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Finding God in All Things ... and Back Home

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Note:

Jesuit philosophy and spirituality are known for their meditative and reflective dimensions. Accordingly, the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius include the elements of examination, meditation, consideration, and contemplation. These can be summarized in a single term, *reflection*. Jesuit higher education all too often and too easily can be distracted by the business and processes of the academy, necessary but not sufficient to achieve its real goals of personal formation and transformation. It is reflection that aids these ultimate aims. In this inaugural issue, and in subsequent issues, JHE is pleased to present a reflective article that calls us to imagine, to reason and to engage our affective sensibilities; in other words, it is a call to deep reflection – without which Jesuit higher education remains incomplete.

- General Editors

Finding God in All Things ... and Back Home

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In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola maps three types of mental prayer: (a) Considerations, (b) Contemplations, and (c) Meditations. I say “mental” prayer to distinguish this prayer encouraged by Ignatius from ritual and liturgical prayer (Mass or the Divine Office) as well as the long tradition of devotional mantra, like the Rosary or litanies, where the vehicle that carries the soul to God is the mantra, the repeated, rhythmic prayer that creates a cadence in the heart. I want to point this out but add that these three types of prayer mapped by Ignatius are also *affective*. That is, they become the prayer of the heart through the imagination. We are meant, ultimately, to feel what we consider, contemplate, and meditate.

Spiritual Exercises [Section 230], The Contemplation on Divine Love:

1. Love manifests itself more in deeds than in words.
2. Love consists in the mutual sharing of goods, for example, the lover gives and shares with the beloved what he/she possesses, or

something of that which he/she has or is able to give; and vice versa, the beloved shares with the lover. Hence if one has knowledge, she/he shares it with the one who does not possess it; and so also if one has honors, or riches. Thus, one always gives to the other.

Sometime in 1877, most likely at St. Beuno's College in Wales, Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a masterpiece.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each
hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its
name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justifies;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –

Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's
faces.

I begin with the above sonnet by Hopkins, the Victorian Jesuit, as much for his use of form as for the content of his sonnet. Like a sonnet, the *Spiritual Exercises* are a form; but also, like readers of a sonnet, each "reader" of the *Spiritual Exercises* is unique; within each person making the *Spiritual Exercises*, beauty and truth play in an infinity of ways.

As you know, a sonnet is a fourteen-line poem and presents an issue, a problem, or a paradox in the first part, usually the first eight lines in an Italian (sometimes English) sonnet. In the second part, the remaining six lines, the poet crafts a response or answer to the issue offered above. In Hopkins' poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," the issue is how we humans find the presence of God in the "rest of life," in the aftermath of the Resurrection, after the Fourth Week of the *Exercises*, in the real world of commerce, in the slow death of committee meetings, and the hurly-burly that is anything but peaceful. We have been to the mountain top and we experienced something beautiful, something holy. So, now, how do I balance the ambiguity of my deepest most cherished experience of the Good with the debilitating mundane? How do I live without either crushing my experience with doubt or arrogantly demanding that God paint by my numbers?

Annie Dillard reframes Hopkins' issue for us postmoderns:

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in [God's] holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers [and mothers] are all dead – as if innocence had ever been – and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each

of us chosen wrongly... Yet some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dream for description, and fancy that life has devolved..." (Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 56-7).

What Dillard points out is that the vocation of any Christian community is to imagine well; to imagine so well that the dream becomes reality; to imagine and use the gift of reason so well that terror and pain are not ever the last words. In no other Christian community is this more important than in a Catholic university.

"At the end of Mark Helprin's long and troubling book called, *A Soldier of the Great War*, there is a discussion among the main characters about the meaning of sacrifice in the face of the insanity of war. This is what the protagonist says:

'Really, everything they said seemed to be in contradiction to the truth of what I've seen. And if you ask me what it was, I can't tell you. I can only tell you it overwhelmed me, that all the hard and wonderful things of the world are nothing more than a frame for the spirit, like fire and light; that is, the endless roiling of love and grace.

'I can tell you only that beauty cannot be expressed or explained in a theory or an idea, that it moves by its own law, that it is God's way of comforting his broken children....'" (Tom Lucas on Helprin, Homily, July 2007).

