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North window of the Chapel of St. Ignatius, Seattle University. The fused glass window was designed by Steven Holl and made by Doug Hansen. Photo: Amil Kapahi

Seattle University

Mortal Beauty: Jesuit Tradition and the Arts

J. ROBERT BARTH, S.J.

To what serves mortal beauty— | dangerous; does set danc-Ing blood—the O-seal-that-so | feature, flung prouder form Than Purcell tune lets tread to? | See: it does this: keeps warm Men's wits to the things that are[.]

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

Everyone knows, I suppose, that the Jesuit tradition has always prized logic and rigorous analytical thought. The Ratio Studiorum—the sixteenth-century set of principles and practices officially set forth for the Jesuit schools of the time—is, after all, a "ratio," founded on solid intellectual principles. It is sometimes forgotten, however, that Jesuit education has also prized beauty and the movements of the heart. So, from the very beginning of the Society of Jesus, there have been Jesuit artists of every kind.

Architects especially had a privileged role in the early Society, because of their contributions to Jesuit churches and schools. Distinguished and important architects, like the brothers Lorenzo and Giovanni Tristano, entered the Society and brought their skills to its work; Giovanni was in fact a major contributor to the

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Church of the Gesu in Rome, which has been called a "prototype of baroque religious architecture" (Bangert 59). In France alone, thirty-four Jesuits are known to have been architects, and in Belgium thirty-seven churches were built during the early years of the Society there. Throughout Europe, Jesuit superiors worked with distinguished architects—even the great Bernini—to bring beauty to the Society's churches.

Painting too was an important part of the adomment of Jesuit churches, and Giovanni Battista Gaulli's interior design of Il Gesù, the mother of all Jesuit church-

es, stands as a monument to this tradition, as does Brother Andrea Pozzo's design for the Jesuit church of San Ignacio. Music as well was central to Jesuit enthusiasm for the arts. St. Francis Borgia, the third General of the Society, was a gifted composer, and St. Robert Bellarmine was a devoted patron of music. Jose de Anchieta, the founder of Sao Paolo in Brazil, asked again and again for musicians to be sent as missionaries, saying that (as the late C. J. McNaspy, himself a missionary in Paraguay in his later years, records) "with enough of them he could convert all of Brazil to Christ" (McNaspy 98).1 And poetry, too, was part of the tradition from the beginning. Andre des Freux, one of the early followers of St. Ignatius, was an accomplished poet, eulogized by Ignatius himself. Other poets of the early Society included the German Friedrich von Spee, the Italian Costanzo Beschi, and the Pole Matthias Casimir Sar-

biewski. In England, the martyr Robert Southwell was a celebrated poet, whose work is still anthologized today.

It was perhaps in drama above all that early Jesuits made their mark, as a look into any history or encyclopedia of drama will make clear. Literally thousands of plays were written by Jesuits, in almost every country of Europe. By the end of the eighteenth century, for example, in Poland alone there were fifty-three active Jesuit theaters. And not only did Jesuits write and produce plays themselves, but many of their students became outstanding dramatists, including Corneille, Moliere,

Voltaire, Calderon de la Barca, and Lope da Vega.

There have been periods in the Society's later history when the arts were less encouraged—one thinks of the period in the nineteenth century under the generalship of the rather austere Jan Roothaan, whose instinct was to further codify methods and practices rather than to encourage individual creativity—but by and large the arts have continued to flourish, and today they are in full flower. They are not simply voices from the past, but a living tradition. The poets still write: Daniel Berrigan, Francis Sweeney, James Torrens, until

his recent death Francis Sullivan, and a host of others. The musicians still compose and play: in St. Louis, John Foley composes both liturgical and concert music; in Spokane, Kevin Waters composes both for liturgy and for operatic performance; and in Alaska, Normand Peppin has for many years been composing music for performance by the Fairbanks Choral Society.

As the work of the three Iesuit artists featured in this issue shows, Jesuits continue to flourish in the visual and plastic arts.2 Michael Flecky (Creighton), Joseph Sobierajski (Loyola Maryland), and Michael Tunney (Canisius) are three out of a distinguished group of Jesuits currently working in photography, sculpture, and painting. Dennis McNally paints and teaches painting at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia; William Hart McNichols creates icons of striking beauty and spiritual depth in his studio in New York, as does Brother Geb-

hard Fröhlich in New Orleans; Dennis Leder not only creates his own paintings and sculpture but also teaches architecture at the Universidad Rafael Landivar in Guatemala; and Michael Tang's paintings hang in the permanent collections of several museums and galleries in California. Don Doll's and Brad Reynolds' photography

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¹ I am indebted to Fr. McNaspy 's splendid essay, "Art in Jesuit Life," for a number of items in my historical overview.

