The Communio Letters
Exploring Faith and Hope in the Media Arts

Spring, 2017

Introduction

I'm asking you to join me in a leap; it's a leap of faith, of course.

These letters were written as an act of faith, and they explore the media arts in the light of religious faith. The more inclusive term 'spiritual' that I've employed in past writings has become so vaguethat I now prefer the word 'religion,' which implies not only spirituality but community with its attendant moral precepts and obligations. So I unapologetically use the word 'faith' in these letters, but with the recognition that, as Rabbi Joshua Heschel cautions, faith is not the same as its description.

My persistent emphasis throughout this small book will be on the need for radical change. This simply means trying to go to the 'root of things'. However, I do not propose to issue a manifesto, but rather provocations, which, though, I hope, generous in tone and spirit, will prod us to go deeper in our pursuit of the unity of truth and beauty.

My goal is even more radical than that: I propose that we aim at the full integration of our personal lives, faith, and work. I will employ the principle of the unity of form and content as a guiding framework for this effort.

If this all seems unreasonable and unrealistic, all the better. I believe that we should admit to being in the tradition of Christian artists and poets who, as Eliot observed, are called to a "constant raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment."

Films as Poetry

I'm increasingly convinced that at least some of the films that artists of faith seek to create will be closer to poetry than to drama, perhaps even a form of metaphysical poetry. As such, they will serve a different purpose than the 'movies' of the marketplace, and, thus, share few affinities with them. Thegoal of a "filmic poetry" also implies a new way of sharing and distributing our work. We have no need to produce commodities because our viewers are not consumers or customers. This orientation is not an indulgence in aestheticism or innovation for innovation's sake. What we aspire to is new relationships and it is the faith content of this aspiration, not the desire for innovation, that will demand poetic expression.

As I will be speaking often in terms of Catholic teachings, I don't want to imply that I am speaking in any authoritative capacity, nor do I wish to give the impression that I'm saying anything original. (I'll warn you if I succumb to that temptation.)Catholics are people who, if they take their faith seriously, look forward and backward at the same time; this isn't easy and can make you dizzy, but it is vital and necessary . So I will also be probing some of the historical roots of this search for an art that merges faith and hope with truth and reality.

I am writing these reflections primarily for those who are already convinced that under the present circumstances an evasion of the existential questions posed by religion is futile or even intellectually dishonest. I will not restrict the dimensions of religious belief by definitions. As a Roman Catholic, I hope to broaden the religious scope of the discussion by emphasizing what we have in common based on the Scriptures, and particularly in the deepest meaning of the Beatitudes.

Whatever one's craft, the obligation of the media artist – writer, director, or performer - is nothing less than to seek a holistic integrated vision of the human person. I know that sounds impossibly ambitious, and it is even harder to do than it sounds. We must accept paradox and incompletion for, at best, our powers are limited. We must embrace and exercise our freedom while at the same time recognize our utter dependence on God. We cannot even perceive Grace, much less create it, and yet we know from experience that "all is Grace."

Communio

This book is derived from a series of letters that I wrote in the summer of 2015 and then supplemented by later reflections. These letters, somewhat amended for clarity, came out of a dialogue within the Communio group, mostly graduate students at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, California.
Communio is the media arts workshop at DSPT which, as a Fellow of the school, I initiated some years ago. Over time, we have engaged in a serious dialogue about art and faith,

and in that many of the DSPT participants are post-graduate students of philosophy and theology, our approach has been at times richly interdisciplinary. While few of the participants felt a calling to media work as a vocation, all, including some of the Dominican seminarians, were interested in integrating the media arts and culture into their studies and work, whether in teaching or in pastoral spheres.

Over the years, we watched films, usually the international 'classics' that I teach, and attempted to evaluate these works in terms of both art and faith. In time, we opened this discussion up to the wider Berkeley community and presented two series of public screenings. The first was Kieslowski's *The Decalogue* series and then what we called "Before and After Films", works that advanced both the film art and spiritual perspectives. I offer some of these reflections in the course of this book.

By "communio" we meant a group of people committed to communion and community as the basis of the artistic interchange. A "communio" is a group of people not afraid to open their hearts to each other. Our goal was to integrate all of life and belief into our work. We knew that our only possible failure would be an insufficiency of love.

Here, then, are the 'Communio letters," each followed by later thoughts and then a second section with some further commentary.

Communio Letter One
Setting the Stage

Dear Communio friends,

This initial letter is in the form of a challenge to all of us. As media artists, whatever our craft and goals, we must face some hard truths.

First, as I see it, we are living in a time similar to that of Saint Augustine in the fourth century -- a period of incessant conflict and anxiety, unending warfare and imperial decline. Such historical stages are often called 'decadent -- an unfortunate and often misleading term in that it ignores the fact that such historical stages, though gripped with uncertainty and anxiety (or, perhaps, because they are so afflicted), can also be rich in creativity.

Nonetheless, there is a challenge inherent in the characteristics typical of such times, which include self-absorption and an eroding sense of identity and relationships. In such a subjective cimate, imagery can become overwrought, even obsessive, and, of course, imagery is a fundamental part of our art and work.

The first challenge then is to recognize that we are living in such a time and to better understand it. The next challenge is to clarify our work and responsibilities by asking some fundamental questions, both personal and artistic.

Who am I and who are we? How do we define ourselves as human beings, artists and members of a faith tradition?

These questions and our attempt to answer them can provide a context for our work. We need also to know to whom we are offering our work, or, better, whom are we called to serve?

The hard truth is that the present-day film world has been engendered by this essentially narcissistic condition -- increasingly self-contained and self-referential among serious media artists, while overtly commercial and exploitive in the industry marketplace.

I don't mean to neglect or denigrate the efforts of highly talented and committed filmmakers. As I suggested, difficult times can inspire the best work. But there seems to be a tendency, even for many of them, to escape from life into movies. This has always been what the marketplace offered -- the 'dreams that money can buy' on which (full disclosure) I often labored in Hollywood. Entertainment as escapism can be a form of healthy release and diversion; but when the appeal turns into addiction and compulsion, the indulgence becomes destructive.

This, I suggest, is the media world within which, and to which we are trying to address matters of truth, with conviction, integrity and, most importantly, humility.

This isn't going to be easy.

Another very serious and practical challenge is simply how to make a living and support a family while pursuing this work. In reality, today's serious media artist or filmmaker is now comparable to a poet -- few of which, even the most

celebrated, have made, or do make a living from poetry. Most, out of necessity, became teachers or, as with current media artists, found some related work that provided regular income.

The 'mainstream' industry in which I worked for decades now seems to provide even less security and continuity than during the past perilous times. This is especially true for writers. On the other hand, the danger of the dream of the independent filmmaker -- winning festival awards that lead to further financing or possibly an industry job -- is not merely that it has become statistically problematic, but that, out of desperation, it can begin to shape one's imagination .

I know of no easy answer to this dilemma (there never was in the past); but we have already noted the value of collaborative work and the formation of something akin to a 'communio' -- a collective effort that shares resources and talents. However, it must be underlined that this kind of cooperation requires a level of self-sacrifice not congenial to individualistic Americans, and, as I predicted in print a decade ago, is not going to happen until it must.

Some questions about art's relationship to personal expression are perennial, yet, given our circumstances, seem relevant today. What is the relationship in art between the personal-subjective dimension of creativity and the Mystery at the heart of all creation, whether termed truth, goodness, or beauty? This inescapable and natural tension between the subjective and the objective is not

meant to be overcome, but should at least provoke reflection, for it can shape and direct our work.

In making a film, for example, if we rely on collaboration and improvisation to promote spontaneity, do we risk surrendering the personal vision, the core or 'meaning' of the story to some sort of group process? I doubt that there is a theoretical answer to this, but I've certainly seen this tension at work. I've seen this dynamic succeed in sustaining a larger vision, but I've also seen it fall into mere indulgence.

In addition to these questions of process, there are also even more important and lasting questions about the moral dimension of art.

The Exiles, the feature documentary on which I worked in the Fifties as a co-producer, was more the vision of a single individual, the late Kent Mackenzie, than something expressly communal; yet we who were involved in the film all shaped and at times altered Kent's vision. Sometimes the questions we discussed were about the ultimate meaning, not just of the film but of the actual lives of the people we were depicting. We were resolved not to impose our own 'meaning' and yet we took great liberties in changing the real personal relationships in order to clarify the underlying conflicts. I don't think there were any 'right' or 'wrong' answers to the difficult choices we had to make in creating the film. But that was fifty years ago, and the questions, moral and aesthetic, are still with us. The vision we put on the screen can change lives, including our own.

As filmmakers, can we use people (and 'use' is often the right term!) as our medium, the way painters use paint and colors? Similarly, we use actors (whether professional or not) to embody a truth that is often inseparable from its embodiment. The truth is not an abstraction or 'lesson'; it is an embodiment, an "incarnation," analogous to the way we Catholics recognize Jesus as the Truth -- a Person, not a book or a theory.

Even if not articulated, the moral vision of the media artist is as inseparable from the work as the lens from the camera.

Blessings,
Ron Austin

COMMENTARY
Our No Name New Age

In the first letter, I recognized the challenges the contemporary media artist faces; but I feel the need to put these matters into a more complete historical and cultural context. For some, particularly the young, such a broad historical view may seem irrelevant or unnecessary, and that's why I want to impose it. The obligation of the 'old' (and I qualify) is to offer the long-view, even if we don't always get it right.

I'm hardly alone in my conviction that we are living in an historically unique time, which Walker Percy described as the "No-Name New Age" and George Steiner termed the period of the "After-Word." These designations, almost epithets, made a generation ago, suggested then that we are in an historical period of prolonged crisis characterized by a loss of ultimate meaning. Perhaps, as with all historical evaluations, we may see this disorientation as relative. But while it's a serious problem to be lost; it's a crisis to have forgotten where you were headed.

I'm not going to try to offer a full analysis, only a partial description of some of the characteristics of this befogged condition that I've observed. We are, in fact, caught in the middle of three converging crises, each of an historical magnitude --- which, at the very least, should continue to make our times interesting.

