

Charles Miller on a pastoral reading of Rowan Williams' *Reflections*

How are the arts, and in this context visual art especially, relevant to the pastoral life of the Christian community? In exploring that question I want to draw upon insights developed by Archbishop Williams in his Clark Lectures at the University of Cambridge and subsequently published as *Grace and Necessity; Reflections on Art and Love*.¹ The case he develops, with its careful reading of the phenomena of artistic endeavour, seeks to renew 'convergences' between artistic labour and theological discourse.²

It seems to me, though, that another sort of convergence emerges as well, namely, one between aesthetic and theological 'theory', on the one hand, and pastoral life – the life of the Christian community – on the other. Williams' lectures suggest rich trajectories of reflection on the relation between the arts and what we can broadly call 'pastoral theology', that is, thinking that tries to describe and prescribe the character of the life of believers as the 'people of God'.

We note a vibrant interest in visual and other forms of art within the Christian community as well as in the secular sphere. Certainly there is a fascinating growth of advocacy and explorations from the Word-centred end of the ecclesiastical spectrum. Traditions more historically committed to visual expressions of faith (ie the catholic traditions of east and west) are positioned more comfortably on this wave, not least because they embrace as part of their formal corporate memory both praxis and theory that seek to bind faith and visual art.

To what extent, though, is this continuance mere habit or articulated principle? The question is pertinent as soon as we notice incidents where visual representation provokes reaction tantamount to rejection.³ Such incidents should urge us to recognise that the case for visual representations within Christian communities is not always rooted in positive and widely-accepted theological principle. Reactions within Christian communities when visual representations are not time-honoured and in an obvious sense 'traditional' highlight the fact. So it may be that we can fruitfully explore why artistic expression ought to be an

intrinsic feature of Christian community life. That trajectory of consideration is what I want to try to extract from Williams' lectures.

Williams on 'God and the Artist'

The fourth and last of the Clark lectures, 'God and the Artist', is most suggestive for the relationship between the arts and the pastoral art that I want to develop here. The whole series of lectures, taking its starting point in the milieu of the rich Thomist revival of early 20th-century France, and moving thence to the scriptural and literary worlds of Eric Gill, David Jones and Flannery O'Connor, is formidable and dense. Some re-capping is therefore necessary to gain a sense of the general lay of the land that Archbishop Williams maps.

Reminding us of Jacques Maritain's Neo-Thomist assertion that 'things are not only what they are', Williams begins his fourth lecture by exploring the relationship between the world as something known, the artist as knower, and artistic endeavour as 'an acute form of knowing'.⁴ Co-opting recent studies of the psychology of knowledge, Williams reminds us that perception is always incomplete; the world that is knowable by us is not known as a single or static datum; the act of knowing is as a 'spiral of self-extending symbolic activity' and no 'non-revisable and exhaustive correlations between outside and inside (the world and the knower) are possible. Here we see darkly as in a glass (1 Cor. 13.12).

That inexhaustible spiral of meaning fuels the distinctly generative quality of artistic 'knowledge'. Why? because '[T]he inner life of a reality is what unfolds in time, generating more and more symbolic structures, not a time-less and relation free definition'.⁵ The real is 'active' not 'static' and necessarily involves us in a process. So, '... what is involved in knowing something is more like re-enacting a performance than labeling an object'.⁶ 'The "what" of what is known is not something that simply belongs to the given shape we begin with in our perception; it extends possibilities, or even ... invites response that will continue its life, its specific energy'.⁷

Williams describes artistic endeavour as an 'acute' form of this generative engagement with the world and reality. Part of that acuteness is because artistic endeavour involves 'asymmetrical thought' within what Williams calls 'the realm of excess'. In that 'realm of excess' the conventions of 'routine mechanical thinking,' analytic, left-brain thinking alone do not apply; 'symbolic generativity' is ascendant.⁸

It is common in Christian discourse about artistic endeavor to assert a simple parallelism between divine and human creativity.⁹ Williams reminds us that divine creativity, as theologians understand it, is both 'the setting in being something that is both an embodiment of what is thought or conceived and a radically independent reality with its own logic and integrity unfolding over time'.¹⁰

Human creative endeavour is like divine creativity in that what we create is in some sense the expression of 'the mind of the human maker'. At the same time, what is created, while it has its own 'life' and integrity independent of the maker, is nevertheless invested with some degree of self-love by the maker. In the realm of human making there is no such thing as a wholly selfless creative act, one in which the alterity, otherness, of the creative object is absolute. No human creation is ever truly free of its human creator simply because human creators/artists are never wholly free of self.