² The Winter 1995-6 issue of *Company* magazine features the work of a number of Jesuit artists. A sample of that issue is available on the World Wide Web at http://www.companysj.com/magazine.html

has been acclaimed, and their work has often appeared in the pages of *National Geographic*.

Following in the long tradition of Jesuit drama, Jesuits today are flourishing in various aspects of the theater. At Loyola University in New Orleans, Ernest Ferlita, a graduate of the Yale Drama School, has become a distinguished and much-acclaimed playwright. Robert Ver Eecke of Boston College-also pastor of St. Ignatius Church—has for some twenty years directed a talented dance company which has become a Boston tradition. Michael Sparough is founder of Cincinnati's Fountain Square Fools, an acclaimed religious theater troupe. Theater director Brother Michael Breault, of the California Province, is currently an artistic associate at the famous Circle in the Square Theater in New York, while Brother Rick Curry, himself physically handicapped, founded the National Theater Workshop for the Handicapped, now flourishing in Manhattan's West Side-even as its new residential facility, the International University of the Arts, opens in Belfast, Maine. Bill Cain, founder and formerly Director of the Boston Shakespeare Company, in recent years has turned his attention to television, where his film Nightjohn! and his series Nothing Sacred have earned acclaim from critics and audiences. And this past year, Chris Donahue won an Academy Award as producer of the year's best short live-action film, Visas and Virtue.

Clearly the arts have been—and continue to be—a significant part of the Jesuit tradition. But why this commitment to the arts? Perhaps I can begin to explain with the help of an unlikely ally, George Bernard Shaw. At one point in Shaw's Saint Joan, Joan's interrogator Robert de Baudricourt asks her: "How do you mean? voices?" Joan replies: "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God." "They come from your imagination," says Baudricourt. "Of course," Joan replies. "That is how the messages of God come to us" (16).

Whatever you may hear to the contrary, Saint Ignatius Loyola was a man of imagination. As his Spiritual Exercises amply demonstrate, Ignatius combined the mystic's vision of eternity with the pragmatist's sharp eye for the particularities of things. He brings together in a single view the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human, the universal and the deeply particular realities of our world. Ignatius, as we all know, was driven to seek out "the greater glory of God." And since, as the Psalmist says, the heavens and the earth "show forth the glory of God," it is there that we find him, in the beauties of his creation. It is the special gift of the artist to be able to show us that creation—

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and that glory—in a new way. In Shelley's words, the poet (and by this he means any artist) can lift "the veil of familiarity" (295), and show us "the before unapprehended relations of things" (278).

Every Jesuit is formed, of course, by the Spiritual Exercises, and it is perhaps there that we find in clearest focus the heart of the Jesuit tradition. I would like to approach my reflections on the role of imagination in the Spiritual Exercises through the lens of one of the other great influences on my own life, the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who has been the object of my study for some thirty-five years. The relationship between Ignatius and Coleridge is of course personal for me, but there is a strong connaturality between them: both are deeply grounded in the Incarnation of Christ; both traveled their journeys of faith through suffering; both saw the working of the human imagination as central to their experience.

For me, such a reflection should begin—and I believe Ignatius and Coleridge would agree—with the Incarnation of the Word of God. Here the Logos—Christ, the Word of God—enters human life and history. Transcendent reality becomes immanent. But how do the poet and the religious thinker—however seemingly different their purposes—both strive after this divine reality incarnate in the world, and what is the role of imagination in that striving?

Theologian James Cutsinger, who has written perceptively on Coleridge's religious thought, finds that in much of modern theology an "oppressive set of dividing surfaces" has arisen between the world and God (92). The result for theology has been a series of dichotomies between "the immanent and transcendent, reason and revelation, the secular and the sacred, the scientific and the religious, and the natural and the supernatural" (102). Coleridge, who brought together in his own intellectual activity the theologian's mind and the artist's sensibility, can help us to explore these dichotomies.

