

Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice

by Christopher Pramuk

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.
Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

Theology makes progress by being always alive to its own fundamental uncertainties..
John Henry Newman

Christopher Pramuk is Associate Professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati. He is the author of *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Liturgical Press, 2009), and *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line* (Liturgical Press, 2013).

Few have captured the heart of the Christian and Catholic sacramental imagination so vividly as the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins' luminous vision of the Christ who "plays in ten thousand places" is not an exercise in literary fantasy. It begins, like all authentic Christian hope, with the world as we encounter it, the world in which God became flesh, "a broken world with many broken people."¹ It is there, through eyes of faith, that we meet Christ, "lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his." In the words of Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolas, the act of sacramental faith and incarnational hope begins with a "profound engagement with the real, [and] a refusal to let go until one goes beneath the surface."² But alas, how difficult it is to get beneath the surface of *people*, especially those whom we are inclined to identify ahead of time as suspect or dangerous because they are different. How often do we presume, without the benefit of a real encounter, that what lies beneath the surface is not trustworthy?

We who are the Church might ask ourselves honestly: In whom are we least prepared to meet Christ, the incarnate face of Love? The Jew? The Muslim? The young black man from the inner city? The "welfare mom"? The gay couple down the street? The atheist? The priest behind the altar? This essay is an attempt to wrestle honestly with the reality of human difference and the ways we handle racial, biological, and cultural differences imaginatively, theologically, and pastorally in relation to God and the sacramental realm of religious practice. The intuition I wish to explore here is that our theology—our ways of thinking about, speaking from, and practicing the presence of

¹ Adolfo Nicolas, S.J., "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today," Mexico City, April 23, 2010, <http://www.sjweb.info>.

² Nicolas., "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry."

God—requires a method, a language, and above all an imagination that does not seek to manage or erase difference out of the gate but is committed to listening to the other receptively, contemplatively, as “an other with words to speak—words of his or her own that may challenge from difference and may love with freedom.”³

More precisely, the question at hand is not only how *we* relate in church and society to all manner of differences—racial, cultural, sexual, biological—but also God’s freedom to love in and through all of God’s creation, not least those we hold apart, categorize, and often demonize as different. Theology, for the sake of love, must interrogate the ten thousand ways we cut ourselves off from the unfamiliar or feared other and, thus, from the hidden Christ who plays in all things. Our poverty, I will argue here, is foremost a poverty of theological imagination.

It should be clear in what follows that by imagination, I do not mean the realm of make believe or fantasy. Following John Henry Newman and the Ignatian tradition of Hopkins, Adolfo Nicolas, William Lynch, and many others, I mean that dynamic mode of cognition that perceives the basic resemblances between things and selects and organizes experience into a meaningful whole. The imagination is not separate from reason but enables us to reason differently by enlarging and reordering our perception of reality, providing a new unity to our understanding and knowledge. For Newman, the “theology of the religious imagination”⁴ summons forth all our most subtle faculties: reason and imagination, intuition and deduction, experience and memory, and analysis and prayerful realization. The aim of theology is not strictly faith or truth but wisdom, which Newman describes as “the clear, calm, accurate vision, and comprehension of the whole course, the whole work of God.” Wisdom seeks “a connected view of the old with the new,” and insight into “the bearing and influence of each part upon every other, without which there is no whole, and could be no centre.”⁵ Wisdom implies growth, slow-paced change, and prayerful discernment. Because our faith is not fantasy, the path toward wisdom in the church must begin, often with a jolt, again and again in the reality of things as they are, as best as we can discern them, and not as we should like them to be.

We begin, then, with a montage of contemporary realities that serve to illuminate the challenge of difference as it confronts us from all sides in society and church. By difference I mean not only racial, religious, and cultural differences but also biologically inscribed differences, such as gender and sexual orientation. From these cases I then identify a pervasive essentialist style of thought and imagination that permeates our language-worlds and ritual practices in society and church, crippling our capacity for love and transformative engagement with others. Drawing from Thomas Merton, St. Paul, Newman, and others, I conclude with some schematic reflections on the imagination and theological development as the difference comes into play, or meets painful impasse, in the lives of Christians and Catholics everywhere.

Language, Reality, and Difference

Like any recitation of images or examples the following montage is highly selective and leaves aside a great deal of contextual nuance, not least any silver linings or graces that may be hidden in each of these contexts and the different worlds they represent. What follows are only partial snapshots of the real, yet together they suggest a society and church increasingly, sometimes dangerously, impoverished of empathy, theological imagination, and hope.

³ Karl Plank, “The Eclipse of Difference: Merton’s Encounter with Judaism,” in *Merton and Judaism: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 67–82, 81–82.

⁴ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1979), 106.

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 287–93. One of Newman’s enduring gifts to Catholic thought is the gift of wisdom, his reflective manner of discerning the shape of the whole not by way of “generalized laws or metaphysical conjectures” but by basic trust in and careful attention to the “concrete” and “living” soil of experience and religious imagination.

