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Art History and the Mission Statement

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When the current mission statement of the College of the Holy Cross was being drafted about a decade ago, I had only a vague idea of what the academic life at a Jesuit Catholic College involved. Nearly everywhere on campus, from assembly hall to lunchroom, conversation had to do with mission. Admittedly, I was one of a number of faculty who heard these discussions from afar. Matters of faith and social justice, emerging as key tenets of the mission and thus prevalent in the discussions, seemed, from the distant vantage point of my discipline, quite removed from the affairs of art and architectural history. I admired the mission statement as one might admire the sights of a foreign land—as a sympathetic, even enthusiastic, spectator, yet a stranger to most of what dwells there. What could an art historian possibly bring to, of all things, a dialogue on poverty and social justice? If anything, the talk about Catholic and Jesuit mission only emphasized that my beloved Western art—with its elitist, aristocratic, and male-centered history—was far removed from social justice and gender equality. This apparent disjunction endured until three years ago when my estrangement from the mission ended dramatically.

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In 1997, the College invited me to apply to *Collegium: A Colloquy on Faith and the Intellectual Life*. According to the online description, Collegium was, and is, a summer seminar for

> faculty from its member institutions and for advanced graduate students from universities throughout the United States and Canada. The seminars provide a collegial environment in which participants from diverse backgrounds, faiths, and disciplines can discuss the sources and implications of a Christian academic vocation. . . . *Collegium* seminars invite scholars to explore some of the most compelling aspects of the Catholic intellectual tradition and to develop their own sense of vocation as intellectuals in a contemporary context.[1]

In that summer of '97, I joined the gathering of *Collegium* scholars at Saint John's College, Saint John's Abbey, in Collegeville, Minnesota.

Looming above our activities was Marcel Breuer's mighty Abbey Church. We worshipped there daily, singing side by side with the "black monks" in the stark serenity of the vast, vaulted choir. The bells calling the monks to chant the divine praises of the Liturgical Hours marked the passing of time. The bell tower, perfect symbol of Benedictine life, stood solidly before the church like some serene colossus. Monks moved about us in their regular duties of teaching, counseling, writing, and other monastic chores. As I walked from my room to the refectory, housed at the monastery, I passed the buildings and people that symbolized and shaped the life of this profoundly religious community.

Our business, however, was not to experience life in a Benedictine monastery. It was to share experiences of teaching and research at Catholic institutions of higher learning: " . . . to discover how [we] can make a particular contribution to [our] institution's identity that respects and explores Catholicism's traditions and goals, while also respecting and taking advantage of [our] own religious perspectives and talents." This we did intensely, meeting throughout the day in small groups, assisted by an assigned "mentor," and coming together in plenary sessions, in which guest speakers presented topics of general concern and encouraged collective discussion and debate.

There was time for private as well as communal reflection, and time for casual talk at meals and in the later hours of the evening. We could participate, or not, in a daylong retreat of a particular form of spirituality—Ignatian, Franciscan, Benedictine, Dominican, Christian Feminist. I learned a lot from the stories of other faculty and graduate students—that they, too, were trying to find their professional bearings with what seemed to be the indefinite compass of our respective missions.

The space we occupied to do all this—the monastic buildings crowned by the powerful stark presence of the Abbey Church—communicated as directly and effectively as did the sessions that faith and spirituality can be immediate and relevant to ordinary daily life, when embedded in routine and given the architectural environment to shape and symbolize it.

Together, the conversation among fellows, the inescapable presence of the monastic architecture, and the living Benedictine community permanently altered my relationship to Holy Cross's mission. The mission became a place where henceforth I would draw strength and tackle questions of authority and freedom. It invited me to search for ideas that can lead to spiritual and ethical questions, and for ways in which spirituality can show that ideas have equally important ethical consequences.

For me, that experience epitomized the nature of what this essay is about—"Living the Mission"—especially as it continues to reshape my pedagogy and my professional identity. I wish the story I am about to unfold were seamless and easy, and that the wonderful insights gained at *Collegium* had been brought home to Holy Cross, yielding the bounty and sustaining the fervor they promised. The reality, however, is that for all my enthusiasm and commitment to "live the mission," it remains, three years later, hard and sometimes confusing work. Confidence and optimism mingle with doubt, as the project of linking art to contemporary issues of living spiritually is alternately embraced and marginalized by the academic community.

I have developed several new courses[2] (two of which are co-taught with Philosophy faculty), which we will explore presently. Reaction to them, however—

[1] Our group had the gift of John Thompson as mentor. His openness, intelligence, grace, and wisdom will stay always fixed in my memory. He was hugely important to the meaningful experience I had at *Collegium*, as well as its endurance in my life. All quotations about *Collegium* have been taken from the website on *Collegium* at www.fairfield.edu/collegium.