Coleridge's idea of imagination is built on the notion of "polarity," upon a "balance or reconciliation of opposites": old and new, sameness and difference, real and ideal, sensuous and spiritual, temporal and eternal, immanent and transcendent. These seeming opposites are not in fact dichotomies, but polar tensions within the same "field of force." If the task of the theologian is, as Cutsinger says, to render intelligible man's relationship to a God who is "forever overflowing custom's bounds," he must do so in a vision that is true both to the divine reality and to the human experience of that reality, to allow "for the immanence yet transcendence, the

sameness yet otherness, the 'in' of the 'out' and the 'out' of the 'in' of this strange one called God" (105). The exercise of imagination, which can (as Coleridge writes in his *Biographia Literaria*) "awaken the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom," can also open our eyes to "the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" (II, 7), thereby revealing (in Cutsinger's fine phrase) "a world translucent to deity" (93).

Coleridge's theory of imagination, grounded in his idea of "polarity," is deeply bound up with his vital philosophy. The merely "mechanical" mind can see only opposition or, at best, the juxtaposition of separate realities. However, for the mind that is imbued with what Coleridge calls a "living and spiritual philosophy" there is not only a connaturality between the mind and the world it knows, but an innate and active participation of the imagination in the eternal creative act that empowers it. As Coleridge insists in *Biographia Literaria*, imagination is "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (I, 304).

Such a mind can envision two distinct realities—two "counter-powers," Coleridge calls them—actually "interpenetrating" one other, so that each shares in the being of the other (*Lay Sermons 89*). Such a "living" vision—and only such a vision—can encompass immanent and transcendent, human and divine, the reality of the self and the reality of God, in a single act of knowing. It is no accident that the *Biographia Literaria* ends with a paean of praise to the Logos, the pattern of creation, through whom—as the incarnate Christ—humankind and God most fully "interpenetrate."

It is only the imagination, I suggest, that can bring us-whether in a work of art or in the Spiritual Exercises—to the full encounter with religious reality, because it is only the symbolic language of imagination that can resist the human drive for simple clarity and determinateness. The divine, the numinous, the transcendent, can never be encompassed by the clarity of what Coleridge calls "consequent Reasoning." Mind, without imagination, is not enough. Transcendent reality can only be intimated, guessed at, caught out of the corner of the eye, and for this, only the splendid ambiguity of symbolic utterance and experience will serve. Since God cannot be seen, we must work with analogues of God: stories, images, rituals, and gestures. And it seems to me inevitable that anyone who wishes to discover as fully as possible the human experience of

³ This paragraph and the next are adapted from my essay, "Theological Implications of Coleridge's Theory of Imagination" (7).

the divine will turn to the artist's attempts to capture—in paint, in clay and stone, in words and the sounds of music—her and his own experience, whether within one's own heart or in the beautiful and terrible world around us, of the God who continues to reach out to and to touch us.

The same is true of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: the work of imagination is at the heart of the experience.4 As Thomas Lucas, S.J., has written, "Ignatius understood and trusted the powers of the human imagination. He shaped his Spiritual Exercises around its careful and attentive use as a means of finding God in all things." Ignatius, he continues, "saw the products of the imagination as vehicles that transport us to an understanding and experience of higher realities in ways that linear discourse cannot carry us" (18). Those who are familiar with the Spiritual Exercises will know that the goal of the Exercises is union with God through Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. The first of the four "weeks," or periods, into which it is divided focuses on the foundations of humanity's relationship with God-the fact of Creation and of human dependence on God-and on the ways in which we have, in our own lives, weakened through sin our relationship with God. The second week centers on the life of Christ, as he calls each Christian to follow him in loving service. The third week is the week of the Passion, seen as the ultimate proof of the depth of God's love for us. Finally, the fourth week dwells on the Risen Christ, as sign and efficacious symbol of our own "resurrection," here and now, to a new life in Christ and a more generous commitment to the love of God and of one another.

Throughout the Exercises, the emphasis on the particularities of experience is striking. In the first week, our own personal sinfulness, manifested in quite specific ways, comes to the fore, while we are asked to be aware of God's creative acts not only generically but in very particular interventions in our own lives. In the second week, the life of Christ is brought sharply into focus, and we are asked to dwell prayerfully on the humanness of Jesus: picturing such details as the cave of the Nativity, for example, feeling the cold of the winter, imagining how Mary and Joseph looked, feeling their weariness after their journey, their joy at the birth of the child. In the third week, we are asked to enter into the sufferings of Christ, picturing each moment and detail of Holy Week. In the fourth week, we are called upon to imagine in detail each of the apparitions of the Risen Christ to his loved ones.