- An unarmed 17-year-old black man named Trayvon Martin, wearing a hoodie and walking in a gated community in Florida, is identified as “suspicious-looking” by an armed 28-year-old Hispanic neighborhood watch volunteer, confronted, and shot to death as a 911 operator records screams for help and gunshots. Americans are divided along racial lines as to whether or not racial profiling is self-evident in the case.
- Black parents everywhere describe the obligatory ritual of teaching their sons the “Black Male Code,” i.e., the rules of how to act in the presence of white people and, above all, how to act when—not if—they are pulled over by the police while driving.⁶
- Analyzing thousands of music videos aired on MTV and BET in the last thirty years, media critic Sut Jhally describes the dominant portrayal of young black men as possibly “the most racist set of images ever displayed in public” since D. W. Griffith’s white supremacist film of 1913, “Birth of a Nation.” The portrayal of women in music videos, and black women especially, is almost universally dehumanizing and objectifying. “Their value [is] often reduced to a single part of their anatomy.” Several infamous hip-hop videos, for example, feature the male star running a credit card through a willing woman’s buttocks. Jhally describes the dominant lens or narrative through which men and women have been portrayed in music video since the early 1980s as the “adolescent male heterosexual pornographic imagination,” a narrative now so dominant in American popular culture as to be widely considered normal.⁷
- Federal statistics report that one in five college women are victims of sexual assault, most often during their first few months on campus. College women express conflicted feelings about reporting sexual assault in the face of enormous social pressures not to do so, especially when incidents involve alcohol (as most do) or high-profile male student athletes. As one University of Notre Dame professor sees it, “Most of my colleagues and almost all of my students tend to be very protective of the institution and our image, and they’re not eager to look too closely at anything that might raise questions.”⁸
- A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation survey reports that children between age eight and eighteen in America spend an average of fifty-three hours per week engaged with television or some form of electronic media. African American and Hispanic kids spend nearly one-third more time than white kids. Jesuit ethicist Fr. John Kavanaugh describes the advertising imagery driving these media as the dominant form of education and moral formation in our lives, crippling our deepest capacities for social empathy and loving, committed sexual relationships.⁹
- A study commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops reports that between 1950 and 2002, approximately 10,667 children were sexually abused by clergy in the United States. The revelation of widespread sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church and the systematic denial and obfuscation by bishops around the world continues to this day.¹⁰

⁶ Jesse Washington, “Black Male Code Still—Sadly—Needs to be Handed Down,” in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 24, 2012.

⁷ *Dreamworlds 3: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Video* (dir. Sut Jhally, Media Education Foundation, 2003).

⁸ The Editors, “Anything But Clear: A Report on Campus Sexual Assaults,” *Notre Dame Magazine* (Winter 2011–12); Jean Porter quoted in Melinda Henneberger, “Reported Sexual Assault at Notre Dame Campus Leaves More Questions Than Answers,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 26, 2012, <http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/reported-sexual-assault-notre-dame-campus-leaves-more-questions-answers>.

⁹ Greg Toppo, *USA Today*, “Kids Spend Nearly 8 Hours a Day on Electronic Media,” in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 18, 2010; John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

¹⁰ John Jay College Research Team, “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors By Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010” (May 2011), <http://old.usccb.org/mr/causes-and-context.shtml>.

- Several African American Catholic eighth graders in a Midwestern parochial school habitually refer to one another in casual conversation as “niggers.” Their white classmates understand that they are never to use the term but confess bewilderment as to why the black kids, and presumably their parents, would use it.¹¹
- The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio estimates that some twelve to twenty-seven million human beings are caught in one form or another of modern day slavery with as many as 17,500 trafficked into the United States annually. Nearly three out of four victims are women and half are children.¹²
- Congress repeatedly fails to pass The Dream Act. Opponents decry any hint of “amnesty” for the children of “illegal aliens.”¹³
- During a televised Mass presided by Pope Benedict in Washington, DC, following Prayers of the Faithful and a Presentation of the Gifts marked by diverse languages and spirited Gospel and Spanish singing, a noted commentator on the influential Catholic EWTN network remarks: “We have just been subjected to an over-preening display of multicultural chatter. And now, the Holy Father will begin the sacred part of the Mass.” Black Catholic ethicist Fr. Bryan Massingale observes that such a statement reflects an attitude “more typical and widespread than many are willing to acknowledge,” namely, that Catholic equals white. “In U.S. Catholicism,” Massingale writes, “only European aesthetics and cultural products are truly Catholic—regardless of the church’s rhetorical commitment to universality.”¹⁴
- The white pastor of an urban black Catholic parish in a Midwest diocese is reprimanded by his bishop for sitting among the parishioners during the Liturgy of the Word instead of remaining situated above them in the presider’s chair in the sanctuary as liturgical norms dictate and for participating with parishioners in a spirited, wide-ranging, and lengthy sign of peace. Asked to explain, the priest says, “They forget that I, too, like the laity, am the object of the Word.”¹⁵
- The Roman Catholic Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei* clarifies that the newly reinstated Tridentine or Latin form of the Mass does not permit girls to serve at the altar. Pastors in Arizona, Michigan, and Virginia forbid altar girls during *all forms* of the Mass under the logic that “replacing girls with boys as servers leads to more vocations to the priesthood.” Facing objections from parishioners, a Phoenix pastor says he did not consult the parish council “because they are not theologically trained.” One (female) Catholic blogger applauds the move, describing girl altar servers as a “liturgical aberration” and “one more example of the devastating feminization of worship which has contributed in no small measure to the prevalence of effeminate priests and the sex abuse scandal.” A Virginia mother whose pastor instated a boys-only policy says, “That’s when I knew, in my heart, that we couldn’t stay any longer at this parish.” She and her husband and daughters have since “floated around” between area parishes, feeling “heartbroken by our church.” The diocese of Lincoln, NE, has forbidden girl servers since 1994.¹⁶

¹¹ Conversations with the author’s son, March 2012.

