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Radiance

LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

THE RETURN
OF WONDER

HOSPITALITY
AND GRACE

THE ART
OF INTIMACY

THE LOVE
BEHIND SILENCE

***THE HIDDEN LIFE
THAT CHANGED
THE WORLD***

VOL. 6, 2026



Editor's Letter

We live surrounded by answers. Faster machines. Louder voices. Endless distractions. The promise that more control will finally make us whole. But the soul grows differently—through attention, wonder, silence, beauty, presence.

Maria Carvalho reveals how Thérèse discovered greatness in littleness. I question a tech-driven future that would make us gods; conversely, Thomas Arnaud-Beaumont celebrates the mercy of our human limits. Tom McGrath searches for a God who seems hidden. Lena Feindt follows beauty into longing. Leo McGrath rebels against urgency. Gabriel Olearnik rediscovers intimacy as attention. Annabelle Burns finds grace in hospitality. Marie Moore uncovers the luminous in the ordinary. Fr Kevin O'Donnell invites wonder home.

Each, in a different way, asks the same question: what if the deepest realities cannot be mastered, improved, or possessed? What if they must be received?

Modern life reaches. Grace arrives. Usually quietly.

— *Richard Wise*

RADIANCE

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Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

THE HIDDEN LIFE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

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*A Carmelite nun discovers that holiness begins not in spiritual brilliance or emotional strength, but in learning how to receive love like a child.*  
~~~~~

by *Maria Carvalho*

Some saints' legacies were already recognised when they were still alive. Think Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc or more recently, Mother Teresa.

Other saints' impacts were discovered after their deaths. Perhaps, none was more surprising - and revolutionary - than St Thérèse of Lisieux, a young girl who never stepped out of the Carmelite Convent she entered in a small town in Normandy, France at the age of fifteen, and where she would die nine years later.

This saint did not become famous because it was discovered she had done great feats in her lifetime, like curing illnesses or having visions. And yet, St Thérèse of Lisieux intuited that Christ would make her a great saint after her death.

How she was discovered by the world was through the publication of her spiritual memoir

The Story of a Soul. She wrote her autobiography at the request of her superiors at the convent in the midst of great pain as she was dying from tuberculosis. The book was published a year after her death in 1898. Seventeen years later, it sold millions of copies and was translated into over 35 languages. Nothing short of a miracle.

The power of her story lies in its simplicity: it shows how a soul is not remade by force, but by accepting Christ's transformative love, and in gratitude, reciprocating with small acts of love. And through this little way, setting the world on fire with God's great love.

The Little Queen

Thérèse Martin was born on 2 January 1873 in Alençon, France, the youngest daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin. Her early childhood was

shaped by warmth and affection, fussed over by her parents and sisters. Her father called her his “little queen.”

Perhaps this title came because she acted like a little queen - flying into tantrums when she did not get her way, taking all the gifts when presented to her sister and her and even truthfully admitting to her parents when she pushed her sisters around. Thérèse freely admits in her autobiography her stubbornness was born out of love for herself.

A Childhood Marked by Loss and Love

At the age of four, her mother died. Something in her became more withdrawn, more fragile, more easily wounded. Her sensitivity deepened.

Yet her father's and sisters' love remained steady, affectionate and marked by a deep Christian faith that revealed itself in humility and detachment. Even in tenderness, she learned that love is not possession and consolation is not something to cling to.

From the love of her father and her family, she witnessed the paradox of what it meant to love Christ: deeply loved yet called to surrender; fragile in herself yet destined for a strength not her own.

The Night Everything Changed

On Christmas Eve 1886, after returning from Midnight Mass, Thérèse overheard her father remark that he was glad it would be the last year of the tradition of placing gifts in her shoes. In just over a week, she would be 14 years old.

Instinctively, her natural sensitivity rose - where normally, she would descend into floods of tears at the merest insult. But instead of collapsing and making a scene, she experienced something she later described as a grace: the Child Jesus flooded her soul and freed her from childhood sensitivity.

She went downstairs in peace and joy.

She called it her “complete conversion” and it inspired the name she would later be known by: Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

Seeing Others with the Eyes of Christ

From that moment, her interior life began to shift. She did not become insensitive. She used her sensitivity to be attuned to others.

She had already begun praying for a singular grace: to see others as Christ sees them, and to love them with His own heart.

This prayer was put into action when she became a Carmelite nun in Lisieux. When she first entered, her superiors complained of her slowness in doing chores.

Instead of being discouraged, she chose small hidden acts of kindness precisely where they would go unnoticed or cost her something. She helped without seeking recognition, and responded gently when a sharp comeback—or withdrawal to then stew—would have been part of her natural inclinations.

There was an elderly sister who was particularly difficult—irritable, critical, often abrasive. Thérèse did not merely endure her. She actively looked for ways to serve her.

*She did
not become
insensitive.
She used her
sensitivity
to become
attentive to
others.*



Her perception changed: she began to see not only the exterior difficulty, but the hidden fragility beneath it.

This was no longer people-pleasing. It was love purified of self-reference.

A love that wills the good of the other as Christ wills it.

Charity in the Ordinary

This same interior clarity shaped her role as novice mistress, forming younger sisters.

She observed carefully, and when she saw tendencies toward worldliness—attachment to comfort, self-importance or subtle pride—she corrected them gently but firmly, always calling them back to simplicity so they could love God more easily.

Instead of responding with priggish correction, she delivered feedback with sensitive discernment through learning how to love like Christ: delivering clarity without losing charity.