Williams' discussion thus highlights the element of love in artistic endeavour. More particularly, it highlights a point that recurs throughout Williams' exploration of the work of various artists, namely, that at the centre of 'making other' is disinterested love, what he calls 'dispossession'.¹¹ It is not only possible but necessary to say that the artist loves what is made, and within the scope of Williams' sources and argument that means that the artist honours the alterity and integrity of what is being made, whether it be a character in a plot or some two or three-dimensional piece. It could be said that the greater the alterity accorded to what is created, the more its own integrity is allowed – the more freedom it possesses – , the purer is the love that has created it.

Pastoral Implications

In turning to the pastoral implications, what is being felt for is not a strict paradigm that can be rigorously transferred from the artistic to the pastoral sphere. I would want to say, rather, that artistic endeavour as plotted in Williams' account relies upon dispositions and habits of engagement with self and the world that are not just germane to but in some sense definitional of the life of Christian communities.

In its embrace of artistic endeavor the church is sending important signals about how it understands the world and how it understands itself in relation to that world. The dynamics of artistic creation are themselves a kind of icon of the church's life. So when Christians 'read' such icons they can discover that what is held up for their contemplation is nothing less than their own life in Christ set forth by artists both in their own relation to their work as well as in their concrete, material creations. To recall St. Augustine's statement about the eucharistic altar and the people of God is useful here: 'the mystery of yourselves is laid upon the table of the Lord; the mystery of yourselves you receive.'¹²

I would highlight three themes of this mystery of ourselves.

1. We could say that one of the chief witnesses of artists is simply that the world is far more generative than we commonly allow or fail to construe. This implies an open-endedness to the world, a 'plasticity' to creation.¹³ In contrast to engagement with the material world and other human subjects that is chiefly manipulative, a re-organizing of what already is, artistic labour represents a qualitative enlargement of what can be known as real.

'Here is born in Spirit-soaked fertility ...' – so begins a text about Christian baptism inscribed on a wall of an ancient Roman basilica. Baptism acknowledges the generative character of the created world of persons and things, and the generative way in which we embrace both our natural and our supernatural good. Just as in its distinctive way artistic labour takes what is given and then draws out of it realities that were not there before, so the community born of baptism acknowledges about itself and the

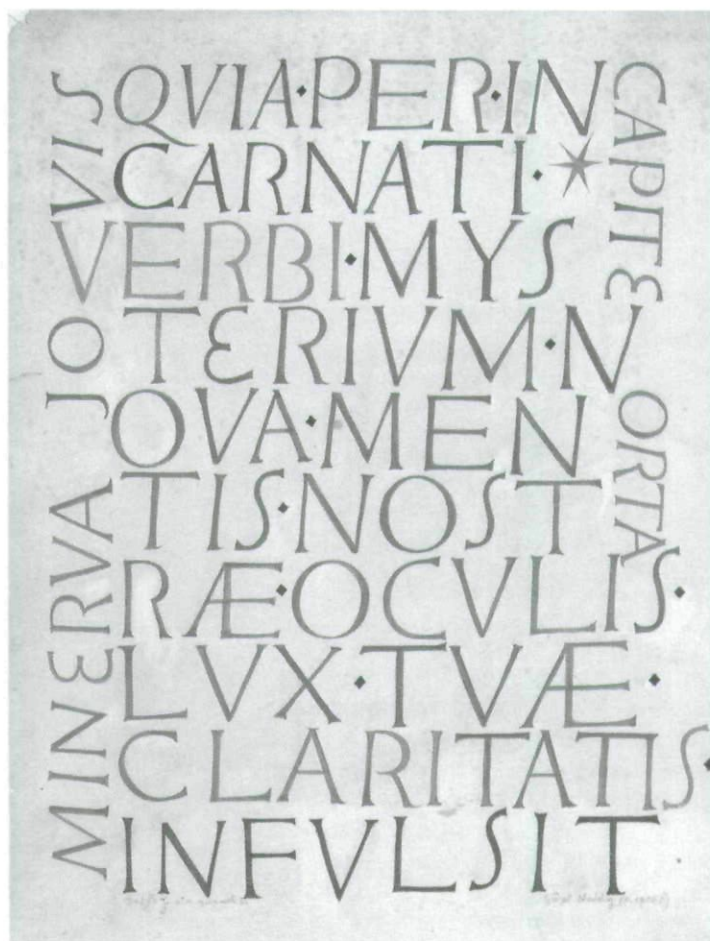
world that such generativity is a necessary way to 'read' properly the world and human experience. Perhaps one of the distinctive roles of the artist along side or within the faith community is to enact such free generativity as a model for the all-too conformist church.