The first and most defining crisis comes from nothing less than "the end of the modern world," that is, the end of

"modernity" as an historical period and orientation. (If you want the most thorough and breath-taking assessment, turn to Romano Guardini's prophetic work, *The End of the Modern World*, written in 1950!)

 "Modern" and "modernity" are vague designations, but, in this case, I am referring to the historical period that began roughly with the terrors of the French Revolution and ended with the thundering collapse of its bastard offspring, the Soviet Union two hundred years later.

I concede that this is a somewhat arbitrary time frame, but we should be less concerned with definitions than consequences. This termination has meant the loss of many reassuring assumptions once held in common, including the notion of linear progress, the benign nature of science and technology, and the unlimited power of human reason. We are so deeply into our now-deprived state that many aren't even aware of these once-prevalent and reassuring assumptions, or hear them only elegiacally, as fading echoes.

The second significant development is the mass migration of peoples all over the world, bringing with them at least remnants of their own cultures. While offering a potential richness of diversity, mass migrations have created a crisis of convergence. The turmoil and violence in so many parts of the world has caused millions of people to cross borders everywhere. In the United States we tend to view this epic phenomenon rather narrowly in terms of politics and economics -- serious problems, of course; but the long-term

impact of this development will be cultural and, indeed, spiritual and religious. If so, what will it be?

The third development is equally as important but more difficult to define, much less assess. We are now facing what has been called a "mimetic crisis." Bear with me as I try to explain what is both a difficult, and even more troubling, religious and anthropological concept.

"Mimetic crisis" is the term used by the late Rene Girard, a pre-eminent scholar and member of the French Academy, who in the judgment of many remains the foremost contemporary analyst of religion and culture from an anthropological viewpoint. For a fuller understanding of this crisis, one should turn to Girard directly, or to his astute interpreter, Gil Bailie and his book, *Violence Unveiled*.

Succinctly, in my own inadequate terms, the "mimetic crisis" we are facing arises from the relative loss of the "scapegoat." This refers to the sacrificial victim of the ancient (though universal) practice of condemning (or eliminating) the "other" as a means of resolving, at least temporarily, inescapable internal conflicts in society. ('Mimetic' refers to the human inclination to imitate others, a tendency that leads to conformity.)

This is a complicated phenomenon but, on the other hand, it is easily recognizable. "Scapegoating" is blaming others as a way of uniting ourselves and escaping responsibility. The most common form of the scapegoating process historically has been war, although in America it has assumed contemporary form as talk radio and, of course, it is at the

core of political campaigns. This evasion of moral responsibility, however, is both personal and collective and goes beyond politics.

According to Girard, we face a crisis because this ancient mechanism of blaming others for our problems is failing. Slowly subverted for centuries by Christianity , the sacrificial murder, once relied upon to relieve societal division and restore order, is increasingly unconvincing. Christianity has taught us to identify with the victim; hence, the "scapegoat" mechanism resolves nothing and thus becomes, like violence itself, self-perpetuating.

This 'mimetic crisis' is important for media artists to recognize and understand because, one might say, this is 'the stuff that movies are made of.' Sacrificial violence relates directly to the function of Hollywood and the mass media, which are the primary social instruments that support the scapegoating process. They do so through 'entertainment', news and politics – once separate fields, but now increasingly hard to differentiate.

We clearly live in perilous times, but we should learn from the deep and prolonged fears about the once-projected victory of communism that our present despair over late modernity is equally unfounded. The real 'danger' facing us as Christians are our own betrayals: the sins of apostasy dissent, and heresy.

Our times are different only in details. That's why I like the old boogie word 'heresy.' Maybe it might wake some people up. There has always been and will always be 'heresies,'

which, properly understood, are 'truths taken to an extreme'. They then become distortions. In other words, a heresy promotes one aspect of the Divine Revelation, which is then used to obscure or denigrate other Mysteries.

Our dissenting times are characterized by endless debates about abstractions. In effect, this obsessiveness reflects the modern temptation to invent ideologies. Once politicized, the hair-splitting and endless talk of abstractions can also conveniently disguise self-interest and a desire for power.

Our American heresy usually takes the form of the venerable Gnostic Temptation – the idolatrous exaltation of human reason and now, more perilous still, technology. The new techno-utopia promoted by corporate visionaries is both very old and very new.
It is a familiar heresy in that it exalts power, though, in this case, a digital more than military one. And yet it is unique in that it dreams of a post-human or even trans-human state that has eliminated suffering and even death through advanced computation.

This dream-state has not only marginalized religion but subjected it to the criticism of being   wholly irrelevant, possibly even an obstacle to human happiness. While we should welcome honest criticism from any source, we should also note that the vast majority of Church critics comes from the 'gnostics' of academia and media pundits and not from the 'missionaries on the street' who deal with real people in real-life situations.

The adulation of human power affects the arts as well, manifested in an over-emphasis on 'art as spirituality,' which is, once again, a search for a technique or a method that will somehow validate truth by itself, and on its own terms. The essential Truth in our arts will only come from Christ and Grace. This declaration might be self-evident to those of you who share my faith, but we should recognize that just declaring that there is something like Truth, capitalized or not, is now in itself a provocation.

The 'cultural crisis' Americans now face, however, is primarily moral in character. I saw a fundamental change begin when I was already a husband and father in mid-century. American attitudes about sexuality and the family have changed so fundamentally that we've lost not only shared values but a common vocabulary that might enable an adequate assessment. The concern about 'family values' goes far beyond politics; we are addressing the weakening foundations of our society.

Some may dispute the degree to which a vacuum in aesthetic judgment has emerged as well, but the growing divergences in critical thought were discussed in the Fifties when I studied art history at UCLA. By the Seventies, the lack of common standards was widely acknowledged and sometimes lamented, but art work was commonly celebrated as either "multi-cultural" with highly variable and relative values, or so innovative as to defy evaluation. It strikes me that the word 'vacuum' remains appropriate.

I believe our obligations as artists at this moment are simple but difficult: We must observe and 'see,' and then describe

what we see with complete honesty and conviction. But, second, we must do this with compassion. We should not be God's 'prosecutors' nor 'spin doctors.' As in hospice work with those who have suffered great loss, we must be prepared to listen with our whole being, with our eyes, with our touch and heart.

Only then will we be ready and obliged to speak.

I believe our "no-name new age" is a time of prophecy. It is prophets, not professors, who sense when the light will break through and the stream of vitality resume. We will witness a renewal of the deepest spiritual experiences that shaped Christianity and that are common to all people. Sometimes the prophets who inspire renewal are holy people, sometimes they are poets.
Perhaps in coming times they will be media artists.

Let me conclude by trying to restore my credibility with some Scripture. Here's good advice for us from the Second Epistle of Peter, chapter one:

'Say only the good things men need to hear, things that will really help them. Do nothing that will sadden the Holy Spirit with whom you were sealed against the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice of every kind.
We possess the prophetic message as something altogether reliable. Keep your attention closely fixed on it, as you would a lamp shining in a dark place until the first streaks of dawn appear and the morning star rises in your hearts.

First you must understand this: there is no prophecy contained in Scripture which is a personal interpretation. Prophecy has never been put forward by man's willing it. It is rather that men impelled by the Holy Spirit have spoken under God's influence.

I wait in hope, as I'm sure you do, for that first streak of dawn.

Communio Letter Two
The Unity of Form and Content

Greetings, Communio friends:

In these initial letters I want to explore the relationship between our spiritual, moral, and religious convictions and art, including the media arts. This is, once again, a question about the relationship of form and content.

 I will use primarily the development of the art of film as the basis of this examination, but, initially, I want to elucidate the principle of the unity of form and content in the other arts, such as poetry.

This unity has been most commonly recognized in the classic poetry of the past, such as that of Dante, Saint John of the Cross and Gerard Manley Hopkins. To express their profound faith, Dante and Saint John, finding formal change a necessity, literally transformed the Italian and Spanish languages as a result. Hopkins, centuries later, became, in a sense, the first modern poet in English, re-fashioning syntax and compounding words, again to find expression for his faith and God's Grace as found in nature.

However, the poets of the twentieth century are our more immediate artistic forebears and so how did the 'content' -- that is, the deepest experiences and convictions of artists a hundred years ago -- shape their artistic forms and styles? I'll offer only brief and limited examples.

I assume that there would be little dissent to my saying that Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), Paul Valery (1871-1945), and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) should be numbered among the greatest modern poets -- those who developed their craft in the first part of the twentieth century. I have deliberately chosen poets from different cultures to see if we can discern some commonality.

This 'greatest generation,' it should be noted, was also among the most tragic.

These three poets, German, French and Anglo-American, all born within little more than a decade of each other, provided what we might call a choral lament for humanity. Their most distinguished work -- Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1912-1922) Valery's *Cemetery by the Sea* (1922), and Eliot's *Prufrock* (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1923) overlap not merely in time but in their steady-eyed view of death, decline, and destruction.

Their work soars far beyond the morbid, of course; but the common elegiac tone is unmistakable. They confront and lament not only the inevitable death of the person, but of society, and, indeed, of a civilization. Rilke, always, and Eliot ultimately transcended this tragic sense, but Eliot did so only much later in his *Four Quartets*, a deeply religious, even mystical work published in 1943, even as the war raged on.

Let me pause here to correct any impression that the development of an art is somehow 'progressive.' Each initiation of new forms is needed following the loss of

classical forms based on shared values and order. There is nothing inherently linear in this and, in fact, the re-discovery of an old form may prove inspirational and rekindle new work.

The 'content' of a poem, as Flannery O'Connor observed about stories, *is* the poem and can't be extracted except from bad and didactic poetry. There is, therefore, no analysis that can replace simply reading this great poetry. Nonetheless, we can discern some common insights, even themes, in the work of these poets, and a sensibility that was shared by many other fine writers of the time.

