

A Sacred Look: Becoming Cultural Mystics

Theology of Popular Culture

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Communicating Beauty-A Sacred Look

Seeing is a function of the body but also a function of the soul. The human person sees tangible realities and makes meaning that transcends these realities. This meaning comes from the depths of human understanding of what is being, what is real. To look at the real is to probe the depths of being. When we do this we touch upon ineffable realities that challenge and probe the human psyche to grasp a Beauty that is beyond itself, a Beauty that can be seen by plunging the depths of created reality. However, this effort often meets with ambiguity since created beauty, even though its purpose, whether conscious or not on the part of the artist, is to point to the beauty of the Creator from whom all beauty originates, is seen through humanity's deformed vision that often becomes enamored and distracted by penultimate beauties.¹ Sacred Scripture and theology tell us that this vision can be deformed by the darkness of sin that can blind and obscure one from seeing the beautiful harmony of creation pointing to the source of Beauty, who is Being itself.² To truly see this reality, the infinite beauty of the Creator in creaturely beauty, one must make that journey inward, perceived, as Augustine says, through our spiritual senses,³ to develop one's power to see beyond to the ultimate source. This interior journey allows us to understand that we, human beings, are not the creators or sustainers of life and reality. Instead, this interiorization opens us to a humble stance before transcendence, to that which is beyond our finite intellectualism, giving us eyes to see to the non-material, supernatural realities. This is the *sacred look*.

Everything in creation leads us to a harmonious relationship of the beauty and truth of individual creations to the beauty and truth of the Creator, the source and summit of all beauty. This is the heart of theological aesthetics, which, according to Hans Urs Von Balthasar, the main task is to cultivate the imaginative awareness to recognize created

¹ Cf. Forte, Bruno, *The Portal of Beauty: Toward a Theology of Aesthetics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 11.

² Forte, Bruno, *The Portal of Beauty*, 9.

³ Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* X, 6, 8: "What am I loving when I love you? Not bodily beauty nor the gracefulness of age, nor light's brightness, so dear to these eyes of mine; not the sweet melodies of song, nor the fragrance of flowers, of perfumes, of aromas; not manna, nor honey; not the body so dear to the embraces of the flesh: no, these are not the things I love when I love my God. And yet in a certain sense I do love light and sound, smell and food and embrace, when I love my God, the light, sound, smell, food, and embrace of my inner being."

beauty as manifesting the presence and glory of God.⁴ This relationship between creation and the Creator comes together in the incarnate Word made flesh, forming a bridge between creature and Creator. Augustine says that the Word is the perfection of Beauty, the way we enter into relationship with ultimate Beauty through the “superabundance of his life.”⁵ Thomas Aquinas shows that it is in beauty where the Incarnate Word is revealed to humanity.⁶

Through contemplation of the Son of God made man, we encounter the eternal self-communication of God that draws us into a relationship of love, where the Word is the icon of the Father.⁷ The icon is the image of the, “impossible possibility which God comes to accomplish in the world.”⁸ It is how the Transcendent, the One who is completely other and not confined to limits, shines forth in order to direct the gaze of the beholder to glimpse the eternal.⁹ At the same time, Henri Nouwen purports that the icon of the Transcendent also invites the beholder into an experience of the Divine.¹⁰ No longer is humanity trapped in its own existential darkness because through Christ we have been made new, as St. Paul says, we are a “new creation.”¹¹ It is by this contemplative *sacred look* through the power of the Holy Spirit that we see Christ as the perfection of humanity, the One who shows us what it truly means to be human. Christ in his humanity expresses the truth, beauty and goodness of God most unequivocally in his passion, death and resurrection. For it is in probing the depths of human existence in its desperate, despairing darkness that he brings humanity the hope of salvation. It is in the anguish of abandonment that he communicates a communion of love. It is in the horror of death that he offers eternal life.

⁴ Eggemeier, Matthew, T., *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 65.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 12, 18.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 39, a. 8c.

⁷ Forte, Bruno, *The Portal of Beauty*, 17.

⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰ Cf. Henri Nouwen's reflection on Rublev's icon in *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007), 20-22.

¹¹ 2 Cor. 5:17

By seeing the Word we see ourselves and we also see the One who is Other, the Trinitarian God who communicates the abundance of truth, beauty and goodness. As Bruno Forte expresses, “the beauty of ultimate Love evokes the love of beauty, which little by little draws our inner selves to travel the path that leads to perfect joy in God, who is all in all.”¹² This Trinitarian communion of love is the communicative expression of these qualities of being that flow forth upon all of creation in God’s self-communication. These qualities of the true, the good and the beautiful, these modes of being are often referred to as the *transcendentals*, meaning they lead us beyond material categories to the realm of the spiritual. Human beings are the receivers of this communication of God, but not passively or alone. Instead, this communication calls forth an active relationship of love—a two-way communication that gives birth to creative beauty in humanity, in community, expressed in its cultural artifacts that communicate the depths of human experience. This response does not remain only with the artist or the observer of the art, but moves beyond to the entire community. It is in grappling with what it means to be human that we come to an experience of the Divine. We, therefore, enter into that transcendent communication with God the Father aided by the grace of the Spirit, with Jesus, the Word made flesh, as our mediator.

