the invisible, communicated only through the body, will pass away. In that most blessed home, which is nothing but the life of the Trinity made visible and tangible to us, even in the flesh, and permeating the entire universe with its radiant light, body and spirit will be perfectly joined together and will manifest, with perfect transparency, the beauty of the essence of each person and each thing, and the beauty of God himself who looks upon all with love and cherishes all within himself, even as his beauty is seen and known in everything by hearts ravished with his love.

WHAT IS BEAUTY? WHAT IS ART?

A noted Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, wrote that “beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up.” The theme of beauty is decisive for a discourse on art. It was already present when I stressed God’s delighted gaze upon creation. In perceiving that all he had created was good, God saw that it was beautiful as well. The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two concepts, coined a term which embraces both: kalokagathia, or beauty-goodness. On this point Plato writes: “The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful.”

- St John Paul II, Letter to Artists

The body is the incarnation of the unique person, a gift from God and a gift oriented towards relationship; indeed, it is the sacrament of encounter and communion in the very likeness of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. We explored this in depth in the previous reflection. Before we turn to the theme with which we began, the evangelization of the heart through art, through beauty, there is another question we must ask. Namely: what is beauty? And this raises another: what is art?

Beauty is often described as that which *attracts* when beheld or received. Visible beauty attracts the eyes, captures our attention, and invites the heart along with the eyes. Audible beauty draws the attention of the listening ear, and the heart with the ear. The beauty of coherent clarity, of harmonious unity in the mind, draws the spirit, draws forth the intuition of the heart with a compelling and yet gentle force. The beauty of drama, of story, issues an invitation to us to step forth into its sphere, to co-live it, to experience it. Here we see that beauty does indeed attract; and yet beauty is not attractive merely because it is *pleasant*, though this may seem to be the case on the surface. Rather, what is *pleasant* and what is *beautiful* are very different things.

A pleasant meal is precisely that, enjoyable, but it is not beautiful for that reason. Basking in the sunlight is pleasant because of its warmth and comfort; but the beauty of the sunlight is something different than the pleasure it gives. Here we see that the true philosophy of beauty is something far different than hedonism, the pursuit of the deepest possible pleasure with the least amount of pain. Rather, beauty is something that surpasses pleasure, even though most kinds of beauty (perhaps all), in the process of being received, bestow pleasure, if not of the senses, at least of the mind or heart or emotions. For there is beauty also in heroic virtue, in an act of generous self-sacrifice, in suffering born with nobility, and indeed in the very being of a person who has allowed himself to be transformed by the grace and love of God, becoming in this process, *holy*. Here, in beholding the beauty of such realities, we see that beauty is far more than the mere attraction of pleasure.

But we also need to acknowledge that beauty is more than the mere attraction to the promise of our own personal fulfillment. Beauty is more than the mere promise of *benefit*. I can be attracted to things because I recognize, even just intuitively, even just instinctively, that they are “good for me,” that they

will help to fulfill me as a person. But this promise is not beauty. So here a distinction must be made which will lead us to our conclusion. *Beauty is the voice of goodness, the voice of the good.* Philosophical thought distinguishes what are termed three “transcendental properties of being,” meaning three aspects of everything that exists, which can be found in all things. They are beauty, goodness, and truth. All things that exist portray themselves to us as beautiful, as good, and as true. And yet these properties are transcendent because they point beyond themselves, or rather the manifestation of these properties in limited, imperfect, transient created things points to their utter fullness in the infinite Being, in God. God is infinite and eternal Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.

And there is an order, a harmony, between these properties of being. In fact they are only one, converging in a unity at the heart of Being, and in the heart of every created being as it is rooted in God’s creative love and his cherishing gaze. Thus the core of Being itself, its essence, is Love. Love is the Truth of all things, and this Love is Good, this Love is Beauty. And thus being is also always *relational*, it is always communion, intimacy. Here we get a glimpse of the heart of the life of God, the inmost mystery of the Trinity. In God, who is Being in its fullness, all is pure *Relationship*, the everlasting Communion of the three divine Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The words of Saint John, “God is Love,” therefore imply that God is both the *act of loving*—which includes everything involved in this, namely a gaze of receptive, cherishing tenderness, as well as the pouring out of one’s heart to the other and the welcoming of them into oneself—and also *the fullness of love*, which is Communion, the co-living of persons within one another in the joy of mutual belonging, the fullness of life which is perfect intersubjectivity.

All of this is to say that being is not merely abstract, or even merely concrete. Being is also always *personal*. The fullness of Being, God, is eternally personal, eternally the intimacy of three Persons united in love. And everything that exists within this world derives from God, is born of God’s own love expanding out of the inner life of the Trinity in order to *create* outside of itself, to pour itself out in gratuitous and cherishing generosity. And nothing can exist in created reality that has not already existed, in its utter fullness, in its all-surpassing perfection, in God himself. Thus all created being is also personal, both in being born of the creative life of the personal God, as well as in being *seen* by the personal gaze of God at each moment, this gaze that holds all things in existence without ceasing.

Here we can summarize and come to our conclusion about the nature of beauty. There are three transcendental properties of being: beauty, goodness, and truth. And these three are the traits of the Love-that-is-Communion. The *essence* of being, created being imperfectly and uncreated Being perfectly, is *love-that-is-communion*. Love-Communion is the essence of all things as participation in the life of God, as born of him and sustained by him. Thus all things bear a Trinitarian stamp and are Trinitarian in their core, rooted in God and pointing to him, even as in their imperfection and limitation they are infinitely below him who is utter fullness of Love, utter consummation of the Intimacy between three infinite and eternal Persons.

In this world all things exist in interrelationship with one another, and for relationship; even impersonal and organic things do so.

But human persons, the apex of God's creation fashioned in his own *image* and *likeness*, live and are oriented towards this essence of being in the fullest possible way. Being in his *image*, we are persons after the likeness of the divine Persons. We do not merely bear the mark of personal love, as a tree bears the mark of God's personal love which has fashioned it, and a painting bears the mark of the personal love of its painter; rather, we are gifted with the mystery of *personal existence*. We are persons who are not a mere "what," but a "who." We have our own inner subjective life—what we termed as solitude—which is opened in nakedness to interpersonal relationship in mutual self-giving, aimed at the fulfillment of communion. Thus we share in being in the fullest way, since, as we said, all being is personal and personhood is the highest expression of being. The fullness of Being is Persons, Persons united eternally in Love. We have been created in God's *image* as persons precisely so that, through reciprocal love, we can be transformed in him and exist in the manner that he does. We have been made in his image so we can live in his *likeness*, namely, in the fullness of personal relationship, in intimacy.

All of this is important to say, but we need to distill it down to return to our point. If all being is personal, rooted in the ultimate Being who is Persons-in-Love, then this illumines our understanding of the three transcendental properties of being: beauty, goodness, and truth. When I referred to the *essence* of being, in fact, I was speaking about the *truth*. The truth is defined simply as "what is." Truth is the what-ness of things, their core identity. The Truth of God is that he is a Trinity of Persons united in perfect Love. The truth of human persons is that we are created persons fashioned in the image of God and called to his likeness, unique in our singular identity and yet opened wide to communion with God, with other created persons, and indeed with the whole creation. This is our *truth*.

And this truth is *good*. Goodness, the Good, is the property of truth that makes it *desirable*, but not only desirable but desirable under a particular aspect. Or rather, the good is manifested in many degrees. Food is good, for example, both because it tastes good—the enjoyable or pleasant good—but also because it nourishes our body—the utilitarian or necessary good. But under both of these there is also a *gratuitous good*; in other words, food is good by the very fact of its existing, of its participation in being. Everything that exists is good simply because it *is*, because it shares in the perfection of being, which is made and sustained by God, and leads back, ultimately, to the fullness of Being who is God himself. This is what Scripture means when it recounts that God, looking upon all that he made, exclaimed: "It is very good!"

It is good not only because we get anything out of it (though this is also good, and rightly so), but simply because it *exists*, because it manifests the mystery of being. Here we touch upon what Gerard Manley Hopkins terms "inscape," and which he said poetry sought to express (we could say *all art*). Inscap is the inner expanse that lives within each limited thing, an expanse that points beyond itself towards the infinity of God who sustains it, as well as reveals the inner richness of each thing itself in God's intentions, the "in-

ner richness” hidden within it. Each thing thus has, as it were, a “bounded infinity” within it. A created thing is not infinite; it is limited. But because it participates in being and points back to God, God himself and his own eternal Being can be encountered in and through it; and, in fact, even the smallest of created things cannot be fully known or loved unless loved in the light of the eternal Being. This is how the new creation at the end of time, when the light of the Trinity-as-Communion shall permeate all things, shall reveal the true goodness and meaning of all things, and thus bring them to consummation in God.

Here with the concept of “inscape” we come also to the final transcendental property: beauty. Beauty is a trait of the truth that presents itself to us as good, because it is good. It is good not merely because it fulfills a need or desire in us, but absolutely good, good because it is Being (God) or shares in being. Indeed, all of our needs or desires, even the lowest utilitarian ones, are simply manifestations of our orientation towards being, towards life, towards communion with reality (and every sin is the twisting of such desire from its authentic end to a false or disordered one, harmful of the fullness of being, and of true relationship, communion). Beauty, in sum, is *the voice of goodness which is truth. Beauty is the voice of the Good Truth.*

Beauty is the irradiation of the divine light so that it may be perceived, may touch and ravish the receiver, and may draw them back to the Bearer of this Beauty, to the One-in-Three who is eternal and infinite Beauty. The Truth is Good; the Truth is Beautiful. And through beauty we recognize goodness, and through goodness we trace our way back to truth. On the other hand, if we try to sever goodness from truth we lose goodness. And if we sever beauty from goodness (and truth), we lose beauty. For beauty is the voice of the real, the voice that touches, moves, delights, and attracts us. It makes goodness and truth known.

This is how we can distinguish true beauty from false beauty, from deceptive beauty. Deceptive beauty portrays only a partial beauty, an aspect of a created reality, while concealing other undesired aspects; it presents something beautiful under a guise that only addresses what is fallen and impure within me. And in this process it twists beauty, its severs it from goodness and ruptures it from truth. For example, the portrayal of fornication or adultery in a film as something good and beautiful is a false beauty (but in how many contemporary movies is it glorified!). For the coming-together of persons in love is beautiful, indeed the highest beauty of all, but here its rootedness in the good and the true is profoundly severed. And thus it becomes, in fact, not only *partially beautiful*, but also *ugly* and a bearer of ugliness. The rupture from the good and the true is ugliness. Sin is ugliness, even if it tries to cloak itself in a guise of beauty. And since this is the case, even the guise of beauty, upon deeper reflection and contemplation—and above all with purification of heart—shows forth its weakness and thinness, as it were. It is a glimmer upon the surface of the water, quickly passing, rather than a radiation from the depths that endures and draws us into communion with these depths.

The radiation of the good and the true is beauty. Thus we have the whole task and gift of art, whether in visual media of painting, drawing, sculpture,

in the written word, in story, in theater and film, or in music. The task of art is to make the beautifully good truth known. It seeks to express something of the light of being, to make known the truth of things in the light of God as fullness of Being, as Persons-in-Love. And it does this, concretely, by tapping into the “inscape” at the heart of each created reality and seeking to *unfold* it more clearly for the receiver to welcome and experience. And thus art is also a journey, a journey from God to the artist who, in humble contemplation and a spirit of deep service, seeks to accept reality and to manifest it as transparently and authentically as possible.

And it is then a journey from artist to receiver, by which the fruit of their hands, the overflow from their creative play and contemplative wonder, is entrusted also to the contemplation of others, for their enrichment, and so that the word received from God, finding a home in the creative work of the artist, may also find a home in the heart of the one who contemplates it. And this word from God magnetizes; beauty draws. Art invites then, finally, on a journey from the receiver back to the heart of beauty, to the heart of reality, as the beauty seen in art leads to goodness, which leads to truth. Beauty attracts; art attracts, and thus it also educates (insofar as it authentically manifests the good and true). Beauty, the ravishing voice of the truth speaking its goodness into our hearts, leads us on a journey out of our sinful narrowness and isolation, and into relationship—relationship with created reality, with other persons, and ultimately with God—and thus into the fulfillment that is found in being wedded to eternal Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, in participating in the inner life of God which is the Love-Communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ישוע

BEAUTY IS A SIGN OF GOD'S INCARNATION

The Way of Beauty...leads us to grasp the Whole in the fragment, the Infinite in the finite, God in the history of humanity. Simone Weil wrote in this regard: “In all that awakens in us the pure and authentic sentiment of beauty, there, truly, is the presence of God. There is a kind of incarnation of God in the world, of which beauty is the sign. Beauty is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible.” (Benedict XVI, “Address to Artists,” November 21, 2009)

In the light of the exploration we took together in the last reflection, the words of this quote unveil their true depth. Authentic beauty, pure beauty—as opposed to the seductive lies of “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 Jn 2:15)—is *a manifestation of God*. It is a kind of primal incarnation of his own uncreated Beauty in the world, pouring out through the “inscape” at the heart of all things. And this infinite Beauty, made visible through finite beauty, truly communicates itself to us in finite creation, is truly in some way incarnate: made-flesh. This is what is called *theophany*, the appearance of God, the manifestation of God. It is also called the *icon*. An image represents, and idol distracts; but an icon communicates. True, pure, and holy beauty is an icon. And as with icons as an art form in the history of the Church—images of the spiritual body of the resurrection written with tempera upon wood and gilded with gold—so all beauty leads

us to the liturgy, to worship, to communion with God who is Beauty himself.

Thus the icon leads to the sacrament. Beauty is the sign of the incarnation of God. And a sign, when it becomes fully efficacious, effective by God's own indwelling, is a *sacrament*. Even before the institution of the Sacraments of the Church, which spring from and perpetuate the Sacrament of the Son's own incarnate humanity, every created thing is in real fashion a sacrament. We could say that the "iconography" of creation is its sacramentality, whereas the specific sacramentality of the liturgical life of the Church lies on a higher and fuller level, fulfilling and also surpassing the realm of mere icon to be something even more: God's literal presence and self-communication through Jesus Christ in the Spirit.

Because beauty is a sign of the incarnation of God, his radiation through the icon, this is why God was definitively able to make himself known in the flesh and through the flesh. He could make flesh his own because flesh is already a "word-bearer," a bearer of truth and goodness, radiant through beauty. So when the "Word becomes flesh" (Jn 1:16), he is not joining himself to a creation that has been extraneous to him all along; rather, he comes to live in the fullness of his personal subjectivity at the heart of the visible world which he has always permeated with his divine presence. He comes to live *as man*, as flesh, in our midst, and thus to heal all things from within by his presence and his love. The sacramentality of creation, therefore, is set free, and achieves its highest fulfillment. It becomes, not only spiritually but physically, a *home for the Word*, and thus also a sacrament of nuptial union between God and human persons.

The original sacramentality of every created thing is a promise of this definitive sacramentality achieved in the Incarnation of Christ and in the Sacraments of the Church. Here God truly *indwells* in the visible, here he is truly and fully made flesh, such that the Body of Jesus is the living Sacrament of God throughout time and space. And the Sacraments of the Church are but the single Sacrament of the Body of Christ reaching out to touch us in the here-and-now, to be communicated to us through the beauty of the sign which mediates, which communicates, the life and love of God himself. Everything in our world—and pertinent to our discussion, all the works of our own creativity in the likeness of God, all true art—are and can become homes for the Word, signs and sacraments of the invisible. Thus they are at the service of the one Sacrament of Christ and the Church, as little extensions of it into the world, so as to touch hearts and to draw them back—along the journey of beauty—to the center-point, to the inner heart, which is the hidden life of the Blessed Trinity throbbing at the core of the Church and her sacramental life.

Intimacy with God in the likeness of God, communion with the Blessed Trinity in the Trinity's very own way of living and loving: this is the heart of the Church, the center-point of all things. This is the Convergence-Point to which all the energies of the entire universe flow like rivers into the sea, or like lines intersecting on a point—just as from the beginning all flowed out from this place of white-hot light in God's primordial creative act, and indeed from which it flows in each and every moment of time. This union with

God is filial and spousal, thus fulfilling all the “language” inscribed on our bodies in this temporal world; but it is also more than that. It moves beyond these images of filial and spousal love while also super-fulfilling them completely in God—in a *pure virginal intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, participating in the very manner of love and relationship that is theirs for all eternity.

ישוע

EROS: THE DESIRE FOR HOME IN HIM

There are a number of different directions in which our contemplation could move at this point, and we will eventually address all of them. But which first? We could walk along the path of artistic expression, reflecting upon what makes for authentically beautiful art as opposed to opaque or twisted art, or even simply art lacking in that “something” that makes for a true sacrament that evangelizes. The word here is “transparency,” like a pane of glass for God’s light to shine through. In this we would also be led to think about the dispositions to which artists, indeed all creators of beauty, are called (which in one way or another is each one of us, even if the art we fashion is only our own life, our own humanity, within the fashioning hand of God).

We could also reflect more deeply upon the nature of beauty and what makes something beautiful, and in this light also look more deeply upon the ways in which our world is both *lacking* in beauty but also *aspiring* towards it. In this light, indeed, we could seek to plunge even more deeply into that center-point, that heart-of-the-heart where all lines converge in the infinite and eternal Beauty of God, the Most Holy Trinity. Thus we could see how beauty is linked to sacredness, to holiness, and thus to glory, which is nothing but the radiation of God’s eternal Being-as-Love into the world.

Finally, we shall have cause to return to the theme with which we began these reflections, and to unfold it deeply: the evangelization of the heart. Here we can unfold all the different ways in which this evangelization occurs, or rather more specifically we can hone in on those ways in which *beauty* can evangelize in our world, and thus pave the way for an experience of the true and the good that reopens hearts to the Gospel, to the explicit, conscious acceptance of Christ and the full teaching of Scripture and the Church. It is, of course, of prime importance that evangelization occurs first of all with the *word*, and leads to the word, that the word of truth educates and guides seeing, choice, and action. But this word is not merely “spoken,” that is, not merely formulated in written and voiced words of human language. This word—rooted in and expressing the Word of God who is the eternal Son of the Father, and is indeed ultimately identical with him—is the origin of all meaning, all *logos*, whether formulated in thought or encountered in visible and audible beauty, or experienced in the rich fabric of human life. This Word seeks to pervade all the spheres of our being and existence, to the very wellsprings of our conscious life and the slightest colorations of our subjective experience.

This is how the word of evangelization, the word of the Gospel as the explicit preaching of the Gospel *in words*, also calls for, and becomes manifest

within, *images* that speak to sight, *sounds* that speak to hearing, and all other manner of cultural manifestation, of the radiations of the beautifully good truth present in this world. But most particularly the word flows from, speaks of, safeguards, and leads to the mystery of personal relationship, of *communion with the Trinity in Christ, and the restored communion of the entire human family*. This is *the* word that the world needs the most, which all other “words” serve; indeed, it is simply the fullness of created being participating in the fullness of uncreated Being, the universe itself lifted up in the priesthood of man and woman who are given totally to God in love and who let their lives be utterly transformed in his light. Thus the beauty of authentic human love and communion in all its fullness, and, even more deeply, the beauty of holiness, of the human person transformed in the grace and love of the Trinity and united to him in perfect intimacy and love—this is the word that the world needs the most, and the word that God has poured into the world in the Redemption brought in Christ and extended throughout history in the Church.

So it looks like we have our path. For the three paths actually appear to be one path with three different aspects or dimensions. We shall simply walk forward and address each theme as it organically arises in our reflections. But let us begin where we have already spontaneously begun. I mentioned the need for the evangelization of the heart; so let us speak of the world’s need for this evangelization, so that we can feel the “ache” to which God’s saving word responds, in fact, even more deeply, the ache which is nothing but a manifestation of the thirst that he himself birthed within us by creating us in his image and likeness. It is right here, in fact, that we can touch upon the central need and the central wound of our world—and not only our contemporary world but indeed the world of all times and places. I am speaking of the wounding of *desire*, of the thirst for beauty, goodness, and truth. All sin is born of desire gone awry, and all love is born of desire harnessed by God in beauty, goodness, and truth. Thus at the heart of all existence is the mystery of desire, the reality of the *eros* that fuels love and births love, the eros that is the hidden inner wellspring of agape and finds perfection in agape.

Eros is our longing for beauty, goodness, and truth, the profound “ache” or thirst to be wedded as deeply and intimately as possible—indeed totally—to the fullness of being, to all that is good, all that is beautiful, all that is true. And above all, it is the thirst to be united to God who is the utter fullness of Being, who is uncreated and eternal Love and Communion. Thus eros is nostalgia, “longing for home,” a remembrance of our origin in the creative love of God and also a seal of our destiny in definitive “homecoming.” And eros is stirred into flame by our encounter with beauty, speaking as it does of goodness and truth, of the goodness and truth of the Trinity who is our Origin and our definitive and only Home. In all sparks of beauty, in every harmony, we glimpse the light of heaven, we hear an echo of the silent music of eternity. And our hearts resonate with it, reverberating like a string plucked by the hand of the divine Artisan, singing in response of our longing for home, our thirst for eternal union with infinite Beauty.

And indeed this Beauty is not a mere quality or quantity, a mere abundance of all things beautiful or good; for as such the longing for heaven

would still be impersonal, would still be in danger of being a merely self-centered satisfaction of our desires for fulfillment. No, this Beauty is a Person, indeed three Persons eternally pouring themselves out into one another in disinterested, cherishing love, and rejoicing in the fullness of their consummated intimacy at the heart of this threefold embrace! We have been born right from the heart of this union, and participating in this union is our true home. This world can be a home for us, indeed, only insofar as we taste heaven within it, and we find repose to the degree that we glimpse, hear, receive, experience, love, and are loved by God in the midst of it.

And in order for this to happen, a *profound purification* is necessary. For eros, this pure and holy desire for the homeland of heaven, for participation, completely and in the whole of our being, in the innermost life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has become deeply wounded. Our desires have been twisted in all directions, like a magnet whose polarization has gone awry, such that now it is repelled by what it should be attracted to and attracted to what should repel it. Now the sweetness of the spirit feels inaccessible, even threatening, and the liberty of poverty and purity seems to be nothing but lack, rather than utter abundance and radiant super-affirmation of all things in the openness of God's own love. Yes, the inner savor of silence in prayer, alone with God, scares us, even though it is the most blessed of all things, the highest holy of holies and the center-most sanctuary of sanctity. It is the place where beauty is allowed to dilate its presence to fill every feeling, to permeate every pore, to sweeten every sense, and to transfigure every thought while warming the will with the vibrant energy of God's own love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Despite the woundedness of our being, the fracture of our desire, it is nonetheless true that home still lives in our hearts, even if only as a distant echo. And this echo can grow, grow to a world-permeating and consciousness-consuming conflagration of personal relationship and intimacy with God that inundates all things and becomes the very light by which we see. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:3, 8): this is the path of healing, and healing's destination. It is to find the fullness of God's reign in open hands and heart to receive and to give love, the reign of love consummating intimacy in me. And it is to see beauty unveiled, in all things and beyond all things: Beauty himself, Love himself laying his being open to my gaze and touch, face-to-face, heart-to-heart, flesh-to-flesh, as he approaches me to consummate the union of deepest communion with me. Yes, this is what we desire under every desire, what we are meant to seek under every seeking. The dispersed energies of our being, caught up in "this" and "that," seek to be magnetized again, drawn by love again to be utterly caught up in HIM.

And the beauty of goodness and truth alone can do this. The radiance of truth, our true home, is made tangible to us in the attraction of the good and the magnetism of beauty. And as we walk this path, born of sensitivity of heart, our eros shall be made clean, our desire shall be purified and shall become true love, love in the likeness of God, in which eros and agape are one and the same. But for this to happen not only must selfishness die (the desire to have "mine" apart from "you"), but so too must living from fear; fear lies

at the root of every sin, with the exception of those sins that are diabolical in nature, a willed spitting in the face of God, a despising of him, born of a malice that springs from a place even deeper than the human heart, even though embraced by a human heart as their own. For a human person to become like a devil; this is the lowest possible descent. But on the other hand, we have the breathtaking words of Jesus Christ: “In heaven they shall be like the angels of God” (Mt 22:30). This means to be bathed in the light of the divine presence such that it absorbs our entire consciousness, our every thought, feeling, and desire, and even the very experiences of our body: our whole being and existence made utterly trinitarian by sharing in the inmost life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It means that God is All in all, our everything, the One in whom and through whom we encounter everything and from whom we are never in the least way separated. What bliss! What beauty! What security! What amazing intimacy and profound love!

יְשׁוּעָה

HOLY DESIRE: HEALING AND LIBERATING EROS FROM THE EROTIC

We ended the previous reflection at the inmost center, the burning heart of the holy of holies, the sanctuary of perfect peace and sweetest intimacy. It was important to do so, because after coming to such a place, the only adequate response is to pause...indeed to fall silent in awe and adoration, in wonder-filled gratitude and praise-filled delight. And yet this encounter births playful creativity as well, as exhalation following inhalation, as blood flowing through the veins of our common humanity—wedded by Christ in whom we are all made one—until all shall flow back definitively, into perfect rest, in the inmost heart of the Trinity’s embrace. So let us return to the trajectory of our reflection and pick up where we left off.

We spoke of fear as the root of every sin. Fear lies at the ground of so much disorder in human society and in individual personal life. Even our most sought-out desires are often times a cloak for a deeper fear which we are unwilling to admit. Afraid of losing personal security, for example, we amass all kinds of external safeguards, money, success, fame, pleasure, and any other number of insurances. Or, afraid of the pain at the core of my heart in its existential thirst for more than I yet know, I saturate myself with titillations of the senses in media, in film or games or food or entertainments or work; afraid of never finding true love, I plunge into lust instead. The list goes on. And the painful part of all of this—or rather one painful dimension of an ocean of suffering—is that what began as fear can often become arrogance, a love of what is evil, a rejoicing in autonomy, in possession, in illicit pleasure. Here fear is so deeply buried that it is almost forgotten, or rather it is forgotten but not entirely inaccessible. For God can always speak to the heart to awaken deeper desire, to call forth the act of repentance and conversion.

And when this call is heard, *really and deeply* heard, even the most secure and exalted of persons will feel a surge of fear. “He who loves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will save it” (Mt 16:25). Yes, now, rather than illicit desire cloaking fear, fear becomes the veil thinly hiding the face of desire—a deeper and more authentic desire welling up in the inmost

heart and seeking to give voice to our true being longing for God. Here is a sign of our humanity! Our fear is the voice of our need, our desperate need, to be what we are: creatures of a provident Creator, children of a loving Father!

That desire surges to the surface accompanied by fear is due to the state in which we live in historical time, ruptured from our original innocence and not yet at our final end, when innocence shall be rediscovered and definitive security shall be found in God's recreating love. Fear is born of sin, or rather of our sinful, ruptured state in a broken world, of our loss of the pristine purity of the beginning, in which solitude was pervaded fully by the intimacy of God's love in its very nakedness and vulnerability. Now we feel this vulnerability painfully, in anguish, in existential questioning, in fear; and the only definitive remedy to this, the true, God-given remedy, is *faith*. Faith is victory over fear, not because it is a flight from the real, but because it is *a surrender to the real*. Faith is the exodus out of my narrow, fear-enclosed isolation and into the embrace of the One who calls me, into the embrace of the divine Lover who invites me into intimacy with himself.

And God invites me into intimacy with himself through each and every thing, and in every instant of my life. All is a sacrament of his love and a word of his invitation, a breath of his presence and an echo of his voice. Thus the only appropriate attitude towards human life is *faith*. (This is true even on a merely human level in which no relationship, no life, indeed, is possible without trust.) To live not on the basis of my own control but on the basis of God's Love. This is the path of conversion and the movement into the fullness of life. In surrendering myself I truly find myself, for this surrendering is not a rejection, not a devaluation of myself, but rather the deepest reverence and care for myself by trustfully giving myself to the One who can truly love and shelter and protect me, and carry me to fulfillment. Letting God minister to me and love me in all the places of my insecurity, beyond all my paltry modes of self-protection, self-affirmation, which miserably fail, gives birth to a joy and a peace beyond anything that the world can offer. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives to I give unto you" (Jn 14:27). Here I find myself bathed in the light of God's gaze of love that gives me existence at each moment and which delights in me with ineffable tenderness. Yes, faith is to step out of the pain of loneliness, the insecurity of fear, the vulnerability of shame, and to be carried along the trajectory of purified desire, eros, into the intimacy born of nakedness beheld by Love, and by Love embraced.

"I want to see God!" This is the cry of pure desire, longing not only to be beheld—and thus to experience oneself bathed in the light of God's gaze—but also, in this experience, to gaze with reciprocal love upon the ravishing beauty of the One who is everlasting Love, who is eternal Intimacy as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is to love God because he is worthy of love, to rejoice in him because he is eternal, everlasting, and undimmed Beauty and Joy. Therefore, this eros that draws us, as it grows and expands, begins to live not only on the basis of its own desire—"I desire because I was made to desire"—but also on the basis of the desire of the One who loves us—"I desire, my God, because *you* desire. Your desire is a fire within me enkindling and sus-

taining my own desire.” I desire to love you because you love me! I thirst for you because you thirst for me! I wish to satisfy your thirst with my love just as you satisfy my thirst with your love. In this encounter of thirsts, in this reciprocal gift of cherishing love, the desire of God and the desire of the human heart meet, kiss, and are fulfilled in the sweetness of intimacy.

Let us pause here. It is time to turn back to our broken world, in order to begin paving the path that travels from the heart of God into the darkness of our exile, and the path from our exile—our painful isolation and sin-wounded relationships—back into the purity and transparency of the relationships of the Trinity. But in this contemplation, we need not leave the center. Indeed, we *must not*. For this path between God and man is also the center-point: Jesus Christ. He has become the path between man and God, but he is also the One in whom we find definitive rest, the Convergence-Point who upon the Cross and in the Resurrection draws all unto himself to make us one within his embrace, carrying us to the Father.

So let us turn our eyes, in Christ, upon our world. In contrast to the purity of heart that seeks and indeed sees God (albeit veiled), our culture is so deeply wounded by a “pornification of vision.” This pornification is the very opposite of authentic eros. And let me clarify at the outset: by pornification I mean not only lust in relation to the human body and its sexual value, I mean indeed an approach to the whole of life and all manifestations of beauty. A possessive heart, an impure heart, turns all things to itself and grasps and consumes them, thus prostituting reality itself to the desires of the fallen ego, whereas the pure heart seeks and finds God in all things, and thus encounters all things in their meaning as icon and sacrament. Saint Paul wrote of this clearly: “To the pure all things are pure, but to the impure and unbelieving nothing is pure” (Tit 1:15).

The path to purity, therefore, lies in the healing and transfiguration of desire, and the rendering of desire *docile* to the gift of God, the rendering of the person filial and spousal in a receptivity and responsiveness that reflects and shares in the receptivity of the eternal Son before his Father and of the Church before Christ. Only poor and meek desire, only mourning and pure desire, only merciful desire, only desire that pursues righteousness, pursues nothing but God, is able to find him and behold him. Thus eros is rendered transparent, limpid and clean and pure to be what it was always meant to be: nothing but a participation in the ardent love and delight of the three divine Persons in the magnetism that draws them eternally into one another in the ecstasy of loving gift, in the circumincession of total mutual belonging and reciprocal indwelling.

How far we are here from understanding or living eros as essentially a purified sexual desire, as what the contemporary world terms “erotic,” even if purged from what we call lust. Eros is so much more than this, and indeed something else altogether. It is rooted in a realm entirely beyond the impulse of the body toward sexual union or the attractiveness of the sexes to one another: it is rooted in the virginal realm, of which the sexual dimension is but an image and a small participant. But our world has prostituted the meaning of eros just as we have prostituted the meaning of sex, of the person, of beauty, of truth, and of goodness. Indeed, this is a fitting moment, I think, to

make an important clarification that goes unsaid even in theological expositions on eros. It is this: namely, eros—in its true meaning—in fact has nothing essentially to do with what could be termed “sexual desire,” with the stirring of sensuality that seeks an outlet in bodily contact. True eros is wider and deeper than the reciprocity of the sexes, even if, in God’s design, the reciprocity of the sexes is a special incarnation of many traits proper to eros—namely, the longing for union, the moment of ecstasy out of oneself to the other, the sense of love coming as a gift from far beyond me, the yearning for eternity, for a love and union total and neverending, and the openness to expansive fruitfulness.

