

Begin with the Heart

*'Where then do we begin?' Meister Eckhart was asked.
'Begin with the heart'*

Dedication

*The Project is dedicated to those whose hearts are always beckoning
them on; who put themselves in courageous conversation with the
cliff-edge of their lives, no matter how frightening it seems*

**DANIEL
O'LEARY**

Begin with the Heart

RECOVERING A SACRAMENTAL VISION





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Preface

There is no doubt that contemporary culture is both a challenge and an opportunity for women and men of faith. Faith cannot be simply a series of arguments defending propositions about God, Christ, the church, humanity and the world. It certainly needs a conceptual coherence which engages reason and imagination, but it needs something more. If all we are asked for is our intellectual assent, then faith remains largely formal and, to some extent, dead. Indeed, we can find many men and women who know all the arguments and counter arguments but still somehow faith remains elusive; at best, it never gets much beyond a routine of practices. If this is all there is, then I think once that supporting culture or community begins to dissolve or come under pressure then the 'faith' that it carries also begins to dissolve.

To be sure, faith is rooted and grounded in the community which it also creates. It is carried in the living tradition, the life of the church and in the holiness of its members. But it is also always a gift that comes new each day from the Spirit of the Risen Lord, the seal of the Father's love. The church lives each moment from this unfathomable and utterly free gift. Each day we come as beggars to receive the 'bread of life'. What is our prayer, whether personal or liturgical, if it is not the expression of our poverty?

In this we begin to touch something of faith's mystery. Beyond its conceptual structure it is always essentially a personal relationship. It comes as surprise and gift; it is not something that can be generated or produced; it is something offered and accepted. It is personal in the deepest and most direct way because it is Christ's offer of himself to each one, irrespective of their race, culture, status or ability. When we experience this, then, we know that it is also grace and we set out upon

the adventure of this relationship which does not come to an end.

The adventure of faith does not take us out of the world but opens up a path that leads more deeply into it. How could it be anything else given that this is the path that God takes to come to us in the person and gift of his Son? And so we find ourselves on a road at once familiar but also strangely and inexplicably always new. It is the road of humanity itself and yet we find again and again that faith gives us a new way of seeing and understanding – a new way of being and maybe even opening up this way for others. This road is the way into that deeper relationship with Christ. It begins with the heart, but not the heart of a passing sentiment or emotion, rather, it is the heart that carries with it a sort of wisdom and courage, a sort of inventiveness also. This is the heart that is the school of the Spirit.

We find, too, that in this school we are not alone. We stand within a community that supports us and nourishes us, that helps us to stay on the journey, carrying us when we are weary or despondent, calling us when we lag behind or get distracted, inspiring with its own love and always holding before us the one who makes it all worthwhile.

The heart that lives in the school of the Spirit learns to discover a ‘sacramental imagination’. It can express itself in many ways: in reason and poetry, in silence and in life – ordinary and heroic. That ‘sacramental imagination’ is the eye of the Christian heart which sees all things in Christ and traces the lines of his work – even in the darkest moments and the desert places. It has courage and it has truth; it is not some story of enchantment which the Christian invents as a sort of protective mantra against a hostile emptiness. It is truly the vision of faith because it sees God’s faithfulness at work and knows how to wait upon him.

In his accessible and imaginative treatment, *Begin with the Heart*, Fr Daniel O’Leary has opened up the dimensions of this journey of the life of faith. He has also grounded it in a theological and ecclesial vision which brings out the personal, creative and dynamic reality which transforms not only our own life and understanding, but that

of the culture in which we live. This book is about the mission we have to our culture and our world. It is also about how we, as parents, teachers, catechists, friends and companions can help unfold that life of faith in each other. That is truly a sacramental action. I have profited from reading Daniel's work and have learnt from his approach. I am grateful to him for taking up the suggestions of our report, *On The Way to Life*, and working with them sensitively and creatively. There is a lovely poem by e.e. cummings. It is not, I think, a religious poem but a love poem. Yet, its final stanza – which echoes Dante – has a resonance with all that is written in *Begin with the Heart*:

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
 (here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
 and the sky of the sky and the tree of a tree called life; which
 grows
 higher than the soul can hope or the mind can hide)
 and this the wonder that's keeping the stars apart
 i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart).

