

# **Treasured and Transformed**

SAMPLE

It is such wisdom as Daniel O'Leary's that will lead our people through this dark and narrow time in Western Christianity. God always sends us what we need. This is the wisdom that only comes from having been there, having done your homework, and having met God.

Richard Rohr on *Travelling Light*

To me, Daniel O'Leary is with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in that he is fearless, always exploring, always confronting pain and hurt and trouble, and always finding and revealing these seeds of love and hope that shine like stars in our souls' darkness ... Daniel is a poet of God.

Brendan Kennelly on *Unmasking God*

**DANIEL  
O'LEARY**

**Treasured  
and Transformed**

**VISION FOR THE HEART  
UNDERSTANDING FOR THE MIND**





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landscapes are painted in the 'Tonal Impressionist' style.

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## *Dedication and Acknowledgements*

This book is dedicated to you who carry the seeds of a new beginning in your hearts – a new beginning for your own lives first, and then for the church and for the world. You are all, in fact, the human bodies and minds of God's own incarnate beauty, and when this revelation is growing stronger in your own heart, it is also growing stronger everywhere. It is important that you believe this. The dream is already within you. Now it is coming true. And other hearts are catching it!

In his *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) Pope Francis repeatedly calls for fresh eyes and insight, for new and imaginative ways of talking about the enfleshing of God in Jesus, the Human One, and therefore, in every single human being that ever existed. And about how that transforms us and the whole world.

*Treasured and Transformed* is an effort to convince you that you are part of a treasured new beginning that is silently transforming you, and then changing the whole universe. Even one persistent possibility can wake you up for ever. Once your heart, soul and imagination are stretched by a vision, or possibility, they will never fall back to their old shape. They become the deepest part of you, the light in your eyes, the passion of your life. You were born for this moment to happen to you.

My thanks to all of you who have travelled with me through many years of adult teaching, retreats and honest conversations. At many Centres for Spirituality in different

parts of the world we have been sharing the love-story together; weaving a beautiful fabric for our hearts to wear with a new joy. Out of this creative womb *Treasured and Transformed* is born.

Thank you also to Maggie Jackson, Sr Pat Carney CP and Margaret Foster for reading the first draft of this book and for making suggestions about improving it; to Margaret Siberry for her constant and empowering assistance and for agreeing to write the *Song of the Seals* reflection in Part Two; and to Michael Brennan of Columba Press for his passionate encouragement and support at those inevitable moments of doubt.

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*The purpose of these reflections is to reveal the divine presence shimmering through everything when we pause to really see and recognise the deeper reality of things. This recognition leads to a transformation of our own lives, setting us free to live more freely, more joyfully and more abundantly. In the play of faith-imagination we recognise God's real presence in the present.*

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*Here we have some explanations and explorations of the graced habit of divining and recognising God's heart at the core of everything. They require a different kind of attention and presence on the part of the reader. The understanding of the head facilitates the movements of the heart. The chapters in Part Two are offered as accessible theological nourishment and spiritual encouragement, with practical examples from the worlds of art, nature and evolution, as we endeavour to become more sure-footed around the 'sacramental imagination' – that incarnational window of wonder through which we love to look. You, the reader, will benefit from reading these explanations, thus becoming more centred and confident in grasping and speaking about the meaning of this vision of Incarnation that underpins Part One – and, indeed, all my writings.*

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## *Introduction*

*Treasured and Transformed* is about what happens when we live our lives in God's presence, aware of the divine essence hiding below the surface of everything human, seeing our relationships, our experiences, our sins, through the eyes and with 'the mind of Christ'.

Each piece in PART ONE – *Vision for the Heart*, begins with real-life situations, daily events or human themes and then, at the heart of it all, the light of a more profound presence is glimpsed. This way of seeing, this gift of recognising is called 'the sacramental imagination'. The veils of our often complicated and messy lives may then part to reveal a real surprise – incarnate beauty within us and all around us. That is God's secret, St Paul writes, 'in which all the jewels of wisdom are hidden' (1 Col 2:3). Part of that wisdom is the fact that 'You are God's poetry, written not with ink but with the love of the Holy Spirit, not on tablets of stone but across the pages of your human hearts' (2 Cor 3).

The work and play of faith-imagination is to perceive the deeper meaning of the ordinary, to touch God in the daily realities of our lives, to make the invisible visible. This happens when we try to be really present to what is happening. Simone Weil wrote: '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 is laid bare. I live in this world by attention.' This is the daily grace we long for.

This is the transformation for which we were created.

PART TWO – *Understanding for the Mind* continues to work and play with the implications of the Incarnation, but this time concentrating on helping the reader to better understand some of the profound significance of the mystery of a human God, and of our own divinity. The aim is to enable you to know and to share more fully in your conscious mind what you already know in your heart. This will enable you to own the vision, providing you with a kind of spiritual and mental support and encouragement for practicing your own spontaneous ability to discern the deeper heart of all you experience. This background understanding of the beautiful vision of incarnation will work wonders for the wisdom you bring to every conversation, to every relationship, to every experience. One day this sacramental way of perceiving and of being will become like second nature to you, even though too often it will still be like seeing through a glass darkly. All will be revealed in heaven. In the meantime, we have to make do with glimpses. And with the work of reflecting the light of those glimpses for others.

The repetition of statements, phrases and insights in PART TWO is to help the reader to really face, grapple and better understand something of the beautiful Christian mystery of the Incarnation. Beyond just ‘knowing something about’ this mystery, the reason behind our consistent focus on its central wondrous meaning is to change people’s hearts at a profound level.

*Treasured and Transformed* follows the pattern of two of my recent books – *Already Within* (2007) and *Unmasking God* (2011). Most of the articles in PART ONE have already been published in *The Tablet* (2010–14). PART TWO contains rewritten extracts from earlier books and new material.

