



Catholic Imagination

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Saint Meinrad Studies in Pastoral Ministry No. 2

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Very Rev. Denis Robinson, OSB

Saint Meinrad Pastoral Studies Series

VERY REV. DENIS ROBINSON, OSB

For 150 years, Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology has striven to provide the highest quality education and formation for priests, permanent deacons and lay ministers for the life of the Church. This work has gone on because Saint Meinrad has always been convinced that the Church deserves the brightest, holiest and most ardent ministers for service to God's people.

Today more than ever, in a rapidly changing and expanding Church environment, the work of formation needs to find new and creative ways of raising up these ministers. The Saint Meinrad Pastoral Studies Series is intended to provide creative responses to critical pastoral issues in the life of today's Church.

The series features articles and reflections by Saint Meinrad faculty, staff and visiting lecturers on topics that touch the very heart of the Church's work in the 21st century. The series aims to reach those who are laboring diligently in these same ministries. Through these pages, we hope to provide some stimulus for critical thinking on important issues, as well as a source of intellectual and spiritual renewal for those dedicated to parish and diocesan life.

Introduction

BISHOP TIMOTHY L. DOHERTY

Any talk about one's mission must account for basic information. A simple illustration might help. Before mobile navigation devices, I was traveling in unfamiliar territory and looking for a place to mail a birthday card. I asked the clerk at a burger stand how to get to the nearest post office. Without hesitation, she asked: "From here?" It was instantly clear how this simple transaction might have overlooked cascading assumptions. I received wisdom and directions for the price of a cup of coffee.

In today's conversations about management or ministry, we plot present location, dispositions and resources as part of goal setting (discernment, if you will). Because of the communal nature of activity, we should account for similar information among individuals and groups. In fact, we do not start from scratch, but arrive equipped with references provided by reports, experience or varieties of vicarious knowledge. The last bit combines data alloyed with an understanding of how a manner of thinking reveals or obscures our facts. This is only one way of describing imagination, setting it apart from works of fantasy. Imagination helps to make information accessible and to construct ways of sharing it.

If I allow myself an assumption, it is that human beings have a shared capacity, more or less developed, for sharing ideas. For any who hold that our existence has purpose and meaning, individually and socially, imagination plays an important role. It is more than a tool, and the quality of its operation sets human beings apart from other sentient creatures.

A comprehensive dissection of effective ministry exposes the imagination's organic contribution. For good reason, admittance interviews with people interested in the helping professions, perforce ministry, should verify an aptitude for imagination directly

or indirectly. Why? Because imagination ignites or enhances capacities for perception, sympathy, communion and mission.

Any Christian person must be able to spot goodness and have ways to distinguish it from external goods such as power, position or security. Both pastoral and political environments address the distinction that ancient Plato examines in his *The Republic*, or that Christ illuminates in meetings with public officials. These ancient conversations place us in the scene with great educators, focusing our contemporary perceptions.

The art of creative imagination aids the common good not by inventing fantasy, but by enabling sympathy. Ministry has to value ordinary life, precisely because there is nothing ordinary about it. The shortest sentence in the Scriptures, “Jesus wept,” should invite us to see what he did, and how.

Most human beings seek a communion with people and with God, if given both permission and a path. Works of imagination become bridges to the good, true and beautiful. These works become tests that might separate central values from peripheral desires. Imagination about our humanity shines in many media and is pursued by hungry audiences. Recall a bookish student in the movie about C. S. Lewis titled *Shadowlands*. This young witness for communion says simply, “I read to know that I am not alone.”

As with my search for a post office, our religious mission to the world requires that we recognize our own starting point, and that of others. Good tools are necessary so that we can state a goal, but also uncover unhelpful biases or invisible allegiances. Active imagination provides forensic tools that help to see the rules, facts and circumstances that enfold us in dynamic tension. And it likewise enables us to see that the people and institutions that we encounter have other ways of being that require some acknowledgement, if not agreement or comprehension.

Imagination has its own logic, but, like grace, it does not always move in a straight line. I have always appreciated skilled guides to help me spot the trail. I think you, too, will enjoy these writers who

can spy imagination's possibilities and products in the service of
faith's mission.

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty
Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana

Preface

The exercise of the imagination, including an interest in fiction, poetry, film and drama, are not characteristics often associated with the pursuit of priestly life and ministry. In fact, in our contemporary epistemological ethos, the opposite may be more the case. Fiction, poetry and the lively arts are seen as escapes from reality, as plunges into a world of fantasy and non-sense.

In 1854, the English novelist Charles Dickens published a devastatingly apropos novel, *Hard Times*. In the novel, Dickens takes on the contemporary rising enthusiasm for the philosophy of utility. The fictional anti-hero, Mr. Gradgrind, represents, for Dickens, everything that is negative about a worldview that envisions utility as the sole *raison d'être*. When Dickens wrote the novel in the middle of the 19th century, the pursuit of the philosophy of utility was still a viable choice that some made. Today, it is the norm, although most of us would reject the Utilitarian ethic as a way of life.

In our time, the principle of usefulness and a decided appreciation for the ordinary have cost us the ability to see beyond the daily grind of the human condition. We have lost our vision, or approach to excellence, and perhaps our ability to dream. It seems at this critical historical and intellectual juncture to ask some significant questions about the place of the imaginative in religion.

In these essays, the question of the importance of imagination as a theological category is explored through a number of different disciplinary perspectives. Br. John Mark Falkenhain, OSB, opens the volume with an insightful overview of the question of imagination and the role that it plays in various aspects of formation in the Church.

Fr. Gueric DeBona, OSB, a homiletics professor with a doctorate in English literature, explores the means by which the literary imagination is employed in the action of preaching and, by

extension, in priestly life and ministry. He develops three forms of literary encounter – the poetic, the mnemonic and the prophetic – as means of engaging the Word and applies these to the life of the preacher, but more broadly, also to the life of the priest.

Dr. Robert Alvis, a historian, looks at the medium of film in light of theological categories, or perhaps more daringly, at film as a theological category. His use of the idea of image forms a solid Catholic ethos that gives life to the Church in new and informative ways. Using contemporary filmmaking as a guide, Dr. Alvis explores the contemporary creative process as well as our role as those devoted to the enterprise of theology.

Fr. Harry Hagan, OSB, offers a powerful contribution on the place of imaginative thinking in the priesthood. He explores in depth the use of poetry in the life of the priest and the significance of the Word in priestly life and service. Fr. Harry, a poet and hymn writer, has been a monk for almost 40 years and has used his many talents and interests to advance the cause of imaginative thinking and acting among our seminary and monastic communities.

Fr. Thomas Gricoski, OSB, a philosopher and a younger member of the Saint Meinrad community, offers a very challenging essay on the philosophical treatment of imagination. Using the thought of the philosopher Richard Kearney, he develops the means by which philosophical approaches to imagination can be recaptured for contemporary theology.

Br. Francis Wagner, OSB, contributes a wonderful reflection on the role of imagination in writing and journaling. Br. Francis has spent a lifetime in the publication world and is also adept at the use of contemporary technologies for communication.

The final article is a personal contribution considering the role of imagination in the work of the seminal contemporary theologian, Blessed John Henry Newman. In many ways, Newman reignites the horizons of the imaginative spectrum for modern theology in ways that modern theology was not even aware until the 20th century. Newman was truly a prophet of the theological imagination and

forms a kind of opening (and closing) salvo to the writings presented here.

What is significant with these essays is that the authors are all, in a sense, reaching beyond the confines of their established disciplines, a trajectory that may prove not only beneficial, but necessary, as theological discourse moves into a new millennium.

I am especially grateful for the introduction to this volume provided by the Most Reverend Timothy Doherty, bishop of Lafayette-in-Indiana. Bishop Doherty and I have had many long conversations about the role of imagination in ministry. His contribution is gratefully appreciated.

*Very Rev. Denis Robinson, OSB
President-Rector*

I. Introducing the Question: Catholic Imagination

BR. JOHN MARK FALKENHAIN, OSB

Several years ago, I went over to a colleague's house to work on a young adult retreat she and I were planning. Shortly after I sat down at the dining room table where we planned to work, Jane's 4-year-old daughter, Annie, came over to my chair and blurted out rather matter-of-factly: "What'll you have?" Slow to catch on, I looked over at Jane for a cue. "She's a waitress," Jane mouthed inaudibly. I nodded, turned and ordered a hamburger and fries. After she asked if I wanted "a Coke with that" and pretended to write my order down on the palm of her hand, Annie was off.

Our imaginations are born around the age of 3 when we achieve the important developmental milestone of semiotic language. Semiotic language is the ability to use words to represent objects, people and actions in our minds without them actually being present or taking place. A ball no longer need be within sight for a child to think about it and wonder what it might do if pushed down the stairs. And when a parent is not in sight, the child with semiotic language can wonder where he or she is.

Semiotic language is the engine behind imagination or "make believe" and allows the child to see a row of dining room chairs as a classroom full of children to teach, a sheet thrown over a card table as a fort from which to fight legions of attackers, or the coffee table and a plate of potato chips as a make-believe church for his 7-year-old Mass. In the same way that the preschool-aged child "tries on" these different identities, the adolescent later employs his imagination to try on different jobs, different kinds of relationships and different dreams as a means of discerning what he or she might be as an adult.

With the ability to wonder "What if...?," the imagination becomes

the key to our future identities and central to our vocations. And although we no longer find the late adolescent and young adult playing priest at the coffee table, or fireman with the garden hose, his imagination is just as busy wondering what it might be like to live life as a monk, to marry and raise children, or to serve the Church as a diocesan priest.

In fact, throughout our lives, we exercise our imaginations – our ability to ask “what if” – as we go about solving life’s problems, whether they arise in our professional lives, our personal lives or even our spiritual lives. Scientists, inventors and researchers use their imaginations all the time. So do philosophers, theologians and everyday Christians as they try to figure out how best to love, how better to serve, and how more fully to know and relate with God.

Some who are delighted by the active imaginations of children, struggle with its adult manifestation. It might be the abandonment that imagination requires that causes discomfort in some adults. After all, imagination requires a certain willingness to suspend what we know long enough to enter an imaginary world where conventions, reality checks and assumptions about “what is” loosen up and get challenged.

An adult who finds it cute that an arm cover from a couch can become a veil and transform a little girl into a nun may struggle to see how such imagination is useful in adulthood. Preferring to stick closer to the hard facts of reality – what we *know* to be true and real – the adult may strictly assign the world of “make believe” to childhood and cling strictly to logic, data analysis and proof as his tools of problem-solving.

Perhaps unfamiliar with the limits of knowing, the adult, in his insecurity, might shy away from (if not scorn) the dangerous territory of questioning truths, asking how we know something to be true, or even wondering if there are limits to what we think we know. And yet, that’s what philosophers and theologians, scientists and artists, and even mystics do – set aside what is known, or perhaps even question it, in order to ask if there is something more,

something we have missed or don't fully comprehend. "Let's say for a moment..." "Let's make (ourselves) believe..."

MYSTIC OR HERETIC?

The thing that makes the mystics so threatening, and yet so important to us, is that they are willing to slosh around in uncharted territory and lean into their faith (their believing without knowing) in such a way that they eke out some new insight, knowledge or encounter with God that the rest of us are unsure of, shocked by or at least unfamiliar with. Their courage is in their willingness to loosen their grip on what they already know of God and sit in the presence of the Unknown.

We all accept, of course, that God is infinite and cannot be entirely known to us in this world. But why be satisfied? *What if* there was more we could know, this side of heaven? Whereas our natural human instinct is to cling to our knowledge of God, the mystics invite us to let go (not deny, but to let go) of what we already know long enough that our hands, eyes, minds and hearts might be open to what more God might be willing to reveal of Himself to us. They encourage us to *imagine* what we have not yet seen, heard or felt.

But then what is the difference between a mystic and a heretic? To map it into another plane, what is the difference between someone with a great imagination and someone who is psychotic? What if the "what if" is just a little too far out there?

What if "make believe" leads to a permanent belief in something that is simply wrong, unorthodox or dangerous? The difference between a mystic and a heretic, of course, is accountability and discipline, which often comes in the forms of study, the acceptance of limits, and relationship with an ultimate authority who can provide a reality check, feedback and an occasionally necessary redirection – in other words, accountability to a *magisterium*.

Let's go back to children, for a minute. In my practice as a pediatric psychologist, I often encountered parents who were reluctant to discipline or say "no" to their children, fearing they might "shut down their child's creativity" or "crush their spirit." I

used to handle these situations by bringing a cup of water into my office. After explaining all the wonderful things this water could do – quench thirst, water plants, wash the windows, cool off the kids playing outside – I would ask them to pour it out on top of my desk (actually, I never let them do this!) and then ask them to then consider how they might take a drink, water the plant or offer it to the kids if it is running all over the desk and onto the floor. What followed was a conversation about the importance of a container – limits and boundaries – if our precious resources like creativity and spirit (or in our case, imagination) are to be useful and productive.

A CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

When we study theology, familiarize ourselves with Church doctrine and steep ourselves in Catholic tradition, we build a container for our imaginations – or as our Fr. Harry Hagan likes to say, we “define the playing field” for our imaginations. With the boundaries clear, our imaginations are not so much confined, but rather set free to play, wonder, question and explore the far regions of our faith, confident that if we wander too far, the boundaries will redirect us and even help us deepen our understanding of what we actually believe: why *this* and not *that*?

In addition to defining the playing field, a solid foundation in Catholic thought and culture provides the Christian thinker with an expanded collection of ideas, concepts and vocabulary to analyze, synthesize and juxtapose as he stretches his understanding of what he believes. The more we know, the more fertile our imaginations become. A painter with only two tubes of paint – basic black and white – can do many interesting and imaginative things. But artistic possibilities explode when the palette blossoms to include tubes of emerald, azure, vermilion and magenta.

This, then, is the *Catholic* imagination: an imagination enriched and directed by a strong formation in Catholic theology, doctrine and culture. The Catholic imagination is an imagination set free, not made fearful, by its container of knowledge, truth, experience and accountability. It paints with a full-color spectrum of Catholic

ideas, symbols and constructs, and waxes fluently in the languages of Scripture, the saints, and the mothers and fathers of the Church.

If a child with imagination can transform herself into a nun with only the arm cover of a sofa, imagine what an adult might do with a fully formed and freed Catholic imagination! He might turn mystic or theologian. She might expose some hidden glint of God or solve some great moral conundrum. He might love with incredible abandon or pray with fire at his fingertips and urgent longings in his heart.

ROLE MODELS

Let's look for a moment at a few models of Catholic imagination at work. They come in every age in the form of artists, writers, composers, theologians, activists and prophets – all of whom open for us a new view of what it means to be Christian. Some inspire us instantly with their direct and accessible brilliance. Others make us squirm and struggle a bit, pushing us out of our comfort zones as we work to grasp insights that sting and yet are so deeply rooted in our Catholic and Christian tradition that we can't deny the challenging truth they reveal.

Flannery O'Connor's uncanny ability to draw her readers to a deeper, sometimes disturbing understanding of theological concepts, such as grace, forgiveness, Eucharist and sin, is surely based on a disciplined and clearly studied grasp of Catholicism. Within this container, she exercises great imagination, leaving her reader with short stories that uncover grace in the most unexpected places, and forgiveness in the most undeserving of persons.

Take Ruby Turpin, for example, the main character in O'Connor's short story "Revelation." Ruby is us – an upright, pious and church-going, if somewhat self-righteous, woman who thanks God she has been given the right gift of faith. She holds tightly onto what she knows of God (or what she *thinks* she knows of God) only to be labeled an "old wart hog" from hell by an insolent, young student of the secular sciences!

Offended on her behalf, we smart with embarrassment (and confusion) when Ruby is delivered the final blow: a revelation of

the Kingdom in which all the people she pities, including “lunatics and freaks,” the “white-trash” and her own black farmhands, are marching to heaven in front of her! O'Connor rarely, if ever, uses words such as “grace,” “forgiveness,” “Eucharist” or “holiness” in her stories. She simply sees the possibility for them everywhere, then allows them to erupt, obvious but unnamed, in places that the reader might rather leave unnoticed.

Shocked, we finish the story upset by the juxtaposition of divinity and such base humanity; then we feel a little embarrassed that we had never seen such possibilities before. In the end, we take comfort in knowing that even *we* might be so close to grace as to touch it without even having to move.

Among the many imaginative carvings that adorned the medieval cathedrals and churches of Europe, those of Giselbertus stand out, partly due to his distinctive style, but perhaps more to his ability to expose a new angle from which to view the stories, ideas and teachings of our Catholic tradition. In his dramatic depiction of the last judgment in the famous tympanum at the Cathedral at Autun, for example, we find the typical composition of Christ seated in judgment. The saved are at his right and the damned are at his left, being led away to demons waiting to devour them.

But Giselbertus has added a surprise: an elegantly tall angel who has crossed over to the side of the damned. There she pulls on the scales of justice in an apparent attempt to save even those whose lives did not warrant salvation. The scene challenges our notions of judgment and poses an interesting question: Are there any limits to God's mercy?

This same Giselbertus appears to have carved the tympanum at the Cathedral at Vezelay as well, but probably did not lend his hand to all the carvings in this great church. Still, one wonders if his keen imagination may have influenced the other stone carvers at work at Vezelay. Among the many provocative and playful images carved into the church's capitals is the famous “Mystical Mill.” This capital features Moses pouring a bag of wheat kernels into a feed grinder

while St. Paul crouches below, catching the flour in a sack of his own.

Here, the imaginative sculptor has suspended the limits of time and space to explore a relationship between the two laws of the Old and New Testaments as symbolized by each of their great teachers, Moses and Paul. Are they two laws or one? The answer lies in the symbol of Christ, the “Mystical Mill,” who transforms the wheat kernels of the old law into the flour of the new covenant, whose sign is living bread and whose law is written in our hearts.

Christ, too, provides a perfect model of an imagination at work within the tradition of the Jewish faith He was steeped in. Take, for example, the myriad times Jesus’ persecutors attempt to use the law to trip him up and condemn him. Yet, Christ’s knowledge – better, his *understanding* – of the law is far greater than his attackers’, and his imagination is too keen. With responses like “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s...” and “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone,” Christ not only dodges their malicious schemes, but proves Himself a great teacher. For Christ goes beyond simply *knowing* the law to *fulfilling* the law – seeing not its limits, but the limitless possibilities for love, mercy, forgiveness and true justice that lie within.

CONCLUSION

In his *Introduction to Catholic Theology*, Richard Lennan (1998) explores several definitions of theology before finally asserting that “theology is an activity...and not simply a body of knowledge to be learned.” If, as Lennan goes on to suggest, theology involves such specific activities as meditation, interpretation, critical reflection and translation, we might further conclude that imagination – the capacity to creatively juxtapose ideas, to see beyond the literal, to ask hypothetical questions (i.e., to “make believe” for a while) – is necessary for one truly to be called a theologian.

I have asserted in this article that the *Catholic* imagination is distinguished by a particular formation or discipline: the study of and accountability to that body of Catholic knowledge that we find, for example, in the *Catechism*, in our official Church documents and

in our tradition. Both then – the imagination and the discipline – are necessary to the practice of theology. Just as the highly imaginative individual without any accountability to Church teaching runs the risk of turning heretic, the highly knowledgeable, orthodox and well-read Catholic without any imagination is not so much a theologian, but an encyclopedia or a mere clearinghouse of Catholic information.

This monograph series has been envisioned for those involved in seminary education and formation. Given this audience, a challenging question arises: how does a priesthood formation program assist men in developing a Catholic imagination? Academic courses in Scripture, systematic theology and patristic authors offer a solid knowledge base of Catholic teaching and thus help to define what we have earlier called the “boundaries” of the imagination’s playing field.

The more elusive task, however, is to find ways to foster appropriate freedom of thought, critical reflection, comfort with ambiguity, and the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity needed to recognize, accept and even admit the limits of our spiritual and theological understanding. Yet, these skills of imagination are indispensable if a priest or minister is to deepen his relationship with God, much less enter another’s world of suffering, spiritual doubt or rapture.

Another chapter might explore various strategies for fostering these skills of imagination within the context of priestly formation. For now, we might leave the question unanswered and hope that simply posing the question might allow for some discussion among seminary formation staff, faculty and students. The discussion, itself, would be an exercise in Catholic imagination!

2. Incarnating the Homily: Priestly Preaching and the Literary Imagination

FR. GUERRIC DEBONA, OSB

The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) of the Second Vatican Council reminds the Universal Church that ordained ministers are to regard preaching the Gospel to all creation as their primary task, engaging the Word of God in various and diverse ways. To this end, preaching in ordained ministry strives to be present to the unique and particular historical lives where men and women work and love.

“Priestly preaching is often very difficult in the circumstances of the modern world. If it is to influence the mind of the listener more fruitfully, such preaching must not present God’s Word in a general or abstract fashion only, but it must apply the perennial truth of the gospel to the concrete circumstances of life. Thus the ministry of the Word is carried out in many ways, according to the various needs of those who hear and the special gifts of those who preach.”¹

Indeed, the Word of God is “living and active” and present among us and so priestly preaching reaches into the hearts of the Christian faithful and opens up a space for the Spirit to breathe new life. Sometimes those wounded hearts have been shaped by tragedy and disappointment, disillusionment and anger and so the priest finds himself something like Moses and the prophets, revealing God’s

1. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, The Documents of Vatican II, Ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (Piscataway, N.J.: New Century, 1966), 539–540.

works to those who have caved in from worldly anguish. How do we give a restorative word to the weary and set the captive free in a language that is compassionate, vibrant and authentic?

The task of making the Word present will always be inflected by the present culture and, inevitably, the ordained minister will find himself in the role of what *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* calls “the mediator of meaning.” “The preacher represents this community by voicing its concerns, by naming its demons, and thus enabling it to gain some understanding and control of the evil which afflicts it. He represents the Lord by offering the community another word, a word of healing and pardon, of acceptance and love.”

From the point of view of vocation, the ordained minister is called to be “priestly” when it comes to exercising the function of proclamation because he is “a mediator, making connections between the real lives of people who believe in Jesus Christ but are not always sure what difference faith can make in their lives, and the God who calls us into ever deeper communion with himself and with one another.”² Therefore, when he preaches, the priest exercises a unique faculty which gives a Word to those who are hungry, providing a rich and nourishing Table of the Word from which God’s people might feast.³

If priestly preaching is called to interpret meaning for the

2. NCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1982), 7-8.
3. For a brief but informed discussion on the Church’s teaching on priesthood and preaching, see Stephen Vincent DeLeers, “The Place of Preaching in the Ministry and Life of Priests,” in *The Theology of Priesthood*, ed. Donald J. Goergen and Ann Garrido. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 87-103.

Christian faithful, this activity is rooted in the Church's tradition, especially in the sacramental imagination. The preacher lives out his priestly ministry in dialogue with the world and with the God who created it, becoming a bridge between these two worlds for the sake of pastoral charity. As *Gaudium et Spes* teaches us, "To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other."⁴

Effective preachers, then, deepen their awareness of human language, helping others to come to a deeper understanding of the Word made visible in their very midst. Priestly preaching abides in a sacramental reality, calling to mind the marvelous deeds the Lord has accomplished; he names grace in the world. Especially at the Eucharist, "the salvation that the preacher announces in a word has already been made tangible and visible in deed. Before a word is spoken, the disciples of Jesus have already proclaimed the power of the resurrection in healing touch and in the community's attention to the needs of the world, especially to those whose well-being is most threatened. The result of this 'preaching in praxis' is the very kind of conversion that is the goal of all preaching: Freedom, wholeness, reconciliation, and human flourishing that overflows in joy and praise."⁵

When it comes to ordained ministry, then, we might ask, how shall such "preaching in praxis" best be accomplished? What tools should be used to en flesh the Gospel in the everyday lives of God's people? How best to reveal the presence of the Word made visible? From the

4. *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, 201-202.

5. Mary Catherine Hilbert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 44.

point of view of Christian anthropology, human language must be incarnated and, as Catherine Hilbert suggests, sacramental.

Does the preacher paint with words? If so, then such tangible epiphanies in language become a kind of gateway for intuition, for apprehending the Logos. In making the Word concrete and sensory, the preacher is called to deploy the literary imagination that is at the service of the Word. But that imaginative palate is filled with a spectacular array of colors. So for the remainder of this essay, I will suggest some primary colors in the artist's box of tools and supplies, something like a subdivision of the literary imagination that priest preachers might access in painting a canvas for the sake of the People of God.

I will call these various functions of the literary imagination the poetic, the mnemonic and the prophetic. Since "the literary imagination" is a very general term and encompasses all of these aspects of the linguistic faculty, it stands to reason that every good piece of literature harbors these qualities to some degree. Needless to say, I am not suggesting that the idea of the literary is somehow corralled into these categories exclusively, but rather that these salient characteristics of the literary imagination broaden and enrich the scope of the ministry of priestly preaching and ministry.

THE POETIC IMAGINATION

The "poetic imagination" is human communication at its most basic artistic level; it is the quality or ability to invent and assemble language for a desired effect on a reader or hearer. That is not as easy as it sounds! Our contemporary age tends to think of the literary enterprise as the province of the lone artist, shut away somewhere in a lonely garret and suffering for art. But as Natalie Goldberg reminds us, "Writing is a communal act. Contrary to popular belief, a writer is not Prometheus alone on a hill full of fire. We are very arrogant to think we alone have a totally original mind. We are carried on the backs of all the writers who came before us.

We live in the present with all the history, ideas, and soda pop of this time. It all gets mixed up in our writing.”⁶

The conception of the poet as some kind of a lone wolf is a legacy of 19th-century Romanticism and could not be further from the way that Aristotle designed his *Poetics*. We know that the root of the word “poetics” comes from the Greek verb ποιέω, I make or I do. Now Aristotle was hardly interested in what we might call today “art for art’s sake,” but recognized that poets wrote for the sake of the audience.

In a way, the *Poetics* concerns itself with what the literary does or makes happen to an audience. Everyone engaged in the authentic enterprise of the poetic imagination imagines an outcome on a receiver. Aristotle knew this literary dynamic perfectly. The plot, meaning the arrangement of the incidents, and character, or those persons in a drama who propel the action forward, are all foundational components of an imitation of life that exists for a desired effect on an audience or shaped around a desired pathos. All this is to say that the poetic imagination hardly exists in a vacuum, but desires to communicate itself in order to transform the other.

Perhaps a specific example would be illustrative in this regard. Consider, for instance, the importance that Aristotle placed on catharsis in the tragic play. As the word implies, the “pitiably and fearful” occurrences in the excellent tragic drama skillfully engage the pathos of the audience, thereby purging the viewer in a purgation of emotions. The audience has their pity enlivened for the sake of exorcising these fearful emotions.