Nonetheless, what we so often term eros in our world (even sometimes theologically) is not eros but a bodily instinct that has been severed from the heart and rendered impersonal by the effects of sin. To foster what is erotic here (even in marriage) is in fact to foster not eros, but lust or at least the sexual drive in its fallen tendency to act apart from the spirit’s guidance. I have written about this at great length in my book *Loving in the Light of Eternity*. In our original state before sin, eros was utterly pure, and so even the movement towards bodily, nuptial union between man and woman would have been born, not of any spontaneous impulse of the body nor any stirring of the passions (i.e. the sexual urge), but out of the *deep seeing of the heart*, out of the desire to *cherish* the beloved person and to *receive them unto oneself*, which desire would harness the rest of the body with it. Thus I would make a distinction, a deep distinction, between *erotic desire* on the one hand and *conjugal intent* on the other, the former being the autonomous movement of the fallen flesh and the latter being the inner voice of the heart born of love. The goal of chastity in the relation between the spouses as regards the sexual act, in fact, could be summarized as *recovering the original virginal state of Adam and Eve before the flesh was ruptured from the spirit, and the urge of the body ruptured from the free choice and intention of the loving heart*. Or said positively: *it is the rediscovery of the original meaning and liberty of the gift, in which the surrender of the sexual act was a surrender to God and, in God, to the other, in a “yes” of love that radiated freely through the body*.

“Conjugal intent,” this free voice of the heart, is the manner in which sexual union has always been meant to unfold, and those spouses who persevere in seeking chastity in marriage will find that this dimension emerges between them, while the carnal impulses of what is usually termed “erotic” will give way wholly to this, in simplicity and transparency. This is not a repression of any healthy or good dimension of our humanity, but rather the subsuming, the lifting up, of what has become “animal” due to sin, and its sublimation back into the realm of the spirit. For sex is not meant to be a passionate, instinctual, intoxicating affair, as our world so vehemently insists on presenting it to us. Rather, as all sacred and holy things that invite us to participate in them as icons and sacraments of God, it is meant to be profoundly *sober, to be deeply restful, recollected, and prayerful*. Indeed, it is meant to be a mutual prayer born of deep shared silence and reciprocal listening on the part of each person, both to one another and, above all, to God, who invites them both to seal their conjugal union in this way as well as, in this, to reflect something of the inner life and love of the Trinity.

To return now to the theme of eros, true and proper eros. I have indicated that our world desperately needs beauty in order to be healed, to be evangelized. As Dostoevsky famously said: “Beauty will save the world.” But this is not any beauty, for in fact our world is already filled with beauty, both in nature and in art. Rather, what we so deeply need is *the revelation of beauty*, the key that will unlock for us all beauty by revealing to us its true foundation and its deepest word—will reveal to us the face of the Lover of all, who in all beauty directs his gaze upon us so tenderly and so intimately. Yes, what shall bring healing to our hearts is *evangelical beauty*, beauty as the voice of the Trinity operative in the world through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Hence the term “evangelization of the heart”! So it would be better to say: “The Beautiful One will save the world.” Beauty is only fully healing and saving to the degree that *he* becomes present within it and is acknowledged, encountered, and received by the human heart. Thus we see how our contemporary world—which is in fact longing for and seeking beauty of all kinds (think only of the glorious sensual feast of movies and their soundtracks!)—still needs to rediscover him who is Beauty.

The beauty that we witness, all beauty, already speaks of him; it is already his voice, the hymn of his love resounding within us. And that is why it touches us and draws our hearts so deeply. But how much more beautiful it shall be still whenever we learn to follow the voice of beauty back to its origin in God, and to behold and hear it there in all its glorious fullness. Here every form of created beauty, which before touched us so intimately, shall touch us still more, and shall reverberate within us all the more profoundly. Here, in communicating to us God’s own love and beauty, all forms of beauty shall aid to liberate and heal our hearts in a way far deeper than they can without him. For here our reception of beauty opens us to the beauty of God’s own self-communication—still manifested through art, through music, through creation, through every single incarnate moment of life—but rendered transparent for the human heart to recognize that he, alone, is ultimate Beauty, and that all beauty speaks of him.

The encounter with true beauty itself quiets our heart and stirs us to seek out yet more deeply the fullness of Beauty. We learn little by little to welcome the approach of the beauty, a beauty that is sober, that is quiet, that is a glimpse of the uncreated light of God and an echo of the silent music of eternity. Thus we need artists and creators whose work is not merely beautiful, but beautiful in a way that God is seen, that God is revealed. We need art that is beautiful in a way that the receiver is invited into the sober stance of childlike receptivity before the Creator of all, into the stance of wonder, trust, and awe that allows beauty to be, not merely pleasant, not merely moving, but a word drawing us deeper into intimacy with the Trinity. Yes, art can teach love. Art can heal and order desire. Art can encourage gift of self, and affirm, therefore, all the fullness of human life, in both joy and suffering, life and death, and all the mystery of our being in this world as we stand within the loving and cherishing gaze of God, bathed in the light of our eternal home for which we long in the holy nostalgia that is called eros, and which already mysteriously holds and accompanies us on every step of the journey of time.

I AM LOVED, THEREFORE I AM

A central point has emerged in all of this to which I have not yet given explicit voice. It has been implicitly present, but it would be helpful to name it. All beauty, all reception of beauty, is innately *virginal*, utterly chaste, and the chaste heart alone can see and receive it as it truly is. Thus there is no such thing as “erotic art,” of which we see so much today. I indicated that the truly erotic—which for the sake of clarity I shall term “erosic”—is not meant to be tied in with *sex*, but rather with *God*, with the aspiration for beauty, goodness, and truth (even if the sexual realm itself can and should be purified by the erosic and thus come to express it). Yes, the sexual dimension, indeed, when purified of the effects of original sin, is rendered transparent to the virginal reality of love. Thus sexual intercourse in its utmost purity resembles far more a virginal embrace than it does the degrading passion flaunted before our eyes so vehemently in our contemporary world. The difference, as I said, is the conjugal intent (and the act born of it): the choice of mind and will, of heart, to seal the bond of mutual belonging with one’s spouse through this incarnate act of love that has been designed by God to express love, to incarnate gift, to reflect the Trinity, and to open both persons to the fruitfulness of parenthood.

Thus we can say that true beauty is *virginalizing*. To see the beauty of a woman, her true *beauty*, and not the attractiveness of her body, is at the same moment to be rendered incapable of lusting after her or being stirred to desire her carnally. This deeper seeing, in other words, so totally bathes the temptation to carnal seeing that it extinguishes it, and leaves only reverence and love and a deep esteem for the unique beauty of the other person. And thus one’s approach to the other, whether in simple affirmation or friendship, or even in conjugal union, is virginal. In this way and in this light, we see that the true beauty and sacramentality of the sexual act, with all the bodily processes that it entails, is *restored to its purity and transparency as an image of the divine in human flesh*. And this is true, in fact, of all things: all beauty, all relationship, all that bears the taste of God’s sweetness and the glimpse of his light and the echo of his harmony, invites us into the disposition of virginal love. It invites us into a reverent, non-possessive, cherishing love that cares for the other, cares for reality itself, with open hands and open heart; and even when love also draws us near into intimacy, it does so not with grasping but with pure and chaste desire for the sharing of being, for the communion of reciprocal presence and gift, that is God’s own way of living and loving.

And at the heart of all manifestations of beauty is a dual call to love: 1) First, there is the call to reverence in utmost respect that which cannot be “owned” or “had” by us, the voice of the *mysterium tremendum*, a taste of God’s own majesty and beauty, which we call *glory*, communicated to us through created beauty. Here we have the disposition of “fear of the Lord,” that holy awe that humbles us before God and before his presence in reality, particularly in the sacred existence of each human person. This awakens a song of praise from the inmost heart, a voice of gratitude, as well as deep de-

votion and service welling up from our inner being as a gift for the other.

2) Second, there is the *magnetism for union*, the awakening and directing of eros which guides us toward the heart of the beauty that touches us and invites us, that calls us to be wedded to this beauty in its inmost meaning and its sacred essence. At the heart of all beauty there is a profound attraction, as we said, an attraction to pass to the good which is truth, to the true being of things in God's creative intentions, so as to be united with it in a mysterious co-sharing of life. Even impersonal things, when seen as radiant with beauty, issue this call to us: to be wedded to the trees and the sky and the sea, to be wedded to the essence of this music or the essence of this work of art.

Thus we can see that this unitive desire is born of gratuitous contact with beauty, and is not a mere projection of our desires outward, nor a mere appetitive drive (that is something else entirely). Even the seeds of eros already present within us, seeming to arise "from out of nowhere," are in fact a kind of primal "memory" of our origin, of the uncreated Beauty of God, the stamp of his creative love impressed upon us in our creation and crying out to return to him anew. Yes, this cry of eros is the voice of our heart, of our being, which has been created as a *response* to God's creative love, and in order to be a *dialogue partner of the divine*. But this capacity, this orientation outward in longing, in hope, leads to receptive-responsiveness to the gift from outside, to a living relationship with the One whose Beauty touches and guides us on the path of love—whose presence is the pole-star, the pillar of fire, leading us on the exodus into authentic relationship and the full expansiveness of truth.

Here it is apparent how the second movement of love, namely eros, is cradled within the first, within the *mysterium tremendum* and the reverence it awakens, namely agape, and it grows and matures precisely within it. For in the attraction of all created beauty I glimpse the tremendous Beauty of God, and I am drawn to him both in humble service and in the desire for union. I am drawn to all things in both dimensions, the second held within the first, and unfolding within it. First I praise the sunrise! And only then do I enter into union with it! Or rather, the praise of the sunrise, born spontaneously of its beauty which draws me out of myself and into it, is my first union, my first surrender to the beauty, which births both the desire for union and also sustains the movement into deeper union itself. Thus eros finds fulfillment not by grasping but by surrendering, not by taking unto myself but by entering into the beloved, by the exodus of chaste love that alone is true ecstasy.

But in all of these reflections on eros and the inner virginal form of love, we have gotten rather off the topic of art and culture specifically, though the insights we have sought to glean are wholly relevant. After all, the relationship between the sexes, second only to the primal relation of each person with God, lies at the heart of every culture and is the true standard and well-spring of a culture's wholeness and health. But now we again turn back to the world in order, hopefully, to lead into a discussion of what makes art authentically beautiful, beautiful in a way that is fully and transparently virginalizing, beautiful in a way that the *mysterium tremendum* is seen and its call to love is heard. We see that our world is aspiring precisely for some kind of "exodus," for the path out of the enclosed, isolated self and into the ex-

pansiveness of love. And yet the philosophical and spiritual (and ethical) foundations of our culture do not provide the context in which this desire can easily come to fulfillment. This is the case in a number of ways, but two particularly come to mind here: 1) the “turn to the subject” that has occurred in philosophical thought since Descartes and Kant, in which exploration of the world no longer begins with primal wonder at what exists outside of me—and a deep, fundamental *faith* in the truthfulness and knowability of this reality—but begins rather with the self, with “I,” the ego, and tries to build bridges of proof from the inside out. Thus we live in a world that conditions us to a disposition of cynical doubt rather than childlike faith—the faith in fact to which we are naturally inclined from the beginning by God’s design, and which we are meant to grow into by education and by mature acceptance of the fullness of the faith. Instead, we are mis-educated, taught to unlearn this primal wonder and trust at the radiant intelligibility of reality, and instead to approach it at a distance, with doubt and hesitation and “mature,” scientific and rational questioning. Of course, questioning is not a bad thing; on the contrary, the birth of all philosophy, as the ancients understood, is *wonder*. But wonder is drawn by desire not by fear, awakened by beauty not by obligation, and carried by hope not by arrogance or the will-to-power. And without this primal trust, in fact no questions or answers are possible at all; to use a phrase of G.K. Chesterton, modern skepticism is “the suicide of thought.”

The second thing that comes to mind, related to the first, is the birth of a new gnosticism, particularly in relation to the body. In fact, the above premise already paves the way for a new gnosticism. What is the trait of such gnosticism, which takes the form primarily of “new age” in our world, drawn as it is by the relativism and subjectivism of the Asiatic philosophies? The premise of gnosticism is that knowledge is not abundantly accessible to us—trees pouring out their essence for every contemplative heart, the universe singing of the glory of God, the designs of God written into our bodies and into every thing that he has made—but is rather hidden for the elite, for those willing to face down the essential unintelligibility or duality or absurdity of reality and to confront the despair it awakens. There are many ways that gnosticism expresses itself, given its particular flavor (and there are many). But it is marked by this flight from an incarnate, sacramental trust in the real, and by a movement into a subjective spiritualism that neglects both the body and a rationally discoverable truth that would join all together in authentic dialogue and communion (this includes, specifically, the historical revelation of God and his presence in the world in Jesus Christ).

In the face of this despair of finding a single universal truth accessible to all, even the littlest, one is asked to exercise a contentless act of faith, the object of which remains vague and indiscriminate, whether it is called the “Infinite,” or the “nous,” or the “One,” or even the “Self.” But in our world, so (sadly) influenced by the writings of Nietzsche, it often means to *choose* meaning beyond absurdity, to will it forth from within oneself, and thus to become the super-man, the god-man (*ubermensch*). There is then no god but man himself. Granted, this is the furthest extreme, but the seeds of it lie everywhere in our culture, and this tendency to some form of “hidden knowl-

edge,” and a tendency to flee from the body to a realm that is supposed to be more “real,” finds many and varied expressions. Divorced from the intelligibility of the body and of the material universe—which while being radiantly accessible is *also* mysterious and invites ever deeper pondering and penetration into the mystery—the path out of ourselves in love, the exodus of true eros, is cut off. We are stuck with questions of epistemology rather than living the wonder-filled expanse of metaphysics and ontology, and indeed of theology and mysticism.

All of this should make us all the more grateful for the historical nature of Christianity, and indeed its doctrinal, ethical, and communal nature! For it truly touches all of our humanity, and through the fullness of revelation God presents himself to us and asks for a response that is totally specific and concrete: the commitment of my being in all that I am, to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who reveal themselves in history and who in this same act reveal the truth of reality and of human life!

To return for a moment, however, to this “turn to the subject,” we can summarize as follows: When I start with the premise that “I” am the deepest and most obvious thing that I know, and that everything outside of this “I” (including my own body) is questionable and uncertain, then the bridge out of myself remains frail and wobbly. In fact, without a primal act of faith—of trust in what approaches me from the outside—the exodus outside of myself into relationship with reality, with another, is impossible. But this movement of establishing the thinking “I” as the certain foundation of all else is precisely the move that Descartes initiated with his, “I think, therefore I am.” This statement, while obviously true in itself, leaves out so much. And making it the basis of knowledge has profound repercussions for our approach to the real, as we are seeing so much in our society today. In the ages before Descartes, it would be more accurate to say that our approach to reality was marked by, “I am thought, therefore I am,” or, “I am loved, therefore I am,” or, “I am seen, therefore I am.” This is in fact prior in our experience even to the “I think” experience, to the “I am” awareness. Really? Is something deeper in my consciousness that my own self? Absolutely. There are two things.

First, there is the awareness of those who have loved and nourished me into the consciousness of this very self, usually my parents. I have written of this at length in *Sheltered Within Her Heart*. Before I am awake to my own “I,” my unique individuality, I am aware of the face and the smile and the love of my mother. I know “you” before I know “I.” And precisely by her gaze of love fixed upon me, by her smile of delight which responds to me, I am awakened to become aware of my own self. She bestows upon me, in a way, the awareness of my own “I” by looking upon me as “you.” Thus, from the very beginnings and in the foundation of my consciousness, I am not an isolated subject, but rather *relational, a person-in-relation*, in the image and likeness of the Persons of the Trinity. And thus, from the beginning, the taste and longing for my ultimate destiny is granted: to pass through the image and into the uncreated Reality, to find the fullness of my being in the likeness of God by experiencing utter fullness of relationship in the embrace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But even deeper than this primal experience of “you” and “I” before my parents and caregivers, I have a kind of “memory” (though the word is not entirely fitting) of God himself, of God loving me into existence and looking upon me with love. This is the fingerprint of God, the stamp placed upon my being, the return-label, as it were, saying: “Please return to the heavenly Father, through Jesus and the Spirit; address: heaven.” And God *is* heaven! Heaven is already impressed upon me as my deepest memory-beyond-memories, and my longing deeper than all longings. And indeed this memory, or rather this lived-experience of the present, of “now,” is made present in each moment of time to some degree or another. For every glimpse of being, every experience of goodness, every reception of love, unveils that deeper Love, that all-encompassing and all-permeating Love—God—who lies at the origin and foundation of all things. Nothing would be were God not to hold it in existence in love, and every single thing radiates his love to me, or rather is his radiation of love to me. Thus I am perpetually being reminded of this Love that loves me into existence, not only at the start of my life, but at every succeeding moment. Thus every moment, every incarnate encounter, becomes a sacrament of Love, it becomes a kiss of eternity upon time, an intersection point where the “now” of this moment becomes a taste of the Eternal Now of God’s own life, and draws my heart to that place where I shall experience rest in my definitive home: in the Eternity of the Trinity’s life of Love and Intimacy.

Everything in this world stirs me to heart-aching, soul-tearing longing precisely because I bear this memory of creative Love within me, and because I encounter this Love, hidden but true, in every moment of time; and it stirs me so because I am made sensitive to it by my very being, because I am marked for the homeland of heaven, and I am restless until I rest in the embrace of the divine Persons. I have been created with a sensitivity to beauty because I am a person, and because I am a person I can and must pass along the trajectory of this beauty into the fullness of the love of the One who is Beauty itself, Beauty as Love and Intimacy of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

All of this does not destroy whatever good comes from contemplating the depths of my own self-awareness, my “I think, therefore I am,” but it does radically change the tone and import of this reflection. It pervades it with the presence of Another, and makes it dialogue. Now it is not only “I think, therefore I am,” but it is also, “I think, and in my thinking I discern the lines of *your* thought thinking me.” My thinking follows along the lines of your thought. My life, my self, and the universe itself is intelligible because it is already *known*, known by you, and by you infinitely loved. And thus my own knowledge is always recognition: re-cognition, a thinking-again of what you have already thought-loved into existence, and which you continue to do at every moment!

HE IS THE NEW CREATION

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” says Gerard Manley Hopkins. This is one of the points drawn out in the previous reflection. The world, in all of its limited, created being, is a *radiation of the Love of God, an outpouring of the inmost life of the Trinity in creative act*. It is thus a self-expression of God, an unveiling of God’s own being to communicate to us his love and to invite us into relationship, into intimacy, with himself. To say that God is far away, to imagine that he does not speak, therefore, is simply to bear witness to one’s own inability to see and hear, and not to note the absence of God. For God is continually speaking his very self outward in love by creating the universe at every moment (which is his way of sustaining the universe in existence).

However, God *is* veiled in his manifestation, communicated in a hidden and sacramental way, and not made manifest in the fullness of his being and his undimmed glory: face-to-face, heart-to-heart. Ever since the sin of our first parents and the veil it pulled over our eyes—and the corresponding dimming of the divine light pouring through reality—God is not and cannot yet be beheld face to face. To lament *this* lack is a sign of the heart-ache for heaven, the pure eros of longing for union with the divine Bridegroom and communion in the heart of the heavenly Father. It is a longing, too, for the whole universe to be restored to its true dignity and to find its consummation in the heart of the divine embrace. For the heart that loves can be satisfied with nothing less than perfect union in the fullness of transparent light: for God to walk again with his children in the garden of the world in the fullness of the light of Day!

We saw that the severing from this original gift lying at the origin of our being and also sustaining us at every moment—communicating itself to us tenderly without ceasing—has had terrible repercussions for our cultural experience of life and meaning. We hinted that one of these effects is in relation to our experience of the *body*, and, by extension, of the material world itself. This often finds expression in gnosticism, a heresy that severs knowledge of reality from the givenness of the body and its senses, and instead seeks it somewhere else, apart from incarnate reality as given by God. Unmoored from its anchorage in the real, in the given, it becomes profoundly detrimental to the person in the integrity of their being as created by God: here we have all manner of repression, of dualism, of unhealthy asceticism, of esoteric knowledge, and even traits of Jansenism and Pelagianism that replace the loving God, incarnately bestowing himself upon us, with our own striving and efforts.

But to recover the body, and God in the body, what does that mean? It means recognizing that this body is not merely something I *have*, nor is it a mere extension of me, like an artificial limb; it is, rather, *me*, but not all of me. For I am both body and spirit, two distinct dimensions that are unique but not separable. They are meant to abide together. First: that which surpasses the material toward the immaterial and eternal and infinite—toward the God who has existed eternally before the material universe was made—

which we term the spirit, the soul. On the other hand, second: the body, which is immersed in the material and cannot directly step outside of it; the body which is body and cannot be anything but body. And yet...and yet this body, as the incarnation of the spirit, also aspires beyond itself, aspires to share in *everything* that is known and lived by the spirit, aspires to become a “spiritual body” also tasting, to the full, though in its own way, the immaterial and eternal and infinite, namely, the *divine*.

What a paradox! What a beautiful mystery, better understood in the silence of prayer and life than merely conceptualized in ideas (though ideas help, indeed are essential, to protect the reality from misunderstanding and to give deeper insight into it). Yes, though the body is not the spirit, the body is *for* the spirit and even *of* the spirit; and the spirit is meant to live in and through the body, as one inseparable being, as *me*. The body is my spirit’s incarnation; it is my enfleshed being; it is my bodily radiation of self. It is my self’s permeability in the created universe of material things, *my extension into the visible universe, my spirit’s incarnate presence within the contours of visible and tangible reality*. It is *me* as living within the universe fashioned by God to be my home, a home that reflects and shares in the definitive home of heaven, and which indeed shall be lifted up to become one with this heavenly home, becoming “a new heavens and a new earth” where God himself shall reside and shall be fully, tangibly, directly seen and known and experienced—in the very body!—by me.

Wow. Through reflecting upon the tension—and longing for restored harmony—between my body and my spirit, we are tapping into the pulse of all things. For all the drama of the universe—fallen, redeemed, and pressing on to definitive consummation—is reflected in the drama that I carry in my inmost self, where body and spirit seek to be harmonized together again in a single, indivisible gift of love participating in the intimacy and love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through union with God my spirit is restored to integrity, and the body participates in this union. But to say only this is to persist in the division. For in fact the body is not only spiritualized by the spirit, lifted up to share in the life of the spirit; but the spirit also lives and communicates in and through the body, and is made to encounter God through the body. At the end these two shall be inseparably one—in a way we can glimpse but can’t grasp or fully understand—body and spirit the single person living in fullness of love and relationship with God, with other persons, and with the whole richness of creation permeated and illumined by the light of the Trinity.

This is where the language of “sacrament” becomes so helpful and important. We have explored in depth the sacramentality of the universe, of every created thing, and in particular the nature of our bodies as the primal sacrament of encounter: as the sacrament of our own persons by which we relate, give, love, and enter into intimacy. We have looked at the Sacrament of the Body of Jesus Christ, who came into this world and wedded our very flesh in order to make it again fully permeable to the life of the Spirit, a full and transparent Sacrament in which, truly, God lives and freely communicates himself. And so he did, even through the obscurity and pain of the Passion—divine light penetrating, illumining, and healing the darkest places in our

fallen world—and breaking forth into the undimmed light of the Resurrection. In his Resurrection, Jesus has entered into the definitive state of restoration: the restored harmony between body and spirit, and the total permeation of both with the very light and love of the Trinity. In other words, he already lives the full and unified participation of both body and spirit—or better, of the unified human being as a single self—in the innermost life of the Trinity. He *is* the New Creation.

And in and through him we shall all find definitive fulfillment as well, insofar as we allow ourselves to be grafted into him and to drink of his life, to accept it as our own. This has already occurred fully in the Virgin Mary, who, at the end of her life, was assumed both body and soul into heaven, and experiences there eternally—in the heart of God—the fullness of ecstatic intimacy utterly pervading her whole spiritual-bodily consciousness. Indeed, from this space she also pervades the universe, reaching out—in, though, and with Christ, as Bride with Bridegroom, as one with him in the single Body of the Church—to accompany all the children of God on the paths of this life. And into the life of God we shall go, first in the spirit after death, and then in the fullness of our bodies restored, raised again to share fully and eternally in Christ's own Resurrection, when he returns to the earth and remakes it, refashions it as a new heavens and a new earth, in which God himself shall reside.

The point in all of this for our topic? Well, it is simply important to contemplate and live in itself, gratuitously, because it is beautiful, good, and true. But it also illumines deeply the topic we are here seeking to address: the nature of created beauty, in particular creative art as the work of human hands and the fruit of culture, and its importance in mediating an “evangelization of the heart.” It is illuminating because, in a profound way, art can be understood precisely as the effort to *recapture* the integrity of original man in the harmony of body and spirit, to rediscover, therefore, the *original sacramentality of the body* and *the transparency of human life to the divine light*. It seeks to recapture the presence of God in the human body, and the body as icon of God. Or better, it goes the other way around: it seeks to recapture God in the body, God glimpsed and made tangible in the world, and thus to find the path to the redemption and restoration of the integrity of the human person (body and spirit) and of the universe itself.

It thus reaches back into the original state of Adam and Eve before sin, but also, and more importantly, reaches toward the eternal renewal that awaits us at the end of time. And the link between these two? It is obvious. The center-point of all reflection, the apex and true wellspring of all art, the icon of Love made flesh, the Word carrying all the beauty of voice and music and harmonious sound, the Form that gives form to all things, and the Light that makes all things radiant and beautiful...is the Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, and Eucharistic Christ. It is the eternal Word of the Father, the only-begotten Son who lives eternally in the bosom of the Father in their single kiss of the Holy Spirit; it is the Son who, remaining eternally God, has also wedded himself to humanity, has entered into our world, and has poured forth throughout all things the very light and love of the Trinity, totally permeating them, healing and transforming them, and then lifting them up in

himself to participate in the very life of God that is eternally his with the Father and the Spirit. He—the eternal Son, Jesus Christ—is the Convergence-Point in which all the strands of history flow together and are granted full access into the innermost heart of the Trinity.

Yes, in him we find original innocence restored in its childlike purity; in him we find historical humanity carried, in all of its darkness and pain, its aspiration and hope; and in him we find all carried into the everlasting consummation in which the whole universe is made pure love, made transparent participation in the love and intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This Sacrament, this Mystery, this divine Presence is what our world so desperately needs. The Son of the Father made flesh, ever at work in this world through his Spirit and his Church, manifesting the Father, and drawing all back to the Father, into the heart of the Trinity's life. All of our efforts in artistic co-creation, in playful creativity, in contemplative manifestation, seek to serve this one Mystery, and to open up the path for hearts to enter into it and, there, to find home. All of our life, indeed, rendered a masterpiece by the redeeming and transfiguring work of God—particularly the highest fulfillment of human life, where our true identity lies, in gratuitous love and intimacy—participates in this work of redemption, and helps to carry the world back into the embrace of God where it finds everlasting fulfillment. It is all God's work, God's gift, poured out freely into human hearts, permeating our bodily existence, and spreading out to touch, heal, sanctify, and transfigure the whole universe, until it is carried, at the end of time, into the eternal joy of perfect consummation in the embrace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ישוע

SANCTIFYING SACRAMENTALITY: THE LITURGY OF LOVE

Architects and painters, sculptors and musicians, filmmakers and writers, photographers and poets, artists of every discipline, are called to shine beauty especially where darkness or gray dominates everyday life. They are the custodians of beauty, heralds and witnesses of hope for humanity. I invite you, therefore, to cherish beauty, and beauty will heal the many wounds that mark the hearts and souls of the men and women of our day.

- Pope Francis, Dec 6 2016 Address to Pontifical Academies

I indicated in the previous reflection that art, above all and in its inner essence, is *seeking God*. The impulse toward the divine Beauty is the fuel that drives all the artistic aspirations of humanity, just as it drives, indeed, all of our efforts at love and in fact lies at the hidden wellspring of each and every desire, however inordinately expressed. But the purification to unveil this pure and holy aspiration planted in us by God—this holy nostalgia for our true home—is quite radical, since our desire is so burdened by disorder, so twisted by concupiscence, so submerged in the rupture of body and spirit. So often we seek a glimmer of created beauty apart from infinite Beauty, and even twist created beauty itself and seek ugliness as if it were beauty. This is

the inheritance of sin, in response to which Christ calls each one of us to walk the path of purification of heart so that we may learn again to see, and, in seeing, to desire rightly. And art, when born of such seeing, opens up a path to seeing for others; art helps to “order” desire, to liberate and direct desire to its true ends, to a healthy relation with all that is, and above all with God, the Author of all and its eternal Consummation.

And art does this by recapturing—by making visible—in some way the *transparency* of reality again, its transparency to the light of God. It unveils again a glimmer of that original *sacramentality* that marked all things, and that still shines forth from within them at every moment of historical time. Whatever may be the subject of a work of art—the human person, nature, relationships, a particular experience, a musical theme—in the end all art presses on into the *essence* of things, trying to touch and commune with that “inscape” by which each thing is rooted in God, and, in its very limitation, communicates more than it is, communicates something of God himself. This is a sacrament. Thus by touching the sacramentality of beauty, beautiful art becomes a sacrament itself—a sacrament of co-creation by which the creature, the child, fashions in docility to the Creator and Father, using the good things that he has given, a kind of “distillation” of creation’s beauty into an artifact of beauty. Like the pressure needed to create a diamond, or like many grains of wheat brought together, kneaded and baked to become bread, so human art is a reflection of the Art of God, his own creative act. It does so not by creating out of nothing, but rather by attuning to what is, what has been given by God, and molding it in such a way that its inner essence is unveiled, channeled as a gift, and made to sing more freely and deeply the song that it was made to sing.

Here, in fact, we come to the *liturgical* nature of authentic art. Speaking so much about sacramentality fittingly leads to this place, does it not? For sacramentality is not self-centered, it is not only God’s communication to us, his beauty and loving communicating itself, to which we cling like hungry infants desperate for satiation. Rather, sacramentality is a dual road, a reciprocal gift, a dilation of the heart of man and woman to become *liturgeia*, service of the divine, the praise and glorification of God through the very gift of the human person incarnate in the body and in all of their actions. As Saint Paul said: “Offer your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). This is the *liturgeia* of human life, flowing from God as a ceaseless act of gratuitous love, and flowing back from human hearts to God as a reciprocal gift. And this reciprocal gift births intimacy, the deepest goal of all worship, all liturgy, and the inner heartbeat of all things, since it is the very Being of God as the eternal Communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And art, human activity and work in molding this creation, is part of this liturgy: it lifts up created things and gives them voice, channeling their praises, joined to the praise and love of man and woman, back to God. For man and woman hear the echo of God in created things; they glimpse something of his beauty. And they hear created things singing the praises of God, manifesting his glory, in their own unique way. But this voice, the voice of created things, seeks to be taken into the heart and life of man and woman,

to be lifted up also in their activity, and to be “personalized,” fully realized, sanctified, by becoming an explicit participant in the fully personal love between God and humanity, thus finding access indeed into the heart of the relational love of the Trinity.

Thus even the humblest of impersonal things, the tiniest glimmers of beauty, are waiting to be beheld by us, yearning, as it were, to speak their “word” about God from God, a word of love that God speaks through them to man and woman, his children. And in being received by us, they become more fully what they are, they unfold their essence by allowing the “I am” of each created essence to become fully an “I am for you.” And as we hear this “I am for you” from each created thing—God’s gift given to us in his immeasurable love—we are drawn to take up created things, to join them to the song of our own heart, and to give them back to God, so that all things may speak to him, with us and in us, so that the whole universe may sing in his praise: “I am for you!”

It does not matter whether this creative gift, this gift of human heart and act, occurs with the littlest of things or the greatest, for the liturgy of love is not determined by external standards but by the gift of the heart and the depth of contact with God’s beauty sacramentally incarnate in reality. A single act of pure love is of infinite worth before God, and all that we need to do is open our hearts to welcome whatever touches our hearts, whatever God entrusts to us, and to bear it in ourselves, in our love, our prayer, and our activity, back to him anew. “I am for you!” he says to us through created things, which are his gift to us, and we say to him, in return, “And I am for you!” Yes, this sacramental encounter pervades every moment in all of its richness, while also surpassing all—in the depth of heart-to-heart contact, in that place of core identity where I stand in solitude before God—into the inmost space of virginal intimacy between the human heart and the Most Blessed Trinity.

This complete fulfillment of the song of praise of all created things is precisely the new creation. When all creation is utterly permeated by the light of gift, by the radiance of love, and unveils its true essence both as given *by* God and also as *giving* God, then it achieves its definitive and everlasting fulfillment. Here God will no longer only be glimpsed through created reality, but rather created reality will be fully seen, known, and loved in God himself, and through the light of his glory which shall utterly penetrate and pervade our entire consciousness. We shall no longer “need” creation to mediate God to us (and we have never needed it except that God has willed to reveal himself through it and in it, and has not wished to save us except in the body, except in the communion of a single humanity and a single universe); but creation does not therefore pass away or become unimportant. Rather, it reveals its true meaning as *gratuitous gift*, as a simple bestowal of God’s love upon us, such that he has poured forth his own inner being as Trinity so fully that it has birthed a rich fullness of created being that reflects and shares in its own creative Origin.

