

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Much of the focus of conversation following Mark Bosco's and Michael Pratt's papers was on questions related to the relationship between aesthetics, imagination, meaning, and the relationships that members of university communities cultivate. One participant observed, for example, that student questions of meaning recall the kinds of questions that Saint Augustine raised in his *Confessions*. Encounters with literature and other forms of beauty can capture students' imaginations so that they can develop new ways of imagining themselves, the world, and God.¹ Another participant suggested that in this context, reading itself becomes a kind of sacramental act: an encounter with God mediated through an imagination that gives rise to new patterns of desire beyond those of the marketplace. Learning takes on a paschal pattern, inasmuch as it involves the dying of unfruitful desires in order that newer, more fruitful desires might emerge. Further, in the Catholic imagination, *kenosis*—the emptying of self in love—emerges as a new form of beauty. Suffering and death do not change, but one's interpretation of their meaning changes in light of the Paschal mystery.

Considering these observations further, participants analyzed the difference between modernity and postmodernity, pointing to the pervading theme of sacramentality. Perhaps the postmodern turn to the specific, to anomie (as in Walker Percy), and to violence (as in Flannery O'Connor, or, in a more analytical frame, to René Girard) points less to broad questions of transcendent meaning, as in the early-twentieth-century aesthetic of Greene or Mauriac, but it nevertheless points to the importance of experience, of pilgrimage. For Catholic colleges and universities, the importance of this turn to the personal suggests tasks for both students and professors: to draw conversation partners into relationships that are apt for the honest exploration of the true, good, and beautiful, and providing the opportunity to overcome the separation and alienation that exist in many sectors of contemporary society.² Ultimately, the search for the good, true, and beautiful is a search for integrity, integration.

1 See also Paul Mariani, "Charism and the Literary Imagination," *Integritas* 1.2 (Spring 2013), 1–20.

2 This turn to the importance of relationships recalls a central theme explored in Volume 1 of *Integritas* (Spring 2013), addressing the theme of charism and hospitality. See also Marian K. Díaz, "Friendship and Contemplation: An Exploration of Two Forces Propelling the Transcendent Hope and Power of the Liberal Arts," *Integritas* 2.2 (Fall 2013), 1–18.

Several points emerged in conversation as responses to these considerations. One was that the Catholic college or university must be a place not opposed to modernity or postmodernity, but very much immersed in it. Professors must come to live where students live, and vice versa. One participant shared the story of coming to love a modern composer whom she had previously disliked because her students taught her how to listen beyond the critical frame she had learned in her musical training. She came to appreciate the beauty behind the noise because of that relationship with her students. An emphasis on this kind of community, another participant noted, called for a renewed leadership of Catholic intellectuals in administration of institutions. A related observation had to do with the question of who our colleges and universities serve, observing that there is a radical disjunction in access to higher education between the poor and the rich. Another participant pointed to the work of Philip Brickman, who observed that commitment serves to resolve ambivalence, though not remove it. The commitment of Christian faith is not, then, a refusal to admit doubt, but rather a decision to follow Christ's pattern of reaching out to the margins and to see beauty where others may see only ugliness. This pattern of discovering the beautiful—of having “eyes to see”—is a thread that connects the aesthetics of Catholic moderns and postmoderns as well as those drawn into the intellectual life of a Catholic college or university campus today.