It is God who carries our heart in Christ, and in that wonderful exchange it is we who are given his through the love of the Holy Spirit. This seems to me to be the essence of the incarnation and the mystery of grace.

James Hanvey SJ

Director, The Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life.

Introduction

These pages offer reflections for beginning a conversation about four inter-connected themes in the work of Christian education in its widest sense – the Catholic imagination and the sacramental vision (Part 1), a theology of nature and grace (Part 2), an educational theory for sharing our faith (Part 3), and the multi-cultural, postmodern reality of the world we live and work in (Part 4). These underlying motifs are central to *On the Way to Life* (OTWTL), a document commissioned by the Bishops of England and Wales in 2005 (see below).

All evangelising, catechising, teaching and preaching are based on a theology. It is important that we should be able to articulate it. Otherwise we do not have a ground to stand or build on. The Vatican II theology outlined in OTWTL is both imaginative and sacramental. It offers a vision of creation and incarnation that brings a new dynamism to our own faith and, therefore, to our ministry in the classroom and the parish-room.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols sees OTWTL as ‘a vital catalyst for bishops, priests, teachers and all those involved in catechesis to reflect on the Church’s mission in education.’ What this document refers to as ‘the Catholic imagination’ and ‘the sacramental vision’ has always been an essential, but too often neglected, dimension of our tradition. It brings a richness and a resonance that gives new life to our efforts to spread the word.

Throughout the reflections that follow, suggestions are made for linking this sacramental imagination and theological vision with the actual lives of God’s people, with pastoral ministries, and with an experience-based, life-centred educational theory. This is one of the hopes expressed by the Bishops’ Conference, the Catholic Education Service (CES), and the authors and

reviewers of OTWTL. They are concerned about how to maintain and enhance the spiritual integrity of Catholic schools in a 'results' dominated age.

Much creative work needs to be entered into before we can restore to the young and old of our schools and parishes this central spiritual vision and imagination. Many questions arise. How can hearts be touched? How can faith be 'caught'? How do we protect and liberate that innate creativity already inside our students, waiting to be drawn out? How do we make both relevance to life and abundance of humanity the aim of all our teaching and catechising? How do we keep the vision of Jesus at the heart of everything we do?

One way is by paying more attention to the hearts and minds of those who work so generously and faithfully in our parishes and schools. Too often the prescribed books and programmes do not touch the source of all transformation – the spirit, enthusiasm and motivation of the educator. The heart of catechesis is the heart of the catechist. The teacher's spirit must be transformed before the students' will be. 'Unless the faith means something to the teacher,' Cardinal Hume used to say, 'it will not mean much to the student.'

Another way of keeping Christ at the centre is by restoring to people once again what belongs to them, by virtue of their birth and baptism – that is, their idealistic fire, their divine light and unique loveliness. Maybe we need, as Ronald Rolheiser holds, to re-romanticise faith, religion and church; to give our students something beautiful to fall in love with, as John Paul II insisted. One thing needs to be noted. Given the continually changing nature of the world we live in, a mere adaptation of what worked in the past may not be enough.

Maybe another renaissance is needed – a renaissance of the sacramental imagination. The use of those words should not put us off. Imagination, sacramentality and faith have always been sisters. Imagination is the divine creativity within us.

The way we faithfully co-create our lives and the world with God depends on the vitality of our imagination and Catholic vision. Such imaginative vision needs to be nourished through exposure to the arts, to the great stories of the world, to intimate conversations with ourselves and with others, to play and to children, to poetry and to music, and to everything that nurtures our intuition and our sensitivity to God's presence all around us. (This is the focus of the attached DVD.) Part of the challenge of this task is always to be true to the central place of the familiar and traditional dimensions we rely on for the definition and sharing of the Catholic faith.

We have, of course, been here, or close to here, before. Throughout these pages the reader will notice many references to the post-Vatican II decades when much devoted work was entered into by the churches in these countries and elsewhere so as to clarify, cultivate and nurture new shoots of promise in the world of Christian education. The Bishops' Conference Report *On the Threshold* (2000) was a striking example of such promising work. Many church leaders in education believe that now is the time for another renewed and courageous beginning.

