

# Preface

SEPARATED BY SEVEN BLOCKS of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, two works of video art by Bill Viola on display at the Guggenheim Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (as I write) offer compelling hints about the contemporary openness to religious experience. Neither work incorporates explicit iconographical elements of Christianity, yet each hints at aspects of Christian Medieval and Renaissance art through posture, gesture, and sometimes action, enabling the viewer who wishes to do so to connect these intense video images and actions with the light thrown by Christianity on suffering and death and the prospect of life after death. The two video works indicate the opening of fissures in the representation of contemporary experience through which a refracted awareness of religious illumination breaks through.

The work at the Guggenheim is titled *Going Forth by Day* and consists of five video screens installed on the four walls of a large room. The viewer stands in the room surrounded by five videos running simultaneously. Viola cites Giotto's frescoes for the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy, as an influence, and the experience of being surrounded and overwhelmed by images conveying a tone of solemnity and contemplative seriousness indicates the relevance of this reference, even though the traditional elements of Christian iconography are not presented in the video images. Gradually the viewer discerns depictions of birth, the unfolding path of life, crisis, dying and being

mourned, and in two culminating videos, the emergence from life into a new stage of existence, with the most dramatic image that of a man ascending from within a body of water and disappearing into the upper border of the unshifting video scene.

The work on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is *Quintet of Remembrance*. Notes outside the small room in which the video is shown offer references to classical Medieval works of art, including a depiction of the *Mater Dolorosa*, and prepare the viewer for the startling and moving presentation of the work. Three women and two men stand together, and in extremely slow motion they respond to something seen beyond the boundary of the camera and unknown to the viewer. Different postures and facial expressions of fear, compassion, acceptance, and deep suffering unfold rhythmically as the viewer watches the sequence without narrative or musical cues. Viewers who bear in mind the reference to the sorrowing mother will see aspects of that suffering clearly and evocatively expressed in the contemporary characters who offer, again, no explicit iconographical elements to provide a religious framework for the experience presented.

What is most notable in the context of this preface is the phenomenon I attempted to describe in the first paragraph: Viola finds a way to make his video presentations permeable to a spiritual sense emerging into the scenes of contemporary life without incorporating traditional religious iconographical elements but still indirectly but powerfully evoking the very same elements. The world he depicts (in these two works, although I believe they are typical of what he has done) has been secularized, but the barriers against transcendence that this world has attempted to construct for itself have become permeable even if the spiritual sensibility of that world is not yet stable enough to ground explicitly religious symbols.

Do we find here an artistic indication that a path back to a more fully religious experience of the world is gradually opening within main-

stream contemporary Western culture? It is impossible to pass beyond speculation in saying so; still, this speculative thought seems promising. Eric Voegelin has written about a “modernity without restraint,” describing the characteristic modern stance as a form of gnosticism that constructs a world closed to the transcendent in which “[t]he will to power of the gnostic who wants to rule the world has triumphed over the humility of subordination to the constitution of being.”<sup>1</sup> Viola’s works of art provide a suggestion that can be found more broadly in our culture: the humility that enables us to open ourselves to the transcendent continues to emerge all around us.

In this issue of *Logos*, readers will find numerous indications of humility opening a path to the transcendent within contemporary culture and calls for such humility as a balm for the arrogance exhibited in the lust for wealth and power. Raymond B. Marcin’s account of the sin inherent in the construction of the city (and not only the tower) of Babel guides us to the observation “that humanity requires humility in order to be able to share in the viewpoint of God.” Marcin brings his reading of a portion of Genesis to bear on contemporary social and political issues and attitudes. Two articles on economics continue the exploration of contemporary social thought in this issue, each exhibiting a certain humility within the science of economics by seeking to reconcile economic thinking with fuller conceptions of the human person as illuminated by Catholic social thought. We learn from Gregory R. Beabout and Kevin E. Schmiesing about numerous efforts in progress to incorporate concepts of social responsibility grounded in Christian social thought into the practice of sound economic investment. We also learn from Daniel R. Fairchild that the goals of Catholic social teaching can best be brought to bear in public policy decisions by carefully integrating rigorous economic analysis with the fundamental principles of such teaching.