And therefore, already in this life insofar as this reciprocal circuit of love, of receiving and giving, is restored, *childlike play* is born, as well as *nuptial intimacy*. And such shall be fulfilled eternally in God. The whole universe, renewed by God, shall be but a palace for the Bride and a playground for the

children of God; it shall be a holy temple of the praise and worship of the Trinity and the fulfillment of all things, all persons, in intimacy with God; it shall be a sanctuary of the deepest mutual belonging in which the solitude of each person, indeed the “inseparable” of every thing, is unveiled in utter reverence and love, and in love sheltered, so that the deepest and most perfect intimacy is sealed, fulfilled, and experienced without ceasing. Yes, for all eternity creation shall not pass away; rather, it shall be fulfilled, with man and woman, with humanity, the apex and crown of creation, in the everlasting bliss of perfect communion with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

יְשׁוּעָה

THE WELLSPRING OF AUTHENTIC CULTURE

*Beauty grows in you to the extent that love grows,
because charity itself is the soul's beauty.*

- St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Saint John Paul II speaks about the longing in the human heart to make contact with *primordial beauty*, the thirst that impels humanity to pursue this beauty, to live it, to become united to it, and to express it. And yet he also said that this beauty, because of the fracture of sin, has become somehow opaque, hidden by the rupture of harmony and unity between humanity and God, in human relationships, and within the human heart itself—a rupture that has also pulled a kind of veil over the beauty of creation and has caused a discord between humanity and the visible universe. This beauty, nonetheless, is still present, and it still speaks to us profoundly, if only we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the flesh to be touched, and the hearts to be moved, to be ravished, and to respond.

And this beauty, while liberating us and impelling us to love, while lifting us up closer to God, also seeks to be liberated by our own love and affirmation, tied up as is the destiny of creation with the destiny of man and woman themselves, “groaning in labor pains even until now for the revelation of the children of God” (Rom 8:22). We saw this in depth in the previous reflection, in the way that the “liturgy of love” of man and woman unseals and fulfills the sacramentality of creation in personal union with God. Beauty is a gift that surpasses the human heart, a living irradiation of the beauty of the Trinity which magnetizes us toward him, awing us, drawing us, awakening in us wonder and play and gratitude, which then permeate the whole of our existence with the beauty of the Trinity that has so deeply ravished our being. But beauty is also a gift entrusted to the human heart which depends on the integrity, love, and prayer of this heart to find its definitive fulfillment. What a mystery!

And yet not all see this beauty, and the face of creation itself is opaque and obscure for many. Thus the human heart needs to be taught how to see, to see with purity and reverence, with humility and awe—not with a possessive grasping but with a childlike wonder, with a trustful surrender to mystery—in order to experience and reverence this primordial beauty, to be united to it, and to let it be expressed in every moment and aspect of human existence, in our very being as well as well in all of our work and activity in the sight of

God. It is thus that beauty draws us, and that beauty, also, is unsealed through the loving gaze and tender hands of human creativity, through the flowering of authentic culture.

Let me quote here some words of John Paul II in this regard:

The Resurrection of Christ initiates the renewal and rebirth of that beauty which man has lost through sin. St. Paul speaks of the new Adam (Rom 5:12–21). Elsewhere he speaks of creation's great thirst for the revelation of the sons of God (Rom 8:19). It is true that in humankind there is a great yearning and thirst for the beauty with which God has endowed man in creating man and woman. There is also a quest for the form of this beauty that finds expression in all human creativity. If creativity is a special way in which man expresses himself, it is also an expression of that yearning of which Paul speaks. There is suffering connected with this yearning, since "all of creation is groaning in the pangs of childbirth" (Rom 8:22).

The yearning of the human heart after this primordial beauty with which the Creator has endowed man is also a desire for the communion in which the sincere gift of self is manifested. This beauty and this communion are not goods that have been lost irretrievably—they are goods to be redeemed, retrieved; and in this sense every human person is given to every other—every woman is given to every man, and every man is given to every woman.

These strivings of the human soul that are associated with longing for the beauty of the human person and the beauty of communion come up against a certain threshold. Man can stumble at this threshold. Instead of finding beauty, he loses it and begins to create only ersatz substitutes. Man can clutter up his civilization with these substitutes. It ceases to be a civilization of beauty because it is not born of that eternal love from which God brought man into being and made him beautiful, just as the communion of persons—of man and woman—has been created beautiful. Norwid, who had an immensely perceptive intuition of this truth, wrote that beauty is the form of love. Beauty cannot be created if one does not participate in that love. One cannot create beauty if one does not look with the eyes through which God embraces the world he created in the beginning and beholds man whom he created within that world.

We see in these words that beauty, all beauty, bears the form of love, and that it can only be seen, cherished, and created with eyes of love. Thus beauty also ultimately bears the form of communion, of *intimacy*. Beauty is a communion, it is a bond, it is a harmony. All beauty is beautiful because it reflects and participates in the Love-Communion of the Trinity and makes it known. And therefore the longing for beauty is ultimately a longing for communion, for the reconciliation between humanity and creation, between human hearts and one another, and between human hearts and the ineffable Trinity. It is the impulse of pure and holy *eros* to return to the Fountainhead of Beauty, to the Beautiful One, who is Beauty because he is the Truth that is Love.

For the eternal Beauty of God—of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is

nothing but the glory of their everlasting intimacy in a life of reciprocal self-donation and perfect mutual belonging. And the whole created universe has been born precisely from this fullness of the Trinity's life of love and intimacy, and thus can unseal its true beauty only when it is seen in this light. The beauty of creation can be unveiled fully only when the light of the Trinity is allowed, anew, to pour forth upon, and to shine forth from within, every created thing. This beauty can radiate in its fullness only when creation is seen, revered, and received by the human heart, and lifted up anew into the living intimacy with the Trinity that can find its full and highest expression only in the personal realm. It is here, in the embrace of hearts—in the intimacy between the heart of the Trinity and the human heart, and in the embrace of human hearts within the all-enfolding love of the Trinity—that all of creation is set free and begins to shine with radiant light and beauty in anticipation of the eternal consummation that awaits at the end of time.

Therefore, the true unsealing of the beauty of creation itself is hinged upon the liberation of the human person. And the liberation of the human person, inversely, lies in the purification of love, the purging of *eros* from the dross of concupiscence and the baseness of the carnal flesh, and the fully mature blossoming of the ardent capacity to care, cherish, give, and receive before God and others that we call *agape*. The human person, in other words, is called to live and love in the likeness of the Trinity—in the love in which *eros* and *agape* are one—and the entire cosmos is destined to participate in this mystery through humanity. Thus the locus of the whole universe, the hinge-point of the entire created order, is reposed within the convergence-point of the human heart. Yes, and this means that the center of the whole world, the most important reality in all of creation, and the greatest gift and task of humanity as the meeting-point between God and the universe, is *prayer*. It is in prayer that the human person is touched, healed, and liberated. Indeed, prayer is the beginning and end of all things, and the only ultimate consummation of what it means to be human. It is to pass into the inner heartbeat of love and intimacy that throbs unceasingly at the core of all things, with which I make contact at the very core of my being, where singularity and universality flow together in my living participation in the intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

By immersing myself into the embrace of Jesus, into the inner Heart of the Crucified and Risen One who draws all together in the innermost embrace of the Trinity, I discover the full flowering of my own authentic self within the shelter of the Trinity's love. And from this place of intimacy with God, my whole being also spontaneously opens out, widens and expands, to become a living welcoming-space for the beauty of the whole creation, and in particular for each singular child of God. It is here, also, that the wellspring of true culture begins to flow, the culture that is nothing but the activity of humanity in unsealing, at the heart of creation, the beauty that God placed within creation from beginning. It is the human capacity to unseal the innate beauty of creation—not through autonomous efforts nor through activity for its own sake, but through the overflowing movement of contemplative repose, in which the human heart conceives the great mystery that is then brought to birth in true art and culture. It is the capacity to unseal the innate

beauty of creation, helping creation itself to be what it was meant to be, and especially helping human hearts to rediscover their true grandeur and the grandeur of all that God has made, not as an independent and isolated universe enclosed within itself, but rather as the ceaseless irradiation of the very inner life and love of the Trinity, seeking to flow back anew into the welcoming embrace of the Trinity, where alone every human person and the whole of creation will find full and everlasting consummation.

To tie all of these strands on authentic beauty and culture together, let me quote the words of Jean Corbon. He wrote:

The drama of culture is the drama of men as created creators, as nature rooted in the cosmos but called to bear fruit in communion with God. Shall the river of life save a culture from the barrenness of death? For culture—or, in other words, the integral calling of men as they move towards the harvest of the kingdom—is not simply creative; it also exists as either fallen or redeemed. No word of culture is innocent. Art, no matter what the claims made for it, is not immediately divine. If beauty is to save the world, it must first cleanse the world. If the work of artisan or artist is to reveal the glory resident in beauty and bring it to fulfillment, it must first have passed through the fire in which creation is restored to its integrity. It is in this fountainhead that the river of life enters into and permeates culture. Culture is an iconography of the Spirit and man, or it is the beauty solely of the devil.

The reason for this is that in its first synergy the work of culture is revelatory. Even though artisans may not be aware of the Spirit who is illumining them, their work is an attempt to bring to light the glory of God that is buried and held captive in creation. In the pottery they fashion, in the children whom they awaken to freedom, in the poem to which they give birth, men who work upon creation are trying to reveal the meaning of a vast symphony... They are searching for a beloved Face that calls to them from the depths of their being. Here the original condition for all creative and liberating culture becomes clear: a silence, thanks to which men put themselves in tune with the “wordless” Word, the Son who became a “nonspeaker” (an *in-fans*), the “seeds of the word” that await them in the universe.

But the hour when culture dawns is the very hour of creation itself: mute nature is transformed into word, raw matter is impregnated with spirit, opaqueness becomes transparent. Those who allow themselves to be apprehended by the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit then experience a real transfiguration of culture. The supreme activity of man is to consent to a marriage with the Word. If our gaze is to liberate the beauty hidden in all things, it must first be bathed with light in him whose gaze sends beauty streaming out. If our words are to express the symphony of the Word, they must first be immersed in the silence and harmony of the Word. If our hands are to fashion the icon of creation, we must first allow ourselves to be fashioned by him who unites our flesh to the splendor of the Father.

It is then that culture bears its promised fruit, as it anticipates the

eternal communion in the lowliness of the flesh. It achieves its goal only when in its own mysterious way it moves man toward communion with God and thereby with reconciled humanity and with nature that has become transparent. The freshness of the first creation, which nostalgically inspired artistic creativity, is no longer in a mythical past but in the world that is coming, and culture, delivered from its bonds, already opens us to that new world. Silence, “the mystery of the world that is coming” (Saint Isaac of Nineveh), transfigures our gaze; we are able to see the glory of God with open eyes. The silence of the eyes, which is as it were the brightness shining from a heart at peace, can then welcome him who comes: yes, “the Word became flesh, and we saw his glory” (Jn 1:14).²

The parallels between this and the text from John Paul II above are almost uncanny in their convergence. Truly, if our gaze is to unseal the beauty hidden in all things, we must look with the very eyes with which God looks upon his creation. If we are to attune to the “word” that created things speak from God, and to let them breathe forth their fragrance, to sound their echo of eternity, and to radiate with the light bestowed on them by the Trinity, then it is all the more important, and utterly necessary, to seek God himself in his transcendent mystery. For only in knowing him can we know them as they are. Only in being joined to him, married to him totally in all that we are, can we cultivate created reality to be all that it was meant to be. Yes, the greatest and utmost activity that God wishes for us is “to consent to a marriage with the Word,” with the eternal Son of the Father who became man to espouse us to himself, and, secondarily but truly, to cultivate our creation into life.

And the goal of this whole transfiguration, this whole work of culture, is not merely some impersonal beauty, some quality of radiance and clarity, but *communion!* It “anticipates the eternal communion in the lowliness of the flesh.” How beautiful a definition of culture this is! It is the living space in which the transfiguration effected by God in the depth of the human heart—teaching us to gaze upon the whole of creation with his very own tender and affirming gaze—flows out to touch and unseal the beauty latent in the whole of creation itself. And this seeing, this seeing of the pure of heart, is not a mere reading of the temporal structures of the cosmos and their horizontal word, their fading significance. Rather, it is reading the very mystery of eternity within them: blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall *see God*. They shall see God in all that he has made, because their hearts have been handed over to him in the poverty of love, the poverty in which and from which and towards which all abundance flows, in the never-ceasing respiration of contemplative love and mutual self-giving. See, prayer truly is everything, and all artists, creators, and artisans of culture—which we all are in one way or another—cannot do so authentically and securely except in, from, for, and towards prayer: towards intimacy with the Trinity in total and unmediated embrace.

Culture “achieves its goal,” therefore, “only when in its own mysterious way it moves man toward communion with God and thereby with reconciled humanity and with nature that has become transparent.” This means

that the fruit of authentic culture, in all of its diversified manifestations, is a living irradiation of the mystery of eternity, a kind of anticipation of the very beauty of the new creation, when the whole universe, made new by God himself, will be totally irradiated by the light and love of the Trinity. Here each individual person and the whole of humanity is drawn into perfect intimacy with God, complete communion with other persons, and indeed here the very visible, material creation itself, harmonized within the human heart and sharing in the redemption of the body, is made completely transparent to the ravishing beauty of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ישוע

PLAYFUL INTIMACY: THE HEART OF ALL THINGS

Before beginning to speak more deeply about culture, and about the specific healing of our culture in its materialistic opacity, in its pornified vision, in its atheistic muteness, I would like to make one more comment that will situate everything else. In speaking about the birth of authentic culture, I am aware of a deeply rooted human tendency, to which I wish to draw attention, precisely so that what I am saying will not be misunderstood, but rather may be received as I intend. This is the tendency to focus on “things” rather than on persons, and, indeed, to focus on “task” rather than on “gift.” But the profound and beautiful thing about true culture is that its inner heartbeat—the throbbing core at the center of everything and permeating everything—is precisely the primacy of persons over things and the reality of gift that far surpasses every task and also enfolds all tasks and alone gives them meaning. To the degree that a culture expresses this, it is true, since to that same degree it is transparent to the life of the Trinity. This is essentially the same thing as saying that childlike wonder lies at the foundation and the heart of culture, as it lies at the heart of human existence itself.

This is so important: *the innermost disposition of the human person before God is that of childlike wonder and lighthearted play, and, within this, everything else can blossom and flower according to God’s intentions and within the radiant beauty and harmony of his all-enfolding and all-permeating Love.* And this is true not only in the inmost recesses of the heart in its solitude before God—though it occurs here with a particularly beautiful vulnerability and intensity—but indeed in the heart’s relationship with all that exists, and in a special way in the relationship between human persons drawn together within the enveloping love of the Trinity. It is from this central place of wonder and play, of gratitude and awe and tender receptivity, that the whole of human existence flows freely and beautifully, and to this place that all returns anew. After all, in the new creation, after God remakes all things according to his reconciling and transfiguring love, and takes the whole universe up into the innermost embrace of his own divine life through the Risen Body of Jesus Christ, there will remain nothing that is not totally permeated by *person* and *intimacy* and made radiant in its participation in this glorious, undimmed light.

The whole richness of the created world will be so immersed in the innermost circulation of the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and in the participation of created persons within this life of love and intimacy—that it

will simply be impossible to see or approach any created thing outside of the beauty and love of the Trinity. Matter itself will be made new, not losing its properties of materiality, but rather finding its consummation in the very tangible fullness of the living “space” of the dance of love between the divine Persons, and in the space of loving communication between all human persons who are taken up into the embrace of the Trinity. The materiality of the whole universe will thus be transfigured, irradiated with the uncreated light of eternal Love, sharing in the newness that we already glimpse in the Resurrected Body of Christ, and in the body of the Virgin Mary, assumed in her fullness into the life of heaven. Our own bodies will follow where the bodies of Jesus and Mary have gone before—and in us the whole material creation will find consummation too—in the ceaseless respiration of loving intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To the degree that life and relationship and culture express this mystery, to the degree that they are transparent to the mystery of the eternal love and intimacy, to the primacy (and indeed the ultimate meaning and beauty) of the person and intimacy over all else—to that degree they grant a glimpse, an anticipation, a foretaste, of the beauty of the new creation that awaits us when Christ comes again at the end of time. But to the degree that they focus on secondary things as if they were primary, on “artifacts” or “things” over persons, on abstract and intellectual questions divorced from the incarnate mystery of human existence in the rich fabric of life and relationships—and to the degree that they fall short of expressing objective truth and goodness—then there is a danger that such a culture will obscure rather than reveal the mystery of eternity.

In responding to the “culture of death,” in which the individual person is seen as dispensable, valuable only insofar as he or she is useful for the good of society and productive in the realm of things, there is a contrary danger, that essentially follows the same paradigm, even if in a much more subtle way. This is true, sadly, even in much of the life of those in the Church and in their efforts of ministry and evangelization, and in their desire to foster a contrary culture, a culture of life and beauty. Here, too, there is a tendency to focus on the periphery, on secondary things, and to lose sight of the centrality and absolute meaning of person and intimacy. Instead, one can get caught up in programs of evangelization, in strategies of ministry and restructuring, in the fashioning of artifacts of culture meant to speak to the people of today, all the while listening primarily or solely to one’s own ideas rather than to the throbbing hearts of actual people, and, above all, to the throbbing Heart of our loving and compassionate God.

This is why I believe that prayer, the prayer of the liturgy and the prayer of the heart (become one single stream of the divine life at the heart of human existence)—lies at the core and the foundation of authentic culture, and is the primary gift that God desires to give to us anew, in our culture which is aching with hollowness and yearning to make contact with ultimate meaning. Yes, and prayer is not some “thing” that we are to achieve or create, some particular practice that we should engage in (as much and as deeply as we *must* explicitly pray each day!), some refueling exercise so that we can return to ministry and activity with greater vigor. No, the prayer of the heart is sim-

ply the life of the heart. It is simply the heart's ability to breathe again the breath of love for which we were created, to inhale and exhale the life of the Spirit, reopened thus into the true mutual self-giving, and the flowering intimacy, in which alone we will find true and enduring rest. Thus, prayer is my entrance back into pure and gratuitous intimacy with God for its own sake, and, from this place, to welcome and be united to others in an intimacy that is just as gratuitous. Let me say it again: each one of us has been created by God for one ultimate purpose alone—for *playful intimacy* with him, and, in him, with our brothers and sisters and with the entire universe.

ישוע

LOVE AND INTIMACY: THE WELLSPRING OF ALL FRUITFULNESS

In the light of the playful intimacy which we explored in the previous reflection, this reality of “holy gratuity” that springs from something being meaningful for its own sake, we can find a pathway to the heart of authentic culture, and, specifically, of artistic creativity. Art, in particular, manifests precisely the gratuity of existence, beyond the realm of pragmatic goals and the paradigm of success, competition, and lucrative profitability. This also is why patronage of the arts is so important, so that those who have been entrusted with a gift by God, the gift of seeing and communicating beauty, may be able to do so without excessive worries of material and monetary well-being. Of course, God provides for his children, but he loves to do so precisely from the heart of the communion of saints, this holy interchange of persons in heart-to-heart communication, which also enfolds and is expressed within the mutual exchange of gifts. One of the prime temptations of the artist is to lose the gratuity of beauty and instead to make it a means of profit, of success, of prestige, or any other end result which would make the art about the individual rather than about reality, and, ultimately, about God.

This is also why art, though manifesting the mystery of gratuity, cannot be idolized in and of itself either (as the saying “art for art’s sake” seems to imply). Art, rather, exists for the sake of man, and man exists for the glory of God, or rather, he exists from, in, and through the glory of God, this glory which is nothing but the irradiation of God’s eternal Love. In a word, man finds his fulfillment in the glory of God, as Saint Irenaeus said: “The life of man is the glory of God; and the glory of God is man fully alive.” So art exists for man and for God, it exists within the richness of their relationship and as a manifestation of the communion between them. But art also exists for creation, for the redemption and elevation of creation, as a part of that sacred priesthood of humanity which participates, in its small way, in the universal redemption wrought by Christ, preparing the cosmos for its definitive fulfillment at the end of time, when Christ shall come and inaugurate the final consummation by drawing the whole visible universe into the innermost heart of the Trinity.

And if this is the case, then we cannot say merely “beauty for the sake of beauty,” in the sense of created beauty separated from God. Rather, it is “beauty for God’s sake.” It is “beauty because it is God’s beauty.” As Jean Corbon so pointedly wrote, and which we quoted above: “No word of cul-

ture is innocent. Art, no matter what the claims made for it, is not immediately divine. If beauty is to save the world, it must first cleanse the world. If the work of artisan or artist is to reveal the glory resident in beauty and bring it to fulfillment, it must first have passed through the fire in which creation is restored to its integrity. It is in this fountainhead that the river of life enters into and permeates culture. Culture is an iconography of the Spirit and man, or it is the beauty solely of the devil.” How educative these words are! Art demands a radical commitment on the part of the artist, not only of practice, skill, care, and responsibility, but also, and much more deeply, of purity of heart, of union with God, of deep prayer.

For art surpasses the realm of the pragmatic, the paradigm of achievement and success, not because it is a form of self-expression where I speak “my truth” “regardless of what ‘they’ say,” but rather because it is an *affirmation of the beauty that God has placed within creation, and which seeks to be cherished, unsealed, revealed, and lifted up by man and woman and their loving contemplation and creative activity*. This is so important to emphasize. Art speaks an “ultimate” word not merely because it is art, that is, the work of human hands, but because it is *a word of truth*. Thus art is subjected to the truth and at the service of the truth. It is, as I have said, a “home for the Word.” This is the great gift and task of art, and also the wellspring of profound play. Play? Yes, for in artistic creativity—and the contemplation from which it springs—the deepest disposition is wonder and gratitude, wonder and gratitude birthing and sustaining desire and carrying it to fulfillment.

The deepest disposition of true creativity, therefore, is love. It is love as the welcoming acceptance of the approach of the Beautiful One who comes to me in the sacraments of his presence, and who unites me to himself in the sacred space of the heart. It is love as surrendering to the word of beauty that speaks of the good truth, and following this path to the mature fullness of self-giving before God and all of creation. Yes, there is in fact nothing ultimately fruitful in this world except what is born of love, through love, for love. There is no fruitful force in this world if it is not love and intimacy. Love and intimacy alone bear authentic fruit, for they alone manifest and share in the nature of God’s own life as Trinity. Every form of artistic expression, every act of service, every word spoken, is fruitful if it is born of love—born of the tender and affirming presence of the loving heart—and springs from the intimacy of this heart with reality, or of the intimacy of human hearts with one another. Ultimately, it springs from the intimacy of the human heart with God. This alone is the intimacy that reaches the fulfillment of fruitfulness in the mystery of co-redemption—in the perpetuation of the mystery of redemption achieved in Christ through the individual person in whom he continues to live. This intimacy allows God to pour out his healing love into the broken world through the heart, life, and creativity of the person united to him.

Let me give an example of love and intimacy as the only ultimate wellspring of fruitfulness. If we think of the process of creating art, we see this dynamic of *love* and *intimacy* very clearly. If one is drawn to create works of artistic culture for the right reason, then one does so not as a mode of self-expression, not as a way of exerting one’s individual rights against those of oth-

ers, not even as a mode of self-improvement. No, one does so *as a living responsiveness to the call of reality*. One does so because one's heart has first been *touched* and *moved* by the beauty of the real. Being touched in this way by the truth of beauty, by the beauty of truth, a person wants to be joined together to it, to be *united to it, wed to it, joined to it*, and, through this union, also to be able *to express and manifest it*. This responsiveness to the real, this receptivity to be moved and drawn out of oneself, to be "harnessed into work by the beautiful" (as Norwid would have it), is precisely the form of love. Love is the gift of self that is drawn out of me by the beauty, goodness, and truth that engages me from the outside. Indeed, if we look more deeply, we recognize that love is *me-in-the-act-of-gift*. I myself am called to "become love" by becoming pure gift, pure relationship, in the likeness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are pure love and relationship in the consummate intimacy of their eternal life.

Art, therefore, does call forth the recesses of my own being, drawing forth what is deepest of my very self, not because I am identified with what I create, or that I am reducible to my activity, but because it flows from and manifests this gift-nature of love, and is transparent only insofar as it springs from this deep wellspring of the contemplative heart. Yes, I am who I am not fundamentally in what I do, what I achieve or create, but first of all in my very act of receiving from God, in my virginal receptivity to the gift of his love. I am, in fact, God's very love for me, and I return to the full truth of my identity only by returning to the sacred solitary space where I stand alone before him, and allow him to pronounce in me: "You are my beloved child, in whom I delight." Here my identity is not "realized," not achieved, not fashioned, and indeed not even grown; it is simply received as a gratuitous gift from God, full and complete from the first moment of my conception. Nonetheless, this gift, flowing from God, seeks to flow back in reciprocal surrender: in my becoming-gift-to-God as I have first been, and am always, gift-from-God.

Yes, here alone I find my full maturity as a person, and the consummation of my humanity: in completing the circuit of reciprocal gift with God, and entering, thus, into the fullness of intimacy with him that this reciprocal giving establishes and brings to fulfillment. This, in fact, is the deepest meaning of redemption, and what Christ himself accomplished for us in his Incarnation and Paschal Mystery. He has come to us and completed the circuit of love which sin disrupted. And by accepting the gift of grace, the gift of redemption flowing from him, we are drawn back into this circulation of relationship with God, drawn back into the receiving and giving of the life of the Trinity. And as this relationship matures to touch, permeate, and harness our whole being, we attain to the meaning of our existence: the fullness of love, the consummation of intimacy. This is the fullness of *becoming-love* in the God-who-is-Love, and also, thus, the total permeation of our whole being and all of our experience by *lived intimacy with him*. This is sanctity. This is holiness.

But let us return, in this light, to the nature of art. I said that art expresses our inner being and harnesses it as gift. This is true of *all* human activity, all of our choices and actions. Thus, though I wanted to emphasize that I re-

ceive my identity from God in an act of pure receptivity, and surrender it to him in the sanctuary of unmediated surrender, in the heart of prayer's solitude and silence, this circulation of acceptance and giving is also manifested *in all the moments and details of life*. Indeed it must be. For my whole life, in every one of its thoughts, choices, actions, and experiences also seeks to be permeated by this circulation of love, seeks to become love. The two are not separable, the ontological truth received from God as a pure gift, and the existential truth of the transfiguration of my whole life by this gift. Rather, it is precisely the gift of love already received, God's never-failing love for me in every single moment of my life, that enables me to walk the path of fidelity to him and to let myself be harnessed as a gift back to him, and to my brothers and sisters, until my whole life becomes a "eucharist of love" in the likeness of the Eucharistic Christ, and indeed in the likeness of the eternal life and love of the Trinity.

And art, as a gift born of love, from love, for love, is part of this "eucharization" of my existence. It is the sacramentalizing of my very body, of my whole being, as well as of the work of my hands. For it is an act in which the heart—by exteriorizing itself through communicating what it has been granted to see and experience, and thus what is most intimate and precious to it—is made *vulnerable as a gift of love*. Yes, the artist reveals himself or herself in the art that is born of their creativity. Of course, the beauty is sought for itself, the beauty is set free by the loving creativity of the artist, and, in this and through this, the Creator is glorified whose beauty lives in every thing. But in this act the created-creator, the artist, acts in the likeness of the true Creator, and thus becomes gift as God the Creator is gift. The artist, indeed, to the degree that the art is born of the heart, born of the deep and living truth of love and intimacy—in other words, of prayer and sanctity—the artist becomes, indeed, a begetter, a birther, in the likeness of God the Father who is the begetter of the Son for all eternity. Or, from another angle, one becomes conformed to the Son in his Incarnation, life, and Paschal Mystery, by which his redemptive activity, his fruitful suffering, has birthed the great good of a new creation, permeating this fallen and obscure creation with the light of grace that makes it free and unseals the beauty that is latent within it. Yes, one is drawn into a synergy with the Spirit, by whose presence alone all things unveil their deepest meaning and are set free: "You send forth your Spirit and you renew the face of the earth." The artist, in summary, is called to be conformed to the Trinity—to the Creative-Begetting Father, to the eternal Word-Son through whom all things were made and in whom have all been saved, and to the Spirit whose breath impregnates all things and brings them to life.

ALLOWING REALITY TO LIVE IN ME: KNOWING AS COMMUNING

Let me continue in the light of the reflections from the previous section, specifically unfolding more deeply my words on art as born of *love* and *intimacy*. While the word intimacy is most properly used to describe interpersonal human relationships, since it implies the mutual indwelling of “I” and “You” born of reciprocal self-giving—and thus requires knowledge, love, and freedom on the part of both persons—the term can be used analogously to describe all profound relationship with reality. There is a primal intimacy, a fundamental communion, which is established in every act of *knowing*, just as there is in every act of *loving*. Whenever I come to understand the essence of a tree, for example—the unique being of this particular tree that stands before me as well as the true nature of trees, as expressed in the giving of the name—I enter into communion with this tree. The inner being of the tree, as it were, unfolds itself outward to come and live within me, in the inner sanctuary of my own mind. And this living finds its fulfillment when the act of knowing births the act of *loving*, when what I behold and receive of the tree in knowledge awakens in me an attitude of reverence, affirmation, care, and affection. And in fact, as my love is awakened toward the tree—as for any reality—my knowledge itself attains to a whole new level of depth, since true love purifies and unseals our vision and allows us to see what is accessible only to love, looking with the eyes of love which God himself turns ceaselessly toward his own creation.

Aristotle in fact understood knowledge this way, as the welcoming of things into ourselves, and thus as a form of communion born of deep contemplative receptivity before the essential word that each reality speaks. To open myself to understand, therefore, is to open myself in vulnerability to allow reality into myself, and thus to lose my self-enclosed autonomy and to become a person-in-relation. This in-living, however, applies most properly to *true* understanding, the prerequisite of which is humility and reverence, and contrasts radically with an empty head knowledge or with the “knowing” born of prideful appropriation (“I own this reality because I know it, and thus I can control it, master it, and manipulate it, or even simply use this knowledge to bolster myself”). True knowing is communing; it is intimacy, seeing into the interior and allowing the interior of what is known into my own interior. The word intimacy itself expresses this, as it derives from the Latin *intimus*, as in Saint Augustine’s “*Deus interior intimo meo*,” “God is more interior to me than I am to myself.”

John Henry Newman spoke of this in another Latin phrase, which he took as his episcopal motto: “*Cor ad cor loquitur*,” “heart speaks to heart.” This is the nature of all true knowledge between persons, the profound communing in which what is deepest in each, their own subjectivity, their own “I” in solitude before God, is in some way shared with the other and revered by the other. But it is also true, in fact, in all knowing even of non-personal things, of all things that exists. There is, of course, a hierarchy of being in which creatures of a higher order possess a richer “interior,” a more pro-

found essence and thus speak a more vivid, weightier word from God, and creatures of a lower order are more simple and less rich (though still rich in their own way, according to God's intentions). In fact, the higher orders of being are *simple* too, but in the manner proper to God's own Being, since their participation in this Being is greater: their simplicity does not consist in not being composed of parts, not having relational elements, of being a simple "thing," like a rock, for example, but rather consists in *the simplicity of harmony and unity, of interrelationship bound together by communion*.

A tree is composed of many elements, but it is simple because it is harmonious, because all of these elements are *one* in the single *essence* of the tree. So too a symphony is one symphony, expressing the essence of beauty that was conceived and brought forth by the composer and performed by the orchestra. But the symphony is also incredibly complex, not in a contradictory, off-putting, or absurd way; rather, its complexity comes together in simplicity, and the richness is nothing but the richness of a fullness of being. How much more true this is of human persons and of human communion! Here, through the image of God that we are, and to the degree that we live according to his likeness, we have a true living participation in the infinitely rich and infinitely simple existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What does all of this have to do with our reflections on art? The connection should be rather clear. If all true knowing and understanding is a form of primal communion, of intimacy, then the degree of communion necessary to give birth to authentic art is particularly profound. Indeed, the knowledge here is not only understanding the essence of a thing—or rather communing with it, "standing-under" it, as we can never *fully* comprehend anything in the sense of possessing it—rather this knowledge goes even further. It is *joining* oneself to the reality so deeply that it becomes, as it were, a part of oneself, taken up into one's own existence and activity. For example, how many hours does it take practicing a musical instrument before it becomes, as it were, an extension of one's own life, docilely cooperating with one's intentions to give birth to the beauty of sound! One is invited to enter into a prolonged dialogue with the instrument, and through it with the very nature of music, of sound as produced by air, by vibration, by strings under a bow, etc. The prolonged hours invested in coming to know and be joined to the beauty manifest in the instrument is a portal into the whole of reality itself, as it were, since from the instrument one comes to know music more deeply, and from music one comes to understand existence itself more profoundly, in its passage from dissonance to harmony, in its movement through the varied passages of the melody of life.

We see here anew how important is the interior life of the artist, how important is the life of prayer, which is the true heartbeat and life's breath of the soul and the body. Without prayer this movement of understanding breaks down, and can only reach a certain degree of depth. For all the strains of beauty and meaning in the universe lead back to God, and in him alone unveil their deepest secrets, their most intimate mysteries. Of course, many persons come to know God "implicitly," come to feel him and catch glimpses of him in beauty, even to reach out to him in the shadowy apparitions of his face in their encounter with beauty. And they may express very profound in-

sights concerning God and reality without even realizing it, to the degree that they are docile and obedient to the reality that they do see. But how important it is to know God himself, to live in him and he in us, not in an unconscious, implicit way, but in the fullness of loving relationship, a relationship born of reciprocal seeing and the profound knowledge to which this gives birth!