To meet the daunting challenges of today's complex society (Part 4) we need good creative theology and dedicated teaching. While holding fast to the fullness of our tradition, we need to set free the Catholic imagination and sacramental vision that has always characterised that tradition. Without catching the vision, the heart does not know where to go; but without the fire of imagination it doesn't want to go anywhere, least of all to church!

As teachers and catechists we are called to work with a passion for acquiring that central vision in ourselves, first. We must, in fact, *become* the vision. Filled with that vision, and together with a clear awareness of our complex cultures, we can all be part of a new and blessed renaissance in our church and world.

Notes

These reflections, drawn in large part from *On the Way to Life*, are meant for all facilitators involved with any age-group in evangelising, catechising, forming, religiously educating and preaching in the Catholic tradition of Christianity. Throughout, the term ‘students’ is used to include all those (pupils, teenagers, adults) who participate in such educational ministries in school and parish.

On The Way to Life: Contemporary Culture and Theological Development as a Framework for Catholic Education, Catechesis and Formation. A Study prepared by the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life and commissioned by the Department for Education and Formation of the Bishops’ Conference for England and Wales. The Catholic Education Service (CES) is facilitating its dissemination. While readers may wish to read the full text of the document at a later date, there is no need to have done so before exploring *Begin with the Heart*.

Part One will have a special interest for readers who seek a deeper understanding of the notion of the Catholic imagination that lies at the heart of this book and of the author’s other books.

Part Two sets out to explain and explore the attraction of the traditional theology of nature and grace that radically changes our understanding and experience of ‘the abundant life’.

Part Three focuses more particularly on the implications of this theology and vision for teaching, catechising, preaching and the exercise of all church ministries.

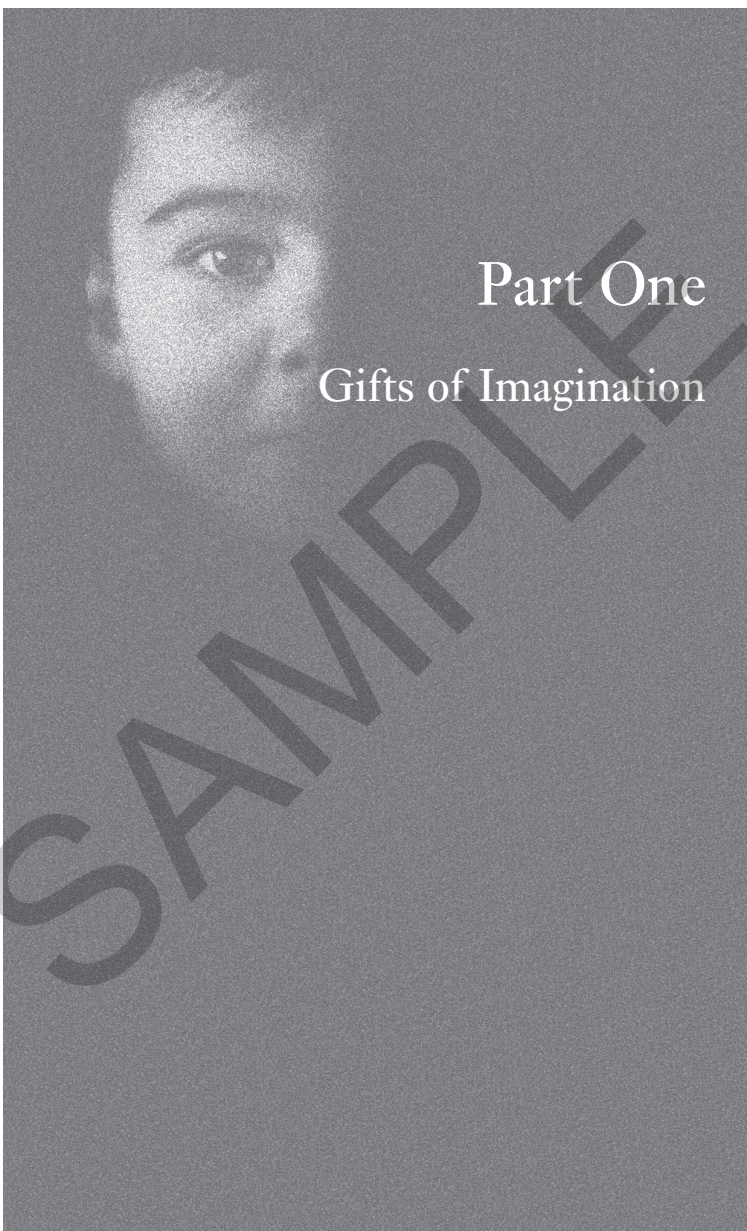
Part Four briefly addresses the challenges of ‘telling our story’ in a richly multi-cultural, postmodern society.

