

Three-Dimensional Transcendentals

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“...the invisible aspect of festivity, the praise of the world...can be made perceptible to the senses only through the medium of the arts.” Josef Pieper, In Tune with the World

Speech, Art, Festivity – Rooted in affirmation of being, linked in Liturgy

In *In Tune with the World*, Josef Pieper develops ‘a theory of festivity’. What is festivity? It has to do with the willing renunciation of work and the fruits of work, but must not be defined only by its relation to work, because man must not be understood only as a ‘worker’. Festivity is, at its core, a religious celebration, because the joy that characterizes it is a response to man’s recognition that *being* is a gift from God, and his affirmation that Creation is ultimately good. Christian ritual worship keeps the eternal festival alive in the midst of a world where festival is being corrupted and destroyed, and where man is losing his capacity to celebrate festively. The arts can help keep the human person in touch with the need for authentic festivals, and, thus, may help him recover that capacity.

We can’t understand festivity without an understanding of the human person, because his fulfillment and freedom, his joy in the gift of life, his works of art, are integral to the celebration of festival. Even – and especially – to the celebration of the eternal festival, which we call the Liturgy. Pieper perceives that language itself has a festal origin, and that there is a “reciprocal relation of festivity and the fine arts, which may be seen as merely different ‘dialects’ of man’s obscurely ‘singing’ speech.” Speech, Art, Festival – all are rooted in the affirmation of *being*, the praise of God. When one prospers, or suffers, the others are likewise affected.

Truth, Beauty and Goodness must be realized in speech, art and festivity, or they remain impotent abstractions, at best, or dangerous distractions, at worst. I want to explore how the transcendentals take form, and show why it is a vitally important task.

Three Dimensions of Realization – Verbal, Metaphoric, Sacramental

We use the term ‘three-dimensional’ to convey the fullness of form, of *realization*. 3-D Transcendentals are Truth, Beauty and Goodness realized as fully as possible in actuality, material form, integral representation. Pieper’s insights offer a way of seeing how that fullness emerges through Speech, Art, and Festivity, or Verbal, Metaphoric, and Sacramental Dimensions. Let’s look at them one at a time.

It’s easy to see how verbal structures – our books, sermons, lectures, blogs, encyclicals, conversations – convey Truth. Without words, we’d not have access to the history, doctrines, or Scriptures of the Church. No one doubts the need for Christians to develop greater facility with words and logic (from *logos* – word) in order to communicate the Good News. This dimension is foundational (Faith comes,

after all, by hearing the Word of God) to the person, to the Catholic Faith, to the Liturgy, so I call it #1 of the dimensions. In the beginning, was the Word.

Likewise, we easily acknowledge the need for Truth, Beauty and Goodness to be expressed through Sacramental forms. The Liturgy is the ritual festival – a form which serves to communicate God to his people. Each Sacrament is a form – made of words and gestures, symbols and substances – that actually conveys the very grace it represents. This dimension is clearly the highest, fullest realization of transcendental realities, so I call it #3.

That leaves #2 for consideration. The metaphoric dimension is less obvious. In fact, it's easier to see if you try to imagine either verbal structures or sacramental forms *without* it. Words don't get far without linking up to visual imagery through the power of metaphor. Science, theology, Scripture, and other spheres of study, would be flat and lifeless without the layers of meaning imparted by poetic use of words to lift mere words into greater dimensionality. The mysteries of the Faith are made more accessible – smaller, in a way – by metaphors such as 'the Bread of Life' and 'the armor of God'. This dimension, which corresponds to the arts, is a *way* of communicating Truth, Beauty and Goodness through stories, poetry, visual images, and other forms that link – metaphorically – what is known to what is not yet known.

Truth, Beauty and Goodness must be *realized* through speech, art, and festivity, in order to be *communicated*. We need to learn those skills, develop those dimensions of our own being, in order to translate the Ideals into the real world. Let's think next about how and where we do that.

The Missing Link – A movement that generates form

We think of 'school' or 'education' as the sphere in which we learn to use words well. Of course this includes the home, as the parents are a child's primary educators. Increasingly, it implies also the 'media'. Neil Postman, among others, has observed that television, movies and other modern media forms are now the primary educators of most students, for good or ill. Hard work is needed to improve our ability to take meaning from words, or translate our highest ideals into words.

And where do we receive formation in 'Sacramental communication'? Mostly at Church; hopefully in the home as well; possibly also at school. Faithful and frequent reception of the Sacraments, participation in the Liturgy (both Mass and the Divine Office), friendship with the Saints, prayer all contribute to our capacity for worship, for encounter with Christ. I'll give short attention to these two types of formation, because we're concerned with the dimension that's missing. Where, how, do we develop a capacity for the giving-and-taking of material contained in artistic, or metaphoric, forms?