Let it be so in us and in all of your children! May we know you and, in knowing you, love you. May we open ourselves to your approach in knowing that we are known by you, known by you with a gaze of utmost tenderness and cherishing love. Yes, as you know us and welcome us into your inner being, so may we know you and welcome you in turn. May you live in us through knowledge and may we live in you through knowledge. May you live in us through love and may we live in you through love. May we share a single life, joined together in a single activity, as the musician with his instrument, no, as persons joined together in the freedom of mutual self-giving, birthing a single life of perfect harmony in which all the fullness of your eternal life of love pervades our existence and causes it to radiate with your own light, love, joy, and beauty. Let it be, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let it be.

Part II

Beauty Irradiating
the World

IN SYNERGY WITH THE SPIRIT: CHANNELING THE WELLSPRING

How profoundly the reality that we approached in the previous reflection illumines the nature of beauty, of art, and of the humble gift that the artist offers to God and to others in placing his or her life at the service of the manifestation of the beautifully good truth in this world! The artist is a servant of knowledge, of true knowledge born of love, born of contemplative receptivity before God's voice as incarnate in beauty. Thus the artist is called upon to exercise a ministry of *prophesy*, just as he or she exercises a ministry of *priesthood* (and, in this, a ministry of *kingship* as well, of stewardship over the good things of creation and of one's own life, in humble docility to God the true King). This prophetic stewardship is a service of the Word, of the Wisdom of God who is Truth, by placing one's entire being and all of one's efforts of creativity, of co-creation, into the orbit of his love and at the service of his desire to communicate this love to each one of his children.

Yes, the artist's great gift and task is to reveal to humanity the beauty given from God, and to help all trace their way back into the uncreated Beauty of God himself. In this they participate in the birth of true culture and in the transfiguration of the world by the grace of redemption. But as has been emphasized many times already, the true transformation of the world, its redemption, is something that only God can do. God alone redeems. But he seeks to perpetuate the activity of redemption that he has already accomplished, to spread the fruits flowing from the Crucified and Risen Body of Christ, by the Spirit of Love, into every time and place. And he humbly rejoices to do so also in and through those who surrender to this grace and who wish to cooperate with him, to serve him, in this magnificent saving mystery. This synergy of God and the human person, of the divine Spirit and the human spirit, of the Son-made-man and of man-made-partaker-in-the-life-of-God, is the wellspring of all authentic fruitfulness and of the deepest and most transparent creativity in this world. And in order for this synergy to occur, everything we explored in the previous two reflections on knowledge as communion seeks to be realized both between the human heart and created reality and also, more deeply, between the human heart and God. This knowledge both causes and also calls for a deep purification of heart, such that one approaches reality, welcomes it, not with a possessive, grasping, lustful, use-oriented, irreverent, flippant, know-it-all, doubting, or criticizing gaze, but with a gaze of humble, reverent, awe-filled, playful, wondering receptivity and responsiveness that participates in the very eternal wonder and play of the Trinity himself.

One approaches reality with a spirit of faith, hope, and love, a spirit born of one's profound relationship with God in prayer, the crucible and the playground in which the life of communion, the life of mystical intimacy with God, matures most deeply and fundamentally. Here we come, at last, to the threshold of speaking about the "iconography" of true art, which is so desperately important in healing the wounds of our contemporary culture, hurting and blinded as it is by a pornification of seeing, hearing, and life. Re-

call that by pornification I refer not only to explicit sexual lust, the objectification of persons through sexual desire and use-oriented fantasy, but more deeply to the blindness from which such a radical perversion springs. This pornification is a deep impurity of heart that springs from the roots of original and personal sin in the depths of our being. And it is allowed to spread its effects throughout our relationships with reality because of the false presuppositions so widely believed in our world: namely, cultural and moral relativism, materialistic consumerism, hedonism, a paradigm of success and achievement excluding God and the praise of God, a preference for the “made” over the “born,” the *factum* over the *natum*, a fascination with technological sights and sounds and with virtual reality, which numbs the heart to the wonder of ordinary reality, and makes the silence, stillness, and sobriety of authentic presence to being very difficult.

Pornography in the narrower sense, and pornification in images and sounds (permeated by sexual innuendo and lustful energy) is only one aspect of this deeper trend that marks our culture. For the “taking” of sexual use is only one manifestation of the grasping and use that mark every sin, from gluttony to manipulating another person for one’s own success. And the root of all of these sins is *narcissism*, but not fundamentally as the psychological disorder (though this disorder springs from the deeper spiritual disorder of a lack of humility and authentic contrition, of a radical openness to and reliance on the grace which alone can make me righteous). Rather, it springs from the inward-turning gaze upon myself, which looks out to reality not with primal wonder, with poverty of receptivity, with generosity of surrender, but in order to take and use and control. But we can take one step further. This inward-turning movement, and this grasping possessiveness, is a compensation for a more fundamental rift, and seeks to bandage over the bleeding wound of the loss of God. The loss of God, the rejection of God, the forgetfulness of God. This is the heart of every sin and the greatest wound gaping open at the heart of our contemporary world. Even when so many still profess to believe in God, so few actually live according to these empty words; and more and more as time passes, explicit atheism, or simply complete dismissal of the thought of God altogether, is replacing what once claimed to be a culture founded in the values and beliefs of Judaeo-Christian revelation and history.

Thus the art that is needed today—no, let us go deeper, the *word of truth* needed today, in art, culture, spoken and written word, in life and love and community, in every detail of human life—is the *Word of God*. It is Jesus Christ as the revelation of the Father and his Love. It is the Holy Trinity as the Origin and Consummation of all things, as the Love and Intimacy from which we have been born, in which we are ceaselessly sustained, and toward which we are called to journey, unto the consummation of eternal life.

The Wellspring of the waters of life, pouring out from the wounded side of Jesus Christ on Calvary and in the Resurrection, and from the heart of his Church in which he continues to live until the end of time, is the reality that alone can heal the wounds of our aching hearts, of our broken culture, still bearing seeds of beauty, impulses of longing, but also so fractured and lost in the wayward paths that we have chosen. Yes, and each one of us, in our

unique way, is called upon to be a channel of these waters into our world, into the hearts of our brothers and sisters. We are called to join in with the Holy Spirit in a total synergy of love, so that out of our hearts, too, may flow rivers of living water, to make the parched land of this world bloom, becoming radiant with the beauty and fragrance of innumerable flowers of love and intimacy, until we return home at last to the garden of paradise in the eternal life of heaven.

יְשׁוּעָה

PORNOGRAPHY OF THE BODY VERSUS ICONOGRAPHY OF THE BODY

Let us prepare to pass now from the pornography of the body to the iconography of the body. Pornification is marked by the severing of the body from the person and the sexualization of this body as a mere object of lust. Here the *language* of the body becomes unintelligible, and the icon becomes an idol. One sees the bodies of others no longer as a living self, a beautiful and unique “I” incarnate within this world and aspiring to be loved and to love, but as a locus for one’s own lustful desires. Woman, for example, becomes the anonymous bearer of man’s ideal of beauty, his muse, his goddess, or, further along this path of depersonalization, the object of his fantasies. And sadly the woman, created to receive and rejoice in the gaze of love, often feeds into these fantasies by presenting herself precisely in order to invite this gaze, since it seems to be the only way to draw attention. But being lusted after is very different than being desired, and light-years away from being loved.

To the impure heart, the body has become opaque, rather than transparent to divine light. It proves to be a stumbling-block rather than a stepping-stone, a sacrilege rather than a sacrament. Yet the problem lies not in the body, but in the way that it is seen! The body of each person retains, even in its fallen state, its inalienable dignity and its capacity to manifest the person and the person’s call to communion; it retains its permeability, indeed, to the light and love of the Trinity incarnate in human flesh. It remains, in other words, an icon and a sacrament, even if it is so often treated as an idol and the locus of deepest sacrilege. As unworthy reception of the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion is a sacrilege, so too relating to the bodies of others in similar ways is sacrilege. Of course, the gravity lies on different levels, but the similarity remains. Why? Because both are forms of *rape*, in the original meaning of the term: to ravage another person’s sacred solitude with my possessive intrusion, to use another person for my selfish satisfaction. It is to take what is not mine, what can only be freely given by the other. And indeed, it is even deeper: not only can this sacred gift be given only by the other person—by Christ in Communion and by man or woman in the body—but I must find the sanction, the permission, the invitation of God himself, to enter into such a holy space.

Even if a woman wishes to give her body away in pornography or prostitution, or in a passing sexual encounter, this does not imply that she has the *right* to so give herself. For in this sacred sphere of sexual capacity, the blessing of God itself must first descend upon two hearts—and this blessing is the

gift of marriage, which makes the act of sexual union what it is truly meant to be, the sealing of a lifelong bond of covenant-love and mutual belonging open to fruitfulness in the likeness of God. However, I am not saying that nakedness itself needs a similar sanction—i.e. that nakedness is wrong in all circumstances except marital union—since the word that the body fundamentally speaks is *not sexual, but personal*. It is in fact of prime importance in the healing of our culture to come to experience and understand nakedness, nudity, not as directly connected with sex, but rather as the simple manifestation of *personal vulnerability and unveiled beauty*. The capacity for sex and the sexual values of the body are a small part of this vulnerability, a specific incarnation of this vulnerability, but by no means the only or even the deepest dimension of our bodily sacramentality.

Let it suffice to say here that the most important thing is to see the *body* as the *person* and the *person* as the *body*. The two are not separable, though not identical either. I do not merely “have” my body; I *am* my body. But not only am I my body, but I am my spirit too. Best said: I *am bodily*. I *am spiritual*. I am bodily and spiritual, I am embodied spirit and spiritual body—currently ruptured by the wound of sin that tears the harmony between these two dimensions asunder and places them in conflict, but destined to be fully restored to radiant harmony and perfect cooperation and unity by the redemption wrought in Christ. And to see the person as the body and the body as the person? It means that the only adequate response to seeing and encountering another person’s body—in whatever circumstances—is *love*. As John Paul II said in his early work *Love and Responsibility*, a person can never become an object of *use* for us, becoming a means for the fulfillment of our own ends (as would an impersonal tool); rather, the only adequate response to a person is always and ever *love, which is to affirm the other person for their own sake as possessing—as being—infinite dignity rooted in the creative love of God, and to seek their authentic good based on this dignity*.

The body itself, in its wholeness as well as in all of its parts, speaks precisely of this deep need of the person to be loved for his or her own sake, and also gives voice to the orientation of the person to communion in and through the body: solitude blossoming through nakedness into intimacy. And what is so deeply needed in our world, fractured by sin, is a purification of heart that permeates all of our faculties of thought, feeling, and imagination, and transfigures even our bodily senses and responses, so that our only response to the body of another person is that of reverent love. A human gaze, after all, is only authentic, true, and transparent to the degree that it shares in the gaze of God, seeing as he sees, loving as he loves. As John Paul II says, “Only before the eyes of God can the human body remain naked and unclothed, and keep its splendor and its beauty intact.” And the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, opening up to us the deep promise of transformation that allows us to see as God sees: “Even now [purity of heart] enables us to see *according to God*...; it lets us perceive the human body—ours and our neighbor’s—as a temple of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of divine beauty” (par. 2519).

Our culture, so pornified by the exaltation of the sexual values of the body

*Address at the Dedication of the Sistine Chapel on its Restoration.

and by the idolization of fantasy—whether it be “perfect” beauty or the “perfect” sexual experience that my lust dreams up—desperately needs the evangelization that comes from the gaze of God cast upon our humanity. And this gaze has been given in Christ, and continues to spread throughout time and space, touching and harnessing our hearts, and seeking to behold and love the human person—each human person—in and through and with us. Thus our culture deeply needs to behold the beauty of the *meaning* of the body, and not merely its visible attractiveness or pleasantness. It needs to be taught and enabled—through both the radiant clarity of words of truth as well as the radiant transparency of authentic beauty—to see the body as an *icon* again, an icon of the Trinity and of humanity’s participation in the Trinity. Thus there is a deep need for the unfolding, throughout our culture, of a true “iconography of the body.”

ישׁוּעַ

A GARDEN ENCLOSED: TO SEE WITH PURITY OF HEART

As John Paul II says, sexual difference goes down to the very foundations of our humanity. Therefore, the distinctions between man and woman are not just secondary or accidental, but influence us to our very core—even if in this core they converge together in the single and indivisible mystery of personal love: our call to intimacy with the Trinity and with other persons in the Trinity. In other words, here sexual difference is surpassed, not by no longer being present or relevant, but by returning to its source—not annihilated but perfected—in the Reality of the Trinity’s Love.

This makes me think of a conversation I had in a group a number of years ago, in which we spoke about nuptial and bridal spirituality—as in the Song of Songs—and if men can relate to Christ as their Spouse, or if they instead relate only to the Church as spouse, and relate instead to Christ as only Brother or Friend. I do relate to Christ as Bridegroom, and not merely brother or friend, even as I also find myself invited to participate in his spousal love and self-donation to the Church and to those persons entrusted to me. I owe a lot of this to God’s grace at work from early in my life, drawing me to the center where intimacy with God alone gives meaning to all things, a love that is so often expressed by the mystics as nuptial, and yet which indeed surpasses all created analogies while fulfilling them. I feel like here my masculinity is making contact with that deepest Mystery in which sexual difference is not absolved but makes contact with its very Origin in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here the analogy of the sexes—of man and woman—makes contact with the intimate love and self-giving of the Trinity, which is the Archetype of both the *filial* and the *spousal* relationship, and thus the ultimate origin of gender while itself surpassing gender. And it is supreme friendship: “I have called you friends, for I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15).

This is where the intimacy between men and men, women and women, and between men and women, can all be equally deep and intimate—when it roots itself in the love and communion of the Trinity. And yet it still remains true, particularly in this life (and, in some way, in the next), that a par-

ticular form of intimacy is possible between persons of the opposite sex. It is clear that the spiritual constitution of woman and the spiritual constitution of man are inherently ordered to resonate with one another with a profound and particular depth. The physical complementarity is really a symbol of a much deeper personal and spiritual complementarity—and so just as two women can never interpenetrate in sexual intercourse as can a man and a woman, the same is true on the spiritual level. Man alone has the capacity to reverence this mystery of the woman with a reverence that fully mirrors the *spousal* and *paternal* love of God. And in loving her like this, God invites her to open herself to the gift he wants to pour into her, as well as, in her very receiving of his love, to give herself to him in return. (But indeed this is true both for the man and the woman, even their relation to each other manifests one or other dimension of this “vertical” mystery that gives meaning to everything.)

The “otherness” that man and woman experience before a person of the opposite sex is an awareness, not only that they are “different,” but that they *correspond*, that we are *ordered to one another* by God. The woman yearns to have her unique beauty and preciousness seen, revered, and loved, and the man has an unparalleled ability to do so. And the man, for his part, yearns to make contact with primordial beauty in the way that it is manifested in an unparalleled way in woman, and he yearns to give himself to shelter, protect, and serve this beauty with all that he is. The woman also has a unique capacity to receive the man, to provide a space in which his own person and masculinity may unfold themselves, and she, in turn, sees in man and through man the mystery of God, just as he sees in her the same mystery, such that, together, they are impelled ever deeper into the embrace of the Trinity himself. Yes, and persons can never stop at the point of relating to one another on the basis of their complementarity, of their orientation as man and woman, of their desires and aspirations; no, they are called to press on, through the purifying fires of God’s love, to the place where love is matured as disinterested, cherishing gift in the light of the tenderness of the Trinity. Here complementarity is fulfilled, not by being a “theme” focused on, not by blinding persons in the immature longing for fulfillment, but by simply being a dimension of the fully mature and free donation of persons in the likeness of the Persons of the Triune God, and, indeed, of their donation to the Triune God above all and in all, this God who has first given himself totally to them and for them.

I think here of how John Paul explains that *eros* and *ethos* come together: the yearning for union with primordial beauty (*eros*) and the goodness of the pure heart that alone can truly see and enter into such beauty (*ethos*). Of course, in our culture the term “erotic” is almost always misunderstood, and so can be misleading to use. For *eros* is not fundamentally or basically about sex—indeed, it is not originally about sex at all—even as the conjugal intent also finds its place within, and as a particular manifestation of, the *eros* that permeates the whole of human existence. But even here, the impulse of the heart toward the beauty of a person of the opposite gender is not merely sexual or biological, though it can have biological elements (which we commonly wrongly term “erotic”), which are called to be taken up and transfig-

ured in the realm of a fully personal and free love.* Thus these dimensions of sexual capacity call forth in us an attitude of true discernment, in which we bring into the light the stirrings of our hearts that they may be purified and ordered by the grace of God, until they spontaneously manifest his own disinterested and affirming love (TOB 46.4-6, and indeed audiences 46 through 49). And here, in being wedded to *ethos*, true *eros* aspires, not only towards beauty, goodness, and truth in their created manifestations, but above all and beyond all towards the primordial beauty which is the intimacy of the Trinity, the only true fulfillment of the longings of every heart. Eros is, in fact, in its simple and transparent truth, nothing but the longing for God which God himself has implanted in our hearts. As Augustine said, that man who understood so profoundly that the desire for God is the heart of all prayer and Christian life: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

As we walk this path of purification and are radically renewed in our very being, in the inner wellsprings of our heart, this weddedness to the ineffable beauty of God allows us also to look upon other human persons, even those of the opposite gender, with a chaste tenderness completely “desaturated” of the concupiscent gaze against which Christ warned in the Sermon on the Mount. This is indeed possible, and is the great gift and task of Redemption flowing from the Paschal Mystery—that our hearts may be purified and transfigured in the grace of God in order to see and love as God himself loves. Let us not presume upon our own strength or self-righteousness, our own capacity, but let us yield ourselves up to the flame of love flashing from the Heart of Christ, and the light radiating from his eyes. The humble heart, and the humble heart alone, is able to receive the gift of purity of vision such as this. For only the poor in spirit can also become pure in heart. On the other hand, if we pull back from this path of purification, from this possibility of a new way of seeing, fearing that it is not possible, and despairing of ever being able to see and love with authentic purity, John Paul encourages us. He says that Christ’s words

do not allow us to stop at the accusation of the human heart and to cast it into a state of continual suspicion, but...must be understood and interpreted as an appeal addressed to the heart. *This derives from the very nature of the ethos of redemption. ... Man cannot stop at casting the heart into a state of continual and irreversible suspicion* due to the manifestations of the concupiscent of the flesh... Redemption is a truth, a reality in the name of which man must feel himself called, and “called with effectiveness.” ... Man must feel himself called to rediscover, or even better, to realize, the spousal meaning of the body and to express in this way the interior freedom of the gift, that is, the freedom of that spiritual state and power that derive from mastery over the concupiscent of the flesh. (TOB 46.4)

*For more on the relation between *eros* and *agape*, and the purification and maturation of *eros*, see my book: *At the Heart of the Gospel: The Love in Whom All Lines Converge*.

Yes, the fruit of an evangelization of the innermost wellsprings and impulses of the human heart by the light and love of the Trinity is possible. And there are without a doubt persons in this world in whom this kind of purity is realized. There are persons in whom the movements of *eros* as relating to the attraction to the sexual value of the body are totally held within, or even dissolved by, a chaste orientation towards the ineffable beauty of God, and a tender reverence and unconditional affirmation of the dignity of each unique person, man and woman, created in God's image and likeness. In persons such as this, the redemption of the body is, as it were, already becoming a reality in anticipation, as their way of seeing, loving, and living is a foretaste of the purity and intimacy of the virginal consummation that awaits us in eternal life.

Saint John Climacus, a monastic writer in the early period of the Church's history, has beautiful words that confirm this very mystery. They are a little glimpse, from over a millenium before, of the truth that John Paul has expounded so beautifully in his words on purity of heart in his *Theology of the Body*. In his work, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Climacus says: "Someone, I was told, at the sight of a very beautiful body, felt impelled to glorify the Creator. The sight of it increased his love for God to the point of tears. Anyone who entertains such feelings in such circumstances is already risen...before the general resurrection."³

And this kind of purity can be born within our hearts, not merely from a rigid "avoidance of the near occasion of sin," but rather through a persistent and trust-filled surrender of our whole being, and of every one of our thoughts, feelings, and desires, into the embrace of the God who made us. And here, in this very act of surrender to God, we can find the humble confidence and courage to make contact with the beauty for which our hearts were made—the beauty of the whole creation which manifests the beauty of God, and in particular the beauty of masculinity and femininity. Yes, and in this path we need not fear, need not cut off our humanity and flee from it, but are invited to walk a path that—while certainly taking account of our capacities and our weaknesses in our actions—also trusts in the grace of God and is not content with anything less than a true super-affirmation of the beauty of the whole creation (of the human body included) in the sight of God. God's grace, pouring from the Crucified and Risen Body of Christ, can truly make us new. It can teach us, in our very beholding of the body, to see the beauty of the Trinity manifest, and to affirm the dignity of the incomparable person unveiled. Again, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "Even now [purity of heart] enables us to see *according to God*...; it lets us perceive the human body—ours and our neighbor's—as a temple of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of divine beauty" (par. 2519).

To aid in this evangelization of the heart is a large part of the purpose of these few reflections. Yes, a pure man knows from experience that the human body is not a scandal, not something to be escaped from in fear, but something—or rather someone—to be revered, loved, and cherished as the living incarnation of the person, of a person called into everlasting intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, this is how even the intimate parts of a woman's body are much more than merely "arousing" to a man,

that is, if he has the capacity to really see and reverence, and not merely to lust and use. (The same goes for a man's body to a woman.) For all the parts of the woman's physical constitution are touching, beautiful, and mysterious on a totally other level than the sexual, even if in our culture we are continually barraged with the claim that tells us the opposite. But if this is really true, if the "word" of the body is first of all *personal*, first of all *virginal*, then it is necessary for us to be able to see and reverence this mystery. It is, as John Paul says, "a value not sufficiently appreciated" (TOB 45.4-5).⁴

One of the beautiful modes in which we can grow in appreciating and reverencing such a value is through a truly chaste and transparent portrayal of the human body in art. This can be of great power in helping to heal and integrate the human heart, in all of its masculinity or femininity, to see and love with purity of heart. Yes, for the heart has the capacity, not only to "look with lustful desire" (Mt 5:27), but to be rent by an unspeakable encounter with beauty, and a deep reverence for the mystery of woman in her fullness or man in his fullness. This is the physical, bodily incarnation of what I mentioned above about the spiritual complementarity of man and woman. For the man, the woman is always a "garden locked, a fountain sealed" (Sg 4:12), before which he bows down in reverence, sheltering her with the enshrouding veil of his love, even as, according to the call of God and out of this same love, he desires to draw closer to her, even "beyond the veil" to make contact with the inner sanctuary of her mystery as woman and beloved of God. And for the woman, the man is always a mystery of transcendent love and imminent closeness, a promise of security and a call to gift, a call to open herself to the nobility of beauty and love that surpasses her and yet seeks to enter into her, to live within her, and to be born from her heart and her existence. And even more so, each man and each woman is an incomparable person, unique and unrepeatable, who is known, willed, and loved by God from all eternity, and called and destined to an eternity of intimacy with God, and with all created persons, in the everlasting consummation of heaven.

ישוע

MEANING AND BEAUTY: READING THE LANGUAGE OF THE BODY

I have spoken in many different ways throughout these reflections of the importance of the body in our existence, as the living "locus" of our intimacy both with God and with other human persons, and indeed of our relationship with the whole of creation. I quoted John Paul II, with his basic premise of the *Theology of the Body*, as saying: "The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it" (TOB 19.4). I would like to speak much more explicitly about this reality here, about the beauty and meaning of the human body. And every human body, of course, is never merely a "thing" within this world, an object, but always a person. It is never a "something" but a "someone," not a "what" but a "who"! And therefore every human body—or better said, every single embodied-person—is deserving of immense reverence and love.

And the very bodily constitution of man and woman speaks this “word” of reverence and love, and indeed reveals visibly something that is even more true, on a deeper level, in the realm of the heart and the spirit, as hopefully has already become clear throughout these reflections. I would like to speak about the very symbolism of the gendered body and how it manifests this call to reverence, how it symbolizes, through being the revelation of the inner person, the mystery of our call to love, and indeed “pulls back the veil” to the very Mystery of God himself. I will also try to show how the very constitution of the body points to, and finds its fulfillment, not ultimately in the sexual sphere itself, but in the realm of virginity, opened up within the Paschal Mystery of Christ and finding its consummation in the resurrection of the body at the end of time.

In order to understand the meaning of the gendered human body—the body of woman as oriented towards man and the body of man as oriented towards woman—it is necessary to understand why the body is beautiful, why it is good. Why does the body speak a particular “word,” such that the breasts of the woman, for example, truly and inherently symbolize something, or the sexual organ of the man and woman (not to mention the “global” beauty of the male and female body)? And why is this very meaning, this very symbolism, beautiful? Let us try to look at this “primordial sacrament” of love that God has impressed upon our very bodies, beautiful in themselves and beautiful in the way that we relate to one another.

The first thing to say is this: is it not true that, in the human body, *meaning* and *beauty* are inseparably united together? I don’t mean that the body is beautiful only because it is “well-fitted” to perform certain functions—e.g. eating, procreation, the nursing of children, work, athletic performance. Rather, I intend to say that the very meaningfulness of the human body is inherently beautiful, precisely because its meaning cannot be divorced from its beauty, and vice versa. It is not merely useful, in other words, perfect in a utilitarian way; rather, it is radiant, glorious, ravishing, because the very operation of the human body, indeed its very existence, is a manifestation of something of the beauty of God himself.

The rupture between meaning and beauty is often one reason that persons who do not have a healthily integrated sexuality struggle so much with chastity and even fall into sexual addictions. It is because, on one level of their being, they fear that sexuality is something bad, something forbidden, or at least something dangerous. But on a deeper and more spontaneous level of their being, they sense that it is indeed one of the deepest and most sacred of all created realities. They cannot but see and be attracted by its beauty. I would also add that, even beyond a developed disorder in one’s sexuality, because of original sin itself, the pure beauty of sexuality (in the broadest sense) has become fractured from the realm of the person, from the realm of the spirit, and can incline towards the level of the flesh in its possessiveness and lust. What this means is that both the *beauty* and the *meaning* are obscured. And obscured by what? By a mere lust for pleasure and sexual gratification, by the “concupiscence of the flesh,” which is ultimately blind to what really makes the reality beautiful and sacred at all.

The “virginal word” that the body speaks has been muffled, and sexual-

ity has come for many persons to carry connotations of impurity and possessiveness. It calls for a deep healing and transfiguration of the human heart to “rediscover” the virginal beauty of the human body, even and especially in its gender and sexuality. And here the chaste beauty of sexuality itself, even in its concrete physical manifestations, becomes something sober and transparent to the light of God. And this rediscovery, this super-affirmation of the beauty and meaning of our bodies as the incarnation of our person and of our call to intimacy, is so necessary for our wholeness and holiness, as well as to respond more deeply to that “value not sufficiently appreciated” (TOB 45.4-5). And we can truly experience this gift, this healing, this renewal—through the amazing activity of grace flowing from the Redemption of Jesus Christ, pouring from his own sacred Body, Crucified and Risen and permeated with the very life and love of the Trinity. We can anticipate in some way already now, what will find full consummation at the end of time, when Christ comes again to re-create the heavens and the earth, where the meaning of sexuality will again be wholly virginal, wholly personal, penetrated and permeated by the life of the Trinity. In this way, meaning and beauty will be restored and perfected. And they will be perfected in a union that is no longer sexual (as we experience it in this life), but virginal, yet which precisely in this way super-fulfills sexuality in its fullness, even in the very body. And they will be virginal because they will be wholly Trinitarian, a pure participation in the mutual self-giving and everlasting intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This union will be the fruit of the pure donation of persons to one another through the medium of the body—fulfilling the partial word spoken by sexual union in this life, while fulfilled in an immeasurably deeper measure on the model of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, and indeed on the basis of our participation in the very innermost life of the Trinity. In other words, the body will be so permeated by love, and by the loving desire of my heart to give itself to another in the love of God, that my whole bodiliness will be harnessed into a gift for the other. It will not be a part of me, but the whole of my being, which pours forth in tender love as a gift for the one whom I love, and which also becomes a sheltering space to receive and gently cradle them. And this gift and receptivity between persons is a living share, a transparent participation, in the innermost life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who live precisely this mystery for all eternity: mutual acceptance and self-giving in which they are so deeply united that they interpenetrate and mutually indwell, each living in the other in the sweetest embrace.

We obviously cannot adequately imagine what this virginal union will be like, but we can glimpse it by looking at the deep desires of our hearts and at the way that love is most deeply manifested in this world. We can recognize that the sexual union between man and woman, as paradigmatic as it is in the life of history, and as beautifully as it distills the nature of reality, is really but a particular expression, a symbol and an incarnation, of the mutual self-donation of persons to one another in the whole of their life and existence. It is a way of saying to the other: “I give myself to you completely and forever, and I also welcome you entirely to myself.” And in pronouncing this word, I am also saying: “I desire to be united together with you so intimately,

so totally, that while we remain two, we become one.” This is the nature of the sexual embrace, but it is also the inner essence of all love, born from and expressing the love of the Trinity. And insofar as we allow ourselves to be permeated by God’s light and love, and begin to live already now “in the light of eternity,” we can taste, can feel in some way in anticipation, the virginal super-fulfillment that awaits us. And thus we come to the profound experiential conviction that heaven and the life of eternity are not actually far away, but intimately close, pressing upon us in each singular moment.

What is the point in saying all of this? Essentially, what I am trying to say is that all of the natural expressions of love within this earthly life (sexual union, nursing a child, a physical embrace, a kiss), while truly expressing and incarnating the beauty of love, also point towards realities that surpass them and which will find consummation only in eternal life. This is what I was referring to in speaking of the *virginal union* that awaits us at the consummation, and indeed about the *virginal word* that the body already speaks. No sexual embrace, however total, can give enduring rest to the human heart, or truly unite two persons together so deeply that they are inseparably bound to one another in love. No nursing mother can truly pour forth into her child the fullness of her love and the whole of her being. No kiss can truly breathe forth into another person my very life-breath and receive their life-breath in return. But are not these precisely the things that we long for? Is it not precisely this *totality* of communion, this *totality* of gift, and this *everlasting* intimacy for which our hearts thirst?

In conclusion, let me say this: at the end of time, not only will Christ fully reunite the *meaning* and the *beauty* of the body, yes, of the whole human person and indeed of the whole creation. Rather, he will restore them so totally that beauty and meaning shall be *one*. The very pouring forth of God’s uncreated Beauty into us—rapt as we will be in ceaseless, face to face contemplation of the Trinity—will enable us to pour forth the fullness of our own beauty as a total gift, both to God and to one another. Yes, the very Being of God, pervading our entire being, will enable us both to give and to receive that complete gift for which our hearts long, and to experience that “forever” of perfect intimacy in which alone our hearts will find enduring rest.

ישוע

AT A TURNING POINT

I have spoken in depth now of the contrast between pornography and iconography. There are still practical considerations that could be pursued, but I do not intend to do so here (see the reflections in *Loving in the Light of Eternity* regarding the portrayal of the body in art and media). My goal has been rather to try and direct our gaze, to open our eyes, to the path that we are invited to walk, and to give a direction of our purification: unto the total virginalization of our whole being, in which we relate to the body as nothing but the manifestation of the glory of God and a temple of the Holy Spirit, being the living incarnation of the unrepeatable beloved of God that this unique person is. And in this purification, a preoccupation with the sexual realm and the sexual values of the body in fact passes away, is desaturated, to

make way for a total transparency, a lucid and pure and simple radiance in the living and beholding and encountering of bodiliness. This is the ultimate goal of the purification of the heart as it relates to the human body and its sexual capacity, and one of the deeply needed fruits of an iconography of the body—a portrayal of the body that purifies, elevates, and draws to God rather than blinds and corrupts.

As long as sex is not yet made utterly simple, utterly transparent as simply one manifestation of love and communion that seals the word of commitment and gift spoken in marriage, then the heart is not yet utterly pure, not yet utterly pure with the purity of God himself. Spoken more positively, purity of heart reaches full flower whenever a person is enabled to spontaneously see and experience the *sacramentality* of the body, of the person-in-the-body, as the living locus of love and relationship in the likeness of God. Here the beholding of the incarnate person, in all circumstances of life, truly abides in a foretaste of the new creation, when sexuality as we now know it will pass away, and all shall be eternally consummated in the face-to-face vision of the eternal God and in the ecstatic joy of his Trinitarian embrace, in which also all human persons shall be united to one another in complete intersubjectivity and perfect mutual belonging.