This communication with God takes place most concretely in liturgical worship and sacraments. It is through the communal worship of believers who embody rituals that communicate reverence, praise and adoration of God that this relationship of love is clearly expressed. In the liturgy, the gathering of the faithful for worship, Christ is present in his Word and Eucharist, thereby the believers enter into a profound and corporeal intimacy with Christ and his Body, the Church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, liturgical/sacramental rituals and symbols use material objects and human actions as means for encountering the Word made flesh, He who comes to redeem us and draw into a new and lasting relationship with himself. Through the objects of bread, wine, fire, water, oil, incense, icons, artistic images and the theatricality of ritual, we not only

¹² Ibid., 11.

perceive the Divine mediated through the tangible realities but truly receive grace, the gift of God himself, communicated through the material symbols and embodied rituals.

It is through these symbols and signs that our *cultural imaginations* are formed. That is, the way we view reality and our place within the wider cultural experience, and in this case, the digital media culture. When Dr. Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock in the film *Gravity*, is stranded in a capsule at the International Space Station without fuel to propel her to the Chinese Space Station in order to return to Earth, she shuts the system down and prepares for death. One camera shot focuses on a small icon of St. Christopher, the patron of travellers, while Ryan is giving up on life. This symbolic screen shot offers the viewer a sign of hope, communicating that we are never all alone. There is Someone guiding and watching over us. Our liturgical communal practices represent that desire for human beings to belong, to be in communion. Though Dr. Stone was an independent, self-assured professional, she was also very lonely since her young daughter died in an accident. This was symbolized in her aloneness in space. Yet, through the communication with an Aleut-speaking fisherman on Earth she realizes then how she needs other people. Her perspective on life changes even while she is preparing for death.

To truly see with new eyes, to develop that *sacred look* that sees beyond the cultural imagination and the tangible realities to a broader liturgical and sacramental vision of the human person, there is a need for *cultural mystics*. These are people who embody the desire for transcendence, that is, the desire to reach beyond what is tangible and surpass finiteness, while critically engaging the popular culture. They offer a perception of reality that is anthropological-incarnational-sacramental. As Von Balthasar states that in encountering such a person our faith compels us, “to see, to respect, and to anticipate in action”¹³ the profoundly rich image which the triune God has of each person and all of creation. This embodied encounter then with, we could say, the *popular cultural mystic*, is a spiritual exercise in recognizing God’s presence in the world and especially in the artistic questioning in regard to human experience that ferments in popular culture. All Christians are called to be mystics, to see the world with eyes of faith. It is through a

¹³ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *The Glory of the Lord: Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. I, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leva-Merikakis, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 423.

contemplative stance on the world and our popular culture that mystics offer a transcendental view of reality that is only fulfilled in the beatific vision of our God.

Experiencing Transcendence—Theology of Grace

Human beings experience the world in and through the self. We become self-aware as we come to knowledge of the world around us and develop language. These are functions of the non-material dimensions of personhood. We exist in the world as spiritual beings since we do not exist completely immersed in the material. As persons, in the philosophical and theological sense, we are metaphysical substances while also being relational subjects.¹⁴ There is a dimension of our personhood that is not influenced solely by the world in which we live. This is the experience of transcendence, according to Karl Rahner.¹⁵ Since we are free, intelligent creatures we can reflect on the transcendent realities of our lives and have hopes, dreams, loves and question the ultimate purpose of our existence. To acknowledge these fundamental questions is to recognize that we are ultimately oriented to mystery. We are constantly seeking and searching for these transcendent realities that are beyond us and we yearn for that something more that they represent. These existential structures of self-awareness, transcendence and freedom are present in all human existence. These influences, says Rahner, are part of what constitutes true personhood.¹⁶ An understanding of the human person, and the person's existential desires, yearnings and purpose provide a lens with which to view popular culture from a theological anthropological perspective. This then will lead to a recognition of the *supernatural existential* in each human being, that longing for 'the more' that is made visible through the symbols of the popular culture's artifacts.

Personhood

¹⁴ Patrick McArdle, "Ecce Homo: Theological Perspectives on Personhood and the Passions", *Australian eJournal of Theology* 7, June 2006.

http://aejt.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/395737/AEJT_7.18_McArdle.pdf

¹⁵ O'Donovan, Leo, Ed., *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 26.

If we look to the dawn of the Enlightenment and into the postmodern era humanity has seen an increase in denial of human personhood. Considering the extreme destructive forces of the two great world wars of the twentieth century along with the many incidences of genocide we come to realize that an ideology that disregards human dignity is lurking beneath the surface of human intelligence and power. When there is a denial of transcendence, as the postmodernists purport, then there logically follows a denial of the concept of person since transcendence is essential to this concept of personhood.¹⁷ Science, specifically the neo-Darwinian evolutionary biological perspective, which has become the postmodernist religion, focuses so much on nature to the exclusion of person.