The tragic play – and this is to cite only one genre – has a ritual quality that touches the deepest of emotions. When Oedipus recognizes that his pride in searching for Laius, the murdered king, has blinded him to the truth – that he is himself the criminal who perpetrated the crime on the one who he now knows is his

6. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1986), 79.

father; when the sorceress Media is betrayed by her husband, Jason, and revenges herself by murdering their two children; when King Lear eventually realizes that he has divided his kingdom wrongly, persuaded by flattery and lies, we are engaging in some form of catharsis. The poetic imagination desires to engage the eyes and ears, the hearts and the minds of the audience into pathos, to move the participants in the drama in a process of ritual action.

The poetic imagination is by no means reserved to classical tragedy, or even drama. Centuries later, we can point to a unique Christian version of catharsis in a masterpiece of medieval Italian verse. “Midway in the journey of our life/I came to myself in a dark wood,/for the straight way was lost.” So begins the famous line of the first of the books of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, *The Inferno*.⁷ The overall trajectory of *The Divine Comedy* takes the reader through a passageway from Hell to Paradise, following Dante’s footsteps as he is led from the dark wood, first by Virgil and then, at last, by Beatrice.

The design of this medieval Christian masterpiece takes the reader through its own purification ritual, as Dante and his guide(s) make their way through sin’s dark night and then up the seven-story mountain of Purgatory and then, finally, to Paradise. The poetics of the *Comedy* shapes the reader, not unlike the very catharsis that Aristotle had in mind for tragedy: the pitiable and fearful sinners we meet along the way help to name our own demons buried deep within us so that we might be brought into the light.

The poetic imagination reaches one of its pinnacles in the *Divine Comedy* because the author has arranged the workings of language for the benefit of our salvation in Christ. Here Dante stands in for every reader: his initial confusion in darkness is ours; his astonishment and horror at sin is our own; his embracing of the beatific vision eventually becomes ours as well. We are taken

7. Dante, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Random House, 2000), 3.

through a process of purification as we witness the horror of sinfulness and scale the heights of heaven toward the beatific vision.

When it comes to contemporary homiletic practice, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the contemporary preacher inherited a kind of Romantic quality that paid very little attention to the ears of a hearer.⁸ Moreover, our American individualism simply underlines the tendency to think of preaching, like writing, as a kind of singular activity. The preacher becomes removed from the concrete and sensate world of others and barely considers the formational role of the speech act itself.

Preachers become lost in abstractions, bogged down in unorganized structure, stuck in quirky habits of self-disclosure. Instead, every conscientious preacher should ask: what is preaching if it is not a communal act? Every good homilist possesses a poetic imagination because preaching allows the assembly to ascend the homiletic text (either using a manuscript or not) through a process where both demons and grace are named.

So the homilist, like every good writer, has to take to the task of “writing down the bones” of salvation history for the sake of God’s people. Indeed, like a good drama, the homily that focuses on the good of the assembly takes the congregation through a process that traces a plot or outline of the workings of grace, a map of God’s activity in human history. In the final analysis, if the homily does not fall on the ears of the listener in a communal enterprise, then our preaching is in vain.

With the skills learned from the poetic imagination, the homilist can recognize that the destiny of his preaching is for the sake of

8. The great shift in the so-called New Homiletics in the mid-20th century was a turn toward the listener. See, for instance, Fred Craddock’s call to attend to the hearer in *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) and *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

another; thus, he arranges his recounting of the works of God in the Scriptures that the hearer can be moved to praise and thanksgiving. In a very real sense, the act of preaching the Word exists for the sake of pastoral charity in order that our brothers and sisters will be able to worship the living and true God. Preaching must attend to the dynamics of the congregation by asking: where do you want this assembly to be at the end of the homily?

Therefore, the homily plays out a kind of ritual by which the assembly finds itself engaged with the *Sunday Lectionary*, mediated by the preacher. That the baptized are taken through something of a literary process in the homily has its roots in Aristotle's theoretical musings on the poetics of ancient Greek literature and could be extended to a variety of literary genres (including film) that are well plotted and centered on the pathos of the audience or reader.

The experience of the poetic imagination cannot fail to ensure that homilists begin to ask fundamental questions about their preaching. With Sunday preaching, does he “plot” his homily so that he moves the congregation to the Eucharistic table so that the people “lift up their hearts?”⁹ Does our preaching carry the faith-filled destiny that God has loved the world from its origin, redeemed it and will bring humankind to completion?

At weddings, is the preaching a retelling of the “plot” of God's plan for his people, disclosing the God who created us in order to enable the couple to go out into world to witness to co-creation? In funeral homilies, is the grieving assembly taken through a process in which the Word of God becomes a consoling balm for their anger, confusion and darkness? These are plotted homilies shaped by sacred Scripture and forged by the poetic imagination.

THE MNEMONIC IMAGINATION

9. For a good discussion on this idea, see Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletic Plot*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

The literary imagination also remembers. Like the poetic imagination, the mnemonic quality of literature has its roots deep in antiquity and becomes highly instructive for our contemporary culture and the identity of the priest preacher. As its name implies, the mnemonic simply refers to the capacity of memory and its literary ties are probably as old as speech itself.

Early epic poems such as Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* show us the power of memory to evoke key historical markers in our culture. "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns,/driven time and again off course, once he had plundered/ the hallowed heights of Troy." The narrator of *The Odyssey* calls upon the goddess of his inspiration to recall not only the hero Odysseus, but the national history of Greece as well.

Indeed, the *Odyssey* is driven not only by the winds of the kind of plot imagined by Aristotle (who mentions the Homeric epic and Odysseus' exploits as particularly demonstrative of plot), but also by cultural memory. Memory forms the backbone of the poet, not only in oral culture – where entire books were committed to memory – but written practice as well. Such a predilection to recall national origins undergirds Virgil's *Aeneid* as well. The hero of the story, Aeneas, escapes from the burning city of Troy and journeys to Italy, where he became the ancestor of the Romans.

These large poems revisit national origins and suggest the importance of memory, literature and the place of the contemporary reader in the unfolding of history. To this day, the tradition of Homer and Virgil plays a strong role in the history of Greece and Italy, as does France's *Song of Roland* and the Chinese or Icelandic epics; these are national historical charters put to verse and brought to life by memory.

But there is more to the mnemonic imagination, because its poetics marshals canonical literature itself as historical artifacts or cultural markers. The great works of literature become ways of understanding history and the diverse circumstances of the human condition. Consider, for instance, the works of Charles Dickens, who was writing in London in the middle of the 19th century. Dickens'

novels explored the social, psychological and political dynamics of his time in a variety of ways; these aspects point to the relevance of such literature as something of a time capsule for future generations.

David Copperfield is a *Bildungsroman*, or story of human development, which also revealed the treacherous societal practices of child labor and domestic abuse in British society. *Bleak House* is a novel about the collapse and failure of governmental legislation to take care of its citizens. *Great Expectations* deals with the coming of age of a young man, his moral collapse in the face of expanding capitalism and, finally, his moral redemption. If we were to look for the memory of 19th-century England, we could do no better than to read the works of Dickens.

In many ways, the mnemonic imagination reaches its zenith in the 19th-century British and Russian novel, with the likes of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The narrator's omniscient role in these fictions is clearly intended to place him or her outside of time as the holder of historical memory. Authors throughout the ages have represented their works as enormous sweeps of history, recollected and then disseminated for the ages.

The literary canon is a record of the importance we place on literary remembrance. The literary canon, or a kind of library of books that are thought to be of important value, is largely constructed during particular periods to establish a guidepost for navigating our way through the millions of literary artifacts generated over the years. Canonical literature is a memory of history, albeit a limited one. But these canonical works show us what values are important at a particular time – and indeed how these interests also change through history.

For many years, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* was on everyone's list of canonical literature, including high school reading assignments meant for standardized exams given at the end of the year. Then, the wisdom of granting canonical status to Twain's novel was questioned, especially given its overt racial politics and explicit

racial slurs. Very recently, further developments altered the canonical status of Twain's novel. In 2011, *Huckleberry Finn* was re-edited and published, removing the offensive language against African-Americans.

Should the newly reframed novel be placed back in the canon? For some, the original novel must be in the canon, no matter what. For others, the new version of the novel makes Twain more appropriate as a canonical text for today. In any case, both the original novel and its revision show us something of the cultural politics of the canon in two very different periods in American history. The controversy surrounding *Huckleberry Finn* points us to the place of literature as the something that shapes human memory. The function of the mnemonic literary imagination is to remember, but its canonical texts also serve as the artifacts of historical memory as cultural values change over time.

A preacher without a memory is like an eagle without wings; unfortunately, that is an easy identity to claim in the United States in the 21st century. Study after study indicates that Americans draw a blank when it comes to the most important aspects of history, and this includes religious literacy as well.¹⁰ Inevitably, the preacher will find himself in a difficult position during the Sunday preaching at the Eucharist. As a site for mediating meaning, the liturgical homily depends on traversing space and time and disclosing the intricate corridors of sacred and human history of the Christian assembly as witnessed in sacred Scripture.

Reconnecting the assembly to the reality of salvation history can be a daunting task, so the preacher himself will need to establish a firm foundation to historical memory. A relationship with good literature – indeed, “regular and sustained contact with the world’s

10. See, for example, Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007).

greatest literature or with its painting, sculpture and musical achievement can rightfully be regarded by preachers not simply as a leisure time activity but as part of their ongoing professional development.”¹¹

I will add to *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* by suggesting that canonical literature forms the backbone of the preacher’s library precisely because its traces have left significant footprints on the world stage and continue to do so. After *Huckleberry Finn*, what other text will be reshaped by the new historical circumstances in which we find ourselves? How does our own society read the polite world of marriage and manners in Jane Austin’s fiction? How did James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner anticipate the way we think of time?

Read one way, these are much more than literary questions; they are pastoral investigations that also help to shape homilies because the hearers have themselves been formed by the very same history that literature remembers. Secular history was not eliminated but sanctified by God’s presence among us.

And there is more for the preacher to consider, especially during the Sunday liturgical homily. The priest preacher at the Eucharist is the spokesman for the mnemonic literary imagination. In a way, the preacher is not unlike the unnamed singer of an epic poem, standing in the midst of the assembly, calling on the Holy Spirit and remembering salvation history as it is recalled in sacred Scripture. The connection from the Table of the Word to the Table of the Eucharist is bridged by the mnemonic: the Lord’s Supper is an *anamnesis* of Christ’s Paschal triumph over sin and death, which the Church recalls by the working of the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father.

The preacher at Eucharist stands in the midst of the baptized assembly *precisely* and *essentially* to remember the works of the God through historical time. His language incarnates the mystery

11. Fulfilled in Your Hearing, 13.

we have come to celebrate. In some sense, his preaching narrates the memory of salvation history so that the assembly might once again acknowledge the action of the Holy in the world.

THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

The literary imagination has an intimate connection with the prophetic. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Word of the Lord is both aggressive and irresistible. Those prophets, like Ezekiel, whom God wills to speak the truth before the Powers, are literally called to devour the Word. “He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. He said to me: Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them” (Ezk. 3:1-4 NRSV).

Similarly, the Christian tradition understands the enfleshment of the Word of God in Christ as bringing “a two-edge sword” into every time and place, proclaiming a world in which the Beatitudes inaugurate the coming of the kingdom. Therefore John’s Apocalypse envisions a mighty angel coming down from heaven who “held a little scroll open in his hand” and he said, ““Take it, and eat; it will be better to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth... ““You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”” (Rev. 10:2, 9, 11).

The prophetic imagination exists to reimagine the status quo. In the process of speaking the truth to what has grown ossified – even corrupt – in their contemporary culture, literary prophets deploy various genres to accomplish their task. Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in Middle English in the 14th century, created a cast of colorful characters on pilgrimage to Canterbury to the tomb of St. Thomas à Becket in order to draw biting satire and parodic parallels to his contemporary age. In his masterwork, *The Canterbury Tales*, each of the pilgrims, be they friar, knight, miller – or a whole host of others representing the various professions at the time – tell a

“frame narrative” that often unwittingly betrays their own interest and prejudice.

Toward the end of the “The Pardoner’s Tale,” for instance, we see Chaucer’s stinging prophetic poetry burlesquing the horrendous practice of bartering absolution: “So graunte you his pardon to receive,/For that is best—I wol you nat deceive... But sires, oo word forgat I in my tale:/ I have relikes and pardon in my male/ As fair as any man in Engelond,/Whiche were me yiven by the Popes hond.”¹² The poet lets the pardoner disclose his own sin, a vice which was frequented by many during this period: he freely offers the sale of relics, allegedly blessed by the pope, while invoking the power of Christ to forgive sin. With irony and biting satire, Chaucer’s prophetic imagination reminds us that, in the world of *The Canterbury Tales*, we stand at the edge of the Reformation.

A striking example of the prophetic imagination emerged in the 20th century with what we now call the Harlem Renaissance, a broadly represented cultural movement (roughly spanning the 1930s and 1940s) that originated in New York City and which more or less embraced the principles of literary modernism, racial equality and American folk (especially jazz) traditions. We know that American literary modernism itself called for a break with the status quo and colluded with the prophetic tradition with the call to “make it new” for the purposes of “de-familiarization.”

The Harlem Renaissance was marked by manifestos that were both new and a plea to return to (racial) origins. Langston Hughes,

12. Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader, Ed. E.T. Donaldson (New York: John Wiley, 1975), 426. “So grant you his pardon to receive; for that is best: I would not deceive you... But gents, one word I forgot in my tale. I have relics and pardon in my pouch—as fair as anyone in England, the which were given me by the Pope’s own hand.” (English prose translation mine).

writing in the *Nation* on “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), critiqued the enormous desire for black poets to assimilate into white literature. Instead of dissolving into cultural homogeneity, Hughes urged African-American poets to embrace their own cultural difference, “for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, [there is] a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their ‘white’ culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work.”¹³

Not surprisingly, the Harlem Renaissance spoke very prophetically to white American Protestantism and articulated the experience of cultural oppression from slavery to lynching. Claude McKay, who was born in Jamaica, expressed his ambivalence with the United States in his poem “America” (1922). “Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,/And sinks into my throat her tigers’ tooth,/Stealing my breath of life, I will confess/ I love this cultural hell that tests my youth!/ Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,/Giving me strength erect against her hate...”¹⁴

Religion’s prophetic voice played no small part in creating an alliance for McKay and others. During the 1940s, for instance, *The Catholic Worker* magazine became the chief vehicle for McKay’s poetry, as he galvanized his social protest against capitalism, using much of the social teaching of the Catholicism that would eventually convert him.

13. Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents, ed. Vissiliki Kolocotroni et. al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 419.
14. Claude McKay, “America,” in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. 2nd. Edition. Ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (New York: Norton, 1988), 518.

The call to the prophetic remains a necessary foil to the mnemonic imagination and should be sewn into the fabric of the mantle of preaching. If the mnemonic recalls the importance of tradition and holds up to the light the treasure of canonical works over the centuries, then the prophetic stands at the ready to balance the weight of the tradition with the emergence of a new (often disturbing) and reinvigorating voice.

The preacher ought to be attentively eager to listen to God's penetrating Word, which must be spoken to the weary and proclaimed to prisoners, an echo of Jesus' iconic stance in the synagogue as portrayed in Luke 4:16-21. We know that the Word Himself brought new life to his own culture: "You have heard it said, but I tell you" is a prophetic retelling of a tradition. Indeed Jesus' parables are little masterpieces meant to unearth a kind of thinking that had become calcified by self-righteousness and legalism.

Therefore, as a constitutive component of Jesus' own identity in the New Testament, substantially claimed in Nazareth to give sight to the blind and set captives free, the prophetic imagination should be hardwired into every priest's identity at ordination and underlined every time he preaches. When Jesus tells his followers that they should be "in the world but not of it," he surely was remembering the tradition of the prophets and their call to consume God's Word and deliver a (sometimes difficult) message to the people they serve.

The preacher with the prophetic imagination understands the dynamics of popular culture and the various technologies with which his people are invested, but he is not absorbed by these activities; instead, the preacher with the prophetic imagination becomes an authentic witness to the Gospel by virtue of his prayerful and zealous dwelling each day with the Word and his desire to make it visible; the preacher with the prophetic imagination has "a comprehensive knowledge of the social, political

and economic forces shaping the contemporary world,”¹⁵ and calls the congregation and the culture to accountability in light of the Gospel of Peace and Justice.

If the priest preacher is familiar with the literary tradition of the prophetic – and reaches out to understand new, contemporary voices even now emerging – he will begin to ponder the ways in which the Holy Spirit has always spoken, from the moment that God’s breath moved across the water at the creation of the world – in many and diverse ways, and always with love.

CONCLUSION

The various facets of the literary imagination – poetic, mnemonic and prophetic – are undoubtedly inscribed in the vocation of preaching. In a certain sense, however, these qualities bear witness to all of priestly ministry. Hearing the graced call to mission, the priest invites others to long for the kingdom of heaven for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. To this end, his priestly ministry is rooted in making Jesus Christ present in the world.

Therefore if the poetic strives to make and to build a living community with language, the priest does so every time he gathers the baptized Christian community, especially at the Eucharist. If the priest draws on the mnemonic imagination to access salvation history in his preaching, then he does so as a spiritual leader and pastor of God’s people as well. What stronger impulse for ordained ministry can there be than to help parishioners in all circumstances of their lives to bless the Lord at all times, remembering God’s deeds, even in difficult times?

And finally, priestly ministry often must prophetically proclaim to unpopular societal attitudes, using as testimony biblical faith and the teaching of the Church. The priest accomplishes a prophetic role by his very life as a celibate witness to the coming of God’s kingdom in our very midst.

I have tried to suggest here that these roles in priestly ministry

15. Fulfilled in Your Hearing, 14.

can only be strengthened by the daily involvement with the literary imagination. Making, remembering and challenging: these are priestly qualities that cannot fail to call the people of God to a greater awareness of the presence of God living and active in their lives, revealing “the perennial truth of the Gospel to the concrete circumstances of life.” Our Gospel proclamation is always Incarnational.

3. Moving Pictures: Film and the Formation of Imaginative Priests

DR. ROBERT ALVIS

In the iconic opening scene of “Citizen Kane,” the audience is transported to the bedside of Charles Foster Kane, a dying media mogul who holds a snow globe in his outstretched hand. After uttering perhaps the most famous last word in cinematic history – “Rosebud” – he expires, and the snow globe rolls from his hand and smashes on the floor below.

The rest of the film follows a journalist named Thompson, who is determined to understand the internal forces that inspired Kane’s ruthless pursuit of money and influence. He suspects Kane’s final word might provide the key. As Thompson interviews those who knew the man, Kane’s life is retold in a series of flashbacks. Thompson ultimately fails to untangle the riddle, but the filmmakers let the audience in on the secret: Rosebud was the name of Kane’s childhood sled.

The sled and the snow globe were mementos of Kane’s early childhood, which was materially poor but rich in maternal warmth and carefree play. After coming into sudden wealth, Kane’s mother sent him away for a proper education, and Kane never recovered from the emotional damage of this rupture. For all of his business triumphs, he could not master the art of connecting to people and building life-giving relationships.

Rosebud is just one example of a motif commonly found in movies and storytelling more generally: an innocuous clue, often overlooked, that holds the answer to the mystery at the center of the plot. This motif has something to teach us about how we approach the training of priests. The Catholic Church has invested

a tremendous amount of thought and resources to develop a comprehensive program of priestly formation. Nearly every question is answered; every essential skill is honed; almost nothing is left to chance. This formation program reliably produces competent priests.

Yet one of the qualities that often distinguishes truly great priests – a vibrant imagination – is not usually addressed in any intentional way. Various resources for cultivating the imagination exist, but some of the most effective ones are often overlooked or casually dismissed. In this essay, I will offer some reflections on one such resource: the movies. While their popular appeal is readily calculable, the capacity of movies to exercise the imagination and contribute to the formation of seminarians is rarely given its full due.

In emphasizing the importance of cultivating the imagination, by no means do I intend to disparage the current model of seminary formation. This model is carefully calibrated to prepare men for the heavy demands contemporary priests encounter. For decades now, Catholic dioceses in the United States have been faced with the challenge of serving the needs of a burgeoning Catholic population with a dwindling cadre of priests.

With fewer priests available for service, each active priest is called to master the full range of skills required to run a parish well. In addition to his sacramental duties, he must teach the faith, counsel those in need, manage the human resources at his disposal and oversee the many details of parish administration.

He must apply these skills within an ecclesial context that in many respects is growing more complex. The contemporary lay faithful are generally more educated and articulate compared to earlier generations, and they are also polarized over a range of theological and social issues. Meanwhile, the global reality of the Church increasingly is being felt at the local level, giving rise to linguistic and cultural fissures within Catholic communities that can widen into chasms without proper management.

He must also operate in a cultural context that, in many respects,

is hostile to the priesthood. Celibacy is widely perceived to be an unhealthy lifestyle, and causal connections are routinely drawn between celibacy and the scandal of priestly sexual abuse. No priest can escape the resulting shadow of suspicion.

Aware of the challenges priests face, the bishops and those directly engaged in priestly formation have created a lengthy and exhaustive process designed to refine the character of candidates for ordination and invest them with the knowledge, skills and temperament they will need for successful ministry. Before stepping foot in seminary, candidates first submit to a battery of psychological tests that can bring to light any underlying issues that need to be addressed in formation.

Once enrolled in seminary, they can expect to spend many years in academic study, first in philosophy, then in theology and related disciplines. Many will be called to study a language and culture other than their own in order to minister to a diverse population. To hone their capacity for pastoral work, seminarians undertake a series of ministerial assignments, and they are presented with feedback on their performance and opportunities to process their experiences with peers and mentors.

Seminarians are also called to participate daily in the communal celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, to meet regularly with a spiritual director, and to follow a regimen of private prayer. Such practices are designed to deepen their spiritual lives and to equip them to offer spiritual guidance to others.

To enhance their understanding of celibacy, seminarians are instructed in the historical development and theological foundations of the practice, its relationship to human sexuality more generally, and practical strategies for living a celibate life with integrity. Attention is increasingly being paid as well to basic life skills and effective techniques of parish administration.

Punctuating the formal program of seminary formation are regular occasions for entertainment and cultural enrichment, which run the gamut from rarified encounters with high art to guilty pleasures. At Saint Meinrad, which is located at some remove from a

major population center that can sustain a vibrant arts community, the seminary and monastic community take steps to attract the arts to campus. Every year, we host two theatrical performances by the National Players, a series of concerts by renowned choirs and ensembles, and gallery exhibits by visual artists. Complementing these high-profile occasions are less tony events, such as student reading circles, movie nights and even adventures with karaoke.

The significance of such programming to the seminary's core mission is often undersold. These events are commonly understood to be refreshing reprieves from the more serious work of priestly formation. Plays, movies, concerts and the like are indeed enjoyable, but they are often much more than that. In fact, encounters with the arts have the potential to mold us in profound ways.

They lead us beyond the limits of our everyday lives, exposing us to wider registers of human emotion, thought and experience than we would otherwise have occasion to encounter. In so doing, they expand our awareness of what is possible and exercise our imaginations. The relevance for priestly ministry is clear. Truly imaginative priests are capable of entering into the lives of others, offering timely and calibrated responses to their needs and transmitting the faith in compelling ways.

Such lofty claims regarding the value of the arts and the cultivation of the imagination are nothing new. They are routinely advanced by representatives of the arts community (often in connection with the pursuit of patronage), and they are intuitively understood by aficionados. Interestingly, one can also make a case for the arts by looking to recent research findings in a number of scientific disciplines regarding how our brains work. What this research suggests is that the process of preparing a person for a successful and meaningful life is much more expansive than the educational systems we typically rely upon to complete the process.

Mainstream models of education focus on the acquisition of abstract concepts and practical skills by the reasoning individual in controlled environments. What has become increasingly clear is that the human brain is perpetually being formed. What happens

outside the classroom has a major impact on what and how we learn. Also coming into focus is the social dimension of learning and the interconnections that exist between our capacity to exercise reason and nonrational and unconscious dimensions of thought. A brief review of some of these findings is in order, as it directly relates to my larger argument.¹

The perpetual nature of brain formation is powerfully illustrated by studies on infant and childhood development. Attachment theory, a model pioneered by the English psychiatrist John Bowlby and elaborated upon through the work of a diverse array of researchers, highlights the critical importance of the bonds infants and children form with adult caregivers. These early bonds establish patterns of thought and emotional response that reverberate throughout a person's life.

The quality of a given child's early attachments has been shown to be a remarkably accurate predictor of how successful he or she will be in school, in relationships and in a career.² Another recent subject of study is child's play.

The research of a number of observers, including the psychologist Elena Bodrova, highlights the fact that, when children play with other children for extended periods of time, free of adult regulation, the imaginative scenarios they construct and the cooperative arrangements they operate within help develop "executive function," the capacity to control one's impulses and emotions. Advocates of free play have been raising the alarm that today's

1. An accessible and entertaining introduction to some of this research can be found in David Brooks, *The Social Animal* (New York: Random House, 2011).
2. For more on attachment theory, see Klaus Grossmann, Karin Grossmann and Everett Waters, *Attachment from Infancy to Adulthood: The Major Longitudinal Studies* (New York: Guilford Press, 2006).

children, who spend much of their time either watching television, playing video games or taking lessons, are not given sufficient opportunities for cultivating essential life skills.³

Research into the significance of attachment and play illustrates as well the central place of relationships in the learning process. Our minds do not function exclusively at our discretion; they are hardwired to respond to other people. It is well established, for instance, that students learn more effectively when they feel a sense of connection and personal affection for their teachers.⁴

Advocates of social learning theory, such as Albert Bandura, argue that the most important factor in the development of human behavior is the observation of others.⁵ Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience have brought to light the critical function that mirror neurons play in human communication. These are small circuits of cells that fire up both when we perform a given action and when we observe another person perform the same action. In other words, mirror neurons enable us to understand the actions, feelings, and intentions of others by generating internal simulations of the feelings and intentions linked to the actions of others.

As neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni explains it, “When I see you smiling, my mirror neurons for smiling fire up, too, initiating a cascade of neural activity that evokes the feeling we typically associate with a smile. I don’t need to make any inference on what

3. Alix Spiegel, “Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills,” National Public Radio, February 21, 2008, accessed March 22, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19212514>.
4. Deborah Stipek, “Relationships Matter,” *Educational Leadership* 64, no. 1 (September 2006), 46-49.
5. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (New York: General Learning Press, 1977).

you are feeling, I experience immediately and effortlessly (in a milder form, of course) what you are experiencing.”⁶

The work of mirror neurons hints at how much human brain functionality takes place beyond the conscious exercise of reason. There are, in fact, vast domains of unconscious, nonrational neural activity that inform how we perceive, interpret and respond to the world around us. Another example is supplied by the psychologists Alexander Todorov and Janine Willis, who through a series of experiments determined that humans make snap judgments about essential characteristics of people based upon the briefest of glances at their faces, easily outpacing the process of reasoned analysis.

