On The Promise of Film as a Locus Mystagogicus: An Appraisal from the Perspectives of Roman Catholic Teaching on Cinema and Karl Rahner's Fundamental Theology

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ON THE PROMISE OF FILM AS A *LOCUS MYSTAGOGICUS*:
AN APPRAISAL FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC TEACHING
ON CINEMA AND KARL RAHNER’S FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY

a dissertation

by

THOMAS JOSEPH MAXIMILIAN CURRY, III

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for the degree of
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Grace sows the seeds of God’s sacred word in every human life. One of theology’s most important functions is to furnish people with ways of perceiving these divine intimations in their concrete lives and relationships. Orientation to transcendental mystery is the sine qua non for initiation into faith. Theology must therefore lead people more deeply into the mystery of everyday existence as a preparation for the Christian life. At the same time, theology aims at expounding Christian teaching in as clear and intelligible a manner as possible. Theology accomplishes this by adapting its modes of presenting doctrine to the needs and capabilities of its addressees. This two-fold responsibility is properly understood as theology’s mystagogical task.

This dissertation argues that film is a crucial reference point for mystagogy—a locus mystagogicus. Film interprets human experience in ways conceptual theology cannot. It is thus a rich source for theological reflection. Theology is also an indispensable resource for film interpretation and a natural dialogue partner since it seeks to disclose the deepest dimensions of existence. More importantly, film needs theology as the hermeneutic that formally interprets religious experience—something that many human beings only vaguely sense, often misunderstand, and can easily misrepresent. With the help of film experts, theology can turn its discerning eyes to the stories and
images of film and present viewers with a unique language by which they can articulate a response to their film experience. Film thus requires theology to bear witness to its artistry when it does succeed in opening people in wonder and humility to the ever-greater God.

This dissertation in Catholic systematic theology investigates the theoretical and practical conditions of possibility for film as a locus for and of mystagogy. The question that it attempts to clarify is the extent to which Karl Rahner’s fundamental theology provides an apposite and needed model for the way Catholic theology relates to film. There are three basic goals: (1) to outline existing ecclesial and theological foundations for a Catholic theology of film by way of a survey of magisterial documents on cinema and the writings of individual Catholic theologians and film scholars; (2) to provide greater theological grounding for Catholic approaches to film by developing the model that film is a *locus mystagogicus* on the basis of Rahner’s transcendental method, creative retrieval of ancient mystagogy, and theological aesthetics; and (3) to test the viability and vitality of this model by way of analysis of the film *Babette’s Feast*. 
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Keynotes** ........................................................................................................... iii

**Acknowledgments** ................................................................................................ iv

**Introduction** ......................................................................................................... 1

**Chapter 1: Vatican Perspectives on Cinema, Part I** ........................................... 16

- **I. Introduction**
- **II. Vigilanti cura (Encyclical Letter of Pius XI on the Motion Picture)**
- **III. Discorsi sul film ideale (Apostolic Exhortations of Pius XII to Representatives of the Cinema World)**
- **IV. Miranda prorsus (Encyclical Letter of Pius XII on Motion Pictures, Radio, and Television)**
- **V. Inter mirifica (Decree on the Media of Social Communication)**
- **VI. Conclusion**
- **VII. Excursus: The “Legion of Decency” and “SIGNIS”**

**Chapter 2: Vatican Perspectives on Cinema, Part II** ........................................... 64

- **I. Introduction**
- **II. Gaudium et spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)**
- **III. Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)**
- **IV. Communio et progressio (Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication)**
- **V. Letter of Pope John Paul II to Artists**
- **VI. Conclusion**

**Chapter 3: Theological Approaches to Film** ..................................................... 117

- **I. Introduction**
- **II. André Bazin**
- **III. Neil Hurley, S.J.**
- **IV. Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J.**
- **V. Joseph Marty**
- **VI. Richard Blake, S.J.**
- **VII. Conclusion**
- **VIII. Excursus: Other Catholic Approaches to Film**

**Chapter 4: Mystagogy in Christian Antiquity** .................................................... 179

- **I. Introduction**
- **II. Pagan Roots and Adoption into Christianity**
- **III. Christian Initiation Rites**
- **IV. Mystagogia**
- **V. Mystagogy as Theology**
- **VI. Typology**
- **VII. Liturgical Mystagogy Today**
VIII. Conclusion

Chapter 5: The Mystagogical Method of Karl Rahner’s Fundamental Theology. 216
  I. Introduction
  II. Recovery and Adaptation of Mystagogy
  III. Motivations toward Methodology
  IV. Bipolar Structure of Theology
  V. Transcendental Anthropology
  VI. The Structure of Transcendentality
  VII. The Unity of Transcendental, Grace, and Revelation
  VIII. The Unity of Transcendental and Categorical Experience
  IX. Christ the Criterion: The Privileged Place of Christian Categorical Revelation
  X. Conclusion

Chapter 6: Theology and the Arts: Babette’s Feast………………………………..318
  I. Introduction
  II. Karl Rahner on Theology and the Arts
  III. Babette’s Feast: Aesthetic Analysis
  IV. Babette’s Feast: Theological Analysis
  V. Conclusion

Concluding Reflections……………………………………………………………………385

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………………394
KEYNOTES

The invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.

- St. Paul, Romans, 1:20

Come, I will show you the Word and the mysteries of the Word, and I will give you understanding of them by means of images familiar to you.

- St. Clement of Alexandria

Theology must somehow be “mystagogical,” that is, it should not merely speak about objects in abstract concepts, but it must encourage people really to experience that which is expressed in such concepts.

- Karl Rahner, S.J.

Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. Christ himself made extensive use of images in his preaching, fully in keeping with his willingness to become, in the Incarnation, the icon of the unseen God.

- Pope John Paul II

My function is to make whoever sees my films aware of his need to love and to give his love, and aware that beauty is summoning him.

- Andrei Tarkovsky
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The impact a project of this scope makes on a man, his family, friends, students, and health is immeasurable—or perhaps only too measurable. With so much gained, one cannot dwell on what was, or what at times seemed to be, lost. I should like to take this opportunity to express heartfelt thanks to some very important people.

First, to my parents, for every moment of their love, understanding, and encouragement along this difficult and rewarding journey. You gave me the greatest gift a mother and father can give. Some day the two of you will be right up there in beatific glory discussing with Sts. Mary and Joseph the trials and joys of raising an only son. When I see you together, it is if I am looking into a mirror at the man I have become. And to the ones who light up my life—my sisters, Aimee, Colleen, Camille, and Mollie: You gave me the hope to carry on.

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For my beautiful babies, Celia Teresa, Ella Augustina, and Nina Maximilia. Now we can play! My profoundest gratitude is reserved for my wife, to whom this dissertation is dedicated:

결코 쉽지만은 않았던 지난12년간의 여정을 함께 한 나의 아내에게 –

나를 위해 모든 희생을 감내하고, 우리의 예쁜 딸들을 낳아 주고, 내가 힘들 때마다 격려하여 준 당신에게 감사합니다. 나의 모든 것을 당신에게 바칩니다.
INTRODUCTION

Background and Need for the Study

Filmmaker Stanley Kubrick once claimed his medium to be “the most powerful art form ever devised.”¹ While clearly a subjective assessment about a comparatively young art, the statement acknowledges an inexorable fact: Film is a cultural reality that continues to document and shape the way countless people feel, think, and dream. In many ways it is the dominant vernacular of our time.² Certainly film has made a powerful impact on the Catholic church over the last century. The church, too, has had an important influence on both the movie industry and the manner in which people experience film. “The cinema has always been interested in God,” wrote Catholic film critic André Bazin; the “Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles were the first best sellers on the screen, and the Passions of Christ were hits in France as well as in America.”³

Indeed, shortly after Thomas Edison and his assistant William Dickson unveiled the Kinetoscope in 1894, and Auguste and Louis Lumière the cinématographe in 1895, Christianity and cinema were linked with the production of three short films about Jesus between 1895 and 1897: *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ; The Horitz Passion;* and *The Mystery of the Passion Play at Oberammergau.* One might also say that the Catholic

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² The term “film” can sometimes connote obscure, often foreign, art-house movies. Here, the term is used broadly—to designate any movie regardless of production value or country of origin. While film scholars will make distinctions among the terms “film,” “movies,” “motion picture” and “cinema,” here, for stylistic reasons, they will be used interchangeably.

church has also always been interested in cinema. This interest has manifested itself at many levels of Catholic life. For instance, in 1928, the International Catholic Organization for Cinema and Audiovisual (OCIC) was formed as an association of Catholics working in the film industry. In 1930, two Catholic men, Martin Quigley and Daniel Lord, S.J., drafted the Production Code, which was for decades the standard set of directives for motion picture moral content. For more than three decades the Code was kept in force by the church sponsored “Legion of Decency,” one of the industry’s moral watchdogs.\(^4\) The Vatican’s first official teaching on film—the encyclical *Vigilanti cura*—was promulgated in 1936; and prior to that, ten papal communiqués on cinema had been issued. Since then, Rome has propagated dozens of letters and statements and hosted numerous conferences on cinema. Film was discussed at Vatican II and officially addressed in the decree *Inter mirifica*. In 1995, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication released a list of forty-five films it deemed religiously, artistically, and morally laudable.\(^5\) Periodicals like *America* and *Commonweal* have reviewed movies regularly for decades. Priests and deacons often reference films in homilies. And since the dawn of video accessibility, teachers and religious educators in Catholic schools and parishes have augmented their courses and sacrament preparatories with film.

Yet amid the range of associations made between Catholicism and film in the last century there was little engagement between Catholic *theology* and film. The majority of theologians remained virtually silent about cinema and how it might relate to their field. While some theologians were consulted for their responses to movies like *The Exorcist*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, these were mainly *ad hoc* solicitations about

\(^4\) See the excursus “Legion of Decency” at the end of this chapter.
controversial films. Whereas the area of “religion and film” was for decades an established category of study with its own experts, “theology and film” was not. Even those working in related areas like “theological aesthetics,” “theology and culture,” and “narrative theology” did not manifest direct interest in film.

Only in the last two decades has the subfield of “theology and film” explicitly emerged by way of a contingent of scholars who believe film to be a not-so-distant cousin of theology. Today many others are joining them in considering film as an object for serious theological reflection. Inaugurated by theologians from a variety of ecclesial confessions, their pioneering work helped: (1) a larger public know that there were indeed theologians working with film in university courses and in their own research and that their work spanned as far back as the 1950s—albeit in something of an academic ghetto; (2) begin to establish theology and film as a legitimate academic field of research and teaching; and (3) communicate innovative theories for discerning possible theological implications in films that may or may not treat explicitly of religious themes. As pioneers of a nascent theological style, these scholars had to contend with the professional circumspection of colleagues and film experts alike. They would have to justify that their motivation for engaging film was not owing to theological ascendency or a desire to colonize film for the church. The onus was also on them to develop a basic knowledge of film interpretation and to explain theology’s function as a mode of film criticism. Yet the earliest theologians of film saw such challenges as risks worth taking.

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6 John May writes that “theologians’ general ‘discomfort’ with films, even distrust of them, is acknowledged and regretted, though explanations for the phenomenon may be hard to come by—except perhaps as a reflection of earlier ecclesiastical disputes over the seductive potential of images, or as a recurring but fortunately minority tendency these days to consider ‘popular’ culture as an unworthy ally in the process of evangelization (John R. May, ed., New Image of Religious Film. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997, p. ix).
Perhaps galvanized by the prescience that “the grammar of the next phase of theology is being hammered-out in non-theological, and even non-believing circles,” these pacesetters took the risk of developing a novel theological style.

A cohort of theologians, more Protestant than Catholic at first, began to see the possibilities a partnership between theology and film might foster for the theological, catechetical, aesthetic, and spiritual life of the church. Gradually, their numbers grew and today there are theologians thinking about Christian faith from the perspective of film and on film from the perspective of Christian faith to the extent that university courses are offered in this field, supported by numerous publications in books and journals. The field has its own online resources, modules at academic conferences, and even film festivals. Indeed, the explosive growth in the field has led to such an outpouring of research methodologies that it is impossible to define what ought to be included or excluded under the rubric “theology and film,” and one cannot construct a unilinear summary of existing approaches toward their interaction.

Many of the existing studies that connect Catholic theology and film are foundational and valuable at the level at which they operate, and this project remains beholden to them in many ways. Yet, among those committed to the field, few are writing explicitly from the standpoint of systematic theology. Present works on theology and film generally take the form of scholarly essays, collected in thematically allied compendia. While such studies are not entirely unsystematic in character, none of these volumes can be said to be a single, extensive treatment of the cinema written from within a Catholic systematic framework. A consequence of systematic theology’s inattention to

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film is that the broader question of what engenders and sustains their relationship remains underdeveloped. Existing studies only attend cursorily to the historical and doctrinal preconditions for how the two are actually already connected. The classic systematic question of the “conditions of possibility” for the relationship between theology and film remains largely untried. Greater theoretical precision concerning the very prospect of their association is thus needed. Overall, there is an urgent need for theologians across the disciplines to consider the “reading” of film, even at a bare minimum, a relevant theological talent in relation to our cinema-enthusiastic, but often uncritical, generation. Yet it is fitting that systematic theologians be especially involved in deepening the links between religious experience and film since one of the substantive tasks of this area is the critical correlation of Christian faith and culture. Indeed, systematicians are trained to find and strengthen connections often between seemingly disparate enterprises. They will thus raise questions about the points of connection between theology and film that others might not think to consider.

This problematic situation is heightened by the fact that the backstory of the Vatican’s teaching on cinema is little known. Many of those working in theological and pastoral circles remain unaware of the content, if not the existence, of official ecclesial pronouncements on cinema. To date, no critical study has assembled and carefully examined the many documents pertaining to the church’s position vis-à-vis cinema. Consequently, certain foundational principles communicated in these writings that would necessarily have a bearing on Catholic approaches to film have not been given the exposure they deserve. A critical appraisal of these documents is essential in the development of a Catholic theology of film.
At the same time, Vatican teaching on cinema is itself challenging to grasp, given that it constitutes a cumulative response to film by various popes and councils over an entire century. This teaching comes in many forms—speeches, letters, decrees. Some of the texts treat film directly, while others regard film under a more comprehensive rubric (“social communication” or “art”). Further, since most of these documents are addressed to the church directly, they presume Catholic faith. A consequence of this is that theological presuppositions underpinning Vatican opinion remain tacit or undeveloped altogether. It is necessary, therefore, to read these documents in concert with others that may not reference “cinema” or “media” but nonetheless more vigorously define the theology behind Roman proclamations on film.

To summarize the need for the dissertation, procedural and substantive lacunae in the existing literature necessitate a more thoroughgoing, systematic approach, one that has at its center a unifying method broad enough to assimilate foundational strands of Catholic teaching on film into a larger theological framework and specific enough to move the discourse into new territory. Present works on Catholic theology and film are insufficient to the extent that they: (1) do not consider Roman magisterium’s positions on cinema; (2) abbreviate the theoretical preconditions of theology’s relationship to film; (3) only moderately insist that theology can offer film scholars a language and a conceptual framework helpful for interpreting religious impulses in film; and (4) need to convey methods which safeguard film against facile theological uses that risk contravening film’s artistic integrity. In short, these writings beg more substantial reflection on the transcendental question pertinent to Catholic systematic theology concerning the a priori conditions of possibility for the correlation of theology and film.
This dissertation attempts to reinforce the foundations laid down in the body of Catholic writing on film as it searches for hermeneutical tools and other resources in the tradition that substantiate the correlation of theology and film and illustrate possibilities for their dialectical “give and take.” Greater wisdom concerning what the two have in common and what, indeed, differentiates them, will lead to a more meaningful and lasting exchange between the two.

**Thesis**

The movement of Catholic theology toward film has come about in waves—gradually, but intermittently. A treatise that sets forth a Catholic interpretation of film formally and systematically has yet to emerge. Whereas this dissertation does not presume to attempt such a monumental—and perhaps unachievable—task as developing a comprehensive systematic theology of film, it does represent a sustained theological exploration of film from a Catholic theological perspective. The study is designed in part to illustrate the many ways Catholic Christianity in particular helped cultivate the relatively new area of “theology and film.” It endeavors to contribute to the conversation by building upon the pioneering efforts mentioned above, placing the relationship between theology and film within a broader historical and theological context, providing further foundational principles for their interaction, and hopefully leading the dialogue in new directions. What is needed is an approach that at once encompasses the valuable insights of existing Catholic literature and specifies the doctrinal presuppositions for the correlation between theology and film which many of the present writings seem to take for granted.
This project operates under the conviction that the soil generative of “theology and film” will be better irrigated and its produce heartier and more abundant if those in the field are equipped with these implements. It thus turns to the storehouse of Catholic theology to uncover these already available yet overlooked instruments and adapt them for the cultivation of this innovative theological field.

The dissertation discovers in the fundamental theology and theological aesthetics of twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner elements that provide theoretical foundations and give further justification and encouragement for Catholic theology’s turn to secular sources like film for critical reflection and learning. The project attempts to elucidate the extent to which the interrelated topics of Rahner’s theology provide an apposite and needed framework for the growing rapprochement between Catholic theology and film. While Rahner never wrote about film directly, his teaching on the arts, which is founded upon his larger systematic project of integrating Christian faith and basic human experience, can be extended to include film. According to Rahner, already inherent to theology is an aesthetic dimension that comprises both verbal and non-verbal forms. Conversely, he holds that the transcendental orientation of genuine art suggests it has at least an implicit theological capacity. His assertion that there is a poetic impulse within theology lays the foundation for what he names the “mystagogical” dimension of theology. This dissertation takes its cue from Rahner’s intuition that the concept of mystagogy—“initiation into mystery”—is a promising tool for facilitating a stronger integration between theology and art and posits the thesis that film is a promising locus mystagogicus. This thesis suggests that film is important cultural reference point for and of Christian mystagogy, artistically descriptive of the human search for meaning in
wonder and in struggle and disclosive of the mystery dimension implicit in all human experience, to which theology may turn in its task to help people discover in their daily lives the truth of Christian faith and lead them more deeply into the mystery of faith. The study investigates the theoretical and practical conditions for this possibility from the perspectives of Vatican teaching on cinema, the approaches of individual Catholic film experts and theologians, the patristic tradition of mystagogy, Rahner’s fundamental theology, and film itself.

Procedure

The dissertation argues the thesis in a course of six chapters. The first chapter surveys what might be called the Vatican’s “first phase” of official teaching on cinema. It consists of a critical analysis of four of the magisterium’s main documents on film promulgated between 1936 and 1963. The chapter sets forth the seminal themes of the earliest ecclesiastical teaching on cinema since these would become foundational for all future Catholic discourse on the topic.

The second chapter complements the first by examining the “second phase” of Vatican teaching on film, beginning with the conciliar document Gaudium et spes and ending with John Paul II’s Letter to Artists. The documents chosen for analysis do not all treat film as an explicit topic, yet they establish principles that relate directly to Catholic interpretations of film. The chapter will track shifts and expansions made in the Vatican’s teaching on film between its first and second phases. These initial chapters of the dissertation represent an original contribution to Catholic scholarship on film since, to
date, no study has assembled Rome’s major texts on cinema and critically examined them as part of the larger conversation about Catholic theology and film.

The *third chapter* then turns to the writings of a representative group of Catholic film experts and theologians. The purpose is to present a sense of the range of specifically Catholic ideas on film and theology, especially some of the more advanced theoretical models for relating theology and film. Each author appreciates the complexity of the film-theology colloquy and works toward a resolution of a specific aspect of that conversation. The chapter demonstrates how the dissertation’s thesis both draws from and expands these prototypes. Indeed, because each writer has had a decided influence on the ideas in and need for this dissertation, the chapter constitutes more than a survey of existing models: it is designed to be constructive, with each approach adding a theoretical layer to the thesis that film is a source for mystagogy. The analysis will attempt to reveal those characteristics that define each approach as distinctly Catholic and judge what they may or may not have in common with the teaching espoused by the official church. Thus, the third chapter represents something of a primer in the foundational literature of Catholic theological approaches to film.

The *fourth chapter* provides historical and theological warrant for the employment of mystagogy in the dissertation’s main thesis. As noted, the project proposes to develop a model for the way theology relates to film based in part on Karl Rahner’s distinctive construal of mystagogy. To appreciate how his restoration expands the scope of what constituted mystagogy in the early church, the chapter explores the methods the fathers used in their mystagogical homilies. Characteristic elements of patristic mystagogy are highlighted that provide substantial grounding for the thesis that
film is a potential source for and of mystagogy, including: the fathers’ turn to elements in secular culture to help illuminate the symbols of Christianity; the importance they accorded direct experience over conceptual knowledge of sacramental initiation; the role narrative, symbol, and imagination played in their rhetorical analysis of the mysteries; the fact that mystagogy was multivalent and easily adaptable; and that mystagogy was considered to be an abiding process for all Christians, not only neophytes.

The fifth chapter is the hub of the dissertation as a systematic project. Using mystagogy as the interpretive key to Rahner’s methodology, the chapter establishes further theoretical warrants for the claim that film is a valid and crucial locus mystagogicus. According to him, receptivity to transcendence is the sine qua non for initiation into the theological life. Mystagogy, for Rahner, is more than reflection on sacramental experience; mystagogy is orientation to the transcendental dimension of human experience as preparation for the explicit encounter with the God of the gospels. Rahner relates mystagogy through and not in addition to his fundamental theology, which is the process by which he outlines the logic of Christianity, gives a reasonable basis for religious belief, and demonstrates how the doctrines of faith are inherently interconnected. The chapter discusses Rahner’s conception of the nature and purpose of theology, including the cultural situation to which his retrieval of mystagogy attempts to respond and which, as this project’s thesis suggests, film can serve to complement and inform. By laying down the theoretical foundations for Rahner’s mystagogy the chapter attempts to define with more precision many of the presuppositions underlying the Catholic literature on film studied in earlier chapters.
The first half of the sixth chapter considers Rahner’s theological aesthetics. Through his writings on poetry and the arts, Rahner insists that all theological language, whether verbal or non-verbal, ultimately serves to negotiate divine Mystery—not with a mind to contain or explain it away but rather to be opened transcendentally by and guided toward its horizon. His approach leads one to see that theology and film, while distinct, are already related and can be mutually illuminating. The chapter substantiates that film is an important source of theology since it can reveal the religious dimension of human experience in concrete, imaginative forms beyond what conceptual theology can accomplish on its own. It also argues that theology is a required hermeneutic for disclosing the religious dimension in film. Though film, as art, is incommensurable, it still needs to be interpreted by way of methods outside itself. These twin impulses of Rahner’s aesthetics provides further basis for a Catholic mystagogy that uses film as a source which leads people through film’s form, dramaturgy, images, and symbols into awareness of the sacred principle of human life as a preliminary step to fuller initiation into the gospel.

The second half of the final chapter is essentially a practicum that tests the viability and vitality of theology as a form of film criticism. Tutored by Rahner’s transcendental and mystagogical theology, it engages in a deep look at the film Babette’s Feast. The first step of the analysis is an aesthetic evaluation. The film is approached as a work of art that “speaks for itself.” The structure, narrative, and symbols of the film are described and interpreted for the possible messages they communicate. Such a descriptive approach intends to guard against theological eisegesis without precluding the need to submit the film to a Catholic theological reading—a unique perspective sensitive
to symbols that might escape the eyes of those with other interpretive strategies. The further advantage of a Catholic semiotics is that it can help disclose possible religious messages latent in the film and aid the exegesis of symbols that others may be less equipped to assess. The second step is a theological evaluation of the film, which takes the interpretation to another level in the sense that it sees the film as a touchstone for deeper theological engagement. Application of theology’s hermeneutical tools—the determiners of gospel and tradition—can serve to discern the validity and genuineness of the Christian message already expressed in the film but it can also provide a reading that the director and his collaborators might not have anticipated.

The concluding portion of the dissertation rounds out the discussion, as it recapitulates the conviction that one of the most important functions of theology is that it clarify and lead people more deeply into the mystery of existence as a preparation for the explicit profession of faith. The section draws out implications of the dissertation and judges whether in fact the project has proved successful at illustrating film to be a indispensable source for theology’s mystagogical task. It treats of how the dissertation can be helpful across a number of theological fields (pastoral theology, religious education, comparative theology) and highlights further desirable possibilities for a cooperation of film and theology.

**Delimitations**

It should be clear by now that the dissertation is expressly Catholic and theological in nature since it aims at increasing an understanding of Christian faith by way of believing conversation about God through an investigation of theology and film.
It is important to confirm this position from the beginning in order to demarcate the project. For instance, the study should not be misconstrued as broadly religious or operating under the heading “religion and film,” an area that typically accommodates cinema to more rather than fewer religious Weltanschauungen. Neither is it a study of the (interesting) history between Hollywood and the Catholic church. Nor is it an exhaustive account of initiatives made by theological scholars to connect their area of expertise to film. Indeed, since the dissertation is Catholic in nature, and since there are limits to such studies, it does not intentionally try to accommodate theological approaches to film developed by Protestant and Orthodox scholars. Whereas the hope is that much of the study can be helpful to those of other confessions, it does not purport to have designs on an all-encompassing methodology that would be acceptable to other theological sensibilities. Finally, the intention of the study is not so much to mount an argument against other contrasting theoretical positions than it is to build a theological model in accordance with existing strands of Catholic teaching about cinema. This does not to suggest the dissertation is uncritical of the literature it places under scrutiny, as an analytical approach is maintained throughout. The hope is that the model developed by the project helps to broaden the scope and amplify the insights of these antecedent works. Still, the idea that film can become a mode of mystagogical theology is certainly not an original insight. As will be shown, the intention, if not the structure, of this theoretical approach can be found in the work of other theologians of film. Thus, the study does not so much hammer out an original theoretical model than it does explicate and apply one

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that is already available, yet underemployed. It is believed that these constructive and integrative intentions of the dissertation align with the true nature of Catholic systematic theology.

Good, relevant theology is always intensely linked to exchanges with modern culture (the aggiornamento pole) and yet without forfeiture of the fruits already within the tradition (the ressourcement pole). The hope is that this dissertation will perform according to these twin Catholic initiatives. Finally, it is hoped that the dissertation encourages theologians of every field to place a higher esteem on exceptional film for its ability to engage students, colleagues, and others in theological exploration and to lead people deeper into transcendental mystery.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Over the last century, the Roman Catholic magisterium has promulgated dozens of official statements and documents concerning motion pictures. Taken together, this literature defines, in greater and lesser degrees, the Vatican’s perspective on film. Since these writings are seldom discussed in Catholic sectors, it may come as a surprise to many in the church that the Vatican has a fairly substantive, if not systematically developed, doctrine on the cinema. One of the problems in discussing Catholic positions on film is that “not enough people read these documents.”

Describing the church’s position on cinema and charting its development, however, is not a simple matter. For one, Vatican opinion on film is not encoded in any single pontifical statement and can be delineated only through an evaluation of several decrees and papal speeches. Some of these treat cinema directly, while others handle the subject under larger headings such as social communication or art. Also, because these documents presuppose Christian faith, a Catholic worldview, and a basic knowledge of church doctrine, few articulate the theological principles underlying the claims made about cinema. It is necessary, therefore, to read these documents in concert with others that may not reference cinema but nonetheless more vigorously define the theology behind the church’s teaching on the subject. Explicating the Vatican’s attitude toward cinema is also challenging because no independent study exists that has assembled all of the pontifical material on film and presented it in any comprehensive manner. Even pioneering Catholic studies in the area of “theology and film” (covered in chapter three of

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the dissertation) seldom refer to these documents. Indeed, a thoroughgoing study of Roman Catholic approaches to cinema—Vatican and otherwise—has not been tried. Thus, the attempt in the next two chapters to describe where the magisterium stands with regard to motion pictures is something of a pilot endeavor. Such an effort is necessary for a dissertation in Catholic systematic theology that attempts to understand and strengthen the relationship between theology and film, for it situates the study within the context of the church’s “official” conversation about cinema and demonstrates that the study is theoretically warranted by the magisterium and grounded in doctrine.

The chapter explores four documents seminal to the church’s position on film up to and including the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. *Vigilanti cura*, Pope Pius XI’s encyclical letter on motion pictures, was the first significant pontifical statement on film and provided a platform for all future ecclesiastical discourse on the topic.\(^2\) *Discourses on the Ideal Film*, which is the text of two speeches given by Pope Pius XII to professionals in the Italian film industry, exhorts filmmakers to be mindful of the spiritual affects that film content and technique have on audiences and to make movies that aid the common good of society. *Miranda prorsus*, an encyclical from the same pope, attends to film alongside television and radio. It declares mass media to be providential and couches the church’s position on cinema in more explicitly theological terms. *Inter mirifica* (*Decree on the Means of Social Communication*) is the only document promulgated at Vatican II that pertains directly to cinema. While the decree includes

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\(^2\) The chapter analyzes only the Vatican’s main declarations on film. There are numerous smaller communiqués, the quantity of which grew in proportion to Rome’s interest in cinema. For instance, ten documents were issued prior to *Vigilanti cura*, forty-five before *Discourses on the Ideal Film* (1955), and fifty-four before *Miranda prorsus* (1957).
slight shifts in the magisterium’s opinion of film, it largely repeats earlier teachings; yet these modifications are noteworthy for the nuances they make to earlier doctrine.

The documents are analyzed in chronological order, which allows for developments in church teaching to emerge and leads the investigation up to the expansions Vatican II would make to Rome’s perspective on film (covered in chapter two). The chapter places each document in its historical context, explains its salient philosophical, moral, and theological points, and draws conclusions for Catholic theological reflection on film. Whereas several themes get repeated across this first phase of Vatican doctrine on cinema, each of the four texts chosen offer unique contributions to the magisterium’s standpoint. After a formal conclusion, the chapter finishes with an excursus on two Catholic groups that have played important roles in the history of the relationship between the church and cinema: the Legion of Decency and SIGNIS.

**Vigilanti cura (1936)**

Written nearly forty years after the invention of cinema, Pope Pius XI’s 1936 encyclical, with the English title “On the Motion Picture,” was the first papal letter devoted entirely to the then burgeoning form of entertainment, art, and industry. Addressed to bishops in the United States, yet intended for a wider audience, its occasion

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4 *Vigilanti cura* was not the first papal statement on cinema, but it was the most substantial. Prior to it, in the encyclicals *Divini illius magistri* (1929) and *Casti connubii* (1930), Pius XI condemned “immoral films for harming the sound training of youth and making a mockery of the religious and Christian concept of matrimony,” (E. Baragli, “Media of Social Communication, II (Attitude of the Church),” in *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, p. 553).
was to applaud initiatives made in the U.S. by the Legion of Decency and to encourage the group to continue its “holy crusade against the abuses” of motion pictures. Pius XI levels a critical eye at the motion picture industry and urges his audience to keep a “vigilant watch” (the encyclical’s title) against the possible inimical effects of cinema on those under their episcopal care. With such an attitude of cautious optimism the letter also describes certain benefits of film such as recreation and its potential as an instructor in morals. A number of points are covered within its exhortative lines, chiefly: the cultural impact, popularity, and importance of motion pictures; the nature and effects of its depictions, especially on the minds of young people; the moral responsibility of industry leaders in producing films; and the duty of the Catholic church as a whole in supporting the making of morally “decent” movies.

Vigilanti cura amplified a fundamental teaching of Pius XI, one first articulated in his inaugural encyclical Ubi arcano Dei consilio (1922), namely that as long as nations refused to faithfully submit to Jesus Christ’s “sovereign rule over the family and society” there would be no prospect of a lasting world peace. The pope expressed deep concern over the rapid secularization and materialism that spread across Europe after the First World War, highlighting that these currents would only increase the pain and alienation of a people already suffering. Pius XI believed the catastrophes of the Great

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5 Vigilanti cura, op. cit., par. 1. Hereafter, all quotations from and references to church documents from the Vatican’s official website will be noted according to the organization of paragraph sections as it appears on the document’s webpage. Some online documents already have sections numbered. For others, section breaks have been counted and numbered for ease of reference.


7 Ubi arcano Dei consilio, ibid., par. 54.
War had served to wrench humankind from its revealed spiritual path and obliterated “all traces of those natural feelings of love and mercy which the law of Christian charity had done so much to encourage.”

The “active and fruitful tranquility which is the aspiration and the need of [hu]mankind,” would not be achieved by denial of religious values, the amassing of wealth, or a facile yearning for a peaceable world. Rather, he writes, the peace of Jesus proclaimed in the gospels comes from the “acquisition of spiritual treasures.”

Accordingly, the Catholic church must help lead nations and individuals together in search of “the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ” by “extending farther and farther the boundaries of the Kingdom of Christ,” setting “both public and private life on the road to righteousness,” and demanding through its own example that all human beings “become obedient to God” at every level of their lives. The church has the indispensable duty to “watch over the entire education of her children, in all institutions, public or private,” and, especially for the sake of the young, to ward off “the moral poison which at [their] inexperienced and changeable age more easily penetrates the mind and more rapidly spreads its baneful effects.”

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8 Ibid., pars. 18 and 20.
9 Ibid., par. 7.
10 Ibid., par. 57.
11 Ibid., par. 55. This was Pius XI’s papal motto.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., par. 54.
14 Ibid., par. 23.
15 Ibid., par. 24.
Vigilanti cura applied this mandate of *Ubi arcano* to a particular public institution: the cinema. Because film had become “the most popular form of diversion . . . offered for the leisure hours . . . of all classes of society,” the Holy Father believed it important to identify its merits and safeguard against its (perceived) deficiencies and pernicious effects. **Vigilanti cura** communicates overlapping philosophical, ethical, and theological themes that pervade subsequent church discourse on cinema—themes that would ultimately provide a platform for future Catholic teaching about film.

Philosophically, film is identified by Pius XI as *art.* The medium is lauded as capable of being more than a popular entertainment: “The motion picture should not be simply a means of diversion, a light relaxation to occupy an idle hour; with its magnificent power, it can and must be a bearer of light and a positive guide to what is good.” The statement also hints that cinema’s considerable influence on the minds of audiences means that the magisterium must treat it more seriously than a mere pastime. A brief attempt is made to explain film’s massive appeal and why, indeed, it had become the “most powerful” medium of art and communication:

The power of the motion picture consists in this, that it speaks by means of vivid and concrete imagery which the mind takes in with enjoyment and without fatigue. Even the crudest and most primitive minds which have neither the capacity nor the desire to make the efforts necessary for abstraction or deductive reasoning are captivated by the cinema. In place of the effort which reading or listening demands, there is the continued pleasure of a succession of concrete and, so to speak, living pictures.

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16 *Vigilanti cura*, op. cit., par. 23.
18 *Ibid.*, par. 27.
Today, one may be struck here by the apparent air of condescension toward cinema and its patrons. Though film is deemed a powerful art, the passage could be interpreted as suggesting it to be a somewhat “lesser” art compared to traditional arts like literature and music, not only perhaps in its form but because of its association with the “crudest and most primitive minds.” This might insinuate that film cannot be “high art” because it is enjoyed by so many. However, he might also be simply implying that film is able to captivate a wider audience, much like music. Whereas the church would in time modify such rhetoric, still, the main point of the passage should not be lost: namely that given film’s potency and artistic value it should be evaluated according to a higher standard than would an amusement or simple pastime. Cinema, it states, should be held to “the supreme rule which must direct and regulate the great gift of art in order that it may not find itself in continual conflict with Christian morality or even with simple human morality based upon the natural law.” Because film is “in reality a sort of object lesson which, for good or for evil, teaches the majority of [people] more effectively than abstract reasoning, it must be elevated to conformity with the aims of a Christian conscience and saved from depraving and demoralizing effects.” The encyclical mandates that Catholic leaders lobby the motion picture industry to produce films of such elevated standing and take responsibility for the formation and direction of moviegoers who might lack the wherewithal to assess the value of the messages communicated in film.

20 Indeed, it would be more than a decade after Vigilanti cura before film would begin to receive widespread artistic praise throughout the world. It was primarily the critical work of film scholars associated with the journal Cahiers du Cinema, which began in the mid-1950s, that opened up critical inquiry into the artistry of film (cf. the section on André Bazin in chapter three of this dissertation).

21 Ibid., par. 6.

22 Ibid., par. 27.
The pope’s philosophical reflections lead to certain moral conclusions about the “magnificent power” of motion pictures. He includes film’s accessibility as a major factor in its cultural, intellectual, and emotional force. Because film is often less removed from the average person than other fine arts, it stands a greater chance of having a persuasive influence—a consequence Pius XI thinks is double-edged:

Everyone knows what damage is done to the soul by bad motion pictures. They are occasions of sin; they seduce young people along the ways of evil by glorifying the passions; . . . they destroy pure love, respect for marriage; . . . and are capable also of creating prejudices among individuals and misunderstandings among nations, among social classes, among entire races. On the other hand, good motion pictures are capable of exercising a profoundly moral influence upon those who see them. In addition to affording recreation, they are able to arouse noble ideals of life, . . . to present truth and virtue under attractive forms, . . . to favor understanding among nations, social classes, and races, to champion the cause of justice, to give new life to the claims of virtue, and to contribute positively to the genesis of a just social order in the world.23

Judging from this passage, the church’s perspective on motion pictures might appear dichotomous: Films are either “good” or “bad” depending on their contributing effect to moral lives of viewers. While such a viewpoint might be criticized as ignoring the fact that film, like any art, often thrives in ambiguity—the “grey area” of life—the point being made here is that, given cinema’s enormous capacity to influence the development, character, and behavior of countless people, film art “must itself be moral.”24 Pius XI contends that the essential function of art, its raison d’être, is “to assist in the perfection of the moral personality.”25 This assertion is made in part to urge film producers not to

23 Ibid., pars. 28-29.

24 Ibid., par. 6. This seeming dichotomous vision of films (“good” and “bad”) would carry over into subsequent Vatican documents on cinema, only to be superseded by a more balanced concern not only for film’s moral effects but for its artistic expression of the many dimensions of human life.

25 Ibid., par. 6.
lower “the moral standard of the spectators,” discredit “natural or human law,” or otherwise be “offensive to Catholic moral principles.” He also suggests that because those in the industry do not always hold to these values, it is up to the church to sustain its “crusade” against the “parade of vice and crime” on the screen and demand from the motion picture industry “clean films which are not offensive to good morals or dangerous to Christian virtue.” As witness to the fullness of moral perfection—Jesus Christ—the church must take up the task of keeping a “watchful eye” on cinema and promoting it as “a valuable auxiliary of instruction and education rather than of destruction and ruin of souls.”

Whereas Vigilanti cura was not intended as a theological tract on film, one important declaration it makes would serve to influence and be further developed within future ecclesiastical teaching on cinema. It says that the arts and sciences (film is simultaneously art and technology) “are true gifts of God [that] may be ordained to [God’s] glory and to the salvation of souls and may be made to serve in a practical way to promote the extension of the Kingdom of God upon earth.” The passage sustains the position of Ubi arcano concerning the need for the international church to seek out cultural resources for advancing the gospel; however, it leaves largely to speculation

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26 Ibid., par. 12.
27 Ibid., par. 15.
28 Ibid., par. 13.
29 Ibid., par. 18.
30 Ibid., par. 7. Practical recommendations are made as to how this vigilance should be maintained. These include recruitment of more Catholics to the Legion of Decency, the creation of national film review boards facilitated by Catholic bishops, organized boycotts of theaters showing movies with questionable content, and the widespread screening of “approved” films in parish halls.
31 Ibid., par. 9, emphasis mine.
what film as a “gift of God” exactly means and stops short of describing how films in particular effectively “extend” God’s kingdom, serve as vehicles toward moral perfection, or are instrumental to God’s salvation of the world. One possible interpretation of the statement is that it refers to films which are illustrative of Christian principles. Since depictions of charity can lead to imitative action that builds God’s kingdom, film is in fact providential and God can be experienced in the righteous deeds inspired by film. In this sense, the text refers to film’s divine giftedness as potentially motivating Christian behavior. Little more in the text suggests that Pius XI accords film with any further theological value.

A criticism of the document is that it holds to a utilitarian or consequentialist notion of the nature of art, one that measures the worth of film solely on its usefulness in the training of morals. The letter would have Catholics judge film as “good” only insofar as it functions as a potential motivator for Christian action. Taken too far, such a reduction of film to an ethical tool runs the risk of limiting the craft of filmmaking—and any other art for that matter—to its practicability, a position that constrains the medium’s autotelic dimension (l’art pour l’art). That is to say, taking only this approach to film evaluation not only disregards the need to appraise a film’s production quality but eclipses its full aesthetic value: its capacity to elicit wonder, for instance; or train the emotions; or mediate an experience of beauty.

A related shortfall of the encyclical is that it remains on the level of abstraction when discussing cinema. As mentioned earlier, its condemnation of cinematic portrayals of “sin and vice” outweighs efforts to extol cinema.\textsuperscript{32} Yet no sense is given as to what

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., par. 3.
constitutes on-screen “sin and vice.” And whereas the encyclical admits that “classic masterpieces . . . and original creations of uncommon worth”\textsuperscript{33} had been produced by 1936, it does not identify these masterpieces by name or present concrete rationale as to what makes for exemplary cinema.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{Vigilanti cura’s} language has been criticized. Certainly from the perspective of twenty-first century sensibilities its style and censorial leanings seem outmoded. Thus, its “authoritative and even arrogant” manner and “one-sided view of cinema as a ‘spectacle nuisible,’” [are positions] more intelligible under the circumstances of those days.”\textsuperscript{35} Its defensive, even pejorative, tone is certainly consistent with the language of Vatican pronouncements from the time. And from the perspective of twenty-first century sensibilities, the encyclical’s attitude, style, and censorial leanings may seem outmoded. One might wonder if the letter would have been more impressive had it encouraged U.S. bishops to invite writers, producers, and directors into dialogue with the Catholic church about principles for cinematic content rather than demand, as it does, that they “conform entirely to our standards.”\textsuperscript{36} Clearly, the piece is of a different time and ecclesiastical ethos. Still, there is appreciable value in Pius XI’s cautious optimism and defensive positioning of the church \textit{vis-à-vis} cinema and its industry. For instance, his approach expresses the church’s parental concern to protect the vulnerable—young people, in this

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 17.

\textsuperscript{34} His successor, Pius XII, would work to remedy this problem in part through his 1955 \textit{Discorsi sul film ideale}—talks in which he presented the qualities of an “ideal” film. The next section of the dissertation evaluates these lectures.


\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Vigilanti cura, ibid.}, par. 54.
case, and audiences yet unequipped to make informed judgments about what they see on screen. Pius XI might well have taken as his cue the words of Jesus: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42). Indeed, this instinct would be borne out in subsequent pronouncements on film.

**Discorsi sul film ideale (1955)**

The years between Pius XI’s *Vigilanti cura* and Pius XII’s *Discourses on the Ideal Film*—alternatively titled *Exhortations to Representatives of the Cinema World*—saw extraordinary changes in the world of cinema. In many ways these were the defining two decades of film history. The motion picture industry (“Hollywood”) went through its Golden Age, consisting of the rise and eventual reformation of the studio system, the grooming of movie “stars,” and the proliferation of movie theaters. Unprecedented capital was gained from these ventures. Technology and the ease of transportation made the artistic vision of filmmakers more realizable. Literary artists began to collaborate with film artists. The field of film criticism was inaugurated. Two major wars and the shifting dynamics of geo-politics created international and existential situations that could be interpreted through the camera eye. Between 1936 and 1955, style- and genre-defining films were produced, including nine of the American Film Institute’s top-25 movies\(^{38}\) and international works long lauded as masterpieces.\(^{39}\) The OCIC (*Office

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Catholique International du Cinéma) awarded its first seventeen awards at film festivals during this period.\(^{40}\)

Pius XII gave his *Exhortations* in two speeches. The first was an address to representatives of the “Italian Cinematograph Industry” on June 21, 1955; the second, to representatives of the “International Union of Cinema Theatre Managers” and the “International Federation of Film Distributors,” on October 28, 1955.\(^{41}\) The discourses were thus offered to film industry constituents, not clergy. Conceivably, it is owing to the fact that he was not communicating an ecclesiastical directive but rather inviting filmmakers to listen to a Catholic perspective on their medium that it has a more “diplomatic” tone than *Vigilanti cura*.\(^{42}\) *Exhortations* sustains the former encyclical’s twin attitudes of optimism and caution, yet it also expresses a firmer trust in film and its possibilities—a confidence ascribable perhaps to the many artistic successes cinema enjoyed in the intervening years. There is continuity between the two pronouncements in their sketching the contours of a Catholic approach to cinema. For instance, both (a)

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\(^{39}\) Films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), *Tokyo Story* (1953), *La Strada* (1954), and *The Seven Samurai* (1954).

\(^{40}\) The OCIC awardees included six American productions: *The Fugitive* (1947); *Home of the Brave* (1949); *Intruder in the Dust* (1949); *The Quiet Man* (1952); *On the Waterfront* (1954); and *Marty* (1955).

\(^{41}\) For ease of analysis the two speeches will be treated if they were one document—“*Exhortations*.” Indeed, they were intended to be complementary. References will be numbered according to section breaks in the first speech (I) and the second (II) as they are organized on the Vatican’s website.

\(^{42}\) While generally more positive in character than *Vigilanti cura*, certain passages in *Exhortations* suggest Pius XII wished the church to remain at a critical distance from film: “Certainly it seems that the cinema, being by its nature an art and a diversion, ought to remain confined, as it were, to the fringe of life, governed, of course, by the common laws which regulate ordinary human activities; but since, in fact, it has become for the present generation a spiritual and moral problem of enormous importance, it cannot be passed over by those who have at heart the fate of the greater part of [humankind] and of its future” (*Exhortations II*, par. 2).
recognize the importance of film as art and industry; (b) acknowledge film, as a free expression of human creativity, to be a gift of God which obliges responsibility on cineastes and audiences alike; and (c) think through the social and spiritual impact of film. *Exhortations* builds on the foundations set down almost twenty years earlier and fleshes out some of *Vigilanti cura’s* more hypothetical concerns, particularly those related to the impact of film on the human psyche.

In stating the purpose of his discourses, Pius XII declared that because of the “tremendous dynamic activity to which the cinema ha[d] given life” and the “extraordinary influence” motion pictures had on society, it was time for a “proper study of the art of the cinema.”43 This “study” would entail considering film both “as it actually is” and “as it ought to be”—i.e., in its “ideal” form. The pope hoped his examination would help raise film “to the dignity of an instrument devoted to God’s glory and [humanity’s] full development.”44

From the start, it is important to state what *Exhortations* is not attempting when it discusses the “ideal film,” for *prima facie* it might appear presumptuous for a pope to pronounce definitively on standards for artistic excellence and to delineate criteria prescriptive for an entire type of art. Pius XII readily admits that it is not the place of the church to tell filmmakers how to do their job or to make definitive claims as to what qualities make for a superlative film. As he says, “no discerning person could ignore or deride your conscientious and well-weighed judgment in matters concerning your own

43 *Exhortations* I, par. 5.

44 *Exhortations* II, par. 1.
profession.” Indeed, the pope applauds the merits of film artists, encouraging them to put to “good use” that pre-eminence and authority which your knowledge, your experience, and the dignity of your work confer on you. In the place of irrelevant or harmful shows present pictures that are good, noble, beautiful, which undoubtedly can be made attractive and uplifting at the same time, and even reach a high artistic level. You will have the agreement and approval of everyone of upright mind and heart, and above all the approval of your own consciences.46

With full knowledge of the universal appeal of cinema, the position Pius XII takes here would seem to be that of a spiritual leader who is faced with a very popular, very influential source of information and entertainment and considering its effect on those under his pastoral care. In offering representatives of the film industry a Catholic perspective on the nature and prospects of their craft,47 the pope explains that the term “ideal film” is not intended to denote any singular movie, one inclusive of all the elements he will lay out. Instead, Pius XII’s remarks suggest advocacy of something like a humanism informed by Christian anthropology as an ideal framework from out of which filmmakers can tell their stories. Movies, he says, ought to “strengthen and uplift” audiences in the knowledge of the dignity conferred upon them by God; increase people’s “gifts of energy and virtue”; galvanize them to “overcome obstacles and avoid erroneous solutions”; urge them to “rise after every fall and return to the right path”; and encourage people to “go from good to better through the use of [their] freedom.”48

45 Exhortations I, par. 22.

46 Ibid.

47 Exhortations anticipates by forty years John Paul II’s Letter to Artists, which offers an even more thoroughgoing model for collaboration between the church and artists. This text will be considered in Chapter 2 of the dissertation.

48 Ibid., par. 29.
Pius XII cites the classic philosophical triad of transcendent values—Truth, Goodness, Beauty—as qualities that should inhere in an ideal film. A film will be ideal in content to the extent that, in perfect and harmonious form, it measures up to the original and essential demands of [being human]. Basically, these demands are three: truth, goodness, beauty—refractions, as it were, across the prism of consciousness, of the boundless realm of being, which extends beyond [human beings], in whom they actuate an ever more extensive participation in Being itself. . . . It is clear that the content, or rather the choice of the plot, such as comes from looking with all possible fidelity at reality in its goodness and beauty, is of fundamental importance in the creation of the ideal film.49

Whereas Exhortations largely encourages filmmakers to produce such movies, since the “range of plots remains wide, rich, rewarding and attractive, no matter what may be the element of the triad which predominates in the individual film,”50 still, the pope asks whether film is a “suitable vehicle” for the expression of the transcendentals—the very things of Being itself?51 He answers that “even, in the case of a film worthy to be classified as good,” obstacles “of an entirely practical nature interfere, which check the filmmaker on the threshold of the ideal, as, for example, the intrinsic impossibility of giving a visible representation to some truths, goodness or beauty.”52 This principle—that there are limits to the artistic expression of truth, goodness, and beauty—cautions against the potential idolatry of art. It also urges filmmakers to bear in mind the gravity of what they do; given cinema’s public and influential reach into the private sphere, filmmakers should not approach their craft facilely.

49 Exhortations II, pars. 6-7.
50 Exhortations II, par. 7.
51 Ibid., par. 6.
52 Ibid.
Nowhere in the discourses does Pius XII name as a criterion for the ideal film that it be explicitly Christian or even thematically religious. Indeed, he speaks about problems related to the expression of spiritual and religious realities:

Not every religious action or occurrence can be transferred to the screen, because either a scenic representation of it is intrinsically impossible, or piety and reverence are opposed to it. Moreover, religious topics often present particular difficulties to authors and actors, among which perhaps the chief is how to avoid all trace of artificiality and affectation, every impression of a lesson learnt mechanically—since true religious feeling is essentially the opposite of external show, and does not easily allow itself to be "declaimed." 53

Certainly, Pius XII does not oppose the production of religious films; yet there is need for “considerable finesse and depth of religious sentiment and human tact, in order not to offend and profane what [people] hold sacred.” 54 Further, the interpretation of religious experience, even when “carried out with a right intention, rarely receives the stamp of an experience truly lived and as a result, capable of being shared with the spectator.” 55

With the understanding that no single movie can be expected to embody all the proposed ideals, specific features of an exemplary film are further named and defined. Foremost of these should be respect for human beings, a value grounded in the theological anthropology of Genesis 1:26, which claims for all people a dignity and nobility bestowed by God “in whose image and likeness” they are made. Pius XII calls the human person “the universe in miniature,” equipped by God with the “heights and depths” of an emotional life; the world of the senses “with its numerous powers,

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53 *Exhortations II*, par. 24.


55 *Ibid.*. This may be more evident today as one looks back to the religious epics of that era. In some cases, the dramaturgy and primitive visual effects of many mid-century biblical epics might be characterized as overwrought, pietistic, and stilted. Chapter three examines how both André Bazin and Richard Blake treat the question of filming the religious.
perceptions and feelings”; and the body itself, “formed even to its minutest parts according to a teleology not yet fully grasped.” Secondly, film should express humanity in its struggle and development. In this sense, film ought to be tailored to suit the stages of human life, meeting both children and adults according to their “own manner of seeing and understanding things.” Finally, film should aid people “in maintaining and rendering effective [their] self-expression in the path of right and goodness.”

*Exhortations* also examines more carefully than *Vigilanti cura* the question of cinema’s “terrific power,” specifically its mimetic effects: “Many, particularly if their spiritual formation is weak, are allowing themselves to be brought to adopting behavior in their private and public lives, which is determined by the artistic fictions and the unsubstantial shadows of the screen.” Yet *Exhortations* goes into a deeper assessment of cinema’s capacity to impress itself on the human spirit. A fair portion of the document explains film’s impact from the perspective of “the important part played in it by the laws of psychology.” While today it is taken for granted that filmmakers use various techniques to influence audiences intellectually, viscerally, and subliminally, in 1955 the

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56 *Exhortations I*, par. 28.


58 *Ibid.*, par. 47. Recall that *Vigilanti cura* did not offer specific filmic instances where its magisterial prescriptions had obtained. Here again no movies are referenced by name, perhaps keeping in line with the general principle of the document that no individual film will epitomize all the “ideals.” Still, it would be helpful to have some sense of particular films that approach the pope’s vision of an exemplary work. As is noted in the *Excursus* at the end of this chapter, the OCIC (now SIGNIS) operates officially under the auspices of Rome. Thus, one possible indicator of films Pius XI had in mind as ideal are those that received prizes by the OCIC in the year he gave the *Exhortations* (1955): *Sinha Moca* (dir., T. Payne, Brazil); *Marty* (dir. D. Mann, U.S.); and *Amici per la Pelle*, (dir., F. Rossi, Italy).

59 *Exhortations I*, par. 3.

science of psychoanalysis was, like cinema itself, just beginning to mature. Pius XII made it a point to incorporate language about the “internal structure of psychic process” to explain the way viewers are so intensely affected by film:

Through the whole time of this sort of enchantment, due in large part to the suggestion of the actor, the viewer moves in the actor's world as though it were his own, and even, to some degree, lives in his place, and almost within him, in perfect harmony of feeling, sometimes even being drawn by the action to suggest words and phrases. This procedure, which modern directors are well aware of and try to make use of, has been compared with the dream state, with this difference, that the visions and images of dreams come only from the inner world of the dreamer, whereas they come from the screen to the spectator, but in such a way that they arouse from the depths of his consciousness images that are more vivid and dearer to him. Often enough then it happens that the spectator, through pictures of persons and things, sees as real what never actually happened, but which he has frequently pondered over deep within himself, and desired or feared. With cause, therefore, does the extraordinary power of the moving picture find its profoundest explanation in the internal structure of psychic process, and the spectacle will be all the more gripping in proportion to the degree in which it stimulates these processes.

Today one marvels at the depth of psychological insight this passage offers; indeed, its grasp of the interior processes triggered in the experience of film viewing was truly ahead of its time. But what does Pius XII conclude about this process in relation to his vision of the ideal film? Where to his mind do such vicarious experiences lead audiences?

[T]he internal dynamisms of the spectator's ego, in the depths of [one’s] nature, of [one’s] subconscious and unconscious mind, can lead . . . thus to the realm of light, of the noble and beautiful, just as they can bring [a person] under the sway of darkness and depravation, at the mercy of powerful and uncontrolled instincts, depending on whether the picture plays up and arouses the qualities of one or the other field, and focuses on it the attention, the desires and psychic impulses.

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
Perceivable here is a slight movement beyond *Vigilanti cura’s* bifurcation of film into “good” or “bad” depending on its effect on the morality of spectators. Whereas the concern remains as to which direction film leads the spectator—good or evil—in *Exhortations* a greater effort is made to take into account the cumulative and lasting effect of film on the human spirit, which may or may not express itself in direct action.

To conclude, while on first impression it may appear an odd if not presumptuous gesture for a pope to summon film producers to the Vatican in order to posit criteria for an ideal film, a closer examination has revealed the real intention behind *Exhortations*, which surfaces most clearly in his closing remarks:

> As we spoke, there came before our mind the immense crowds of men and women, of youths and of children, to whom daily the film speaks its powerful language. We gathered up their longings and hopes with love and fatherly solicitude. The majority of them who are, in the depths of their souls, good and sound, ask no more from the cinema than some reflection of the true, the good, the beautiful: in a word, a ray of God. You, too, listen to their plea, and answer their expectations, so that the image of God, stamped on their souls, may always glow clear in the thoughts, the feelings, the deeds inspired by your art.  

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As chief pastor of the Catholic church, the pope’s primary concern is the spiritual wellbeing of God’s people. Pius XII’s recourse is directly to filmmakers: Not to tell them what to do, but to petition them to consider seriously the real impact their medium can (and does) make on the individual and society. His intention is to humanize movie audiences so that filmmakers treat viewers not as idle spectators or commercial pawns but as people who have absolute worth in the eyes of God. Speaking with the conviction that film is an art form blessed by God, the pope exhorts industry leaders to consider that the motivating force behind the creative talents of even the most principled of producers ought to be more than simple altruism: cinema’s terminus should be nothing less than

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64 *Exhortations II*, par. 61.
“the education and development of the soul.” Filmmakers have the rare and great opportunity to reflect through their craft something of the truth, goodness, and beauty of the human person. Yet it is an opportunity they must approach responsibly, which, to his mind, is only possible when done according to Christian principles.

Finally, Exhortations implies that film is a providential instrument which, in its expression of aspects of truth, beauty, and goodness, can lead people to more deeply experience these values and thus predispose them to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet it does not make this judgment explicit. Whereas Exhortations opens wider the possibility that film can prompt people to recognize the experience of God already present in their lives—a possibility that both Vatican documents studied so far suggests is real—it does little to flesh out the meaning of this judgment. It is therefore incumbent upon a survey of Vatican approaches to cinema to determine whether this position is sustained and further substantiated in future documents. This question will be kept in mind as the dissertation turns to the third major ecclesiastical document about motion pictures, Miranda prorsus.

**Miranda prorsus (1957)**

This encyclical by Pius XII was the first papal document to make mass communication an object of Catholic church inquiry and teaching. Here, radio and television are considered along with motion pictures to be technologies worthy of papal attention on a number of counts, including: the great influence of the media on the lives of viewers.

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65 Exhortations II, par. 3.