The tragic violence of the Great War had rendered many artists and thinkers mute as the ideals of the past were shattered, including the concept of 'unity' or 'harmony' in the arts, and 'progress' among secular thinkers. As one poet put it, "the Nothingness now shows through!" The modern poets explored this gap that had emerged between rationality and hope and the bloody chaos they had witnessed. For a few, the 'Gap' became revelatory as it had for mystics for generations. Many, however, retreated into solitude, some even into madness. There was, nevertheless, a brave attempt to express what they were experiencing, as well as, at times, a determined effort to affirm, if not faith, then the reality and goodness of life. As Valery wrote: "At times I think, at times I Am." Eliot's near-mystic vision ends with the perception of the incomprehensible unity of suffering and redemption when, at that moment, "the Fire and Rose are One."

But if this attempt to explore the gap between the real and ideal, between Man and God, leads ultimately to an expression of mystery, if not the mystical, then what would be the form and language required? Clearly the precise and measured stanzas of the classical form wouldn't suffice. Even before the terrible destructiveness of world war, the Surrealists and others had sought expression that would surpass the narrow rationalism of a materialist age. Some turned to symbolism. Eliot's "fire and rose" are symbols, as are Rilke's "angels" and Valery's linking of the sea with fate, but symbols alone can become too explicit, even heavy-handed. Modern poetic language attempted to express, as a later great poet, Octavio Paz realized, the inexpressible. An oxymoron, yes, but that's what poetry sometimes lives on. What is being 'expressed' is the mystery of life and death, always beyond words.

The formal techniques these poets "used" to 'express the inexpressible' clearly lie beyond the scope of this exploration, but they include a highly compressed imagery of often paradoxical pairings, and sometimes a chant-like rhythm. There is often a deliberately provocative syntax that defies quick or easy comprehension, hence forcing the willing reader further into the depth of the experience.

I suggest that we face a similar challenge.

Blessings,

Ron Austin

COMMENTARY
The Religious Roots of Art

Even before I drafted these letters I sensed that many of us with a religious orientation were moving in the same direction, with an understandable uncertainty, however, as to where the Spirit might be leading us. But if we're not certain about the destination,, we at least know where to start.

I don't think it is an overstatement to assert that all art has its origins in what we can legitimately call 'religion.' This is because our most basic human needs are inescapably related to the questions of life, death, and ultimate meaning that religion poses. . In this inquiry, we are, therefore, simply returning to our origins.

And yet we don't know what form or forms our work will ultimately take. I suspect, however, that the forms-to-come will be as "necessary" and recognizable as the chant and the stained-glass windows of the medieval cathedrals.

Where to begin? Let's start at home. I propose that we start with our most definitive personal experiences.

Awe and Reverence

Dante recognized that the young at some point of maturation are 'stunned by reality' and suddenly feel 'awe and reverence' for something or someone, perhaps yet undefined: This, the great poet believed, out of his own experience, was the first step toward true knowledge and

wisdom. 'Awe and reverence' were also the characteristics of universal religious experience noted by both William James and Rudolph Otto in their seminal studies. (Though they also noted a fearful 'trembling' as a further characteristic of encounter with the sacred.) These perceptions, however personal, can also be, I suggest, a break-through step in the creative process.

How might we capture these often-inner experiences in art? It has been done, particularly by the great poets as well as by the great composers throughout the ages. This inner-directed art is not, however, merely the expression of deep emotion. The best and lasting work has a 'pure light' in it which Dante saw as intelligence in addition to feeling -- an intellectual light fused with love.

Gerard Manley Hopkins refers to the essence of a poem as its 'inscape' and defines 'inscape' as a work (or person) with a 'unified complexity' that is unique to it. It is held together by 'instress,' which is a 'force of being' or an impulse that reveals this unity to a viewer. Hopkins saw this 'beautiful one-ness' in a dead tree, revealing the force that created it and why God made it as a 'moment in time.' Hopkins' concept is clearly related to the principle of the unity of form and content, but with a metaphysical dimension. Beyond its possible use in critical analysis, the idea of "inscape/instress" suggests to me a unique kind of experience that a film might present beyond 'story-telling.'

Can a series of images and related sounds, words, music, convey the essence or 'insight' of a person? It was in this

sense that I proposed to the Communio group the creation of film 'portraits' rather than drama.

Symbol as Mystery

In proposing a path that merges filmmaking with poetry, I'm not advocating an imitation of form any more than a mere recital of lovely words. Poetry, however, can be the filmmaker's muse and as it springs from metaphor and symbols in our exploration we should have some awareness of the power of symbolism but also its limitations. As Dana Gioia writes, 'symbols are always more or less than is really meant.'

There are three basic aspects of the Symbol to be noted: first, a symbol must be real, concrete, and legible in itself not merely fanciful or a conceit. However imaginary, it is a link to ordinary reality. Second, a Symbol is defined by pointing to something or someone greater than itself, that is, a transcendent reality. Third, it must somehow represent this mysterious transcendence 'in itself'. A Symbol is meant to be something more than a cypher. Perhaps the best example of this is Dante's Beatrice, a transcendent ideal incarnated in a real woman.

We will find that however profound the mystery or the symbol our work must also be rooted in real life and people.

Communio Letter Three
Spiritual Foundations

Greetings, Communio friends,

Please bear with me as I try to lay some further spiritual grounds for our inquiry into the media arts. Again I want to probe the relationship of 'form and content' but on a deeper level.

Concerning the media, I will be using the term 'form' in a more inclusive way than is customary. I don't mean simply common elements such as story structure, visual design, or acting styles, but also the way the film is produced and exhibited, and particularly the creative relationships.

By 'content' I also mean more than the underlying ideas and beliefs that shape the story and characters but the total experience that the audience shares. I posit a dialectical relationship between form and content. Form isn't the bottle in which we pour the 'content'. The formal elements in the creative process also reveal, deepen and transform the ultimate content.

Unless one is consciously making a didactic work for teaching or propaganda then our personal experience seems an essential basis for our 'content'. However, to become art, experience must be shared and understood, not merely subjective emotion.

Contemporary film artists face some unique challenges. To grasp the essence of even our most personal experience, we

must realize how conditioned we are by our environment. Unlike previous generations, we are living in a media-saturated society in which basic assumptions about reality are concealed in the plastic-wrap of entertainment. Beyond shaping our thoughts, there is now an addiction to 'screens' and images that perpetuates a collective escape from reality.

How can we break out of this dream-spell?

A first step might be to think of our audience or viewers in more personal even communal terms. Only a depersonalized mass society promotes a 'mass audience.' We should ask ourselves whom we feel obliged to serve. What are their needs? Are they prepared for a truthful encounter? Would they even welcome it? To speak the truth are we willing to accept the consequences, to risk rejection? Through our art we must create relationships, not commercial transactions.

Beyond the merely personal, what is the 'content' of a specifically Christian or Catholic work? I suggest that, for Catholics, our most fundamental 'content,' that is, the heart of our work, and our lives, lies in the three central Mysteries of our faith: Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. These are traditional Christian terms and concepts, but there are analogies in every tradition and, beyond that, in the universal human condition.

This is at the heart, I believe, of the Catholic-Christian 'content' for which we must find the adequate forms. As Gertrud von Le Fort, another great modern writer, described an art rooted in faith,, it provides a 'vision of the further

horizon.' As I see it, the present challenge for all of us is not simply to engender forms to express our deepest convictions, but to make our experiences meaningful to those who do not share our religious assumptions, or who, perhaps, have no coherent conceptual framework of their own.

The secular media world in which we might sometimes work, and, in any case, cannot escape, has little interest in what, to most, are outmoded if not obscurantist concepts such as the Incarnation or Resurrection. (No one doubts the Crucifixion!) But these mysteries at the center of our faith can be conveyed in art beyond conceptual thought or creed. Christians are hardly the only humans who struggle with the reality of suffering and death, and, sadly, we do so sometimes as inadequately as the most despairing non-believer. In fact, the 'noble pagan' of the past (including some of my early teachers) displayed an integrity and courage that we can learn from as well as admire. There is common existential ground here. I find many such spiritual differences to be more rooted in experience than in philosophy, and, given the agonies of the modern world with its fragile, fragmented and contingent relationships, it is easy to understand how the experience of love and grace has been missed or diluted.

So if what we seek to express -- our 'content' -- must be essentially a mystery affirmed in lived experience, then what are the sufficient forms we must seek to convey this?

Once again, we might look to the great poets for clues. Frequently, we will find that the spirituality of their art

relates to the experience of death as prelude to the Resurrection. Rilke wrote that death is not a negation but a completion, a fulfillment. As he put it, death is 'the dark side of the moon that knows its own light unseen to us.' Death and life are inseparable. As Eliot wrote: "In my beginning is my end." However, as suffering can bring despair, the contemplation of death induces fear. In my experience, both personally and as a teacher, it is our fears, whether one is religious or not, that prevent us from pursuing the full depth of content and lure us back to the comfort of reliable and familiar old forms.

I hope you will not find this unnecessarily morbid. My early writing workshop members dubbed themselves the 'suffering group' because of my perhaps too relentless use of suffering and death as the necessary starting point of discernment as well as creative discipline. Yet, like life itself, great art merges the forces of vitality and decline, life and death.

I'm suggesting that our search for adequate artistic form must begin with the integration of the most difficult and even frightening aspects of our life experience, and if we are suppressing vital aspects of our life experience – including the spiritual dimensions of sexuality -- our work will be marked by radical deficiency if not distortion. I'm urging us toward a personal, not theoretical approach -- an opening to the full spectrum of life, death, and suffering as a foundation for artistic work. For Catholics, this is being 'Christ-centered.'

Yet another aspect of our work must be humility. As artists, we are not offering 'answers,' theological or philosophical, nor providing therapy; we are only opening paths, often stumbling ahead with as little foresight as anyone else. . We can only point in a direction. However, we and our work must point as Heraclitus pointed, that is, 'beyond' -- beyond our selves, personalities or craft -- and thus we must admonish our viewers, as he did: 'Do not gaze at my finger!'

I appreciate your patience. In the next letter, I'll probe specifically into the forms found in films and the media art.

Blessings,

Ron Austin

COMMENTARY
Further Spiritual Foundations

Image and Word

Any artistic idiom reaches its spiritual limits where silence and mercy begin. It is on this perimeter, however, where the most significant and expressive art resides. For me, this has been manifested in music and poetry, both boundary languages.

