Human imagination and the God it reveals

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THE HUMAN IMAGINATION IS A WONDERFUL CAPACITY that allows us to receive what is presented to us and discover within it much more meaning than the mere phenomena should allow. The classic distinction is between sign and symbol. A sign gives meaning to the phenomenon itself; the symbol expands the meaning to make the event a token of friendship, for example, or a mark of national heritage or even a struggle with the mystery of God. I have seen something as obscure as the *mho* (the opposite of electrical resistance in physics) become a symbol of friendship between two people who would then welcome others into what they came to call *The Order of the Mho.*

The same can be said of myths. These complex symbols say much more than a simple story should allow. Such tales of wondrous deeds have a power well beyond their own telling. They may be a force to hold a people together, or they may offer wisdom or consolation or any other virtue that life may require. The imagination is magical to those who allow it to guide them well.

Unfortunately, the imagination has a dark side. By itself, it simply looks for meaning, and those who employ it give free rein to the good and the evil that is within them. Stories of war can induce patriotism. They can also send children with guns into parking lots to attack their fellow students. Stories which speak of care for little children may feed love for the child who is blind or deaf or battered. They may also bring bombs to abortion clinics. The human imagination is part of the whole person. In a medical paradigm, imagination will serve well if the person is healthy; it could be destructive if the person is not. In a religious paradigm, it will serve well if the person is holy; it could be destructive if the person is not.

Setting the stage

How the human imagination is capable of this is part of the history of human thought. There are many interpretations, but the

options seem to fall into just two categories. The one sees the human imagination itself as the source that reaches out from itself to the possibilities it may discover. It serves as what the Scholastics would call the *efficient* cause. The other sees a principle outside the imagination that summons the imagination towards it. It could be the other reality itself. It could be the person or persons presented through the reality taken as symbol. It could be the mystery of God as God may be known. The Scholastics called it the *final* cause. Every interpretation struggles with these two, allowing one or the other to be dominant.

Paul Ricoeur traces this history in four stages.[1] In the first stage, the imagination set *God or the gods* in the centre, with all reality, human and non-human, placed together on the rim. Questions were asked about the world, about life, even about natural phenomena, and the answer always made reference to the gods. The gods were angry or the gods were pleased, the gods wanted worship from all that is. Ricoeur called this a *first naïveté*, where the myths about the gods determined meaning.

The second stage looked more immediately to the phenomenon itself. Here the imagination placed *nature* in the centre, with everything else, including human beings and God, on the rim. It was the world of objective truth where the phenomenon itself gave its own specific meaning. Lightning, for example, was no longer seen as a concern of the gods. Its reality became, more mundanely, a matter of electrons and a potential difference in voltage. This was the first stage in what Ricoeur calls a *loss of innocence*.

The third stage shifted from *nature* to the *self*, where the imagination set the *ego* in the centre and made the self determinative of all reality. What exists in the world of meaning is little more than a projection of the self. This was the age of Descartes: 'I think, therefore I am'. It was the age of Luther: 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. For Ricoeur it is the second stage of a loss of innocence.

Ricoeur's final stage is now upon us, the age of hermeneutics. It requires not a return to the *first naïveté*, which we can no longer achieve, but an advance to a *second naïveté*. which learns from the double loss of innocence humanity has endured. Educated by the first three stages, this stage requires three things: first, it must allow the human subject to be a uniquely human subject, and not reduced to the category *human nature itself*; second, it must allow created reality to speak, however ambiguously, of meaning beyond itself, and not reduce everything to what the bare phenomenon might suggest; and, finally, it

must allow the possibility that myth is more than fantasy, but rather speaks a particular kind of truth that cannot otherwise be spoken. Symbol and myth allow God to speak as God wishes to speak.

In this final hermeneutical stage, God is once again at the centre. But it is not a God of our own creation or projection. God speaks through creation, but is never identified with it. The natural world is once again on the rim, but this natural world is more *instrumental* than *final* as it addresses the imagination. Nature once again is capable of speaking more than itself. Human beings are also on the rim, but *as human beings*, with all the risk and ambiguity of their own imagination. The *human* is never simply *human nature*. Humans will speak as they must uniquely. But they also speak in the context of others, and in the context of a God who is always beyond everything that is.