These snap judgments seem to originate in the amygdala, a primitive part of the brain that responds to fear, and they often prove to be enduring and definitive.⁷ Over the course of his distinguished career, cognitive scientist Keith Stanovich has explored the complex web of factors that inform human decision making, including the mystery of why intelligence and good judgment often diverge.⁸

6. “The Mirror Neuron Revolution: Explaining What Makes Humans Social,” *Scientific American*, July 1, 2008, accessed March 24, 2011, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-mirror-neuron-revolut>.
7. Willis and Todorov, “First Impressions: Making Up Your Mind After 100-Ms Exposure to a Face,” *Psychological Science* 17 (2006): 592-98.
8. In 2010, Stanovich was awarded the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for his book *What Intelligence Tests Miss: The Psychology of Rational Thought* (Yale University Press, 2009).

Taking into account the many factors that contribute to human development, it stands to reason that much of the work of forming future priests takes place outside formal channels of education, like the classroom and ministry placements. Critical contributions unfold within the interstices of these channels, including time devoted to recreational activities and encounters with the arts. Especially fruitful are those instances of meaningful connection with other people, and when broad expanses of the mind are stimulated.

Priests are summoned to embody Christ for others. Approaching this ideal requires not only a personal and theological knowledge of Christ, but also a nuanced understanding of human nature. Understanding human nature, in turn, is in large part a matter of imagination. Imagination refers to the human capacity to operate beyond instinct and the data immediately present to our senses or stored in memory. It enables us to bend the known reality of experience into new formations, to construct parallel universes of possibility, and to venture at will throughout the limitless expanse of time and space.

Empowered by imagination, we can break the seal of our individual personhood and enter into the lives of others, intuiting their thoughts, feelings and dreams. In addition to being an individual exercise, imagination can be shared between people when it is rendered into a cultural artifact (words, images, actions, etc.).

The freshness and range of a given person's imagination is, in part, a natural endowment and, in part, a matter of conscious development. When one considers the lives of great artists, some have manifested evidence of virtuosity at a very early age (Mozart comes to mind). Many more have devoted countless hours practicing their art and exposing themselves to the artistic production and other relevant forms of life experience that stimulate their own creative vision.

Gifted writers, for instance, have tended to be avid readers. William Faulkner offered the following advice to aspiring writers:

“Read, read, read. Read everything – trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it.”⁹ Martin Scorsese honed his genius as a filmmaker by spending countless hours in movie theaters as a child and young adult.¹⁰ Seminarians and priests can benefit from a similar regimen of cultural consumption. By thoughtfully considering the creativity of others, we nourish our own capacity for imagination and come to a fuller understanding of the human condition at a given moment and place.

One effective way of immersing oneself in rich streams of creativity is the movies, from the latest Hollywood blockbuster to more obscure films on the art-house circuit. Film is a relatively young art form, technically speaking, first emerging as a popular and commercial phenomenon in the 1890s.

But in another respect, it can be seen as an enhanced approach to storytelling, which is as old as humankind. Talented storytellers are valued not only for the information they share, but also for their ability to transmit it in compelling fashion. A story well told unleashes the awesome potential of the imagination, allowing us to lose ourselves in expansive realms of experience and emotion.

Its narrative force reinforces the persuasiveness of the story’s central meaning or moral. In essence, movies are very elaborate

9. Qtd. in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Conversations with William Faulkner* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 68.

10. For an enlightening window into Scorsese’s obsession with movies and the distinctive cinematic vision that emerged in the process, see Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, directors, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (1995).

stories created through the collaboration of a team of talented people, which fuse together text, images and sound.

There are traditionalists who argue that movies stymie the imagination by providing the sound and imagery of a story that the audience would otherwise have to generate on their own. A friend of mine, for instance, who happens to be a Tolkien enthusiast, steadfastly refuses to see Peter Jackson's recent treatment of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, lest his own imagined Middle Earth be dislodged by the cinematic version.

I would counter that the aural and visual content of a good film actually stimulates the imagination, providing rich streams of data that we react to and build upon. This helps explain the popularity of movies. We flock to cinemas, not because we are too lazy to imagine for ourselves, but because we delight in stretching our imaginations beyond their ordinary capacity, and movies provide the requisite challenges.

Movies come in all shapes and sizes, and their value for shaping the imagination and contributing to priestly formation likewise varies. Certainly, the most visible films are big-budget affairs produced by the major Hollywood studios, which increasingly rely upon blockbusters to meet desired profit margins. The enormous expense entailed in making such films usually leads studios to eschew artistic risks and to rely instead upon story lines and plot devices with proven appeal to broad audiences.

Critics bemoan such conventionality, and it can indeed lead to bland and predictable films. But big-budget films that become blockbusters often have more going for them than box-office receipts alone. Their capacity to attract tens of millions of viewers suggests they may be either tapping into the *Zeitgeist* or speaking to some enduring element of the human condition in a compelling fashion.

Seminarians and priests would do well to take notice. The success of their ministry depends in large measure on their capacity to understand their audience and to apply the light of the Gospel to people's lives in fresh ways that educate, challenge and inspire.

Hugely popular films can contribute to these types of understanding.

For the moment at least, the biggest blockbuster of them all is *Avatar*, a 2009 science fiction epic directed by James Cameron that has generated nearly \$3 billion in revenue. The film is set in the year 2154 on the planet Pandora, which is home to both a tribe of giant blue humanoids (the Na'vi) and a rare mineral (unobtainium).

The RDA Corporation from planet Earth has established a presence on Pandora to extract unobtainium, and its ruthless methods threaten the Na'vi way of life. RDA tasks a paraplegic marine named Jake Sully to use his avatar (a Na'vi body he controls remotely by his mind) to infiltrate the Na'vi and learn their secrets. Sully comes to identify with the Na'vi, falls in love with a Na'vi princess and uses his avatar to thwart the RDA's mission.

Despite its futuristic setting, *Avatar* is very much a film of its time. James Cameron has stated plainly that he used the film to call attention to a number of his political concerns, including environmental despoliation, the horrors of mechanized warfare and the excesses of amoral corporations.¹¹ Judging from the discourse it has generated, the film clearly has touched a nerve in the American body politic.

While observers on the political left have registered their approval of its underlying themes, critics on the right have accused *Avatar* of being an anti-American, anti-capitalist, anti-military and/or anti-Christian polemic.¹² Further afield, other communities have

11. See, for example, Mekado Murphy, "A Few Questions for James Cameron," *New York Times*, December 21, 2009, accessed April 4, 2011, <http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/a-few-questions-for-james-cameron/>.

12. See Tom Shone, "James Cameron Hates America: The

recognized their own distinctive political concerns reflected in the film. Some have identified with the oppressed Na'vi, including a small group of activists in the Occupied Territories who painted themselves blue to call attention to the cause of Palestinian statehood.¹³

In China, the film has been criticized for being just the latest iteration of the Orientalist myth, a kind of *Madame Butterfly* for the digital age.¹⁴ In short, this fictional account of a future conflict on a distant planet has generated a great deal of conversation about the concerns and tensions coursing through contemporary culture, and one can learn a lot about our times by following the conversation.

In addition to being timely, *Avatar* is, in certain respects, timeless. This is not to say that it is a classic that will be appreciated for centuries to come; it is far too early to render such a judgment. Rather, the film elicits a sense of *déjà vu*: you have been here before, many times over. Like *Star Wars*, it is a story of a hero, who against all odds vanquishes an evil and much more powerful foe.

Like *Dances with Wolves*, it is a tale of a man converted by the decency of his erstwhile enemies, who goes on to defend them against his erstwhile allies. Like *Romeo and Juliet*, it is an account of star-crossed lovers (only in this Hollywood version they do not die

Conservative Attack on Avatar,” *Slate*, January 14, 2010, accessed April 4, 2011, <http://slate.com/id/2241542/>.

13. Robert Mackey, “‘Avatar’ on the West Bank,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/avatar-on-the-west-bank/>.
14. Dave Izkoff, “China Sees ‘Avatar’ (and Criticizes It, Too),” *New York Times*, January 11, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/11/china-sees-avatar-and-criticizes-it-too/>.

at the end).¹⁵ Some critics have called Cameron to task for this, but the fact of the matter is that storytelling is a domain rife with redundancy, and not without reason. There are certain tropes and narratives that we simply never tire of.

New iterations of plotlines encountered countless times before faithfully elicit satisfying cascades of thought and emotion, for they speak to core elements of our psychological and spiritual lives. Movies like *Avatar* that attract large audiences by telling familiar tales open a window to the values, expectations and aspirations that are widely shared by people across the globe. Moreover, they illustrate well a principle that guided the literary work of, among others, J.R.R. Tolkien: mythic language is a powerful and persuasive means to speak about moral truths.¹⁶

Opposite the blockbuster on the cinematic spectrum is the art-house film. Such creations are typically produced on modest budgets and are thus under less financial pressure to achieve mass appeal. This enables directors to embrace the role of auteur, abandoning cinematic conventions in favor of a distinctive creative vision.¹⁷

15. Many observers have commented upon the influences that shaped *Avatar*. See, for instance, Mark Feeney, “*Avatar*’ Is Powered by Many Influences—for Better and Worse,” *Boston Globe*, January 10, 2010, accessed April 8, 2011, http://www.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2010/01/10/avatar_is_powered_by_many_influences__for_better_and_worse/.
16. For more on Tolkien’s vision and method, see Richard L. Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003).
17. *Auteur* is French for “author.” Its use in connection to

Indeed, the economy of the art-house film demands nothing less. The relatively small but savvy audiences drawn to such productions tend to favor intellectually substantial films with nuanced character studies and surprising plot twists. Art-house films can be splendid opportunities to exercise the imagination. When a film is placed in the hands of gifted artists facing relatively few restrictions, the results often expand the boundaries of the expected and enrich our capacity to envision the world anew.

A noteworthy example of the director as auteur is Krzysztof Kieślowski, a leading figure in the distinguished field of postwar Polish filmmakers. After devoting his early career to making documentaries of everyday life in Poland, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s Kieślowski directed a series of feature films that are widely considered to be some of the most influential and significant cinematic achievements of the era.

These films include *Camera Buff* (1979), *Blind Chance* (1981), the 10-part cycle *Decalogue* (1988), *The Double Life of Véronique* (1990), and the *Three Colors Trilogy* (1993-94). Kieślowski's films are distinguished by their weighty moral themes, their subtle portraits of both the darker recesses of the human psyche and the quest for transcendence, and an overarching mood that is at once majestic and melancholic, profound and absurd.¹⁸

Kieślowski's *Decalogue* cycle offers a powerful illustration of how

cinema reflects the idea that movies can rise to the level of high art, reflecting the authorial vision of the director. This idea first emerged in France in the 1950s among filmmakers and critics associated with the New Wave movement.

18. One of the best introductions to Kieślowski's approach to filmmaking can be found in Danusia Stok, ed., *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (Faber & Faber, 1995).

art-house films can enlarge the viewer's imaginative register. The cycle, developed with his longtime collaborator Krzysztof Piesiewicz, consists of 10 hour-length films, each of which is a meditation on one of the Ten Commandments. In his inimitable fashion, Kiésłowski interprets this mandate broadly, creatively weaving dimensions of each commandment into the dense textures of human relationships.

Just to cite one example, the third film in the cycle treats the commandment to "honor the Lord's day." Christians generally have interpreted this commandment as an injunction to honor Sunday by eschewing work in favor of more spiritual pursuits such as attending church, though in practice the distinction between Sundays and other days is often minimal.

Kiésłowski's film, by contrast, is set on the night before and the early morning of Christmas, and the main character, Janusz, is faced with a dreadful dilemma. As he is celebrating the holiday with his wife and young children, he is lured away by a former lover named Ewa. She begs his assistance in tracking down her husband, who supposedly has gone missing. Over the course of their peregrinations through Warsaw, we slowly learn that, three years earlier, Ewa and Janusz had an affair that wreaked havoc on their respective marriages.

Janusz managed to reconcile with his wife, but Ewa's husband left her, and ever since her life has been a shambles. Her loneliness is especially difficult to bear at Christmas, and in her desperation she makes a momentous vow. If Janusz remains with her until 7:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, she will interpret it as a hopeful sign that her life will get better; if not, she will commit suicide.

Janusz only learns of her vow at 7:00 a.m. In the intervening hours, and at considerable personal cost, he accompanies her on an increasingly absurd search for a husband that does not exist. He patiently endures her periodic taunts and accusations, suspended between erotic desire, guilt over past mistakes and empathy for her plight. In the end, his willingness to be present to

Ewa, risking the harmony of his own family to share in her suffering, makes all the difference.

Through his act of human decency and her renewed willingness to hope, both characters honor the Lord's day. Kiésłowski's fresh interpretation of a venerable injunction leaves a lasting impression. I suspect many viewers come away from this and other episodes of Decalogue with a more expansive moral imagination.

Movies are more than just old-fashioned storytelling enhanced by images and sound. A key dimension of their richness is the fact that these stories are embodied by actors. When accomplished actors are paired with quality scripts well suited to their strengths, the effects are nothing short of magical. Talented actors have the capacity to fully inhabit the characters they play, bringing to the screen an exquisitely wrought being.

Viewers are given privileged access not only to the outward personas of characters, but to their inner lives as well. Lingering camera shots allow us to scrutinize their body language and micro expressions and to follow them behind closed doors, where brave façades dissolve. Such intimacy enables us to share in their struggles and triumphs to a degree that is rare in ordinary life. The more we watch top-shelf actors plying their craft, the more we enlarge the frames of reference we employ in assessing human nature and experience.

In the catalogue of thespian triumphs on the silver screen, one of the greatest is Renée Jeanne Falconetti's portrayal of Joan of Arc in Carl Theodor Dreyer Jr.'s masterpiece, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).¹⁹ For all of the acclaim it now enjoys, this silent film was a

19. Legendary film critic Pauline Kael argued that Falconetti's portrayal of Joan "may be the finest performance ever recorded on film." Kael, *5001 Nights At the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 449.

box-office failure, and for many years it was believed that the last copies were destroyed in a fire.

Then in 1981, to the shock and delight of cineastes around the world, a nearly complete exemplar was found in a closet in a mental institution in Oslo. A sumptuous version has since been released on DVD by Criterion Collection, paired with a haunting opera/oratorio newly composed for the film by Richard Einhorn.

Even the most talented of screenwriters would be hard pressed to improve upon the actual course of St. Joan's short, remarkable life. She was born to a peasant family in Orleans around the year 1412, in the thick of the Hundred Years' War. Forces loyal to England controlled much of France, and King Henry V of England seemed poised to win the French crown.

Visionary experiences in her early teens led Joan to conclude that God wanted her to lead French armies in a campaign to drive out the English occupiers, and she managed to win the trust of a number of key French lords. In 1429, she inspired French forces to a series of victories that turned the tide of battle, ultimately resulting in the expulsion of the English from French soil.

Not long after her public career began, however, Joan fell into the hands of her enemies. She was placed on trial for heresy, found guilty and burned at the stake in 1431. A subsequent investigation authorized by Pope Callixtus III exonerated her, concluding that her trial had been illegitimate. She became a national heroine in France and was canonized a saint in 1920.

In telling Joan's story, Dreyer made a number of unconventional and commercially risky decisions. He essentially ignored her remarkable rise from obscurity and military achievements, focusing instead on her trial and execution. Instead of using an original screenplay, he largely relied on the lengthy transcripts of the interrogations Joan had to endure. Foregoing elaborate sets and period details, for much of the film the camera is tightly trained on the faces of the actors, unredeemed by makeup.

The key to the film's power is Falconetti's tour-de-force performance. Powerful emotions wash over her face and body in

waves, and it is almost impossible for viewers to avoid being buffeted by their wake. We soar with her in ecstatic rapture, taste her intimidation before her judges and shudder in the face of her imminent demise. “You cannot know the history of silent film unless you know the face of Renee Maria Falconetti,” writes film critic Roger Ebert. To watch her portrayal of Joan “is to look into eyes that will never leave you.”²⁰

Another way movies can contribute to the formation of imaginative priests is by bringing past eras and distant cultures to life in particularly vivid ways. This is especially valuable for Catholics for a couple of reasons.

First, the faith emphasizes the importance of tradition as a witness to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and a resource that informs Catholic belief and practice. Catholics are called to understand the tradition that undergirds their faith, and priests should be effective mediators of that tradition. For this reason, movies that treat aspects of the Church’s past in ways that enable believers to enter imaginatively into their tradition are especially useful.

Second, the Roman Catholic Church, as its name suggests, is universal by design. What happens in one corner of the Church should be of concern to Catholics elsewhere, and priests are in a position to promote this kind of global vision. Movies that reveal important truths about cultures different from our own challenge us to rise above the temptation of parochialism and to inhabit a more expansive world.

An excellent example of cinema’s potential to enhance our historical understanding is *Black Robe* (1991), a film about Jesuit

20. Ebert, “The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928),” rogerebert.com, February 16, 1997, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19970216/REVIEWS/401010350/1023>.

missionary activity in New France in the 1630s. Directed by Bruce Beresford, the film is based on a novel of the same name by Brian Moore. We have all heard the old saw that truth is stranger than fiction. The book and film versions of *Black Robe* demonstrate that fiction can be more revealing than the truth contained in the historical record.

We happen to know quite a lot about French colonial and missionary engagement in North America in the early 17th century. The French were prolific letter writers and record keepers, and they were inspired by the strange and wonderful new world they encountered.²¹ Working from this trove of material, Moore developed a story about an imagined missionary venture that combines a gripping plot, keen historical sensitivity and an ability to portray the inner lives of characters that feel utterly authentic. Film adaptations often fall well short of the novels that inspired them, but in this instance Beresford manages to compensate for the loss of textual detail by exploiting advantages inherent in film, including powerful visuals. The effect is mesmerizing.

The main character in *Black Robe* is a Jesuit priest named LaFogue, who has been sent by his superiors to reinforce a fledgling Jesuit mission to the Huron tribe deep in the North American interior. Arriving at the primitive capital of New France in 1634, he promptly wins the support of the governor, Samuel de Champlain, who arranges for a contingent of Algonquin Indians and an experienced French colonist named Daniel to accompany him on his dangerous journey through uncharted territory.

Drawing from extensive ethnographic research, the film captures the stark differences in language, dress, custom and worldview that

21. An excellent introduction to this material can be found in Catharine Randall, ed., *Black Robes and Buckskin: A Selection from the Jesuit Relations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

distinguished the indigenous peoples from the French. Fr. LaForgue's taut expressions mirror the mixed emotions that frame his relationship with the Algonquins: the contempt he holds for their "savage" culture is tinctured by love he believes he should feel for them as fellow human beings and his genuine concern for their spiritual well-being.

Through artful flashbacks, we witness how he draws upon memories of his European past to sustain his faith and identity in a context nearly devoid of recognizable markers. For their part, the Algonquins struggle mightily with the stranger in their midst. After initially finding humor in his ineptitude at wilderness survival, they are increasingly unnerved by the radical otherness of his dress and behavior.

Drawing upon their own religious resources, including dream analysis and the advice of a shaman, they conclude that Fr. LaForgue is a source of bad fortune. Despite their promise to Champlain, they abandon him midway on his journey. The film's compelling treatment of the tense, layered relationship between LaForgue and the Algonquins offers a memorable and fine-grained portrait of the challenges inherent in cross-cultural missionary encounters. Few resources are more effective at allowing one to enter imaginatively into such an encounter, thereby illuminating one of the most significant features of the history of Christianity in the modern era.

Finally, another advantage film offers in cultivating the imagination of priests is its communal dimension. From time immemorial, the phenomenon of storytelling has been social, with storytellers enveloping groups of people into shared imaginary worlds. This helps explain why the rise of the novel as a popular mode of storytelling was initially so controversial. Some observers feared that the solitary nature of reading drew individuals away from their natural communities.

Movies helped reinvigorate the practice of storytelling as a social experience. The immense popular interest in the medium led to the building of a vast infrastructure of movie theaters, often large and

ornate, and for decades the dominant mode of screening films was to crowds of people in public spaces. The popularity of theaters has since been eclipsed by technology that allows for inexpensive home viewing, but even in this more intimate context most people watch movies with family or friends.

Watching movies together contributes to the cultivation of community and to the collective imagination that nourishes community life. By sharing the emotional journey a good film offers, and then reminiscing about it afterward, we reinforce our connections with other people and bring our identities and worldviews into greater conjunction. These are positive processes that dovetail naturally with the proper work of priests.

A great example of how movies can contribute to community and the collective imagination is Frank Capra's masterpiece, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Released in 1946, the film was something of a box-office disappointment, but it was rediscovered in the 1970s and has since become a much-beloved cultural institution. Its denouement takes place at Christmas, and for this reason countless families and communities have made a tradition of watching it during the Christmas season.

The film's idealized portrait of small-town life and its happy ending has led some to dismiss it as a frothy entertainment, but in reality it is a serious film that deals with weighty themes. In one of the best roles of his storied career, Jimmy Stewart stars as George Bailey, who as a young man is ambitious to leave his hometown of Bedford Falls to see the world and achieve great things. He repeatedly puts off his anticipated departure for the good of others, including his brother, his family's savings and loan company, and the people of Bedford Falls in need of affordable credit.

After falling in love with a childhood friend, George starts a family and becomes a pillar of the community. Bedford Falls thrives on account of his selfless dedication to others, but his thwarted ambition continues to fester and, in a moment of financial crisis, he contemplates suicide. At this point, his guardian angel intervenes,

and he allows George to experience what the world would have been like had he not been born.

It is a nightmarish vision: his younger brother dies in a childhood accident, the town druggist is ruined for accidentally poisoning a client, his family business folds, his wife becomes an old maid, and his hometown succumbs to economic and moral decay under the thumb of a ruthless slumlord. George decides to continue living, and events quickly conspire to solve his problems. The curtain falls on a joyous gathering of family and friends around the Christmas tree.

The enduring appeal of *It's a Wonderful Life* rests, in part, on the fact that it explores a moral dilemma endemic to human existence. For a society to function, each individual member is called to curtail his or her personal desires. The benefits of this grand, unspoken bargain are real, but so are the costs.

In other words, we can all relate to George Bailey. His joys and frustrations resemble our own. George's tour through a world bereft of his contributions allows the viewer to explore vicariously a widely held fantasy: what would happen if I abandoned my obligations in favor of my desires? That imaginary exercise, ultimately, is cathartic. Without having to say a word, the families and communities watching the film ritually reaffirm the respective sacrifices they make for the common good.

The superb German drama *The Lives of Others* (2006) tells the story of Gerd Wiesler, a fictional officer of the East German secret police. Assigned by his superior to spy on a prominent East German novelist and his actress girlfriend, Wiesler is gradually transformed by the experience. He comes to understand that his superior is motivated by base desires rather than genuine security concerns.

More importantly, the loving relationship between the writer and actress and the richness of their artistic milieu leads him to recognize the poverty of his own life. To protect the pair, Wiesler uses his insider status to thwart the investigation he was assigned to advance. This betrayal ruins his career, but on a personal level he realizes a more authentic existence.

Wiesler's transformation is an apt metaphor for the contributions

movies can make to priestly formation. Good movies transport us beyond ourselves, allowing us privileged access into the lives of others. Our own worlds and imaginative capacity are enlarged in the process. Many popular films can instruct us regarding the way humans think and the issues of momentary or perennial human concern. More artistic films challenge us to imagine the world anew. Other films provide virtual passage to distant cultures and bygone eras. In these and other ways, movies offer seminarians and priests a wider perspective on the human condition and the art of effective communication.

4. Priest and Poet

FR. HARRY HAGAN, OSB

This essay considers the metaphor: “A priest is like a poet.” As metaphors do, this statement suggests that we can understand a priest better by understanding his likeness to a poet. Generally, priests are not literally poets, and only three Catholic priests are commonly found in standard anthologies of English poetry: St. Robert Southwell, SJ (1561-1595), Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ (1844-1889).

Of the three, Hopkins is arguably the best poet, though the other two were more important during their lifetimes with Newman continuing to play an important role today. Clearly, a priest need not be a poet. Still, I would argue that a priest should be like a poet in some ways.

Just as there is a large discussion about priest and identity, so also one can find a parallel wonderment about poets and what they might or should contribute to the world. Lest either of these discussions bog us down, I leave them aside and propose that the basic similarity between priest and poet lies in their relationship to words.

The poet is a wordsmith – someone who makes things out of words. A priest, among other things, is tied to the Word of God, not just as one who repeats it but also as one who gives it flesh again – in part by the living of it, in part by speaking this word anew. The priest, then, must be, to some degree, also a wordsmith.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), like Hopkins, died an unknown poet, but since her death she has taken a place in the front ranks of American poets. She has a small poem that sets out the task of words and, so, of poetry.

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say—
I say it just begins to live

That day.

Surely, Dickinson overstates her claim. Every spoken word does not “live.” Still, some words, once spoken, do not disappear. They may be harsh words, best forgotten, but once said they must be dealt with and reconciled, if possible, but even that does not make them go away.

Words of love are surely meant to live, and marriage vows create a new reality, which must be dealt with – even if the vows prove impossible to keep. Perhaps Dickinson’s poem best describes our hope that we can say something that will endure, and surely this is the hope and the task of the poet.

Dickinson’s poem is more than a good idea. The directness of the poem disguises its craft – that is, the poet’s ability to use language with power and precision. Here, Dickinson disguises a heroic couplet: two rhymed lines of iambic pentameter.

A word is dead when it is said some say.
I say it just begins to live that day.

Many would say that the heroic couplet stands as the strongest two lines in the English language, and Dickinson uses it to give strength and fixity to her statement. To the heroic couplet, she adds the repetition of words and sounds to create internal rhyme and alliteration with “d” and “s” to the fore. The poem turns on the word “say,” which contrasts what is “dead” with what “begins to live.” The craft of the well-said makes a difference, and a poet knows the craft, knows how to put words together so that they have weight and density or lightness and transparency, as the need may be. Still, Dickinson brings more than craft.

In the search for truth, some take refuge in truism – those statements that undermine the truth with banality. Dickinson, however, captures a more complex reality. She does not say that the words necessarily will be true, but that they will live. In this, she has proposed her own metaphor: “Speaking is like giving birth,” or “A word is like a living person who has a life that changes and unfolds.” Dickinson has captured a genuine similarity between a spoken word and a living person. She suggests unfolding possibilities rather than

narrowing definitions, and it would be hard to explain its possibilities and, harder still, to define the many ways that people might relate to this poem.

Monroe Beardsley called metaphor “a poem in miniature,” and some regard the poet’s ability to discover metaphors to stand at the heart of the poetic vocation. Dickinson seems to say as much in her definition of a poet:

This was a Poet —

This was a Poet — It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings —
And Attar so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the Door —
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it — before
Of Pictures, the Discloser —
The Poet — it is He
Entitles Us — by Contrast
To ceaseless Poverty —
Of Portion — so unconscious
The Robbing — could not harm
Himself — to Him — a Fortune
Exterior — to Time —

The basic metaphor of the poem compares the poet to a perfume maker who distills a fragrant essential oil, i.e., an attar, from dead flowers, which is the normal way that perfume is made. However, Dickinson adds a twist. These dead flowers come from the familiar species that grew by the door, that we walked past, day in and out, that seemed to be noticeable only while alive and blooming and now useless being dead.