[2] For an additional perspective on Jesuit tradition in the arts, see *Conversations* 14 (Fall, 1998).

where there has been recognition—has been largely mixed. Does this have to do with the traditional discipline of art history, I wonder, so often seen as irrelevant (even antithetical) to social justice and Catholic activism? Is it that Philosophy, sadly disengaged from practice and remarkable now for its hermetic feats of analytical language, has lost its allure—not to mention *its* relevance in the face of market-driven education? Or is it that art historians exemplify the ivory-tower scholar, toiling in the antiseptic vaulted silence of archive and museum—a perfect study in contrast to the mission-oriented activist/educator, serving up soup and otherwise volunteering in support of the poor and marginalized in the "real world" of inner-city slums?

"Living the Mission" affects professional practices and identity as well, beyond the College's gates and in the field of disciplinary inquiry. Art history is currently defined as a project to locate history—to locate subjectivity in the past—in quantifiable evidence and hard data, whose footings lie deep in sociology. Thus, any sort of personal, contemporary experience of historical form—the very thrust of my courses regarding art and contemplation—is looked upon skeptically, even censoriously as something better left to personal rather than professional journals.[3]

Part of this story, then, is about the taxing demands of persevering in a relationship of art conjoined to spirituality as a serious academic pursuit, that is, as a matter of genuine and significant intellectual content such as befits an academic discipline. For now, art history (as serious "scientific" study) and spirituality (as religious non-academic experience—as a matter of faith) compete for ultimate authority in their absolutely separate domains. My attempt to "live the mission" is, in a very real sense, an effort to bridge that separation.

Central to this quest for the unity of art and spirituality are the courses I've developed, both alone and in conjunction with colleagues from Philosophy, Christopher Dustin and Joseph Lawrence. I am interested in ways that art—the practice of really looking at it—joins spiritual experience with rigorous intellectual content. Art History can do this, I believe, if viewed and taught as a practice—one that, like other practices, is governed by discipline and daily routine. In the courses mentioned above, practice is the continual and repeated engagement with a single work of art.[4]

The cornerstone of these courses is the integration of practice with theory. Students are required to visit the local Worcester Art Museum on a weekly basis. I would

prefer daily, but this is impractical for our students. In the introductory art history course, for example, students are asked to choose one painting by one of three artists: Thomas Gainsborough, Claude Monet, or Robert Motherwell. They must write one paper a week on the same painting for the entire semester—thirteen weeks, thirteen papers in all. I implore them—for this is all but impossible to require—not to consult outside reading, even to avoid reading the Museum label, if possible. Their charge is to describe what they see in the picture as precisely and faithfully as they can in approximately five typed pages. With this paper and related notes handed in, they then return to the Museum the following week to take up the process all over again.

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[3] One great exception to the general trends of current art history is Marcia Brennan, whose work on Abstract Expressionist aesthetics and gender will radically revise the discipline. She promises to breathe optimism, joy, and affirmative values back into ideas that lately seem imprinted with a sort of negativity and antagonism.

[4] Some of this material is taken from my article, "Practice Makes Reception: The Role of Contemplative Ritual in Approaching Art," forthcoming in Tom Landy, ed. *Vocation and the Intellectual Life* (Franklin, Wisc.: Sheed & Ward, 2001).

The results have been surprising and enlightening. Although space prevents a full accounting here, some highlights of what occurs help to reveal the genuine intellectual content of the relationship between art and spirituality and its ultimate link to the mission. Generally speaking, the only repetitive activity most Holy Cross students experience (short of "mashing" buttons on a television remote) is in playing a sport or in building their bodies—actually valuable starting points for us, by the way. My assignment, far from soccer fields and wellness rooms, therefore fills students with dread—of boredom and monotonous papers. Yet, wondrously, transformation does take place. Writing does evolve, from opinionated, narcissistic proclamations—including, of course, willful reactions of "I know what I like and I know what I don't"—to skillful and nuanced descriptions of brushstroke, color, and surface texture. Through this practice, students become disciplined beholders, able to communicate precise knowledge of what is affectionately and invariably identified, somewhere along the thirteen weeks, as "my work of art." The true makeup and content of the painting become accessible to them, with time—and, curiously, it is often deeply personal. This experience of familiarity and objectivity can forever alter a young person's views on talent and learning—demonstrating that accomplishment, indeed the joy of creative knowing, requires discipline and practice, and requires it again and again.