66 See Miranda Prorsus: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus_en.html> (last accessed 1/17/10).
of people worldwide; the position of the church as the principal disseminator of Jesus’ message of salvation; and the possibility that electronic forms of communication can aid the church in its task to spread the gospel and unite humanity.\textsuperscript{67} The intention of this section is to trace the contributions \textit{Miranda prorsus} made to Rome’s then nascent understanding of film. The letter represents the Vatican’s most systematic treatment of the subject of film to date (some fifty years hence) and it laid the groundwork for the decrees \textit{Inter mirifica} and \textit{Communio et progressio}, works that will be taken up in the next chapter. The encyclical is divided into two main parts. The first inquires into the nature of social communication as a whole and outlines general principles that ought to govern the production and reception of mass media; the second half evaluates cinema, television, and radio each in their particularity.\textsuperscript{68} Throughout, the letter covers the specific role the church should play with reference to these media.

Pius XII recapitulates earlier church teaching on the cinema by identifying film, television, and radio as “forms of art [that] exercise very great influence on the manner of thinking and acting of individuals and of every group of [people],”\textsuperscript{69} noting that, since their inception, the church welcomed these arts with “great joy.”\textsuperscript{70} At the same time he states that ecclesial enthusiasm for them is curbed by an instinct to guard against the possible hazards of such potent influences with “motherly care and watchfulness.”\textsuperscript{71} The

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 12.

\textsuperscript{68} While the encyclical’s first half addresses the three forms of mass media as a whole, for the sake of style, the present analysis treat \textit{Miranda prorsus} as if it were reflecting only on film.

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Miranda prorsus, ibid.}, par. 5 (emphasis given).

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 4.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}
pastoral intention and cautionary tone of *Miranda prorsus* echo *Vigilanti cura*. Like the earlier text, this missive acknowledges the tremendous effect media has on society, sets out the high ideals toward which they ought to strive, and warns against potential dangers that can result when such heights are not reached. It fortifies its addressees against such hazards with the knowledge of the providential nature of all media. It is assumed that possession of this wisdom will oblige responsible participation in the creation and patronization of these arts.

The letter, however, does more than restate Vatican teaching; it develops several themes found in the earlier documents. Previously, the church had taught that motion pictures are “true gifts of God [that] may be ordained to [God’s] glory and to the salvation of souls and may be made to serve in a practical way to promote the extension of the Kingdom of God upon earth.” Further, it taught that film can contribute to moral development and is capable of reflecting something of the beauty, truth, and goodness of God. However, these claims went largely unsupported by theological principles developed within the literature. *Miranda prorsus* expanded Catholic opinion on cinema by defining the theological nature of social communication as well as the origin, object, and proper use of media forms. For instance, it states that all instruments of communication originate as a cooperative effort between Providence and human ingenuity. Whereas these “remarkable technical inventions” are the result of “human intelligence and industry,” they are “nevertheless the gifts of God, our creator, from whom all good gifts proceed.” The real gift, however, does not consist in media alone;

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72 *Vigilanti cura*, op. cit., par. 9.

73 *Miranda prorsus*, op. cit., par. 1.
rather it is the knowledge that God has given human beings the means of free self-expression and hence willed them to be participative in God’s own creative spirit:

[Since God] longs to see in man the image of His own perfection, He even wills him to be made a sharer in this supreme generosity, and has linked him with His own activity as the proclaimer of those good tidings, making him become their donor and dispenser to his brethren and to the whole human race. From the beginning of time, it has been man's natural and normal tendency to share with others the treasures of his mind by means of symbols whereby he daily tried to develop a more perfect means of expressing his material problems. Thus, from the drawings and inscriptions of the most ancient times down to the latest technical devices, all instruments of human communication inevitably have as their aim the lofty purpose of revealing men as in some way the assistants of God.74

Here, Pius XII accords nobility to the work of media artists. Just as God has made all human beings capable of assisting in the dissemination of “good tidings,” so into the hands of producers, directors, announcers, actors, technicians, etc., “have been placed these useful instruments by which the priceless treasures of God may be spread among [people] like good seed which bring forth fruits of truth and goodness.”75 The encyclical teaches that because all human communication derives from God, its use should be proportional to its providential design. Thus, the “first aim of the arts” must be “to serve truth and virtue.”76 This means that all those involved in the art/technology of electronic communication should

refrain from error, from lies, from deceit of all kinds, [and] shun everything that can encourage a manner of living and acting which is false, imperfect, or harmful to another party. But above all, let the truths, handed down by God's revelation, be held sacred and inviolable.77

74 Ibid., par. 25. There is a conscious attempt to use gender-neutral language throughout the dissertation. Consequently, many quotations have been altered. However, in certain cases such as this, for stylistic purposes, quotations have been kept in the original.

75 Ibid., par. 26.

76 Ibid., par. 45.

77 Ibid., pars. 47-48.
The freedom that artists enjoy in plying their craft will be the exercise of “true freedom” when their work makes “the bonds between peoples become yet closer.”\footnote{Ibid., par. 46.}

As construed by Pius XII, just as the authentic use of media is capable of supplying “good seed” for intellectual and moral cultivation, so can its abuse spread seed which “become the means, and as it were, the paths leading to evil . . . .”\footnote{Ibid. pars. 27-28.} The letter reproaches those who would deny “Christian teaching and the principal end of these arts . . . [and] desire to use these inventions exclusively for the advancement and propagation of political measures or to achieve economic ends, and who treat our noble aim as if it were a mere business transaction.”\footnote{Ibid., par. 33.} Such a degradation of the art of cinema is even more reprehensible in the hands of those who “assert and claim freedom to depict and propagate anything at all, even though there has been established beyond dispute [in Vigilanti cura and Exhortations] both the kind and the extent of the damage to both bodies and souls which has had its source in these principles.”\footnote{Ibid., par. 34.} As author of human intelligence and freedom, God has equipped people to develop the—morally neutral—media forms for the purposes laid out above.\footnote{Ibid., par. 46.} Too often, however, an attitude of

\footnote{The encyclical is clear that forms of social communication are willed by God and therefore are not themselves “evil.” Rather, it is the exercise of human freedom, both in producing and receiving cinema, that makes for “good” or “evil” media: “All evil, of course, which is opposed to right moral principles, cannot have its origin in God, who is complete and absolute Good; nor does it come from the techniques themselves, which are [God’s] precious gifts. It can be only from the fact that [human beings], endowed as [they are] with free will, can abuse those gifts, namely, by committing and multiplying evil” (ibid., par. 28).}
"uncontrolled freedom, which disregards all precautions" is taken and "can result in serious danger to souls"\textsuperscript{83}:

[It] is true that an explicitly moral or religious function is not demanded of art as art; but if artistic expression gives publicity to false, empty and confused forms—those not in harmony with the Creator's design; if, rather than lifting mind and heart to noble sentiments, it stirs the baser passions, it might, perhaps, find welcome among some people, but only by nature of its novelty, a quality not always of value and with but slight content of that reality which is possessed by every type of human expression. But such an art would degrade itself, denying its primary and essential element: it would not be universal and perennial as is the human spirit to which it is addressed.\textsuperscript{84}

\textit{Miranda prorsus} makes more explicit than previous documents the sense of the church’s responsibility in relation to film and defines this in terms of the church’s basic mission: to announce the "message of eternal salvation."\textsuperscript{85} It must take the role of pastoral teacher, instructing those involved in filmmaking so that their work remains at the service of truth and virtue, unites people, and advances civilization. Through local offices the church must continue to keep a "watchful eye" on the industry so that there be "a lessening of the dangers which can threaten harm to morals;"\textsuperscript{86} it must educate spectators so that they might "practice mature consideration and judgment on the various items which the film . . . puts before them . . ."\textsuperscript{87} Finally, the church should support efforts by filmmakers that extend the gospel and otherwise enable people to grow in wisdom and virtue. The encyclical claims the "right" of the church to utilize film for the sake of its mission, the rationale being that because Jesus commissioned his followers to

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 34.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 36.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 6.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 62.

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 54.
proclaim his gospel of deliverance from evil throughout the world, it is the church’s duty in every age to employ for this purpose every effective means of communication available—cinema notwithstanding.

As in *Exhortations*, Pius XII does not insist that a film have as its primary subject a religious personae or promote an explicitly religious message for it to be laudable in the eyes of the church. What is suggested, however, is that filmmakers strive through their work to serve the truths handed down by divine revelation and instill “into minds that Christian truth which alone can provide the strength from above to the mass of [people], aided by which they may be able with calmness and courage, to overcome the crises and endure the severe trials of the age in which we now live . . .” The pope goes so far as to state that film is a medium which can “permit Christians, through the new knowledge they acquire to raise their minds to a contemplation of heavenly truths.” This nuances the earlier position of *Exhortations* that cinema is capable of conveying to viewers some perception of divine goodness, truth, and beauty and makes clear Pius XII’s belief that film has a profound theological purpose: to lead people to God. Film is a “worthy instrument” by which people can “be guided towards salvation, raised to higher things, and become really better.” It does this when it communicates human dignity, reflects the wonders of God, and inspires holiness by opening people to the wisdom and hope of the gospel.

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90 *Ibid.*, par. 75.
It is now possible to summarize how *Miranda prorsus* advanced Vatican teaching on cinema. For one, in discussing film within the larger context of social communication and art it does not sequester film, as it were, in an exclusive corner. This does much to diminish the earlier impression that film is a *spectacle nuisible*. Instead, film it is looked upon as a multidimensional medium that operates socially, artistically, technologically, and spiritually and can be fully engaged by Christians. Also, with this document the Catholic church confirmed the compatibility between the belief and practice of faith and the experience of film. It pushed reflection on the subject into a more explicitly theological arena, beyond the strictly moral discourse of *Vigilanti cura* and its utilitarian view of film. Still, as with the previous Vatican teaching, the document considers film in abstraction from real movies and the relation they bear on the concrete lives of believers.\(^9\) It leaves to speculation how, in practical terms, film is capable of interpreting the “things” of God and leading people to contemplate “heavenly truths.” This is the same question that remained open at the end of *Exhortations*.

As noted, *Miranda prorsus* sustains some of the tone and rhetoric of *Vigilanti cura*, particularly with reference to the perceived negative affects of cinema. Consider, for instance, Pius XII’s assertion that the media “introduce a most powerful influence into [human] minds both because they can flood them with light, raise them to nobility, adorn them with beauty, and because they can disfigure them by dimming their luster, dishonor them by a process of corruption, and make them subject to uncontrolled passions.”\(^9\) Or

\(^9\) Again, like *Vigilanti cura* and *Exhortations*, no specific cinematic works are referenced. In the year *Miranda prorsus* was released (1957), the OCIC presented awards to *Twelve Angry Men* (dir. S. Lumet, U.S.); *Ich Suche Dich* (dir. O.W. Fischer, Germany); and *A Hatful of Rain* (dir. F. Zinnemann, U.S.).

\(^9\) *Miranda prorsus*, *ibid.*, par. 19.
again, media “can be the source of countless evils.”93 By comparison, this language was noticeably absent in *Exhortations*. The variance is noteworthy for two reasons. First, because the positive character of *Exhortations* with its clear excitement for cinema and its promises seems dimmed here. Whereas *Miranda prorsus* expanded the Vatican’s moral discourse about film to include theology, it does not acknowledge the need for *aesthetic* discourse: the question of how from the perspective of Christianity film might serve an important artistic function in itself. In other words, Pius XII does not develop the “art for art’s sake” motif in his *Exhortations*.94 Second, with respect to cinema there is a consistent dichotomy in Catholic doctrine up through *Miranda prorsus*: A film is either good or evil, virtuous or shameful. If a movie is of the first class, it unmistakably enlightens all who view it and helps to build God’s kingdom; if from the second, it fosters incalculable evil into the human mind and ushers into the world only corruption. At this stage in Vatican teaching, there is little room for degrees of film interpretation, no grey matter, as it were, that would require critical analysis. This ignores the fact that different movies reach people differently and that the many dimensions of a film obtain in viewers in varying ways—often, over time, in a single viewer. As the next chapter will illustrate, later Vatican teaching would move away from such a polarized view of film. However, the attitude established in these earlier writings continues to influence the way many Catholics approach cinema today.

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94 As will be detailed in chapter two of the dissertation, John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* incorporates film in his reflections on the relationship between the Catholic church and the arts.
Inter mirifica (1963) \(^{95}\)

On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced that he would convene the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Catholic church. He intended the council, which would open nearly four years later, to be a pastoral rather than strictly dogmatic undertaking. As the pope said in his opening address, the salient point of the Second Vatican Council was not to hold discussions about one article or another of the fundamental doctrines of the church, rather what is needed at the present time is a new enthusiasm, a new joy and serenity of mind in the unreserved acceptance by all of the entire Christian faith . . . . What is needed, and what everyone imbued with a truly Christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit craves today, is that this doctrine shall be more widely known, more deeply understood, and more penetrating in its effects on [people’s] moral lives. What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honored teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else. This, then, is what will require our careful, and perhaps too, patient, consideration. We must work out ways and means of expounding these truths in a manner more consistent with a predominantly pastoral view of the church's teaching office.\(^{96}\)

John XXIII hoped the bishop’s pastoral focus and presentation of doctrine in new ways would resonate with the lived experience of Catholics and lead to renewal within the church and a greater openness to the world.

Even before the announcement of Vatican II, John XXIII had appointed a committee to gather materials on the subject of mass communication in preparation for the approaching convocation. He commissioned the group to

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\(^{96}\) Pope John XXIII, Opening address, October 11, 1963. See: <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/pope0261i.htm> (last accessed 1/17/10).
identify the problems raised by the press and the audiovisual media and, while recognizing the individual character of each sector, to assemble all this material into a single study which would yet leave room for future developments in which the different instruments of social communication, as they were called from then on, would find their proper place and receive due consideration within the church’s renewed ministry.\textsuperscript{97}

The committee’s work eventually led to the writing of \textit{Inter mirifica (Decree on the Media of Social Communication)}, one of the first documents propagated by the Second Vatican Council. Like \textit{Miranda prorsus}, it concerns basic Christian principles for mass media as a whole and so only indirectly handles cinema. An immediate difference between this document and the foregoing literature on film is its nature as a conciliar edict. This is significant for two reasons: first, it did not come from the hand of an individual pope but from the collective thought of a panel of bishops (specifically the Commission for the Lay Apostolate) and ratified by the ecumenical council (1,960 to 160 votes); and second, its composition reflects something of the spirit and objectives of the general council. As will be shown, \textit{Inter mirifica} largely restates prior papal teaching on cinema. The focus of the present analysis, therefore, will be on the modifications and/or enlargements it makes to earlier positions.\textsuperscript{98}

\textit{Inter mirifica} recapitulates several themes present in earlier Vatican statements on film. Briefly, it reemphasizes the teaching that the church has deep insight into the nature of the medium by virtue of the revealed knowledge of film’s transcendent origin and goal. Film is ordained by God to be instrumental in the welfare and healing of humankind; to assist the church in disseminating the gospel; and to mediate “the


\textsuperscript{98} As with \textit{Miranda prorsus}, although \textit{Inter mirifica} concerns various forms of mass media, for the sake of style the document will interpret it as if it were written with film directly in mind.
salvation and perfection of [Christians] and of the entire human family.” 99 Whereas the
magisterium acknowledges how film “greatly contribute[s] to [people’s] entertainment
and instruction,” 100 its primary interest remains the opportunities it affords evangelization
and catechesis. God has imparted to the world various means by which the gospel can be
propagated. The church claims an inherent right to employ all media appropriate for the
pastoral formation and “instruction of Christians and all its efforts for the welfare of
souls.” 101 Film, a product of humanity’s God-given creative spirit, is one such medium.

A leitmotif throughout Inter mirifica is its emphasis on the “proper use” of film.
For its part the church has the responsibility to instruct the world in Christian principles
and to ensure that the gospel remains the criterion for judging human action. The
document insists that the film industry has a share in this “gravely important
responsibility” 102 by producing works that are ordered to the common good of
humankind. Because filmmakers are in a position “to lead the human race to good or to
evil by informing or arousing [hu]mankind” 103 through their work, their efforts need to be
guided by an “upright conscience,” one which corresponds at the very least to natural
law, i.e., the “absolute primacy of the objective moral order.” 104 The decree thus
subordinates the “rights of art” to the “norms of morality” with the justification that the
moral order “by itself surpasses and fittingly coordinates all other spheres of human

99 Inter mirifica, op. cit., arts. 2 and 3.
100 Ibid., art. 2.
101 Ibid., art. 3.
102 Ibid., art. 11.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., art. 6.
affairs—the arts not excepted—even though they be endowed with notable dignity.”

Practical directives are given for Catholic advocacy of morally wholesome films. For instance, Catholics can cooperate in “projects and enterprises for the production and distribution of decent films by encouraging worthwhile films through critical approval and awards [and] by patronizing or jointly sponsoring theaters operated by Catholic and responsible managers.”

Yet all of this is essentially a reiteration of prior doctrine. So, what exactly did Inter mirifica newly contribute to church teaching on film? One change can be detected in the rhetoric concerning portrayals of “moral evil.” Since Vigilanti cura, the church had considered cinematic representations of violence harmful to viewers, particularly if the violence was not plainly condemned as such during the course of the movie. Here, allowances are made if the depiction of depraved acts is intended to chronicle the sinful condition that Christ came to heal. As the decree states, such portrayals of moral evil can “bring about a deeper knowledge and study of humanity” and thus “reveal and glorify the grand dimensions of truth and goodness.” Despite the qualification that these representations remain “subject to moral restraint,” what is shown in this slight doctrinal shift is greater ecclesial flexibility regarding the need for art to investigate humanity in all its aspects, including the errant and corrupt.

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105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., art. 14. Though not mentioned by name this statement clearly references the Legion of Decency, still in operation at the time, and the OCIC. See the excursus at the end of this chapter.

107 Ibid., art. 7.

108 This shift in doctrine could also be interpreted as simply an extension of the church’s positive posture toward arts such as painting and sculpture where depictions of “moral evil” run throughout their long history.
Also new in this document is the Vatican’s advocacy for a more informed reception of film on the part of viewers. Those who watch movies have moral obligations along with those who produce them. Not only should Catholics select to see motion pictures that excel artistically and that promote virtuous living, they should also acquire some skill at film evaluation so as to “deepen their understanding of what they see, hear or read. [This should lead them] to discuss these matters with . . . teachers and experts, and learn to pass sound judgments on them.”109 The text stresses the need for anyone involved in catechesis to be “equipped with the proper skills for adapting these media to the objectives of the apostolate”—a recommendation that builds on the earlier mandate that the church make “proper use” of the arts to proclaim the gospel.110 For its part, the church should ensure that Catholic universities offer programs of education on the media that are governed by Christian foundations.

Over the decades since Inter mirifica’s promulgation several criticisms of the decree have been issued from within the church. There are those who feel the document was a missed opportunity, that the council fathers did not reflect deeply enough on the nature of media and on the benefits and challenges it holds for Christian faith. For instance, Gustave Weigel, S.J. said that the decree did not strike him as “being very

109 Ibid., art. 10.

110 Ibid., art. 15. Judging from these criteria the conclusion might be drawn that not just anybody can develop a talent for making appropriate links between Christian faith and film. It would require someone with a doctrinal education of a fairly high order as well as an aptitude for connecting church teaching and film criticism. Such a person would be required to match exegetical and kerygmatic competence with skills in film literacy and be able to effectively communicate insights arising from this interaction. Who can meet such great expectations? Inter mirifica states that “laymen who are experts in Catholic teaching and in these arts or techniques should have a role” in film interpretation and the governing of Catholic film offices (ibid., art. 21.). The next chapter will show that Gaudium et spes suggests Catholic theologians are the natural people for this task (possibly to the chagrin of many theologians!). The third chapter of the dissertation looks closely at the work of Catholic writers (theologians and film experts) possessive of these credentials and who have made significant contributions to the field of theology and film.
remarkable. It is not going to produce great changes. It does not contain novel positions but gathers and officially states a number of points previously stated and taught on a less official level.”

Others cite a problem with the document’s overall ecclesiology and sense of the church’s relationship to culture. Avery Dulles, S.J. remarked that Inter mirifica “represents the institutional model of the church as authoritative teacher. The decree is filled with presumptions about the power of the church to control and influence the mass media. Its authors failed to understand that unlike previous times, the church was now entwined and dependent on a channel of communication, which was outside its control.”

A group of American media experts, with the backing of council theologians like John Courtney Murray, S.J. and Jean Danielou, S.J., claimed that the decree has a “hopelessly abstract view of the relationship of the church and modern culture. . . . [It] may one day be cited as a classic example of how the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council failed to come to grips with the world around it.”

Robert Waznak, S.S. writes that it is “an irony that Inter mirifica, which dealt with the most pervasive force in our culture, became the least significant document of the council that sought to ‘read the signs of the times.’” Its authors, he continues, “failed to grasp the fact our video culture is not just a challenge to religion, but a form of religion. It, too, reads the signs of the times.”

Waznak also comments on Inter mirifica’s seeming isolation from other

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112 Ibid., p. 138.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid. pp. 136-137.

115 Ibid., p. 142.
conciliar documents and the general spirit that imbued them, namely that it lacks “the wisdom and theological embrace of the later documents of the church and its relationship to the world.” Richard McBrien echoes this perspective: The “decree was one of the first two documents approved by Vatican II . . . at the end of the first session. That may explain why it is so clearly out of touch with the theological and pastoral character of the council as a whole. It is indeed . . . one of the two weakest documents produced by Vatican II.” Finally, the general tenor of the decree has also solicited much discussion. John Richard Neuhaus admits that “when the decree was adopted, the tone of council documents had not yet develop in a more dialogical, rather than admonitory mode.” Further, the “title Inter mirifica suggests a sense of openness and wonder, while the diction of the decree seems at times more like a laying down of rules.” Neuhaus asserts that it is not part of Catholic orthodoxy to believe that the Holy Spirit guarantees that the teaching of the truth will be done with literary grace and persuasive argument. What might be called the tonalities of the decree leave much to be desired. There is a certain defensiveness in speaking of the numerous problems and abuses connected with the instruments of communication. Obviously, such abuses abound, but one might have wished for more of an exploratory reflection on opportunities. Then too, it is said that the decree tends to speak of the church as an institution concerned about protecting its own institutional interests, rather than the church as a “sacrament” in service to the world, a theme developed so powerfully in the council’s later deliberations.

116 Ibid., p. 138.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
Neuhaus counteracts criticisms that the decree exhibits “a narrow, institutional self-interest in how the media can serve the church.” Communicating the gospel, he says, “is not institutional self-interest but the constituting mandate and *raison d'être* of the church.”¹²¹ Indeed, to his mind there is an inherent modesty to *Inter mirifica*, one that defines honestly the church’s boundaries in relating to the instruments of communication:

The decree calls for a world of communications that is very different from the one that we have. It envisions social communications in the service of morality, truth, charity, and the common good. But is also recognizes the limits of what the church can do to bring about such a change—calling upon faithful Catholics to exercise their influence in trying to effect the transformation envisioned.¹²²

The legitimacy of the foregoing expert comments is not diminished when one reads *Inter mirifica* as a *transitional* document in the Vatican’s teaching on mass media. The decree came at a time when the world was also in transition, as many cultures rapidly became more technologically sophisticated and media-dependent. The fact that the bishops of Vatican II dedicated special attention to social communication meant that this sector of culture would remain a permanent subject for church reflection and teaching. Their treatment of media would in time prove prescient, for they “sensed that the media were offering new challenges and blessing to the church. They grappled with the fact that people today are influenced more by image than abstract thought.”¹²³ The document reflects the magisterium’s gradual movement from a fairly instrumentalist and morally focused vision to one integrative of the gospel and communication theory. Because Vatican II was such a transformational council, many people inside and outside the

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¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., p. 356.

church became more aware that the magisterium had for nearly thirty years been thinking formally about Catholicism’s relationship to cinema and other forms of mass media.

*Inter mirifica* was transitional for another reason, for it was a “stimulus to further reflection and action” on an issue “in tune with the lives of many people.”¹²⁴ This begot a larger ecclesial conversation about the relationship between theology and film. In point of fact, toward “the end of their debate on the schema, the bishops realized that they were confronting a topic beyond their expertise,”¹²⁵ and they mandated that further pastoral instruction on communication be presented in a future statement:

So that the general principles and norms of this sacred Synod with respect to the media of social communications may be put into effect, by the express will of the Council, the office of the Holy See mentioned in Number 19 should undertake, with the assistance of experts from various countries, to issue a pastoral instruction.¹²⁶

That instruction would become the document *Communio et progressio* (1971) which “was written by media experts and is a more intelligent and practical document than *Inter mirifica.*”¹²⁷

**Conclusion**

This chapter gathered the strands that formulated the Vatican’s earliest teaching on cinema and looked at them from an explicitly theological perspective. Spanning

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¹²⁵ Waznak, “Preaching the Gospel in a Video Culture,” *op. cit.*, p. 138. The fact that the decree was not very influential may have stemmed from this fact that “it was written by people who knew little about the topic” (*ibid.*).

¹²⁶ *Inter mirifica*, *op. cit.*, art. 23.

nearly thirty years, the four documents analyzed represent what can be termed the “first stage” of the Roman magisterium’s approach to film. The investigation highlighted the motivating factors behind the documents, looked at attendant philosophical, ethical, and theological themes, and traced how the literature developed the Vatican’s official stance toward a novel form of art and recreation. The church expressed a position of “cautious optimism” toward cinema in this early phase. And while it is difficult to summarize succinctly the Vatican’s opinion on cinema, there are certain characteristics that help us understand it as a whole. For instance, the Vatican acknowledged that cinema serves the common good of recreation; yet, the church also recognized that, given film’s potential to grip audiences in emotive and deeply psychological ways, it should not be considered by Catholics to be a mere pastime or harmless entertainment. In general, the magisterium interpreted film within the grand scope of salvation history, wherein everything comes from God and returns to God. Within this theological framework, film is understood to be a gift of God; and, like all divinely bestowed gifts, is intended to lead people to back to God. Rome acknowledged that film is capable of chronicling the human condition and expressing the spiritual dimensions of human nature, i.e., the struggle for life and meaning. Film can aid people in perceiving the invisible reality of the spirit. In other words, film is capable of raising the mind to contemplate the truth, beauty, and goodness of Being. Given its providential giftedness and potential to express humanity’s transcendental orientation, the church is justified in turning to film as a means for evangelization and catechesis.

And yet film is also capable of degrading the values of religion, virtue, and the human person, of compounding the spiritual ills that debilitate our culture—of spreading
The belief “that film corrupts morals and perverts theological vision is . . . particularly prevalent in the earlier Catholic documents considering film.” As illustrated, these early documents judged films to have “considerable power in changing people’s behavior and beliefs” and encouraged Catholics to become critically engaged with cinema and to maintain an active role in promoting “moral” film by influencing film producers through various means (e.g., financing and awarding “good” cinema; boycotting “bad” cinema). The Vatican urged film producers to remain mindful of the immense impact their works can have on audiences and to create films that have as their end the common good of viewers rather than the intake of profit. Viewers, too, have a responsibility to develop skills in film evaluation to deepen their understanding of what they see and hear and so discern the value of a film based on Christian principles.

The documents studied thus far claim film to be a legitimate art form, independent of the church for its life and imagination. At the same time film, seen from a Catholic point of view, is a “gift of God” in the sense that it is a product of the human person’s God-given freedom and creative ability. As such, film has something of a theological purpose, in the sense that its use must be proportional to its providential design as an instrument of revelation and unity that should “serve truth and virtue.” Yet even portrayals of moral evil can disclose a deeper knowledge of the reality and darkness of sin and serve as a study of humanity in need of redemption.

There is a tendency in the Vatican’s early literature on cinema to focus on the moral benefits or detriments of film content, rather than on any of film’s artistic merits.

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129 Ibid.
A dichotomous and utilitarian notion of movies prevailed in the formative teaching that would for decades carry forward in the church’s “film consciousness.” As suggested, church leaders and supporters of the Legion of Decency remained highly critical of film content judged to be injurious to viewers mainly in an effort to protect young people given the possible mimetic effect of film. And while today one might “look back at Catholic and Protestant attempts at censorship with a mixture of bemusement and fascination,” there is a tendency to focus only on the censorious character of the Catholic church’s early attitude toward film, rather than its positive valuation of film. For instance, religion and film scholar John Lyden offers his perspective on the Vatican’s first stage of opinion:

Roman Catholic approaches to popular film have not always been open to seeing a harmony between the values of movies and those of Christianity. Even before the advent of sound films, Roman Catholic leaders had been among the most vocal in the denunciation of popular films. They had a crucial role in the founding of the Legion of Decency, which policed cinema, and they aided in its censorship during the decades when the Hays Code ruled. In the 1960’s, however, the Roman Catholic Church realized that the days were past when it could or should try to engage in this sort of heteronomous critique. After the Second Vatican Council, there was a new openness to culture that, in part, helped to open up possibilities for seeing the cinema in a fresh light.

Lyden is correct in his assessment that the Catholic church was historically one of the first religious institutions to take interest in cinema and to decry the perceived abuses of film industry. Catholic leaders pressured production companies to make movies that met the church’s standards. He is also right that with Vatican II a shift occurred in the

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130 Ibid., p. 736.

magisterium’s rhetoric; Rome began to approach film on its own terms.\textsuperscript{132} Lyden’s overall judgment of the pre-conciliar approach to cinema is nevertheless fairly typical. Because Lyden focuses only on what he judges to be the negative aspects of Vatican opinion, he glosses over what are clearly positive inroads made by the church that would, in time, lead to a stronger bond between the church and cinema and lay the ground for appreciable advances between theology and film. For instance, the Vatican accorded nobility to the work of filmmakers—artists who, as the documents say, have the rare and great opportunity to reflect through their craft the truth, goodness, and beauty of the human person. Providence has placed in their care “useful instruments by which the priceless treasures of God may be spread among [people] like good seed which bring forth fruits of truth and goodness.”\textsuperscript{133} In the right hands film has the potential to lead people to God by raising them to “higher things” so that they can become “better people.”\textsuperscript{134} Yet not once did the Vatican name as a criterion that the “ideal” film be expressly Christian or even thematically religious. No other Christian church or religious group had this as its official teaching on cinema as early as the Catholic church.

Looking back to \textit{Vigilanti cura}, the Vatican’s position on film can be judged as comparatively ahead of its time. The intellectual world of the early-1900s had not yet accept film as culturally or artistically important; the discipline of film criticism had yet to materialize; and few if any other Christian churches or religious authorities by 1936 had heeded more than the destructive capabilities of film. With this watershed document

\textsuperscript{132} The next chapter looks closely at selected documents of Vatican II to discern what constitutes this “shift.”

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Miranda prorsus, ibid.}, par. 26.

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 75.
the attitude of the Catholic church toward cinema began to take shape. The magisterium emphasized film’s potential as a powerful instrument for the good of the individual and society and its capacity to be a sensational classroom that, along with formal religious education, can train people in Christian conduct. This allowed for the church to, in time, take a more magnanimous view of cinema, even to the point of commending particular films for the aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual values they express. One might wonder where Catholic theological conversation about film would be today had the magisterium taken an altogether condemnatory approach, as did several Protestant denominations. The Vatican’s early recognition of cinema’s artistic integrity, its divine giftedness and evangelical potential, and other important claims opened up symbiotic possibilities for theology and film that would begin to be developed only decades later.

135 Cf. the Vatican’s 1995 list of forty-five praiseworthy movies: <http://www.usccb.org/fb/vaticanfilms.htm> (last accessed 1/17/10). Also, see excursus on the OCIC at the end of this chapter.
EXCURSUS

The Legion of Decency and SIGNIS

The Catholic Legion of Decency was a censorship board established in the early 1930s by U.S. Catholic bishops as a campaign to identify and protest the screening of movies with objectionable moral content. The “vividness with which films could portray morally questionable activity—love triangles, suggestive dancing and speech, disrespect for authority—worried many. The movie industry had adopted a self-censoring production code, but church leaders judged this as insufficient.”\textsuperscript{136} Criticism was directed at Will H. Hays (namesake for the Hays Code for censorship of American films) and his office’s ineffectiveness in enforcing the Hollywood production code which controlled movie conventions; and for allowing movies with alleged evil and immoral content to continue to be made.\textsuperscript{137} The Legion became a powerful lobby group that imposed its standards on Hollywood producers (the majority of whom were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia) as to what could and could not be shown on the silver screen. To avoid possible boycotts by the group, production companies would submit motion pictures to a board of reviewers who would demand that certain scenes offensive to the church be removed prior to public release. Producers generally complied with their demands for fear of extreme financial loss. Indeed, the Legion’s approval or condemnation of a film had a considerable influence on the business of motion pictures. The group “exerted enormous pressure on the industry, whose own self-regulatory


production code lacked provisions for effective enforcement.”¹³⁸ For more than three decades—pivotal years when “Hollywood” came into its own—producers were compelled, more for reasons of capital than for concern for public morality, to take into serious consideration how the Legion would evaluate their motion pictures.

The Legion attracted a number of Protestant and Jewish leaders as well, prompting a change to the organization’s name to the National Legion of Decency. Both lay and clerical members were required to take a pledge dedicating themselves to the condemnation of “all indecent and immoral films” and to the boycott of any theater that might show them. Catholics took the pledge at Mass each year on the Sunday following the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8). The group syndicated lists of movies with ratings based on moral suitability as judged according to Catholic principles: “A” for no objectional content; “B” for moderately objectional content; and “C” for a film condemned by the organization as abominable. Between “the years 1937 and 1968, the National Legion of Decency reviewed over thirteen thousand films, 2 percent of which received a C (Condemned) rating at the time.”¹³⁹

All Catholics were expected to avoid condemned films entirely. To legionnaires, the C-rating was a clarion call to boycott all theaters showing condemned material, no matter what other movies might be showing there. James O’Toole relates one telling anecdote:

The threat of Catholic boycotts was a powerful one, and sometimes backed up by direct action. A movie house in Sayville, Long Island, was showing Belle of the Nineties, starring Mae West, until a priest from the local parish showed up and


¹³⁹ Tropiano, ibid., p. 80.
stood outside, examining the faces of those who bought tickets to see if any of his parishioners were among them. Attendance dropped off immediately, and the manager closed the picture down.\textsuperscript{140}

This trend continued until the mid-1960s, when the Legion felt increasing pressure to change its image in the face of rapidly changing public taste and a liberal interpretation of obscenity by Federal courts. In 1966 the National Legion of Decency changed its official name [again] to the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures and, in line with Pope John XXIII’s policy of updating Catholic thought, announced a more progressive attitude.\textsuperscript{141}

In the 1980s, the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures was renamed and incorporated into the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' “Office for Film and Broadcasting,” which is operative today.\textsuperscript{142} This office syndicates movie reviews to diocesan newspapers throughout the country and is also available online.\textsuperscript{143}

In November of 2001, two groups—the International Catholic Organization for Cinema and Audiovisual (OCIC—\textit{Office Catholique International du Cinéma}) and the International Catholic Association for Radio and Television (Unda)—merged to form the World Catholic Association for Communication (SIGNIS), a non-profit organization with a mission to unite Catholics already working as professionals in the media in order to

\textsuperscript{140}O’Toole, \textit{ibid.}, p. 170.

\textsuperscript{141}Katz, \textit{ibid.}, p. 837.


\textsuperscript{143}See: <http://www.usccb.org/movies> (last accessed 1/16/10).
promote and educate Christian values through the media. This mission is articulated on the group’s website as follows:

SIGNIS is a worldwide network of associations, institutions and individuals working in the mass media, with the aim of alerting Christians to the importance of human communication in every culture, and encouraging them to speak out in this sector. The association, which represents Catholic media in all the governmental and nongovernmental organizations and institutions, is committed to lobbying for policies to encourage communications that respect Christian values, justice and human rights; to involving media professionals in the dialogue on questions of professional ethics, and to fostering ecumenical and interfaith cooperation in the media sector.¹⁴⁴

OCIC was founded in 1928 at the Hague and so pre-dates the Legion of Decency. Though by design both groups had the same motivation, de facto the OCIC was less involved in shunning “bad” motion pictures than on the positive recommendation of “good” films. After World War II, the organization set up an international film prize. Here was a Catholic body which had moved beyond censoring cinema and was now keen to celebrate some films, particularly those “most capable of contributing to the moral and spiritual elevation of humanity.” The OCIC award has been conferred on directors such as John Ford and Francis Ford Coppola. OCIC (now SIGNIS) not only supports the awarding of prizes and the development of national film offices, but it also organizes Catholic film juries, which continue to serve alongside ecumenical juries at the world’s major film festivals. There are no restrictions on the kind of films that can receive awards.¹⁴⁵

Since 1947, the OCIC has “awarded prizes at the great international festivals to films that by their inspiration and artistic qualities have contributed to spiritual progress and the development of human values.”¹⁴⁶ Through its national offices, the OCIC initiated a

¹⁴⁴ See: <www.signis.net> (last accessed 1/16/10).
¹⁴⁶ L. Lunders, “Office Catholique International du Cinéma,” in The Catholic Encyclopedia, p. 656. Along with productions from Italy, Spain, Sweden, Brazil, Japan and others, several American productions have won awards over the years. These include The Fugitive (dir. John Ford) at Venice in 1948; On the Waterfront (dir. Elia Kazan) at Venice in 1954; Twelve Angry Men (dir. Sydney Lumet) at
number of actions to promote cinema, including the formation of cinema clubs and
courses in film study and appreciation.

Many American Catholics still remember the Legion of Decency; many more
consult their diocesan newspapers and the USCCB’s website for film reviews. Very few,
however, are aware of SIGNIS and the significant contributions that OCIC made toward
formulating the church’s overall positive attitude to motion pictures. That is to say, there
is a sense in several sectors of American culture that the Catholic Church has always
been and remains today suspicious of motion pictures and that it is, as a rule, “anti-
Hollywood.” This sense might be mitigated by knowledge of SIGNIS and its mission as
well as the group’s history of recognizing the excellence of movies that many film
scholars and devotees independent of the church would consider masterpieces of

147

Berlin in 1957; The Miracle Worker (dir. Arthur Penn) at San Sebastian in 1962; and Hud (dir. Martin Ritt)
at Berlin in 1963.

147 For more on the OCIC and its relationship to Vatican teaching on cinema, see Gaye Ortiz, “The
Catholic Church and its Attitude to Film as an Arbiter of Cultural Meaning,” in Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia
CHAPTER 2

Introduction

The last chapter took a careful look at the Vatican’s “first stage” of teaching on cinema, beginning with the first significant document promulgated, the encyclical 

*Vigilanti cura,* and ending with one of the first decrees presented by the Second Vatican Council, *Inter mirifica.* The current chapter turns to the “second stage” of official Catholic teaching on film, a period that was inaugurated (though not explicitly) with the promulgation of *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*) in 1965 and which essentially brings us up to the present day.

Vatican II as a whole marked a sea change in the church’s understanding of its relationship to and within world culture. Whereas a number of conciliar documents advanced positions of open, critical dialogue with cultural elements as normative for the church, *Gaudium et spes* was the landmark document to articulate this attitude as the church’s formal position. Cinema is not mentioned in this important text; yet, the principles that the constitution sets forth regarding the relationship between church and culture hold deep implications for Catholic approaches to film. This chapter highlights the principles in *Gaudium et spes* that serve to justify the church’s turn to secular culture as a source for Christian reflection.

A consistent theme in the first stage of Vatican literature on cinema was the importance of film as a medium for evangelization and communicating the message of the gospel. Few of the documents, however, discussed the question of this possibility from a theological standpoint. Is it legitimate, for instance, for the message of sacred revelation, as spoken by Jesus Christ, recorded in scripture, and expressed in the tradition
of the church to be conveyed in a non-traditional medium like film? To help clarify this question and approach an answer, the chapter includes an analysis of Dei verbum (The Constitution on Divine Revelation). While film and other instruments of social communication are not the subject of this text, its teaching on revelation will be shown to have consequences for a Catholic understanding of film.

The post-conciliar document Communio et progressio represents the Vatican’s interest in further investigating the nature of human communication and the many media through which social interaction takes place. This it does in connection to the council’s judgment that Jesus Christ, as God’s incarnate Word, is the perfect form of communication. Unique to this document is the fact that it includes a section specifically on the cinema. Because this section represents the magisterium’s first statement about film directly after the council, it is worth investigating how its material reflects the overall concerns of Vatican II and ushers in any new teaching about cinema.

John Paul II’s Letter to Artists invites the world’s artistic community, including filmmakers, into a dialogue on the relationship between the Catholic church and art. It is a seminal text for the dissertation because it reinforces and expands the teaching, extending back to Vigilanti cura, that film is a form of art. This is significant since several of the documents in between Vigilanti cura and Letter to Artists tend to regard film only as a medium of social communication. Several principles that the holy father sets out for the interplay of church and art help evolve Rome’s approach to cinema.
While cinema is not discussed by name in this revolutionary treatise, it is nevertheless germane to this dissertation because it explores the relationship of the church to the world and advocates for ecclesial discovery of new channels of dialogue between Christianity and society’s secular dimensions. It was the final constitution promulgated at Vatican II and many consider it the council’s crowning achievement. It is divided into two main parts. The first is wider in scope and develops the following themes: (a) the mystery, dignity, and freedom of the human person made in God’s image and likeness; (b) the social structures of the world, the interdependence of its people, and the responsibilities persons have for one another; (c) the solidarity the church must have with the world and its obligation to serve humankind in every respect. The second part narrows the focus to social issues specific to the current age and which require the church’s urgent attention, including marriage and family, the development of culture, the nature of peace and the prevention of war, and other questions related to economic and political exigencies.

Analysis of this sophisticated statement on Catholic social teaching can be approached from any number of angles. Here the discussion is limited to those aspects that contextualize and give emphasis to magisterial teaching on film, particularly its

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2 Though Gaudium et spes was overwhelmingly ratified (in a vote of 2307 to 75), a number of council bishops and theologians raised reservations about several of the constitution’s elements. Chief among them was then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who called it a “counter-Syllabus” (Thomas Rausch, Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to his Theological Vision. Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009, p. 51). He believed the document abrogated much of the teaching of Pius IX who in his Syllabus of Errors (1864), among other injunctions, encouraged the church to resist modernism. While Ratzinger would later praise aspects of Gaudium et spes, he represented those who were critical of the (apparent) concessions the constitution makes to the modern world.
theological anthropology, Christology, and vision of a reciprocal relationship between
church and culture.

Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II with the hope that the church might renew
itself through a process of intense self-examination and internal reformation as well as a
more open communication with the larger society. He envisioned that the council would
give the church a chance to reinvigorate elements of its theology, ritual life, and internal
structure; rekindle Catholic spiritual life; and open new relations in the world—
particularly to Christians of other confessions. John XXIII used the Italian word
aggiornamento (“bringing up to date”) to describe the spirit of change, openmindedness,
and modernization he believed was overdue in Catholic intramural (ecclesia ad intra) and
extramural (ecclesia ad extra) affairs. Gaudium et spes represented the council’s formal
effort to divest the church of any sectarian or “ghetto” mentality that had infiltrated
certain sectors of its life and which kept the church effectively closed off from the post-
war Zeitgeist. In this way it revised aspects of the ecclesiology of the First Vatican
Council (1869-70) which

essentially severed the church’s relationship with the world by declaring that the
church was supreme and self-contained, divorced from this world though in it. As
a result, the dominant communication model was also non-dialogic. The church
defended itself against anti-Catholicism and falsehood, but it was a community of

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3 The document is deeply indebted to the ecclesiological vision of John XXIII and to the spirit in
which he ushered in the council. His writings are referenced no fewer than twenty times.

4 Among the council fathers were those who believed that the key to Catholicism’s relevance in
the modern world lay not only in the church’s ability to speak to (and with) the present situation but in
recovering the forgotten riches of its tradition. Hence “updating” the church would at the same time
require that it return to the early sources in Christianity, many of which sources of teaching and spirituality
had come to be neglected by the mid-twentieth century. The French term ressourcement—associated with
the “new” theologies of Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar—was used to describe this process of consulting
ancient and medieval reference points of the church (scripture, ancient liturgy, the writings and practices of
theologians, mystics, and saints) and integrating them into contemporary theology and preaching.
people who had little need to know about the world, and nothing to learn from it that it did not already know.\textsuperscript{5}

A century later, \textit{Gaudium et spes} presented the model of a church \textit{inseparable} from the world and its historical and cultural developments. Embedded in history, though not determined solely by it, the church could no longer conceive of itself as operating alongside the world as if from within a sacred enclave. Like Christ’s entrance into the throng gathered for the Jerusalem festival, the church must accomplish its mission among and not apart from those it is called by Christ to serve.\textsuperscript{6}

In 1964, the council promulgated \textit{Lumen gentium} (\textit{The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church}), a document that probed into the nature and mission of the church. \textit{Gaudium et spes} flowed out from \textit{Lumen gentium} in the sense that the bishops wished to speak directly to those whom Christ commissioned the church to serve: not only those “who invoke the name of Christ, but the whole of humanity.”\textsuperscript{7} The opening lines of \textit{Gaudium et spes} fairly summarize its nisus: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”\textsuperscript{8} The passage indicates the \textit{pastoral} intention of the constitution, conceived not so much as an exhortation to those outside the formal church but as an empathetic evaluation of the existential situation of the modern person, Christian or otherwise. The idea of a “pastoral” intention

\textsuperscript{5} William Thorn, “Models of Church and Communication,” in Paul A. Soukup, ed., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 95.

\textsuperscript{6} Matthew 21:10-11.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Gaudium et spes}, \textit{op. cit.}, art. 2.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ibid.}, art. 1.
meant that [the document] was rooted in doctrinal principles but extended its analysis to contingent issues in the sociopolitical order. Second, the methodology of *Gaudium et spes* required that the first step of theological reflection be an assessment of the empirical situation the church sought to address. Then the assessment of this data “in the light of the gospel” followed.\textsuperscript{9}

The council acknowledged that many people were “shaken”\textsuperscript{10} by the “dramatic situation”\textsuperscript{11} of the world in the mid-1960’s. *Gaudium et spes* endeavored to reassure them “that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ.”\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, a profound christological element pervades the constitution, and the text explicitly subordinates its teachings to the paschal mystery.\textsuperscript{13}

The constitution envisions the world as essentially a place of encounter between God and humanity. God meets us first in history and calls us to salvation precisely in the “joys and griefs” that accompany the challenges of each age. This principle, that God encounters us historically, is founded on the doctrine of the blessedness of the created order and more especially in the belief that God condescended to become part of history in Jesus Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) and himself “the perfect man”\textsuperscript{14}:

Since human nature as he assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by his incarnation the


\textsuperscript{10} *Gaudium et spes*, *ibid.*, art. 7.

\textsuperscript{11} *Ibid.*, art. 10.

\textsuperscript{12} *Ibid.*

\textsuperscript{13} *Ibid.*, art. 22.

\textsuperscript{14} *Ibid.*
Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every [person]. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.\textsuperscript{15}

The constitution’s leitmotif—the dignity of the human being—is substantiated wholly on this basic mystery of faith. God’s taking on history means in part that what matters for human beings matters for God. Consequently, belief in the incarnation means that what mattered to Jesus, God’s only Son, as expressed in his life, death, and resurrection must become the mission of the church. In its attempt to heal whatever divides culture from the gospel, the council draws out the implication that what matters for the whole of humanity, as defined by revelation, must matter for the church. The Christian community must be bold enough to make the first move toward solidarity with the modern world precisely as a people that should have at its heart an unwavering commitment to serving the world in imitation of Christ who “entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served.”\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Gaudium et spes} recommits the people of God to this “sacred obligation”\textsuperscript{17} of being “the neighbor of every person without exception,”\textsuperscript{18} and it does so on the revealed principle that every person is inalienably dignified by God with an absolute, eternal worth. Economic disparities, illiteracy, psychological slavery, abject poverty, and wars of ideology are among the

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, art. 3. This line must be read within the overall context of the document’s Christology, for taken alone this might suggest that \textit{Gaudium et spes} glosses over the reality of Christ as final arbiter of sin and salvation. It says in a later article that before “the judgment seat of God each man must render an account of his own life, whether he has done good or evil” (\textit{iibid.}, art. 17). And again, the Christian “who neglects his or temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation” (\textit{iibid.}, art. 43).

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, art. 30.

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, art. 27.
social inequities referenced in the text to which the church must attend with urgency and charity. In naming these injustices the treatise does not ignore the ambivalent nature of the world in its sinful condition and obliges all Christians (who are not without sin) to respond to sin not by fleeing the world but by carrying “forward the work of Christ”\footnote{Ibid., art. 3.} in the tangle of the quotidian.

*Gaudium et spes* characterizes the split between religious faith and the activities of daily life as “among the more serious errors of our age.”\footnote{Ibid., art. 43.} It cautions against any sectarian attitude which reduces religion to “acts of worship alone and to the discharge of certain moral obligations”; conversely, it reproaches those “who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life.”\footnote{Ibid., art. 43.} With the faith that God has sanctified and redeemed the world through Jesus Christ, the constitution affirms the rightful “autonomy of earthly realities”\footnote{Ibid., art. 36.} (i.e., culture\footnote{23} The term “culture” is defined in *Gaudium et spes* as follows: In its “general sense” culture “indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family” (ibid., art. 53).} and the church’s reliance upon cultural implements to evangelize the world. To help repair the breach between sacred and secular Christians are called on to engage culture and listen attentively to “its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics”—what the text calls the “signs of the times”—with a
generous, empathetic, and not immediately condemnatory mind.\textsuperscript{24} Confident that everything exists under God’s providence and still acutely aware that sin threatens humanity’s response to God’s loving plan, Christians should remain magnanimously open to and be humbly willing to learn from a world that is through grace capable of bearing the divine word wherever God chooses to speak it. This is a critical implication of faith in God incarnate: that the church remain ever alert to the One who encounters humanity in unpredictable ways and often through the unlikeliest of people.

Because the church does not have prefabricated answers to every complex social and philosophical concern, in the gospel or otherwise, the council exhorts Catholics to participate in authentic dialogue with the elements and experts of world culture (i.e., governments, the sciences, technology, the arts, etc.).\textsuperscript{25} Together, church and world can “shed light on the mystery of [the human being] and . . . cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time.”\textsuperscript{26} The constitution recognizes that persons and institutions independent of the church are capable of expressing the mystery and dignity of the human being, often with exceptional insight and in ways that complement church teaching. It is therefore a parcel of Christian responsibility to recognize the full worth of these expressions and, through them, gain perspective on what it means to be in the world.

The church’s openness to the world should be a dialogical experience. As the church can learn from the world, so the world can (indeed, must) learn from the church, a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., art. 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., art. 33.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., art. 10.
\end{flushleft}
community that obtains only as Christ’s own body—the full and eternal form of truth, goodness, beauty, and love. This means more than a simple acknowledgment by those cultural institutions that owe elements of their historical existence to the church (universities, hospitals, the arts, etc.) While the council fathers were generally in “agreement that the church was no longer in control of culture, as it has been in times past, at least in Western Europe,” still they conferred a moral responsibility upon world culture, that its customs remain “subordinated to the integral perfection of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole society.” Thus, wherever social institutions and individuals contravene the principle of human dignity the church must spotlight the injustice, act for change, and aid the Spirit in freeing “humanity from the misery of ignorance.” Christian faith should never be understood as a mere tonic to contemporary cultural fragmentation; rather, it is its great integrator.

Still, the point should not be lost that the church’s listening to the many different voices of the times is not to be done with the immediate purpose of converting or condemning those that are prima facie at variance with the faith. The modern world should be met generously by the church and with a mind to learn from it, particularly with “the hope of [a] joint witness [to] human and religious values . . . and making common cause on issues of justice, peace, and human solidarity.” Only with such attentive listening and cultural depth perception can the church make a comprehensive

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27 See ibid., art. 32.
29 Gaudium et spes, op. cit., art. 59.
30 Ibid., art. 60.
assessment of the signs of the times. And only then can the value of cultural messages as possible indicators of God’s presence be named as such and integrated into the nexus of Christian belief and practice; or, when necessary, corrected and reoriented toward a charitable end; or, when warranted, formally condemned as anathema to the gospel. In each case the gospel is the decisive norm. It is the criterion, the revealed testimony by which cultural sources are to be evaluated.

Gaudium et spes is careful to show that this particular method of meeting the world with both a sincere heart and a critical attitude of mind is founded on the person, model, and work of Jesus Christ, who as “the very Word made flesh willed to share in the human fellowship”32 in order break human bondage to sin “so that the world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfillment.”33 The followers of Jesus are likewise expected to serve the world by scrutinizing cultural signs (Matthew 16:4) in light of God’s law so as to distinguish wisdom from folly. This mandate, that Christians measure atmospheric changes in the modern age with the barometer of faith, was idiomatic to Gaudium et spes if not the entire Second Vatican Council. “Reading” these signs refers to the process of deciphering those events, persons, yearnings, and struggles in history “through which God continues to speak to us and summon us to respond for the sake of the reign of God’s love and justice throughout the whole of creation.”34 Here the council recovers the rich Catholic tradition of spiritual discernment and extends it to mean the judicious evaluation of temporal signposts for the presence or

32 Ibid., art. 32.
33 Ibid., art. 2.
34 McBrien, Catholicism, op. cit., p. 95.
“absence” of God and the path of action God is calling people to take within those situations. Detecting God’s presence amid the din and complexity of human experience involves drawing from the gospel “moral and religious principles” that help determine the spiritual direction human beings are being summoned to take. The church believes these revealed principles illuminate the path of humankind and assure that its way “will not be a dark one”\(^{35}\):

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire people of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.\(^{36}\)

*Gaudium et spes* promotes the unity between Christians and the larger society by illustrating that faith-life and cultural-life are essentially intertwined; though distinct, they are never separate. The two *should* mutually condition one another. As its says, “let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other.”\(^{37}\) So-called secular experiences should inform the way the message of Christ is heard and acted upon, and vice versa. These experiences ought to be a true exchange, a process of teaching and learning, enlightenment and correction, between faith and culture. Most importantly, they should lead Christians to solidarity with the world that Christ loves and serves. In this grand exchange, the church ultimately offers the world the good news that in the incarnation “the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man”; and that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word

\[35\] *Gaudium et spes*, op. cit., art. 33.

\[36\] *Ibid.*, art. 44.

\[37\] *Ibid.*, art. 43.
does the mystery of man take on light. . . [Christ’s] revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear."

38 Because the gospel is addressed to all people its message holds true not only for Christians, but for all [people] of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all [people], and since [their] ultimate vocation . . . is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. Such is the mystery of the [human being] . . .

39 Again, whereas film is not referenced by name, it is here, in the constitution’s promotion of deeper interchange between faith and culture, that the document develops Vatican opinion on film. Because film is a powerful cultural force, conclusions may be drawn about its relation to Christian faith. For instance, the constitution places mass media within the larger context of human dignity and human communication:

One of the salient features of the modern world is the growing interdependence of [people] on one another, a development promoted chiefly by modern technical advances. Nevertheless . . . dialogue among [people] does not reach its perfection on the level of technical progress, but on the deeper level of interpersonal relationships. These demand a mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of the person.

40 It stresses that the promotion of the “genuinely human” ought to be the primary subject of Christian dialogue with the world and that the church should put at the world’s “disposal those saving resources which . . . under the guidance of the Holy Spirit [it] receives from [Jesus Christ].”

41 This is language similar to that of earlier ecclesial documents on cinema. In those texts, the church invited film purveyors into a conversation about the

38 Ibid., art. 22.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., art. 23.
41 Ibid., art. 3.
nature of the human being and esteemed cinema as capable of artistically illuminating the depths of that nature. To help keep this representation “authentic” the church opened its “saving resources” to filmmakers so that they might create a more genuinely human form of art.\textsuperscript{42} Invoking the First Vatican Council, the document declares that the church “does not forbid that ‘the human arts and disciplines use their own principles and their proper method, each in its own domain; therefore acknowledging this just liberty,’ this Sacred Synod affirms the legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences.”\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Gaudium et spes} expands this positive estimation of film art by insisting that humanity “comes to a true and full humanity only through culture . . . [and] the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved . . . nature and culture are quite intimately connected with the other.”\textsuperscript{44} Perhaps it is more prudent to

\begin{quote} 
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., art. 59. It goes on to say that because culture “flows immediately from the spiritual and social character of [human beings], it has constant need of a just liberty in order to develop; it needs also the legitimate possibility of exercising its autonomy according to its own principles. It therefore rightly demands respect and enjoys a certain inviolability within the limits of the common good, as long, of course, as it preserves the rights of the individual and the community, whether particular or universal” (ibid.).
\end{quote}

\begin{quote} 
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., art. 53. This statement that humanity is fulfilled through culture is perhaps one of the less judiciously written passages of the constitution, since from a theological perspective it can be interpreted as essentially Pelagian—the view that human beings can effect their own salvation apart from supernatural grace. Article 53 is one passage with which some council members took issue and it begs greater nuance. The framers of the constitution willfully subsumed all of their teachings under the headship of Christ as the paschal mystery, the event through which God reveals things accomplished, things present, and things to come. From the point of view of Christian eschatology, both church and culture are preordained by God toward a final consummation that is as yet incomprehensible. Thus, the church’s recourse can never be to the world, which remains unfinished and imperfect, but only to Christ who in his perfect humility took on the world and transformed it from within. This is a point that Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger drove home in a 2005 homily (“The Call of Justice Cannot Be Reduced to Categories of This World,” St. Peter’s Basilica, March 18, 2005; see: <http://www.zenit.org/article-12866?l=english> (last accessed 2/9/10)) wherein he referenced \textit{Gaudium et spes} several times. His choice of passages suggests what he considers to be the document’s most abiding legacy: “As Christians we must constantly be reminded that the call of justice is not something which can be reduced to the categories of this world. And this is the beauty of the pastoral constitution \textit{Gaudium et spes} evident in the very structure of the council’s text; only when we Christians grasp our vocation, as having been created in the image of God and believing that ‘the form of this world is passing away ... [and] that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth, in which justice dwells’ (\textit{Gaudium et spes}, ibid., art. 39), can we address the urgent social problems of our time from a truly Christian perspective.” Far from “diminishing our concern to develop this earth,” he continues, “the
say that the church is first beholden to the grace of Jesus Christ and relies on cultural institutions for its self-expression and growth only insofar as the Word of God is an inculturated reality. From the beginning of its history the church learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various philosophers, and has tried to clarify it with their wisdom, too. [Its] purpose has been to adapt the gospel to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned . . .. Indeed this accommodated preaching of the revealed word ought to remain the law of all evangelization. For thus the ability to express Christ's message in its own way is developed in each nation, and at the same time there is fostered a living exchange between the church and the diverse cultures of people. To promote such exchange, especially in our days, the church requires the special help of those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers.45

The principle that the church “realizes that in working out her relationship with the world she always has great need of the ripening which comes with the experience of the centuries”46 marks a major step forward for a positive collaboration of church and culture and, by extension, theology and film. It moves the conversation in a direction away from an attitude of ecclesial immutability toward a greater consciousness of the church’s organic, evolving structure, and its need to engage cultural forms like cinema to accomplish its mission of conveying revelation. Indeed, if Jesus came to transform and redeem culture, and not condemn it, so must the church perceive and cultivate the seeds of the gospel if and when they are present in culture.

