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Faith’s Reasons

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition at the University of Dayton

“St. Peter said that we must give a reason for the faith that is in us, and I am trying to give you those reasons...” —Dorothy Day

Ethics and the Professions

As a part of the University’s Sesquicentennial celebration, Dr. Patricia Johnson and Fr. Jim Heft, with the assistance of Kevin Hallinan (Engineering), Richard Saphire (Law), Elizabeth Gustafson (Business), and William Losito (Education), organized a year-long series of lectures, readings and seminars for nearly 80 faculty. Four national speakers, one from each of the professional areas, came to campus, interacted with students and faculty, and gave a lecture open to the public. The series concluded with the annual Richard R. Baker Colloquium, which featured sixteen sessions and guest speakers Jean Bethke Elshtain from the University of Chicago and Larry May from Washington University in St. Louis. The entire effort helped those involved realize more clearly the University’s commitment to connected learning.

Teresa Thompson, Professor of Communication, wrote of her participation in the ethics and education group, “On a day-to-day basis we get so wrapped up in the activities of pedagogy, research and service that it is difficult to allow time to focus on the broader ethical issues which confront us as educators. One of the many strengths of the Ethics in the Professions series was that it allowed us to get a step back and examine these issues as we experience them in our daily lives. It allowed critical examination of what our activities communicate to students and colleagues about our ethical priorities. The series also provided an opportunity for re-examination and reassessment of those ethical priorities themselves. This opportunity was provided within the context of collegial discussion which encouraged us to share with other members of the academic community the experiences that give voice to our ethical priorities and allowed us to seek feedback from others about our evaluation of those experiences. The new relationships that were forged within this context were perhaps the most positive outcome of the series for me.”

Some Memories of Rome

by Brian Conniff

My most vivid memory of Rome, and the events surrounding the beatification of Father Chaminade, is of a Korean nun doing the Chicken Dance (Il ballad quoc quoc). It was the evening before the beatification, at a festival for Marianist students held at the Centro Universitario Marianum. She was wearing an off-white habit, topped by one of those hats with the large “wings” that flare out parallel to the ground and then turn down at right angles near the end. She was flapping her elbows wildly and wiggling her knees in a rapid motion that sent a constant stream of waves through her skirt. Anticipating the larger event of the next day, I suppose, she had a beatific look on her face. If chickens could fly, she would have flown.

At that festival, I also found a group of Italian students selling a commemorative poster that referred to Father Chaminade as “Profeta del Laicato.” I brought one back with me to keep on the wall of my office. As one of the “Laicato” and English professor, I thought I could use a good prophet, to say nothing of a future patron Saint.

Yet given all the pomp and tradition of an event like a beatification, “prophecy” and laity were about the last things I was prepared to think about. Like most American Catholics, I had thought of the Vatican—when I thought of such things at all—only as the center of church authority, the top of the hierarchy. Prophets always seemed to me peripheral, eccentric, quirky, edgy. They seemed to belong in unexpected places, in undesirable company. For some reason, since my trip to Rome, I have often thought about the “good thief” in the Gospel of Luke, and Flannery O’Connor’s Misfit. Prophets have a way of understanding such people—or, if necessary, inventing them.

But as I stood the next day in a crowd of 100,000, more or less, I immediately knew I was in for a view of the Church unlike any I had ever seen before. I soon came to realize that Saint Peter’s Square is in itself a remarkable invention: a meeting ground of the Pope and the people, a sort of
football field of Catholic ritual. Long before the ceremony began, an especially large-breasted old Italian woman spent most of an hour hanging into me as she tried to advance to a better position. If not for group of sturdy Dayton pilgrims locking arms in front of me, I surely would have been lost. (Later, when she feigned dizziness to acquire a chair, my righteous indignation gave way to gratitude. I told myself I had won. She rested comfortably.) Vast segments of the crowd burst into cheers each time their particular Saint-to-be was mentioned.