Not only does this neo-Darwinian view of science exclude the person, but the market economy can also diminish personhood. Our technological consumerist society blocks human beings from recognizing the deeper realities of human existence because it focuses on a manipulated surface reality.¹⁸ The television show, *Mad Men*, effectively portrays Madison Avenue advertising executives in the 1960s, who persuade people to buy products they do not necessarily need as long as it brings in big money. The compelling impulse to consume, which drives popular culture, is what Pope Francis calls the “poison of emptiness”¹⁹ that threatens true happiness. It devalues the person by insinuating that having things and profit is what brings fulfillment to life. Instead, as the Pope emphasizes, it brings a life devoid of meaning and values.²⁰ Consumerism treats the person as a commodity, buying and selling our hopes and dreams as simply as we buy and sell candy bars, razors, cars and beer. It threatens human beings’ freedom to live according to the higher values of love, rather than the base material instincts, as John Paul II would often express.²¹ Consumerism also reduces the human person to an object—either one that is consumed or one that continually consumes. This limits the human being’s freedom to seek the true, the good and the beautiful, since authentic freedom

¹⁷ Philip A. Rolnick, *Person, Grace and God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 6.

¹⁸ Brian Gleeson, CP, “Symbols and Sacraments: Their Human Foundations,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 2 (February 2004), 11.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Angelus Message* Aug-5-2013, Catholic News Service

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Raymond J. de Sousa, “John Paul II and the Problem of Consumerism,” *Religious and Liberty*, Vol. 9, No. 5, <http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-9-number-5/john-paul-ii-and-problem-consumerism>

according to Rahner, “is not the power to be able to do this or that, but the power to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself.”²² It is the freedom to constitute oneself as person.²³

In our imaginary and sometimes not-so-imaginary worlds, this view of the human person naturally leads to dystopian societies where the destructive forces of our fallen human nature reign. Evolutionary biology dissipates the concept of the human person so that, “In the dismal view of things, love, personhood, and virtually all of human existence would be reduced to the struggle for genetic continuity in which selfish individuals seek to maximize their own little niches in a competitive and hostile environment.”²⁴ This is poignantly portrayed in the film, *The Giver*, where society has become so controlled in a faux utopian community as to impede human freedom, love and creativity. The young man Jonas (Brenton Thwaites) is selected to be the Receiver of Memory and so comes into contact with The Giver (Jeff Bridges) who shares the secrets and knowledge of the past with him. This opens Jonas up to the deceits of the leaders and their control on human freedom and knowledge as a way of preventing war and destruction through new ideas.

The Christian perspective is that the human person is not fungible,²⁵ meaning that the human person is not interchangeable with any other similar or identical item. Richard of St. Victor and Aquinas assumed from Boethius the term *incommunicabilis*, which means that a person has a non-transferable uniqueness. Just as there is a completeness within the unity of the Persons of the Trinity, there is also a differentiation in the relationships that glories in the uniqueness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as distinct Persons in the One God. The human person’s personality, then, is a uniqueness that cannot be replicated.²⁶ This is compatible with the concept of human dignity. Human beings are made in the “image and likeness”²⁷ of God and because of that have meaning and purpose. As Christoph Cardinal Schönborn relates, “The world was made for man, but man was made for God. The true ‘locus’ of his dignity is to be sought in this unique designation of man,

²² Rahner, Karl, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 38.

²³ Duffy, Stephen, J., *The Dynamics of Grace*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 278.

²⁴ Rolnick, *Person, Grace and God*, 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁷ Genesis 1:26

which makes him, in the midst of all other creatures, the living image of God.”²⁸ He continues to write that this realization of the dignity of the human person is a liberating message and one that provides good news for the constantly desperate seeking of humanity today.²⁹ Once humanity bases its dignity on a type of “pure nature” making itself the ultimate reality and finding an end in it, it then becomes destructive. Hans Urs von Balthasar writes so succinctly that, “Only where God is person is the human being taken seriously as person.”³⁰

Grace as Divine Gift

Christian theological tradition holds that deep within the human being is an inherent tendency to evil that is activated through an immorality leading to social disorder and disintegration. Stephen Duffy says this can only be healed by grace.³¹ We have the ability to make choices, however, and we are capable of recognizing, even when violence and hostility seem natural reactions, the possibility of the grace offered to us by God to act in a way that appeals to our higher selves. Grace is God giving of himself to humanity. This gift of grace alone allows Father James (Brendan Gleeson) in the film *Calvary* to respond to a murder threat with supernatural forgiveness and self-sacrificing love. Karl Rahner writes that, “The capacity for the God of self-bestowing personal Love is the central and abiding existential of man as he really is.”³² That existential is the supernatural longings in the human person. Grace does not diminish human nature or supersede it, since Father James continues to struggle with his own humanity. Rather, it builds upon it and is “an unsurpassable perfectioning of nature.”³³

A theology of grace leads to a theology of hope. The belief in the reality of grace leads to salvation from our self-destructiveness. Grace is a foundation of the reality of faith. Only God can be this foundation since he communicates himself through the Holy

²⁸ Christoph Cardinal Schonborn, *Man, the Image of God: The Creation of Man as Good News*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 40.

²⁹ Ibid., 68.