Even when misunderstood, she did not complain and lash back. Instead, she offered it to God.

From Shyness to Courage

Thérèse was naturally shy, yet at fifteen she felt a strong conviction that she was called to Carmel. When the local clergy refused her request because of her age, she did not abandon her desire.

Indeed, through a stubborn act of will, supported by her family, she undertook a pilgrimage to Rome in 1887, with the singular mission to do something remarkable.

At a general audience with Pope Leo XIII, she broke protocol. When she reached him, she knelt and boldly asked for permission to enter Carmel at fifteen.

The Pope gently told her to obey the decision of her superiors. Rather than adhere to the astonished clergy surrounding the Pope, she persisted, trusting her call was from God. The guards had to drag her away - quite the scene for someone who was naturally shy.

Her courage in this moment was not self-confidence, but conviction in Christ's will.

Soon after, she was admitted to Carmel in 1888. It was here that her deeper mission also



became clearer: not outward activity, but hidden prayer for the conversion of souls to accept the kindness and love of Christ.

This mission had been in her heart even as a teenager, before she joined the convent. She prayed for a condemned criminal, Henri Pranzini, trusting in God's mercy—and saw in Pranzini's final act of repentance a sign that grace reaches even the hardest of hearts.

The Little Way: Not by Climbing, but Being Lifted

Thérèse longed to be a great saint. She looked at the saints and felt small in the wrong way—as if she did not belong among them. It is something that could easily lead to despair for someone who desired reaching their heights of spiritual greatness.

In fact, she describes an episode in her childhood where she was bedridden for months due to spiritual scrupulousness - and her family feared she was close to death. She was finally cured after her family prayed for the intercession of Our Lady of Victories.

Gradually she understood something simpler that cured her of her need for spiritual perfection -

a different way in which Christ saw her. She came to realise that comparison itself can become a subtle pride.

She was not called to be a rose in God's garden, like St Teresa of Avila. She was a little flower—small, unremarkable—but just as necessary to complete the beauty of God's garden.

And a little flower does not climb to reach the sun. It opens.

She realised that she could not ascend to God by her own strength. She was too small for such a climb.

Her path was not an effortful ascent, but confident abandonment—trusting that Jesus would not ask her to climb stairs that she could not, but that He—seeing her as a child too small to climb—would Himself lift her to the Father.

This became her “little way of spiritual childhood.”

Little Acts, Great Love

In daily life, this became visible in small, real acts of love. The little girl who was used to taking and receiving everything from her family due to her sheer stubbornness, now learned to give.

Not through symbolic gestures. Not grand missions, like the great missionary St Francis Xavier, or heroic acts of martyrdom, like St Joan of Arc, both of whom she greatly admired and hoped to emulate.

But how could she change the world, cloistered in a Carmelite convent?

She realised with Christ that she could make concrete choices in the humdrum of everyday life: patience when irritated, small acts of charity that are unseen, generosity when it costs something.

She understood that the greatness of Christ was not just shown in the courage to bear the cross but in the patience to bear the company of his very flawed disciples during his three years of public ministry. She saw these acts of charity as “little flowers” gathered from ordinary life and offered as a spiritual bouquet to Jesus.

Their value was not in their size, but in their love.

A Hidden Life That Set the World on Fire

Thérèse entered Carmel at fifteen as a cloistered nun. She never left. She died at twenty-four in 1897, hidden from the world.



And yet she has become one of the greatest of saints, due to the popularity of her autobiography. It was not because it relayed great spiritual conquests or sophisticated theological treatises like St Augustine's *Confessions*. Readers found not a distant ideal, but a mirror of their own everyday weaknesses—and the discovery that these very weaknesses do not disqualify them from holiness.

*The greatness of Christ was
revealed not only in carrying the
Cross, but in patiently bearing the
company of flawed disciples.*

Her Story of a Soul fulfils a promise she had made when she was alive: to spend her time in Heaven doing good on Earth.

She was beatified in 1923, canonised in 1925, and later declared a Doctor of the Church, putting her in the same echelons as St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, and “the rose” St Teresa of Avila.

And yet her teaching remains disarmingly simple, her book as easily accessible and charming in story and message as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, or Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*.

The difference is hers is a true story - a witness of how a soul, deformed in self-centeredness, can be transformed by the fire of God's love. About how an unremarkable life can show “the little way” to heaven, even after her death.

And through the witness of her autobiography, and heavenly intercessions, she continues to set the world on fire.

It is why - despite never having left the convent after entering it at age fifteen - she is declared the principal patron of missionaries with St Francis Xavier. She is also declared the secondary patron of France, with St Joan of Arc.

And This Is How She Set the World on Fire

Not with greatness,
but with littleness.

Not with power,
but with trust.

Not with extraordinary deeds,
but with small acts of love—
offered entirely,
and received by God as something infinitely great.

Her “little way of spiritual childhood” is an invitation to you to become great through becoming as small and innocent as a child: Small enough to be carried.

Small enough to be loved without conditions.

Small enough to stop climbing and begin trusting.

Like a child who stops struggling up the stairs and allows themselves to be lifted.

Like a flower that simply opens to the sun. ♦

A close-up photograph of a single white flower with a bright yellow center, growing from a bed of dark, wet moss and small green leaves. The flower's stem is thin and covered in fine hairs. In the background, a dark, silhouetted mountain range is visible under a deep blue night sky. A bright, full moon hangs in the upper right corner, casting a soft glow. The overall scene is serene and evocative, with a focus on the flower's delicate form against the vast, dark landscape.

*A flower does not climb.
It opens.*



A New Gospel

AND WE SHALL BE AS GODS