I am most concerned in this context, however, with the contemplative process that underlies this assignment, and especially with what it shares with other forms of contemplation. First, looking becomes habit. It is a dependable, weekly occurrence, with a repeated pattern, which I prescribe: traveling to the Museum at the same time each week, entering the same door of the Museum, sitting in the same place—in other words, repeating the same procedures each time, week after week. In fact, this aspect of the assignment came to me during the daylong exposure to Ignatian spirituality at *Collegium*. Father Brian Linanne, S.J., encouraged us to return to one spot, throughout the day of reflection, so that despite the randomness of our mood or temper, just being in a single place would foster reliability, or "readiness." By this process, we are open to communication with God, regardless of where our emotions or senses might wander. Moreover, repetition, grounded in physical discipline, promotes concentration.

As a participant in repetitive practice, the student is now a whole person, awakened to emotional and sensory stimuli, and ready, indeed fully able, to look and—this is the important point—to be open to the painting on its terms rather than *his* or *her own*. This teaches students how to cultivate "awareness" and "mindfulness" by repetition and physical ritual. As all great contemplative practices teach us, we must learn to leave our will behind so the air of spiritual enlightenment might flow freely about us. The habit and disciplined practice of looking at art teaches us, through example, how to accomplish this.

Conceived as something akin to a skill, the art of looking (or spectatorship) can occasion contemplation and mindfulness—inner states that are recognized nearly universally as the true paths toward spiritual awareness. Eastern meditation practices, Zen Buddhism, Benedictine spirituality, Western mysticism, Emersonian pragmatism, and stress-reduction exercises, to name but a few, all seek to attain "wisdom" through attention and awareness. Concentration is the cornerstone. As I envision it, then, the study of art—outside the studio—might appropriately take its place alongside other contemplative practices. It shapes contemplative consciousness by insisting on routine physical discipline, which enables readiness, and, in so doing, shows students the spiritual and intellectual depth of artistic creativity—for them as beholders, no less than for the creators.

Faith and creativity share a paradox, as I see it. Fidelity and stability, gained through practice, prepare the way to true freedom. Only with readiness can one hope to transcend the constraints of practice (therein lies the paradox) and enter that place which is mysterious and immeasurable. The experience is so unlike the routine activity that gave rise to it, that all the names given that experience through time—transcendence, divinity, creativity, performance, ecstasy—cannot begin to capture its true nature.

For me, to pursue the *mysterium tremendum* of creativity in history springs from and reflects the mission of Holy Cross, which in clear language calls upon "diverse academic disciplines" to engage in "dialogue about basic human questions concerning moral character, meaning in life and history, obligations to one another, and social justice." Although the approach outlined here falls outside the current boundaries of my discipline, I am encouraged in this pursuit by the Mission's call for "diverse interpretations of the human experience . . . [and] that sense of the whole which calls us to transcend ourselves and challenges us to seek that which might constitute our common humanity."

In some ways, my approach seems to return to what is known as Formalism, a method that works from the form of a created image or object, without taking into account its historical, economic, or social context. Now largely viewed by art history as mere "empty" analysis, Formalism today has a negative, to some scholars even unconscionable, ring to it, as art historians increasingly apply sociological frameworks—Marxist, feminist, or postmodernist, for example—in order to understand and to give meaning to works of art. Gods and saints and heroes, even the flowers of a Monet garden, are rather harshly showcased as economic and political products of power and oppressive consciousness. Even the word "art" itself has become suspect.

Perhaps more disconcerting than its supposed similarity with Formalism is the emphasis I place on the training or practice involved in looking. I emphasize the word *training*, for what happens in my classroom—and by extension the museum—seems more in line with studio or fine art, rather than art history *per se*. Colleagues who paint, sing, or dance embrace the sort of training I require of my students. Yet for art historians, it can smack of art appreciation and, worse, appear to offer an insufficient amount of quantifiable, documentable, "hard" evidence—the currently favored material for serious intellectual content. Too much emphasis on sensory and practical information, too much prominence given to the present, and too little time spent on word and theory, is how my approach is seen to fall short of current standards in teaching art history.

The joining of faith and spirituality with art—an important element in my approach—is a legitimate and long-standing aspect of art history, to be sure, but *only* when firmly lodged in period styles, such as Gothic or Renaissance. Professional groups have priorities and, at the moment, for works of art to have religious or spiritual significance, they must be of explicitly religious subject matter or have clearly devotional applications. In this view, the emphasis I place on developing a personal, present-day relationship with a work of art belongs, somehow, in the realm of New Age therapy rather than hewing to the "exacting" professional standards of contemporary art history, which tend to see and confine works of art firmly within the time frame of their production.

For me, therefore, the message of the mission poses a dilemma. It asks me to heed its call, when to do so I must step beyond the boundary—to put it bluntly, to write myself out of the norms of publishable scholarship—of the very discipline that brought me to the College in the first place. True, the mission statement has inspired and enriched my thinking on creativity immeasurably, but I have had to leave the collegial setting of my discipline to pursue that thinking and to nurture thought into action.

