

WOUNDED GRACE AND THE DISQUIETING INVITATION OF THE REAL

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It may seem obvious to us, but may not be to those who follow, why my exploration of grace begins with woundedness. When CTSA President-Elect Paul Lakeland called on January 4, 2017 about this invitation, I, like many of you, was in the midst of discerning how to protect communities whose life was under the most acute threat we had known in our lifetime. Only two-weeks stood between us and the rise to the Presidency of the United States of an administration that promised, among other things, to take away healthcare for the poor, abrogate international treaties on the environment, nuclear weapons, and refugees, to legitimate white supremacy, and to deport hundreds of thousands of students and their families.

My university's undocumented student group had been targeted and harassed during the presidential campaign¹ so they feared election night isolated in their dorm rooms. We decided to be in community, met at my home, prepared popcorn and *pan dulce* and settled in with cautious hope to watch election results.² For these students and their loved ones, this night was critical and as the results came in, chatter turned into stunned silence, then tears, and then panic. Donald Trump had promised a "deportation force"³ to end DACA (which protected them)⁴, and to build a wall.⁵ The already challenging life of an estimated 11 million people, and the many millions who love them, had just become exponentially more dangerous.

As a community, we have spent the last year and a half in what has felt like a rickety suspension bridge, sometimes taking a few steps forward only to have a gaping hole open before us. It could have broken our communities, it could have discouraged my students, it could have engulfed daily life in darkness, it could have, but it didn't. These wounds have become a way for grace to erupt in unexpected beauty. University communities are engaged in education, legal aid, expanded scholarships, and public acts of solidarity and resistance. Catholic communities and allied faith groups prepare materials, hold workshops, defend immigrants and shelter refugees. Catholic national

¹ Miriam Hernandez, "LMU wall defaced with anti-immigrant, pro-Trump Messages," ABC 7, April 7, 2016.

² Many of the faculty women had worn white that day, recalling the suffragettes and anticipating our first woman President, and a compassionate administration.

³ See David Nakamura, "Trump administration moving quickly to build up nationwide deportation force," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2017. Teresa Puente, "The Nightmare of Donald Trump's Deportation Promise," *Time*, November 10, 2016.

⁴ The situation with DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is fluid as I write. Although Trump rescinded the program on September 5, 2017, lawsuits and counter-lawsuits from immigration advocates and opponents have forced the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to continue accepting renewal applications. Timely updates available from the National Immigration Law Center at nilc.org.

⁵ As of this writing the administration had managed to get funding of \$1.6 billion for expenditures on security and barriers on the border with Mexico.

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organizations, like the Center for Migration Studies⁶ and the Ignatian Solidarity Network⁷ spring into action with research and legislative advocacy. Coast-to-coast, undocumented students excel and lead while educators organize and share tips for funding, education, and protection. As communities of people devoted to the common good, we have grown, we have become more informed, we have organized, and we are “resilient.”⁸ The disconcerting “real” came at us, and grace, wounded by these events, rather than retreating flourished.

This is the context of the work I have undertaken, and my process of theological reflection is embedded in this urgent reality. As our lovingly-remembered colleague Ada María Izasi-Díaz expressed it so well, this “is a way of responsibly living my Christianity, struggling for survival and liberation as a Latina in the U.S.A.”⁹ Seen from the perspective of “the least,” this moment reveals the connection between woundedness, the honest engagement with the real, and the flowing of grace. It is not a new connection, suffering communities have been witnessing to it for centuries.¹⁰ What the nationalism, racism, sexism, protectionism, and xenophobia of these days has accomplished is to unmask what communities under siege have known; the exclusion of the other, the closing in on oneself, and the demonization of difference also excludes grace, it is an affront to God. The events of Charlottesville, the Muslim Ban, the indiscriminate deportations, and the attack on DACA youth have exposed a virulent form of “Christianity” that denies the law of love, therefore denying God’s action in the world.¹¹ To respond to this moment I want to expose the lie of the invulnerability of the powerful and to point to the unmistakable marks of grace that radiate in our world when we face the real. To do this, I bring a diverse community. Starting from the locus of my weeping students on election night, I have spent hours in the company of a fearless sixteenth-century woman, pondering a substantial document from the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), in conversation with an improvised online group of theologians and activists, and in community with my coworkers who

⁶ Founded in 1964, the Center for Migration Studies of New York is a think tank and educational institute of the Scalibrini International Migration Network. A preeminent resource for comprehensive information and updates on the issues of immigration as interpreted through Catholic Social Teaching. At Cmsny.org.

⁷ The Ignatian Solidarity Network is a national Jesuit ministry founded in 2004 as a response to the assassination of seven Jesuits and their companions in El Salvador. It provides training, advocacy and tools to Jesuit institutions, especially parishes, high schools and universities on areas of public concern as these are challenged by Catholic Social Teaching and Ignatian Spirituality. ISN also partners with other Catholic institutions internationally. At Ignatiansolidarity.net.

⁸ Loyola Marymount University’s student organization for undocumented students and their allies is called “Resilience.”

