

'Doorways to faith - the role of mysticism and sacramentality in prayer' – a reflection by Tina Beattie

Pope John Paul II used to speak repeatedly about our need to do less in order to be more. In the freneticism of modern life, we've crowded out all the spaces of silence and rest, and even our faith becomes an endlessly activist and politicised mission to change the world, or to coax and coerce the people around us to change their way of being in the world.

For Catholics, this was one of the unintended consequences of the Second Vatican Council. Although that was a marvellous transformation in the life of the Church in so many ways, there is a feeling across the Catholic spectrum that too much was sacrificed by way of the mysticism and sacramentality of the Catholic tradition.

To give a flavour of this, let me quote from two very different Catholics commenting on what they see as the sacramental and liturgical aridity of the postconciliar church. Here is Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who was a vocal critic of the Council and whose theology was much admired by John Paul II. If Karl Rahner had been 'the Holy Ghost' of Vatican II as some suggested, his vociferous opponent von Balthasar came into his own in the 1980s, and today it's von Balthasar rather than Rahner who is the theologian of choice in many seminaries and Catholic universities.

Von Balthasar lamented what he saw as the loss of the mystical, Marian character of the Church after the Council. In typically effulgent language, he complained that it had become

more than ever a male Church, if perhaps one should not say a sexless entity, in which woman may gain for herself a place to the extent that she is ready herself to become such an entity. ... What can one say of 'political theology' and of 'critical Catholicism'? They are outlines for discussion for professors of theology and anti-repressive students, but scarcely for a congregation which still consists of children, women, old men, and the sick ... May the reason for the domination of such typically male and abstract notions be because of the abandonment of the deep femininity of the marian character of the Church?¹

It's interesting that von Balthasar groups women with children, old men, and the sick, over and against professors of theology. Professors of theology include an abundance of old men and even a few women – and professors get sick sometimes too.

Charlene Spretnak is an American feminist writer at the opposite end of the theological spectrum from von Balthasar, but in her book *Missing Mary* she appeals for a rediscovery of the Catholic Church as 'a container and guardian of mysteries far greater than itself'. She describes what she sees as the destructive influence of rationalising modernity on Catholic devotion:

When ... the Roman Catholic Church deemphasized and banished an essential cluster of (Marian) spiritual mysteries, as well as the evocative expression of ritual and symbol that had grown around them, a profound loss ensued.

¹ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs (1975), *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches, London: SPCK, p. 70.

Today, the theology and liturgy of the Catholic Church is less 'cluttered,' less mystical, and less comprehensive in its spiritual scope. Its tight, clear focus is far more 'rational' but far less whole. We who once partook of a vast spiritual banquet with boundaries beyond our ken are now allotted spare rations, culled by the blades of a 'rationalized' agenda more acceptable to the modern mindset.²

One reason for the recent restoration of the Latin rite and the imposition of the new translation of the liturgy has been an attempt to recapture some of that lost liturgical richness, but one cannot bring about such change by force. It requires a new awakening in our souls of the desire for God which is nurtured in contemplative silence and fallow times of rest and reflection.

Contemplation is a doorway into the most profound freedom and fullness of our humanity, and it comes about through a quiet receptivity to God's grace beyond all the rules and regimes of institutional religious life. It also requires serious commitment, and that is an aspect of its freedom. God is a God of invitation and liberation, a God of patient and enduring love who awaits our response. God waits beyond the threshold of the finite, beyond the time-bound limits of our conscious, calculating minds, holding open the door into mystery and calling to us from the far side. But God never forces or tricks us into going through that door. In his poem 'Love', the poet George Herbert beautifully expresses this gracious invitation by way of which God calls to us:

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
 'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
 So I did sit and eat.

I want to use my time this morning to reflect on this vocation to mystery which constitutes the Christian life, in order to ask how we might rediscover the contemplative quest as a path that leads to the fullness of our humanity through our awakening to the mystery of our own being hidden in God and revealed in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

² Spretnak, Charlene, *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 4.