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, Eds. Medard Kehl, SJ, Werner Loser, SJ, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982), 194.

³¹ Susan A. Ross, *Anthropology*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 114.

³² Rahner, *A Rahner Reader*, 187-8.

³³ Ibid., 176.

Spirit to humanity as its ultimate salvation. It is grace that exclusively mediates salvation, which is at the core of revelation. Through grace, God imparts himself to humanity, for it is “the free action of divine love which is only ‘at the disposal’ of man precisely in so far as he is at the disposal of this divine love.”³⁴ It is this grace that God offers, the gift of himself, that produces the desire for the supernatural in the human person. Human beings receive this gift of Love Itself as something wholly not owed to us, as the “unexacted real receptivity” that is built upon the concrete quiddity of our nature,³⁵ as Rahner calls it.

This gift of grace, of God’s own life in the soul, means that something of God’s light and uniqueness shines within the human person, who when God chooses that person and acts within him, his own light shines through.³⁶ Art has this unique ability to express that light in the grace of perseverance in the films *Whiplash* and *The Straight Story*, bringing out the goodness and undying spirit in the person. God’s work of grace, of salvation, comes through His Son, Jesus Christ. As such, humanity’s guilt, sin and finiteness are subsumed into Christ’s redemptive suffering so that humanity can be set free from the oppressiveness of sinful human nature. There is a restlessness in the human spirit that longs for this supernatural gift of grace, one that cannot be attained by any natural means. No matter how much human beings long for it, this world alone cannot satisfy all our deepest longings, as is expressed in *Before Midnight*, the last of a trilogy of films created and directed by Richard Linklater about a man and a woman who met eighteen years earlier on a train in Vienna. In this film, they have become a couple and have twin daughters. Their conversation centers around their deep, profound longings and needs. Celine (Julie Delpy) tells Jesse (Ethan Hawke) that each of their personal fantasies and dreams of communion, love and happiness will never match the imperfections of daily life. They will always desire something more.

The human need for grace is evident in the world, especially when we see and hear of destructive forces at work. If God is not active in human existence we would have destroyed ourselves long ago. Instead, there is the power of God’s self-communication

³⁴ Ibid., 70, 178-80.

³⁵ Ibid., 188-9.

³⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement With God*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 82.

present at every moment, to every person, in every circumstance. That is the gift of grace. This grace is what gives us the ability to reach for *the more*, to the supernatural world, to what is beyond our material existence.

Supernatural Existential

The transcendental experience of our personhood is our starting point, as Rahner explains, for speaking about God.³⁷ Yet there is another existential structure through which grace becomes present. That is what Rahner calls the “supernatural existential.”³⁸ This is the understanding that the finite, material world is not enough to sufficiently quell the deepest longings of our being. We are not satisfied with the natural world, although we sometimes worship it as if it were God or pursue our interests as if this is all there is. Human beings long for *the more* that can be known and loved. There is a longing for the infinite, the non-material, the supernatural that is present in every human being. It is in this self-aware desire for freedom, transcendence and the supernatural that grace is present.

Based on Rahner’s assertion, popular culture, too, can become a means for experiencing the transcendent. There is a pursuit for *the more* in contemporary television shows, film, music and social media. We see this supernatural existential in contemporary television shows such as *Jane the Virgin* whose main character mimics the Virgin Mary’s pregnancy with Jesus except that she is accidentally inseminated rather than through divine intervention and faces her pregnancy with her morally strict family. She seeks to do the right thing while struggling with her humanness. The religious satire of *The Simpsons* pokes fun at human foibles and religious practices while addressing issues of belief in the supernatural through its cleverly concocted scripts. *Constantine* is a super hero who is troubled by past sins and struggles with his faith while fighting against evil under the burden of his misunderstanding of free will. *Madame Secretary* and *The Good Wife* continuously address religious and moral issues often showing that some things are just beyond human control and must be left to the realm of the supernatural. Popular

³⁷ O’Donovan, *A World of Grace*, p. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

MMORPGs³⁹ such as *World of Warcraft* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* offer power, control and fantasy that is beyond what one can obtain on this Earth. These games express the search for something more.

Our lived human experience leads us to seek that which transforms our existence into a life with God.⁴⁰ Everything authentically human, says Rahner, can be an experience of grace—God’s self-communicating love. This is completely gratuitous. This free love of God is what gives human beings the ability to contend with the darkness and weakness that overwhelms us. Humanity struggles with the angst of disunion, alienation and separation causing spiritual disintegration and darkness. We address this angst in every era and throughout the centuries. Volumes of books have been written on this subject that can fill libraries around the world. Yet, the angst remains. When knowledge cannot answer a profound human question then often the arts are a place to turn as a means to give expression to what cannot be fully communicated academically. Artists reach down deep in the human psyche and with sounds, images, reflections, tastes and feelings express the inexpressible in order to give voice to the groanings of humanity. It is often here, in the deep recesses of our beings, where grace is at work. Artists, then, are the conduits of grace if they let themselves truly experience and give expression to these existential anxieties of humanity.