⁹ I work on a number of projects with undocumented students and advise groups on the theological and pastoral implications of immigration, education, and social justice. This methodology is proposed and practiced by Ada María Izasi-Díaz. See *En La Lucha, In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), xi.

¹⁰ The instances are too numerous, ranging from African-American Spirituals, to the traditions surrounding Our Lady of Guadalupe, to the teachings of leaders like Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez and the creativity of the communities that continue their work.

¹¹ “[T]he wisdom of love doesn’t depend directly on the enlightenment of the mind, but on the internal workings of grace.” *V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, Documento Conclusivo*, 2ª edición, Aparecida, 13–31 de mayo de 2007, 263.

are custodians. These diverse sources share one conviction: grace is not a concept but an experience that is recognized in the midst of a suffering world, and they are witnesses to its work. In addition, to prompt a shared experience for us, I bring images, and one key work by a contemporary Latino artist.

The Unexpected Encounter which Wounds

As a “theological aesthetics” scholar-activist, I am concerned with the real and our wakeful encounter with its non-reductive wholeness and its aesthetic mediation through human creativity. I recall the first time I met Vincent Van Gogh’s *Irises*¹² at the Met years ago. That one encounter took my breath away and awakened a love for creation and creativity that has never dissipated. I couldn’t name it then, but today I know my experience with the *Irises* an instance of what philosopher Martin Buber calls a moment of relation joining my will with grace.¹³ In Buber’s method, we are “drawn into a relation” where the other, (in his example a tree, but just as plausibly the *Irises*, a pastoral letter and even a community) “ceases to be an It.” And where what he calls “the power of exclusiveness,” the uniqueness of that very thing or being, “has seized me.”¹⁴ Buber’s method stresses that what we *know of* the tree and what the tree *is in itself* is fused and inseparable. As our will desires grace, we confront the other “bodily” and refusing to “dilute” the “meaning of the relation” choose to enter into “reciprocity.” Rejecting the idea that we may “divide the indivisible,” Buber stresses that in this practice “what I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.”¹⁵ It is in this way that the *Irises* reveal to me a new “you” and engender love.

Buber has three categories for this way of encountering life. We enter into relation with nature, which “vibrates in the dark and remains below language,”¹⁶ with other human beings, where “the relation is manifest and enters language,”¹⁷ and finally with “spiritual beings.” This final relation, he tells us:

is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language.

We hear no You and yet feel addressed, we answer—creating, thinking, acting: with our being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth.¹⁸

Two things to note. First, his category of the spiritual relation describes experiences of intense beauty, stressing a generative relationality and an embodied wordless dialogue resulting in transformation. Second, approached in this way, as “You,” works of creativity (and most of what humans make falls into this category),¹⁹

¹² *Irises* by Vincent van Gogh, 1890. (29x36 1/4, oil on canvas), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York permanent collection.

¹³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Touchstone, 1996 [orig. pub. 1923]), 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ My view of works of human creativity is expansive. I want to push against the boundaries of what we consider “creative” as only what is identified as the “arts.” Human creativity includes the ancients breaking flint to make tools, their descendants planting crops to feed communities, their elders passing along origin stories, women baking bread, communities

become effective witnesses of “grace in the world” because in their beauty, they interlace all three of these encounters, involving an intimate refashioning of the natural world in material and subject (canvas, pigments, irises),²⁰ being created by humans as an intentionally communicative activity (Van Gogh’s role), and confronting us from beyond ourselves in ways that address, reveal and call to us, through an experience of relationship (my response to the *Irises*).

For Buber, the relationship is always new, because what is real as it encounters us is always new. In another text, Buber underscores the requirement of intentional wakefulness before the new because “in this as in every hour, what has not been invades the structure of what is.”²¹ In this very hour. Now. Decades later in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis, seeking to awaken a lethargic world to the beauty of encounter with the loving God who makes us all *familia* stresses that “every form of authentic evangelization is always new.”²² The philosopher and the pontiff share the view that encountering the real entails freshness, immediacy, and respect for what is encountered. We meet life in its appeal to us through beauty or beauty’s heartbreaking absence, allowing us to engage “the structure of what is” fully in the very moment when “what has not been invades” it. Buber asserts that “[i]t is in encounter that the creation itself reveals its formhood; it does not pour itself into the senses that are waiting but deigns to meet those that are reaching out.”²³ There is reciprocity, reverence, and freedom in such a meeting, and because of this there is beauty.

Beauty and Grace

In his work on a theology of art, Alejandro García-Rivera²⁴ asked “[h]ow can one speak of the beautiful in light of the terrible suffering that exists in the world?”²⁵ I felt the same when asked to speak about grace, revealing the connection between beauty and grace, and the possibility that grace is how we name the human recognition of a relationship with the Divine Other that offers and meets us with Beauty.²⁶ If this is so, then the question still stands: how to speak of beauty and its recognition in our relationship to it as grace, when there is so much suffering in the world? García-Rivera suggests an answer by exploring woundedness as an experience which brings to self-consciousness a profound vulnerability, a radical openness to being acted upon, that, ultimately, expresses itself as the need for

writing down gospels, generations building cathedrals, and all the processes that contribute in beauty to the flourishing of our planet and all its inhabitants.

