

**RESPONSE TO CECILIA GONÁZLEZ-ANDRIEU, “WOUNDED GRACE
AND THE DISQUIETING INVITATION OF THE REAL**

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When I read Cecilia’s lecture for the first time, I was in agreement with her central thesis. I was again impressed with it when I heard her reading it just now. I have learnt a lot from it, and I think we share a certain theological-aesthetic engagement, even though we are working in different contexts. Cecilia and I also share the influence of Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, her supervisor, on our interpretation of Von Balthasar. Like Cecilia, I have done my time with Balthasar, and Garcia-Rivera’s work taught me how to apply his aesthetics to the political situation of marginalized communities. Therefore, I am very grateful for the opportunity to respond to Cecilia’s lecture, and to her careful reading and treatment of the diverse responses to the questions that grace poses to us.

For Cecilia, grace could function as a critical concept, one that enables us to be responsive to the lies and abuse of the powerful, and to be receptive to the signs of grace that, as she put it, “radiate in our world when we face the real” (p. 24). Grace therefore, to Cecilia, is much more than a concept. It is an experience, especially when confronted with suffering, and a witness of God’s love at work in the world, especially there where it is contradicted and violated. So, in aesthetic terms, grace is the event in our recognition of beauty, and happens in our reaching out to “face the real in all its wounded fullness and engage its truth.” Cecilia has presented us with this rich concept of grace, which is the “more” in the beautiful, that which brings a community together in its resistance to oppression, and which comes to us, and awakens us amidst the woundedness of life.

It is this radical relationship between grace and woundedness, that reminded me of an essay by Thomas Merton, who died fifty years ago this year, in which he described Christian communities as bodies of broken bones. To Merton, these bodies are sign and instrument of Christ’s body. In his words: it is “the body that resurrects in us after being torn apart, member after member, God in us is being murdered.”¹ But precisely here, he writes, does God’s solidarity with humanity become manifest, both in the despair and in the protest and fight against it, but also of the ultimate witness that God has become present among the brokenness, and as such forms the life source of faith that gives the power against cynicism, lethargy and resignation. In Exodus, God says: “and so I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians. . .” Seeing the suffering, hearing the lamentations, knowing the sufferers, these are the beginnings of liberation, signs of the grace that already lives among us, not as a preceding phase, but as an unfinished, yet true form of what grace is. Grace dwells in a communal body of broken bones that does not cease to rise up against suffering and injustice. It seeks to heal, not by being an identifiable unity but instead by a call to respond, through an awareness of mutual dependency, through laments and prayers, and acts of mercy.

My question for Cecilia, and for all of us today, is a simple one, but it may be an impossible one to answer. In this trinity of the beautiful, the communal and the wounded, where do we *locate* grace when we face the real, what Sobrino called *la*

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New Directions, New York 2007), 70–79.

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realidad? How do we prevent ourselves, as Sobrino put it, from violating it by our own tastes and interests, and molding it into what we would like justice, mercy, and goodness to be? What, if we locate the event of grace amidst the brokenness and woundedness of our and other people’s lives, will prevent us from identifying grace all too easily with other people’s resilience or our own works of charity, which would turn love and hope into our own desires for survival, or from identifying grace with woundedness itself, and thereby sentimentally glorify suffering? Where do we *locate* grace, or better, how should we resist locating it in anything, and turning it into a function against our fears and sins?

I would like to illustrate this question with the help of an image that has left a deep impression on me, a painting by the Dutch designer and photographer Hans Versteeg, whose artistic name is “Hansa.” Since the turn of the century, he mainly paints, and specializes in the realistic depiction of textures and fabric, much in line with the seventeenth century Dutch masters, Rembrandt and Anthony van Dijck. For a monastery, Hansa recently painted this *Madonna del Mare Nostrum*—Our Lady of the Mediterranean.



The painting shows a woman and her child, who have been wrapped in a foil thermal blanket to keep them warm, as one does with people who were just rescued from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. Behind them we can see the sea and an overcast, threatening sky. This is a refugee with her child, and despite the hyper-realism—or rather because of it—the painting has the effect of an icon, even on a computer screen.

We are being looked at, both by the child and the woman. Piercingly, yet neutral. There is no fear, but there is no relief or gratitude either. Nor is there any superficial, sentimental appeal. They are just there, signs of a changing world, and it is up to the observer to determine her or his response. Yet at the same time, it is clear that this response will have little meaning. Their right to exist does not depend upon it, in any way. They are there, arrived in the world that the observer belongs to, and to whom they pose a question; a question therefore, on our side: How do we react to the fact that they are here?

The striking radiance of the thermal foil is in gold and silver, and when I looked at this painting, it made me think of the heraldic colors of the Catholic Church. The Church is the cherishing cloak of the poor that are the flesh of the Anointed, the *theotokoi*, the bearers of God. The Church derives its objectivity from it, from that bodily, carnal presence, even though it is nothing but an extremely thin foil that derives its meaning from whomever it serves, the grace given to the Church by the wounded and the poor. And, we could add, not because it is strictly necessary—the cloak is already there—but because it is good.

If you look closely at the mother's eyes, you will see that she looks straight past you. Not in an impolite or disinterested way, but, still, she places you in a wider perspective. She sees you, but you are not the centre of her attention. You are a representative of the world to which she now belongs, which has now become her world too. Only she is looking into the future, at what presents itself behind your back. Will you become part of that future that is expecting her, that will be her space? If she is indeed the Madonna, as the title of the painting suggests, and therefore the image of the Church, the question is no longer whether you will save her, but whether you will be with her to be saved, just like her. You do not have to be grace—we do not have to be grace—for she carries grace in her arms.

Are we able to welcome her and him? Even if they do not give us hope right away, but we feel included in the current hopelessness of their situation, the situation of those they have had to leave behind, both at home and along the way? Are we able to believe that only from this hopelessness, true hope can be born? Or are we unable to believe it and have given up on them already: if there is any hope at all, then surely not for them? And if that is the alternative, are we even able to choose hope? Does it not mean that we are called upon to, as the title of Miguel De La Torre's *Embracing Hopelessness* (2017) suggests, embrace hopelessness in the name of grace?

The child on the Madonna's arm *does* look straight at us, the observers. It does not have the imploring look we know so well from the contemporary world of charities, but a look that seems to be reserved for young children; it is pure anticipatory, receptive observation. This anticipation seems to be not entirely without tension: the big toe on the child's little foot that is visible, is clearly pointing slightly upward. It embodies the future that its mother can see over your shoulder, before you can see it yourself, and praise:

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He has shown the power of his arm,
he has routed the proud of heart.
He has pulled down princes from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.

(...) mindful of his mercy... (Luke 1:51–52, 54).

It is not our job to rescue the child, our job is allow ourselves to be appealed to by the grace that has come with and in this child, and we are saved by it if we believe that we are saved by this child with this child. That is why we are inconsolable about every child, every adult, every elderly person that is not saved. This inconsolability is not a form of despair, but grace at work in us, presenting us with the hope that is at the same time abundantly becoming present in all that are saved, which is a twist of a certain interpretation of grace as consolation, and which, I think, is also the dynamic motif behind Cecilia’s “more in the beautiful” that awakens us to the opportunities that grace has given us. It teaches us that we should not oppress oppression with an imposed vision of grace, but that we should try to find grace amidst oppression. In Jesus, no one is “alien or a foreign visitor: you are citizens like all the saints, and part of God’s household,” as it is written in Ephesians 2:19. Just what this means and what effect it has, we will have to find out in trying, again and again. In this dedication to the world and the community, we can become signs and instruments of grace.