



Column: Consecrated Life

Living Beauty: Being Contemplation in Action

by Graham R. Golden, O. Praem.¹

“Great Heaven! The prince says that beauty saves the world! And I declare that he only has such playful ideas because he’s in love!”²

Foster’s eyes were glassy, moist with emotion. He stood on the fractured concrete slab looking at us, head cocked with confusion, hands rising as though to indicate speech. Brent broke the quiet tension, “what happened over there by the fence?” “There are children laughing...” Foster said, “they are playing a game behind the apartment building. I guess I just didn’t think we would find beauty here. I thought we would bring it. It seemed like such a desolate place.” There we were, Metra rail tracks to one side, a dilapidated electric transformer station on another, and the backs of deteriorating apartment blocks closing the circle, reaching above unruly clumps of ghetto palms. We stood in silence—at least we made no sound, but this back corner of a south side Chicago neighborhood had plenty to say.

I found myself standing in this seemingly destitute place with Foster and Brent, two visual arts graduate students, after meeting them in a coffee shop a few hours before. Foster approached me while I was working on a project. “Are you a monk?” he asked (presumably in reference to my religious habit). Assuming “no, I am a canon regular” would be too confusing, and “why else would I wear white after labor day?” too sarcastic, I simply responded “yes.” Foster wished to discuss a project he was working on, an artist monastery—an intentional artistic community based on monastic principles. Intrigued, I agreed to entertain his questions and visit his work site.

Why an artist in the midst of a seemingly destitute environment? Why an artist in search of a monk? Our contemporary societies often live from the assumption that human reason, intelligence, and ingenuity can solve all ills—that if we can only qualify, quantify, analyze, and assess the world all will be well. If something cannot be commodified or accounted for, it might as well not exist. Hence in a world bound by empiricism, the prince’s transcendent optimism proves him to be a fool. We succumb to the internal inertia of our human immanence, drowning “wonder, curiosity, [and] moral and political adventure...”³ in our own fini-

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2 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Evan Martin (Auckland, NZ, The Floating Press: 2009), 756.

3 Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York, John Lane Company: 1914 c. 1908), 230.

tude. And yet, as through the prince's experience of love, something tells us that codes, laws, and systems (as good as they may be) do not in themselves make us fully human. There is something more, something in the abstract expanses of our mind and the intimate recesses of our heart that points us beyond ourselves. All our complex processes of thought, even scientific, are forged in the foundry of metaphor,⁴ and metaphor is cast by the crucible of imagination. We cannot escape it, but we can ignore it.

Our imagination has forgotten to be *imaginative*. It now only visions what is already known to be possible—it does not reach beyond itself. Utilitarian presumptions, cost benefit analyses, efficiency, and productivity guide our visions of the future. As Albert Einstein famously said, “imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.” If we can come to imagine that which is beyond the confines of our current knowledge (to see beyond ourselves) then we may imagine the world anew. Our imagination may then be governed by virtue, wonder, and hope and not by the bottom line. It may delight in the beautiful.

Beauty is that which can pull us outside ourselves and allow us to reclaim a fuller humanity and a more creative vision of hope. Pope Benedict XVI taught that “authentic beauty...unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond.”⁵As we are captivated by beauty, we are inspired to imagine new possibilities for living and are impelled to proclaim these in word, image, and action. This capacity to think and encounter realities yet to be empirically known is seen by John Paul Lederach as the hope for bringing about peace and reconciliation in the most devastating of human conflicts. Hope, peace and reconciliation are ideas which hold their origin in revealed senses of truth. They are not simply imaginaries, they are virtuous sensibilities. They are indeed things of beauty.

This beauty may often seem to dwell in the realm of the aesthetic, the poetic—embedded in the narrative of our faith expressed through its artistic imagination. “The Catholic religious sensibility is often almost overwhelmed by the thickness of the metaphors in its dense forest of imagery and story.”⁶ Our collective imagination has produced great works of sacred art, music, and literature. These imaginative expressions even concretely impact the lives of the faithful.⁷ This is because the beauty in which we imagine comes to form us as we think and as we live. As G.K. Chesterton writes, “wonder...is not a mere fancy derived from the fairy tales; on the contrary, all the fire of the fairy tales is derived from this [wonder].”⁸ It becomes a celebration of that which was unseen because of narrow presumptions and perceptions. Thus the artist believes his or her vocation can be at the service of human suffering and social degradation.