²⁰ John Paul II makes a special point about the role of what has been created in the work of the artist, who takes from the created world and reshapes and adds meaning, but always as a craftsman rather than Creator. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 1999, 1.

²¹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 99.

²² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, 11.

²³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 77.

²⁴ Alejandro García-Rivera (1951–2010) was my mentor and directed my doctoral work at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. He died of cancer at the age of 59 and instructed me to “tell my friends I miss them and that there is still a lot of work to do!”

²⁵ Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 11.

²⁶ “As disciples of Jesus, we feel invited to give thanks for the gift of creation, reflection of the wisdom and beauty of the creative *Logos*,” *Aparecida*, 470.

intercession, a call for sacred sympathy...and insight into the need and way of salvation.²⁷

Because Buber insists that relationships of reciprocity are never forced but freely given,²⁸ then we can understand the state of woundedness as opening us to relationship in all its sacredness. The opposite of the desperate grasping at invulnerability of attitudes of racism, classism, and xenophobia, which seek to separate and sow distrust as a defense²⁹ against the truth of human frailty, shared woundedness creates community, engenders trust, and reaches out to the other in kinship.

I experienced this in a surprising way in the hospital ward where I went for the infusions of medicinal poison meant to fight my cancer. One day, having come to terms with the inevitable reality of what was happening to me, I finally noticed the gentle smiles and loving eyes of the other chemo patients in the room. We were many colors, ages, and genders; in another context we probably would have never met. Yet, in the chemo ward we were mirrors of each other, truly kin: all of us equally bald, as our woolen caps came off, all of us intensely fragile, as the matching warm blankets covered us, and all of us connected in a wordless kinship created by our woundedness, which revealed the truth of our shared humanity. After that day, rather than dreading those sessions, the grace of relationship and kinship made it possible to find peace in the sacredness of the chemo ward. I was seized by the beauty of my sisters-and-brothers-in-cancer, and our connection gave us all courage. Buber, the prophet posits:

Creation—happens to us, burns into us, changes us, we tremble and swoon, we submit. Creation—we participate in it, we encounter the creator, offer ourselves to [the creator as] helpers and companions.³⁰

Buber's appeal to Creation may be another way to speak of what Jon Sobrino calls *la realidad*, the real, which is only *the* real if it is true. Sobrino emphasizes:

[t]o grasp and accept truth is to allow reality to be, in the first place, that which it is, and not subject it to a violence, calculated to adjust it to our own tastes and interests. . . [when we do so concrete realities are no longer creatures, sacraments of God (as they are objectively), but manipulated things. Indeed, from the root of this basic dishonesty follow all the sinful fruits catalogued by Paul, and God's wrath, instead of God's grace, spills out over the heads of those who are not honest with the real.³¹

²⁷ García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 18.

²⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 77.

²⁹ "There is a way of knowing the real whose purpose is to defend the knower *from* the real," Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds. *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 681. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Buber, *I and Thou* 130.

³¹ Sobrino, "Spirituality", 681. As of May 29, 2018, the Pulitzer Prize winning *Politifact* rated Donald Trump's statements as: half-truths (16%) Mostly False (22%), False (32%) and Pants on Fire (14%). This means that a full 84% of Trump's statements have little to no relationship to reality. I argue that beyond manipulation, the defense against reality is a way to try to make himself invulnerable from the truth of his own humanity. See Politifact.com

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A theologically aesthetic perspective reveals the link between being grasped by the truth of the real and being moved by the possibility that there is beauty in it.³² Sobrino sees such honesty as necessary for the instantiation of grace, and Buber reminds us that encounter asks something of us that involves our will in reaching out in honest reciprocity. Those aspiring to invulnerability by building walls, locking away the poor and desperate, and seeing all others as enemies, have effectively walled themselves off from *la realidad* and consequently from truth and beauty and its “spilling over our heads” as grace.³³ One of the ways García-Rivera describes the beautiful is that it is “about ‘being more.’”³⁴ This “being more” was apparent in the chemo ward, which revealed a dimension of reality full of grace. Reflecting on my students, coworkers, and friends, I know many of us have experienced the beauty of “being more” and we have done so together.³⁵

How to speak of beauty and its recognition in our relationship to it as grace, when there is so much suffering in the world? By noting that courage and resilience seem to flourish in direct contradiction to the assaults which mean to destroy us. As another Jewish prophet, the great Leonard Cohen put it in his song *Anthem*:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in.³⁶

We have experienced wounds as the reality of this moment has overtaken us, these wounds have revealed the truth of what is, and in that truth, we have found the grace of kinship and persevered. Moved by the beauty of that perseverance as communicative of God’s graceful accompaniment, we have felt loved.

Love, Constancy, and Grace

Love as expressed through our recognition of beauty in grace makes us aware of our worth when we feel worthless. In Teresa of Avila’s literary masterpiece *La Vida*,³⁷

³² “[b]ecause God is truth, goodness, even beauty itself, an experience of truth, goodness or beauty is also an experience of intimacy with God,” García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 3.