Thus an iconography, in the deepest sense, teaches a heavenly way of seeing, which nonetheless pervades and illumines our encounter with the real, historical body as we experience it every day. It thus bridges the gap between the “already” and the “not yet,” a gap which has already been overcome by Jesus Christ and his Virgin Mother, in their passage into the realm of eternity, into the heart of the Trinity, in the fullness of their bodily being. In sum, purity of heart, which iconography of the body aids but which also includes so many other dimensions as there are dimensions of our humanity, enables us to *live and love in the light of the eternity, in a true participation in the innermost life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Let us now move beyond these reflections on the body and its iconography, and speak more broadly of other forms of art and beauty, before bringing these reflections to a close. There is not a great deal more that I wish to say, but there are a few loose ends which I wish to tie up and especially a few themes I want to specifically treat. In particular, I want to emphasize that I have never intended my words in these reflections to be only or even specifically about the relation between the pornography of the body and the iconography of the body. In fact, we have explored so many other things, from the lowest to the highest, from east to west and north to south, without even feeling the slightest need to return to the realm of sexuality. These sections in which art and beauty are treated in their own right, from the “center,” as it were, are in fact more important than the sections treating on the healing of pornified vision and learning to see the body in truth. This is because these latter reflections, while of course important in their own right, have called for so much time and attention precisely because they are so deeply needed in our current world. But the former reflections call for so much time and space simply because they are so radiant, so amazing, and so central to every single moment and experience of our life in this world as we journey towards the consummation of eternity.

Our culture, in order to be made whole again and to learn to love, desperately needs the manifestations of beauty, goodness, and truth bathing the human person in order to teach us again to esteem and value every individual in their profound dignity, as well as to reverence all of creation in God and God in all of creation. As we saw above, these three transcendental properties of being—beauty, goodness, and truth—are indeed only aspects of a single mystery, the beautifully good truth which is Love. True art, good culture, manifests and serves this; as does the sanctity and purity of human life surrendered to God; as does, indeed, every created thing when seen, revered, and cherished in its authentic truth as loved into existence ceaselessly by the Triune God and pointing back to him. In following reflections we shall look more extensively upon particular forms of art and try to unfold their inner meaning and significance in the light of God.

ישוע

A VIVID FORM OF ART: THE GIFTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF TECHNOLOGY

*Being human totally sucks most of the time.
Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable.
-Anorak's Almanac, Chapter 91, Verses 1-2**

In this reflection, I would like to devote some time to thinking about the particular gifts and challenges of art and communication in a society that is highly advanced in technology, particularly computer technology. This implies all that is included in the “communications age” of vast access to information on the internet, and immediate contact with other persons even on the other side of the world, as well as the “products” of technology more specifically speaking: film, television, internet, video games, and all manner of interactive software. In particular, however, I will focus on the latter rather than the former, on art rather than communication. It is perhaps a less explored issue, but also one with grievous harms if improperly used, since, as the now-popular saying goes: “The medium is the message.” This is not entirely true, but it nonetheless illustrates a profound truth. The manner in which a truth is communicated to me influences the *way* in which, and also *how deeply*, this truth is received by me. And along with this, different media also simply have different effects upon our manner-of-being and our attention, not just in the moment that we are using them, but even in the long term. This is how people speak of the “death of the linear mind” and the birth of a “multitasking mind” that can no longer follow a complex train of thought through to the end but instead tends to consume vast amounts of bite-sized information without fatigue (or perhaps there is a great fatigue which we simply take for granted?) and yet remains superficial in its approach. The whole point is that this is not a neutral matter.

As Nicholas Carr writes in *The Shallows*:

Over the last few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind

*from *Ready Player One*, by Ernest Cline.

isn't going—so far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

I think I know what's going on. For well over a decade now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the internet. The web's been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes. A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I've got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after. I couldn't begin to tally the hours or gallons of gasoline the Net has saved me. I do most of my banking and a lot of my shopping online. I use my browser to pay my bills, schedule my appointments, book flights and hotel rooms, renew my driver's license, send invitations and greeting cards. Even when I'm not working, I'm as likely as not to be foraging in the Web's data thickets—reading and writing e-mails, scanning headlines and blog posts, following Facebook updates, watching video streams, downloading music, or just tripping lightly from link to link to link.

... The boons are real. But they come at a price. As McLuhan suggested, media aren't just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. I was once a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.⁵

Did God create us to be multitaskers in the way that the internet invites us to be, to have immediate access to vast stores of information without the laborious preparation of seeking it out and preparing our hearts to welcome

*I would like to note here at the outset that, though the media will unavoidably have *some* effect upon our habitual way of being (brain chemistry included, but remember we are much more than mere material beings!), it is within our freedom and power to *limit and gauge this effect*. Man, after all, always remains in the hand of his own counsel, and he is never the mere victim of his environment. This is in fact clear in the short text from Carr. His very choice to engage in the internet the way he does has been part of the effect it has had upon him. And though much of this we too must embrace either in necessity or in prudence, we can also make a deliberate choice, born of the heart's contemplation, to retain (or rediscover) a depth of thought and presence more fitting of the rational mind as designed by God, who is eternal wisdom, knowledge, and love.

it? Did God, to use another example, design us for the intense sights and sounds with which so many films, television shows, and video games present themselves to us, entertaining us and gripping us while at the same time dulling our rational judgment of the content that we are beholding, and also numbing our freedom in standing over and against the art presenting itself to us? This is perhaps the crucial issue: we were meant to stand over and against all that we encounter in our lives, and not to be possessed or enslaved by it. But this latter is a perennial danger in us due to the effects of original sin and concupiscence, a tendency only intensified by the nature in which technology has developed and the addictive qualities that much of our modern media inherently bears within it due to this course of development.

This standing face-to-face with reality is not a self-enclosure, an unwillingness to be moved by what is outside of us, but rather the primal *solitude* from which all healthy relationships spring, and which they presuppose. But in our world this solitude has often been all but snuffed out by the perpetual presence of sense input and impersonal information from technology, and yet has led, not to a growing communion with others and the surrounding world, but, more often than not, to loneliness and alienation, both from the depth of our own selves as well as from the depth dimension of reality in other persons and in all non-personal things. The danger is that technology leads to a dwarfing both of my own subjective life as a person as well as to my diminishment into a narrow, mediated world of technological experience and information, far from the sacramental, incarnate, and direct communion with reality for which I was made, and in which alone I find fulfillment.

Part of our recovery as a society and as individuals, even if we cannot (and should not) erase technology from the world, is to rediscover the truth of our being and, from this, to order technology accordingly, so that it may truly be a tool in the hands of a free subject, a servant of human freedom, rather than a master of the very one who first created it. Each one of us must discover, and live, the truth of our personhood as a “self possessing itself,” as a free individual who sees, receives, judges, engages, and chooses not because swayed by exterior forces and sensations, however strong, but rather out of the deep wellsprings of the heart where mind, affections, and will converge in the innermost “I” of a person’s being in solitude before God.

Before we dive in more deeply, let us quote a pertinent passage from the beginning of the document *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council. It shows that, regardless of many developments, things remain very much the same now as they were in the 1960’s, and also that the enduring answer remains timeless, born as it is of the eternal God:

Persons and societies thirst for a full and free life worthy of man; one in which they can subject to their own welfare all that the modern world can offer them so abundantly. In addition, nations try harder every day to bring about a kind of universal community. Since all these things are so, the modern world shows itself at once powerful and weak, capable of the noblest deeds or the foulest; before it lies the path to freedom or to slavery, to progress or retreat, to brotherhood or hatred. Moreover, man is becoming aware that it is his responsibility to guide aright the forces which he has unleashed and which can enslave

him or minister to him. That is why he is putting questions to himself.

The truth is that the imbalances under which the modern world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself many elements wrestle with one another. Thus, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways; on the other he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life. Pulled by manifold attractions he is constantly forced to choose among them and renounce some. Indeed, as a weak and sinful being, he often does what he would not, and fails to do what he would. Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society. No doubt many whose lives are infected with a practical materialism are blinded against any sharp insight into this kind of dramatic situation; or else, weighed down by unhappiness they are prevented from giving the matter any thought. Thinking they have found serenity in an interpretation of reality everywhere proposed these days, many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort; they are convinced that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart. Nor are there lacking men who despair of any meaning to life and praise the boldness of those who think that human existence is devoid of any inherent significance and strive to confer a total meaning on it by their own ingenuity alone.

Nevertheless, in the face of the modern development of the world, the number constantly swells of the people who raise the most basic questions or recognize them with a new sharpness: what is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?

The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. Hence under the light of Christ, the image of the unseen God, the firstborn of every creature, the council wishes to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 9-10)

Christ, yesterday, today, and forever. The boldness of this proclamation is what our hurting world needs more than anything else, the answer which shall never grow old, however much our tired humanity may think it has been disregarded as a thing of the past. But let us turn now to the topic I

have presented. At first, my approach may appear to lean toward the negative, but I do not intend it to be so, and I ask you to stick with me through everything so we can bring out what is authentically good. As Saint Paul says: “Test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thes 5:21). And again: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).

First, then, a positive statement: it is quite amazing what human creativity has been able to discover and fashion, not only in creating computers, but also in all that this has made possible. I think of the widespread communications media that have made a sense of a “worldwide community” tangible in a unique way, and have truly heightened something of a newfound sense of universal solidarity, even if we are yet to grow in a moral sense worthy of such an awareness. I think also of computer technology progressing so quickly and deeply that we are now able to generate vivid, nearly real-to-life visuals, virtual “worlds,” and vibrant stories communicated through this medium. Indeed, when we think of art born in the technological medium, of the “world” of internet and technology, whether it be a film, a video game, a website, or a piece of interactive software, we recognize that this too, as in all human creativity throughout history, is nothing but a fruit of our own creative intuition, desire, and imagination. As common sense recognizes, no computer can “have a mind of its own,” but can only generate forth what has first been put into it (appearances notwithstanding). Artificial intelligence is really just human intelligence programmed into the automatic processes of a computer, and thus an extension of our own creative work, even if it does seem, as it were, “to take on a life of its own” simply by the fact that we have programmed it to function without continuous human input. It is really just scripted processes following the track that we have marked out for them, and never true *intelligence*, something which is proper to *spiritual persons* alone, which can only come from the creativity of God himself at work in begetting and birth in which he infuses a human soul into the body conceived of man and woman.*

*The trend today to speak of a.i. technology becoming “self-aware” is patently absurd, and such a claim is only possible on the basis of an entirely materialistic, evolutionistic view of life. For it sees even the human mind as nothing but an organic computer, the brain as a highly developed process of synapses, responses, etc. But this view is profoundly immature philosophically, ethically, and theologically, and it accounts neither for freedom and desire, for death and grieving, nor for the mystery of self-consciousness, that is, for “the self aware of the self.” It fails to understand the difference between liberty and determinism, responsibility and causation, facts and truths, data and understanding. Self-consciousness, that is, inner solitude in the sanctuary of the self, is a property that is exclusive to the *person*, to the spiritual individual who has an “I,” who is an “I,” and relates to all else from this spiritual center. Neither animals nor computers have such an “I,” animals because they are not spiritual persons but only natural creatures of a lower order, and computers because they are merely an artificial product of human making, processing data that has been input into them by humans and according to parameters given by humans (even if they someday “generate” new parameters based off of those already given). These are not empirical questions, but philosophical questions, indeed theological questions. They are simply not questions that science or technology can answer, but fall upon the reflective mind and heart of the individual person—and of the human community as a

Art in technology, just as art on the page or on the canvas, is an “extension of the imagination” of man. And due to the nature and reach of technology, such an extension can reach further in scope across the world, and present itself more vividly to the senses of others, than ever before in history. Think only of the immediate reach of communications and news media, or of how many persons understand immediately the question, “Do you prefer Windows or Mac?” Or how many people have seen the *Star Wars* films, or were first introduced to *Lord of the Rings* through the movies rather than the books. We live, in other words, in a “media culture.” This is a culture in which so much of our contact with art and the works of human creation, and at times with other persons even in the sphere of ordinary communication, occurs through the *medium* of computer technology. The medium is not inherently a bad thing, even though we all know that it carries dangers within it, dangers of a loss of deep *communion* where an abundance of *communication*, and often superficial communication, takes over; dangers of an addiction to the immediate answers, or immediate input, or dopamine-inducing software and games, and even instant messaging, that have been born in this surge of new technology. The danger is of superficiality preferred to depth, of loneliness in a world of connectivity, of surface experience rather than deep *logos*.

Yes, for all the extent of newness, there is a danger of a loss of depth, not only in what is communicated, but also in our response, in the heartfelt presence with which we receive the works of culture presented to us through technology. The danger is that we become mindless consumers rather than contemplative receivers, that we allow the technology and media to determine us, to hijack our freedom and sway our minds, rather than acting as free persons who hold our mind and freedom “in the hand of our own counsel” (Sir 15:14), and from this place intelligently relate to all works of culture from the deep and alive place of the heart. One vivid sign of this is evident to those who receive side-by-side works of classical culture—such as the epic poems of Homer or Virgil or the writings of the Fathers of the Church or the fiction of Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, or Chesterton—on the one hand, and the technologically mediated stories of today, on the other. Though there are truly great works of art also in technological media, particularly film, it is also true that much of what is being created today reveals a great numbness and decay of the wondering and thinking mind, and a very low standard of reflection, of morality, and of beauty.

whole—who stands in contemplative awe and receptive responsibility before the world that has been given to us, trying to make sense of it based on the light of our reason and the even greater light of divine revelation that shines upon us from God.

*For anyone who has extensively watched television or played video games, either in the present or the past, this difference is glaringly obvious. The worlds created by people like Dostoevsky, Tolkien, or Hugo are so much richer in all respects—with the exception of the visible and audible portrayal exclusive to technology—than most or all of the art being created today in technological media. This is true, however, even earlier, for example in the development of Dungeons and Dragons as a tabletop rpg (role-playing game). In itself the concept of a role-playing game, particularly tabletop—unfolding in the living space of persons who gather together and talk through the story together, rather than a person alone before a television or computer screen—is brilliant and beautiful. And when it is truly sober, the medium can convey the mes-

In our technologically-advanced western culture we now have the capacity to co-create incredibly realistic graphics, audio, and indeed virtual worlds which would have been inconceivable in the past. We are able to “simulate” the real in the non-real, in the artistic, technological, and virtual, and thus to make pieces of art which are more engrossing than ever before (at least in their engagement of the senses and the repercussions in the consciousness through this). To listen to a symphony of the past required great effort—not only in purchasing tickets and traveling to the symphony hall, but also in the deep investment of the person in listening attentively to the richly layered fabric of beauty that the symphony presented. And think how much effort and love is put into a single symphony by those performing it! The same is true of theater; this is also true of the visual arts of painting and sculpture, which are clearly the products of a laborious work of the hands and heart of the artist, symbolizing and unveiling reality through the work of the creator. Finally, it is true of ordinary storytelling (in written or spoken words), in that stories call for a deep imaginative effort on the part of the reader or listener, an imaginative effort which itself makes the receiver grow, expand, and mature as a person.*

sage, can unfold and educate in moral discernment, in storytelling, in imaginative world-building in a way that wonderfully complements the traditional practice of reading and writing novels. As Jaclyn S. Parrish writes:

“Through tabletop RPGs, we enter into that creative process with particular, visceral force. Because the player is, in the same moment, both writer and reader, and because the moment of writing and reading are one in the same, we experience the entire sub-creative process at full power, all at once. And because tabletop RPGs are so inescapably cooperative, we shape the minds of our fellow sub-creators even as we are shaped by them, caught up in the echoing strains of reciprocal and responsive creativity, which characterizes the Trinity itself.” (<https://thinkchristian.net/dungeons-dragons-doxology-a-theology-of-role-playing-games>)

*Allow me to offer another note on the phenomenon of “artificial intelligence,” namely “a.i. generation” tools. Using computer processes to aid in certain tasks of life is acceptable and, in its proper bounds (and when properly subjected to human discernment and reason), can be helpful. For example, search engines themselves utilize a.i. to bring up search results, and this has both positives and negatives, since it brings access to a plethora of information based on my search terms, and yet it also in the same moment relies upon algorithms that favor popularity rather than honesty or truth. The most popular search results may not at all be the most true ones, only the ones most clicked (or even most payed-for). But a.i. generation is another matter entirely, and one with which I strongly disagree in many of its manifestations. For example, the fad of “a.i. artwork” that has arisen in 2023-2024 is unfortunate. Simply put, these images *are not artworks*, whatever their proponents may say. For they are not born from the heart and skill of a creator, an artist, but rather are an impersonal product of an algorithm that searches for images tagged with results based on your input and “mashed” together into a conglomerate image which is, when looked at even in the best light, a kind of anonymous forgery. To promote or sell a.i. images as art is dishonest and blind, and obscures so many things, such as the superiority of the human mind over the machine, and also impinges upon the rights and dignity of human creators and the sacredness of their artwork. Such images may have a very limited use whenever a “stand-in” stock image is needed; but they are not art. Going forward into the future, we must learn to cope with the technological revolution in such a way that we retain our humanity and our mastery and custodianship both over nature and over the work of our own hands. Any tools should only be in the service of our own human contemplation and the creativity of our own hearts and hands, and never their replacement. Further, as I say repeatedly in this reflection, all

In sum, art in the past (which obviously continues unchanged to this day even in a technological society) offered a word of maturing contemplation to those who were on the path to maturity. If one did not have the capacity to be moved by a piece of art, whatever the medium, this often reflected on the lack of sensitivity in one's own heart; but so too, a sensitive heart was able to find in a single painting, in a single movement of a symphony, years' worth of contemplation and reflection, touching as they did, in and through the art, the very wellspring of beauty. Now, this is still true in many places today, but it would be remiss to fail to point out that, in a vast majority of the so-called "popular culture," our world has fallen into a technocratic rather than artistic mindset. In other words, by relying on the unique capacities of technology, one is able to create a piece of art (or whatever it may be called) which is engrossing in a way deeper and more difficult to resist than has ever been imagined. Perhaps this is the very definition of "pop culture" as over and against true culture. One is able, therefore, to emotionally, sensitively, move the receiver in a way far different than in the past. No longer need beauty be the goal of co-creation; now it can be sensitive titillation, fast-paced action, amazing computer generated graphics, and a virtual world which is so apparently rich and alive, that it is in danger of being preferred to the *real* world. Again, I am not saying that such technology, or even the vivid sensitive presence it allows, is wrong or illicit. In fact, in the best cases we can discover the same depth of sobriety, the same contemplative presence, face-to-face with technological art as we can with traditional art. This is very important to emphasize. It just has a certain tendency to take more than it is proper to take, if we allow it, and thus calls for a free choice and disposition on our part to embrace technological art in the manner of a true and full human presence, in an ordered, healthy, and beautiful way.

And if we don't? Here we come to the main problem, to one of the deepest and most painful idolatries of our time. It is the idolatry of the co-created over the created, the idolatry of the virtual over the real, the idolatry of the simulated over the sacramental, the idolatry of the enjoyable over the beautiful, the idolatry of entertainment over art, the idolatry of the "video game attitude" over childlike wonder and play in contact with the real. As the main character, Wade, in *Ready Player One* comes to realize (though not enough to actually change):

Once I had the [virtual reality] suit on, I ordered the haptic chair to extend. Then I paused and spent a moment staring at my immersion rig. I'd been so proud of all this high-tech hardware when I'd first purchased it. But over the past few months, I'd come to see my rig for what it was: an elaborate contraption for deceiving my senses, to allow me to live in a world that didn't exist. Each component of my rig was a bar in the cell where I had willingly imprisoned myself.

that we make should but serve the circuit of reciprocal communication between human hearts, and between the real and the receptive person, and not set up an alternate world of "escape" and "entertainment" that ultimately closes itself in a narrow circuit of narcissistic self-focus and meaningless enjoyment, something so painfully evident in much of the popular culture of today.

Standing there, under the bleak fluorescents of my tiny one-room apartment, there was no escaping the truth. In real life, I was nothing but an antisocial hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned pop culture-obsessed geek. An agoraphobic shut-in, with no real friends, family, or genuine human contact. I was just another sad, lost, lonely soul, wasting his life on a glorified videogame.⁶

This is a terrifying prospect. Indeed, a prison that is pretty and comfortable is much more dangerous than a prison that is comfortable; a prison of my own choosing is much more terrible than a prison that another forces upon me. The latter can be a catalyst of human growth and indeed a crucible of sanctity, in which the heart bursts forth beyond its surroundings in longing for God, for transcendent truth, and in deep compassion for all who suffer in this world. The former, however, is an isolated and self-made “comfort zone” in which all of these things shrivel up and die, and the thirst for God, the search for objective truth, and the empathy and care that draws me outside of myself to feel for others and to seek their authentic good suffocates to nothingness. This picture may seem exaggerated, but for many people today it is in fact not far from the truth. Whatever its particular contours or the particular nature of the prison bars, it is one of the main reasons that our affluent first-world West is so much more sad, depressed, isolated, and unhappy than the poorer countries around the world. For while they may be lacking in material goods, their lives are much more open to true values, to transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty, and to relationships that bring life, and are less tied down by “things” and by the ever-present barrage of stimuli that so many people gladly welcome in the sense of numbing comfort and addicting “nourishment” that it gives.

People today speak of “interactivity” and how it can be therapeutic for a human person, how entering into a virtual environment and receiving sense impressions—sight and hearing, and maybe someday the other senses as well—can bypass our wounded rationality and allow us to receive therapeutic input in a way that our conscious mind resists. The truth here is that indeed rationality is not the only way to heal, and a return to the simple heart-experiences is necessary; but we must be wary of relying on technology to do this for us, for the risk is that in the very process of surpassing one wound a person receives another. For healing only comes from the real in the real; it comes from the Word, from the *logos* communicated to us, and not from any experience, particularly artificially generated experiences. We can heal in and through technological art and mediation only insofar as the *logos* of the real is made visible, tangible, and audible to us, and touches us at a deep enough level to address us in the sober realness of our existence as persons incarnate in this world. The question in all this, therefore, lies in *how* technology can be appropriately used, becoming not an idol in itself but a *servant of reality*, as all media are or should be throughout history.

The point here is that “shortcuts,” even if they claim to lead to the same destination, ordinarily do not do so. For whenever a person is educated, healed, eased of anxiety, entertained, or anything else, not on the basis of contact with the real, but rather in contact with a virtual reality that offers itself as more-real-than-the-real (however subtly)—or even simply diverts the

mind and heart from the real—then a very deep fracture occurs in the subjective life of the person. For example, rather than learning to pray and open one's wounds to the Creator of the universe, or finding the courage to enter into living relationships with other persons, an individual turns to a “therapeutic game” which functions more as medication than healing, more akin to the diversions of alcohol or drugs than akin to a true sacrament of healing. A person is not more deeply wedded to the simple, humble, ordinary life of the world that God actually created—and which precisely in its deep sobriety, which is never “in your face,” is profoundly sacramental—but is actually predisposed to preferring the co-created to the created, the fantastical to the real, the immediate relief to the organic process of growth, the virtual, technologically-fabricated to the humble ordinariness of the reality in which we truly find ourselves.

It is also true that this kind of technologically mediated experience—not necessarily because of what it is in itself (within proper limits) as rather how it has been used, the trajectory that its development has taken—tends to speak to us on a level that does not summon forth the inner, personal freedom of the individual engaged with it, but rather drags down to a low level of base, sensual engagement, and often times also speaks to us on the concupiscent levels of our being (i.e. sex, violence, titillation, etc.). It so often summons forth what is lowest and most broken in us, not calling us to holiness, to reality, to growth as a person, but rather speaking to us in our desire for escape from reality, or our violent tendencies, or our wish to be “the victor on the top,” our longing for freedom without boundaries or limit, or any other manner of things. This is not due only to the “content” of such media, though this is also the case, but also to the very nature of how it has come to express itself in our contemporary world—in other words, the way that our culture has come to “engross” us with games and movies. In other words, it is not only the content that is sick, but often the *way* in which the content is communicated. We may be tempted to blame technology, to blame the medium; but this wouldn't be quite right. Yes, the medium has dangers, as every new medium does. But the disorder lies in how the medium is used, how its capacities are misused, as well as in the worldview and values communicated through it.

In summary. The danger in so much of our media today, born of a seed of danger present in the new medium but much more from this disorder in the heart of the creators which has twisted the promise inherent in the medium to ill purpose, is that it leaves very little space for me to engage as the unique individual that I am, but funnels me along the path predetermined by the creators, and hardly gives me space to realize that this is what is happening. Or it is simply *too much*, transgressing the limits of proper co-creation, seeking to create “more” than the human heart was ever meant to create, in the Nietzschean will-to-power that wants to create an alternate universe better than the universe that we have been given, or to create a space of escape within it that goes far beyond the proper place that any art should ever ask for itself. And so much of such “art” gives very little space for a word about reality—objective, universal reality—to echo in my heart and to summon me to personal, ethical, spiritual growth. Think, for example, of the time and en-

ergy that the creators of certain games demand of the players for them to accomplish the “goals” these creators set. Again, in itself interactive engagement is not necessarily a bad thing. But is it directed to reality? Is it a way of processing and growing in the real, an artistic form of contemplation? Or is it escape, flight from reality, an empty past-time? So many games, for example, deliberately hijack the players’ freedom without their even realizing it, precisely because they speak to the basest or most subtle addictive and clinging tendencies within us.

Compare this to the sobriety, the effort, the time and energy that a musician puts into learning how to create beautiful music with their chosen instrument, how they are wed to the reality and so harmoniously united with it that they can, objectively, create something beautiful in the real world. The former is ultimately the self closed in upon the self, me trying to beat a challenge that I want to beat for myself that does nothing for anyone else: this self-enclosure, this “enclosed circle of energetic striving,” is a part of the very essence of sin. The other, when healthily embraced, is the exodus outside of myself in response to the beauty of an objective reality, which also in this way becomes a gift to and for others. We see here how the current “video game” culture—and to a degree television and film—has been born precisely from the individualistic hedonism and subjectivism that lie at the heart of the woundedness of our contemporary world (after, of course, the forgetfulness of God).

Only if these things point to the real, direct us to objective truth, and summon forth our own contemplative, reflective, free, and intelligent response can they be positive forces in society. Otherwise they are a waste of time. Yes, even if they claim otherwise, unless they are born from the real and directed to the real, they are not playful gratuity, but pleasant emptiness—for playful gratuity can also be said to be a “waste of time,” but not in the sense of being meaningless, being mere entertainment, but in being a vigorous, gratuitous contact *with the deepest meaning that is beyond all secondary, pragmatic, utilitarian goals, and which precisely in being beyond, also illumines all of these goals and gives them ultimate meaning.**

We all have a deep, powerful need for gratuity, for playful wonder, for heartfelt responsiveness to what is amazing, what is true, what is beautiful, simply because it deserves such a response. This is what we have been created for, and this shall be the very “stuff” of heaven, the very fabric of which our

*The insights gleaned from our previous reflection can, by grace, bear beautiful fruit in the sphere of the many forms of technology today. But in order for this to occur, a deep fidelity to reality, a sober sense of responsibility for the artistic vocation, needs to be born within our hearts. The “entertainment industry” needs to give way to “a culture of the arts.” The two are, in fact, radically opposed, so much so that mere entertainment is one of the only things in this world that is truly a waste of time, whereas artistic beauty, gratuitous beauty, beauty even and especially in play, is the high point of human existence and the fullest expression of our being. As G.K. Chesterton said: “The true object of human life is play.” Absolutely. But this play is not entertainment, not fleeing from real life, from responsibility, from solidarity, into a sphere of mere and isolated enjoyment. It is, rather, the dilation of my heart, through wonder, trust, longing, and surrender, to be in touch with that deep well-spring of divine beauty that flows at the heart of all things and of every moment. Yes, thus the true object of human life, play come to full flower, is *prayer*.

eternal life in God and with God—permeating the whole new creation—is woven. So it is not playful wonder that is the problem. Rather, the problem is of *instasy* versus *ecstasy*. Instasy is the closure upon self in a “closed-loop” of unreal imagination, escape from reality, self-indulgence, or enjoyment, all leading to loss of freedom, because I surrender myself to something lower than I am (even if it uses higher things to attract me). Ecstasy, on the other hand, is the fruit of faith—the trustful response to the word of reality spoken to me, and drawing me out beyond my narrow confines so that I may breathe a deeper and more expansive air of a deeper and more expansive life. It is a taste of eternity, and it occurs through surrendering myself, not to what is lower than I am, but to what is higher, what speaks of God, in other words, to his beautifully good truth.

After all, the very law of all art, its very *raison d’être*, without which it becomes not iconography but idolatry, is that it remains wholly *transparent to reality* as given by God. Only thus can it serve the purpose that it is meant to serve: that our contact with any co-created artwork more deeply directs us back to the *real*, to the bodily, to the actual world that God has made, and enables us to receive, love, cherish, and affirm all things more deeply, and with a more disinterested spirit of service and care. Art is priesthood, and must remain priesthood to remain faithful to itself. And one of the prime ways to tell if art is remaining faithful to this purpose is if it stirs up the sense of priesthood in the receiver, stirs up the sense of responsibility within them, in the awareness that the whole world has been entrusted to them by God, and seeks their own affirming response of love. This is a response that is sober, humble, and real in each moment of time, and which sees every departure from the real as a betrayal—whether in flights of fantasy that are separate from the objective truth of the cosmos, or in forms of media, entertainment, or technology which create an alter-world that wastes time, resources, and energy, which divides persons from their incarnate existence in the body, from their true milieu, and from their relations with the living persons among whom God has placed them.

What then is the proper place for “interactivity” in our world? Place for forms of art that take advantage of the new technological capacity to create in such a way that the receiver can “participate” in the co-created reality, “entering” in a particular way into the creator’s art? Sadly, not a small part of our activity since the dawn of technology has been touched by, or even based on, the “idolization of the object,” which is in fact most often rooted in an idolization of our own creative capacity. It is born of the disordered desire to “be like gods,” to push our creative, productive, technological abilities to the limit, to see how far, how high, how deep we can go (often fueled by the desire for financial profit). Thus technology of today is like a new tower of Babel, humanity reaching up to the skies in arrogance, and which often results not in a new-found communion among persons, but in a scattering of individuals, in a “babel” of language in which, isolated by the very products of our making, we are alone and unable to communicate with one another.

For artistic creation in this sphere to be fruitful and transparent, therefore, it must be *born of the attitude of humble service, humble service of God, of reality, and of the contact of the human person with both*. It must also be

born of *the true spirit of gratuity, which seeks not success, not fame or wealth, but beauty for its own sake, which plays and wonders in artistic creation and reception simply because it is a worthwhile activity, indeed the most worthwhile of all.* True art, therefore, must be a service of the truth even as it is a gratuitous form of play finding meaning only in itself. These two are not opposed; rather, when play is true, it is transparent to truth, and when the heart loves and seeks truth, indeed reposes within it, play is begotten and brought forth. All works of technology, of human creation, call therefore to be part of the deep and intelligent dialogue of human hearts, of human cultures, about the universal truth that unites us all, and which we, together, seek. This has been the heart of all culture, thought, writing, and art since the beginning of history, and unless it becomes so again now, our capacity to create, though highly advanced technologically, will dwindle to absurdity in terms of depth and significance.

Our acts of creation, also, therefore, must be born from a sense of the deep solidarity of all humanity, that we are brothers and sisters to one another, and that everything I do or don't do resounds in the lives of others, and vice versa. There is therefore no merely "private" act, no merely harmless entertainment, no moment that is rightly wasted on something that is not truly good, truly a gratuitous manifestation of the beauty of reality. All must be from the real and for the real, and remain always within the real. Only then can art remain what it is meant to be, here as everywhere else: a priesthood for the glorification of God, the salvation of man, and the fulfillment of the entire cosmos in the embrace of the Trinity, who is everlasting Beauty, Goodness, Truth, and Love.

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GOD IN ALL THINGS AND BEYOND ALL THINGS: SANJUANIST LONGING AND HEALING OF THE HEART

In order to cradle and deepen all that we are exploring in this book about art, culture, the fostering of the beauty of creation—and most specifically the *true* nature of *eros* that lies at the heart of all of this—I would like to emphasize again that *only God is the true fulfillment of all the desires of the human heart.* In all that I am writing, this is a deep, implicit assumption: that the heart reading these words longs for God beyond all things, and is eager to seek his face alone, in poverty of spirit, without leaning on created things as a crutch, without resting in creating things as if they were our destination, but receiving and cherishing them only insofar as given by God and as made sacraments of his own loving self-communication. I realize, however, that this assumption may in many cases be false, and that such purity of heart is, sadly, the exception rather than the rule.

That is why I want to explore now how the profound incarnational reality we have been exploring, the redemption not *from* the body but *of* the body, is rooted in *a deep purification of the innermost wellsprings of the human heart and spirit.* Only this, indeed, this deep purification and maturation of the human person, can allow a spontaneous drawing toward what is authentically good, an ordering of our natural inclinations in truth, and also birth a lighthearted trust in these deep movements of our hearts—which is itself al-

ways dependent upon a deeper trust in God who speaks, for it is his voice that we learn to hear even in these most intimate stirrings of our own hearts.

