

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Paul Mariani's and Thomas Plante's remarks elicited conversation about the place of beauty in the Catholic intellectual tradition, and the role of colleges and universities to invite students into contemplation of beauty. On the one hand, several Roundtable participants observed that the professional guild to which professors (and, by extension, graduate students) are beholden is fragmented, a battleground for different boutique academic interests. On the other hand, that fragmentation allows a place for a study of the Catholic literary imagination that is intellectually credible and welcoming to all students.

The challenge is that sharing an invitation to consider the Catholic literary imagination will take leadership and money. At present, the chairpeople of English departments (not to mention departments of fine arts, Romance languages, music, history, and other humanities) are under pressure to represent various strains of contemporary study in their respective fields. They must seek out excellent scholars irrespective of religious practice or theological conviction. Yet, Catholic institutions have an interest in inviting students into encounters with great literature, art, music, and so on. The ways that colleges and universities shape core curricula and interdisciplinary courses; the people and texts that students encounter as freshmen; the living-learning environments that students experience in their residence halls; and many other facets of college life will reflect the structures decided by college and university leaders.

One administrator observed, for example, that his institution's commitment to the arts lagged behind many other area institutions, public and private, and that it has taken concerted efforts from the provost and various department chairs and faculty to broaden student access to the arts—and there is still a long way to go. Similarly, one professor lamented that he is unsure who will be in a position to take up the mantle of teaching Catholic literature after he has retired. The broader issue that emerged in conversation was the recognition that, on some level, many of our institutions have neglected a facet of our charism: reflecting on and teaching the long tradition of literature (and other arts) rooted in, or reflective of, a Catholic imagination. One participant observed that in addition to the substantial good of drilling deep into this tradition, there is the ancillary good of showing how it has impacted many elements of Western culture and history, from the likes of Shakespeare to Martin Luther King, Jr.

Paul Mariani recalled for the group that his course on the Catholic literary imagination

draws great interest from students of all backgrounds. Those who criticize the theme as parochial, he suggested, misunderstand the tradition. Students quickly recognize that the course theme is a seven-course meal—to carry the banquet metaphor—in contrast to the grilled cheese they are accustomed to sampling in their usual imaginative exercises. He called to mind the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well: the woman tells her neighbors the story of meeting Jesus, but when they meet Jesus for themselves they are able to remark, “now we have seen with our own eyes.” That sentiment, he suggested, is what students express about the theme of the course, inasmuch as they begin to understand how looking at the world through the lens of Catholic imagination opens them to see the possibility of God in all things.

One participant suggested the story of Rabbi Gamaliel from the Book of Acts, who, commenting on the preaching of the early disciples of Jesus, suggested that if their preaching was from God, then it will prosper despite all efforts to quell it. Perhaps teaching the Catholic literary imagination is similar, inasmuch as it returns again and again to the way that, in the words of Dostoevsky, “beauty will save the world.” For that teaching is rooted in love of students, and in the conviction that the Catholic literary imagination evinces again and again a kind of healing, a reorientation of the direction of the human heart toward the good.