³³ “Concrete reality cries no to its own negation – to the absence, lack, and annihilation of life. In biblical terminology this no is no to Cain the fratricide, no to the oppression in Egypt, and the prophets’ no to those who sell the just for a pair of sandals.” Sobrino, “Spirituality,” 682.

³⁴ García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 18.

³⁵ “Beauty shines through the suffering in this world through its communal dimension,” *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ Leonard Cohen, “Anthem” in *Stranger music: selected poems and songs* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 373–74.

³⁷ About “*el libro de la Vida*” Tomás Álvarez writes, “With it, the author reaches the summit of her ‘*dominio de la pluma*’ (ability as a writer), unexpectedly touching the zenith of her literary inspiration.” See Teresa de Jesús, *Obras Completas*, ed. Tomás Álvarez (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2014), 12. Teresa was awarded the doctorate *honoris causa* in 1922 in a session presided by Miguel de Unamuno, the first woman so honored in the history of the University of Salamanca (est. 1218). She was declared a doctor of the church in 1970. The manuscript for “*el libro de la Vida*” was sequestered by the Inquisition in 1575 and released to Friar Luis de León after her death in 1582. He edited and published it in Salamanca in 1588. It

which travels from intimate journal, to letter,³⁸ to doctrine, to prayer in the same sentence, the sixteenth-century nun explains how she feels grace most palpably in God's stubborn determination that she be saved despite every impediment she puts in God's way.³⁹ God's grace is God loving us in spite of ourselves.⁴⁰ Teresa believes herself worthless and irreparably lost, and is filled with wonderment that it is God who through grace makes her virtues, her beauty, shine.⁴¹ She confesses disarmingly that her initial religious vocation was motivated by fear of eternal damnation and her conclusion that "the purgatory of the life of a nun would be better than hell."⁴² In the depths of her despair, the beauty of God's constancy invaded her every moment remaking her world. In Teresa we see the contrast between radical humility,⁴³ which is given in grace and grows as we become ever more awake to God's work in us, and defiant self-confidence, which will allow us to follow the challenging promptings of grace in us.⁴⁴ We must not hesitate to carry out bold works for God out of fear, or a wrong sense of our nothingness, but have God's power be what makes us audacious and unafraid.⁴⁵ She disapproves of models of humility that require we overlook God's generosity by denying our giftedness, "if we do not know we are receiving [gifts from God]," she clarifies, "we are not awakened to love."⁴⁶ She advocates a tension between contemplation of our lowliness, a necessary condition to experiencing the wonderment of God's graceful healing and the courage this engenders, and recognizing our gifts and their source in God resulting in gratitude.⁴⁷

is the original manuscript given to Luis de León kept at the library of the Escorial that Álvarez uses for his careful reconstruction. *Obras Completas*, 30. Translations are mine from Álvarez's edition.

³⁸ There are multiple addressees to her lengthy letter, which she broadens in certain passages. She addresses it to her spiritual director (who has permission to burn the entire manuscript), to a small circle of friends who share and understand her spiritual journey, and the nuns in the Carmelite houses she has founded. My citations for Teresa's works refer first to the particular book, chapter, and section, and secondly to the page number in Tomás Álvarez *Obras Completas* edition cited above. For nuns, see: *Vida* 7:9, *Obras Completas*, 76.

³⁹ *Vida* 1:8, *Obras Completas*, 36.

⁴⁰ As she looks back on her life, Teresa is able to read every eventuality as an instance of God preparing her for what God needs of her. *Vida* 3:4, *Obras Completas*, 45. She feels God's insistence in giving her "delights and gifts" even though she does not ask for these making clear that it is all initiated by God (*Vida* 9:19, *Obras Completas*, 97).

⁴¹ *Vida* 4:10, *Obras Completas*, 54.

⁴² *Vida* 3:4, *Obras Completas*, 45.

⁴³ She asks for "grace to not offend [God] and forgiveness for my great sins," *Vida* 9:9, *Obras Completas*, 97.

⁴⁴ "Everything is of little use if, having lost all confidence in ourselves we do not place it in God," *Vida* 8:12, *Obras Completas*, 92.

⁴⁵ *Vida* 4:2, *Obras Completas*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Vida* 10:4, *Obras Completas*, 100.

⁴⁷ Only by cultivating an intentional awareness of our faults will we experience the lavishness of God's *misericordias*, the gifts of grace given through God's generous compassion (*Vida* 4:3, *Obras Completas*, 49; also *Vida* 5:5, *Obras Completas*, 58; *Vida* 5:8, *Obras Completas*, 60; *Vida* 5:11, *Obras Completas*, 62). "I never mistrusted God's mercy, myself many times," *Vida* 9:7, *Obras Completas*, 95.