The screens showed a group of young Japanese Marianists, wearing their “Chaminade scarves” tied around their foreheads.

In the course of the week, we became accustomed to hearing prayers, introductions, and even sermons repeated in four or five languages at a shot. I have tried to keep track of the languages included in the “text” of the beatification (to say nothing of those spoken in the Square: Italian, Latin, French, German, Japanese, Irish, English, Polish, Malaysian, Spanish, and probably a few I have not yet deciphered. Attending a mass spoken in so many languages can be both comforting and disorienting. I cannot imagine that such a Mass aspires to universality by using translation as a means of access to a single “canonical” language; rather, it provides a sense of commonality in the sheer proliferation and exuberance of language. Though I am a poor linguist—or perhaps because I am—the beatification seemed to me a progressive, even prophetic, artistic form.

A couple of decades ago, I wrote my Master’s thesis on the poet Wallace Stevens. I chose this topic because my Jesuit mentor told me I would (“student-centered” was not a term he understood, but he really did love me, I could tell.) In his peculiarly forward-looking way, he wanted me to be conversant with current developments in theory and criticism, and Stevens was becoming an icon of American post-modernism. At the time I did not know, and I’m pretty sure my teacher did not know, that Stevens converted to Catholicism on his death-bed.

Of all the canonical twentieth century poets, Stevens had perhaps the most highly developed sense of improvisation (“One’s grand flights, one’s Sunday baths, / One’s tootings at the weddings of the soul / Occur as they occur.”). Late in his life, Stevens wrote a poem about his former teacher, George Santayana, who was dying in a hospital in Rome. Stevens had never been to Rome. In fact, when he died a couple of years later, he had never left the United States. “On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street / Become the figures of heaven,” he wrote, as he imagined Santayana in his hospital bed, surrounded by books and “moving nuns.”

I am sure that Stevens would have liked my nun. He would have seen her, like the nuns he imagined caring for Santayana, as one of the sources of happiness in the shape of Rome.”

From Barlach to Baselitz Art Exhibit

Excerpts from remarks made by Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., director of the International Marian Research Institute, at the opening of the exhibit From Barlach to Baselitz, featuring 75 artworks from the Schuefelen Collection, on exhibit through the end of the semester in Roesch Library, the Marian Library, and Keller Hall:

Religious print art has a similar function. It gives to the any what is too precious to be hoarded up by few people only. Print art has the ability to multiply and disseminate the genius of the artist. It popularizes art but it does not cheapen it. It is one of the most effective tools we have to promote art and art appreciation. Print art allows each one of us to have his or her little museum. It has also the wonderful ability to reconcile two of our most human tendencies: the tendency to have and appropriate, and the tendency to give and share. Don’t we all like to appropriate things, to have them, and call them our own? However, a print by Barlach, even if I have it, will never be only mine.
There are at least 49, 99, sometimes 199 other people who share in the same moving and challenging beauty as I do. Acquiring and sharing are pillars of a rightly understood and lived Christian humanism. Print art is like the great school for the apprenticeship of such humanism.

We find in Chagall’s art some of the moving Hasidic religious tradition and its wonderfull ability to see everything as one. All things visible are messengers of the invisible. What is below resembles what is above. Reality is permeated in various degrees with the light and warmth of divine presence. A redeeming quality lies buried in every thing and every person, and begs to be liberated. Painting for Chagall is a labor of love: “In art as well as in life, anything is possible provided there is love.” For him, painting and color is not technique, but love. Love is what brings heaven and earth together, and binds them to each other. The artist sees himself as born “somewhere between heaven and earth,” a “lighted torch” wandering in a vast desert. The secret of his life is this flame of love, and thus his art reflects lightness of being.

Rouault was always motivated by a deep religious sense, and his commitment to the Christian faith is indisputable. His art is the constant and stubborn attempt at tearing down the walls that separate the social and the religious, the spiritual and the material. He wanted to find a way that would show the deep affinity that exists between grace and gravity, which meant, among other things, that grace would never be more glorious and triumphant that when it permeates and transforms gravity or human condition. Herein lies the truly dramatic character of this artistic work. In the midst of suffering, it does not give in to torment and despair but assimilates and transforms them. The foot of Christ that followed Rouault is the symbol of a holy obsession; it is like grace catching up with gravity.