Literature and music frequently present the ways in which humility overcomes pride and thereby renders us responsive to the tran-

scendent. Robert Coles finds indications that Bruce Springsteen “addresses the yearning so many have for a loftier transcendence” in his songs. Coles then points to Springsteen’s reading of Flannery O’Connor as a significant part of his artistic development and goes on to find through conversations with Regina Cline O’Connor, Flannery’s mother, of Mary Flannery’s lifelong openness to and observation of the world around her in a complex mode of vision attuned both to the details of daily life and to the light of the sacred falling on daily life. In another article we encounter the surprising reflections of Thomas Weinandy on what many consider the great American novel—Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Weinandy pursues a reading of the novel that brings to light what he calls “Twain’s soteriology”—his understanding of salvation history as exemplified through the novel.

We also find in this issue theological and philosophical reflections on contemporary life that guide us toward a renewed awareness of the importance of humility. Surely the term *humility* describes the call issued by theologian Michael S. Sherwin, O.P. to “befriend the challenges” faced by modern moral theology, that is, to encounter those challenges openly and to learn from them the path that will lead to a renewal of moral theology. James S. Spiegel explores Christian humility through an insightful philosophical analysis, bringing into focus what he calls “the moral irony of humility.” Even hypocrisy, if understood properly as Shane D. Drefcinski calls on us to do, has an affiliation with humility because it is a prideful blindness to one’s own wickedness and a refusal to know oneself as one truly is. The humble acknowledgment of one’s sinfulness would offer a way of overcoming such hypocrisy.

There exist “**Four Challenges for Moral Theology in the New Century**” according to the article by that title by **Michael S. Sherwin, O.P.**: the challenge of history; the challenge of nature; the challenge of grace; and the challenge of spirituality. These challenges emerge from the contemporary cultural and intellectual land-

scape in which the moral theologian lives and works. Sherwin emphasizes the importance of listening and attending to these challenges with patient care and openness so that the challenges once met might guide the theologian to a comprehensive encounter with the contemporary world that will enable moral theology to address the needs of the new century with clarity.

**Robert Coles** guides us to a vivid understanding of the power of Flannery O'Connor's writing by tracing some of the surprising ways in which her influence emerges in contemporary popular culture and by drawing closer to O'Connor's development through extensive conversations with her mother in "**Flannery O'Connor's Pilgrimage.**" We hear many splendid stories about O'Connor's life through the words of her mother quoted by Coles, and we are guided to a deeper understanding of the importance of O'Connor's work: "She was a great one, Flannery O'Connor was, for taking on the sin of pride, that sin of sins for so many of us."

Mark Twain warns against efforts to find a motive or moral in the narrative of *Huckleberry Finn*, as **Thomas G. Weinandy** reminds us in "**Huckleberry Finn and the Adventures of God.**" Yet such motives and morals are surely at work within the text, as Weinandy demonstrates in his careful reading of the novel. "On one level this is a story about Huck and Tom helping to set Jim free by their own heroic deeds, but, as I have argued, they have, through these heroic deeds, also told the story of God's heroic adventures throughout history to bring truth and freedom to humankind. It is primarily through irony that Twain tells this second tale, his characters being unaware of the deeper significance of what they were doing." Twain called himself an agnostic, but Weinandy suggests that it was "hypocritical religion" that Twain despised. While the life-transforming claims of Christianity had great appeal for him, he regarded his biography of St. Joan of Arc to be "his most beloved and greatest work."

