

Preparatory Materials for COMW Retreat, Saturday, March 18, 2023

Engaging the holy mysteries through poetry

from Bishop Porter Taylor

The scholar, Lynn Ross Bryant, writes this:

“The work of art may then open for us a new way of understanding the religious symbol as it presents it in a way that is available within the context of contemporary culture.”

She adds’ “We discover not only something about another culture through the study of literature but also something about ourselves.” (Imagination and the Life of the Spirit)

Therefore, when we read a poem and ruminates on it (which means to chew on it), it becomes both a mirror and a telescope. We learn about ourselves as we translate the poem into our own circumstances, but in the process our sense of the human condition as well as our theology are expanded.

It’s why Emily Dickinson wrote, “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” Jesus taught in parables because story or image is the primary way to invite someone into the deep mysteries of the faith. How do you describe God’s love except through image or story? It’s why Jesus said, “The reign of God is like....”

This day will be an opportunity to go deep into God’s mysteries through poems. Let me add that it is not an opportunity to prove our intellectual prowess by analyzing much less dissecting poems. This is not a literary exercise. It’s an invitation to use a different road to go deeper into your soul and the mystery of God’s love and grace. As T. S. Eliot reminds us, we need an “objective correlative” to rediscover our own true self.

The poems we will use are from mystics of different eras.

St. Teresa of Avila, “On Those Words” and “Loving Colloquy”

St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night” and “O Living Flame of Love”

Christina Rossetti, “A Better Resurrection”

Thomas Merton, “Wind and a Bobwhite”

Catherine of Siena, “Consumed in Grace”

Meister Eckhart, “The Wind will Show Its Kindness”

The point is less about analyzing the poems and more about letting the verse sink into our hearts so that these words might be a catalyst for us to see the world as if for the first time.

St. Teresa of Avila

On Those Words “Dilectus Meus Mihi”

Myself surrendered and given,
The exchange is this:
My Beloved is for me,
And I am for my Beloved.

When the Gentle hunter
Wounded and subdued me,
In love's arms, my soul fallen;
New life receiving,
Thus did I exchange
My Beloved is for me,
And I am for my Beloved.

The arrow he drew
Full of love,
My soul was ones
With her Creator.
Other love I want not,
Surrendered now to my God,
That my Beloved is for me,
And I am for my Beloved.

Loving Colloquy

If the love You have for me,
My God, is like the love I have for You,
Say, what detains me, that I do?
Oh, what is delaying You?

— Soul, what is it you desire of me?
— My God, no more than to see You?
— And what is it that you fear more than self?
— What I fear most is losing You,

A soul hidden in God,
What else should it desire,
But to love more and more,
And in that love all hidden,
Return anew into love's fire?

One all-possessing love I ask,
My God, my soul centered in You,
Making the sweetest nest,
A resting place most pleasing.

Translated by Kiernan Kavanaugh & Otio Rodriguez

St. John of the Cross

The Dark Night

1. One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
— Ah, the sheer grace! —
I went out unseen,
My house being now all stilled.

2. In darkness, and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised,
— Ah, the sheer grace! —
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now all stilled.

3. On that glad night,
In secret, for no one saw me,
Nor did I look at anything,
With no other light or guide
Than the one that burned in my heart.

4. This guided me
More surely than the light of noon
To where he was awaiting me
— Him I knew so well —
There in a place where no one appeared.

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
The Lover with His beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

6. Upon my flowering breast
Which I kept wholly for Him alone,
There He lay sleeping,
And I caressing Him
There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. The breeze blew from the turret,
As I parted His locks;
With His gentle hand,
He wounded my neck
Suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,
Laying my face on my Beloved;
All things ceased; I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lilies.

St. John of the Cross

Oh, Living Flame of Love

Oh, living flame of love
that so tenderly wounds
my soul at its deepest center:
you are no longer fickle,
so finish, if you will,
end this sweet encounter.

Oh, gentle searing brand!
Oh, caressing wound!
Oh, soothing touch from His soft hand
that feels like life eternal
and pays every debt:
you killed me, making life from death.

O you lanterns of fire,
your brilliance inflames
the deep caverns of my senses,
that were blackened and blind.
You give forth, with rare elegance,
both warmth and light to your beloved.

How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell
and with your sweet breathing,
filled with glory and good will,
how tenderly You swell my heart with love!

A Better Resurrection

Christina Rossetti

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk:
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see:
Yet rise it shall—the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the searching cold;
Cast in the fire the perish'd thing;
Melt and remold it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.

Wind and a Bobwhite

Thomas Merton

Wind and a bobwhite
And the afternoon sun.

By ceasing to question the sun
I have become light,

Bird and wind.

My leaves sing.

I am earth, earth

All these lighted things
Grow from my heart.

A tall, spare pine
Stands like the initial of my first
Name when I had one.

When I had a spirit,
When I was on fire
When this valley was
Made out of fresh air
You spoke my name
In naming Your silence:
O sweet, irrational worship!

I am earth, earth

My heart's love
Bursts with hay and flowers.
I am a lake of blue air
In which my own appointed place
Field and valley
Stand reflected.

I am earth, earth

Out of my grass heart
Rises the bobwhite.

Out of my nameless weeds
His foolish worship.

Consumed in Grace

Catherine of Siena

I first saw God when I was a child, six years of age.
The cheeks of the sun were pale before Him,
and the earth acted as a shy
girl, like me.

Divine light entered my heart from His love
that did never fully wane,

though indeed, dear, I can understand how a person's
faith can at times flicker,

for what is the mind to do
with something that becomes the mind's ruin:
a God that consumes us
in His grace.

I have seen what you want;
it is there,

a Beloved of infinite
tenderness.

The Wind Will Show Its Kindness

Meister Eckhart

A man born blind can easily deny
the significance of a vast landscape.

He can easily deny
all the wonders that he cannot touch,
smell, taste, or hear.

But one day the wind will show its kindness
and remove the tiny patches that cover your eyes,

And you will see God more clearly.
than you have ever seen yourself.

Both poems translated by Daniel Ladinsky