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Poetry is the best theology

Michael Leach | Mar. 25, 2014 Soul Seeing

When I was in the seminary, our English teacher, Fr. Ignatius Burrill, introduced us to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. I'll always remember these lines from "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is --
Christ -- for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

When I was at home that summer, I glimpsed Christ on Clark Street. I was walking down the street toward our apartment near Wrigley Field and passed a down-and-out man leaning against a wall and drinking from a bottle in a paper bag. I recalled my friend Larry McCauley telling me about a church nearby with a crucified Jesus etched in stone on the wall. A legend under the cross read, "Is it nothing to you who pass by?" I realized that the man on the street and the man on the cross were one.

I didn't know it then, but Burrill and McCauley had taught me that poetry is the best theology.

Poetry evokes what is good, beautiful and true. It imagines the unimaginable, describes the indefinable, and unveils what our senses cannot know or our intellect figure out. Poetry is theology leaping out of the file cabinet and into the heart. It is the Word or words that stir our souls.

And, paradoxically, you don't have to put words to paper to be a poet. Jesus never wrote a poem. The only words he ever wrote were on the sand. And the rain washed those away. His life was poetry. He was the Word made flesh.

A poet is a poet because, like Jesus, she sees what is really there. Jesus saw goodness in the adulteress, wholeness in the leper, forgiveness in the thief on the cross. He even beheld innocence behind the masks of those who taunted, scourged and crucified him. Jesus acted in God's eye what in God's eye he was. When asked who he was and how he healed, Jesus told his disciples, "Come and see."

A poet is a seer who cultivates the Christ-like faculty of looking at what is temporal and discerning what is eternal. As Jesus saw splendor in the lilies of the field, the poet, too, perceives power in everyday places. Poet William Carlos Williams understood that everything depends on "a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens."

A poet also divines the divine in the most unlikely places. J.D. Salinger's alter ego Buddy Glass talked about his poet brother Seymour who "had a distracting habit, most of his adult life, of investigating loaded ashtrays with his index finger, clearing all the cigarette ends to the sides -- smiling from ear to ear as he did it -- as if he expected to see Christ himself curled up cherubically in the middle, and he never looked disappointed."

It was Buddy who urged his sister Franny, an aspiring actress, to "act for God," and brought her back from the brink of a breakdown by reminding her always to act for the Fat Lady in the back row, assuring her: "There isn't anyone anywhere who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. Don't you know that? Don't you know that goddam secret yet? And don't you know -- listen to me, now -- don't you know who that Fat Lady really is? ... Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy."

Jesus put it straight: "I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I tell you the truth, whenever you did this to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me."

That is poetry. That is theology. That is real.

The poet sees: Christ on Clark Street; Christ in the back row; Christ nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet. "What is essential," wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, "is invisible to the eye." Jesus invites us: "Come and see."

[Michael Leach is the editor of many books, most recently, with Doris Goodnough and Maryknoll Sr. Helen Phillips, of the anthology *A Maryknoll Book of Poetry: Beauty, Truth, and Goodness from Around the World*.]

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