This is the profound wisdom of Saint John of the Cross, which our world today—as the world always—so desperately needs. But his wisdom is in fact nothing but an aspect of the wisdom of the Gospel, nothing but the truth of Christ expounded in its furthest implications, where it meets us in the places of our innermost purification, in our deepest darkness, as well as in our highest and most radiant capacities for participation in the life and love of the Trinity. John sees humanity as poised between the infinite majesty of an all-surpassing God and the dim beauty of a creation that reflects this God but also lies infinitely below him, and which, when clung to in disordered possessiveness, hinders the flight of the human spirit into communion with the divine.

Granted, the true drama of human life is not a choice between God and creation—as if the two are mutually exclusive—but rather the choice between love and lovelessness, between a life open to God and a life closed to God. This drama, this drama is so central...it is the central drama of human life. But an aspect of this is certainly the purification of our heart's relation to all created things, so that it may be made capable of living, loving, and responding with the rediscovered innocence of the beginning. For it is a fact that we can relate to creation as a sedative that, because so close, feels so real, and yet ultimately leaves the heart washed out, empty, naked, and stuck in mediocrity whereas it was meant to fly free into intimacy with the Infinite and Eternal. We cannot therefore lessen the impact of the words of John of the Cross, as radical as they may be, nor the depth and extent of purification to which he invites the human heart—on behalf of Christ, whom he serves.

The wisdom of John of the Cross is sure, and the Church has recognized this in calling him a Doctor of the Church. Nonetheless it is also important and helpful to realize that his particular focus—of the negation of every disordered clinging to be pure space of openness for God, and union with God beyond all things—while being the *central* focus that alone allows everything else to unfold with authentic purity and transparency, should also be complemented by affirming the goodness of created reality, and indeed the obligation to love creation rightly, not just to renounce it. Only the purity to which he invites us allows us the love creation rightly, yet in his particular historical situation and also with his passionate focus on God alone, sometimes one wishes he would have situated his words more firmly on the foundation of a healthy humanity, a mature humanity that lives truly within the incarnateness of this world. For the beautiful truth is that the ecstatic movement that John expresses so vividly, and which is meant to be the true heartbeat of the life of each one of us (manifested uniquely, however, according to God's particular design and the unique voice of our own heart), is not a dualistic movement that denies creation or the body, but purifies it, lifts it up, and sanctifies it, to participate freely in the life of the spiritual union of the person with God in the abundant poverty of love, hope, and faith.

Yes, this negation—negation of the clinging tendencies of sin—occurs within, and is indeed led by, a mature and healthy human affirmation of all things, and of those capacities placed in us by God (which is what I have

been emphasizing in these reflections). But to truly affirm created things as God intends, as living sacraments of his presence and gifts from his heart to ours, we must affirm them *with poverty and purity of heart*, which means with a heart totally open to God as the only true solace and rest and fulfillment of all that we desire. If this is the case, then our relation with all created things, with our own desires and capacities, will be marked by a placid simplicity, a peaceful rest, a lighthearted responsiveness, a simple and humble trust in the voice of God that sounds even in our own most intimate desires, while also being the true and only rule by which we gauge everything. We desire God, God alone and God beyond all, and in this one, all-consuming desire of our life is every other desire set free, liberated, and elevated, to be what it was always meant to be.*

All the works of John of the Cross are aimed toward this one thing: that we may raise up our desires, our infinite desires, from finite, created things, and *cup them upwards to welcome the outpouring of the infinite and eternal God, who ardently desires to communicate himself to us in love*. This process is deep and prolonged, and goes from the most superficial tendencies that we experience from day to day, and which, when marked by fear or possessiveness, keep us bound to ourselves and to the petty wishes or problems of daily life, to the deepest and most hidden aspirations of our inner being, which impel us restlessly beyond all limited, finite beauty (but also through it and in it) to the One who alone is boundless Beauty, and thus eternal Repose. This is what John encourages us to do insofar as he calls forth our own ascetical response, our own effort: to press beyond all created things, and through them, to seek the face of God as our only true and definitive happiness. Or better: to recognize that God ardently desires to pour himself out, all of himself totally and without reserve, into the receptive human heart, and that all we need to do is let ourselves be set free from all that clutters the inner space of our heart, so that he may have space to give himself.

Yes, we have a God who is Gift, a God who ardently desires to give all that he is to us, without reserve! And if this is the case, all that we need to do is open ourselves to receive. So much gets in the way, however, and this is where John wishes to help us, where John so ardently wants to help prepare our hearts to welcome God as he gives himself, to welcome God as he is—not God as we imagine him, not God as he is limited by our own conscious wishes or desires, not God limited to the frailty of human willing or the narrowness of human comprehension, but God, the infinite and eternal, the

*A telltale sign of a disordered attachment, as opposed to a healthy, free, and loving relationship with created reality, is that it blinds, constricts, preoccupies, and narrows the human heart. It causes restlessness, superficiality, anxiety, petty cares, frustration, impatience, and a host of other ills (to a more or less obvious degree depending on the gravity of the attachment). But whether it is great or small, it limits the human person from being all he or her is meant to be, or, said more accurately, it limits the human person from taking flight into the intimate embrace of God. A truly loving responsiveness to reality, on the other hand, begets lightness of spirit, freedom of will, illumination of mind, humility, patience, peace, and a spirit of expansiveness. This is because such responsiveness to created reality has been willed by God to be a “sacrament” of his presence to us, and to exist in harmony with the more direct, unmediated contact with God in the depths of our hearts, in the virginal-point of stillest prayer.

burning furnace of eternal love and everlasting intimacy that is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

Iain Matthew says of John of the Cross:

If put to it, he would divide reality into two. On the one hand, there is the universe of stars and space, sun and earth; of animals and plants; of microbes, neutrinos and quarks. There is spirit, flesh, thought and movement. There are people, with all our relationships, and all the choices and chances holding our history together. In short, everything there is, on the one hand.

And on the other hand, there is God.

God, who is not a part of all that, who is not one more piece when all the pieces have been located; God who sustains all of that but is grasped by none of it. All of that derives from, exists in, points to, reveals God, but when one has penetrated to the deepest godliness of it all, God remains infinitely different. "God" means just what man cannot say, that blazing reality which is and remains for us absolute mystery. ...

John has no doubt about humanity's real possibilities for greatness. The universe is a 'limitless sea of love'; the soul 'a most beautiful and finely wrought image of God'; a single thought of the human person 'worth more than all the world'. There is no question about John's optimism. It is just that it translates into an equivalent hunger when human capacity is not felt to be fulfilled:

'The capacity of these caverns [the human spirit] is deep, because that which can fill them is deep, infinite; and that is God. So in a sense their capacity will be infinite; so their thirst is infinite, and their hunger is deep and infinite, and their sense of pain and disintegration is infinite death' when the soul is alert to 'receive what will fill it.'

That is the dilemma: John has an absolute need for a God who transcends absolutely. The impasse accounts for most of the deviations in human living—trying to fill the need with something else, or trivializing God so that I can grasp him. John however believes there is an answer which compromises nothing.

[He says] 'You do very well [...] to seek him always as one hidden. You honour God greatly and indeed come near to him, when you hold him to be nobler and deeper than anything you can attain. So do not settle down or try to find a corner in what your mind and heart can grasp... And do not be like many heartless people who have a low opinion of God: they think that when they cannot understand him or sense or feel him, he is further away—when the truth is more the opposite: it is when you understand him less clearly that you are coming closer to him... So you do well at all times, whether life, or faith, is smooth, or hard, you do well to hold God as hidden, and so to cry out to him, "Where have you hidden?"'

Feeling he is absent need not mean he is absent; feeling he is closer need not mean he is closer. Having disconnected ninety-five percent

of the gauges we use to read God's proximity in our life, John does have something positive to say:

'If you want to hear it again, listen to a word filled with reality and unfathomable truth. It is this: *seek him in faith and love.*'

Here the dilemma is resolved. John is looking for union with a transcendent God; he needs a means which yet does not get in the way; a ladder which is also the top of the ladder. Believing, hoping, loving are the only means, and they are the means by which a person is directly 'united' with God.⁷

To turn our desires upwards, in our relation with every created reality and also far beyond them, to the God who wishes to give himself—and who *always* does give himself. This is what John wishes for us. And yet even beyond that, he realizes that our own "cupping upward" of desire, our own purification of heart insofar as it lies within our capacity, falls infinitely short of the depths of our need for purification and transfiguration. This is where his exploration of the mystery of "night" comes into play, comes as an enthralling reality, as a beautiful mystery that involves us in the infinite expanse of God's own capacity to love, and yet does so precisely by opening us to the experience of our desperate, anguished, gaping need for God, and to the purification of our sin that is a true crucible in which the redeeming work of Christ is made alive at the heart of our own life.

The night leads to the experience of what John calls the "caverns" of our inner being which are crying out to be filled by the infinite, and can be settled with nothing less. This crying out beyond all things can feel like death, like suffocation, for it is but the voice of our heart opening itself to the One who surpasses all things even while sustaining them; it is the voice of our inmost solitude made to rest in God alone, made to welcome God as he is in poor and virginal receptivity, with utter nakedness.

And God meets us in our desire and our longing, and himself pours out his love so intensely that it accomplishes in us all that we cannot accomplish on our own (even though, in fact, we cannot accomplish *anything* on our own, and even the smallest efforts and acts of goodness and truth are awakened in us, sustained, and brought to completion by his grace). In the night this hidden operation of grace that is present at every moment of life—in every aspiration, action, and choice for beauty, goodness, and truth, this grace that communicates itself freely and lovingly through every created reality given by God as a gift and sacrament of his presence—communicates itself so intensely, in nakedness, to the human spirit that it plunges the person in darkness. It is like looking directly and intently into the sun, and experiencing one's vision darkened by its own limitation. The light of God given so deeply is too intense, too bright, too radiant and clear, for us to contain within our fallen and sinful limitations, and even in our current creaturely condition. But God pours anyway, and as he does so his very gift makes space for his gift, his very love expands the heart until it is capable of receiving his love, his very light burns its way into the very core of our capacity for vision, so that we may know and be united to God, not in a clinging to this or that little insight or idea or desire, but in a profound contemplative contact—spirit to spirit, heart to heart—with the infinite and eternal Trinity, with the

boundless threefold life of Love that is God.

This is the blessed reality of *contemplation*. It is knowledge of God, not through any created medium, not even through the sacramental symbolism and capacity of the body, but in unmediated contact. But because of this, such a contact seems generalized rather than specific, obscure rather than obvious, ineffable rather than expressible. It is not in fact general in the sense of being abstract; it is in fact as far from abstract as possible: it is utterly concrete, utterly specific, but not because defined by creaturely limitations, by a natural created essence, or by any of our ideas or thoughts about it. Rather it is specific because it is Personal, because it is God. It is a Presence in the darkness...or a Presence emerging from a light too radiant to behold in the confines of this present life. But the Presence is real, and true, and concrete, even though only known in the obscurity that is also clarity, in the clarity that is also too deep and wide to be contained or pinned down by us, but can only be surrendered to, lived through, and loved.

Yes, contemplation is God himself communicated directly to our spirit—and in fact to our body—as he is in himself without the mediation of created forms, deeper than mind, deeper than will, deeper even than our capacity to feel. And this is why the only proximate means to welcome this contemplation—this self-communication of God in grace—is *faith, hope, and love*. Yes, only in welcoming God in trust and in desiring him as he is (as *he* is, not as I wish him to be!) beyond all things, only in the loving receptivity and reciprocal gift which lets him unreservedly flow into me and lets myself flow back into him—only in this can I welcome and enter into communion with God as he is in himself.

[W]hat unites you to God is faith, hope, love, in Christ, risen in his Church, present in the world. Anything else ‘that you could imagine, understand, or think in this life’, while it may be good if it stirs up your faith and love, in itself ‘is not and cannot be a direct means to union with God’.

*It is immensely important to distinguish John’s deep reverence for the inexpressible mystery of God’s Trinitarian Being from an Asiatic or New Age quietism—such as in Buddhism. The latter relativizes all religions and religious practices, and even ethics, and, in despairing of truly knowing anything about God, invites us to relate to God (or “whatever he/it is called”) as beyond all that is knowable, the kind of inaccessible common denominator at the heart of all religions. This is yet another form of what G.K. Chesterton calls “the suicide of thought.” John’s worldview, and all of his writings, operate in a very different universe—a truly Christian, Catholic universe in which the Logos of God illumines all things, pervades the very human faculties, to make reality intelligible, knowable, and lovable. John was a solid Thomist in that he believed we understood and communed with the essences of things in knowing them (the essence living in the subject, as I expressed in an earlier reflection). This goes even for the knowledge of God and the truths of the faith, the mysteries revealed to us by God. And yet these realities are of a different order than mere created things that we can know directly; they come to live in us and come to be understood, therefore, not by natural sight or touch, but *through the communication of faith, hope, and love*. And thus it is important to emphasize that, though in the moment of intense contemplation the sense of God is “general, obscure, and non-specific,” this is not because God is unknowable or impersonal, but rather because his fullness is not bounded or contained by concepts or by any other human faculty. Rather, his inflow is so full and so intense that we can receive it only with the full and undivided atten-

So John's negative emphasis in faith and love is prudent enough: unhook a chain of dependence which can lead to tragedy. Still, in itself it could be depressing, even destructive. However, the fact is that John is saying 'Let go, get out of the way', only because he is so convinced that God, in his truth and love, is pressing to come in. His God is not 'out there' to be hit upon by the lucky voyager; his God is invasive, self-giving, entering to befriend. Where the gift is *that* total and immediate, then making room, not launching out, has to be the priority. ...

The whole pattern of John's experience is concentrated here: making 'room for God in order to receive'; 'when the soul makes room for God, then she is enlightened and transformed in God'. This is a 'letting go' born of passion more than prudence. It is the scramble of people who realise that a loved one whom they thought to be in a distant country, has already got into the lift and will be coming through *that* door in a matter of seconds.

Paul's understanding of love—'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5)—was taken into the decrees of the Council of Trent in northern Italy (1545-63), decrees promulgated in Salamanca while John was a student there. They effectively spoke of faith, hope and love as gifts of God given in baptism, by which God, dwelling in the soul of the Christian, takes us into his own inner life.

Developing on this, faith is a divine gift by which we believe God as he proposes himself; love, a gift by which we choose God and want what he wants. In this, the Spirit of God is loving us and putting us in the current of love between the Son and the Father. By faith we know with the Son's knowing and by charity we love with the Spirit's loving.

Something takes place in the Christian which is greater than she is: faith is God's lifting the soul into God's own life. It is 'theological' virtue: it comes from God (*theos*) and leads to God.

This is not a depth one necessarily perceives—though in mystical experience it is beginning somehow to register. But this (grace, the indwelling of God in the soul, the soul's sharing the life of God, faith-hope-love) is a Christian's deepest truth. ...

John's own experience of God nerved him to speak in this way, because it was experience in faith—'most enlightened faith', *Flame* says—not outside faith. Contemplative growth, into the white heat of a dark, loving knowledge, is growth into faith, not something foreign to faith. John's security remains, not science or elation, but belief in the God of Jesus Christ. In summoning the believer to 'union', he proposes a goal which, while it must unfold, is already ours.⁸

Faith, hope, and love are not merely human acts that I perform; no, they are God's own inner life as Trinity poured out into me through grace and op-

tion of our whole being. But it always remains a communion of the human person, adhering to God in faith, hope, and love, with the Persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who pour themselves out so lovingly into us.

erative within me, teaching and enabling me to know, choose, and desire, to live and love, in the very likeness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: in their own utterly virginal, utterly poor receptivity to one another and in the totality of their reciprocal gift, bound together in complete, unmediated, contemplative intimacy for all eternity!

This path from the narrow clinging of sinfulness to the expansiveness of faith, hope, and love—through being incorporated into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, in his passage through suffering and death to the glory of Resurrection—is the path of redemption, the path that is offered to us by God in grace. It is already a seed given in baptism, which seeks to grow and mature until it has totally gripped, totally harnessed, totally permeated, healed, and transformed our entire existence into ceaseless communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this communion, born of the deepest naked contact of the heart in faith, hope, and love—held in the poverty of virginal receptivity that relies totally on God in utter openness and total surrender—also allows us, indeed calls us, to welcome and cherish all things in God and God in all things, in the vivid sacramental, incarnate existence that he has willed for us in creating us as embodied persons in a material universe.

This is, in fact, the deepest priesthood to which he has called us: not merely caring for creation, not merely acting in this world, not merely lifting things up and beautifying them; no, in ourselves being freed in the innermost wellsprings of our being so that, passing beyond all things into the naked, unmediated embrace of God in faith, hope, and love, we may also turn out and welcome, cherish, and hold all things from within this place, with the gaze of free love, pure love, disinterested and cherishing love, which we have first received from God, and which has also matured from gazing, in faith, upon the mysterious countenance of infinite Beauty that is all of our life and joy: the Father gazing upon the Son, and the Son upon the Father, in the radiant and ecstatic joy of the Holy Spirit, a gaze which is turned also upon us, and draws us into the heart of their eternal mutual beholding and the everlasting joy of their undying embrace.

THE MEANING OF MYTH: I HAVE LOVED YOU INTO EXISTENCE

None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colors and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.

- St. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*

One of the greatest gifts and joys of the artist, as an artist, is to look upon the work of their own hands with the same delight that God, the Creator of all, looks upon what he has made. Yes, this joy, mediated through the unique work of art, is, insofar as it is pure, but a joy in reality itself, a delight in what *is*, which art seeks to harness and funnel into greater transparency and radiance. Thus the joy of the human creator, when it is humble and true, is a literal sharing in the joy of the divine Creator. And this joy, thus, is redemptive, mediating the healing and atoning gaze of God more deeply into the universe, into the very fabric of created reality.

There is quite a beautiful paradox here, but one that is important, in fact, not only for artists strictly speaking, but for every person. It is that the most gratuitous and “useless” things are in fact often the most important and fruitful things of all. For what pragmatic purpose does a painting actually serve, or, even more so, a novel or a film? Of course they can be *made* to serve pragmatic purposes—for example, the pushing of a particular agenda or a vessel of education—and while this is obviously a part of art, it cannot be the heart of art. I said before that art cannot exist for “art’s sake,” but it most certainly exists *for beauty’s sake*. And beauty, in the last analysis, cannot be made to serve any ulterior motives other than itself...at least when traced back to its ultimate origin and fulfillment in the One who is infinite and eternal Beauty. The artist tastes this in his or her love for the mystery that they bear within their heart—which their external works of art only ever try to approximate and to express—a mystery that, in the deepest and most authentic cases, is always one that is conceived through *inspiration*. This in-breathing of the Holy Spirit into the artist’s heart, mind, and imagination—whether they are aware of it or not—is the true criterion of what makes something a masterpiece, in other words, of piece of art given by the true Master, the true Creator.

It does not matter that the piece of art—say a myth—is not “real” in the sense of conforming to strict historical truth (unless of course it parades as history or colors our understanding of real historical events or sets up an alternate reality as preferable to objective, ontological reality). Insofar as it expresses *truth*—for truth is the criterion of all creativity and the gauge of its enduring reality—it *becomes* real through the creating intentions of God and

the co-creating activity of man. It becomes real as myth, as story, as a co-created world existing in the minds and imaginations of all who participate in it, and who are delighted, encouraged, and enriched by it.

After all, the entire universe itself was not yet real before God breathed it forth into existence. And yet he conceived of it, in all of its rich expanse, all of its particularities, all of its drama, from within the heart of his own divine life, and from this birthed it into existence. Of course, when God creates it is from nothing into something, from a void into existence, and he breathes forth the very essence of life to bring angels, human persons, animals, and a vibrant cosmos, into being. The human person cannot create in the same way, since we cannot ever literally bring forth something from nothing; however, receiving what has been given by God and letting it educate the heart, transform the heart, fecundate the heart, it does coalesce into something that has not existed before, something new, as it were. It coalesces into a piece of art that is a crystallization of reality, funneling reality into a single, intense, white-hot glow. And in this lies the co-creative activity of man and woman. They too, if their creations are to be *real*, and not *lies*, to be true, and not false, to be transparent, and not opaque, must look to the archetype of all creativity, the origin and fulfillment of all reality: God. For as God looked inward, to the infinite richness of his own Being, his own divine life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and from this gave birth to the universe, so too from gazing upon God and upon the refractions of his light in the real, the human person is enabled to create on the model of this one Reality.

Whether a story is true or not, therefore—in this respect—does not lie in whether it actually happened, but in whether or not it expresses truth in all of its parts. This, in fact, even includes reflecting the fabric of the *actual* historical truth of our world mediated into a non-real world (in fantasy), since history expresses not accidental occurrences that could be any other way, but the very dynamic nature of God's life and love spread abroad through time and space. And good story also expresses the ontological meaning of reality, reveals the inner consistency of being, even if not all that it portrays is rooted in actual historical fact. This is why a rebirth of a dead person, though it doesn't happen in historical fact (except in certain moments of the Christian dispensation), is still "true"—it is interiorly consistent with and manifests the truth—whereas the reincarnation of a human person in another body is not. The first lies in a manifestation of a historical "possibility" in a mythical world, whereas the second contradicts an established ontological truth, namely the identification of person and body, i.e. *this* person with *this* body, with an event that obscures rather than reveals what it means to be a human person. This does not apply, of course, to mythical races, which have their own unique existence based on, and unfolding, what already exists, but following a trajectory of being that is born of the mythic impulse and not rooted immediately in what already is (e.g. think of Tolkien's elves).

In fact, one of the beautiful gifts of true myth and fantasy, as paradoxical as it may seem, is precisely to cast an illumining light upon the true historical trajectory of humanity, upon our own story, precisely by "processing" and elucidating it in a mythical context. In this respect, myth in its deepest reaches and its highest expression is *biblical*, it is *typological*, meaning that

through myth we discover the face of Christ in a thousand faces, and hear echoes of his voice in a thousand voices, and thus come to know him, to desire him, and to seek him more truly and more ardently. Whether this is the threefold office of Christ as revealed in the central characters of *The Lord of the Rings*: the priesthood of Frodo, the kingship of Aragorn, or the prophecy of Gandalf, or the Christ-like nature of the lion Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or even the intimations of Christian truth (seeds of the Word, as St. Justin Martyr called them) in the myths of pagan Rome and Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia and India, and so many others—at the heart of all true myth is longing for the Beloved of the heart. This is the case because the very foundation of all fantasy and faerie story, and the root of our deep fascination with it, is the *nostalgia for our lost homeland*. It is *eros*. Fantasy is one of the songs that the bridal heart sings, even if unknowingly, in its thirst to return to the home for which it was made, and yet which it has lost.

Regarding the typological nature of myth and faerie story, it is important to note that *typology* is different than *allegory*. Typology, which is God's own way of writing history and of revealing himself in preparation of the coming of Christ—hence the types of the Old Testament, for example Adam, Abraham, and David, revealing in anticipation facets of the person of Jesus before his coming. But allegory is a way of intending a specific individual to “represent” Jesus or another person or reality in a mythical context. J.R.R. Tolkien himself was actually quite averse to allegory, and refused to “equate” any of his characters with a given person or theme in the real world, though he admitted of countless applications. Thus he disliked the direct personification of Jesus as Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. While I think allegory is a totally legitimate art form—and the above-mentioned an example of it done well—I think myth properly speaking, in its typological nature, can go both deeper and wider since it respects the mystery of the given-world of historical truth and does not seek to “capture” it in a story, but rather to gesture to it, to allow facets of its light to refract in countless different ways in the very fabric of the characters and the story.

Indeed, myth can stand on the dividing-line of history and fantasy, in that it seeks not to re-present historical events in an allegorical way (since our own imaginings can never catch up, even distantly, to the radiant beauty of *what God has actually done in history*!), but rather seeks to express the real in an imaginative story, being born of deep contemplation of the meaning of the central events of redemptive history and what they reveal of God, of humanity, and of the meaning of the universe itself. Thus myth is ontological contemplation, it is theological reflection, it is prayer and wonder and play, rooted wholly in the real and yet processing it precisely in story. It can even seek to present a pre-Christian society or age of the world, before written history or in a place that history has not touched, and to offer a wholly believable (as far as fantasy goes) representation of an age of the world illumined by the hidden light of Christ that shines upon all things, and thus make more tangible, make more visible, the seeds of his presence in every time and every place.

However, fantasy is not an end in itself in the sense of being an escape merely in order to be an escape. It is regretful to even need to say this. How-

ever, in our contemporary society in which so many hearts have despaired of ever finding the universal truth, or even of believing that it exists, the distinction between a pleasant fantasy in one's head and the true and everlasting joy of eternal bliss in the real and radiant truth of God's life has been dulled. I think only of some comments I encountered on a YouTube video of fantasy music, which I paraphrase here not (at all!) in order to criticize, but rather simply to place the finger of our contemplation upon the pulse of our contemporary world. One person said something to the effect of the following: "Is it not amazing that this music stirs in all of us a longing, a homesickness, for a place that we have never been and which does not even exist?" Here we see the stirring of eros by fantasy, that primal wonder that the land of faerie enkindles within us, the aching of the heart for the gratuitous beauty of adventure and the radiant freedom of play in the security of a story held totally by the arms of cherishing love. And yet we see the despair of our modern society underneath it, bubbling up and betraying the wonder in the very moment in which it springs forth: But this doesn't exist! We've never been there and we never shall! How sad!

Two other comments responding to the first are worth noting. One person replied, "Just because something happens only in one's head doesn't mean it's not real." True enough, but also deeply inadequate. It is real, sure, real as imagination, as thought, as the adventure of the heart—and this should not be underestimated—and yet it is not real in the sense that only reality coming to meet me from the outside can be real. And it is only this latter, the radiant truth of a world that precedes me, enfolds me, and offers itself to me—flowing from the generous heart of a loving and creating God—that can give me the liberation, the freedom, the adventure, and the joy that I seek. I can only truly lose myself, can only escape from all that holds me bound, not in the fantastic flights of my own mind, but in the ecstasy into the beautiful embrace of reality. And here, this loss is finding.

The second comment is more apropos: "But it does exist, and we have been there! And we shall be there again!" Wonderful! But one must ask: What? Why? How? What is the content of this "there"? One of the sad parts of our world today is that we take "heaven" for granted (if we want that kind of thing) and yet forget the great price that was paid to open it to us. We want the self-centered joy without the movement out of ourselves into the arms of Love. We want the assurance of happiness after death without even asking the question of what, of *who*, makes such happiness possible, indeed, of *who is that very happiness that we seek*. This is akin to saying that having a family is a wonderful thing and yet it is not important either to love one's spouse or one's children, but only to kind of "let it happen," and to enjoy it.

But one of the paradoxical truths of all that I am here trying to express is that these subjectivistic comments, these comments that fail to affirm the objective order of reality and its truth, not only betray reality itself, but also betray fantasy! They betray the very impetus of faerie story! For the heart of faerie is love for the real, wonder at the real! In fact, the truest and deepest safeguard of the wonder that fantasy kindles within us is precisely the Gospel, the revelation of God's love given in Christ and opening up to us the greatest adventure—the *true* fantasy—that is the journey of love leading all

the way to the heart of the Trinity in everlasting bliss. Here all the wonder of faerie and all the concrete realism of historical truth blend together in the consummating movement of God's redeeming love, in the revelation of the great Story told by the ultimate Storyteller, the one true Masterpiece that holds all other masterpieces, the Masterpiece in which each one of us is a protagonist.

After all, what is one of the things most fascinating and inviting about fantasy? It is the ability to be the protagonist of a great story, to be a hero, to walk with nobility and courage against forces of evil and darkness, and to stand victorious over them. As G.K. Chesterton said so wonderfully:

Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear, or any of the shapes of fear; fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already. Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon.

Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear. (*Tremendous Trifles*)

This reveals the beautiful truth that at the heart of fantasy, a thread woven into its very heart, is the movement of sacrificial self-gift, of love that conquers death and of goodness that overcomes evil. And this precisely is the heart of the Gospel. And when fantasy despairs of this (as in contemporary "dark fantasy" or fantasy in which one can be evil, or in which illicit and disordered actions are encouraged or accepted, e.g. *Game of Thrones*, *The Witcher*, *Baldur's Gate 3*), then it betrays the flowing current, the river of life, at its very center.

But is myth, storytelling at its most "epic," truly this important? Is it a way of feeding flights of fantasy and delusions of grandeur, or is it rather,

*One of the greatest dangers of our day in this realm is the "gameification" of fantasy. Were the "game" attitude to replace the "receptive contemplation" attitude in our approach to fantasy—and in those areas where it has already done so—a profound loss is suffered. Once we approach fantasy as an alternate world there merely to be enjoyed, or even (in the worst case) as a place where we can privately nourish our illicit inclinations, a terrible tragedy has occurred. We in fact see this dividing line cutting right across our culture today, and it affects so many areas, from books to film to other artifacts of popular culture. With the mass production of objects of entertainment, and their un-rooting from the true wellsprings of the creative impulse in service of truth, we have greatly lost our sense of what is a good story, of what is true art that builds culture—yes, that "cultures" the human heart to maturity—and what rather corrupts and dulls and distracts. Much obviously is a mixture of both, and the point here, more than being about the artifacts, is about our approach to them, which of course reflects and extends, and reflects back upon, our attitude and disposition toward life itself. But surely there are far too many hearts today who have not only "gameified" fantasy, but have gameified life itself, losing the sobriety and moral seriousness that are necessary for all true play, wonder, and contemplation.

truly, but an expression of the dramatic nature of human existence, of the warfare between heaven and earth, of the marvelous mystery unfolding through conflict, to climax, unto definitive and everlasting resolution? Yes, it is really this important, as man and woman are “story” beings before they are conceptual beings, personal before they are abstract, relational before they are ideal. We think in stories far more than we realize, and stories that we receive—both in their essential meaning as well as in so many of their accidents, their facets—profoundly shape our human development, character, and personality. This is why myth is so profoundly important, and why every age has its myths, whether good or ill. To again quote the ever-quotable Chesterton:

The things I believed most then [as a child], the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things....Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised the earth.

And what is the primal law of the land of faerie? It is wonder and gratitude; and it is the “law of gift” that emerges from this. These are the secrets to true joy and the foundation of all faith, hope, love, and worship.

I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder. ... The test of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys and sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?

Good myth, as the enkindling of gratitude and wonder, gives us a taste of our final destination even in the heart of the journey, and thus is true “escape,” in the right meaning of the word: escape from the narrow confines of discouragement, or from a merely pragmatic approach to life, or from an existence fueled by mere burdensome responsibility rather than fecundated by the inventiveness and creativity of love. And as the enkindling of gratitude and wonder, myth is a profoundly “erotic” activity (a movement of spiritual *eros*), a stirring into flame of the longing for the homeland of heaven. The creation of rich, beautiful, and vibrant imaginary worlds, of stories of profound drama and meaning, is a deeply human activity. It is in fact a deeply divine activity, a participation in the reality of the divine Craftsmanship over the world.

A true storyteller, a true creator of myth, will feel for the world born of his or her own mind and heart something of the “trepidation of love,” the intense longing and anxiety, that reflects the anxious care that God himself has over the world that he has made, and over each one of the creatures within it. Aware of the deep and irreplaceable gift of this myth—which, if true and transparent, never comes merely from human ingenuity but from divine inflowing—the person feels fear at a “stillbirth,” a fear that this beautiful real-

ity will be lost or shall never reach the hearts for whom it is intended. But they also feel a trust that, given by God, by God it will be sustained. And this trepidation of love, just as with the divine Creator, is always held and permeated by the wonder of play and the lightness of gratitude

So too, the real human drama expressed in myth—even if occurring in a fantastical setting with premises not identical to this real world—is a privileged way that we, as men and women born of the dramatic love of God and written into the story of the universe, can process, come to understand, and participate in the greatest Mystery of all mysteries. Thus myth is never merely story; it is sacrament. It is mediator of grace. For it is simply a fact that every aspiration of the human heart, expressed in all the forms of art and in myth in particular, finds fulfillment in Christ and in our participation, through him, with him, and in him, in the inner life of the Trinity. All that we taste of the beauty of heaven in the fascinating, wonder-evoking world of story is found fully alive and consummated in the heart of God, who is the deepest profundity and the widest expanse.

Reality is the most beautiful story of all, the origin from which all other myths derive their impetus and to which they return. Thus the “mythic impulse” in human hearts, the longing to co-create beauty, to fashion worlds and histories and characters from within the bosom of our own contemplation and love, is but a facet of love for the real, of delight in the real. It is a way of processing the deep existential drama that unfolds in the life of each one of us, and in history as a whole—and an expression of the innate heroic nature of our human vocation to complete victory over evil and the definitive consummation of goodness in the true “happily ever after.”