Dickinson is connecting several things: the poet to the perfume maker and the perfume to the ordinary flowers of daily life. Surely, there is every good reason to hope that a priest can be compared to

such a poet, because life is mostly made of ordinary events that get lost unless they are connected and so magnified.

As Dickinson suggests, the connections are not abstruse or particularly inscrutable; rather the poet is able to see the obvious because:

We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before.

Once pointed out, the insight is clear. According to this poem, the poet's power lies not in some superhuman intuition, but in an aptitude for reality – for seeing the likeness between things in front of us. As Dickinson recognizes, we easily overlook the possible connections in front of us.

This kind of insight caused Viktor Shklovsky, a Russian formalist, to argue that the function of all art is to “defamiliarize” the ordinary. The artist takes what we know too well – what has become boring, trite and commonplace – and makes it strange so that we must look at it in a new and arresting way. To accomplish this, the poet uses unfamiliar words, unexpected rhythms, unexpected twists to force the reader to struggle with the text and so to experience the commonplace as if for the first time. For both Dickinson and Shklovsky, the poet focuses on what lies in front of us, and this ability becomes the source of a wealth that cannot be robbed, because this seeing is constantly generating new fortune which, as Dickinson says, is “exterior to time.”

A priest, too, must be able to forge the bonds of likeness not only between the things of this world, but also between this world and the larger reality of God. In this, Jesus shows us the way because much of his teaching is grounded in his ability to make metaphors: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed or like yeast that a woman took or like a man who built a house. This larger reality requires metaphors to describe it, and while those of Jesus remain canonical, the preacher must have some ability to see the metaphorical possibilities of this world to give the Kingdom new metaphors, new flesh in our own day.

If, as Dickinson suggests, a poet's power lies in the ability to

discover the metaphorical links between unexpected realms, then the poet cannot be just a literalist interested only in the literal thing itself. Certainly, there is a place for concern with the literal. One must understand what a mustard seed literally is before it is possible to understand how the Kingdom of God could be like it. Moreover, both law and science depend upon the limits of the literal meaning to name things with precision. So the botanist moves from the tree, to the deciduous, to the oak and then to the red or white or pin oak and more.

The connections here are literal and contiguous, and this type of relationship is found everywhere. Pen and ink and paper have a literal, physical connection and belong to the domain of writing. There is no metaphorical leap here, no juxtaposition from different domains with an assertion of likeness. Examples of this type of connection could be multiplied endlessly in a game of free association: window and wall, table and chair, cup and saucer.

As said above, metaphor requires a leap. Speaking a word is only somewhat like giving birth to a child; the endurance of a word spoken is only somewhat like the life of a person. Because the similarity is only partial and often cannot be precisely defined, some refuse to allow the truth of the metaphor. These literalists claim to be realists because they demand facticity, but really they are continually reducing reality only to physical, literal relationships.

As a result, these “realists” isolate and fragment the pieces of our world because they cannot recognize the likeness of different things. Their reality, bereft of metaphor, lacks imagination. With the exclusion of metaphor, science can lose sight of the wonder of creation; the law court can forget the larger purpose of the law and make the laws an end unto themselves, and priesthood can cut itself off from mystery.

A priest, like a poet, depends upon his ability to find the metaphorical link between things, especially between the words of the Scriptures and the life of the Church. The Scriptures do not literally describe our experience today; they do not tell us exactly what we should do. Rather, the reader, in this case the

preacher, must discover a relationship of likeness between the Book and ourselves. The literalist may insist upon a literal match between the text and today, but this leads to a violation of the text, which must be contorted and forced to make the text somehow fit literally even though there is no fit.

Admittedly, metaphor is no simple solution. It creates possibilities which, in turn, bring the problem of deciding which possibilities fit. For a priest, the possibilities are limited by the creed, the tradition as taught by the Magisterium. Still within that large context, possibilities abound, and possibility gives rise to possibility, to things unseen, unexpected. This makes some nervous; they want the world nailed down – clear and literal. This tendency toward a narrow literalism always exists, for it seems to offer the comfort of things known and sure, but this comfort requires a space small enough to be knowable. In such a small place, the ego becomes the measure of the world. When everything is measured against myself, that which is different and other becomes a threat and so must be defined as outside and false, and it must be kept outside.

Dickinson plays with this problem in a poem on preachers.

He preached upon 'Breadth'

He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow—
The Broad are too broad to define,
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar—
The Truth never flaunted a Sign—
Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
As Gold the Pyrites would shun.
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
To meet so enabled a Man!

For Dickinson, the pride of this preacher – his narcissism and therefore his small-minded myopia – lies at the root of the problem. Instead of gold, we get fool's gold.

It is true that the preacher is faced with a difficult, if not impossible, dilemma. The preacher should preach and practice the same thing. In the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer concludes his description of the parson with just this ideal:

But Cristes loore, and Hise apostles twelve
He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe
But Christ's own teaching and his apostles Twelve
he taught, but first he followed it himself.

Prologue, 527-528

Surely, this is the goal. However, if the preaching does not exceed what the preacher can practice, then the preacher is forced to remake God and the Gospel in his own image and likeness. Though Chaucer's ideal is much to be desired, it is more important that the preacher be faithful to the Gospel, and a good preacher really must preach a sermon that is a judgment on himself, first of all. The difficulty of doing this and sustaining it over a lifetime should not be underestimated. Sometimes the decision is conscious, but often it is unconscious. The preacher avoids this or that because it would be too difficult to face. In Dickinson's poem, the preacher's arrogance makes him unaware of his narrowness.

Although the literalist may claim to be a realist, the opposite is true. The literalist is unable to see the possibility of the world, but as Dickinson argues, the poet is able to see the possibility of the dead flowers at the back door becoming an immense perfume.

In his *Spoon River Anthology*, Edgar Lee Masters captures something of this metaphorical realism in his poem, "Father Malloy." All of the poems in this book tell something of the people buried in the graveyard of an imaginary Midwestern town named Spoon River. Though hailed as a great American poetic work when it appeared in 1915, its luster has faded in academic circles, though it robustly remains in print.

As the poem makes clear, the speakers describe the deceased Catholic priest from a non-Catholic point of view, from that of the people buried on the hill and not in the Catholic cemetery, where "the cross marks every grave." The poem lacks our typical theological concerns about priesthood. Still, or perhaps because of that, it describes in 23 lines, this parish priest as a real realist.

Father Malloy

You are over there, Father Malloy,

Where holy ground is, and the cross marks every grave,
Not here with us on the hill –
Us of wavering faith, and clouded vision
And drifting hope, and unforgiven sins.
You were so human, Father Malloy,
Taking a friendly glass sometimes with us,
Siding with us who would rescue Spoon River
From the coldness and the dreariness of village morality.
You were like a traveler who brings a little box of sand
From the wastes about the pyramids
And makes them real and Egypt real.
You were a part of and related to a great past,
And yet you were so close to many of us.
You believed in the joy of life.
You did not seem to be ashamed of the flesh.
You faced life as it is,
And as it changes.
Some of us almost came to you, Father Malloy,
Seeing how your Church had divined the heart,
And provided for it,
Through Peter the Flame,
Peter the Rock.

The poem claims humanity for Fr. Malloy, who was not opposed to taking a friendly drink with whomever – not just with his parishioners, but also with those now buried over there on the hill, and this detail illustrates the priest's larger moral horizon and his pastoral relationship with the world beyond his parish. The poem connects the priest to both the past and the present as if he had been a sightseer in a strange mysterious land and so had the ability to make that world present and to bring it and himself “so close to many of us.” Though the priest belongs to these two worlds, he is able to move between them and to hold them together. The poem, then, makes this theme of incarnation explicit:

You believed in the joy of life.
You did not seem to be ashamed of the flesh.

An affirmation of the priest's realism follows:

You faced life as it is,
And as it changes.

This priest did not live in some spiritual world far away from this here and now. The poem ends with two metaphors for Peter, who stands both for the Church and for its priests:

Peter is (like) a Flame.
Peter is (like) a Rock.

The second, of course, is taken from the Gospels (Matt 16:18) and captures something of the Church's stability against the forces of chaos and evil. The flame, connected with the divining of the heart just above, suggests emotion, passion, zeal, mystery. The juxtaposition of the two – the Flame and the Rock – captures two essential pieces of the Church and of priesthood: the transcendent made incarnate, the divine made human.

Those who would limit the Church just to the rock of stability deny the Church its vitality, its mystery. They deny the change that living must necessarily bring. Likewise, those who focus only on the spiritual miss the essential element of incarnation. For us human beings, incarnation includes the breakage that comes with sin. Fr. Malloy, the poem tells us, "faced life as is." He was a realist in touch with the human and the divine.

Edgar Lee Masters' poem stands as a wonderful tribute to the many nameless priests who have, through the years, played such a role in the small towns and big cities of the Midwest and farther abroad. For their sake, the poem deserves to be known more widely.

Just as the poet can see the metaphorical connections – the ways in which persons and things are alike, so, too, the priest must be able to discover the connections between the human and the divine and to hold them together. This charism is Christological, for Christ is himself "the image of the unseen God" (Col 1:15), and in his very person he holds together divinity and humanity. This charism is given to us in baptism, and the priest has the special responsibility of making this reality present by means of word and sacrament in the name of and for the sake of the Church. In his poem "God's

Grandeur,” Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrates this sacramental manifestation in the opening metaphor:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

Hopkins not only grasps the likeness between God’s grandeur and the light scattering from crumpled metal foil, he is also able to set it down in two lines of iambic pentameter. Very few of us priests have the skill of a wordsmith like Hopkins. Yet I have heard some preachers who caused the ground to move under my feet. All of us, as best we can, must hammer out or at least point out what the Kingdom of God is like so that its mystery may continue to unfold in our midst.

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5. Holding Images Lightly: Philosophy's Appreciation of the Imagination

FR. THOMAS GRICOSKI, OSB

Philosophers since Plato have expressed a variety of opinions on the imagination, ranging from enthusiastic endorsement to critical refutation. In modern culture, imagination remains associated with fantasy and frivolity.¹ Such whimsical associations make the imagination seem unsuited to serious intellectual life. If the imagination were unfit for strictly rational philosophy, then it would also be unfit for strictly orthodox theology.

In this context, a call for the faithful to develop broader and deeper imaginations may sound like a concession to critics of the faith. The connection between theology and imagination needs to be qualified, lest it lend support to critical ideologies that would dismiss dogma as opinion, scripture as myth, spirituality as

1. Common idioms reveal this bias against the imagination: "I must have imagined it," meaning that I made a mistake; "Just a myth," meaning that imaginative explanations are only placeholders for truly scientific explanations of reality; "A mere metaphor," meaning that imaginative analogies are only rhetorical devices that do not reveal essential truths.

psychotherapy, liturgy as formality, hierarchy as patriarchy, morality as repression, and faith as weakness.

This image of a counterfeit imagination works as a kind of “reality distortion field,” within which everything fantastical is true, while the cold world of scientific fact stands outside. The world of faith and the “real world” diametrically oppose each other, and the only way for a sane person to live in both worlds is to adopt a cartoonish suspension of disbelief while they are in church, so says the critique of imaginative theology.

In the face of these critiques, the question arises of whether the imagination can be trusted. It is one thing to exercise the imagination while reading fiction or while daydreaming; few would seriously object to these activities. It is quite another thing, however, to make use of the imagination, by way of metaphors, analogies, myths, etc., in the practice of philosophy and theology. It is necessary, then, to form a philosophical rationale for the positive appropriation of imagination in the life of faith and reason.

While imagination is popularly linked with error, fantasy, deception and madness, a philosophical account of the imagination recognizes that there are more nuanced exercises of imagination. This chapter explores the delicate interplay between truth and fancy in the imagination, with the help of brief sketches of the concept’s meaning in the history of philosophy.

The goal is to work toward a hermeneutic of imagination in the life of faith and reason that offers qualified appreciation. A study of the imagination reveals that its importance for priesthood and faith in general can hardly be overstated. Philosophy and reason cannot support themselves without the aid of rich and deep imaginations, cultural critiques notwithstanding.

Richard Kearney’s excellent work on the imagination² serves as the primary source for the brief notes on the history of the

2. Kearney, Richard, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

philosophy of imagination in this chapter. The ancient philosophers were generally ambivalent toward imagination. A brief recounting of Plato and Aristotle in this regard will highlight this basic trust and mistrust of images throughout the history of Western thought. As an attempt to synthesize ancient Greek thinking and the revealed truths of the Christian dispensation, medieval philosophy shed new light on the role of imagination as a mediator between sensible and invisible reality.

This middle position both celebrates imagination as helpful and, likewise, relegates imagination to an instrumental and temporary role on the ascent to truth. With the emergence of modern thought, and its newfound ambivalence toward religious faith, an exaggerated position emerges. Spurred on by the philosophy of Kant, modern romantic and existentialist thinkers celebrated the imagination to such an extent that objectivity and reason became suspect in the light of superior creativity. Post modern philosophies have inherited the problem of imagination, and with Western culture's relativized stance on truth and objectivity, the interest in imagination almost disappears, along with every other claim to truth or falsity.

Western philosophy was founded as a reaction against the highly imaginative claims of ancient myth. The first Western philosophers, like Thales and Anaximander, were well aware of, but unimpressed by, the mythical accounts of the world's order and constitution, consisting of divine explanations for natural and human phenomena. Myths were communicated through the arts and religion, through drama and mystery religions, as well as being employed as persuasive evidence by rhetors and sophists. Myths in the ancient world were likely not believed with the same credulity their enlightened opponents often imagine.

Even if recognized not to be literally true, the teachers and purveyors of myth likely found their stories to be apt vehicles for communicating truth and teaching wisdom. Philosophers wanted to arrive at the truth through different means, through rational rather than mythical discourse. Mythos became opposed to logos. Despite

this opposition at the start of philosophy, Socrates and Plato took recourse to myths in their educational efforts. The value of myth, and of the imagination overall, was too great to be completely set aside.

IMAGINATION AND EDUCATION

Philosophers are not immune to ironic self-contradiction, a point that Plato apparently demonstrates in his great dialogue, *The Republic*. This work contains both indictments and pardons for the alleged crimes of the imagination. On the one hand, Plato assigns the imagination the lowest place on the divided line of truth, while (imageless) reason holds the highest place.

Imagination, or the images on which it relies, are merely copies of sensible things. A painted image of a dog is only a facsimile of the reality that it represents, and is thus “less real” than an actual dog. Plato’s metaphysical theory of forms, moreover, would also place the living dog at some distance from the “most real” dog, the ideal “dog.” The idea or form of “dogginess” has its place in the “realm of the forms,” and the actual hounds in the world are mere copies of the ideal.

An image has the disadvantage of being a copy of a copy, and thus stands rather far removed from the fullness of reality and truth. Plato illustrates the lowly position of images in the hierarchy of being by recounting the myth of the cave.³ In this extended metaphor, the imagination may be likened to silhouettes on a cave wall, which chained prisoners on the cave floor mistake for reality, since these images are all the prisoners are permitted to see.

These wall-images, however, are only shadows (a rather poor copy) of “human statuettes, and animal models carved in stone and wood,” paraded about by deceptive puppeteers.⁴ These wooden and stone figures are, likewise, only poor imitations of actual persons

3. Plato, *The Republic*, 514a-517a.

4. Plato, *The Republic*, 514c.

and animals that live outside the cave, in the world illuminated by the sun.

What is ironic about this myth is that Plato relies on his readers' creative powers of imagination to condemn the use of images. The fantastic myth, however, is perhaps more memorable and better known than the abstract notions of form and mimesis that the myth communicates. In the same dialogue, Plato goes on to concede that teachers often make good use of students' imaginations to communicate abstract concepts. He offers the example of a geometer who draws squares and angles to illustrate the ideal concepts of square and angle.⁵ The decisive difference between the deceptive puppeteers in the cave and the instructive geometers is that the latter indicate that their images are only approximations of the reality they represent. Plato makes allowances for the positive use of images, as long as the chief threat, i.e. deception, is curtailed.

Whatever we do not know can only be taught to us through what we already know. This axiom of education suggests that all learning relies on the imagination, using metaphors, analogies and similes. Imagine that a computer programmer enrolls in an introductory psychology course. The programmer is likely to assimilate the new knowledge of the mind in terms of her prior knowledge of computers. When the psychologist speaks of sensory input, the programmer may think of input devices, like a keyboard. When the psychologist speaks of thoughts and memories, the programmer may think of electronic files and folders.

The shared task of student and teacher is to make use of the student's prior knowledge and expand it, perhaps through the explicit use of metaphors and analogies. The comparison of the human mind to a computer system opens up an interesting metaphorical world, which holds certain benefits and limitations. Every metaphor only goes so far before it is "stretched too thin"

5. Plato, *The Republic*, 510d-510e, as quoted in Kearney, Wake, 100.

and “breaks.” The metaphor may prove too thin if the programmer declares that the human mind may be “copied” from one host machine to another, arguing that one’s mind may be in two places at the same time.

Testing the limits of metaphors proves to be a helpful imaginative exercise for student and teacher. As the metaphor “stretches,” it can be said that the imagination itself also stretches. The imagination can be called narrow or wide, according to how “far apart” the members of a metaphor stand.⁶ As education proceeds and more and more knowledge accumulates, the imagination finds new creative possibilities.⁷

IMAGINATION AND MEMORY

Aristotle, with his “realist” metaphysical commitments, offers a renewed appreciation of the imagination. Whereas Plato denounces the “mimetic,” or “copy,” quality of images as moving further away from the ideal essence of reality, Aristotle has a more positive view on the truth-revealing potential of images. Aristotle’s view of reality differs from Plato’s, primarily in the question of where the essence of an object has its locus. For Platonic philosophy, the truth of reality resides in the transcendent realm of the forms. Aristotle’s realist metaphysics, however, places the essence “within” the physical, sensible object.

6. It is perhaps less of a stretch to compare the human mind to a computer than to imagine that the body is a ship, and the mind is its captain (this was one of Descartes’ imaginative descriptions of the soul/body relationship).
7. This is one of the hallmarks of a “liberal arts” education, since science, history, philosophy, the arts and mathematics are all studied in tandem, allowing and encouraging a variety of imaginative connections.

An image, for Aristotle, has the capacity to outline and reveal the essence or truth of something, rather than only obscure the radiance of a transcendent idea. Images may thus reveal truth, rather than simply conceal it. Aristotle also repositions the locus of images and the imagination, shifting it away from the external aspect of image as art, toward the interior and psychological understanding of imagination as a faculty of the mind. The psychological imagination still reflects external reality, but it does so now as a kind of mental representation, rather than as a statue or spoken myth.

A mental picture is more fluid and dynamic than the images of the plastic arts. This added dimension of activity and dynamism leads Aristotle to place imagination on a continuum between the “outer” world of sensible things and the “inner” world of reason. This train of thought will continue in the Middle Ages, viewing imagination as a mediator between the material and the spiritual. Aristotle gave broader permissions to trust the workings of the imagination. His focus on the psychological aspect of images, however, reveals new avenues of suspicion.

Some of philosophy’s ambivalence toward imagination stems from the ambiguity of what the term “imagination” means. Whether considered in its Greek (*phantasy*) or Latin (*imaginatio*) roots, the word “imagination” can refer to the mind’s ability to “see” mental pictures (images) or to knit together new images in acts of creativity.⁸ The first sense is primarily “psychological,” related to the mental operations of remembering a scene from earlier in the day, picturing the consequences of my actions and perceiving objects with the eyes.

These images may be more or less accurate, and errors of

8. See Roger Scruton, “Imagination,” in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Davies and others (Chichester, U.K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 346.

imagination are common. It may be that I remember the wrong face for the wrong name, as when meeting several new people at once. In this case, my imagination seems to have failed me, by handing me a false image when I had requested a true one. Such mistakes of imagination are common enough that we easily learn not to trust imagination as an infallible source of information.

Mental images may be true or false, depending on their relation to the concrete, extra-mental realities to which they refer. Our memories are not picture-perfect representations of the past, and when attempting to recall details of a previously witnessed event, imagination assists the memory to “fill in” the missing gaps of an image.

As a psychological, interior faculty, the imagination plays a formative role in the world of dreams. Memories and bodily sensations during sleep feed the imagination with the raw data it needs to construct a clever dream narrative. This creative capacity of the imagination is also at work while reading fiction or appreciating art, when our imaginations help us to become absorbed in the artistic reality.

These latter examples of imagination show the inherent ambiguity of the faculty of imagination. Both aesthetic experience and dreams combine the dual senses of imagination, as simultaneous instances of mental imagery and creative thought. The possibility for falsity in the second, creative sense of imagination is more evident.

Whether imagining fantastic myths of the gods and their dramas, or enjoying the plainer prose of historical fiction, the use of creative imagination entails a rupture between image and reality. This rupture between what I see with my mind’s eye and what I see with my body’s eyes is at the root of many suspicions of imagination’s reliability. In the first case, falsity meant innocent errors of memory, while in the second case, the imagination actively breaks away from reality to posit a new, imaginary reality.

IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

Calling the imagination “false” when it appreciates a work of

fiction may be too strong an accusation; the mind of an imaginative reader does not suffer from any epistemological deficiency. Imagination may be called properly false in cases of hallucination, but only if the sufferer of a false image mistakes the hallucination for reality. Despite the various grades of “falsity,” from the innocuous to the dangerous, the imagination always entails a difference between image and reality.

This difference does not negate the insight that some images may be “more true” than the bare reality that it seems to contradict. The paradox of imagination is the linking of presence and absence, such that the image may communicate and make present some reality that otherwise would be, or seem, absent. The case of fiction and emotions illustrates the point; readers of poetry or emotionally charged prose may “imagine” emotional responses to events that did not actually occur to them. These emotional reactions may feel quite “real,” whether by virtue of their intensity or the potential they hold for educating the heart.

Young people who read about love may be more wise and “experienced” in matters of the heart than their peers who do not invest themselves so deeply in an imaginary world. Readers must maintain the difference between imagined and real emotion, however, since fictional romance is not a substitute for personal relationships. The “danger” of imagination in this case, as above, is to mistake the image for the reality, as if it were an adequate substitute for reality. If the reader keeps a safe distance between imagination and reality, however, s/he may reap the rewards of literary emotional education later in life.

Plausible historical fiction and impossible fantasy myth share the common feature of picturing reality as it is not, at least not as it is right now, not factually or literally. The danger of creative imagination rests, ironically, not on “letting the imagination have its sway,” but rather on not giving the imagination enough space. One may deny the imagination adequate “space” by making unimaginative, literalistic interpretations of images, i.e., taking the images as real.

The less-imaginative readers are more likely to confuse reality with fantasy, while the highly imaginative readers may have minds broad enough to hold several (contradictory) positions at once. If memories may be proven false, the danger is not in having memories, but in trusting all memories as if they were infallible. A person who cannot accept the limitations of memory might easily succumb to all sorts of error without realizing it.

The same is more evident in the case of one who cannot distinguish between an imagined world and the objective world as shared by his companions. Hallucinations are possible, even if they are not common occurrences for every mind; the danger of these false mental images, likewise, rests on a person's inability or refusal to distinguish mental imagery from verifiable sense perception. One of Plato's great problems with imagination in the Republic rests on the artist's ability to fool some people into believing that artistic representations are, in fact, the reality they represent.⁹

At a distance, it may be possible for someone to mistake a sculpture for an actual person, and this type of illusion suggests to Plato that images are generally unreliable. With such evidence bearing against the faculty of imagination, it would seem that philosophy would have easily discarded it from the repertoire of truth-seeking tools. Plato and Aristotle, however, could neither wholeheartedly reject nor endorse imagination, in either its recollective or productive senses.

The truth-value of creative imagery does not rest so much on the image's correspondence to "actual reality," but on another set of criteria. As indicated above, every metaphor has a "breaking point," beyond which it is unhelpful and untruthful; however, within the tenable bounds of the image, there are creative, imaginative truths. It should be noted that metaphors, analogies and other literary or rhetorical devices do not necessarily require "mental images" to operate.

9. Plato, The Republic, 598b.

The simile, “my love is like a red red rose,” surely relies on mental images, but this is not required by the nature of simile. The modified simile, “my love is like a melody,” conjures not so much a specific image, but more likely either an “imagined” sound, or more abstractly, a mental concept of melody in general, which has no sound. To understand any of these more abstract or “imageless” literary devices, we need to expand our notion of what counts as image and imagination.

Metaphors and analogies are common and necessary in everyday language. Even when not engaged in the enjoyment of fiction, the mind is occupied with other, creative uses of imagination. The philosophy of language has studied this property of metaphor, analogy and simile rather fruitfully.¹⁰

A mental image such as a memory may be judged as more or less accurate, depending on its degree of correspondence to reality. The same type of measure proves inadequate in judging the truth or falsity of creative works of art or fiction, and their imaginative enjoyment. Poetry and novels may be true in a different sense than memories or sense impressions, despite their apparent incongruity with objective states of affairs.

The truth of art is an example of the truth of the creative imagination, whether it is employed to create paintings and sculptures or metaphors and analogies. It is perhaps difficult to locate the appropriate method of judging the truth of a creative imagination, although persons regularly and readily judge that this piece of art is “true,” or that metaphor is “revealing.” The ability to judge a metaphor’s truth seems to rest on the image’s correspondence to the hidden, or absent, reality it is meant to illuminate.

10. See for example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Metaphors about spiritual matters can be judged as true or false only if there is some form of contact with the hidden side of the metaphor. The metaphor may be judged on how well it mediates this hidden reality, and makes it present and “visible” to the mind; a metaphor lends its earthly clothing to other-worldly realities. The truth of imagination depends, according to this metaphor, on how well the clothes “fit” the ghost.

IMAGINATION AND SYMBOLIC MEDIATION

Both priest and philosopher stand between two worlds as mediators and communicators between ordinary life and transcendental reality. The priest celebrates the sacraments, those mysterious moments when the marriage of heaven and earth is glimpsed, as when bread becomes flesh. The philosopher, even if s/he resists being compared to a priest, likewise stands apart to announce that ordinary reality is anything but ordinary.¹¹

There are many ways of being priest and philosopher, and many practitioners of each craft would minimize these romantic and imaginative portrayals. Priests who identify more strongly with servant-leader images than cultic-mediator models of priesthood, nonetheless, proclaim by their actions with equal poetry that the homeless and the poor are members of the Body of Christ, thereby employing a spiritual metaphor with social consequences.

The majority method of philosophy in the English-speaking world is traditionally more pragmatic and scientific than its continental counterpart, which might more readily identify itself with the romantic description. American philosophers of science and politics, however, also rely on a notion of the world as far more complex and nuanced than they would allow popular culture to

11. On the comparison of philosophers and priests, see William Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 39ff.

imagine. Without a positive appreciation of the faculty of imagination, none of this is possible.