~~~~~  
*Silicon Valley proposes to make us impervious to ageing, supremely intelligent, and capable of surviving the coming apocalypse—but with what consequences?*  
~~~~~

by *Richard Wise*

“Death is a disease. And like any disease, it can be cured.” — Ray Kurzweil, Futurist, Director of Engineering, Google.

I imagine hearing that for the first time. Not from a mystic. Not from a priest. But from one of the most influential technologists of our age—a man who predicts that within decades we will merge our minds with machines, expand our intelligence beyond comprehension, and free ourselves from the biological constraints that have defined humanity since its beginning.

It sounds audacious. It sounds hopeful. It sounds, in a strange way, compassionate.

Why should we accept suffering? Why should we tolerate decay? Why should death have the final word?

For a culture that has lost confidence in heaven, this begins to sound like one. We are being told a new story about salvation. Not redemption or resurrection, but upgrade.

In laboratories and venture capital decks, a new gospel circulates: the body is obsolete, death is a technical glitch, consciousness can be uploaded, intelligence scaled, weakness engineered away. Neural implants promise to merge brain and machine. Longevity research seeks to defeat biological decay. Artificial intelligence is framed not merely as a tool but as successor. The future, we are told, belongs to those who transcend the flesh.

This is not merely innovation. It is anthropology. It is a redefinition of what a human being is.

Writers such as Joe Allen warn that trans-humanism is not just technological enthusiasm

but an ideology. In his critique of Silicon Valley's ambitions, Allen argues that a new elite imagines humanity as raw material for redesign.

The language of inevitability is everywhere: enhancement is coming; augmentation is destiny; resistance is sentimental. Our dystopian films no longer ask whether this future will arrive, only how painful the transition will be. The body becomes scaffolding. The self becomes software.

*If we defeat death but do
not learn how to love, what
exactly have we preserved?*

Allen's alarm is not hysteria. The aspiration to become like gods has returned in lab coats and hoodies. But warning alone does not explain the longing beneath the ambition. Why does mortality feel so intolerable? Why does weakness feel like humiliation?

The Dream of Disembodiment

Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff approaches the question from another angle. In *Survival of the Richest*, he describes what he calls "The Mindset": the belief among certain tech elites that technology will allow them to escape the mess of embodied, political, mortal life. Private bunkers, Martian colonies, AI-governed enclaves insulated from democratic instability—the fantasy is not transformation but exit.

Rushkoff's analysis is psychologically astute. Beneath the rhetoric of innovation lies fear: fear of collapse, of disorder, of entropy, of death. But diagnosis is not cure. Neither Allen's alarm nor Rushkoff's anthropology reaches the deepest layer of the problem. The dream of disembodiment is not merely about control. It is about transcendence.

Here is the great irony. While Silicon Valley speaks of uploading consciousness into the cloud, modern neuroscience increasingly affirms what ancient Christianity always insisted: there is no mind without a body. Consciousness is not a detachable ghost in a machine. It is inseparable from sensation, memory, relationship, and emotion—all of which are embodied processes. Remove sensory input and the mind destabilises. Deprive a person of relational feedback and

psychological fragmentation follows. A "mind without a body" does not become superhuman. It becomes unwell.

The body is not the prison of the self. It is its condition.

The fantasy of pure intellect, freed from flesh, is not progress but abstraction. The more we study the brain, the more we discover that thought, feeling, and embodiment are woven together. We do not merely inhabit bodies; we are embodied beings. To erase that fact is not transcendence. It is self-denial.

Power Without Vulnerability

This is why the transhumanist dream feels strangely ancient. In the desert, Jesus is offered three shortcuts: turn stones to bread, let the people see you are protected by angels, rule the kingdoms of the world. Power over things. Power over people. Power over systems.

He refuses them all.

The parallels to our moment are unsettling. Master material scarcity through total technological control. Eliminate vulnerability through engineered immunity. Govern systems through algorithms that anticipate and shape behavior. The temptation is not crude evil; it is efficiency without surrender. It is power without vulnerability.

The deeper question is not whether we will develop new technologies. We will. The question is what story we tell about what it means to be human.

*To be embodied is not
a defect, but the place
where love happens.*

At the heart of transhumanism lies a scandal: death. Christianity does not solve death by deleting it. It walks through it. The Resurrection, if it is anything, is not an escape from embodiment but its glorification. Not a cloud upload, but a wounded body made radiant. The claim is audacious: that the infinite entered the finite, that weakness is not shameful, that limits are not defects but the very place where love takes form.

Without that story—even as cultural memory—we lose the vocabulary to resist the



upgrade narrative. If this life is all there is, indefinite extension feels rational. If the body is merely biological machinery, enhancement is optimization. If human worth rests on capability, then redesign becomes compassion.

The logic is coherent. What it lacks is reverence.

The Courage to Remain Human

To be embodied is to be interruptible, dependent, aging, in need of forgiveness. It is to suffer, to watch those we love disappear and to know that we will follow. This is unbearable unless it is held within a larger horizon. Transhumanism promises to relieve the burden by removing the limits. Christianity proposes something far stranger: that the limits are not the enemy.

If we defeat death but do not learn how to love, what exactly have we preserved? If we enhance cognition but lose reverence, what have we become? A super-soldier does not need mercy. A cloud brain does not need forgiveness. An immortal algorithm does not need grace. But we do.

There are use cases for neural implants that

free people from neurodegenerative diseases and make it possible for someone who suffers from constant seizures to be free of these or for someone who has lost the faculty of speech to regain it. These are stunning breakthroughs. But the quiet danger of transhumanism is not that chips will enter our brains tomorrow. It is that we will slowly accept the premise that the body is optional and mortality is intolerable. Once that premise is granted, resistance looks irrational. We will call enhancement progress, inevitability compassion, and disembodiment freedom.

The most radical act in the coming century will not be rejecting technology. It will be remaining human. To insist that we are not projects to be optimised but creatures to be loved. To say that finitude is not failure, and that death, though terrible, does not have the final word.

Unless we remember the Christian imagination that taught the West the infinite value of each embodied life, we will not know how to say no to the offer to become like gods. We will trade surrender for control, mystery for management, resurrection for extension.

And in doing so, we may gain power—but lose the very conditions that make love possible. ♦



THE LOVE BEHIND THE SILENCE

Why does God so often feel absent in a world flooded with noise, distraction, and instant answers? Perhaps divine hiddenness is not a failure of love—but part of how freedom, longing and faith grow.

by **Tom McGrath**

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”
the Lord cried out at the ninth hour.
(Matthew 27:46).

In this most brutal and moving moment, which Catholics recall each Good Friday, Christ’s humanity was laid bare. His cry echoes and fulfils the same plea and expression of abandonment, found in the Psalms:

Why are you so far from saving me,
So far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
By night, but I find no rest (Psalm 22:1–2).

That Christ, for all his power, miracles, wisdom, and vigour throughout his Gospel mission, at that moment of gravest sorrow felt distant from his Father, only intensifies the horror of the scene. This feeling of distance, though singularly acute for Jesus at that instant, is a feeling we may all

encounter. We may all wonder sometimes why God feels far away, why we ‘cry out by day’, but fail to identify his reply. Why is God lost behind mist and clouds? If the Lord is ‘with you wherever you go’ (Joshua 1:9), why might God still feel absent?

The Silence After the Prayer

Modernity doesn’t help these feelings. What could be less conducive to a life alive to the Spirit and transcendent beauty than one spent largely interacting with software on a screen of pixels or where so many activities feel directed towards commercial ends? In a world where a swipe of a screen or click of a mouse is expected to immediately make a device achieve what we want, how unnerving it could be to finish a prayer in church but then sit in silence, as nothing (seemingly) happens. Is God still loading the page? Is the server down?

Might it be that this feeling of divine hiddenness has a role to play in the drama of faith, in the movement of our spirit towards something higher? Maybe there is, for some (if not all), an essential mystery and romance to faith.

Think of a rural valley or woodland, with old ruins overgrown with ivy and lost in time. Such a place invites us to explore and fires the imagination in ways that, say, an area of dense housing and driveways, whose every nook and cranny is allotted and developed, never could.

Perhaps there is spiritual fuel to be found in a little space. Space to breathe, to pray, to consider the revelation of God on our own terms. We need this to receive his care and grace, and to allow our spirit to move closer to Him.

Why God Does Not Overwhelm Us

