

“Using Your Talents to Impact the Culture”
A Presentation for the Catholic Writers Guild, St. Johns Chapter
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Felix Varela Center
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Greeting

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What a distinct pleasure it is for me to join you in this special event hosted by the St. John’s Chapter of the Catholic Writers Guild.

I notice that there are new chapters of the Guild forming in many parts of our country, all of which are faithful to the Magisterium and intent on “building a vibrant Catholic literary culture”. This mission of yours is one of the most worthy endeavors that Catholic writers can engage in, and one in which the Church has shown special expertise through the centuries. I’m sure that all of you realize that we live a world awash with superficial words, erroneous words, defamatory words, and even at times blasphemous words, but in the face of this avalanche of false words, you have decided to dedicate yourself to infusing the culture with holy words, true words, beautiful words, and ultimately with “The Word” Himself. You are attempting to use your talents to impact and transform the culture into a better environment where the dignity of the human person and the good of society can flourish.

You have my greatest support for your efforts! Indeed, St. Paul said that “you must not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s Will, what is good, pleasing, and perfect” (Rom 12:2). This is essentially the work of the Catholic writer: to bring people to a greater awareness of God’s presence and His Will operative in our world.

Two True Literary Geniuses of our Times

In our efforts to use our talents to “impact” the culture, we stand on the shoulders of giants, as they say. I would like to pay tribute to two such literary geniuses of our times that have impacted me greatly: namely, Flannery O’Connor and Jessica Powers (also known as Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit). Time allows me to give only the most minimal reflections on their contributions to the literary field, but it is worthwhile to do so because these supremely gifted women express the great richness of literary talent that can be found in our own hemisphere and time.

These two literary greats lived vividly contrasting lives: one was one a cloistered Carmelite nun, and the other was a Catholic lay woman; one was born and bred in a strong Catholic enclave in the Cold North, while the other lived her entire life in the Deep South, surrounded by and immersed in Protestant culture; one died at the ripe old age of 83, and the other did not even live to the age of 40. Yet, despite the diversity of their lives and circumstances, there were remarkable similarities to them that transcended their differences. Both women knew deep suffering from an early age and met their sufferings with an even deeper reflection on the mysteries of their Faith. Both lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War and lost loved ones at an early age. In the case of Jessica Powers, she lost

both parents and a sister by the time she was twenty. Flannery O'Connor's father died of lupus when she was only 15 years old, and as we know, she would eventually succumb to the same disease in her own young adulthood.

These amazing literary figures show that there is no standard mold in which Catholic writers are formed, but there is a standard mission. Both writers engaged in a common attempt to do exactly what is at the heart of your mission: to infuse the culture with the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith, and they did that with remarkable – even at times disconcerting – creativity. For example, no major character in her novels and short stories was Catholic, yet Flannery O'Connor always claimed that her writing was consistently fed on Catholic dogma and doctrines. She often attempted to show the superficiality of Christians who worship in “The Holy Church of Christ Without Christ”, yet her essential mission was not to criticize but to evangelize. The core themes of her writing always express the pattern of the Gospel message in concrete form for her readers: that is, she wrote relentlessly about the Fall of man, the Redemption of Christ, and the Judgment that we must all meet in hope and in the rich mercy of the Eternal Father. She also proclaimed the Gospel message with the materials given to her by her time and her particular cultural milieu; something that imbued her writings with a strong sense of realism and humanity.

Jessica Powers used poetry to communicate a sacral vision of the world, a vision of the divine reality shining through the mundane. Being from a farming family, her writings contain many beautiful Nature and landscape images reminiscent of Robert Frost. Being a contemplative nun, however, her essential mission was to remind us of the Divine Indwelling of God, and her poetry reflected something of the character of her religious confreres, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. Her effectiveness in communicating the personalized experience of God's love has often earned her a comparison to Emily Dickinson as well. Sr. Miriam's life spanned virtually the whole twentieth century (1905-1988), but despite being a cloistered nun, she was well aware of the many dehumanizing forces that had entered society during her lifetime. She sought to counterbalance these forces by creating a culture more aware of and imbued with Christian mysticism through poetry.