The medieval theories of imagination rely on the classical dualisms between flesh and spirit, placing imagination in the middle, as mediator between interior reason and exterior sensation. An apt symbol of this role is found in a text of Richard of St. Victor, in which the imagination is portrayed as the handmaid that travels back and forth between the inner chamber (of reason and contemplation) where the mistress lives and the outside world (of body and sensation).¹²

The mistress is occupied with the higher and purer realities of contemplative prayer, intent on gazing upon the invisible God. The mistress, however, requires the assistance of her handmaid, even though she is often disturbed by her ministrations, since she chatters and interrupts her prayers with reports from the outside world of sensation. The imagination performs a mediating function, going back and forth between sense and reason, while not being either fully sensible or rational. The paradox of the imagination rests on this in-between status.

This in-between notion of the imagination fuels the basic premise of the imagination's important function in faith and reason. Using a faith metaphor, the imagination is a kind of bridge between flesh and spirit, and as such, the imagination is incarnational and Christological. To use a rational metaphor, the imagination stands between disembodied pure concepts, which are timeless and unchanging, and the sensible world of becoming, without which reason would have nothing on which to reflect. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider the imagination as a tool shared between priests and philosophers.

Both priest and philosopher need a vast and flexible imagination to learn and practice their vocations. From its first instance, faith formation relies on the imagination of both the proclaimer and the

12. Kearney, Wake, 119.

hearer of the Good News. Sacred Scripture begins and ends with fantastic accounts of the creation and re creation of the world, as exemplified in the image-rich books of Genesis and Revelation.

Philosophy, too, has its images and stories. Apart from the contradictory use of myths in philosophy, which was said to transcend *mythos* in favor of *logos*, myth in favor of rational discourse, philosophy nonetheless demands the operation of the imagination.¹³ Although ideas may be imagined as purely “ideal,” the human thinker is nonetheless undeniably enmeshed in the physical world. The imagination works as a kind of arbiter or mediator between two worlds, linking the material (an image) with the immaterial (a meaning). Without their imaginations, neither teachers nor students of philosophy or theology would travel far on the road to truth and wisdom.

IMAGINATION AND IDOLATRY

The question of imagination’s truth-value rests largely on the epistemological and metaphysical commitments of the various philosophies in question. The ancient and medieval philosophies of imagination, whether tending toward idealism or realism, shared the common view that the imagination was a kind of mirror, and images were a reflection of reality. Even in the case of creative or

13. The philosophical science of symbolic logic, with its mathematical formulae, requires of its students the ability to imagine concrete meanings underlying abstract ciphers. More familiarly, philosophers of mind and philosophers of science ask their readers to join them in imaginative “thought experiments,” such as the “brain in a vat” or “evil genius” images. Since philosophy tends to deal in abstractions and otherwise intangible matters, metaphors and analogies become indispensable tools.

metaphorical images, the raw materials of these imaginings came from “outside” the self and were understood as representations and products of external objects.

The shift in thinking from medieval to modern philosophy brought about radical differences in metaphysics and epistemology. With Descartes’ systematic doubt of all sense perception, all received opinions and the reality of any appearance beyond the thinking self of the *cogito*, reality was, methodically and albeit temporarily, reduced to the internal musings of the individual. It took rigorous logic and reliance on a truthful God to bring Descartes out of solipsism and dream-reality into the broader world again.¹⁴

One cannot help but wonder if some traces of methodical doubt remain in modern philosophy, and in our present culture, such that at any moment the world may collapse again into the mental confines of the individual thinker. The epistemological development of methodical doubt that uncovers the bedrock of the individual’s mind brought with it a lingering metaphysical suspicion of external reality in general. The imagination can no longer be conceived strictly as a “mirror” of external reality, if perhaps that external reality is nothing more than my own mental projection.

Kant typifies the modern development by raising human imagination from reality’s counterfeit to reality’s author. Whereas the imagination in ancient and medieval philosophy was subsequent to the prior givenness of the sensible world, and acted as a “storehouse” of mental images already received, in Kant’s system, “transcendental” imagination becomes the pre-condition for all knowledge.

Rather than the imagination or the mind in general being formed

14. It may be argued that Descartes, and all of modern philosophy, remains somehow trapped inside the thinking subject.

and shaped by the external world, Kant's reflection on the operations of pure reason lead him to conclude that human subjectivity pre-conditions all sensory impressions. All knowledge of the external world is first mental and, in some sense, "imaginary." The Kantian revolution placed the human mind at the center of reality, even as the creator of reality and meaning. Subsequent modern philosophers will take these ideas to their logical conclusions.

Kant himself seemed ambivalent about granting the imagination such authority over all reality; he attempted to check the fancy of imagination with the dictates of reason. His followers in German idealism and, later, romanticism and existentialism seemingly felt no such constraint. The modern imagination begins to take on the qualities of a deity; imagination is omnipotent to create the world as it sees fit; imagination is omniscient and capable of revealing all truth, for it is the source of truth; and imagination is omnipresent in that it occupies and illuminates every corner of the world that the human mind would want to know.

THE ILLUSION OF IMAGINATION

Despite the grand apotheosis of the imagination in modern philosophy, the adjective "imaginary" remains synonymous with "illusory" in contemporary culture. The humanist, romantic promise of imagination creating utopian systems of government has fallen woefully short. The existentialist promise of the imagination's ability to negate a false-self and create a new world of freedom has likewise proven ineffectual. The post-modern fascination with "deconstruction" undermines the modern notion of the imagination as a productive and "original" source of meaning and truth. Whereas modern philosophy undermined the potential of the imagination to faithfully mirror reality, post modern philosophy prevents the imagination from positing any original reality.

The post-modern imagination is more removed from reality than even Plato's cave shadows. The shadows on the cave wall at least had a definite pedigree, and some family resemblance could be discerned between divine idea, natural object and human image.

Imagination, for post-moderns, has become again a kind of mirror, but instead of mirroring objective reality, imagination mirrors another mirror. There is no longer any discernible origin; everything is a copy of a copy, and there is no original by which to judge and compare an image as true or false.

In such a worldview, the imagination is neither reliable to reveal reality nor free to posit an arbitrary reality. The imagination, as such, begins to disappear and the question of its truth-value is rendered moot; without any criterion to judge truth, the paradox of the imagination as straddling two poles of a dualism likewise evaporates.

The post-modern worldview is not the final word, nor is it the only model available to contemporary thinkers. It is possible to maintain modern, medieval and ancient philosophical positions as perennially valid, even in a broader post-modern context. The community of the faithful operates according to a number of possible philosophies and wide variations of theology; there is no single ultimate philosophy or any single theological pronouncement that could exhaust the mystery of Trinity, Christ and Church. The task of theology and philosophy continues *ad infinitum*. The question remains for contemporary thinkers, in light of the long history of thought: how can the imagination be helpful and trustworthy in the life of faith and reason?

Despite the lingering possibility of modern doubt and post-modern deconstruction of all truth-claims, there remains an inner sense that guides us toward helpful and instructive imagining. At the risk of employing circular logic, the ability to judge the imagination depends on the ability to employ and broaden the imagination; the imagination assists in its own defense.

For situations that require literal-mindedness, the imagination retreats into the background, even while the mind is always calling on it in various ways. As problems that are more abstract arise in the developing mind, such as the questions of the meaning of life and the nature of being, the imagination becomes more and more responsible.

DEVELOPING A RESPONSIBLE IMAGINATION

The problem of biblical interpretation serves as an illustrative case study on the development of the imagination. As a familiar and oversimplified example, the account of the six days of the world's creation in Genesis, Chapter 1, bears a multitude of interpretations. Here it is helpful to concentrate only on the detail of the six days and their duration in time. If the story is taken to be literally true, then one may argue that the world was indeed created in six days, or 144 hours. This interpretation requires little by way of imagination, since there is a simple 1:1 correspondence between the facts of the story and the facts of reality. The literal interpretation creates a fantastic imagined scene of creation.

Despite the wonder of this imaginative exercise, the mind can be stretched further. When pressed to reconsider this interpretation, scholars and laymen alike have stretched their minds to imagine that perhaps one day in the story represents 1,000 years in reality, as suggested by the poetry of Psalm 90, verse 4, where "a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past" (NRSV). The interpreter has stretched his/her imagination from 1:1 to 1:1,000.

The imagination may be stretched further, as in the interpretation that "day" in Genesis 1 need not refer to a period of time at all, but may refer instead to God's orderly intentions, with the rubric of days standing in for every other kind of orderly system. In this instance, the imagination has been stretched from 1:1 to 1:X; or, in other words, "day" may mean almost anything that represents the idea of orderly creation.

At this point, a wonderful and disturbing event may occur in the mind of the previously literal-minded exegete. The basic laws of reason and logic may appear to bend and break before the power of the imagination, whereas once "A is A," to state the principle of identity, for the more imaginative, now "A is B," and even "A is A, and A is B, and A is C." This stretching of the imagination has disturbed the previously logical and rational rules of reason and truth, even while it may wonderfully expose the mind to deeper and richer deposits of truth.

The danger of such a disturbance is allayed, however, not by denying the imagination its space, but by expanding the imagination even more, although within certain bounds. The expanded mind of the increasingly imaginative thinker should be able to accommodate not only the metaphorical truths on the order of “A is B,” but also the literal and rational truths of “A is A” (the principle of identity) and “A is not B” (the principle of non-contradiction).

A restricted mind might only accept what was logically true, while the imaginative mind may accept both literal and poetic truth as equally valid.¹⁵ There are certain helpful boundaries for the imagination, however; one should learn not to mistake the poetic for the logical, but rather to recognize each type of truth according to its own internal meaning.¹⁶

The imagination has many sides, and each of the philosophies sketched here has focused on one or more of these facets. No definitive image has captured the imagination in its essence. Several images have been suggested: mirror, storehouse of images, intermediary handmaid, producer of worlds, etc. Many images are

15. It is possible, however, to err on the side of the imagination, by disallowing logical truth in favor of poetic truth. This error of the imagination, again, is mitigated by expanding the imagination to include rational truth, rather than applying a kind of limitation on the imagination.
16. The Christian belief in the compatibility of faith and reason suggests, a fortiori, that poetry and logic are also ultimately reconcilable. Advances in contemporary science make this argument rather compelling, although that discussion is beyond the scope of this present study.

necessary to grasp the imagination, and more metaphors are always possible.

It is possible from this vantage point to suggest a helpful hermeneutic for the responsible exercise of the imagination. From Plato, we learn that images should not be confused with the objects they represent. The risk of exercising the imagination is that the line between fact and fantasy may be blurred. This risk is perhaps overstated for those who are in little danger of succumbing to delusion. A more subtle, but likewise dangerous, risk is present, however, whenever someone rigidly holds onto a single image, as if this single image were perfectly adequate to represent another reality.

The nature of the imagination as both present and absent, both concealing and revealing, means that every flight of imagination is only partial. No single image can capture either an abstract concept or a mysterious transcendence. Philosophers make us a multitude of images to explore even the simplest abstract concepts. When the mind is fixed on a single image, then the deficiencies of that image become more and more problematic. Since every metaphor has a “breaking point” beyond which the image should not be stretched, a mind fixed on a single image will likely transgress this boundary.

As the mind seeks to explore more and more aspects of a hidden reality, it needs a multitude of tools and images to be convincingly successful. Any single image taken as if it were whole and complete in itself becomes no longer an icon into the hidden world, but an idol that disfigures the very reality it was meant to convey.¹⁷

By holding images lightly, and always seeking new images, the seeker of truth, the seeker of God, may use the imagination fruitfully. A responsible imagination does not mistake the image

17. This distinction between icon and idol is inspired by the work of Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

for the reality, even when that reality has no other clothes than imagination's wardrobe.

6. Buried Treasure: Unearthing the Faithful Imagination through Journaling and Creative Writing

BR. FRANCIS DE SALES WAGNER, OSB

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

Matthew 13:44

There is very little about the landscape – for an adult, at least – that seems especially captivating: A creek (really just a sewage ditch) separating our backyards from acres of fields filled with beans or corn, occasionally interrupted by small patches of woods. As a young child, however, there was nothing that would keep my neighborhood friends and me from leaping over the creek (often not making it without losing a shoe in the goo – or worse, falling into it).

Whatever the risk, it was worth it. The other side of that nasty creek was a rich paradise for young minds, bodies and spirits. We fashioned small forts and hideaways. We caught glimpses of feathered, furry or scaly creatures eager to elude our curiosity. We discovered arrowheads, “precious” stones, and sometimes mysterious scraps of paper or personal belongings (i.e., “junk”) for which we constructed elaborate narratives explaining how they came to be where they were. When we were especially high spirited, someone would spot the paw print of a panther or spy Bigfoot plodding through a clump of trees, sending us with a thrill sprinting

and leaping back over the creek into the routine safety of our own backyards.

Our little excursions into “uncharted territory” were journeys of exploration and discovery. We peeked and poked through the world around us to unearth hidden treasures. Mostly, we found time to be free with one another and our imaginations. At that age, we had not heard of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, but we were experiencing, as he wrote, that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.”¹

As I grew older, those fields and woods also became a proving ground – an expanse to wander and sort out lonely, heartbroken thoughts; an environment to cool off after an argument; or a space to simply be still and hear God’s voice whispering beyond the wind.

OPENING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL

So what does this fond childhood memory have to do with spiritual formation and journaling? I mention it by way of analogy because such an adventuresome, yet heartfelt, outlook is often lacking in our spiritual lives. Journaling, however, can open the landscape of our souls, and it invites us to discover the heavenly treasure hidden within our earthen vessels.² As Catholic teacher and author Christopher Pramuk has written, journaling can bend the ear of our hearts toward a “hidden wholeness” by teaching us how to pay attention, how to become creative, how to recognize grace and how to open ourselves to the universal.³

This inner journey is a necessary task, often acknowledged but rarely pursued without at least some resistance. Our own backyards

1. “God’s Grandeur,” in *The Harper Anthology of Poetry*, ed. John Frederick Nims. New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 445.
2. Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7.
3. “The Song of Faith,” *America* (April 8, 2002), accessed at: www.americamagazine.org.

are safe places, but they can also limit our vision if we never venture beyond them. Those who are committed to the spiritual life, those undergoing priestly or religious formation, and those who are engaged in lives of ministry and service to the Church – whether in the clerical or lay state – are perhaps more subject than anyone to the temptation of uninspired superficiality. Satan would like to make Pharisees of us all.

Even with the best of intentions, it is far too easy to merely scratch the surface of life. We often see without understanding, hear without listening and speak without communicating. We have difficulty recognizing the value (and necessity) of mystery, ambiguity and paradox. We seek to avoid embracing that inevitable moment in life when we will be called to joyfully give up everything we have to possess that treasure of inestimable value buried in the field of our souls.

None of this, of course, is consistent with either Scripture or our rich Christian tradition. However, all too often, we settle for less than the magnificent treasure offered by God, jeopardizing our spiritual welfare by sliding into the illusory comfort of a routine, unexamined life.

This treasure – the very love of Christ at work within us⁴ – is a rich paradise of “uncharted territory” inviting exploration and discovery. But it is hidden beneath the surface of our lives. Finding it requires getting our hands dirty and digging a little. It involves risking a leap over nasty spiritual creeks – even if it means possibly falling into the goo. It means cultivating a faithful imagination to become our true selves in the image of God.

“If you want to know God, know yourself first,” said the fourth-century desert monk Evagrius Ponticus. Prayer, worship, Scripture, the Eucharist and other sacraments, spiritual direction and the life of the Church point the way in this regard, but the journey cannot end there. It also requires the rewarding, but grimy, work of daily

4. Cf. Colossians 3:1-3; Ephesians 3:19-20.

discerning God's presence in our lives and in the lives and circumstances that intersect with our own. It involves prayerfully seeking the things above, within and around us, here and now, and beyond all appearances.

It requires imagination to become our true selves, which is essential not only for our own sake, but for the benefit of those entrusted to us through our ministry and service. If we are called to make Christ present in the world through Word, sacrament and the example of a holy life, we must also learn how Christ is present and working in our own lives, and deep within our very souls.

GOING WHERE THE PATH LEADS

Writing – specifically, journaling – is one way to do this. It is a discernment tool – to be used in conjunction with others – of self discovery and self-examination. The words we write for academic or pastoral purposes, or for other worthy projects, are typically the final product or the goal of expressing our thoughts on a particular subject. Journaling is different; the process matters more than results. Journaling is essentially an extension of prayer, and the words we express are really tools of exploration to lead us to self discovery.

Author Annie Dillard describes this process quite vividly:

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year. You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path, you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins.⁵

Going where the path leads is a novel concept for many. While I will not claim to have mastered it, this notion has already yielded

5. The Writing Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 549.

for me enormous spiritual dividends during intense periods of discernment and formation. It has taught me to become more trustful of God's providence furtively working within *all* inherently flawed, weak and even sinful human processes. As St. Paul says, "all things work for good for those who love God."⁶

What Dillard suggests is difficult at first, but rewarding. Rather than directing the flow of words, this type of writing (particularly useful in journaling) calls for our words to direct us. It means giving up control and joyfully discovering a greater force at work within us – the art of faith.

"But I'm no artist," some may object. *Really?* Is God an artist? Surely – look at all he has created. And *we* are created in his image to *participate* in the work of creation.⁷ Author Flannery O'Connor, whose ostensibly grotesque stories startlingly (often violently) reveal a world literally *charged* with the presence of God's grace, sought to fully participate in God's work of creation as an artist of faith through her writing. "When people have told me that because I am Catholic, I cannot be an artist," she noted, "I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic I cannot afford to be less than an artist."⁸

It is interesting to note that O'Connor's cleverly disguised theological allegories unfolded in ways that surprised even her. Speaking of writing as an organic process of discovery, she said that she sometimes did not know until 10 or 12 lines before the fact what a certain character was going to do.⁹ That is going where the

6. Cf. Romans 8:28.

7. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2427, 2501.

8. "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), 146.

9. "Writing Short Stories," *Ibid.*, 100.

path leads, allowing oneself to be directed by the art of faith and participating in the work of creation.

While O'Connor wrote primarily fiction, she approached writing as a process of discovery – something that is available to us all. This is particularly true with journaling. Approached prayerfully, honestly and openly, journaling can lead us by paths unknown and reveal formerly unrecognizable heavenly treasure.

Author Helen Cepero compares the process to panning for gold in a stream:

If you are willing to dip your journal into the stream of your life, even though it may mean getting a bit wet and muddy, you will find the gold of your own life and God's eternal presence. There is risk in writing, but that is also where the reward is found. Buried in the stuff of our lives, underneath the running current of daily activities, lies the treasure, if only we are willing to risk looking and seeking. ...Like all spiritual practices, it begins with the trust that God is active at the heart of our lives and the life of the world.¹⁰

DEALING WITH REALITY WITH CREATIVE POWER

Trust of this sort requires *imagination*. The word carries with it the potential for misunderstanding – harmless fantasy on one end of the spectrum, and sheer lunacy on the other. Unfortunately, in today's world, having imagination can often imply being removed from reality – making something up. However, there is a more authentically balanced interpretation. Imagination is the “ability to

10. Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing. (Downers Grove, Illinois, 2008), 11-12, 20. An excellent practical resource on the subject from a Christian perspective. Highly recommended.

[faithfully] confront and *deal with reality* by using the *creative power* of the mind.”¹¹

Dealing with reality with creative power is how we are using the term *imagination* here. In the context of faith, it means a participation in God’s creative work right here, right now. It totally collapses the widely held, but mistaken, view that God is “up there” and we are “down here.” It electrifies that sense that the world truly is charged with the grandeur of God.

This is a *faithful imagination*, which is useful and essential to the spiritual practice of journaling. To trust – as Cepero puts it – that God is active at the heart of our lives and the life of the world is to go beyond merely recording life’s events in a journal, on the one hand, or writing for the sake of posterity, on the other. It means honestly dealing with reality with creative power, writing to dig below the surface of life’s events to discover purpose, meaning, direction and God’s abiding presence in all things.

As Catholics, we profess and strive to live an incarnational spirituality. So, in the Catholic imagination, the world has a sacramental character. Every thing, every person and every circumstance somehow fit together in God’s universal plan of salvation—though some points may seem scattered and a few lines may appear crooked. Journaling assists in recognizing the movement of God’s grace present within and around us. As O’Connor would say, the writer “presents mystery through manners, grace through nature.”¹² Writing–journaling–with a Catholic imagination helps us connect the dots.

11. The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982). The second definition listed within the entry for the word imagination. Here, it means resourcefulness. I have inserted the word *faithfully*, and the emphasis is added.
12. “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” 153.

A prominent example in this regard is the writing of Thomas Merton. This prolific spiritual author and Trappist monk wrote many works for publication (and therefore posterity). However, he also wrote voluminous journals of his day-to-day life in the monastery, many of which were not published until long after his death in 1968. Commenting on Merton's spiritual journey through his writing, Victor A. Kramer notes that the monk's journaling helped him to see beyond visible life:

Everywhere [Merton] looked he saw evidence that the entire world was sacramental.... He is always looking carefully at what is right in front of him at that particular time. What he teaches us is that the sacramentality of our world is always there to be observed and honored in its immediacy.... Cumulatively, these journals are Merton's record of his encounter with God's world. It is through the appreciation of the everyday experiences that we begin to learn how to apprehend our harmony with all of creation. The journals are insights, fragments, prayers, notes, phrases which can lead us to see the divine plan, the completeness, the wholeness that is sometimes hidden.... They are the record of how one man saw beyond seeing by looking carefully.¹³

Merton himself spoke of employing the imagination as a "discovering faculty" through his writing: "The imagination is something which enables us to discover unique and present

13. "Merton's Published Journals: The Paradox of Writing as a Step Toward Contemplation," in *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Br. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 39, 40, 41.

meaning in a given moment in our life.”¹⁴ The late priest and spiritual author Henri Nouwen noted that, while the concept can be difficult for many to grasp, the very act of creative writing holds for us the promise of untold treasure waiting to be discovered (if we’re willing to loosen our hold on the process):

Most students of theology think that writing means writing down ideas, insights, or visions. They feel that they first must have something to say before they put it on paper. For them, writing is little more than recording a pre-existent thought. But with that approach, true writing is impossible. *Writing is a process in which we discover what lives in us.* The writing itself reveals to us what is alive in us. The deepest satisfaction of writing is precisely that *it opens up new spaces within us of which we were not aware before we started to write. To write is to embark on a journey whose final destination we do not know.* Thus, writing requires a real act of trust. Once we dare to “give away” on paper the few thoughts that come to us, we start discovering how much is hidden underneath these thoughts and gradually come in touch with our own riches.¹⁵

Likewise, numerous saints throughout the history of Christianity have left us written records of their personal journeys of discovery to “see beyond seeing by looking carefully.” Two of the most obvious examples are St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s *Story of a Soul*. More recently, Blessed Pope John XXIII kept a journal from his early teens until his death at age 82, published posthumously under the title *Journal of a Soul*.

14. *Contemplation in a World of Action*. (New York: Image Books, 1973), 357.

15. “Reflections on Theological Education,” in *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, ed. Robert Durback. (New York: Image Books, 1997), 79–80. Emphasis added.

While obviously in a different category altogether, Holy Scripture also must be considered writing that engages the faithful imagination – both for the human authors and readers through the centuries. Scripture is the Word of God, but was not dictated to us from on high. Human participation in God’s creative work is involved, as the Church teaches us by comparing Scripture with the incarnation of Jesus, the Word of God.¹⁶

Put another way, the sacred words of Scripture, expressed in human words, are meant to reflect and feed the faithful imagination arising from the very mind of God, in whose image we were created. Though that image is distorted through the Fall, humanity’s share in this creative written work invites us to restoration and redemption. As Jesuit author and veteran spiritual director William A. Barry points out:

The Bible is not a theological textbook designed only to feed our minds and provide intellectual thought. Most of the Bible is *imaginative literature meant to draw us into its world so that God can touch us*. Even the historical books are written as stories to touch our imaginations. The biblical writers want to help us encounter God; ultimately, they want to move us to engage personally with God.¹⁷

Perhaps this seems like an unfair (or even dangerous!) comparison in the context of a discussion on journaling. However, my point is to illustrate that from the perspective of the Catholic imagination, *we each have a story to tell* – one that lies at least partially hidden from

16. Dei Verbum No. 13: “The words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.”

17. *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God’s Amazing Embrace*. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 167. Emphasis added.

ourselves in the depths of our very being. And it is a *sacred* story because it begins and ends with God – whether or not we acknowledge it. A faithful imagination that is engaged through creative writing to unearth that story is anything but removed from reality. It is a *lack of imagination* that gets us into trouble! Lack of a faithful imagination is slavery to self-delusion and the fantasy of self-reformation.

Christina Bieber Lake, in her 2005 book *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*, makes the case that our culture is becoming “posthuman” – striving for made-to-order lives, even made-to order bodies. We are seeking to perfect ourselves without God, “to become like gods,” as in the downfall of Adam and Eve. Lake notes that we are moving away from “a healthy view of the self – the conviction that we are created beings, made in the image of God, but limited and dependent – toward an unhealthy belief that we are cosmic accidents whose only hope is to remake ourselves into whatever image fits our fancy.”¹⁸

A faithful imagination is our defense against this. It acknowledges God as the beginning and end of the equation and invites Him into everything in between. Imagination is freedom from self. It is trusting in the revelation that our limited human nature is redeemed through incarnated grace.

18. *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 240. “Incarnational art,” Lake says, “insists on the broken and limited human body as its starting point – the acknowledgment of which is the only means to spiritual growth” (12). She notes that, for O'Connor, redemption begins with human limitation and ends with the *Imago Dei*. This theme is most colorfully illustrated (pun intended) in O'Connor’s short story, “Parker’s Back” (207).

As Pramuk points out, journaling is a means of paying attention to the hand of God's incarnated grace in our lives, of exorcising those demons that strive to imprison us within the fantasy of becoming like gods.¹⁹ Journaling – or any writing – with a faithful imagination is bearing the imprint of Christ in our very being – human beings borne from God's imagination. It is, as Pramuk points out, a *means of participating in our own salvation.*²⁰

This is the treasure we seek: With, in and through Christ, we are both characters and co-authors in God's story of human creation, incarnation and redemption. As author Madeleine L'Engle notes, "If our lives are truly 'hid with Christ in God,' the astounding thing is that this hiddenness is revealed in all that we do and say and write."²¹

By grace, we are instruments of divine providence, gardeners in the field of God's creation. Imagine that!

RESTORING ORDER FROM CHAOS

Fanned by the winds of the Holy Spirit, journaling becomes a means to restore order, purpose and beauty to the murky chaos swirling beneath the surface of our lives. A journal is not a diary. It involves more than merely recording the day's events. Rather, journaling is about reflecting on the meaning of those events.

In my own experience, journaling has been a helpful tool in preparing for spiritual direction, for putting words to my innermost prayer, for examining the motives of my actions, or why I feel or think a certain way about something or someone. Writing in this way with a faithful imagination has peeled back and revealed layers of myself I never knew existed. Some of it is not very pretty, but I am grateful for the grace that has revealed and identified these parts of

19. "The Song of Faith," America.