Rowan Williams, the soon-to-retire Archbishop of Canterbury, was invited to address the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. He chose to speak on the question of contemplation as the essence of what it means to be human, because to be fully human is, he said, 'to be recreated in the image of Christ's humanity'. This means that our own lives must become modelled on the relational love of the Trinity, in which the self is constantly pouring itself out in love for the Other. Let me quote a short passage from that talk:

To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts. With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow. And the face we need to show to our world is the face of a humanity in endless growth towards love, a humanity so delighted and engaged by the glory of what we look towards that we are prepared to embark on a journey without end to find our way more deeply into ... the heart of the trinitarian life.³

This call to enter into the trinitarian mystery of the divine life asks of us the hardest thing of all, for it asks nothing of us. It asks us to do nothing, to be nothing, to say nothing, to achieve nothing. It asks us simply to be, and to discover that our being is nothing except insofar as it is a participation in God's being. With Catherine of Siena, it invites us to experience the astonishing freedom of our own soul when it is liberated into the eternal being of its creator, so that we are able to say with her, 'I am she who is not',⁴ and of Christ that 'he makes of her another himself'.⁵

Yet this vocation to be silent and at rest in order to become one with Christ is a disciplined task of daily attentiveness – what Buddhists call 'mindfulness' – and it is altogether different from the kind of apathetic passivity which is its counterfeit other. Here is how Mother Mary Clare describes it in her book, *Encountering the Depths*:

The most difficult and decisive part of prayer is acquiring this ability to listen. Listening is no passive affair, a space when we happen not to be doing or speaking. Inactivity and superficial silence do not necessarily mean that we are in a position to listen. Listening is a conscious, willed action, requiring alertness and vigilance, by which our whole attention is focused and controlled. Listening is in this sense a difficult thing. And it is decisive because it is the beginning of our entry into a personal and unique relationship with God, in which we hear the call of our own special responsibilities for which God has intended us. Listening is the aspect of silence in which we receive the commission of God.⁶

The Anglican contemplative Maggie Ross uses the word 'beholding' to describe this activity of focused listening which goes far beyond looking or seeing, for it draws our consciousness towards the inner mystery of the meaning of all matter and all life as

³ The full text of the address is available on the website of the Archbishop of Canterbury: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/>.

⁴ Ibid., p. 273.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶ Mother Mary Clare SLG, *Encountering the Depths*

emanating from and sustained by the divine life. She writes that

Silence and beholding are our natural state. ... The story of the Garden of Eden tells us of the primordial distraction from beholding, the descent into noise and bewilderment caused by the projections we call 'experience'. ... It was in the context of beholding that we were given stewardship of the earth; it is in the context of distraction that we have (mis)managed it. As the pace of contemporary life accelerates and the rising tide of noise degrades the biosphere, the need to recover and, more especially, to teach and practice silence and seeking into the beholding becomes even more critical.⁷

We might ask why we find it so very difficult to listen to God, when God's being is the very air that we breathe, the bodies that we touch, the people that we meet, the creatures that share the earth with us, the music of the birds and the wind in the trees. In the words of George Eliot, 'If we had a keen vision of all that is ordinary in human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which is the other side of silence.'⁸

The Book of Genesis tells us that we were created to enjoy intimate friendship with God in the garden of creation, to walk with God in the cool of the day, to be at peace among all the creatures and features of God's very good creation. But Genesis finds potent affirmation in modern science and psychology when it tells us that some cataclysm occurred which introduced disorder, shame, blame and alienation into paradise, and this was a cataclysm of human consciousness. Nature retains all the grace and goodness of creation, but the human soul is wounded and no longer able to recognize God in the garden of creation nor to enjoy the peace of communion that is our natural condition.

The Oedipus myth of Freudian psychology is a story that bears all the hallmarks of the Genesis myth. It tells us that our emergence into consciousness is a traumatic experience of sexual conflict, alienation and loss. If we turn to the biological sciences, we see a story of apparently futile and random arbitrariness in the evolutionary struggle. We don't have to be creationists to recognize that Darwin puts paid to the idea of a world harmoniously designed and orchestrated by God's benevolence. That old Victorian hymn which tells of God creating all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, - each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings - no longer has quite the same ring to it if we view the natural world through Darwinian eyes. And lest we become too nostalgic, we should remember that the hymn also celebrates a God who designs a social order that keeps everything in its place: 'the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, God ordered their estate'. For better or for worse, that orderly and hierarchical view of the world has disintegrated, and we find ourselves facing fragmentation, violence and meaninglessness wherever we look.

In times like these, we need to learn to look differently at creation and our place within it. We need to recognize that the old securities and illusions have gone. We find ourselves cast upon what the poet Matthew Arnold referred to as 'the naked shingles of the world', as we listen to the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the sea of faith.

We need to begin by recognizing, against the naïve optimism of a certain kind of liberalism, that alienation and shame are hard-wired into the human condition - part of our genetic make-up, if you like, for that's what the doctrine of original sin means. And

⁷ See Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding*, p. 11.