Gaudium et spes elaborates earlier Vatican teaching on film by explicitly inviting trained theologians to make meaningful connections between Christianity and culture; to

expectation of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, prefiguring in some way the world that is to come” (ibid.).

45 Gaudium et spes, ibid., art. 44.

46 Ibid., art. 43.
find new and creative ways of interpreting faith and doctrine in light of “signs of the times.” Theologians are called to play a chief role in the dynamic interchange of faith and culture by correlating revelation with the real situations of people today:

[Within] the requirements and methods proper to theology, [they] are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the [people] of their times; for the deposit of faith or the truths are one thing and the manner in which they are enunciated, in the same meaning and understanding, is another.  

For Christian faith to be credible and effective amid the ambiguities of the modern age “sufficient use must be made not only of theological principles” but also of the cultural arts and sciences, “so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith.” Therefore, theologians who teach

in seminaries and universities [should] strive to collaborate with [those] versed in the other sciences through a sharing of their resources and points of view. Theological inquiry should pursue a profound understanding of revealed truth; at the same time it should not neglect close contact with its own time that it may be able to help these [people] skilled in various disciplines to attain to a better understanding of the faith.

To conclude, Gaudium et spes marked a turning point in the way the Catholic church thought about its relationship to the world. It offered believers an approach to seeing the intrinsic unity between their faith and the larger secular world in which they live. This emphasis invited the church to renew its faith—truly, its massive hope—that the Holy Spirit is guiding the world in all its aspects toward the Father of Jesus Christ.  

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47 Ibid., art. 62.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Gaudium et spes amplifies a teaching from Miranda prorsus: “But if the expression, the independence of temporal affairs, is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that [human beings] can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear. For their part,
The implication: Authentic practice of Christian faith can never be divorced from the people Christ came to serve. This is the theology behind the pastoral imperative that Christians be fundamentally united to the world according to the principles of the gospel. And whereas the text admits to the complexities involved in relating Christianity and culture (while united, the two are not altogether harmonious), it does hold that the struggles involved in relating the them do not necessarily harm the life of faith. Rather, tensions and differences “can stimulate the mind to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the faith.” The document calls for a lively interplay between church and world so that multiple cultural resources can be brought to bear upon problems of special urgency that affect both. Mutual enrichment between theology and other disciplines is nothing new in the history of the church and yet at the time of the Second Vatican Council much of Catholic theology had become divorced from everything but itself. *Gaudium et spes* continues to provide foundation and facility for theologians committed to making connections between faith and cultural elements. It teaches that they “will be able to present to our contemporaries the doctrine of the church concerning God, [human beings] and the world, in a manner more adapted to them so that they may receive it more willingly.” Again, a practical implication of deep dialogue between church and world has to do with the way teachers and pastors connect to their students and congregations. Church leaders need to connect the gospel’s appeal to everyday life with the appeal that the torrents of everyday life make to the gospel.

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.
One question unaddressed in the Vatican documents on cinema has to do with how the sacred word of God can be conveyed through a non-Christian, non-traditional medium such as film. While this question is not the immediate concern of the dissertation, it is a legitimate concern within the overall conversation between Catholic theology and film. This portion of the chapter looks at how the Second Vatican Council addressed the crucial theological question of the nature of revelation. The question of how God’s word is communicated to human beings in the first place logically precedes that of how the church hands on what it has seen and heard. While *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* does not formally address film or mass media, its instruction on the handing on of revelation has important implications for assimilating Vatican opinion on cinema, specifically its underlying theology.

The comparative brevity of *Dei verbum* belies its theological density. To do it fuller justice would demand an interpretive commitment to its sources, method, and implications quite beyond the scope of this study. The following analysis is delimited by five characteristics of Christian revelation described therein—points that have bearing on the question of film as a possible mode for conveying the message of revelation.\(^{54}\)

1. *Revelation is the gift of God’s self.* The basic structure of *Dei verbum* differentiates the revealed word of God from how that word is transmitted. It states what

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\(^{54}\) It is difficult to distinguish each feature with complete accuracy. Many of the constitution’s themes interrelate and overlap or are otherwise indefinitely presented. Several of the themes communicated in *Dei verbum* will be recapitulated in chapter five of this dissertation, which concerns in part Karl Rahner’s theology of revelation.
might seem an obvious point, yet is the essential theological feature of the doctrine: namely, that revelation comes to us only as a free divine initiative—as grace. Revelation is first and foremost the personal act of God’s self-manifestation to the world. God in “goodness and wisdom chose to reveal [Godself] and to make known the hidden purpose of [God’s] will” and saw to it that what was “revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations.”

Furthermore, the divine plan of revelation is “realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.”

(2) God’s Word is mediated through created reality. Creation originates in God’s Verbum. When God speaks, the world comes to be: “God, who through the Word creates all things and keeps them in existence, gives [human beings] an enduring witness to [God’s self] in created realities.”

Dei verbum outlines a narrative of revelation, a kind of biblical digest, as it leads readers through God’s communication first to creation itself, then to the first parents, and then to the ancestors and prophets of Israel. After speaking in these “many and varied ways,” God “sent his Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all [people], so that he might dwell among [them] and tell them of the
innermost being of God (see John 1:1-18). Jesus Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, was sent as ‘a man to men.’”60 In the incarnation, the fullness of God’s being was mediated to the world as one of us: “To see Jesus is to see his Father (John 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself.”61 Christ reveals the mystery of God and is indistinguishable from that mystery since “the deepest truth about God and the salvation of [humankind] shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.”62 The invisible God is rendered visible through the flesh of the one who made his dwelling in the economy of the world and communicated the news of salvation in human words and tangible signs. In his life, death, and resurrection, Christ mediates salvation through concrete acts of obedience to God (faith), anticipation of God (hope), and love for God and neighbor (charity). He calls all the Father’s children to respond to revelation in kind—in their own flesh, in their own time. Thus, revelation is imparted personally and historically. To employ a term not in Dei verbum, yet that is de facto operative therein, the second noted feature of revelation is that it comes to us sacramentally because it is mediated through symbols, actions, and relationships.

(3) Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God’s Word, is the fullness of revelation. The words, deeds, signs, and wonders of Jesus’ life that culminated in his death and resurrection are the perfection and fulfillment of revelation for all time. Revelation therefore “happened” at a particular time in a particular place and the church proclaims it

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60 Ibid., art. 4.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., art. 2.
to be a complete and peerless event: This “new and definitive covenant, will never pass
away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious
manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Though revelation is “closed,” it is ongoing.
This is the eschatological dimension of revelation, viz., that in the abiding presence of
Jesus’ paschal mystery, the people of God await the glorious return of Christ promised to
his beloved, when he will deliver a final judgment, and hand over the Kingdom to his
Father in the Spirit of love. Until then, the church lives in the intervening time as a
pilgrim people awaiting Christ with a “joyful hope.” In this advental time of preparation
and sacrifice, the Holy Spirit breathes life into the church, inspiring Christians to live and
proclaim Jesus’ gospel. The Spirit assists evangelization by

moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving
“joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.” To bring
about an even deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly
brings faith to completion by [the Spirit’s] gifts.

(4) Revelation is mediated through the Church, its Scripture and Tradition. From
its foundations, the church has been charged with the task of handing on God’s revelation
from age to age. Christianity believes that Jesus alone “has the words of eternal life.
This mystery had not been manifested to other generations as it was now revealed to his
holy apostles and prophets in the Holy Spirit, so that they might preach the gospel, stir up
faith in Jesus, Christ and Lord, and gather together the church.”

Scripture is the privileged witness to the revelation of God whose fullness is the person of Jesus Christ.
With authority from the Father, Christ commissioned the apostles to be humble and

63 Ibid., art. 4.
64 Ibid., art. 5.
65 Ibid., art. 17.
courageous bearers of his word. Through the Spirit they received the Pentecostal zeal to broadcast this message to the ends of the earth. This same authority they conferred onto others who continued the mission of worship, evangelization, and service through liturgy, the writing of scripture, and the saintly execution of Christ’s command to be faithful in love to God and neighbor:

And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time. Therefore the apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter.66

Revelation, then, is expressed in scripture and tradition and handed down over the ages through apostolic succession and arbitrated by the magisterium to assure the authenticity of its transmission.67 Because of this episcopal hierarchy, the church has the confidence that the faith it assents to today is no less than the faith of the apostles—a single faith based in the one truth—Christ himself. Christ’s word reaches us today through this process of mediation; and it is believed the Holy Spirit safeguards the church’s interpretation of revelation so that it reaches people with clarity and certainty:

[The] task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit,

66 Ibid., art. 8.

67 *Dei verbum* moved the discourse about revelation away from an inordinate attention to propositional truths that the church has in its “deposit” (which it then must guard against dilution) to an understanding of revelation as first and foremost the offering of the wonderful mystery of God’s personal being. This allowed for a far freer yet nonetheless profound understanding of the role of the church in interpreting and transmitting Christian faith. Revelation is not simply a parcel of content to be passed down from one generation to another. Revelation is God’s loving and trustworthy offer of relationship with the world. Tradition is the dynamic and symbolic chronicle of that relationship. To use a simple analogy, tradition is not passing down an heirloom to your child: it is having a child in the first place.
it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.\textsuperscript{68}

This statement conveys the important point that while Christians are covenantal partners with God, the church is not itself generative of revelation; rather, its fundamental purpose is to live, preach, and responsibly interpret Jesus’ word for every culture. Again, while revelation might be closed, its comprehension and handing on by the church remains incomplete.

\textit{(5) The church interprets revelation.} Because God’s Word comes to us in the particular words and actions of people living in specific times and places, there is an ongoing need to translate that message for others living in different times and locales. A significant portion of \textit{Dei verbum} outlines general rules for the interpretation of scripture. Prescinding from a deep examination of these rubrics, it is important to note the general importance the council assigns the art/science of biblical hermeneutics. This practice is indispensable from the Catholic vantage point articulated so far, since the church needs to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us [and] should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.\textsuperscript{69}

Revelation is thus transmitted and interpreted within a historical context. Again, the notion of mediation is implied: As the Father adapted the transcendent Word to the human condition, and as the Son revealed the mystery of the Father in the flesh according

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} \textit{Ibid.}, art. 10.
\item \textsuperscript{69} \textit{Ibid.}, art. 12.
\end{itemize}
to (or in violation of) the norms and conventions of his time and culture, and as the apostles communicated the gospel “to all nations,” so too must the church interpret this single message of salvation faithfully for peoples and cultures.\textsuperscript{70} Interpretation of God’s word thus presupposes prayerful reflection. There is need for growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.\textsuperscript{71}

\textit{Dei verbum} here echoes the injunction in \textit{Gaudium et spes} that the task of the whole people of God is to scrutinize the “signs of the times” and “interpret them in the light of the gospel in language intelligible to each generation . . ..”\textsuperscript{72} This scrutiny consists of a perennial process of discernment by which the church looks deeply at the events, needs, and longings of each age in order to discover genuine signs of the presence or purpose of God. To preach the gospel effectively, the church must understand the world in which it lives and be able to respond to the questions people ask about “this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other.”\textsuperscript{73} This task requires the use of any and all resources at the church’s disposal that are effectual toward this end. This returns us to the dialogical model in \textit{Gaudium et spes} whereby church and culture are conceived as deeply involved with each other. Where \textit{Gaudium et spes} spoke of Christianity’s indebtedness to culture for its divergent modes

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid.}, arts. 12-13.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, art. 8.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, art. 4.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibid.}
of proclamation. *Dei verbum* establishes the legitimacy of the correlation of church and culture by anchoring the possibility of their communion to the doctrine that God has blessed the world by entering fully into it. Thus, the incarnation of the Son of God into the secular is the foundation for the church’s injunction to discern cultural signs for their consonance with gospel truth.\(^{74}\)

To conclude, while the constitution does not offer a specific theological model for how the arts might operate as vehicles for handing on the message of Christian revelation or, as suggested in earlier statements, leading people to discern the presence of God in their lives, we can extrapolate from its principles that film is a means by which the church can scrutinize the signs of the times so that its preaching can remain effective, accessible, and invigorating:

The primary goal of the liturgical homily is not to repeat or explain the biblical text but to spark the imagination of listeners so that they will read the signs of the times in light of the alternative world of the gospel. In *Dei verbum*, the Bible is compared to ‘a mirror, in which the church during its pilgrim journey here on earth, contemplates God’ (art. 7). The vocation of the preacher is to hold up that mirror in an imaginative way so that, despite our sinful lives and our anguished world, we can see ourselves as graced and interpret our times as Good News.\(^{75}\)

This hermeneutic of preaching can be applied to theology since each must interpret revelation as expressed in scripture and tradition in language that meets the needs and

\(^{74}\) Avery Dulles, S.J., opines that *Dei verbum* “did not spell out the concept of revelation underlying documents such as *Gaudium et spes*, but it if fair to say that these documents 'rest upon a more developed notion of revelation that [sic] has yet surfaced,”\(^{74}\) (Avery Dulles, *Revelation Theology*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969, p. 158). Certainly, *Dei verbum* is not an elaborate theological monograph; nor does it relate its theology of revelation to any Christian anthropology or a broader history of religions. A “more developed” understanding of revelation, Dulles might counsel, would consider the source and content of revelation side by side with the spiritual conditions necessary (in the human subject to whom revelation is addressed) for an accurate hearing of and response to God’s word. The text does not present a Christian anthropology—that is, an explanation of how human beings are structured in order to be open and receptive to revelation.

\(^{75}\) Waznak, “Preaching the Gospel in a Video Culture,” *op. cit.*, p. 136.
challenges of contemporary believers.\textsuperscript{76} Whereas preaching and theology are distinct enterprises in the church, they are radically related. The object of both “is an unveiling of meaning. The preacher [or theologian] is not primarily a teacher, but a ‘mediator of meaning’ who attests to the present moment as revelatory of God.”\textsuperscript{77} Film assists theology by artistically representing the “present moment” as it is lived out by people from culture to culture. Effective preaching and theology presuppose an in-depth knowledge of the present human situation since, together, they must serve the church by bringing Christian teaching into closer proximity to the lived lives of believers. Both preacher and theologian represent the world in which they live “by voicing its concerns, by naming its demons, and thus enabling it to gain some understanding and control of the evil which afflicts it.”\textsuperscript{78} At the same time, they represent the church and its divine message—yet “another word, a word of healing and pardon, of acceptance and love.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textit{Communio et progressio} (1971)\textsuperscript{80}

At the end of \textit{Inter mirifica} the council fathers mandated that the church take up an official and more extensive study of mass media with aid from an international panel

\textsuperscript{76} This distinction is mentioned since the primary interest of the dissertation is the relationship between theology and film, not, strictly, “homily and film.” The principles Waznak lays out for preaching are interchangeable with theology since the two are really opposite sides of the same coin. More will be said about this in chapter four which discusses the concept of “mystagogy,” and in chapter five which explains Karl Rahner’s conviction that all preaching is necessarily theological and the most effective forms of theology will always be profoundly kerygmatic.

\textsuperscript{77} Waznak, \textit{ibid.}, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid}.

of communication experts. Eight years later, the result of that study, *Communio et progressio* (*Pastoral Instruction on the Media of Social Communication*), was issued. Advances in technology and the proliferation of film, radio, newspapers, and television in the years between the two documents prompted the magisterium to admit that, more than ever before, the way people “live and think” was being “profoundly affected” by these media. It decided to revisit some of the ideas formulated in *Inter mirifica* and to consider them in light of the changing social and technological landscape, the theological outcomes of Vatican II, as well as the communication models entrenched in many of its documents. *Communio et progressio* recounts a number of the teachings of *Inter mirifica* (e.g., that media are gifts of God intended to unify people, deepen social consciousness, lead to responsibility and cooperation, etc.) with the difference being a more thorough demonstration of the train of intelligence linking these themes and its placement of them directly under the headship of Christian first principles. *Communio et progressio* is helpful to the dissertation because it is one of the few magisterial documents to have a section (albeit small) devoted entirely to cinema. And whereas a number of scholars have explicated its theory of communication or used it as a touchstone for their own theories, few have looked at it from the perspective of our investigation and linked it to the line of Vatican teaching on film. The present analysis will draw from these studies to flesh out more hidden points in the document; although, to be sure, the immediate concern is not with Catholic theories of communication, which are many and varied, or of developing a theology of communication in relation to film.

81 *Communio et Progressio*, *ibid.*, art. 1.

82 *Inter mirifica* was promulgated early by the council; thus, it did not reflect the communication theology espoused by later documents.
Since the primary motivation is theology and film, the inquiry shall be into the Christian doctrines that form the foundations for the church’s engagement with communication resources and technologies.

As shown in *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II essentially decreed that the church has an obligation to actively engage contemporary culture. *Communio et progressio* renews that commitment by calling “for use of the communications media to engage the world in dialogue, to participate in the formation of public opinion, and to explain the church to the community.” The first line of the document indicates that the “unity and advancement” of humanity should be the chief aim of all the means of social communication.

[*Communio et progressio*] treats communication media first in their role of creating and shaping public opinion. Here they establish a “great roundtable” for humanity and offer the possibility of an end to the isolation of individuals and nations. Because of the importance of social communication, the document declares that people have a right to information, a right to inform, and a right to access the channels of information. From these rights flow protections against propaganda, manipulation, and deception in public affairs.

If the goals of the mass media are those of unity and advancement of people living in society, then these aims “and all things leading to them flow from God’s creation and the model of God’s love. Vatican opinion about modern communication calls people

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83 Thorn, “Models of Church and Communication,” *op. cit.*, p. 89.

84 *Ibid.* Pope Benedict XVI raises the point that thinking of the forms of mass communication as a “great roundtable” can tend to flatten and trivialize any substantive conversation about truth and the promotion of peace: “While the various instruments of social communication facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, and mutual understanding among groups, they are also tainted by ambiguity. Alongside the provision of a ‘great round table’ for dialogue, certain tendencies within the media engender a kind of monoculture that dims creative genius, deflates the subtlety of complex thought and undervalues the specificity of cultural practices and the particularity of religious belief. These are distortions that occur when the media industry becomes self-serving or solely profit-driven, losing the sense of accountability to the common good.” From the text, “The Media: A Network for Communication, Communion, and Cooperation,” Benedict XVI’s message for the 40th World Communications Day, February 2006. See: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20060124_40th-world-communications-day_en.html> (last accessed 2/9/10).
everywhere to live up to the example and gift of that love of God.”\(^{85}\) The doctrines of Providence, Trinity, and the Incarnation form the bedrock for the document’s further hewing a Catholic theory of communication. From this perspective, social communications arise only because of their integral bond to “the central mystery of the eternal communion between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who live a single divine life.”\(^{86}\) Knowledge of this bond gives the church an understanding of the proper use of all media, which knowledge it then shares with the world. Through the blessing of media forms, God intends to bring people together to “share their knowledge and unify their creative work”; indeed, they are given “a share in [God’s] creative power,” and summoned to cooperate with each other “in building the earthly city” through the agency of the communication arts extended to them as gifts.\(^{87}\) Since Christ commissions the church to give people “the message of salvation in a language they can understand” and to concern itself with the concerns of all humanity,\(^{88}\) there is need for various means of social communication. These help the church accomplish three goals: to reveal itself (i.e., the message of the gospel) to the modern world; to foster dialogue within the church; to make contemporary opinions and attitudes clear to the church.

In the Incarnation, the church finds the supreme example of communication. Jesus Christ is the “perfect communicator”—the model for all forms of human interaction:

\(^{85}\) Paul Soukup, S.J., “Vatican Opinion on Modern Communication,” \textit{op. cit.}, p. 245.

\(^{86}\) \textit{Communio et progressio}, \textit{op. cit.}, art. 8.

\(^{87}\) \textit{Ibid.}, art. 7.

\(^{88}\) \textit{Ibid.}, art. 125.
Jesus] utterly identified himself with those who were to receive his communication and he gave his message not only in words but in the whole manner of his life. He spoke from within, that is to say, from out of the press of his people. He preached the divine message without fear or compromise. He adjusted to his people's way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And he spoke out of the predicament of their time.\(^89\)

There is an emphasis here on communication as “more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level it is the giving of self in love. Christ's communication was, in fact, spirit and life.”\(^90\) All means of human communication are by grace designed as paths to greater communion among human beings and their creator. Thus, media should permit people to know themselves better and to understand one another more easily. By this, [they] are led to a mutual understanding and shared ambition. And this, in turn, inclines them to justice and peace, to good will and active charity, to mutual help, to love and, in the end, to communion. The tools of communication, then, provide some of the most effective means for the cultivation of that charity among [people] which is at once the cause and the expression of fellowship.\(^91\)

This signals a change in the orientation of the church’s rhetoric about film, since earlier statements on film tended to address moral issues and the effects of cinema on audiences. Film, here understood as a medium of real communication, should lead to communion and, ultimately, charity, among people.

Still, this positive vision of cinema and other means of communication is tempered by the church’s recognition of the way human beings really use them. Too often the media have been used “to contradict or corrupt the fundamental values of human life. The Christian considers these evils evidence of [humanity’s] need to be

\(^{89}\) Ibid., art. 11.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., emphasis given.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., art. 12.
redeemed and freed from that sin . . .”92 The text cites the Genesis story of the tower at Babel. The folly shown there rendered people incapable of communicating with one another. And while God’s love for humanity never ceased, sin persisted in the world.93 This situation gives rise to a host of problematic questions:

How in the face of competition to capture a large popular audience are the media to be prevented from appealing to and inflaming the less admirable tendencies in human nature? How can one avoid the concentration of the power to communicate in too few hands so that any real dialogue is killed? How can one avoid allowing communications made indirectly and through machinery to weaken direct human contact—especially when these communications take the form of pictures and images? When the media invite [people] to escape into fantasy, what can be done to bring them back to present reality? How can one stop the media encouraging mental idleness and passivity? And how can one be certain that the incessant appeal to emotion does not sap reason?94

These questions hark back to those raised in previous Vatican statements on cinema and its concern for the moral wellbeing of society in relation to such a powerful medium as film. Here, however, they are reformulated to meet the demands of the time. For its part, the Catholic Church is called to dialogue about these serious issues with professionals within the communication industry “of every religious persuasion,” to provide them with “spiritual help to meet the needs of their important and difficult role,”95 and to collaborate on efforts “to solve the problems inherent in their task and do what is best for the benefit” of humanity.96 A good portion of the document presents concrete responses to some of these issues, including the rights to free speech and information; the accountability of

92 Ibid., art. 9.
93 Ibid., arts. 9-10.
94 Ibid., art. 21.
95 Ibid., art. 104.
96 Ibid., art. 105.
those involved in local and global communication; the question of leisure; responsibilities of the national governments for societal relations; and the particularities of the respective media arts. Obligations are laid out for Catholics in particular. Because they are through revelation informed of the media’s transcendental orientation, Catholics must take upon themselves the task of offering the world examples of communication that lead to “true communion”:

If Catholics are to be of service to the means of social communication and to act so that these may serve humanity’s ends, it goes without saying that it is in the spiritual sphere that the church can best help. The church hopes that, as a result of [its] spiritual contribution, the basic nature of social communication will be more clearly appreciated. The church hopes, too, that the dignity of the human person, both communicator and recipient, will be better understood and respected.97

The document’s section on cinema repeats themes the church’s teaching on motion pictures up to that point with little expansion on previous themes. It does offer a renewed appreciation of the integrity of film as an art and of filmmakers as artists, who “have to face many difficulties in the course of their creative work.” Catholics are encouraged “to engage in dialogue with them.” Together, their “shared belief in the good that the cinema can do for [human beings], these contacts will bear witness to the nobility of the vocation of those involved in film production.”98 It reemphasizes the power of film on culture, knowledge, and leisure, and claims that film is “a very effective means” for expressing the interpretation of human life.99 Many classic films, it continues, have “compellingly treated subjects that concern human progress or spiritual values” in addition to explicitly religious topics, which fact “not only proves that the cinema is a

97 Ibid., art. 102.
98 Ibid., art. 147.
99 Ibid., art. 142.
proper vehicle for such noble themes,” it is likewise a “strong encouragement to produce films of this kind.”\footnote{Ibid., art. 144.}

To finish, it is worth considering briefly the document *Aetatis novae*,\footnote{See *Aetatis novae*: <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021992_aetatis_en.html> (last accessed 2/9/10).} which was promulgated in 1992 by the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, then-Archbishop John Foley, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of *Communio et progressio*. It revisits the same kinds of questions about media that the earlier text contemplates but from the perspective of all the “new languages” resulting from the “rapid evolution” of technology two decades hence. It takes with even greater seriousness the pastoral implications resulting from the availability and power that the digital age has over world culture:

As media become ever more intertwined with people's daily lives, they influence how people understand the meaning of life itself. Indeed, the power of media extends to defining not only what people will think but even what they will think about. Reality, for many, is what the media recognize as real; what media do not acknowledge seems of little importance.\footnote{Aetatis novae, *ibid.*, art. 4. Chapter three will consider how Joseph Marty negotiates this problem of the allure of the “image” in media today.}

The above declaration is even more pertinent now that one can access virtually any image, movie, message, or sound anywhere at anytime. Further, *Aetatis novae* recapitulates the continuing need to discern the signs of the times with the encouragement and wisdom of the Holy Spirit:

As the Spirit helped the prophets of old to see the divine plan in the signs of their times, so today the Spirit helps the church interpret the signs of our times and carry out its prophetic tasks, among which the study, evaluation, and right use of
communications technology and the media of social communications are now fundamental.\textsuperscript{103}

And it reminds the church of its theological frame of reference with respect to any new technology:

Human history and all human relationships exist within the framework established by this self-communication of God in Christ. History itself is ordered toward becoming a kind of word of God, and it is part of the human vocation to contribute to bringing this about by living out the ongoing, unlimited communication of God's reconciling love in creative new ways.\textsuperscript{104}

Again, the teleology of human communication is accentuated. But what is novel about this document’s vision is its concern that the church establish a more thoroughgoing understanding of the theoretical preconditions for human communication. As it says, the dialogue between the church and the world means that the church must be “actively concerned with the secular media” and that this interface “requires the development of an anthropology and a theology of communication—not least, so that theology itself may be more communicative, more successful in disclosing gospel values and applying them to the contemporary realities of the human condition.”\textsuperscript{105} This directive gives further impetus to the dissertation and its investigation of connections between Catholic theology and film. Looking ahead to the second chapter, which analyzes the work of professional theologians and film scholars, it is worth bearing in mind whether their theories include anthropologies that help elucidate the reality and significance of film.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., art. 22.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., art. 7.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., art. 8.
In composing his *Letter to Artists*, Pope John Paul II drew upon his own experiences as a poet and playwright. A highly personal piece, the letter fuses his faith to his love of culture—a letter written by an artist for artists on the nature of art: “I feel closely linked by experiences reaching far back in time and which have indelibly marked my life.”* Letter to Artists* builds on the “fruitful dialogue between the church and artists which has gone on unbroken through two thousand years of history,” a dialogue “rooted in the very essence of both religious experience and artistic creativity.”* The pope invites artists into a renewed alliance with Christianity in order that through this partnership humanity can be better served and culture renewed by God who is the “sole creator of all things.”* The letter integrates several theoretical features distinguished in previous statements related to church and culture and applies them directly to art.

John Paul II develops his exhortation to artists using perspectives from theology, philosophy, aesthetics, and ethics. Two fundamental questions guide the discourse: Does the church need art? and Does art need the church? In both cases, John Paul II answers positively; however, there is the sense in the text that he knows the latter is the more controversial claim; his answer, in other words, is not submitted casually. His responses to the questions hold importance for our study since they help shape Vatican opinion on art and, by extension, its position on cinema. Specific films are not mentioned.

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107 *Letter to Artists*, *ibid.*, par. 1.


in the discourse, nor are other individual works of art; but the pope does list filmmakers among those artists (poets, architects, musicians, etc.) whose imaginations have been “fired” by the realities the church holds to be true, good, and beautiful.¹¹⁰

The theological dimension is evident in the structure of the pope’s letter, which is distinctly Trinitarian. It begins with a reflection on God, who as creator fashions human beings “in his image” and who calls on them “to share in his creative power.”¹¹¹ According to John Paul II, artists participate in the very nature of God when they produce works of imagination and beauty: “None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands.”¹¹² The centerpiece of the letter relates art and beauty to the mystery of God taking human form in Jesus Christ who is at once the “icon of the unseen God”¹¹³ and “the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God.”¹¹⁴ From the epiphany of the “God who is Mystery” has come “a flowering of beauty which has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation.”¹¹⁵ The letter ends with a meditation on the Pentecostal hymn, “Veni, Creator Spiritus,” whereby the pope remarks

¹¹⁰ *Letter to Artists* outlines something of an aesthetic theory in terms of its conversation about the relationship among the transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness. While he is not referenced directly, the influence of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar is apparent. It is well known that John Paul II esteemed von Balthasar and his writings on theological aesthetics and there is little doubt these informed his *Letter to Artists*.


that the divine Spirit who “breathes out” the creative power into human hearts and minds “with a kind of inner illumination” is the source of all enlightenment and the “starting-point of every true work of art.” The letter’s intentional structuring reflects his belief that the Trinitarian design of creation is the very condition for art.

A significant portion of the letter is a historical digest of the relationship between the church and art and how each contributed to the development of the other. The evolution of Christian art in antiquity grew out of the necessity for self-definition and religious identification rather than leisure.

Art of Christian inspiration began therefore in a minor key, strictly tied to the need for believers to contrive scripture-based signs to express both the mysteries of faith and a “symbolic code” by which they could distinguish and identify themselves, especially in the difficult times of persecution.

He recalls some of the first symbols used by the church: “The fish, the loaves, the shepherd: in evoking the mystery, they became almost imperceptibly the first traces of a new art.” Needs such as the design of liturgical space necessitated new art forms. As the ritual life of the church began to take a consistent form it became essential to instruct believers in its rubrics—its words, symbols, sounds, and gestures. Art has always held

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116 Ibid., par. 15.

117 Ibid., par. 7.

118 Ibid.

119 See ibid. For example, the post-baptismal training of Christian novices in the sacramental symbols was called mystagogia—initiation into mystery. We recall from the Introduction of the dissertation that “mystagogy” will be the primary interpretive concept of our study of the relation between theology and film. Chapter 3 is a substantial investigation of the concept and practice of mystagogy. John Paul II does not use this term in his letter but suggests the point that the interpretation of ritual symbols in the early church was always more than mere art appreciation: it was a thoroughly liturgical action meant to intensify the experience of Christ’s mystery. Mystagogy was a time for “the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity” (Craig Satterlee, Ambrose of Milan’s Method of Mystagogical Preaching. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002, p. 6).
pedagogical importance for the church, as “the need to contemplate the mystery and to present it explicitly to the simple people led to the early forms of painting and sculpture.”

And as Christianity grew, so did the arts; both were engaged in centuries of mutual development. Many new genres appeared: Gregorian chant; the Byzantine tradition of icons; sacred poetry; monastery and abbey construction; the blend of arts that make up medieval cathedrals; musical compositions of the Mass; and the numerous masterpieces with scriptural tableaux. The intentionality behind these forms went beyond the needs of ecclesial definition and catechesis: sacred art aimed to inspire wisdom and holiness, both in its production and admiration. Referencing Gaudium et spes, John Paul II says that thanks “to the help of artists ‘the knowledge of God can be better revealed and the preaching of the gospel can become clearer to the human mind.’”

In addition to explicitly religious artwork, Letter to Artists accords high value to so-called “secular” art, or what the text describes as an impulse toward non-religious humanism in the arts. Alongside the Christian humanism that gave rise to many great works of art throughout history is “another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself. Such an atmosphere has sometimes led to a separation of the world of art and the world of faith, at least in the sense that many artists have a diminished interest in religious themes.”

However, the works of these artists are “not at all a danger for Christian faith, centered on the mystery of Christ.”

Thus, from the beginning, the mystagogical use of the arts to evoke the mystery of Christ had far reaching theological and ethical implications; indeed, the arts themselves embodied a theological and ethical vision.

120 Letter to Artists, op. cit., par. 7.
121 Ibid., par. 11.
122 Ibid., par. 10.
of the Incarnation and therefore of God’s valuing of the human being.”

Again echoing *Gaudium et spes*, the Holy Father considers art to be an important linchpin between religion and culture. Not only is art a bridge between faith and culture, it can lead to a contemplative experience if it aims at disclosing the mystery that permeates all creation:

You know, however, that the church has not ceased to nurture great appreciation for the value of art as such. Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.

In an earlier pontifical communiqué specifically on cinema, John Paul II wrote that film is “an authentic vehicle of culture for the integral growth of each person and of society as a whole.” There are human and religious values present not only in films that make direct reference to the tradition of Christianity but also in films of different cultures and religions. This confirms the importance of the cinema as a vehicle for cultural exchange and as an invitation to openness and reflection in dealing with realities foreign to our upbringing and mentality.

He returns to a point made in earlier statements concerning film’s power and psychological influence and connects it to the fundamental task of all Christians: “the proclamation of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, ‘the Savior of all,’ to the people of their time.” He writes that film is “a form of communication that is based not so much

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126 *Letter to Artists, op. cit.*, par. 7.

on words as on concrete events, expressed in images which impact greatly on the viewers and on their subconscious.”

From this he concludes that “cinema, with its vast possibilities, could become a powerful means of evangelization.”

John Paul II follows this up in a message he gave to a conference on cinema on a separate occasion, stressing the need for the church, artists, and all society to recognize together the power cinema has to bring distant people together, to reconcile enemies, to promote a more respectful and fruitful dialogue between different cultures, by showing the way to a credible and lasting solidarity, the essential premise for a world of peace. We know how much man also needs peace to be a true artist, to create true cinema!

The church, he suggests in Letter to Artists, values not only the works artists produce (ends) but also the dedication behind and responsibility to their vocation (means). By developing talent and technique, artists work in the service of beauty. Simultaneously, artists serve humanity and contribute “to the life and renewal of a people—for art is never a solitary activity. It is in every aspect a relational event, just as there can never be a church of one.” When artists are not driven “by the search for empty glory or the craving for cheap popularity” and when they are “obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional

128 Ibid., par. 4.
129 Ibid., par. 18.
131 Letter to Artists, op. cit., par. 4, emphasis mine.
social service in favor of the common good.”

Seen from a broader perspective, the history of art “is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women.”

This sentiment can be expanded to include the manner in which men and women receive and interpret art reveals as much about the spiritual/moral dimensions of art’s patrons as it does artists themselves. Indeed, all men and women “are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.”

Not only professional artists but all people are called through their existential situation, their work and relationships, toward human authenticity—to live ever more fully in God’s image by remaining worthy of divine likeness in their capacity as artists.

As civilization and society needs art for its self-expression and self-definition, so the church, as God’s people and a portion of history and the larger society, needs art—both religious and secular—for its own self-expression. And, of course, “self-expression” applied to the church means nothing less than its mission to communicate the message of revelation entrusted to it by God in Christ. Given this, what is it that art uniquely has that the church needs to fulfill this mission?

Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable. Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colors, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery.

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132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid. Letter to Artists complements Dei verbum in spelling out further the relationship between God’s revelation and the human reception and response to that revelation.
135 Ibid., par. 12.
Given what has been laid out so far, John Paul II concludes that “the church needs art.” He then turns to the more controversial question, “Does art need the church?” What is it that the church uniquely has that artists need? What is intriguing here is the fact that the pope writes in the form of a question, one he hopes does not come off as provocation. Since the letter is an appeal to artists he extends an invitation rather than a verdict. Indeed, there is no definitive pronouncement that “art needs the church.” And while he submits reasons as to why the church might be essential to artists, he leaves it up to them to make that judgment. This gesture is fundamentally grounded in the teaching of Gaudium et spes which encouraged the church to maintain a bearing of magnanimity in its critical correspondence with culture.

He answers the question of whether art needs the church in two stages, the first of which presents a kind of anthropology of the artist. Artists, he writes, are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable. How then can we fail to see what a great source of inspiration is offered by that kind of homeland of the soul that is religion? Is it not perhaps within the realm of religion that the most vital personal questions are posed, and answers both concrete and definitive are sought?

If it is the aim of artists to express something of the mystery of life then they must remain open to and in touch with those individuals, communities, and institutions that have deep insight into the nature of transcendence. Art loses something of its very reason for being

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136 Ibid.

137 His query appears to represent an effort to avoid an attitude of ecclesiastical hegemony vis-à-vis culture that was present in the Neo-Scholastic style of language of earlier documents like Vigilanti cura. It suggests, perhaps, that he is conscious that there are artists who may expect the Vatican to insist that art needs the church rather than invite them to draw the same conclusion.

138 Letter to Artists, Ibid., par. 13.
when it cuts itself off from religion, which is such a wellspring of responses to the most fundamental of human questions. The pope believes that artists reflect God’s nature as Creator since they disclose some amount of their own being through their handiwork. From the many available forms, artists choose as their craft the optimum method to communicate who they uniquely are and the vision they hold of reality.

Art and morality thus meet in the character of the artist. The act of creating art facilitates in the formation of an artist’s intellect, emotions, and personality and is thereby revelatory of his or her inner life:

In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are. And there are endless examples of this in human history. In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. For him art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them.

This “new dimension,” the letter suggests, consists “in the potential of the fine arts to transport us from the mundane to the transcendent, from visible realities to invisible, yet deeper, realities.” Every work of art in some way reveals its maker; art thus expresses the transcendent insofar as it “will always convey some meaning or trace of a personality.”

Questions such as those raised both explicitly and implicitly in Gaudium et spes: “What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life? . . . What does the church think of man? What needs to be recommended for the upbuilding of contemporary society? What is the ultimate significance of human activity throughout the world?” (Gaudium et spes, op. cit., arts. 10-11).

Letter to Artists, op. cit., par. 2.


Still, the pressing question remains as to why “the artistic task of expressing the transcendent require[s] the incarnation?”

In the second stage of his argument, and without denying that artists have “found inspiration in other religious contexts,” the Holy Father offers what he perceives to be the unique contribution of the Catholic Church to the world of art:

[B]ecause of its central doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word of God, Christianity offers artists a horizon especially rich in inspiration. What an impoverishment it would be for art to abandon the inexhaustible mine of the gospel! …The close alliance that has always existed between the gospel and art means that you are invited to use your creative intuition to enter into the heart of the mystery of the Incarnate God and at the same time into the mystery of [human beings].

Moreover, Christianity and especially Catholicism provides an especially fruitful source of inspiration to the artist because Christianity proclaims the Incarnation, that Jesus Christ is God become man for love of human beings. Therefore, art needs the church because the goal of the artist can best be fulfilled in the context of the life and doctrines of the church.

Jesus Christ “not only reveals his Father to man but also ‘fully reveals man to himself.’” Hence, any authentic attempt to give aesthetic expression to the mystery of man will find both inspiration and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The Holy Father asserts that the classic philosophical categories of goodness, beauty, and truth find their fulfillment in the Incarnation. No longer are these mere intellectual concepts: they have become enfleshed, tangible realities in Christ and transformed through his dying and rising

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143 Ibid.

144 Letter to Artists, ibid., par. 13.

145 Ibid., pars. 13-14.


147 Ibid.
beyond what the philosophers could ever have anticipated. The Son of God “has introduced into human history all the evangelical wealth of the true and the good, and with this he has also unveiled a new dimension of beauty.” While this “new dimension” remains unspecified, when considered against the letter’s inherent Christology and its appeal to artists to offer “service which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people,” it can be deduced that it refers to the paschal dimension of beauty ushered in by Jesus Christ. What appears to be an unsightly curse (Passio) is true blessedness and the fullness of beauty (Pascha) offered to all creation. Christ’s passover heralds a new knowledge: that a gilded world cannot reflect the divine initiative—only a humble, contrite world can. The scorned and abandoned, the weak and the wrecked, can with certitude be called eternally beautiful by way of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Art that is reflective of this paschal dimension of beauty is not only of great interest to the church, the work remains dependent on God’s revealing and the church’s proclaiming the purest form of beauty.

It is important to notice that it is on the same premise—the Incarnation—that John Paul II bases his answers to the letter’s twin questions concerning the interrelationship between church and art. Indeed, the ultimate ground for his belief that the church is essential for the arts is based on the earlier premise that Christ is “the icon of the unseen God.” He sees an analogous link between objects of art and the incarnate Word of God:

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148 Letter to Artists, ibid., par. 5.
149 Ibid., par. 4.
150 From a Christian point of view, the metaphoric “death” that occurs when artists abandon themselves to their craft and all that it demands for the renewal of others, they partake in Christ’s action for others and thereby fulfill their vocation.
Just as the church needs Jesus Christ to make visible his unseen Father, so too she needs literary and figurative works, music, and architecture to raise our hearts and minds to the Father revealed by Jesus Christ. The incarnate Word serves as the model of corporeal representations of transcendent realities and thus secures the place of the fine arts within the practice of the church.\textsuperscript{151}

Art needs the church because art is concrete and when it pursues what is true, of necessity it has to rely on the Incarnation. That is to say, art must not “cut itself off from the full truth about man, which is found in Christian revelation.”\textsuperscript{152} When art is properly ordered “to our ultimate end and joined to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, it can serve to sanctify both ourselves and others. In this way our work, done well and with the right intention, becomes a vehicle of growth in moral and spiritual goodness.”\textsuperscript{153}

To conclude, as we come to the end of the second chapter of this dissertation and its assimilation of Catholic Church teaching on cinema, it is possible to appreciate how important \textit{Letter to Artists} is for this study. It affirms and nuances much that has already been stated in Vatican documents concerning film but it also takes the discourse to a new level.\textsuperscript{154} John Paul II treats film as more than an electronic form of communication. He confirms the teaching of \textit{Vigilanti cura} that film is a form of art and then spells out the implications of this judgment. When film is genuinely artistic, it “goes beyond what the senses perceive,” reaches “beneath reality's surface [and] strives to interpret its hidden mystery.”\textsuperscript{155} Cinema is thus a “vehicle” to faith since every authentic “art form in its

\textsuperscript{151} Freddoso, “The Church and Art,” \textit{op. cit.}, p. 218.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 219.

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 217.

\textsuperscript{154} Perhaps it is because of his background as an artist that he is uniquely able to take the conversation to a new level. John Paul II demonstrates a great affinity for art and seems to hold less of a concern with scandal at it.

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Letter to Artists, op. cit.}, par. 6.
own way is a path to the inmost reality of [human beings] and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. Indeed, the Holy Father helps us to see that in all artistic endeavors, in creating and delighting in art, we grow in the image of God. And when art given and received is lifted up in adoration of the ultimate source of beauty, of which art is a mere reflection, then our efforts are united to that source and the relationship between artist and Creator is deepened. The physical object of art remains a symbol of this spiritual relationship:

All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardor of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendor which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit. Believers find nothing strange in this: they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God.

Pope John Paul II remained a strong advocate of film throughout his pontificate. He hosted several international conferences on cinema as a resource for spiritual reflection; oversaw the Pontifical Council for Social Communication’s release in 1995 of a list of forty-five films deemed religiously, artistically and morally laudable; and actively supported the World Catholic Association for Social Communication (SIGNIS). Although his letter is not descriptive of film, its attributes, or its contribution to art

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156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 Examples of films on the list range from the explicitly Christian (The Gospel According to St. Matthew, dir. Pier Pasolini), to the secular (2001: A Space Odyssey, dir. Stanley Kubrick) and humanistic (Dersu Uzala, dir. Akira Kurosawa). While the list was a welcome complement to all of the Vatican’s positive and theoretical pronouncements on cinema seriously, questions about the list remain outstanding: Why forty-five? Why these forty-five? What criteria were used for selection and evaluation? Why were reviews of the films not part of the inventory? What of the thousands of other films that might possibly be considered valuable to Catholics?
history, much of what it says specifically about other forms of art is applicable to film—as, for instance, in its description of a cathedral: “In the play of light and shadow, in forms at times massive, at times delicate, structural considerations certainly come into play, but so too do the tensions peculiar to the experience of God, the mystery both ‘awesome’ and ‘alluring.’”\(^\text{159}\) This excerpt, which clearly references Rudolph Otto’s famous definition of the experience of “the holy,”\(^\text{160}\) while ostensibly descriptive of the splendors of cathedral architecture, if placed in another context might very well describe the artistic characteristics of cinema.

Since this dissertation is concerned specifically with the relationship between Catholic theology and film, it is worth noting that the letter cites M. D. Chenu, O.P.’s teaching that the work of theologians would be incomplete if they failed “to give due attention to works of art, both literary and figurative, which are in their own way ‘not only aesthetic representations, but genuine ‘sources’ of theology.’”\(^\text{161}\) This dictum anticipates the upcoming chapter in which we look carefully at this possibility through the writings of Catholic theologians and film scholars.

**Conclusion**

This chapter attempted to further articulate the Vatican’s approach to film by analyzing documents pertinent to an understanding of the placement of film in a Catholic context. Whereas Rome’s approach to film was fairly straightforward in its “first stage,”

\(^{159}\) *Letter to Artists, ibid.*, par. 8.

\(^{160}\) In his volume, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto (1868-1937) designates “the holy” as “totally other” (*Ganz Andere*). He describes experience of the holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: the mystery which produces in humans feelings of fear and fascination.

\(^{161}\) *Ibid.*, par. 11.
its “second stage” of development is more difficult to grasp. This elusiveness is due in part to the fact that no document handles cinema as its main subject; nor does any text build explicitly on the foundational literature surveyed in the first chapter. Instead, film is considered under the broader headings of media, culture, social communication, and art. Looking at film under such large-scale rubrics increased our sense of the theoretical complexities involved in interpreting the relationship between Catholic theology and cinema.

A hypothesis asserted at the beginning of the dissertation stated that Vatican opinion on cinema remains insufficient at the levels of both formal clarity (theory) and direct critical reflection (praxis). This we have found to be true. Theoretically, while recommendations were made for more substantial engagement between Catholic theology and film, the official teaching comes up short in presenting models of how this might be accomplished. Deficiencies were noted at the practical level, too. For instance, none of the pontifical documents on cinema reflect directly on the concrete material of film or expressly relate Christian doctrines to the content of actual film stories. Whereas general principles for Catholic engagement with cinema were laid down in these texts, none presented specific examples of movies the magisterial authors considered valuable (or reprehensible) when crafting these principles. This is a significant weakness since it means that the church’s official teaching on “film” is just that: discourse on a broadly-conceived notion of “film” that is largely abstracted from real film referents. Such inattention to actual films keeps the magisterial discourse at a theoretical level, offering more of a justification of cinema’s importance for the church (and vice versa) than a practical application of how Catholic faith and film actually relate. If a sharper picture of
the placement and function of film within a Catholic theological framework is to emerge then at some point film must be viewed as it really exists. The remainder of the dissertation attempts to mitigate these limitations.

To draw out some implications of this chapter for our thesis, we might borrow language from John Paul II’s Letter to Artists to say that, according to the magisterium, the “church needs film” and “film needs the church.” For its part, the church has the duty to employ every effective means to bear witness to the truth of God in Jesus and to communicate his gospel in each age in vibrant, compelling ways. Its mission is not only to preach the gospel, but to critically engage and reflect on the world to which the gospel is delivered so that Christian teaching can be related to human experience. In light of this mission to proclaim the path of salvation in and through culture, the church can turn to cinema for its unique ability to illuminate the mystery, dignity, questions, and struggles of the human being to whom salvation is offered. In turning to film, the preaching of the church can become clearer as it matches message to the language and environs of the listener. A barometer of culture, cinema is a tremendous source for theological reflection, since the church is called to scrutinize the signs of the times in the light of the gospel and to discern what in culture bespeaks God’s presence and what does not. The church needs film because, as an art, it is concrete; and, as a popular art, it is accessible to many. Film can express the transcendental dimensions of human beings by illustrating what they hold to be good, true, and beautiful; what they wonder at; what they utterly abhor; and what gives them joy. While film is a form of art independent of the church for its existence, application, and cultural relevance, it nonetheless needs the church. As

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162 Gaudium et spes, op cit., art. 4.
John Paul II writes, when art pursues what is true, and good, and beautiful, it is really
pursuing Christ, the *Logos* of God. Therefore, art needs the Christian church because the
church has, in the criterion of Christ, the preeminent revealed means of discerning what
in human experience is *really* true, beautiful, and holy.

The dissertation’s first chapter pointed out certain characteristics of the Vatican’s
approach to film that, if left unmitigated, would in time limit the church’s vision of
cinema and the possibilities it held for the church. This included Rome’s heteronomous
rhetoric toward and dichotomous vision of film and its propensity for a morals-only
hermeneutic with regard to motion picture content. In the light of this chapter,
particularly the *Letter to Artists*, some of these problems can be attributed to the church’s
understanding of the function of art. Looking back at Rome’s “first stage,” it is possible
to see that, when film was approached in a utilitarian way, the church looked solely at the
effects of film; however, when the notion was pursued that art speaks for itself, then the
church could accept the transformative power of art not just as impetus for moral action,
but toward beauty. While the Vatican has always judged cinema to be a legitimate art
form, the documents prior to *Letter to Artists* did not reflect appreciably on this
dimension and focused more upon its function as a means of social communication. John
Paul II’s letter opened ecclesiastical conversation about cinema in a direction beyond
communication theory. Thus, with this chapter we have a better sense what the church
means that film is a form of art.¹⁶³

Certainly, the notion of film as a mode of communication should not be
overlooked, for such a viewpoint and can lead to important theological conclusions, such

¹⁶³ Still, since John Paul II wrote of “art” as a whole, the particularities of the cinematic medium
were not examined.
as those made by Pope Benedict XVI in his address on the church’s annual World Communications Day:

The desire for connectedness and the instinct for communication that are so obvious in contemporary culture are best understood as modern manifestations of the basic and enduring propensity of humans to reach beyond themselves and to seek communion with others. In reality, when we open ourselves to others, we are fulfilling our deepest need and becoming more fully human. Loving is, in fact, what we are designed for by our Creator.\textsuperscript{164}

There remains the unresolved concern that Vatican literature on film does not go far enough in developing theological foundations for its approach to cinema or in spelling out the theological implications of its teaching. As noted, this shortcoming is, in part, one reason for this dissertation, which attempts at some level to mitigate this deficiency. The next chapter builds toward this goal by looking closely at essays from Catholic theologians and film experts to see how professionals in the field have negotiated the relationship between theology and film and whether these writers pursue the question of the conditions of possibility of their interplay.

It is worth finishing with a remark that summarizes nicely the need for Catholics to understand and pursue the Vatican’s approach to cinema as expressed in the documents we have studied in these first two chapters of the dissertation:

Through such publications the church has promoted critical awareness and critical engagement with media. The church consistently calls the means of social communications “gifts of God.” However, in church documents such affirmative statements are always followed by a firm “but.” The church knows that the media are a garden and a minefield, too. At the end of the day, the church respects storytelling and creativity, and the intelligence of people to discern, choose, and to make meaning about the media they consume. These documents can educate

and form the storytellers of tomorrow who are in our pews, living rooms and classrooms today, as well as their teachers and parents. They also advise advocacy but not boycotts. The church, at its heart, knows that how one teaches is what one teaches.\textsuperscript{165}

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

The last two chapters gathered together the various strands of Vatican teaching on cinema and inspected them against the larger background of the church’s relationship to the secular world. From the beginning of its teaching on cinema, the magisterium has consistently approached film as a highly influential element in modern culture that deserves serious attention. An attitude of cautious optimism prevailed in the earliest teaching as “mother church” struggled to balance her mission to protect her children and come to terms with a powerful new form of entertainment, art, and industry. Overall, Rome maintained a positive and constructive attitude toward cinema and strongly encouraged Catholics, particularly those in teaching roles as pastors, catechists, and theologians, to see film as a form of art worthy of both respect and critical engagement for the many possibilities it holds for evangelization and Christian development.

The investigation found that whereas the Vatican over the course of its teaching on cinema has made certain theological judgments about film (e.g., that it is a providential gift that, like all of God’s blessings, ought to be oriented toward the propagation of Christ’s kingdom) it has not presented a thorough study of film. Even when all of the magisterium’s documents related to cinema are evaluated as a whole, the Catholic church does not have as part of its official doctrine anything that amounts to a comprehensive “theology of film.” The Vatican effectively invited other in the church, and theologians in particular, to begin the job of exploring film’s deeper significance for Christian faith and the implications Christianity holds for film interpretation. Yet in the years immediately following Vatican II, it appears that few Catholic theologians took up
this task in any significant way. Indeed, individual theologians came quite “late to the scene” compared to the magisterium’s efforts to build bridges between Christian faith and film. However, beginning in the early-1970s and reaching something of a critical mass in the late 1990s, a number of theologians (Catholic and Protestant) broke new ground, inaugurating what is now an area of study in its own right—“theology and film.” Because of these efforts there is now an increased recognition among many theologians “that films can explore with great depth, power, and artistry moral dilemmas and theological questions.”

This chapter looks closely at seminal essays by several Roman Catholic theologians and film experts that span the course of the last fifty years. There is a threefold intention: (1) to provide some sense of the historical and conceptual developments in the area of theology and film; (2) to determine what elements stand out as characteristically “Catholic” in the interpretive approaches of key shapers of the field; and (3) to convey a sense of the variety of Catholic theoretical approaches to film so as to illustrate that there is no particular “fixed” method of working with film from a Catholic perspective. Each writer represented here identifies unique points of intersection between theology and cinema and insists on the importance for theology to connect directly to particular films—something the magisterium did not do—so as to avoid overly theoretical interpretations. To be sure, the chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of all the relevant literature pertaining to Catholic theological engagement with film. If this were an exhaustive study of Catholic styles of film analysis there are several

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1 Jolyon Mitchell, “Theology and Film,” op. cit., p. 743.
other authors whose work would need to be included (e.g., Lloyd Baugh, Richard Leonard, Peter Malone, John May, Rose Pacette, etc).

The chapter begins with an essay by French film theoretist and critic André Bazin. Though he was not a trained theologian, his review of the film *Heaven Over the Marshes* was one of the first publications to connect film and theology and to suggest that Catholic theology is an essential hermeneutic for film evaluation. Neil Hurley, S.J. was the first American Catholic theologian—indeed, one of the first theologians ever—to attempt an extended study relating theology and cinema. His volume *Theology Through Film*, published in 1970, essentially instituted “theology and film” as a legitimate area within theological studies. Hurley constructs what he calls a “cinematic theology,” an approach that treats films as indispensable theological texts. Irish theologian Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J. retrieves the Catholic practice of discernment of spirits for his interpretation of film. His essay, “Theology, Discernment and Cinema,” applies the discernment tradition as a way of discriminating genuine religious impulses in film from those that are illusory. Especially important for this dissertation is the fact that Gallagher’s article represents one of the first theological studies of film to integrate some of Karl Rahner’s positions theology, the arts, and mystagogy. Joseph Marty’s essay “Toward a Theological Interpretation and Reading of Film: Incarnation of the Word of God—Relation, Image, Word,” insists that Christianity cannot cease to evangelize culture and so it must root all possible dialogue about the film image in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Just as the chapter begins with a film scholar (Bazin), so it is fitting to end with one. Richard Blake, S.J. comes at the problem of relating Catholic theology and film from his perspective as a film studies expert. Through an examination of a selection
of Blake’s publications on Catholicism and film criticism, the attempt is made to uncover and explain his two-fold interest: legitimizing theological interpretations of cinema on the one hand, and “protecting” the film image from theological eisegesis on the other.

This chapter follows closely after the dissertation’s exposition of the Vatican’s opinion on cinema, allowing for trends, expansions, and possible variations between the church’s official position and the methods of individual scholars to emerge. This will help uncover elements within the overall Catholic conversation about theology and film that require even further investigation and/or expansion.

André Bazin²

André Bazin (1918-1958) was a prominent French cinema theorist and critic who in 1951 helped to found the highly influential journal Les Cahiers du Cinema. Along with those critics-cum-directors associated with Cahiers, such as Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, Bazin put the discipline of film criticism on the world map. As one biographer puts it, Bazin’s “‘impact on film art, as theorist and critic, is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer in the history of the cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit,’ as well as with being the spiritual father of the French New Wave.’”³

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² This section of the chapter considers an essay by André Bazin, “Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven Over the Marshes.” A translation of this article by Bert Cardullo can be found in the electronic journal, Journal of Religion and Film, Vol. 6, No. 2 (October 2002). See: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/heaven.htm> (last accessed 2/11/10). All references to this article will be noted according to paragraph numbers on the webpage.

Bazin was a chief proponent of the *auteur* theory of film, an approach that considers a filmmaker to be the singular “author” of a particular work of art. The auteur school teaches that “film is a work of art, and since a work of art is stamped with the personality of its creator, it is the director, more than anyone else, who gives the film its distinctive quality.” Directors like D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Akira Kurosawa, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick are regarded as auteurs, owing to their control over every detail of a project—including scripting, photography, editing, and scoring.

Bazin was a Roman Catholic. In his 1951 essay “Cinema and Theology: The Case of *Heaven Over the Marshes,*” Bazin asserts that many of the religious films made in the first fifty-five years of motion picture history failed to inspire as compellingly as *Heaven Over the Marshes* (1949, dir. Augusto Genina). To understand why, he reflects upon the overall content and style of such religious films. While he did not intend the essay to be a theological monograph, his review of the movie *Heaven Over the Marshes* represents one of the earliest attempts to bring the two worlds of film and theology—specifically Catholic theology—together. As one writer suggests, Bazin’s essay reveals that “he was also the most religious of film critics and theorists. He is fundamentally holistic in his Catholicism, however, not remotely doctrinal.”