The role of the artist as such is expressly portrayed in the Oscar-winning Danish film, *Babette’s Feast*⁴¹. The French woman, Babette, enters a small coastal village in Denmark where the staunch inhabitants live strict and somber lives. She is given hospitality in the home of two unmarried sisters, Martine and Philippa, after escaping the revolution in France where she lost her loved ones and her livelihood. Unknown to the women, Babette had been a famous chef in Paris and now she becomes the sisters’ cook. After many months, she discovers she has won a lottery and so takes the money to create a feast for the sisters and the villagers who belong to a Christian sect begun by their father. The feast she prepares is a culinary work of art, and it is in this lush experience of

³⁹ Massively multiplayer online role-playing games

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴¹ *Babette’s Feast*, DVD, Directed by Gabriel Axel, 1987, Beverly Hills, CA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Home Entertainment, 1989.

creativity that the villagers are transformed. Where before they were arguing and backbiting, they then become kind, loving, forgiving people and see possibilities for their lives beyond that night. It is within the artists' self-gift that grace enters to be a life force for communion and love. The artist, as Babette says, in order to be true to oneself, feels compelled to give expression to that supernatural power within by bringing together the physical and the spiritual. She tells Martine and Philippa, "Throughout the world sounds one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me the chance to do my very best." It is this gift of the artist that can communicate what words alone cannot suffice. Art communicates the truth of human existence, the hungers of humanity, the struggles for communion and the longings for something more than this world can provide. The artist communicates the *supernatural existential*, the gift of grace.

Receiving Grace through the Supernatural

When humanity is open to receive the divine gift of grace, it means that there is the ultimate desire for what is true, good and beautiful for these are the essence of every gift.⁴² This is the Catholic notion of grace building on nature. These *transcendentals*, properties of our being, are our "absolute points of reference"⁴³, as Karol Wojtyla would call them. They are present in creation and most clearly presented to us in Christ, for our relationship with God actualizes the true, good and beautiful in us.⁴⁴ What is ugly or evil cannot be received as a gift because the gift is ultimately bound to what is true, good and beautiful.⁴⁵ What is false and ugly is an entirely different category than gift. It is the opposite of gift since sin turns in on itself and cannot give or receive. We only give of ourselves and receive the gift of others in love. Love alone is what confirms the presence of these transcendentals in the human soul.

Each human being is a recipient of divine grace because we are recipients of God himself as his children who are made in the image and likeness of God. Since we are heirs and offspring of the divine, "our kinship to God is not by nature and necessity, but by the

⁴² Rolnick, *Person, Grace and God*, 170.

⁴³ Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, Andrzej Potocki, Trans., (Boston, MA: D. Reidel, 1979), 155.

⁴⁴ Rolnick, *Person, Grace and God*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

freedom of the gift—by grace.”⁴⁶ In this light, we see all as gift. All of being, what is good, true, beautiful, everything in the universe and every relationship is a gift from a most generous God. We are ourselves gifts from a loving Creator and so are already disposed to giving and receiving.⁴⁷ The ability to receive the gift comes from grace alone.

The transcendentals are the essence of the gift—the gift of friendship and love. We can never fully exhaust their potential since humanity is always seeking *the more*. In our desire for ultimate communion and connection we find glimpses of this divine union in friendships where persons are gifts to one another. Popular culture offers examples, such as the team in *NCIS: Los Angeles* who watch out for each other in their dangerous murder investigations. Senior Field Agent Sam Hanna (LL Cool J), partner to Special Agent G. Callen (Chris O’Donnell), rushes to the scene at the exact moment when Callen is about to be shot by a criminal. Such also is the example of the high-class intrigues of *Downton Abbey*, where the aristocratic Crawley family live out the drama of familial affairs in a class-driven post-Edwardian society. Because we are in relation with God who is truth, goodness and beauty, our self-gift to others is a living out of these very transcendentals.⁴⁸

In Christopher Nolan’s film, *Interstellar*, Dr. Amelia Brand (Anne Hathaway) tells Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), as they attempt a nearly impossible feat of directing their spaceship through a wormhole to discover alternate galaxies with life-sustaining planets, that science can understand most things, except love. They must choose to visit one more planet before returning to Earth and Brand wants to go to Edmund’s planet, an astronaut who left years ago for this planet discovery and may or may not be alive, but whom Brand loves. Speaking to her scientist shipmates for whom empirical evidence is paramount, “Love”, she says, “is the one thing that we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't understand it.” Love is a mystery since it surpasses time and space. It is that power within human beings that propels us toward the supernatural. It is ineffable.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 184-5.

Belief in God—Incarnational Perspective

An understanding of nature and grace leads us to consider the One who is above and beyond all human knowledge and intellectual experience. As the Apostles Creed states, “We believe in one God, Father Almighty.” This declaration of faith is the basis for our life as Christians. Not only the belief in God, but in God as Triune—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This very belief in God is often a question raised in the media culture, as is occasionally brought up in the television series *The Simpsons*, such as the episode of “Homer the Heretic” in its fourth season. In it, Homer avoids going to church on Sunday and stays home enjoying his time alone but later experiences a series of dreams in which God speaks to him, first through wrath but later through a discussion on the meaning of life. Even though God is somewhat misrepresented here, there is an element that shows how belief in God is a core human need and desire. We worship not to appease God but to respond to his loving invitation for a relationship. We are happier the more we enter into that relationship.