If you find yourself at sea from time to time in the following pages, just skip on to the next sentence or paragraph and you will sail

again on familiar waters. The format of the material in these pages is cyclical; there is a repetition in the structure that keeps coming back to the central theme.

The DVD is best watched after Part Two.

The title and sub-title of each of the four Parts is followed by a sequence of quotations to stimulate thinking. This is followed by a brief preview of the contents of that particular Part. Each Part is rounded off by a short summary of the Sections and a series of discussion points. A brief glossary is added at the end.



On the Way to Life (OTWTL) is like a coat of many colours, and we are all attracted to our favourite hue within it. Many commentators and reviewers have indicated their preference for this or that theme, praising its promise for a deeper understanding of our current catechesis, teaching and formation. What captured the attention of many was the excitement and rich potential of what the authors call 'the Catholic Imagination'. They offer it as a grounding for renewing the process of effective catechesis in a world and in a culture that is forever changing. 'This would mean developing the sacramental imagination with the theology of nature and grace that underpins it, as the core conceptual structure for all the cognitive elements of educational and formational programmes. It would help to create a structural coherence between family, parish and school' (p 67). It is well worth reflecting on this exceptionally strong statement. It carries, as well, implications for other pastoral initiatives in the home countries. What follows is an attempt to unpack it.

The world needs the unifying power of the imagination.

R. S. Thomas

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

Albert Einstein

The human faculty of imagination is one of the most neglected and most misunderstood areas within contemporary theology ... Imagination is, as it were, a bridge between human experience, understanding and interpretation. It is the imagination that enables human understanding to take place and it is impossible for understanding to exist without the power of imagination.

Dermot A. Lane

You may not consider it blasphemy, I hope, that belief in God depends on the direction of our imagination. You will know that the imagination is the highest and most original element in us.

Friedrich Schleiermacher

With imagination you don't have to travel far to find God – only notice things. The finite and the infinite live in the same place. It is here alone, at this precarious and vital point, that the holy secret is laid bare. 'I live in this world by attention.'

Simone Weil

For what is a man's heart but his imagination.

George Bernard Shaw

The aim of the artist is to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe ... The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.

Flannery O'Connor

The concept of sacramentality must be broken open so that we rediscover the sacramental potential of all creation. In such a vision the Eucharist becomes a focal point that is inclusive rather than exclusive in its capacity to express and celebrate the abundant sacramentality of everyday life, in which the surplus of meaning spills over into society, culture and indeed the cosmos itself, so that it cannot be contained in structures, rules and institutions.

Tina Beattie

The only real fall of man is his non-eucharistic life in a non-eucharistic world.

Alexander Schmemmann



This first section indicates that together with creativity, inspiration and beauty, imagination too must be found at the heart of our Catholic faith and education. It introduces the role of imagination in the work of catechesis and teaching. As with our consideration of theology in Part Two, we have to ease ourselves into a familiarity with this concept. We need to be reminded that already deeply embedded in faith and its practices, is the gift of imagination. To avoid confusion for the reader, terms such as ‘theology of nature and grace’, ‘sacramental vision’ and ‘the Catholic imagination’ are all, in the present context, intrinsically connected.

Hard on the heels of the general euphoria of the sixties in general, and of the Second Vatican Council, in particular, waves of fresh hope, and dreams of new beginnings were flowing across the land. Those of us who were young teachers and priests at that time were full of energy and excitement. Truly incarnational theology, liturgical openness and catechetical imagination were filling our days and nights. There would be a transformed church soon, where teaching, parenting and preaching would be realistic and optimistic, challenging and fulfilling, where human wholeness and holiness would be essentially compatible.

