

From Fantasy to Contemplation: Seminarians and Formation in a Paschal Imagination¹

JAMES KEATING
Institute for Priestly Formation
Creighton University
Omaha, NE

See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the wilderness I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. —Isa 43:19

IN REVELATION, we read: “Behold, I make all things new (Rev 21:5). There is a distinction to be made between God making all things new and this generation’s constant pursuit of novelty at the “click” of a computer key. The search for the “new” that God inspires is a human restlessness born of a transcendent destiny. This restlessness finally does come to rest at one point: union with God. But the pursuit of novelty in cyberspace actually unleashes an insatiable restlessness. This insatiable restlessness births a demand for more and more of what satisfies less and less. This restlessness is kept alive by a roving eye upon the screen and a

¹ Attesting to the cultural problem that it is, the social science literature on cyber activity is vast; some example studies are: S. M. Grüsser, R. Thalemann, and M. D. Griffiths, “Excessive Computer Game Playing: Evidence for Addiction and Aggression?” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 10, no. 2 (2007): 290–92; Chih-Hung Ko “Internet Gaming Disorder,” *Current Addiction Reports* 1, no. 3 (2014): 177–85; Junghyun Kim, Robert LaRose, and Wei Peng, “Loneliness as the Cause and the Effect of Problematic Internet Use: The Relationship between Internet Use and Psychological Well-being,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 12, no. 4 (2009): 451–55; C. T. Wetterneck, A. J. Burgess, and M. B. Short, “The Role of Sexual Compulsivity, Impulsivity, and Experiential Avoidance in Internet Pornography Use,” *Psychological Record* 62, no. 1 (2012): 3–17.

twitching hand upon the computer mouse. Seminarians, of course, are not immune to this restlessness.

Human formation programs in the seminary do well to assume that candidates have the potential to move from self-preoccupation to embracing transcendent values and concern for the welfare of others. But for men for whom entertainment has been almost exclusively the fantasy of video gaming and other interactive computer activities, breaking through self-involvement may be harder to achieve. In such men, gaming delivers pleasure, a sense of achievement, social interaction, and an immersive experience that is so stimulating that the “ordinary” world appears flat and uninviting. Formation programs may struggle to influence those men who are so enculturated.² Many vices gather around fantasy thus making it harder for a man to receive the truth about his condition before God.

As an example, Reinhard Hütter³ has noted the connection between engaging the “wasteland” of cyberspace and the vice of acedia. Acedia communicates the futility of resting in transcendent and spiritual realities, thus creating a void within which the lies of cyberspace and gaming can speak: “Since God is not satisfying, these other things will give you pleasure.” Even more powerfully, Hütter gives voice to the origins of a pervasive clerical vice, cynicism: “The flight from sadness that begins with avoiding and resisting spiritual goods ends up attacking [these same goods].” Many a “clergy day” presenter has run into the priest who embodies this attitude toward the supernatural: “You still believe in such things?” Of course, within a cynic is a former idealist who does not know how to relate his grief to God over inevitable human suffering and finitude. Hence, this cleric, who first avoided praying and then resisted praying, now ends up attacking or mocking the power of a personal spiritual life. In the void of rectory living that now engulfs this priest, he becomes unable to do the one thing necessary: suffer the ordinary until the Presence is revealed and received. “When confronting the suspension of time and the void of boredom, the most classic strategy is to try to ‘kill time.’ . . . It is not insignificant that this idiomatic expression uses the verb ‘to kill,’ which relates boredom to hatred. Now time is

² Committee on Priestly Formation of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation* [PPF], 5th ed. (Washington, DC: United States Council of Catholic Bishops, 2006), §89.

³ Reinhard Hütter, “Pornography and Acedia,” *First Things*, April 2012, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/04/pornography-and-acedia>.

not killed; on the contrary, it is necessary to wed it, . . . to cling to the present moment and to live it in all its spiritual intensity.”⁴ One way out of the vice of acedia, born of behaviors that coddle distraction as a good to pursue, is the choice to “go deep,” “deep” meaning the choice to suffer the ordinariness of one’s days until God moves within a man, “wedding” him to the Incarnation and shooing away fantasy from alighting upon him as temptation.

