

ABOUT:

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Received a Bachelor of Arts in History from Stanford University in 1990, graduating *cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa. After college, he worked as a high school history teacher, drama director and baseball coach. He spent a year as a professional actor in Chicago before entering the Legionaries of Christ, a religious organization, in 1993. He has since received degrees in philosophy and theology, worked in youth and college ministries, and was ordained a Catholic priest in 2003. He is currently studying for an advanced degree in moral theology in Rome, where he now resides.

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“Straight Talk About

... ART”

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From the COMPASS “Treasure Chest”:

Straight Talk About... Art

by Fr. John Bartunek, LC

The Magic of Art

The Columbian Cardinal Dario Castrillón-Hoyos, prefect for the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy in the first years of the Third Millennium, did not grow up a big movie fan. In fact, when movie-star and filmmaker Mel Gibson invited him to a private screening of “The Passion,” while the final version of that groundbreaking film was still being edited, the Cardinal didn’t even know who Mel Gibson was. But he attended the screening anyway. And he was glad he did. In a newspaper interview afterwards he explained why. “Seeing this film provokes love in your heart, and compassion. It makes you want to love more, to forgive, to be good and strong no matter what, just as Christ was good and strong even in the face of such terrible suffering.”

That’s what art does best: stir up the noblest aspirations human spirit. Great art awakens noble thoughts and desires; it lifts the soul out of the routine and the clutter of daily life and puts it in contact with transcendent values, reminding the human heart of its own vocation to transcendence, to the life of the spirit, to communion with God. It doesn’t necessarily increase this communion – that takes God’s grace and each person’s free decision – but it points to it, it makes the invisible excellence of spiritual maturity visible, so that it has a chance to exert its full force of attraction and provoke a renewed commitment to living a virtuous, meaningful life.

That’s the genius of great art. And that’s what we mean when we say

that great art is inspiring. It breathes new life into our noble desires; it jumpstarts our yearning for spiritual greatness. Such is the power of art, and such is why Christians have always been such great artists and promoters and appreciators of art.

How Art Works Its Magic

But how does it achieve such a remarkable thing? Where does it get its power? Human nature gives us a clue. Angels are pure spirit, animals are pure material, but people are both: spirit-in-material, materialized spirits. Because of this unique structure people need material intermediaries in order to come into contact with spiritual things like love, truth, and loyalty, the only things that can satisfy the human desire for meaning.

The Catechism puts it succinctly: “...As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols...” (CCC #1146) This happens in every realm of life, not just in art, and these signs and symbols take thousands of forms: a mother’s kiss, a birthday cake, a hug, a wedding ring, a wave goodbye, a lighted candle in a Chapel, a tombstone.

Within this realm of expressing and perceiving spiritual realities through physical signs art takes a privileged place. Artists have received a special, two-pronged vocation: first, they are able to perceive the hidden splendor of spiritual things with extraordinary clarity; and second, they are able to express their perception in such a

way that others too can perceive more clearly that hidden splendor. Ultimately, the “hidden splendor” of spiritual things is nothing less than a glimpse of the infinite splendor of God himself, which the Bible often refers to as God’s “glory,” his unique kind of goodness. In this sense, every great work of art is a mini-incarnation. Jesus Christ made the infinite splendor of the invisible God visible, touchable, live-with-able. Every great work of art continues, in a limited fashion, that same process, making some hidden aspect of God’s glory perceptible in a new way.

The work of art that does this successfully is what we call beautiful, and it is the goal of the artistic vocation to make beautiful works of art. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in his Letter to Artists for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, “Beauty is the visible form of the good... The artist has a special relationship to beauty. In a very true sense it can be said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of ‘artistic talent’” (#3).

This special relationship with beauty gives art its power. The human soul naturally longs for communion with God, and God is pure, overflowing, infinite goodness. Beauty is that goodness made visible, or hearable, or watch-able. Nature makes some of it visible, which is why the Scriptures are so full of references to the wonders of the natural world when it praises and blesses God. It is also why a beautiful sunset can move the human spirit as much as a beautiful song. But since God’s goodness is boundless, nature cannot exhaust the possibilities of beauty. Artists take up the baton, using their special gifts of expression, developed through training and hard work, to communicate their privileged vision of God’s goodness (although they may not always realize that this is what they are doing). In encountering a great work of art, therefore, the soul comes into contact with its own destiny and is drawn towards the God whom it was made to love, just as the needle of a compass is drawn towards the magnetic north pole. Thus great art

stimulates all that is great in the human soul; it makes you feel more alive, it fills you with joy at existing and with hope for an even fuller existence, because it opens a chink in the wall separating time and eternity, and gives you a glimpse into what John Paul II has called “the inscrutable secret of human existence, of man’s origin and destiny, of the meaning of his life and work... of the greatness of man.”