With heart and soul we entered into this brave new world of the seventies and eighties, living the questions and exploring

the seemingly unlimited potential for growth and vision. In the world of catechesis and religious education, writers and theologians such as Karl Rahner, Enda McDonagh and Kevin Nichols, educationalists such as David Konstant, Christianne Brusselmans and Patrick Purnell, institutions such as Louvain in Belgium, Dundalk in Ireland and Corpus Christi College in the UK, were all deeply devoted to finding dynamic ways forward.

But something happened to the creative promise of those post-Council days. Fears surfaced, cautions followed, rival approaches were championed. During those decades of doubt, enthusiasm faded and a certain vision was almost lost. But not completely, and only for a while. God always sends us what we need – eventually. In spite of a perceived lack of nourishment over the years, the green shoots of Vatican II have never died. They still keep appearing. There is one in particular that brings much hope.

Many reviewers of *On the Way to Life* (OTWTL – see Introduction), have indicated their preference for this or that theme within it, praising its promise of a deeper understanding of our current catechesis, teaching and formation. What captured the attention of many was the rich potential of what the authors call ‘the Catholic imagination’. They offer it as a grounding for renewing the process of effective catechesis in a church that is losing ground in a world-culture that is forever changing. ‘This would mean developing the sacramental imagination with the theology of nature and grace that underpins it, as the core conceptual structure for all the cognitive elements of educational and formational programmes. It would help to create a structural coherence between family, parish and school.’ It is well worth reflecting on this strong statement which, of course, refers to all kinds of adult formation too. What follows is an attempt to unpack it.

In *Retrieving Imagination in Theology*, Michael Paul Gallagher reminds us of Schleiermacher’s comment about belief in God

depending on the direction of our imagination, the highest and most original element in us. He offers ample evidence of the respected place that the gift of imagination holds in the theologies of John Henry Newman, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan. Rejecting a strait-jacket type of doctrinal formulation, these theologians gravitate, he writes, to the uses of imagination for liberating us into a deeper awareness and experience of the mystery of Incarnation. 'Theology needs to approach art and literature more as experience than as message or meaning. The wavelength shared by theology and imagination lies in the whole adventure and joy of self-transcendence in its many forms.'¹

It is not easy to define 'the Catholic imagination'. It has to do with a wonderful capacity for seeing into, and beyond, the mystery of what happens. It allows us first to experience what is presented to us, and then to discover within it, much more meaning than the basic phenomena would allow. In one of his weekly columns, Ronald Rolheiser quotes from W. Wright's *Sacred Heart, Gateway to God*: 'A layered reality is part of the Catholic imagination. To possess this imagination is to dwell in a universe inhabited by unseen presences – the presence of God, the presence of the saints, the presence of one another. This life transcends the confines of space and time.'²

the Catholic
imagination

Rolheiser goes on to draw attention to what is all but lost today, namely the fact that reality is more than just physical, that it has layers that we do not perceive empirically, that there is more mystery within ordinary life than can be measured. We live in a world that is 'mystically tone-deaf, where all the goods are in the shop window'. The mystical imagination is not only as real as the scientific imagination; it reveals what science, on its own, could never tumble to – the many grace-drenched and spirit-laden layers of reality, even inside the law of gravity, that are not always readily available to the senses.

We can build up a picture of what is meant by 'the Catholic

imagination' from the references and comments made in its regard by the authors of OTWTL. They write about a 'sacramentality' that is inclusive, mystical, incarnational, and that has a coherent 'central vision'. There is 'a desire in every human heart' for transcendence. We are all on 'a search for God' since our 'human nature is intrinsically ordered to God'. It is this that makes us so wonderfully human. This 'profound Catholic intuition, in which grace is seen as constitutive of human nature, transforms our understanding both of Revelation and of our humanity.'

We are on the brink, here, I think, of being one step closer to how OTWTL might enrich the theory and practice of parish catechesis and school ethos.

