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BEAUTY REVISITED: Catholic Studies and the Arts

In a 2013 essay entitled The Catholic Writer Today, the fruits of nine years of research, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts Dana Gioia writes of a great severing:

The schism between Christianity and the arts has had two profound consequences, two vast impoverishments—one for the arts world, the other for the Church. First, for the arts world, the loss of a transcendent religious vision, a refined and rigorous sense of the sacred, the breaking and discarding of two thousand years of Christian mythos, symbolism, and tradition has left contemporary American art spiritually diminished.

I cannot help but wonder whether this schism has some part to play in the steady decline in book-readers. I do not mean to make a direct, causal connection, but merely to ask whether the decline in reading might have some correlation with the decline of spiritually rich art.

On the other hand, I have come to suppose that literature is by-and-large relegated to requisite high school and college courses because many hold a low opinion of fiction and art in general, considering it false or perhaps escapist. They proclaim that: “the truth has been instrumentalised by ideologies, and the good horizontalised into a merely social act as though charity towards neighbour alone sufficed without being rooted in love of God. Relativism . . . continues to spread, encouraging a climate of miscomprehension, and making real, serious and reasoned encounters rare.

Because of this, “the Way of Beauty seems to be a privileged itinerary to get in touch with many of those who face great difficulties in receiving the Church’s teachings.”

In Catholic Studies, a significant part of our work involves the unification of things which have been unrightfully severed and compartmentalised: the teachings of the Church and professional life; faith and reason; beauty and truth and goodness in their manifold forms. In our Catholic Imagination class, necessary for completion of the degree, we root students first and foremost not in the classroom, may contribute, in some small way, to making literature worth reading, to melding faith and fiction, to suturing literary culture and the beautiful tradition of the Church.

By: Joshua Hren, Asst. Professor of English and Catholic Studies at University of Mary

The University of Mary proudly offers Catholic Studies courses and degrees for traditional and non-traditional students right here in Tempe, and at our campus in Rome.

mary.edu/asu
arizona@umary.edu

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By: Joseph Ratzinger's masterful The Spirit of the Liturgy. Students learn to identify the variant articulations of a Mass as composed by Mozart as opposed to a Mass composed of Gregorian chant. They study the writings of Popes Pius XI and Pius XII on film, then learn to intelligently analyse movies from the Vatican’s film list. Finally, and significantly, they study literary art across a rich chiascuro of centuries—be it Dante’s Divine Comedy, the short stories of Flannery O’Connor, or Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings—as more than mere artifacts of beauty.

We teach students that part of studying literature means, to use Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman’s phrase “the study of man largely in rebellion.” Newman argues that because literature is written by sinful humans, we cannot expect most literary works to be “sinless.” To the contrary, we should expect that when authors study literature they primarily study man’s sinful side. Is not such a study dangerous at worst, not such a study dangerous at worst, a strange pasture at best? On the contrary, for Newman, in matters of literature, “the Church should [still] claim to deal with a vigour corresponding to its restlessness,” building “rules for discrimination,” learned in the Catholic Studies classroom, may contribute, in some small way, to making literature worth reading, to melding faith and fiction, to suturing literary culture and the beautiful tradition of the Church.

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