Whenever I speak of this exceptional poet of our age, I am often surprised at how few people, even Catholic writers, are aware of her beautiful works. Allow me to read an excerpt from her poem entitled “The Garments of God”¹ to stimulate your interest in her poetry:

*God sits on a chair of darkness in my soul.
He is God alone, supreme in His majesty.
I sit at His feet, a child in the dark beside Him;
My joy is aware of His glance and my sorrow is tempted
To nest on the thought that His face is turned from me.
He is clothed in the robes of His mercy, voluminous
garments—
Not velvet or silk and affable to the touch,
But fabric strong for a frantic hand to clutch,
And I hold to it fast with the fingers of my will.*

¹ *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, Regina Siegfried and Robert Morneau, eds. Sheed and Ward: Kansas City, Missouri, 1989.

I'm sure you will agree that this kind of poetic mastery is very beautiful indeed!

Encounter the Word through *lectio divina*

Allow me to suggest that all efforts to change people or cultures through the power of words must be rooted in a deep, personal encounter with “The Word” Himself, Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh in Mary’s womb. As Catholics we are immersed in the public reading of the Word in our liturgies and have a strong tradition of reading and study of the Scriptures that perhaps we don’t appreciate enough. Sometimes Catholics even blame themselves for being less than committed to the Word of God than other Christians, but this is certainly not true of the tradition of faith that has been handed down to us in the ancient practice of *lectio divina*.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission describes *lectio divina* as “a reading, on an individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the Word of God and leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation.”² Such reading of Scripture is meant to be a sort of heart-to-heart contact with God in the diligent seeking that takes place through reading the sacred page. It is a true *inner discipline* in that it requires the habit of interior listening, inner seeing, and meditating on what we read – for the eyes, the ears and the mind are the passageways to the heart.

The goal of *lectio divina* is divine friendship and inner transformation that can only come from paying attention to the Word on a very deep level, whether that be individually or as a group. Since the Holy Spirit “inspires” and “inhabits” Scripture, we live with the understanding that only the Holy Spirit can give us light to understand the mysteries of Faith and to make that unique encounter with the Person of Christ in the written word.³ Hence a prayer to the Holy Spirit should always accompany our reading of the Scriptures.

The Second Vatican Council dedicated a whole document to the subject of Divine Revelation and had this to say about the importance of the Scriptures in our lives of faith:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles.

That very beautiful concept of “table” or “altar of the Word” signifies how important the Scriptures are for Catholics and how necessary it is for us to regularly “consume” the Word of God through *lectio divina*, much as we consume the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ in

² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993.

³ Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina: An Ancient Prayer that is Ever New*, Alba House: New York, New York, 1998.

the Mass. Pay attention to the architecture of the two tables. Notice the contrast of before the Council and after the Council such as in the chapel of our own Seminary of St. Vincent de Paul, Boynton Beach, Fl. We do this both personally in our individual spiritual lives and communally in our liturgies. The Council document further states that "... all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. Here there is a great influence from St. Jerome's teachings. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life."⁴

What is said of the "preaching of the Church" can equally be said of the ministry of Christian writers. The efforts to evangelize through literary means must flow out of a personal encounter with the Scriptures, particularly those elements of Scripture that have been used for centuries as forms of prayer, namely, the Psalms. And in this regard, I would like to engage with you in a small exercise of *lectio divina* tonight. I would like to take a number of the more well-known psalms as both literary and spiritual realities and meditate on them with you for the benefit of our souls and our missions. Our exercise – just a beginning – will hopefully lead to a greater embrace of the Scriptures in your personal lives.

The Psalms in the Christian Life

The 150 psalms are what constitute the "public prayer" of the Church. Our Church has learned through long experience that the Psalms are nearly perfect expressions of prayer given to us by God Himself through the lived experiences of the Chosen People. Every student of the psalms is tempted to look for consistency or structure in the Book of Psalms but you will not find anything resembling a modern literary or organizational plan in this type of literature. The Psalms, rather, are "human responses to God's word and actions"; they are "heard throughout the entire Bible, from the first book to the last....Whenever God acts, there must be a response of praise."⁵ It is this aspect of *human responsiveness to God's actions* that makes the psalms so universally open to prayer.