20. Ibid.

21. *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art.* (New York: North Point Press, 1995), 122.

my disordered self so that they can be transformed into my true self in Christ.

As a habit, journaling can develop:

- an enlarged awareness of God’s grace working in the soul.
- an increased sense of gratitude.
- a greater degree of openness to the challenges God may be offering,
- along with the opportunity to overcome trials and temptations.
- a deeper appreciation of the simple but mysterious beauty of our faith so that we’re drawn into it more fully.

In her thorough and practical book *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, Cepero explains that journaling helps us to stop and notice what we might otherwise miss or dismiss. “Everything in our lives tends to be hectic,” she writes. “What is subversive about a journaling practice is that it calls us to stop. It is when we stop, when we let our look linger, that a deeper movement can be discerned.”²²

Discernment, Cepero notes, comes from the Latin *discerne* – to separate, distinguish or sort out. Christian discernment, she says, is about “sorting out the voice of God speaking into our own lives from the cacophony of many voices that we hear, and then choosing to follow that voice.”²³

The key to discernment in the context of journaling, she writes, is to enter into an open and honest dialogue with God so that we can sort out our desires and dig below their surface:

Such honesty about what we truly want opens us up to new discoveries and change.... We may recognize that without forgiving someone, we will never be free of

22. *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing*. 33. 23 *Ibid.*, 79.

23. *Ibid.*, 79.

bitterness and resentment. We may find that we do not want to let go of anger that makes us feel strong and righteous. We may find that an addiction is a comfort we are unwilling to release. At those times, it is especially important to pray for the grace that we desire, knowing that the power of God is greater than we are and greater than the power in the world around us.²⁴

This is precisely where journaling intersects with spiritual direction. Both are invaluable tools in the spiritual life, and when they are used in conjunction with one another, they become a powerful means of identifying and rooting out hidden faults and failings. What's more, they open up the possibility for reconciliation.

In his sixth-century *Rule*, St. Benedict encourages his monks: "As soon as wrongful thoughts come into your heart, dash them against Christ and *disclose them to your spiritual father.*"²⁵ Such thoughts – passions, desires, motives and impulses – have much less power over us when they are released (or expelled, as it were) and exposed to the light of truth. This is especially true in the arena of spiritual direction, where the Holy Spirit is at work. However, journaling with a faithful imagination can also be a source of revelation in this regard. L'Engle provides an excellent example:

If I can write things out, I can see them, and they are not trapped within my own subjectivity.... Not long ago someone I love said something which wounded me grievously, and I was desolate that this person could possibly have made such a comment to me. So, in great pain, I crawled to my journal and wrote it all out in a great burst of self-pity. And

24. *Ibid.*, 84-85.

25. *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, "The Tools for Good Works," Ch. 4:50, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1981), 185. Emphasis added.

when I had set it down, when I had it before me, I saw that something I myself had said had called forth the words which had hurt me so. It had, in fact, been my own fault. But I would never have seen it if I had not written it out.²⁶

Merton, too, recognized the power of journaling to unearth the radiant treasure of Christ buried in the field of his soul. His writing was a means of freedom, he says:

I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me; if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy. I have tried to learn in my writing a monastic lesson I could probably not have learned otherwise: to let go of my idea of myself, to take myself with more than one grain of salt....²⁷

Some voices – including those within the journal writer's own mind and heart – will claim that journaling is an outlet for narcissism. Honestly engaged with a faithful imagination, however, it achieves just the opposite. Paradoxically, journaling helps strip away selfishness and self-absorption, as Kramer notes in Merton's case:

A careful reading of Merton's writing reveals the fact that he learned to give up a consciousness of himself through the exercise of writing. Of course, Merton's writing is often an analysis of self, but such analysis (paradoxically) leads to an awareness of the unimportance of self and to an awareness of one's relationship to others, and to the mystery of the universe as a whole.... His journals were, of course, his working ground, a testing place and foundation

26. *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, 137.

27. *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell. (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 16-17.

for his ideas and spiritual development. In a paradoxical way, therefore, it seems to have been necessary for Merton to write so that he could become more quiet.²⁸

The gentle touch of Christ is not restricted, however, to correcting faults. It can also be a source of reassurance, which we all need from time to time. Journaling can allow this light to shine through and illuminate the darkness. Following is an excerpt from one of my own journal entries during a particularly trying period in my life. General enough to share without breaching any sense of one's "inner forum," it illustrates one method of journaling with a faithful imagination.²⁹ Here, I imagine the voice of Christ speaking directly to me while meditating on Philippians 1:6³⁰ for *lectio*:

My friend, look at all I have done for you. Think back to where you were and where you are now. Can there be any doubt of my unending love for you?

Stop considering where your next step will be. I have placed you here and I will guide you, just as I have told you. You have nothing to fear.

Trust in me. I am the Truth, the doorway through which you come to the Father. Nothing is on your own because your sight is limited, too narrow. Speak with me as I speak

28. "Merton's Published Journals: The Paradox of Writing as a Step Toward Contemplation," 24.
29. In the interest of full disclosure, this journal entry also represents one of the very few times in my life where I have surrendered to the organic process of writing, allowing it to direct my thoughts rather than vice-versa.
30. "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus," New American Bible.

to you now, as a friend. Put aside your former ways, your doubts, and anxieties – even your old way of praying.

I have much to share with you and with others through you if you will simply rest in my tremendous love for you. It is a love so vast that it is incomprehensible, nothing you can aspire toward or earn. It is freely given. Receive my love, for you cannot share a gift until you are willing to fully accept it.

All I have told you, shown you, and revealed to you is nothing compared with what is to come. Have no fear. Your purpose, your being, reside in my Truth, not within your own sense of it.

Rest in my love. Remember what I have told you – you belong to me! What belongs to me, I present to the Father. I have taken you to myself, and have shaped you, although you are not finished and cannot comprehend it.

I will complete the work I have begun in you. You knew this once. Recall it now and take hold of it, as I have you. Your life is not your own. It rests in my hands, and my hands rest on you.

My delight is your surrendered will, and I am pleased you have offered it to me as I asked. All that is left for you to do is be confident in my love for you. Trust me and in all I have said. Put aside all else and live in my love.

This sort of dialogue may seem silly to some. However, no claim is made here of any sort of holy dictation, privileged revelation or knowledge of the mind of God. On the other hand, there is no discounting the movement of God's grace; "the wind blows where it wills."³¹ When the faithful imagination is honestly engaged, authenticity cannot be doubted. This caution is raised for those who may embark on such a quest in their journaling, only to dismiss the words that pour forth from their pen (or keyboard) as echoes of their own wishful thinking. One can *never* be too sure!

31. John 3:8.

In each of the cases cited above, the mystery of God's grace is evident through the practice of journaling. In these instances and so many others, the faithful Catholic imagination has become the means to restore order to the chaos churning beneath the surface life. Grace has built on nature. By the art of faith, the Word redeems through the word.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While a thorough look at journaling from a practical perspective is available elsewhere (such as in Cepero's book), I will offer a few brief suggestions (without claiming to have mastered any of them myself):

- Be intentional. Journaling, as with any practice employed as a means to an end, requires discipline. One has to be regular about it, sincerely commit to it and make time for it each day – even if nothing seems to be happening, just like prayer. The fruit will be revealed, tasted and shared over time.
- Be honest. Only you and God are at work. No one else will see it (unless you choose otherwise later). Formality is neither required – nor desired. Truth, however, is absolutely necessary.
- Permit imperfection. Trust in the process of writing as a tool of discovery. A journal is not a theological or philosophical treatise. Allow it to be an imperfect progression.
- Go with the flow. Write without regard to sentence structure, grammar, spelling, vocabulary or even logic. Resist the urge to revise as you write. As O'Connor has remarked, "The more you write, the more you will realize that the form is organic, that it is something that grows out of the material."³² Once what is within has been unearthed and laid bare, you can come back and tidy it up if you like.
- Ignore – as Cepero puts it – the "Censor" and the "Inner Critic."

32. "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, 102.

They don't want you to discover anything that leads you to God. If they become too loud, turn the tables and journal about what nasty killjoys they are.

- Do not be afraid. The closer we move toward God, the more fearful the old self will become. Don't turn away! It is at the heart of those fears that God wants to meet you so that your new self in Christ may emerge.
- Unplug the social network. Journaling is not the same as blogging. By its public nature, blogging obviously cannot (or should not) deal with one's inner forum. More importantly, once you become aware of writing for an audience – any audience – you're not journaling anymore. With all that said, however, blogging can be a means (if you wish) of sharing the fruit of one's journaling. If you blog, you may later discover that a particular journal entry can be developed further to have broader appeal and possibly make an impact on other people's lives. A word of caution: Such an aim can never be an honest starting point for a journal entry.
- Use your faithful imagination. My own journal entries often take the form of prayers, reflections or *lectio* meditations. But not always. Write a poem, paraphrase a Psalm, write a letter to God, dialogue with Jesus: whatever works. Later, you can go back and highlight patterns or moments of insight, and then bring them forward as well. Freely explore the landscape of your soul.

RADIATING GOD'S GLORY

Ultimately, our goal as Christians is to transcend ourselves, paradoxically by discovering and embracing our true selves with, in and through Christ – in whom we live and move and have our being.³³ Through the practice of journaling, we are invited to explore the open landscape of our souls, go where the path leads

33. Cf. Acts 17:28.

and deal with reality with creative power, so that with Christ, order is restored from chaos. Therein dwells the buried treasure revealing the transforming presence of the Holy Trinity. As Cepero notes:

The more authentically we travel into our own lives and our own stories, the more we will lay claim to God's image deep within us. This is both the beginning point and the destination. The more deeply we immerse ourselves in the story of God, the more our lives are filled with the love of Christ.... And the more available we are to God, the more available we are to truly love ourselves, one another and the world.³⁴

True self-discovery with a faithful imagination leads to self giving, to an awareness beyond self that inspires others to seek this very same treasure buried within themselves. Whether or not journaling is the precise means we employ, we must have a faithful imagination to arrive at our true selves and help others to do the same. All of us engaged in lives of ministry and service to the Church – whether in the clerical or lay state – must be willing to dig below the surface of our lives and become artists of faith, participating in the work of our Creator, who created us in his image.

The key to leading others to this treasure is mentioned in Matthew 13:44: When a person finds the treasure of Christ buried in the field of his soul, “*out of joy* [he] goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” This joy, this gratitude, this love of Christ that overpowers all else, will radiate out and attract others to the buried treasure within. Now to God, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.³⁵

34. Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing, 9.

35. Cf. Ephesians 3:20-21.

7. The Priesthood in the Illative Sense: Newman, Knowledge and Imagination in the Practice of the Priesthood

VERY REV. DENIS ROBINSON, OSB

The practice of the priesthood and its attendant theologies and spiritualities are well-attested topics in contemporary Catholic literature. Since the Second Vatican Council, a great deal of ink has been spilled realigning a vision of the priesthood with the “signs of the times.” One topic that has received scant attention, perhaps because it is too esoteric in an increasingly practical clerical worldview, is the epistemology of the priesthood. What does priesthood look like in connection with the functions of human knowledge? How is priestly epistemology different from that of other human beings? What insights about the holy priesthood can one gain by going even further *ad fontes*, that is, to the very nature of the human person and his way of engaging the world?

One thing is certain; there is no exercise of the priesthood outside the categories of human knowledge and engagement. Blessed John Henry Newman was intensely interested in the question of the way in which human ways of knowing affected the life of faith and discipleship. His landmark book, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1863), demonstrated the way in which theories of knowledge impacted the life of faith. His intention in writing the work was to demonstrate the way in which epistemological theories (particularly those of Locke and the Evangelicals) had a negative effect on faith because they opposed the real nature of human experience.

The Priesthood in the Illative Sense:
Newman, Knowledge and Imagination

The work is perhaps the most important in Newman's extensive and groundbreaking oeuvre. The insights of Newman, in particular his insights about imagination, may well prove beneficial in "getting behind" a theology of the priesthood and, by extension, its spirituality.

In this article, I will consider the content of Newman's epistemology with an eye toward its understanding within the context of priesthood.

THE EXPRESSION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IMAGINATION IN THE GRAMMAR OF ASSENT

Newman's project in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* proceeds from a phenomenological starting point.¹ Newman, at least in this later stage of his career, is not interested in theory per se. He is interested in what people do and how they think day by day. "Truths such as these, which are too obvious to be called irresistible, are illustrated by what we see in universal nature."² The appeal to "universal nature" already places Newman on a different theoretical plane than many of his contemporaries. He is certainly appealing to an epistemological "nature" in terms of the way people think. He is a foundationalist in this sense.

However, Newman's appeal must also be grounded in something

1. W. Jost, "Philosophic Rhetoric Newman and Heidegger," in *Discourse and Context. An Interdisciplinary Study of John Henry Newman*, ed. Gerard Magill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1993) 54-80. See also: J.H. Walgrave, *J. H. Newman, His Personality, His Principles, His Fundamental Doctrines* (Leuven: Unpublished Course Notes, 1975-1977) 130-133 in which Walgrave compares the thought of Newman, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.
2. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 349.

more practical. In a way, he seems to be asking those who hold positions like those of Locke or the Evangelicals to examine themselves in terms of their own “common-sense” understandings of knowledge. Newman, in his appeal to universal nature, is attempting to place the argument squarely within the context of the existential concerns of the philosophy of Utility.³ Newman’s concern in writing the work, after long years of reflection, study and pastoral experience, was to comment on things as they were, “to ascertain what is the matter of fact as regards them.”⁴

In some sense, Newman’s starting point for the reflection is already the result of the method of construction and convergence he will present.⁵ A particular dilemma in 19th-century thought involved the question of certainty and probability and a kind of schizophrenic approach to knowledge, particularly religious knowledge, that reduced the terms of knowability to an either/or proposition. For a proposition to be true, claimed the rationalist, it must be supported by adequate evidence, that is, empirical verification. For a proposition to be true, said the Evangelical, it must be felt to be true in the heart of the believer, a divine gift. For Newman, both of these approaches limped when forced to walk alone:

Earnestly maintaining, as I would, with this latter school of

3. See: Fergus Kerr, “Tradition and Reason: Two Uses of Reason, Critical and Contemplative,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004) 37-49.
4. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 344.
5. C. M. Streeter, “The Lonergan Connection with Newman’s Grammar,” in *Personality and Belief. Interdisciplinary Essays on John Henry Newman*, ed. Gerard Magill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

philosophers, the certainty of knowledge, I think it enough to appeal to the common voice of mankind in proof of it. That is to be accounted a normal operation of our nature, which men in general do actually instance.⁶

In other words, Newman was fully aware that he was entering into a debate, another controversy, but one that affected not only academics, but the whole of humanity. The theories of knowledge (in particular those of religion) were contrary to the experience of knowing as understood and *lived* by those ordinary mortals that did not inhabit the common rooms of the nation's centers of learning, or profess spiritual enlightenment in the meeting halls of diverse dissenting and non-dissenting sects.

Newman begins his reflection with a simple insight. One of the basic characteristics of the human being is the ability to hope, that is, to project a character of life onto a present condition of which it is not already in possession.⁷ For Newman, this is the human impetus for exercising the imagination. Here the existential insight comes to the fore once again.⁸ "Our hoping is a proof that hope, as such, is not an extravagance; and our possession of certitude is a proof that it is not a weakness or an absurdity to be certain."⁹

And Newman begins with the position of minds thinking and digesting and acting as an infallible fact. "Our being, with its faculties, mind and body, is a fact not admitting of question, all

6. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 345.
7. H. Geissler, "Getting Your Life in a Better Perspective. An Essay Exploring Newman's Thoughts on Hope," *Newman Gradual*, no. July 1998 (1998) 11-14.
8. P. Boyce, "The Enduring Relevance of Newman's Vision of Hope," in *Conoscere Newman* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2002) 15-33.
9. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 345.

things being of necessity referred to it, not it to other things.”¹⁰ But these questions are not merely theories from Newman’s perspective, nor should they ever be simply reduced to philosophical constructs, for: “My only business is to ascertain what I am, in order to put it to use.”¹¹ Usefulness, then, becomes a criterion for hoping and knowing, but not along the lines of Utilitarianisms. Imagination is useful. In Newman’s epistemology, use has to do with applicability to the action of the imagination. Use is tied to hope in that use enacts that which hope conceives as possible. The connection between use and hope is imaginative. Hope was not a response of the utilitarian mind, which relies on a reduction of probability. Hope expands where use constricts. In aligning use and hope in imaginative tension, Newman hopes to re-use use in a new context and re-hope hope, not as pie-in-the sky optimism that defers reward to a vague afterlife, but as a functional attitude toward the world.

Another imaginative observation to be made from the *Grammar* is that Truth is viewed as a process. The existential starting point is upheld in Newman’s understanding of two distinctive ways of dealing with questions of Truth. The process of ratiocination – and Newman always holds that ratiocination is a process and not a delivered product – is “the exercise of a living faculty in the individual intellect.”¹² Thought bears upon life. This position is opposed to what Newman regarded as the approach generally found in philosophy, that is, thought as “mere skill in argumentative science.”¹³

In the popular mind, ratiocination was seen as an academic

10. *Ibid.*, 347.

11. *Ibid.*, 348.

12. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 303.

13. *Ibid.*

pursuit, the mediation of knowledge, a classroom activity.¹⁴ Such activities are perceived as “pedant” and “doctrinaire.” More importantly, academic approaches to epistemological questions never make converts, and conversion is essential to Newman’s schema.¹⁵ Newman believes this is a particular trait of academicians that contradicts the spirit of thought in England, where “an ounce of common-sense goes farther than many cartloads of logic.”¹⁶

What is the nature of this process? In the Grammar, Newman draws a parallel between ratiocination and other life processes. He uses the examples of “poetical excellence, heroic action, or gentleman-like conduct,”¹⁷ actions of the person that have no direct and *simple correlation* with a given formula or fact. Here Newman is on the same argumentative ground as Mill’s “poetic canvas.” Newman, however, does not see these qualities as mere additives to the human condition, as Mill seems to imply. They are, rather, the essential way that the human being “knows.”

In other words, imagination is essential. These senses pertain to the expansiveness of life. They are constructed and complex, and yet they make sense because we *know* what is poetic, what is heroic and what is polite behavior. Nevertheless, these senses cannot be reduced to one or even a dozen observable qualities that constitute their essence. Yet, we base our lives on perceptions such as these and other similarly complex senses. We live according to them. They are “useful.” We construct communities according to them and they ultimately impact lives more significantly than syllogistic equations, which, while all simple and self-evident, do not breathe life.

Therefore, “our duty in each of these is to strengthen and perfect

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 304.

17. Ibid., 360.

the special faculty which is its living rule, and in every case as it comes to do our best.”¹⁸ This is a crucial point for Newman. We have a *duty* to cultivate the senses, these truths that impact us, and not only us but the communities in which we live. The priesthood is impacted by the senses insofar as it is a human function. In other words, Newman is basically subverting the Lockian criteria of evidentialism and Mill’s ethic of belief.

Whereas Locke and his followers would hold that knowledge is simple and straightforward, even to the point that we should not hold anything *not* simple and straightforward, Newman attempts to demonstrate that it is not only unnatural to consider Truth as simple and straightforward, but at some level morally irresponsible to do so. He holds that Truth is necessarily complex and that everyone knows this fact as much as they know the complexity of the other basic senses that govern life. There is a moral *imperative* to preserve this complexity if one expects to live responsibly, much less well. In other words, there is a moral imperative to exercise the quintessential human quality of imagination. Here Newman can return, in a decidedly gentleman-like way, to the thought of Locke:

I have so high a respect both for the character and the ability of Locke, for his manly simplicity of mind and his outspoken candour, and there is so much in his remarks upon reasoning and proof in which I fully concur, that I feel no pleasure in considering him in the light of an opponent to views, which I myself have ever cherished as true with an obstinate devotion.¹⁹

While he can maintain a respect for Locke’s simplicity, even his clarity of thought, he cannot ultimately give credence to the theory, because to hold Locke’s position, in Newman’s opinion, goes against the common appreciation of knowledge, its “universal nature”; and to go against this is not only intellectually inappropriate but morally

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 163.

incomprehensible.²⁰ “The practice of mankind is too strong for the antecedent theorem, to which he is desirous to subject it.”²¹

Like Locke, however, Newman equally repudiates the “supernatural extravagancies” of a position such as that of the Evangelicals.²² Just as knowledge cannot be simple and straightforward by logical processes and observation, it cannot be immediate and unencumbered by complexity along the lines of enthusiastic enlightenment. If Locke is wrong, so is Boehme. They are, likewise, wrong for the same reason, for even the most enthusiastic of evangelical converts still intuit the imperative for the complexity and subtlety of ratiocination outside whatever emotional enthusiasms may be *held* as tantamount. Evangelicalism, as an epistemological position for Newman, is unimaginative.

What is knowledge for Newman? Here, again, Newman makes two distinctions that, at some level, relate to the dichotomy presented above. Newman begins with the idea of notions as *kinds* of propositions.²³ Notions, for Newman, are propositions that are placed before the human person for acceptance or rejection, that is, a level of assignation of Truth or assent. Notions are particular kinds of propositions, however. They are simple and direct, the principles of mathematics, the formulae of logic, certain sensory observations, etc. They are open to judgment, but, in general, their truth-value is deductive, that is, not dependent upon real reflection within the human consciousness.

For the ordinary person, $1+1=2$. There is no contradicting the

20. R.A. Naulty, “Newman’s Dispute with Locke,” *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11 (1973) 453-477.

21. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 161.

22. *Ibid.* Michael A. Testa, “Newman and the Evangelicals,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 69 (1997) 237-244.

23. See: Walgrave, J. H. Newman, *His Personality, His Principles, His Fundamental Doctrines*, 44-45.

proposition. However, for Newman, such propositions, simple and straightforward as they are, can only illicit from the person a *notional* assent. That is, the person may readily acknowledge that $1+1=2$, but the bare fact has no *real* meaning, no living consequence.²⁴ The statement is undoubtedly true, but so what? The evidence is all there for assenting to them, yet they are cold and indifferent. No one will die for a mathematical principle. Notional assent is the language of Locke's certainty, yet Newman was skeptical as to whether or not such certainty existed phenomenologically.²⁵ Imagination plays no particular role in notional propositions.

For Newman, however, there was another action of the mind, which he terms "inference."²⁶ Inferences are more complex ratiocinative functions than the apprehension of simple

24. On Newman and the logical see the dissertation: Robert Christie, "The Logic of Conversion: Reasonable Imagination in the Theological Method of John Henry Newman" (Fordham University, 1997).
25. Newman notes: "I do not allow the existence of these abstract ideas corresponding to objective realities with Locke – but then, I do not pass over the experiences gained from the phenomena of mind so lightly, as I fancy the school of Locke is apt to do." Hugo M. de Achaval and J. Derek Holmes, eds., *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 135.
26. J. Newman, "The Illative Sense vs. Interpretation: D'Arcy's Critique of Cardinal Newman's Approach to Insight and Inference," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1999) 179-191.

notional propositions. Inferences are carried out in the messiness of daily existence, whereby thinking subjects are not presented with notions simply and straightforwardly.

Inference, as an existing phenomenon of mind; and that the more, because I shall thereby be illustrating and supporting what I have been saying of the characteristics of inferential processes as carried on in concrete matter, and especially of their being the action of the mind itself, that is, by its ratiocinative or illative faculty, not a mere operation as in the rules of arithmetic.²⁷

Inference, like life itself, is messy. It involves a choir of competing propositions, sometimes singing in harmony, but often atonal. There are propositions that are quite notional, but these recede into the background when confronted with the complexity of life. Inference is, rather, a constructive process, a force that acknowledges the complexity of even the simplest of propositions and events. Newman uses the example of language.²⁸ “Words which are used by an eye-witness to express things, unless he be especially eloquent or graphic, may only convey general notions.”²⁹

Rightly so, such is the ordinary mode of understanding language, the premise of Dr. Johnson’s dictionary. Yet, any poet, or any person with a poetical imagination, realizes that words are also the occasion of inference. In an imaginative context, words

27. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 331.

28. See the favorable comparison between the thought of Newman and Bambrough in: Walgrave, J. H. Newman, *His Personality, His Principles, His Fundamental Doctrines*, 169-174.

29. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 34.

are charged.³⁰ The appearance of the word, spoken, written or thought, has the power to open to the hearer, the reader or the thinker horizons and vistas that are distinct from the denotation of simple rationality.

This is the craft of the poet, but also the art of life. This is the imaginative use of language. Words are always complex, but their complexity is geometrically exaggerated by the countless lives that they delineate and envelop. We listen daily to countless words spoken by a multitude of speakers, and “we fancy that we are doing justice to individual men and things by making them a mere *synthesis* of qualities, as if any number whatever of abstractions would, by being fused together, be equivalent to one concrete.”³¹ By concrete here, Newman means, one messy living expression of speaker and hearer in relationship with themselves, each other, society and the world.

Opposed to notions, for Newman, is reality.³² The real proposition is one that is multivalent in its conception, hypertextual in its articulation and imaginative in its reception. Here Newman uses the contrasting example of those Protestants who read the Bible in a literal way, as a notional text, and those (Catholics) who read the Bible in a real way. For the Catholics, “henceforth there is to them a reality in its teachings, which they recognize as an argument, and the best of arguments, for its divine origin.”³³

30. See: Stephen Prickett, “La langue philosophique de Newman,” *Etudes Newmaniennes* 10 (1994) 107-116.

31. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 34.

32. L. Orbertello, “Newman, L’idealismo e Il “Realismo” Cristiano,” in *Filosofi cattolici a confronto con il pensiero moderno: Rosmini Newman Blondel* (Turin: S. Biolo, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1996) 27-66.

33. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 80.

There is a hint here in Newman's example. For Newman, reality is always predicated on the multivalent qualities of the author and giver of life, the Divine Reality. Mediation, as a practice, inculcates the spirit of the reality of the text, moving the mediator to witness to the Truth about the Author through the text. The mediator realizes the words on the page, appropriating them as more than congruence with certain images and ideas, understanding them for more than historical insight or direct commands. The mediator realizes the words of the Bible as an imaginative invitation to conversation with the divine author, an invitation to a living and inexhaustible reality that has been unfolding, is unfolding and will always be unfolding.

Reading, as we do, the Gospels from our youth up, we are in danger of becoming so familiar with them as to be dead to their force, and to view them as a mere history. The purpose, then, of meditation is to realize them; to make the facts which they relate stand out before our minds as objects, such as may be appropriated by a faith as living as the imagination which apprehends them.³⁴

These real propositions do not call for assent in the same way as notional propositions.³⁵ Rather they call for greater, or more profound, assent because, in Newman's estimation, they have the power of generating a living, realized assent. Assent, for Newman, is a complex function. It is credited in the imagination. To say something that is true notionally is rather straightforward, but to give real assent to a proposition is bound up with a process. Assent is determined by a multiplicity of antecedent probabilities,

34. *Ibid.*, 80.