This essay speaks of the sacramental. It wants to name all that is created as capable of manifesting the mystery of God. God who is beyond us is nonetheless able to meet us, and in that meeting to continue to bring about something within us. Nature is sacramental in that sense. Other people are sacramental in that sense. Even the symbols and myths which humans create are sacramental in that sense. God is not nature. God is not other people. God is not a symbol or a myth. But God is capable of using any one of these to reach and engage the human heart.

This article also speaks of the human imagination, which is the human way of perceiving within nature, within other people, within symbol and myth, a reality that is beyond them all. If the imagination were not cluttered with a mixture of good and evil, it would unambiguously present the mystery of God to the human heart and allow the heart to surrender to God's gracious approach. Alas, this is not true. Good and evil are the source of ambiguity in the human imagination, and it is only through this ambiguity that God will be revealed. The human imagination has its own work to do to ensure it is operating correctly.

Which means that this essay is about spirituality, the way in which the human spirit grows. It is about the meeting of God and the human person and the way in which one is invited through any part of creation to *engage* the God who is totally Other. God uses everything that is to reach out and draw us to God's own self. God uses the workings of the human imagination as God's own vehicle to bring that engagement about. But the journey is about more than insight. It is about growth. The summons of God is *toward* God in

such a way that all that is opposed to God needs to be overcome. In the medical paradigm, the summons of God is toward health and away from disease. In the religious paradigm, the summons of God is toward holiness and away from evil. In either case the point of the meeting is to bring about something in the human person, that *in the end* what God desired *from the beginning* may happen, and we may find in God what Scripture calls 'life in abundance'.

The making of myths

A first step in exploring the sacramental, imagination and spirituality is to examine one aspect of how symbol and myth come to be. Usually we are presented with already formed symbols and myths and asked how we might decipher them. These may be religious myths, or may not be. In either case, the task we are given is to engage the truth that is contained within the symbols and learn how to engage them. What I am thinking of here, however, is something more existential and more primitive. I am asking how the human imagination takes the ordinary phenomena of life and begins to think of them as something more.

A most vivid example of this happened when I was on sabbatical in Hawai'i. Though everyone thinks of Hawai'i as a sunny paradise, most of the time there are clouds over the mountains just off shore. I always took careful notice of the clouds, to determine if it would be a good beach day and where it might be possible to go. As the days went on, however, I began to notice something else. I saw the clouds and mountains as involved in a complex dance. At times they liked each other, and at other times one or the other was hesitant and filled with fear. Now the clouds embraced the mountains intimately. Now the mountains were angry and threatened the clouds instead. Once the mountains pushed back when 'they did not like the clouds'. Or they were playful, when the clouds were being too serious. In other words, what started as 'mere fact', soon began to take on terms of human feeling in order for me to describe it.

It is a simple thing, really, to see the world through the lens of human feelings, but that is essential to how symbols and myths tell their tale. Nature becomes like us, and can speak our truth as well as its own.

When myths begin speaking of God

I ask the same question when we say casually that symbols and myths are the language of God. Why is that so? This too is a state-

ment that begins with symbols and myths already formed. From them we can hear of God and our relationship to God. But that is not the question I am asking. I am asking about a human capacity that allows us to reach beyond our own yearnings and desires into a world that we know is so thoroughly beyond us, and dare to name it as a world that wants to communicate to us about itself.

This is harder to get at, because it is only through symbols and myths that the idea of God is known. The double loss of innocence spoken of earlier suggests there are many who find liberation either in seeing the world as nothing more than itself or in thinking of God as a projection of human need. The only mythic structure they recognize is Ricoeur's *first naïveté*. But for those who wish to examine the possibility of a *second naïveté*, a different path is required. Loss of innocence refuses to acknowledge God. A path forward requires listening beyond one's doubts.