¹² See <http://www.freedomcenter.org/slavery-today/>.

¹³ See <http://dreamact.info/>.

¹⁴ Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 81; cf. 46.

¹⁵ Interview with the author, April 2012. The priest, for obvious reasons, wishes to remain anonymous.

¹⁶ Editors, “Save the Altar Girls,” *America*, October 10, 2011, http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=13056; Tom Gallagher, “No Girl Servers at Latin Masses,” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 9, 2011, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-no-girl-servers-latin-masses>; Alice Popovici, “Catholics Protest Altar Server Policy,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 3, 2011, <http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/catholics-protest-altar-server-policy>.

- Pastoral staff and teachers in many dioceses across the United States are increasingly required, as a condition of remaining in employment, to sign loyalty oaths indicating that they personally embrace the official teachings of the Catholic Church on matters of widespread conscientious dissent such as contraception, gay marriage, and women's ordination. Many choose to sign; some refuse and resign or are terminated.¹⁷
- A 2012 survey reports that ninety-two percent of American youth aged two through seventeen years old play video games while some nine percent of players between eight and eighteen are "pathological players," or clinically addicted. A respected medical journal describes video games as possibly "the most effective educational technology ever invented. Players are immersed in an environment where they are rewarded for doing well and punished when they don't. Either way, they get to keep doing it until their performance improves." In the case of the massively popular "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3" and "Grand Theft Auto," mostly what children "keep doing until their performance improves" is kill people. "If you're being rewarded for killing female hookers," worries Dr. Michael Rich of Children's Hospital in Boston, "that's bound to teach you something over time."¹⁸
- A 2012 Nielsen report shows that children aged thirteen to seventeen send an average of 3,417 text messages a month. The Pew Research Center notes that the near ubiquity of handheld devices has had an enormous impact on kids' free time, filling up the "interstitial spaces" in their daily lives. Yale professor Stephen Carter worries that as young people "increasingly fill their free hours with texting and other similarly fast-paced, attention-absorbing activities, the opportunities for sustained reflective thought will continue to fade." One cost of social media, suggests Carter, may be to accelerate the decline "of what our struggling democracy most needs: independent thought."¹⁹
- A gay student at Rutgers University commits suicide after his roommate secretly records him engaging in sexual activity with another man and posts the video online. Educators describe cyber-bullying as a national epidemic and the harassment of gay students during the high school and college years as a particular cause for alarm.²⁰

Ways of Seeing and Managing Difference

A great deal could be said about any one of the above points or any number taken together. I limit myself to three observations, each subject to my own biases and need for greater understanding and conversion, and trust the reader will find (or reject) other possible connections.

First, in all of these snapshots, from music videos and national political discourse to the Catholic liturgy, note how prevailing images, language-forms, and ritual practices often serve not to open up the circle of loving encounter between persons in a community but rather to create image and language-worlds that effectively divide, dehumanize, and close the circle of mutual encounter, friendship, and grace. Young men of color are routinely profiled as "suspicious-looking," often with tragic consequences; black women are "welfare queens," "hoes," and "bitches" and are visualized and treated as such in popular public imagery ranging from political campaign ads to music videos.

¹⁷ John Coleman, "Church Loyalty Oaths Revisited," *America*, June 29, 2012, http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=5221; Michelle Boorstein, "Arlington Diocese Parishioners Question Need for Fidelity Oath," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/sunday-school-teachers-balk-at-oath-agreeing-to-all-church-teachings/2012/07/11/gJQAcAvGeW_story.html.

¹⁸ Bruce Jancin, "Video Games: What You'd Really Rather Not Know," *Pediatric News* 46, no. 3 (March 2012).

¹⁹ Toppo, "Kids Spend"; Stephen L. Carter, "A Little Less Texting, A Little More Thinking," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 24, 2012.

²⁰ "Suicide Among LGBT Youth," *Wikipedia*, last modified October 5, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_among_LGBT_youth, and references therein.

Freshmen women in college are targeted as easy prey and plied with alcohol to facilitate the easy hookup or the traumatic sexual assault. Adolescent boys score points and esteem among their peers for their efficiency in gunning down female prostitutes and stealing cars in sexually-charged virtual feedback loops. Gay students are bullied and exposed via the Internet to the point of suicide.

In the realm of the church, the Catholic laity cannot be trusted for consultation or insight in matters of faith or worship because “they are not theologically trained,” nor daily immersed in the “sacred” realm of the ordained; the sexual abuse crisis is rooted in the “liberal culture of the 1960s” and can further be blamed on the “feminization of worship” and “effeminate priests.” European cultural imagery is “authentically Catholic” while African and Latin American forms of imagery and worship are suspect. God is a reflection of the white European “Holy Father”; and altar girls (it can only follow) are a “liturgical aberration.”