The emphasis on physical detail throughout the Exer-

cises is insistent. Listen, for example, to the first two "preludes" to the contemplation on the Nativity:

"The First Prelude is the history. Here it will be to recall how Our Lady and Joseph left Nazareth to go to Bethlehem and pay the tribute which Caesar imposed on all those lands. She was pregnant almost nine months and, as we may piously meditate, seated on a donkey; and with her were Joseph and a servant girl, leading an ox."

"The Second Prelude. The composition, by imagining the place. Here it will be to see in imagination the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Consider its length and breadth, whether it is level or winds through valleys and hills. Similarly, look at the place or cave of the Nativity: How big is it, or small? How low or high? And how is it furnished?" (149-50).

Throughout the Exercises, too, the exercitant is urged to respond personally and feelingly to the scene, especially to Christ—and through him to God the Father. The Exercises are thus, in a very real sense, an exercise in experiencing the Incarnation of God in our material world—to see, in the Coleridgean sense, symbolically—to experience God in the intimate details of our world.

Most importantly, those who are familiar with the Spiritual Exercises will know that the whole of the Exercises moves toward a great crowning "colloquy"—an intimate conversation—between the individual and God, the "Contemplation for Obtaining Divine Love."

The Contemplation begins with the reminder that love is shown in deeds more than in words, and above all in a mutual sharing of self and all one has between lover and beloved. The four points of the Exercise then proceed to demonstrate how God shares with humankind: first, by the gifts God gives, such as Creation itself, Redemption by Christ, and the particular gifts of one's own life; then, how God not only gives to us but even dwells in his creatures—in the elements of the earth, in plants, in animals, above all in humankind; next, how God acts, even labors, within all created things, charging them as it were with the energy of their being; finally and climactically, the exercitant is asked to imagine all these gifts—filled with God's presence and energy—descending from heaven, like the rays of light from the sun or water from a fountain. Clearly the movement is into deeper and deeper union between ourselves and God, a deeper intensity of relationship.

^{*} See Ernest Ferlita, S.J., "The Road to Bethlehem," for an excellent discussion of this dimension of the Exercises.

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Equally important, however, is the response the exercitant is asked to make at the end of each of these four reflections: a personal colloquy of self-offering—a loving response to the love one experiences from God. With each of these exchanges of love, one enters more deeply into loving union with God.

The imagery of the closing section of the "Contemplation for Obtaining Divine Love" is particularly significant: the rays of light descending from the sun, the water flowing down from the fountain. Such an intensity of union has been reached that one can no longer separate the beloved from the lover: the rays of light, the downflowing water, are not separate from their source—distinct, yes, but not separate. Such a phenomenon is what Coleridge has called the "translucence" of symbol. In his great essay *The Statesman's Manual* (in which he explores the imagination at work in sacred scripture), Coleridge writes of symbol:

A symbol is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative. (*Lay Sermons* 30).

When Coleridge speaks of a symbol "abiding itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative," the Unity he is speaking of is God, imaged here (implicitly) as light. As I have expressed it elsewhere, "if a symbol of the Eternal is 'translucent,' then God is the light that passes through it—the Eternal revealing itself 'through and in the Temporal'" (Barth, "Coleridge" 137). Throughout the Bible (Coleridge's privileged example of symbolic expression), God—the Eternal—is constantly revealing himself in and through the temporal, whether it be in a person like Abraham or David, an action like the crossing of the Red Sea, or through the rich profusion of the very creation itself. "In the Bible," Coleridge says, "every agent appears and acts like a selfsubsisting individual: each has a life of its own, and yet all are one life" (Statesman's Manual 31). God is distinct from Abraham, from the Red Sea, from his creation-but he is not separate from them; he remains abidingly present in his power and in his love.

The image of a stained-glass window may serve to explain this conception. The colored window and the light of the sun are quite distinct, but in an act of vision

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they are not separate; the sun and the stained-glass are "translucent" to one another. We perceive them, not separately, but in a single act of vision. This is "symbolic" vision: not merely metaphor, in which one reality "points to" another that remains separate from it; but symbol, in which two realities—distinct but not separate—have become so intimately united, have so "interpenetrated," that we cannot perceive one without the other. The same light at once reveals both.