Yet there are many different human responses to God's acts; not only praise. The psalms contain laments for the many sorrows and sins of human life, prayers of petition and longing, songs to communicate wisdom, festival chants to celebrate the harvest, victory cries, and liturgical prayers. Psalms arose out of the worship and the lived experience of Israel, but they were not written at first and then sung in the liturgy as we compose music today; rather, they were *sung first as lively responses to God's presence* and then written down sometimes centuries after their origin! Perhaps it is better to say that they arose out of the people's communal life, which took on more structured forms of worship with the establishment of the Temple in the time of King David.⁶

The immense variety of psalms, their raw and expressive emotions, the vibrancy of their honesty with God are true gifts to anyone who is more accustomed to praying with formulaic and

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on Divine Revelation, (*Dei verbum*), 1965, n. 21.

⁵ Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, Augsburg Publishing House: Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1980, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 16.

ritual prayers. Entering into prayer with the psalms, as most religious men and women can attest, helps to deepen one's understanding of his relationship with God and helps to give expression to it. As the psalms arose out of the life of the people of Israel, so also they speak to the common life experiences of all believers.

I have chosen four psalms to review with you in a prayerful way, for the purpose of deepening our relationship with God. Although the psalms are prayers that express the desires and feelings of every human being, they are particularly poignant for people who are directly committed to the mission of evangelizing. While we cannot do justice to the full mystery of any of these psalms, yet, our *lectio divina* tonight should help us to continue to pray the psalms with great benefit for our souls.⁷ All psalm translations will be taken from the Grail Psalter, which is the translation for the Church's liturgy of the hours.

Psalm 1

The Book of Psalms stands as the crown jewel of that portion of the Old Testament known as Wisdom Literature. In fact, the Book of Psalms is divided up into five sections that mirror the five books of the Law. The first psalm, therefore, has a very important function in setting the tone for the whole book. It is a *wisdom psalm* which expresses succinctly, in poetic language and imagery, the basic theme of all wisdom literature: namely, that there are two ways a person can travel in life – the way of righteousness or the way of the sinner. This theme will, of course, be echoed in Jesus' analogy of the narrow way to heaven versus the wide road to perdition. Let us listen to the wisdom of this psalm:

*Happy indeed is the man
Who follows not the counsel of the wicked;
Nor lingers in the way of sinners
Nor sits in the company of scorners,
But whose delight is the law of the Lord
And who ponders his law day and night.*

*He is like a tree that is planted
Beside the flowing waters,
That yields its fruit in due season
And whose leaves never fade;
And all that he does shall prosper.
Not so are the wicked, not so!*

*For they like winnowed chaff
Shall be driven away by the wind.
When the wicked are judged they shall not stand,
Nor find room among those who are just;
For the Lord guards the way of the just
But the way of the wicked leads to doom.*

We may note a number of very interesting literary and spiritual accents in this psalm:

⁷ Some insights for the commentaries are derived from *The Anchor Bible: Psalms I and III*, Mitchell Dahood, tr., Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City: New Jersey, 1966 and 1970.

The psalm tells us that the sinner's life is one of a gradual progression: first he "follows" the counsel of the wicked, then he "lingers" in that terrible way, and finally he "sits" in their company. In expressing the gradualism of the sinner's life in literary imagery, the psalmist communicates a great truth about the spiritual life; namely, that God does not will or predestine anyone to sin. Rather, sin is a voluntary act, which has increasingly negative consequences for those who choose it. Because of free will, the evil one must seduce man into sin, but man is always free to choose to sin or not. Just as Moses and Joshua offered the Israelites in the desert the chance to "choose life or death", so we are offered the way of righteousness or the way of wickedness as a constant choice.

This opening psalm of the great Book of Psalms is not at all unclear about the consequence of sin and a life without God. The consequences of following the way of the wicked are too great to ponder: being winnowed like chaff, being driven away by the wind, and above all, being judged unto doom. These stark metaphors hardly need interpretation.

But the psalm also points out the immense blessings of righteousness, something that *does* need to be emphasized in every generation. The very first word of the psalm is "happy" or in other translations, "blessed", echoing a sort of universal goal of human life that transcends all cultures and times: man seeks "happiness", both in this life and the next. The way of righteousness will bring us there. This way too is a progression: first the righteous man "delights" in the law of the Lord, then he "ponders" that law day and night, and finally he sees the fruits of his righteousness, which are many: he becomes unmovable – like a tree planted near a permanent source of water; his life comes to be fruitful in a material and spiritual sense; everything he does prospers; and above all, he is protected by God.