Filmmaking is comparable to poetry in that poetry preserves a reservoir of language with signification latent since the beginning of human consciousness. All language in this sense has a pre-history and contains sensory and metaphorical images. Words inescapably relate to images that, in turn, evoke a sense of time even beyond memory. The film image has the potential to penetrate this deep reservoir. But this potential must overcome the encrusted forms of the present. We risk employing a language 'born dead' if we speak only in terms of logic and reason. It seems to me that this is a very high risk in our technological age. Traditional language including poetry and religious idioms come from roots that 'bind us together.' Throughout the ages, poetry speaks of the power of Being itself as well as evoking the 'voices of the dead.' This poetic power is the filmmaker's spiritual and artistic legacy as well.

Story-telling

One of the dilemmas of the modern era has been whether we should accept the stories we are told as beautiful, artful,

and ennobling while not believing that they are true. The questionable 'truth of the story' was recognized early in the twentieth century by Virginia Woolf who said: 'My contemporaries don't write stories because they don't believe stories are true.'

This again raises the question of how the 'truth' as content relates to form. The celebrated early twentieth-century Christian writers known as the Inklings, including C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien, primarily wrote fantasies and even 'fairy tales,' but these were based on an underlying Christian faith. Without this foundation, the popularity of the fantasy today lies in its escape from reality rather than its deeper insight into it, into ultimate Reality. 'Once upon a time' no longer has its magic appeal to a mythical past characterized by both recognizable virtue and evil, and the 'future' is rendered into a kind of horror-story or, more commonly, simply a projection of the narcissistic adoration of power.

Under this debased cultural conditioning, the only 'true story' we should seek to tell is a 'wake-up' story, somehow so shocking and unique that it cannot be folded into any present genre. The challenge is to avoid reducing these "wide-awake" shocking and disconcerting events into melodrama or into reassuring fairy-tales. We must make them in their own way as unpalatable as the Crucifixion and as 'unbelievable' as the Resurrection -- yet true.

Words and images are evocations of time and memory, and it has been poetry that revealed and sustained this 'world of words' beyond mere connotation. In this respect, poetry is not just an offering of beauty but a 'fight for life' in the face

of a depersonalized world of numbers and 'mere signs.' Film artists must now join this struggle.

The seeming insufficiency of modern stories – that is, their tentative relationship to 'real life' -- I've come to see as a religious if not theological matter. The problem of the contemporary 'story' or narrative is that they seem false much of the time because no 'story' in life or art is or can be fully complete in itself. The contemporary story seems, therefore, less than 'truthful' on some level unless it reveals a limit.

A story need not offer an 'ending' to be complete and satisfying. Too many 'endings' are often merely concoctions of the author meant to 'satisfy' the reader or viewer. However, a 'true story' must in some way point to an End. This is often an implied recognition of our human limits, which is essentially a religious insight.

Many contemporary films reflect this dilemma as they either offer a cynical or despairing ending, which can be as artificial as a 'happy ending,' or they merely drift to a pointless cessation. Yet such endings have been characteristic of some of the best films of our era simply because incompletion is more honest than the well-intentioned but forced conclusion and resolution.

This challenge may relate to craft and experience, but fundamentally it isn't resolvable by craft alone. To struggle with a story and the characters therein is a struggle with yourself. To 'give up on a story' as a writer or viewer is excusable only as an act of humility.

Communio Letter Four
Form and Content in Films

Greetings, Communiards:

I now want to apply the principle of the unity of form and content to the art of film.

Last spring I offered some comments about film form at our DSPT screenings of 'before and after' films -- that is, those films which I suggested broke new ground in both form and content. Here are a few of my reflections on some notable works.

The Passion of Joan of Arc, 1927
Carl Dreyer's silent masterpiece was in many respects the summation of the silent film art form and one that I believe was inspired by his reaction to the tragedies of his time.

While Dreyer compressed the mytho-historical story of Joan of Arc into the dramatic structure of a classical tragedy (five acts, unity of time and space), he more fully expressed the 'content' in innovative cinematic forms, particularly in the predominance of intense close-ups. The naked human face was perhaps the last defense of human dignity following the devastation of the Great War and its aftermath. The series of close-ups also resulted in a lack of space orientation for the audience, thus forcing concentration on the inner life of the central character.

Dreyer claimed that his ultimate goal (in effect, his self-perceived 'content') was to realize a form of Christian

mysticism on film. He sought not only the revelatory power of the human face but a 'spirituality of silence' that Bresson would later embrace. Dreyer wanted to create a religious work of art that would be experienced as such. However, this contradicted the desires of the mass audience then and now. We cannot divorce the circumstances of the venue and screening from the ultimate experience of the film. This remains a major challenge for us.

Grand Illusion, 1937
Our second film in the series was made just two years before the outbreak of the Second World War, and one might say that its 'content' was the inescapability, if not inevitability of war. By extension, Jean Renoir's work also reflects the ambiguity of the modern condition as traditional values and relationships are eclipsed. It remains, in this respect, a very 'modern' film.

I pointed out the formal elements that Renoir used to convey this ambiguity as well as the profound inter-connectedness of his characters included the staging and depth-of-focus camera angles. This view of the depth of personal inter-relatedness, despite status and background, was also evident in his next film, *The Rules of the Game* in 1939, an even more pronounced study of moral ambiguity in the face of social disintegration.

In this work, as with others of the period, the change in acting style was a formal innovation. In contrast to the performances in Dreyer's film, the acting, while still theatrical to some degree, moved toward the naturalism more appropriate to film close-ups. I would suggest that our

challenge is not merely to adapt acting styles, but to achieve a deeper level of reality through an approach based on a deeper form of collaboration – one that does not treat the performer, whether professional or not, as an object to be manipulated.

Perhaps the lasting esteem shown *The Grand Illusion* was reflected in an audience member's comments. She said that while the film's ending recognized the tragic reality of unending war, the humanity displayed in the character relationships still left her with hope.

Bicycle Thieves, 1947
De Sica and Zavattini's highly influential 'neo-realist' film was the next step in a search for a deeper reality through the simplification of form. In this simple story 'nothing happens,' at least in conventional dramatic terms. Yet the modern characteristics of powerlessness and loneliness are powerfully evoked, sometimes merely by crowded streets and traffic.

Acclaimed around the world and often described as 'social realism,' the neo-realist approach clearly transcended politicsand openly aspired to universality. The use of non-actors and real locations was, at that time, a formal innovation that, as Zavattini expressed it, aspired , to 'give every person a name,' however unrecognized or seemingly ordinary and insignificant.

Again, for us, this implies a deeply collaborative approach for everyone involved in the film and the overcoming of barriers whether based on craft, status, or identity.

Four Hundred Blows, 1958

Truffaut's semi-autobiographical work was our next film, and I believe his 'content,' while deeply personal, was the depiction of a new urban poverty of alienation and displacement, particularly of the young. An early work of the French "New Wave" filmmakers, it dispensed with conventional narrative and, as with Godard, deliberately at times violated space/time conventions, which conveyed the radical discontinuity of life. Truffaut was moving film in the direction of 'poetry over prose' - that is, capturing moments and 'situations' more than unfolding an expository or even satisfying narrative.

A half-century later, we are now confronting an even greater degree of alienation and social dislocation than these earlier forebears faced. By the end of the Fifties, particularly in America but also elsewhere, the strategies of the mass media deepened generational gaps by creating a permanent adolescent mass market. How can we, in contrast, use the media arts to unify and heal rather than divide?

Mirror, 1975

Andrei Tarkovsky's challenging work might be best understood in the literary context of Joyce and Proust, that is, the revelation of an inner-life freely mixed with memory. This required a radical exploration in form and Tarkovsky was later honored along with Robert Bresson at Cannes as the two most notable explorers of new filmic frontiers. Bergman considered Tarkovsky the 'greatest' due to his creation of a 'new poetic language.'

Tarkovsky wanted films to be *experienced, not understood*. He hoped to have a universal emotional response and then let the interpretations vary. He thus applied the Zen poet's principle and made any definitive interpretation impossible. The point of this approach was to open the viewer to grace and to a more direct revelation of the goodness of God.

Tarkovsky desired to speak for all humanity and he explored dreams and levels of consciousness for evidence of commonality. *Mirror* is thus a mosaic with a musical form, not a logical one. To convey different dimensions and levels of time/space, he does not use fades or dissolves, and the camera is tracking and moving all the time. As with poetry, he juxtaposes images to create new meanings or reveal hidden ones. It is the total effect, psychological and aesthetic, that is sought, not an interpretation of ideas or events.

Tarkovsky was searching for means to express the transcendent and he uses different forms and techniques to do so, including objects that rise and fall   without apparent or natural cause. I don't see this as a crude supernaturalism because the filmmaker is not asking us to accept this as objective reality.

While I celebrate Tarkovsky's remarkable body of work, there is some danger for us in this legacy, which, as with later Fellini, tended to retreat into the subjective. As contemporary Americans subjected to an almost-total immersion in media, we risk being enclosed in the now-dominant cultural narcissism. Our search for new forms,

unlike Tarkovsky's, may be directed toward a greater grasp of objective reality.

Blue,1985
Kieslowski's second film of his Tricolor trilogy is ostensibly about the risks and limitations of human freedom as it descends into personal isolation. However, stated thematically, this description is too abstract. The film has levels of meaning, one of the characteristics of a genuinely spiritual art. Dante urged his friends to read his Divine Comedy with an awareness of his multi-layered vision.

Kieslowski's desire in his films was to demonstrate that 'there is a human soul,' that is, a universal transcendent reality that includes personal human consciousness. Another one of Kieslowski's acknowledged themes, so to speak, was the severe and ubiquitous loneliness that characterizes modern life. One might see his work as a response that asserts 'we are not alone!'

In some of his work, Kieslowski also explores the nature of time, an inquiry as significant today as ever in that the technological society tends to make computerized chronological time ever more dominant. This is in contrast to the ancient concept of 'kairos' -- time experienced as significant moments or even as a mysterious simultaneity. For Jews, this points to prophetic unique moments in history; for Catholics, this points in the direction of the radical inter-subjectivity that Saint Paul recognizes and is now often termed "Christ Consciousness."