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4 The auteur theory has its critics. Some suggest that its main weakness consists in the fact that film is a composite art (a fusion of theater, photography, music, etc.), and therefore one that relies on the collaboration and vision of many people. “At its most extreme, auteur theory neglects the contributions of actors, screenwriters, cinematographers, production designers, and others. . . . Since 1970, critical approaches such as structuralism, semiology, and Marxism have deemphasized the ‘author’ in favor of analysis of the film ‘text,’” (Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, Fourth Edition. New York: Harper Collins, 2001, p.66).

5 Katz, *ibid.*

6 Cardullo, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*
Bazin categorizes what accounted popularly as a “religious” film in 1951 as one of three types: i) a biblical story; ii) a hagiography; or iii) one concerning the life of a church religious—usually a priest or nun. Yet, he remained unsatisfied with this simple classification and his essay attempts to expand the notion of what constitutes a religious film; or, better, what constitutes a film that has genuine religious significance. Of particular interest is his judgment that what makes for a “religious” film may not involve overtly religious symbolism. For Bazin, explicit religious references may in fact be quite ineffectual at awakening authentic religious consciousness; indeed, his essay is essentially a gloss on this notion.

With reference to the many movies made about Jesus and the apostles in the early years of cinema, Bazin writes that the “cinema has always been interested in God.” 7 It is important to keep in mind that Bazin was writing for an early-1950s audience accustomed to the religious styles and sensibilities of the time. This was the era of David and Bathsheba (1951, dir. Henry King), Song of Bernadette (1943, dir. Henry King), and Going My Way (1944, dir. Leo McCarey), movies that catered to large audiences looking for spiritual succor in a world ravaged by war. And though film has “always been interested in God” the products of this interest, suggests Bazin, did not live up to the loftiness of the subject matter: the “history of religious themes on the screen sufficiently reveals the temptations one must resist in order to meet simultaneously the requirements of cinematic art and of truly religious experience.” 8 He suggests that the presence on screen of a religious person, a sacred rite or symbol, or the simple injection of a pious

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7 Bazin, “Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven Over the Marshes,” *ibid.*, par. 2.

message, does not necessarily make a film religiously meaningful or for that matter theologically sound. Nor is good cinema made sheerly by virtue of their presence.

Many of the religious films of this era (not necessarily those just mentioned) inclined toward sentimentality and bathos. Especially in Catholic circles, there was a tendency to sanctify any film that followed the life of a saint or cleric. Many of these films were plainly mawkish, but audiences had few options beyond them. Contributing to this ethos was the fact that Catholics (and others) had limited means for keeping a critically distant eye on such films. Film criticism had only recently been inaugurated and the only source for film “reviews” was the Legion of Decency. Bazin cautions against sentimental excess claiming that the “affinities which have made for the success of countless films are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them”; and he insinuates that Catholics with an interest in both good cinema and good theology should be concerned that much of what is put forward by the industry under the rubric “religious” is often symbolically overwrought and categorically kitsch.

The seeming inability of Hollywood and others to produce intelligent, relevant religious films raised two important questions for Bazin: (1) Just what constitutes a “religious” movie?; and (2) Is the medium of the cinema a sufficient vehicle for communicating genuine religious experience? It is important to note that he does not answer them abstractly. Instead, he turns directly to Heaven Over the Marshes and considers the questions from within the narrative and style of the film.

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9 Ibid.

10 At one point, Bazin wryly quips that “our children will probably one day see a Golgotha in 3-D” (ibid., par. 5).
The movie follows the real-life story of Maria Goretti, an Italian peasant girl who in 1902 at the age of twelve was the victim of an attempted rape. After resisting her attacker, Goretti was stabbed fourteen times. She survived only two days. On her deathbed, she forgave her attacker and asked God to forgive him as well. Goretti was canonized in 1950 by Pope Pius XII—with her murderer present, no less.

Bazin places the biopic under the heading of “hagiography.” But what about this film does he think transcends the hagiographic status quo and offers a more authentic instance of a religious movie? Bazin calls Heaven Over the Marshes a “theological” film and it is important to understand what he means by this. He was convinced that theology really only exists, as it were, on the ground; theology is an existential reality, played out by real people in real situations. He credits the film’s director, Augusto Genina, for choosing such a commonplace story to illustrate what it means to be a saint.11 There are no spectacular miracles; no mystical raptures; no celluloid theophanies. The story’s ordinariness is reflected in the film’s remarkably simple style, which is devoid of extraordinary events; hers is the life of a daughter of a poor family of farmhands in the Pontine marshes near Rome at the turn of the century. No visions, no voices, no signs from heaven . . . . All that we have here is the senseless crushing of a poor child’s life—there are no unusual, mitigating circumstances. There is not a single aspect of the crime that doesn’t have a natural explanation. The resistance of the girl is perhaps nothing but an exaggerated physiological response to the violation of her sense of decency, the reflex action of a frightened little animal.12

Writing his essay within a year of Goretti’s canonization, Bazin remarks that “at least in France, this saint’s life has disappointed the Christians,” apparently because her

11 Bazin is not suggesting that the rape and murder of Goretti constitutes an “ordinary” experience. He simply wants to accentuate the point that the religious value of the film is not equated with “spectacle.”

12 Bazin, “Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven Over the Marshes,” ibid., par. 7.
piety did not involve extraordinary, spectacular events. He commends Genina for having made a hagiography “that doesn’t prove anything, above all not the sainthood of the saint. Herein lies not only the film’s artistic distinction but also its religious one.” The director did not simply eschew the use of religious symbolism, ornamentation and sentiment—motifs normally used by filmmakers to communicate a supernatural aspect in a film hagiography; rather he

set out to achieve much more than this: his goal was to create a phenomenology of sainthood. Genina’s mise en scène is a systematic refusal not only to treat sainthood as anything but a fact, an event occurring in the world . . . the ambiguous manifestation of a spiritual reality that is absolutely impossible to prove. The apologetic nature of most hagiographies supposes, by contrast, that sainthood is conferred a priori . . . Yet, good logic dictates, as does good theology, that a saint becomes a saint only after the fact: when he is canonized; during his lifetime, he is simply Monsieur Vincent.

Apropos of Bazin’s Catholic instinct, here he makes an important theological point about the doctrine of sainthood, namely that because all persons are by grace potentially saints we must be attentive to this possibility both in our own lives and in the lives of others. A saint “does not exist as a saint in the present: he is simply a being who becomes one and who, moreover, risks eternal damnation until his death.” The ordinary story of Goretti is a cinematic model of this doctrine. Quoting Genina, Bazin writes, “This is Maria Goretti, watch her live and die. On the other hand, you know she is a saint. Let those who have eyes to see, read by transparence the evidence of grace in her life, just as you must do at every moment in the events of your own lives.”

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13 Ibid., par. 8.
14 Ibid., par. 9.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., par. 10. Audiences “know she is a saint” presumably because she was canonized and are aware of this as the events in her life unfold. But they are perhaps surprised that the extraordinariness of
(and Bazin’s) point is that the signs that God sends to his people are not always “supernatural” in the paranormal or extramundane sense. Sainthood “isn’t signified by anything extraordinary, either on the physical or the psychological level. Divine grace doesn’t manifest itself in nature as the product of a tangible causality; at most, it reveals itself through some ambiguous signs that can all be explained in quite natural terms.”

This is what makes *Heaven Over the Marshes* so *theologically* significant for Bazin. It is a “rarity: a good Catholic film,” for its singular ability to communicate that the experience of grace is to be found in ordinary human experience. This is why he thinks the film “will be disconcerting to viewers who are used to an apologetics that confuses rhetoric with art and sentiment with grace.”

The article concludes with a line that opens for us two important and related questions about the possibilities for cinema and for the way theology relates to it: 1) whether it is possible for cinema to convey “religious experience”; and 2) whether film itself can be regarded as an authentic mode of theology: Bazin writes, “I would consider *Heaven Over the Marshes* the first theological film to assert—through the very nature of its characters, story, and event—the total transcendence of grace, which occurs at the expense of apologetics.”

What Bazin states here corresponds to his general theory that film ought to be shot and edited in a “realist” (or, truly, “neorealist”) style. For him, the

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Goretti’s story (as Genina portrays it) is found in her devotion to God and heroic act of forgiveness and that the film does not chronicle her sanctity in dazzling spectacle.

less conspicuous the filmmaker and the filmmaking process, the better for capturing “objective” reality in the *mise-en-scène* and disclosing the natural world as the *locus* of God’s activity. “Real life,” according to Bazin, should not be manipulated by film. He thus favored minimal camera movements and continuity in editing. Expressionist ventures in montage, lighting, and camera angle, he believed, stole away from natural beauty and forced a director’s interpretation of reality onto the spectator, instead of allowing the spectator to take in and interpret a filmic slice of unadulterated real life. For him, cinema “was not an art at all, at least not in the first place an art. Its home, he argued, lies not in the heavens of aesthetics but solidly, even clumsily, on this earth to whose material surface it is bound.” Bazin held that “the aesthetic core of cinema was comprised of an innately sacramental dimension, wherein the movie camera, through photographing the world, bears witness to the miracle of God’s creation.”

This “sacramental vision,” which is often referred to as a defining characteristic of Catholic Christianity, suggests that “the physical can be an important, and even necessary, gateway to the spiritual . . ..” Bazin brings this sensibility to his interpretation of film, which he believes to be “‘preordained to bear endless witness to the beauty of the cosmos,’” and that the “filmmaker who preferred montage and editing to the realist style was . . . ‘committing ‘a minor heresy—since it arrogated the power of God, who alone is entitled to confer meaning on the universe.’”

Indeed, to Bazin, film is “obligated to

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God, to honor God’s universe by rendering its reality and, by means of its reality, its mystery.”

Whereas Bazin’s perspective that only a realist cinema can evoke a sense of transcendence might be challenged by Catholic theologians and film theorists, it is possible, from the viewpoint of theology, to flesh out the finer points of his theory, since what he says corresponds closely with the Catholic teaching that the transcendent God is experienced only in the “categorical” order; that is, in created reality and in the ordinary, often unspectacular flow of daily living. While God transcends the created order, God’s presence permanently pervades and sustains material reality to the point of entering into creation and becoming flesh in Jesus Christ. This belief informs Bazin’s vision of the function and style of filmmaking. For him, a director must practice a kind of restraint by remaining close to the real-life dynamics of person, community, and setting. In this sense, although “the austereness of the Protestant sensibility is not indispensable to the making of a good Catholic film, it can nevertheless be a real advantage.” In remaining more true-to-life, filmmakers create more religiously relevant movies and do much to prevent a misbalance of the immanent and transcendent. At “the heart of Bazin's strictures on cinematic realism lies the conviction that the movie camera,


25 Cf. Richard Blake’s analysis of Catholic directors in the last section of this chapter.

26 Cf. the fifth chapter of this dissertation for a discussion of the terms “transcendental” and “categorical” and their relationship, as understood by Karl Rahner.

27 Bazin, “Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven Over the Marshes,” ibid., par. 2.
by the simple act of photographing the world, testifies to the miracle of God's creation.”

Indeed, spiritual “sensitivity and its enablement through cinema are central to Bazin’s view of film as obligated to God, to honor God’s universe by rendering its reality and, by means of its reality, its mystery.”

This does not diminish the importance of the directorial “craft,” yet because life is already theologically imbued, a filmmaker should restrain from manufacturing a religious message. For Bazin, the medium is the message:

Bazin recognised that film art always condenses, shapes and orders the reality it records, but what he looked for in filmmakers was a kind of spiritual disposition towards reality—an intention to serve it by a scrupulous effacement of means and a corresponding unwillingness to do violence to it through ideological abstraction or self-aggrandizing technique.

In sum, Bazin’s insights have been helpful for considering existing Catholic approaches to film. His article: (1) represents an early model of theology and cinema in dialogue, one that is unique in that it initiates from within the milieu of film criticism and not academic theology or the magisterium; (2) demonstrates the importance for theology to connect directly with a film and not to abstract too far from the narrative, characters and symbols that are the real communicators of a possible theological message; and (3) provides greater rationale for what constitutes religious experience in film and, thus, what makes for a theologically relevant film—giving excellent justification for widening the scope of the kinds of movies worthy of theology’s attention.

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Neil Hurley, S.J.

Neil Hurley’s volume *Theology Through Film* was published first in 1970, and then re-published in 1975 under a different title, *Toward a Film Humanism.* It is rightly hailed as a *tour de force,* one that inaugurated “theology and film” as a valid, needed field of research. In it, Hurley unabashedly treats film as a theological text and considers them indispensable to Christian theology. He asserts that film images “can no longer . . . be ignored, especially as a significant mode of religious awareness, though they are obviously different from traditional prayer, liturgy, and acts of piety. Those who profess to be dedicated to religious education and theology should acknowledge the universality of the motion picture experience as one of the foundation stones” of world culture. A “wedding of the two is overdue,” he continues, “although, happily, the matchmakers are growing in number.”

It is important to understand the book for what it truly is and not overextend its value as an expressly theological text. Hurley acknowledges as much when he writes in the introduction that in the book might be found only the “dim outlines of a cinematic

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31 Neil Hurley, S.J. *Toward a Film Humanism.* New York: Dell, 1975. In reading through Hurley’s book one is struck by his vast comprehension of a formidable repertoire of world cinema. His recollection of specific scenes and themes particular to each of the high quality films he references is impressive considering the book was written in a pre-video age and without the indices on film readily available today.

32 Consider, for instance, the following lines: “*The Pawnbroker* is as central a contribution to a behavioral theology as could be hoped for” (p. 129); “For Christians who have faith in the communion of the saints . . . *La Strada* is the most sublime expression of this belief” (p. 150); *La Dolce Vita* is a “theological masterwork of the screen” (p. 135).

33 Hurley, *Toward a Film Humanism,* ibid., p. x. This idea accords with what *Gaudium et spes* stated regarding Catholic theology’s need to engage culture as a matrix of meaning.

theology,”35 which is likely why the title was changed. He calls the text a “primer, not a rigorously logical system of doctrine that one finds in the classic works of theology.”36 Nor is Hurley interested in directly pursuing the theoretical preconditions of an alliance between such different fields as film and theology. Toward a Film Humanism essentially takes for granted that such an alliance is already legitimate within the Catholic tradition, perhaps based on the Vatican’s doctrine of film, though Hurley does not state this. The methodology of the text is therefore more thematic than systematic. For instance, a number of traditional theological topics are brought into conversation through specific films, as the original title indicates. Chapter headings include, “A Cinematic Theology of Freedom,” “Toward a Cinematic Theology of Sex,” “Death on Camera,” and “The Screen Theology of Sacrificial Love”; yet the chapters do not define the Christian doctrines of freedom, sexuality, death, or charity that undergird Hurley’s reflections on these themes—again, as he readily admits. Thus, the book is more a richly textured, interdisciplinary reflection on world cinema along adumbrated Catholic theological lines that integrates perspectives from anthropology, literature, pop-culture, and behavioral psychology.

The book follows its own logic, which makes finding and following the theoretical thread he uses to weave together these subjects a bit demanding. If the volume has any one, consistent theme that conceptually integrates its many ideas it is transcendence. For Hurley, transcendence is the key for understanding the human being


36 Hurley, Toward a Film Humanism, ibid., p. 11.
and therefore everything that is theologically, scientifically, and artistically related to the human person. He “presupposes religious transcendence in some form as a constant” in the history of humanity and culture. It is a “restless onward dynamism” that moves human beings toward truth “which is the heart of human cognition and love and thus of the religious act.” Transcendence is “openness to values [and to] spiritual powers of perception regarding the hidden but not indecipherable meaning” of all reality. Both “motion pictures and theology work with transcendence,” he asserts, “with the difference that the latter is an elite enterprise and the former oriented to the masses.” Film, as transcendently oriented, opens people’s imaginations “so that in their screen experiences and, hopefully, in real life, they will recognize the grand religious themes of the human spirit.” Theology and cinema represent different expressions of and responses to what Hurley terms the “transcendental “impulses” that are “rooted in the human spirit. These include conscience, guilt, death, redemptive love, and freedom. Such interior drives “give witness to the deepest aspirations of the human spirit and the larger scheme of truth after which it thirsts.” Because these are universal realities “treated in every culture, every religion, and every period of history, even if under distinctive images,” their presence in cinema is “capable of creating intercultural and


41 *Ibid*.


interfaith bonds among peoples of the world.” Film offers theologians “an exhilarating opportunity to compare their messages with those expounded by others,” and vice versa. And whereas the hermeneutical instruments by which cinema and theology each interprets such transcendental impulses may be prima facie incongruous, Hurley contends that the two enterprises should not be perceived to be essentially at variance. Therefore, just as Bazin advocated from the side of film scholarship that a dialogical rather than partisan relationship ought to exist between theology and film, so Hurley advocates the same from the side of professional theology.

Hurley unites transcendence to the Christian doctrines of freedom and grace to explain his perspective on film. He writes that any “discussion of transcendence must touch on the question of the conditions whereby [human beings exercise their] powers of autodetermination.” Freedom, he asserts, is the reason why human beings are “more than the sum total of influences that converge on [them] in time and space.” Freedom is “the condition sine qua non for history, politics, and art.” As for grace, its “avenues” are many, and it “seems to hide itself in deeds.” Hurley attempts to “identify signs of grace on the screen” by looking closely at the “deeds” to which film gives expression.

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44 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
46 Ibid., p. 45.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., p. 130.
50 Ibid., p. 139.
Concealed as it is within acts of freedom, grace is a universal presence, since the “anonymous believer . . . is obviously drawing motivation from some transcendental source that even [he or she] cannot explain, a source that is open to all people.”

Because grace is manifested “anonymously” through “transcendental impulses,” what film uniquely offers theology on this count is a “catalog of concrete instances” where grace “occurs”—hidden, as it were, in the thoughts and activities of human beings. In an important insight that echoes André Bazin’s interpretation of the film *Heaven Over the Marshes*, Hurley asserts that if “we wish to put down a basic principle for a cinematic theology of grace, it is that the good flourishes on what to the worldly minded people is arid, unpromising soil.”

Because one of the crucial tasks and challenges of contemporary theology is that it speak existentially rather than simply theoretically about the experience of God, Hurley contends that film (its stories and distinctive techniques for telling them) helps theology accomplish its task by offering specific instances where grace is experienced, if not explicitly named.

In this sense, Hurley’s method is at once pedagogical and pre-evangelical. Film is presented as critical to the schooling of the contemporary Christian not so much in the doctrines of the faith but in expressing the human condition that longs for the realities and relationships toward which those doctrines point. For Hurley,

[Film is] a kind of natural theology or “humanism” that proposes values according to which we can live. They are not a substitution for Christian values, but rather a

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52 Ibid., p. 27.

53 See note 55.

54 Ibid., p. 139.
preparation for them; Christian beliefs and values can complete the process of moral development begun by humanism.\textsuperscript{55}

At the time Hurley’s book was published, few theologians and pastors were engaging film in their scholarship, teaching, and preaching. Thus, his valuing of the film image as an approach to religious edification and his assertion that movie stories constitute a “new mythology” must have seemed bold.\textsuperscript{56} He writes that “religious educators and theologians would do well to study just how universally decisive in the lives of young people are [certain] films.”\textsuperscript{57} In a clearly dated, yet still relevant, line, Hurley remarks that “James Dean is inside the skin of youth in a way that Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Martin Buber, and other great theologians are not.”\textsuperscript{58} Young people in particular “are certain to learn more about the complexities of our emerging world civilization through the image than through literature about ethics, philosophy, religion, and theology.”\textsuperscript{59}

This gives further weight to the need for his own study and, as we saw in Chapter 1, to the need for the church to develop approaches to film for its theology and preaching.

\textsuperscript{55} John Lyden, \textit{Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals}. New York: NYU Press, 2003, p. 23. The quotation represents Lyden’s summary of Hurley’s approach which Lyden calls a “synthetic” one, characteristic of classical Catholicism. It “looks for a generalized sort of religiosity in all cultures and religions. . . . As a part of culture, films can express [the] ‘humanistic’ form of general revelation, even if they do not speak of specifically Christian themes” (\textit{ibid.}) For more on this, see the summary at the end of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 192.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, p. x.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 11. Because this is an even truer assertion today in a culture where the “image” has become equal to or overtaken the “word” in terms of human communication, an important dimension in any pedagogy of the image needs to be training in the skill of the reception and critical assessment of it. The previous chapter discussed the Catholic church’s early advocacy of this approach. This is a massive question, one obviously beyond the range of consideration in this dissertation. However, there is a sense in which our project taken as a whole is a method of “receiving and assessing” the film image from within a Roman Catholic optic. It is thus one of a host of interpretive theories of cinema. This idea will be developed throughout the study.
Hurley’s method of using transcendence as a link between theology and film must not be overestimated. As noted, he discloses from the beginning that his is not a project in systematic theology; nor is it an attempt to construct a comprehensive theology of film. *Toward a Film Humanism* is a more suggestive than probative study, at least in terms of its theological claims. Indeed, Hurley’s fairly thin descriptions of “transcendence,” “grace” and “anonymous belief” suggest that he presumes his readers are familiar with these words and so does not need to commit a substantial portion of his text to their elucidation. Still, the theological density of such terms necessitates their clarification even at a basic level, especially in a study that applies them to an area with limited historical interaction with theology. At the very least, Hurley’s work would have benefitted from a discussion of the basic contours of the Catholic theological notion of transcendence on which his ideas are largely based.60

A criticism of Hurley’s volume comes from Richard Gilbert, who takes issue with Hurley’s sense of aesthetics. Gilbert claims that Hurley approaches movies with too much “theological baggage.” According to Gilbert, the theological dialectic is powerless to describe the artistic dialectic. By imposing predetermined standards such as “transcendence” on movies from the outside, as it were, there is danger of losing the film as a work of the imagination. Unlike theology, cinema is an art of movement in space as well as in time, in color as well as in thought, in performance as well as in direction. Ultimately a film is what it is, not what we make it by translating it into another medium.61

60 Clearly, Hurley’s theological framework depends on the thought of fellow Jesuit, Karl Rahner. It is remarkable that he does not disclose this fact or refer his readers to literature that explains the concepts he borrows. Rahner elucidates the doctrines of grace, freedom, transcendence, and anonymous Christianity but Hurley does not clarify his use of these terms using Rahner’s reflections. Rahner’s theology is the subject of chapter five of this dissertation, where these characteristic teachings of Rahner will receive extended attention.

Gilbert is correct to point out that a difference exists between a work of art and conceptual theology. They are, indeed, two different “ mediums” with two different “ languages.” He is also right to say that a film, as an object of art, “ is what it is” and therefore eludes any description. However, the review fails to take seriously that art, as a form of self-expression, is already interpretation. As a medium, it mediates meaning, often in a non-conceptual fashion, but in a language nonetheless. An object of art also mediates a relationship by brokering a bond between artist and recipient. As a form of communication, art requires some form of translation—first by the artist (through the medium), then by the recipient (as when someone answers the question, What did you think of the movie?). Whereas Gilbert faults Hurley for imposing a fixed set of theological concepts onto film, and thus reducing film to concepts, Gilbert himself is at fault for reducing theology to concepts alone. What he refuses to acknowledge is that theology is itself a form of imagination. Hurley does not translate the films he discusses into theological categories: he uses theological categories as a mode of interpreting and better understanding film. He is not reducing images to concepts: he is interpreting film from a theological point of view. In doing this, Hurley accords honor to the image because he recognizes its capacity to “ speak” on a variety of levels and an understanding of each level increases the value of the image. This is why he approaches film from the perspectives of psychology and sociology and not only from theology. Gilbert appears to suggest that any interpretation of film, theological or otherwise, is made in vain because film operates at a different level than conceptual language. But his criticism collapses on itself when he states that film “ is an art of movement in space as well as in time, in color as well as in thought, in performance as well as in direction.” Is this not a conceptual
interpretation of film? Does this description of the art not attempt to “translate” film? Gilbert would have art simply end in silence. Finally, the above criticism seems to be based on the theological (likely Protestant) notion that a separation exists between the orders of transcendence and immanence—between grace and nature.62

Still, Gilbert’s comment illustrates just how complex the engagement can be between the related but nonetheless different worlds and languages of theology and film. Perhaps we might agree with a point that appears to undergird his comment: namely, that any notion of theology appropriating cinema on theology’s terms alone and for its own purposes will be rejected by many as impertinent to the autonomy of film. Early in the dissertation it was shown that the magisterium recognizes the sovereignty of film as an art independent of the church for its existence and reception. Yet because art requires interpretation, and because people ask theological questions, theological approaches to film interpretation are legitimate and absolutely necessary. The remainder of this chapter discusses this dynamic further in the work of other theologians.

Because this dissertation represents an attempt to strengthen the lines between theology and cinema by considering the very prospect of their connectivity, we will need to develop a greater theoretical accounting for Hurley’s presupposition that the two are relatable in the first place and do so without dismissing differences between them. His notion that film offers paradigms of transcendence represents a fairly common and questionable trend in the way theologians and others in the church engage film. In this perspective, film is ancillary to theology, for it is seen as providing theology with

62 For the moment, it is necessary to prescind from an explanation of what this means since it involves defining these terms with precision and from within a larger theological framework. These terms will be made clear in chapter five of this dissertation.
“illustrations” of its universal claims. As will be shown, this perspective is open to criticism because it does not fully appreciate that film can be theological in itself.

Finally, we can only remain grateful to Neil Hurley as a pacesetter in the area of theology and film. Whereas almost forty years later his belief that film holds tremendous possibilities for the work of theologians, preachers, and religious educators and those whom they serve might seem less revolutionary, still, he was one of the first to wed “theology” and “film” and it is owing to his ideas that this discipline has become a permanent location on the pastoral and academic map. He was pioneering, if not altogether expository, in his conviction that film can help reinforce and deepen Christian faith. In this way, he accomplished what the Second Vatican Council encouraged Catholic theologians to do: to open channels of dialogue between church and culture in its many forms. Hurley’s text critically engages film and also clearly reflects the delight he takes in movies. His approach to film is demonstrative of the kind of magnanimity the Vatican encouraged Catholics to take in their necessary in their engagements with culture.  

Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J.

Irish Jesuit Michael Paul Gallagher’s essay, “Theology, Discernment and Cinema,” is a compact response to two related questions: First, how to know when the

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63 A nice feature of Toward a Film Humanism is an index of about seventy movies to which he attributes multiple theological valences (p. 177). One can only wish a new edition of the text would update this listing to include the last forty years of cinema.

“religious element in film demonstrates itself?”; and second, how to identify that it is a genuine expression of religious experience and not just sentimentality, melodrama, religious tourism, or propaganda? A film, he says, “may induce a certain satisfaction, even a felt enlargement of heart, but this yardstick of feeling is not in itself a valid criterion of authenticity.” This satisfaction is not limited to the visceral plane, for a film in all its complexity and clever posturing might encourage a kind of gnosticism, whereby some audience members “get it” and others do not. Also, he indirectly gets at the problem of reviewers who mantle a film as “spiritual,” with or without the knowledge of just how fuzzy an appellation that has become. For Gallagher, the critical theological task is to distinguish between films of an authentic religious nature and those that are dangerously illusory. It is a question that can be posed both to movies with overt religious content as well as those of a more tacit nature, the latter being his own interest. The task is one of obvious concern to theologians of film; yet, according to Gallagher, it is equally a valid problem for a secularist critic.

Before mapping out his response, it is worth considering how he contextualizes the question. He begins with the observation that “religious films” today take a different form from those sixty years ago. The mid-twentieth century films of Fellini and Bergman, let alone the biblical epics and hagiographic pictures of that era, contained openly religious dialogue and images. More recently, however, attention has shifted in the direction of what he names an “anonymous religiousness.” This term suggests that

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65 Gallagher, p. 151.

66 Ibid., p. 153.
any “film which evokes fundamental questions cannot but be religious.”67 Gallagher knows his is no new observation. As has been shown, André Bazin had the foresight in 1951 that religious concerns often worked better in film when incognito. Still, Gallagher wants to know more exactly what gave rise to this shift in paradigm from explicit to implicit religiousness in cinema. Both Bazin and, as we shall see, Richard Blake, claim it had to do with the limited imagination of certain filmmakers and the perennial problem of expressing the numinous. Too often, cinematic “religious experience” came off as pure Hollywood camp.68 As audiences grew more sophisticated in reading media images and as international cinema grew more available, other possibilities opened for the filmic expression of religious and spiritual concerns.

Gallagher puts forward another, related, reason for the shift. The “transition from the comparative clarities of the ‘modern’ to the fragmentation of the ‘postmodern,’”69 characterized by a distrust of ideology and a general suspicion of organized religion and its traditional rubrics, has given rise to a preference for the ambiguous, the complex, and the existential in both philosophy and aesthetics. Seen from a theological perspective,

the disillusion with rationality that marks postmodernity links up with a new “primacy of experience in the search for God” and in this way a new post-atheist mood can be interpreted as an “excellent preparation for Mystery.” In spite of all

67 Ibid.

68 Though Gallagher does not say this, such films may have caused this reaction because they were made by directors who, in many cases, were attempting to pander to a Catholic demographic (viz., the Legion of Decency). The last commentator of this chapter, Richard Blake, will take up the question of the validity of theological film criticism amid resolutely secularist hermeneutical stances. Here, it is worth noting in advance what he writes concerning the problem of filming theophantic experience and spiritual ecstasy: “Judged in terms of content alone, most films do a pretty poor job with inviting viewers to enter into any direct awareness of the presence of the Numinous: The swelling choral music—suggesting heavenly choirs—eyes rolling upward toward a bright off-camera light, and the half-step backward to indicate awe, really don’t do it for me, and in more cynical moments sophisticated viewers are tempted to giggle at such ham-fisted spiritual shenanigans.” Richard Blake, “From Peepshow to Prayer,” par. 42. See: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/peepshow.htm> (last accessed 2/11/10).

its possible ambiguities, this less explicit, shy spirituality seems more in tune with the fragmented lifestyle that dominates the urbanized and developed world.\footnote{Ibid., p. 152.}

While an aesthetic predilection for the subtle and indirect is nothing new, it is the artistic intention behind such a sensibility within a postmodern milieu that particularly interests Gallagher. On the one hand, it could “be a sign of a new if hesitant openness to religious horizons … [whereby] basic human hungers reemerge from suppression and seek some nourishment.” On the other hand, it could “be symptomatic of a certain preference for vagueness, an avoidance of definite commitment, and even a distortion of the religious impulse into narcissistic self-satisfaction.”\footnote{Ibid.} The problem of distinguishing whether a film is of the first or second order (or somewhere in-between) is a concern for theologians and film critics alike, since each has a stake in how films with possible religious leanings, however implicit, are deciphered. When it comes to film interpretation, both theologian and film critic will bring to the theater a certain set of exegetical talents and personal sensibilities. Writing as a Catholic theologian, Gallagher proposes the ancient Christian practice of “spiritual discernment” as a method for negotiating where a particular film stands on the continuum between true religious impulse and ersatz religiosity. The tradition of discernment, though historically a Catholic practice, can really help anyone in the authentication of religious film. Both believer and unbeliever, he suggests, can benefit from an interpretive method that discriminates genuine religiousness in film from the saccharine variety.

Rooting his explanation of discernment in the New Testament and the \textit{Spiritual Exercises} of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Gallagher defines the tradition as “another and more
specifically Christian mode of hermeneutics: it involves interpreting signs of the Spirit in human experience.”

Discernment is a process by which a person negotiates the course or direction of his or her heart and mind in the face of an experience or set of experiences. Discernment is about judgment based on wisdom; it is most often the conscious process by which one makes a liminal decision. It begins easily enough with questions like, what are my feelings about this experience? What thoughts does it elicit? Where am I being led by this experience? Are my normal inclinations confirmed to be genuine or are they being reoriented? Spiritual discernment clarifies and expands these questions since it “specializes in unmasking illusion and [offers] skills for a deeper wisdom of judging reality.”

The “unmasking of illusion” happens when obstacles blocking the ability to make an honest judgment are dislodged in order “to move towards a positive option for the good, ultimately of God’s will.” However, Gallagher does not explain any more precisely how such obstacles are removed other than that it “involves the practical skill of sifting the genuine from the deceptive in spiritual experiences.”

Discernment becomes a Christian religious exercise when it recognizes “the genuine call of the Spirit within one’s human freedom,” to reject false values and turn to God in love and trust, and, even more, to recognize Christ’s presence in reality.

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72 Ibid., p. 153. Gallagher’s discernment strategy is founded on the gospels and the Exercises of St. Ignatius and he shows how its patterning is at work in the theologies of other Ignatian-trained scholars: Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner. Yet, it is to Rahner that Gallagher gives the most attention.

73 Ibid., p. 154.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., p. 153.
Within a Christian context, discernment was historically and remains today a skill in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Gallagher retrieves this tradition as a method of film interpretation, a method he claims to be “eminently translatable for the world of cinema” for opening up new meanings in the films we experience. Its application to a film can help raise a host of questions that might not otherwise be asked of it. And this can aid an understanding of whether or not a film presents a model of genuine religiousness. To make this method more concrete, let us consider the kinds of questions Gallagher says the discernment tradition asks of film:

Does this movie open or close the hearts of its audience to compassion? Does it seduce people into a vague “self-trip” of nice feelings (the solipsistic spiritual trap), or does it point them to an encounter with mystery? Does it serve the spirit of poverty that knows its own vulnerability and honestly tries not to hide it, or does it foster infantile fantasies of various kinds—power, pleasure, unhistoric play? Is it faithful to the spirit of incarnation, which means a reverence for the holy in the human? What quality of looking and receiving is evoked—voyeuristic or stunned, humble silence?

Discernment is an interior journey that has external consequences—not only good intentions. Movies that draw out of audiences little more than momentary good-heartedness are not to be rejected outright, Gallagher implies; but neither should they be facilely categorized as spiritual or religious. On the contrary, when a film impels its viewers to re-commit to act on behalf of others out of true love, and not out of a superficial altruism, then an authentic religious element has been expressed. When a film provokes cathartic release that leads to a renewal of faith in self and in others and thus puts one on the threshold of a fuller conversion to God, then an authentic religious element has been expressed. When a film opens up to a “wavelength of humility and

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77 Ibid., p. 152.

78 Ibid., p. 154.
wonder … [and] we as an audience are where Virgil leads or leaves Dante—on the threshold of a listening that might make faith glimpseable,” then an authentic religious element has been expressed. Gallagher uses the gospel line, “by their fruits you will know them,” (Mt. 7:20) to describe the intention behind discernment: “If all the fruits are good and lasting, this offers the best available confirmation that the roots are in God.”

Film, he suggests, is not direct evangelization, but when it functions transcendentally, that is, when it serves to open viewers beyond self-constructed spiritual enclosures, it indirectly prepares “the path for faith. Baptist-like, it can arouse a potential receptivity for an encounter with greater mystery.”

Gallagher asserts that “theologians especially should be familiar with film’s capacity to evoke wonder as an apt tool of pre-evangelization.” And he turns to the thought of Karl Rahner and his ideas on poetry and the arts as an example of a theologian who reflects on the possibility of the arts as preparative for the gospel. Though Rahner did not write about film, according to Gallagher, his writings on poetry and the arts hold great significance for understanding film’s relationship to Catholic theology. Gallagher quotes Rahner as saying that today “a ‘poetic theology’ is needed and that it should be a ‘mystagogical theology’ in the sense of encouraging people to discern the presence of the Spirit in their secular and artistic experiences.”

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
83 Gallagher, ibid., p. 155.
that a person ‘must undergo to be or become a Christian, which turns out to be a receptive capacity for the poetic word.’ He sees this whole wavelength as being able to ‘reach the heart, the center,’ where mystery becomes incarnate.” In this sense, Gallagher’s Catholic thesis would suggest that film can be judged as authentically religious only when it prepares us to meet Jesus Christ.

**Joseph Marty**

The previous commentator, Michael Paul Gallagher, contended that because film has a tremendous capacity to sincerely and honestly present matters of ultimate human concern it holds great interest for theology. Subjects like betrayal and devotion, marriage and child-rearing, addiction and healing—the stuff of life that plays out in the commonplace—may appear on screen without religious trappings, yet demonstrate religiousness because they expose us to the mysterious depths of living in the world and thereby “reach a level of spiritual authenticity … mainly due to their indirection. Deep issues are delicately touched upon in an incarnate way . . .” Gallagher, however, does not expand on this notion of “incarnation” and its link between Christianity and film. In the same volume, French theologian and film expert, Joseph Marty, treats of the relationship in his essay “Toward a Theological Interpretation and Reading of Film: Incarnation of the Word of God—Relation, Image, Word.” Like Gallagher, Marty holds the conviction that “the religious belongs to humanity and not only to Christianity,” and

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that the transcendental “openings” film images effect in us are legitimately religious when they consummate in deeper commitment to others, “to the totally Other, and ought not to develop into a world itself.”87 Whereas Gallagher emphasized film as a means of anonymous preparation for the reception of the gospel, Marty stresses the need for Christianity to evangelize culture, cinema included. His concern lies in the problem of where the anonymous religious impulses stirred by film are directed, for a “religious initiative can open toward God, but not necessarily the one that Jesus Christ reveals as his Father.”88 If an approach to film is to be made from an expressly Christian perspective, then more specificity needs to be given to how a film relates to and even participates in the person and reality of Jesus Christ, the one whom the church believes and proclaims to be God incarnate. Marty asserts that Christ is the ultimate condition for the possibility of any relationship between film and theology because, as he says, “only ‘Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15) and that it is by the mystery of his incarnation . . . that [we] can envision the reality of cinema and the religious world.”89 What has Christ to do with film? Simply put, Christ, as Word and Image par excellence, makes all the difference for language and culture and, thus, for film. We will here trace the anthropological method at the “crossroads of these two complex theological areas”90 by which Marty arrives at this conclusion.

His anthropology of the “image” connects cinema to the roots of language, communication, and culture. The image, as “the indispensable reflection of something

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87 Ibid., p.133.
88 Ibid., pp. 141-142.
89 Ibid., p. 131.
90 Ibid.
else, always leads back to that referent, even if it is hidden—because the human being, child or adult, wants everything immediately”; that is, without mediation. It is a part of human nature to want the true presence of the other and not only a reflection. Yet the reality is that all things come to us in a mediated way and “there is no human life or faith without images because they are a fundamental reality of all language and culture.” Marty writes that it is only by means of language that there is a humanity, and language come also from non-immediacy, from the absence that creates desire. The word brings things alive, permitting the separated beings to bind together and face the lack. But the word binds at a distance; it creates closeness without fusion.

Still, enthusiasm for the image cannot neglect the classic Hellenistic caveats issued against taking the image as “more important than reality to the point that the artificial and the apparent are preferred to the thing itself.” This is when the image slips “toward [a] fundamentalism in which the mediation of the letter is taken for the spirit of the text,” and becomes a world unto itself. In cinema, which overlays moving images with sound, “the illusion is immense.” There is the “risk of a mediation that does its job so well that it can make us forget the representation . . . [and] the image becomes more important than reality to the point that the artificial and the apparent are preferred to the thing itself . . ..” A treason of the image ensues when it is taken as “only a double and

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91 Ibid., p. 132.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., p. 133.
95 Ibid., p. 134.
96 Ibid., p. 133.
97 Ibid.
not the presence." Marty maintains that Christianity constitutes victory over the treason
of images, a claim we will take up shortly.

The arts are “bearers of transcendence,” he writes, and “cinema can make a type
of transcendence sensible. It is a call toward something more” that

awakens homo religiosus [and] enlivens human dimensions that are somewhat
underdeveloped in our scientific, technological and . . . rationalized cultures: the
symbolic and the poetic, sensibility and emotion. . . . It brings back to life the
sense of mystery by making us love what is not immediately perceivable . . . [and] provokes an awakening that puts us in a state of admiration and contemplation
before scenes we marvel at.

The stories and characters on the screen remind us a lot of ourselves. We have a
vicarious connection to their thoughts and emotions, struggles and successes; and we can
even come to love or hate them. While we remain aware (but easily forget) that they are
in fact “images” and not “real,” still there is no denying that the reactions they stir, the
tears they trigger and the discoveries they elicit in us, are quite real and thoroughly
visceral. This harks back to Michael Paul Gallagher’s thesis that film functions pre-
evangelically. When film reaches us at such depths there is “something that resembles a
first religious step . . . [that] may be blasphemous, contentious, provocative, pantheist,
deist, mythic or revolutionary.” Experience of such depths of meaning elicit a genuine
human religious sentiment and signal the transcendental thrust in all of us. From the

98 Ibid., p. 132-133.
99 Ibid., p. 134.
100 Ibid., p. 135.
101 Ibid., p 135-6.
102 Ibid., p. 136, emphasis given. Marty subsequently lists two-dozen or so examples of such
g films, including Babette’s Feast.
angle of Catholic faith, it is permissible, then, to accept “secular” film images as
illuminative of the depths of life because they open us toward (if not entirely unite us
with) the one who is liberator of images—Jesus Christ. This is also to rediscover with
humility “the fact that the Catholic church is not the only repository of the religious and
the sacred.” And this fact is nothing new since, in “order to evangelize, the church has
sometimes grafted itself onto previous image systems, either suppressing them or turning
them to its own uses.”\textsuperscript{103}

However, in a clear reference to Rudolf Otto’s famous definition of the “holy,”
Marty states that the “experience of the religious provokes simultaneously attraction and
repulsion, fascination, and fear. But Christianity comes to convert it, to ‘evangelize’ it, to
make of it one of the places of encounter with Jesus Christ and his Father.”\textsuperscript{104} He asserts
that the “religious,” the “sacred” and the “holy” take on different meanings after the
event of the Incarnation. Through the knowledge of faith in God’s incarnation, so-called
“religious” experience (e.g., in Otto’s sense of the holy as \textit{mysterium tremendum et
fascinans}) is no longer opposed to “secular” experience. The demarcations “sacred” and
“profane” no longer apply to a world sanctified by God’s presence in the incarnation.
And while these polarities remain at times helpful designations, “with Jesus Christ, the
incarnation shocks and transfigures these frontiers. God is with us at every moment and
in every place.”\textsuperscript{105} There are no particular districts—material or spiritual—that can be
named “sacred” or “religious” opposite “profane” sectors. All dimensions of life,

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 140.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid.}. 
especially the broken and sinful, have been offered consecration through the complete communication of God’s word as Christ.\textsuperscript{106}

As has been shown, Bazin, Gallagher, and Marty are in agreement that film has a transcendental capacity to open people to hearing God’s word and to, with the help of theological discernment, ready them for a relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet Marty provides a needed corrective to this idea because there is no mechanism within film that assures the direction that such transcendental openness might lead its viewers. If a religious motivation—however genuine—obtains in a movie, who is to say that it is especially Christian, or Jewish, or Buddhist or something else entirely? As Marty says, there are in the world and in film “so many loves, gods, idols, stars, gurus or masters who are ‘seductive’ or ‘captivating . . .’”\textsuperscript{107} To conflate and confuse “God” with so many of these images is nothing less than idolatry, an assignment of something this-worldly to something utterly beyond comprehension in word or image. Indeed, a religious film can “be ‘captivating’ to the point of making us ‘captives’” because it may open us up to what is utterly false, a charade—shadows on a cave wall. Yet, with the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ the earth is no longer a plane of shadows and fear to which we are shackled, for it has been illuminated by a true and everlasting light. Philosophy alone cannot promise that the world is no longer enclosed by death and the treason of images. Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection assures victory over images that enslave:

The God of the Trinity . . . undoes bonds, including the cunning and seemingly innocent ones that attract us to images. . . . [God comes] to shatter the mirrors that lose us in labyrinths of the image, to destroy imaginary things that do not refer to

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 142.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 143.
us to the real, to break the mediations that do not open onto an elsewhere, to tear down the representations that make present only themselves and nothing else.\textsuperscript{108}

In sum, Marty roots his theology of film in the normative significance of the mystery of the incarnation, which “establishes through faith a relationship between the seen and the unseen. Films that open us up to mystery, however dimply, are liberating like the word (Word) of God . . .”\textsuperscript{109} He insists that cinematic images and representations are indispensible but are not reality. A Catholic theology of film must therefore announce “a good news for the happiness of [humankind] and its liberation from everything that enslaves it, including the religious and the image.”\textsuperscript{110}

**Richard Blake, S.J.**

Richard Blake is a historian and professor of film as well as the chief film critic for the Jesuit periodical *America*. His research focuses primarily on American film but extends to aspects of European cinema. Blake’s bailiwick is the intersection of religion and film, specifically Catholicism and film, and his teachings hold great importance for a dissertation concerned with the questions and implications of their relationship.

Like Bazin, Blake writes about these problems from the side of film scholarship, not academic theology. He is also just as forthcoming about his Catholic approach to film criticism and it is clear that a deeply incarnational view directs his analysis of movies. We will here consider his articles “From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a

\textsuperscript{108} *Ibid.*


Spirituality of the Movies,”111 “The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship”112 and “Uncovering the Sacred: Substance and Style in the American Film”113 as well as parts of his book Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers.114 Taken together, these writings offer a number of practical solutions to the problems that beset the connectivity of theology and film.

Blake contends that a symbiotic relationship should exist between theology and film because, quoting Bazin, they have a “natural affinity.” The problem is that theologians, and other religious groups untrained in film criticism, too often foist dubious meanings and messages onto films for their own catechetical purposes.115 As any professional would be, Blake is wary of those who compromise the integrity of his craft. A particularly thorny issue for him is the appropriation of film to support ideological agenda beyond what is communicated in a film. He points out that some theologians, catechists, and preachers over the years have too easily manipulated film, bending its messages to conform to their own schematic. They “began lifting material from films for their own purposes as eagerly as film makers had been swiping material from the Bible.”116 Whereas the intent behind their interpretations might seem commendable,
given that they are “using feature films to edify and inspire their congregations,” or to illustrate a theological or moral doctrine, it is precisely this “use” of film for extrinsic purposes that is problematic for Blake. In the church and the academy “film has been and continues to be victimized by benevolent amateurs,” he asserts. For example, a catechist might use a movie to teach a moral lesson, or make a biblical parallel. This often necessary kind of teaching is benign in itself, but can tempt the uninitiated to read a religious meaning into the text of a film that might not be there. Another example might be a theologian who appeals to a film as a kind of “prooftext” which illustrates a certain faith claim. Though well-intentioned, this usage suggests the theologian actually has a low esteem of film vis-à-vis Christian faith and theology, in the sense that the function of film is to exemplify some heady, speculative bit of “theologese.” Film art is thus rendered subclass, ancillary to theology, and not considered to be a possible theological medium in its own right. Blake suggests sardonically that religious subsuming of film is a kind of tyrannical act; for rather than allowing an individual film to communicate its particular vision of life—a vision which may or may not be explicitly religious—it at once imposes a framework of meaning on all films, essentially handicapping other interpretive theories by virtue of its ideological dominance. Taking this into account, it should not be surprising that film scholars are generally suspicious of religious interpretive frameworks.

117 Idem., “From Peepshow to Prayer,” ibid., par. 2.

118 Idem., “Uncovering the Sacred: Substance and Style in the American Film,” ibid., p. 3.

119 Recall the Vatican’s position on the autonomy of the arts and sciences (cf. Gaudium et spes, art. 59).
At the same time, Blake is aggrieved at the ambivalence prevalent among fellow film exegetes regarding religious and theological interpretations of film.¹²⁰ He argues that theological interpretive frameworks are essential to film analysis and ought to be accepted in the academic world just as readily as Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical, queer-theorist, or ethnographical analytical methods. Certain movies require that they be read through a religious lens, be it Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, or otherwise. He therefore proposes that theology be considered yet one more legitimate style of film interpretation, a critical tool to be employed alongside the mainstream methodologies seldom challenged in the academy. When applied in concert, these approaches can help reveal multiple dimensions concealed within the layers of a film text. It is appropriate and necessary at times to bring a theological mind to bear on films in order to “uncover the sacred element” in them.

These two positions, that on the one hand religious and theological mindsets ought not be imposed on a film, and on the other hand that those same frameworks are often necessary for film analysis, at first glance appear antithetical—an “antagonism between methods of faith and methods of reason.”¹²¹ Rather than treat it as an interpretive breach, Blake’s dialectical ingenuity is to demonstrate that theologians and

¹²⁰ A further Catholic reflection on this prevailing attitude comes from Ambros Eichenberger, O.P.: “Regarding film criticism in particular, the negative image of theology as being irrelevant or functioning as an instrument of censorship and control instead of interpretation and ‘liberation’ has been reinforced by some well-known, questionable past experiences with certain organs of the churches. Great filmmakers like Luis Buñuel have suffered from the ‘clerical’ mentality that is ready to control and to condemn rather than to analyze, to engage, and to understand.” From Ambros Eichenberger, “Approaches to Film Criticism,” in John May, ed., New Image of Religious Film. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997, p. 9.

film scholars each have something to offer the other when it comes to understanding the many dimensions of a movie.

Before considering how Blake arbitrates this situation, let us first risk to simplify the hermeneutics behind the problem. Film is an art and as art it is received by a public. Since “public” means many perspectives, one of the risks a film artist takes in creating is that some audiences will misunderstand or misinterpret a film’s “message.” The risk might also prove worthwhile since audiences are likewise capable of “getting” the message. This message might be (and most often is) multi-faceted, one that can neither be interpreted completely in words, nor merely “felt.” Indeed, the form of the medium is the message. As art, film often requires multiple viewings or “readings” that open to different and ever new perspectives. There may also be interpretations made of a film that its creator(s) could never have imagined. Part of the beauty of film art is the risk and uncertainty involved in creating it, receiving it, and understanding it.

Stanley Kubrick was famously reticent to discuss the “meaning” of his movies. For instance, regarding the film 2001: A Space Odyssey, Kubrick felt that if he imparted his own interpretation it might easily become the “official” word and thus color or otherwise restrict interpretations by others. He wanted his film to be an experience that touched people differently and on many emotional and intellectual levels. Film director David Lynch, himself a Kubrick devotee, considers it absurd for a filmmaker to say what a film means in words: “We’ve got to guard the film itself. It should stand alone. You work so hard to get a film a certain way; it shouldn’t be fiddled with. Director’s [DVD] commentaries just open a door to changing people’s take on the number one thing—the film. I do believe in telling stories surrounding a film, but to comment as it’s rolling is a sacrilege” (David Lynch, Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006, p. 147).

A host of other interpretive and contextual questions must also be raised. Who is to say what messages are even present in a film and to what extent they can be interpreted? The director? The screenwriter? The most informed reviewer? When should a film be interpreted? Immediately upon release? What of the hundreds of movies panned at first and only later recognized to be masterpieces? How does the biography of the filmmaker impact his or her direction of a film? How to account for historical and cultural conditions that affect the making of a film as well as its public reception? And what about the interpretations that follow upon interpretations of the original work? Clearly, these represent only a portion of the many hermeneutical considerations that impinge upon the reception of film, or any type of art for that matter. These questions are raised in order to demonstrate something of the complexity of the hermeneutics of art. They remain technical questions for the areas of aesthetics and film scholarship to ponder. This dissertation attempts to follow the advice of Blake and others that it is imperative to remain
Hermeneutics is an ongoing game because art forever transcends the meanings that it generates. This is precisely what is meant when a work of art is called a “classic,” for no one interpretation or set of interpretations ever suffices.\(^{124}\) *Ars longa*, indeed.

Blake writes that “as we embark in the enterprise of film history and criticism today, we must be aware that in good post-modern fashion, many perspectives, many uses and many audiences must enter into any analysis of film,”\(^{125}\) for any “work of art with any depth provides enough complexity to admit many interpretations.”\(^{126}\)

When it comes to the art of film, Blake notes that, by their lights, film scholars and critics are the arbiters of this dialectic. He ironically refers to them as a priestly class, performing their sacerdotal duty of unlatching film’s semiotic locks, for which only they hold the keys. Here, of course, Blake (a Jesuit priest and film expert) waxes self-deprecatingly. Obviously, film scholars more than theologians have a trained ability to negotiate these questions. Yet because film generates divergent meanings for experts and non-experts alike, a film’s hidden riches cannot be mined by only a few highly-trained cineastes. Blake advocates a more pragmatic approach, one that takes seriously the need to rightly perceive the signals a film communicates, but one that does not get forever tangled in theoretical intricacies that diminish the accessibility of film reviews.

\(^{124}\) Here Blake is basing this idea of “the classic” on the thought of Catholic theologian David Tracy.

\(^{125}\) Blake, “Uncovering the Sacred,” *ibid.*, p. 17.

\(^{126}\) *Idem.*, “From Peepshow to Prayer,” *ibid.*, par. 40. Still, while variant interpretations remain important, Blake is wary of an “anything goes” attitude. As will be shown, he insists on the need for any interpretation to remain rooted in the text of the film itself, and not in the designs of the interpreter.
Since no one theory can claim exclusive interpretive rights to a film, it is more advantageous to have an ongoing conversation among many voices. Today, it is de rigueur that a critic be self-conscious and forthright about his or her hermeneutical approach since every reviewer has a particular subjective frame of reference. It is also more than good manners to be appreciative of other perspectives, be they (again) Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical, queer-theorist, or ethnographical. Each of these groups evaluates film differently and in so doing “risks distorting the text to suit a particular agenda . . . [yet] each has a contribution to make.”\textsuperscript{127} Blake admits this evaluation is nothing new in a postmodern climate. What is strange, however, is that within this ethos of so-called tolerance religious and especially Catholic theological methods are not granted the same rights and privileges accorded to other hermeneutical modi operandi. He writes, “I would like to think religious critics, especially those of a Catholic background, also have a place in the critical literature. Why not view a film as a religious critic or more particularly, a Catholic critic?”\textsuperscript{128}

Blake acknowledges the cool reception that his Catholic point of view gets in academic circles. Among his own class, “professional critics, film scholars and reviewers as a group look on religious concerns with bemusement at best [and] contempt at worst . . .”\textsuperscript{129} This “proposal to add one more tool for critical analysis seems harmless enough,”\textsuperscript{130} yet religious and theological approaches to film analysis are largely eschewed by secularist critics who consider them outmoded or untrendy if not entirely

\textsuperscript{127} Idem., “From Peepshow to Prayer,” \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 13.

\textsuperscript{130} Blake, \textit{Afterimage, ibid.}, p. 3.
inimical to real cinematic evaluation.\textsuperscript{131} Whereas religious critics might perceive a film to have theological undercurrents, dogmatic secularists will consider these an illusory undertow.\textsuperscript{132}

In response to this impasse, Blake offers something of an apologia for a Catholic theological interpretation of film, a form of interpretation that, by virtue of its being true to its religious sensibility, does not compromise but rather develops the still-adolescent art/science of film criticism. He maintains that “looking at the substance of [a film] with a self-consciously Christian and Catholic optic will invariably add to an appreciation of [it] without having to read extraneous meanings into the text.”\textsuperscript{133}

In the history of cinema, the works of many filmmakers have religious frames of reference and any competent assessment of them must take these into serious consideration. Blake’s own Catholic framework has helped him discern themes and symbols intrinsic to certain films, yet that remain undisclosed or ignored by theorists unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to matters Catholic and theological. For instance, only a handful of the films by Catholic-raised directors like Frederico Fellini (Italian), Alfred Hitchcock (Irish) and Martin Scorsese (Italian-American) are laden with Catholic trappings. Beyond these, Blake is able to decipher resonances of sacramentality, mediation, and communion—features commonly associated with a “Catholic imagination”—even, and perhaps especially, in those films that appear to be the most

\textsuperscript{131} Blake likewise notes that explicitly religious movies are often labeled by some critics as “sentimental, pious and anachronistic” (“From Peepshow to Prayer,” \textit{ibid.}, par. 13). This recalls Bazin’s similar comments on the problems of filming “the religious.”

\textsuperscript{132} For many, the term “Catholic” connotes something provincial rather than universal; and because people have gross preconceptions about the church.

\textsuperscript{133} Blake, “Uncovering the Sacred,” \textit{ibid.}, p. 23.
He knows that many of these directors are “lapsed” Catholics, or altogether rejective of their religious faith, but asserts that a residual Catholic sensibility (what he names an “afterimage”) subconsciously informs what sorts of subjects they film and how they film them. Even when religious imagery is absent, the “principle of intertextuality makes the theological effort worthwhile.”

For later in a director’s life, perhaps long after a formal separation from the church, the artist’s explorations of ritual, death, love and community continue to be colored by these earliest perceptions, which have in turn been shaped by a specific religious tradition.

This principle works not only for Catholic directors but can be applied when interpreting the films of others, like Ingmar Bergman’s “Swedish Lutheran” cinema and Woody Allen’s “Manhattan Jewish” cinema. We recall André Bazin’s triptych of traditionally “religious” movies: biblical, hagiographical, and clerical. He emphasized the need to move beyond this simple classification to see that religiously significant films may in fact appear entirely secular. Films of this sort move “beyond manifestly religious content (images, concepts, and words) to something a bit more subtle [and] more rewarding for an exploration of a much wider range of contemporary films.”

The theologians of film surveyed earlier in this chapter maintained a similar position. And the Catholic

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134 Blake applies these categories as they are developed by Catholic theologian Richard McBrien and Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley.


136 *Idem.*, *Afterimage*, ibid., p. 3. Blake gives nuance to this approach which considers the Catholicism of a director: “Their artistic perceptions and reconstructions of reality ought not be examined as theologically precise expressions of Catholic doctrine. None of the filmmakers under discussion is a theologian, and none would claim to be. They should not be criticized according to the rules of a game they never intended to play” (ibid., p. 12). Furthermore, elements of the “Catholic imagination cannot be catalogued and quantified; it remains the work of intuition and feeling as well as careful observation” (ibid., p. 24). Much of the work of a theological analysis of film is to intuit something like a critical mass of meaning through a deep look at a film’s symbols and themes because “neat, simplistic one-to-one analogies rarely hold” (Blake, “Uncovering the Sacred,” ibid., p. 19).

137 *Idem.*, “From Peepshow to Prayer,” ibid., par. 28.
Magisterium at the very least suggested as much. Blake affirms that films involving “neither religious figures, nor religious language … invite an exploration of religious questions exclusively through parallels and analogies.” What he names the “theological films” of Bergman and Fellini, for instance,

often featured perfectly secular, contemporary figures, but the scripts explicitly teased out the religious implications of their lives in some quite traditional theological terms like faith, redemptive love, sin and atonement. …While the identifiably religious figures address traditional theological questions in recognizable religious language, the secular protagonists resort to symbolic, analogical or metaphorical language to grapple with their religious questions.