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The reversal of the world's order, so present in Jesus' view of God's reign,⁴⁸ overtakes Teresa. She sees the human creature, lowly and insignificant, so loved by God that God chooses to be aggrieved so we may be improved.⁴⁹ The love is unmerited and initiated by God, because "no one believes God a friend who was not first loved by God."⁵⁰

Like Teresa, the group of immigrant custodians meeting for prayer on my campus believe their very lowliness and suffering calls out to God, their intimate friend.⁵¹ Their improvised prayers appeal to the generosity of "so great a God who would listen to the prayers of," as they put it, "those who clean the bathrooms."⁵² From their vulnerability they invoke the Holy Spirit, interceding forcefully for a community of concentric circles beginning with their families and radiating out to the university,⁵³ the city, the nation and the world. Survivors of wars, perilous migrations, the deaths of children and spouses and living under the constant fear of racial profiling and economic peril this "family of workers"⁵⁴ prays, preaches, weeps, and asks questions. The view of grace they present is like the difference between reading a sheet of music and listening to an orchestra playing it. There is a symphony of grace from the depths of those who cannot survive without it. Every small act of kindness is beautiful and has its source in God.⁵⁵ Even their back-breaking jobs are a constant source of gratitude and joy. The beauty unleashed in that small room by this community is so thick that cathedral walls could be built from it.

⁴⁸ Reversal of conventional hierarchies of values and structures is a constant theme in Jesus' preaching and actions, most dramatically presented in the "Parable of the Two Sons," Luke 15:11–32.

⁴⁹ *Vida* 4:3, *Obras Completas*, 48. Interestingly, Teresa uses the word "*criador*" for God rather than "*creador*" (creator). In the feminine *criadora* denotes a wet nurse, and a *criador* may be a greenhouse or land that produces plentiful fruit, and generally someone who cares for and nurtures anything that is alive.

⁵⁰ *Vida* 8:5, *Obras Completas*, 88.

⁵¹ Teresa's idea of prayer matches closely the experience of the immigrant group, a time to be "as friends, spending time... with someone we know loves us." *Vida* 6:4, *Obras Completas*, 65.

⁵² "*desde los que limpiamos los baños.*"

⁵³ When I asked the group permission to share their story with my community of scholars in this paper they began praying for the CTSA gathering and for each person present and their intentions. They invoked the Holy Spirit on the meeting and are present with us.

⁵⁴ I am grateful to this community of custodians for welcoming me into their midst. The daily prayer services are almost always in Spanish and the leadership rotates among the members. The leader asks for intentions, and then acts as the voice of the community. They pray standing holding hands in LMU's Marymount Interfaith Chapel during their morning break. The prayers sometime flow into deliberations on actions to help a sick coworker, intercede with a manager for better working conditions, share national news and reflect on challenging situations in their families. Often the stories shared are tragic, and they express that it is precisely because they "should not have survived" that their testimony attests to God's grace accompanying them. The leaders are Felipe, Fatima, Hilary, Gigi, Enrique, Hilda, Maria, and Ricardo.

⁵⁵ A favorite response to acts of kindness is "¡Que hermoso!" Literally the most complete and enticing form of beauty.

Grace, Bridges and the Real

What is beautiful unites and the pain of the world is most apparent in the incessant efforts to divide human against human. Following Pope Francisco's words heard around the world: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel."⁵⁶ I propose a bridge to connect us across the American continent.

Situating ourselves on the bridge, from the north come the generous friends who participated in my online forum and from the south, the Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM).⁵⁷ Two pluricultural contexts providing perspective into the real, linked by the Latin American diaspora and signs of the times that call for "subordinating everything to the service and building of the Reign of life" (366). I will conclude with the wound as evoked by Chicago artist Sergio Gomez.

Sobrino hopes we will have an honest encounter with *la realidad*. Buber reminds us to meet what sometimes may seem overwhelming as "you" and not defend ourselves against it by making it into a remote "it" and just so in Aparecida, Brazil, the Latin American church met for a fifth time intent on discovering "the real." From the perspective of suffering of the peoples who share our hemisphere⁵⁸ CELAM's closing document captures the disquieting socio-political trends that have overtaken us in the north as well. Their prescient analysis states,

...we note with worry the accelerated advancement of diverse forms of regressive authoritarianism through democratic paths which, on certain occasions, develop into neopopulist regimes. This indicates that it is not enough to have democracy in form, founded on the integrity of electoral processes, rather what is needed is participatory democracy based on the promotion and respect of human rights. A democracy lacking values. . . easily becomes a dictatorship and ends up betraying the people (74).

Aparecida confronts the wounds squarely, searching for ways to transform "the continent of hope" into one where love has finally taken root (522, 537). The issues, which they accurately describe as global,⁵⁹ include the fragmentation of life due to technology and the "cultural colonization" that forces an artificially constructed, individualistic, consumerist and homogenizing culture (45–46). This new form of colonization results in the diminishment of human dignity for "the poorest and most

⁵⁶ Speaking on February 18, 2016, during the U.S. Presidential campaign and having just returned from his visit to Juarez, Mexico, Pope Francisco was responding to then-candidate Donald Trump's promise to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. See "Pope: Donald Trump 'is not Christian' if he wants to build a border wall," *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2016.