“Many young people seem to live hours each day that are almost programmatically reduced to shallow, impulsive dependencies on visual stimulation and technological chatter. The search for meaning . . . has shifted to a compulsive quest for perpetual distraction.”⁵ Instead of being locked into this quest for distraction, for fantasy, quite often the seminarian has entered seminary as a “remedy” for such. Needing a remedy does not necessarily mean that the man is pathologically attuned to cyberspace, but there are many seminarian testimonies that indicate the emptiness of their lives before seminary. This emptiness became the occasion to hear God’s voice calling to go deep and to receive a priestly vocation. However, even though such interest in cyberspace may not be pathological, it can be problematic for the seminarian. For such a vapid endeavor, escapist digital fare, he admits to have given it disproportionate attention. He is now in seminary wanting to disown fantasy and no longer resist the reception of love that is prayerful contemplation. In this new commitment, however, he finds a battle as the *residue of the culture of distraction* still clings to his affections.

The *very desire* to engage substantive occupations and leave behind superficial ones contains *within it the energy of God* directed toward his creatures.⁶ God is the One who enters nothingness and leaves in its place being. God breaks down the resistance to love by unflinchingly revealing his face to us and awakening within us a longing to behold his face above all others.⁷ Part of the mission of seminary formation is to move a man from fantasy to the contemplation of God’s face. Formation is to be a time where the beauty of God comes to inform

⁴ Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., *The Noonday Devil* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 126.

⁵ Donald Haggerty, *The Contemplative Hunger* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 31.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 83.

⁷ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 76.

a seminarian's knowledge and to have this beauty progressively order the man's desires.⁸ Then-Cardinal Ratzinger spoke about allowing ourselves to be wounded by this beauty, which is the crucified One, and to resist the "dazzling" beauty of false attraction.

"[There] is a dazzling beauty that does not bring human beings out of themselves into the ecstasy of starting off toward the heights but instead immures them completely within themselves. Such beauty does not awaken a longing for the ineffable, a willingness to sacrifice and lose oneself, but instead stirs up the desire, the will for power, possession and pleasure."⁹

Such false beauty would be luxury or lust, and it arises within persons so that it can take and possess its object. This is in contradistinction to engaging authentic beauty, which invites one to make a gift of himself. One way seminaries can assist in moving the masculine mind and heart out of the clutches of fantasy is to make formation seriously ordered toward contemplation of the Beautiful.

Contemplation

"Contemplation is given or achieved," says our faith tradition; it comes about through an interior vulnerability to being loved, to being beheld by God. In this beholding, one is awakened¹⁰ to God's mercy and his offer for loving union. "Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. . . . This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart. . . . Contemplation . . . turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus, it learns the 'interior knowledge of our Lord,' the more to love him and follow him" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] §2715). As Adrian Walker noted about Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology, Christ is the ontological key *to all of reality*.¹¹ On the other hand, video fantasy is a participation in images that are disconnected from reality. The man who fantasizes orders the hunger of his heart toward

⁸ Romanus Cessario, *Theology and Sanctity* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2014), 29–30.

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 40.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 76.

¹¹ Adrian Walker, "Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as Master of Theological Renewal," in *Love Alone is Credible: Hans Urs von Balthasar as Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. David Schindler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 21n13.

food that simply returns more and more of what satisfies less and less.¹² If the satisfaction derived is so poor, why is it difficult for a man to move from fantasy to contemplation?

This resistance to move from fantasy to contemplation is tied up in a man's refusal to suffer the inculcation of patience, allowing the ego to cling to the habit of immediacy. "The superficial will is usually at the service of egoism. It listens to all its conflicting impulses and lets itself be led by the notorious couple: 'I like—I don't like.' The deep will . . . is at the service of love; it coincides with the innate desire for God. The deep will . . . finds satisfaction . . . in God."¹³

The need to placate immediacy indicates the seminarian is only at the very early stages of affective maturity and needs the rigor seminary provides to facilitate the death of self-involvement. "The identity to be fostered in the candidate is that he becomes a man of communion, that is, someone who makes a gift of himself and is able to receive the gift of others. He needs integrity and self-possession in order to make such a gift."¹⁴ The "rigor" needed to bring such selflessness to life is engagement with the transcendent, an engagement one suffers in order to defeat the habit of returning to escapist distractions. *To suffer the coming of God* is the crux of seminary formation. To suffer God in one particular aspect, his Divine Beauty, is a commitment embraced to heal the pleasure of immediacy. This pleasure of immediacy is what ruins the prospect of attaining affective adherence to that beauty God revealed: the Cross of Christ. Balthasar predicted that, without a fascination with this Divine Beauty, a man would lose interest in prayer and even love.¹⁵ This is true because beauty carries one into union with the Divine Person. Without this transcendental, a person becomes fixated on "taking" from reality rather than "receiving" from it. To be affected by the beauty of Christ, to receive his person, such is the way to becoming a giving person. Beholding the beauty that is Christ, contemplating him, is the "river in the wasteland," the source of life among the distractions and life-ebbing involvement in images that possesses so many today. These images, at

¹² Wilfred Stinissen, *Into Your Hands, Father*, trans. Sister Clare Marie, O.C.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 63.