 Kieslowski, in my judgment, returned to a more theatrical form of story-telling while brilliantly incorporating many of the innovations of others. The formal expression in *Blue* only reaches its heights at the end, one of the most exquisite endings in films as images; music and even Scripture fully integrated.

What we can learn from Kieslowski's accomplishments is that forging ahead in the 'frontier' of film art is not a competition to be the first to find the 'gold nuggets of the new'; it is far better to secure the forms available that best tell the truth.

In summary, let me review these specific 'break-throughs' in film form, some of which we now take for granted as basic film grammar. None were arbitrary; all were efforts at meaningful expression.

We have cited Dreyer's visual power in the use of close-ups of the human face; Renoir's humanist rendering of the complexity of human relations in the depth of his *mise en scene;* de Sica and Truffaut's use of 'real people' and places to stress both universality and particularity; Tarkovsky's poetic renditions of time, memory, and dreams, which found adequate form only by his defying the logic of narrative. Kieslowski, in my judgment, then integrated many of these formal developments into a new synthesis, which, in itself, was 'breaking ground.'

I believe a study of the principle of the unity of form and content -- though admittedly an often elusive unity -- demonstrates that we are not called to innovate for the sake

of innovation, but to find the form that is needed and most integral to the expression of the deepest level of experience in our work.

Art, poetry, music and film are the means by which we are still exploring the spiritual frontiers of our time. This ongoing inquiry is about more than films. It asks 'who we are, and who God is' and, therefore, in the end, what it means to be human.

Blessings,

Ron Austin

COMMENTARY

Hollywood in Retrospect

In my fourth letter to Communio I cited those films that best demonstrated the principle of the unity of form and content and that also broke new ground artistically and spiritually. Perhaps the absence of a Hollywood film was conspicuous and so let me acknowledge the contributions of the Hollywood industry in which I grew up and worked.

Knowing first-hand the restrictive conditions in which Hollywood creators had to labor, often surrendering their work to the heavy hands of others, a tribute to their achievements includes acknowledging courage and determination as well as talent.

Also, in fairness to the earlier generation of Hollywood filmmakers, we must remember that Hollywood tended to 'eat its young' and not-so-young by expelling some of the most talented filmmakers, including those who shaped the art, who would not conform to the studio system, based on its 'bottom-line' of profitability. Those exiles eventually included D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Eric von Stroheim, Orson Welles, Preston Sturges and later the political blacklistees such as Jules Dassin. One can imagine what creative richness might have been added to the Hollywood legacy had these and other remarkable talents been given the freedom they deserved.

How do mainstream Hollywood films, mostly made for entertainment and commercial purposes, reflect the

principle of the unity of form and content? Again, we will need some historical background.

I'm not a social theorist; I'm a witness.

As a generalization, I believe the mainstream film industry of my day and before reflected cultural trends, eventually including the growing crisis we've described. Often obliquely, Hollywood movies mirrored the loss of common moral values and a confidence in the future.

By the 1950s, when I first entered the studios, it was already becoming apparent that the Hollywood creative community, particularly writers, was suffering from the "dying of the local gods." I refer to the demise of Marxism, Freudianism and a flamboyant bohemianism, all of which were failing as a substitute for faith or as a basis for hope. This profound disillusionment wouldn't become apparent on the screen until well into the Sixties, but the lights were already dimming. Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* was a bitter depiction of the death of old Hollywood, and it was made in 1959. By 1969, "Hollywood" was no longer Hollywood. Classic Hollywood, old Hollywood, was dead. I know because I was at the funeral.

As a community Hollywood had been traumatized by three modern tragedies, which I will encapsulate as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the Gulag. I'm referring less to the particular political and historical impact of these tragic events as much as to their symbolic significance for those of us who witnessed them. The effects were long-term and, in some cases, took a long time to be realized.

The Holocaust, that is, the full realization of what had happened to European Jews, was the most traumatic to our largely Jewish community; it represented not just a previously unimaginable yet modern barbarism but, in time, the failure of the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress to bring universal peace and justice.

Hiroshima was an almost simultaneous blow to the concept of a progressive future, yet was largely denied as such by most Americans. Again in time, it came to represent not only a horrifying new aspect of war, but left us with far less confidence about the beneficent role of science and technology in the future, a skepticism that lingers to this day.

The exposure of the Gulag, the vast Soviet slave- labor system, though the evidence of this bitter truth was overwhelming immediately after the war, took thirty years to be accepted by Western intellectuals, particularly those on the Left. This was a prime example of the blindness induced by ideologies and confirms Simone Weil's observation that while 'politics suppress the truth' (a truism), 'partisan politics suppresses a desire for the truth.'

The revelations of the true criminal nature of the Soviet regime largely through the work of Russian dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn led eventually to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This brought down not only Marxism but struck a blow at the optimistic claims of all political ideologies.

The impact of these particular historical traumas in Hollywood as elsewhere cannot be over-estimated. Each one, in different ways, was a blow to hope and cause for lingering fear. The effects of this angst and trepidation became increasingly evident on our movie screens, whether in the form of honest but despairing portrayals of modern life, or, more frequently, in an escape into never-never land. As was evident in so many of the endings of the best of the films of the Seventies, the protagonists were now uniformly lost, often unmotivated, and essentially anti-heroic.

By the 1970s, however, a new generation of filmmakers had emerged. They began by opportunistically exploiting the growing youth market but, well-trained in the film schools and knowledgeable about world cinema, developed their talents and began to address the real world.
Arguably, some of Hollywood's finest films in terms of realistic form and style in directing, writing, and acting, came during this time. Among the several outstanding works were the *Godfather* films, *Chinatown*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,   Network* and the early films of Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen.

The most significant and long-lasting transformation of Hollywood, however, was the development of the 'youth market' -- a pseudo culture that divided generations and further fragmented society. The loss of the adult audience to TV created a desperate need for huge money-making, action-oriented blockbusters. The movie audience, very young to begin with, increasingly became international. By the late Seventies, the era of multi-national corporate control had begun, and given the limits of language,

Hollywood, not surprisingly, sought an audience with little interest in or orientation toward character-driven drama. This is naturally discouraging for serious writers and directors, anyone wanting to make anything more than a "popcorn" movie.

Mass media isn't simply a technology; it is an industry and one now controlled by those who have been formed by it. Like many Americans, many of these corporate leaders, have never experienced a communal life based on permanent or even lasting personal relationships, and accept this lack as the 'new norm.'

Hollywood has produced many fine artists who have made splendid films, not just the delightful entertainment that was once Hollywood's specialty, but many that inspired ideals of freedom and equality, and some that were thoughtful in doing so.

On balance, Hollywood has offered neither heaven nor hell.

Hollywood Forms and Techniques

Whether serving as a model, or, more likely, as a contrast to what we might seek as Christian artists, we can learn much from the development of the Hollywood movie.

The period known as "classical Hollywood" is usually designated as peaking in the late thirties and expiring by the Sixties. What characterized this classical form was a

seamless, almost invisible style in cinematography and editing as well as smooth narrative continuity.

As fanciful as the stories often were, romantic fantasies or tales of heroism, there was, as with the classic tradition in other arts, a proportionality and harmony that could produce a dream-like state in the viewer. This was the audience-pleasing goal that mandated Hollywood techniques. But it was precisely these qualities that many of us in the next generation, inspired primarily by European filmmakers seeking a greater sense of reality, sought to overcome.

While the narrative structure of the 'classic' Hollywood film offered a reassuring sense of continuity and causality – however improbable the story elements – the new generation sought to express the discontinuity and ambiguity of modern life. The most influential filmmakers during this time were the French 'new wave' group. However, in mainstream Hollywood their hand-held camera and quick-cut styles were most influential in TV commercials.

Old Hollywood, pre-war and for a decade afterward, offered stories that allowed audiences to be omniscient, knowing that the boy will get the girl and the bad will be punished in the end. The audience didn't have to believe the story to be comforted by it.

By the Nineties, my perspective on Hollywood came primarily from teaching screenwriting at the USC cinema school. Endowed by prominent Hollywood figures such as Lucas and Spielberg, it was not surprising that what was

being taught were mainstream industry techniques. Unfortunately, the 'how-to-do-it' screenwriting books, few written by screenwriters, were being used to promote the crippling idea that there was a fixed structure for a screenplay that could be used as a kind of blueprint. The best of my students instinctively knew better and were receptive to my instruction that characters must first be fully developed before one even has a 'structure.'

Throughout this time, there had been several filmmakers, including some Americans, who were exploring non-narrative film forms that still conveyed humanity in characterization. Increasingly, many of these independent experiments too often reflected not so much an inability to 'tell a story" as a reluctance to try. This also, I suggest, reflects the mood of the time and the loss of confidence in even the concepts of truth and beauty.

Facing the loss of ultimate meaning and lasting truth, the capacity for convincing story-telling became problematic. Yet if there are truthful characters capable of thought and change, then there is a 'story' being told, however indirectly. A loss of 'faith,' whether in God or mankind, may distort a film, yet if there is a recognition of limits, if there is some <u>humility and a sincere desire to transcend one's fears and limitations, then a passion for truth</u> might still emerge that some of us might call faith.

But then, perhaps this is another story.

A Note on Hollywood and Christian Faith

There have been many Hollywood productions made about religion and Christianity, beginning with images in D.W. Griffith's films and Cecil B. deMille's *King of Kings.* It is beyond the scope of this brief review to assess the merits of such a wide variety of works including Biblical epics and crypto-Christian social justice stories. I think it is fair to say, however, that most Hollywood films about Jesus, despite the best intentions, tended to reflect the dominant American ideals of justice and heroism more than faith or the surrender to Grace. Later films often presented Jesus as a tormented existential hero more comparable to Sisyphus or Prometheus than the radically self-sacrificing yet loving Jesus of the Gospels.

There were also many independent American films with religious themes made over the years, some quite sensitive and artful; but they often reflected the personal doubts and conflicts of the filmmakers, many of whom had lost their faith, rather than the liberating nature of Christian belief. Unfortunately, some of the films that were clearly inspired by a strong Christian commitment succumbed to the temptation to 'preach and teach' rather than engage the despairing secular culture.