There might be nothing, metaphysically speaking, preventing the Lord from being triumphantly manifest. But then again, if angels greeted us into church on a Sunday morning, perhaps this would risk losing our ability to doubt, to question, and to approach God freely. After all, we are not conscripts at the recruitment office, nervously awaiting processing, but a 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:9–10) apt for 'calling and election' (2 Peter 1:10–11).

This means our hearts may 'find no rest', such is their tumultuous journey in faith. As Augustine memorably put it, 'our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you'.

*Perhaps there is spiritual fuel
to be found in a little space.*

Of course, God was not hidden when revealed in the historical person of Christ. Jesus was someone known by those around Him, was visible to them, and became one of the most documented figures of the ancient world. Christ's life fully answers the Psalmist's question, 'Why are you so far from saving me'; for He showed that He is not far at all; He is here and has won victory over evil through His love.

But not everyone feels immediacy in history. Christ, as the person who lived on Earth two millennia ago, may feel too remote and distant to provide the comfort or reassurance sought. That was then, one might think, a world without football, the microchip, and credit scores.

The Light at the End of All Things

For the Catholic, though, Christ really is present in this world, and not only in a spiritual or intangible way. This is because Catholicism makes an astonishing claim, one that shifts the paradigm for any response to God's hiddenness. The claim is that the God who seems hidden has chosen to be genuinely present among us, at each and every Mass, in the form of bread and wine.



This is the light of God's presence at the back of the tabernacle, the light at the end of all things. A sublime and definite presence—right here, right in front of us. Visiting a church, sitting within its sacred space and beholding the Blessed Sacrament, is perhaps the strongest remedy to God's perceived hiddenness.

*The God who seems hidden has
chosen to remain genuinely
present among us.*

Christ's sacrifice, at the moment when his Father's absence was felt most keenly, is made visible and present to us again in the Eucharist. Armed with this understanding and hope, the Lord's presence is revealed to the extent that we can approach him freely, so we may 'overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:13). Faith springs not merely from demonstration, but from within us, using the space granted to us to pray, to learn, and to explore the divine mysteries:

Nor I beheld aught,
Without light or guide,
save that which burned in my heart.
— St. John of the Cross. ♦

HE KNOWS THIS PLACE

— BY JANET WILKES —

When the days are short and there is
Nothing we can do, rather than
Dwell on what went wrong, come inside
The stable where The Christ was born.
Here, where there is neither light, nor
Warmth, nor friends to help, see cold air
Drop on shivering straw and see
The road to Egypt down which His
Parents fled on rocky stones, when
Herod in his rage pursued them,
While night owls gathered overhead
And flapped their wings to stir up sand.
Then see the cross on which He died,
Forsaken by His closest friends
And let Him come and sit with us
Because He knows this place so well.

*Why the most powerful beauty does not soothe
—but unsettles, exposes, and asks something of us.*



The Suffering of All Mankind in Grünewald's Altarpiece

WHEN BEAUTY FEELS LIKE A WOUND

There are moments when beauty arrives without warning. A piece of music you have heard before suddenly opens something in you; a painting holds your attention longer than you intended; a memory returns—not as thought, but as feeling.

by *Lena Feindt*

Instead of comfort, there is a kind of ache. Not overwhelming, not dramatic—just enough to unsettle. It is as though something has been touched that was not meant to be touched, as though something in you has been exposed.

Many people recognise this experience immediately: moments in which beauty does not soothe but unsettles, when it draws attention to loss, absence, or longing.

When beauty feels like a wound, it may be because it interrupts the illusion of control. It reminds us of love, loss, and dependence.

But why does beauty sometimes console—and sometimes disturb?

The Beauty That Asks Nothing of Us

When we speak of beauty today, we often

associate it with a fast-consumable form: scrolling through Instagram and “liking” posts without real engagement, intellectual stimulation, or emotional depth. These are images without friction—aesthetically pleasing, but largely devoid of meaning. They offer a brief dopamine response, quickly replaced by the next.

The dominant images of beauty in modern consumer culture — supermodels, celebrities, perfected faces and bodies — present a controlled and often unrealistic aesthetic. This kind of beauty signals success and wealth, but it rarely asks anything of us beyond admiration or envy.

It is, in this sense, frictionless.

But there is another kind of beauty—one that interrupts.



Ophelia by John Everett Millais

Beauty that slows us down. Beauty that resists consumption. Beauty that asks something of us.

A painting, a piece of music, a long-standing friendship, an act of unconditional love—these forms of beauty are not always easy. They can unsettle, disrupt, or demand attention. They do not leave us unchanged.

The Cross and the Mother Who Stayed

Within the Catholic tradition, beauty is not merely aesthetic; it is understood as a route to God.

This is nowhere more visible than in the image at the centre of Christianity: the Cross. And, beside it, Mary—not as a symbol, but as a mother: present, watching, unable to intervene.

The Crucifix does not present beauty in a pleasing or decorative sense. It draws the viewer into suffering; it exposes love fully given and fully vulnerable; it resists distance.

This is sometimes described as *pulchritudo crucis*—the beauty of the Cross.

But this beauty does not aestheticise pain. It does not invite admiration from a safe distance. It exerts pressure: one must either turn away or be moved.

Compassion, in this encounter, becomes difficult to avoid.

In this way, beauty wounds—not by harming,

but by revealing. It confronts us with suffering and love at their most complete, and it does not allow us to remain detached observers.

Grief, Music, and the Truth We Already Know

We already recognise this kind of beauty, even if we do not always name it as such.

Much of what we experience as beautiful in music arises from loss: requiems, laments, love songs written in grief. We return to them not despite the pain they carry, but because of it.

Grief is painful precisely because the love we experienced was real. To grieve is to acknowledge both the depth of attachment and the necessity of letting go.

Beauty, in this sense, exposes absence. It makes us aware of what—or whom—is no longer present, and it names sorrow without resolving it.

And yet, we return to it.

“Indeed, an essential function of genuine beauty... is that it gives man a healthy ‘shock’... it even makes him suffer... but in so doing it ‘reawakens’ him.” — Pope Benedict XVI

St Thomas Aquinas offers a way of understanding why this kind of beauty has such force.

He describes beauty as consisting of three properties: *integritas* (wholeness), *consonantia* (harmony), and *claritas* (radiance).

Something is beautiful, in this sense, when

it is whole rather than fragmented, when its parts are in proper relationship to one another, and when it possesses a kind of radiance—whether visual, intellectual, or spiritual. These qualities allow a thing to be fully itself, and they give pleasure when perceived. Beauty, then, is not imposed by the viewer; it belongs, in some real sense, to the thing itself.

Seen in this light, the Crucifixion can be understood as beautiful not because it is visually pleasing, but because it is truthful.

Its wholeness lies in the completeness of Christ's self-gift—nothing is held back; its harmony lies in the alignment of suffering, obedience, and love; its radiance lies not in visual splendour but in the clarity with which it reveals what love costs.

The beauty of the Cross is inseparable from truth and goodness. It does not charm; it reveals.

And this is why it wounds.

I encountered this understanding through Bishop Robert Barron's reflections on beauty. He draws on the concept of the three transcendentals — truth, goodness, and beauty — arguing that these cannot exist in isolation. If something is beautiful but not true, it cannot be good; if it is true but not good, it cannot be beautiful.

Beauty, in this sense, is not subjective decoration. It belongs to reality itself.

Barron suggests that beauty does something active: it calls us outward. It arrests us—not to leave us where we are, but to move us—towards others, towards reality, towards God.

Beauty is not passive; it addresses us. And sometimes, to be addressed in this way is to be unsettled.

In a culture trained to consume images quickly, this kind of beauty can feel rare.

It requires attention; it cannot be reduced to a glance or absorbed in passing; it resists immediacy.

And when we do encounter it, it can feel invasive.

When beauty feels like a wound, it may be because it interrupts the pace to which we have become accustomed. It exposes what we would rather not see and points beyond itself—to something we cannot control.

Christian faith does not promise that beauty will always console. It suggests something more demanding: that beauty tells the truth.

And truth, even when painful, leads somewhere.

A piece of music that brings you back to someone you have lost; a painting that refuses to let you look away; a moment of unexpected stillness in which everything feels briefly, painfully clear—these are not distractions from reality.

They are encounters with it.

Beauty draws us outward.

Toward compassion.

Toward others.

Toward God.

Sometimes gently.

Sometimes through a wound. ♦

*When beauty
feels like a
wound, it is
often because it
has interrupted
the illusion that
we are in control.*

*We return to
certain music not
despite the pain
it carries, but
because it tells
the truth about
what we have
loved—and lost.*



Attention and Escape

THE TYRANNY OF URGENCY

