



INCARNATION, ICONS, AND SCREENS

Colin Miller

There is no shortage of cultural commentary today about the emergence of a new sort of age, sometimes called a visual age, dominated by screens of all kinds, from the one I am currently watching myself type onto, to those thousands and millions of little screens that folks carry around with them in their pockets.

How to evaluate the pervasive existence of screens is a matter of some disagreement. I have good friends who think this phenomenon a great boon, others that see it as simply where the world is now--neither to be lauded nor condemned--and yet others who suspect that these machines are tools of the antichrist. There seems little doubt that American society as a whole gravitates towards the former view. And this is true across classes: I often see homeless people typing away on their smartphones just as much as students of private area colleges.

But how do we think about this new, "visual" nature of our age as Christians? One place to begin is to recognize that the Church has been thinking about images for a long time. It did so when it considered something close to the heart of its own worship--icons (icon just means "image"). The Seventh Ecumenical Council (A.D. 787) took up and gave a resounding "yes" to the question of whether Christians ought to offer devotion to the Lord by means of visual images of Jesus, His Mother, and His Saints. The great theologian of that Church Council was St John of Damascus, who grounded his

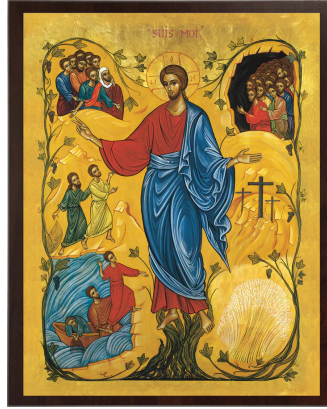
pivotal discussion of images in previous Church teaching about the Incarnation.

His teaching is worth quoting at length. Notice especially the way he makes the connection between the way that God has become visible in Christ--Christ is the image of God--and the use we make of images in churches today. John of Damascus writes:

God, as both incorporeal and inconceivable, can in no way be imaged. But now that God has been seen in the flesh, living among mortals, I can make an image of that visible aspect of God... For if the body of God is God, because of the union of God and man in the incarnation, that body is God's flesh, as it were, with its own soul and mind, with a beginning, and is not uncreated. So I can venerate that created 'stuff' [of Christ's body], through which my salvation was wrought, as being filled with dread divine power and grace. After all, we honor the cross, and what was that blessed and favored wood of the cross but material stuff? Or isn't the ink and the all-holy books of the Gospels 'stuff'--and don't we venerate that? Or what of the life-giving Altar-Table, or the Bread of Life, or before all things the Body and Blood of Our Lord? What is it all? Stuff!

Because, John says, God has been made "stuff," in a way, in Christ, we can now "look" at God in a way that was not possible before the incarnation. Not just, that is, with the spiritual eyes of our hearts, but with our physical eyes too. John continues:

For this reason, we put His image aesthetically everywhere, and in this way we sanctify the first of the senses. For the first of the senses is sight. Just like hearing is with words, an icon is a visible aid to the memory. A book aids memory with letters, the icon without letters. For we are united to an icon with the mind.... It's clear that we don't worship them in the same way as God, but we are led through them to the memory of great sights, and we offer adoration through them to the wonder-working God (Oration on Images, excerpts, PG 94, AT).



"I am the vine, you are the branches."
By Sister Marie-Paul

Icons, John says, lead our gaze to Christ, who stands "behind" them, as it were. Thus, our hearts and minds use our eyes and our eyes use a physical image, to make a new kind of incarnate worship possible--Christian worship. The argument is simple, and its application relatively straightforward: in the incarnation God takes a human body to himself, and therefore opens up the possibility that our sight, "the first of our senses," might be sanctified. But what could this mean?

What does it mean for our sight to be sanctified? This is admittedly a strange notion to us modern people.