The history of these efforts reveals the formidable challenges Christian artists face: How to engage the society without being acculturated by it, and how to portray the salvific love of Christ while being boldly truthful and unblinking about the human condition.

We may be understandably offended by distortions of our faith or criticisms of Catholic beliefs ripped out of context, but we should listen carefully and compassionately to these critics. However prejudiced, they may reflect abuses suffered in the name of religion for which we should repent and which we should try to redress as much as possible in our own work.

Communio Letter Five
Summing Up

Dear Communio friends:

In this fifth and final letter, I'll try to summarize some of what we've explored as well as further elucidate our purposes.

At the outset I posed some questions about who we are and the meaning of our work as filmmakers. My aim was to suggest the need for a way of life that integrates faith, conviction, and work. In that regard, perhaps the ultimate challenge we face is that of art itself, its nature and purpose, and particularly contemporary concepts and attitudes.

Some of the most vivid and dramatic confrontations with contemporary artists and critics come when we challenge the potential idolatry of art. This danger derives from trying to offer an aesthetic substitute for faith, a kind of 'cheap grace.' This tendency concerned Kierkegaard, who recognized the "aesthete" as a false prophet, as well as contemporary writers who warn of 'art for art's sake' as naked idolatry. I have noted this tendency among film-makers in their preoccupation with technology and techniques. Jean Renoir saw this as a particularly American malady.

Going deeper, in his spiritual classic, *The Flight from God*, Max Picard asked: Why do we need so much art? Isn't much of it simply the endless adoration of the Self in the growing

void? For all of its blessings, art can provide the illusion of the self-sufficiency of the wounded ego. Films, in particular, can manufacture a disembodied world, seemingly not dependent upon any Being beyond itself. In this regard, we must resist the image that devolves into an idol to be worshipped. Our icons, in contrast, are meant to be transparent, conductors of Light.

The place of our art is not at the center of devotion but at the boundaries, at the limits of our thoughts and words. Our deepest spiritual experiences take us to a closed door without a key. Yet we know there is something, Someone, on the other side. We know because we hear 'the sound of silence.'

What we must explore are the forms that we need to convey this sound of silence; there will be no end to this inquiry for it ends in work, not analysis. Moreover, the formal elements are not merely those of the work itself, the craft and techniques, but, first, the form of our work together, our relationships. And, in the end, there is the form of presentation, the offering of the gift to others, our 'audience.' Those who 'hear' this will require more preparation than the purchase of a ticket if it is to be a shared spiritual experience.

The art of film is based on two unique characteristics: It can transcend time and space, and, most importantly, it can offer the human face and eyes in extraordinary ways. We must view films that offer this gift as we have at the Dominican school -- that is, as a communal experience including preparation and discussion.

Our contemporary world has tended to fragment if not divide our commitments. Sometimes this is due to over-specialization or even a compulsive need for 'success.' But this is not a condition unique to media artists; all of the arts have suffered from thedivorce from life and community during much of the modern period.

Art in the twentieth century tended to be either a form of combat or rejection of a 'bourgeois' life of false values and conformity, or at least a sanctuary from the pressures of the dominant society. By and large this has been the posture of artists for more than a hundred years. More recently, lacking a common goal or style, much of the improvisational and spontaneous work in all of the arts from 'Action painting' to improv theater to aesthetic primitivism has been the result of a desire to discover something natural and 'more real' than art itself. Sadly, the competition between 'avant-gardes,' one more self-consciously transgressive than the next, has produced a tedious conformity of dissent and alienation.

In response to the need to escape this wilderness, I have suggested a return to the principle of the unity of form and content as a diagnostic start. This implies that, first, formal innovation is inadequate in itself, and, second, the belief or truth-claim of the artist, however insightful and sincere, is embodied and potentially limited by form. Hence the real 'avant-garde,' the substantial innovation in art, comes from the need, the demand of an adequate expressive form.

My experience with Christian artists, especially filmmakers, has made me, I confess, rather dogged in this conviction. It seems difficult for artists of faith to grasp, despite the scriptural admonition, that you cannot pour 'new wine into old wineskins'. The Gospel rendered as a comic book will be a comic book, or, more to the point, translated into the predictable style and narrative structure of a Hollywood blockbuster, it will be just another movie.

Let me add to the notion of 'form' when it comes to films. Clearly the most fundamental form in a fictional film will be the narrative structure and flow. This, however, will largely depend upon the nature and depth of the characters. If the exploration of character becomes too deep, a melodrama or an adventure film will fall flat. On the other hand, if the characters are so existentially lost and their motives so ambiguous or confused, then drama itself tends to collapse. It should come as no surprise then that at a time in which society itself has lost a sense of ultimate meaning and lasting truths, the capacity for convincing story-telling became problematic. The silence is then filled by noise.

I suggested in my survey that the most significant and lasting films have come from efforts to explore reality truthfully and in greater depth. Throughout film history this has led to a more 'realistic' or naturalistic form of performance, even in films whose stories and filmic styles were expressionistic or fantastic. We should make a distinction then between the objective of the film that seeks to depict a social reality, an observation of people's struggles in modern life, and a work that seeks more of the 'essence' of a person or conflict than what is merely natural

and life-like. This assumes, however, that there is an 'essence' to human beings, or as Kieslowski hoped to demonstrate a 'soul' that exists beyond social and biological conditioning.

To validate this belief, I'm convinced it will be necessary for us to go to the far reaches of our experience, and often to the darkest places. Whatever the equivalent might be for others, for Catholics, it is only the crucified Christ that fully reveals the love of God. This may be manifested in many ways that are not overtly religious, yet without this underpinning it is easy to be overcome by the seemingly endless conflicts of our time.

Thanks for your time and patience in reading these letters and your thoughtful responses.

Blessings as always,

Ron Austin

COMMENTARY
Digging Deeper

I concluded the final letter with reflections on the search for our deepest content as preliminary to finding the right form. In that I consider this the central challenge of all that we face, I want to delve into this question again.

How do we go from 'intimations of immortality' and other powerfully reassuring insights to the common reality the philosophers call ontological? The process, if that's what it is, will also remain mysterious, but there are some shared experiences worth considering.

We must first recognize that our response must be that of the whole person, not limited to reason, emotion, or instinct. This immediately distinguishes the creative impulse from the modern intellectual's search for abstract universals. We must seek, as Rabbi Heschel urges, 'the unknown within the known,' that is, we do not confine what we mean by 'real' to the known, a tendency that, in its extreme, is a form of intellectual solipsism.

This is what I was reaching for in the last letter when I suggested that, for Christians, the creative path can never exclude the Cross. Once we touch or even come close to the Cross, to the Crucified One, then everything changes. There is no way to follow this path that does not require pain and courage. Art is never a short-cut. I recognize that art is always inadequate to express the full Mystery of the Cross, but it is woefully inadequate when the artist draws back into

fear. Our failure as Christian artists is not merely a lack of craft or skill, but, in this sense, a failure of faith.

Giving Witness to Mystery

To be credible witnesses to the truth offered by Christ, we must first not only 'go deeper' in our faith, but as the Gospels demand, we must 'speak plainly.' This doesn't mean disputation or 'arguing about God.' Debating abstract criticism of religion is as pointless as the criticism itself.

Secularism as a world-view without a transcendent dimension is becoming increasingly dogmatic and even fundamentalist because it is based on an outmoded 'scientific' concept of a unitary sequential flow of time-space without levels and other dimensions. Increasingly, however, the inadequacy of the secular imagination has become apparent. Many who rejected religion are once again confronting the essential mystery of existence.

To accept the reality of a 'mystery' means the acceptance of our human limitations and a readiness to embrace paradox. What we Christians accept as 'miracles' are occurrences in our time-space that reveal the unexpected intersection of different levels of reality. This confirms that our concept of reality is not just based on tradition but on our various personal experiences of transcendence. These universal experiences have been best grasped and preserved for generations by music, art, and poetry.

Hence, the formidable and exciting task before us!

Our Spiritual Frontier: The Resurrection

It is predictable and yet curious that our Christian faith in the reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection should remain literally for centuries a flash-point of passionate disagreement on the part of non-believers or even those who would relativize the faith, reducing the Resurrection to a symbolic or mythic expression of mutual hope and compassion.

It is predictable because belief in the Resurrection is a conviction that challenges and, indeed, undermines the basic assumptions of much of modern thought since the Enlightenment, particularly the notion that what is 'truth' is only that which can be observed and measured in the physical world. What is curious is that this rejection remains so vehement. One might have assumed that the centuries of Enlightenment rationalism and materialist reductionism would have eradicated this extraordinary belief long ago. But, if you will allow the metaphor, Jesus keeps Rising again and again.

Theologically, the Resurrection is incomprehensible outside of the context of Jesus' self-sacrificing love, a love that heals and sanctifies. The Resurrection most clearly relates to the Revelation of the Cross and Jesus' promise to his disciples that He will be with and in them always.

The disputations as to the 'meaning' of the Resurrection continue to this day, and there is no reason to think that they will – or should – ever end.

Catholic scholars, often impressive, are inclined to make insightful intellectual or historical arguments as to the profound significance of the Resurrection for all humanity, but I find myself more in agreement with those who conclude that there is inadequate evidence to provide any final judgment as to what 'really happened' on Easter. Again, this is the limited 'reality' of facticity, elucidated and yet walled in by human reason.

Nonetheless, Christian faith isn't simply a matter of trust -- though, bottom-line, it may come down to that. One's judgment should also be rational and seek context and 'the whole picture.' We should consider the history of the faith and the lives of those who testified to the Resurrection. And ultimately it is the whole of our own lives and experiences, including faith and reason, that determine our beliefs.

What makes the Resurrection such a powerful vision and such a challenging question for believers and skeptics alike, is that it points to either eternal life or, on the other hand, the possibility of meaningless extinction. No one has neutral feelings on such matters.