In "**Socially Responsible Investing: An Application of Catholic Social Thought,**" **Gregory R. Beabout** and **Kevin E. Schmiesing** review the important development of the practice of socially

responsible investment (SRI) and demonstrate the ways that such practice can be both morally and economically effective. The authors provide a rigorous account and definition of this mode of investment and show how Catholic social teaching should be considered relevant to investment decisions because “the insights of the Church should be considered in all facets of life.” The article describes a variety of ways in which socially responsible investing has been conducted in recent times, concluding, “[i]n light of the foregoing discussion, it seems reasonable to conclude that, based on the principles of Catholic social teaching, the attitude of Christians toward the development of SRI should be cautiously positive. SRI carries with it the potential for religious investors to influence society in beneficial ways, helping to improve the prospects for a humane, just, and peaceful social order.”

**Daniel R. Fairchild** in “**Economic Efficiency, Growth, and the Catholic Vision of Economic Justice**” reminds us that we cannot incorporate the principles of Catholic social teaching into public policy decisions in a sensible manner without paying special attention to the economic analysis of such policy decisions. He focuses on “the preferential option for the poor” and shows that such an option is pursued effectively only when the implications of any particular policy for overall economic growth and productivity (that inevitably affect the poor) are considered carefully. Policies calling for a redistribution of income in a manner that is relatively efficient and has a relatively small effect on economic growth would prove to be advantageous because such policies would impose smaller costs now and in the future on society as a whole and would be less likely in political terms to engender a backlash. Fairchild demonstrates that we cannot ignore the insights provided by rigorous economic analysis if we wish to be true to the principles of Catholic social teaching when making public policy decisions.

The story in Genesis that we usually recall as focused on the tower of Babel is really about the city of Babel and by extension about the danger of human arrogance and pride in the construction

of any city, according to an insightful article by **Raymond B. Marcin** titled "**The City of Babel: Yesterday and Today.**" Through a careful reading of the Genesis account, Marcin suggests that the story is about a kind of humanism that forgets the divine and comes to trust human powers alone as sufficient for the construction of sound communities, human powers that are indeed considerable but all the more likely to lead us to arrogance because of our success in the construction of the cities within which we dwell. We tend to be blind to our own sinfulness inevitably at work within the good that we do in the construction of the city, viewing sin as residing in the other and not in ourselves. Marcin's words have a powerful resonance at this historical moment: "We see an evil in *some* of us, to be fought against by some *others* of us. What we resist seeing, of course, is that the evil is in *all* of us."

"The Christian faith is profoundly ironic," **James S. Spiegel** tells us in "**The Moral Irony of Humility,**" and humility carries us to the heart of such irony. Spiegel surveys a wide variety of approaches to the concept of humility, showing the deep accord among many philosophical approaches to humility as a moral virtue culminating in the scriptural account of humility. Spiegel provides illumination when considering the problem of evil: "The humility of Christ provides the most important clue regarding the centrality of the virtue of humility to the moral life. God chose suffering and death as the antidote for evil."

"**Is Hypocrisy Always a Vice?**" asks **Shane D. Drefcinski**. His article by that title surveys the contemporary tendency to overuse and misuse the concept of hypocrisy. Drefcinski also looks at the abuses of the term *hypocrisy* that undermine moral clarity and the abuses that result from a general lack of moral clarity in modern culture. Drefcinski turns helpfully to Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas to gather a fuller and more rigorous understanding of hypocrisy and argues that we should resist the tendency to adopt an unduly broad understanding of the concept because such a tendency leads to a "flaccid moral skepticism."

Our feature, “**From a Logical Point of View,**” provides careful responses to an argument from the writings of John Stuart Mill concerning the financing of public education. Readers will find a fuller account of this feature in the introduction to that section written by consulting editor Gordon Barnes.

We bid farewell to former managing editor Pamela McClanahan, who has accepted a position as book editor for the Minnesota Historical Society Press. Pam made countless contributions to the development of this journal, and we are glad that she will continue to be close by so we can call on her for advice as we continue to develop. We are pleased to welcome new managing editor Maya Hamilton, a graduate of Yale University who comes to us with excellent experience and strong recommendations from New York University Press. We look forward to working with Maya as we continue to develop this journal of Catholic thought and culture.

### *Note*

1. Eric Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 309.