35. See: D Chenk, "Newman's Complex Assent and Foundationalism," *International Studies in Philosophy* 26 (1986) 229-240.

of images and ideas, of words and persons, of witnesses and constructions, all complicated by the messiness of daily life.

The greater the level of assent, the more complex is the process of construction. However, it would be wrong to assert that notional assent and real assent are opposed to one another. Rather, notions can be a part of the data that informs real assent. As Stephen Prickett notes, the force of these distinctions does not undervalue notional assent or make irrelevant its particular conventions.³⁶

Newman states of the believer, for example, “Her veracity and authority is to him no abstract truth or item of general knowledge, but is bound up with that image and love of her person which is part of himself, and makes a direct claim on him for his summary assent to her general teachings.”³⁷ Nevertheless for Newman, asking in the wake of Locke “can I believe as if I saw?,” it is a complex and extremely fertile question. It hammers at Locke’s empiricism; it pounds away at the ethics of belief found in the thought of Bentham and Mill. It is a highly suggestive question that anticipates a critique of fideism as much as a critique of metaphysics and onto-theology.

In some ways, it is the first post-modern question in theology. How is it possible to bring together the conflicting strains of theory found in 19th-century thought? These strains of theory bear upon the question as to what is the meaning of God in the complex epistemological landscape of modernism. This question is a hound that barks at the theological schools and categorizations of theology down to the present day. Can I believe as if I saw? Can I be as certain about God as I am about my hands and feet, as I am about my desk, as I am about $1+1=2$? “Can I attain to any more vivid assent to the Being of a God, than that which is given merely to notions of the intellect?”³⁸

36. See: Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion*, 185.

37. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 18.

38. *Ibid.*, 103.

This leads Newman to the question of whether mystery can be more than a mere assertion or an opinion.

Since such a high assent requires a present experience or memory of the fact, at first sight it would seem as if the answer must be in the negative; for how can I assent as if I saw, unless I have seen? but no one in this life can see God. Yet I conceive a real assent is possible, and I proceed to show how.³⁹

Here we may relate this epistemological insight to a prominent theme in Newman's writings, the theme of development.⁴⁰ For Newman, personal development necessarily had to be a complete movement of the person for it to make any sense whatsoever. In his estimation, notional assent "requires but a cold and ineffective acceptance, though it be held ever so unconditionally."⁴¹ In other words, it did not matter. It had no realization. The separation between theory and life, a kind of epistemic schizophrenia, was the affliction of many. "Such in its character is the assent of thousands, whose imaginations are not at all kindled, nor their hearts inflamed, nor their conduct affected, by the most august of all conceivable truths."⁴²

Newman must have known countless examples of such characters in the university; but something else is at stake here, for Newman not only critiqued the ivory-towerism of academia, he also criticized those who move unquestioning through life as though motivated only by fixed theories and perceptions of the world that never change.⁴³ Such people, in Newman's estimation, were less

39. Ibid.

40. See: Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 187.

41. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 127.

42. Ibid.

43. See: Robrecht Boudens, "'Growth': A Key Concept in

than whole. The experience of complete living, that is, the fusion of the intellectual and the moral and emotional, brought about a different kind of experience.⁴⁴

Is it the elaborate, subtle, triumphant exhibition of a truth, completely developed, and happily adjusted, and accurately balanced on its centre, and impregnable on every side, as a scientific view, “totus, teres, atque rotundus,” challenging all assailants, or, on the other hand, does it come to the unlearned, the young, the busy, and the afflicted, as a fact which is to arrest them, penetrate them, and to support and animate them in their passage through life?⁴⁵

In other words, Newman is arguing here for what we might term a pastoral approach or, more concretely, a sacramental approach realized in the human imagination. The chief insight of this sacramental approach is that, in every instance of life, there is more than meets the eye, there is a behind and before, there is a wholeness and roundness that only presents itself in imaginative engagement. For Newman, there could be no authentic living that did not uncover such wholeness and such roundness. He understood, however, that such an imaginative endeavor was fraught with tension by its very nature and that the natural inclinations of the person were toward peace and serenity.

Newman used this comparison between the notional and the real to show the difference between theology and religion.⁴⁶ Theology,

Understanding Newman,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 69 (1993) 335-353.

44. See: Walgrave, J. H. Newman, *His Personality, His Principles, His Fundamental Doctrines*, 21-25.

45. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 127.

46. James Gaffney, “Newman on the Common Roots of

as it was traditionally conceived, while an essential component of a religious worldview, was constructed principally on notions. Formulae, axioms and corollaries are the fodder of theological reflection.⁴⁷ “Theology, properly and directly, deals with notional apprehension; religion with imaginative.”⁴⁸

Theology is an intellectual exercise and, as such, forms a necessary component toward the expression of religious life, but it remains an expression of a notion, which is constructed of “proof, analysis, comparison, and the like intellectual exercises.”⁴⁹ “For the purposes of devotion, it is the image of a reality.”⁵⁰ Religion is different for Newman in that: “Religion has to do with the real, and the real is the particular; theology has to do with what is notional, and the notional is the general and systematic.”⁵¹ Theology and religion are not opposed, but there is a danger on the part of academics of mistaking theology for religion.

Likewise, there are those within a religious tradition that would view a devotional life as something divorced from theology. While Newman makes the distinction, he is clear that theology and intellectual processes are a part of religion, but that religion excites a level of commitment from the individual precisely as it touches on the reality of life.⁵² Theology generates teachings, but religion “lives

Morality and Religion,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 1 (1988) 143-159.

47. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 119.

48. *Ibid.*, 119-120.

49. *Ibid.*, 120.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 141.

52. See: Aidan Nichols, *From Newman to Congar: The Idea of Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990) 28-30.

and thrives in the contemplation of them.”⁵³ Theology considers systems of truth, and rightly so, but religion considers systems of living. The priest in Newman could never have accepted a delineated view of religion as cold analysis. In fact, he disdains the discussion of religious matters, notions of God, by those for whom the lived experience of religion is not evident.

In other words, questions of God should only be discussed within a life of faith and devotion, in the lived experience of the community of faith, with all its complexity and indeed messiness. It is a theology done on the knees. Only then will the religious seeker find motives for devotion and faithful obedience. Such an insight necessitates a re-appropriation of the very concept of theological method and may, in the long run, entail a conflation between theology *per se* and what Newman refers to as religion.

The starting point for Newman’s epistemology is the foundational experience of conscience. It begins almost with the beginning of life in that:

The child keenly understands that there is a difference between right and wrong; and when he has done what he believes to be wrong, he is conscious that he is offending One to whom he is amenable, whom he does not see, who sees him. His mind reaches forward with a strong presentiment to the thought of a Moral Governor, sovereign over him, mindful, and just. It comes to him like an impulse of nature to entertain it.⁵⁴

While the experience of conscience is foundational, it cannot reveal the *content* of religious truth. Nevertheless, it remains the link between the individual mind and the possession of Truth in the concrete.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in Newman’s analysis, this natural instinct

53. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 141.

54. *Ibid.*, 113.

55. See: Boekrad, *The Personal Conquest of Truth*.

is connected with other similar instincts by “which the typical child, whom I am supposing, more or less consciously loves and approves,—truth, purity, justice, kindness, and the like,—are but shapes and aspects of goodness.”⁵⁶

But, again, these are only initiators of a full apprehension of the Truth. While Newman acknowledges that other beings come into the world in full possession of the natural end that is allotted them, humans are necessarily undergoing development. The person “begins with nothing realized (to use the word), and he has to make capital for himself by the exercise of those faculties which are his natural inheritance.”⁵⁷

By careful cultivation of his natural faculties, the fullness of life is achieved. This is not a mechanical process or a necessity. Rather, “it is committed to the personal efforts of each individual of the species; each of us has the prerogative of completing his inchoate and rudimental nature, and of developing his own perfection out of the living elements with which his mind began to be.”⁵⁸

However, with conscience there is, for Newman, always an instinct, anticipation, as he terms it. This anticipation creates an expectation of what is to follow.

One of the most important effects of Natural Religion on the mind, in preparation for Revealed, is the anticipation which it creates, that a Revelation will be given. That earnest desire of it, which religious minds cherish, leads the way to the expectation of it.⁵⁹

The next topic that Newman must address is the role of imagination *per se* in knowledge.⁶⁰ By imagination, Newman does

56. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 115.

57. *Ibid.*, 350.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, 424.

60. See: Terrence Merrigan, “The Image of the Word: Faith

not mean the fanciful application of perception to realities that result in fictions.⁶¹ Rather he means the property of the ratiocinative function by which images are perceived, stored and retrieved for later use.

What does Newman mean by images? Here we have a key question. Images for Newman are much more than sensory impressions. Images are any bits of information and feeling that impress themselves upon us. Example is the best option for explanation here. For Newman, an idea like God, or Christ, or religion, or England is presented to the mind not as the mere correspondence of a perfected idea to the word.

England, for example, means more than an island located in the North Sea. England is an aggregate of images, pictures, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, thoughts, memories, histories from books, patriotic songs, faces of people, actions and behaviors, things personally experienced and read about. If I have never been to England, for example, I may have a very different idea of England than an Englishman. Winston Churchill certainly had a very different idea of England than Robert Peel. A North Country collier's England is different from the Duke of Wellington's. When individuals respond to "England," however, they respond to something that goes beyond what a notion of England could propose.

Again, all these processes are dependent for Newman on the exercise of the imagination. The imagination is the great synthetic

and Imagination in John Henry Newman and John Hick," in Newman and the Word, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Ian Ker (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2000) 5-47. See also: Janine Langan, "Newman and the Catholic Imagination," *The Newman Rambler* 5, no. 2 (2001) 32-36.

61. See: Michael Paul Gallagher, "Newman on Faith and Imagination," *Milltown Studies* 49 (2002) 84-101.

engine that makes impressions into living ideas.⁶² For Newman, the imagination intuits what is not on the surface.⁶³ When theology encounters the fertility of imagination, then “It has a living hold on truths which are really to be found in the world, though they are not upon the surface.”⁶⁴

The imagination helps the individual to integrate the various evidences she or he has received, even those that, at first, seem purely of the intellect such that “they will find everything that happens tend to confirm them in the truths about Him which live in their imagination, varied and unearthly as those truths may be.”⁶⁵

But here again there is a cost: the price of surrender. A firm realization of the truths about anything requires a surrender and a desire for development and change. “We may be able, for others have been able, so to realize the precepts and truths of Christianity, as deliberately to surrender our life, rather than transgress the one or to deny the other.”⁶⁶

These ideas, all complex and multi-layered, are subject to two processes of intellection. The first is reflection. Reflections are responses of the intellect to images presented by way of abstractions. The mode of understanding these images is explicit reason; they yield notional apprehensions and notional assents. In

62. See: Mario O. D’Souza, “Intellectual Unity, Intellectual Virtues and Intellectual Culture,” in Maritain, Newman and the Future of the University (Antigonish: St. Francis Xavier University Press, 2000) 59–70.

63. Stanley Jaki, Newman to Converts: An Existential Ecclesiology (Pinckney: Real View Books, 2001).

64. Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, 118.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 179.

terms of religious discourse, this is theology, and it yields certitude properly speaking.

The second process of intellection is more important for Newman. It is experiment.⁶⁷ Experiments are the process of examining objects presented by the imagination that employ implicit reason. Experiments yield real apprehensions and real assent. They are generally expressed poetically or, in religious discourse, religiously, that is, in the life of faith. These processes gain virtual certitude. This process of intellection is never complete in any formal sense of the word. It is ongoing and necessitates a continual re-appropriation of the matter under consideration. It is the imagination at play.

Since the imagination is realized in experimental action, let us consider for a moment the certitude that Newman associates with this ratiocinative process. Virtual certitude is gained through the active and ever-fertile processes of the imagination, that is, the synthetic engine of the human mind. The imagination is the faculty for *realizing* (in Newman's terms, making most vivid) images that are important, durable, poetic and, in every sense, more real than real; that is the reality acknowledged by proper certitude, the outcome of reflection.

The interplay between these processes of the intellect is delicate. Too much reflection or too much emphasis placed on reflection can destroy certitude. Too much reason can destroy faith.⁶⁸ This was the difficulty of the deists. Rational religion is impotent. It does not stir the deep recesses of the human consciousness. That is why, for Newman, religious topics could only be debated by religious people, that is, in this context those actively engaged in ongoing

67. Meriol Trevor, "Science and God," *The Ransomer* 32 (1993) 5-7.

68. See: Robert P. George, "On Faith and Reason," *The Newman Rambler* 5 (2001) 11-22.

experimentation, living a life of faith in the Church. Yet, faith is likewise not faith without the action of the intellect, without reason.⁶⁹

Experimentation is an important image here. For Newman, to really know something meant engaging with it. A person cannot really apprehend, really assent, until she or he has *really* delved into the complexity of the thing. When she or he has delved into the complexity of the thing, then the inexhaustibility of experimentation is understood. The perception of inexhaustibility is concomitant with real apprehension and real assent. In other words, when I really know a thing, what I really know is that there is a great deal more about it to know. This is true of things in general. It is absolutely true of God, and indeed God is the term of the ratiocinative process in the first place.

What is faith? Faith is a complex intellectual action related to all other intellectual actions.⁷⁰ Faith is a collage, as all knowledge is a collage, of real and notional assents. It consists of notional assents in the full knowledge of their being notional. It consists of real assents in the full knowledge of their being inaccessible to full knowledge. It is a personal conquest of truth that knows what is true merely by a suspension of knowing it in a notional or reflective way. It is the ratiocination of a religious mind, a clear head and a right heart, a holy heart.

The reasoning of a religious mind is more than Locke's reason, and the thinking of a renewed heart is more than evangelical emotion. It is all at once. In other words, faith is the holding in tension

69. See: William Sweet, "Faith and Reason in Newman's Thought," *The Newman Rambler* 5, no. 2 (2001) 26-30.

70. See: Frederick Aquino, "Modalities of Reasoning: The Significance of John Henry Newman's Thought for Shaping Accounts of Rationality," *Downside Review* 121 (2003) 79-104.

two terms of a parable. Reason and passion do not seem to belong together. We cannot lock Locke and Kierkegaard in the same room without expecting bloodshed. Nevertheless, the actions of living persons reveal to us the fact of their being together in every true ratiocinative process.

Faith is a parable postulated in the between, in the energetic place between the two poles. To know something is precisely to know it there in the convergent fields of energy. God is real to me because of this convergence, and the abiding reality of God depends upon the fact that the tension of the convergence is never relaxed.

Newman calls this sensible-sensibility, this rational emotionality, this process of the cool head and holy heart, the illative sense. The imagination is exercised in the illative sense, which is understood by Newman as this synthetic movement.⁷¹ It is the engine of complex intellectual actions being a near relative of Aristotle's *phronesis*.⁷² The illative sense, as imagination, strides through all intellectual difficulties precisely in its tensile property. It pursues Truth, which Newman always understands as the natural pursuit of the person. It aspires to certainty. It is romantic, poetic and experiential. It is reasonable, analytic and reflective. It is not, as some critics have proposed, fideism.⁷³

As Boekrad states: "It is absolutely clear that this view is not fideistic, because fideism of whatever shade must maintain that

71. For a general treatment of the illative sense see:

Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts* 202-228.

72. See: David Brown, "Epistemology and Ecclesiology: Phronesis and Doctrinal Development," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* (2001) 70-85.

73. See: Achaval and Holmes, eds., *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, 17-31.

our natural incapacity for truth is in some way supplemented by supernatural means."⁷⁴ The illative sense constructs certainty through praxis. A person must live in order to know, and living is imaginative and messy, the process of unfinished business. Living and knowing is interaction with images, with laws, doctrines, teachings, liturgies, ceremonies and moral imperatives. It is an edifice constructed over a lifetime, continually being pulled down and reconstructed. It builds on foundations, on previous habits. It integrates and clarifies notions and first principles, as well as individual and community background theories, which it understands as means of proof that are not themselves proved. It is necessarily ongoing in that:

The practiced and experienced mind is able to make a sure divination that a conclusion is inevitable, of which his lines of reasoning do not actually put him in possession.⁷⁵

The illative sense yields certitude through experimentation understood as:

Probabilities which did not reach to logical certainty might create a mental certitude; that the certitude thus created might equal in measure and strength the certitude which was created by the strictest scientific demonstration.⁷⁶

The illative sense is a collection of weak evidences that make a strong evidence, a cable whose individual fibers can do nothing, but, when woven together, make a powerful cord.⁷⁷ The illative sense

74. A.J. Boekrad, *The Personal Conquest of Truth According to J.H. Newman* (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1955) 289.

75. *Ibid.*, 322.

76. Newman, *Apologia*, 123.

77. See the treatment of practical certainty in: Achaval and

yields a degree of certainty whose history cannot be charted, a body of proof recognized only as a body and not in its constitutive parts. It extends beyond cognition and presses on the person a reality that cannot be reduced to dissection or argumentation. By virtue of the illative sense, the person knows what he knows, and this knowledge betrays two essential qualities. It is resistant to any alternative propositions, that is, it rejects the notion of being rejected; and it is indefectible, that is, it can never fail.

Finally, the illative sense is not simply a process betrayed in individual processes of intellection. Every exercise of the illative sense intersects with the illative sense of others.⁷⁸ In the Christian context, it intersects with the illative sense of the Church, because, precisely as a process of exercising the imagination, the ratiocinative instinct recognizes the need for continued growth and development of every image placed before it. The illative sense invites a participation in a depth of reality to oneself, to God, to the world, and also to the community that yields an imaginative certainty from behind and beneath, from shadows and insinuations as well as the cold light of reason, which points to the infinite nature of God rather than the totalizing nature of God talk.

Truth for Newman is something constructed in the life of the individual, but also in the life of the community.⁷⁹ The community has a corporate identity and arrives at its own appropriations of the Truth. The community is necessary for the individual so that the Truth of the community and of other members becomes an essential way of furthering or deepening what originates in the natural instincts of the person. This deepening is essential for Truth

Holmes, eds., *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, 35-36, 88-89.

78. See: Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts*, 205-206.

79. See: Samuel Femiano, *The Infallibility of the Laity: The Legacy of Newman* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

to be Truth, for it to be satisfying as Truth and for it to be realized in the lived experience. Newman purports that what begins in youth in an embryonic way can be lost if not nourished.

And, even were it deemed impossible that those who had in their first youth a genuine apprehension of Him, could ever utterly lose it, yet that apprehension may become almost undistinguishable from an inferential acceptance of the great truth, or may dwindle into a mere notion of their intellect. On the contrary, the image of God, if duly cherished, may expand, deepen, and be completed, with the growth of their powers and in the course of life, under the varied lessons, within and without them, which are brought home to them concerning that same God, One and Personal, by means of education, social intercourse, experience, and literature.⁸⁰

It is interesting to note the various means that Newman singles out. Education provides a deepening, but what is meant by education? Involvement with the society is essential, as are artistic and non-didactic pursuits such as literature. All have a mark to make. In religion it is, again, not only a notional apprehension of questions that matter, but rather, Newman postulates, “the firmest hold of theological truths is gained by habits of personal religion.”⁸¹

Truth is a construction.⁸² Now the assertion is taking on the force of an axiom. The fact that truth is constructed is sanctioned by our very being. Although we are born with these native elements, we, unlike the animals, have the ability to change what is within. Speaking in the terms of the 19th-century natural scientist, we are not arbitrary victims of natural selection, flotsam and jetsam of

80. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 117.

81. *Ibid.*, 118.

82. See: Ian Ker, “Newman on Truth,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 44 (1977) 67-68.

the wild eccentricities of nature. Rather, the human person has the ability to change herself. She may use what is born within and certainly will use it. But progress is the key, and that is fueled by the will. “It is committed to the personal efforts of each individual of the species.”⁸³ We are not people, in Newman’s estimation, if we choose not to improve ourselves.

What is the peculiarity of our nature, in contrast with the inferior animals around us? It is that, though man cannot change what he is born with, he is a being of progress with relation to his perfection and characteristic good.⁸⁴

The goal of this purposeful and pursued progress is an advance toward the full expression of human nature. “Thus he gradually advances to the fullness of [our] original destiny.”⁸⁵ While Newman eschews Locke’s *tabula rasa*, he does see that the canvas of each life will be painted differently, so that “each of us has the prerogative of completing his inchoate and rudimental nature, and of developing his own perfection out of the living elements with which his mind began to be.”⁸⁶ Each is a palimpsest, continually scraped and repainted, but leaving traces of what has gone before.

If Newman rejects the excesses of natural selection, he also rejects the mechanism of Newton. “His progress is a living growth, not a mechanism; and its instruments are mental acts, not the formulas and contrivances of language.”⁸⁷ Newman is here steering his by-now-familiar *via media*, a middle way between Romanticism and mechanism, between Platonism and Aristotelianism, between Leibniz and Locke. The subtle interplays of

83. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 350.

84. *Ibid.*, 348–349.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*, 350.

87. *Ibid.*, 351.

the human mind hold all of these in tension, while none is rejected outright; none holds the entire answer either.

Newman's postulation of the illative sense may be considered his most important contribution to theological discourse.⁸⁸ It was by way of the illative sense that he was able to escape the theological hazards of 19th-century thought. For this reason, it merits a more careful analysis, particularly in connection with Newman's overall understanding of imagination. The nature of the illative sense begins with the observation, again, of the complexity of the human mind and its self-directedness. "It is the mind that reasons, and that controls its own reasonings, not any technical apparatus of words and propositions."⁸⁹

Through those complex actions mentioned above, the mind inculcates the power of judging and, more important, concluding. The perfect exercise of this faculty Newman calls the illative sense.⁹⁰ He then goes on to name a series of parallel faculties that demonstrate a similar constructive function. Here Newman is using the tools of imaginative discourse to bring together several factors that are held in tension in order to draw an inference. He compares the function of the illative sense with methods of judgment. He uses the example of the complexity of ethical systems whither their attendant components, but he notes that the faculty of judgment is needed in order to *realize* these systems:

An ethical system may supply laws, general rules, guiding principles, a number of examples, suggestions, landmarks,

88. See: M. Martin, "Enlargement of Mind and Religious Judgment in Loss and Gain," in *Personality and Belief. Interdisciplinary Essays on John Henry Newman*, ed. Gerard Magill (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994) 147-160.

89. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 354.

90. *Ibid.*, 353.

limitations, cautions, distinctions, solutions of critical or anxious difficulties; but who is to apply them to a particular case? Whither can we go, except to the living intellect, our own, or another's?⁹¹

In other words, the mere presence of theories cannot guarantee an action; it is the necessary combination of countless features, within the ethical system itself and outside in each individual, that generates a judgment.⁹² There is no utilitarian calculus. Different judgments might be made in different situations. The terms of the imaginative encounter may be seen in different ways at different times; what remains, however, is the necessity of giving assent, of action and movement. In other words, for Newman, the terms of the imaginative discourse are variable, but the fact of their engaging the imagination is certain. The reasonings that go into the parable will be more or less strong and developed at different times; what is imperative is the forward movement. Newman says:

In this respect of course the law of truth differs from the law of duty, that duties change, but truths never; but, though truth is ever one and the same, and the assent of certitude is immutable, still the reasonings which carry us on to truth and certitude are many and distinct, and vary with the inquirer; and it is not with assent, but with the controlling principle in inferences that I am comparing *phronesis*.⁹³

This constant need to rethink and re-evaluate the terms of the parable is made possible by the imagination. The imagination takes a judgment and, by virtue of its native ability, forces a re evaluation of

91. *Ibid.*, 355.

92. See the treatment of onlooking and participative imagination in: Walgrave, J. H. Newman, *His Personality, His Principles, His Fundamental Doctrines*, 102-104.

93. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 355-356.

the judgment. The imagination is never satisfied and its reasonings are more vivid than those of notions. "These images, when assented to, have an influence both on the individual and on society, which mere notions cannot exert."⁹⁴ Imagination acts as an engine to call to mind possibilities other than those the judgment of the mind has settled on.⁹⁵

A judgment is made, but the imagination immediately suggests another conclusion. Likewise, imaginations act in tandem to support and critique one another's findings. Imagination propels the illative sense, making it "the normal constitution of our minds, and of the natural and rightful effect of acts of the imagination upon us, and this is, not to create assent, but to intensify it."⁹⁶ This intensification, this making more vivid, is powerful because the imagination has the power to reject just as a conclusion is drawn; in fact, it always rejects provisional answers. It motivates us toward refinements and perfection. It finds "a means of stimulating those motive powers; and it does so by providing a supply of objects strong enough to stimulate them."⁹⁷ This is an important point for Newman because imagination, in order to properly fulfill its function in the epistemological schema, must be stimulated. It must have access to and the purposeful presentation of numerous images within many genres of imagination. In other words, there is an imperative to nurture the imagination by turning over in a purposeful way different ideas presented in different genres.

To the one who thinks, there must be the encouragement to experience because "the imagination has the means, which pure

94. *Ibid.*, 75.

95. See the treatment of imagination and action in Walgrave, J. H. Newman, *His Personality, His Principles, His Fundamental Doctrines*, 110-111.

96. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 83.

97. *Ibid.*

intellect has not, of stimulating those powers of the mind from which action proceeds.”⁹⁸ To the one who is particularly sensate, more in the way of cognitive reflection is necessary. To the painter, some music is in order, and for the musician, perhaps some painting. Nevertheless, the purposeful stimulation of the imagination, as an imperative to growth and deepening apprehensions and assent, is a condition of development.

For Newman, these were very practical, even pastoral, considerations, as was evident from the fact that he wrote poetry and novels. He used an overwhelmingly expansive catalogue of images in the creation of his literary works and, moreover, used these in an imaginative way to add layer upon layer of meaning. He did this because he understood that “the imagination may be said in some sense to be of a practical nature, inasmuch as it leads to practice indirectly by the action of its object upon the affections.”⁹⁹ For the priest, then, the exercise of the imagination and the cultivation of his imagination and the imaginations of his parishioners are essential not only to authentic living, but to engaging the discourse of an ever-expanding divine horizon.

Religious living, in this context, becomes a purposeful, it might be said, “experimental,” appropriation of a systematic lack of system.¹⁰⁰ This is the essence of real assent for Newman, which creates a “fact” from all the actions of the human person so that “to give a real assent to it is an act of religion; to give a notional, is a theological act. It is discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination; it is held as a truth, by the

98. *Ibid.*, 90.

99. *Ibid.*, 84.

100. See: Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts*, 222-224.

Merrigan relates the operation of the illative sense to Newman’s conversion.

theological intellect.”¹⁰¹ This ratiocinative process is, moreover, a way of life in that what it breeds, when employed in the full sense of its action, is not knowledge *per se* but wisdom.

Through the purposeful directing of the principles laid down in the *Grammar*, the imaginative inquirer could only expect to grow and change realizing, “still there is no one ruling faculty leading to eminence in all these various lines of action in common.”¹⁰² The imperative application of all at once will lead to wisdom that is both *knowing* and *being* something.¹⁰³ The principle of convergence is overwhelming to the imagination, so that what is stimulated is dissatisfied with anything less than growth. A proof, Newman holds, “is the limit of converging probabilities.”¹⁰⁴ By force of intellect, such finality of proofs cannot sustain the human person fully alive.