Great art is like a love letter scented with God’s perfume, a letter from mankind’s true homeland. A soldier on the front lines feels his heart burn with new courage and purpose when he holds in his battle-worn hands a letter from his loved ones back home; we too are filled with hope and enthusiasm when a great work of art reminds us that the struggle of life is worthwhile, when it whispers to our soul the secret that we are part of a grand, glorious, and eternally meaningful adventure.

The Snob Factor

Because this experience is linked to sensory perception, however, it can’t last very long. The senses are in a constant state of flux; bodily existence – especially in a fallen world – creates interference with their powers of perception, making intense moments of aesthetic perception fleeting. But for this same reason, aesthetic sensitivity can be developed; the senses can be trained to perceive beauty more easily and profoundly, increasing one’s capacity to appreciate great painting, music, literature, and theatre. A class on art appreciation, a bit of reading, a few conversations with someone in the know is enough to get started. Once you find the medium and style that appeals most to you personally, you can mix trips to the sculpture garden or the film festival or the music library into your normal entertainment activities, and you will soon be enjoying and spreading the unique benefits of artistic achievement.

There is a danger to watch out for in this process, however: snobbery. Artistic snobs have trained their senses

to appreciate beautiful art, but they have forgotten why it’s worth appreciating. Instead of letting beauty propel them forward in their project of living a worthwhile life, they have made beauty itself into an idol. The beautiful form has become everything for them; the goodness that it communicates has been forgotten.

The Ugly Factor

The world of fine art also faces another danger. Sin has introduced evil and suffering into the human condition; it has alienated man from God, distancing the human heart from the truth. Because of this, it is possible to lose faith in transcendent values, to think that evil and suffering have emptied life of any lasting meaning, of the possibility of communion with a God who is infinitely good. There is a certain truth to this point of view. Sin does make eternal separation from God a real possibility. But that is only a partial truth. In spite of sin, of evil and the suffering it causes, the human heart still yearns for communion with God, and it does not yearn in vain, because God has overcome sin and evil through the Redemption wrought by Jesus Christ.

This dramatic struggle between good and evil appears in art under the form of ugliness and tragedy. Just as beauty is the visible form of the good, ugliness is the visible form of evil, and just as beauty draws the human heart, ugliness repels it. And because the world is, in fact, a battleground between good and evil, authentic art has to take the ugly and tragic into account. But when art is exclusively ugly, when it glorifies and presents chaos, despair, violence, disorder, and horror as the final word, it is presenting – either consciously or unconsciously – a lie. Sin is not the end of the story; salvation is. Thus, when art presents sin in its proper context – that of the redemption – even the ugly and the tragic can become beautiful. This is why even the terrible sufferings of our Lord, not at all beautiful in themselves, can be legitimate subjects of art; in the context of the Redemption, they become a visible expression of God’s mercy and love; they become beautiful.

The False Beauty Factor

There is also a third danger, beyond snobbery and the cult of ugliness: the danger of false beauty. Instead of stirring up what is noble in the soul and filling it with a desire to give, to love, and to pursue transcendent values, false beauty turns the soul back in on itself, stirring up destructive, selfish passions like lust, greed, and domination. False beauty often appears in advertising, for instance, or in soap operas, or music and music videos that stir up raw passions and exaggerated emotions. There the creativity of artists and their vocation to beauty is prostituted for merely commercial ends. Works of false beauty don't elevate the soul, they enslave it. They uproot sensual pleasure from its proper place within a balanced and meaningful human life and turn it into a kind of drug, suffocating the noble aspirations of the human heart.

Understanding these dangers helps discern good art from bad art: if it stirs noble desires, if, as Cardinal Castrillón-Hoyos said about Mel Gibson's "The Passion," it makes people want to "love more... to be good and strong no matter what" it is good art. Pope John Paul II put the same thought in different terms when he invited artists as well as non-artists to make room in their lives for contemplating and promoting great art, because that contemplation sparks existential enthusiasm, what the Holy Father calls "a deep desire to savor life and to dream of the future." (LA #16) If, on the other hand, when you truly come to understand a work of art and even then it breeds pessimism and makes the heart contract, or if it stirs up selfish, sinful desires, then it is betraying the beauty that it ought to serve.

A Rebirth of Enthusiasm

The power of stories, images, and melodies to ennoble or corrupt the human heart is not a new discovery. Already back in the fifth century BC Socrates used to say that he would prefer to rule over a society's music rather than its laws, since the music would have a bigger impact on the social welfare. Perhaps this same

insight inspired Pope John Paul II made a point of signing his Letter to Artists on Easter Sunday. In an age jaded by the frenzied pursuit of money, pleasure, and power, authentic spiritual enthusiasm is in short supply, but thanks to the artistic vocation it is a renewable resource – at least, it is for those who are willing to drop by the museum on their way home from the mall.

And that's some straight talk about... art.

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