The thrust of the book is to open your hearts to an astonishing understanding of the implications of the Incarnation for your daily lives.

SAMPLE

# *Part One*

*'Speak to us of God' the almond tree was asked.  
And the almond tree blossomed.*



SAMPLE



## *Human Face of Divine Love*

*We need all the help we can get from the world's artists to get glimpses into what we mean by Incarnation, by the revelation that God's presence can be detected in everything and everybody, that there is a sheen and a shimmering of divinity in the most ordinary moments of our lives. There are special films that open our hearts to that revelation.*



One wintry evening I went to see *Les Miserables*. I had heard about its spiritual power, its contrasting images of God, its compelling emotional resonance within the human soul. In particular, the words 'To love another person is to see the face of God' from the final song of the film seem to reverberate at ever-deeper levels in many hearts. People sense a profound truth in these words without quite knowing why. They hint at the unsuspected and astonishing closeness between the human and the divine, between heaven and earth.

To say 'I love you' to someone, some spiritual writers believe, is like saying 'Rejoice that your name is written in heaven' (Lk 10:20). In these earthly graces we experience the presence and promise of God. We are sacraments for each other, carriers of divinity, radiant with God's incarnate

being. Such is the power of human love in *Les Mis*. Archbishop Emeritus George Carey believes that some moments in the film's story of the misery and ecstasy of human life contain 'the finest description of grace outside the pages of the New Testament'.

St John Chrysostom wrote that 'Whatever unlocks the human heart, unlocks the heart of God as well.' St Augustine said that 'The love with which we love each other is the same love as that with which God loves us.' When costly, enduring love emerges between people something new and beautiful is created. Every healing that love brings to a lost soul is a sacramental event. In all the aspirations of the human spirit another face of God is revealed. This is incarnate Spirit in time, place, flesh and free will.

The mystery of faith, correctly understood, reveals that creation, evolution and all the capacities of humanity for death and life are revealed as embraced, healed and transformed from within by the God of Jesus. The whole heart-wrenching story of *Les Misérables* with its extremes of tragedy, ignominy and despair, with its searing emotion and passion, its human endurance in the face of utter loss, loneliness and longing, is, in faith and fact, the incarnate presence of the Christian God.

There is no longer any competition between the world and God, between the secular and the sacred. The evolving planet Earth itself is, in fact, the body of God made visible. We no longer look up to the heavens for God; we now explore more deeply the human realities of our daily lives. Sacramental moments of intimacy with God are strewn all around us. These are the daily places of revelation. But we must dig deeply to divine the hidden spring, to mine the immortal diamond. 'What makes a thing sacred or profane,' writes Richard Rohr OFM, 'is precisely whether we live on the surface of things or not.'

With all its passion and power, its beauty, pain and pathos, *Les Misérables* truly reveals another face of God. It uniquely expresses, according to Rev. Dr Ian Bradley, 'the central Christian message of the redemptive power of forgiveness and sacrificial love'. Theologian Karl Rahner calls this way of seeing things 'the mysticism of life'. All our lives and loves are the work of God in the human heart.

God's revealed face is always specific and tangible; it is an enfleshing, an embodiment to be endured and enjoyed, reaching its fullness in one vulnerable human being called Jesus. God materialises in human form – the only form in which God's love can be experienced. Think, then, of the characters in *Les Misérables* and their roles, personalities, dreams, sins and shadows.

Into the three hours of the film so much of human life is compressed – the terrible despair of Inspector Javert and the aching loss of the mother and prostitute Fantine; the heroic self-sacrifice of the reformed Jean Valjean, culminating in the costly, beautiful blessing he bestowed on the bruised and blossoming love of Cosette and Marius; the youthful heroism of Enjolras, Eponine and Gavroche and the deaths they died for freedom; the unscrupulous gracelessness of the Thénardiens. Incarnation reveals the divine energy in all such human aspirations towards fulfilment.

But where is God in the terrible suffering, deception and cruelty at the core of the film? Jesus spoke of the divine presence in the criminals, prostitutes, drunkards and tax collectors of his time (Mt 25). So we believe that he embraced and actually became the hopeless lives of those urchins and prostitutes, the utter degradation and humiliation of once-beautiful bodies, the corruption and destruction of once-brilliant minds. Our wretchedly-human God still looks

out from these ravaged faces in the rat-infested backstreets of Paris – or any other city. Can this be true?

Where can the real presence and promise of the divine be physically and mentally experienced if not in the dark labyrinths of human hearts? What is the stream of human desire that runs through the film but God's incarnate saving grace transforming that hell into hope? And where else can there be the slightest evidence that God is an effective, invincible power healing humanity at its most desperate, most diabolic and most despairing, other than in the raw reality of our complicated, ambiguous and beautiful lives? Every day of his life, Pope Francis will be reminding us of this resisted revelation.

'Les Misérables', 'The Wretched' – they have also dreamed a dream. They carry a relentless belief in the breaking of 'the chains of slavery'. The exultant strains of 'the music of a people who are climbing to the light', who are singing of those 'chains (that) will never bind you' in that 'new world about to dawn' sounds like a kind of secular *Exultet*, a redemption song of the people.

This vision of Catholic Christianity, though still not integrated into its full theology of incarnation, may be its most important contribution to universal awareness today. The freedom and the flourishing of humanity and of the world are the deepest desire of both Christianity and secularism. Human love and endeavour are brought to completion in God's heart. And they come together in the elegant theological line 'To love another person is to see the face of God'; dare we call it a kind of mini-credo of the Christian faith?

Beyond enjoying it as a moving film, watching *Les Misérables* through the 3D of Christian revelation is a moment of utter grace and wonder. Contemplation in a cinema.