From a religious viewpoint, Chagall’s and Rouault’s artistic messages are different but complementary. Chagall is the painter of the Old Testament, Rouault that of the New Testament. For Chagall, “perfection in art and life has its source in the Bible, and exercises in the mechanics of the merely rational are fruitless.” Chagall is the painter of the covenant, as can be seen, for example, in the etching The Arch of the Covenant. In this print, like a wide open compass, the rainbow enfolds the whole of creation symbolizing the new and eternal covenant between God and humanity. It is a covenant of love, and thus cause for joy and lightness of being. Chagall’s message should be remembered when looking at Rouault’s Christ. A scholar of Rouault once said: “With Rouault there is no Annunciation, very little trace of Resurrection, only a grand and permanent Incarnation.” This means that Jesus assumes human condition in all its concrete realizations - good and evil. There is no opposition to suffering in Rouault’s Jesus. His face, as, for example, in Jesus before Pilate is a mirror of infinite capacity of suffering, meaning of incarnation.

Cluster Discussions

The General Education Cluster in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition sponsored an interdisciplinary discussion April 10th among cluster faculty on several topics of recent (and enduring) interest. Dr. William Trollinger from the Department of History led a discussion of a Nation article by Ellen Willis entitled “Freedom from Religion: What’s at Stake in Faith-Based Politics” (Feb. 19, 2001). Dr. Laura Leming, FMI (Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work), led a discussion of the first chapter of Michele Dillon’s Catholic Identity: Balancing Faith, Reason and Power, entitled “Pro-Change Catholics: Forging Community out of Diversity.” The session closed with a discussion of the Andre Dubus story “If They Knew Yvonne” led by Dr. Tom Wendorf, SM, of the English Department.

Recent Faculty Work in Brief

Michael Barnes (Religious Studies; Alumni Chair in Humanities) met at the University of Notre Dame as part of a panel on brain, mind and soul sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committee on ethics. Six bishops, five scientists, five theologians, and five philosophers (including Ernan McMullin, Michael Buckley, and John Haught) met to bring together scientific information from brain surgery and neurological studies, theological and philosophical reflection and analysis, and pastoral concerns on the topic.

John Inglis (Philosophy) has written On Aquinas as part of Wadsworth Publishing’s Philosophers Series; it will appear later this month. In addition, he has a contract from Wadsworth for a second book On Medieval Philosophy. He is spending his sabbatical semester in Germany.

Maureen Tilley (Religious Studies) recently published “The Collapse of a Collegial Church: North African Christianity on the Eve of Islam,” in Theological Studies (62.1 [March 2001]: 3-22). The article would be of interest especially for readers who follow issues in ecclesiology, specifically the variety of relationships between bishops’ conferences and the papacy, because it deals with the
relationship of the progenitor of bishops' conferences to the papacy. She will be visiting Algeria from March 30 to April 8 for a conference on Augustine as an African whose work is of broad interest. The conference is sponsored by the Swiss government through the University of Fribourg, the Algerian government and the Islamic High Command. The 30 invitees include two Americans.

Bro. Tom Wendorf (English) presented a paper at a conference on the work of Andre Dubus held March 30th to April 1st at Loyola College Baltimore. The paper was titled "Implications of the Incarnation: Sexual and Spiritual Love in Andre Dubus's Voices from the Moon and Adultery."


For the next issue:
The next issue of "Faith's Reasons" will appear in the fall of 2001. If you know of any other activities, events, people, or publications that should be highlighted here, please bring them to the attention of the editors. Contact Una Cadegan by e-mail (cadegan@udayton.edu) or at the Dept. of History, The University of Dayton, Dayton, OH 45469-1540.