~~~~~  
*In a culture addicted to noise, productivity, and distraction, silence can feel less like peace than exposure.*  
~~~~~

by *Leo McGrath*

YouTube is the most-used app on my phone. Last week it logged six hours and twelve minutes—almost a full working day given over to algorithmically driven content. I would love to say it was all spent learning languages, absorbing DIY tips, or listening to worthy theological lectures. It wasn't. An embarrassing amount of my time was wasted, as it is every week, on filler and fluff.

The unsettling thing, when I contemplated my use of these noise-generating devices, wasn't the content itself but what it revealed about my priorities. What if even a tenth of the 26 hours I spent staring at my phone last week had been spent in prayer?

That would amount to 156 minutes—two and a half hours. Most of us would be doing well to spend even 1% of that time in prayer. A decade of

the Rosary takes less than ten minutes, after all.

The fiction I spun for myself was that this was harmless, brain-off relaxation as the pressures of a house move, job stress, and daily responsibilities piled up. Faced with urgent demands on all sides, it felt easier to escape—or to convince myself that I had earned the right not to think too deeply about difficult things.

Stillness and Stress

The less palatable truth was that, as a coping mechanism for the ordinary bumps of life, I had colluded with the forces of noise and allowed even more urgency into my life, not less. I had actively cultivated the very time pressure I used to justify my escapism, for the simple reason that the alternative was stillness.

And stillness felt worse than stress.

The Fear of Silence

Blaise Pascal wrote that human beings often use entertainment as a shield against interior exploration—focusing on outward distractions to avoid the awkward questions raised by introspection. Yet Pascal himself was terrified of silence and the vastness it opened before him. I recognise both of these instincts.

I also found his argument irritating. Easy enough for a French philosopher to lecture us about cultivating deep interiority, I thought, but the man never had to deal with Google Calendar invites, Slack notifications, or negotiating appointments with the local council.

In the real world, demands on our time and attention are not imaginary. Children really do need to be clothed, fed, and transported. Bills need to be paid. Bins taken out. Dogs walked. And the wider culture beats out an endless rhythm demanding ever more productive use of our time—even, perhaps especially, in our leisure.

In this context, the challenge becomes how to find spiritual and moral independence, even in small ways, from the demand to move constantly and quickly.

The House of the Mind

In the wellness industry, silence and stillness are often treated therapeutically. On the massage table or in the sauna, thoughts are not really meant to happen. One is encouraged simply to notice bodily sensations and remain present in the moment. Intrusive thoughts are discouraged.

While this may be a vital first step—one my YouTube statistics suggest I would benefit from taking—it may not be enough. Pascal believed that, without God, silence reveals an emptiness within us. The void we encounter when we stop, even briefly, can expose the inadequacy of our own foundations.

How Are We to Fill It?

The Church is one of the few institutions left that organises its life against urgency. Its calendar does not bend to the demands of an inbox. The Mass takes back an hour from the working week rather than adding another obligation to it. Structured prayer—in the Rosary, in *Lectio Divina*—builds upon the silence sought by mindfulness, but instead of merely emptying the mind, it directs the house of the mind toward something.

If this is what builds our inner life, confession is what makes it habitable. Sit alone long enough with your face turned toward Christ and something eventually surfaces—usually something we would rather avoid. The Church gives us a place to face whatever lurks in that silence and ask God for help.

The Real Tyranny

As Catholics, we often fail to make time for confession. Perhaps it happens at inconvenient hours, or we convince ourselves that there are simply too many other things to do. For many—especially those struggling to keep their heads above water under the pressures of work and family life—this is understandable. But we should still ask ourselves whether we avoid this special stillness because we genuinely cannot make time, or because we would rather not.

The stillness of prayer is the enemy of both productivity and escapism. It is there that the soul finally begins to breathe again, finding its voice after so long spent mute beneath deadlines, responsibilities, and entertainments. It is also where the real battles take place—where the deeper tyranny is confronted.

The Church is one of the few institutions left that organises its life against urgency.

Urgency itself is not always bad if it is directed toward something good. Some weeks ago, I found myself troubled by a regret that would not go away. It was Lent, and while others prepared earnestly and prayerfully to encounter Christ anew at Easter, I felt spiritually overrun. I avoided thinking too deeply and allowed the world's distractions and demands to crowd around me.

Only as Holy Week approached did I realise the deeper problem: I had silenced the quiet voice reminding me that a busy life does not remove the need to make right what is wrong.

With a sudden and genuine urgency, I sought out prayer and confession. It did not fix everything immediately; prayer is not magic. But for the first time in months, my internal antenna was listening again for the voice of Christ—once more perceptible above the noise. ♦





LEARNING HOW TO REALLY SEE EACH OTHER