⁸ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 194.

that's why the most natural thing in the world for us is also the most challenging. We are naturally made for God. We are naturally made for one another, and we are naturally made to live in harmony with all living beings in God's creation. That's how it was in the beginning, but the beginning is not a chronological beginning. Our medieval ancestors were wiser than so many modern Christians in their understanding of scripture and the meaning of creation. Whether or not the beginning refers to the origins of creation in time is not the fundamental issue. The fundamental issue is that every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every year is given to us as a new creation, for time and space and life are continuously emerging and coming into being from their beginning, source and end, which is God. Let me quote Thomas Aquinas:

The activity by which God maintains things is no new activity, but the continued act of giving them existence, an act which is not a process in time. ... Before things existed God had the power not to give them existence, and thus not to make them. So, in the same way, after they have been made, he has the power to cut off the inflow of existence, so that they cease existing; that is, he has the power to annihilate them. But there is no point in him doing it. For his goodness and power are shown better by eternally maintaining both spirits and matter in existence.⁹

We have a potent sense here of Thomas's understanding of the being of God as the doing of the world. God's being is not a noun but a verb, not a thing out there but the 'inflow of existence' that accounts for the fact that there is something rather than nothing. It's when we learn to surrender ourselves to that oceanic dynamism of the divine being, that we might begin to experience the healing of our own souls, so that we can in turn begin to heal this fractured and arid world we are bequeathing to the future.

In contemplation, we seek to go through and beyond the time and space of the created order, to arrive in wonder and silence at that eternal now in which creation is always beginning, always new, always open to possibility, transformation and becoming. In contemplation, we position ourselves in a state of absolute nothingness, at the very point of creation when the moment just past is gone forever, and the moment yet to come has not yet emerged, and in that time out of time we begin to experience eternity and the continuous creation of time and space and life and love as they flow from the Trinitarian love of God to become the matter and order of the cosmos.

But the contemplative life is not frozen in time. Our path to the doorway of eternity always leads through the time and place of who and where we are. The questions we face today are not the questions that the desert mothers and fathers faced in the fourth century when they laid the foundations of Christian mysticism. They are not the questions of the great medieval theologians and mystics, as they sought God amidst the intellectual, spiritual and social turmoil of a culture in transition. Today, we approach the eternal Trinitarian relationships of the divine being with new crises and questions. Like every generation of Christians, we come bearing fundamental existential questions about suffering, injustice, poverty and sorrow. We come in this Advent season to kneel before the infant Christ in wonder at the fragile mystery of life. We come to the cross where wounded love reaches out in healing and forgiveness. But we also come with questions that are different from those that our ancestors asked. We come in the knowledge that we are destroying the very planet upon which our lives depend. We come knowing that the modern worship of Mammon has brought us to the brink of social disintegration. We come knowing that our technological and scientific mastery

⁹ ST I, 104. McDermott, *ibid.*, pp. 154-5.

has far oustripped our capacity for wisdom and goodness, so that our human genius is too often used in the service of death and destruction rather than in the service of life and creativity. We come as men and women who mistrust and question even our most fundamental experiences of identity, sexuality and relationality. These are new challenges and issues that must be woven into a sacramental vision of the world, and I want to suggest that this might come about through a profound transformation in the way in which we relate to God in our theological language and exploration.

All theological language is analogical. To quote Aquinas again, 'what God is not is clearer to us than what God is'.¹⁰ This means that there is a certain playfulness to theological language – what postmodernists might refer to as an inherently deconstructive approach. Like Penelope at her shroud, a theologian must unweave by night what she weaves by day, so that the fabric of her language remains loosely woven in order not to obscure the mystery of which it speaks.

Theology has strayed much too far down the path of a sterile rationalism, so that our understanding of God becomes trapped in a systematic approach which stifles the wonder of faith. We need to learn to let go of all our human constructs of God, in order to reflect on the mystery of creation. We in the West worship the God of reason, even or perhaps especially when we no longer believe in God. The early Christian love affair with Greek philosophy means that, contrary to all that the Bible tells us of God, rationality became the defining characteristic of God and of the creature made in the image of God – the human. It's little wonder that, when Immanuel Kant dispensed with the notion of a personal God, reason took the place of the divine as the guiding light of our being in the world.

That was the Enlightenment, when western Europe shrugged off its various religious identities – Christianity had by that time fractured into a multitude of warring parties – and embarked upon the road of science, reason and progress. Today, many still put their faith in that dream of progress, believing that science will deliver us from evil and give us each day our daily bread, if only we can resist being led into temptation by religion with its ignorance, violence and fanaticism. But as we count the cost of our dreams of progress, we might do well to wonder about this rational god in whose image we are made. Beneath the veneer of rationality, we are beginning to sense a terrifying madness in our way of being in the world.

Is it possible that we've got it all wrong? What if we are made in the image, not of the God of reason but of the God of creation? What if it's not rationality but creativity that marks our species out as unique among the other animals with which we share this fragile and wonderful world? How might that change our understanding of humanity, and indeed of God?