We'll have more to say about this in the next issue, but at the very least, let me suggest that it means that our senses are not mere tools. They are not morally indifferent, useful machines that we can

use however we want to, for good or for ill. Rather, our physical senses, including their aspect that is part of our body, can be morally disposed one way or another. They can be holy, and they can be unholy. They can be good, and they can be bad. They are not machines of our souls, but what they see and how they see it, is, as it were, part of the nature of our souls.

Put differently, according to John's teaching, you cannot divide human beings up neatly into exterior mechanical bodies connected somehow with internal spiritual souls, the former being "morally neutral." Rather, all of us--including our senses--are always moral and spiritual all the time.

This is why it is good to look at icons of the Lord and the Saints. Such physical gazing morally and spiritually trains our senses by offering adoration to the thing we see the image of, and therefore trains our eyes, our memories, our souls. Our physical senses, of which sight, John says, is most important, can be in better or worse shape, depending on the kind of thing they habitually see and seek.

This, in our intensely visual age, must be significant. We'll consider some further applications of this teaching in the next edition.+

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POLITICAL IMAGINATION: LEARNING FROM ANARCHISTS (AKA MY CHILDREN)

Tyler Hambley

Politics is a practice of the imagination. Sometimes politics is the 'art of the possible,' but it is always an art, and engages the imagination just as art does. We are often fooled by the seeming solidity of the materials of politics, its armies and offices, into forgetting that these materials are marshaled by acts of the imagination.

This refreshing statement from William T. Cavanaugh in his book, *Theopolitical Imagination*, challenges our usual tendency to view politics as something large, unwieldy and distant--something beyond our daily, personal creativity. What Cavanaugh wants to bring to our attention is the simple, child-like way our imaginations can, and do, deploy our bodies (that is, our actions) in powerful ways. The good news here is that when we consider what might be politically possible, realistic, or even what might count as 'political,' we are limited by nothing other than our own imaginations. There is always room to make room for the Christ Child among us.

Unfortunately, our imaginations--and therefore our bodies--are all too often held captive to practices we haven't the slightest urge to challenge. So when our Lord does come to us in the face of the poor, the sick, or the unborn, rather than responding imaginatively through the stories, liturgies, and communal practices of the Church through the ages, we instead respond narrowly through the political routines that have dulled our imaginations.

Take presidential elections for example. Every four years, hundreds of millions of dollars are pumped into the campaigns of just two rival parties. The candidates are pitted against one another in a competition for nothing less than the "defense of democracy" (a line curiously pitched by both parties without irony). Naturally, everyone gets involved, or so we're expected to believe. Political participation--that is, voting--is trumpeted as the one sacred duty of any self-respecting citizen. In fact, I recall a graduate school professor once saying with great perturbation,

"Make sure you get out there and vote, everything's on the line this time. It's really important!" Interestingly, that professor felt no inclination to check out whether a vote from me would align with her side of the battle "line" or not. "Go vote!" was (and is) the universal, moral and political directive. "Everything's on the line."

Perhaps.

But what has led us to view political "involvement" under such an attenuated horizon? I would like to suggest that our bodies--i.e. our actions--have been made stagnant by practices, especially consumptive and competitive practices, that distort our imaginations. Notice how going to the voting booth has an air of the "official" to it. The two parties have become political brand names. Candidates "shop" for votes through marketed appeals to various constituencies. "Winning"--or the perceived need to win at all costs--shapes and molds the policies proffered. Political positions get advertised through commercials--that is, if they're not merely negative ads against the other party. Taken altogether, the emerging pantomime shifts largely to the genre of entertainment. In fact, one can't help but notice the roundtables of political commentators resembling the exact format of halftime commentary at events like the Super Bowl. In all these ways, voting--or what principally counts as being politically "involved"--is shaped by impersonal competition largely determined by market and entertainment forces.

Now, I am not suggesting that one should not vote, nor that a Christian couldn't take a clear and sobered interest in elections (so long as we don't forget we're Christians first). However, we might do well to stretch our political vision while also taking stock of how practices like presidential elections fundamentally distort and stultify our political imaginations.