While it is true that not all the differences in play here are of the same order—e.g., socially constructed differences such as race and class are not of the same order as biologically inscribed differences such as sex and sexual orientation—nevertheless one can discern a certain tendency or common style of thought epidemic both in society and church in the way language and imagery are used to manage, compartmentalize, and contain difference. Following a number of seminal feminist writers, Thomas Merton diagnosed the problem almost fifty years ago. The basic error underlying all manner of dangerous “isms” or phobias of the other—racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, clericalism, homophobia, xenophobia—“is the logical consequence of an essentialist style of thought.” Merton laments the degree to which language is used not to facilitate genuine communication or understanding but to identify and label the other’s essence, so as to manage and contain our fear of difference:

[An essentialist style of thought involves] finding out what a man is and then nailing him to a definition so that there can be no change. A White Man is a White Man, and that is it. A Negro, even though he is three parts white is “A Negro” with all that our rigid definition predicates of a Negro. And so the logical machine can devour him because of his essence. Do you think that in an era of existentialism this will get better? On the contrary: definitions, more and more schematic, are fed into computers. The machines are meditating on the most arbitrary and rudimentary of essences, punched into IBM cards, and defining you and me forever without appeal. “A priest,” “A Negro,” “A Jew,” “A Socialist,” etc.²¹

Whether conservative or liberal, gay or straight, white or black, Christian or Jew, an essentialist style of thought errs dangerously by employing language and imagery as an unyielding straitjacket, short-circuiting the imagination and nailing a person (and everyone like them) to a definition, a tautology, an essence, so that the game is up well ahead of time. There can be no room for change, no room for dialogue, no room for encounter, no room for growth, no room for transformation, no room for freedom, no room for curiosity, no room for spontaneity, no room for discovery, no room for risk, no room for error, and above all, no room for mercy or forgiveness. In short, depending on your essence, you are innocent or guilty, never both. There can be no room for love.

Second, what scandalizes about many of the above accounts is not just that individuals would be capable of bigotry, willful ignorance, and mischaracterization of others, fantastic displays of ego, sexual dysfunction, and violence—all marks of sin and human freedom gone badly awry—but that the very institutions that profess a commitment to

²¹ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 200–201. That Merton also saw and resisted the dangers of gender essentialism for both women and men, especially within the life of the church, is patently clear in “The Feminine Mystique,” a conference given to religious sisters in 1967, inspired partly by Merton’s reading of Betty Friedan’s ground-breaking 1963 book of the same title. See Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1992), 125–35.

human dignity and justice and that hold the power to effect positive transformation in society would fail or refuse to do so when sinful patterns of injustice are brought into the light. Nothing threatens a child's emergent sense of identity and belonging so much as the realization that his very presence is perceived as a crisis and a threat to his society. Because of his parents' country of origin, his skin color, or the clothes that he wears, he is not only unwelcome but also, according to the prevailing legal system, literally disposable. Nothing is more damaging to the church's moral authority or more disheartening to the laity than the hypocrisy and willful blindness of some of its shepherds and the punitive disciplinary measures often employed to silence thoughtful, conscientious dissent. Few practices—though I am open to correction on this point—are more demeaning to the dignity of peoples of color than their adoption of the racist terms, images, and misogynist practices long used against them in the white “master's house.”²² If language makes a world, the future of hope in families, society, and church depends not a little on the image and language-worlds we choose to inhabit.

Third, while it is difficult to measure or fully understand the impact of television and electronic media in our lives, it is impossible to ignore their enormous sway in the imaginative lives of our children. What is the status of our loving presence—our capacity to “just be” with our spouses, children, or by ourselves in reflective solitude—when there is hardly a moment of the day that we (and our children) are not tethered to an electronic device? What are the prospects for social empathy when the media to which we are addictively present, and through which we so often surrender our capacity for independent thought, fill our imaginations with so much fear, aggression, and unmitigated garbage about those who look and think differently than us?²³

If culture may be broadly described as the constellation of images and stories by which we live our lives, it is not too strong, I think, to suggest that the crisis of culture threatening our very personhood and the pursuit of the common good in America today is not just white privilege or white racist supremacy but an all-encompassing media supremacy. This is a public and increasingly private atmosphere of imagery and language so rancorously divisive and often violent with respect to difference that it threatens to bury our most basic capacities for empathy, intimacy, and love beneath an avalanche of narcissism, political self-interest, and distraction. All of this adds up to a very different kind of presence and power at work in our relational lives, shaping our conception of the real at every level.²⁴

Indeed these points come into particularly intense focus when we consider the dominant images and practices shaping our conceptions of sexuality, intimacy, and family life. What are the prospects for sacred eros or erotic love, for example, when so many children, adolescents, and not a few adults are exposed regularly, if not addictively, to sexually charged video games and to pornography, accessed easily via the Internet in ever more fantastic iterations? Even more contentious from a theological perspective is the question of homosexual love. A great many

²² See the influential essay by Audre Lorde, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1984), 114–23.