If we set aside the God of reason and turn to the God of the Bible, we encounter a very different God – a God who creates and destroys, a God who thunders and cries out, a God who weeps and grieves, a God who loves with a tender love and who desires with a passionate desire, a God who speaks not in syllogisms, arguments, premises and propositions, but in music and psalms, in the unfolding of human history, in metaphors of feasting and hunger, of eroticism and mourning. In other words, we encounter a God who looks rather more like an artist at work in her studio than a philosopher at work

¹⁰ ST I, 1, 9.

in the university. So, without denying the importance of reason in enabling us to steer our way through this chiaroscuro world with its choices and decisions, what happens if we expand our idea of what it means to be made in the image of a God whose creative mystery far exceeds all our powers of reason and comprehension?

The Bible opens with God creating the world, with a spirit that broods over the darkness and kindles the cosmos into being, and it was very good. When Jesus seeks to reassure his followers, he directs their attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. When he laments over Jerusalem, he likens himself to a mother hen, brooding over her chicks. When the psalmist seeks the God his heart desires, he looks to the hills and he compares himself to the deer that pants for running water. When he sees the stars and the oceans, the forests and the mountains, his heart overflows with the wonder of God. And when God challenges Job in the midst of his anguish, he speaks out of the whirlwind and points to the grandeur of creation.

The Book of Job has inspired countless writers and artists, with its contemplation on the mystery of suffering and the impossibility of searching the mind of God. It offers us a disturbing picture of Job as a good man who loses everything he cherishes most – livelihood, family, health – because it seems he is the victim of a wager between Satan and God. Job’s friends are the philosophers and theologians who try to make him see reason, offering various spectacularly unhelpful suggestions and explanations as to why Job’s life has been plunged into chaos – as friends are wont to do, sometimes. Maybe God is teaching you a lesson, Job. Maybe you’ve brought it on yourself, Job. Are you sure you haven’t screwed up, Job? But God’s response to Job offers no answers, no arguments, no reasons. Look at creation, and accept the mystery that you are part of. The psalmist expresses this so beautifully when he sings that

The heavens declare the glory of God;
The skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;
Night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language
Where there voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth,
Their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19: 1-4)

That is the very essence of prayer, for prayer is learning to wonder at the creativity of God. It is allowing ourselves to participate in God’s work of art, to become part of that work, co-creators with God, immersed in the artistry of creation. This calls us to venture upon imaginary journeys to chart unknown lands, to recognize that the quest for God is an exploration along the pathways of art and beauty, music and poetry, literature and creativity, all gathered up and offered as the bread and wine of the human soul in our liturgies.

We might answer that art and beauty will not feed the hungry nor clothe the naked, but they may answer to a deeper need than our basic physical needs. It may be of the very essence of our humanity that we hunger for beauty as much as we hunger for food,

and those who seek to do good in the world must be providers of beauty as well as of food to those in need. Maybe that is something we have fundamentally misunderstood in our desire to eradicate poverty and disease, to improve the living conditions of our fellow human beings. Of course it is vital that these basic physical needs be met, but this doesn't answer to the deepest hunger and thirst of the soul.

When I lived in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, there were Mozambican refugee camps all along the eastern border. Fundamentalist sects and cults were proliferating in the camps, as indeed they do in many poorer parts of the world today. A director of an aid agency working in one of the camps told me that they were recognizing that to go into those camps with food and blankets wasn't enough, because people were crying out for meaning and hope. That's why it was so easy for those unscrupulous preachers to prey upon them.

There is an extract from a diary in London's Imperial War Museum, written by one of the first British soldiers to enter Bergen-Belsen:

It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived ... that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick.

I wish so much that I could discover who did it. It was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and in her hand was a piece of lipstick.

At last someone had done something to make them individuals again; they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. ...

That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.

Today, our humanity is under threat from many directions, as we are squeezed between the encroaching pressures of an inhumane and violent technocracy on the one hand, and a looming natural catastrophe on the other. Religion becomes part of this dehumanising process, when it privileges dogma over mystery, truth over wonder, law over love. The challenge we face today is first and foremost a religious and spiritual challenge. It arises from the depths of the human condition, and it asks us to consider what it means to be made in the image of God, and how that affects our relationships with one another and with all God's creation. It asks us to recognize how Christ dazzles and dances throughout the atoms and quark of matter and in every human encounter so that, to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins, we recognize that

the just man justices;
Kéeps grace: th'at keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God' 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 feature of men's faces.

Perhaps I can end with another poem by Hopkins – his great poem to the grandeur of God, which has such prophetic poignancy for us today:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all are seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.