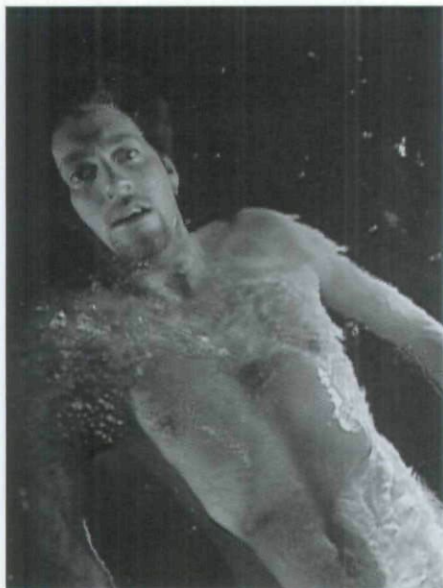
2. Closely connected with generativity is the notion of excess. That means that there are countless spiraling 'layers' of meaning implicit in the reality in and with which we work in our quest for meaning and knowledge. Williams presents the artist as one specially given over to a 'realm of excess'. The phrase 'layers of meaning' ought to resonate with Christian awareness for the concept lies at the heart of how Christians have often read the Bible. The literal meaning, while non-negotiable, was nevertheless not sufficient by itself. In that traditional hermeneutic the text possessed an 'excess' (St Augustine called it 'a marvelous depth', *mira profunditas*) and only by engaging that excess could truth unfold.¹⁴ Likewise, in speaking of the 'classic sacramental model' of churches Richard Kieckhefer refers to the 'multiple levels' on which the building's meaning operates, a meaning that cannot be reduced to 'simple formulas.'¹⁵

Neither the world of things, of human subject and relationships, nor God can be fruitfully penetrated and engaged in anything nearing their respective full realities without that sense of excess, of layers of meanings. Williams remarks: 'Something in the world of phenomena exceeds what is 'needed'; there is no final account of how things are that confines itself to function ... *this life could be otherwise; this life could mean more than its adaptation to these particular circumstances suggest.*'¹⁶ That is an apt description of the pastoral posture of the church.

3. It is not arbitrary to connect generativity and excess with love. It would indeed be eccentric to 'see art as central to the distinctively human and at the same time as operating independently of love'.¹⁷ In fact, in the trajectory of thought that Williams is tracking artistic labour is an act of love. Most simply, it involves 'delight in the actuality of the other'.¹⁸ In expression of such a love the artist recognizes the actuality and the alterity of both the imaginative goal being pursued and the integrity of the material with which she or he is working.

In such creative *caritas*, therefore, the artist has to negotiate both interior and exterior challenges: to allow the





imaginative trajectory its appropriate freedom to 'find itself', and to honour the material being used. Both challenges involve a loving constraint by means of which the ego allows what is being created to become itself, to be other than the artist's mere self-expression. The artist dispossesses so that the artist's work is free to 'be itself'.