Yet the idea of 'eternal life' is another mystery. Christians recognize that eternity is not merely endless time; there would be little comfort in that. Eternity is outside of our concept of time and thus beyond our imagination or speculations. Eternity is approachable only through metaphor. It is perhaps something like the paradoxical experience of an 'endless moment.' Even if we have had such experiences, we can never find words to describe them.

Eternity is the anticipated state of utter perfection and fulfillment, the completion and purification of all that has been and was meant to be. Anticipating 'eternal life' is then looking forward to one's perfect integration and indwelling in God. Through our union with God, we are joined in mutual perfection with everyone whom we have ever known and loved. These words may inspire hope. They do for me. But they can never be subject to 'proof'; they are, at best, a kind of poetry, the human language that best expresses the ineffable.

For Christians, the Resurrection is not a hypothesis. Like God, it is a reality, as real and yet incomprehensible as death itself. This is ultimately revealed to us as a gift of Grace as well as a profound experience. For me, personally, the experience of otherwise inexpressible beauty in music and nature is a revealed truth that is then confirmed by the lives and sacrifices of the saints, the holy men and women throughout time. These witnesses affirm the endless renewal of love and hope and the miracle of forgiveness. In this very real sense, we are not merely 'believers' in the Resurrection, *we are the Resurrection*, lived out each day in love of God and each other.

For any artist, in any medium, form or time, to be able to express even a hint of this miracle will perhaps be a miracle as well, a gift we will all share.

Some Conclusions

My conclusions concentrate on a few basic questions: What criteria must we establish for ourselves as Catholic artists? What is the content that will and must shape our forms? And how are we to create the community that we will need to do our work? I admit that I again leave you with more questions than answers.

The Search for Catholic Criteria

In making a critical judgment, artists and critics alike will stress different aspects of an art work, including its historical and social significance or its continuity within a tradition. However, in considering specific Catholic criteria, we are looking to evaluate work that relates most directly to our love of God through Christ. But does this really offer us any artistic guidance? If not, why bother, in strictly artistic terms, being 'Catholic' or even 'Christian'?

Let me clarify my vocabulary: In referring to 'Catholic' rather than 'Christian' criteria, I'm merely acknowledging that my assumptions may or may not correspond to the theology of other denominations. I'm not seeking a parochial art; if what we seek is both artful and truthful, then it is truly universal, and, in that other sense of the word, genuinely 'catholic.'

Moreover, in suggesting that we explore explicitly Catholic criteria, I'm not looking for -- nor would I welcome -- rigid categories for judging art and literature. Criticism should

serve art, not the other way around. The criteria we should seek are not just for critical purposes, however, but should provide a direction, even inspiration, for the work of the next generation.

In initiating our search for a means of evaluating media art, we might note that fine art itself has always implied criteria in the past just as did spoken language, which included being tested by time and universality, fuller expressive power with greater range and levels of meaning. Art was 'beautiful' because it rejected indulgence through conforming to certain formal demands and disciplines. However, even such words as 'beauty' and 'form,' much less 'discipline,' have recently fallen under suspicion.

We should recognize that in re-affirming traditional concepts such as 'truth' and 'beauty,' we are bucking the tide of contemporary attitudes, perhaps even reversing an historical direction. Whether judging poetry, fiction, paintings or films, the common standard of judgment in contemporary American society is now comparable to what Alasdair Macintyre analyzed in the 1970s as the operative guide of our moral decisions. Both our aesthetic and moral judgments are now based on "emotivism," that is, the intuitive emotional reaction to the work or behavior. This is primarily if not a wholly subjective viewpoint, even though the once-common vocabulary of the past may still be loosely employed. We still speak of 'good' and 'bad' without any certainty as to what these words mean to others.

What has made us so uncomfortable about even posing these questions? What has caused our spiritual 'stutter' or 'muteness'? Isn't it to a great extent the inescapable result of trying to adapt to the broader cultural climate change, the dampening, melt-down effects of the pervasive relativism and subjectivity that now substitutes for judgment? I think we need to put ourselves into this picture.

We are now engulfed in a world of "entertainment," as Neil Postman and others predicted decades ago. Even the offerings of the most sincere "believer" in the media marketplace have become products to be promoted or just another diversion from reality. I can tell you from long experience that one can't live in that 'world of entertainment' and not have it affect your thinking. No authentic "belief" converts into propaganda, much less a commodity, and remains authentic . Catholics cannot avoid this debilitating contemporary context.

Let us take a clear stand. There can be no lasting criteria for art or anything else without integration and authority. As Eliot observed, art, faith, and culture are what 'we aspire to more than merely possess.' Culture is not an accumulation of precious objects or based on habitual behaviors; it is an integrated way of life. One might say that we lost our culture when we needed to analyze it. Culture, indeed, civilization then became an abstraction. Modernity destroyed culture by gradually eliminating the legitimate authority of accomplishment, replacing it with the acquisition of wealth and power.

This dissolution of culture, turning society into a marketplace, took a long time. The original 'forms' of ancient literature were oral – poets as bards – and sponsored by elites. Books were few and precious. This limited literacy lasted until the industrial revolution when the mass distribution of books became possible. We can and should celebrate this extension of literacy and increased access to the arts, while noting, however, the gradual shift in standards of evaluation. Over time, the test of a book or art work rested less on taste and judgment, but on profit. Mammon became art's king and arbiter.

Mammon remains on the throne of popular culture and, as we are told, "You cannot serve God and mammon."

Perhaps the deepest and most defining conflict regarding the valuation of art concerns the nature of hope. Christian hope is based on faith understood as a form of revelation, a "gift" from God that some of us accept but which others may and do not. This is another tension point with contemporary society, for in asserting our understanding of hope, we, inevitably, challenge the contemporary world with its faltering notions of a hope based on human self-sufficiency.

It is in this context that we must seek our own criteria.This is not a resolvable 'argument'; our hope will become a gift to others only through our work and lives.

If there are outstanding Catholic writers and artists – and undoubtedly there are – how would we know?

By what standards would they be judged? Certainly the 'mainstream' criteria of popular and commercial success would provide little help, only publicity at best. Nor can our work be evaluated as 'effective' evangelization or by judging who is more overt or more subtle in evoking faith. Is there any definite basis of judgment? Should there be?

The distinguished poet, Dana Gioia offers several criteria for recognizing Catholic poetry beyond the mere fact of it having been written by Catholics. I see the most salient point as the recognition of a world-view that accepts and embraces humanity's pilgrimage through a fallen world, the vision offered by our most distinguished literary predecessors, from Dante to Eliot. Beyond creed and theology, there is also a sense of Mystery and the acceptance of the redemptive nature of suffering.

I would suggest that this last attitude – the affirmation of suffering as essential to our self-understanding – will increasingly isolate the Christian artist from the emerging technological society of the future. Whatever its benefits, technology has no place nor tolerance for suffering.

In considering aesthetic criteria, then, we are not just demarking degrees of craft and skill, but evaluating the relationship of substantial content and significant form. The content is not "subject matter," which, as Gioia notes, will vary widely among all artists and writers, but refers to a deeper understanding of the human person, and then, through the eyes of faith, seeks something more, aspiring to work variously designated as religious, sacred, or transcendent.

We have Christological foundations to guide us as well. As Gregory Wolfe, the publisher of the *Image Quarterly* and heroic champion of the arts, has pointed out, 'the artist begins empty,' in perhaps an unconscious imitation of Christ's *kenosis*, or 'self-emptying.' In this regard, Gil Bailie speaks of 'iconic mediation,' which ideally should inspire our imitation of Christ as the 'icon of the living God.' Gil recognizes that the actor – that is, the good actor – 'loses himself' in his role and thus 'finds himself' on a deeper and more universal level of being. This, I hardly need to point out, is in stark contrast to the actor who works to promote an idolatrous celebrity persona.

As I stated at the outset of this inquiry, I have not sought to assemble a rule book or even a precise categorization of the criteria we seek. But our tradition and experience points, I believe, in the direction of an integration of the classic virtues that once characterized art with deeper religious principles. The Catholic concept of art directly challenges contemporary attitudes by incorporating both truth and virtue into the concept of beauty.
Besides, as a friend of mine, a poet, has remarked: "Only goodness is interesting."

All of the elements we should consider – a time-tested universality, a unity in complexity, recognition of limits and an aspiration for transcendence – must then find the right level of formal expressivity. In its completion, our work must reveal that art incorporates a truth that lies beyond rationality, and a beauty that is 'the splendor of truth.'

It is this integrated view that makes calling art a 'truth statement' meaningful. It is 'truthful' because it faces and describes what is most real in life. It is 'good' because the ultimate objective of art as with the liturgy is not an aesthetic experience but our redemption. In short, it is the full integration of truth and goodness that produces beauty, or, better, the profound experience of beauty.

An evocative description of the nature of art and beauty comes from Romano Guardini who, in fact, isn't describing art but the experience of the liturgy, which, of course, incorporates art.

Guardini is so eloquent in describing this experience that he is worth quoting directly: *"The degree of perception varies according to our aesthetic sensitivity. Perhaps it will merely be a pleasant feeling of which we are not even particularly conscious of the profound appropriateness of both language and actions..."* or, in contrast, the experience may be akin to a kind of revelation in which *"from out of the vanishing mist the peaks and summits and slopes of a mountain range stand out in relief shining and clear so that we imagine that we are seeing them for the first time."*

There is yet another description of this experience offered centuries earlier by Saint Teresa of Avila in which art penetrates us with the divine 'arrow of love':

The arrow he drew
Full of love
My soul was oned
With her Creator.

Other love I want not,
Surrendered now to my God,
That my beloved is for me,
And I am for my Beloved.

On Creating Community

I have suggested throughout this book that to do the work we are called to do as filmmakers of faith we need to create a community that will sustain our collaborative work. Let's examine this challenge.

I want to first correct a common impression, if not prejudice, that creating or living in a community is a utopian – that is to say, unrealistic – vision.
This is a typical late modern distortion of reality. For millennia human beings lived in organic stable communities. It wasn't until the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century forced people off the land and villages into huge metropolitan areas, often slums, that communities were destroyed. Even then the human inclination to 'commune' with others persisted in local neighborhoods.