Many secularist film scholars might demur on this argument on the grounds that love, redemption, and faith are realities not exclusive to religious people. The presence of these themes in a film, therefore, does not necessarily grant clearance for a religious evaluation. Blake would agree, for example, that charity, mercy, and trust are universal human realities that transcend any particular religious description; yet, it is precisely their universality and ambiguity that invites theology into the conversation as yet one more interpreter of them. Interpretive work, however, “becomes more demanding as we move away from specifically religious content. Frequently, we find ourselves dealing with analogies and metaphors, and this is dangerous territory. Eisegesis, or reading meanings into texts, simply because we want to find them there, has often enough compromised the credibility” of film scholarship. For instance, a theologian will wish not to bracket his or her faith commitment when reviewing a film, yet might lack the semiological skill set

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138 As noted earlier, the Vatican film list of 1995 included many secular films that are “worthy” of the church’s recommendation (not official imprimatur) due to their artistic, moral or religious merits.

139 Ibid., par. 27.

140 Ibid., par. 26.

needed to interpret the film with accuracy. Or, conversely, a film critic, who has a hunch that a film without explicit religious language/symbols might in fact have deep religious significance, may lack the specialized language and hermeneutical virtuosity needed to probe such meanings. These well-intentioned reviewers may read a meaning into a film that is simply not there or otherwise miss a meaning actually embedded in the film text. In either case, the potential of misinterpreting the artistic designs of the filmmaker is great. “The search for allusions, analogies and visual metaphors … [can] lead enthusiasts to capricious couplings that exist merely in the mind of the beholder and [add] little to the understanding of a film.”

And so we return to the original question of how theology and film ought to engage each other. How can theologians at once avoid misreading and distorting a film and retain their own subjectivity and religious investment in it? Blake comes at the problem of theological eisegesis, of “baptizing a film as unconsciously Christian,” from the viewpoint of film scholarship and offers four principles or correctives that should guide theological criticism of film. We might summarize Blake’s method in terms of a specific consideration: (1) the artist; (2) the artifact; (3) the audience; and (4) the art form.

The first corrective is to know something of the biography of the filmmaker. It is the wont of auteur theorists to investigate a director’s personal and artistic history, the social and cultural currents that impinge upon that artist’s worldview, and the thematic

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144 Blake, “From Peepshow to Prayer,” *ibid.*, pars. 6–ff.
patterns and recurring symbols in a filmmaker’s *oeuvre*. Auteur theory adds a crucial interpretive layer when approaching film from within a theological purview since, among other things, it may help answer whether a filmmaker intended that his or her work carry religious significance. A director’s ethnographical, educational, and (if any) religious background might shed light on this question. Nevertheless, a filmmaker’s life story remains only one of many investigative strata and its importance for film criticism should not be overestimated. According to Blake’s “afterimage” thesis, it may be the case that a film artist unintentionally and even unconsciously included religiously-charged themes and symbols into a movie. It may not matter at all whether a director did or did not intend religious overtones since, as noted above, the risk and beauty of art is that audiences will ultimately read what they want in a film narrative.

This leads to the second corrective, which is to focus on a film’s internal evidence. “In a search for the religious imagination, it is more important to look at the films than listen to the director, even though the artist can obviously provide helpful clues for addressing the films.”\textsuperscript{145} In order to diminish eisegetical tendencies, of utmost importance for the interpreter is the artifact. A reviewer should keep closely to the text of a film, because what is sure, complete and public is the final product—the material of the film itself, and not its manifold influences. Among other analytical methods, a film’s internal evidence can be studied by way of *mise en scène*, the editorial syntax of image and sound, and intertextuality. Film scholars are trained in these techniques and they do much to offset the problem of injecting significance into the film.

\textsuperscript{145} *Idem., Afterimage, ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
Blake confesses, however, that as much as film criticism attempts to prevent eisegesis, “reading meaning into” a film text is to a large degree inevitable. After all, we do see what we want to see. Nonetheless, in terms of theological analysis Blake hopes this second corrective—to pay close attention to and make judgments firmly on what is embedded in the film text—will foster a trend away from the sort of facile reading and symbol hunting that he believes has plagued much of theology’s interaction with film. “Sometimes, as Freud said, a cigar is only a cigar.”146 Not every loaf of bread paired with a bottle of Chianti is a hidden Eucharist, says Blake.147 Not every woman holding the body of a man in her arms is a Pietà. Not every change of season from winter to spring means death and resurrection. And yet, table fellowship, physical tenderness, and the redemption that can follow a massive tragedy are realities not foreign to the faith of Christians.

This leads to the third corrective, which is to observe how film is received by different audiences. The more objective considerations of artist and artifact must be balanced by an assessment of the subjective responses a film elicits. A number of considerations might be made including the physical, psychological, and even economic effects a film makes on an audience and on society as a whole both in the short and long term. For his part, Blake contends that the visceral reaction of particular groups can indicate a film’s overall meaning and appeal. For example, Catholic audiences more than others may be more alert to certain types of religious imagery present in a film and Catholic theologians may know much about the historical sources and meanings of these

147 Idem., “From Peepshow to Prayer,” ibid., par. 37.
symbols. Rather than dismiss these responses as one-sided and injurious to strict film analysis, Blake recognizes their value for film scholarship and compares them to the needed sensibilities of other interpretive frames of reference. “We may bring a valid sensitivity to the text and thus make a contribution to a critical appreciation of the film, much like a woman responding to a female character. She is simply alert to things that a man might miss.”\footnote{Ibid., par. 39.} This further solidifies Blake’s thesis that theology should be employed as a legitimate interpretive model of film, since it has the right navigational system to pick up signals that someone untrained in the field would either miss, be incompetent to interpret or, for ideological reasons, be resolutely opposed. When religious and theological themes are present in a film, however secularized they may appear, they must be named as such and capably investigated. If ignored, film critics risk under-interpreting or even thoroughly misinterpreting a film.\footnote{To drive home the point even further, if Catholics expect to receive a hearing from others, they must first demonstrate a genuine openness to how those with different frames of reference interpret film (hence, the need for “dialogue” between church and culture). They should likewise not be surprised if these differing perspectives yield divergent verdicts. This may hold great promise in the field of comparative theology for assessing how others come to conclusions about film that are not in exact correspondence with a Catholic reading. And to say this is not to suggest that all Catholics will wind up hermeneutically in the same place.}

The final corrective is consideration of the nature of film as an artistic medium. Earlier in the dissertation, we noted Catholic theologians’ late and tentative acceptance of film as a legitimate place for theological inquiry. Blake observes that post-Enlightenment skepticism of religion has affected a prejudice among film scholars against religious and theological modes of film analysis. Perhaps this two-way suspicion is owing to the fact that theologians and film scholars alike have been “very uneasy at the prospect of turning their attention to uncovering the sacred in something as worldly as the
film.” But why this unease? Blake asserts that there is “a consensus of opinion since it mechanically reproduces physical objects set before the camera’s lens, that film is much less successful in capturing spiritual realities than other media, like literature, painting or music, each of which involves an apparently more aggressive intervention of the artist and thus a more intimate, spiritual relationship between artisan and audience.” Blake labors to overturn this opinion, which has intensified to the point that the “element of the sacred” has gone largely unnoticed in cinema. He claims that “by moving beyond content to the nature of the medium itself one can discover an avenue toward an awareness of the Divine.” Although we will have more to say about it later, a Catholic perspective sees “material objects as sacramentals, as having a meaning that approaches the symbolic. Catholics appreciate in a visceral, sensual way that God is there, immanent, deep down in things; that God is present and active in the material order he has created.” Blake’s own Catholic imagination informs his seeing film as uniquely capable of incarnating the human spirit. The medium is inimitable because unlike other forms of art, cinema adds the

missing dimension of time and thus pushes the artifact [of film] even closer to physical realities. Objects grow and move and change right before our gaze. Yes, it is still an artifact, still under the direction of a filmmaker who chooses lights and settings, and even more edits the film into a series of connections with other realities. The moving images can even tell a story. Those real faces of real actors function amid shifting visual habitats. They can speak and sing; the faces become transformed from laughter to tears as we watch. More than any other medium, the

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151 Idem., “From Peepshow to Prayer,” ibid., par. 41.
153 Idem., “From Peepshow to Prayer,” ibid., par. 43.
154 Ibid., par. 53.
film creates art that cuts very close to the shifting, transient skin of the real material world as it exists in daily experience. We become so engrossed in the spectacle that we think we are watching reality and forget that we are watching a film, an artifact.\textsuperscript{155}

One might read a little into what Blake is suggesting and consider the possibility that, in coming into such close proximity to real people expressing real emotion, a relationship is forged between the viewed and the viewer and that audiences in this sense experience a real love for (or aversion to) a film’s characters. “That uniquely intimate relationship between medium and object brings the observer and observed into an privileged unity that invites contemplation.”\textsuperscript{156} This act of beholding the world with such immediacy, and with the added emotional dimensions produced by sound and editing, approaches the possibility that “film viewing may lead the imagination down a path that approaches prayer.”\textsuperscript{157} How? Because film “forces us to look not at itself, but through the film to the marvels of the material universe that it presents for our gaze.”\textsuperscript{158} Blake suggests that the camera takes on an artistic equivalent of agape. It looks upon material objects and sees within them the sacred and in the photographic image enshrines their value. It does not create ontological value, as Divine Love does, by loving the object into existence, but the camera does endow the most mundane objects with sacramental value by recognizing and enshrining that value in a publicly accessible artifact.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., par. 47.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., par. 49.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., par. 3.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., par. 50.
\textsuperscript{159} Blake, “Uncovering the Sacred,” p. 15.
This “unity of lens and object” that takes on sacramental value in minimizing the distance between the seen and the unseen holds “enormous implications for a theological inquiry.”\textsuperscript{160}

Blake’s approach to film criticism is therefore distinguished by a Catholic imagination and his belief that if you really look at a movie, “you will see the face of God.”\textsuperscript{161} Because he is a writer who measures his words very carefully, we know that he does not make that statement facilely. So, what can he mean? To make his point, Blake turns to the Christian doctrine that the canonical texts of the bible were “inspired” by God and therefore hold a privileged position in the church apart from other writings. Drawing an analogy between the artistic imagination and the theological concept of “inspiration,” as it is applied to the writing and codification of scripture, he wonders if “inspiration” in an analogous sense might be extended to other attempts of the human imagination to approach God through different media. Surely, when a great composer or artist approaches religious subject matter, we can speak of the work as being inspirational in some sense and consequently as an additional vehicle of God’s self-revelation. We can speak at least in some metaphorical sense of God’s inspiring Michelangelo or Bach to use their own respective media, like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or the Mass in B Minor to reveal and communicate some insight into God’s own infinitely complex mystery. Of course, at this point I would suggest that film is but another venue for the ongoing project of God’s self-disclosure and the human response in trying to reduce mystery to more comprehensible dimensions.\textsuperscript{162}

Blake is not suggesting that film artists impart God’s word through their medium in the same way the medium of the gospels impart God’s word. Strictly speaking, from a Christian theological perspective, only God reveals God, and God chose to speak through the words of the biblical authors. Anything else is interpretation of God’s self-revelation

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., par. 51.

\textsuperscript{162} Blake, “The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship,” p. 15.
which, at its highest level, involves the personal response to revelation in an act of faith in Jesus Christ. However, in a comparable way, “inspired” film can be understood as a response to revelation when it lead the human person to contemplate the mystery of God. In film, therefore, we metaphorically witness the “face of God” in the faces and images on screen that imitate reality—reality that is already incarnated by Christ’s presence. This returns us to Joseph Marty’s point that, because of the Incarnation—the liberation of the “treason of images”—the church remains confident in the goodness of images as able to point beyond themselves to the mystery of God. And because we cannot put limits on how God chooses to meet us personally in our lives, there remains the possibility that God encounters us in our artistic experiences. Wisdom is needed, therefore, to discern whether film prepares us for this encounter and whether our contemplation is directed genuinely toward God, or is misguided (Michael Gallagher’s point). This point allows us to see how Blake minimizes the distance between film and theology; for if theology at a basic level is understood as the interpretation of the encounter with God, then our experience of film is an important mode of theology. In point of fact, he hopes that systematic theologians and church historians might join the conversation and help film scholars “view the confluence of their work as part of the larger scheme of revelation.”

This, finally, returns us to Blake’s original premise that “the religious imagination is something worth uncovering and discussing in order to gain a fuller understanding of cinema.” He has demonstrated that while a theologian must exercise extreme “caution

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163 Ibid.
164 Ibid., par. 4.
before pushing [film] story over into the realm of religious parable,” it is at the same time appropriate to bring a theological mind to bear on film in order to disclose its sacred elements and, in so doing, “add to a more comprehensive critical appreciation of the texture of the film.” This practice, however, is not limited to theologians. In applying their own interpretive skills to film, film critics, too, will disclose the sacred element within film. Just as biblical scholars “have to understand [their] medium in all its complexity and then seek distinctions between truth and error, wisdom and nonsense . . . [so does] the same obligation [rest] heavily on film critics and scholars.” Blake invites all of these parties into a Casablanca “beautiful friendship” of collaboration and mutual formation.

Conclusion

Over the course of a half-century the margins of two vast fields—theology and film—have met and slowly merged into one another, forming something of an in-between, third field. Their cross-fertilization has taken root and shows signs of growing deeper and ever more lush. While it is unclear the shape the field will take in the future, the varieties it will yield, and what effect it will have on the pre-existing tracts, one thing is certain: the landscape has been unalterably transformed and, owing to the labor of a dedicated few, such as those represented in this chapter, its potential for a rich harvest is great.

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165 Blake, “From Peepshow to Prayer,” *ibid.*, par. 12.


The last three chapters of the dissertation have highlighted some of the ways Catholic Christianity in particular helped cultivate the field of theology and film. Both the Roman magisterium and a growing contingent of Catholic theologians and film scholars have acknowledged the tremendous promise film holds for theology and for Christian formation and action. Together, the texts we studied laid down a number of foundations that help root theology’s relationship to film in church doctrine, Christian spirituality, and aesthetics. Something of a grammar for a Catholic theology of film emerges in these pioneering writings, a grammar that will likely remain seminal for future scholarship in this area. Because it is an evolving syntax a number of questions remain about how film ought to be construed within a Catholic theological framework.

The experts profiled in the current chapter did not find it necessary to relate their approaches directly to the Vatican’s teaching on cinema, yet they share the church’s conviction that a more dynamic symbiotic relationship ought to exist between Catholic theology and film. They agree that approaching the task of film interpretation from the standpoint of theology is legitimate if only for the simple reason that people ask theological questions. Like other interpretive frameworks, Catholic theology comprises a distinctive set of norms by which film can be evaluated. It is thus a necessary analytical lens, since through it people can see things in film that other perspectives might miss. Catholic authors have refashioned distinctive tools in the tradition, such as spiritual discernment, the notion of transcendence, theology of the image, and the principle of

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168 As discussed in the section on Richard Blake, this might also suggest that the lens of theology is capable of misinterpreting or even distorting the meaning of a film. This can occur, to paraphrase his point, when the lens itself becomes the focus of attention and not its direct object—a particular film. Catholic approaches should take a lesson from Blake’s method, which had precautionary measures built-in so as to preclude this possibility.
sacramentality, into methods of film criticism. Certain teachings stood out as particularly important for the study. For instance, Bazin believed that the very nature of cinema is to honor God by honoring the reality and mystery of human experience. Hurley emphasized that film’s ability to express the transcendental thrust of human experience is something that theologians, trained to perceive the presence of grace in human life (and name it as such), ought to be equipped to interpret. Gallagher claimed that religious impulses in film, when rightly discerned, can prepare people for the reception of the Christian message. Marty asserted that any Catholic theological interpretation of film necessarily operates evangelically, since the criterion for perceiving what is true and lasting (i.e., not idolatrous or rival to Christian faith) in the film image is Christ himself, who is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Finally, Blake insisted that Catholic theological perspectives are crucial for film interpretation; but if they are to maintain legitimacy in the world of film criticism such approaches must take every necessary step to avoid theological eisegesis.

Having now analyzed Vatican teaching on cinema in the initial chapters and the interpretive methods of individual scholars in this chapter, we are now in a better position to see the shortcomings in the literature and to propose how the remainder of this dissertation will attempt to mitigate these limitations and provide sturdier theological footing for Catholic approaches overall. In the introduction to our study it was asserted that existing theological approaches to film do not seem to attend adequately to the question of how these two ostensibly divergent areas naturally incline toward one another. This was found to be the case in the documents of the magisterium as well as in the writings of individual scholars; both groups seem to presume that such a relationship
is already warranted and begin their reflections accordingly. Thus, only limited attempts were made to pursue the question of how Catholic theology and film can be integrated in the first place. In short, these writings beg more substantial reflection on the transcendental question pertinent to Catholic systematic theology concerning the *a priori* conditions of possibility for a correlation between theology and film. Greater wisdom concerning what the two have in common and what, indeed, differentiates them, will lead to a more meaningful and lasting exchange between the two.

Part of this *a priori* theoretical concern must involve responding to the question of normativity. What Christian norm acts as a controlling hermeneutical principle of discernment when theology is done in conjunction with a non-traditional source such as film? What justification is there in the church’s theological tradition for turning to such a secular source for Christian reflection? We recall that the Catholic magisterium did not insist a film be explicitly religious for it to be a source for theological reflection and aid to Christian formation.¹⁶⁹ *Gaudium et spes* taught that the secular world and its cultural expressions ought to be met generously and critically by the church. However, no formal church document provided ample justification for the turn to secular film as a theological source. Thus, the *onus probandi* was on the individual scholars and theologians of this chapter to clarify the question of normativity in doing theology through an outside secular medium like film. Some attempts at articulating Catholic normativity were made in this chapter. For instance, Michael Gallagher and Joseph Marty grounded their

¹⁶⁹ Indeed, both Bazin and Blake stressed that the inherent difficulty of expressing the numinous can lead to problematic tendencies in the production quality of explicitly religious films (sentimentality, overdramatization, exaggerated style).
theologies of film in the doctrine of the incarnation: the decisive norm that, for them, is the rule by which secular sources are judged to be true and correct.

This dissertation has insinuated that a more comprehensive, systematic presentation of the relationship of Catholic theology and the art of film is needed, one that has at its center a unifying method broad enough to integrate important elements of the existing strands of Catholic teaching on film into a larger theological framework and specific enough to move the discourse into new territory. The main thesis of the dissertation identifies the Christian tradition of mystagogy to be a promising tool to facilitate this integration. Mystagogy, the subject of the next chapter, was an ancient theological method by which church leaders would turn to non-Christian sources as a means of disclosing the meanings of Christian doctrine and practice. In putting forward the thesis that film is a locus mystagogicus, we are suggesting, only at a very basic level at this point, that (a) film can be a matter for mystagogical reflection; (b) the tradition of mystagogy provides principles for justifying theology’s contemporary turn to secular film as a theological source; and (c) the tradition holds tools that can facilitate the process of discerning authentic religious themes within secular film. As the project moves ahead in its quest to strengthen the correlation between Catholic theology and film, the following passage might act as a guide. It is a succinct way of expressing what is at stake in bringing theology and film into closer and mutually critical correspondence:

Theological and spiritual traditions have something to offer the film world insofar as they are concerned with the quest for deeper meaning, truth, and wisdom about human life, history and destiny. On the other hand, there is no doubt that many films, past and present, can provide a stimulus and a challenge to theological disciplines and to theologians to lean more about “the human journey” and the individual or collective struggle for survival—phenomena that are mirrored in so many films.170

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170 Ambrose Eichenbacher, “Approaches to Film Criticism,” in ibid., p. 9.
EXCURSUS

Other Catholic Approaches to Film

In the first two chapters, we looked at how the magisterium has developed the relationship between church and cinema. In this last chapter, we profiled several university theologians and film scholars who have developed theoretical Roman Catholic-based approaches to film interpretation. We believe it is worth taking a moment to consider intersections between theology and film made in other sectors of the Catholic church. This will provide further context for our conversation as well as demonstrate the broadness of “theology”: i.e., that “Rome” and the “academy” are not the exclusive, nor necessarily the most significant, places where theology and film have come together.

The Daughters of St. Paul is a religious order whose mission is to announce the message of Jesus Christ through the means of electronic media. Rose Pacette, FSP, is director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Culver, CA, an institute administered by the order primarily to educate Catholic teachers and ministers in media literacy. For more than two decades, Pacette has been involved in bridging the worlds of faith and film in a number of ways. She has a series of books called Lights, Camera, Faith!, which follow the church’s three lectionary cycles and places weekly readings into dialogue with motion pictures so that the message of Jesus can be related directly to contemporary experience. She speaks regularly at media conferences throughout America and has a blog which tracks the many connections being made between Catholicism and film.171 As a high-ranking member of SIGNIS, Pacette has sat on judging panels at some of the world’s most prestigious film festivals.

Barbara Nicolosi is the director of a program in Hollywood that mentors Christian screenwriters and others who work in film media and the mainstream entertainment industry. The program is called “Act One: Writing for Hollywood” and is sponsored in part by the Catholic Communication Campaign. Formerly of the Daughters of St. Paul, Nicolosi believes it important and, what is more, possible for Catholics to bring their faith to bear on the construction of good cinema. She laments that in the film industry there are few talented writers who not only have some theological training but who desire to evangelize via film and television—“the most potent and influential global pulpits available to disseminate the Catholic imagination.”\textsuperscript{172} She says that while there have been isolated instances of film projects that represent a Catholic worldview, the sad reality is that we do not have any filmmakers who have done with cinema what Flannery O’Connor and Graham Greene did in literature, or Fra Angelico in painting, or Bach in sacred music—that is, it is difficult to come up with a single filmmaker who, being what I call a “happy Catholic,” has consistently sought to make an appeal for Jesus and the Gospel through mastery of the craft of film.\textsuperscript{173}

Her organization is dedicated to redressing this situation by training Christians in the media who wish to lead people to the gospel in film that may or may not have explicitly Christian content, but that has a Christian character:

When it comes to "Christian movies," I think we should be doing one tenth of what we do for ourselves and nine tenths for secular people as seeds to try and get them questioning. Unfortunately, the opposite ratio is true. Probably nine out of ten Christian artists are working just for Christians, and maybe one in ten are


\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
Nicolosi rejects, however, what might be considered by some to be a possible solution to this problem, namely a virtual incursion by Catholics into enemy territory by way of mass production of wholesome movies that families can watch. “Instead,” she says, “what is needed is for the church to recognize and respect the power of the cinematic art form, to embrace it, and to send a whole new generation of young artists into the entertainment industry so that, in seeing the good that they do, the culture will give glory to God.”

In 1995, the theology faculty at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) conferred an honorary doctorate upon German film director Wim Wenders. A decade later, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Catholic church’s highest office on issues related to cinema, awarded Wenders the Bresson Prize, named after the French Catholic filmmaker Robert Bresson (*Au Hasard Balthasar*, *Pickpocket*). Instituted in 2000 to show the support of the church for outstanding works in cinema, the prize is awarded annually “to an artist whose work ‘promotes a truly humane culture’ and advances appreciation for the life of the spirit.” President of the Council, then-Archbishop John Foley, said in bestowing the award that Wenders’s films contain “many meditative moments of high spirituality on the meaning of life, evil, death, and the

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176 See: <http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=46313> (last accessed 2/11/10). Past recipients include Giuseppe Tornatore (Italy), Manoel de Oliveira (Portugal), Theo Angelopoulos (Greece), Krzysztof Zanussi (Poland), Jerzy Stuhr (Poland), and Zhang Yuan (China).
beyond,” and that the director has demonstrated that film is a “source of reflection.” In its gesture the Catholic hierarchy “decided (agreeing with some critics) that films like *Wings of Desire* (1987), *Paris, Texas* (1984), *The American Friend* (1977), *Kings of the Road* (1976) and *Alice in the Cities* (1974), movies that deal with alienation, disengagement and a lack of identity, represented a spiritual quest.” Having charted the evolution of ecclesiastical teaching and Catholic scholarship on cinema in the last three chapters of the dissertation, we can better appreciate the gestures of the University of Fribourg and the Vatican in acknowledging the artistic and theological contributions of Wenders. These attest to just how far the church has come in its relationship to cinema and just how expressive cinema can be of contemporary human experiences that are of deep importance to Christian faith. This example is one practical indicator of where two principal groups within the Catholic church—the academy and the magisterium—have stood *vis-à-vis* filmmaking.

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177 See the news brief “German Film Director Gets Award From Vatican Official,” from September 10, 2004 at <www.zenit.org> (last accessed 2/11/10).

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

This chapter proposes the adoption of the underutilized and promising interpretive tool of mystagogy (Gk., μυσταγωγία = mystes “initiated person” + agogos “leading”) as a means for more firmly fusing Catholic theology and film. Because mystagogy is a relatively unfamiliar term, even in theological circles,¹ the present chapter attempts to explicate mystagogy and its meaning(s) in Christian history to better illustrate why it has been chosen as the controlling concept for the dissertation’s main thesis and as background for understanding the aim and methodology of Karl Rahner’s fundamental theology, to be covered in the fifth chapter.

While other Greek words have been received rather easily into the Christian matrix, mystagogy has not. Yet it is “not more difficult, nor more Greek, than Eucharist, kerygma . . . ecclesiology, theology or pedagogy. It is an old word, coming from pre-Christian religions, borrowed from them by the early church, then forgotten for centuries”² until the Second Vatican Council mandated the reinstatement of an adult catechumenate. The Catholic church instituted the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (R.C.I.A.), a restoration of the ancient Christian liturgical process by which a person officially enters the church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. Mystagogy is the final phase of this formal initiation rite, a time when the

¹ There is a value to mystagogy’s relative obscurity as it is appropriated to support this dissertation’s main idea, for it is not laden with a cumulative load of interpretive positions that would need significant sifting before it could be legitimately applied as a helpful link between theology and film. This should not suggest that scholarly perspectives on the tradition do not vary; nor does it suggest that mystagogy has a single, definitive meaning. “Mystagogy” is not a catch-all. It is a precise term; yet, as will be justified, it is broad enough to be adapted for the purposes of the dissertation.

newly baptized are taught the deeper meanings of the sacraments, less by instruction than by way of remembering and interpreting the experience of initiation. Mystagogy is a process that introduces people to “the depths of the Mystery of Christ”\(^3\) as experienced in the sacraments. Its method of sacramental interpretation is meant to initiate a faith community more penetratingly into the inexhaustible, personal, and holy experience of God’s Mystery. Its intention is to illuminate, not mystify; to lead people into a profounder sense of the depths of their relationship to God. Its relative obscurity therefore should not suggest the tradition is “mysterious” in the sense of something being obfuscated. The word itself “easily evokes negative reactions from those who feel that anything which has to do with ‘mystery,’ ‘mysterious,’ or ‘mystic’ is necessarily out of touch with the real world in which normal people have lived their lives.”\(^4\) On the contrary, any perceived esotericism about the term is a result of a misunderstanding or misappropriation of the tradition.

This chapter attempts to illustrate that the method of mystagogy is a tremendous counterpoint to (a) notions that experience of God is reserved only for the extraordinarily pious, or engenders detachment from the concerns of daily life; and (b) a corrective to trends in theology that privilege reason over emotion and orthodoxy over orthopraxis. If a truly integrated “religious experience neglects no facet of this world”\(^5\) that aids deeper initiation into the life of God, then theology needs to continually develop methods by which people can learn to make deeper and more relevant connections between Christian

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 116.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 35.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 144.
faith and the concerns of daily life that are drawn from their concrete experience and in language that makes a difference.

Today’s church faces a world disillusioned by institutional religion. Religious experience, however it may be defined, is interpreted by many to be something private in nature and better left undisturbed by religion itself. Further, the church includes a membership often disenchanted with a faith that appears archaic mainly because meaningful connections are not drawn between the gospel and the experience of contemporary life. In fact, this situation is nothing new; for in every age the church struggles to provide “an experience of Jesus Christ in his Paschal Mystery [and] to help Christians live that Mystery and dedicate themselves to building the Kingdom.”

It is incumbent upon theologians to interpret the Christian message that this Mystery was made flesh in Jesus Christ and communicate in a manner that serves the religious formation of the baptized. To help the current situation, the chapter suggests that theology today return to the mystagogy of the fathers as an effective model for interpreting the faith. The fathers broke the bonds of a “narrowly doctrinal view of Christian belief . . . [and paid] due respect to experience . . .” In so doing, they accorded a greater respect for the integrity and relevancy of doctrine and overcame any perceived disconnect between belief and life. As shown through their homilies, they were master integrators of scripture, doctrine, worship, and experience and thus consummate translators of the message of the gospel and life of the church. This chapter strives to make the case that the mystagogical style of theological interpretation

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6 Ibid., p. 145.

7 Ibid., p. 146.
underscores the deep unity that exists between the content of faith and the content of daily living and can serve as a paradigm for how theology approaches film.

The discussion will proceed according to the following questions: (1) What further meaning does the term “mystagogy” suggest and how did it obtain and function in a Christian milieu? (2) What was the hermeneutical method of mystagogy? (3) What did mystagogy interpret? (4) How were mystagogy and theology related in the early church? (5) Finally, what conditions exist within the tradition that facilitate the possibility of adapting mystagogy beyond a liturgical and catechetical environment? To be sure, any one of these questions is complex enough to warrant extended consideration, in each case beyond the ambit of the present study. Here, the focus is narrowed to achieve a solid working knowledge of mystagogy so that it can be applied more accurately to the substance of the dissertation’s thesis. In other words, the chapter attempts to give a fuller understanding of the notion of mystagogy by way of a substantial if not comprehensive grounding in the liturgical, theological, and aesthetic elements that form this rich and fairly unknown Christian tradition.

Pagan Roots and Adoption into Christianity

The term “mystagogy” is of Greek provenance and scholars distinguish a number of senses of the word. One finds it variously translated as “indoctrination” or “induction” into, “instruction” in, and “revelation” or “interpretation” of mystery. More

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8 References to these etymological studies can be found in Enrico Mazza, Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age. New York: Pueblo, 1989, see p. 1 and p. 182, n.1.
sensual renderings include “savoring” or “tasting” of mystery. Originally, it meant “to teach a doctrine” and therefore “to initiate into the mysteries.” The “earliest allusion in early Greek refers to someone, a mystagogue, who initiates neophytes into the Eleusinian mysteries [i.e., the cult of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone]. Mystagogy later became associated with the teaching of mysteries found in secret religions.” Mystery religions, such as the Mithraic or Dionysian cults, abounded in Greco-Roman antiquity and were “secret” in part because their mystical rites were not sponsored by the state. These religions, called “mysteries,” were generally “agricultural in origin, arising from seasonal cults to ensure fertility of crops. . . . [These] were secret cults into which a candidate had to be initiated—almost like secret societies. The constitutive features of a mystery society were common meals, common dances and ceremonies.” Initiates would “re-enact events in the lives of the gods through ritualistic feasts and orgies, receiving in essence a share in the lives of the gods through the highly sensual and psychic ceremonies.” Thus, these mysteries were, at one level, a way people believed they consorted with the gods and solidified the cult. However, there was a deeper level

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12 In Christianity, the Greek word mysterion (mystery), which was used originally to describe the rites of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. In the western church the Latin word sacramentum was used for the rites, not “the mysteries.”

13 Regan, Experience the Mystery, op. cit., p. 12.

of meaning which “was not expressed in words, but transmitted by the rites themselves to those who were capable of appreciating it. There was no formal theology . . . but it was the religious experience which made the initiation memorable and gave the cults their grip.”

Mystagogy is linked etymologically to the Greek verb *myein* meaning “to shut the eyes” and relating to the fact that “only those already initiated were permitted to witness secret rites.” Because the mystery cults “involved an experience and not a doctrine [participants] had little to tell to someone who had not undergone the experience.” Members were forbidden to speak to outsiders about what was witnessed in these ceremonies because their beliefs and practices often subverted those of official state religions. Enrico Mazza claims that in every instance mystagogy had a “sacral context.” However, David Regan avers that the word and practice extended into the secular sphere of ancient Greece, which fact “made it easier for the church fathers to borrow it” since it was not altogether a pagan religious practice.

Mystagogy became an explicit Christian reality as early as the second century, although its ecclesial heritage goes back even to the time of Christ. In the apostolic era, as the infant church struggled to digest its still-fresh experience of Christ, early converts could know the still-developing Christian theology concerning creation, death, resurrection,

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19 Regan, *op. cit.*, p. 11. In this extended sense, “someone who introduced a friend into the sacred precincts of the Greek family could be called a mystagogue; and the word mystagogy could be used of someone being initiated into the business of tax-farming” (*Ibid.*).
and eternal life only by participating in the experiences of baptism, Eucharist, and charitable ministry.\textsuperscript{20}

As the church expanded its mission to the nations and adapted itself so that the Christian faith could be more accurately and meaningfully communicated, it acquired certain characteristics of those cultures. Mystagogy was one such acquisition. The nascent church borrowed from the mystery religions the “language and experiential approach of initiation” for those wishing to convert to Christian belief.\textsuperscript{21} The Christian borrowing of Greek mystagogy involved substantial transformation. Indeed, like so many inculturations in the early church, once grafted onto the Christian stock it turned into something so qualitatively other than its pagan counterpart that comparisons can only be made at a superficial level. Its liturgical manifestation “did not go beyond language and external forms . . ..”\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps more importantly, the Christian “practice of initiation can be traced back to Judaism rather than to the traditional cults of Greece, Rome, and further East.” Thus, there was already precedence in the tradition for mystagogy.

**Christian Initiation Rites**

Entrance into the Christian church did not consist of a single initiation ceremony, but was rather an intense process of prayerful discernment and intense examination, involving candidate and community, that could take a number of years.\textsuperscript{23} Liturgical scholars know very little about the precise content and organization of the initiatory

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Covington, *op. cit.*
\item \textsuperscript{21} Regan, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
process in the earliest years of the church, although the records suggest that by the fourth century “there was an established pattern, which was more or less universal.” Edward Yarnold’s reconstruction of the primitive church’s initiation procedure helps to contextualize mystagogy and understand its original form and function.

The first period (Precatechumenate) was a time of inquiry, evangelization, and acceptance of candidates by the community into the order of catechumens. It is difficult to determine how long this initial stage lasted since much depended on the readiness of the individual candidate to choose a Christian life and for the believing community to consent to this desire through an examination of the moral and spiritual character of the candidate.

The second period (Catechumenate) consisted of initiation of a candidate into the order of catechumens (Gk. katekhoumenos, “being instructed”) followed by rigorous instruction in scripture, doctrine, and prayer. It was a time concerned mainly with “communicating the central truths of the early Christian faith, creation, sin, and redemption, grounded in the understanding that the events of the OT prefigure those of the NT, and characterized by a strong emphasis on ethical teaching.” Although this phase was markedly notional, given that central theological concepts were being taught, the catechesis was meant to awaken and nourish faith and not simply provide information about Christianity. Catechumens also participated in a limited way in the worship life of the church. For instance, they were allowed to partake in what is today called the “Liturgy of the Word,” the first portion of the Mass that concerns the reading and

24 Baerwald, op. cit., p. 881. The structure of today’s R.C.I.A. represents an adaptation of this ancient pattern.

25 Ibid., p. 883.
preaching of scripture. After the homily, catechumens were dismissed for prayer and instruction apart from the formal worship.26 Prior to their own initiation catechumens were prohibited from partaking in or even witnessing the Eucharistic rite. Nor were they allowed to be present at a baptism before their own.

The entire process of Christian initiation was shrouded in a veil of intentional secrecy called the *disciplina arcana*, a practice that produced some controversy. There were some who interpreted it as surreptitious and accused Christians of practicing a secret religion like the idolatrous mystery cults of Greece and Rome.27 Such accusations were common and inevitable as Christianity inculturated itself over the centuries, borrowing and recasting local and at times pagan religious ideas and practices. The point to be made here is that the fathers “were not so much concerned with the initiation sacraments as mysterious; *rather with the mystery that the initiated experienced in the sacraments.*”28 The *disciplina arcana* and the secrecy surrounding the initiation rites was not simply a form of esotericism for its own sake; rather, it was necessary for preparation.

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26 The now outmoded term “Mass of the Catechumens” comes from this practice of dismissing the catechumens or “hearers” prior to the celebration of the Eucharist (i.e., “Mass of the Faithful”). Today, based on the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the former is named “Liturgy of the Word,” and the latter “Liturgy of the Eucharist.”

27 The controversy about the secrecy surrounding the initiation rites, and Christianity in general, stems back to Origen (c. 185—c. 254) who answered “the accusation of his opponent, Celsus, that Christianity is a religion of secrecy like the pagan mystery religions: Christian doctrine is not secret, he asserts, though he has to concede that some things are not for outsiders” (Yarnold, *ibid.*, p. 56). Although the “Christian practice of secrecy goes back to the gospels it seems likely that in the fourth century the desire to rival the pagan mystery religions led to an elaboration of the practice of secrecy. Chrysostom’s phrase “the holy and awesome rites of initiation” seems to be worded in language borrowed from the Greek mysteries” (*Ibid.*, p. 57). No doubt the element of secrecy led some to approach the church out of sheer curiosity. Leaders like Cyril of Jerusalem set out “to convert that curiosity into something more religious” (*ibid*).

Its secrecy was meant to instill in catechumens a sense of watchfulness and enthusiastic anticipation for their sacramental union with God.

The third period (*Enlightenment* or *Election*) was a time of intense self-reflection on the part of catechumens, of “spiritual preparation rather than instruction.”\(^{29}\) A variety of religious acts at this stage contributed toward the moral purification and spiritual illumination of catechumens. These included scrutinies of conscience, confession of sins, penance, fasting, exorcisms, and recitations of the creed and the Our Father. The third period culminated in the *denouement* of the catechumenal journey: full sacramental initiation into the community of faith on the vigil of Easter. Yarnold sets the scene:

> The ceremonies took place at night, some of them in the dark, after weeks of intense preparation; they were wrapped in secrecy, and the candidate knew little about them until just before, or even after, he had received them. Everything was calculated to inspire religious awe, to make these rites the occasion of a profound and life-long conversion.\(^{30}\)

Given all the preparatory measures, the fact that catechumens had no first hand knowledge of the rites prior to their own induction, and, most importantly, the solemnity of the occasion, there was an extraordinary air of expectancy the catechumens experienced prior to the ceremony. While the structure of the initiation rites varied from church to church, reflecting local customs and styles, a consistent pattern emerged in the execution of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation (anointing), and Eucharist. Elements of this pattern included:

> the renunciation of Satan, the proclamation of the Apostle’s Creed, prebaptismal anointings, the bath of new birth with a Trinitarian profession of faith, bestowal of

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\(^{29}\) Yarnold, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

white garments, and anointing and imposition of hands. Following these initiatory rites the newly baptized were welcomed at the eucharistic table.\textsuperscript{31}

After years of formal preparation, the experiences of being immersed in water, draped in fresh white garments, anointed with oil, embraced in the kiss of peace, and fed the food of salvation must have had a tremendous cathartic effect on the converted. The sequence “seems to [have been] calculated explicitly to stir up emotions of spiritual exaltation and awe”\textsuperscript{32}, it was an ordering of events that outwardly signified the interior, ontological changes effected by the Holy Spirit. This “dynamic process that [led] from death to life”\textsuperscript{33} was both a purgative and an illuminative experience and surely induced an intense emotive release in the initiand—a catharsis that at once symbolically and \textit{really} affirmed new life in Christ.

\textit{Mystagogia}

The ceremony’s visceral impact and spiritual profundity rendered catechumens somewhat dumbfounded. Whereas prior to their initiation catechumens were made notionally aware that through the sacraments their lives would become united to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, now it was true: they were saved from sin, made to be new beings in Christ. Neophytes came away from this unparalleled experience astonished and, naturally, with many questions. The intensity of the initiatory experience coupled with the fact that they had never before participated in or even witnessed the sacraments gave rise to the need for a formal interpretation of the experience. The church felt that


\textsuperscript{32} Yarnold, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{33} Baerwald, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 882.
neophytes needed a sapient guide to help them gain insight into the ritual elements of Holy Saturday night in a way that would sustain the enthusiasm and sense of privilege wrought by their covenantal “amen” to the Lord. It was prudential, therefore, that the church provide a post-baptismal forum to help neophytes “process” their induction experience and lead them to a greater understanding of its significance.

The fourth and final period of Christian initiation (Mystagogy) was reserved for this purpose. During the week following their baptism, neophytes would gather around the local bishop to hear a series of sermons designed to interpret the “spiritual and theological significance of the various signs, symbols, and gestures” of the sacraments. The mystagogic homilies of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, and Theodore of Mopsuestia were idiosyncratic, yet they shared a general purpose: to help neophytes “gain knowledge (gnosis) of the Mystery through contemplating it . . . where it is to be found: in creation; in Scripture; in the liturgy, as mediated by symbols.” Their homilies helped the newly baptized relive the moments of initiation in order to draw them deeper “into the mysteries [=sacraments], moving them to enter spiritually and intellectually into the rites in which they [had] previously

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34 To be sure, mystagogy was not a time to “debrief” initiates or furnish them with additional conceptual explicanda of the ceremony. The primary aim was to interpret the experience of initiation in a manner that intensified its significance.

35 Baerwald, ibid., p. 881.

36 Sacramental interpretation was not original to the fathers, for the church had “always had explanations of its liturgical celebrations” (Mazza, op. cit., p. x). Even before the Christian use of the term mystagogy, the intention behind the practice is found in the New Testament. For instance, the First Epistle of Peter “has a largely mystagogic outlook. It builds on the experience of baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, an experience considered as recent, and tries to help those who have come from afar to feel at home in the Christian community” (Regan, op. cit., p. 15). However, only at the end of the fourth century did explanations of the Easter rite “take on the truly distinctive form of mystagogical catechesis.” (Mazza, op. cit., p. x).

37 Regan, op. cit., p. 21.
participated but may have understood only in terms of sense-perception." Following the rationale that “one learns more easily if one has *seen* before learning,” the church felt that catechumens needed to *experience* the sacraments first before receiving instruction about them. For it is next to impossible to discourse effectively about an experience of great moment and intensity with someone who has never really had such an experience. One cannot speak tellingly of love to the unloving. Those who do love, moreover, speak not in analytical or discursive terms but in the language of poetry, music, and symbol.

The emphasis of mystagogy was on experience more than theory, observation more than speculation, feeling more than reason. The mystagogical sermons were evocative invitations for neophytes to internalize the meaning of the rites through a rhetorical process of *leading back* (to the experience of initiation), a *leading into* (the Mystery of God communicated through the sacraments), and a *leading forth* (to continually ratify their baptismal faith in the throes of the everyday). This emphasis of mystagogy—the symbolic and existential—was founded on the deepest meaning of the sacraments: Jesus’ own life, death, and resurrection. Thus, mystagogy carried with it an eschatological dimension:

Christ our Lord established these awesome mysteries for us. We look forward to their perfect fulfillment in the world to come, but we have already laid hold of

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38 Craig Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan’s Method of Mystagogical Preaching*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002, p. 2. Any thoroughgoing study of patristic mystagogy would need to attend carefully to the method of each of the fathers. It is enough for our purposes here to take a broad view of mystagogy in order to gain a sense of its general form and purpose in the ancient church.

39 Yarnold, op. cit., p. 100, n. 2, emphasis mine. This sense was not universal. Unlike Cyril and Ambrose, Theodore and John Chrysostom explained baptism in advance. However, “in all four sets of sermons the instruction on the Eucharist is held back until after the neophyte’s baptism and first communion” (*Ibid.*, p. 167).


them by faith, so that even in this world we can struggle not to abandon any part of our faith in them. Accordingly we need this sacramental liturgy to strengthen our faith in the revelation we have received; the liturgy leads us on to what is to come, for we know that it contains, as it were, an image of the mysterious administration of Christ our Lord, and affords us a shadowy vision of what took place.\textsuperscript{42}

This fourth phase of initiation was purposely distinct in tone and content than that of the previous stages. Pre-baptismal instruction was necessarily conceptual given its focus on “the communication of the foundational creedal tenets of the Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{43} Mystagogy was less didactic, less fixated on doctrinal matters, and concentrated more on impressing in a “poetic and lyrical”\textsuperscript{44} way the experience of “the economy of salvation that [was] offered to the neophyte”\textsuperscript{45} in baptism. The content, tenor, and style of mystagogical preaching was marked by a rhetorical ornamentation and theological splendor that is unparalleled by contemporary standards. The patristic mystagogues are given to images, metaphors, and stories that reveal the significance and deeper meaning of the baptismal symbols.\textsuperscript{46}

Yet, as profound as these homilies were, it was not their eloquence alone that illuminated the minds and hearts of communicants. The sacraments themselves were the “prime factors in this illumination . . . the supreme words, speaking more loudly than any homily. Initiation [was] initiation into the truths of faith, through the sacraments and not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Yarnold, op. cit., p. 215.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Baerwald, op. cit., p. 881. More will be said below concerning the poetic and lyrical style of mystagogy.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 883.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
For the fathers, the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit communicated through the sacraments consisted of the true elucidation of mystery \textit{qua} mystery. Additionally, the neophytes were not simply awestruck spectators acted upon, as it were, by Spirit and saint. The baptized shared in the mystagogical process first and foremost through their free and radical faith in Jesus Christ. Just as the rites themselves—and not only the masterful sermons of the fathers—were the illuminating influence of mystagogical instruction, so faith was understood as the \textit{primary} means into the mystery and into the community formed in the love of Mystery:

For patristic theology in general, faith makes us enter into a mystery . . . into a design of love which God has conceived from the beginning, and which is being worked out over the centuries. The first characteristic of initiation is that it introduces into a mystery of God’s love in Christ. The second characteristic is that this initiation is always, at the same time, initiation into a community. Patristic mystagogy applied to both aspects—mystery and community—of this initiation process as a whole. Similarly, the neophyte had at one and the same time a religious experience of the Mystery of Christ and of insertion into the Christian community.\footnote{Ibid., p. 21-22.}

Mystagogy was a “special method of developing an understanding of the mystery,”\footnote{Mazza, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 3.} one that incorporated “sensual, evocative symbolism capable of reinforcing the mystery of the experience”\footnote{Covington, \textit{op. cit.}} of initiation. The constituent elements of initiation, including material elements (water, oil, light, space, bread, wine), gestures (stripping of garments, embrace of peace), and verbal expressions (creed, consecration), needed to be interpreted in order to show that “behind the visible and tangible rites deeper and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Regan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 21-22.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Mazza, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Covington, \textit{op. cit.}
\end{itemize}
invisible effects are operative.”

While more will be said later about the mechanics of this method, mystagogy consisted of a rhetorical movement from the visible elements and gestures of the sacraments to “the invisible reality of Christ”: *the mystery “underlying the sacramental material and rite . . ..”*

The mystagogical homilies were Christ-centered and thus thoroughly incarnational, that is “meaningless apart from the sense of a unified vision of the mystery of God’s intervention in human history” and meaningful only in so far as the newly baptized acquired “a more profound experience of the paschal mystery” of Jesus Christ on both an “intellectual level [and] also on the level of lived personal experience.”

Whereas the mystagogical method of each of the fathers may have differed from that of the others, they shared a common purpose: “to give the baptized the understanding and motivation that [would] enable them to live the life of Christ that [had] been bestowed in them in the liturgical celebration.”

The fathers built upon the experience of being purified in the rejuvenating waters of baptism by illustrating ways to “examine everything with the eyes and mind of Christ. [Mystagogy] was more than just the experience of God in the events that surrounded the Easter vigil; it was a process that started with conversion and culminated in a life consecrated to the missionary service of Christ.”

In this way, mystagogy was meant to sustain the local church community as a

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51 Regan, *op. cit.*, p. 16.


56 Covington, *ibid.*
whole in the life-long process toward Christian perfection. While addressed directly to the newly baptized, mystagogy was open to all; indeed, Christians “of longer standing liked to join [them] to hear the mystagogic sermons.”

Cyril of Jerusalem remarked that “these daily instructions on the mysteries, and these teachings which proclaim new tidings, are useful to us all, but especially to you who have been granted new life from old age to rebirth.”

The struggle to live the gospel—first under the threat of Roman persecution then later owing to “the pernicious laxity of faith fostered by a comfortable lifestyle in prosperous Byzantium”—was felt by the fathers, who intended mystagogy “as a pastoral practice for the recuperation of those of the baptized who had grown disillusioned and indifferent—towards the church if not towards Christ.”

Thus, the annual period of mystagogy was an opportunity to renew the faith commitment of all church members and to seek the return of the estranged.

**Mystagogy as Theology**

Enrico Mazza distinguishes two basic forms of mystagogy in the early church: *homilies* addressed to catechumens or neophytes; and *commentaries* on the liturgy “with a strong emphasis on [its] spiritual meaning.” The first form is simply “one of the many ways by which a homilist adapts himself to an audience that is not yet capable of a

59. Covington, *op. cit.*
deeper understanding of the mystery and therefore requires a very lively kind of
instruction, one without much theological meat in it lest this uselessly burden the
hearers.” Mystagogy of this type is designed for the newly baptized and adopts a
narrative style to describe the initiation rite, most often in its relation to figures in bible
stories. Though based in doctrine, its concern is not with systematically elucidating
specific points of doctrine. The second form of mystagogy is designed for the more
spiritually proficient, namely those capable of understanding interpretations of liturgical
symbols that express (in word or matter) certain spiritual truths. Mystagogy of this sort
places strong emphasis on the spiritual meaning of liturgy by attempting to give “divine
and spiritual realities (which in themselves are inexpressible) . . . a kind of material
consistency and thereby the concreteness of what is visible and tangible.”

Mazza believes these meanings, even when taken together, limit the reach and
richness of mystagogy. His study demonstrates that the mystagogy of the fathers had a
broader scope than what is suggested by these two forms. For, in these modes,
mystagogy owes its existence to the specific needs of particular groups of Christians
(viz., novices and contemplatives) rather than to

the very nature of the object being explained, namely, the liturgical celebration.
Mystagogy would then have its origin not in the church as such and be her
understanding and explanation of the mystery, but rather in the special experience
of limited groups . . . . It would, therefore, not be the way of interpreting the
liturgical celebration, but simply one particular way arising from the limited
situation of some.”

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
In short, mystagogy was much more than a type of pedagogy that might be easily replaced with another form. Rather, it was a special method of developing an understanding of the mystery (=liturgy), one that illuminated the ontological content of the sacraments and thus their christic nature. Mystagogy intended to lead people searchingly into the mystery of Christ because his very mystery is mediated through the sacraments. Mazza claims that mystagogy “is not to be regarded as belonging solely to the sphere of catechesis or spiritual theology, but is rather a true and proper theology: a liturgical theology.” He contextualizes this assertion by suggesting that there was no “standard way of doing theology” in the patristic period. Theology developed situationally, from out of particular pastoral and/or apologetic needs. The pastoral need for mystagogy led the fathers to develop through their homilies what are demonstrably the first forms of sacramental theology. Certainly, these are not academic treatises that hammer out comprehensive theoretical accounts of the sacraments. Yet mystagogy was in fact a means of “doing theology.” As Mazza contends, mystagogy ought properly to be spoken of as mystagogical theology.

Whereas the practice of mystagogy was universal by the fourth century, there was no strict set of rubrics that local church leaders were expected to follow. This gave the fathers a good deal of latitude in composing their homilies. Even as a phase within the relatively fixed canon of liturgical initiation there remained a flexibility about mystagogy: it could be adapted to the needs of a particular church community and was

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65 Ibid., p. 3.
66 Ibid., p. 7.
67 Ibid., p. 6.
fluid enough to allow for the charism of the preacher to be expressed. Still, the intention which informs all mystagogy—immersion into the mystery of Christ—constitutes its unique methodology which, according to Mazza, “never changes.”

In turning to consider this method and specific instances of its application in the homilies of the fathers, it will become clear that, given the variety of mystagogical writings and the styles of their authors, the institution of “mystagogy” is perhaps best understood as consisting of a variety of mystagogical theologies.

**Typology**

So far mystagogy has been discussed along theoretical lines. But how was it actualized? What constituted the material of mystagogy? Undergirding “the notion of mystagogy as theology was the fact that each of the mystagogical fathers relied heavily on biblical ‘typology’ when explaining the sacramental mysteries to the Christian neophytes.” At the risk of oversimplifying a rather complex hermeneutical issue, typology was the unifying if not uniformly applied method that the fathers employed as a means of discerning God’s plan for the salvation of humanity as revealed in scripture. Typology constitutes a style of interpretation which maintains that the texts of the Old Testament prefigure events in the life of Jesus Christ and the early church. The fathers interpreted the persons, events, and symbols of the Old Testament stories as “types”—i.e., figures and examples—of what is communicated in the person, words, and actions of Jesus Christ. Conversely, the New Testament illuminates what is concealed in the Old

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69 Covington, *op. cit.*
Testament. Typology presupposes that because the record of salvation is revealed in the narrative sweep of scripture the Bible operates as an integrated whole, with each testament making “the other relevant to the progression of God’s salvific order.” Typology demonstrates that behind “the writer’s words and intended meaning [are] . . . deeper reaches of meaning intended by the Holy Spirit . . .”

Typological method was not original to the fourth century mystagogues, it simply continued the form of scriptural interpretation already present in the gospels; for the evangelists interpreted the great actions of God on behalf of Israel as prefiguring the definitive salvific event of Jesus Christ. So, for instance, “Moses was a prophetic figure and lawgiver, like Jesus; the sacrifice of his firstborn son, Isaac, by the patriarch Abraham was more than a hint of what God the Father would do in sacrificing his Son, Jesus; Jonah in the whale’s belly for three days is like the Son of Man who spent three days in the tomb . . ..” Cyril of Jerusalem connected the waters poured out at baptism to the waters of “creation, the Exodus and passage through the Red Sea . . . culminating in the Lord’s baptism as a harbinger of his resurrection from the dead, his descent into the ‘nether world’ and ascension into heaven.” Mystagogical typology connected God’s mysterious plan for humanity to sacramental action. Creation, as illustrated in the Old

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70 Ibid.

71 Regan, op. cit., p. 16. Today, scholars of these patristic sources claim that the application of the typological method to Scripture “is called spiritual exegesis, whereas its application to the liturgy is called mystagogy” (Mazza, op. cit., p. 9). Mazza goes much deeper into this hermeneutical question by making further distinctions between typological and allegorical methods (see ibid., p. 9ff.).


73 Regan, op. cit., p. 16.

74 Baerwald, op. cit., p. 882.
Testament “was united through the revelation of the New Testament with salvation, which was made available to all mankind through the sacramental rites of the church.”  

Let us consider some material instances of typology to gain a better sense of mystagogy’s method. The fathers drew symbols and metaphors for their mystagogy from three sources: scripture, daily life in the ancient world, and from pagan mythology. We will look at examples from each of these sources and offer a brief commentary on their mystagogical contents. We begin with an excerpt from Ambrose’s *De Sacramentis* which interprets the Exodus story as prefiguring Christian baptism:

Moses took his rod and led the Hebrews, by night in a column of fire, by day in a column of cloud. What is this fire except truth, which gives clear and visible light? What is this column of light except Christ the Lord . . . [and] the column of cloud the Holy Spirit. The people were in the sea and the column of light went before them; then came the column of cloud; the shadow, as it were, of the Holy Spirit. You see then that we have in the water and the Holy Spirit the type of baptism.

This passage communicates a number of interrelated points. The first thing to notice is the close connection Ambrose makes between the Old and New Testaments and the liturgical rite. The signs and events of Exodus 13 prefigure the symbols of the baptismal rite (water, fire, possibly incense). This implies that from a Christian perspective the Israelites’ passage from the throes of Egyptian bondage (a type of death) through the waters to freedom (a type of resurrection) take their fullest meaning from the event of Christ’s Passover from death to new life. The saving waters of the Red Sea are shown to be the same life-giving waters poured out on catechumens at baptism; the light that guided the Hebrew people’s desert journey comes from the same source as the

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75 Covington, *op. cit.*

76 Yarnold, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
candlelight which illuminated the darkened space of the Easter vigil sanctuary. The second thing to notice is the existential and emotive dimension. Ambrose thrusts his audience directly into the narrative of salvation history, heightening their consciousness of just how ancient the mystery is into which they have been immersed. Ambrose’s intensely imaginative mystagogy emphasizes that “God’s salvation is mediated to us through the history of the world,” in particular through the paschal mystery of the Son of God and the sacraments of the Church. Knowledge of the historical and theological sweep that Christ’s death and resurrection encompass evoked in neophytes a sense of their own cooperative role in the story, a story that continues to unfold and is now inclusive of their lives. This undoubtedly stirred in the baptized attitudes of awe, privilege, and responsibility.

Now, if this modest analysis of the passage is in any way accurate, we can along with Mazza conclude that “this is nothing but theology; [and that] it is no longer possible to distinguish between a mystagogy of baptism and a theology of baptism. The text of Ambrose makes it clear that theology is directly produced by the consistent typological application of Old Testament passages to the Christian sacraments.” This further substantiates Mazza’s claim that mystagogy is always mystagogical theology.

In another instance of Ambrose’s mystagogical exposition of the baptismal rite, he rhetorically leads his audience back to the night of their initiation:

You came into the baptistery, you saw the water, you saw the bishop, you saw the levite . . .. You saw all you could see with the eyes of the body, all that is open to human sight. You saw what is seen, but not what is done. What is unseen is

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78 Ibid., p. 6.
much greater that what is seen: “because the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”79

Here Ambrose moves from the signs that are still freshly present in the minds of his listeners to a spiritual perception of the realities behind those symbols, leading them from the appearance (“what is seen”) to the effect (“what is done”) of the singular mystery of baptism, namely the saving efficacy of the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit.

