

The Spiritual Imagination

What do we mean by a 'spiritual imagination'? It is the recognition of the dimension of a creative imagination that opens us up to mystery and 'points upward', so to speak, to a greater reality. It is the dynamic element that makes works of art not only true and beautiful but transcendent.

If one accepts the reality of this non-rational aspect of creativity then this is an inquiry that raises important questions for not just a religious person but any artist open to mystery.

For the religious artist this form of imagination is clearly of essential

value and so if lost or missing how might we recover it?

Christian artists are 'Church artists' in the sense that 'Church' is more than an institution or affiliation. We are called to serve a community and particularly the faithful. But how do we use art to serve others? To respond to this challenge also requires a special imagination.

Art in this respect is not education, however beneficial, nor is it the promotion of or 'advertising for the good'. As the Church, we are the people who help each other to imitate Christ and to do so we seek a spiritual dimension in all of life. In art we seek

'signs of the invisible' within the visible world.

To do this, to even make the effort, we will need community which means not just mutual support but order and authority; we need a source of faith that is deeper than conviction and sincere emotion. As Christians we must also recognize the need for humility. Our goal is 'to know what you don't know and why you don't know it'. However, we should acknowledge, as Madeleine Delbrel wrote. 'to be saved you must know you are lost!'

So the challenge of finding and employing a 'spiritual imagination' suggests a form of redemption. This

seems particularly true in this endless 'age of anxiety'. We must be aware of the double-effects of this period of deepening alienation: on the one hand 'impotent rage' and on the other a silent sleep-inducing conformity.

Our obligation is also to others, even those, or perhaps especially those who deny and denigrate our faith. A once-triumphant secular liberalism is being destroyed by its contradictions – the most fundamental being the irresolvable conflict between pseudo-scientific forms of determinism and the claim to the 'right' to an absolute freedom of personal choice.

The secularists who rejected traditional religion have now lost their own faith in objectivity and self-determination; they are now 'non-believers' dancing in the empty space of relativism. To preserve what is left of their 'order' they now vigorously attempt to impose the arbitrary on us.

My contention is that we have entered a new historical period which is characterized by a spiritual vacuum. This was anticipated by several prophetic figures including Walker Percy who in 1979 cautioned us that we were entering 'the No Name New Age'. A generation earlier diverse figures such as historians Toynbee, Dawson and Arendt, poets Yeats and Eliot and, most prophetic, religious

figures such as Romano Guardini had anticipated the end of the modern age. Loosely defined, this was a remarkable two-hundred year era with roots in the Enlightenment. Its advocates believed that human beings were self-sufficient or meant to be. This new modern enlightenment based on reason and science disintegrated in the fires of the first half of the twentieth century, conflagrations still smoldering.

This cultural decline became evident only later in America, concealed by our triumph in war and technology. But gradually the loss of belief in the modern tenets of progress and rationality has not only caused a diminishing of hope but robbed us of

artistic criteria and expressive language. Our first task as artists then is to use our spiritual imagination and discipline to recover a language that can more fully express our faith and love of God.

The challenge facing dramatists is formidable. Our goal is to allow characters to express their deepest thoughts and feelings in a distinct manner consistent with their life and character. But we can seldom use the vernacular at least in America. It has been degraded and largely emptied of significance by the mass media and technology. Redeeming the Word of God will mean redeeming our own language.

As dramatists we need a 'new dialogue' beyond verisimilitude. We must transcend the colloquial.

In the past talented playwrights such as O'Neill, Odets, Williams and African American writers were able to use a local idiom or colloquial speech expressively.

As a screenwriter I employed the language of vocational and marginal subgroups such as street hustlers, pickpockets, cops and long-distant truckers as the basis of characterization. Again the speech wasn't as 'real' or natural as it was stylized. However, the danger of using contemporary slang especially that of the young, often artificial to begin with, is that slang dates so quickly.

For writers in the media or theatrical arts to recover an expressive language I see three possible paths – poetry, music and comedy.

By poetry I don't mean simply 'elevated' language but symbols and words that express our deepest feeling though not always in fully coherent sentences. The 'poetry' of film art is primarily visual so some new merging of word and image might be explored.