~~~~~  
*In a world that isolates sex and exposes everything, let's bring back the deeper art of intimacy: attention, subtlety, regard.*  
~~~~~

by *Gabriel Olearnik*

Let us go by the longer path, under the trees. I'm in the middle of my years, after all, and enjoy a detour with a companion in the woodland shade.

Not because we are lost, though we are; nor because the matter is obscure, though it is; but because some thoughts do not come when summoned directly. They prefer the hush between branches, the wet bark, the bird startled once and then unseen. You throw out a few breadcrumbs and wait. The old truths are shy. We must wait for them.

One of the stranger things modernity has done is not to discover sex, but to isolate it. Bodies, desire, jealousy, tenderness, fertility, shame, delight, transgression—these are ancient. We had them in Athens, in Rome, and in Jerusalem, in monasteries and marketplaces, in royal beds

and rented rooms. The world did not wait for the twentieth century to feel longing. But sometime in the last sixty years or so, we sharpened a particular idea of sex into being: a category, a discrete object, something that can be named apart from the rest of life.

This was, in one sense, an achievement. The modern world often has a genius for taking what was once woven into the fabric of existence and pulling it loose into a separate thread. We did this with religion, with politics, with childhood, with art, with the self. We made departments of them. We made vocabularies. We became experts. So too with sex.

And yet there is a loss in that sharpness. For as soon as we isolate a thing, we begin to imagine that we have mastered it. We pin the specimen and declare the creature known. But the human

heart is not a cabinet of dazzling insects, and what is most living in desire has a way of dying when held too hard beneath the light.

What if sex is not best understood as an act at all, but as an encounter? As a way in which one person comes near another—through the body, but never only through the body. No human experience of intimacy is ever generic. It is always this person, this hour, this room, this history. It is never simply the act. It is the texture around it.

*One can say what
happened and still
miss what happened.*

Perhaps that is why language strains here. A kiss may be described mechanically and yet not described at all. One can say what happened and still miss what happened. The truth lies in the inflexion: who turned first, who hesitated, who allowed themselves to be seen. These are not ornaments to the event. They are the event.

And because they are, subtlety matters.

Perhaps this is one of the things our age understands least. We are trained to prefer the explicit, the visual, the frontal. We distrust allusion. Yet desire often comes sideways. It lingers in tone, in implication, in the slight shift in a room when one particular person has become suddenly more present. The deepest human things often arrive obliquely because they are tender.

*Desire that rushes to
possess loses the very
thing it seeks—the living
mystery of the other.*

There is an old screen test of James Dean and Lois Smith for *East of Eden* that shows this beautifully. What you notice is not grasping, but appreciation: a charged attentiveness, playful and uncertain, in which the other person is not

seized but discovered. The energy comes from regard, from receptivity, from a kind of wondering notice. It is erotic, but it is also courteous: an act of attention.

For there is a difference between desire that grasps and desire that appreciates. The first wants to take. The second wants to behold. The first shortens the distance too quickly, anxious to convert mystery into possession. The second allows mystery to remain partly itself and is all the more moved by that partial unknowability.

And perhaps that is why so much of the most affecting human intimacy takes place by side doors: through humour, through pauses, through what is almost said. People often reveal themselves in profile before they can bear to do so face-on. A glance can hold what words would crush.

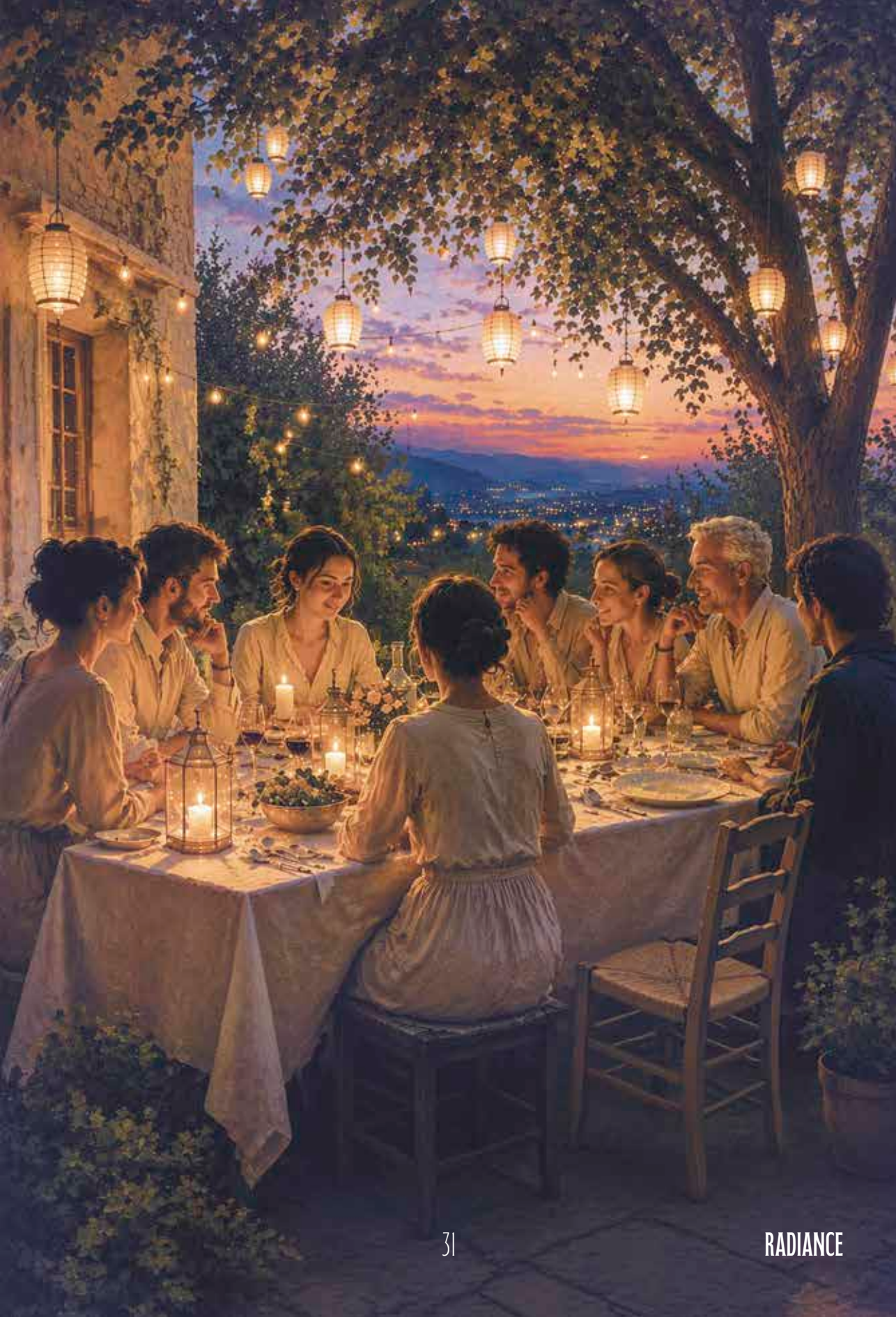
So yes: modernity invented sex, in the sense that it gave us a new and overconfident way of talking about it. But the older truth remains less tractable. Human closeness is not exhausted by any category because persons are not exhausted by any category.

*The deepest forms
of intimacy arrive
indirectly, because they
are too delicate to be
forced into the open.*

The best moments of intimacy are recognitions. They seem to say: we have seen beauty, and she has looked back at us.

So let us keep to the woodland path a little longer. Let us not rush to drag everything into the open and call it understood. Better, perhaps, to admit that what is finest in human attraction is something between: speakable only with care, and truest when approached at an angle. Not grasping but appreciating.

Not the hard pride of having named a thing, but the gentler grace of having glimpsed, for a moment, what in another person can never be possessed, only met. ♦





Before You Are Ready

YOU MUST SIT DOWN AND EAT