²³ This is not to deny the potential for good of the Internet and other forms of electronic media as tools of communication and building community, especially where person-to-person means are impossible or even forbidden. It is also important to note that the factors contributing to excessive television and media exposure among children are socially variable and complex.

²⁴ According to Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolas, one of the greatest challenges facing university educators today is what he calls the “globalization of superficiality,” partly a consequence of our ability to instantly access unlimited quantities of information via the Internet without personal engagement, depth of thought, or intellectual labor. “People lose the ability to engage with reality, a process of dehumanization that may be gradual and silent, but very real.” Nicolas, “Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry.”

thoughtful people who love the church and who also love their gay and lesbian friends, sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters are asking for theological clarity on this most vexatious of all issues of human difference.²⁵

This is clearly not the place to attempt a discussion of homosexuality in the Scriptures or the Christian tradition, but the question, as an acute problem of difference, merits brief consideration along the lines of reasoning (and imagining) already laid out in this essay. Can sexual love, this most wondrous of mysteries of our relational life as fashioned in the image of God, be fixed to a *single* image and essence so that the mystery is resolved and contained ahead of time?²⁶ Is it congruous with our experience that homosexuals, by virtue of biological denotation, are “objectively disordered” and incapable of familial covenantal love or selfless contribution to the common good of society and church? The gathering chorus of Christians who question an essentialist or strictly heterosexual vision of sacred eros evidently do so from the intuition, rooted in the loving witness of gays and lesbians themselves, that homosexual love can be and in practice often is sacramental, an incarnate sign and instrument of covenantal love and divine grace. More and more Christians and Catholics are coming to grasp the issue at its heart (and in their hearts) as a question not of political correctness, minority rights, or accommodation to liberal culture but rather of theological integrity, wholeness, and doctrinal development. In whose image are homosexual persons made?²⁷

Unfortunately, even to clear a space for such questions is to wade deeply into the turbulent waters of the culture wars, where efforts at dialogue are often met with scorn and punitive *ad hominem* reprisals. That there is little room in the church to discern such questions safely, openly, and honestly should be a matter of deep concern for every Catholic and Christian, no matter where one’s convictions lie on the spectrum of sexuality. Gays and lesbians continue to suffer a terrible existential and theological loneliness, a great many doing so in the heart of the church they love.²⁸

How much easier to keep quiet and swallow the beautiful opiate pill of consumerism! Gay or straight, white or black, rich or poor, Christian or Jew, in practice we all seem to agree that what really promises to set us free is money, glorious money, and splendid, self-driven success in the real world of capital. No presence, no mutual vulnerability, no companionship, no attentive silence, no deference to the earth, no making room for the hidden,

²⁵ Sexual diversity raises the dilemma of difference in ways arguably more primordial than race, insofar as it manifests differences that are biologically inscribed and not just, or primarily, socially constructed. Among my college’s students there are few issues that generate more intensive discussion than homosexuality and the question of how to account for gay and lesbian persons, theologically, sacramentally, in God, and in the life of the church.

²⁶ The relevant Church teachings, available at www.usccb.org, include *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2331–400; *Homosexualitatis problema*, or “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (1986); “Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers” (1997); especially influential among younger Catholics are John Paul II’s conferences on the “theology of the body.” For a balanced summary of “gender essentialism” and “complementarity of the sexes” in Church teachings, see Beth Haile, “Catechism Commentary: The Sixth Commandment,” at <http://catholicmoraltheology.com/catechism-commentary-the-sixth-commandment/>.

²⁷ “What are gays and lesbians to do with their bodies, their selves?” asks M. Shawn Copeland, one of a handful of Catholic systematic theologians who calls explicitly for the development of Catholic theological anthropology inclusive of homosexual embodiment, in her case primarily through the lens of Christology. See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 55–84, and references therein. See also Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2008).

²⁸ Bishop Thomas Gumbleton has openly supported Catholic ministries to gays and lesbians while emphasizing primacy of conscience. See Thomas Gumbleton, “A Call to Listen: The Church’s Theological and Pastoral Response to Gays and Lesbians,” in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), and other essays in this volume. Catholic priest and theologian James Alison and Jesuit author James Martin have also written eloquently on this topic; see, e.g., James Alison, *On Being Liked* (New York: Crossroad, 2004) and James Martin, “Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity” (Jan. 12, 2012), and “She Loved Prophetically” (Jan. 9, 2013), both accessible at www.americamagazine.org.

the sick, the ugly, the forgotten—just swipe your credit card, hit the gas, and enjoy the ride. “Love: it’s what makes a Subaru, a Subaru.”

Love: The Uncontainable Mystery

It may be that our most urgent task today is to take back the word “love” from the corporate spin doctors, best-selling psychologists and self-help gurus, and self-appointed prophets of religious orthodoxy and return it fully to the boundless mystery of God. The Bible itself offers not one image or metaphor for love but at least three—*agape*, *filios*, and *eros*—and even these with their beautiful and various shades of meaning cannot fully contain the mystery. The much-neglected Song of Songs gives us a wondrous affirmation of erotic love but still no room for affirming homosexual love as holding a place in God’s heart from the very beginning.²⁹ Yet if God is Love—not a fixed and solitary essence but a way of being-in-relationship—and God remains free and beyond our comprehension, does not the burden lay upon us to make room in our hearts and theological imaginations for the mystery of covenantal love in all its potentially sacramental realizations? Might that mystery not also include homosexual love?

