

ART & THEOLOGY: My Ruminations on the Good, the True, and the Beautiful

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Something is "beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating." (Hans Urs von Balthasar)

True beauty draws us out of ourselves toward the transcendent. The more beautiful an encounter is, the more the divine presence is made manifest to us. Thus, there is none more beautiful than that of the Incarnation of Christ. My hope with my drawings is to point to that fundamental importance of beauty as a vehicle to journey into the mind of God.

Every month I will share an art piece of mine along with a description of the theological reflection that went into it so as to hopefully provoke theological reflection of our own.

St. Teresa's Loving Exchange

This drawing is based on St. Teresa of Avila's mystical encounter from The Book of Her Life, Chapter 29: "I saw an angel near me, on the left side, in bodily form.... He was not tall, but short, marvelously beautiful, with a face which shone as though he were one of the highest of the angels, who seem to be all of fire: they must be those whom we call Seraphim.... I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God. The pain was so great.... and yet so exceeding sweet is this greatest of pains that it is impossible to desire to be rid of it, or for the soul to be content with less than God."



I also wanted to use as a reference the sculptor, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's masterpiece, The Ecstasy of Teresa, which was based also on the same excerpt from Teresa's life. Using his statue I drew her in ink to show the outer physical reality of her experience. On the other side in colored pencil, I wanted to draw the inner spiritual reality of that same experience of the angel with its face aflame piercing her heart with a golden dart. In drawing the anatomical heart I wanted to portray the visceral nature but also to show how the spiritual reality was so intense that it penetrated into her physical reality. This is actually what happened. What sparked Bernini's interest in the first place was the fact that after Teresa's death her heart remained incorrupt with a wound in it reflecting the mystical encounter with the dart piercing her heart. This encounter is called the "transverberation of the heart".

What drew me to Teresa's encounter was how this mystical exchange describes a genuine experience of love. What I mean is that it dismisses the idea that love is simply a lovely feeling we have toward another person but it is a self-sacrificial love that draws us through suffering for the sake of the other. It is not that she is taking pleasure in the painful experience itself but rather that she is overjoyed by Christ allowing her to participate in his suffering act of salvation on the cross. The joy of her experience is God Himself as indicated by the last line described in her experience. To love is to allow the divine life to enter into you and flow through you. That was precisely what happened when that angel pierced her heart over and over again.

St. Teresa has also been acknowledged as a Doctor of the Church because of her important contributions to prayer and mysticism. This does not mean she spent her whole life locked up in a room seeking mystical encounters. Encounters such as this were gifts given to her by God. She herself said, "it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings the soul benefit: when we spend our time in good works, it is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation." We can see the mark of her enkindled love and pierced heart not only through her important and insightful contribution to mystical theology but also through the great reform she had established in the Carmelite order, the Discalced Carmelites she had co-founded, and the many convents she worked to erect as well.