Here, I've found one political subgroup especially inspiring: anarchists--by

which I mean my children. Contrary to what many of us think when we hear the word 'anarchism,' it does not simply stand for chaos and disorder (although I'm less certain about the word, 'children'), but simply means: apart from official government. I find this definition helpful because it reminds me that politics is just as much about imagining a world outside of the status quo, as it is about working within it.

The political cynicism of our day has been widely remarked upon. Many people, especially young people, increasingly feel that the whole system is broken, and that it's not worth their time to participate when little more than power or money are doing the talking. And yet, they are not ultimately without hope, as they try to imagine something different. Their attitude is nicely summed up by the French theologian Jacques Ellul:

No [true] society is possible among people who compete for power or who covet and find themselves coveting the same thing. [...] Our parliamentary and electoral system and our political parties are just as futile as dictatorships are intolerable. Nothing is left. And this nothing is increasingly aggressive, totalitarian, and omnipresent. [...] There is no point here in discussing what everybody knows, namely, the growth of the state, of bureaucracy, of propaganda (disguised under the name of publicity or information), of conformity, of an express policy of making us all producers and consumers, etc. [...] Most people [...] ridicule political chatter and politics. They see that there is nothing to hope for from them. They are also exasperated by bureaucratic structures and administrative bickering.

Ellul calls the Christian alternative to this cynicism "anarchism"--not, again, in the sense of chaos--but of a determined effort to think outside the box, to cultivate a distinctively Christian political imagination. In this sense he says,

The only thing is we now have to begin afresh. [...] I regard anarchy as the only serious challenge, as the only means of achieving awareness, as the first active step. [...] We can organize on the fringe. [...] If we denounce [business as usual], we gain the ear of a large public. (Anarchy and Christianity, pp. 21-23)

We might doubt that "anarchism" is a helpful term to unlock the world's political imagination, but what Ellul means by it undeniably captures a prevalent current attitude. In this light we might find inspiration where we least expect it--in those anarchists known as children. I happen to have four. While political collaboration is not the first thing I think of when adjudicating their disputes over legos or bicycles, they have on occasion displayed remarkable political cooperation--apart from official government (mom and dad).

Recently, my kids decided to sell some toys so they could give some money to the homeless folks they see walking up our street regularly. The four of them--ages 2 to 9--set up a table, chairs, and decorative signs by the side of the road. They sat patiently for two hours (itself a remarkable moral achievement), waiving to cars with hopeful expectation. They didn't end up selling anything, but they did share a collective goal and worked creatively to achieve it--all based on the way their imaginations took up the Church's scriptures ("Go sell all you have and give it to the poor"). When a homeless man eventually did walk by, my son--with no money to offer--quickly ran inside to grab granola bars for distribution. "Right on, little man!" the gentleman thanked him.

Such an antidote might seem trite next to the ostensibly high political stakes of American elections. "Everything's on the line!" But then, there's something about the creativity of even young children to "organize on the fringe," apart from government, against the grain of consumption, and for the sake of the poor that offers a glimpse of a better hope. For the Church's imaginative resources include nothing less than the Sacred Scriptures and liturgical practices of the Child whose alternative politics playfully invite all of us who say, "we now have to begin afresh."+

Tyler Hambley edits the *Catholic Citizen*.

SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY

Carter Edwards

"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7)

Seek the welfare of the city, Jeremiah says. Is this not obvious? Why must the LORD exhort the Israelites to seek the welfare of the place they live? Do we not all want peace, justice and fairness in our home? Why would the prophet have to tell Israel this, and us by implication? And why would the diviners and other prophets be saying anything contrary? To answer these questions, a little bit of background is helpful.

The LORD brought Israel out of Egypt and settled her peacefully in the Promised Land. But Israel has broken her covenant. She has taken to incorporating other gods, making false oaths, committing adultery, prostitution, and murder, neglecting the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien. Worse, she does not think that the LORD will punish her for these her misdoings.