A while back, a TV show explored the Pacific rim. One segment focused on tidal waves, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. How did the various peoples understand them? There were some of course who lived in the world of Ricoeur's *first naïveté*: they established rituals to the gods to appease their anger. Others addressed them scientifically: give the measurements of the event and mark its toll. The sceptic would see human needs projecting their own resolution by creating the gods and their anger. But there were some who understood the demands of nature, who knew the threats of projection, who were convinced that a *first naïveté* was not possible, and yet who wondered if these human realities signalled an epiphany, a time when the hidden Other approached us and chose to work with us. The realities of the earth were one factor. They would be measured and at times predicted. The human needs were a second factor. People are filled with various feelings about the life that is around them. But could it be that the realities of nature became more than they were because of the human needs that sought some kind of resolution? Could it be that the truth of those human needs is that they were a summons from beyond?

At the very least, it is necessary to live in that kind of ambiguity to proceed to the *second naïveté*. Answers are discovered by listening, and listening is a lifelong task. If the hope of human feelings come from projection, we will resolve our needs accordingly. But if those feelings are a summons, we do not know what response they will bring.

Though it is more difficult when symbols and myths speak of God, human feelings remain key to the workings of the imagination. Nature is raised to the level of human feelings, and the mystery of God is likewise endowed with human feelings, for it is on the level of feelings that the meeting between here and the world beyond is negotiated.

Image–affection–behaviour

Every image created by the human imagination has its own set of feelings and its own proper behaviour. To image someone as a kind person will usually make one comfortable with the person, and cause one to act kindly in return. To image one as a nasty person will have a different effect on one's feelings and one's behaviour. I will be careful with them, if indeed I even choose to spend time with them. If, as was said before, the imagination were uncomplicated by the good and the evil in us, the journey ahead would be quite simple. The human world and the world of God would have easy access to each other. But the imagination usually presents several different images for different realities, each with their own set of feelings and behaviour.

In the Christian paradigm, some images are rooted in the language of grace, what we call God's view of things. Others are rooted in the language of sin, which is the counterpoint of God. Whenever the imagination embraces the sacramental, these two worlds must interact. The hope is that the imagery of sin, with its feelings and behaviour, will be overcome by the imagery of grace, with its own feelings and behaviour.

Images of life with God counter images of life without God. Images of communion counter images of isolation. Images of healing counter images of disease. Images of forgiveness counter images of regret and guilt. Paul speaks of grieving with hope as opposed to grieving without hope. All of these are the stuff of a sacramental spirituality, the movement of growth toward God's design. This is a lifetime venture, and in the end it spells out redemption.

Is there a sacramental mysticism?

So the question arises, is there a way to penetrate symbols and allow them to speak this challenge? This is a question of faith. Paul Ricoeur has helped me most in dealing with sacramental symbols, because in seeking to understand the language of symbol, he guides us through the dynamics of faith. Let us explore this a bit.

As Ricoeur explores the nature of symbols, he insists there are two layers of meaning to them, which distinguishes them from signs. In all symbols there is a literal meaning intended, and this primary, literal meaning becomes a vehicle for meaning on a deeper level. This, in religious symbolism, expresses the human relationship to the sacred. These two levels of meaning are related. The path to the second level of meaning is always and only through the first. Ricoeur puts it this way: 'It is by living in the first meaning that I am led by it beyond itself'.[2] The first-level meaning leads beyond itself to reveal the symbol's inexhaustible depth.

The enigma of symbols is expressed this way: symbols both reveal and conceal. The revealing power of symbols is precisely the inexhaustible depth to which immersion in the first intentionality can lead. But symbols also conceal. Since their deeper level of meaning cannot be objectified, symbols can never be completely comprehended. Symbols always leave something unsaid. Because of this revealing power of symbols, Ricoeur insists that the stance one must take before symbols is that of listener.

The dual texture of symbols invites two different styles of interpretation. If the bias of the interpreter is toward the revealing dimension of symbols, interpretation is in the direction of fullness and depth. One listens to the symbol. If, however, the bias is toward the concealing dimension of symbols, one seeks a clear and distinct meaning 'behind' the symbol. For Ricoeur, both styles of interpretation need to have their say.