In the community of the Church, these various stimuli to intellect are contained in distinct modalities. There is doctrine and teaching, liturgy and art. There is prayer and devotion, as well as the scientific study of Scripture. The convergence is the key. “Break a ray of light into its constituent colours, each is beautiful, each may be enjoyed; attempt to unite them, and perhaps you produce only a dirty white.”¹⁰⁵

Newman is practical enough, however, to realize that no construction, no convergence, will be perfect. In fact, it is this very lack of perfection that inculcates the need for continued development and new approaches. A pure Church, a pure parish, a pure university would have a perfect exercise of the imagination.

101. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 100.

102. *Ibid.*, 358.

103. See: Jeffrey D. Marlett, “Conversion Methodology and the Case of Cardinal Newman,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 669–685.

104. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 322.

105. *Ibid.*, 133.

People, however, have limitations. There can be the purposeful stimulation in one area or another, but only to a certain degree.

In the ideal epistemological environment, the painter would naturally turn to music and the scholar to charismatic prayer, but, in fact, some have no ear for music or hand for painting. “The pure and indivisible Light is seen only by the blessed inhabitants of heaven; here we have but such faint reflections of it as its diffraction supplies; but they are sufficient for faith and devotion.”¹⁰⁶ This sufficiency assures two things, the first being a perception of the lack of completion. The person that authentically lives the life of faith is like a scholar; she mostly knows what she does not know. Second, it unveils the term of this further inquiry, which is mystery. Mystery comes about from the realization of the parable, the terms of which when we ... “[a]ttempt to combine them into one, [gains] nothing but a mystery, which you can describe as a notion, but cannot depict as an imagination.”¹⁰⁷

Mystery cannot be depicted. That is the key. It can only stimulate to greater facilitation of the mystery. It is an energy rather than an object, a process rather than a finished project. A mystery is inexhaustible, but not unknowable. It is the overwhelming magnitude of the term of the mystery, the Divine Reality, “which is addressed far more to the imagination and affections than to the intellect.”¹⁰⁸ The mystery to which we devote our lives is not reducible to any aspect of it or any single term of the imagination. “Hence in the Creeds the dogma is not called a mystery; not in the Apostles’ nor the Nicene, nor even in the Athanasian.”¹⁰⁹

What is inculcated by creeds and formulae is a stimulus to meet the mystery at a higher level. Indeed, as Newman points out,

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid.

108. Ibid.

109. Ibid.

originally these “dogmatic” pronouncements were located in the context of liturgy, that is, they were seen as epistemologically centered in the larger imaginative act of realizing the mystery, bit by bit, in the imaginative act of the liturgical assembly that combines various modes of imagination to lead the worshiper further into the mystery. “The reason seems to be, that the Creeds have a place in the Ritual; they are devotional acts, and of the nature of prayers, addressed to God; and, in such addresses, to speak of intellectual difficulties would be out of place.”¹¹⁰ For Newman, the creed was a song, a psalm.

It is not a mere collection of notions, however momentous. It is a psalm or hymn of praise, of confession, and of profound, self prostrating homage, parallel to the canticles of the elect in the Apocalypse. It appeals to the imagination quite as much as to the intellect; it is the war-song of faith, with which we warn, first ourselves, then each other, and then all those who are within its hearing, and the hearing of the Truth, who our God is, and how we must worship Him, and how vast our responsibility will be, if we know what to believe, and yet believe not. It is:

“The Psalm that gathers in one glorious lay
All chants that e’er from heaven to earth found way;
Creed of the Saints, and Anthem of the Blest,
And calm-breathed warning of the kindest love
That ever heaved a wakeful mother’s breast.”¹¹¹

The song-like quality of the creed, its placement within the imaginative/epistemological environment of the liturgy, even the imaginative “antithetical form of its sentences,”¹¹² propels the creed forward as an imaginative force, which may act as a stumbling block to less imaginative minds. To Newman’s apprehension, however,

110. Ibid.

111. Ibid., 134.

112. Ibid.

all of these factors, which seem “to force, and to exult in forcing a mystery upon recalcitrating minds,” have, “even notionally considered, a very different drift.”¹¹³ The words confound and, precisely in their confounding, force a re consideration. They are repeated week in and week out to purposefully engender new thoughts and approaches by hearing them in new personal and social contexts.

The very regularity of liturgy acts as a term of a parable against which the vicissitudes of society, culture and personality clash to force meaning by the very fact of their being together. This mysterious being together is “intended as a check upon our reasonings, lest they rush on in one direction beyond the limits of the truth, and it turns them back into the opposite direction. Certainly it implies a glorying in the Mystery; but it is not simply a statement of the Mystery for the sake of its mysteriousness.”¹¹⁴

Mystery is, rather, for relationship with the thing that the mystery suggests. Mystery is the perpetually disturbing invitation that haunts the imagination with an insatiable curiosity. It is the distillation of “a multitude of facts, which, taken separately, may perhaps be natural, but, found together, must come from a source above nature; and what these are, and how many are necessary, will be variously determined.”¹¹⁵ In this necessary, various determination, the imagination has its life.

In the *Grammar*, Newman goes further to suggest that, even notions or images that seem straightforward initially, upon closer inspection reveal their imaginative character.¹¹⁶ Over time,

113. Ibid.

114. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 135.

115. Ibid., 311.

116. See: Christie, “The Logic of Conversion: Reasonable Imagination in the Theological Method of John Henry Newman.”

even notional propositions are unveiled in their mysteriousness by way of the community's attempt to understand them at a greater level, so that "the mysteriousness of the doctrine is observed in the successive definitions of the Church concerning it."¹¹⁷ Formulations and re-formulations of even a notional proposition over time unveil the imaginative character that underlies all sincere and meaningful discourse: "Confession after confession, canon after canon is drawn up in the course of centuries; Popes and Councils have found it their duty to insist afresh upon the dogma; they have enunciated it in new or additional propositions."¹¹⁸

New expressions of a doctrine appear; it is restated in song and chant, developed anew in liturgical actions and public prayers and devotions. Taken together, the various manifestations of the doctrine over time, in countless nuanced notional formulas, in professions of faith, in celebration and performances of various kinds, constitute belief. "*Lex orandi, lex credendi.*" The maxim might also be formulated as "the law of parable constitutes the law of knowledge." To know is to never *finally* to know. "However this contrast of usage is to be explained, the Creeds are enough to show that the dogma may be taught in its fullness for the purposes of popular faith and devotion without directly insisting on that mysteriousness, which is necessarily involved in the combined view of its separate propositions. That systematized whole is the object

117. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 134.

118. Newman is speaking here specifically of the doctrine of the Trinity. M.A. McIntosh, "The Formation of Mind: Trinity and Understanding in Newman," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 136-158.

of notional assent, and its propositions, one by one, are the objects of real.”¹¹⁹

Insufficient religion, like insufficient knowledge, is a different matter. “Its doctrines are not so much facts, as stereotyped aspects of facts; and it is afraid, so to say, of walking round them.”¹²⁰ Insufficient knowledge does not admit to enlargement. It does not consider alternative opinions. It is satisfied with its own limited opinions and limited scope. Insufficient religion is the same. It limits the divine by extinguishing the mystery. Certitude in religion, as in other matters, is only judged by the whole evidence, inside and outside the system, taken together.¹²¹

Real religion cannot insist on its own insularity or a limited venue for its deliberation. Its truth must be based on a universal (in every sense of the word) approach. “Certitude, as I have said, is the perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth, or the consciousness of knowing, as expressed in the phrase, ‘I know that I know,’ or ‘I know that I know that I know,’—or simply ‘I know;’ for one reflex assertion of the mind about self sums up the series of self-consciousnesses without the need of any actual evolution of them.”¹²² This “reflex assertion of the mind” is the imagination.

Next, Newman follows the action of this imagination and its relationship with knowing by tracing it in the life of the average person. In childhood, the lessons of right and wrong are taught as precepts. Children know what they should and should not do because they are given these moral lessons by their parents and their teachers. The impacts of these precepts, which to the child

119. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 136.

120. *Ibid.*, 58.

121. “The truth of our religion, like the truth of common matters, is to be judged by the whole evidence taken together.” *Ibid.* The quote is from Butler.

122. *Ibid.*, 198.

may be only notions, are carried into the world. In this way, “the intellectual assents, in which they have in like manner been instructed from the first, have to be tested, realized, and developed by the exercise of their mature judgment.”¹²³

Here the imaginative action is between precepts and the lived experience of being in the world. The notions originally taught as precepts are now assented to in a real way because they are questioned, tested, strengthened and reinforced through experience, observation, reading, reflections and countless other ways. As time passes, the assent becomes stronger, the warrants become more manifold, the matter becomes extraordinarily, even mysteriously, complex, and looking back, “We assented to them, and we still assent, though we have forgotten what the warrant was.”¹²⁴

These warrants, strange and mysterious, some vivid and some less vivid, the product of countless experiences and observations, of notional apprehensions and emotional resources, form what Newman describes as a *depositum*, a treasure chest, as it were, from which we draw in the continual process of inventing and re inventing. Such a *depositum* exists for every individual and every corporate entity.

In secular terms, the *depositum* forms the core of the national identity; it is the font of patriotism; it is preserved in archives, enshrined in songs, waved in flags. It gives substance to the national understanding by virtue of its allowing for a continual re imaging by using the components again and again in different contexts. Old images and figures are brought out at different times to take on new meanings in new contexts. The new contexts then become an element of the *depositum* so that the *depositum* is not a dead museum of images and memories but a living, thriving entity that undergoes transformation through use.

It is permanent by virtue of its dependability, its time-testedness,

123. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 193.

124. *Ibid.*, 168.

but exists in an imaginative nature with the community in that it represents, at once, the past and the future of the corporation of which it is a *depositum*. Here Newman seems to be employing again the language of science. There is an origin of species being traced here, so that we can look back on what the species was as a way of tracing what it has become. However, as with Darwin, so, too, with Newman, we may find unexpected ancestors and trails that seem to go nowhere. We might fail to recognize the grown thing in the infantile.

Of course, the Church has such a *depositum* called tradition.¹²⁵ Tradition represents for Newman the complex truth, the ways and means by which the central truth of God has been worked out in dogmas and doctrines, in prayer and devotion, through the centuries. It represents the product of the collective imagination of the Church. “The Catholic intellect makes a survey and a catalogue of the doctrines contained in the *depositum* of revelation, as committed to the Church’s keeping; it locates, adjusts, defines them each, and brings them together into a whole.”¹²⁶

The life of the *depositum* of faith is its use. In this way, the *depositum* forms the parts of a great quilt, stitched together from various elements, so that it takes “particular aspects or portions of them; it analyzes them, whether into first principles really such, or into hypotheses of an illustrative character. It forms generalizations, and gives names to them. All these deductions are true, if rightly deduced, because they are deduced from what is true; and therefore

125. See: Gunter Biemer, “Newman on Tradition as a Subjective Process,” in *By Whose Authority? Newman, Manning and the Magisterium*, ed. V.A. McClelland (Bath: Downside Abbey, 1996) 149- 167.

126. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 148.

in one sense they are a portion of the *depositum* of faith or *credenda*, while in another sense they are additions to it.¹²⁷

Here, Newman neatly uses the binary of *depositum* and *credenda*, a combination of substantive and gerund, as a way of illustrating that the *depositum* is not something static and fixed,

but something inculcated by the very *act* of believing. This continual dipping into and using the various elements of the *depositum* forms the life of the imagination in the Church and extends the life of its mysterious source, so that that mystery is extended and prodded in the devotional mind to encompass the immensity of the Divine Reality.

A devotional mind, on perceiving that mysteriousness, will lovingly appropriate it, as involved in the divine revelation; and, as such a mind turns all thoughts which come before it to a sacred use, ... as a truth befitting, so to say, the Immensity and Incomprehensibility of the Supreme Being.¹²⁸

The mystery, which is the paradoxical object of all knowing, knowing that we need to know more, is located precisely in the tense center of the terms of a parable. For Newman, though we can imagine the terms, “though we can image the separate propositions, we cannot image them altogether”¹²⁹ except by their statement precisely as a parable. We can know that we do not know and attempt to work out in our minds an answer and thus enter into a life-long relationship with the terms of the parable. Again, Newman states:

Let it be observed, it is possible for the mind to hold a number of propositions either in their combination as one whole, or one by one; one by one, with an intelligent

127. Ibid., 148.

128. Ibid., 130.

129. Ibid., 131.

perception indeed of all, and of the general direction of each towards the rest, yet of each separately from the rest, for its own sake only.¹³⁰

In this way, the mystery lying at the imaginative center goes beyond any particular experience. If we need, then, a final statement of what Newman means by the imagination, we can do no better than this:

The mystery transcends all our experience; we have no experiences in our memory which we can put together, compare, contrast, unite, and thereby transmute into an image of the Ineffable Verity;—certainly; but what is in some degree a matter of experience, what is presented for the imagination, the affections, the devotion, the spiritual life of the Christian to repose upon with a real assent, what stands for things, not for notions only, is each of those propositions taken one by one, and that, not in the case of intellectual and thoughtful minds only, but of all religious minds whatever, in the case of a child or a peasant, as well as of a philosopher.¹³¹

Finally, to summarize Newman's treatise on epistemology, it is necessary to return to the source of this wild and complex process, the Incarnation. The whole of the Truth for Newman proceeds from the truth of Christ. For Newman, the event of the Incarnation has a particular history, a *depositum*. Acts of faith, even when professed in specific beliefs, are always acts of faith in the ground of believing. If I say I believe in one God, the Father almighty, I am professing belief not only in the paternity, but also in the Sonship and in the Spirit.

I profess the whole in the parts because the ground allows for such an interaction by virtue of its imaginative character. It insists upon a mutual interpenetration of doctrines and fundamental professions. I say I believe in the real presence of Christ in the

130. *Ibid.*, 130.

131. *Ibid.*, 130–131.

Eucharist and I am professing also my belief in the Trinity, because all particular profession is a profession in the ground.

I mean by belief, not precisely faith, because faith, in its theological sense, includes a belief, not only in the thing believed, but also in the ground of believing; that is, not only belief in certain doctrines, but belief in them expressly because God has revealed them.¹³²

It is sensible enough to say that the Divine Reality is the ground of all belief, but Newman also postulates that it is the nature of that ground to facilitate the imaginative shifting in the profession of the general in the particular. Thus, when I say that I believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible or in papal authority, I am professing not only particular beliefs in these articles of faith, I am professing something about that ground, and that something is its imaginative character so that I must attempt to grasp the imaginative nature of the ground first in this particular belief and then in that one.

He who believes that Christ is the Truth, and that the Evangelists are truthful, believes all that He has said through them, though he has only read St. Matthew and has not read St. John. He who believes in the *depositum* of Revelation, believes in all the doctrines of the *depositum*; and since he cannot know them all at once, he knows some doctrines, and does not know others; he may know only the Creed, nay, perhaps only the chief portions of the Creed; but, whether he knows little or much, he has the intention of believing all that there is to believe whenever and as soon as it is brought home to him, if he believes in Revelation at all.¹³³

The ground is the source of the possibility of imagination. In all particular beliefs, I am really expressing belief in the imaginative nature. As such it is not possible to solidify, to calcify or to inordinately inflect any one particular belief, except in its more

132. *Ibid.*, 100.

133. *Ibid.*, 130-131.

closely resembling the imaginative ground from which it gains its credibility and its life. Any attempt to grasp the ground must be formulated in the totalizing nature of the workings of the human mind, and all the more so with religion, in that the ground is the source of all epistemic wandering, the parable of Truth, the parable of Parables, the Incarnate Word, ironic and imaginative in its very title for being a word with flesh. “And if all this is too much for us, whether to bring at one time before our minds from its variety, or even to apprehend at all or enunciate from our narrowness of intellect or want of learning, then at least we believe *in globo* all that He has revealed to us about Himself.”¹³⁴

This leads emphatically to understanding our stance toward the ground as that of a relationship. In Christianity, the nature of our knowledge is to have a relationship with knowledge itself, which can only inculcate knowing by expanding knowing and thereby creating an indissoluble bond between the knower and the source of knowledge. This personal conquest of truth is central. As Boekrad states: “If we should reject such a truth coming to us in such a way, we would reject ourselves.”¹³⁵ Our relationship with this divine entity promotes enlargement and growth, the goal of life and faith, what it means to be human.

In some ways, the *Grammar of Assent* is Newman’s most complex work. In its style and in its structure, it replicates the epistemological conclusions (or lack of conclusions) that Newman wishes to make. It is a work drawn from his personal experience of knowing, reflected upon over a long course of years. Analyzing the *Grammar* from the perspective of the imagination is fraught with difficulties because each sentence, each paragraph, seems to turn in on itself in ever-expanding imaginative discourse.

134. *Ibid.*, 101.

135. Boekrad, *The Personal Conquest of Truth According to J.H. Newman*, 303.

NEWMAN AND PRIESTHOOD IN THE ILLATIVE SENSE

For Newman, these rather daring insights about human knowledge and imagination were rooted in a fundamental Christological basis. In light of this, I now offer three Christological insights that help focus Newman's epistemology into a priestly identity and spirituality.

The first Christological insight into priesthood in the thought of Newman follows from his understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Our profession of the Rule of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon unveils a richness to the Christ event that extends beyond the apprehension of the physical person of Jesus of Nazareth. Perception of the Jesus of history is perception of the Christ of faith. Things are not what they seem to be by way of the senses.

Through the senses, Jesus is a Jewish itinerate preacher of a certain time and place with messianic pretensions, the historical Jesus. His execution is a barrier to the full realization of his being. St. Paul elucidates this point with his insight that "we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness."¹³⁶ There is more to the cross, however, than meets the eye. From this Christological insight, we discover the central principle of Christian existence – the presence of a sacramental imagination.

The sacramental imagination, by which we discern the reality lurking behind and beyond the physical species, governs the life of faith. We celebrate it daily in the Eucharist. As priests, we announce it in the Holy Mass: *Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi*. We make this audacious announcement while having the impunity to hold what to the eyes of sight appears to be a mere piece of bread, a cup of common wine. The sacramental imagination proclaims with boldness: things are not what they seem to be. There is more here than meets the eye. This boldness is drawn from the energy of the simultaneous presence of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

136. I Corinthians, 1, 23.

As we proclaim this reality with such boldness, we also realize that it extends beyond the action of the altar to the world, indeed to the whole world. The Eucharist, as source and summit, both feeds and gains momentum from the action of the sacramental reality of Christ in the world, indeed in the most mundane aspects of the human condition.

This is the pastoral instinct of the priest. The implementation of the sacramental imagination in daily living, in daily pastoral care, is his license to make the bold pronouncements of the liturgy. The priest looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the flock and proclaims: there is more here than meets the eye. He gazes upon the troubling and troublesome parishioners and knows: there is more here than meets the eye. He understands that this paradox is the bread and butter of discipleship, his constant challenge, his most ardent desire and his greatest aspiration.

Our priesthood depends upon our ability to transfer the imaginative insight of Christology into the daily narrative of the Church. We look upon our fellow human beings in the context of complex narratives. We search behind and beyond what is presented by the context of frail humanity and realize that the folly of their crosses, the scandal of their lives, are not their ends anymore than the cross with its fearsome presentation exhausted the reality of the living God present in the person of Jesus.

There are multiple meanings in every life. That is pastoral care in the illative sense. But priesthood also depends upon our ability to turn the generative power of this insight, that there is more here than meets the eye, upon ourselves. We must not reduce ourselves to our daily failures, our momentary lapses or the internal scandals that appear, perhaps only to the inner eye of our imagination. The sacramental imagination is self-perception and sometimes the greatest pastoral care is that which we must offer ourselves.

The second Christological insight for priesthood drawn from Newman is that tension is the only way to growth. The Incarnation, as the central principle of our faith and our living, is a tensile reality. It tugs at the mind and the heart with contrariety. This tension,

central to the orthodox expression of faith, becomes the very engine, the energy, of the life of the Church. One way of understanding this necessary complexity, this tension, is in the realization of emotional maturity.

The immature person seeks facility. The immature person is completely self-referential. The immature person is simple. The immature person is a kind of Arian, a psychological heretic. Often, perhaps all too often, this immaturity is expressed among priests as a kind of narcissism. My opinion is the only one that counts. I must have the last word in every conversation. Only my needs need to be met.

The inability to see ourselves as part of a larger world, a greater good, is the essence of narcissism. Some scholars see the prevalence of the narcissistic personality at the core of the Church's scandals surrounding sexuality. A less dramatic form of narcissism is a kind of clericalism that seeks privilege, entitlement or even profit from the total gift of vocation that God has given to us. We cannot build our egos by way of the gift of vocation. The narcissistic personality sees the needs of others as intrusions on his or her fulfillment or, more sinisterly, the means of his or her fulfillment. The narcissistic personality cannot find a place in imaginative priesthood because he does not perceive the need for others. He has all of the answers.

One thing, however, is very clear. The Church has no need for any more narcissistic priests, deacons or lay ministers. There is no room in the Church for the completely self-referential, the guru or the alternative formator. Why? Because the narcissistic personality thinks he has all of the answers and sees no value in the pursuit of discipleship at all. Emotional and imaginative maturity is the ability to see my needs and the needs of the other as complementary. Bound together on a common journey of the discovery of God, the pastor and the parishioner find common hopes, common frustrations and common dreams in the tensile engagement with the God who is beyond all understanding.

Emotional and imaginative maturity implies the ability to continually rethink and reform assumptions, ideas and conceptions,

to suspend judgment, to seek beyond the eternal “I.” Imaginative maturity engages the illative sense, as it is the ability to change one’s mind as one grasps the ever deeper, ever broader, ever wider reality of men and women who are images of God, the God that cannot be reduced to the mirror image of my preferences, my opinions, my goals. This imaginative maturity and the use of the illative sense invariably evoke tension in the person, but this tension is the vibrating heartstring of an intense, intimate relationship with the divine and human Christ who invites us into the life of God himself.

The third Christological insight for priesthood in the illative sense is the necessity of the development of the poetical sensibility. We live today in a culture defined by utility and popularism. Newman referred to the popular as the fantastical and defined it as that which engaged the person for a moment, in a defined aspect of the personality, but was not ultimately fulfilling by way of its simplicity. We might refer to this same reality as popular culture, a life lived in the Top 40, the newest fad or the latest celebrity.

The utilitarian is defined by Newman as that which is narrowly perceived to fulfill certain needs in the human condition, but only on a provisional basis. We live in a culture that promotes both of these values. Gabriel Marcel defined the two pursuits of the human mind as problem solving and mystery seeking. The problem-solving man seeks solutions; the mystery-seeking man seeks inspiration in the imaginative engagement on the illative sense. Inspiration is neither utilitarian nor popular.

The paradox of modern humanity is that, while we live in a culture that presents utility and the popular as ends, we are still possessed of human hearts that long for the expansive horizons of the poetic, even though we no longer have the language to talk about it. This is pastoral leadership’s greatest challenge and its greatest opportunity. Newman insists that religion is, ultimately, to use his expression, imaginative and poetical. It requires time and devotion to fully begin to appreciate its gifts.

It requires a lifetime of engagement that extends beyond the Top 40, the up-to-date or the relevant. It realizes that the cult

of immediate relevance is the death of God, whose mysteries cannot be fathomed in a thousand “readings,” “hearings” or “sightings.” Pope Benedict has remarked: “Faith creates culture and is culture.... It tells man who he is and how he should go about being human.”¹³⁷ When we know this, we have attained true humanity.

And so, the priest must necessarily seek the expansion of cultural horizons, finding meaning in the arts, in literature and in other expressions of the human spirit that transcend the utilitarian and popular mentality. The priest, as pastoral minister, must understand popular culture, but he must not live in popular culture. He must not see the bounds of culture in the ephemeral and the passing. Learning to view art, to listen to music, to experience drama, to read literature and poetry is necessary because it trains the mind, the heart and the spirit toward the transcendent. It gives the priest depth perception, encouraging him to guide his life, not by that which is temporary but that which infinitely engages.

In learning to appreciate art and poetry, the priest learns to look for the art and poetry in the mundane, daily tasks of spiritual and pastoral care. In learning to look at art, he learns to look at the world as potential rather than finality. In learning to read literature, he seeks the imaginative horizons of the page in the nursing home patient, the sick, the dying, the student, the homebound and, indeed, himself. Again the Holy Father has remarked: “All sacred images are, without exception...images of the resurrection. History is read in the light of the resurrection and for that very reason they are images of hope, giving us the assurance of the world to come.”¹³⁸

The inculcation of the imagination in poetic sensibility leads us to prayer. Prayer, likewise, in our cultural understanding can be highly utilitarian. How often does the priest hear: “I am frustrated; my prayer is not working”? Yet the object of prayer is not utilitarian

137. Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 69.

138. Josef Ratzinger, *Images of Hope*, 229.

fulfillment, but an immersion in the depths of the life of God. It is communion with God. It takes time and does not necessarily yield immediately gratifying results. Prayer is a commitment to the poetic and imaginative life in God, one that expands over time and draws the person of prayer into the folds of a relationship that cannot be exhausted by first acquaintance.

Prayer familiarizes us with the poetical God and makes us love him, and in loving him, loving the Other and, ultimately (yet paradoxically, firstly), our true selves. The ability to love, truly love, unveils the mystery of God who is love in the actions of the human heart. We experience this love, this poetry, imaginative engagement, this prayer most profoundly in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, by which we offer true immolation to the lies that plague modern man, as surely as the lies of the serpent plagued our ancestors in faith.

As the fragmented pieces of the Host are re-gathered in the body of the Church, we fulfill the prayer of Christ, that they may be one. We find, once more, that original unity of self lost in the Fall. We discover, once more, our profound oneness with God. We become One by becoming more like Christ, we become truly who we are by conforming our life and our *mode* of being to his. The Eucharist, then, forms the ultimate imaginative parameters of human formation. It tells us who we are.

These are challenging insights. However, equipped with these insights, we have the raw matter of living a full life, the only kind of full life, a life in union with Christ and in union with the source of our being, the Holy Trinity. With these insights, we have the potential to understand more profoundly the powerful longing that churns within us. With these insights about Christ, we can see clearly who we are amid the encircling gloom of social maledictions, the swirling fog of a culture of mendacity.

With these insights, we know who we are, who we truly are within the context of the lies that sometimes cloud our senses, both external and internal. The realization of these insights is, in essence, the imaginative project of our seminaries, our schools of theology, our parishes, our dioceses and our institutions. We can, in this

context, only rely upon the light of God revealed to us in the face of Jesus to continue to enlighten us. Perhaps we can find no better words to formulate our prayer than those of Cardinal Newman himself:

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.
I was not ever thus,
nor prayed that Thou shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path;
but now lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!
So long Thy power hath blest me,
sure it still will lead me on.
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent,
till the night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile,
which I Have loved long since, and lost awhile!