'If grace is integral to nature, then all nature in some way has the capacity to disclose grace and be a vehicle for it.'³

That sentence, from a life-enhancing theology of nature and grace, has within it, the quiet power to transform the very basis of our teaching, pastoral ministry and preaching. 'It opens the possibility of an enriched spirituality (that) allows people to understand the sacramental nature of their ordinary lives ...' Everyone then, particularly teachers in the widest sense of that calling, becomes 'a minister of grace (with) the possibility of mediating it in, and through, their lives.'⁴

If we reflect on these profound statements, and let our imagination run with them, then some fairly far-reaching questions will arise – about, for instance, what we think we're doing with RCIA enquirers, First Sacraments candidates and their parents, and almost all education within home, school and parish. Now many of the OTWTL statements we already know. So why the fuss? Well, because there are levels of knowing. Not all knowing captures the imagination and sets our hearts on fire. There is a knowing that burns within us and becomes a wisdom that yearns to be shared.

When we reflect on the central emphasis of the document with an open mind, we find an intensity about the way it lifts humanity, and all things created, into new levels of meaning. They now become the locus of revelation.

There is a theology of creation and incarnation that, in solidarity with Christ, the Human One, focuses on this world, and everything in it, as the continuing presence of the divine.

The document retrieves and honours an orthodox tradition that, for one reason or another, had almost been lost and has been sorely missed. It explores 'a Catholic humanism (with its) deep and rich history from the Fathers into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, finding its expression both theologically and practically in the mystical traditions of the church'.⁵ The task, then, is to become more human, not less; to love the world more, not less.

There is much to reflect on in John Paul's hopes for today's world and church. 'What is needed,' he wrote, 'are ministers of the gospel who are experts in humanity, familiar with their own emotions and able to share them with others, and who are, at the same time, contemplatives who have fallen in love with God.' It takes immense imagination to take the incarnation literally, to identify God's signature on everything around us, to see God's face behind every face, to discover the Lover-God who comes to us disguised as our lives.

Reclaiming Beauty

When Albert Einstein holds that imagination is more important than knowledge, and when George Bernard Shaw equates the language of the heart with imagination, perhaps it is the notion of creativity, openness and beauty that they are trying to protect. Beauty and imagination are too often obscured by the high walls of logic. Formulations and doctrines will never do justice to mystery. Faith is more than the sum of its constituent

beliefs. It is a way of imagining and experiencing our divine/human world. That is why, after the narrowness of modernist critiquing, prophets in the church are trying to recover the neglected role of imagination, the ‘poetics of theology’ and its artistic expression, in the more positive and open approach of the contemporary human spirit.

God the
source of
beauty

We all have within us the icon of God, the source of beauty. No less an authority than Thomas Aquinas has written: ‘God puts into creatures, along with a kind of sheen, a reflection of God’s own luminous ray ... From this Beautiful One, beauty comes to be in all beings ...’ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, too, believes that at the deepest level of our being, we already ‘vibrate sympathetically’ with beauty because we ourselves are beautifully created. In its presence, he says, we fall into ‘aesthetic arrest’. He sees beauty and grace as one. It disturbs us, captivates us, provokes us. It keeps our eyes on distant horizons of ultimate beauty. It is what keeps us searching for God.⁶

Many readers will be aware of the devotion to beauty expressed in the writings of St Augustine, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil. We love reading the clear, pure expressions of beauty in the meditations of the mystics of the past and present.

With imagination you don’t have to travel far to find God – only notice things. The finite and the infinite live in the same place.

It is here alone, at this precarious and vital point, that the holy secret is laid bare. God walks in two shoes – the shoe of creation and the shoe of incarnation. Each footfall is a threshold moment – the breath before the vision, the cusp between the seen and the unseen, the substance of things hoped for, evidence of the invisible. ‘I live in this world by attention’, wrote Simone Weil.

How can beauty, this powerful sacrament of the incarnate God, be somehow harnessed in the service of our evangelising,

catechising and teaching? The authors of OTWTL enlist the power of beauty in their quest for the reclaiming of the Catholic imagination. They want to restore its pride of place in our teaching and preaching. 'The practice of faith in all its forms is the participation in the beauty that God is, and it is the constant disclosure of that beauty in the world. Thus art, in all its modes, is not something that is a luxury, but the very living out of the vision of God. For this reason, the aesthetic of the life of faith is integral to the sacramental vision and it is also integral to religious education, catechesis and formation ...'⁷

This powerful statement is asserting that when we truly believe, we are both participating in, and revealing, God's beauty.

All artistic enterprise is a part of this epiphany.

The statement is a call to a greater appreciation of the beautiful in the practice and teaching of our faith.