Once again, this dimension suffers from invisibility. We learn it everywhere – or nowhere. There's no particular, actual, concrete, well-defined place for most of us to acquire the kind of mind that drinks deeply of meaning from artistic forms, or yearns to create them to communicate meaningfully with others. Art has, largely, been abandoned in the schools, where teachers are tasked with moving ever-longer lists of 'musts' into the minds of students before testing time, before job interviews, before graduation. Religious formation, or weak liturgical practices, may also omit art training. Liturgical abuse

will be de-formational. Art seems superfluous in the light of pragmatic goals, and unnecessary in the light of high spiritual goals. It seems messy, risky, self-indulgent, even decadent, and might lead to an excessive demand for freedom, or individuality.

But without the arts, we are left with only one, or two dimensions. The invisible second dimension is hard to see, because it's found not in a place of formation, but in a movement that forms the human person. Without all three dimensions, we are not fully realized, fully formed. As we grow in dimensionality, or realization, we become more and more able to take in and to communicate meaning, whether it is contained in words, art forms, or festive celebrations.

That growth occurs as we move, as we are moved, between the active development of self (education) and the action of God upon the self (worship). We are meant to 'work out our salvation' in this temporal sphere, and these dimensions help us see what that means. Picture your natural, verbal formation (or 'school') on one side, and your supernatural, sacramental formation (or 'Church') on the other. You – the human person – are in between, working out your salvation by struggling to integrate the two **in** yourself. Back and forth you move, you are moved, between a receptivity to God's action upon your soul, and a response-ability to whatever realities you encounter. Keep that image in mind as we consider how the arts help you do that.

The Pivot, Fulcrum, Intersection – Human person at the center

However we describe this work of moving and being moved – the second dimension that is this integrating, whole-making, form-generating movement – from disintegrated dualism to 3-D wholeness, from flattened to spherical, from Christ in the Church to Christ on the street in distressing disguises, from communion to communication – the individual Christian is at the center of that movement. His dependence on Christ, his natural and supernatural formation, and his self-donation are keys to the fullness of his realization, and thus to the fullness of his communication of Truth, Beauty and Goodness, or of Christ, to others. The need of the person to affirm, to re-present what is whole, real, true, beautiful and good, and to bring to the foot of the Cross every reality that affects him, is the motive force, that calls for artistic expression and develops this dimension.

Art teaches you:

- To bear tension until it can be resolved creatively, to be free to act within constraints. Creativity involves resolving tension – between positive and negative space, between melody and harmony, between people with competing interests – with a new thing.
- To see negative space creatively, as a part of a composition. Too often, we refuse to see the negatives, or we merely compromise, because we don't have experience resolving seeming conflict creatively.
- To deal with interference, frustration, mess...people like us (academics, meta-thinkers, conceptual types) are most in need of this help from real materials, real work, real struggle.
- To better understand the dynamics of *being* formed by God – you are a poem, He is the author, the potter, organizations are first formed by law.
- To value silence and interior spaciousness, non-doing and receptivity, holy leisure.

- To use material things generously, as means rather than as ends.
- To see persons as works of art, to be received with awe and respect.
- To see deeply into things, and through them to their creators.
- To know the difference between 'idea' and 'real' and to do the hard work of realizing ideas.
- To draw others to Christ by means of your own vulnerability and pain.
- To accept criticism and discipline as necessary conditions for approaching perfection.
- To develop magnanimity and joy through self-donation.
- To bring truth, and not propaganda, to the world.
- To be a beginner (sometimes frustrated, inept, clumsy) and so to be a better parent, or teacher.
- To participate in the Liturgy as in a great drama, a work of art brought to life by the full engagement of free actors.
- To respond to the reality you encounter and thus, to increase your freedom, your sphere of response-ability.
- To be still and wait – for an idea to develop, for a solution to present itself, for form to become whole within your being.

Art has something to teach you about economics. Creators and consumers understand 'money,' 'work,' 'value,' 'justice,' and 'exchange' very differently, and we need more artists to explore these insights.

Art has a role in social justice that we need more artists to take seriously. (As stewards of this world, we must be led as much by painters and poets as by scientists.)

Art cultivates your imagination, which is an element of your prayer life and response-ability.

Art develops an interior spaciousness, an inner architecture, that adds coherence and context to everything you learn and experience, thus raising IQ scores, as demonstrated by several different research studies.

Art stimulates creative playfulness in every area of life, and increases your sense that life is a surprising adventure.

To understand why art experience – *practice creating forms* that convey the transcendentals, communicate Christ, realize ideas, re-present experience, respond to reality – has so many potential benefits, consider next how forms and human formation serve each other.

The Glory of Form – Art at the service of human freedom

Sermons, a good lecture, a life, a beautiful home, a service-delivery model – all are forms that embody our values, the transcendentals, the Faith, our personhood. We expect our priests, parents, homemakers, teachers, philanthropists to create new and effective forms, but don't teach them to create art! Evangelism – communication of the Good News, invitation to encounter with Christ – is weakened by the weakness of our formation in art. That formation can be 1-, 2-, or fully 3-dimensional.

To generate '3-D transcendentals,' you need '3-D human beings,' with fully developed verbal, metaphoric, and sacramental dimensions.