A second example demonstrates that Greco-Roman daily life was a common locus from which the Fathers could draw patristic typology. If one traces Christian mystagogy back to its ultimate origin, it is Jesus since the “formation given by Jesus to his disciples was the true mystagogy.”80 Initiation placed catechumens in the same company as the apostles whom Jesus commissioned to be his gospel in the world. John Chrysostom did not wait until after the sacramental initiation on Easter to preach his mystagogical sermons because he believed that baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist were themselves the mystagogy. Because the sacraments communicate the supreme mystery, who is Christ, the rites—not the homilies—initiate one into the mystery of God because they effect an ontological change in the baptized, a true conversion. Chrysostom’s pre-Easter sermons served to “enhance this role of the sacraments as themselves the mystagogy.”81 He did not comment on the sacraments so much as offer lessons in the Christian life. It would appear that one of Chrysostom’s chief concerns was to show that the sacraments were nothing to be taken lightly. Initiation into the Mystery of God is ongoing throughout the life of the baptized and often comes at a great


80 Regan, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

cost. Chrysostom encouraged his whole church community (and not only catechumens) with practical ways that such daily initiation actually happened. He was renowned for “his emphasis on the pious and practical application of theological affirmations. [His] sermons . . . underline the perspective of the heavenly kingdom, which is in turn reflected in human art and culture.”

In this way Chrysostom was quite comfortable using metaphoric language drawn from the life of the culture around him. Take, for instance, his rather dramatic interpretation of the anointing rite:

Now the bishop knows that the Enemy is enraged and is sharpening his teeth going around like a roaring lion, seeing that the former victims of his tyranny have suddenly defected. Renouncing him, they have changed their allegiance and publicly enlisted with Christ. It is for this reason that the bishop anoints you on your forehead and marks you with the seal, to make the devil turn away his eyes. . . . From that day onward you will confront him in battle, and this is why the bishop anoints you as athletes of Christ before leading you into the spiritual arena.

In this passage, the saint readies his audience for holy war with Satan, who is compared to a raging beast searching for its next kill. The oil the catechumens will receive at the anointing rite is emblematic of their new and eternal allegiance to Jesus—alignment with whom frustrates the diabolical attacker. Chrysostom then intimates that chrismation is like the practice of rubbing down athletes prior to a match; in this case as preparation for metaphysical battle with the devil. Whereas these metaphors are somewhat mixed and inconsistent, there is a connection: in the ancient world, anointing with oil was a sign of blessing and preparation for entry into a new and strenuous life. For the Christian, it a


84 Indeed, these images are not unique to Chrysostom. The image of the “roaring lion” comes from 1 Peter 5:8; and Paul uses the “athlete” image (2 Tim: 2:5).
symbol of initiation into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The images would have been familiar to anyone in Greek society. Chrysostom surely knew his audience would perceive the subtext of Christian martyrdom by lions, an image that further illustrated the cost of discipleship. The rites, after all, represented “a much broader struggle, one of spiritual, or cosmic, proportions.”

A third example shows that the church fathers looked even to pagan mythology for their typological interpretation of sacramental action. Homer’s epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and their tales of war and wandering were esteemed throughout Mediterrania. The most popular Homerian myth was indisputably that of Odysseus and the Sirens. The story was no less familiar to the fathers who saw embedded in the text a “profoundly meaningful system of symbolism” and values. References to the story can be found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, Gregory of Nyssa, Methodius, Origen, Jerome, and Tertullian, among others. Their appropriation of the story represents an intuition early in Christian history that the secular arts can help prepare a path to the faithful hearing of God’s word:

Sailing by the island of the Sirens on his way home to Ithaca, Odysseus tied himself to the mast of his ship so he could hear their seductive singing . . . without succumbing to their temptation and destroying himself on their rocky shores. So too could the mature Christian make his way through the sensual and intellectual enticements of the secular world and pagan culture, having full knowledge of them while tying himself to the cross—the mast of the Church—for spiritual security.

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The “myth became for the Christian an expression of the belief he so passionately held, the belief that while he was on his journey to the port of eternity, he was in the throes of a decision, the issues of which were life and death. True, he sailed in the good ship of the church, but a ‘shipwreck of the faith’ was still possible, for the all-knowing Sirens still threatened.”

The hero Odysseus “tied of his own free choice to the mast . . . is the exemplar of the spiritually mature Christian who concerns himself with the doctrines of the heretics without endangering his soul, hearing but not following.”

The fathers interpreted this secular work for those who had freely “fastened” themselves to the cross of Jesus through baptism. Their typological rendering of the story taught that “what is concealed in the mystery of baptism and what takes place there under mystical forms, will at the end of days become the final reality and then will be fully revealed whether our voyage in the ship of the church spelt death or life, victory or ruin.”

In *Protrepticus (Exhortation to the Greeks)*, Clement of Alexandria’s weds the Siren myth to his overall theological project of demonstrating that Greek thought was a foretaste of the truest philosophy, viz., the gospel of Jesus Christ. Clement desired that cultured “persons under instruction for baptism . . . [should] feel that they would be at home in the Church. He wanted to show that one could be an educated and intelligent believer without abandoning the apostolic rule of faith and life.”

His mystagogy thus offered novices a way of assimilating aspects of their culture into a Christian frame of

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Clement insists that those who instruct catechumens should integrate into their teaching culturally-celebrated stories and familiar ideas and make “a kind of beggar’s collection—and that on as liberal a scale as he can—of helpful thoughts (from the wisdom of the Greeks). All that we must guard against is that we should dally there and go no further instead of returning home again to the true philosophy.”

Clement’s mystagogical interpretation of the Siren myth equips his audience with a two-directional interpretive method. On the one hand, his mystagogy appropriates a work of great literary art as a source through which he might teach Christian faith (often vis-à-vis idolatry) and correct what he considered reprehensible behavior in Greek society. On the other hand, Clement gives his assembly of cultured Christians the means of interpreting on a larger scale the Homerian narrative they knew so well: the wine-dark sea, the ship, the voyage, the Siren’s song, Scylla and Charybdis, the “mystical mast” —all of these familiar symbols were charged with a new, eschatological meaning when understood within the framework of the Christian story. For Clement, the Odyssey was the par excellence allegory of the Christian journey:

The helmsman will be God’s Logos and the Holy Pneuma will waft thee into the port of the heavens. Then wilt thou behold my God, wilt be initiated into the holy mysteries and wilt be suffered to enjoy that which is hidden in heaven, that which has been prepared for me, which neither ear hath heard nor the heart of man conceived.

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94 *Ibid.*, p. 350. The myth of Odysseus carried such meaning for early Christians that many had an image of the wise and virtuous seafarer tied to the mast carved in marble on their sarcophagi, “thereby expressing the idea that whosoever holds firmly to the wood of the cross will make the port of salvation” (*ibid.*, p. 377).

As shown in the foregoing examples of biblical typology, the church fathers turned with relative ease to the culture of their time to help explain the convictions of Christian faith, its symbols and practices. Indeed, emergent Christianity as a whole borrowed frequently, deeply, and critically from Hellenistic culture, philosophy, and mythology for its self-definition. To the fathers, being Christian was not about abandoning or condemning the world, but of embracing it in its fullness—made manifest in the Incarnation. This belief inculcated a generous attitude toward secular society and gave them a barometer by which to measure what was true, good, and lasting in popular culture as well as what was fallible and incomplete.

Yet the question remains as to why the church would need to turn to any other source other than the symbols and convictions of the Judeo-Christian tradition itself for catechesis on the faith. For a religion that claims it has by grace received and through faith believed that in Jesus of Nazareth the definitive revelation of God had been enfleshed for the sake of all creation, why would any other sources other than scripture and church tradition have intramural value? What was the force within Christianity itself that justified what might be described as the fathers’ magnanimity toward secular society? What principle legitimized the use of local legend and practice as a prime source for mystagogy? Surely, to answer this question would be to shed light on a significant presupposition not only behind mystagogy but behind the whole of Christianity and its ongoing dialogue with culture.

Hugo Rahner speaks to this question specifically in relation to the Christianity of the Greek fathers. He names the magnanimous impulse in their writings a form of “Christian humanism”—that “wonderfully bold and widely ranging gesture of the
Hellenic Christian, that gesture whereby he fetches everything home to Christ, the spring of water and the stars, his sea and his swift ships, Homer and Plato and the mystical numbers of the Pythagoreans. All was but a preparation” for the gospel. In particular, the proto-Christian myth of Odysseus rested

on an intimation, even though dim and fleeting, of that truth that is the foundation of Christian humanism, the humanism that is proof against all illusion; the truth is this: God has willed it that heaven is not to be the only thing that man should enjoy. Earth also, transfigured but still delectably tangible, earth with all its loveliness is also there, here and now, for his delight . . .”

The fathers’ openness to the customs and institutions of the time was nothing less than a faith affirmation that creation and culture are divine gifts and that the world is blessed because of God’s universal presence deep within the created order. This orientation, which H. Rahner names “Christian humanism,” gave credence to their appeal to Greek modes of understanding the world which in turn helped patristic mystagogues show that Christian faith was not something foreign or irrelevant to the way of life of their audiences. In short, what might be called a “mystagogical consciousness” is one that promotes inculturation, for

the people to be initiated must have contact with Christ and his Mystery in cultural terms which they can understand and appreciate. Their experience must be a real one that touches their lives. Mystagogy is the initiating, done by the Spirit, in the church, through the instrumentality of rites and with the help of mystagogues. This means that the language of the Bible, the experience of Christian witness and the help of the mystagogue must be accessible to that people. This rendering accessible of the Christian message and of Christ living in his church, for each era and in each cultural area, is the work of inculturation.

96 Ibid., p. xix.
97 Ibid., p. 281.
98 Regan, op. cit., p. 117.
The precise nature of the relationship between Christianity and culture and the related question of inculturation is a massive issue, one at the heart of theology, a science tasked with interpreting expressions of faith—expressions that are inexorably cultural. While the problem of theology and its inculturation is not the primary concern of the dissertation, it shall be taken up to some degree in the next chapter in relation to Karl Rahner’s mystagogical theology and only after sufficient prolegomena.

**Liturgical Mystagogy Today**

To round out the chapter’s discussion of patristic mystagogy a quick word should be said about mystagogy and its place in the liturgical life of the Catholic church today. The chapter began with a quote stating that the practice of mystagogy was abandoned for almost fourteen hundred years only to be revived again in 1974. What happened that it became virtually forgotten until its reinstallation as part of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II? Scholars note both historical and theological reasons for the near demise of formal ecclesial initiation rites, including the institution of mystagogy. Briefly, the rites began to wane in the late fifth century owing to a number of factors, foremost of which was the declaration of Roman emperor Flavius Theodosius in 391 banning pagan worship practices—after which people became Christian in droves, less for pious reasons than for maintaining socio-political acceptability. Furthermore, the fourth and fifth centuries saw an increase in the number of converts after Christianity became the official religion of the empire. This resulted in a shortened initiation process, relaxed requirements, and unverified conversions. With the universal acceptance of infant baptism during the fifth century and indiscriminate baptisms of conquered “barbarians,” the adult catechumenate became nearly defunct.  

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Mystagogy’s obsolescence was due

not only to the move to an intellectual theology, but also to the atomizing of the view of faith consequent on this. Only when each aspect of Christian tradition was recovered—respect for religious experience as of theological value and a unified view of faith centered on the Mystery of Christ—could mystagogy reappear as a realistic pastoral practice.\(^{100}\)

As noted earlier in the chapter, in 1974 the Catholic church issued the *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* (R.C.I.A.) as the official process for entrance into the community of faith. The R.C.I.A. was modeled upon the church’s primitive initiation procedure with certain adaptations made to accommodate contemporary needs.\(^{101}\) The R.C.I.A. restored “a vision of Christian community embraced by the early church, the vision of a people with conversion as its primary focus, the faith community as its context, and discipleship as its goal.”\(^{102}\) Consistent with the patristic notion of mystagogy as the perpetual initiation into the depths of Christ’s mystery, the R.C.I.A. recognizes that the “whole community needs to be renewed.”\(^{103}\) Initiation is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful. By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the Paschal Mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously.\(^{104}\)

Today, mystagogy is the last formal stage of the R.C.I.A., a period of instruction following the formation and initiation of catechumens into the church that spans up to fifty days and which involves the newly baptized, their sponsors, and (ideally) the entire

\(^{100}\) Regan, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

\(^{101}\) Yarnold, *op. cit.*, p. 2.


\(^{103}\) Ibid.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., (This quote referenced in McBrien is from the official text of the RCIA.)
parish community. The official text of the R.C.I.A. states that mystagogy is a “time for deepening the Christian experience, for spiritual growth, and for entering more fully into the life and unity of the community. . . . [As] the term ‘mystagogy’ suggests, [neophytes are] introduced into a fuller and more effective understanding of mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received.”\textsuperscript{105} Mystagogy explains “how the new Christian is to live the new life into which he or she has been initiated,”\textsuperscript{106} empowering them “to draw from their sacramental experience a new sense of the faith, the church, and the world,”\textsuperscript{107} so that they may begin to see “the connections between their lives, liturgy, and the Christian tradition.”\textsuperscript{108}

However, while sincere efforts have been made to bring to the fore the importance of an ongoing mystagogy for all the baptized—efforts reflected, for instance, in the texts referenced in this chapter—mystagogy remains a fairly marginalized concept and practice in the church today. Here three reasons might be suggested as to why Catholics remain unfamiliar with the term and function of mystagogy. First, while conversions to the faith are common enough, the average parish will not name its post-catechumenate instruction “mystagogy” as such, perhaps out of fear of confusion over its verbal opacity. Second, there is widespread inconsistency in implementing programs of post-baptismal catechesis.


\textsuperscript{106} “Mystagogy,” in McBrein, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 899.


at the local church level. Some parishes take great pains to do it well; others might not have the pastoral resources or personnel to make it very effective; still others simply have very few converts from year to year. Probably the greatest obstacle to effective mystagogy is the (misguided) notion that the initiation rite constitutes something of a graduation exercise: there is no need to continue with instruction after the “commencement” at the Easter Vigil Mass. In this case, the onus is on the neophytes and their sponsors to commit to the full program of initiation, mystagogy included. And third, in the realm of academic theology, although important studies have been published about mystagogy the tradition never became a mainstream topic in systematics and it remains a fairly minor, though clearly important, area in patrology and liturgical theology. Thus, despite the clarion call by some for a renewal of mystagogy and an expansion of its meaning, in name and application it gets little exposure in the Church today.

Conclusion

The first three chapters of this dissertation were concerned with the question of how the Catholic church, and Catholic theology in particular, has made sense of film in relation to itself. It was concluded that while the merits of the existing attempts to link Catholic faith and film are many, a more comprehensive theological study of their relationship needs to be made. This dissertation has proposed that “mystagogy” holds great promise among the possible interpretive concepts available to theology for understanding the role of film vis-à-vis Christian faith. To show the strength of this proposal it was necessary to first lay hold of the meaning of mystagogy in Christian
history from antiquity to the present. To this end, the present chapter has attempted an accurate précis of the concept and practice of mystagogy, including its: (a) placement in the ancient Christian initiation rites; (b) homiletic form; (c) poetic and interpretive character (typological methodology); and (d) pastoral and theological nature. The progenitors of mystagogy were pastors who saw in their flock living evidence that initiation into the economy of salvation through communion with Jesus Christ and the church had engendered deep emotions, wonderment, and many questions. They recognized the need for a post-baptismal forum where the experience of initiation could be explained in such a way that sustained the sense of awe inspired by the rites (mysteria). Such a form of instruction would complement the more conceptual type of catechesis they underwent prior to their initiation. Christian mystagogy developed as a form of homiletic instruction that intended to lead converts toward an increased affective rather than strictly intellectual understanding of their baptism. The objective of mystagogical catechesis was to magnify the feelings of amazement, privilege, and reverence stirred in neophytes by the power of grace communicated to them through the rites and to lead them to feel intensely Christ’s extravagant love for them:

Now by means of these commemorations and signs that have been performed, we all approach the risen Christ with great delight. We embrace him as joyfully as we can, for we see him risen from the dead and hope ourselves to attain to a share in the resurrection. In the symbols that have been enacted . . . he appears and comes close to us, he is entire in each part and close to each of us to seize and embrace him with all our might and show him whatever love we choose to give . . .

The fathers’ mystagogical homilies disclosed the meanings of the sacraments primarily by way of typology, a method that compared sacramental elements to stories, characters, and metaphors found in both religious and secular writings. As master students of the

gospels and the holy texts of Judaism, and versed in Greek and Roman oratory and mythology, patristic bishops knew the power of the poetic integration of word and image. They were trained in rhetoric, not logic. What mattered to them was not clever argumentation; rather, it was the emotive capacity the poetic word had to set aflame the hearts of listeners and lead them to really experience the divine mystery into which their lives were now immersed. Bishops had to draw deeply from their poetic sensibilities to find language and images appropriate enough to cast light on the limitless depths to which the sacraments give access and to accommodate their sermons to the circumstances and abilities of local church audiences. Because stories communicate ideas and emotions in ways that a strict apologetics cannot, the catechetical strategy of mystagogy was a critical use of both ecclesial and extra-ecclesial narratives and experiences to help interpret Christian narrative and experience analogically. What justified the fathers’ borrowing from non-Christian sources to teach the gospel was finally their belief that in the Incarnation, God was forever united to the world and to God’s creatures. The divine plan of redemption had been disclosed in creation and history through the advent of God’s Logos in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, the Incarnation was the ultimate criterion for the inculturation of Christian belief and the doctrinal precondition for the fathers’ critical search for intimations of ultimate truth in the philosophy and poetry of their age. God had entered the world so completely that any barrier between sacred and secular was forever vanquished. Their faith that God (Mystery) was enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth permitted the bishops to scan creation and human history for intimations of the truth of life that they believed was manifested fully in God’s incarnation.\footnote{The fact of the incarnation makes the rise of Christian art virtually inevitable. That God had...} And the gospel was the hermeneutical canon, the normative justifying...
source of discernment, for their evaluation of which secular sources were in continuity with Christ’s message and which were not. Mystagogy was a specialized theological method, one that introduced communicants to the depths of the mystery of Christ not by intellectual speculation but by interpreting the visible symbols of the sacraments in a way that disclosed their hidden meanings and in so doing aroused in communicants feelings of the numinous and inspired commitment to discipleship and service. Thus, mystagogy materialized through a poetic catechesis—a compelling integration of rhetoric and theology. It followed the logic that instead of “starting from doctrine, one may start from experience. Instead of beginning outside the Mystery, with the likelihood of never really penetrating it in a salvific way, one can start from inside the Mystery, through experience. As Cyril of Jerusalem said in his first mystagogical homily, ‘seeing is far more persuasive than hearing.”

Theologians of every age are challenged to interpret the Christian message for the people and culture in which they live and of disclosing in turn how the gospel itself—which is to say the person and message of Jesus Christ—interprets the people and culture of every age. In antiquity, great apologetic efforts were taken by the fathers to make Christian teaching intelligible, credible, and accessible to those they were evangelizing and to interlocutors who exacted a defense of the faith. As an institution of Christian initiation, mystagogy developed within this matrix. The next chapter looks to see how the matrix of contemporary transcendental theology can serve to develop mystagogy for today’s church.

revealed himself definitively through a human being meant henceforth true belief about the divine could be expressed in works of art.” Aidan Nichols, The Shape of Catholic Theology, op. cit., p. 189.

111 Regan, op. cit., p. 129.
CHAPTER 5

Introduction

With this chapter we come to heart of the dissertation as a project in systematic theology, one that will explore in particular how the theology of Karl Rahner (1904 – 1984) contributes important resources for a Roman Catholic interpretation of film. However, before introducing these resources and then applying them to the question of the relationship between theology and film, it is worth taking stock of what has been accomplished so far and what contribution the present chapter hopes to make to the conversation.

So far the dissertation has analyzed elements of the fresh “field” of academic research—“theology and film”—that has been shaped by a community of scholars, all from different places and perspectives. As with any new and unfolding tract of theological study, maintenance and upgrading are required if its fruits are to remain wholesome and its perimeter to expand. The first three chapters provided a topography of this field’s current features and contours—a “lay of the land,” as it were—first by tracing the genealogy of ecclesiastical teaching about film and then analyzing pioneering Catholic monographs that explore film from specific theological perspectives. As demonstrated, these Roman Catholic-based approaches held a largely positive estimation of the cinema, commending it for its artistry and encouraging the church to engage it critically, for the sake of evangelism, theology, and pastoral practice. Overall, the magisterium and the individual Catholic authors agreed that while theology and film are formally distinct enterprises, they are relatable, mutually informative, and their relationship is crucial for today’s church. The initial chapters of the dissertation
contextualized our project and highlighted important existing theories about Catholic theology and film.

They also provided starting points for further development of the area. For instance, the exposition uncovered a major shortcoming in existing Catholic teaching on the cinema. Although these writings are linked by virtue of their Catholic identity, the particular significance of that identity went largely unspecified in the texts themselves, leaving the common thread connecting them implicit and Catholic teaching about film on the whole disjointed. Much of the literature operates on the presupposition that a relationship or “dialogue” between theology and a non-Christian source like film is already justifiable according to principles in the Catholic tradition. However true this presupposition might be, from the perspective of systematic theology it needs exposition so as to make clear the foundations within the tradition that justify theology’s turn to film. A preliminary step is therefore needed, one which attends to the theoretical conditions of possibility for any relationship between theology and film. This fifth chapter represents one attempt to find within the Catholic theological tradition the resources for building a more theoretically comprehensive model of exchange between theology and film. At the very minimum, what is needed is an approach that is (i) rooted in tradition and the teachings of the Vatican on film; (ii) broad enough to encompass elements of existing Catholic approaches; (iii) able to identify the diagnostic character of “Catholic” interpretations of film; and (iv) demonstrative of the a priori conditions for the possibility of correlation between theology and film. With Rahner as our guide the chapter attempts to disclose theological sources that authenticate engagement between theology and cinema so that we may reflect more consistently and meaningfully on
particular films from the standpoint of Christian principles. Thus, it is hoped that the criteria established herein will provide theoretical support to the magisterium’s pronouncements and to other existing Catholic approaches to cinema. It is further hoped that the chapter helps bring to the fore a greater sense of the importance film holds for theology, catechesis, preaching, and other pastoral initiatives.

Based on Rahner’s recovery and adaptation of mystagogy for contemporary theology and spirituality, the chapter presents the thesis that film is a *locus mystagogicus*. As will be explicated, the thesis suggests that film has the great potential to be both a source for theology’s critical engagement and a mode of theology in itself. The model of film as a locus of mystagogy has two interrelated ideas. First, film is a medium of art and culture, independent of the church, that theology can approach in order to aid its inherent mystagogical task of relating experience and Christian doctrine. Film is a point of reference, a cultural *topos*, artistically descriptive of the anthropology presupposed by doctrine, that theology can engage as part of its mission to lead people into a greater perception of their experience of God. According to Rahner, theology must present church teaching in a way that organically relates it to common human experiences by demonstrating points of contact between the two. Toward this end, theology can turn to movies, not merely as object lessons for its own principles, but as unique expressions—conveyed, as they are, more in narrative and image than concept and word—of the human quest for knowledge, love, and meaning. In accordance with the directives of the Second Vatican Council, theology needs to actively engage the world into which the gospel has been delivered. Since film discloses particular interpretations of the world and broadcasts these to countless people, it is a crucial channel for theology’s engagement; it
demands an at once generous and critical hearing. If theology is to awaken and aid the process of the deepening of faith, it must do so with a concrete knowledge of the world in which its addressees are immersed. Toward this end it has a two-fold responsibility: “to learn better to read the world along with the gospel—to hear more clearly the questions the world is asking and to provoke the world to ask new questions. This is the essence of Christian theology, not merely the study of scripture text but of worldly context. Theology always demands an intimate familiarity with both.”¹ Thus, the first idea of the thesis is that film enlarges theology’s sensibilities and capabilities.

Second, if theology, as Rahner argues, is understood to be “the total and conscious self-expression of the human being, insofar as this self-expression arises out of God’s self-communication to us through grace,”² then film, as one form of human self-expression, can constitute a legitimate mode of theology. Specifically, film operates as a mode of “mystagogical theology” when it initiates people into the mystery element of their lives in ways that theology operating at a conceptual level cannot.³ Our direct cinematic experiences, even prior to explicit reflection and analysis, can serve to open us to mystery. When film leads people to a greater awareness of the religious dimension present in their concrete experiences it operates mystagogically and can serve to place us on the threshold of a genuine act of faith in God. Discernment is needed here, however,


³ This reading of mystagogy is an extension of the kind practiced in the early church. Rahner’s interpretation of mystagogy for contemporary theology represents a movement beyond, though never detached from, a liturgical setting—the locus of the fathers’ mystagogy. We will in due course present the grounds for Rahner’s adaptation.
since what constitutes film’s “openness to mystery” and its possible disclosure of genuine “religious experience” needs explication, and film itself cannot be expected to provide such an interpretation. In turning to cinema, theologians must become mystagogues and learn to read its symbols in film in light of Christian symbols. Within the illuminating light of the gospel, theologians should be capable of perceiving genuine religious phenomena in film, a dimension that often remains latent even to filmmakers. Theological engagement of film, however, is not an end in itself: For the theologian-cum-mystagogue, disclosing the religious dimension in film serves as a path to faith. Thus, the second idea of the thesis is that *theology enlarges film’s capabilities*.

If film stands today as an irreplaceable examiner of life and death, a nonconceptual, compelling, and sensuous form of human self-expression capable of revealing the (often implicit) desire for faith in human experience, then it is a medium that theology cannot fail to reference for its own life. If theology’s mission is to serve the preaching of the church and the spirituality of believers, then when believers (and non-believers) find their own search for knowledge and love reflected in cinema, then it is a text that theology cannot afford to neglect. The question this poses for systematic theology concerns the preconditions of theology’s engagement with film. How can a secular form of aesthetic experience be a source for theological inquiry? To answer this particular query, we must consider it in terms of a wider concern: On what doctrinal grounds is theology, whose object is God as God is revealed to us, justified in turning to a non-Christian source such as film for sustained reflection? This chapter finds the means for answering this question in Karl Rahner’s insistence that theology turn to human experience as a primary theological source. If, again, theology is the total and conscious
self-expression of the human person that originates in God’s own self-communication as grace, then what needs clarification is just how film “arises” out of grace (at least potentially) and can be a source for theological engagement as well as constitute a legitimate mode of theology in itself. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to provide ample justification for theology’s turn to film as a potential means to faith—that is, a source for and of mystagogy.

Using mystagogy as the interpretive key to understanding the ultimate aim of Rahner’s thought, this chapter attempts to establish the theoretical warrants for the claim that film is a legitimate and crucial locus mystagogicus upon the interrelated aspects of his fundamental theology. For Rahner, fundamental theology studies that basic principle which gives rise to Christianity and therefore to all forms of theology: the revelation of God “who communicates and discloses himself is the foundation and principle and likewise the all-embracing truth which takes in all elements of revelation and hence all theological disciplines.”

Fundamental theology’s foremost concern is revelation “as the origin and heuristic principle and overriding unity” of theology. It asks: What is revelation and how does it appear? How is it communicated and how can it be understood? What are its structures and categories?

In Rahner’s view, fundamental theology must maintain its traditional apologetic dimension in its effort to explain the foundational themes of Christianity (revelation, Jesus Christ, faith, church). However, it cannot begin with an exposition of these doctrines. It must posit the reasonableness of belief in God and the credibility of faith in

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5 Ibid.
Christ by beginning with an investigation of the transcendental and historical conditions of human life that make openness to revelation and reception of the divine word of God in faith possible: the revelation that doctrine interprets and expresses. Fundamental theology “may be described as a transcendental theology, inasmuch as it considers the nature and event of revelation as such, prior to all special theology or branches of theology.”

Rahner’s theology commences with an inquiry into the structures of human experience that render people open to and capable of receiving divine revelation. His interest is in how revelation, “which as God’s word is beyond space and time, can take place in space and time; how revelation, which does not stem from the mind and words of men, can still be word and event for men and their minds and their capacities as being of this world and of history.” Grounded in the fact of revelation, Rahner’s fundamental theology, therefore, turns to anthropology, to human experience, as a primary theological source.

This chapter builds upon this principle by suggesting that film, a secular artistic vehicle of self-expression and reflection on human experience, is a legitimate and fecund locus mystagogicus for leading people to a greater depth of faith. The chapter will follow the transcendental method and concepts (anthropology, transcendence, grace, revelation, supernatural existential, symbol) by which Rahner articulates his fundamental theology of the religious experience of God. Rahner’s approach leads us to see that theology and

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 370.

8 It is, of course, impossible within the parameters of a single dissertation chapter to do full justice to these themes as Rahner relates them. We must be content to give a condensed, yet still precise, expression to the main theoretical lines of these subjects. It may be helpful to present from the start a
film, while distinct, are already related and can be mutually illuminating. It is his notion of mystagogy and its role in fundamental theology that will provide the dynamic link in construing theology’s relationship to film and vice versa.

Rahner may at first appear to be an odd choice as a resource for our thesis. He never wrote about film directly, nor is he renowned for his aesthetic writings. Furthermore, specifying what Rahner means by mystagogy with precision is not a simple assignment. Indeed, the rationale for synthesizing sources on early mystagogy and laying down its key historical and theological foundations in the fourth chapter of the dissertation was to provide background and context for this chapter’s investigation of mystagogy as Rahner interprets and adapts the tradition in relation to theology and the arts. Yet mystagogy was not a topic about which Rahner developed a full-fledged theory or even a single, normative definition. He did not establish his notion of mystagogy explicitly on its Christian prototype, and so he never needed to explain the

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9 Though it should be noted that in the past decade his aesthetic writings have received greater scholarly appreciation.

10 Aiden Nichols gives further rationale for the need for our analysis of mystagogy in chapter three. He writes that whereas theologians have the task “to repossess the inheritance of the past in a distinctively modern way and [reorganize] it on a basis that seems to us intellectually satisfying and pastorally helpful, we cannot do this without a rich and detailed knowledge of the inheritance” (Aidan Nichols, The Shape of Catholic Theology. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, pp. 198-199).
continuities and differences between the ancient form and his own extrapolation. Nor do his reflections on mystagogy refer directly to the Catholic church’s reinstallation of the tradition as part of the R.C.I.A. Yet what Rahner does write on the subject suggests that it is not merely one of the myriad theological matters upon which he reflects: it is the hidden agenda behind all of his theological musings. Rahner’s mystagogy is a blend of continuity and innovation and it represents a significant evolution in its meaning and intention for contemporary theology.

It is clear from Rahner’s writings and interviews that his primary concern as a theologian, pastor, and poet is to open people to the revealed reality that their lives are saturated with the mystery of God’s forgiving and saving grace even amid the clamor, monotony, and anxiety that often characterize our age. This is nothing less than a mystagogical sensibility, one discernable even in his most scientifically rigorous reflections. He affirmed this appraisal of his theological orientation even while admitting that mystagogy remained an underdeveloped facet of his thought. In the places Rahner uses the term it appears that he assumes readers are familiar with at least the basic contours of his overall theology and can deduce his extrapolation of ancient Christian mystagogy. That is to say, he relates mystagogy through and not in addition to the categories of his fundamental theology by which he outlines the logic of Christianity,

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11 Similarities and differences between historical mystagogy and Rahner’s more speculative interpretation will be noted along the way in this chapter. However, it should be clarified from the beginning that the chapter is not a comparative study of these understandings.

12 See Karl Rahner, “Introduction,” in James Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980, pp. ix-x. This work, which represents the most comprehensive account of Rahner’s mystagogy, is one we shall reference frequently throughout our study. Hereafter, reference to this text will be abbreviated *Apologetics*. 
gives a reasonable basis for religious belief, and demonstrates how the doctrines of faith are inherently interconnected.

The chapter discusses Rahner’s conception of the nature and purpose of theology, including the cultural situation to which his retrieval of mystagogy attempts to respond and to which, as our argument suggests, film can serve to complement. Here we will present an overview of Rahner’s theological anthropology and the method by which he analyzes the content of Christian faith in light of the a priori transcendental structures of human experience, structures that by grace incline people toward divine revelation and prepare them for the knowledge of and assent to the truths of faith.\(^{13}\) In short, the chapter lays down the theoretical foundations for Rahner’s mystagogy, and, in so doing, defines with more precision the theological presuppositions underlying the Catholic literature on film studied earlier.

This then paves the way for a mystagogical practicum in the sixth and final chapter of the dissertation, which elucidates Rahner’s reflections on poetry and the arts in conjunction with two films.\(^{14}\) His writings on theological aesthetics demonstrate that for him the arts hold tremendous potential as mystagogical loci. As will be shown, Rahner’s teaching on transcendence is the conceptual link between these two chapters, since human transcendentality is the condition for the underlying unity he intuits between theology and the arts. Thus, our film analyses will constitute one way in which theology


\(^{14}\) I am grateful for the work of theologian Gesa Thiessen whose research into the relationship between theology and art has helped frame the approach this dissertation is taking toward cinema. Personal correspondence with Dr. Thiessen in the early stage of research for this dissertation helped confirm that my initial thoughts about Rahner’s “aesthetics” were sound regarding his importance for relating theology and film. Her essay on Rahner’s aesthetics in the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* summarizes this importance.
can become mystagogical. Again, while Rahner never wrote directly on the topic of cinema, the insights he develops in his essays on poetry and the arts, when understood within the wider framework of his systematic theology, are transferable to film, *mutatis mutandis*, and support the thesis that film is a locus of mystagogy.

Finally, myriad attempts have been made to comprehend the integrated elements that make up the whole of Rahner’s theology. These testify to the intricacy of Rahner’s thought, his intensity as a theologian, and to his sensitivity as a pastor and writer. They also indicate the multi-faceted richness of his writings: after all, so many people seem to want to learn from him, including those critical of his viewpoints. It should be clarified from the start that the chapter does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of Rahner’s fundamental theology, which is nevertheless an impossibility within the parameters of a single dissertation chapter. The chapter relies on Rahner’s own literature as well as on the interpretive work done already on many fronts by his students. It is not our intention to add to the galaxy of interpretive literature on Rahner. Here, we are attempting to construct an argument, namely that film is a source for and of a specific form of theology.

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16 The countless interpretations of Rahnerian theology available today begs the question of whether anything more and original can be said about it. Whereas explications and evaluations of the major themes of his theology made by the brightest of his first and second generation students provided deep insight into his thought, what one finds more often today are studies (such as this dissertation) that are practical applications of Rahner’s ideas to specific scholarly problems and pastoral situations. These tertiary studies can be said to continue the task of interpreting Rahner’s theology as they add at times fresh variations on conventional themes. Thus, the task of interpreting and applying Rahner’s theology to the questions of the church today remains incomplete. See James Bacik, “Is Rahner Obsolete? What his Critics Get Wrong,” in *Commonweal*, Jan. 28, 2005, p. 19.
called mystagogy, and we are turning to Rahner because we feel he has very useful tools that can assist in setting down foundations for Catholic interpretations of film. The idea here is to connect certain elements in his thought that substantiate the thesis that film is a locus mystagogicus.\textsuperscript{17}

It should also be made clear that the chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive commentary on Rahner’s mystagogy. That project (happily, for us) has already been done, or at least proficiently started, by James Bacik in his volume \textit{Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy According to Karl Rahner}. Bacik’s pioneering and insightful study, to which Rahner gave his imprimatur, gets closer than anyone to a thoroughgoing interpretation of Rahner’s mystagogy. It should come as no surprise that we will follow Bacik as an important guide throughout the chapter. For all of its comprehensive scope, however, Bacik’s analysis abbreviates elements that influenced Rahner’s mystagogy. For instance, he forgoes discussion of the significance Ignatian spirituality has on Rahner’s mystagogy and takes little account of Rahner’s own homilies and mystical writings. More importantly for our purposes is the fact that Bacik only hints at the mystagogical role Rahner believed the arts play in and for theology.\textsuperscript{18} The next chapter attempts in part to remedy this latter omission.

Because Rahner taught his students to “be fearless in seeking truth from any human quarter,”\textsuperscript{19} he “would be both complimented and complemented were his students

\textsuperscript{17} Limitations of this theory as well as certain criticisms of Rahner’s theology will to a certain extent be vetted in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{18} Bacik’s later text, \textit{Catholic Spirituality: Its History and Challenges} (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2002) takes into greater account Rahner’s homilies and writings on spirituality \textit{vis-à-vis} his mystagogy.

to do as he himself did, by trying in every imaginable, conceivable, and responsible way to continue and expand his dialogue with contemporary philosophy, theology, and science.”20 If we add “dialogue with the arts” to this list, then the aim of this chapter and the next is to take up Rahner’s challenge by gaining perspective on the relationship he solders between theology and the arts and drawing out the implications of their communion for a more comprehensive Catholic approach to film. In arguing the theory that film is a crucial cultural source for and of mystagogy and a vibrant dialogue partner with theology as a whole, this penultimate chapter provides a firmer theoretical basis for a Roman Catholic-based interpretation of film. It overcomes some of the lacunae in existing Catholic literature on film and provides a necessary foundation for Rahner’s teaching on theology and the arts as well as the film analyses in the final chapter.

**Recovery and Adaptation of Mystagogy**

To understand what of early Christian mystagogy Rahner retrieves and what modifications he makes to it for modern theology and church life, it is necessary to return briefly to our discussion of the early practice and fill out more of how the fathers justified their turn to Greek cultural sources both in their mystagogical sermons and in their theologies overall. We recall that Christian *mystagogia* (“immersion into the mysteries”) was a practice associated primarily with the ancient custom of local bishops spending Easter week with new converts in order to explain the details of their initiation experience and thereby illuminate the depths of the truths professed at baptism. This form of

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preaching, called “mystagogical catechesis,” consisted of a series of homilies whereby the church fathers disclosed the hidden meanings of sacramental symbols and actions by correlating them with familiar biblical and pagan literary stories and characters. Their mystagogical sermons disclosed God’s loving plan of salvation in evocative, lyrical ways rather than through concepts or discursive reasoning. The fact that patristic mystagogy tended to be more emotive than analytic underscores the value the fathers placed on experience and imagination in educating converts about the multiple meanings of Christian symbols and helping them “savor” the mystery of Christ’s love communicated to them in baptism.

The previous chapter spoke of the “magnanimity” of the fathers in their turning to Greek culture for elements used to teach Christian faith. With regard to mystagogy, we analyzed several instances when the fathers turned to Greek philosophy and poetry as points of reference for the inculturation of the gospel—sources that could augment the church’s own self-interpretation. Yet on what theological basis did they justify appropriation of the “wisdom of the infidels”? What precedent in the history of the covenantal tradition did they draw upon to warrant the use of outside references? Whereas the fathers did not develop any comprehensive theory justifying their turn to pagan sources, there are some hints in the literature as to the perspectives they held.

Two main positions emerge with respect to how the fathers interpreted the relationship of the church to classical culture. On the one hand, there was absolute rejection. The so-called wisdom of Greek philosophy was in certain fathers’ minds specious because it did not issue from divine revelation. Mixing truth (gospel) with error (philosophy) would lead to the contamination of faith and corruption of the soul.
Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 240), a proponent of this view, believed that in Christ the very wisdom of God had been communicated and entrusted to the church. His oft-quoted questions indicate his repudiation of non-Christian sources: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus, from this perspective, the church has no further need of any knowledge, particularly the kind that comes from reason alone and not the divine Word.

On the other hand, there were advocates of what might be called the cautious discernment of Greek sources. Knowledge of classical Greek culture gave the fathers a language and a logic by which they could present the teachings of Christianity in ways that made sense to the Hellenistic mind. Mystagogues of this order of thinking appropriated cultural elements familiar to their audiences to develop analogies (“types”) linking the established with the new. Well-known symbols from daily life were linked interpretatively to the symbols of the “new” faith in Jesus Christ to show that Christian faith was not altogether foreign or irrelevant to the way of life of their audiences and, more importantly, to illustrate how the revealed, enfleshed truth of Christianity surpasses all attempts at human knowledge. Jesus’ own recourse to (and scrutiny of) the culture of his time gave justification to this approach of cautious discernment, as did the authors of scripture who recorded the faith of the nascent church through symbols drawn from Greek society.

Another way of justifying the use of non-Christian sources is articulated by Origen (c. 185 – c. 254) in his \textit{Letter to Gregory}:

I have desired that with all the power of your innate ability you would apply
yourself, ultimately, to Christianity. I have, for this reason, prayed that you would
accept effectively those things from the philosophy of the Greeks that can serve as
a general education or introduction to Christianity and those things from geometry
and astronomy that are useful for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. .
And indeed Scripture hints at this principle in Exodus, where, with God himself
the person speaking, the children of Israel are told to ask their neighbors and
cohabitants for vessels of silver and gold for clothing (Ex. 11:2 and 12:35).
Having in this way despoiled the Egyptians, they may find material among the
things they have received for the preparation of divine worship.22

Origen presents this analogy from the Old Testament as grounds for the use of secular
ideas and for what he felt was the proper Christian attitude toward Greek philosophy:
“Just as the Hebrew people took property of the Egyptians with them in the exodus, so
God's people are always allowed to use the ‘spoils of the Egyptians’ in borrowing truth
from pagan sources where it may be useful in explicating the meaning of Scripture and
communicating the gospel to pagan inquirers.”23

Justin Martyr (c. 100 – 165) looks at the problem of the inculturation of the gospel
via retrieval of Greek wisdom from the perspective of Logos theology.24 In certain
schools of Greek philosophy it was believed that the divine logos pervades the created
order, particularly the minds of human beings. The task of philosophy is to help develop
people’s intrinsic logos (reason) and thereby assist them in cultivating their connection
with the divine. Building on the Logos theology of John, Justin Martyr appropriates the
expression logos spermatikos in his apologetic works and identifies Christ with the Greek
philosophical concept of logos. He argues that by virtue of their ability to reason all
human beings share in the divine reason. For him, the “generative seeds” of the Logos


24 The idea of the Logos, of course, comes from Greek philosophy.
had been “dropped” everywhere by the Spirit of God, even prior to the incarnation. He believed that the seed had found fertile ground in the Hebrew prophets and certain of the Greek philosophers and grew into forms of inspired wisdom. Whereas the church has the full knowledge of Christ, “others enjoy the presence of the Logos at least in fragmentary ways. Thus, Justin interprets Greek history as a prelude and preliminary to Christ and Christianity.”

In this sense, Plato’s teachings are not contrary to Christ’s but they are not in all respects identical with them. . . . All those writers were able, through the seed of the Logos implanted in them, to see reality [at least] darkly. For it is one thing to have the seed of a thing and to imitate it up to one’s capacity; far different is the thing itself, shared and imitated in virtue of its own grace.

Several other fathers besides Justin, men like Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Leo the Great, also believed that God had planted these seeds to ready the world for the incarnation of the Word. They sought to identify such intimations of the Word—fragments, as it were, of meaning and truth—and judge their value against the norms of Christian revelation. They argued persuasively that there are semina verbi in the Hellenistic culture, and they took it in hand to identify them. From there they moved on to the all-important work of both analyzing the degree to which these semina verbi required purification in the light of the gospel . . .

The church fathers believed there were limits to where such indications of God’s wisdom could be perceived. Whereas they discerned the semina verbi in elements of Greek philosophy and poetry, as evidenced by their many references to Plato and Homer,

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26 From Justin, Second Apology, 13, quoted in ibid.

to their minds no element of pagan religion could reflect the wisdom of God. To them, worship of false gods precluded the Spirit’s scattering of seed. In the same vein, not all Greek philosophy and poetry imparted the truth of God, and the fathers roundly attacked those ideas perceived, through the lens of the gospel, as folly. Still, with faith that Christ, the Logos-made-flesh, had redeemed the world through his death and resurrection, the fathers felt vindicated in laying claim to all truth, even in seed form. Old Testament and Greek philosophical symbols could therefore be safely appropriated for their theological tracts and mystagogical sermons—seeds that would find their full flowering only in the incarnation of truth, Jesus Christ. Thus, intimations of the Spirit’s presence in these non-Christian sources could legitimately be called a path to faith.

In turning now to see why and how Karl Rahner recovered the tradition of mystagogy for contemporary theology and then building our thesis upon that model, we will need to bear in mind this question of the justification of secular, non-Christian sources. Like the church fathers before him, Rahner’s mystagogy also involves a turn to the “secular” world and to non-Christian sources. For him, common human experience is a theological source since it is the locus for the offer of God’s grace and therefore the place where theology must discern God’s mysterious presence. Since it is upon Rahner’s mystagogy that our thesis is founded, part of the investigative agenda for our systematic study into the theoretical conditions that make possible the engagement of theology and film will be an inquiry into how he justifies the “turn to the subject.” This will provide rational grounds for our own turn to a secular source—film—and lead the way to the discernment of film in the final chapter.
We recall that the formal practice of mystagogy fell into virtual obsolescence when the adult catechumenate disappeared, only to be reinstituted after the Second Vatican Council, healing a 1,500-year-long rupture and helping to reunite spirituality, theology, worship, and pastoral action.\footnote{David Regan, Experience the Mystery, Pastoral Possibilities for Christian Mystagogy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 6. Since the Second Vatican Council, the church has used Justin Martyr’s language of logos spermatikos with regard to non-Christian religions to indicate that the Catholic church must respect whatever is “true and holy” in these traditions. The notion of “preparation has been much used by the magisterium after Vatican II, indicating the semina Verbi, sown by the Spirit in the rites, thought and cultures, which are meant (so the magisterium has held) to mature in Christ (Redemptoris missio, #29). In the past, it was with considerably hasty readiness that ‘errors and falsehoods’ were seen in other religious traditions (i.e. in non-Christian religions). Now theological discernment seeks with reverence, attentiveness and a more irenic spirit to discover those things which ‘the Spirit sows in the non-Christian religions’—seeds implanted by the Holy Spirit which Pope John Paul II says, take on ‘the role of preparatio evangelica’” (Catalino G. Arévalo, S.J., “Discussion on Trinitarian Theology,” presentation given to the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, Manila, Philippines, January 29, 2002. See: \<http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2002-01/29-999999/02TriING.html> (last accessed 2/16/10)). Our concern in this chapter is not so much with how the seeds of the Word can be discerned in the religions of the world, but rather with the justification Rahner gives for contemporary theology’s turn to common human experience. This, in fact, is the starting point for Rahner’s discussion of his theory of the “anonymous Christian” and the possibility of salvation outside explicit Christianity.\footnote{Ibid., p. 33.} Rahner’s contribution is primarily in the second area. Indeed, it was Rahner who, “in the years immediately following on Vatican II, first gave currency to the revived notion of mystagogy (albeit timidly as some would have it).”\footnote{Ibid., p. 33.} Mysticagogy was recovered by the church in three forms: (a) mystagogy as part of liturgical renewal (the R.C.I.A.); (b) the mystagogy of experience as a pastoral response for Christians living in an increasingly secular world; (c) and the mystagogy of mysticism or spiritual theology.\footnote{David Regan, ibid., p. 28.} Regan’s categories should not be interpreted as hard and fast designations. While distinctions among them can be made, these forms of mystagogy are interconnected by virtue of the fact that an integrated Christian life involves elements of each. Regan opines that it “does seem that Rahner lost heart in the future of his revival of the notion and language of mystagogy: his later works do not reveal any stress on the expression” (ibid., p. 38, n.17). While it is true that Rahner did not develop his notion of mystagogy in any systematic way and it remains on the conceptual periphery of his thought, we are justified in taking some exception with Regan’s assessment since, as this chapter expounds, it is for the sake of mystagogy that Rahner became a public theologian and his entire methodology of leading people to Christian faith. Moreover, in one of his late essays, “Theology and the Arts” (1982), Rahner links theology and the arts through the concept of mystagogy. Regan does not reference this article in his volume (published in 1994).\footnote{Ibid., p. 33.}}
believed was a “crisis” afflicting the church. He admits that today theology faces a
difficult, if not historically unique, situation where the seeming absence, silence, and
distance of God is more apparent than ever before and where religious “faith” is often
considered archaic, incredible, and irrelevant. This situation requires that theology think
hard about its fundamental responsibilities and modes of operation. And given the fact
that Catholic Christianity has a mandate to engage the world, theology cannot simply
circle its wagons and ignore the situation. Nor can it cave in altogether and allow
culture alone to determine the issues it must address and the methods by which it must
address them. Rahner is convinced the Christian church has in its tradition the wisdom
and resources needed to help overcome this crisis. He therefore rereads the tradition with
this contemporary problem in mind and reintroduces mystagogy into Catholic theology
and spirituality in a way that maintains elements of patristic mystagogy but also broadens
its scope beyond what the fathers had envisioned.

It is clear that Rahner’s sense of mystagogy has its roots deep in the tradition of
the fathers, men “very conscious of the ecclesial, political or social position of their
hearers.” Like them, Rahner takes stock of the ecclesial situation of his own time and
sees “modern Christians, long baptized, and [others] doubting, grieving, seeking” and
living in environments often hostile to religious faith. He admits that the church finds
itself in a “deep crisis because of the rethinking required in order to attune itself to the
historical situation and the needs of the hour.”

31 Cf. our analysis of Gaudium et spes in chapter two of the dissertation.
32 David Regan, ibid., p. 33.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
pastoral challenges of men and women living in a markedly secular society. When Rahner proposes a new style of mystagogy he emphasizes the problem of discovering the Mystery in the changed circumstances of [modern life]. He saw that the crisis which led to the search for such a new mystagogy was bound up in the need for aggiornamento or renewal in the church, a church which was failing to provide pastoral care relevant to the needs of contemporary men and women.\textsuperscript{35}

Whereas early mystagogy articulated the mystery dimension of the sacraments, Rahner understands mystagogy to be that element in theology that seeks to disclose the mystery dimension implicit in all human experience so that Christian doctrines can be related to genuine human concerns. Rahner’s notion of mystagogy as the interpretation of mystery is linked to his famous dictum that the “devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”\textsuperscript{36} He means that Christians today will either have “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of existence,”\textsuperscript{37} or they will cease to have any meaningful faith. To this end, the task of theology is to equip people with tools to help them correctly discern the genuine experience of God from within their ordinary lives. Knowledge of what consists of an experience of God increases people’s consciousness that they are oriented toward Holy Mystery and prepares them for the gospel annunciation that this mystery is enfleshed in the person and message of Jesus Christ. A heightened awareness of the

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 86.


transcendental experiences that open up to this mystery can serve to plunge people deeper into this experience and lead them to believe in its blessedness.

For Rahner, mystagogy, or the mystagogical task of theology, involves first awakening people to the ever-present but often undisclosed sense of mystery in everyday life as a foundation for their appropriation of the gospel.  

38 Mystagogy is a dimension of theology, one that attempts to “sharpen people’s perception of the mystery that surrounds them, to encourage a type of meditative thinking . . . and to put people on alert for the echoes of the infinite in their ordinary experience.”  

39 Theology’s mystagogical responsibility is to equip people with the resources needed to interpret their deeper experiences with as much accuracy as possible so as to lead them to find in experience and relationships the intimations of an all-encompassing, loving mystery—a mystery to which the church gives explicit testimony in doctrine and doxology. Mystagogy serves as a prerequisite for the reception and understanding of Christian teaching and is thus a path to a more profound experience of faith.

Rahner’s emphasis on mystagogy as an interpretive process that initiates people into a deeper awareness of God’s mysterious presence has kinship with the mystagogy of the church fathers. Like his forbears, Rahner presupposes mystagogy to be an ongoing process in the lives of Christians and does not only serve a provisional liturgical function.  

40 Therefore, his retrieval is less a departure from the patristic understanding


40 Recall that while patristic mystagogy was directed to neophytes, it was intended to promote the growth in faith of the entire community.
than an extension of its meaning to meet the needs of contemporary believers. For Rahner,

personal experience of the transcendental dimension of life is a necessity if the individual is to be a Christian in that world. For this personal experience a wise and skilled guide is necessary. Rahner spells out a spirituality for contemporary men and women of the First World . . . . Well versed in patristic lore, and perhaps precisely because of his familiarity with the Fathers, Rahner can transpose the early Christian practice of mystagogy into a modern key to make it relevant to the pastoral needs of his country and his time.41

Lest we misinterpret Rahner’s transposition of mystagogy from a liturgical matrix to his own Catholic systematic theology, it is important to indicate why such a move is justifiable. There are at least two reasons. First is the precedent of flexibility in the tradition itself. Although mystagogy was a universal liturgical rubric, it remained highly versatile given that many strands (Christian, Jewish, Greek) came together to form the tradition in the first place and owing to the fact that each “mystagogue” brought unique interpretive talents to bear on his catechesis. Second, Rahner’s theology remains primarily at the service of the preaching of the gospel.42 In his view, theology and preaching and thus mystagogy and liturgy are inseparable. He does not simply extract mystagogy from one sphere and insert it into another. Mystagogy for Rahner is the pastoral-theological effort to initiate persons more deeply into the mystery that pervades

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41 David Regan, ibid., p. 33.

42 Regan offers further justification for Rahner’s appropriation of mystagogy as it flows out of and evolves the patristic notion. He writes that its “wider human, extra-Christian origins entitle us to be freer in our use of the categories of mystagogy than if it had been an exclusively Christian creation. What the Fathers did for pastoral motives, in borrowing an experience-oriented approach to religious initiation, employed by the traditional religions of their time, we may do today when human and religious initiation are once more valued. Mystagogy was not a Christian invention but a borrowing from the worldwide, human practice of initiation. We are not limited to the particular style of borrowing done by our fourth-century predecessors in the art of Christian initiation” (from Regan’s Experience the Mystery: Pastoral Possibilities for Mystagogy, ibid., p. 4). Rahner’s retrieval of mystagogy is in line with what he does throughout his theology. For him, theology “must be so presented that it encourages a genuine dialogue between the best of traditional thought and the exigencies of today” (from Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., Karl Rahner in Dialogue. New York: Crossroad, 1986, p. 22).
their daily lives and so lead them to see that they are encountering the very mystery of God to which Christian doctrine and worship attest. Indeed, if mystagogy involves making explicit one’s immersion into Mystery, then mystagogy is never far away from liturgy in Rahner’s theology, for “God remains the holy One who is really accessible only in worship.”

Mystagogy is in part a process of engendering in people a desire to understand the intrinsic connection between what occurs in their daily lives and the revelation of God to which Christianity bears explicit witness. To this end it must

make use of evocative language in order to disclose mystery effectively. It is a matter, not of indoctrination based on the model of filling an empty container, but of trying to describe the experience of mystery in the hope that the listeners will then discover it in themselves.

Rahner explains that what the church holds as its fundamental beliefs can never be communicated merely by a conceptual indoctrination from without, but is and can basically be experienced through the supernatural grace of God as a reality in us. That does not mean that the linguistic representation and interpretation of the religious experience is not something that has to occur within the church under the supervision of her magisterium.

Conceptual theology, understood as discursive reflection on the teachings of the church, is essential to the task of leading people to Christ via interpretation of revelation. Indeed, theology is “perfectly justified in taking a deep breath and proceeding patiently through the long and arduous reflections of conceptual theology which cannot be expected to lead

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43 A detailed study of the connection between Rahner’s mystagogy and his theological reflections on worship and the sacraments has yet to be written. However, in his volume The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship, Michael Skelley references Rahner’s insistence that people must undergo a mystagogy of discovering the transcendental experience of God in their daily lives as preparation for knowledge of what happens in the liturgy. See Michael Skelley, The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, esp. pp. 74-84.

44 James Bacik, Apologetics, ibid., p. 40.

45 Karl Rahner, Karl Rahner in Dialogue, ibid, p. 328.
immediately to some kind of religious or mystical experience.”

We cannot “deny the power of abstract conceptual thought about God to be deeply beautiful in its own way. When it genuinely mediates personal insight, it can be attractive, elevating, personal, and spiritually engaged—as anyone knows who has been drawn into wonder and prayer by ‘abstract’ theology.”

However, theology cannot privilege speculative language alone if it wishes to speak existentially and in concrete ways about the human encounter with God and relate the gospel to the deepest aspects of people’s lives. Rahner believes that “an awakening, a mystagogy into this original, grace-filled religious experience is today of fundamental importance.” He asserts that one of the consequences and deficiencies of a rationalistic theology working exclusively with “scientific” methods is that theology has lost so much of its poetry. Moreover, theology faces a task especially today which is not new, but has been greatly neglected in recent centuries, namely, that it be in some way a “mystagogical” theology. By this I mean that it must not speak only in abstract concepts about theological questions, but must also introduce people to a real and original experience of the reality being talked about in these concepts.

It is here that Rahner makes explicit the connection he sees between art and mystagogy. He commends the arts for their unique capacity to give careful and vivid expression to the religious experience of the human person, to those depth dimensions of human life that point beyond themselves to the absolute mystery of God. Rahner looks at the possibilities the arts afford theology in its attempt to overcome the contemporary

48 Karl Rahner, Karl Rahner in Dialogue, ibid, p. 328.
49 Ibid.
crisis in the church regarding the disconnect between doctrine and experience. Today, theology faces a task which is not new, but has been greatly neglected in recent centuries, namely that it be in some way a “mystagogical” theology. By this I mean that it must not speak only in abstract concepts about theological questions, but must also introduce people to a real and original experience of the reality being talked about in these concepts. To this extent what I have called “poetic theology” could be understood as one of the ways, although not the only way, of doing this kind of mystagogical theology. Immersion in the arts can serve to “awaken” and thus initiate us into a deeper, more conscious perception of the “mystery dimension” of the everyday in ways that theology operating on a purely theoretical level cannot. Indeed, because theology “must be subjective insofar as it has to speak of faith, hope, and love and about our personal relationship with God,” it must be able to “describe, evoke, and introduce one mystagogically to this personal and spiritual relationship.” Thus, theology facilitated by the arts constitutes a mode of mystagogy.

The thesis that film is a *locus mystagogicus* suggests in part that film can facilitate the disclosure of mystery. When film mediates (thematizes or makes explicit) the human transcendental experience of mystery, it can serve to tune people into that wavelength of mystery that is always present in their lives and yet which too often remains implicit, eclipsed, or wholly ignored. In a form that combines image, sound, movement, and montage, film is capable of “describing” the religious experience of mystery by imaginatively capturing the depth experiences of everyday living, which according to Rahner constitutes the locus of God’s abiding presence in human life. Like theology,

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film operates mystagogically when it points away from itself by leading audiences into awareness of the “more” into which our lives are immersed but that too often remains eclipsed by the pressures and distractions of the day. Film is therefore a mode of mystagogy in so far as it is capable of expressing the spiritual orientation of human beings and reflecting the religious dimension of mystery in life which all people share and yet to which many remain closed. The thesis suggests that theology needs the art of film in part because there are people who are “more in touch with their deepest experience and have a greater ability to verbalize it: the poet and the mystic, for example. Others are in close existential contact with the mystery of life but have very little ability to either reflect on it or verbalize it.”