In one of his first homilies as Pope, Benedict XVI said: 'If the church is to transform and to humanise the world, how can she dispense with beauty in her liturgies; that beauty which is so closely linked with love, and with the radiance of the Resurrection' and at the end of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI had a tribute paid to artists of all kinds, which included these words: 'The church needs you and turns to you. The world we live in needs beauty in order not to rush into despair ... It is beauty, like truth, which makes the invisible world palpable, and brings joy to the human heart.' These papal sentiments come straight from a Catholic sacramental imagination.

Small wonder the authors call for the support of artists, musicians, poets and dancers in the clarification and presentation of their vision. It is a truly enchanting one, deeply contemplative, and teeming with pedagogical possibilities. It is not fearful of appealing to the senses, nor does it deny the holistic and poetic nature of the precious ministry of handing on the faith. It has no reason to. In its mystical tradition,

Catholicism is notoriously sacramental, and a champion of beauty. St Thomas Aquinas, again, refers to ‘a kind of sheen of divine loveliness’ that all creatures carry. Hans Urs von Balthasar, too, reminds us that without a feeling for beauty we cannot pray, ‘and soon, will no longer be able to love.’

Whether in teaching or preaching the privilege of the teacher or preacher is to reveal the presence of God’s beauty already there in what is happening all around.

beauty
awakens
the divinity
within us

How rarely we teach, catechise or preach about beauty! The life-centred themes and topics of the various syllabuses we use are there to be mined for the holy treasure of beauty and form that they often carry in disguise. And beauty always invites, enchants and awakens the sleeping divinity within us. The authors of the document put it well: ‘The theology of grace that informs Vatican II recovers “the ordinary” as the realm of grace, God’s “better beauty”; hence the aesthetic of holiness is not something exceptional but the same thing that is shaped in the realm of the domestic, giving to it, the weight of glory; the alchemist’s stone is Christ.’⁸

Catholic Sacramentality

Teaching about the sacraments takes up a huge amount of all catechesis, formation, preaching and religious education. The liturgy in all its variations is rightly at the centre of our faith. Many fear that bland repetition and a cautious ‘rubrical mentality’, are gradually draining the life-blood from our celebrations. There is a vitality in the insights of OTWTL that could bring a fresh enthusiasm into our often-jaded ways of catechising about, and celebrating, the liturgy in school and parish.

The authors ask us to understand the liturgy in terms of the revealing and clarifying of God’s healing presence in the substance of our lives. ‘The liturgy is the routine inscription of eternity in time, the continual action of Christ who is Lord

of time ... In the liturgy the “ordinary” is consecrated and made the place of divine encounter. By its very “routine” and “ordinariness” the liturgy writes us into time; in its rhythms and seasons it celebrates our finitude and embodiedness. It is not an escape to eternity from the contradictions of our finite temporal existence, but a way of seeing them within the greater horizons of God’s eternal life.”⁹

With assured words and images, OTWTL places an awareness of human experience at the heart of God’s self-disclosure. Our privileged task is to consecrate the ordinary, to draw out from its womb, like midwives of mystery, the embodied presence of our wonderful God. ‘RE, catechesis and formation must also be attentive to the mystery at the heart of the world and of all human life. That means that we need to have confidence in our theology of nature and grace. It is essentially a theology that makes explicit the “eternity in the heart” of every human person which is constantly seeking expression and form. The Catholic sacramental vision is the sacrament of the human heart as well and cannot help but find a deep resonance there.’¹⁰

Consecrating
the ordinary

There is no dualism in true sacramentality. The radical distinction between the sacred and the profane has been overcome in the person of Christ. In him it is revealed that the locus of the divine is now the human. We celebrate the liturgy of our daily lives so as to fruitfully celebrate the liturgy of the church. Christian liturgy is the memory and celebration of the deepest dimension of human life, namely, the self-communicating power and beauty of the indwelling Blessed Trinity. The sacraments do not confer a grace that was absent until then. Sacraments proclaim and enable us to own a love that is already the core of our being. They exist to restore the world to its true nature. ‘Not only does grace build on nature, but this relationship grounds human freedom, and thus, the possibilities that nature has for realising itself.’¹¹

It all begins with God. God's imagination is the key to who we are. All human imagination is a reflection of the divine imagination.