⁵⁷ This is the concluding document of the fifth meeting of CELAM at Aparecida, cited above, following the usage in Latin America I will simply call it *Aparecida*. I translate from the original document.

⁵⁸ *Aparecida* mentions vulnerability thirteen times and always in connection with concrete examples.

⁵⁹ "The peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean live today a *realidad* marked by great changes that affect their lives deeply. . . The novelty of these changes, in contrast to those of other epochs, is that they have a global reach which, with differences and nuances, affect the entire world." *Aparecida*, (33–34).

vulnerable” (47). They note that what is under siege is reality itself presenting “life as entertainment” (51) where only what is “immediate is needed, and happiness can be reached through economic wellbeing and hedonistic satisfaction” (50). Taking stock of the riches of the many cultures inhabiting the American continent, they insist that cultural diversity is a requirement, and call for resistance to compulsory cultural uniformity (59). Shifting to economic factors, *Aparecida* stresses that these overpower every other dimension of human life absolutizing

efficiency and productivity as the regulating values of all human relations. . . [and] promoting multiple inequalities and injustices. . . [G]lobalization today is incapable of interpreting and reacting in response to objective values beyond the marketplace, which constitute what is most important in human life: truth, justice, love and most especially, the dignity and rights of all, even those who live on the margins of the marketplace (61).

*Aparecida*⁶⁰ establishes the link between “a historical-cultural reality” marred by sin and suffering but also rooted in the Gospel and filled with “an overabundance of the grace of the paschal victory” (8). The paschal victory, Christ wounded and triumphant, ties vulnerability to woundedness unleashing the “grace to carry on” and “the grace of conversion by the Holy Spirit” (100, h). In aesthetic terms, the contrast of “lights and shadows,” grace and sin, allows us to see both more clearly (5). In its truth-telling, *Aparecida* offers some cautions:

[the opacity and complexity of the present moment] has taught us to look at *la realidad* with more humility, knowing it to be bigger and more complicated than the over-simplifications through which we viewed it in the not too distant past and that, in many cases, introduced societal conflicts, leaving many wounds that have not yet healed (36).

Like Teresa, they call for defiant courage, warning that the complexity of *la realidad* can paralyze us because it appears

too large for one conscience which, taking into account one’s lack of knowledge and information, easily believes itself insignificant, without any agency in events, even when one joins one’s voice to other voices who want to help each other in reciprocity (36).

Refusing to allow “evil and death to have the last word” (548), *Aparecida* insists that

In the heart and life of our peoples pulses a powerful sense of hope, no matter the conditions of life that appear to dim every hope. [Hope] is experienced and nurtured in the present, thanks to the graces⁶¹ and signs of shared new life; [hope] commits us to construct a future with greater dignity and justice and longs for “the new

⁶⁰ The previous four general assemblies of CELAM are Rio, 1955, Medellín, 1968, Puebla, 1979, and Santo Domingo 1992. *La realidad* and its urgent call to us is invoked in the *Aparecida* document 122 times.

⁶¹ The word used is “*dones*.” It is a gift, but a gift that is poured upon the one receiving it who must then make use of it, such as: the gift of being a singer, which is only known when activated. The idea of “*dones*” or “*don*” always implicitly includes a Divine giver as these gifts “to be more” are understood to come generously from beyond the self. Consequently, I translate “*dones*” as graces.

heavens and the new earth” that God has promised in God’s eternal dwelling place (536).

As a sign of hope, *Aparecida* highlights the developing understanding globally of the “fundamental value of a person, her conscience and experience, her search for the meaning of life and for transcendence” (52). This means that there is value given “to simplicity and the recognition of the fragility and smallness of existence” making space for the humility and poverty of Christ (52). *Aparecida* legitimates the efficacy of engaging with others in community, noting, that among the positive developments of our time, “the emphasis on personal experience and daily life opens us to consider testimony as a key component in a living faith. . . In the language of testimony, we find a point of contact with persons in society and for them among themselves” (55).

The testimonies from the north take us into our community’s reality. The story of the beauty we understand as grace begins in a response inside each one of us, as J. K. Kato describes:

“Grace” is one of those oft-used words that I’ve always struggled to really grasp—and (God forgive me) I am a theologian—but feel like I’ve never done so. . . I guess the best I could come up with is: speaking of our ‘locus’, no matter how much SXXT there is in the world, there’s still an overabundance of the good, the beautiful, kindness and compassion (aka, Rom 5:20 “where sin increased, grace increased all the more”).⁶²

Kato points to the possibility that, even as we struggle to name it, today the traces of encounters with grace may actually be more abundant. The conversation⁶³ echoes *Aparecida*’s insight that even marred in suffering we feel the overabundance of grace (8), with responses falling into four general groups. First, the most frequent understanding is that grace is divine love poured out. As MT Davila puts it, grace is “unmerited holy embrace.”⁶⁴ A close second is grace felt as forgiveness and mercy, “Grace says, ‘Judas come home—all is forgiven.’”⁶⁵ Grace is the opposite of transactional because it is both “unearned and unexpected.”⁶⁶ As Ramón Luzárraga argues, “in U.S. Christianity, God’s grace is corrupted by being reduced to a means of exchange” because our culture defines “‘power’ as the ability to get stuff done.” We appeal to God to make something happen for our benefit, rather than to God’s power

⁶² J.K. Kato, correspondence, April 27, 2018.