¹³ Stinissen, *Into Your Hands*, 68.

¹⁴ PPF, §83

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio, S.J., and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.

best, are simply puny entertainment—at worst, occasions of sin. They capture, by their instant gratification, constant action and movement; but they are empty. The remedy is depth; the remedy is to contemplate life and love—not death, not isolation. Since the resurrection of Christ, faith has made it clear that love is greater than death. In order for the seminarian to ascend from narrow immediacy to deep liberty, he must suffer the way of a transposition of images. This contemplation of Christ opens the interior of a man to be affected by him so deeply that the seminarian moves from “seeing” Christ to holding him in his being.

To contemplate the beauty of the Crucified is to place oneself in a condition of poverty, aware of one’s longing to be acted upon in love,¹⁶ healed, and liberated. In the presence of Beauty, we want to become aware of a Presence with us. The whole “fantasy” industry is built upon loneliness and alienation dragging at the depths of every man. To reverse this “drag,” we call the seminarian to place himself in a position to suffer the beauty of God as he awaits the Divine Presence making himself known. “The listening of our soul in prayer is not to hear a voice making *a request* but to recognize a mysterious and sacred presence *asking for this return of love.*”¹⁷

To move to more specificity, we need contemplation to be secured by interior silence, a silence overflowing with divine presence. Within this presence seminarians come to know *celibacy as intimacy*, rather than pain-provoked “busy-ness.” “Silence is the essential condition for receptivity.”¹⁸ Without entering silence, the seminarian inadequately prepares himself to suffer the coming of God in prayer. Silence wraps the man in a habitual openness to receive what is being offered to him from God. In the transition from fixating on images of this “passing age” (Rom 12:1–2) to contemplating the eternal beauty of Christ on the Cross (John 19:37), it will be silence that carries the man from fantasy to contemplation.

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, trans. Brian P. McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 97.

¹⁷ Haggerty, *The Contemplative Hunger*, 145.

¹⁸ Haggerty, *The Contemplative Hunger*, 145. See also James Keating, “Seminary Formation and Interior Silence,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 10, no. 2 (2012): 307–19.

Participating in Divine Beauty: The Birth of a New Imagination

When a man is called to sacrifice marriage for priesthood, he is simultaneously called to become a “mystic.”¹⁹ When a man does not become fascinated with the Holy, the need for erotic fulfillment goes in search of erroneous places of rest like a homeless man looking for shelter. There is only *one* reason God calls a man to celibacy: he wants his full attention in order to satisfy the cleric’s need for love. This love is not simply for the priest’s personal consolation, no, it overflows into ministry as love of neighbor. The mysticism of celibacy proclaims that only when one is totally bound to God’s generous love can he, in turn, donate himself with a universal love “of the many” (Matt 26:28).

To reduce the call to celibacy to utilitarian reasons (more availability to ministry, easier management of priestly assignments for bishops) is ecclesially dangerous. The Church does not want bachelors or workaholics or “shy” men using their “single” state to earn a living from the Church. History has shown that, after a while, these men will direct their need to assuage loneliness in pathological or sinful ways. Making the transition from bachelor to priestly commitment is one that tutors a man to correctly receive love from God, sometimes from God *alone*, and to do so in peace. To become a man fascinated with the Holy may take many years as the superficial elements of popular Western culture are “exorcised” from the seminarian and he comes to rest in communion with God and not false escapist habits of immediate gratification. Only commitment to a disciplined way of life centered in prayer and mercy toward others can liberate a seminarian from superficial elements of popular Western culture.

The formational priority of a contemplative interior life for seminarians is supported within a context of commonsense discernment on the spiritual and psychological level. Promoting interiority to an emotionally immature or unbalanced man may compound the man’s isolation tendencies or personality idiosyncrasies. To underscore the

¹⁹ By “mystic,” I mean an understanding of this term that is sober and contextualized in a man’s *living participation in the sacramental mysteries of Christ*, a participation in Christ that yields wisdom more than personal consolations, such as tears or locutions. See Paul Murray, O.P., *Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism, and Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2014.

vitality of a contemplative life for the diocesan priest is not to make a category mistake and foist upon him the life of a monk. Indeed, without deep interiority, without an identity that rests in communion with God, there can be *no* sending into ministry. In fact, to “take” ministry without being “sent” from communion with God within an ecclesial context configures priestly life as counterfeit. If ministry does not flow from communion with God in personal prayer and sacramental engagement, then from what source within the man is such service flowing?