God is also mentioned in the popular music scene, such as when Grammy winner artists thank God during their acceptance of their awards. This is the case with Pharrell Williams, who even when performing his song *Happy* included the words, “happiness is the Lord.” Rapper LeCrae also does not forget to thank the Lord who is the “giver of all gifts,” as LeCrae explains. Yet, in this world of pop music icons, there is sometimes confusion in understanding the concepts of icon versus idol especially in relation to belief in the One God. Performers put on a persona that is an iconic representative of some image they wish to portray. This image may be idolized by fans but is not necessarily giving them god-like status. Yet, this deep human need to idolize a gift in someone or the performer themselves leads to a questioning of the need to worship a power that is beyond ourselves.

The Trinitarian doctrine supports our understanding of the profound human desire for intimacy and communion. It is within this Trinitarian communicative relationship of love that a theology of communications develops. As theologians Matthias Scharer and

Bernd Hilberath write, "Theology is a communicative event."⁴⁹ God the Father utters the Word who becomes flesh in the physical human body of the Virgin Mary. This mysterious incarnation of the Son of God become man in Jesus Christ is how a communications theology becomes tangible in popular culture. God comes to be one of us, truly human yet also truly divine. In his humanity, Jesus Christ shows us what it means to be authentically human. He does this through his consistent self-giving love, to his mother, to his disciples, to his enemies, to the world. Jesus' entire life is a communication of God's overflowing love and intense desire for human beings' love in return. Through the incarnation we come to know God. Through Jesus Christ we enter into a relationship with the Father through the Holy Spirit. It is here where the questions of popular culture take root: what does it mean to be human? Jesus Christ is the perfect answer.

An incarnational communications theology such as this does not remain at the recognition of God become man in Christ through the communicative self-giving love of God, but is one that takes root in the faith life of the believer. It becomes a communicative faith.⁵⁰ Through God's self-revelation, human beings are called to faith and in freedom can accept or not. When human persons accept the gift of God's self-communicative love in faith this gift is then received in the whole community of the church becoming a communicative faith,⁵¹ because it is a lived faith that draws others into the Trinitarian love of God. In and through the sacraments, where this communicative faith is tangibly experienced, the faith community is built up in a holistic way, through the involvement of the mind, will, heart and actions of each believer. It is, "through communicative actions," such as present in the Church's sacramental life, that, "people help one another to become truly human."⁵²

⁴⁹ Matthias Scharer and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to a New Theological Culture*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2008), 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁵¹ Cf. Ibid., 80.

⁵² Ibid., 17.

Expressing the Mystery—Sacramental Imagination

Human beings, as transcendent beings, are oriented to mystery, to the supernatural. We were born in mystery and directed to mystery. Karl Rahner says that the human person, “is the question to which there is no answer.”⁵³ This, however, does not mean that all of human existence is wrapped in uncertainty, but rather that the answers we attempt to make about our fundamental existential questions leave us only with more questions rather than answers. We are ultimately striving for communion with the supernatural, the other, who is God. Yet, this God we are ultimately oriented to is incomprehensible. Love is that which allows us to surrender our control of understanding the fulfillment of the human person and everything else to the incomprehensibility of God who is Love Itself. Mystery is not about that which we cannot know but rather about what we cannot transcend or exhaust. It is endlessly intelligible.⁵⁴

Liturgy and Sacraments

Since the spiritual is wrapped in mystery there is need for us finite beings to see the expression of God’s presence in the created world through tangible and material substances. The Church’s sacraments and liturgy are concrete communal expressions of the presence of God in creation.⁵⁵ Liturgical worship is the embodiment of created reality offering an act of worship of its Creator. Sacraments, through liturgical ritual, make grace perceptible. A *sacrament* is often defined in St. Augustine’s terms as a “visible sign of invisible grace” or a “sacred sign” that makes the sacred visible. This concept of sacrament can be understood in a much wider context than the connotation of the Seven Sacraments of the Church. It can also be understood as meaning that all that is visible holds the potential to be a sign of the sacred, all human experience can be the place where God is present.⁵⁶

⁵³ Rahner, Karl, *The Content of Faith*, (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2000), 73.

⁵⁴ O’Donovan, *A World of Grace*, 40.

⁵⁵ Eggemeier, Matthew, T., *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 9.

⁵⁶ Gleeson, *Symbols and Sacraments*, 1.