⁶³ Forty-six people responded to my informal inquiry to friends and colleagues through Facebook beginning April 25, 2018. They were able to read each other’s thoughts, adding to the depth of the engagement. I asked: When I say “Grace” what comes to your mind? Respondents ranged from senior scholars to graduate students, chaplains and activists, and the group was particularly diverse in geography, ethnicity, race, generation and gender. Most were Catholics, but non-Catholics also participated.

⁶⁴ Maria Teresa Dávila, Correspondence, April 25, 2018. Jesuit Brendan Busse adds, “God is love loving (Divine Love) and Grace is gift giving (Divine Grace)—Give me only your love and your grace...of *suscipe* fame is better understood as “give me only the grace/gift/generosity of loving as you love.” To receive grace is to become grace-ful...just as to truly receive love is to become loving.” Correspondence, April 26, 2018.

⁶⁵ Rev. Scott Young, Correspondence, April 26, 2018.

⁶⁶ Brett Hoover, Correspondence, April 30, 2018.

to transform us in the midst of our circumstances.⁶⁷ A third group of responses, starting with Thomas Rausch, points emphatically to the Holy Spirit's⁶⁸ "indwelling presence"⁶⁹ among us. The conversation turns trinitarian as Maria Clara Bingemer adds that "God is Grace, infinite Grace,"⁷⁰ and others call out "Jesus."⁷¹ As human rights activist Sister Patricia Krommer testifies, "[g]race is the breath of the spirit, and something occurs, something moves me, enlightens me, I feel a rush of courage, or feeling yes."⁷² Finally, a fourth group points to grace's transforming power, its fostering of kinship and inclusivity, its profound call to conversion, and the inability to contain its wild expansiveness. Eric Daryl Meyer offers grace as "the unexpected solidarity of life shared in common,"⁷³ while playwright Linda Bannister encapsulates it in grace as "all the good stuff."⁷⁴ Finally, author Joseph Wakelee-Lynch summarizes:

It's not very hard to go through a day, or even longer periods of time, and feel that surely God does not exist after all. But as difficult as grace is to define—a power? a state of being?—for me grace is to God as music is to a composer—another way to speak to someone, and one that often seems like the most reliable way. Reliable as in trustable, or surety. I don't think I've ever doubted that grace exists.⁷⁵

Grace is the recognition of beauty, possible when we reach out to face the real in all its wounded fullness and engage its truth.⁷⁶ In the beauty of feeling loved, able to carry on, and transformed, we are gifted with courage to do difficult things, as Teresa declares, and to do these wherever we are placed in history.⁷⁷ "Imagination is required to find answers to the many shifting challenges presented by the real"⁷⁸ and so is prayer. *Aparecida* testifies with Teresa and my coworkers that prayer is "a sign of the primacy of grace" on the disciple's journey.⁷⁹

⁶⁷ Ramón Luzárraga, Correspondence, April 28, 2018.

⁶⁸ Rev. Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, Correspondence, April 25, 2018.

⁶⁹ Rev. Frank Desiderio, CSP, Correspondence, April 26, 2018.

⁷⁰ Maria Clara Bingemer, Correspondence, April 25, 2016.

⁷¹ Greg Walgenbach, Correspondence, April 25, 2016.

⁷² Sister Patricia Krommer, CSJ, Correspondence, April 26, 2018.

⁷³ Eric Daryl Meyer, Correspondence, April 26, 2018.

⁷⁴ Linda Bannister, Correspondence, April, 25, 2018.

⁷⁵ Joseph Wakelee-Lynch, Correspondence, April 26, 2018.

⁷⁶ An integral formation should help to "develop personalities that will mature through the contact with the real and who are open to the Mystery," *Aparecida*, 280 a.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

The Bleeding Border

So, to conclude in prayer, we encounter *The Bleeding Border*.



Fig. 1 *The Bleeding Border*, 2008. Acrylic on Paper/Canvas 77” x 112” by Sergio Gomez. Courtesy of the artist.⁸⁰

A large work recreating an experience of street art, we must be present before it in our bodies to read the text that purposefully invites us into a journey together as it frames the painting. I will do my best to approximate the experience. The text reads:

Their fear, illusion and deception. One door opens, another one closes before their eyes. In the silence of the night, ‘mojaditos’ crying as they cross the border line. The ‘coyote’ is on the run. They don’t understand why. Dream and reality is their wonderland in disguise. Someone’s children, anonymous shadows to the rest of us. Thousands of unspoken and ignored inconveniences. One bleeding border, one more night.⁸¹

The starkly moving lament could stand on its own crying out against the communal nightmare of “despair that might drive. . . a family across the border,”⁸² but the poetry is only part of the complex encounter that *The Bleeding Border* demands. The words, hastily scribbled on a wall, circle the painting, making the point of entry into the text haphazard, and asking us to choose. The upper left corner offers the least resistance, as

⁸⁰ Sergio Gomez (b. Mexico 1971) migrated to Chicago as a teenager. Exhibiting internationally, his work is in the collections of the National Museum of Mexican Art, Brauer Art Museu, and the MIIT Museo Internazionale Italia Arte. He is the curator of exhibitions for the Zhou B. Art Center in Chicago. At: Virtualartist.com.

