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A Reflection after Visiting San Marco

The convent of San Marco in Florence was once the friary of the controversial 15th-century preacher and reformer Girolamo Savonarola. But the convent is perhaps better known because on its walls Fra Angelico and his school painted scenes based on the Gospels, one scene in each of the monastic cells. A striking feature of these 15th-century frescoes is that Saint Dominic appears in many of them. The fact that Dominic was obviously not alive at the time Jesus lived was beside the point. Dominic, after all, had died in 1221. The artist could include him in the scenes from Jesus’ life because in Dominic’s own imagination he had indeed been present as the Gospel story unfolded. In the fresco depicting the resurrection, for example, Saint Dominic “sees” the angel, three holy women, and the mother of Jesus, who is staring into the empty tomb. Above Mary is the artist’s rendering of the messenger’s words about the gloriously risen Jesus, whom Mary presumably sees within her imagination. So we have Mary’s vision of Jesus, within Dominic’s vision of the empty tomb, within the artist’s vision of Dominic, within the evangelist’s recounting of the Jesus story—and all on a wall in some unknown monk’s cell!

Anyone familiar with Ignatian spirituality through the Spiritual Exercises would recognize the affinity between what Fra Angelico and his assistants did and Ignatius’ recourse to imagination. Ignatius, undergoing his conversion nearly a century later, would have us apply not only our imaginations but all of our senses as well to contemplating the Gospel story. The one making the Exercises would become so “present” to each scene that by the time the individual completed the
Exercises he or she would have acquired an intimate knowledge of the events being contemplated, a deeply personal familiarity with Jesus, and a vivid sense of what the Gospel reveals to us about the mystery of God. And perhaps like Fra Angelico, Ignatius had no scholarly qualms about sometimes stepping outside the scriptural text. For instance, Ignatius believed that the first apparition of the risen Jesus was to the Virgin Mary. He wrote: “Although this is not stated in Scripture, still it is considered as understood by the statement that he appeared to many others.”

While recourse to imagination is by no means the only, or even the primary method by which Christians pray, for many of us imagination has paved the way to God. Not simply have we regularly visualized the Gospel story, assisted in this through pictures, works of art, cinema, music, stained glass, nativity scenes, and so on; we have truly inserted ourselves into the Gospels and there accompanied Jesus and his disciples on the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea. The supremely important role played by imagination in prayer is evident, for instance, in the Christian preoccupation with place. One time on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land I noticed a woman as unobtrusively as she could, reaching to the ground to pick up a stone and slide it into a canvas shopping bag. She later explained to me that from each site she had acquired a stone which she was going to put somewhere in her home, each one a reminder of a particular place Jesus had most likely walked.

The same devotional impulse has led Christians over the centuries to make pilgrimages, frequently risking their health and safety in doing so. Although pilgrims have traveled to plenty of other sites besides biblical ones, the land of the Bible conjures up a sense of divine immediacy and nearness. Not
actually, of course; no one part of the planet is more sacred than another. God created the heavens and the earth; the Spirit of God fills the world; the risen Jesus is present wherever his disciples are. But contact with the land of the Bible concretizes the desire of a believer to set foot in those places where men and women so evidently encountered the mystery of God. The places have names; some of those ancient cities still exist. One can walk through a real, not a fictive history in retracing the journeys made long ago by the people of Israel. That is exactly what Bruce Feiler did, a journey he describes in his engaging book *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses* (HarperCollins, 2001). The land, in other words, symbolizes a tradition of faith and to touch that land is to have one’s belief confirmed. Those who cannot set their feet on the land of Jesus physically can do so through their imaginations. One can step where he was, and in doing so Jesus comes to stand where we are. That is what Fra Angelico, and Ignatius after him, and countless others before and since, have realized.

The saints also realized, of course, that no matter how much they might have liked to, they could not turn back the calendar and return to Palestine at the time of Jesus. While some saints have bordered on an extreme literalism in their efforts to imitate the historical Jesus, I think the great majority learned, probably through trial and error, that the living Jesus was to be encountered in their own time and place, not in an imagined, romanticized past. We should not, however, glide by too quickly the actual process of making this profound discovery. When, one must ask oneself, did I finally grasp the connection between Jesus’ historical moment and my own, between his place and the places in which my life has been unfolding? When and under what circumstances did I start to
see that there is not just one Gethsemane or one Golgotha, but many? At what point in my life did it begin to sound utterly natural to speak (at least to the Lord) in terms of “our” Galilee? When did I begin to read the newspapers and routinely interpret what I read through a gospel lens? The process of making these gospel connections is all-important, and more likely than not it had been going on a considerable time before we ever attended to it.