So too, myth and storytelling is itself a fruitful act, not because it is particularly “productive” in the pragmatic sense of the word, or gives some profitable work in society, or even is an artifact of culture in the superficial sense, but because it is an expression—a profoundly beautiful expression—of that reality which lies at the heart of all existence: childlike wonder and play before the awe-inspiring mystery of reality. “Losing oneself in a good book” can in fact be one of the healthiest and most human of activities, and can be very akin to prayer, to contemplation, and to the pursuit of God (and indeed can be an expression of this). For at the heart of it all lies true *eros*, the holy thirst for our definitive homeland, the place in which all the most radiant flights of fantasy throughout history are more than fulfilled, infinitely fulfilled, in the most ravishing harmony of a universe redeemed and restored in God, through his own marvelous storytelling brought to its eternal happily-ever-

*Perhaps the ending of a story is its most powerful moment. This is not only because it is the “punch-line,” as it were, or better said, the climactic moment that begets awe and wonder in us as we see the lines of providence coming together to bring about a good ending. It is also powerful precisely because it is the *ending*. It is not only the *end* as the goal toward which the story has been leading, but it is also the *end* in the sense that, now, the story is over and there is no more to read, to hear, or to experience. Such a moment is powerful because, if the story is good, our response shall be: “I do not wish for it to end!” Precisely. And yet the co-created story, insofar as it is a work of art, must end, so that it, and all of life, can be subsumed into the one Story that never ends, the one and only happily-ever-after that is truly forever, and whose end is never-ending, but only the beginning.

after.

This all leads us back again to the beautiful realization: the *Gospel* is the high point of this myth of reality—it is the “true Myth,” the greatest of all stories which is more than a story: it is utter historical truth, indeed eternal truth, which takes up and fulfills all other stories! J.R.R. Tolkien, the artisan of the great myth of which *The Lord of the Rings* is the central part, had a deep understanding of this. In his terms called “faerie story” or *mythopoeia* (myth-making), this mode of storytelling is in fact a foretaste of the Gospel, of the heart of evangelic truth and joy. For in its very medium—in fact through it, not despite it—it proclaims the definitive victory of God’s love operative in *this* world through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. It does this, in particular, through what Tolkien came to term “eucatastrophe,” or the “happy-catastrophe.” At the apex of every good myth—and indeed, upon profound contemplation, every human life—is the marvelous turn of God’s never-ending mercy by which he transforms the greatest possible evil (sin, suffering, and death) into the greatest possible good. Whenever all human resources have run out, and man and woman can do no more—in fact when, on their own, they fail—this is when the true glory and beauty of the Gospel is made manifest: “In this is the love of God made manifest: in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!” (Rom 5:8). All the aspirations of humanity find fulfillment, not on the basis of our own efforts, but on the pure grace and mercy of God poured out into desperate poverty and utter receptivity.

And this is part of what is so profoundly lacking in our world, which is simultaneously fascinated by myth and yet fails to understand its true meaning, breadth, and beauty. We have all kinds of stories, but very little myth. We have very many fantasies, but they for the most part fail to manifest this truth that salvation comes from far beyond man, as a gift descending from heaven. We want to save ourselves, or we think that we must. Of course, part of the magic of a good story is the heroic response of the protagonists, that they invest every ounce of their will, desire, energy, and effort, and even their very life-blood, in order to remain faithful to the gift they have received. But all of this is held by, and yields to, the true Protagonist of every myth, the true Protagonist, in fact, of the history of the entire universe: the God who is creating and redeeming and consummating Love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I am often surprised at just how deep the love of fantasy lies in the human heart, at how profound and enduring is the sense of “faerie” in each one of us. Few there are who do not feel the tug of wonder, of longing, on contact with a good faerie story or a heroic quest, a fantasy world richly fashioned, or even a little glimmer of light from the land of faerie. But why is this the case? We have already explored it, and we affirm it anew now in conclusion: because fantasy is one of the ways that the imagination reaches out in nostalgia for the paradise that we have lost, and, even more, for the new creation that awaits us. We have a sense of the drama of our existence, of the heroic quest that is the life of each one of us, and we know (or long to know) that we are going somewhere, on a journey to the true faerie land or paradise which is fullness of adventure, romance, and consummate joy.

Sure, as in all things, the icon can be turned into an idol, and the flight

into contemplative wonder that, through story and imagination, shines light upon our existence from the land of faerie, can instead become a mere escape into irresponsibility or mind-numbing entertainment. But it is never a good practice to condemn something because it has been misused, because, when twisted or taken to excess, it can become the very opposite of what God intended it to be. The life of faith, the journey of true adventure, is always risky, and calls for boldness and trust. Love is always a risk. To cease to take the risk of love is to lock one's heart up in a box of self-protection, which, while perhaps maintaining an appearance of purity and of having-it-together, nonetheless leads to the atrophy and suffocation of all that is most deeply and vividly human. And it is the human that God wishes to make divine, to make a partaker in his divine nature; for "he became of Son of man so that we might become sons of God," and this happens right in the meeting-place of our humanity.

After all, even the love of man and woman is dangerous, perilous, fraught with risks due to the wounds of original sin; but love is even more "dangerous" to the disorders and sins within us, which a maturing love shall heal to the degree that we remain faithful to the call that such love issues to us, that the gift of communion speaks within us. The same is true of fantasy and the work of the imagination in storytelling and play. Co-creative imagining, playing is something that God himself has implanted in us, an aspect of us being fashioned in his image. And if we follow the impulse placed within us truly, it shall lead us to God himself, shall lead us to the enrichment and expansion of the imagination, to a deeper and more serious sense of moral responsibility, to a more spontaneous and lighthearted playfulness, and to a longing for fulfillment, communion, and life beyond the confines of the present world, even as it stirs us to love the mythic beauty present already, hidden but true, in every moment of this world as well.

ישוע

ON THE GIFT AND BEAUTY OF A THEOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY

In his book *The Everlasting Man*, G.K. Chesterton presents a view of history that reveals how the longings in the heart of man throughout time, and his very journey through all the ages of our world, center upon Jesus Christ. It is he who reveals man to himself in revealing the true face of God, and it is he who unveils for us the true depth and beauty of our dignity and destiny—rooted as it is in the paternal love of the heavenly Father, who looks upon each one of us with incredible tenderness and cherishing delight, with a love that is neither dimmed nor obstructed by our sins, our foibles, and our brokenness, but rather stirred simply to seek us out, that we may return at last home into his everlasting embrace, into the welcoming bosom of the eternal Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—which is our true origin and our everlasting end.

One of the themes of this book by Chesterton is *myth*, an exploration of the religious longings and imaginations of humanity throughout its ancient history and even up to the present.* In his exploration it becomes apparent

*To summarize more holistically and succinctly this theme in Chesterton's book,

that man is a storyteller in his very nature, and that by telling stories he seeks to make sense of the meaning of the world and of his own place within it. And most especially he seeks to approach and to comprehend in some way—or better, to enter into contact with—the mystery of God. And yet these stories that man has made, these myths, are not meant to be history in the literal sense, nor do they aim to pin a name upon the nameless divinity that man cannot but aspire toward and worship. The only name by which God may truly be called is the name by which he calls himself and reveals himself to us.

Thus throughout history myth has been a religious activity, a spiritual aspiration, a form of primal theology and philosophy—indeed a particularly vivid and important form of human thought which includes all the different facets of human contemplation in a unified whole in a way that story alone can achieve.

But with the coming of Jesus Christ, the unnameable God has entered history; he has revealed not only his name but his face, indeed his open and exposed heart. He has unveiled before us our true origin in his creative love, and he has unveiled before us our destiny to find everlasting home in his embrace; and he has connected the two together, beginning and end, by the outpouring of his redeeming gift, by grace flowing from the Heart of Christ—Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, and Eucharistic—sweeping us up into the dramatic story of his own eternal life of intimacy and joy, and granting us to participate in it, and to share it with others, through every moment of this mortal life, until eternal life is ours.

This is the great adventure, the true journey, the story that makes sense of all other stories—a story that shall not cease with the last page of our mortal existence, but rather shall commence then in fullest and freest measure. All of our wanderings in this temporal world are but like the first chapter of a great epic, a never-ending story, a perfect romance. This God has revealed to us in the story of Christ, and in salvation history as a whole, from the first creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis to the final words of the book of Revelation, and indeed in this history as it continues to unfold within us and our history until the end of time. Yes, divine revelation takes up all the aspirations of man's story-telling, of myth, and the glimpses of beauty and truth that it bears within it, and fulfills them. For this is the *true* story, which not only expresses truths about reality, but *is* the truth, the truth of God's eternal being wedding itself to the concrete truth of historical time, and *becoming the true story of humanity and of the entire cosmos*. All man's stories, therefore, both imagined and lived, are but participations in and expressions of, this great Story in which all things are contained, and in which is found endless adventure, wondrous discovery, ceaseless play, and ecstatic joy in the abundant embrace of perfect Love.

So if mankind has long approached the mystery of God and the world through a *mythological theology*, through creating stories that seek to make sense of the wonder and drama, the anguish and joy, the ugliness and beauty, of the cosmos, so since the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ—since his

we can provide a direct quotation: he says that Christianity “met the mythological search for romance by being a story and the philosophical search for truth by being a true story” (p. 310).

full entrance into the history of our world—we no longer need practice such a mythological theology. We no longer need approach God through our frail imaginings of what he might be like, giving a thousand faces to his mystery through the invention of a pantheon of gods or archetypal stories of good and evil. But this does not at all mean that we do not seek, nor need, to weave the tapestries of beautiful stories in order to unfold all the richness contained within the great events of salvation history, the richness of God's presence and activity in our own lives, and "the breadth, length, height, and depth of the love of Christ, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

Rather, meeting us precisely in the incarnate richness of our historical humanity, God meets us as the great Storyteller speaking to created storytellers, and, by giving us our true Story, he enables us to tell stories anew, and more deeply still, in the light of his love and his activity that ever shines upon us. Thus the religious longing, the human aspiration, and the story and thought by which man has sought to make sense of reality—in the light of God's redeeming activity in Christ—gives way now to Christian theology and philosophy, to liturgy and life, to ethics and evangelization, and to all the beauty of life bathed in the radiance of the Trinity's Love. But this is not all, for man remains a storyteller, even as his story is ever being told by God's loving voice spoken within him and by his own joyful and humble cooperation. Thus man's stories do not cease when his true story is revealed. Rather they deepen and expand. What was before a mythological theology now becomes, among many other things, a *theological mythology*.

Within the light that shines from the eternal Word made flesh, one can look anew upon the world, and upon the creative work of the imagination, and bring forth stories that manifest the truth of this Word in various ways, giving a true "exegesis" of the Gospel reality even while respecting both the transcended historical reality of the events of salvation history and the integrity of the co-created, imaginary story. A splendid example of this is the early mythology of the world fashioned by J.R.R. Tolkien, found in *The Silmarillion*, in which he gives a creation story of the world Arda, which is the same as our own world, unveiled as it were in its "lost history." It is a story that aligns completely with the truths of Biblical revelation and is undoubtedly indebted to them, and yet does not merely repeat or allegorically interpret the Bible. Rather, the tale of the creative love of Eru Illuvatar and the Ainur whom he fashions, who sing the world into existence and many of whom become the Valar, the guardians of the world and its history, illustrates a wholly Catholic vision of history and of the world. It is the fruit of a mind and imagination impregnated with the truths of the faith, and yet which creates not primarily as a form of evangelization or apologetics, but in sheer love and playful wonder—in the image of the Creator himself.

And this wonder and play, this gratuitous creativity, is the key that makes myth so fruitful also as theology, as exegesis, for it is a form of *contemplating the beauty of the real, and especially the beauty of the face of the Triune God*, in the medium of storytelling. This face is veiled, but it is veiled in order to draw near and reveal itself to us at the heart of our own imagination and the awe that we feel before a truly good story. In fact, there are so many themes

that can be treated, and into which we can plunge our hearts, in the creation of fantasy, as in all story, though here with a special depth and freedom. This has been what has inspired my heart in the writing of the *Daunbringer* myth, fruit of an awareness, and a world, that has been present and growing since my adolescence.

A heart that gazes long and deeply upon the majesty and beauty of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and upon their loving work in this world and in the intimate recesses of human hearts, cannot but manifest this also in their creative storytelling. And though human storytelling always falls short of the Word—not only the Word who is the Son in the bosom of the Father and the Word that is his activity in the world, recorded in Scripture—but also of the word of inspiration to create placed in the human heart itself, it is a true word nonetheless. In fact, in my opinion *The Silmarillion* of Tolkien is a deeper and richer myth than *The Lord of the Rings*, and for one reason in particular: in the former he did not veil the presence of the divine and the aspiration of man toward the divine. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien explicitly removed all references to religion, faith, and prayer so that “the religious element could be woven into the story itself.” And this has made the story accessible to millions even of those who do not share Tolkien’s faith; and many of these indeed have been led to faith through this story.

But in my own longtime acquaintance with the LOTR, I have felt ever more keenly *the absence of God and of the religious impulse of man*. I have felt keenly that the “veiling” that Tolkien sought to achieve in *The Lord of the Rings* has also limited the depth and breadth with which he could explore *the deepest longings and aspirations of the human heart*. This has inevitably led to a certain diminishing of the “vertical” dimension of the story and its innate word concerning the religious and spiritual nature of man. It may be an unpopular opinion, but I think that the absence of Eru Illuvatar and of the Valar—and of nearly all references to any sort of relationship with the divine—in the LOTR is an impoverishment of the depth to which the story goes, and of the realities that it could unfold before our gaze. It makes its intimacy to the heart that seeks God and prays to him less than it could be, a “far-off gleam” of the Gospel, to use Tolkien’s words; but what I want is not a far-off gleam, but an *intimate participation*, a profound exploration of the drama unfolding between God and human hearts even in the very heart of myth. Of course, this “veiling” and limiting may precisely have been both Tolkien’s and indeed God’s intention regarding *The Lord of the Rings*, and the story is all that it was meant to be. And the rest of his legendarium helps to flesh out these aspects as well.*

*I will give two examples of how theological realities can be expressed mythically while becoming neither allegorical nor preachy, but rather profound explorations of *the real* in a mythical context. In a less-known work (*Morgoth’s Ring*, Vol. 10 of *The History of Middle-Earth*), Tolkien portrays a conversation in which elves intuit the necessity of the Incarnation: “I cannot see how else this healing could be achieved. Since Eru will surely not suffer Melkor [the devil-figure] to turn the world to his own will and to triumph in the end. Yet there is no power conceivably greater than Melkor save Eru only. Therefore Eru, if He will not relinquish His work to Melkor, who must else proceed to mastery, then Eru must come in to conquer him.” And even more fundamentally, a quote from the creation account in *The Silmarillion*:

But I believe that we need other stories that are not afraid to explicitly plunge the depths of the erosic longing in the heart of man to return to his Creator, nor to explore the center and pinnacle of human life as faith and prayer, nor the foundational fact that when God is forgotten, the face of the creature itself is obscured and eventually shatters into absurdity. Yes, myth need not be content only with “natural theology,” with the general truths about the God discerned in nature and conscience, about the mysterious providence that works all for good while remaining hidden (even though behind this certainly stands all the richness of the revealed God, illumining and teaching), but can also explore the central truths of revelation in God’s fatherhood, in the call to intimacy with God as the heart of human existence and the very purpose of life and our everlasting destiny, and the profound closeness of God’s love in every moment. After all, other stories are not afraid to treat explicitly of the religious dimension, even if they do so often in a profoundly inadequate or even atheistic way—for example *A Game of Thrones (Song of Fire and Ice)*, as well as in all the stories set in *The Forgotten Realms* (the Dungeons and Dragons universe). These have gods and religion, clerics and paladins and temples and prayers, and I think in fact that they tug deeply on the hearts of so many people precisely because they speak openly to these longings and capacities within us. They allow us to explicitly process and fictionally enact these capacities. Nonbelievers and atheists rarely seem to be put-off by the presence of the divine in these worlds, indeed it seems an important part of them. How beautiful an avenue, then, to explore all that is deepest within us, this common longing and capacity in the humanity of all of us for communion with the divine!

This is a delicate path to walk, of course, such that the exploration of faith and prayer, of pain and providence, of the gods and the true God, of angels and demons, of the spiritual journey to heaven and the earthly journey through the heroic quest, does not become a card-board thin allegory or a preachy pastiche. But I am convinced not only that it *can* be done, but that it *must* be done. I am convinced that myth-making not only can but must be a dimension of humanity’s dialogue with God, and a means by which we both seek his face and also seek to unveil his face, his true nature, that it may appear on the page before us, filling our storytelling to overflowing with his transcendent yet immanent presence, and lifting these stories hereby into a whole new level of depth and beauty, not thereby destroying their integrity and beauty, but fulfilling them.

Yes, we remain ever creators and imaginers, since we bear in us the image and likeness of the one true Creator. Storytelling is part of our dialogue with our Creator, an aspect of the gift of ourselves back to him who first gave himself to us, and in this gift gave us all things. We thus yearn spontaneously to co-create, to sub-create by the light that shines within us, and to give expression to the beauty and meaning that we behold, and which touches our hearts. And when God is fully revealed to us—in the breathtakingly beauti-

Eru speaks, and says, “Therefore I say: *Eä!* Let these things Be! And I will send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable, and it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be...” And suddenly the Ainur saw afar off a light, as it were a cloud with a living heart of flame...”

ful drama, the ravishing story that is the Gospel—this storytelling bursts open in depth and beauty. For God’s salvation does not just stir conceptual thought or study, but it also fecundates our imaginations and fires our sense of adventure; it stirs us both to think and to imagine, to imagine and to live, all as part of that flowing current of love that surges on like a river throughout every moment of our life, carried from Love unto Love by Love, unto the consummation that awaits us in the new creation, in the definitive happily-ever-after where God shall be All in all, and all shall be fulfilled in him.

I truly do believe that storytelling, and in particular fantasy, faerie story, mythology (whatever name we give to it) is and should be another theological expression of the richness of the Gospel, standing alongside theology and philosophy and unfolding it in the way that is so unique and proper to storytelling. For here anew the “Word becomes flesh,” and the mystery of reality becomes present within us in a vivid way, permeating places of our life that remain recumbent, that they may be evangelized by the light of God’s love and truth, and may shine in his light, unfolding in the dramatic story that he intends for us. And indeed, how can the heart so touched by such love, and caught up in such a story, not become a storyteller in response? And the heart does this, not merely to teach lessons or to share the Gospel with others (though this also is true) but also simply because such is the attitude and action of a child, born of ceaseless wonder at the miracle of reality and at the undeserved gift of existence, and in the abiding play that is the truest and highest activity of humanity, indeed the very nature of the everlasting life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

יְשׁוּעָה

ECHOES OF THE ETERNAL SONG: THE MEANING OF MUSIC

All of humanity, from the beginning to the end, lives on the edge of silence. Indeed, it is held within silence, bathed in silence, and aspires to silence anew. From the first moment when God spoke his eternal Word and said, “Let it be,” to the final consummation when this Word inaugurates the entire cosmos into the innermost life of the Trinity, all of us spring from silence and return to silence, we remain enfolded in a deeper silence even in all of our words, all of our activity, all of the sounds that surround us. And this is true not only of the cosmos as a whole, the universe in its historical trajectory from first creation to final consummation, but also of each individual human person and life, it is true of *me*.

But what is meant by silence and by living “on the edge of silence”? Silence is not an absence of content, a kind of void of nothingness, nor is it the suspension of thought or belief or knowledge; it is not even an absence of word; it is, rather, the inexpressible *fullness of the Word*. It is the Word’s expression in the deep space where created words are not adequate, and indeed where all finite realities run up against their limit to communicate the divine, the spiritual, the eternal mystery of God as the Communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet in this place, words and created things are not therefore rejected—even if for a moment they “fall silent”—but rather are filled with an ineffable fullness that pours out from within them, living in

them while even greater than they are.

In contrast to this, the “new age” impulse is so widespread in our contemporary culture, and it is ravaging so many hearts, offering them promises of happiness and communion with the divine and yet leaving them washed out and empty, or even open to the influence of the spirits of evil. But what has given rise to what we call “new age,” and in what does it consist? There are obviously different nuances and expressions, and so the motivation or birthplace of these different “schools” can be different (for example “wiccanism” is a syncretic praxis that seeks to offer power and control over one’s surroundings through witchcraft and black—demonic—magic, whereas other forms of spiritual practice are a starry-eyed adoption of the relativistic philosophies of the orient, such as Buddhism). But underneath all of these differences, there is one common denominator that has allowed “new age” to have such a seductive pull on the people of our day. It is despair in the discoverability of objective truth and an exhaustion with the radiant beauty of the Gospel. We as a culture have classified Christianity as a petty superstition or a fanatical religion of intolerant (and even violent) dogmatists, and find ourselves conditioned not to take it seriously. But the spiritual, religious longing is within us still, and if we do not find the truth in one place, we will seek for it in another. But in addition to this despair of objective truth is a worldview that sets itself up as the “new and deeper truth,” namely individualism parading under the banner of tolerance and acceptance. In the process of affirming the subjective nature of truth and the spiritual search—unfettered from the “shackles” of doctrine, authority, institution, and all forms of organized religion—such new age praxis (and believe) loses the breadth and depth of reality, which in the last two-thousand years had found such radiant expression in the teaching and life of the Church, and had, truly, made the world new.

But now we have grown old, and have forgotten the Church, forgotten Christ, who is “ever ancient, ever new” (St. Augustine.) And we tend to compensate for this loss now with a disordered fascination with the allure of the “east” that seems to offer the same thing we have already rejected (spiritual experience and fulfillment) without the demands of objective faith and universal morality. In a word, “new age” spirituality seeks silence without the Word, seeks experience without the Real, seeks relationship without the Person. It goes so far in the despair of the knowability of the truth that it claims (to quote a well known “spiritual teacher”) that

Belief systems can create limitations that inhibit our spiritual growth and awareness. The Infinite sends people blessings daily that often are blocked through scorn, judgment, pride, and other self-defeating attitudes. When using these prayers, if we will suspend our belief systems and speak the entire system of prayers aloud, word for word, we will share in the creation of a reality more beautiful than we could ever imagine – Direct Communion With the Infinite. In the Prayers the reference to the Infinite as God is simply a suggestion. Please address the Infinite by whatever name is appropriate for you. These prayers are meant for all people, all religions, and all beliefs. May the blessings of life be with you.

What such a viewpoint fails to acknowledge is that it *is* a viewpoint, and

that in relativizing all belief systems it is itself a belief system. This is what Pope Benedict XVI called the “intolerant tolerance” which parades itself as universal acceptance and openness, and yet in the process condemns all who claim to believe in one universal truth that binds all persons together and demands their obedience and the conformity of their life. In other words, it tolerates everyone who agrees with its basic premise—that there is no universally-binding truth—and condemns anyone who would call upon it to enter into intelligent debate, would claim to have found that the divine is actually knowable, that, beyond the silence and within it, there is a living and abiding Word, and that this Word, enduring forever, reveals to us God himself. And this God is not an amorphous “infinite” that makes no demands and proffers only fulfillment; rather, he is a Person, indeed three Persons, living eternally in intimate truth and love, and fashioning the entire universe and the life of each one of us in the image of their own everlasting Being and Life.

So let us move beyond the muddiness in which we find ourselves, beyond the “new age” that, for all its apparent hopefulness, is actually founded on despair, trying to grasp for some semblance of fulfillment when the true fulfillment found in the Gospel—in intimacy with the Trinity—is lost. Let us turn our gaze to the Triune Love, the everlasting bliss of the Trinity’s life, in which word and silence are forever joined in the single Word that, once uttered, says everything, and in whom everything is said in the world and in history, from beginning to end.

God lives in an eternity in which he forever pronounces his Word in silence, the Father begetting the Son without the need for formulated speech, in a gift in which all is said in the innermost sanctuary of silent presence, and all is said back by the Son to the Father. Silence is thus the atmosphere of the Spirit, the breath of love between Father and Son, and in silence alone can the human heart hear God speaking in the Spirit. Both word and silence, in our world, express this primal Silent Word, this Worded-Silence, as does sound and soundlessness, in their rich interchange. For silence is not, is never, a mere absence or lack—only the silence of sin, darkness, and death is such—but rather a deep presence, a profound attunement, a tremendously full reality, “shaken together, pressed down, and overflowing, poured into your lap” (Lk 6:38). True silence, therefore, is not a descent into nothingness, not a mere muteness or absence of thought, not a seeking of “nirvana” or even of a feeling of peace and repose. Rather, it is but the fullness of the presence of the human heart to the heart of God, and the presence of the heart of God to the human heart and to all that he has created, and which he unceasingly sustains at every moment with the loving gaze of his eyes and the affection of his heart and the voice of his mouth. True human silence is but reciprocal presence to the God who is always present to us.

All things, as I said, bear echoes of this original silence, and can lead us to it (though in human culture—as we have seen, particularly contemporary culture—there can many man-made things that rather tend to lead us away, distract us, and militate against this silence). The realities within our world that are still permeable to this original silence—which in truth is everything, if purified of the disorders of sin by which we cling and misuse, divert and

twist—become avenues by which we are invited to hear echoes of the silent-Word anew, and to enter into communion with it. Just as with visible beauty, fractured by sin but still visible, still sacramental, still capable of being “set free” by human creativity, so too with sound and silence. This is the profound beauty of *music*. Music and song is heard in silence and given in silence, and its atmosphere is silence. Without silence, music as such cannot exist; and true music deepens silence rather than militates against it (as long as it remains in its proper place). There are, of course, many kinds of music in our world—particularly today—which serve not silence but *noise*. They do not collect the heart in the interior but disperse it in the exterior; they do not still and focus the faculties of mind, imagination, and senses, but fragment them; they do not foster sobriety of spirit and deep presence of attunement, but excess, superficiality, and self-focus.

As I myself have striven over the past few years to draw nearer to music composition, and experienced a great number of struggles and discouragements along the way, the nature of music in general and of the music entrusted to me in particular has become clearer to me. Music truly is one of the primal languages of the universe, and of the human heart, which is in a sense pre-rational in that we can experience it and be moved by it even prior to formulated language or even the capacity for rational thought. On the other hand, music is intensely and richly rational, expressing as it does the Reason, the Logos, that lies at the heart of the universe. Thus music is a great paradox: it is a wordless expression of the Word through whom all things were made, and it can be a vehicle of the word and can channel words into a deeper intensity into the heart and mind (and ears!) of the receiver, while also carrying in itself a language that is itself wordless (in the sense of “little w” words).

Thus music can be both incredibly rich and incredibly simple, profoundly spiritual and yet also deeply enfolded and earthy. But it can also be humble and servant-like or bloated up with self-focus and false prestige. Thus, like in all things, music was designed by God, and entrusted by him to us, for the sake of the *making flesh of the Word*. And in this lies its grandeur and its beauty, its meaning and its mystery.

In discerning what this means for my own practice of music, trying to become as much as I am able a transparent channel for his word to sound through me for others, a few key words remain with me as guideposts, as contours emerging from the silence and the darkness like the shape of a face of the tenor of a voice. I have already mentioned a few: Richness and simplicity in a mysterious tension. Spirituality and yet earthiness. For me, the difficulty (inherently, but especially for me simply in the matter of developing the ear-and-heart hearing and the technical skill) is in bringing these paradoxical realities together in a single reality. To express *richness in simplicity*. And to convey heavenly beauty, spiritual mysteries, in *incarnate reality, in fleshly tones*.

And for this, humility is necessary, humility in the creator, but also humility in the music. Thus it is not first of all a matter of amazing skill or inborn talent, but of docility to the Spirit, and of spiritual realities that live even in the most ordinary or unspectacular of created (and co-created) things. Thus

even as my skill gradually improves—as all things do when you continue to play and work in ceaseless interchange—I continue to hear, and can in fact only write, in a profound simplicity, almost a “music of minimalism,” where sound and instrument are lessened, humbled, to be “at the brink of silence” and only to create a space for the silent echoing of the uncreated Word, the eternal Son of God, who is fullness both of Silence and of Music.

And man’s heart is inclined to silence, drawn to silence, because it is drawn to beauty, goodness, and truth. He is drawn to the music of silence and the silence of music...to the ineffable voice of the Word and the unspoken Logos deeper than every formulated word, the very Son in the bosom of the Father. And yet because of original sin and the effects of concupiscence, this same heart is also easily swayed by temptation, drawn to the periphery, and inclined to flight from silence into noise, as from vulnerability into the paradigm of power, and from poverty into the dynamic of possession. But the good creation of God is far deeper than the twisting effects of sin, the creative work of the Maker far more profound and true than the marring work of the evil one. Yet the sin and disorder exist; the temptation to inauthenticity, to flight from the center into exile, from intimacy into aloneness, from openness into closure, is real. And thus lies the invitation to welcome grace, to welcome the approach of God and the gift of his life, which reopens the closed heart once again and teaches it the true movement of love, of response to the call of beauty, goodness, and truth: the movement of self toward the beloved, and yet also, in this same movement, the welcoming of the beloved into the inmost heart of the self.

So let us come to the final point of this reflection, which is what I intended to speak of originally, though everything else is necessary, not only in order to cradle and inform these words, but also simply in its own right, because it is so very important! Let us speak specifically of music, of the unique language of music as a harbinger of the silent-Word of God spoken in the heart of the world and beyond it. If a trademark of true silence is specificity—not a generalized feeling or a descent into nothingness, but rather a loving and conscious and heartfelt presence to *another*, to the *Beloved of my heart*—then how does music authentically serve this? Does not music, rather, due to its lack of concrete content (assuming it does not have words), foster instead a silence that is more “new age” than it is Christian? Does it not foster feelings above conscious mental content? Does it not give credence, even, to the claims that beyond the specific word lies a silence that is accessible to everyone, and in which all can participate, granted that they are willing to “lay aside their belief systems” and to be open to everything?

Quite the contrary. Just because music in itself does not communicate through formulated words and concepts does not mean that its content is “contentless,” that the silent word that it speaks (the unique “musical word” that is proper to music) does not convey anything specific to the truly attuned human heart. Rather, it carries many nuances of meaning that, while not given in the same way as formulated human words, nonetheless harmonizes with, strengthens, and complements such words, as analogous manifestations of the one Word who enfolds in himself both word and silence, both spoken voice and silent presence. Is this not really the case in all of life, that

what we experience with the senses and in the very fabric of our daily life approaches us, not as concepts or words, but as *lived contact*, only then to be taken up by the thinking mind and put into words that express and, in a true way, make present again within me the realities that I have first encountered in the silence of living presence?

Music is thus but another incarnate word of God that he has given to us in this world, a word of his Word, an echo of his silent fullness, which draws our restless hearts back to him who is the fulfillment of our being and the satisfaction of all our desires. J.R.R. Tolkien himself, in his creation myth at the beginning of *The Silmarillion*, portrays God, Eru Illuvator—the One, All-Father—inviting his angels, the Ainur, to sing with him a great Music. And in this Music the whole of the created world and all of its history is contained, from beginning to end. The insight here is very perceptive and pertinent: in the beginning the Word was Music and Music was the Word, or rather Music was an expression of the Word extended out into the angelic realm, harmonizing created voices with its own and joining them to his own creative activity. Thus all the music that we hear in this world, and the *word* that it speaks to us—stirring up in our hearts a nostalgia for our true home, awakening and directing our *eros* back to God—is an echo of that primal Music in which the world was first fashioned, a distant and yet beautiful reverberation of the Silent-Sound, the ineffable Word in whom all things were made and in whom they shall find their consummation. Yes, all music, just as every other reality that we can encounter in this world, is an echo and a messenger of the one God, the Trinity, who is everlasting music in eternal intimacy, the consummation of love in the perfect harmony of mutual belonging and in the melody of sweetest self-giving, in the fullness of meaning that is the very Being of the Three whom we worship, and who shall be our everlasting bliss: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ישוע

THE GARDEN OF BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM

Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality's surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. The intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one's own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things. All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardor of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendor which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit.

Believers find nothing strange in this: they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original well-spring in God. Is it in any way surprising that this leaves the spirit overwhelmed as it were, so that it can only stammer in reply? True artists above all are ready to acknowledge their limits and to make their own the words of the Apostle Paul, according to whom "God does

not dwell in shrines made by human hands” so that “we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold or silver or stone, a representation by human art and imagination” (Acts 17:24, 29). If the intimate reality of things is always “beyond” the powers of human perception, how much more so is God in the depths of his unfathomable mystery!

The knowledge conferred by faith is of a different kind: it presupposes a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Yet this knowledge too can be enriched by artistic intuition. An eloquent example of aesthetic contemplation sublimated in faith are, for example, the works of Fra Angelico. No less notable in this regard is the ecstatic lauda, which Saint Francis of Assisi twice repeats in the chartula which he composed after receiving the stigmata of Christ on the mountain of La Verna: “You are beauty... You are beauty!” Saint Bonaventure comments: “In things of beauty, he contemplated the One who is supremely beautiful, and, led by the footprints he found in creatures, he followed the Beloved everywhere.”

A corresponding approach is found in Eastern spirituality where Christ is described as “the supremely Beautiful, possessed of a beauty above all the children of earth.” Macarius the Great speaks of the transfiguring and liberating beauty of the Risen Lord in these terms: “The soul which has been fully illumined by the unspeakable beauty of the glory shining on the countenance of Christ overflows with the Holy Spirit... it is all eye, all light, all countenance.”

Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness of truth was bound from the beginning to stir the interest of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every “epiphany” of the inner beauty of things.