⁸¹ For a fuller treatment of Gomez’s works including *The Bleeding Border*, see, Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco: Baylor, 2012), Plate 10.2, 156–62.

⁸² Leslie Berestein, “Highway safety sign becomes running story on immigration,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, April 2005.

the white point of light beckons, and then reveals the terror of a pursuing helicopter. If we enter here, the phrase that pins the work to the wall is “their fear.” Other points of entry (a metaphor for the very act of crossing the border) disclose their own complexity. At the top of the wall, hovers the word “*mojaditos*” above two small children as they run toward the viewer. The pejorative label *mojado*⁸³ transformed through the incongruous use of the endearing diminutive suffix, is split in two by the blackness of the night and the metal of the fence. The text continues running, taking us with it. The word “crying” is barely visible, lost in the whiteness of the wall, and the anchoring phrase on the top right corner tells us what is happening: “they cross the border.” The bottom right corner, rounding the deep green of the Gulf of Mexico set against the bright red blood dripping from the border, provides one more anchor “dream and reality.” Following “reality” the words turn upside down, and we must now work harder to accompany the words. The light of the open door through which the children flee and the round patch of blinding white light projected by the search helicopter with its whirring blades, make these words almost impossible to read: “their wonderland in disguise. Someone’s children, anonymous. . . .” Still upside down, the left corner of the painting is rounded by a longer and more discernible phrase: “thousands of unspoken and ignored. . . .” As our eyes reach “inconveniences,” we notice the silhouette of a family, a repeated and miniaturized echo of the famous signs on California’s Interstate 5 near the border.⁸⁴ Gomez recreates the sign in its historical setting next to a road and multiplies it as families jump from the sign into the darkness. It is at this point that we begin to understand the terrified children running toward us. Bereft of the last shred of safety, which the iconic sign preserves in their mother’s guiding hand and their father’s determination, Gomez confronts the reason California’s transit authorities commissioned the signs, “parents were killed in front of their children, children in front of their parents.”⁸⁵ *The Bleeding Border* is an eloquent prophetic warning and prayer of lament. The painting confronts the hubris of a power that believes itself above the higher moral law and treats human life, embodied in the silhouettes of the children, as expendable “inconveniences.” As we stand before it, Gomez’s painting overwhelms us, stating without equivocation: “I am here, I *am*, deal with me.”⁸⁶ *The Bleeding Border* is an image of one of the most painful realities of our moment, particular and universal, capturing, communicating and transforming the

⁸³ The literal translation of *mojado* is to be wet, its usage in the Southwest is a Spanish rendering of the pejorative “wetback,” a reference to crossing the Rio Grande. For a look at how such terms affect children see, Jeanne Gilliam Fain, “‘Um, They Weren’t Thinking About Their Thinking’: Children’s Talk About Issues of Oppression,” in *Multicultural Perspectives*, 10:4, 204–05.

⁸⁴ “Caltrans posted several of these signs along San Diego freeways beginning in 1990. . . . The signs were intended to warn drivers they might encounter people frantically darting across lanes of traffic as they tried to evade border security,” Berestein, Highway safety.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ For the dynamics of the encounter with art I join to Buber’s I-Thou methodology the concepts of firstness, secondness, and thirdness introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce and interpreted by Donald Gelpi. Central to this approach is the idea that works of art are something in themselves, as each of us also is, and that the encounter should be approached as a real encounter. See, Donald Gelpi, *Varieties of Transcendental Experience: A Study in Constructive Postmodernism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 245. Also, González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder*, 68–69.

experience of the millions of displaced persons struggling for survival on a global scale. In *The Bleeding Border*, the beauty of color attracts us, woos us, and fixes our gaze.⁸⁷ The play of light and dark, continent and ocean, parents and children, point back to the irreducible and beautiful aliveness of our world. The truth of the bleeding wound invites us to know our oneness and work for healing.⁸⁸ We have recognized the possibility of grace because love has awakened in us. This awakening is “the more” of the beautiful, and its recognition and the action for others it calls from us becomes our testimony to grace, alive, and filling the world.

⁸⁷ See Alejandro García-Rivera, “The Color of Truth” in *Arts: Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 21:2 (2010): 17–21.

⁸⁸ One of the most beautiful pieces of music embodying our longing for oneness is Tony Alonso’s *The Greater Glory of God* (GIA, 2012). The refrain expresses a hope “That all may have life, that all may be one, that all we believe, and all we become, may be for the glory, the greater glory, may be for the glory of God.”