The purpose of sacraments is to not simply mediate grace, but to transform human existence. Richard McBrien states, “A sacramental perspective is one that ‘sees’ the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical.”⁵⁷ The broader understanding of sacrament, then, encompasses all of human experience that reaches for *transcendence* or *the more*. Rahner says that nothing is finished or fully created until it becomes a sacrament—a coming together of the natural with the supernatural. Christ effected a change in humanity, he says, and his humanity is the very visibility of God.⁵⁸ Christ is the perfect sacrament and through Christ the entire created order is made sacramental. Henri de Lubac calls it a, “sensible bond between two worlds”—the world of visibility and the world of God coming together in a sacrament. He says the, “Sacramental reality is not just any sign, which is provisional and can be changed at will.... It is always through it that we reach what it signifies; it can never be superseded, and its bounds cannot be broken.”⁵⁹

Sacraments employ symbols and signs that convey a depth of meaning. A sign specifically points to something beyond itself and communicates a sense that is deeper than the concrete object that it is. A symbol is a type of sign that often has numerous connotations and reaches beyond the sign itself to touch the imagination and emotions as a way of communicating feelings and ideas.⁶⁰ Symbols can take us to the depths of things and so can be experienced through contemplation and reflection. For this reason, art employs symbols that reach beyond the tangible realities to deeper truths of human existence and into the realm of the supernatural.⁶¹ We transcend the limits of our finite existence into the realm of the Divine. We reach over our present experience to touch the Divine Reality, God who is Creator of all that is, the ultimate desire of all human longings. This anthropological view is the very human basis for what is call sacramentality.⁶²

⁵⁷ McBrien, Richard, *Catholicism*, revised and updated edition, (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1994), 9-10.

⁵⁸ Cf. Rahner, Karl, *The Church and the Sacraments*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1974).

⁵⁹ de Lubac, Henri, *The Splendor of the Church*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 203-204.

⁶⁰ Gleeson, *Symbols and Sacraments*, 2

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

Sacramental Imagination

When we enter into the realm of mystery, and of God, the incomprehensible, we seek symbols and signs to give expression to our experiences, our emotions, and our awareness. These expressions are sacramental since they make the invisible God visible. Yet, it requires a certain awareness to recognize God present in human experience. This is a “sacramental awareness”⁶³ and is often the way of artists, poets and musicians, since it requires an acceptance of mystery while seeking to convey this through emotions and human expressions.

Sacramentality is seeing the presence of God in the world and in all human experience. It takes our imagination to move beyond the signs and symbols to the deeper meaning they convey—to the point that everyday experiences, situations, objects and persons are, “revelations of grace.”⁶⁴ The sacraments give actual grace. Popular culture’s artifacts, such as film, music and graphic art, can provide grace-filled moments. Robert Johnston says, “We are...provided with an occasion for encountering our Lord afresh, as God transforms the stuff of life into a sacramental that reveals briefly, yet indelibly, something of his glory and grace.”⁶⁵ Today cultural artifacts can be a channel of God’s self-communication and engage our *sacramental imagination*.⁶⁶

Our human faculty of imagination is the ability to form mental images in our minds of things we have not experienced through our senses. A sacramental imagination means that we can experience creation as a manifestation of God⁶⁷, allowing us to see beyond the physical to the supernatural. All of reality reveals the presence of God. It is seeing the tangible realities as conveying something of deeper meaning and purpose. It is an incarnational perspective of the world and human experience.

This sacramental imagination is present in contemporary popular stories, perhaps unconsciously, through the seeking of salvation, redemption, purpose, meaning and hope

⁶³ Gleeson, “Symbols and Sacraments,” 9.

⁶⁴ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

⁶⁵ Robert Johnston, “Visual Christianity,” in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century*, ed. Todd E. Johnson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 181.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

and through the use of everyday symbols to convey meaning. It is visible in the healing balm, like in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, sent to Katniss Everdeen to heal Peeta's wounds in *The Hunger Games*. Or like the interior guiding light that Avril Lavigne sings about in her chart-topping song, *Fly* when she says, *There's a light inside all of us / it's never hid and you just have to light it*, that speaks of the light of Christ symbolized through the candle at Baptism. This sacramental imagination is present in the sign of people gathered in communion for a meal that is experienced like Eucharist in the film, *Big Night*, or in how Matrimony is powerfully portrayed in *The Vow* and *The Painted Veil*. Reconciliation through sacramental forgiveness is expressed in *Calvary* and *The Fighter*. Vocation and calling as in Confirmation and Ordination is represented in *The Giver*, *The Amazing Spiderman*, and overtly in *Keeping the Faith*. Some popular cultural artifacts have all or most of the sacraments symbolically represented either explicitly, such as in *The Godfather* or implicitly as in *Spitfire Grill*.

These are sacramental moments in human experience and God's grace is active in the world through the many longings and desires of humanity. Sacramental imagination refers to the everyday events, persons, situations and experiences that are moments of God's self-communication—moments that reveal God's grace. These sacramentals make God's presence known, not just an idea of God, and so are revelations of grace at work in the world. Andrew Greeley says, "The objects, events and persons of ordinary existence hit at the nature of God and indeed make God in some fashion present to us. God is sufficiently like creation that creation not only tells us something about God but, by so doing, also makes God present among us."⁶⁸

Effective cultural mystics are those who can interpret the common human experience in the light of the great mysteries of faith using the symbols present in the natural world to illuminate our spiritual experiences. It is precisely these common everyday symbols that point to, or reveal, deeper realities that can be means of grace. Popular culture's use of these symbols and signs provide an understanding of our human experience and purpose. In the movie *Chef*, the food truck that Carl Casper obtains after a