The Christian community requires such a notion of creative *caritas*. Everyone within the community inhabits the roles of both the artist and the artist's work under the pressure of the Spirit (St Basil once likened the Spirit to a Greek dramatic *choregos*, arranging the dramatic dance – the shaper of a piece of performing art and worship.)¹⁹ Each has a part in the delineation, or, alas, the defacing, of the divine image and likeness in others. The point, though, is that this process of 'writing in souls'²⁰ is not accomplished through romanticized, affectively-driven forms of fellowship so much as through a disciplined creative *caritas* by which each abandons the desire to create the other as an extension of his or her own ego and ego-needs. Presumably that is why St Paul urged Christians to 'submit themselves' to one another (Ephesians 5.21).²¹

Intensified perhaps by post-modernity's assumption that identity can almost randomly be shaped and reshaped, assumed and discarded, the paradigm of artistic *caritas* reminds the Christian community that each work-in-progress (read 'all of us') is not a mere out-working of one another's self-expression or fantasies. None of us is an endlessly malleable substance which others may shape as they wish. Each of us can only become the perfect *imago Dei* when our givenness and

alterity are acknowledged. In our role as artistic co-creators of one another, then, we must learn and re-learn the discipline of artistic dispossession which lies at the heart of creative *caritas*. This is vital to the authenticity of Christian community life.

Further Thoughts

None of those three habits of artistic endeavour are exclusive to artists. But artistic endeavour presents an 'acute' form of such ways of knowing and relating. Nor are the three themes that have been discussed necessarily exclusive to the Christian community. They are, however, especially relevant to that community given what it says about itself. Therefore, it seems to me, Christian communities have a heightened interest in embracing those habits, in keeping them in conscious awareness and in constant motion.

In his essay 'Presence' in the catalogue for the British cathedral exhibition 'Presence; Images of Christ for the Third Millennium', Archbishop Williams says that '[T]he event of Christ is for the Christian tradition the unsurpassable enlargement of the world ...'²² It follows in a derivative way that his Body, the Church, is likewise for the 'enlargement' of the world. When we consider pastoral art and its concern for the way the Body of Christ is in the world, it seems to me that artists and artistic endeavour have much to tell and teach us so that, in seeing its own integrity manifested in art and artistic effort, the Christian community might indeed be for humankind's enlargement and not for its diminution.

Charles Miller is Rector of Abingdon

1 Morehouse: Harrisburg, USA (2005) (the UK publisher is Continuum: London)

2 These citations are from the web texts, unless otherwise noted; p. 13.

3 See Charles Pickstone's review essay 'The Art of Blasphemy' in *Art and Christianity*, 51 (July 2007), 2-5; and his own essay own article 'Germaine Richier Secular Theologian of Sacred Space', *Theology*, CX, 853 (Jan/Feb 2007): 31-40.

4 p. 4.

5 Ibid.

6 p. 3; I am intrigued by the possible relation of this assertion by Williams to George Steiner's notion of 'enacted criticism' (*Real Presence* [London: Faber & Faber (1989), p. 20.

7 p. 3.

8 p. 4.

9 An interesting exposition is Dorothy Sayer's *The Mind of the Maker* first published in 1941. She, like Williams, finds inspiration in un-packing this area from the scholastic tradition of Aquinas.

10 p. 14.

11 p. 14.

12 Sermon 272.

13 On this notion of 'plasticity', much used by Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae in his understanding of the created world and our relation to it, see the chapter 'Rediscovering Cosmic Christianity' in my study *The Gift of the World; An Introduction to the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), pp. 55-67.

14 See Andrew Louth's chapter 'Return to Allegory' in *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 96-131.

15 *Theology in Stone; Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 17.

16 pp. 11-12; italics mine.

17 p. 16.

18 p. 9.

19 This comparison appears in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, para. 7, line 48 and para. 22, line 25; unfortunately English translations obscure these references, as in David Anderson's edition of the work (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), pp. 24 and 43 respectively. I owe attention to Basil's use of the work *choregos* to Fr Boris Bobrinskoy.

20 A striking phrase used of the 19th-century French priest and spiritual director Abbe Huvelin. See Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: DLT, 1991) p. 22.

21 Paul's word *hypotassomenoi allelois* is challenging to interpret. In context it cannot mean 'subordination' in a simplistic, dominating sense. We are closer to its sense with the meaning of 'placing behind'. When we place ourselves behind another we are, in effect, letting the other's sense of self determine his or her direction as a personal agent. This is precisely the opposite of domination which curtails the other's freedom to fulfill himself through responsible personal agency.

22 (BibleLands: High Wycombe, 2004), p. 8.

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