Ricoeur says that symbols give rise to thought. A simple statement, but a complex process. The first stage involves a symbol association, i.e., understanding symbols in terms of other symbols. This symbolic world provides the richness of symbols. On this first level of intelligence, the interpreter is not yet personally invested in the task.

Personal investment constitutes the second stage. Here the question of meaning and truth *for the interpreter* is asked. Interpretation now seeks the meaning of symbols, not in relation to other symbols, but in relation to the one who interprets. For this the interpreter must surrender the position of objective observer and enter the circle: to believe, you must understand; to understand, you must believe.[3] Meaning for the interpreter is the interpreter's entrance into the circle. It is the point of intersection between meaning given and meaning sought after.

The third stage takes one closer to the *second naïveté*. It lies beyond symbol association, and beyond existential appropriation. One must move from symbol to thought.

Thought, however, is itself a two-sided reality. Thought moves alternately between reflection, what the symbol means, and speculation, what the symbol might mean. These are complementary, though mutually opposed, movements. Reflection tends toward demythologizing and aims at clarity. The price of clarity, however, is loss of depth. Speculation aims at possibility and appeals to the imagination. It aims to preserve the very thing that reflection loses. Speculation explores depth at the price of ambiguity.

If thought rested at reflection, symbols would be reduced to allegory, and meaning would be sought, not within the symbol, but behind, beyond or apart from it. Reflection alone threatens to destroy symbols. On the other hand, speculation alone will also destroy the symbol. It risks becoming mere projection, where the symbol is allowed to mean anything I choose it to mean. Meaning given and meaning pursued need to be held together. Reflection and speculation are two necessary and complementary faces of the thought to which symbols give rise.

These three stages do not yet constitute the full appropriation of a symbol. Together they present an imaginative appeal to human freedom. Freedom itself, however, must act for the engagement with symbols to be complete. At the intersection of meaning given and meaning pursued a claim is made on freedom. Freedom's act is *consent* to that claim.

Symbols do not and cannot coerce human freedom. They can only make an appeal, which freedom can embrace or reject. If consent is to be given, it must be freedom's free act. Yet freedom itself is not disposed to consent. Freedom is egocentric, self-protective. Consent, on the other hand, requires that the self be dislodged from the centre in favour of that which does not arise from one's self. Consent involves giving one's self over to an Other, and that Other must have the power to convince freedom that surrender of the egocentre is not only warranted but desirable.

Consent is aided by the 'incantation' of poetry (read also, *symbol* and *myth*) because it delivers the self from its egocentric stance. The first task of poetry, according to Ricoeur, is to humble the self, for only in such humbling is deliverance from refusal possible.[4] But poetry humbles in order to heal. Healing is possible when the poe-

tics of symbols offers to freedom what freedom can claim as its own.

On finding God in all things

Saying 'yes' to God names God's presence in all things. This trademark statement, 'finding God in all things', belongs to Ignatian spirituality. The horizon and goal of Ignatian prayer is to become *contemplative in action* and to seek and find the presence of God *in all things*. This has much to do with the sacramental instinct, and of growth in the sacramental life. Let me offer first two instances of the outcome.

Teilhard de Chardin proclaimed this at the close of his *Divine milieu*.[5] He insists that 'the progress of the universe, and in particular of the human universe, does not take place in competition with God'.[6] He concludes with a statement of wonder:

> The temptations of too large a world, the seductions of too beautiful a world – where are these now? They do not exist. Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into her dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, every horror, every mystery . . . But her enchantments can no longer do me harm, since she has become for me, over and above herself, the body of him who is and of him who is coming.[7]

My second witness is a Jesuit priest whose life could aptly be described as 'constant expectation'. Whenever anything happened to him, whether it was a sudden assignment, a chance meeting on a train, or just the ordinary rounds of life, he was always alive with wonder at what God might have in store for him. Everything held out the promise of a great adventure with God.

These are two different witnesses, but they capture what the pursuit of God in all things means, and what it is to be *contemplative in action*. The contemplative in action is a person of vision, of expectation and profound wonder. The contemplative in action consciously lives in the abiding presence of God.