But the LORD loves Israel, and wants her to repent, and return to the love of God and neighbor to which she was called. And so he sends her into exile--out of the Promised Land and all the way to the pagan superpower Babylon. This is the context that Jeremiah speaks to.

So, seek the welfare, he says, of Babylon.

Think, for a moment, of how offensive this would be to the average Israelite. Babylon has just demolished Jerusalem; Israel is now the oppressed minority. She is the forcibly moved refugee, who has suffered unfathomable losses. The pagan king Nebuchadnezzar has come and trashed God's holy places, killed their leaders, taken them away from the land God gave them, and made it impossible for them to keep their ancestral customs. Israel's identity has been destroyed. The LORD has, apparently, abandoned them. The pagans have won. Everything that opposes the LORD has

come out on top. That's what being in Babylon means.

Seek its welfare? It is hard to underestimate the hardship of the Israelites having to live in the city of Babylon. And here is where we will begin to address the question: what is the LORD telling us today in this Scripture? How is this prophecy for us?

One clue to the relevancy of this passage from Jeremiah for Christians is the way the New Testament book of Revelation uses "Babylon"--thinking back to the captivity of Jeremiah's time--to name the captivity of Christians today in a world that seems ruled by evil. Revelation calls the victory of Christ--of love over hate, of good over evil--the defeat of "Babylon, the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." Babylon stands for everything in the world that opposes Christians--the great, mighty city where the luxuries of linen, silk, scented woods, olive oil, flour, wheat, cattle, sheep and horses are sold alongside of human souls. Babylon is the heart of all corruption, for the cry of triumph for the angel at the end of time is this: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great."

Such evil was no less true of the Babylon in which Jeremiah spoke to the Israelites. It is described as full of diviners, warriors, and idols (50:36-38). She is a "horror among the nations" (50:23), she is "a golden cup in the LORD's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad" (51:7).

So perhaps we can now understand the attraction of the false prophets--who opposed Jeremiah--who said that Israel should not, should never, submit to the rule of the king of Babylon. Do not, they seem to say, submit yourselves to the rule of one who is evil and against you. And yet, the LORD tells us, seek the welfare of the city and pray for it. Only those who submit to the rule of Nebuchadnezzar will be saved.

And this brings us closer to understanding the complexity and daring of asking Israel, and also us Christians, to pray for the peace of our cities. We as Christians, like the Israelites, find ourselves in exile in Babylon, in a world where evil seems to reign supreme, and we are here as a trial, not least because of our own sin. It is a world that seems to counter at every move our lives as Christians and seeks to engulf us into its ways. We have to pray for it, to seek its good. But that itself should strike us, at least at first, as counterintuitive. If it does not strike us that way, this might be an opportunity to examine if Babylon has rubbed off on us too much--if we've gotten too used to it. The context of Jeremiah, and the book of Revelation, remind us that the normal thing, for Christians, is for the world to be against us. We are not at home here. We are aliens in a foreign land.

And yet we have to pray for it; to seek its good. For in its prosperity is our prosperity; in its good is our good (Jer

29:7). We even have to submit to it. Like Jeremiah, we are not to listen to the prophets who say not to serve it, who say "No King but God!"

How do we square these two things? What does it mean to pray for, and to work for the good of, Babylon as Babylon? There was no thought in Jeremiah's mind that that great pagan empire would somehow convert.

The same is true for us. The assumption of the book of Revelation is that we will continue to live in pagan cities, most of whose inhabitants will not become Christians. What does it mean to find our good here? What are we praying for?

We'll explore this more in Part II, in the next edition.+

Carter Edwards is a mother and homeschooler who lives in community with a handful of other Catholics and formerly homeless folks.

2024 Fall Speaker Series

Love of Neighbor and the Fear of Beggars: A Spirituality of the 'Common Good' for our Streets

Two talks with Professor Kelly Johnson of the University of Dayton. Dr. Johnson (Ph.D, Duke) will help us think Christianly about the poor. She is the author of the book, *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics*.