⁶⁸ Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 6.

video of him ranting at a disparaging food critic went viral, becomes a symbol of a new life. Not only does he once again find his passion for cooking to make people happy, but the truck also creates the opportunity for communion with his young son and a reconciling experience with his ex-wife. The very act of people gathering together for a meal around a table, or a food truck, provides a sense of Eucharist where there is a sharing not only of food, but of life and love. According to Rahner, signs convey meaning that guide us to the mystery. They engage our imaginations to reflect upon the spiritual realm, the *supernatural existential*. Concrete objects and embodied rituals contain invisible dimensions that are not immediately sensible to human experience. There are layers of meaning. When we bring this sacramental/liturgical imagination to the artifacts of popular culture we break open this symbolism and reach through the perhaps not so transparent layers to discover the hungers of humanity and the desire for the supernatural.

Developing a Theology of Popular Culture

In order to address a theology of popular culture, it seems imperative to lay the foundation of a Christian anthropology that looks at the common human experience and views grace building upon nature. Not superseding it, not destroying it, but building upon it, fulfilling it to its greatest potential. By doing so, an incarnational approach is established that delineates the great mystery of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the complete human being, and shows us what humanity looks like. A Christian perspective provides a lens through which the ultimate human struggles are transformed and renewed. Through this lens human beings cannot be seen as overwhelmed or crushed by darkness and confusion because in the end there is a way out. Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, shows that way out through his acceptance of living the limits of pain, suffering, desolation, loneliness, abandonment and finally, the ultimate separation of death itself. Only through his passion and death do we know that all human suffering is captured and transformed in and through his suffering. Only through his experience of darkness is all human evil and sin destroyed. Christ's defiance of death through the resurrection offers humanity hope that darkness does not have the last word, pain is not final and sin cannot kill.

This ultimate act of redemption provides another view to human living: human beings can seek the supernatural and actually attain it. We do not grasp onto God who is Infinite but we can enter into an intimate relationship with the One, True God, Immanent Creator and Divine Lover of all. Our pursuit of the *supernatural existential* that creates a continual angst within us is this desire for faith in a God who redeems and saves humanity from its own darkness and death. I contend that this is what most of the arts of popular culture seek to convey. Many hip hop artists use their music as a way of expressing this angst. Tupac Shakur, considered one of the most revered rapper-artists of our time, lived his questions and emotions through his music. As a teenager he once wrote, "Our goal is [to] have people relate to our raps, making it easier to see what really is happening out there. Even more important, what we may do to better our world." Tupac, along with Eminem, FloRida, Drake and mainstream pop artists such as Sam Smith, Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran all seek to address human experiences that touch upon the supernatural with lyrics and rhythms that draw out the haunting desires of human relationships. Not only do the music lyrics express these powerful emotions and desires, but also the melodies can speak directly to the soul. Music has the power to reach deep into the mind, will, heart, desires and emotions of human beings in a way no other medium can. Music can be transcendent and transformative.

Humanity desperately wants to make sense of human existence, and sometimes we find that only God can provide the answers. At times popular culture remains stubbornly anchored on the questions, unwilling or unable to make that leap of faith in a Loving God who redeems through suffering and death, such as *Interstellar*, *Life of Pi*, and Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*. At other times it stays with the darkness because it is conditioned through philosophical nihilism, which negates all human and moral principles, to remove meaning from all of human existence and supernatural desires, such as *Fight Club* when the narrator says, "I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom."

Through the sacramental symbols and liturgical worship we touch the reality of supernatural grace in a material world. This thread of mystery and sacramentality provides a key to opening up the meaning of human hungers and angst revealed through popular culture. They are the longings of human beings from every time and place. As God speaks

through the prophet Jeremiah, he says, “More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it?” Yet, God continues, “I, the LORD, alone probe the mind and test the heart, to reward everyone according to his ways, according to the merit of his deeds.”⁶⁹ When we touch upon what is authentically human, the whole person, we reach for the divine. The liturgy and sacraments provide a way of reading the culture’s artifacts to discover grace present and the depths of meaning they seek to uncover and discover.

If one can read in the many cultural symbols the elements of self-sacrifice, self-giving love and a search for truth, beauty and goodness or the struggle with existential darkness, then grace is present. These ideals are what give humanity hope. Despite the sinful tendencies of human beings to lie, kill, cheat and destroy, there is always a glimmer of hope in the soul that cannot be extinguished. It is that *supernatural existential* that burns in each human person leading them to desire union with the Divine, God, who is Being Itself and Creator of all that is, and who communicates himself to humanity. God’s self-communication is grace. It is God’s eternal love bestowed on humanity offering the possibility to live in the freedom of the children of God.⁷⁰ It takes cultural mystics, who through a sacred look and attuned to grace can indicate those very existential longings present in the popular culture. They are those who see God’s grace present in and through the cultural artifacts’ symbols and signs and humanity’s hungering for *the more* than what this world can offer. God alone can fill that void, and “he rewards those who seek him.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jeremiah 17:9-10 (New American Bible)

⁷⁰ cf. Romans 8:21

⁷¹ Hebrews 11:6