The term contemplation in action arises within the Fourth Week of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. At this part of the journey, we discover that God can be loved in all things because everything that exists is the act of God loving us. The prayer of the Fourth Week sets us firmly in an ongoing journey of mutual love.

Its first principle is that love ought to be manifested in deeds rather than words. Its second is that love is a mutual interchange between two parties, lover and beloved sharing all they have and are. Ignatius considers these to be not simply principles for love among humans. He offers them to name the love God has for us and which God invites from us. The 'Contemplation for Obtaining Divine Love' is exactly that: a focus of the imagination and affections on God's self-sharing with us in the hope of evoking from the human heart a similar sharing in return.

The contemplation begins with God's presence in creation and considers how all of creation is a gift from God. It reflects how God gives God's own self in and through all that is. God is present as lover and the gift of creation carries within itself not only the love that God *offers* but the love that God *is*. The aim of this contemplation is to train the imagination and school the affections to recognize and respond to the omnipresence of God.

In this contemplation one is invited to move from gratitude for the gifts that have been given, through a gradual embrace of everything that happens in life as gift, towards a deep and abiding love of God who is himself the gift. This contemplation teaches the secret of contemplation in action. What is contemplated and engaged in action is the manifest, all-pervading love of God.

The many faces of love

To see the journey into God as a *journey of love* is to understand contemplation in action. Love has many faces. It involves humans with each other in a mixture of give and take, of desire from and desire for, of intimacy with and distancing from, where the primary rules to be observed are mutual respect, reverence for each other's freedom and delight in each other for the mystery that each one is. For Christians who proclaim that 'God is love', the many faces of love are likewise the many faces of God.

In Christian life, love is a religious as well as a human journey. Christians are admonished by Jesus to 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12). They are also invited to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' (Mt 22:37). Indeed a link is drawn between the two: 'those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also' (1 John 4:21). God is named *Love*. And Jesus, the incarnation of God, is proclaimed both as humanity's love for God *and* as God's

love for all men and women. The ways of love among humans are the only guide to their relationship with God.

Of course, love among humans is not identical with love between humans and God. As Karl Rahner would insist, God is not an object of love alongside other objects of love. God is the condition for the possibility of love, its ground, its horizon and its own true substance. Catholic theology insists that love is a theological virtue, God's own love working within our human love. God sustains human love along its complex journey and guides it to its proper shape and form. Love is the work of God within the human heart. At a point of advanced theological and spiritual insight, God neither loves nor is loved. Rather, 'God IS love' (1 John 4:8).

At the beginning, however, and throughout the human journey into God, it is humanly necessary to engage God as both lover and beloved, to discover and express the human affections that are proper to loving God and being loved by God. It is perfectly proper to address God as personal Other, to hear oneself addressed by God as by One who loves, and to understand our relationship with God through the language and experience of human love. The language must be used analogously to be sure, but it must be used. The reality of God's love cannot be given *sui generis* content such that it bears no relationship to the dynamics of love among humans. Nor can it be reduced to those dynamics alone. It is once again the theological paradox. The ways of human love are the privileged human ways we have to explore and understand the mystery of God's love. Yet in the end these human ways can only point us towards, and open us to, God's love. God must reach out to us and draw us the rest of the way. In the analogous relation between human love and divine love there is one important point that I would like to highlight in this essay. Human love is not negated nor suspended when divine love is set in motion. When God reaches out, it is into human love that the reach is made. Human love is brought to completion in the love of God.

This essay has reflected on imagination, sacrament and spirituality. All three, however, are about the presence of God in all things. God's presence is always a presence-in-action. And God's action is nothing less than God's own love working within the ways of human love, bringing human love to its proper completion in the Love that is God.

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NOTES

1 See especially *Symbolism of evil*, E. Buchanan (trans) (Boston: Beacon, 1967); *Freud and philosophy: an essay on interpretation*, D. Savage (trans) (New Haven: Yale, 1970), both by Ricoeur.
2 *Symbolism of evil*, p 15.
3 *Ibid.*, p 202.
4 *Ibid.*, p 477.
5 Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine milieu* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).
6 *Ibid.*, p 153.
7 *Ibid.*, pp 154–155.