If I had been a friar of San Marco and every day opened my eyes to one of the frescoes, then eventually I would probably have visualized myself in one of those gospel scenes. The mind contemplates an idea inside the image, and the heart penetrates the image by clothing itself with the idea. I would have felt that I belonged there as much as Saint Dominic did, or Saint Peter Martyr (whom Fra Angelico had also inserted), or indeed as much as any of the women and men who accompanied Jesus during his lifetime. For those who do not awaken to a Fra Angelico on the wall, there is always the New Testament itself. Regular contemplation of the Gospels is, for a religious person, the Christian devotion par excellence. Contemporary biblical scholarship will one day prove to have been, I am convinced, one of the greatest aids to Christian prayer and devotion of all time. Scholarship, like great art, helps a person to wear the Gospel.

Imaging Jesus and vocational awareness

There is no doubt that vocational awareness is stimulated by the example of men and women whose lives are marked by zeal, generosity, reverence, a clear sense of mission and purpose, simplicity of life, and solidarity with the poor. But the spark—the awakening to God, the feeling of being called to allow God to be the exclusive focus of one’s mind and heart—is
less easily accounted for. It is probably not just a single event but a cluster of events that figure into the awakening. Books that capture our imagination, conversations with close friends, Christian family life, being seized by the beauty of the natural world, or even coming face to face with severe human misery and deprivation, the innate attractiveness of a particular work which religious men and women have undertaken, stories of martyrdom: these are the sorts of things which contribute to the birth and development of religious awareness.

There are individuals who have a sense of being called to surrender their lives to God fully and unconditionally, even without knowing what that will entail, and without having much prior understanding of the Gospel or Jesus. The Ethiopian eunuch who ran into Philip was someone searching for Jesus without realizing what he was looking for: “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34). Perhaps something similar was going on in the soul of the man born blind. Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” And the man born blind answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him” (John 9:36).

It seems to me more likely, however, that vocational awareness is triggered either because of the way Christians in religious or priestly life model an attractive way of being human, or because the work in which such people are engaged excites the imagination and mobilizes desires.

But having said this I should add that neither the example of selflessness and faith given by others nor the importance of the mission or work to which religious people have committed themselves is enough to sustain vocational awareness over the long haul. Sooner or later our eye must catch up with the
Gospel, for it is out of that story that the living Jesus inspires us, calls, forms, and satisfies us. Sooner or later we have to find our place inside the Gospel story, understanding the Jesus story so well that, from the viewpoint of Christian prayer, it can meaningfully and honestly be said that we were eyewitnesses to the scenes and events that the evangelists have recorded. And insofar as the life and times of Jesus—the places where he walked and healed and instructed and drove out demons—is what constitutes our interior landscape, a person’s sense of vocation and mission will be firmly “grounded.”

Once we have committed ourselves to ordained ministry or religious life, we must be prepared for the ongoing but essentially healthy and invigorating challenge of keeping our vocational awareness strong. One of the greatest sources of assistance for this, I have found, is the people of God. For in some mysterious way, vocations come from the Spirit working within the life and historical fortunes of God’s people. The divine call ordinarily comes from below, not out of the skies. The people of God challenge us to remain faithful to our calling and the experience of sharing their lives can provide a constant confirmation of the Spirit’s voice.

Yet the people form only one leg of the challenge and support on which our vocation stands. The other comes from the heart of the Gospel, since it is from within those texts that Jesus himself helps us to stay in touch with our most profound desire to find God and to walk alongside God’s people. When the imagination ceases to play its part, when prayer is no longer steeped in the concreteness of the Gospel stories, then vocational awareness is in jeopardy. One might be moved to greater generosity and dedication by accounts of religious and priests who have been killed because of their persistence, say, in
defending refugees or victims of injustice. But without the fresco that keeps constantly before the mind’s eye a vision of Jesus as the evangelists have presented him, accompanying marginalized or impoverished people is going to exact a very high toll. Or to put it another way, we might easily lose sight of why we chose to accompany them in the first place.

[2001]