When theology interprets film, it operates in a mystagogical capacity by revealing those dimensions of human life expressed in film that render us receptive to the experience of God. Since effective mystagogy enables people to “interpret correctly their deeper experiences, to move from a vague awareness of the mystery dimension of their lives to a greater conceptual clarity, to find a proper symbolization of their genuine religious experience,” Christian theology is a necessary partner to film because, as the “science of mystery,” it has the tools to discern and make explicit the religious dimension of film that audiences and even filmmakers often overlook. Cinema needs the specialized language of theology to thematize and clarify the possible transcendental elements present in a film. Theology becomes mystagogical in part when it demonstrates

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how it is that a particular film disposes us to the active presence of God in our lives and prepares us for a deeper (i.e., more explicit) initiation into the experience of God in the act of faith.

From the perspective of Christian theology, film itself is not enough to bring people to the threshold of faith. Film needs the implements of theology to help uncover the religious experience of transcendence toward and into this nameless, mysterious “more.” Mystery needs explication, not in the sense of direct analysis, which as we will see, is quite impossible, but rather in the sense of an amplification of its essence—as the at once inscrutable, knowable, and personal mystery of God. Together, film and theology can prepare people for a more genuine reception of God’s revealed word in their own lives by disclosing the hidden depths of life that are never exhausted by empirical analysis. In collaboration with film scholars, theologians can develop the skills to interpret film in a way that facilitates the process of “awakening” needed to bring people to the threshold of faith. The depths that are there need to be spotlighted and reflected upon, which meditation can lead us to the ultimate mystery that our lives are enfolded in the grace of God.\textsuperscript{55}

Film becomes a mode of mystagogical theology when it prepares us for a greater, more sublime message than film itself could ever reveal. Theologians can turn to film as an aesthetic \textit{praeparatio evangelica}—a “preliminary step before speaking of God and Christian doctrines”\textsuperscript{56}—one that trains our sensibilities for an even deeper contemplation of the mystery of God in faith and worship. Rahner believes that people require not only

\textsuperscript{55} See John Macquarrie, “Forward,” in Bacik, \textit{Apologetics}, \textit{ibid.}, p. xii.

\textsuperscript{56} James Bacik, \textit{Apologetics}, \textit{ibid.}, p. 19.
an intellectual preparation to perceive and receive the word of God; their sensibilities must also be trained. Not only must we be prepared to “hear” God’s word but we must be trained in the “‘sacred, human, and Christian art to learn to see’ with loving eyes if we confess Christ not only as the Word but also as the image of God.”

For Rahner, the arts are irreplaceable modes of self-expression “which cannot be completely translated into verbal statements” and which train us in what he calls the “unity of sensibility,” i.e., development and intensification of the faculties that render us responsive to the presence of the living God in all of our experiences.

An important qualification to the thesis needs to be made. Throughout the dissertation we have been speaking of “theology” and “film” as two enterprises that are distinct in nature and yet relatable on many levels. We have already analyzed a number of ways they can be connected, with this current chapter explicating a Rahnerian approach to their relationship, a method that encompasses, nuances, and supports many of the other Catholic approaches. Whereas the immediate focus of this study concerns the similarities and not the differences between theology and film, a crucial distinction remains: Theology is a science, with a particular mission that it receives from the church of Jesus Christ; film is an artistic medium, one that has what might be deemed a neutral nature. In this sense, the two do not share an equal valence. If the source of Christian theology, as Rahner contends, is an encounter with Jesus Christ, a response in faith to the event of God’s revelation in the incarnation and to the mandate of Jesus Christ to “make

57 Gesa Thiessen, “Karl Rahner: Toward a Theological Aesthetics,” in CCKR, ibid., p. 228.


59 We offer these reflections as a preview of where this chapter is headed. Rahner’s teaching on the arts as well as the “unity of sensibility” will be investigated in the next chapter.
disciples of all nations,” then film cannot immediately be expected to share this mission since it does not arise (again, explicitly) from out of the person and message of Jesus. In this understanding, film does not have as its categorical mission the leading of people to faith in Christ as does theology.

Real theology has as its basis an undistorted hearing of God’s word with a view to salvation, ultimately in the service of salvation itself. . . . Since the word of God to which theology listens is the word which engages the whole man, judging and redeeming him, theology can never be purely “theoretical” science, one that is existentially uninvolved. To be worthy of its “object” and thus become scientific, theology must be meditative and kerygmatic theology. . . . By reason of its reference to faith itself, theology is a practical science in the sense that it is oriented to the realization of hope and love in which an aspect of knowledge is provided that is not possible elsewhere.60

While the same definition cannot be facilely appropriated to film, it should not suggest that film cannot be an explicit form of religious or theological expression that intentionally interprets the gospel and thus shares in theology’s mission to lead people to faith by faith. Indeed, film might lead to doxology; and can even be doxological in itself. Certainly there are filmmakers who profess explicit faith in Jesus through their medium.61

Yet, whereas in the much longer histories of music, poetry, and painting, there are numerous examples of “Christ proclaimed,” de facto this has been rarely done in film.62

The approach to film interpretation for which we are in this chapter laying the theoretical groundwork is one that discerns film theologically for its intimations of grace, a

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61 Still, even in these cases, there is need for a theological interpretation of the film’s symbols of religious expression.

62 This returns us to our discussion of film scholar André Bazin and the question of whether the “explicitly religious” can be presented in film in a way that is both pious and artistic. In the next chapter, we will take note of Rahner’s perspective on this question.
possibility only when theology analyzes film in accordance with the norms of revelation as disclosed in the gospel and dogmatic tradition.

Furthermore, the thesis that film is a *locus mystagogicus*, should not indicate that film itself can initiate us into the religious experience of mystery. While film can profoundly reveal (i.e. interpret, express, disclose, etc.) something of the human orientation to mystery and thus what Rahner calls religious experience, it is not a source of revelation in the strict sense—for only God reveals God. Indeed, neither theology nor the arts initiate us into an experience that is something totally new or alien from our ordinary life, which according to Rahner is always already immersed in the experience of God. As he says, “theological concepts do not make the reality itself present to man from outside of him, but they are rather the expression of what has already been experienced and lived through more originally in the depths of existence.”63 However, this statement must be understood within a broader context where faith is understood to be a supernatural gift from God and is therefore “religious experience.” Theology is the science that “reflects on the act and content of faith in the light of faith.”64 In other words, the “science of faith actually becomes part of the faith (of which critical responsibility is a moment).”65 Thus, the qualification we wish to make is that, whereas film potentially proceeds from faith in Christ and reflects in its own way on the act and content of faith, theology does this explicitly as part of its mission. When film does indeed issue from faith, and when it reflects upon the act and content of faith, however


implicitly (or in Rahner’s language, “anonymously”), it is still informed by and subject to the same explicit norms as theology. In the cases of both theology and film, we will know “by their fruits” whether they proceed authentically from genuine faith. Indeed, theologians are just as capable as filmmakers of sowing \textit{semina perditionis} through their work. Therefore, both require discernment according to the norms of God’s revealed word.

In this section, we have introduced Rahner’s retrieval of the mystagogy of the fathers (an action of \textit{ressourcement}) and begun to discuss the adaptations he makes to it in relation to the needs of the church and contemporary theology (an action of \textit{aggiornamento}). The remainder of the chapter will more substantially explore the relationship of Rahner’s mystagogy to his theological method as a ground and support for our thesis that movies are legitimate theological sources, and that they can “find a place” in Catholic theology as \textit{loci mystagogici}. As with any source, one must ask whether it can be trusted and verified. We have discussed in some measure earlier in the dissertation how film can be a source of for theology. But \textit{on what grounds} can it be called a legitimate theological source since it does not (necessarily) issue from explicit Christian faith? Already we have looked at the justification the fathers gave for their turn to Greek intellectual and cultural sources. What is Rahner’s justification for his insistence that theology turn to the arts? What is the normative authority to which Rahner appeals for Christianity’s movement outside itself to secular sources for theological reflection? Essentially, this is the question at the heart of this chapter: \textit{What theological} grounds does Rahner give for his turn to human experience as a locus for reflection? This is the more fundamental question since the condition for the possibility
of theology’s turn to film as a locus of and for mystagogy depends on its ability to turn to 
human experience in general. As we move ahead through the chapter, we will find that, 
because Rahner discovers rationale within revelation itself for the turn to common human 
experience as a theological source, his mystagogy is a significant modification—indeed, 
an evolution—of the mystagogy of the fathers.

**Motivations toward Methodology**

Early in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner asserts that there is really only 
one question underlying all of his theological investigations: Whether God 
wanted to be merely the eternally distant one, or whether beyond that he wanted 
to be the innermost center of our existence in free grace and in self-
communication. But our whole existence, borne by this question, calls for the 
affirmation of this second possibility as actually realized. It calls out to this 
mystery, which remains a mystery. But it is not so distant from this mystery that 
this mystery is nothing but a *sacrificium intellectus*.

In the volume *The Practice of Faith*, Rahner puts the same question in a more poetic 
way: The “question becomes inescapable whether the night surrounding us is the absurd 
void of death engulfing us, or the blessed holy night which is already illumined from 
within and gives promise of everlasting day.” In these passages Rahner presupposes 
that human life is circumscribed by mystery and that this mystery is something with 
which everyone must reckon. However, what he does *not* take for granted is that this 
mysterious presence is simultaneously a call to personal relationship with one who knows 
us and loves us, and who can be known and loved in return. Therefore, the question that 
haunted Rahner most was not whether human life is bounded by an ultimate and

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mysterious reality that Christianity designates as “God.” The “problem,” he says, “is not with the existence of God, but that we can say and pray ‘You’ to this eternal, incomprehensible, inscrutable, nameless God.” When asked in an interview what had been his most profound religious experience, Rahner replied: “Immersion in the incomprehensibility of God and the death of Christ.” And had this been a mystical experience that occurred during prayer? “‘No,’ he answered quickly, firmly. ‘In life, in the ordinary things.’”

In these exchanges, a remarkably candid Rahner gets down to what is most basic to his theological work and spiritual life. Admittedly, these selections offer a concentrated vision of the man and his thought. Still, a constant theme is perceptible: the language Rahner uses to describe what is of foremost importance in his theology and spirituality—“immersion into the incomprehensible mystery of God”—unmistakably evokes mystagogia. For those familiar with Rahner, the above testimonies serve as a reminder that mystagogy is not simply a leitmotif in this theological Meistersinger’s colossal oeuvre. Mystagogy is the very reason he composes theology: to lead people to reflect deeply upon the mystery of human experience so that they may perceive the intimations of God’s grace already there and see how this experience of God is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and expressed in Christianity. To the uninitiated, however, his linguistic arrangements might sound discordant. How is it, for instance, that we can experience an “incomprehensible” God of “mystery?” How does this “inscrutable” God call out to us in mundane experiences? How is it possible to utter a loving “Thou” before a “nameless”


reality? Is it not paradoxical to say that the experience of God is altogether unfathomable and in the same breath insist that within this seeming obscure experience real hope in new life can be found? Or again, how can one be immersed through “ordinary things” into a relationship with Jesus Christ, who the Christian church claims to be the very Logos of God, which is certainly no ordinary claim? To be sure, these are not simply questions a casual reader might direct at Rahnerian patois and the apparent incongruities in his statements: they are important theological themes—paradoxes, even—that he deliberates with great seriousness and which open up quickly and widely to more and greater questions.

In this section, we wish to begin laying the groundwork for the approach Rahner takes toward negotiating these questions and interpreting Christian doctrine, for it is through his method that Rahner demonstrates the need for theology’s turn to human experience as a theological source. And it is upon this justification that we can understand his evaluation of the arts in relation to theology. With mystagogy as our angle of vision into Rahner’s thought, we will lay out the main lines of the organic structure of his transcendental method, the conceptual framework by which he endeavors to lead people into conscious realization that their lives are immersed in the Holy Mystery of God. By following the logic of Rahner’s methodology, we will attempt to lay out the criteria whereby he arrives at a positive estimation of the arts for theology and the life of Christian faith.

To come to an understanding of the mystagogic quality of his theology requires that we begin where he begins, even if it means that we cannot follow, at least in the context of a single dissertation chapter, how that essence courses through the many
channels of his theology. We recall that early mystagogues tailored their preaching to the
abilities and needs of those in their local church. And so it is proper to ask: to whom
does Rahner direct his theology?\(^\text{70}\)

Rahner knows that the addressee of theology today lives in a world where
religious faith and the life of prayer cannot be taken for granted. Even those raised in the
Christian faith may be disillusioned either by the culture in which the church exists or by
the church itself or perhaps a mixture of both. There are pious Christians who find
elements of Christianity to be obscure or alien; as Karen Kilby explains, “something
foreign, something that they cannot make sense of, something which they perhaps accept
but which has little to do with them, and [who] seek to understand anew Christian
doctrines and the Christian faith so as to overcome this felt foreignness.”\(^\text{71}\) There are
those who live within a crisis of faith. Such people may want to believe, and believe
more deeply, but may not know where to begin since the doubts have accumulated to the
extent that they seem insurmountable. It could be that a person does not feel secure
enough to risk a life of active, committed faith, and this for a host of reasons. People are
often reluctant to give themselves over to something (a cause, a relationship, a creed)

\(^{70}\) See Karl Rahner, *FCF*, *ibid.*, pp. 5-8. As a rule, theology has “two types of addressee:
believers and the ‘others.’ We have to give the former the *reasons* for what they believe and the latter
reasons for at least being able to take the challenge of the faith seriously.” Since believers already have the
faith, they “will have to be trained to investigate its content with a critical intelligence coming primarily
from within the act of believing, which as such already involves intellectual activity on the subject’s part.
For the ‘others,’ however, we must show, eventually, that already within the subject’s ontological structure,
‘belief’ is a determining component for self-realization, or (and furthermore) that, in believing, a series of
‘reasons’ or ‘accumulation of possibilities’ (Newman) appears, which can make life fully human” (Rene
Latourelle, “Method” in Rene Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, eds., *Dictionary of Fundamental
Theology*. New York: Crossroad, 2000, pp. 686-687.) Whereas a work like *Foundations* is addressed directly to
Catholic Christians (specifically students of theology), if we take Rahner’s theology as a whole, it appears
he keeps both audiences in mind.

without sound preparation and adequate research that tells them in explicit terms that such a risk is worth taking. Perhaps to them the “leap” required of faith appears more life-threatening than potentially life-enriching. Rahner looks at the present situation and, confronting it honestly, sees a continuum of positions vis-à-vis Christian faith—ranging from sanctimony to hostile atheism—and knows that today’s believer, who lives somewhere in-between these lines, must proclaim faith in Jesus amid many voices. His style of doing theology is thus in part a pastoral response to the many challenges secularized culture poses to Christian faith.\(^{72}\)

The question of where Rahner “begins” his theology is one fraught with much speculation and there is no need to commence with an evaluation of those opinions.\(^{73}\) In

\(^{72}\) This may not be the conclusion one draws if one focuses only on the conceptual content of Rahner’s volume *Foundations*, or his philosophical-theological works *Spirit in the World* and *Hearers of the Word*. A glance at the subject headings of his multi-volume collection of essays, *Theological Investigations*, and his many published homilies and books on prayer give a better sense of the man and his approach to doing theology. Self-described as a theological “dilettante,” Rahner was free to explore a variety of issues and address situations—pastorally and, as need required, scientifically—as they arose in the context of church life and its dialogue with elements of culture.

\(^{73}\) This is not to trivialize the importance of the question since one or another response to it can color, enhance, or distort how his writings are interpreted. Later in the chapter we will consider some important critiques of Rahner’s theology, his “starting point” being one such difficulty. One major concern involves whether Rahner begins with anthropology, theology, or Christology. Briefly, in the volume *A World of Grace*, which is really a study companion to Rahner’s *Foundations*, Anne Carr, a specialist in Rahner’s methodology, entitles her chapter “Starting with the Human,” in which she discusses Rahner’s approach to theology as anthropological, that he begins his deliberations on Christianity with human experience as a whole. William Dych, also an expert on Rahner’s method, quotes Rahner as once saying “I do not have a philosophy.” Dych writes that it is a false impression that Rahner “first worked out a philosophical basis, and then built his theology upon it” (William Dych, *Karl Rahner*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 18). The concern has to do with the fact that theology and philosophy are languages that speak differently from one another because their sources are different. The source of theology is revelation, the word of God that comes into the world and that cannot be deduced from the structures of the world or the human person. Theology appeals to revelation since the nature of theology is one of response to what has been heard from God. Philosophy, on the other hand, proceeds from reason. It may speak of God or the gods as the ultimate ground of being, but it does not appeal to any divine word. The matter becomes complex when one considers that theology also speaks in the language of reason; and that there is philosophical theology and even philosophy inspired by God. As we shall see, Rahner is integrative in his approach and sees the two as mutually conditioning, that there is neither “pure” theology nor “pure” philosophy. Certainly he is not alone in this approach as a Christian theologian, for “whereas by its nature philosophy claims to provide an interpretation of the totality of the real, the church’s faith requires it to be able to dispose of a philosophic reason which can grasp the truth about God, human nature,
a way, the question has already been answered by the man himself in the quotations above: The source of theology is an encounter with Jesus Christ in faith. Theology, as Rahner explains in one of his definitions, “consists in a process of human reflection upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and, arising from this, upon the faith of the church.”74 And so Rahner begins his theological explorations within the mystery of Christian faith. He imagines a Christian reflecting upon the totality of his or her life which “opens out into the dark abysses of the wilderness which we call God” and standing before “the great thinkers, the saints, and finally Jesus Christ” and wanting to give an account to the question: “What is a Christian, and why can one live this Christian existence today with intellectual honesty?”75 The point to be made is that this basic theological question begins with the fact of Christian existence and the proclamation of the church and proceeds from there. As we will see, Rahner seeks to outline a justification of Christian faith, not from without but from within, in the act of faith itself. In this sense Rahner’s approach is aligned with Anselm’s classic notion of theology as faith searching for understanding (fides quaerens intellectum), where theology is understood in the first instance to originate in the knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ and in the knowledge that comes from that relationship. Theology in the first instance is reflection on a relationship: a lover who wants to know more about the beloved within the loving relationship itself. The understanding (intellectum) involved “is not grasping an idea . . . but primarily knowledge of a person. Christian faith and theology begin not


75 Idem., FCF, ibid., p. 2.
with the process of investigating and grasping something, but by being grasped by someone.”

For Rahner, theology is not “reflection on doctrines in the sense of a body of knowledge or ideas to be mastered, but reflection on a person”; thus theology’s starting point, “both about God and ourselves, is Jesus of Nazareth.”

The implications this position holds for Rahner’s epistemology and Christology will be discussed in due course. For now we can say that Rahner’s restoration of mystagogy realigns conceptual, academic theology to what ought to be its primary aim, namely to serve Christian spirituality and its quest for an existential encounter with God in the mystery of Christ.

Even Rahner’s most abstract theology is driven by his conviction that there is an intrinsic unity between spirituality and theology. Any theology “true to its nature and calling would help people achieve a closer personal relationship with Christ. The more scientific theology is (that is, responsive to the questions of the age while drawing on the Christian tradition), Rahner held, the better guidance it provides for the spiritual quest.”

What is more, Rahner maintains that theology “is intended to serve preaching, and preaching addresses people where they are, so that they will be able to bind themselves more intensely to God in their own concrete situations.” Indeed, as we saw in our investigation of early Christian mystagogy, it is only because there is preaching that theology exists, and not vice versa. Theology would in fact “cease to exist if it severed its link to the preaching and the proclamation of God’s word of love.”

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78 James Bacik, “Is Rahner Obsolete?”, *ibid.*


Theology is not kerygma, per se; it remains the science of faith, meticulously and systematically reflecting on the experience of revelation. Still, theology needs to be kerygmic: the "strictest theology, that most passionately devoted to reality alone and ever on the alert for new questions, the most scientific theology, is itself in the long run the most kerygmic."81 From out of faith, theology serves the preaching of the church and the faith the gospel espouses by translating the message of Christ in language and terms understandable in a particular culture and interpreting Christian faith in ways that demonstrates its credibility and meaningfulness for a given human situation.82

Theology is a theology that can be genuinely preached only to the extent that it succeeds in establishing contact with the total secular self-understanding which man has in a particular epoch, succeeds in engaging in conversation with it, in catching onto it, and in allowing itself to be enriched by it in its language and even more so in the very matter of theology itself.83

For Rahner, theology’s search for meaning in faith involves reaching toward a “renewed understanding” of the Christian message and situating it “within the intellectual horizon of people today.”84 Again, there is commonality between Rahner’s approach to doing theology and that of his patristic forbears whose mystagogical preaching (itself a form of theology) emphasized the experience of the sacramental encounter with Christ in their reflection in order to initiate people into knowledge of the depths of the mystery of Christ. Just as the fathers drew concrete material for their preaching from culture to


82 To be sure, the books of the New Testament are in fact translations of the message of Christ in terms understandable and credible to particular peoples and cultures.

83 Karl Rahner, FCF, ibid., p. 7.

84 James Bacik, Apologetics, ibid., p. xi. And although this view may apply to systematic theology in general and is thus not unique to Rahner, the strategy he develops for accomplishing this goal is distinctive.
discern the living presence of God in the sacraments, so must theology today speak as a participant in culture in ways that aid participation in the life of faith. All theology, therefore, presupposes inculturation, not simply to enunciate itself but to put people in touch with the knowledge of faith in ways that touch their lives.\(^8^5\) Rahner reminds the church that all theology ought to operate with this mystagogical orientation to aid believers’ discernment of the intimations of the divine mystery that envelops them at every moment.

Mystagogy is one of the elements that allows Rahner to make the fresh alliance between speculative and pastoral thinking which is one of his contributions to Catholic theological renewal. Mystagogy, as a pastoral/spiritual factor, helped him bridge the centuries-wide gap between abstract theology and untheological spirituality.\(^8^6\)

There are multiple ways theology can disclose the religious or mystery dimension that penetrates human experience. For instance, it can consult the insights of philosophy, which was for centuries the primary discipline that investigated and clarified the self-understandings of human beings. Today, theology may continue to consult philosophy for conceptual frameworks and language that is intellectually justifiable for discourse about the world today, but it must also recognize that contemporary people define themselves more in social and behavioral terms than they do in philosophical concepts.

\[\text{W}\text{e have the fact that the philosophies no longer furnish the only self-interpretation of man that is significant for theology. Instead, as theologians today we must necessarily enter into dialogue with a pluralism of historical, sociological, and natural sciences, a dialogue no longer mediated [and clarified] by philosophy.}^8^7\]

\(^{8^5}\) This refers to theology’s responsibility for both the fides quae creditur (“the faith which believes”) and the fides qua creditur (“the faith by which it is believed”). The bipolar structure of theology and the distinction between these two modes of operation will be discussed in the next section.

\(^{8^6}\) David Regan, ibid., p. 34.

\(^{8^7}\) Rahner, FCF, ibid., p. 8.
Thus, theology must also have contact with existential and imaginative expressions of human self-understanding in the various non-scientific manifestations of the life of the spirit in art, in poetry, and in society . . . [all representative forms] of the spirit and of human self-understanding with which theology must have something to do. 88

Implicit in this statement is a position of Rahner’s that holds particular import for our investigation of the significance that film (a kind of blend of verbal and non-verbal art) has for theology and vice versa. It is an early indicator of the way Rahner views the relationship between theology and culture, the latter of which he defines as such:

Culture may be defined as an element of tradition which helps to determine a person’s surroundings and which human beings themselves not only receive and accept, but also develop through their own creative work as something that is specifically human. Such cultural work is not a luxury in which human beings indulge, because without it they could not even exist as natural beings. 89

As we shall take up in more depth later, Rahner believes that one cannot separate one’s faith, and hence theology, from one’s cultural, secular life. What is not expressly clear here is another inherently related position of Rahner’s, namely that Christian faith demands that “the Christian exercise responsibility for culture even though neither Christianity nor church teachings designs and defines that culture today.” 90 At this juncture in the chapter we simply want to point out that for Rahner culture (i.e. “secular life,” “the world”) is precisely the place where theology operates. However, it should not be thought that theology is there simply to take from culture whatever implements it wishes to achieve its goals. Theology, which is always driven by faith and the ethical

88 Ibid.


responsibilities demanded by faith, must strive to preserve culture precisely by impregnating the elements of cultural life with Christianity’s eschatological hope. The impression of such hope “for eternity is realized in the constant transformation of the structures of secular life,”⁹¹ which includes “criticism also of the secular structures [as] one of the forms of Christian hope.”⁹² Arguing as he does from the position of Vatican II, especially from out of the theological vision of culture articulated in Gaudium et spes, Rahner argues for a critical dialogue with culture. While theology must remain immersed in the tradition of the church and privilege scripture and doctrine it must also be open to expressions of and insights into the human condition that come from contemporary culture. Theology must correlate faith and culture in order to avoid “the acute danger that believers will no longer consider this secular culture as their religious responsibility before God, but will regard it as something that interests them as human beings, but no longer affects them as Christians.”⁹³ Rahner’s method or approach to theology reflects this principle and is set up to engage the cultural experiences of people; for it is precisely there, in the mix of religion and culture, that God encounters us. Thus, Rahner considers missionary activity essential—not because those who are not Christian do not already know in a hidden way something about the mystery of God's love in Christ—but because they must be awakened to what they really are in the depths of their being and consciousness: people graced by God's self-communication in Christ.

⁹² Ibid., p. 305.
⁹³ Ibid., p. 301.
Bipolar Structure of Theology

If the source of Christian theology is faith in Jesus Christ and the conviction that in him our experience of God is fulfilled and redeemed, then, according to Rahner, a key responsibility for theology is that it provide an “intellectually honest justification of Christian faith” which must include a response to the question of “why and in what sense may one risk life in faith in this concrete Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified and risen God-Man.” There are two moments of a single operation expressed here. On the one hand, theology must articulate as clearly as possible what it is that Christians believe. This is the scientific or conceptual pole of theology and is traditionally associated with the form of theology called doctrinal or dogmatic theology. On the other hand, theology must present the message of Christianity in a way that relates to the most important concerns of people’s lives and that leads them to assent to the truth of this message in faith. This is the kerygmatic or practical pole of theology and is traditionally associated with fundamental theology or apologetics. Using the medieval distinction, Rahner argues that the fides quae creditur (“the faith which is believed”), referring to the knowledge of revealed truth and the content of what is believed, should be brought into the closest possible unity with the fides qua creditur (“the faith by which it is believed”), referring to the act of faith, the existential appropriation of the content believed. Rahner’s

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94 Idem., FCF, ibid., p. xii.
95 Ibid., p. 13.
fundamental theology—“the science of the encounter of revelation and man”—seeks the integration of the two. The task of the scientific side of fundamental theology is to describe the nature of revelation and to demonstrate its de facto existence by pointing to the criteria of revelation and the signs of its credibility. This is what gives this theological science its special character. It considers the basis for the various branches of theology and its own special perspective: the question of the credibility of revelation and the justification of faith which this contains. It has to show the justification of faith, in the act of faith itself, which here above all is a faith calling for insight: fides quaerens intellectum.

The kerygmatic side of fundamental theology addresses those outside the faith or on the threshold of faith. Then, as the science of the encounter of revelation and man, it takes man as it finds him in his human nature, situation and existence and tries to put him in contact with revelation. It calls his attention to something within him which is open to the word of God which transcends him, and addresses him without stemming from him, for the work of salvation offered him in that word of revelation. It shows him how truly he longs to hear it, how safely it can fetch him home, how receptive and ready he is for it, and how much he depends on it. It tries further to remove the difficulties which stand in the way of seeing and hearing God’s revelation. . . . Its effort is to expound the word of God’s self-revelation as the answer to man, as the full and definitive disclosure, illumination, fulfillment and realization of man . . .. It works on the theological principle of the theology of existence: “To speak of man is to speak of God, to speak of God is to speak of man.”

Heinrich Fries, “Fundamental Theology,” in ibid., p. 371. There are several historical factors that contributed to the split in theological attention to both fides quae and fides qua and which motivated Rahner to search for a more comprehensive way to connect the two in justification of Christian faith and its content. While it is not in the interest of this chapter to provide a detailed account of the reasons this division occurred, it is worth summarizing the situation which Rahner faced so as to provide context for appreciating his approach to the justification of faith: “The tradition that Rahner is reacting against began with an argument for the necessity of revelation, the credibility of Jesus grounded in his miracles and particularly the resurrection, his founding of the church with a visible structure and its necessity for salvation. Various dogmas, particularly the central doctrine of the Trinity, were simply part of the content revealed, but are not intrinsically related to the whole process of revelation itself or even to human existence. Rahner, on the other hand, seeks a justification which will not involve detailed justification of each part, which would be a complex theological task, or merely abstract justification which makes no contact with the contents of faith. Rahner wants an overall and foundational justification which points to the credibility of the entire Christian message, one in which the various revealed doctrines are implicitly contained in the justification itself” (Neil Ormerod, ibid., pp. 95-96).

Juan Alfaro, ibid., p. 369.

Ibid., p. 371.
Uniting these two poles of theology means that theologians must teach the content of faith with a pastoral view to the self-understanding of believers who struggle to live out their faith and to personally articulate it (to “give an account of their hope”) often amid cultured as well as not-so-cultured despisers of religion.

The point is that theology must discuss and express individual doctrines with constant attention to the interests, needs, and capabilities of the inquirer. It is a question not merely of determining how to present effectively a fixed set of doctrines but of doing theology while maintaining an active empathy for the struggle to make faith a reality.\textsuperscript{100}

Rahner laments that these two aspects of what should be the single, integrated task of theology have grown apart over recent centuries and are too often treated as separate endeavors, with the \textit{fides quae} seen as being the sole responsibility of university theologians and the \textit{fides qua} being what pastors and preachers interpret at the local church level. Rahner reintroduces mystagogy into Catholic theology as a way of mending the splintered axis connecting doctrinal and fundamental theology, reason and experience. He writes that

mystagogy remains important both in itself and for my theology because of the close connection between fundamental and dogmatic theology and between theory and practice. It is in the light of these relationships that the centrality of this concept in my theology is to be seen.\textsuperscript{101}

A theological method that seeks the integration of fundamental and dogmatic theology has a mystagogical orientation insofar as its aim is to

produce evidence for the inner credibility of the truths of revelation and to investigate the conditions under which these truths can be accepted by men existentially at any given moment of their existence. The effort is not directed

\textsuperscript{100} James Bacik, \textit{Apologetics, ibid.}, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{101} Karl Rahner, “Introduction,” in James Bacik, \textit{Apologetics, ibid.}, p. ix.
towards the explication of the content of revelation in all its manifold aspects, but
to concentrate it in the “mystery of Christ.”102

While Rahner did not formally develop his conception of mystagogy or show its correspondence to features of mystagogy in antiquity, here one comparison can be noted. We recall that in the early church there was a period of time prior to sacramental initiation when catechumens were provided with a fairly conceptual introduction to Christian doctrine. This pre-baptismal catechesis was then bookended by the period called mystagogia, which was catechesis in a different key. Marked by an emphasis on the experience of initiation and the poetic evocation and interpretation of ritual symbols, mystagogy was meant to help initiates more fully understand their immersion into the mystery of faith at a visceral level. The fathers believed both forms of catechesis were essential to the initiation into Christian faith. Thus, Rahner’s insistence that theologians today strive to unite the conceptual and experiential poles of Christian faith is thoroughly traditional and demonstrates that his theological method has an intrinsic mystagogical orientation.

Rahner’s mystagogical approach to doing theology is, simply put, one of many possible paths to Christian faith, one that searches along the way for “connections of meaningful correspondence” between human experience and the gospel.

To lead to faith (or rather, to its further, explicit stage), is always to assist understanding of what has already been experienced in the depth of human reality as grace (i.e., as in absolutely direct relation to God). The connection between what has already been experienced (in faith or, it may be, in credulity), and what has to be accepted anew in explicit faith need not and cannot of course always be of the kind that links conclusions to premises in logical inference. There are connections of meaningful correspondence.103


To better appreciate Rahner’s method of correspondence (or “transcendental method”), we might compare it to the method of “correlation” espoused by his Protestant contemporary, Paul Tillich. Both men agree that theologians can offer convincing answers to questions generated from out of the human situation only if they have “shared the human predicament and struggled for the answers.” However, there are clear differences between Tillich and Rahner with respect to the method by which “situation,” referring to the human condition, and “answer,” referring to the teachings of Christianity, are related.

Tillich says they are correlated, which means that they are two independent elements which are interdependent. Thus he can write: ‘The existential question, namely, man himself in the conflicts of his existential situation, is not the source for the revelatory answer formulated by theology.’ In other words, the situation produces no answers, only questions. Natural theology can analyze the human situation, but can offer no theological affirmation because God is manifest only through himself. Thus situation and message for Tillich are correlated as question and answer, and any search for the organic connections described above is theologically ruled out. The situation questions; it does not disclose. The fundamental reason for Tillich’s position . . . is that he does not appreciate the graced character of both the situation and our interpretation of it. On the contrary, Rahner has come to see clearly that we live in one graced world. This fact establishes a fundamental organic unity between experience and doctrine, allows believers to value the answers derived from human culture, and permits them to accept doctrine, not as an external message, but as an objective articulation of human experience which is always already affected by grace.

In Tillich’s view, the “answers” given in the experience of revelation are independent of the “questions” that arise from out of the human condition. Rahner’s view differs from Tillich’s and it is through the lens of mystagogy that this difference comes into sharper focus. His mystagogy, which is based on what he was convinced to be the fundamental

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unity of experience and doctrine, is “not an attempt to unite two independent realities. For this reason it is less likely to appear as indoctrination. It rather seeks to disclose the clues or intimations of divine grace already found in experience and to relate them to the meanings contained in the Christian tradition.”\(^{106}\) Rahner’s position is less dichotomous than Tillich’s (hence a “correspondence” rather than “correlation”),\(^{107}\) for he holds to a greater acceptability of secular culture on its own merits given the belief that God “is already and always, in the offer of his self-communication in the Holy Spirit, in man as the question and the answer (in one) . . . .”\(^{108}\) Rahner’s positive estimation (not unqualified acceptance) of the secular world is based in his theology of grace, a teaching which contends that the world stands permanently under the offer of God’s self-communication, an offer which “is really an intrinsic, constitutive principle of man.”\(^{109}\) As he writes, the “secular world, as secular, has an inner mysterious depth, in all its earthly mysteries from birth to death, through which, by the grace of God, it is open to God and his infinitely incomprehensible love even when it is not, before receiving the explicit message of the gospel, aware of it.”\(^{110}\) The more responsive theology is to the questions and situations of the age and the more in touch with the rich Christian tradition, the better guidance it will offer for the spiritual quest. For Rahner, theology has an explicit correlation task. It must show how specific Christian doctrines can illumine and guide the human

\(^{106}\) Ibid.

\(^{107}\) Still, when Rahner’s method is rightly understood, it is appropriate to call it a “correlational” method.


\(^{109}\) Karl Rahner, *FCF*, *ibid.*, p. 121.

adventure. It is not simply a matter of giving Christians answers to questions posed by the culture . . .. A Rahnerian style of correlation sets up a conversation between the Christian tradition, which both reveals and conceals the Mystery, and the culture, which is graced but sinful.111

While Rahner’s theology of grace will require further demonstration, for now we can conclude that, for him, secular culture presents itself as a way of bringing the Christian message to the world of today.112

Rahner’s method of turning to human experience as a theological source lends itself to the task of relating Christian faith in a world many deem to be secular. For he takes seriously that, because God’s mysterious offer of love communicated in grace abides universally, nothing in the world is entirely profane. In grace, every person has been offered relationship to God. Even if that offer is rejected, the experience, precisely as an abiding offer, is still present. “What is at stake is the true secularity of the world, which consists of the truth that there is nothing in the world which is too ‘holy’ to be accessible to a worldly approach and must be reserved for religion . . .. [Further, there] is nothing in the structure or order of the world which is taboo, which is to be removed from man’s use, as the attitude which could be called ‘sacralism’ has firmly maintained throughout all history of religion.”113

Because Rahner sees the Christian message as coming from God from within the human situation (i.e. in history and within particular cultures), his theological task involves the interpretation of revelation in correspondence with the structures of human


113 Ibid.
consciousness. He develops an anthropological approach to the Christian message, whereby theology first considers the human transcendental capacity for receiving God’s divine word and then interprets Christian doctrine in a way which demonstrates its inherent relationship to the needs, drives, and longings of human beings. This method intends in part to show the relevancy of theology as a discipline in and for the lives of believers by demonstrating the correspondence between Christian teaching and the common features of human experience. Such an approach attempts to illustrate that what theologians discuss has a claim on the whole person. Its correlation with features of the human as such makes clear that theology is of deep and direct concern to people in their day-to-day lives, that it speaks to them in a way that informs their total existence. Theology is no arcane body of abstractions; instead, it refers to matters that the concrete self-understanding of persons cannot ignore.114

A fundamental principle informing correlation methodology is that doctrinal interpretations of Christianity’s proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ will be existentially meaningful to people today and have “a claim on truth only to the extent they disclose and are adequate to common human experience, that is, basic structures of human thought and action fundamental to human life at all times and places.”115 In this sense, too, Rahner’s method of correlation is mystagogical to the extent that its goal is to lead people deeper into the mystery that envelops their lives by disclosing and clarifying that experience. To Rahner’s mind theology must not just talk about God, but must introduce people to the experience of those realities from out of which talk about God emerges. He calls this process of introduction “mystagogy” . . .. It is the process of learning what faith and theology mean from within one’s own existence and experience, and not merely


115 Ibid., p. 66.
by indoctrination from without. It is only when one is in touch with the realities that theology is talking about that one can really see what theology means.\textsuperscript{116}

**Transcendental Anthropology**

At the heart of Rahner’s theology is the human person’s experience of God as a gracious and loving Mystery. It is this experience that forms the very center of all human life and gives meaning to existence itself. Rahner is convinced that such an experience of God is not going to be had anywhere apart from the events and encounters that have shaped us and the experience that forms our present moment. If this is the case, that God’s revelation, and consequently, our knowledge of God, is not going to come to us from outside the concrete lives we lead from day to day, then theology, as the science which interprets revelation, needs to take human experience very seriously.

Anthropology is human being’s interpretation of itself from any number of angles (philosophy, art, psychology, biology). Theology is on a certain level yet another among many approaches to anthropology. However, because Christian theological anthropology presupposes God’s having spoken not only to but from within the history of humanity (Incarnation) it differs from all other anthropological approaches since it interprets the human being as the subject of revelation. And if revelation is understood to be God’s word to humanity about God and human beings then theological anthropology initiates only because it is the recipient of revelation and proceeds to investigate the human being from out of faith in and obedience to God’s interpretive word. Human experience therefore constitutes basic material for theological reflection since it is only within human history that revelation “happens.” Furthermore, Rahner finds it essential that theology

“turn to the subject” given the problem of secularization and the crisis of faith in the contemporary church. For “it is only when all the experiences that constitute the self-understanding of the person of today are taken into account, that Christian faith-statements will begin to make sense.” This crisis is the context within which Rahner presents his anthropological approach as a means of giving intellectual justification to the decision to believe the Christian faith despite the challenges of at times uncompromising secularism and resolute atheism. Theology’s giving primacy to human experience as a point of departure for conversation about God is further justified from the standpoint of Christian faith. Since God esteems human beings to the degree that their lives are the locus of God’s self-communication, then theology ought to analyze human experience to determine where the possibilities lie for such an experience of God. Most importantly, Christian theology may legitimately start its investigations into faith and doctrine with the human person since, according to Christianity, God’s redemptive word was revealed to the world as a man: “the history of salvation and revelation . . . has its irreversible climax in the God-Man, Jesus Christ.” Indeed, the significance of the Christian proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ can only be adequately demonstrated when the human receptivity for this truth has been investigated. Rahner finds it incredible that theology would not in some way include anthropology in its investigations since God comes to people from within their subjectivity, personal existence, and relationships. Because Rahner perceives such a radical unity between human experience and the experience of God, he insists that it is impossible to speak of human beings without speaking of God,

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118 Karl Rahner, *FCF*, *ibid.*, p. 117.
and vice versa. Thus, for Rahner, Christian theological anthropology must commence with an exploration of the preconditions within the human being for a hearing of God’s word.

Rahner’s approach to theological method is described as “transcendental,” an attempt “to bring out more clearly the role of the knowing subject in all of our objective knowledge, including our knowledge via faith and theology.” More specifically, his method is a “transcendental anthropology” or a “method of transcendental deduction” because it operates as a dialectic between the transcendental (a priori) and the historical (a posteriori) features of human experience. This means that he begins his theology by asking the question, “what are the a priori conditions for the possibility of . . . ?” and then proceeds to investigate the transcendental structures in the human subject that give rise to or allow for a given experience to occur and for knowledge to be apprehended. So, for

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119 When asked in an interview whether Rahner’s theology, which places the human person in such a central position, is in danger of speaking only about the human person and thus is an anthropological diminution of the theological, he responded: “There is, first of all, the question of whether such a description of my theology is correct. It has received such a characterization. . . . The fact that the human person appears in my theology, that there is theological anthropology, and that, furthermore, in a certain sense theology must always begin with the human person, seems to me to be self-evident. . . . Even if the supernatural, divine origin of the genuinely Christian revealed theology is stressed radically in the style of Karl Barth, it still remains true for Catholic theology that it must reflect upon the human person as the receiver of divine revelation. . . . [Theology] has to talk about the human person who is a potential hearer of the word by nature, but all the more so by grace and the historical event of divine revelation. In other words, a theological anthropology has to be done. Besides, if the human person is understood from the start as radically related to God in nature and grace and cannot be thought without this relationship, then an anthropocentric and a theocentric theology is no contradiction or inconsistency but ultimately the same thing: a unity, in which neither God nor the human person can be left out. If it is, moreover, true, that God became flesh and remains so for eternity, then there can be no theology in which anthropology need not be done, since in the Incarnation God himself did anthropology for himself and does anthropology for all eternity” (Karl Rahner, Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982, Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., translation edited by Harvey Egan. New York: Crossroad, 1986, pp. 325-326).

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid., p. 50.
instance, the condition of possibility of knowledge of something is the ability to ask a question about that something. The “aim of such a deduction is to arrive at a ‘correlation,’ i.e. it is an attempt to correlate the Christian message with these transcendental structures of human subjectivity.”122 If theology involves more than making explicit and understandable the fundamental beliefs of Christianity \((fides quae)\) then it must be concerned with the \textit{a priori} conditions in the finite believer that make it possible to hear that infinite truth and assent to it in an act of faith \((fides qua)\). In theology, such a transcendental deduction seeks to identify the consistency and compatibility between revelation and its subjective appropriation by asking the prior question of what makes it possible for a human being to acquire knowledge of anything so that it can be determined how he or she can know something quite particular, namely the content of the Christian message and—even prior to that—the knowledge of God that comes from revelation.

Rahner avers that if theology must “first of all speak about the person who is to be the hearer of the Christian message, if in this sense we are speaking about presuppositions, what we want to examine is the specific way in which these presuppositions and the Christian message are interwoven.”123 In this sense his method discloses the transcendental conditions or, perhaps better put, the interior disposition of the human person for knowledge of anything so as to uncover the possibility for knowledge of God, to whom the human person is radically oriented.124

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\item[122] \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 96-97.
\item[124] This does not mean that theology is merely the application of philosophy to theological subjects. “The principle of a transcendental theology is genuinely theological. Since theology deals with man’s salvation (inasmuch as it consists of God’s self-communication) and really with nothing else, its
At first appearance, the transcendental approach to theological inquiry may seem excessively intellectual and abstracted from “real life”; or it may sound like a form of depth psychology that attempts to express the unconscious internal processes that motivate behavior. It may be more helpful to think of Rahner’s transcendental method “more as a way of questioning and relating religious beliefs to basic human questions and experiences of life.”  

Precisely as theology, Rahner’s method presupposes that human beings have an interpersonal relationship with God. Transcendental inquiry does the important job of rigorously investigating whether such a relationship is within the realm of possibility for human beings and thus of establishing foundations for understanding that experience. Against the background of mystagogy, transcendental methodology is simply a tool to unearth some measure of the depths of mystery into which our lives are immersed. To be sure, transcendental anthropology does not itself do the initiating: as we shall see, it is only because the grace of God is operative at the very depths of our experiences that we are immersed in mystery. Thus, Rahner’s method is established upon belief in God’s gracious and universal presence to all human beings.

The Structure of Transcendentality

Two key New Testament passages that Rahner references often are at the heart of what his theology of revelation attempts to interpret for the contemporary church:

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would

subject-matter is the perfect totality of man; man is the ‘subject’ in the strict sense of the word and not a particular along with others” (Karl Rahner, “Transcendental Theology,” in Karl Rahner, ed., Sacramentum Mundi, Vol. 6, ibid., p. 287).

125 Francis Fiorenza, “Method in Theology,” in CCKR, ibid., p. 77.
live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--
though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move
and have our being' (Acts 17: 26-28a).

God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of
the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and
humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all (1
Timothy 2: 3-6a).

These pose enormous questions for the theologian: How is it that “revelation, despite its
directly divine origin, can constitute the very core of human history? How can revelation
be present everywhere at all times for the salvation of all men in all ages” when, at the
same time Christianity proclaims the miracle that “God's grace in an event at a particular
time and place, occurring once and for all in the flesh of Christ, in the voice of the
prophet as he speaks, and in the letter of Scripture.” For Rahner, these passages reveal
that the unity between humanity and God was made complete and final in Jesus Christ.
Yet, in order to express the truth of this faith claim to contemporary people, Rahner
enlists his transcendental methodology. The beginning of a thoroughly Christian
response to these problems is found in the questions themselves; for in the very act of
asking of the questions, human beings are shown to be incessant and insatiable
“questioners.” Every question we ask and have answered immediately explodes into a
host of unanswered queries. We are hard-wired to ask and then ask some more; and there
is something disquieting and yet wonderful (literally) about this process. Our questions
open us outward toward what seems an endless ocean of possibilities:

In the ultimate depths of his being man knows nothing more surely than that his
knowledge, that is, what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small
island in a vast sea that has not been traveled. It is a floating island, and it might

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126 Karl Rahner, “Revelation, I. Concept of Revelation, B. Theological Interpretation,” in Karl
be more familiar to us than the sea, but ultimately it is borne by the sea and only because it is can we be borne by it.\textsuperscript{127}

But our insatiability and our opening outward presents itself in every realm of life, not only the desire to know. As St. Augustine says at the start of his \textit{Confessions}, our hearts, our deepest selves, are fundamentally “restless.” Nothing is ever \textit{satis} (“enough”) in our lives—until, Augustine prays, our hearts rest in the Lord. The question Rahner asks is, why?

Rahner has two famous expressions for talking about the human person: “spirit-in-the-world” and “hearer of the word.” These also form the titles of two of his works in philosophical theology.\textsuperscript{128} An examination of these expressions yields an appreciable sense of Rahner’s analysis of the structure of human consciousness. In the former work, Rahner writes that by “\textit{spirit} I mean a power which reaches out beyond the world and knows the metaphysical. \textit{World} is the name of the reality which is accessible to the immediate experience of man.”\textsuperscript{129} Human beings are constructed as a unity of spirit and matter. Precisely as spirit, we are not completely limited to our bodies or our spatial and temporal situation because our minds and our wills are capable of stretching out beyond the material world. But we are not pure spirits, able to do what we wish, because, precisely as material entities, we have certain limitations. As spiritual (transcendent)

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Idem.}, FCF, \textit{ibid.}, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Spirit in the World} (trans. William Dych, New York: Continuum, 1994) was originally Rahner’s doctoral dissertation, wherein he interpreted a question in the epistemology of Thomas Aquinas, viz., how human knowing is first in the world of experience and how everything metaphysical is known only in this experience of the world. His analysis of Thomas was disapproved and the dissertation rejected by his director Martin Honecker. \textit{Hearers of the Word} (trans. Joseph Donceel., New York: Continuum, 1994) was originally a series of lectures Rahner gave on foundations for a philosophy of religion. In it, he lays the groundwork for his theological anthropology and the question of the conditions of possibility for hearing the revealed word of God.

\textsuperscript{129} Karl Rahner, \textit{Spirit in the World}, \textit{ibid.}, p. iii, emphasis added.
beings, we are “aware that we are the subjects of a questioning that transcends the limitations of time and space. We reach out for truth about the meaning of human existence, and in doing so find ourselves, like it or not, asking questions about God. For Rahner, it is precisely our questions about God, reality, and our existence that define us a human persons.”

In this context of limited-unlimitedness the human person is a differentiated unity: spirit is not the same as matter, and matter not the same as spirit, but each depends on the other. This situation of being finite and yet having an intrinsic capacity to transcend every particular being is not one of our own creation. It comes to us as part of the contingency of the human situation. This is also what Rahner means by the person as “spirit-in-world.” No matter how restricted our situation, no matter how much of our freedom is taken away, there is always the possibility of a “more” because we can ask the question, why is this happening and what does it all mean. Our openness in transcendence towards mystery in our acts of knowing and loving also suggests that nothing in the concrete world of experience can finally and satisfactorily complete us. Transcendental experience, which Rahner also understands to be human self-presence or self-awareness, “takes place” in the world—in and through knowledge and freedom. In other words human spirituality as it is mediated through personal history. This is why Rahner names the human being “spirit-in-world,” for it is in concrete history and bounded by time and matter, and not apart from it, that our spirit reaches out in radical openness beyond the physical and sensible toward the infinite; for it is “there” in mystery that transcendence leads us to search for meaning and for an answer to the question we are.

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Theological reflection on this interior dynamism toward infinite mystery, which is for Rahner the orientation that defines human beings apart from other modes of existence, suggests that we have a capacity for God. The condition of possibility for our relationship to God is precisely who we are and not something that we “have.” It is not as if some people have a capacity for God and others do not. Transcendental analysis of anthropology concludes that this is a universal orientation, but one that eludes complete description. Our transcendental experiences cannot be pinned down, as it were, and analyzed, just as we cannot fully and finally construct a comprehensive, unequivocal statement about ourselves (for as soon as one states “I am this and that,” the definition is already transcended).

In our insatiable questioning, even the endless sea is transcended and our spirit stretches out further toward the horizon. Yet, no matter how much we rush to get to the horizon, it recedes ever before us, and our reach exceeds our grasp, as the saying goes. The horizon, therefore, is what limits or grounds self-transcendence; it is that which we cannot overcome:

A capacity to transcend particular beings and to be open to the limitless horizon, therefore, is the necessary condition of the possibility of our knowledge of anything in our finite world. It would be impossible for us to have any objective, conceptual knowledge of the finite realities of our world unless we were able to transcend those realities. . . . Such transcendence would mean that we are open to an unlimited horizon which lies beyond everything finite. Obviously, that horizon would be different from anything finite, material, or historical. And our knowledge or experience of that ultimate horizon would be different from our knowledge or experience of anything else.\footnote{132}{Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World*, ibid., p. 24.}

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The horizon for Rahner designates that presence in all human experience of something “more,” a source and a goal to everything we do and are. This horizon is not some “thing” which we can know; it is more like a context. It is a metaphor. A horizon by definition is something that can never be reached but that is always there looming ahead of us. It can never be grasped or transcended. We might draw an analogy from film and compare this notion of horizon to a cinema screen. A screen gives the backdrop to projected images of light. When you watch a movie you are unaware of the screen’s presence, but it is the screen that “catches” the light and allows you to actually see the images, otherwise the light would continue on into space. The screen “grounds” the light so to speak and is the condition of the possibility of our ability to see the film. For Rahner the infinite horizon “grounds” all of our experience and is the backdrop which makes it possible for us to know anything at all. While it is true that the movie screen is “invisible” to us while a movie is showing, we are still implicitly aware of its necessity.

We are implicitly aware of this transcendental horizon of being in every concrete act of intelligence (knowing) and volition (willing and loving). It is the hidden context, the secret ingredient, within all of our categorical experience. But, like the horizon, it cannot itself be grasped. The horizon that forever bounds us is itself boundless. In the language of Anselm, it is “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” This implicit experience of a horizon or “ultimate mystery” might be experienced as calling us to itself, since it appears to be the source and ultimate goal of all human experience. The horizon that limits our self-transcendence (not in a restrictive way, but, rather, in a way that lures our transcendence toward it) is qualitatively different from any particular thing, action, or figment of the imagination. And yet, Rahner says, we have a dim awareness or an
anticipation (*Vorgriff*)\(^{133}\) of its presence, a pre-conceptual consciousness—a hunch—that our yearning always for “more” presupposes an infinite horizon of *absolute* mystery, which is “absolute” precisely because it is forever the incomprehensible goal of all knowing and loving. In our transcendence, in the absolute orientation to mystery and thus the openness to all possible things, we at the same time become self-aware. We are able to place our own selves into question. The paradox is that in knowing ourselves to be free and responsible we are confronted with the fact that this permanent, perennial “state” of “reaching out in the unlimited expanse of our transcendence”\(^{134}\) is not a situation we have created. It comes from a source beyond ourselves and so we experience radical limitedness in knowledge and freedom.

Though we may speak of it in theory, transcendence is not an experience that can be analyzed and defined. It is not “the experience of some definite, particular objective thing which is experienced alongside other objects. It is rather a basic mode of being which is prior to and permeates every objective experience.”\(^{135}\) To be sure, the transcendence of which Rahner speaks is

not the thematically conceptualized ‘concept’ of transcendence in which transcendence is reflected upon objectively. It is rather the *a priori* openness of the subject to being as such, which is present precisely when a person experiences himself or herself as involved in the multiplicity of cares and concerns and fears and hopes of the everyday world. Real transcendence is always in the background, so to speak, in those origins of human life and human knowledge over which we have no control.\(^{136}\)

\(^{133}\) A clear understanding of Rahner’s notion of *Vorgriff* is only painstakingly apprehended and there is no need to go into greater detail here of its important function in his theology. For more on its meaning and connection to his overall metaphysics, see *Spirit in the World; Hearers of the Word*, esp. pp. 45-64; and *FCF*, pp. 33-35.

\(^{134}\) Karl Rahner, *FCF*, p. 34.

\(^{135}\) *Ibid.*

Transcendental experience is not a particular type of experience; rather, it is present only as a “secret ingredient” or greater context, in every particular experience. It is, however, something quite real, for the human person “is and remains a transcendent being, that is, he or she is that existent to whom the silent and uncontrollable infinity of reality is always present as mystery.” Transcendence is real enough that people can overlook, evade, or reject it, and this is done in any number of ways. Essentially, evasion or rejection requires that a person claim (explicitly or implicitly) that the abiding mystery of life is something with which he or she need not reckon.

It is this abiding context in which we find ourselves at every moment bounded by an absolute and incomprehensible mystery that Rahner says we point to with the word “God.” God is implicitly known as the transcendent, infinite horizon that we anticipate and toward which we reach out in transcendence in every experience. The term “God” is what we use to describe that which is indescribable, that which cannot be transcended, the horizonless horizon, the absolute mystery, the unconditioned condition that makes possible our ability to know or do anything:

[T]here is present in this transcendental experience an unthematic and anonymous, as it were, knowledge of God. Hence the original knowledge of God is not the kind of knowledge in which one grasps an object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from outside. It has rather the character of a transcendental experience. Insofar as this subjective, non-objective luminosity of the subject in its transcendence is always oriented towards the holy mystery, the knowledge of God is always present unthetically and without name, and not just when we begin to speak of it. All talk about it, which necessarily goes on, always only points to this transcendental experience as such, an experience in which he whom we call “God” encounters man in silence, encounters him as the absolute and the incomprehensible, as the term of his transcendence which cannot

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137 Ibid., p. 35.
really be incorporated into any system of coordinates. When this transcendence is
the transcendence of love, it also experiences this term as the holy mystery.\textsuperscript{138}

This suggests further that all of what makes up ordinary life, our efforts at learning about
the world, growing in self-awareness, and cultivating relationships, already “involves”
the mysterious presence of God. If Rahner is correct in his assertion that there is in every
act of the human intellect and will a pre-apprehension of God as that which forms the
transcendental condition of the possibility of knowing and loving, then everyone,
“whether they describe themselves as agnostic or atheist or indifferent, is actually on
some level aware of God. Though Rahner is not interested in proving the existence of
God, if he is right no such proof is necessary; for anyone who tries to deny the existence
of God is in fact in contradiction\textsuperscript{139} with his or her experience, when that experience is
honestly appraised. If in self-knowledge, our personal dealings with others, and our
knowledge of the world, we experience God as the inescapable and unlimited horizon of
our transcendence, then this experience of absolute “mystery in its incomprehensibility is
what is self-evident in human life. . . . [And] all other understanding, however clear it
might appear, is grounded in this transcendence. All clear understanding is grounded in
the darkness of God.”\textsuperscript{140}

Again, it is difficult to distinguish this horizon or “ultimate ground” of
transcendence because there “is no greater reality beyond God within which God could
be completely categorized or adequately conceptualized.”\textsuperscript{141} God is present to us in a

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. 21.


\textsuperscript{140} Karl Rahner, FCF, ibid., pp. 22-23.

\textsuperscript{141} Michael Skelley, ibid., p. 26.
preconceptual, unthematic way, and our knowledge of God remains tacit. It is a real and
authentic knowledge, but not the sort that is subject to inquiry in the way one might know
a person, thing, or idea. Rather, it is knowledge in the sense of awareness that we are
ecstatically oriented; we are somehow always called to go beyond ourselves. It is less a
“grasping” than a “being grasped.” The fact that our transcendence is oriented toward the
infinite horizon of mystery and that this presence provides the backdrop, as it were, for
all knowledge and action also suggests that our original knowledge of God is present
always already prior to our explicit naming of God. That is to say, “one does not begin to
relate to or to theologize about God only when God has been explicitly named . . ..”\textsuperscript{142}

And this “knowledge of God which we always have even when we are thinking of and
concerned with anything but God, is the permanent ground from out of which that
thematic knowledge of God emerges which we have in explicitly religious activity and in
philosophical reflection.”\textsuperscript{143} Explicit doctrines about God are meaningful and can “really
be understood only when all the words we use there point to the unthematic experience of
our orientation towards the ineffable mystery.”\textsuperscript{144}

This returns us to the original question which we said haunted Rahner most: not
whether there is a God, but how it is possible to say “You” in faith and love to this
incomprehensible mystery that forms and is at the center of every human being’s life.
Rahner calls human beings “hearers of the word,” for in our transcendental experience we
are opened up in a search for meaning toward a definitive answer to who we are and to

\textsuperscript{142} Geoffrey Kelly, \textit{Karl Rahner, ibid.}, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{143} Karl Rahner, \textit{FCF, ibid.}, p. 53.