Formation in the arts can be a merely verbal, intellectual education in art history, art criticism, art principles. Lived encounter with art, receptivity to the power of art as a lived experience, and study of the greatest examples of art adds to the fullness of this sphere. What might get left out, though, is that messy aspect in the middle – the actual struggle to re-present reality, to create! We must, even at the level of children, enter into the experience of being artists to be fully formed by the arts. We act and we are acted upon, and thus we enter into the movement that generates form, and that forms '3-D human beings'. It is not enough to know 'about' art, or to 'appreciate' art. You need to at least try to create art, to experience from the inside what it is to be an artist, even if you are not called to be a great one.

The greatest artist is most able to bear the tension of all the constraints imposed upon him to create a work of art that is his own response to the realities before him. He must make a judgment – take into account the internal and external realities, his own heart's desire and all that confounds or impedes the realization of that desire – and utter it. The judgment of the artist is rendered into the form he creates, and he is thus modeling for us the courage of acting in freedom to *realize* our own responses to reality.

The glory of form is that it is the perceptible memorial of an act (sometimes, of many acts) of freedom. Think how many acts of freedom it takes for all the members of a choir to bring forth into reality the polyphony of Palestrina – subjecting themselves in freedom to his composition, to their conductor's instructions, to the demands of good vocal production. Shakespeare may have spent many hours writing a play, but his creative act has elicited even more free self-giving from actors and audiences who continue to realize his vision.

The painting can be thrown in the trash, the building torn down, the poem ignored, and that does not prove it was meaningless to create, because these forms take their glory from the glory of the free human being who made them. They have meaning, just as he does, apart from the purpose they accomplish, the work they do, the money paid for them, or the scope of their influence. It is because we do not understand this about art, that we do not fully understand the human person, and *vice versa*. Our own work, effort, skill, and action are neither all-powerful, nor insignificant. We are both small, fragile, mortal beings and enormous, grace-filled, eternal beings! Finding our way prayerfully within this tension is the 'working out' of salvation by which we craft our lives and our works of art.

In a free act of gracious self-offering, our Creator responded to the reality of the fallen world by becoming a form through which man might once again encounter Him. When He gives Himself to us in the Eucharist, over and over again, He is uttering that Word within us so that it can resound into the world. Our lives become works of art (as Pope John Paul II has said) when we grow in freedom both to create and to respond to works of art. When we use our words, our paints, our building materials to resound what is true, what is beautiful, what is good, we create small vessels of encounter with God. As persons, we *are* such vessels. In us, the transcendentals live, move, and have being – 3-D being – that can make its way, like a seed, into the stony ground of the hearts around us.

We will encounter people who can't fully receive our Christ-lit personhood, our words of truth, our sense of what is truly good. They may be able to receive the beauty that comes through our very human struggle to resolve the tension in works of art. Even if our artworks are not yet beautiful, our active engagement in trying to perfect them will have left its traces in our humanity.

My plea to Catholics is that you continue to acquire a great education, and exercise to develop your skill in the use of words; that you continue to worship and receive all possible Sacraments frequently; and that you add to this natural foundation and this supernatural grace your own efforts to understand, appreciate, and (at least try) to create works of art that become channels of transcendent meaning and grace for whoever receives them.

About the Author

Charlotte is a Catholic convert, home educator, freelance writer and editor, poet and pro-life advocate. She has spoken for college classes, Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club Meetings, Serra Clubs, Book Study Groups, Moms Groups, teens and graduate students, women's retreats, Home Education Conferences, C. S. Lewis Conferences, and now, the Symposium for Advancing the New Evangelization.

She is the author of *Souls at Rest: An Exploration of the Eucharistic Sabbath*, and of *Souls at Work: An Invitation to Freedom*. (Angelico Press, Summer, 2014), *Making Sunday Special* (Catholic Truth Society), *Catholics Communicate Christ, Holy Geometry!*, *25 Ways to Help an Artist: The Art of Low Cost Philanthropy*, and of several other works-in-progress. Her poetry and feature articles have been published in Gilbert, St. Austin Review, Canticle, Envoy, Hereditas, Mater et Magistra, Catholic Fiction.net, Thesaurae Ecclesiae. She blogs and reviews books at ChattyCatholicDoll.com and CharlotteWeb.org. She's a staff blogger for the Catholic Writers Guild, which awarded the first edition of *Souls at Rest* their Seal of Approval in 2010.

In 2009, Charlotte created a small non-profit, the Joy Foundation, to stimulate 'Catholic cultural initiatives.' Some of the initiatives she's helped start: Catholic Creatives Salon (a monthly conversation at the intersection of art and faith), Sursum Corda (a sacred polyphony ensemble), two Catholic youth choirs, a Catholic family lending library. The most exciting new development is the 50 Million Names project: a memorial website for the aborted unborn which will be launched in December, 2013.

Charlotte lives with her husband, Russ, and five of their eight children on a 'farm wannabe' north of Lawrence, Kansas. She sings in Sursum Corda and at her home church, the St. Lawrence Catholic Campus Center. She is a member of the Family of the Apostles of the Interior Life. She recently completed requirements for the Maryvale certificate in Art, Beauty and Inspiration – a catechetical approach to the understanding of sacred art.

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