~~~~~  
*An ordinary invitation—a cup of tea, an open door—becomes a quiet encounter with a grace that asks nothing yet changes everything.*  
~~~~~

by *Annabelle Burns*

Almost 20 years have passed since my friend Ali died of cancer, but I still remember her invitations: “Stay for a cup of tea.” She always meant it.

It was such a small thing, and yet, more often than I realised at the time, it asked something of me that I did not quite know how to give: to stop, to receive, to stay, before I felt ready.

This memory is why I still treasure the wooden container that held her endless supply of teabags, even though the round knob on the lid is constantly falling off, despite multiple attempts at mending.

I was in my early twenties and had recently moved to London when I first met her. She owned a house and what seemed like an endless supply of things that I needed to borrow or use—a hammer, a printer, a recipe, a sleeping

bag, a toilet (when the bathroom in our shared house was occupied by someone taking an unnecessarily long shower). With every knock on the door and request for a favour or advice, there was always the offer of a cup of tea. It wasn’t politeness, she genuinely meant it, and if you could sit down and talk for a while, even better.

Ali’s house was not spotlessly clean. She was not an especially good cook. She was not always well-organised or well-presented, and her home was not always prepared for the visits of guests. In many ways, she was a terrible hostess, and yet she was the embodiment of true hospitality.

I was privileged to meet a number of people like Ali in the village-like corner of London where I found myself living at that time, people who valued community over status and connection over competition. As a child, when my parents



hosted visitors, it was always preceded by an anxious flurry of tidying up and the hiding of our ordinary mess. Even for close friends and family, our home had to be polished and prepared before it was worthy to be shared.

Yet here I was met with a spontaneous generosity that made no such demands, no preparation, no performance, just an open door and the assumption that I would come in.

Here, I began to understand something of grace.

In George Herbert's poem Love (III), he writes:

"Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin."

Many of us feel unworthy of genuine hospitality when it is offered without expectation or agenda. Our world has taught us that kindness must be repaid, that a gift must be earned, that we must not impose or overstay our welcome, and so we hesitate, we apologise, we linger at the threshold, unsure whether we belong.

My instinct has often been to step back, to assume I am undeserving.

Herbert's poem ends with a simple insistence:

"You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat."

Learning to give and receive true hospitality is a journey I continue to walk, both in a practical sense, with Ali's teabag container serving as a daily nudge towards generosity, and in a spiritual one.

God's grace is not something I earn or prepare myself for, it is given.

My actions—love, joy, peace, faithfulness, kindness—grow from the spirit within me, and I seek to nurture them. But grace does not need me to succeed in this, it welcomes me anyway.

At a soup kitchen run in a local church, the organisers read a prayer together before the meal. It ends with a line inspired by Catholic Worker liturgy:

"The door of my heart is open, the door of my home is left ajar."

An open heart makes space for others, and opening our homes, in turn, reshapes the heart.

I do not have to anxiously tidy away my mess before the grace of God can fill my soul. I am enough, and living in this knowledge changes me, and changes the way I move through the world.

I still live in the neighbourhood where I first met Ali, and I am continually blessed, both materially and spiritually, by the connections and community I find there. In a sermon reflecting on the role of shepherds and kings in the Christmas story, Scottish theologian Doug Gay wrote:

"Those who hanker after the stars, are given flesh, and those who embrace flesh are given the stars."

A cup of tea, a door left ajar, a table where nothing has been carefully prepared in advance, and still the invitation is there.

Not when I am ready, not when I have earned it, not when I have made myself presentable, but now.

And I am learning, slowly, to stay, to sit down, and to eat. ♦

*We linger at
the threshold,
unsure whether
we belong, until
Love insists
that we sit, and
receive.*



Everyday Grace

THE LUMINOUS ORDINARY

On the temptation to believe that meaning and holiness belong to lives more beautiful than our own

by *Marie Moore*

Among my clearest memories of those heady early days of the Covid lockdowns, when staying home felt more like time off than house arrest, was binging the BBC's new adaptation of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*.

While neither the book nor the film is filled with comic moments, one of the jokes the author allowed us must surely be the title itself, for the main characters are most certainly not normal. They are remarkably clever and talented, succeeding with apparently little effort, and their periods of depression still looked somehow glamorous. I knew that the story was at heart about university students trying and mostly failing to have relationships, in the same way my friends and I did as students, but even watching them cook dinner seemed better than when I did it.

I have noticed the same temptation exists

when considering our spiritual practice. Often when I think about those in religious life, such as priests, seminarians, and nuns, I imagine with a touch of envy how much easier it must be for them to grow spiritually, and how much better people they must (or at least could) be than me. If I had become a nun, then naturally I would be a wiser, holier person by now, not dealing with the same faults I've had all my life. Just as Connell and Marianne's tedious misunderstandings seem much more engaging than the ones I've had, so I imagine a nun's daily routine must be holier than anything I could hope to develop myself.

Of course, I know I'm wrong. Firstly, a five-minute conversation with anyone in religious life is enough to put a stop to these imaginings – at least temporarily. The ones I've spoken to do admittedly have more time set aside for prayer, but do not appear to find their lives particularly

*I realise my
fantasies
crucially lack
the details that
cause friction in
daily life.*

enchanted. It turns out that seminarians can be as irritated by someone eating their personal cereal as I was when a housemate took the cranberry bread I had just bought.

While priests don't have commutes to put them in a bad mood, they do have endless calls upon their time and mind-numbing administrative tasks. I realise my fantasies crucially lack the details that cause friction in daily life: the piercing screech of train rails, long queues in a shop, a colleague's passive-aggressive comment. In this light what I long for seems not so much a life of holy contemplation, but rather a selfish withdrawal from one lived in contact with others.

The more substantial part of my mistake though is probably in thinking that having a normal secular life sets a limit on spiritual practice, or perhaps in thinking that the two can be separated at all. There is no such thing as the holy parts of my life and the rest of it. Christians are meant to dedicate every aspect of our lives to God. The call to holy orders is beautiful, but it is only for a few (who are still not spared life's little irritations). The rest of us would do well to remember that what looks like normal life, whether married or celibate, is a calling too when lived in accordance with God's will.

Learning to Notice Grace

I most easily forget this when confronted with the monotony of work. Typing emails at an MDF desk in a stuffy office feels like a far cry from praying in a Victorian church smelling of incense, and I know which one feels more like a sacred calling. Writing to the Colossians though, St Paul instructed enslaved Christians to do their work as if it were for the Lord rather than for human masters, since their reward will come from Him. St Paul repeats the instructions again to the Ephesians, telling them to serve wholeheartedly as if it were for God rather than people. It suggests this difficulty of reconciling the demands of one's secular life with a holy life dates back to the church's earliest days.

The question then arises: how do I make my mundane life holy? For a start, changing the physical space helps. At my confirmation I received a small crucifix that stood for years on my desk at home and is currently above my mantel. Aside from being a lovely piece of decoration, it serves as a reminder to pray. I have similar items in other rooms of the house. Another way I've found of integrating my Sunday self with my working self is through prayer. Every day on my walk to the station I say a decade of the Rosary, sometimes out loud if I'm feeling brave or think I won't be heard.

Aside from these changes in routine, I'm learning that signs of God's presence are there to be found when I start looking. If my office is quiet, I can often hear the bells of the nearby church. During the brief walk in a park on the way there I listen to the birds when I can stop the endless to-do list that runs through my head from drowning them out. With time, patience, and persistence, I am hopeful that one day I'll completely dissolve the barrier between my normal routines and spiritual practice, and it will all be the luminous ordinary.





COAXING THE RETURN OF WONDER

Wonder does not belong to childhood. It returns—quietly—when we learn to linger where meaning does not immediately give itself away.

by *Fr Kevin O'Donnell*

A child stands before a painting and does not move. Others pass by. The child remains. Not asking questions. Not taking a photograph. Just looking.

It is a small thing. But it reveals how easily we forget how to see.

I remember when it happened for me.

I was a child, on a trip to the Isle of Man. We had wandered, almost by accident, into a small, wooded glade. There was nothing dramatic about it—no grand vista, no famous landmark. Just trees, light, and a kind of quiet that seemed to gather everything into itself. The sunlight glistening on the water, the buzz of insects, the white flowers budding beneath the trees...

And yet, something in that moment held me.

I could not have explained it then, and I am not sure I can fully explain it now. It was simply that

the world, for a brief moment, felt more present than usual—more given. As if I had stepped, without intending to, into something that did not depend on me, and yet included me.

That sense has never quite left me.

The Habit of Moving On

We live in an age of explanation. We can describe the origins of the universe, map the brain, predict outcomes with astonishing precision. There is something genuinely remarkable in this.

And yet, alongside this expansion, something else has quietly receded. We have become uneasy with what we cannot master.