I don't know about you, but I think I will choose the way of righteousness!

Psalm 23

Our next psalm is easily the most recognized psalm of the entire Bible. It is a *psalm of trust* or confidence in God, who is described in the most captivating image of a Shepherd. Be attentive, however, to the transition from the image of loving Shepherd to that of generous Host that occurs toward the end of the psalm.

*The Lord is my shepherd;
There is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
Where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me,
To revive my drooping spirit.*

*He guides me along the right path;
He is true to his name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness
No evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
With these you give me comfort.*

*You have prepared a banquet for me
In the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil;
My cup is overflowing.*

*Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
All the days of my life.
In the Lords own house shall I dwell
For ever and ever.*

This psalm rightly deserves its fame and certainly merits ample amounts of prayer and meditation, both in times of crisis and in times of peace. Watch especially the *verbs* that the psalmist employs to describe the Lord's tender love for His children – they are almost a textbook of mystical theology: He provides for our needs; He gives us rest; He leads us to refreshment and boosts our spirits; He guides, He is true, He protects, and He comforts. All of this goodness seems to flow from the Shepherd as if taking care of the individual sheep on his journey were the only preoccupation He had in life.

But the psalmist is not content to leave the sheep on the road. This journey has a destination! It seems that the Shepherd has a most wonderful home to which we are invited as the endpoint of the journey; and when the Shepherd arrives there, He puts aside His walking staff and puts His waiter's towel on His arm. All the enemies that He defended us from on the journey are outside the banquet hall looking in, unable to enter, and the Host now treats us with the same measure of solicitude that He expressed when He was guiding us on our journey. We are his sole preoccupation. The arduous journey has ended in an exquisite banquet in which our Host waits on us, feeds us, fills our cup to overflowing, anoints us, and prepares a place for us to stay.

It takes very little imagination to see the connection between this psalm and the two passages in the Gospel of John where Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn 10) who "goes to prepare a place for us" in His Father's house (cf. Jn 14). As with all images of the Old Testament, this most beloved psalm finds its fulfillment in Christ.

Psalm 121

There is a small phrase or title placed at the head of psalms 120-134 because they were sung on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They were entitled "psalms of ascent." There is a reason for that title. The pious Jew always "went up" to Jerusalem for worship, and so these psalms were sung while "ascending" to the Holy City on pilgrimage. Psalm 121 is easily the most beautiful of the psalms of ascent.

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains:
From where shall come my help?
My help shall come from the Lord
Who made heaven and earth.*

*May he never allow you to stumble!
Let him sleep not, your guard.*

*No, he sleeps not nor slumbers,
Israel's guard.*

*The Lord is your guard and your shade;
At your right side he stands.
By day the sun shall not smite you
Nor the moon in the night.*

*The Lord will guard you from evil,
He will guard your soul.
The Lord will guard your going and coming
Both now and forever.*

The main literary device in this psalm – namely, repetition – is meant to express the feeling of a stairway ascending. The verses have a stair-like pattern where successive verses repeat words or ideas that had occurred in preceding lines, and these increase in intensity and fervor as the psalm progresses. For example, the term “my help” repeats in the first stanza of the psalm and forms the foundational image of the Lord who draws the pilgrim to His Temple. The Lord is a God who helps and cares for His people. He is described further as the Creator “who made heaven and earth.” The God that the Israelites worship is the supreme God of all gods.

The next recurring phrase reminds the pilgrims that this God “never sleeps or slumbers”, a concept that was repeated so that the pilgrim wouldn’t forget it. This poignant image would remind every Jew of the story of Elijah who taunted the prophets of Ba’al about their gods who, Elijah said, may be sleeping and must be awakened! (cf. 1 Kgs 18:27) The picture of the God of the Jews is now intensifying: He is not just a helper but is an *eternally vigilant* helper.

The final and definitive image of this psalm is the description of Yahweh as “your guard”, repeated six times in the course of eight verses and tying together three of the four stanzas. Yahweh’s guardianship is total: He stands guard while you are sleeping; He guards you from the elements; He guards you from evil; He guards your going and coming, meaning the totality of your actions; and above all, He guards *your soul*. There can be no more personal sense of protection than that. Now the picture of this God is complete: He is a helper, an eternally vigilant presence in your life, and a faithful guard over every dimension of your being. This is the God that Israel worships.