It is, as W. B. Yeats put it, 'our evidence of God'. Divine imagination is wider and wilder than we could ever dream of; and it is closer and more loving than we dare hope. God's imagination is at work in every aspect of creation from the heart of the cosmos to the heart of the tiniest insect, and in the very core of our own being.

We sense the divine creativity, in a most intimate way, in our own deepest desire – the desire to create, to be radically original, to break through our limitations, to fulfil God's dream in us, to become full of divine light. We reflect the imagination of God in our passion for the possible, in our everlasting hope even when all seems lost. Beyond a knowledge of God, and of conditioned religious behaviour, it is in our existential longing for the experience of God that imagination is fully at play.

God's
imagination
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God's imagination in us calls us to be faithful to our own originality. It is invincible, uncontrollable and essentially free because it carries no fear. It is eminently trustable. It can live with paradox, difference and contradiction. It does not come with programmes for procedure or instructions for completion. It is about possibility. 'I dwell in possibility' wrote Elizabeth Barrett Browning. So must we. In his inaugural speech in 1994, Nelson Mandela suggested that it was not our frailty, faults and failures that held us back; it was, he said, our inner glory and shining beauty that terrifies us. God sets no limits. We do. And usually because we're afraid.

Into the Future

The reclaiming of what is meant by 'the Catholic imagination' presents a great challenge to all of us. A precious, unique but neglected Catholic tradition of Christian humanism is waiting to be explored. This exploration will be more than a

cerebral one. Basic knowledge of the poetry of imagination and sacramentality is not enough. Intellectual perception is a second-order reflection. The true understanding that lasts and transforms depends on the intensity of the actual experience of what is known. There is a daunting challenge here. It takes imagination to craft a new creation between the knowledge of the head and the intuition of the heart.

Writing about ‘sacramental abundance’, David Power asks, ‘How can we, in a time of computerisation and remote control, get beyond the stranglehold that technique and concept have on language, so that it may speak “in, with, and under” bread, wine, oil and water, through a poetics that allows the things themselves to come to speech, and through them, the gift of divine love and divine life that Jesus and the Spirit have poured into them?’¹²

The
sacramental
imagination
and actual
experience

Some OTWTL commentators have suggested placing a greater trust in the imagination of our teachers and catechists, with less anxiety about detailed scripts and complicated structures, and more scope for improvisation in the sharing of gospel values within the culture of our time. A great part of the unfolding of the current project may well be the task of setting the hearts of the teachers and catechists on fire with a deeper grasp of the astonishing beauty of the good news they are sharing, and then, whatever the syllabus or programme, the listeners will catch the excitement of the teacher. Maybe it is time to encourage our well-informed teachers to trust more confidently in their own imagination already full of God’s creativity.

The greatest threat to the rooting and blossoming of OTWTL will, I fear, be a lack of this very imagination on our part. Many of us still carry the memory of the way we were. A few years ago the Irish poet Seamus Heaney spoke about the loss of our imaginative perspective on the world arising from economic and social change: ‘I would say that the more important Catholic thing is the actual sense of eternal values

and infamous vices which our education or formation gives us. There's a sense of profoundness, a sense that the universe can be ashimmer with something, and Catholicism was the backdrop to the whole thing. The world I grew up in offered me a sense that I was a citizen of the empyrean – the crystalline elsewhere of the world. I think that's gone from Catholicism now.¹³

But maybe not for long more. Maybe John Paul II's millennium dreams for 'a new springtime' in the church are beginning to come true.

Summary

Catholicism is notoriously sacramental; it champions imagination.

The 'sacramental vision' has a central place in Catholic education.

There is a kind of knowing that excites the heart, which 'is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination.' (Cardinal John H. Newman)

Faith is a way of imagining our world as made in God's image.

'Imagination is necessary for faith.' (Robert Haight)

'According to our mystical theologians it is only through the imagination that the presence of the spiritual world is evoked and invoked. Its context is contemplation.' (David Roberts)

There is a need to recover the place of beauty in our catechesis.

All human imagination is a reflection of God's imagination: it is the cradle of possibility.

It takes imagination to hold together the knowledge of the head and the intuition of the heart. We need the unifying power of imagination.