This is what takes place, I suggest, as one reaches the climax of the "Contemplation for Obtaining Divine Love": the lover and the beloved, God and the human person, become so intimately united in love that they are perceived together, in a single act of knowing and seeing—as the rays that emanate from the sun remain one with it, as the water from the fountain is one with its source.

This is what happens, too, I suggest, in works of art that touch the depths of our human experience: the poet's or painter's or sculptor's or composer's experience of the divine—whether in the artist's own spirit or in the beauties and agonies of the world—flows over into his or her aesthetic experience, so that the artist's vision of created reality is at the same time a vision of the Creator. Like the stained-glass, the artist's work is a means of mediating God's glory. The work of the artist, therefore, can be like the created world itself, showing forth the beauty of God-"beauty's self and beauty's giver" (Hopkins, "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo"). Nor is this any surprise if we share Coleridge's view that the work of the artist-and indeed any human creative act-participates in a finite way in God's eternal act of Creation.

This is why, then, the Jesuit tradition, from its very beginning, has privileged the work of artists. Religion deals, almost by definition, with works of the human imagination. Our sources of revelation include the sacred scripture, with all its rich variety of images and literary forms and tropes. Religion deals with sacred ritual, including dance and the language of gestures. But even apart from the art that is bound up with revelation and ritual, all art can attempt to express the ways in which God touches us and the ways in which we search for God, whether it be through the poetry of Dante and Donne, the fiction of Dostoevski and Graham Greene. the painting of Rembrandt and Rouault, the music of Mozart and Messaien, the sculpture of Giacometti and Rodin, or the films of Bergman and Scorsese. All of them, through close and loving attention to our human experience—the sights and sounds, the shapes and textures—show us something of the glory of God, much

as does the created world itself.

Like the sunlight passing through the stained-glass window, God lives and acts through the created world-distinct from it, to be sure, but not separate from it. We can distinguish the light of creation from its source, "whose glory blind would bare" (as Hopkins puts it), but we cannot separate them; they are one light, one glory. We can distinguished God and God's creation, but we cannot separate them; they are bound together, one in life, one in love. To know and love creation is to know and love God, the author of creation. It is the call of the Spiritual Exercises—and of the Jesuit tradition itself-to open ourselves to the experience of God, in the beauties of creation, in the movements of our own hearts, in our loving relationships with one another, and in the wondrous artistic creations of the human imagination.

There is a remarkable passage in William Faulkner's novel *A Fable* in which an old black Baptist preacher, Rev. Tobe Sutterfield, is questioned about the nature of his vocation:

"Are you an ordained minister?"

"I don't know. I bears witness."

"To what? God?"

"To man. God don't need me. I bears witness to Him of course, but my main witness is to man." (180)

Perhaps this is what the artist does in his or her treatment of humanity's religious experience: witnesses to humankind, and by this witness gives witness to God. As Christ, who for the Christian is the epitome of humanity and human experience, has said: "Whoever sees me, sees the Father who sent me." The Eternal is translucent in and through the temporal.

Some twenty-five years ago, our revered and beloved Fr. Pedro Arrupe, as Superior General of the Society of Jesus, spoke eloquently and movingly to a group of Jesuit artists—painters, sculptors, musicians, poets, dramatists, film makers—gathered in Italy from all over the world. His words are as true and telling now as they were then:

Today, as men seek to communicate with one another, they find that there is a gap which words cannot bridge. Youth and age, authority and dependence, priest and people, east and west, white and black, the more they try to reach out to one another, the farther apart they seem to drift. But not you. You are the fortunate ones. You speak and all listen, all understand. More than the

preacher's word, it is the musician's touch that is bringing the young to God again. More than the politician, it is the folk singer who draws the races hand in hand. Heart speaks to heart in mysterious ways, and it is the artist who holds the key to the mystery. His is the catechesis not of word, but of tone and stone. He can touch the well-springs of the human heart, and release energies of the soul that the rest of the world does not suspect. (91)

We need not fear "mortal beauty," whether in paint or stone or the notes of music. To be sure, it can be at times a "terrible beauty," revealing the dark side of humankind. But if it is true to who we are, as sinful but redeemed people, it can show us much more than ourselves. It can be the stained-glass window through which we see, in a single act of vision, the human artifact and the glory of the sun, the here-and-now and the eternal. Mortal beauty, at its best, can touch us with "God's better beauty, grace"—can even reveal to us "beauty's self and beauty's giver."

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