The most amazing image of this psalm, however, is found in the very first phrase. One can feel himself *lifting up his eyes* with the psalmist as he contemplates the physical mountains that surround Jerusalem and the Temple of the Holy City. Indeed, that image dominates the entire ethic of the psalm which aims to “lift up” the pilgrim in an emotional sense, to “raise him up” to a higher standard of moral living, and ultimately, to help him to “ascend” to heaven by his devotion, entering into perfect union with the Lord of Lords through worship.

Psalm 150

And as we started this *lectio divina* with the first psalm of the Psalter, so we finish with the last, Psalm 150. This marvelous expression of joy is perhaps the perfect psalm of praise – it

uses the word “praise” eleven times in six verses as well as two “Alleluias” that stand as bookends on either side of the psalm!

Alleluia.

*Praise God in his holy place,
Praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his powerful deeds,
Praise his surpassing greatness.*

*O praise him with sound of trumpet,
Praise him with lute and harp.
Praise him with timbrel and dance,
Praise him with strings and pipes.*

*O praise him with resounding cymbals,
Praise him with clashing of cymbals.
Let everything that lives and that breathes
Give praise to the Lord.*

Alleluia.

We may remember that the first psalm set the entire tone of the journey through the Psalms. It was admonishing us to follow the way of God, the way of righteousness, with the result that we would arrive at a life of blessedness. This last psalm, then, expresses the cry of the heart *of the one who has followed that way*. It is the total song of joy of the righteous man, the one who has been redeemed and blessed because he stayed on the pathway to the very end. The last psalm is meant to assure the one who struggles with his own sinfulness that there is indeed a reward for perseverance and fidelity.

Fittingly, this is one of the most resonant psalms of all, with vivid imagery that expresses the heart’s joy in a very non-theoretical way. The pilgrims who went up to the Temple would have been familiar with the musical instruments displayed in this psalm because they would have seen them and heard them used in Temple worship: the trumpet (the *shofar*) called them to prayer; the sounds of the lutes, timbrels, and pipes; the murmuring of the strings and harps; and the dancing that was characteristic of every festive celebration, are all found here. There is incredible movement and sound in this psalm; in fact, all the action culminates in the crash of loudest of all musical instruments – the cymbals!

Most importantly, the psalm reminds us that it is not only the pilgrim people of Israel who recognize the greatness of this God. The *entirety of creation* sings the praises of Him who is their Creator – “let everything that lives and that breathes” praise Him! Certainly this psalm is the most expressive of all the psalms and, as such, it forms such a beautiful ending to the entire Book of Psalms. It teaches us that our hearts should find great joy in the blessing that comes

from belonging to the Lord and to the salvation that He offers all of creation but especially to those whom He chooses and protects on the pilgrim journey.

Conclusion

As we bring this talk to a close, my only regret, dear brothers and sisters, is that we cannot go on continually reading these beautiful psalms all night. We have just broken the surface of our *lectio divina*, but we can at least take it as a starting point for further reflection. Those of us who pray these psalms every day can at times rush through them or take them for granted, but we would all do well to spend more time with them in our personal prayer lives, meditating “day and night” on the law of the Lord and contemplating His beauty.

These are the concepts that, in the end, will bind us together as men and women of faith and help to evangelize our society – Truth, Beauty, and Goodness – the “eternal verities”, as William Faulkner called them. The Catholic writer has a calling to evangelize hearts and minds with the things that never fade and which will ever be fruitful for the healing and strengthening of souls, and this calling is a most precious and important one.

Those of you who are writers, as well as those of you who are readers, are well aware of the power of truthful, beautiful, and uplifting words. They are even more important in a society that has become flooded with the wrong words. You have the vocation to be word-smiths and story-tellers of truth and beauty to future generations and especially to those of the current generation who have not been exposed to the great riches of our Catholic tradition. Do so with the power of the holy words and images of our faith and the immense beauty of the Truth, like the great Catholic giants who have gone before us.

Above all, keep The Word Himself in the depths of your hearts, and you will *BE* the word of Christ to others, which is always the most effective way to evangelize.