- St. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, n. 6

To bring these reflections to a close, I would like to quote a reflection from an earlier work of mine, which will hopefully help to summarize many of the themes that we have explored, and will be a good “releasing” point for leaving these mysteries in the silence, in the care of your own contemplation, prayer, and cherishing love.

The experience of love lies at the very heart of the Gospel. We have been created precisely for this—namely, playful intimacy with God and with one another—and this experience is the “good news” that heals and liberates us. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son. ... So we know and believe the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4:10, 16). “Father, may they be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (cf. Jn 17:22-23). Even as the Father has loved the Son, so he also loves us! And in the Heart of this very Son he unveils for us the fullness of this Love! It is thus precisely in standing before Christ and experiencing his loving gaze—in letting him rejoice in my beauty as I simultaneously fall in love with his—that I am truly healed and transformed. He is the great Affirmer of the human heart, who shelters each

one of us in the tenderness and abiding delight of his love. He is thus the true Home, who by creating the space of security in his own Heart, freely communicates to us the living contact with Goodness, Beauty, and Truth for which our hearts inherently thirst. Yes...he is himself also the Beautiful One who ravishes and draws us all to himself, in order to immerse us in the endless joy of the Trinity.

Only when I experience this tender gaze of Christ can I let go of my need to be “adequate,” to act and do and perform perfectly, and in this way to safeguard my own “identity.” Instead, I can sink back into the place of my poverty and weakness, the space of my littleness and need for gratuitous love, *in which my life ceaselessly flows as a gift from the generous love of the Trinity.* And here, surprisingly, I find myself lifted up in the very surging of God’s love which is true strength! By having my own beauty and goodness affirmed by God himself, I find my heart liberated from fear and shame, and my being dilates spontaneously according to the very gift of love that I have first received. Further, in this very experience of being loved I also get to know and feel the immense beauty of the One who loves me. His Beauty touches, ravishes, and draws my heart, and this very Beauty, as it draws me, also sustains me with a strength that, on my own, I could never have.

Yes, in letting myself be loved in my littleness, my authentic beauty is set free by the Beauty of the One who loves me—and the grace of God, pouring forth generously into me, carries me unceasingly in generous love back into the embrace of God, and into authentic love and relationship with all of those whom he has so lovingly created.

And this gaze of God, this touch of God, this embrace of God in which I find my home in the very bosom of the Trinity, is mediated to me and incarnate for me in a beautiful way in my very concrete existence in the world that he has made. We have already tried to glimpse how he comes to me in the very concrete contours of my experience of my tangible, material being, existing as it does in a ceaseless relationship with what is outside of me. He comes to me in the words of Scripture, this precious love letter of the One who has willed to unveil the very contours of his tender Heart through the text of the Bible, living and breathing in the heart of the Church, and also given to me uniquely to touch me in the solitude of my most intimate prayer. Now I would like to speak a little about how he comes in and through the sacraments in the more specific sense—that is, not only the “sacrament of the present moment,” nor even the sacramentality of the universe as a whole, which continually speaks a word of his love and beauty, but also the sacraments that Christ himself gave to be privileged spaces of encounter with the intense activity of the Trinity in the world.

In particular I want to speak of the Eucharist and the liturgy. And yet I am not going to do so in the sense of giving advice about how to approach them with a truly recollected and playful attitude, but above all to speak in broad strokes of the deepest “transformation of vision” that the whole sacramental reality effects within us, unsealing for us the deepest wellsprings of a vision of a world transfigured in Christ, Crucified and Risen, and pressing on towards the definitive consummation at the end of time. It is precisely this deep contemplation of the mystery of the universe bathed in the redeeming and re-

creating light of Love that will also grant us a deeper understanding of the disposition that corresponds to the radical gift of God's presence, the disposition that allows the veil to be pulled back ever more deeply from the ravishing beauty of the One who desires to communicate himself to me and to espouse me to himself. This is the disposition of faith, hope, and love.

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What does all that I have said mean concretely for our lives? It means many things, but, in this context, I can affirm that it means in a special way *the importance of fostering a culture that is founded, not primarily on a shared mission or apostolate, but on a unique yet communal pursuit of the face of the Bridegroom and of intimacy with him, and on the affirmation of the unique beauty and incomparable value of each person as God's beloved.*

This reality of "home" indeed stands at the heart of biblical revelation. How is this so? Because the intimate nuptial union of the bridal heart with her heavenly Bridegroom stands at the very heart of the Church. It is the intimate space from which all else flows and to which it returns. Mary, first of all, has experienced this reality; she is the paradise of God, the garden enclosed and fountain sealed that is nonetheless, precisely in this way, also a garden open for all to come and dwell and a well of living water pouring forth God's Love for all of his children. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

In the Church this communion of men with God, in the "love [that] never ends," is the purpose which governs everything in her that is a sacramental means, tied to this passing world (1 Cor 13:18). "[The Church's] structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. And holiness is measured according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom." Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery as "the bride without spot or wrinkle" (Eph 5:27). This is why the "Marian" dimension of the Church precedes the "Petrine." (par. 773)

Indeed, in God's original intention, the entire universe is meant to be a garden, a paradise in which humanity walks in communion with the Trinity. But this garden is also a temple, a place of ceaseless worship of God. Yet if this creation is a temple, then what is worship? Worship, in its deepest truth, simply means the disposition in which God is free to pour out the fullness of his Love without reserve into the receptive human heart and life, and in which his beloved pours herself out, in loving adoration and joyful wonder, to him in return. Indeed, in Eden, Adam and Eve were created as "priests," mediating between God himself and the whole created world. Through their filial relationship with God, and also through their relationship with one another, they were to draw the whole of the world together into unity in themselves and to bind it inseparably—in their childlike obedience and their playful surrender (and liturgy should always be both reverent and playful!)—to the Trinity from whom it came and to whom it was meant to return.

This is clear in the very text of Genesis, in which God gives man and woman dominion over the entire creation. This dominion is expressed in the entrustment of the garden as a gift and task into the orbit of the love and care of Adam and Eve. In fact, in the desire of God for Adam "to till and to keep"

the garden (better words would be to “cultivate” and to “care”), there is very rich symbolism, since these terms are the same as those used later in the Bible to refer to the activity of the priest in the temple sanctuary. In other words, Adam is being given a *priestly* role within the creation, the creation which is like a cosmic temple radiant with God’s glory, and of which the Garden of Eden is the inner sanctuary. In fact, the very temple that, many years after the events of the Garden of Eden, is built in Jerusalem, was designed as a kind of microcosm of the whole universe, decorated with stars, celestial bodies, trees, and bodies of water, etc. So if the temple was designed to be a microcosm of the universe, then the universe was designed to be a macrocosm of the temple—to be one living space of ceaseless prayer, praise, and intimacy. This has been the clear and constant teaching of the chosen people for centuries. Yes, the universe is not just a “cosmos,” but a temple, a sanctuary, a place of worship and prayer and adoration, by which God’s light shines forth, and which returns, through the priestly love of man, into the receptive embrace of God once again.

And yet this priestly activity is above all a *filial* activity. It is a childlike playfulness, a grateful reception of gift, a wonder-filled awe that takes up the beauty of created things into the embrace of the human heart, and holds them before God. It is a *spousal* receptivity that welcomes the gift of God himself, his all-enfolding and all-permeating love, and lets it irradiate forth into the creation as its guiding principle, as the inner form that gives meaning and direction to all things, unsealing within them their deepest beauty. It is a sharing in the *parenthood* of God, in his maternal fatherhood, in his tender care for all that he has made. Yes, the true work of man is his play, and his true activity is rest. In the Garden of Eden before sin, man was a child, and even in maturity remained a child. As long as he remained enfolded within the embrace of God’s love, then man remained child, remained at rest and joyful in the lightheartedness and carefree playfulness of love. His very responsibility was but a response to a prior gift, and itself a gift; his very tasks within creation were enfolded within play, and an expression of play.

This is clear, again, in the very nature of the Sabbath, which is God’s day of rest that becomes the inner sign of his covenant with his people. The Sabbath is the sign that they are invited to play and worship and rejoice, beyond any of the burdensome tasks that would distract them. And every time God renews his covenant with his people, he invites them to take a prolonged period of leisure and rest and worship, as only in this way—in the heart’s surging prayer beyond all things and yet within all things, at the heart of the joy of gratuity, of sheer “for-its-own-sake-ness”—can the human person find fulfillment and happiness, for it is here that intimacy most fully flowers.

Thus the whole of creation was, and is, meant to be both a paradise and a temple, a garden of intimacy and a space of true adoration and worship. But it can be so only when the human person—upon whom the whole of creation is “hinged” for its own authentic well-being—abides in true intimacy with God. When this is the case, when the person remains open in a “Marian” trust and confidence before the Love of the Trinity, then the whole created order itself reveals its authentic meaning as a “sacrament” of his presence. As Alexander Schmemmann writes:

We *need* water and oil, bread and wine in order to be in communion with God and to know Him. Yet conversely—and such is the teaching, if not of our modern theological manuals, at least of the liturgy itself—it is this communion with God by means of “matter” that reveals the true meaning of “matter,” i.e., of the world itself. We can only worship in time, yet it is worship that ultimately not only reveals the meaning of time, but truly “renews” time itself. There is no worship without the participation of the body, without words and silence, light and darkness, movement and stillness—yet it is in and through worship that all these essential expressions of man in his relation to the world are given their ultimate “term” of reference, revealed in their highest and deepest meaning.

Thus the term “sacramental” means that for the world to be means of worship and means of grace is not accidental, but the revelation of its meaning, the restoration of its essence, the fulfillment of its destiny. It is the “natural sacramentality” of the world that finds expression in worship and makes the latter the essential *ἔργον* [work] of man, the foundation and the spring of his life and activities as man. Being the epiphany [manifestation] of God, worship is thus the epiphany of the world; being communion with God, it is the only true communion with the world; being knowledge of God, it is the ultimate fulfillment of all human knowledge.⁹

The world, from the very first moment of its creation, is a sacrament. It is a manifestation of God’s glory and a mediator of his presence and his touch. And man and woman were given the whole creation as an inestimable gift, as a home and the living context in which their intimacy with God and with one another could flower in a ceaseless wonder and filial play. And this very disposition, this very wonder-filled receptivity and playful intimacy, lifts up the creation and brings it to its own authentic fulfillment in the communion of human persons and in communion with God himself. But because of the rupture of sin, it is as if a darkness has fallen upon creation, and this natural sacramentality has been obscured for human eyes and heart. Our eyes must be reopened, our hearts must be sensitized, and creation itself must be “unsealed” in its deepest meaning, so that it may live again in the cradling embrace of human hearts, being allowed to speak its “word” of love as a gift from God to the children he created, and as the living space of their ceaselessly flowering intimacy with him and with each other.

This is where the liturgy and the sacraments given by Christ find their beautiful place. As I said, the liturgy, in its deepest meaning, is not a “thing” that we do on Sundays, or even for thirty minutes or an hour every day. Rather, liturgy is the very core of all things, for it is nothing but the ceaseless respiration of the Trinity’s own life of intimacy and love, poured out into the creation and seeking to take creation back into the innermost core of his own everlasting embrace as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus liturgy is, in the last analysis, nothing but our living participation in the inhalation and exhalation of God himself, permeating all created things and giving them meaning, while also opening up, in them and beyond them, the sweetest touch of direct intimacy with God in faith, hope, and love. This is a touch by which

creation is not left behind, but sanctified and set free in the virginal hearts of man and woman surrendered into the welcoming embrace of the Father.

And the concrete expressions of the liturgy as lived within the Church's worship, and the tangible contact with God by means of a sanctified creation in the sacraments, exists precisely to allow us to participate in this respiration of love, and to anticipate, already in the shadows of this life, the definitive dawn of light that awaits us at the end of time. For it is precisely the playful wonder that permeates the liturgy that teaches us anew how to love, how to play, and how to relate to the whole of creation, in all of its tangible concreteness each day. And this wonder and play is not a horizontal distraction with peripheral matters, or a focus on the natural beauty of creation alone, but rather a lifting up of the whole of creation and matter such that it becomes a transparent window for the outpouring of the divine light and the self-communication of the Trinity. In the sacraments and the liturgy, time and space themselves unveil their deepest radiance, becoming "stretched thin," as it were, to give a glimpse, a taste, and a participation in the living space of the divine life and in the everlasting play of eternity.

Whenever a piece of bread and a bit of wine can truly be transformed into the very Body and Blood of Christ, while retaining the simple and humble appearance of bread and wine, what consequences this has for my understanding of the whole material universe! Whenever the humble words of a priest in response to the opening of my own vulnerability in confession can truly mediate God's forgiving and healing love, what this means for human relationships in general! Whenever water becomes a bearer of the Spirit's recreating presence, lifting up the human person from the fracture of sin and giving them a living share in the very inner life of the Trinity, what this means for the way that I relate to every created element in this world, however humble!

Yes, and it is precisely worship—in the liturgy in the narrow sense but even more in the "liturgized existence" of the human person whose being, touched by grace, flowers in playful intimacy with the Trinity—which begins to share in the mystery of eternal consummation, and to unseal in creation itself its deepest meaning as living space of encounter and home of communion. For it is in the heart of the each person—in the heart of the bride that each one of us is within the bosom of the bridal Church—that the whole world is gathered back together into unity through unity with God. For here the heart of the bride itself is gathered together into unity in the sacramental encounter of love and the respiration of the prayer of the heart, espoused to the reconciling heart of the divine Bridegroom and made the garden-sanctuary of his presence. And as she becomes the living garden of his delight, the whole world, living in her through God's loving intentions and also consciously taken up in the tenderness of her super-affirmation, radiates forth as a garden too.

The whole world becomes a garden precisely when the bride allows her own heart to become a garden. This is true, first of all, in the spirit and the flesh of the Virgin Mary, in whom the whole of creation is in a way contained and is espoused again to God in intimate love. This is true, universally, in the Catholic Church, the Bride of Christ, who is the garden of God's par-

adise, his living Body in this world. It is in her that the world is truly lifted up from its state of estrangement in sin, purified and healed, and set free to be what God has always intended it to be. This is true, also, in the unique life of each one of us, seen, known, and loved by God, and called into an intimate nuptial union with him in the bosom of his Church.

When this happens, then this threefold bride—Mary, the Church, and the individual human heart—becomes the garden in which God works his greatest marvels of healing and reconciliation, marriage and consummation. He unites her lovingly to himself in a bond of unspeakable intimacy in the enclosed garden of her being, in the rich fabric of her personal existence in intimate contact with himself. But this most intimate touch also pours forth in spontaneous and expansive fruitfulness. The sacredness of God's touch in her inmost being pours forth, not only throughout her entire body (a virginal garden precious in his eyes), but also spreads to touch and transform the whole creation into a garden of the Trinity's glorious presence. It is precisely in this way, through the loving eyes and heart of the bride, that the full beauty of creation as God's gift, a living space of intimacy between humanity and the Trinity, and between human persons bound together as one within the embrace of the Trinity, can again reveal itself in full splendor. It is in the bridal heart and through her, therefore, that creation can again be opened to its authentic meaning throughout the passage of history, and can also be carried toward its full consummation at the end of time in the eternal marriage of the Lamb.

APPENDICES

FILM RECOMMENDATIONS

Violet Evergarden (2018 Series + 2020 Movie)

-This is, in my opinion, a true masterpiece, and one of the most beautiful pieces of art that I have ever received, a profound illustration, among other things, of the primal experiences of human existence in which the Love that precedes me awakens me to life, to my own self, and to the capacity to enter into love, to live love, and to become love, thus finding fulfillment in communion. This is the creator's summary: "A great war has ended, and left in the aftermath is Violet Evergarden—a young girl raised to be a lethal weapon. Now after the war, she learns to heal and recover through her work at CH Postal Company as an Auto Memory Doll writing people's thoughts and feelings into letters. As she works, she begins to understand the parting words from the person she held dearest." If you watch the series, make sure to follow up with the 2020 movie to see the story to conclusion!

The Lord of the Rings (2001-2003)

-A wholly Catholic myth, permeated with the implicit light of Christ and founded on an entirely Christian worldview, it has been instrumental in the conversion or renewed faith of many. The first book of theology or philosophy that I ever read, and which catalyzed so much in my life of faith and searching, was *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, and thus myth, truly Christian faerie story, was for me a stepping-stone for exploring the full depth and breadth of the faith, and of reality in the light of faith, with a spirit of child-like wonder.

I Am Dragon (2015)

-A beautiful Russian fairy tale for an adult audience, on the overcoming of concupiscence and the harnessing of one's whole being in the freedom of love. It is a bold and tender presentation of what I have termed elsewhere as "baptizing the jailer," of channeling the wholeness of our humanity in the gift of love, rather than repressing or fearing it.

Absolution (2018) – also called Harmony

-This breathtakingly beautiful hidden gem of a film portrays a theme that is not often treated, but which I truly believe is so central to human life and love—namely the spiritual "threads" that connect us to one another in a single humanity, a single Body of Christ, such that we can "bear" one another in good and evil, suffering to free others from the chains that bind them. Indeed, this film portrays the conflict of good and evil, of love and fear, vividly, and gives voice to the truth of the words of Scripture: "Love casts out fear." Though there are some "new-agey" themes here, the truth under it all is a radically evangelical mystery, a participation in the atonement (absolution!) wrought by Christ, and in which we are granted to participate. The main actress, Jessica Falkholt, also died (along with her entire family) as a result of a car crash ten months before the movie was released. This makes the viewing all the more powerful, and it can be an act of intercession for her, as well as a plea for the intercession of all those who have passed away, and who remain united to us still.

The Magic of Ordinary Days (2005)

-A good story in its own right, it manifests a truly transparent, virginal love, and thus also serves as an icon or allegory of the love of Christ for the Church, for each one of us. What begins as an arranged marriage for a

woman who bears a child out of wedlock becomes something so much more.

The Giver (2014)

-Yet another story that follows, even if unconsciously, the rhythms of the Paschal Mystery and thus illustrates the mystery of our redemption. Here the film proves to be both deeper and wider than the book, as it explores more thoroughly the rediscovery of love, of eros as both pathos and agape, and the redemptive act of “passing beyond the barrier in order to unleash life for all.”

Clare and Francis (2007)

-A beautiful exposition of the lives of Saints Francis and Clare that, while integrating fictional elements, nonetheless respects the integrity of the story of these two wonderful persons. It truly succeeds in communicating the authentic spirit of Franciscan love, wonder, and lightness, and helps the viewer to draw near to a truly nuptial spirituality—a true marvel.

The Spitfire Grill (1996)

-An unexpectedly beautiful film about a mysterious woman who shows up at a grill, and the events set in motion by her presence.

Ink (2009)

-One of the most creative and thoughtful films I have seen, it proves to be a powerful allegory of many Christian themes—that is, *real* themes—that makes it highly worth the watch. “Our battle is not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers...” and yet God sings his harmony into everything, the true Storyteller who intervenes and delivers in his abundant love.

Chasing the Rain (2020)

-A powerful portrayal of the drama of suffering and trauma and the questions that it poses, particularly concerning the goodness of God. This film does not sugar-coat the rawness of the questions, but truly walks through the heart of the pain and loss, and yet brings light and hope through the midst of it with truly Christian symbolism rooted in the Word of God.

Courageous (2011)

-An explicitly Christian movie about the rediscovery of the beauty and responsibilities of fatherhood. The works by the Hendricks brothers, of which there are a few in this list, all prove to be solid pieces of art, evangelical in their impetus and deeply moving in their storytelling.

The Last Princess (2016)

-A Korean masterwork of beauty and depth, exploring themes of love, fidelity, sacrifice, and tenderness. While the darkness and pain in this film is real and profound, so too is the empathy, hope, and light that it so tenderly communicates.

The Girl Behind the Door (2021)

-An artistic movie that acts something like a stage play, created by a Christian youth camp during the Covid lockdown, it explores beautifully themes of intimacy through vulnerability—of opening the doors of our hearts to God and to others.

Tales of Zestiria the X (2016)

-A Japanese anime that is a surprisingly and touchingly transparent myth and also filled with authentically Christian themes. It is an allegory of the Shepherd who carries the darkness of the world in compassion and atonement in order to liberate it once again.

Your Lie in April (2014)

-An anime series blending the beauty of music with healing from trauma and

human maturation; despite some immature humor, it is well worth the time to watch. The human themes that it treats, and with a genuine sense of wonder and discovery, can truly stir deep contemplation, as we walk with Kousei from his fearful regrets, through the discovery of love, into a more radiant and abundant life.

True Tears (2008)

-Another anime, very sober and reverent, about many themes of love: chastity, tenderness, compassion, affirmation, and honesty. Though there are remnants of the unfortunate Japanese anime style of “harem,” these are rendered almost entirely transparent to the beauty of personhood and to the protagonist’s maturation in a truly affirming and chaste love.

The Devil’s Arithmetic (1999)

-A film about a young woman with Jewish heritage who is “transported” into the life of her ancestor and walks through the Holocaust. While approaching these horrific events with honesty and realism, the film nonetheless also remains hopeful and empathetic, and stirs deep reflection on the importance of remembrance.

The Princess and the Pilot (2011)

-An anime movie about virginal love and care as a pilot escorts a princess across the ocean to meet her fiancé. It illustrates beautifully the many nuances with which love is manifested and the unique word that God speaks into each relationship.

Overcomer (2019)

-Another Hendricks brothers film, it is a heartfelt and touching film about the discovery of one’s identity as God’s beloved, even if it follows a more generic cliché storyline of “sports.” Underneath is a truly and deeply evangelical thread touching the core of what it means to be a believer and a child of God.

War Room (2015)

-Again by the Hendricks brothers, this film is a story about the importance and power of prayer, illustrating the rediscovery of prayer and the way that it allows God to truly enter into and transform human life from the inside. While it does not treat extensively of the inner heart of prayer as growing intimacy with the Trinity, it does illustrate practical aspects of prayer as discernment and intercession, and light cast upon the concrete issues of our life and existence.

October Baby (2011)

-A popular pro-life movie about a young woman who goes in search of her mother, it can truly communicate in a compelling way the tragedy of abortion. It does so in a special way by communicating and inviting us into a gaze of tender love upon the main protagonist, thus stirring a cherishing affirmation for the sacredness of every human life.

Bella (2007)

-A culturally-rich (Hispanic) film touching deeply on themes of abortion and fatherly, motherly care.

Lés Misérables (2012)

-A classic, the musical derived from Victor Hugo’s massive novel, treating of themes of poverty, injustice, and faith in the context of the French Revolution.

The Bells of St. Mary’s (1945)

-A simple and yet touching story of a priest and a nun who grow and walk together as they both face the struggles of a poor parochial school under their care.

Frozen (2013)

-A Disney film that includes a clear thread of evangelical truth in the compassion and love that alone break down the barriers of fear and sin and make love and communion possible.

Ghost in the Shell (2017)

-Based on the anime movie, and yet more transparent, it is an exploration of totalitarianism and violation of conscience (though the anthropology—being dualistic—is obviously not entirely accurate).

The Canterville Ghost (1996)

-Based on a short story by Oscar Wilde, this film treats many themes of faith and science, of belief and rationalism, as well as love, guilt, repentance, and redemption through love.

Peter Pan (2003)

-The classic story of the playfulness and wonder of childhood on the edge of adulthood, in a good rendition.

Robert the Bruce (2019)

-Simply a solid film about true patriotism and care for one's country, rather tense but beautiful nonetheless.

Words Bubble Up Like Soda Pop (2021)

-A very creative and humorous exploration of social struggles and authentic vulnerability, particularly in the context of a technological world.

Clannad: After Story (2008)

-A deeply touching story of loss and redemption. The first season is much less transparent; I would recommend perhaps watching the first two episodes and the last episode as preface to Season 2.

The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler (2009)

-A filmic exposition of the story of the above-named woman, who saved many Jewish children in Warsaw during the time of Nazi deportations to concentration camps, risking her own life in order to protect the littlest and most vulnerable.

Unplanned (2019)

-The film version of the popular book by Abbey Johnson, recounting her conversion from the head of a branch of Planned Parenthood to the realization of the true nature of abortion and her conversion to the fullness of care for life.

Mary of Nazareth (2012)

-Perhaps one of the best biblical films, though it does lapse into apocrypha it remains rooted in a truly Catholic vision of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and of the path that they walked. One can sense the reverence for historical truth with which the creators approached the film, and can also thus approach the true mystery of our redemption more deeply in and through it.

What if... (2010)

-A Christian film about the consequences of choices and about what truly matters in life; a message of redemption told through the parable of "walking the other path," the one not chosen.

Redemption of the Heart (2015)

-A very rich and transparent Christian film with too many themes to recount

here. Though clearly “indie” it deserves a watch (or two) for the transparency and beauty of the storytelling.

Run Boy Run (2013)

-Human and evangelical compassion in a time of great need, as we accompany of young Jewish boy who is fleeing across Poland in the effort to stay alive and free during World War II.

I Am David (2003)

-Based off the small book, it is the story of a boy who escapes from a Communist concentration camp and tries to make his way back to a destination unknown—which he has forgotten but others have remembered, to a promise he can only imagine.

Wish You Well (2015)

-A beautiful and touching story also based off of a book, it bears a simplicity and wholeness that is becoming all too rare in films nowadays.

Meant to Be (2012)

-A parable of the value of human life and a culture of life in a society that is more and more inimical to it.

Pope John Paul II (2005)

-One of the better and more accurate cinematic presentations of the life of Karol Wojtyła, John Paul II.

For Greater Glory (2012)

-“The true story of Cristiada,” this Catholic film portrays events during a painful time in Mexico’s history and also illustrates the beauty of the saints and their witness to *Cristo Rey y la Virgen de Guadalupe*.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Unlike the short history of film, which is still but a century old, the tradition of literature goes back much further. There are a plenitude of books that can be both beneficial and enriching, even life-changing, which may not be “the best of the best,” but which can meet a person in a particular juncture of their journey. And they all express something of humanity, its aspirations and hopes as well as its faults and foibles. I share here only a selection, with a special focus on those which I think to be most transparent, or to most clearly express the center and the heart of reality (though surprisingly and sadly, the heart of Trinity’s love and intimacy is still to be expounded in literature, both fiction and non-fiction, as it deserves). Some are also simply powerful pieces of art in their own right, which have touched millions of readers for the enduring themes that they treat.

NOTE: I have placed a * (or two) before titles that I think to be particularly profound or especially needed in our time, those book of which the truths contained within cause one to cry out, “If only everyone could read and understand this, it would heal so much that is wrong in our world!”

FICTION

- Fyodor Dostoevsky
 - The Brothers Karamazov*
 - Crime and Punishment*
- Heinrich Sienkiewicz
 - Quo Vadis*
- J.R.R. Tolkien
 - The Hobbit*
 - The Lord of the Rings*
 - The Silmarillion*
- C.S. Lewis
 - The Chronicles of Narnia*
 - Till We Have Faces*
- Victor Hugo
 - Lés Miserables*
- Michael O’Brien
 - Island of the World*
 - A Father’s Tale*
- Lucy Beckett
 - Postcards from the Volcano*
 - The Leaves are Falling*
- Antonio Arslan
 - Silent Angel*
- Homer
 - The Iliad*
 - The Odyssey*
- Virgil
 - The Aeneid*
- Harper Lee
 - To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II

Our God's Brother
The Jeweler's Shop
Radiance of Fatherhood

NON-FICTION

- Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI
 - Jesus of Nazareth Trilogy*
 - **Truth and Tolerance*
 - A School of Prayer*
 - God is Near Us*
- Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II
 - **Theology of the Body*
(This is quite a difficult read, and a good unfolding of it that makes it much more accessible is Christopher West's "Theology of the Body Explored," which, while not perfect, has far more positives than negatives, and communicates the true depth and meaning of John Paul's TOB.)
 - Love and Responsibility*
 - Crossing the Threshold of Hope*
- John Henry Newman
 - The Development of Christian Doctrine*
 - *The Grammar of Assent*
- G.K. Chesterton
 - *Orthodoxy*
 - *The Everlasting Man*
 - The Catholic Church and Conversion*
 - Saint Francis of Assisi*
 - Saint Thomas Aquinas*
- Dietrich von Hildebrand
 - Transformation in Christ*
 - *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity*
 - The Nature of Love*
- Servais Pinckaers, O.P.,
 - **The Sources of Christian Ethics*
- Blaise Arminjon
 - The Cantata of Love: A Verse-by-Verse Reading of the Song of Songs*
- Peter Kreeft
 - Catholic Christianity*
 - Handbook of Catholic Apologetics (w/ Ronald Tacelli)*
- Joseph Langford, M.C.
 - Mother Teresa's Secret Fire*
- Conrad Baars (w/ Anna Terruwe)
 - Feeling and Healing Your Emotions*
 - Psychic Wholeness and Healing*
 - Healing the Unaffirmed*
 - I Will Give Them a New Heart*
- Carl Anderson and Jose Granados

Called to Love

- Iain Matthew
The Impact of God: Soundings from Saint John of the Cross
- Timothy Gallagher
The Discernment of Spirits
- Carthusian Authors
**The Way of Silent Love*
The Wound of Love
The Call of Silent Love
- Saint Augustine of Hippo
The Confessions
- Saint Thomas Aquinas
Summa Theologiae
(or a good summary, such as Kreeft's "Summa of the Summa", but it should not be based on the so-called 'commentators,' but on the true Thomas as rooted in the Gospel and Church Fathers. See the Pinckners recommendation above, for example, for the true spirit of Saint Thomas and for the best foundational exploration of ethics that I have found.)
- Saint John of the Cross
The Spiritual Cantic
The Living Flame of Love
- Scott Hahn
Any of his works would be beneficial, and the vast majority are very short, treating a particular Scriptural topic, e.g. The Lamb's Supper, Hail, Holy Queen.
- Various Authors
Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture
For obvious reasons I am recommending this here, as it is a complete collection of books expounding a truly Catholic view of the New Testament, and a good basis for exploring the word of God in the light of the living tradition of the Church.

1. Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (Broadway Books: New York, 2011), 16-18.

2. *The Wellspring of Worship*, 230-231.

3. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, 58, p. 168.

4. “The accusation of the moral evil that the ‘desire’ born from carnal in-temperate concupiscence contains within itself is at the same time a call to overcome this evil. If victory over evil must consist in detachment from it...nevertheless one must only *detach oneself from the evil of the act...and one must never transfer the negativity of this act to its object* [i.e. the human body]. Such a transfer would signify—perhaps not in a fully conscious way—a certain acceptance of the Manichean ‘anti-value.’ [Manicheanism saw matter as the source of evil, and in particular the body and sex as bad.] It would not constitute a real and deep victory over the evil of the act, which is evil by its moral essence, and thus an evil of a spiritual nature... Given that the accusation directed against the evil of concupiscence is at the same time an appeal to overcome it, it follows that this victory must go hand in hand with an effort to discover the authentic value of the object.” If the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount challenge the human heart and put in on guard against concupiscence, “at the same time and by the same words it *is called to discover the full meaning of that which, in the act of concupiscence, constitutes for it ‘a value not sufficiently appreciated.’* ... ‘Adultery committed in the heart’ can and should be understood as a ‘devaluation’ or impoverishment of an authentic value, as an intentional privation of that dignity to which the integral value of her femininity corresponds in the person in question.” (TOB 46.4-5)

In fact, the Church in the previous few centuries, and to a certain degree and in particular periods more than others, throughout her history, there has been a tendency to hear the words of Christ against lust only through a lens of fear. They are not heard as an invitation to sufficiently appreciate, to super-affirm, the value of the human body, of sexuality, and of the person. And this not only has negative consequences for moral maturity, but also profound negative effects in the realm of psychological and personal wholeness. In this regard, John Paul’s words come very close to the marvelous work done by Conrad Baars and Anna Terruwe in treating what is termed the “repressive neurosis.” This is a disorder in which the emotion of fear (or energetic striving) buries the sexual emotions and does not allow them to come out into the open—in the thought that they are evil or too corrupted to be allowed into the light. But in this way they cannot make contact with the guiding power of reason and the will, and cannot be evangelized by truth and beauty, harmonized with all the faculties of the human person. This disorder can reach the point of obsessive-compulsive disorder (and other troubling physiological or psychological symptoms) in which the very reality suppressed so deeply emerges uncontrollably in obsessive thoughts and actions, such as sexual fantasies, masturbation, or pornography. It can also emerge, however, in more “ordered” ways, which still bear a strong emotional intensity due to the repression, such as the desire to make contact with the naked human body, to know what it looks like, how it functions, etc. This, in fact, is a very healthy impulse, as the human heart, wounded by repressive fear, is seeking to become whole again—to become whole in contact with reality, with the value of gender, sexuality, and human intimacy that is always a “value not sufficiently appreciated.” For more on this, see the work of Conrad Baars—particularly *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions*, or, for a more in depth theological treatment, *Psychic Wholeness and Healing*—or my own treatment in my book, *Home for the Restless Heart*.

5. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W> Norton & Company: New York, 2011), 5-7.

6. *Ready Player One*, 198.

7. Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (Hodder & Stoughton Ltd: London, 1995), 96-98.

8. *Ibid.*, 100-101.

9. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998 [1963]), 121.