However, to live from beauty is to do more than create beautiful imagery, it is to live in a beautiful way to form a beautiful social imaginary. Imagination is to be directed toward the good, to be moral, which “...requires...the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown...”⁹ “...Risk accepts vulnerability and lets go of the need to a priori control the process or the outcome of human affairs.”¹⁰ Our life as consecrated religious uniquely positions us to take the risk of entering into mystery (beauty) and come to image our world anew. Beauty does not seek concrete ends—outcomes and operationalization—but the elevation of the human spirit. To inspire imagination, the artist turns to the historically quintessential radical—the religious.

4 George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (New York: Cambridge University press, 1993).

5 Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Artists” (November 29, 2009).

6 Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2000), 10.

7 Greeley, *Catholic Imagination*, 184.

8 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 80.

9 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2005), 5.

10 Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 163.

The foundational characteristic of the evangelical counsels embody a willful relinquishing of control, of dominating power, of particular relationships, of material attachment. If lived well, it is a life lived in search of transcendence, a life lived in wonder, of openness. What is a more existential risk than to give ones entire life to an *idea* in hope that it is also *real*? This idea is in fact a person, Jesus Christ. It is from the love encountered in the incarnation and paschal mystery that the moral, relational and social imagination is formed that undergirds our lives of poverty, obedience, and consecrated celibacy which we believe lead us in conversion and service to uncover the beauty in our world. Rather than enforcing the values of a throw-away economy,¹¹ our lives are free to risk living in another realm visibly distinct and different from the status quo.

As religious we are gifted with the freedom to become icons of the social and moral visions just as great works of sacred art become icons of our narrative imaginaries. As the great baroque Churches of Europe depict eschatological visions to stimulate our senses, so too must our lives as ones striving to conform in a unique way to that of Jesus Christ act as stimulus to inspire new ways for our societies to imagine their own manner of being. As the Christian gazing upon Bernini's "Ecstasy of St. Theresa" contemplates how intimately our encounter with God can be, so too should he or she be able to contemplate the meta-worldliness of God's values through the counter-cultural values of religious life. Through the radical risk of living a life of virtuous beauty, we can come to not only imagine but to know something of a "kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace."¹²

I cannot prescribe what this would be for each community for then it would become programmatic and bound by controlled measures. I can demonstrate when it has occurred. When we live this beauty, the previously inconceivable virtues of the Trappist monks of the Algerian monastery of Tibhirine, of saints like Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein, and figures like Sister Ita Ford and her companions, and St. Josephine Bakhita become visible. By living from the gratuitousness, mercy, and communion these become a sensible reality. They cease to be abstract musings of the imagination and the beauty which we see in faith becomes visible to others. This is our call as religious—to love beauty so that we may live beauty. Even amidst violence, hate, separation, and isolation; if there is compassion, mercy, and love then beauty exists for God's vision persists. Pope Francis exhorts religious that "the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends on the eloquence of your lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full."¹³

Consecrated life has served as an eschatological imaginary since the time of the early church.¹⁴ It can also become a social and relational imaginary, but to be so it must be tangibly visible and known in our world. Choosing to live beauty by taking the risk to enter into mystery is a radical task, but then Christianity is a radical idea. If we take up the freedom given us by the evangelical counsels and live from the possibility of the moral imagination, we may glimpse God's Kingdom which is "...already present in mystery."¹⁵ By living the beauty which we contemplate through our imagination, we are called to not so much be contemplatives in action, but *contemplation* in action—living lives that unveil beauty so that the world may once again wonder in that which transcends our very being. It may seem to the world that we are fools, holy fools. Well, so be it! As St. Augustine exhorted his community in the fourth century, may consecrated religious in the 21st century "be lovers of spiritual beauty, giving forth the good odor of Christ in holiness of conduct, not as slaves under the law but free under grace."¹⁶

11 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2014), no. 53.

12 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), no. 36.

13 Francis, *Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* (2014), no. 3.

14 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*.

15 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 39.

16 Augustine, *The Rule of St. Augustine*, 8.1.