Beauty, Imagination, and Rationality (the tools we need for the *Spiritual Exercises* and for life itself) cannot be expressed or explained in a theory or an idea; they move according to their own laws. The ancients understood this. Ignatius did, too. Beauty is the imagining forth of the Divine, the trace in matter of the God who must share his beauty. Our rationality traces the *digitus Dei*, the finger of God, as it writes in our hearts.

We see it in the beauty of creation, in the splendor and the terror of nature, *mysterium fascinans et*

tremendum; in the vastness of the dark and starry night, in the promise of the sunrise, in the delicate web of an infant's fingers.

That beauty is what Hopkins names in the last six lines of his sonnet. The thought in the poem runs something like this...

- All creatures, kingfishers, insects, stones and streams, all sing the song of mysterious beauty, all are musical in that they sing out who they are; paradoxically that beauty is at once singular, unique and yet participates in the One, infinite beauty of the Creator.
- "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same," that is, each creature reveals itself as beautiful by articulating itself, naming itself by being itself, and so naming the Creator. Each creature's actions and attitudes reveal its nature; that's why it exists: to be beauty and give pleasure to the Creator.
- But there is more. While each creature reflects the Creator, humans are more... We are, more than any other creature we know, the image and likeness of God. We are capable of more revelation, Godly and self-donating love. We "justice," we keep the grace or gift that insures our goings to be gift for others. We, too, are the Beloved, the Christ; male and female we are Christ. Beautiful in body parts and visage, revealing something of the necessary and infinite beauty of God.

In other words, God labors within each and all creatures so they realize their beauty. William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet, the song master says to his beloved what only God can say to all creatures, "You are more beautiful than anyone" ("Broken Dreams"). Each is unique. Each is part of the One. Beauty gives us hope: hope that all the hard and wonderful things of the world are nothing more than the frame for the Spirit of God. That after all, is why we pray the *Suscipe* at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*... Give me only you love and your grace.

***Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding, and my
entire will, all that I have and possess.
You have given all to me. To you, O***

***Lord, I return it. All is yours, dispose of
it wholly according to your will. Give
me only your love and your grace, for
these are enough for me.***

There is no real hope, no real living in the grace of the Resurrection, "without tasting the reasons for despair" (John Staudenmaier, personal notes on the *Spiritual Exercises*). That's what the former soldier knows at the end of Helprin's novel. "That's what Ignatius saw as he wept beneath the stars, as he gazed at the terrible beauty of the cross, and when he saw grace descend like light from the sun, like water from the spring. He saw hope, hope that God's will, can be done, hope that God's love and grace really are enough" (Lucas).

"But beauty is more than hope. It is also the source of courage [to go out and live your life in a hard world]. The beauty of a great idea, the beauty of a great goal or challenge, a shared adventure, the beauty of a true image can give us courage beyond our understanding but accessible to rationality... Such beauty encourages us, literally in-courages us to live lives of compassion, mercy, and justice.

"The humility of mercy given, the harder humility of mercy received are the most beautiful things of all. The center of the life and death of Jesus, the goal for which we strive, the reason for which we place everything into God's hands – liberty, memory, understanding, my entire will, all I have and possess – asking only for the courage to accept the merciful gifts of love and grace that are always offered" (Lucas).

How do we live now and stay with the love of God? It takes an asceticism of open eyes; it takes the practice of listening not just hearing.

Denise Levertov put well such renewed seeing and hearing in her poem, "The Servant Girl at Emmaus." We recall the post-Resurrection scene of Luke 24:13-35. In this as in so many of the Resurrection appearances of Jesus, the disciples are downcast and cannot recognize Jesus. They have been to the mountaintop and they have

tasted despair. They are confused and live in ambiguity. However, the young woman who labors at the wayside inn recognizes him.

She listens, listens, holding
her breath. Surely that voice
is his – the one
who had looked at her, once, across the crowd,
as no one had ever looked?
Had seen her? Had spoken as if to her?

Surely those hands were his,
taking the platter of bread from hers just now?
Hands he'd laid on the dying and made them well?

Surely that face – ?

The man they'd crucified for sedition and
blasphemy.
The man whose body disappeared from its tomb.
The man it was rumored now some women had
seen this morning, alive?

Those who had brought this stranger home to
their table
don't recognize yet with whom they sit.
But she in the kitchen, absently touching the
winejug she's to take in,
a young Black servant intently listening.

Swings round and sees
the light around him
and is sure.¹ 

Notes

¹ "The Servant-Girl At Emmaus (A Painting By Velasquez)"
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