For a man to have a celibate mystic imagination firmly rooted in his character, he must attend to the Paschal mystery of Christ as primary mental and affective nourishment. Contemplating the Paschal mystery must be seen as the seminarian’s main work of affective/spiritual development, along with an integrated intellectual, fraternal, and ministerial life.

When a man suffers a deeper faith in beholding the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, he can then discern all things with a new imagination. This imagination is sacred, born of faith, born of surrender to Christ. Each vocation specifies and particularizes this imagination, and through it, this new way of thinking grasps reality, and so facilitates Christ reaching the mind of the cleric. Specifically, Christ produces and reaches the mind of the priest by affecting him with his own sacrificial mysteries. The experience of being moved by these mysteries opens up the possibility of a priestly imagination. Only when one has experienced these mysteries as real does his mind conspire with the affect for new mental and affective imagery. Without the experience of being taken up into these mysteries, there can be no sustained entry into a new way of thinking founded upon a participation in a new culture, one noted for its diminishing interest in the distractions of this passing age (Rom 12:1–2). There are acts of imagination that one is capable of only after having a relevant experience.²⁰

“Faith is in the intellect, in such a way that it causes affection. For example: *to know that Christ died ‘for us’ does not remain knowledge, but becomes necessarily affection, love* (Proemium in I Sent., q. 3). Love . . . sees what remains inaccessible to reason. Love goes beyond reason, sees more, and enters more profoundly into the mystery of God. . . .

²⁰ John Crosby, *The Personalism of John Henry Newman* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 45.

All this is not anti-intellectual: it implies the way of reason but transcends it in the love of the crucified Christ.”²¹

This love leads the seminarian to contemplate the suffering Christ who, over time and in the Spirit, heals wounded reason (CCC §2037). Such contemplation allows the truth, who is Christ, to enter the conscience, the heart, and order it toward communion with God, and therefore conversion of life. Theological thinking is healed thinking because only it is brought into explicit and sustained contemplation of the mysteries of Christ, mysteries that are not exhausted in historical events, but rather carry encounters that abide in and through the faith of the Church, its sacramental life, and the personal prayer of the seminarian. This is the “suffering” that seminarians are called to assume: to open their minds toward the Paschal mystery of Christ, to sacramentally participate within this mystery and establish their theological comprehension upon Christ doing “His thinking within us.”²² This “thinking within us” is not a mystical exceptionalism, but simply the result of intentionally relating the mind to prayer as this mind receives and suffers the conceptualization of revelation. The seminarian, then, suffers the coming of Christ through noetic structures that are vulnerable to the truth and beauty of Christ; such vulnerability is, in fact, an eagerness within the seminarian to have intimacy with the Trinity and to live within that intimacy as his vocation.

Conclusion

To encourage seminarians to gaze upon a Crucifix, enter *lectio divina* more regularly, or to ponder the needs of the poor in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament loosens the grip cyberspace has upon their imaginations and renders the men more available to a life of mercy toward others. Speaking about the biblical story of the prodigal son, J. Brian Bransfield noted this:

From the moment we go off track, God the Father gazes into the distance between us and him. It is his look, his grace, even when we are in sin, that wakes us up again and inspires in us

²¹ Benedict XVI, General Audience, March 17, 2010, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100317.html.

²² See James Keating, “Theology as Thinking in Prayer,” *Chicago Studies* 53, no. 1 (2014): 70–83.

the desire and longing for repentance. This is known as prevenient grace, a grace that comes to us to encourage us to turn back to God.²³

The imagination is powerful in its capacity to take a person more deeply into reality, especially as images relate to and define one another, such as in Scripture when the Genesis creation story is given further depth and meaning by the prologue of John's Gospel. The imagination is powerful in another way as well, powerful in its capacity to denigrate a man's character, wherein only the purifying images of Christ's mysteries can loosen the grip upon that mind that the culture of distraction currently possesses. Gazing in love upon the Blessed Sacrament in adoration or opening the heart to being moved by *lectio divina* will, over time and in the presence of a sound mind, recover reality's grasp upon a seminarian and birth in him a spiritual creativity. Being lost in the wasteland sections of cyberspace only compounds each person's native self-involvement, pulling him further away from creativity and light while plummeting each man into self-centered darkness. This darkness can never be the origin of ministry, and so there is an urgent cry from the Church to liberate seminarians from this cyber-born imprisonment in the self. **N-V**

²³ J. Brian Bransfield, *Overcoming Pornography Addiction: A Spiritual Solution* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 38.