While I have not lived in an established religious community, I have observed some over the years, including the Focolare and the Dominicans. Both groups have been inspirations for my work and life.
I am also old enough to have experienced both genuine rural communities and close-knit neighborhoods. So to consider the creation of a community to be some form of hopeless idealism is simply to ignore history as well as to indulge in bad anthropology.

The post-modern alienated 'individual' may shy away from the demands of community – which can at times be severe and unpleasant – but this is a choice. To live in the pseudo-

individualistic quasi-freedom of what is in fact urban mass conformity may be your choice but it is not your fate.

When we speak out of experience of 'natural' or 'organic' community, we are recognizing that it is social isolation that is 'unnatural'. However, to break down the walls created by the megapolis will be no small matter. We must be willing, above all, to make sacrifices. We must recognize that the social wilderness we have entered is not a refuge but a place of preparation. I believe that many of us largely agree that this means building communities; but what do we need to create a living faith community and where do we start?

First, how might we characterize a community?

Cardinal Robert Sarah's description of his childhood in an African animist village points to some essential aspects of past traditional communities that we might want to emulate. We are all rooted in our 'ancestry,' however distant and amorphous, which in the past was sustained in various forms of generational bonding. This communal inheritance can be meaningfully renewed in rites of initiation and passage at the time of births and funerals. This re-invigoration will require imagination rooted in faith.

We need a community to be 'apprenticed' to the fullness of life. All this seems universal and essential to a communal life, yet I believe appears most concretely manifested in the rites and traditions of the great religions and particularly the Catholic Church.

However, we have much to learn also from the many secular, political, and utopian communal efforts of the last century, though, sadly, more from their failures than successes. These included non-conformist religious communes, the early Israeli kibbutzim, the anarchist efforts to organize the poor as well as communities formed around charismatic individuals. All of these were desperate efforts to resist or overcome the fragmenting, leveling effects of nineteenth century industrialization. Few, as we have noted, succeeded. Why?

What we learn is that the more secular (at times even anti-religious) efforts were the most fragile and short-lived. George Woodcock, an ardent anarchist, summed up the results of these pre-war experiments in 1947. Most of these incipient communities had rejected any form of 'external authority' as well as private property and displayed a 'missionary zeal' in seeking converts. However, they were plagued by many common problems, including economic and financial ones, but also impatience, inexperience, and isolation. Personal conflicts, including sexual competition, led to dissent and dissolution. What seemed a key to an occasional success was primarily a devotion to a particular common work as an end in itself.

This last insight relates to our own aspirations as I am positing that our work as artists will be largely collaborative. Again, this is not a wisp of idealistic hope. We can see the value and results of collaboration through the history of films even in our competitive free-market societies. We can cite many examples, such as Jean Renoir's long collaboration with his brother, Claude, his

cinematographer, and several actors as well including Jean Gabin and Dalio. Ironically, even 'Hollywood' began as a community.

Krzysztof Kieslowski's collaboration was perhaps even more profound as he acknowledges in his interviews. The 'other Krzysztof' that is, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, though credited, was in fact neither a filmmaker nor a writer but a kind of spiritual companion who made significant contributions to Kiewslowski's conceptual thought as well as practical suggestions. We should also note the invaluable contribution to Kieslowski's films by composer Zbigniew Preisner, one of many composers whose music was essential in defining the style and feel of good films.

In truth, throughout film history it would be more difficult to find a non-collaborative filmmaker than one who gratefully acknowledged his profound debt to others.

At the heart of these collaborations was friendship and a deep mutual respect and this is where our community building must begin. It is a mistake to think that a community has any other foundation – no land, buildings or funding will suffice without a nucleus of established and tested relationships.

Clearly, we must begin with the recognition that creating community can be arduous and even risky. Jean Vanier, founder of the long-lasting L'Arche movement, speaks of two contradictory aspects of Christian community: the first is to increasingly bond in love and mercy through Christ but the other is to help others to transcend and move on. A

community should not become a 'safe haven' or a form of escape or exclusion. We should acknowledge the burdens of ordinary daily communal life. We should not strive to be "heroic" in our self-sacrifice or we will burn out.

As Gabriel Meyer and James Jones observe in *Living the Gospels as a Way of Life*, reflecting on their years of communal experience, a Christian community is created by God's initiative and thus is both a form of 'belonging' and 'estrangement.' It provides valuable encouragement and support, but also reminds us that our ultimate destiny is not 'of this world.' We should also note the necessity for the community to respect the individual, including the need at times for solitude. It is a pseudo-community that is held together by regulations and conformity.

Chiara Lubich, the blessed founder of the international Focolare Movement stressed the compassion of the Crucified Christ as the foundation of community. An imaginative innovator, she also pioneered a cooperative form of business enterprise based on spiritual principles yet utilizing market forces.

We must learn from all of these prophetic figures and from the experience of those directly involved in community building that what we will need is 'small steps and great prayer.'

Perhaps the most evident place to start a community is within the Church. A profound mystical unity defines the nature of the Catholic Church and it is through the Church that Christ integrates us throughout time into Himself as the

Visible Body of Christ. Theologian Karl Adam describes the Church as a pre-existing 'cosmos of humanity,' a one-ness revealed and sustained by Christ. We are thus not creating a communal unity but revealing it, uncovering the hidden Incarnation.

Community is authentic when it is transformative through self-sacrifice and recognizes a purpose beyond itself. Mercy and healing are its defining characteristics. This also opens it up to others.
We must follow the example of the missionaries. 'Under the Cross we must instruct the children about the Mysteries of the faith'! Again, this can only happen within the Church. We are not alone!

There is a spiritual frontier to community just as there is in our faith itself. For Christians, a community is meant to be a means to 'commune.' This means sharing God's call to us with others and understanding it more fully. The abundance of Grace which God provides is also meant to be shared. This allows us to offer intercessory prayers and makes the community itself a redemptive force. Most important, in community we share the 'power of suffering' which, together with Christ and Mary – and each other – we are then able to transform suffering into mercy. Community does not isolate us or separate us from others. In a genuine spiritual community, rooted in silent prayer, we share Grace with the living and the dead, beyond time and space.

For all the admitted difficulties and risks, I find this communal horizon exciting and filled with possibilities. The hour is coming and is now here! (John 4:23).

An Art of the Beatitudes

"Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."

"Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall have their fill."

"Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy."

"Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God."

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the Sons of God."

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

As Christians we are all called as followers of Jesus to be both peacemakers and spiritually poor. How might these Beatitudes relate not just to the questions of violence and social justice, but to our artistic practices? Pope Francis' vision of a Church of the poor suggests that the Beatitudes point to a way of life. Might not this suggest an aesthetic direction as well? I am convinced that this is the path we must explore if we are to overcome the isolation and alienation of the contemporary artist. This suggests a summons to community and a common way of life.

The first Beatitude, significantly, is the 'blessing' of poverty and I believe that this may be the foundation of much of our work.

We are sometimes tempted to interpret this blessing as indicating only the 'spiritual' aspect of life, but I fear this is an evasion. Saint Francis praised the bounty of Lady Poverty who clearly inspired him and guided his followers' way of life, which was materially poor and thus spiritually rich. We must avoid a dualistic interpretation that reduces Jesus' message to either   spiritual discipline, however valuable, or to social activism, however just.

I have lived in direct contact with poverty in all of its forms for most of my life – including growing up in a poor family during the Great Depression, and then through many years as a social worker and prison chaplain. I have witnessed the effects of poverty in prisons and among 'street people,' many very young, for decades. So I'm not inclined to romanticize poverty.

It is this direct personal experience that is the basis of my conviction that only a faith-based hope supported by a living community can overcome poverty, material or spiritual, old or new. To be materially poor is to be without essential goods and services, a hardship to be certain, but, more significantly, poverty can also mean being deprived of sustained basic relationships. This, I'm convinced from my own life, is the most destructive aspect of poverty and it cannot be addressed simply in economic terms. Without some faith in something or someone beyond ourselves,

material poverty degenerates into a deeper inner poverty leading to despair and self-destructiveness. On the other hand, material poverty in a spiritually rich context can reveal and strengthen our dependency on God.

Americans, in particular, should re-consider our underlying assumptions and re-examine the very concept, nature, and meaning of poverty. We must also re-examine what we mean by 'the poor' as we re-imagine a new social order. I admit that this is a radical vision with inescapably political dimensions, but it is not a political proposal which is premature. Imagination must accompany critical thought and both precede action.

Lady Poverty, in the spirit of Saint Francis -- and Jesus' teachings – is a blessing because she strips away pride and our now addictive obsession with power. Lady Poverty affirms the blessings of the poor who find power in their powerlessness. She inspires meekness and generates righteousness. Only Lady Poverty unites mercy with justice.

The Beatitudes teach us that we must respond to violence in all its forms, not merely by protest and indignation, but by offering alternatives through the way we live. The isolation of the contemporary artist or, conversely, the seduction of 'success' seem not only obstacles to shared faith and values but, finally, to artistic creation itself.

An art of the Beatitudes would be open to the needs of others as clarified by living experience not merely sympathy. We will be peacemakers only by being at peace and then perhaps offering testimony and example.

I'm further convinced that a radical commitment to peace and the poor can create the community we seek because it has happened many times before. We have several traditions upon which to draw inspiration.

Dominican spirituality offers an 'embodied' faith, merging contemplation and action. I find Chiara Lubich's spirituality also fundamental for faith communities in that it is based on a hope that arises out of suffering, our own and that of others. As Chiara understood, community and the Cross are inseparable.

If the Beatitudes are to be a basis of art as well as community, we might remember that, as Father Gerald Vann OP has described them, they are a form of 'spiritual ascending.' If we are set free from possessing things, then we must seek to be free from the need to possess others, and, finally, onward to freedom's final frontier: the complete surrender to God.

This, of course, is where we end in every sense.

At the outset of this pilgrimage, I asked you to join me in a leap of faith. We are and will remain pilgrims in unknown territory for some time to come but as with the Children of Israel we know that there is a promised land. We know that this leap is into the loving arms of our Father. So I hope you will forgive my not being able to answer your most pressing questions and simply join me in the exhilaration of being in mid-air.

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