I ask the question provisionally, granting that the discussion here is far from complete. Nevertheless I ask with an eye on the freedom of God to love in and through different forms of bodily human agency. If we are going to err in our ignorance, should we not err freely on the side of inclusion, both in doctrine and deed, and not on the side of exclusion so long as the mystery of covenantal love is served? As St. Paul reminds us, “We know partially and we prophesy partially.” For now, we see only “indistinctly, as in a mirror” and not yet “face to face” (1 Cor 13:9, 12). One has only to think of Christianity’s historical record with slavery or with the Jews to discern that the risk of getting it wrong in theological development is ever outweighed by the demands of love, social solidarity, and pastoral care: the call to encounter God’s presence in those who challenge from difference, and who might yet teach us something beautiful about the mystery of God-made-flesh, something we haven’t before been able to realize.³⁰

How might we make ourselves a little more worthy of the great Welcome Table before our eyes are privileged to see it? We might begin by taking a critical look at ourselves, and our prevailing images of God, through the lens of love:

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor 13:4-7)

Perhaps these lines are too familiar to Christians for their profound meaning to be really knowable or contemplated in a sustained way for their implications in every aspect of our lives.

The Christian mystical tradition interprets St. Paul’s sublime teachings on love through the lens of the Beatitudes, especially what Jesus calls purity of heart and poverty of spirit. Both purity of heart and poverty of spirit describe an interior disposition that is very difficult to realize outside of grace, namely, the humility of love as we stand

²⁹ The great Russian Orthodox theologian Sergius Bulgakov referred to the Song of Songs as the “Holy of Holies” of the Bible, its presence in the canon a “true miracle revealed by the Holy Spirit.” For my own reading of the Song’s history and contemporary relevance for Christian spirituality, see Christopher Pramuk, “Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Song of Songs,” *America* 193 (Oct 31, 2005): 8-12.

³⁰ To put it another way, to counterbalance our “negative theology” (our respect for the limits of human comprehension and language before the mystery of God) we need to uphold a “negative anthropology,” a deep respect for the mystery and diversity of human persons, each of whom holds a unique and irreplaceable place in God’s heart “from the beginning” (Jer 1:5). On the development of moral teaching and implications for ecclesial practices see John Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005); also Dennis M. Doyle, Timothy J. Furry, and Pascal D. Bazzell, eds., *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

before the other, a humility that is not quick-tempered and does not seek its own interests. Politically speaking, such a disposition would seem a recipe for disaster! Yet the deep source of all such humility is incarnational. It is the presumption, in the mystery of faith, that no less than Christ, the incarnate face of God, approaches us in the other: “For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / to the Father through the features of men’s faces.”³¹

In whose image, specifically, are we made? As a father myself and, more pointedly, as the son of a loving father, the paternal face of God as Father evokes well for me Christianity’s sublime teachings about love. For many men, women, and children alike, “Father” has long been and can continue to be a beautiful divine image, a sustaining metaphor of divine presence, constancy, and loving care. (Picture the father, for example, in Rembrandt’s incomparable painting “The Return of the Prodigal Son.”) But for many people whose experience of “father” is traumatic, domineering, or cold, the image does not evoke or make room enough for love. For many, the line between paternal presence and patriarchal power is much too thin. Clearly it is not enough to insist in perfect tautological fashion that God equals Father.

We must remember that God is also Mother, Spirit, and Shekhinah, lest we deny our maternal and feminine experiences of grace, tighten the noose around divine-human wholeness, and foreclose the imaginative flexibility of the Bible itself, not to mention the great intellectual and mystical tradition of the church. My own prayer life, like that of countless Christians from east to west for nearly two millennia, has been enormously enlarged and enriched by the biblical image and memory of God as Sophia, or Holy Wisdom: “For there is nought God loves, be it not one who dwells with Wisdom ... Indeed she reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well” (Wis 7:28, 8:1).

Where the Bible and tradition have been inflexible, making little room for the visage of sacramental love in the marginalized and feared other—blacks, Indians, homosexuals, Jews, women, Muslims, “pagans”—we must pray for courage and grace of discernment, so that the Spirit might clear space in our collective minds, hearts, and imaginations for a new tradition to develop. Why? Only for the sake of love: to defend and preserve that latent image and freedom of God that pulses beneath the surface in all human beings. There is nothing to fear in the intuition that God speaks to us with particular urgency today in the Black Madonna or that Christ is crucified in Trayvon Martin, Matthew Shepard, and Etty Hillesum.³² We may not have grasped it before, imprisoned by deep cultural fears and longstanding religious prejudices. But surely to resist such a growth in theological imagination would be to succumb to the poverty of “doubt and small living.”³³

In sum, the error of an essentialist style of thought applies to God no less than to human beings. To affix God to a one-sided image or reflection of a particular human visage or culture—white, male, heterosexual, European—

³¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1986), 129.

³² Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old college student in Laramie, Wyoming, was tortured and left to die suspended from a fence post by two attackers because he was gay. During his funeral in his hometown of Casper, Wyoming, protestors from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas were on hand to deliver their “God Hates Fags” message to Shepard’s family and friends. Their picket signs read: “No Tears for Queers” and “Fag Matt in Hell.” The harassment of young gays around the country—and in not a few cases their subsequent suicide—is described by many observers today as epidemic. An arresting icon by Fr. William Hart McNichols, “The Passion of Matthew Shepard,” moves the debate surrounding homosexuality from head to heart, from abstract ideals to concrete persons, identifying the suffering of gays and lesbians directly with the passion of Christ. The icon can be viewed at www.fatherbill.org.

³³ The phrase is borrowed from Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), a beautifully realized, almost mythic protest against the forces of racism, sexism, and classism—indeed against a whole civilization, and implicitly a patriarchal church—that seem determined to obscure the extraordinary good news of our shared life together in God, reducing men, women, and children alike to “doubt and small living” (289).

yields a number of logical but dangerously un-Christian consequences in the life of the church. The Christ of Hopkins' imagination is not (simply) the male Jew from Nazareth whose essence we must all physically mirror or whose actions we must all robotically emulate—as if the New Testament presented such a cookie-cutter model of holiness and discipleship (it does not). It is not Christ as essence that we worship but Christ the humanity of God, who hides and plays in every person's latent desire, unique God-given gifts, and implicit freedom for love. God gifts us, as God gifted Jesus, with the faculties to grow in wisdom and love (Lk 2:52). The vulnerability of such a covenantal God, who makes room for the slow flowering of human freedom-in-grace, cannot be overstated.

Imagination and Theological Renewal

In his own reflections on the challenges of theological growth and discernment facing every generation in the church, Blessed John Henry Newman reminds us why a static or essentialist vision of God will not do for the Catholic sacramental imagination:

From the nature of the case, all our language about Almighty God, so far as it is affirmative, is analogical and figurative. We can only speak of Him, whom we reason about but have not seen, in terms of our experience. When we reflect on Him and put into words our thoughts about Him, we are forced to transfer to a new meaning ready made words, which primarily belong to objects of time and place. We are aware, while we do so, that they are inadequate, but we have the alternative of doing so, or doing nothing at all. We can only remedy their insufficiency by confessing it. We can do no more than put ourselves on the guard as to our own proceeding, and protest against it, while we do ... it. We can only set right one error of expression by another. By this *method of antagonism* we steady our minds, not so as to reach their object, but to point them in the right direction; as in an algebraical process we might add and subtract in series, approximating little by little, *by saying and unsaying, to a positive result.*³⁴

Theological discernment can never reach its destination so perfectly as a logical syllogism or a smoothly functioning astronomical machine. God, the object of theology, is no object at all; the human person, too, is an irreducible mystery. Theological language needs room to breathe and be caught up breathless, to speak and not speak, to affirm and deny, and to hold firm and develop. It is not that theology must begin again in a conceptual vacuum with every new generation. Rather, because our grasp of God is always “analogical and figurative,” theology speaks of God, “whom we reason about but have not seen, in terms of our experience.”³⁵

This means that theology at its catholic best, like Christianity itself, is an organic and living language. We are still learning how to give full (and full-bodied!) voice to the mystery of the incarnation. In our stumbling efforts to realize the mystery, we must not only attend carefully to the Scriptures and appeal methodically to reason but also drink deeply from the wellspring of human experience in all its mosaic diversity, an open realm of discovery much more ambiguous and even antagonistic than we should like in speaking of God. To do so is not an act of creativity

³⁴*Theological Papers on Faith and Uncertainty* 1.102, emphasis original; cited in Terrence Merrigan, “Newman and Theological Liberalism,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 605–21.

³⁵ Newman calls this dynamic, holistic, cumulative, often “antagonistic” manner of growing into the truth “the illative sense.” Where scientific rationality proceeds by linear or deductive thinking, imaginative rationality (the illative sense) is closer to literary or poetic cognition, involving an organic process of discernment which Newman compares to a skilled climber on the rock face—we advance “not by rule, but by an inward faculty.” For a more thorough discussion of Newman on the imagination and doctrinal development see Christopher Pramuk, “‘They Know Him By His Voice’: Newman on the Imagination, Christology, and the Theology of Religions,” *Heythrop Journal* 48 (Jan 2007): 61–85.

or theological daring for its own sake; it is an act of trust in God who breathes life into all things. “Theology,” as Newman observes, “makes progress by being always alive to its own fundamental uncertainties.”³⁶

The alternative—to reduce divine and human mysteries to facts akin to axioms of mathematics or science—is the great temptation and error of religious fundamentalism, the death of theology and the death of authentic Christian hope. Newman writes:

Our theological philosophers are like the old nurses who wrap the unhappy infant in swaddling bands or boards, put a lot of blankets on him and shut the windows that not a breath of fresh air may come to his skin—as if he were not healthy enough to bear wind and water in due measures. They move in a groove, and will not tolerate anyone who does not move in the same.³⁷

Thus what threatens our grasp of the great human mosaic is the same captivity of imagination that threatens our grasp of the living God. Like the old nurses who wrap the unhappy infant for fear she will catch ill, the church risks trading in its theological vitality and growth in wisdom of love for withering slowly in self-contained protectiveness.