We are trained—almost without noticing—to approach the world as something to be processed, understood, and then moved past. Even our moments of rest are shaped by this.

A World That Still Breaks Through

And yet, it would be wrong to say that wonder has disappeared. If anything, there are signs that people are beginning, in different ways, to rediscover it.

The renewed attentiveness to the natural world—the language of ecology, the desire to protect what is fragile and given—suggests a growing awareness that the world is not simply raw material for our use.

Even in more ordinary ways, one notices it. Nature programmes, for example, have drawn millions into a renewed sense of the beauty and intricacy of the world. There is a reason why voices like David Attenborough's resonate so widely. They do more than inform; they awaken.

*We have learned to move
on quickly—but not to
remain long enough to see.*

Something similar can be seen in the renewed interest in pilgrimage—an activity also shown increasingly on TV—where people set out, often without entirely knowing why, walking long distances, entering into landscapes not as observers but as participants.

These are small signs, perhaps. But they suggest that the desire for wonder has not been extinguished. It has simply been neglected.

Learning to See Again

The difficulty is not that the world has become less capable of evoking wonder. It is that we have become less practised in receiving it. We move too quickly to recognition—I understand what this is—and in doing so, we lose the deeper encounter. A painting becomes an object to be identified. A place becomes something to photograph. An experience becomes something to share.

But wonder begins where this movement slows. It requires patience. A willingness to remain with what does not immediately disclose itself.

The child in the gallery has not yet learned to move on. He allows himself to be addressed by what is before him.

We might say that wonder begins, quite simply, in attention.

Not Explanation, but Presence

There is one place where this kind of attention is not only invited but required.

The liturgy does not explain itself.

It does not begin with arguments, but with gestures, words, and silences that ask something of us. To someone encountering it for the first time, it can seem unfamiliar, even unnecessary.

And yet, over time, something shifts.

The repetition becomes meaningful. The silences become full. One finds oneself no longer standing outside what is happening but drawn into it.

This is not because everything has been explained. It is because something has been recognised.

The Return

If wonder has diminished, it is not because the world has become less worthy of it. It is because we have forgotten how to receive it. And yet, it returns: not as something we can summon, but as something that interrupts us—often in the most ordinary of moments. A glance, a landscape, a fragment of music, a stillness we had not planned for.

We cannot force such moments. But we can make ourselves available to them. By staying a little longer. By resisting the impulse to move on too quickly. By allowing what is before us to speak in its own time.

*Wonder does not explain
the world. It allows the
world to be given.*

In the end, wonder is not something we manufacture. It is something we recognise. And perhaps nowhere is that recognition more quietly, more deeply given than in the Mass. Not as an explanation, but as a presence. Not something to be grasped, but something to be received.

The same world. The same gestures. And yet, suddenly, more is there.

Not new.

But newly seen. ♦





AGAINST THE GOSPEL OF MORE, MORE, MORE

Why the walls we resent may be the ones that save us

by Thomas Arnaud-Beaumont

No Limits! Beyond...Unlimited! These are not just slogans. They are metaphysical claims. We are told, gently but relentlessly, that the purpose of life is expansion—more options, more experiences, more autonomy, more choice.

To be limited is to be diminished. To be constrained is to be oppressed. Salvation lies somewhere past the edge of whatever boundary currently contains us.

But what if a life without limits is not liberation—but vertigo?

Watch children play. The moment they invent a game, they invent rules. “You can’t touch the ground.” “You have to hop.” “You’re the dragon, but only after I count to five.” The rules are not imposed by a small authoritarian regime of toddlers. They arise naturally. No game works without boundaries. The fence is not the enemy

of play; it is the condition of play. Remove the rules, and the game dissolves.

When the Walls Come Down

G.K. Chesterton saw this more than a century ago in his jubilant defence of Christianity, *Orthodoxy*. He imagines children playing on the top of a high castle wall. As long as the walls are strong and high, the children race right up to the edge. They are bold. They are free. But remove the walls, and they retreat to the centre of the rooftop, anxious and subdued. The absence of limits does not make them daring. It makes them afraid.

Limits create courage.

The same is true everywhere else.

Put six people in a room with instruments and tell them to play whatever they like, with no shared key, no rhythm, no structure. It does not sound like jazz. It sounds like chaos.

Structure is not the enemy of music; it is what allows harmony to exist at all.

Allow children to assemble an outfit with no guidance and the result is often an experiment in clashing colors and confused proportions. Allow adults unlimited cookies and the result is not happiness but heaviness. The “no limits” rock-and-roll lifestyle, so intoxicating in theory, so often ends in rehab.

Freedom without form does not produce ecstasy. It produces noise.

The modern world preaches transcendence without obedience. Break every boundary. Smash every tradition. Refuse every restraint. But human beings are not infinite creatures. We are finite, embodied, fragile. To pretend otherwise is not bold. It is delusional.

The Deadline We Fear

The deepest limit of all is death.

We avoid speaking of it except in hushed tones, as if it were an embarrassment. We treat it as the ultimate cruelty—the final indignity imposed upon otherwise limitless beings.

But what if death, too, is a mercy?

“Time’s up. Hand in your paper.”

Thank God.

Without an ending, nothing would have weight. Without a deadline, no decision would matter. Without the certainty that time is short, we would drift endlessly, postponing love, deferring courage, waiting forever to begin.

Death draws a line under the sentence of a life. It gathers the fragments and says: this is the story.

To accept death is not to become morbid. It is to become urgent. It is to realise that life is a gift precisely because it is bounded. A day has twenty-four hours. A year has seasons. A body has limits. A life has an end.

The refusal of limits is, at heart, a refusal of creatureliness. It is a refusal to be human.

The Rule That Frees

The Catholic tradition proposes something quietly radical in response: not the elimination of limits, but their celebration.

Consider the Benedictine way of life.

The monastic tradition founded by Benedict of Nursia is governed by what is simply called a Rule. The monks of the Order of Saint Benedict rise

at fixed hours. They pray at fixed hours. They eat together. They work. They rest. They return again and again to the same psalms, the same rhythms, the same cloistered paths.

From the outside, it looks restrictive. From the inside, it feels like relief.

*Limits do not shrink
our lives. They make
them playable.*

The Rule is not extreme. It is moderate. Benedict was wary of excess. He understood that spiritual heroics can harden the heart. The Rule bends the will, but it does not break the person. It creates structure without cruelty. It imposes limits that make love sustainable.

There is a reason monasteries have endured for centuries while empires have risen and collapsed.

Visit a monastery for a few days. Pray with the community. Leave your phone in your room. Let the bell tell you when to stop working. Let the psalms tell you what to say when you do not know how to pray. Eat what is set before you. Go to bed when the lights dim.

At first, you may feel restless. Your mind will reach for stimulation. But then something unexpected happens.

Relief.

The constant burden of self-invention begins to lift. You are no longer required to curate your identity hour by hour. You do not have to optimise your life. You simply inhabit it. The limits hold you.

*Freedom without form does
not produce ecstasy. It
produces noise.*

And within those walls, something surprising emerges: joy.

Not the frantic joy of excess. Not the sugar high of unlimited choice. A quieter joy. The joy of proportion. The joy of enough.

Modernity equates limits with loss. The Gospel suggests that limits can be love.



Marriage is a limit: one person, not all persons. Sabbath is a limit: one day set apart, not endless productivity. Fasting is a limit: not every appetite must be satisfied. Chastity is a limit: desire disciplined, not denied. Obedience is a limit: my will aligned to something greater than myself.

Each of these appears, at first glance, like a diminishment. In practice, they carve out space for depth.

We are not infinite beings trapped in finite bodies. We are finite beings invited into eternity. The path there does not bypass our limits. It runs straight through them.

The child inside the castle walls laughs because he knows he will not fall. The monk inside the cloister sings because the hours are ordered. The ageing man who accepts death can whisper, at last, “It is enough.”

There is a strange comfort in hearing, at the end of an exam, “Time’s up.”

You have written what you could. You have done

what you could. You are no longer responsible for infinite revisions. The paper is handed in.

*Inside a life gently
bounded, the soul
begins to unclench.*

Perhaps the mercy of limits is this: they free us from the unbearable task of being gods.

The world shouts that salvation lies beyond every wall.

Smash them. Expand. Escape. Transcend.

The Church, more quietly, suggests that the wall itself may be a gift.

Not a prison wall—a castle wall.

Within it, you can run right up to the edge and laugh.

Within it, you can play.

Within it, you can finally rest. ♦

I

N GRATITUDE

TO JIM, POETRY EDITOR

*Lulu, age 6. Aunt Donna, I want to build a City of Myth
out of popsicle sticks. And I think of you, language shaman.*

*Every Monday, your new poetry module lands at my inbox.
Dense with images, prompts. Seven-day deadline to build a city,
stride in pilgrimage, weep with victims.*

*And you? You are too good a poet to use a throw away word, cliché.
Distill, sharpen, write as only you can. Thank you.
Pointing us to storied poets who left operating instructions.
Actors who spoke into imperfect hearts, attempting the impossible.*

*You asked us to love and travel, like untamed gypsies,
into a broken world. To observe with both wide-angle
and zoom lenses. And then, when night comes,
we could lay down satisfied.*

*We created something tangible. Poetry, like prayer,
rising into the Great Mystery and to the only One
who knows us by heart.*

DONNA COOMBS