I believe music remains the most expressive and essential art form. Music has always revealed something deeper within us and yet fundamentally human and natural.

Many forms of film art employing music as the primary voice are open to us.

By comedy I mean the use of physical action more than words to expose our humanity, including our absurd pretensions. Much of comedy, however, tends to be provincial and time-limited, nonetheless there is a great legacy of film comedy to be explored and possibly be renewed.

All of these art forms need to be integrated and this process in turn may create a new form of filmmaking.

Basic to my assumptions is also a change of relationships with the viewers. (I even avoid the word

audience although it only means listeners.) I posit a far more communal relationship than presently exists in the marketplace society.

Time itself is yet another frontier for us. As we learn from Christian poets and as implied in music, the ultimate meaning of time is not found in mere chronology, or in past, future or present but in the conjunction of all three. As artists before us we are challenged to find the 'timeless in the moment.' The experience of time also opens us up to our tradition. As Eliot observed 'the past is 'beyond our words' and 'our dead live in us'.

An imagining of time with a spiritual dimension can change our concepts of

story structure and continuity as indeed it has in the past. 'The end is often the beginning' and the past is altered by the present.

The spiritual imagination is also challenged to find Christ in the stranger. This can be the isolated stranger in the midst of the urban desert. This is Christ 'passing by'. This recognition is more than an expression of charity. It is another witnessing of mystery that we must interpret as best we can.

For instance, we must imagine the inner life of those who oppose and even claim to hate us and we must do so with compassion and courage.

In contemplating the 'strangers' before us if we can overcome our own fear and resentments we will see that we and they are no longer in an age of lapsed religion; this is an age of 'lapsed atheism' created by the modern failure to find substitutes for faith and tradition. This is an age of 'impotent rage'.

If we are able to grasp what is really happening then our response should be to give praise to God! We are not living any longer in an age of failed religious belief. That occurred in the 19th and 20th century. We are now living in the spiritual vacuum created by the failure of the idols of human autonomy and unlimited rationalism;

they have fallen as did the gods of pagan Rome.

This vacuum has produced despair but also a desire for an absolute (though meaningless) freedom. This is the last idol left and though tottering worthy of some respect. The American ideal of freedom or liberty had its origins more in Christian theology than Greek idealism.

Let us then be even 'more free' than anyone else. This is consistent with our recognition of the gift of free will. We must balance this freedom with recognition of our fallen condition and our severe limits – and this balance makes us more truly free.

The nature of human sexuality may be the major challenge for a Christian imagination. However, any spiritual inquiry into sexuality, including notions of sexual liberation, must begin with an understanding of nature. Romano Guardini teaches us that 'real culture' requires an 'elevation above nature' and yet remains natural. This means that we must master nature yet remain unified in body and soul. This is essential if we are not to succumb to the dualism inherent in these modern concepts of 'liberation' which, characteristic of late modern ideologies, attempt to avoid contradiction by falling into reductive materialism or extreme 'anti-body' Idealism.

We are secure in the truth of our faith tradition – and not just by belief but by the evidence of the sexual disaffection now before us – but we must also incorporate the more diverse aspects of sexuality that have also been observed. The most radical choices to be made have to do with all of our relationships.

Memory, tradition and history are our means of liberation from both the past and future. Memory is essential to sustain and recover our tradition and yet this as with the creation of community is also an act of conscious will. It won't happen by itself.

Again we will need a spiritual imagination to conceive of what new

personal and communal relationships are now needed and how they might be formed. We must not confuse tradition with fixity or stability with immobility. We must work to deserve our tradition, and as Eliot observed, 'better novelty than repetition.'

Ultimately memory reveals transfiguration. It is the task of the Christian artist to reveal and preserve those 'moments' in our lives which are illuminating and offer a 'taste of eternity.'

I have suggested that we are living in a transitional period with no clear direction. We cannot nor are we meant to escape the inevitable fears and anxieties this condition produces.

It is also the material with which we must work. Yet if we embrace the true 'freedom of choice' by choosing to live an uncompromised Christian way of life we will be defining the real meaning of 'liberation'.

In the meantime, be prepared for surprises!

This essay is based on a presentation given to the Act One in Hollywood program in June, 2017.