Historically the great beauty of Catholicism resides in its intellectual and imaginative capacity to renew itself. A danger point is reached when the language of theology is not permitted to renew itself and becomes, as John Coulson put the matter some forty years ago, even less sensitive than the surrounding culture “to that sense of complexity, even paradox, which, in the public language of our poets, novelists, and dramatists, is, in origin, theological.”³⁸ It is worth pondering this insight very carefully. Wherever the church shuts down—imaginatively, theologically, liturgically—the culture rushes in to fill the void, not least in the imaginative lives of Christians themselves.³⁹ The fertile complexity and paradox to which Coulson speaks refers not only to our encounter with the mystery of God but also to our encounter with the deepest mysteries of human being. How often our poets and filmmakers do a better job attuning our spiritual senses to the wondrous play of Christ, the humanity of God, in all things than our increasingly restrictive theologies and liturgies. By Christ, I mean the revelation of our common humanity limned in divine potentiality through the freedom of love.⁴⁰

Of course, as detailed in the montage above, the secular image-makers also hold the power to get it terribly wrong about the human person, and this fact undoubtedly complicates the relationship between church and culture. Witness the rapacious language-world and pseudo-liturgical aesthetics of the Third Reich or, closer to home, the new universe envisioned by so many Hollywood films, where robots and computers vie to dominate (and liberate) the world and the boundary between persons and machinery dissolves. What kind of corporate imagination—and dashed hopes in the (merely) human species—would give rise to the enormous popularity of such films? Both for better and for worse, we become creatures of our own image, ritual, and language-worlds. “The machines are

³⁶ Cited in John Coulson, “Belief and Imagination,” *The Downside Review* (1972): 1–14, at 13.

³⁷ Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, as cited in Merrigan, “Newman and Theological Liberalism,” 614–5.

³⁸ Coulson, “Belief and Imagination,” 14.

³⁹ Witness the enormous commercial success of quasi-mystical films like *Avatar*, as well as my teenage son’s fascination with the *Transformers* films and his concomitant dread of attending Mass.

⁴⁰ As Vatican II put it, Christianity in full bloom comprises a vision and way of life in which “nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in [our] hearts” [*Gaudium et spes*, no. 1, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996), 163]. The principle is brought home beautifully in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22, which centers on the mystery of God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus and, by extension, in every person: “For, by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each individual. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin” (185).

meditating on the most arbitrary and rudimentary of essences, punched into IBM cards, and defining you and me forever without appeal.”⁴¹

As a leavening presence within a domineering technical-economic culture, the church must help people (and then trust them enough) to discern the difference between the sanctification of creation and its profanation. In the realm of sexuality, the church will be a powerful leavening and humanizing force for the good in society by distinguishing between sacred eros and its dehumanizing opposites, the narcissistic and pornographic—not with condemnations and self-inflated rhetoric but with humility of love, trust in the transcendence of human freedom, and respect for the dignity of conscience.

At issue here is not foremost the individual rights of peoples of color, women, or gays in the church as an extension or microcosm of liberal democratic society. Rather it is the vocation to theological wholeness and integrity in the church that ought to be out ahead of the game, leavening a secular society by its visible embodiment of love, justice, and unity-in-difference. Is it possible that the fullness of Christ’s dwelling place inside us is being halved and quartered from the vine, withering the humane vitality of the whole? What so many racist, patriarchal, and homophobic cultures have yet failed to do, the church can and must do to preserve and live fully into its own inherent but tenuous (and free) theological dignity. In the words of Etty Hillesum, executed by the Nazis on November 30, 1943, “We must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.”⁴² How we imagine, speak of, and perform the presence of God is where that defending and leavening of God’s dwelling place within us begins. It is where hope bursts forth or despair sets in in the heart of the pilgrim community.

This is not to say that engaging difficult questions in church and society, such as the empowerment of peoples and cultures of color, the role of women, or the sacramental potentiality of homosexual love, will be painless or free of convulsive birth pangs. Far from it! Nor can we predict what the results of such discernment will be or if our pilgrimage in Christ will be free and uncoerced in the Spirit. It is to insist, again, in the words of Etty Hillesum, and with all the saints who have suffered much greater trials before us, that so much that is hard to bear, if we are ready to bear it together with trust and grace, can be “directly transformed into the beautiful.” Indeed, Hillesum, a Jew who died far too young and horrifically, seems to grasp the paschal lure of God’s beautiful but demanding love better.

And the beautiful was sometimes much harder to bear, so overpowering did it seem. To think that one small human heart can experience so much, oh God, so much suffering and so much love, I am so grateful to You, God, for having chosen my heart, in these times, to experience all the things it has experienced.⁴³

In Christ, God has gifted us with hearts large enough to bear all things in faith, hope, and love. May we show ourselves, one and many in the Spirit, to be worthy of the gift.

* This essay is adapted from a chapter of the author’s book, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

⁴¹ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 201. Or, as Metz has it: “So-called modern man stands in danger of becoming increasingly faceless and (to speak biblically) nameless ... he is being bred back more and more into a cleverly adaptable animal, into a smoothly functioning machine.” Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. and ed. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 80.

⁴² Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 178.

⁴³ Etty Hillesum, 198.