Friday, October 18, 6:30pm

Saturday, October 19, 10:00am

Church of the Assumption, St. Paul, MN

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COLORFUL, NOT COLORBLIND

Fr. Christopher S. Collins

I've been reading a fascinating book recently about a highly multicultural and diverse Catholic parish in Roxbury, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. *People Get Ready: Ritual, Solidarity and Lived Ecclesiology in Catholic Roxbury* is a kind of ethnographic study of a parish, but from a uniquely theological perspective. It resonates with me in particular as I have, in the last year, become the parochial administrator of St. Peter Claver Church in St. Paul. Claver was founded by Archbishop Ireland in 1892 to be the parish designated for African American Catholics. With the deep segregation of those days still very much a reality, Ireland thought this would be a relatively temporary situation because he was hopeful the "color line" would be wiped away soon enough and there would be no need for a separate Black Catholic Church. Today, it is still comprised of families who trace their lineage back to those earliest days of the church but also includes many different families of African descent, especially Nigerian, Eritrean and Cameroonian, as well as from several other African and Caribbean countries. Over time, many white parishioners have also joined the community feeling a vibrancy there that they do not sense in many other parishes.

The author of *People Get Ready* makes a few compelling observations first from the perspective of scholarship. She notes that the actual life of the parishes are too infrequently studied from a theological perspective. There are cultural and sociological analyses of parish life, perhaps most notably Robert Orsi's famous *Madonna of 115th St*. But few have explored the theological riches of a focus on the dynamics of a particular parish life. Especially when people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds somehow land together in worship as the body of Christ, what is it that gets revealed about the actual life of the church? It is a

compelling question not so much in terms of the abstract aspects of ecclesiology, but rather in the concrete and particular elements of revelation that emerges through a unique set of human relations across racial and cultural difference.

Of course, these dynamics of unity in the midst of diversity are also reflective of the life of the Church from day one. Though all Jews, Jesus still called a variety of apostles from different backgrounds. And in the experience of Pentecost in the earliest days of the life of the Church, there is a mysterious union that happens among people who did not know each other's language, and yet by the gift of the Holy Spirit understood each other and were drawn into unity with one another. The point the author of *People Get Ready*, Susan Bigelow Reynolds, makes, is that the union comes not in spite of the difference that exists among the people, but because of it. Rather than looking to be colorblind in a diverse parish setting and focusing only on what unites, we are provided a deeper sense of the richness of the unity of the community when the differences are honored and valued.

These values really come to life when there is also a habit of honoring the differences in ritual, either within the celebration of the Eucharist or perhaps especially outside of the primary liturgy. These again have everything to do with the particulars. Whether, in Roxbury, it was a matter of certain welcoming rituals for visitors enacted at the beginning of the mass, or the Stations of the Cross celebrated outside, moving through neighborhoods, or para-liturgies organized to pray for peace in the midst of waves of gang violence at one point in the parish's history, these particulars enlivened the life of the whole parish in new ways when the community would come back together for the ordinary celebration of the Sunday liturgy.

I am reminded in all these reflections of a homily preached by Pope Benedict on the occasion of baptism. He noted the particular name of the one being baptized as essential to the mystery of the grace of baptism. It is worth noting that the first moment of a Christian's life comes when, at the very beginning of the rite, the priest or deacon asks for the name of the child to be baptized. Not only will the Church be made new by this new member with a distinct identity, but in some mysterious way, God's very self is enriched as the name of the baptized child is plunged into

the name, the identity of, God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Having such reverence for the distinctiveness of each member helps everyone involved become more sensitized to the power of how the Holy Spirit continuously renews our lives together, thereby better preparing us to welcome others in as we fulfill the great mandate to go and baptize all nations.+

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2024 Fall Course

Dorothy Day and the Christian Revolution

Four talks by Colin Miller on his new book, *We Are Only Saved Together: Living the Revolutionary Vision of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*. The book is an introduction to living the Catholic Worker's vision today for the ordinary person.

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Church of the Assumption, St. Paul, MN

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