On sabbatical this year, for example, I reflected upon the contemplative lessons of great art and on the future of making scholarly use of those lessons. I read a broad range of contemplative literature, which led, in part, to this essay and others like it. Meanwhile, my colleagues in art history were off to the archives and conferences in Europe, or reading vast amounts of post-Structuralist and deconstructionist theory. It may seem to them, therefore, that in my current activities I am abandoning the rigors of on-site research and voluminous bibliography-hunting for an apparently more relaxed, home-based form of intellectual pursuit. Such is by no means the case; reflection and contemplation are time-honored pillars of academic inquiry and pursuit. Nor do I want for challenges.

Where are the signposts of the mission, so visible in campus conversation, as I thrash my way in isolation through the underbrush of this dilemma? The mission statement is a demanding document, more so than might appear on the surface. It presents a test of commitment to a purpose that diverges from the one that led me to Fenwick Hall and the Art department some years ago. When I took my place among the other faculty of my Department, I vowed to be a loyal member of the field by bringing the best and most recent of its scholarly developments to our students. The evolution of the mission statement threw this vow into question, asking in a very tangible sense that I reassess and perhaps reorient my understanding of what I do and how that relates to the Mission. This I have done—but now, where am I "current" as an art historian? What is my bibliographic base? Who, really, are my peers? And to what field do I or will I belong? "Living the Mission" has been, in a word, costly.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that the path I have chosen serves both my discipline and the mission of my College. The study of art history, I believe, is strengthened and advanced by the very innovation, freedom of inquiry, and transcendence of ourselves—called for in the mission statement—that are involved in seeking "that which might constitute our common humanity." Spirituality and religion are served by bringing students, through training and discipline in the contem-

plative art of seeing, to a state of openness, revelation, and understanding. . I believe this approach—developed in the context of a Jesuit Mission, conjoining intellect and spirituality—could and should have much broader implications for the field of art history. Moreover, in the face of the horrific, coarsening, and desensitizing effect of much of today's popular media culture—I offer television's "The Sopranos" as *prima facie* evidence—I firmly believe that a renewed quest for the humanizing value of appreciative, creative seeing provides a viable, teachable pathway to an awareness of compassion and social justice.

"Living the Mission" most assuredly will require that all of us involved by choice or desire, rather than by definition, in mission-oriented vision and endeavors will need to work hard to position spirituality and faith so as to be accepted as genuine matters of intellectual—yes, of scholarly—life. Toward that end, I would invoke a note of hope: that academia, and especially art history, will harken to Philosophy when it says, with Homer, that a divinely, beautifully crafted piece of work is indeed a "wonder to behold" and that through making and learning to see such works, as art history promises, the "order of the heavens can be made to appear."

Cultivating Discerning Minds in Caring Hearts:

My First Year at Seattle University

THOMAS MURPHY S.J.

Paul Sato (a pseudonym) enrolled in my course "Origins of Western Civilization" this past spring quarter. At the very end of the term, he introduced me to his mother. Paul is rather illustrative of my students—a person of mixed European and Asian heritage, of great caring, and of no particular religious background or practice. However, I heard Paul tell his mother that, for him, the most memorable feature of my course was our discussion of the effect of religious feelings on history. He had never considered such a connection before. Paul's perspective confirmed some discernments about my ministry that I had made over the course of my first year as both a Jesuit priest and an assistant professor of history at Seattle University. One is that relatively unchurched students can be reached through study of the interrelationship between religion and civilization. The other is that both students and colleagues look for ways to unite discernment of thoughts and feelings. As priest and professor, I have come to realize that I am qualified to assist in the cultivation of both skills.

These discoveries have been possible not only through my developing a capacity to distinguish my own formative experiences from those of my students, but also through my realization of how much I have in common with my colleagues. My students are well in touch with their feelings, less so with their intellects. I think that for my colleagues, both Jesuit and lay, the opposite may well be the case. The call to balance the two aspects of feeling and thought is precisely the place where faculty and students have much to teach one another and where Jesuit higher education has the most capacity to change decision-making in the United States today.

I first encountered higher education ministry in the Jesuit tradition when I enrolled at The College of the Holy Cross in the class of 1981. The four years I spent in Worcester were a time when the Ignatian perspective opened first my mind, then my heart. When students complain to me that college course offerings seem little different topically from courses they took in high school, I remember that I responded much the same way at first to my own college courses. However, Holy Cross taught me how to think about seemingly familiar material in fresh ways. Learning how to teach in the same way is my great challenge as a new professor.

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