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Ibid.}
what or whom we are oriented. Rahner’s fundamental theology describes the condition of possibility for hearing an “unexpected word of God” to be freedom: “We are spirit, hence absolute ‘upwards,’ i.e., for all being. Thus we are also the recipients of a possible revelation. But precisely because, through our mere transcendence, we are spirit, real infinity is never presented to us as actually reached, but always only as the greater beyond of our knowing, only as anticipation [Vorgriff]. Thus we stand as finite spirit before the personal, free, and absolute God.”¹⁴⁵ Though we can anticipate or yearn to hear such a word of assurance, it is not “owed” to us by our nature. As we shall see, if it comes at all, God’s word only come to us as a grace—or better, as grace itself. Our spiritual antennae are poised to receive a signal of hope precisely within the world we inhabit, a word that can ultimately be trusted; a word that says that this mystery at the center of existence is not merely a vast void, an abyss into nothingness, but is in fact the very answer to the question we are. As spirits in the world, whether we are conscious of this or not, we reach out in self-transcendence to history and search it for an event in which our desire for this word is in fact spoken, and spoken with clarity. Because we desire “God” (unconditional Mystery), we search for some “tangible” event where we are promised, unconditionally, that the “darkness” which surrounds us is indeed meaningful and not absurd or conditional, for we do not want the word of love that we long to hear spoken to us to be retracted or revoked. In this way, we are “the openness for being as such, we face the real possibility of a revelation, at least insofar as it is the free personal self-manifestation of a divine Thou.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Karl Rahner, Hearers of the Word, ibid., p. 152.

¹⁴⁶ ibid. Rahner describes this situation using the medieval Scholastic term potentia obedientialis and notes that ultimately fundamental theological anthropology is an analysis of the obediential potency for
We have shown that Rahner’s fundamental theology is an attempt to correlate the basic message of the Christian religion with the structures of the human experience by way of a transcendental analysis. What has been outlined so far has been the logic of Rahner’s thought that leads up to the explicit teachings of Christian faith, a tracing of the presuppositions “without which the Christian message about human beings would not be possible. But by itself it was not yet so specifically Christian that anyone who accepts these assertions as his or her own self-understanding could already be called a Christian on the level of an explicit and reflexive profession of faith.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, what Rahner has up to this point disclosed about God as Mystery by way of his transcendental analysis of human experience has not really said anything beyond what philosophy can tell us:

At best, it shows God is possibly the goal that all cognition and affectivity approach asymptotically; humans could only question whether, or hope that, their striving for the good and for truth would end in fulfillment rather than frustration. Christian faith, however, proclaims in the light of the incarnation that God is not merely the remote, ever-receding horizon and telos of human transcendence but is absolutely close, engaged in a self-communication to humans that brings them fulfillment in the love they seek and the forgiveness they need. God is free self-giving love. This is not a metaphysically self-evident truth but the incomprehensible wonder revealed in Christ.¹⁴⁸


¹⁴⁸ Stephen J. Duffy, “Experience of Grace,” in *CCKR*, *ibid.*, p. 44.
The Unity of Transcendentality, Grace, and Revelation

At the center of the Christian message is the proclamation that the word of God that we so long to hear in the depths of our being has indeed been spoken. The good news of Christian faith is that the Mystery that is master over all that we are is in fact gracious, personal, and forgiving. This mystery, which is experienced at the core of every human life, has manifested itself in the world absolutely and eternally in the person and message of Jesus Christ—the “ultimate, irrevocable self-expression of God to the human race in history.”

For Rahner, the entire Christian message is centered on God’s free and undeserved communication of God’s entire self in Jesus Christ: that through the miracle of the incarnation and in an act of faith in Christ we know that God, now become man, has never been nor ever will be distant and remote from our lives. God has offered to all humanity the gift of being saved in Christ through faith.

God is revealed as communicating himself in absolute and merciful presence as God, that is, as the absolute mystery. The historical mediation of this transcendental experience is also revealed as valid, as bringing about and authenticating the absolute experience of God. The unique and final culmination of this history of revelation has already occurred and has revealed the absolute and irrevocable unity of God’s transcendental self-communication to humankind and of its historical mediation in the one God-man Jesus Christ, who is at once God himself as communicated, the human acceptance of this communication and the final historical manifestation of this offer and acceptance.

According to Rahner, the central mystery of Christian faith is precisely this self-communication of God in Jesus Christ, which he identifies with the biblical term “grace.” He calls grace God’s self-gift, the free giving of God’s entire self to all creation and to

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150 Cf., again, 1 Timothy 2: 3-6a.

every human person, whom he names “the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God . . .” With the revealed knowledge that God wills the salvation of all people, Rahner’s methodological approach is at once to identify the human person as the one created by God with the possibility of receiving the word of salvation in revelation and present Jesus as the historical realization and perfection of that possibility. For something to be universally salvific for all of humanity, the human person must be a priori oriented to it; and it must be capable of affecting humanity as a whole. Therefore, Rahner’s approach is to demonstrate that a correlation exists between the universal human experience of transcendence and the Christian belief that through Christ and in his Spirit God wills the salvation of all people. His investigation leads him to search for the link between our anticipation or desire for God (obediential potency) and revelation. Rahner reasons that God created human beings with the intrinsic capacity to receive grace and discern it precisely as grace. Indeed, this “potency” is what defines the human person precisely as human: the human being is the “the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God.” This suggests that on the one hand God is present for man in his absolute transcendentality not only as the absolute, always distant, radically remote term and source of his transcendence which man always grasps only asymptotically, but also that he offers himself in his own reality. . . . [When] we say that God is present for us in absolute self-communication, this says on the other hand that this self-communication of God is present in the mode of closeness, and not only in the mode of distant presence as the term of transcendence, a closeness in which God

\[\text{Idem., FCF, ibid., p. 116.}\]

\[\text{Ibid. Whereas Rahner uses the word “anticipated” to speak of our graced predisposition for a historical “speaking” of God’s word, revelation as it occurs in Jesus Christ is not something human beings can hypothesize or deduce, either from our interior dispensation or other historical events. We “can and must accept God’s free revelation as unexpected, undue grace, as ‘history,’ not as opposed to nature but as standing above nature” (Karl Rahner, Hearers of the Word, ibid., p. 154). Grace comes unpredicted as a “thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2-4).}\]
does not become a categorical and individual being, but he is nevertheless really present as one communicating himself, and not only as the distant, incomprehensible and asymptotic term of our transcendence.\textsuperscript{154}

God’s self-communication as grace means that “what is communicated is really God in his own being, and in this way it is a communication for the sake of knowing and possessing God in immediate vision and love.”\textsuperscript{155} Grace is thus the free invitation to every human person to share in this mystery, which renders human life mysterious at every level as it opens in us an orientation to the God who is forever greater (\textit{Deus semper maior}). In grace, God is, as St. Augustine says, “closer to us than we are to ourselves.” Indeed, “the giver in his own being is the gift, that in and through his own being the giver gives himself to creatures as their own fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{156} Yet, even in this closeness God remains absolute mystery. “Mystery” is not merely another word for that which for the time being has not yet been comprehended and perceived. Precisely as \textit{absolute}, the Mystery is never provisional, even in the immediate vision of God in divine beatitude. Thus, God “can communicate himself in his own reality to what is not divine without ceasing to be infinite reality and absolute mystery, and without man ceasing to be a finite existent different from God. The self-communication does not cancel out or deny what was said earlier about the presence of God as the absolute mystery which is essentially incomprehensible.”\textsuperscript{157}

Rahner’s teaching on grace—God’s love offered to all people—is rooted in the revelation that God wills a universal salvation, a doctrine that, for him, stands at the very

\textsuperscript{154} Idem., \textit{FCF}, \textit{ibid.}, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 117-118.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 120.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Ibid.}. 
heart of the gospel. An interpretive corollary to this doctrine is Rahner’s concept of the “supernatural existential.” Here we can only provide a rough outline of this theory, the logic of which begins like this:

If God created human beings in the first place so that there would be creatures with whom God could share his own divine life in knowledge and love, that is, if God created human beings precisely for the life of grace, then the offer and the possibility of grace is given with human nature itself as this nature has been historically constituted. Creation is intrinsically ordered to the supernatural life of grace as its deepest dynamism and final goal. The offer of this grace, then, is an existential, an intrinsic component of human existence and part of the very definition of the human in its historical existence.

As we have seen, Rahner’s vision of the human person as “spirit-in-world” lies between the extremes of “pure” transcendence (a rejection of the world as we know it in search for the purely unconditioned) and “pure” immanence (the denial of any other reality other than the empirical). Human transcendence should not, on the one hand, be interpreted as a turning away from the world and its physical reality to something purely spiritual and other-worldly or extraordinary. Nor is it a complete embrace of this world, an espousal of the conviction that there is no reality beyond what we experience directly and can explain clearly in concrete, empirical terms. Human experience of the world is at once direct, concrete experience and an experience of that mystery which lies beyond the

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158 Rahner borrows from Heidegger the term “existential” to denote those permanent constituent elements of every human being (e.g., spirituality, materiality, freedom, limitedness, historicity, guilt). Michael Skelley provides an accessible background to Rahner’s concept of the supernatural existential: “We live in an objective situation of salvation in which we are convinced that God really wills the salvation of everyone, while at the same time the future salvation of any individual is still in the balance. The process of salvation history has never been a matter of bringing about a will to save in God. God has always willed everyone’s salvation. The problem has been to get the human community to freely accept the salvation offered by God. . . . [In faith] we can be certain that everyone is freely invited to enter into communion with God. What will happen in the case of any particular individual remains uncertain, however, because that will depend on the individual’s free acceptance or rejection of God (Michael Skelley, The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship. Collegeville: Pueblo, 1991, p. 61).

159 William Dych, Karl Rahner, ibid., p. 36.
material world and remains inscrutable. Rahner’s analysis of human experience as being a unity between matter and spirit, between the categorical and the transcendental, helps to ground an avoidance of both extrinsicist and intrinsicist notions of grace. His theological concern is to preserve—at the same time—the supernatural quality and gratuity of God’s self-offer and the immanent desire for grace rooted in the human heart. Henri de Lubac and the “new theology” movement tried to counter the neo-Scholastic notion that grace is “extrinsic” to “pure nature” by insisting that grace is both a “natural desire” of human beings and an utterly free offer on God’s part (for friendship is never “owed”). However, this proposal that grace is “natural” threatened to collapse grace into nature. The problem of extrinsicism would thus only be replaced with an equally problematic intrinsicism.\textsuperscript{160} Rahner agreed that a desire for God (whether conscious or not) is a fundamental orientation of every human being, but insisted that this orientation of human existence should be called a “supernatural existential” to indicate that grace is a “permanent modification of the human spirit which transforms its natural dynamism into an ontological drive to the God of grace and glory” and an utterly gratuitous gift of God that need not have been. Because God's offer of grace produces a "supernatural existential" in the human soul, the idea that human beings exist with a “pure nature” prior to grace is a “remainder concept” (Restbegriff) in that God could have created us for a purely natural end, but de facto did not.\textsuperscript{161} Our potential for grace is an “existential” in that it is a permanent modification of human nature; but it is “supernatural” because the desire for

\textsuperscript{160} Cf. Rahner’s discussion of these terms in “Revelation, I. Concept of Revelation, B. Theological Interpretation, in Karl Rahner, ed., Sacramentum Mundi, Vol. 5, ibid., p. 348-349.

God need not have been a constituent element of our essence. As an ontological modification of human nature, grace is completely gratuitous and transformative, creative of an entirely new situation for “spirit-in-world.”

This antecedent self-communication of God which is prior to man’s freedom means nothing else but that the spirit’s transcendental movement in knowledge and love towards the absolute mystery is borne by God himself in his self-communication in such a way that this movement has its term and its source not in the holy mystery as eternally distant and as a goal which can only be reached asymptotically, but rather in the God of absolute closeness and immediacy.\textsuperscript{162}

Thus, to be human is to be invited “into that interpersonal communion with God which is our salvation. Even before we might be transformed by grace, we are already subject to the universal salvific will of God and obligated to pursue the fulfillment of our deepest potential: union with God.”\textsuperscript{163}

The implications of Rahner’s theory on the supernatural existential are wide-ranging, touching upon almost the entirety of his systematic theology. Through this teaching Rahner preserves the utter gratuituity and divine character of grace and its permeating presence in ordinary life. He demonstrates that grace is not extrinsic to us but rather something in which we are always caught up, something that shapes us from deep within. This reflects Rahner’s intuition that whatever God is doing to save the world must somehow be there in our experience, and it must be something that is going on not just in explicitly religious spheres, but it must actually suffuse our experience at every level. As we know and choose very particular things, at the same time we are always transcending those things and moving towards God. Our religious experience is not just

\textsuperscript{162} Idem., FCF, \textit{ibid.}, p. 129.

\textsuperscript{163} Michael Skelley, \textit{ibid.}, p. 62.
intermittently present, either in “ecstatic states” or in prayer and worship, but rather it is woven into the texture of all of human experience.

Grace is present not merely as one of many human aspects, but rather as the deepest and innermost truth about the human. If grace is a supernatural existential, then there is no purely natural state of human existence apart from grace; God is always already “involved” with every human being, whether an individual acknowledges and accepts this or not. Rahner affirms the intrinsic unity of grace and nature by conceiving of God’s gracious presence in the world through his Spirit as a ‘supernatural existential.’ This means that God’s creative intention from the very beginning . . . has been not just the transcendence of matter beyond its own power into the human life of knowledge, freedom, and love, but also the transcendence of human life beyond its own power into participation in God’s own life through knowledge, freedom, and love. Human beings come to be so that God can share his life in this way. Hence the history of God’s self-revelation in grace does not float above the history of nature and man as an added embellishment, but is imbedded within as its deepest destiny.¹⁶⁴

Grace, the miracle of the self-communication of God’s very being, is an offer made universally, to all people, in all times, cultures, and religions, even to those who lived before Jesus Christ. Indeed, the supernatural existential places all human beings, not merely those who have had historical contact with Jesus or his followers, in a “new and improved” condition. God’s self-communication as “supernatural and unmerited is not threatened or called into question by the fact that this self-communication is present in every person at least in the mode of an offer. The love of God does not become less a miracle by the fact that it is promised to all men . . ..¹⁶⁵ As Rahner was fond of saying,

¹⁶⁴ William Dych, Karl Rahner, ibid., p. 71.

¹⁶⁵ Karl Rahner, FCF, ibid., p. 127. Rahner goes on to explain that God’s grace is given “not only as a gift, but also as the necessary condition which makes possible an acceptance of the gift which can allow the gift really to be God, and can prevent the gift in its acceptance from being changed from God into a finite and created gift which only represents God, but is not God himself. . . . [Thus] God’s self-communication as offer is also the necessary condition which makes its acceptance possible” (ibid., p. 128).
the gratuitous offer of God’s love in grace has a history. The supernatural, transcendental experience is embedded in history, a history that is identical with human history; it does not bestow itself intermittently at certain times and in particular places, but universally and intrinsically. For every human being the supernatural existential constitutes a revelation of God through his self-communication in grace.

If the transcendental and supernatural experience of God necessarily interprets itself historically, and therefore forms a categorical history of revelation, and if this is present everywhere, then this also means that such a history is always a history of revelation . . . . Therefore the history of revelation . . . is found where this self-interpretation of God’s transcendental self-communication in history succeeds, and where with certainty it reaches its self-awareness and its purity in such a way that it correctly knows itself to be guided and directed by God, and, protected by God against clinging tenaciously to what is provisional and to what is depraved, it discovers its own true self.166

According to Rahner, grace and revelation are all but inseparable. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit as an intrinsic constituent of every human person’s life, this “gratuitous elevation of human transcendentality in its dynamism of knowledge and love, is synonymous with transcendental revelation [and] uncreated grace . . ..”167 Indeed, the “universal offer of grace entails a universal revelation. There can be no self-
communication of God without a self-revelation, and there can be no revelation in the full
sense of the term without faith."¹⁶⁸ Revelation always presents two aspects:

> On the one hand, it constitutes man’s supernaturally elevated transcendence as his
> permanent though grace-given existential, always and everywhere operative,
present even when refused. It is the transcendental experience of the absolute and
merciful closeness of God, even if this cannot be conceptually expressed at will
by everyone. On the other hand, the active revelation-event is also a historical
mediation and conceptual objectivation of this supernaturally transcendental
experience. The latter takes place in history and, taken in its totality, constitutes
the whole of history.¹⁶⁹

Universal or transcendental revelation is given to all people in God’s self offer in
grace. All human beings have God’s very self as abiding grace as their innermost
constitutive element, summoning them to respond positively in the freedom of faith to the
offer of divine friendship. Revelation “and our reaction to it is in fact the deepest
dimension and ultimate meaning of the historical process. Transcendental revelation is
inseparable from some kind of categorical experience. We only become aware of it as we
engage with mind and heart, in knowledge and love, in the world. It is for this reason
that Rahner can say that all of human history is a form of categorical revelation.”¹⁷⁰ As
Rahner says, there is “never a history of transcendental revelation in isolation. History in
the concrete, both individually and collectively, is the history of God’s transcendental
revelation.”¹⁷¹ Because revelation is always historically mediated in language, symbols,
institutions, and relationships, there is nothing like a “pure” religious experience of God.

Personal relationship with God in human experience is a concrete, historical possibility

¹⁶⁸ Dan Donovan, “Revelation and Faith,” in CCKR, ibid., p. 86.
¹⁶⁹ Karl Rahner, “Revelation, I. Concept of Revelation, B. Theological Interpretation,” in
¹⁷⁰ Dan Donvoan, ibid., p. 88.
¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 350.
for all people whether or not they are aware or accept in faith that they are caught up in salvation history. As Rahner says, grace is “a reality which is so very much part of the innermost core of human existence in decision and freedom, always and above all given in the form of an offer that is either accepted or rejected, that the human being cannot step out of this transcendental peculiarity of his being at all.” 172 But because God’s love is the permanent and abiding presence in which people “live, move, and have their being,” it can be overlooked, ignored, even rejected. Although all of human history is a form of categorical revelation, it is forever ambiguous and mixed with sin and depravity. Thus, it is important to take seriously Rahner’s insistence that grace, as a supernatural existential, constitutes an offer of God’s love. The world may be graced, but not everything is grace. Salvation may be offered universally, but evidently it is not universally accepted.

In this sense everyone, really and radically every person must be understood as the event of a supernatural self-communication of God, although not in the sense that every person necessarily accepts in freedom God’s self-communication to man. Just as man’s essential being, his spiritual personhood, in spite of the fact that it is and remains an inescapable given for every free subject, is given to his freedom in such a way that the free subject can possess himself in the mode of “yes” or in the mode of “no,” in the mode of deliberate and obedient acceptance or in the mode of protest against this essential being of his which has been entrusted to freedom, so too the existential of man’s absolute immediacy to God in and through this divine self-communication as permanently offered to freedom can exist merely in the mode of an antecedent offer, in the mode of acceptance and in the mode of rejection. 173

172 Idem., Faith in a Wintry Season, ibid., p. 21.

173 Idem., FCF, ibid., p. 128. In another place Rahner accentuates the idea that every human person must reckon with his or her supernatural orientation. While an individual may claim indifference toward it, the graced orientation to mystery is the ultimate responsibility: “Even prior to justification by sanctifying grace, whether this is conferred sacramentally or outside the sacraments, man already stands under the universal, infralapsarian salvific will of God which comprises within its scope original sin and personal sin. Man is redeemed, and is permanently the object of God’s saving care and offer of grace. He is under an absolute obligation to attain his supernatural goal. This situation . . . is all-inclusive and inescapably prior to man’s free action, which it determines. It does not exist solely in the thoughts and intentions of God, but is an existential determination of man himself. As an objective consequence of
Finally, the Christian teaching that grace is available to every person means that our supernaturally elevated transcendentality is mediated not only through individual acts of knowledge and love but also through the whole of culture, in social and historical realities. This “realization of the human being’s essence does not take place alongside the events of historical life, but within this historical life. The categorical, historical self-interpretation of what the human being is takes place . . . in the whole human history, in what each person does and what he or she suffers in individual life; in what we call simply the history of culture, of society, of the state, of art, of religion, and of the external, technical mastery of nature.”¹⁷⁴ Because God through his grace demonstrates absolute love and finally the entire welfare of every human being, that is, because the world is graced, Christianity cannot simply be concerned with “heavenly things” and “think that earthly matters do not concern them and have no bearing on their salvation.” It is precisely through “earthly matters” that all people give symbolic value to what it is that they hold to interiorly, that to which they ultimately “give” themselves—be it God or mammon.

The Unity of Transcendental and Categorical Experience

Transcendence “has a history, and that history itself is always the event of this transcendence.”¹⁷⁵ Human history is the only locus of human transcendence: the human

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¹⁷⁴ Karl Rahner, FCF, ibid., p. 153.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.
person’s subjective and unlimited capacity to reach beyond himself or herself toward the horizon of absolute mystery is always mediated historically in knowledge, love, and free self-realization. This suggests that transcendence does not operate, as it were, alongside history, apart from it in some rarefied, metaphysical realm. The “supernatural existential” also has a history, if it is

in this way that the human being is a being of subjectivity, of transcendence, of freedom and of a mutual relationship with the holy mystery which we call God; if he or she is the event of God’s absolute self-communication, and if he is all of this always and inescapably and from the beginning; and if as such a being of divinized transcendence he is at the same time a historical being both individually and collectively, then it follows . . . that this is at once the single history of both salvation and revelation.\(^{176}\)

The history of the supernatural existential is thus also the history of God’s freedom; it is an event in which God’s freedom “can give itself or refuse to give itself.”\(^{177}\) This means the history of salvation is coexistent and coextensive with the whole of human history, “which is not to say identical with human history, for in this single history there is also guilt and the rejection of God, and hence the opposite of salvation . . ..”\(^{178}\) Insofar as there exists “a concrete dialectic in history, both individual and collective, between the presence of God as giving himself in an absolute self-communication, and the absence of God as always remaining the holy mystery, this expresses what the history of salvation and revelation really means.”\(^{179}\) There is no supernatural revelation from God that “could take place in any other way except in the faith of the person hearing the revelation. To this extent it is clear that the history of salvation and revelation is always the already

\(^{176}\) Ibid. p. 141.

\(^{177}\) Ibid.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{179}\) Ibid., p. 141.
existing synthesis of God’s historical activity and man’s at the same time . . .”\(^{180}\) Rahner summarizes this dynamic:

> Corresponding to man’s essence as transcendence and history, such a history of salvation has essentially two moments which mutually condition each other: it is the event of God’s self-communication as accepted or rejected by man’s own basic freedom; and this moment of God’s self-communication, which seemingly is merely transcendent and trans-historical because it is permanent and always present, belongs to this history and takes place within it.\(^{181}\)

Thus, the relationship between unlimited human freedom and God’s eternal freedom, i.e., the intercourse of human and divine spirit, “happens” and occurs in time and concrete history. Since the experience of God’s own self-expression as grace penetrates to the core of our being, the interior transformation this experience makes must be made known exteriorly, symbolically, in our own self-expression. It comes to appearance in the historical corporeality of human history and is expressed (indeed, it can only and must be expressed) in images and likenesses. Our acts of knowing and loving (or their opposite) signal our “yes” or “no” to God’s offer of love; they communicate, thematize, narrate, and give form to what is happening invisibly, deep within. Rahner perceives an absolute and necessary unity between transcendental experience and categorical experience: the transcendental must somehow articulate itself in the categorical. There is “an inescapable unity in difference between one’s original self-possession and reflection.”\(^{182}\) Because we are already immersed in the life about which we wish to know more, we always already have an experiential knowledge of ourselves. We have this knowledge from within our own experience, not because we have learned it from an outside source. Self-reflection

\(^{180}\) Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{181}\) Ibid., p. 143.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., p. 15.
always takes place within the categorical; we cannot remove ourselves from existence in order to observe it, as it were, objectively. Moreover, our lives and actions and relationships are not just source material for us to scrutinize in order to know something about ourselves: the lives and actions and relationship are the knowledge, the “original” knowledge that is experience itself. At the same time, because we are social beings “who exist with others, this knowledge wells up and reaches the level of reflection, expression, and communication. To express our experiential knowledge we must objectify it, in the sense of embodying it in concepts and words which others can hear and understand.”

Simply put, it is essential to our constitution as unified material-spiritual beings that we communicate ourselves and not just parcels of information about who we are. After all, everyone “strives to tell another, especially someone he loves, what he is suffering.” To do this we must try to make explicit (thematic) our own “original” (unthematic) self-experience. Rahner explains:

> When I love, when I am tormented by questions, when I am sad, when I am faithful, when I feel longing, this [personal] reality is a unity, an original unity of reality and its own self-presence which is not totally mediated by the concept which objectifies it in scientific knowledge.\(^{185}\)

There are thus two levels of knowledge: (a) *transcendental knowledge* that comes with the original unity of our existential reality; and (b) *conceptual knowledge*, which is the personal objectification, the communication in language and symbol, of our original self-possession. This latter form of knowledge does not “create our relationship to the

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184 Karl Rahner, *FCF*, p. 16.

world but rather gives expression to it."\textsuperscript{186} However, it should not be thought that the second level is in tandem with the first, as if we experience something and then sometime “later on” we get down to the business of expressing it. Instead, they form a singular unity-in-difference: The original unity between reality and its knowledge of itself “always exists in man only with and in and through what we can call language, and thus also reflection and communicability. At that moment when this element of reflection would no longer be present, this original self-possession would also cease to exist.”\textsuperscript{187} Nevertheless, even though an element of reflection presents itself at the original level of knowledge, the expression or symbol of original experience can never “capture this unity and transpose it completely into objectifying concepts.”\textsuperscript{188} So for instance, the concepts of trust or grief or longing are never the same thing as the realities themselves. That is to say, the “symbol expresses the symbolized, but is never identical with it.”\textsuperscript{189} There is a unity but not a strict identity between original knowledge and its concept. A tension exists, as it were, between our transcendental experience and its expression because the life of the spirit is

that realm of experience where language fails: we have language for objects, for distinguishing one thing from another, for putting things in categories, but not for that which cannot in principle be an object, for that which is beyond categories, for the infinite horizon within which the distinguishing takes place. And yet transcendental experience cannot simply remain inarticulate, but always seeks expression in the realm of the categorical. The expression will never be wholly adequate, will always in some way fail, but it must always nevertheless be attempted.\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{186} William Dych, “Theology in a New Key,” \textit{ibid.}, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{187} Karl Rahner, \textit{FCF}, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{188} Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” \textit{ibid.}, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{189} William Dych, “Theology in a New Key,” \textit{ibid.}, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{190} Karen Kilby, “Karl Rahner,” \textit{ibid.}, p. 99.
There is also a movement in the opposite direction, where conceptual knowledge helps widen the scope of transcendental knowledge by returning us to it with an expanded consciousness. Rahner writes of this with a mind toward the implications this phenomenon holds for theology:

Only very slowly, perhaps, does a person experience clearly what he or she has been talking about for a long time, and was able to because they were shaped by a common language and instructed and indoctrinated from without. It is precisely we theologians who are always in danger of talking about heaven and earth, about God and man with an arsenal of religious and theological concepts . . .. We can acquire for ourselves in theology an extraordinarily great skill in this kind of talk, and perhaps not have really understood from the depths of our own existence what we are actually talking about. To this extent reflection, concepts and language must necessarily be oriented towards this original knowledge, this original experience, where what is meant and the experience of what is meant are still one.191

On this point, if we do not refer our language, symbols, and concepts back to their source in experiential knowledge then “they become empty abstractions”192; or, as St. Paul puts

191 Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” ibid. 5. Though we will at the conclusion of the dissertation consider some of the limitations of Rahner’s theology in and of itself and for our overall thesis, here we might look at one response to the conviction of some who argue that because Rahner emphasizes the a priori (transcendental) aspect of grace rather than the a posteriori (categorical) he relativizes history and, more importantly, Christianity itself: “The emphasis on the internal, on grace and experience, coupled with a heightened sense of the universality of God’s saving will, led Rahner to reflect on the ways in which grace and revelation are present and operative in people who do not share the fullness of Christian revelation and of Christian life. It is this more than anything that accounts for Rahner’s increasing emphasis on the transcendental dimension of revelation and of grace. It is not a question of repudiating the categorical and the explicitly Christian, but rather of deepening our understanding of its implications for a Church and world more conscious than ever before of the age and extent of humanity, and of the social, cultural, and other factors that make difficult for many today an explicit acceptance of Christianity. That Rahner himself continually returned to the Christian message and made the kind of efforts that he did to render it comprehensible and believable within the context of modern culture reveals that in his own mind the transcendental and the categorical, the universal and the particular, are not played off against one another” (Daniel Donovan, “Revelation and Faith,” in CCKR, ibid., p. 90). Also, it is clear that Rahner’s teaching on the supernatural existential is the beginning point for his (in)famous theory of the “anonymous Christian.”

192 William Dych, “Theology in a New Key,” ibid.
it, our words become nothing but a noisy gong, a clashing cymbal.\textsuperscript{193} The tension that exists between these two levels of knowledge, between our original self-possession, which always already consists in the offer of grace, and our conceptualization of it, is a positive, dynamic tension because it is moving (or should move) toward a goal. We should always be striving for a better, clearer, and more meaningful conceptual knowledge of what we have already experienced and lived through “prior” to its thematization, although never entirely without it. In terms of theology, i.e., language doctrine that interprets the experience of revelation

we should show again and again that all of our theological concepts do not make the reality itself present to people from without, but rather they are the expression of what has already been experienced and lived through more originally in the depths of existence. We can and must do both: try to reach greater levels of conceptual clarity, and try again and again to trace our theological concepts back to their original experience.\textsuperscript{194}

\textbf{Christ the Criterion: The Privileged Place of Christian Categorical Revelation}

This brings us to the reality that Rahner says ultimately unites human transcendental and categorical experience and which, to return to an image from earlier in the chapter, assures us that the mysterious night surrounding us is not the absurd void of

\textsuperscript{193} 1 Corinthians 13:1.

\textsuperscript{194} Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” \textit{ibid.}, p. 18-19. Rahner never tired of stressing that language about God, about those aspects of our lives that are deepest and most holy, can never wholly express the experience of mystery itself. He calls such language a “pointer” to the primitive experience of God. But such language is absolutely essential to being human and for expressing both what is most precious and most fearful in our lives. Indeed, he disagreed with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s dictum, “What cannot be spoken about must be left in silence,” (\textit{Tractatus Logico-philosophicus}). Rahner remarks, “I believe that when Wittgenstein says that one should not speak about that about which one cannot speak clearly, then with this statement, no doubt, he has virtually spoken once more about something, and, furthermore, he had no choice but to speak. It is true what Augustine said at the beginning of the \textit{Confessions}: ‘Woe to him who would simply be silent in regard to that about which one cannot speak clearly and univocally!’ No, the belief in the legitimate existence of such language, which by its very speaking, as it were, renders itself mute, is the fundamental presupposition for philosophy and theology,” (Karl Rahner, \textit{In Dialogue, ibid.}, p. 315). In chapter six, we will return to Rahner’s conception of theological language and its “verbal” limits in terms of his reflections on the arts.
death engulfing us, but rather the blessed holy night which is already illumined from within and gives promise of everlasting day, \textsuperscript{195} namely “the message of the unsurpassable and normative role of Jesus and his saving meaning for all people.”\textsuperscript{196} Christianity is a religion that proclaims “salvation and revelation not only for particular groups of people . . . but for \textit{all} people until the end of history.”\textsuperscript{197} We have already said that Rahner understands grace to be at work in all people as the innermost ultimate dynamism of their spiritual existence. In acts of authentic knowledge, love, and responsibility, people implicitly reach out to God who is the mystery that penetrates their lives and relationships. Those who have had “the experience of responsibility, of genuine love, of the inability to run away from their responsibility, have basically had a religious experience, whether they are aware of it or not.”\textsuperscript{198} In the “stretching out” of human transcendence the spirit encounters absolute mystery whereby God “gifts” us in an act of complete self-donation. From God’s side nothing is, as it were, held back; every human life is permeated by the fullness of God’s mysterious presence as an offer of a covenantal and everlasting relationship. To return to an earlier concept of Rahner’s, the human spirit is always searching in the world for meaning, ever yearning to hear a definitive word in the experience of the horizon of knowledge and love that the mystery which engulfs our experience has not remained distant and remote but has come close. He writes that, “thanks to his essence qualified by the supernatural existential, the human being is a being who is oriented towards a saving event which is possible to expect as an absolute


\textsuperscript{196} Idem., \textit{In Dialogue}, \textit{ibid.}, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{197} Idem., \textit{FCF}, p. 140.

\textsuperscript{198} Idem., \textit{In Dialogue}, \textit{ibid.}, p. 69.
and definitive saving event . . .” Reflective awareness of this original revealing self-communication of God “is not the product of mere introversion. It occurs in concrete, historical, human experiences. The human transcendental orientation “towards such a historical redemptive event is only explicitly reflected on when human beings meet with this event in history.” People do not “experience what love is, what responsibility is, by sitting and asking themselves in some psychological introspection: Who am I really? They make this experience of freedom, of responsibility, of love in concrete life, in their concrete activity, in their concrete historical reality.” Rahner insists that we can respond to the self-revelation of God at our innermost depths only in an act of loving surrender, not in a vain attempt to grasp at and control a situation that is ultimately beyond our control. We are, as he puts it, “burdened” with grace and responsibility for our free actions. When “human beings act, when they love, when they think correctly, when they search, when they inquire, when they act freely and responsibly, [they] are ultimately intending the ineffable, unfathomable mystery that we call God.” When it is a matter of the total and definitive sense of human existence, and when this sense is to be the incomprehensible God, meaning becomes mystery, and we must surrender to it in mute, adoring love in order to approach it. This utterly different, unexpected signification makes no sense that we can see through, grasp, and bring into subjection. This sense is the mystery that closes us in its grasp. Its beatitude is bestowed on us only when we affirm and love this holy mystery for its own sake and not ours, when we surrender, and not when we surreptitiously seek to make God a means for our self-affirmation.

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200 Ibid.

201 Idem., In Dialogue, ibid., p. 77.

202 Ibid., p. 76.

203 Ibid., p. 53.
But this presents us with the decisive question of *normativity*: How does one know what constitutes a positive human response to the offer of grace? If God’s offer of salvation is coextensive with our own lives, by what external measure can we know whether we have responded to grace in a *genuine* act of faith? And how can one be assured that this response is what God intends in revelation? As we have shown, “there is never transcendence which is not accompanied by some degree of reflection, however limited, because every transcendental experience must be mediated objectively. But the mediation of this experience of transcendence does not necessarily have to be an explicitly religious mediation.”

Human response to this genuine, original, and universal religious experience of God’s self-revelation is always expressed categorically in myriad personal and collective forms. Yet, how to judge between an authentically-conceived transcendence and the danger of a wrongly-conceived transcendence, which ignores the real conditions under which God reveals God’s self? If God is experienced in acts of *genuine* knowledge, love, and responsibility, by what authority does one discern the authenticity of these actions? What is the historical norm for the complete and definitive comprehension of the human transcendental experience?

Christianity posits that Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the irrevocable, unsurpassable, and definitive self-communication of God to the world in history as well as the historical perfection of the human response to the offer of God’s grace. The Christian church claims that in Jesus Christ God’s revelation to the world is complete, final, and finally known to be available to all. For the church, the history of revelation

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204 *Idem., FCF, ibid.*, p. 144.
has its absolute climax when God’s self-communication reaches its unsurpassable high point . . . in the incarnation of God in the created, spiritual, reality of Jesus. . . [For in him] God’s communication to humanity in grace and at the same time its categorical self-interpretation in the corporeal, tangible, and social dimension have reached their climax, have become revelation in an absolute sense.205

As we have stressed throughout this chapter, the real starting point and ultimate goal of Rahner’s theology is Jesus Christ. His is a theology which claims nothing less than “the absoluteness of Christianity, insofar as Christianity in its proper reality and center, thus in the redemption through Jesus Christ, recognizes the salvation of all people, and insofar as Christianity is the invitation to grasp explicitly in Jesus Christ this true final reality of the grace of eternal life.”206 For Rahner, the entire Christian message is centered on God’s free and undeserved communication of God’s entire self in Jesus Christ.

Where in their history do human beings make, with the absolute certitude of faith, the experience that God has actually promised himself to them in his grace, and that this self-pledging God is irreversibly and victoriously given to humankind, then to this question the Christian answers: I make this experience in Jesus Christ, he who is crucified and rose from the dead. That is where I encounter the person in whose reality, in whose history, in whose actuality, in whose self-interpretation is really experienced that the innermost dynamism in me is really authentic, that it is reliable, that it is not a mere fiction of the mind. Therefore, in the concrete historical experience of Jesus Christ the innermost revelation of God’s grace is experienced as undeniably certain and irrevocable.207

The message of Christianity can be summarized through the proclamation of Christ himself. Jesus announces that

with himself, the definitive, irrevocable address of God’s forgiving and self-bestowing love is present—that the Kingdom of God has irrevocably come, that the victory of God’s forgiving love in the history of humankind is complete and irreversible insofar as God himself is concerned. And in God’s definitive acceptance of Jesus through his resurrection, Jesus’ claim to be the vehicle of

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205 Ibid., p. 174-175.
206 Idem., In Dialogue, ibid., p. 344.
207 Ibid., p. 77.
God’s definitive self-communication to the world, despite its sin and finitude and mortality, is legitimated and sealed.\(^{208}\)

Here, Rahner emphasizes the privileged place of Christian categorical revelation in relation to the other religions of the world:

> It is not until the full and unsurpassable event of the historical self-objectification of God’s self-communication to the world in Jesus Christ do we have an event which . . . fundamentally and absolutely precludes any historical corruption or any distorted interpretation in the further history of categorical revelation and of false religion.\(^{209}\)

In a treatment of revelation faithful to Rahner, we read that the self-revelation of the living God expressed in the New Testament “is salvation-history which does not go beyond Jesus, because it is fulfilled in him, but continues to work for all human beings, whose salvation is promised in the triumph of Jesus. Revelation is God’s word on history, and as faithful word, the history of God’s word among human beings,”\(^{210}\) From the perspective of explicit Christian faith, all other claims to truth must be measured against the full historical event of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, for it is only in the crucified and risen one that we have the possibility of distinguishing “between the categorical history of revelation in the full sense and in its purity, and the formation of human substitutes for it and misinterpretations of it.”\(^{211}\) Therefore, Christ, who is the matchless, definitive word of God’s testimony to himself in the world, is the

\textit{criterion} for distinguishing in the concrete history of religion between what is a human misunderstanding of the transcendental experience of God, and what is the

\begin{itemize}
\item \(^{209}\) Idem., \textit{FCF, ibid.}, p. 155.
\item \(^{211}\) Karl Rahner, \textit{FCF, ibid.}, p. 157.
\end{itemize}
legitimate interpretation of this experience. It is only in him that such a
discernment of spirits in an ultimate sense is possible.\textsuperscript{212}

Indeed, none of the existing non-Christian religions for Rahner is

an unadulterated expression of the right relationship between God and humanity;
each is sinfully deficient also in profound ways. Thus they are not simply
incomplete religions. (It’s possible to ask whether something similar isn’t true
with us.) To this extent, these people are endangered in their salvation in decisive
ways, and so I would see missionary work as always very important and
necessary—although this would not be my final theological reason for missionary
effort.\textsuperscript{213}

Given the constraints of the dissertation, we are unable to set forth an adequate

Christology that would disclose further the organic line by which Rahner connects his

reflections on basic human experience with the church’s proclamation of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{214}

It is sufficient to say here that when the human spirit searches in history for an explicit

word that fulfills its transcendence, it is seeking out an “absolute” answer. When the

spirit yearns for a personal encounter that meets and fulfills that desire for something

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., p. 155, emphasis added. Rahner drives home the point that in the historical “event” of
Jesus Christ, there is the real, definitive, categorical event of God’s revelation. That is to say, the
fundamental message of Christianity is, as we have already stated, a message offered historically and
universally. However, it is not a historical, universal message in the sense that it is philosophical
speculation available to human reason; nor is the gospel a mythic collection of teachings that encapsulates
fundamental human truths. Rather, it is the historical event of God’s self-revelation in the world in the
form of man: ‘The proper and ultimate response to the search for meaning is of course God, in the way
that we have just indicated. Now, inasmuch as we understand Jesus Christ to be the eternal Word of God,
the proposition ‘Jesus Christ is the ultimate answer to the human being’s search for meaning’ is identical
with the proposition that God is this answer—God and no one or anything else. But this is manifestly not
what is meant by the proposition ‘Jesus Christ is the answer to the human being’s search for meaning,’ for
this would be nothing new, nothing particular or proper, nothing specifically Christian. Surely by ‘Jesus
Christ’ we mean the eternal Word of God. But we mean the eternal Word of God precisely \textit{qua} incarnate,
‘become flesh,’ as John puts it—precisely as having entered into a real, substantial oneness with the whole
human reality of Jesus of Nazareth’ (Karl Rahner, \textit{Love of Jesus and Love of Neighbor}, ibid., pp. 53-54).

\textsuperscript{213} Karl Rahner, \textit{In Dialogue}, ibid., p. 135.

\textsuperscript{214} Guided by the doctrine of the universal salvific will of God, Rahner’s theology attempts in part
to provide a systematic account, rooted in revelation, of how it is that God saves all human beings through
Jesus Christ who is the supreme mediator between God and all humanity. While, again, it is not possible to
investigate this point here, we have already outlined its foundations by considering how is it that human
beings are open to hearing this message of salvation; that is, how it is that God makes God’s self-revelation
available to all people.
beyond itself, it is searching for an “absolute bringer of salvation.” From the perspective of Christian faith, when a person encounters Jesus Christ, whom the church believes is Savior to all, that person at once encounters the full presence of God’s gracious word in the world and the fulfillment of obedience to that word in history. In encountering Jesus, a person, by virtue of the supernatural existential, recognizes the one whom he or she is intended by grace to become. The Christian church is the community of persons who have recognized and explicitly assented in faith to the truth that the Word of God has been made flesh in Jesus Christ and is thus the perfection of God’s self-revelation in history. The church’s unique witness to this truth in word and deed is the privileged testimony to this historical revelatory event—the normative event by which God confirms the absolute goal God intends for all human beings.

Rahner’s theology has all along intended to demonstrate that God’s revelation in the world is something that human beings can anticipate but never deduce. The inner thrust of transcendence anticipates, corresponds to, and is fulfilled by the history of salvation and revelation, but which comes to people supernaturally. What is unanticipated and radically new is the manner in which God chooses to reveal God’s self. The incarnation of God’s word in Jesus Christ, is a “word of God that has already as a matter of course been addressed to me by what I call grace, so that by now historical experience and the innermost dynamism of human beings toward God meet each other and confirm each other. From this unity of the historical experience of Jesus Christ and of the innermost experience of grace emerges then what we call God’s revelation

\[215\] Rahner underscores the radically unique claim of Christianity: “But the fact remains: Jesus Christ is not just any old ideal figure among human beings, such as Socrates, Buddha, Martin Luther King, or Mother Teresa; rather, he is the ultimate, irrevocable self-expression of God to the human race in history” (Karl Rahner, Faith in a Wintry Season, ibid., p. 107.)
accepted in faith in the full sense of the word.” Christianity declares that the fulfillment of “the human search for meaning is the incomprehensible Mystery of God given to the world in the historical event of the incarnation that can never be manipulated, and this he remains for all eternity.” Of course, all of this leads to the questions of how one encounters Jesus Christ, both within explicit Christianity and outside it, and why this encounter is salvific. Here, we are content to say that, according to the doctrine of the universal salvific will of God and, for Rahner, by virtue of the supernatural existential, it is possible to achieve salvation outside formal Christianity. And yet, insists Rahner, the human person’s orientation to God is also and necessarily an orientation by and toward Jesus Christ—unsurpassable exemplar and criterion of the path to and of God.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to draw out some implications of Rahner’s theology for clarifying our thesis that film is a locus mystagogicus. The thesis can be better honed now that we have investigated Rahner’s fundamental theology, its connection to mystagogy, and the justification he gives for the turn to secular sources. Here we are guided by the question of the difference Rahner’s thought makes in our perception of mystagogy and its sources and why film is essential to the mystagogical task of contemporary theology. One of the leading concerns of the dissertation has been to establish the theoretical grounds for theology’s turn to film as a source for theological reflection. While a growing number of people in the church are approaching film from

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216 Ibid., p. 77.

theological angles, few have provided ample justification for Christian theology’s engagement of a non-Christian source as a means toward enriching the faith life of believers. If theology is faith in search of understanding of how believers can know and live out their faith in Jesus Christ in the world, then it must furnish the faithful with the means of interpreting secular experiences in light of the gospel.

This, of course, is not a new problem in theology. Earlier we demonstrated that the fathers of the church justified their turn to sources outside explicit Christianity by way of their conviction that the Spirit of God had planted in the world the so-called logos spermatikos as preparation for the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ. In light of the gospel, early Christians could perceive intimations of God’s Verbum in certain elements of the pagan world around them and appropriate these elements in their theology and preaching. Using Greek cultural and literary symbols in their mystagogy, the fathers helped believers deepen their understanding of initiation into the mystery of Christ. To their minds, God’s revelation outside explicit Christianity was present in seed form—that is, limited and incomplete—and that possession of the gospel allowed them to discern between the good and bad ground on which the seed had fallen. The seeds were preparatory of an unequivocal and awe-inspiring word that would come historically, in “the flesh of the Logos.” The fathers’ mystagogical sermons clarified that only through baptism did one reap the full harvest of truth, and not only seeds.

Just as the patristic writers retrieved “types” of Christian symbols from sources outside the tradition for their sermons, this dissertation has suggested that film should be a material source for and of mystagogical interpretation today. To help articulate this possibility in contemporary theological language, we turned to the theology of Karl
Rahner. He inquires into the relevancy of secular sources under the broader question of the relationship between Christian faith and human experience as a whole. For Rahner, human experience is already a legitimate theological source because of its graced nature. He grounds this judgment explicitly in revelation through his teaching on the supernatural existential, a theological category he derives from Christian categorical revelation itself. Just as there are no purely spiritual and unmediated religious experiences, so there are no purely secular areas of life that are untouched by God’s grace. Thus, anthropology is a valid entry point for theological reflection. Theology can approach secular, and not only explicitly Christian, sources in culture as loci for theological inquiry and learning. Indeed, with the assurance of grace, theology can welcome secular culture “on its own merits, since ‘it results directly and authentically from the kernel of Christian revelation itself.’ . . . [For what] is at stake is the true secularity of the world, which consists of the truth that there is nothing in the world which is too ‘holy’ to be accessible to a worldly approach and must be reserved for religion . . .”

Rahner’s teaching that ours is a world of grace suggests that nothing is beyond the reach of God, that there are no wholly secular regions of activity untouched by the offer of God’s grace, and that “religious experience” should never be conceived as being consigned to a particular district in our lives. Experience of God is made possible because of the gift of God’s grace offered to the transcendentality of every human being, inviting them into relationship with God through their concrete, historical lives. Each life is always already immersed in the presence of God in grace, at least as an offer. Human experience is a justifiable locus of theological investigation because it is the locus of

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God’s offer of personal friendship. In this understanding, all human acts of self-expression, including the non-religious and non-Christian, are in some way symbolic of the acceptance or rejection of God’s offer of love and therefore legitimate sources for theological inquiry and even sources of theology itself.

Rahner’s interpretation of secular culture thus shares a measure of continuity with the early fathers’ conception. He “would have unhesitatingly maintained that the ‘seeds of the Word’ can be found” in [secular culture and other religions] and that [these], too, in some sense, are a ‘preparation for the Gospel.’” Yet his justification also expands the patristic perspective. The fathers believed that certain elements of Hellenistic culture (philosophy and poetry) contained semina verbi and others did not (Greek religion/mystery cults). The latter contained only semina perditionis. Rahner, on the other hand, does not perceive that the Holy Spirit scatters seeds “here” and “there.” By virtue of the supernatural existential, every human being is an “event” of grace and thus recipient of God’s complete offer of self-communication. Rahner evolves patristic mystagogy by extending the places to which theology can legitimately turn for evangelization and learning. In his view, human culture, including the religions of the world, contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what the Holy Spirit brings about in human hearts throughout history.

Like the early fathers, Rahner contends that revelation prior to Christ and outside its explicit formulation in Christianity is always limited and incomplete. The incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ remain the unsurpassable expression of God’s self-

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communication in the world. Because Christ is the absolute savior of the world, Christian theology can legitimately work “extramurally,” among those outside the church, since its task is to interpret revelation for all. As we have ventured to show throughout the dissertation, Christian theology is at its most magnanimous when receptive to idioms besides those in its own tradition to make the practice of faith reasonable and meaningful to believers. Such a gesture also suggests that theology is capable of new and needed discoveries as it becomes increasingly conversant with non-Christian religion and secular culture. For Rahner, Christianity “must continue to learn from its encounters with other religions—not as though it is learning something that is being imported into Christianity from the outside, but rather as learning to come to itself in a radical, decisive manner.”

What differentiates Rahner’s position, however, is his openness to the possibility of salvation apart from the visible church, though never apart from Jesus Christ, whose salvific significance is universal. The self-revelation of God in grace is God’s complete offer of salvation to every person. What emerges in Rahner’s theology is a picture of God’s revelation which is not limited by God’s own self-

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220 Karl Rahner, *In Dialogue, ibid.*, p. 345. Further on, Rahner explains that “experience is never merely a raw or secular source in relation to theology. Christian revelation is not merely an interpretation of experience but is ‘already and always’ its transformation. Wherever human experience is authentic, it is already anonymously Christian. Hence, experience could be a genuine source for theologizing, an equal partner in the dialogue with the objective word revelation. Each would be the corrective of the other” (*ibid.* p. 376). This gives further weight to the point made earlier in the chapter that theology’s turn to film involves a dynamic of mutually critical correlation.

221 To be sure, this is the Roman Catholic church’s official doctrine. His adaptation of mystagogy suggests that he is evolving the Christian understanding of mystagogy beyond the notion of the early church fathers. Certainly, Rahner’s emphasis on mystagogy as an interpretive process that initiates people deeper into the experience of mystery has kinship with the mystagogy of the church fathers. Like his forbears, Rahner presupposes mystagogy to be an ongoing process in the lives of Christians and does not serve only a provisional liturgical function. The difference, however, between Rahner and the fathers, is that for him the universal presence of God as grace (and hence salvation) is offered to *all* human beings as an invitation into an everlasting covenantal relationship. For Rahner, since grace touches all things, there is nothing in the world so profane as to preclude the presence of God.
communication but, rather, by the limits of apprehension of the recipient of grace. In positing a graced world, Rahner is not suggesting that all is grace. Rather, because the Spirit of God dwells within and without human experience, Christianity and its theology must remain open to the possibility that, even amid sin, the Word of God speaks its truth, for “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Theology, therefore, has the mandate to turn to human experience, however secular it may appear, and to discern its many aspects according to the norms of the gospel. It must do this in order to give a more complete witness to how the Holy Spirit is preparing the hearts of God’s people for explicit recognition of the truth of Jesus Christ through the assent of faith.

This relates to Rahner’s conception of the missionary effort of the church and the kerygmatic aspect of mystagogy. According to Rahner, given the New Testament teaching that God wills the salvation of every human being, the church “must be concerned about people, all people, not only about itself. [Its] mission to all peoples does not mean that outside its visible confines there is no salvation. The winning of new Christians is not a matter of saving people who would otherwise be lost. Rather, it is a matter of winning over witnesses, who can be a sign to all of the grace of God at work everywhere in the world.”222 In particular, the missionary activity of theology involves enabling people “to make explicit and to verbalize and to institutionalize that which is present to them in a rudimentary way.”223 This then returns us to Rahner’s conception of

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222 Karl Rahner, *In Dialogue, ibid.*, p. 106. Reflecting further on the question of the mission, Rahner asks: “What must I do in my concrete situation, myself as an individual and in community with others, so that the Spirit of Christ in me and in us can overcome in the contemporary world the non-spirit of egoism and hatred—of the quest for power, of the use of violence, of skepticism about the meaning and value of life—and overcome the nonspirit of a false secularism, which is without the worship of God and without ultimate hope? This is the mission of the church, that is, our mission, in the contemporary world” (ibid., p. 53).

223 *Idem., Faith in a Wintry Season, ibid.*, p. 103.
mystagogy: the awakening into the original, grace-filled religious experience of God. We recall that Rahner conceived of his retrieval of mystagogy in part as a pastoral response to people living in a secularized world. His theology addresses believers and non-believers who are struggling to make sense of their lives and who, in many cases, implicitly believe in God but do not have the language to articulate that belief. All they know is that the language of the church, as they have learned it, does not seem to help them in this process. Rahner’s point is that a new approach must be taken, one that attempts to meet people at the level at which they operate (“in the ordinary”) and to lead them to greater wisdom, but in a way that does not completely discount their experiences of disorientation and doubt. He is convinced that the doctrines of the church indeed illuminate our experiences and train us to be open to seeing the ever-greater mystery that surrounds and penetrates every aspect of our lives. Rahner thus “calls for a new ‘mystagogy’ in which the sources of religious experience within the secular culture can be explored. . . . Such a mystagogy would concentrate on finding a new opening into the incomprehensible mystery of human existence . . .”

His own theological method is an attempt to make explicit (categorical) the mystery dimension of human experience, awareness of which prepares people to hear and accept the message of Jesus Christ. The mystagogical aspect of theology guards against its becoming “stuck fast at the merely conceptual level.” Theology must “constitute a ‘mystagogia’ leading men and women to the experience of grace, and should not merely speak of grace as of a material subject

which is present in human beings’ lives solely through the conceptions which they formulate of it.”

When theology addresses itself to those outside the church or on the threshold of faith, its mission is to put people into contact with the revelation of God that is already addressed to their spirit. It makes explicit that element of openness to God’s word that will settle for nothing less than God’s word. Theology illustrates in concrete ways how it is that human beings long to hear this word of salvation and how they are already receptive to and dependent on it. To do this, theology must retrieve its inherent mystagogical orientation and take every effort to remove obstacles that prevent people from attending to this religious experience in their lives. As this chapter has detailed, Rahner’s method of transcendental anthropology is the means by which he “does” mystagogy. His method intends to immerse people into the mystery of their original and ever-present experience of God. Mystagogy is a path to faith in Jesus Christ that first involves initiating people into the human transcendental experience of mystery. To Rahner’s mind the broad mystagogical task of theology is “to disclose and articulate the mystery dimension implicit in all human experience so that Christian doctrines can be related to genuine human concerns.”

Surely this should be the task of every theologian, which is to say that every theologian needs also to be a mystagogue.

Having investigated Rahner’s theological methodology and his retrieval of mystagogy, we can put forward here the suggestion that the mystagogical task of

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225 Ibid., pp. 345-346.

theology is better accomplished when theologians have a developed sensitization to the transcendent dimension of all experience. For, if the ultimate task of mystagogy is to lead people to explicit faith in Jesus Christ, then this goal is should be “facilitated by an anthropocentric approach in which the theologian carefully examines the structure of human consciousness which makes the appropriation of particular Christian truths possible.”

A mystagogue who is tutored in the transcendental approach of Rahner will be much more “existentially attuned” to the totality of human existence and the structures of human consciousness. Mystagogy done with a greater sensitization to the transcendental dimension can serve to help the many people today who are out of touch with a proper sense of mystery. In such cases the mystagogue must provide people with the proper interpretive tools to help them discern the intimations of God’s presence in their daily lives. Only then can the theologian match Christian doctrine with the lived experience of an individual or community.

To reiterate, mystagogy is that element in theology that exposes and expresses the experience of the mystery of God that dwells both within and beyond us. It seeks to unveil the basic religious experience of grace that so often remains implicit or suppressed by the exigencies of daily life so that people can see that precisely in the pressures and urgency of daily life God is actively, silently there. Only then can theology relate the concrete message of the church to the concrete lives of people. It is in this sense of interpreting the intimations of grace in concrete ways that mystagogy is always

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228 This of course is the beginning of Rahner’s teaching on the mysticism of daily living, a topic that we shall discuss more explicitly in the next chapter.
categorical. Through the gift of language mystagogy discloses the experience of God’s holy mystery that often goes wholly repressed and buried by our daily routine, by all that we otherwise have to do with men and things. This primal religious relationship to God can be buried again even through our theological, ascetic, and pious chatter. All this proves indeed how much we must constantly struggle in a more genuine, more religious life to set free and constantly dig out this primal relationship to God.\textsuperscript{229}

Further, since it is exactly within their biographies that people conceptualize their experience of mystery, the task of mystagogy must be to appeal in all the various conceptual forms in which it is objectified, to this basic experience of grace, to bring human beings again and again to a fresh recognition of the fact that all this immense sum of distinct statements of the Christian faith basically speaking expresses nothing else than an immense truth . . . namely that the absolute mystery . . . has bestowed itself as itself in an act of forgiving love upon human beings, and is experienced in faith in that ineffable experience of grace as the ultimate freedom of human beings.\textsuperscript{230}

What is important to understand here is that all mystagogy is in fact categorical in that it is done by a mystagogue who uses symbols, be they conceptual or non-conceptual, to bring together doctrine and experience and in so doing lead people into a deeper articulation of the mystery dimension of human experience as a first stage toward explicit faith in Jesus Christ. The theologian/mystagogue should “make use of evocative language in order to disclose mystery effectively”\textsuperscript{231}, he or she “must take the risk of employing vivid, symbolic, poetic language even though it may be open to the charge of meaningless and unverifiability.”\textsuperscript{232} Now obviously, not every theologian has this

\textsuperscript{229} Karl Rahner, “Experiencing God,” in \textit{The Practice of Faith, ibid.}, p. 64.


\textsuperscript{231} James Bacik, \textit{Apologetics, ibid.}, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{232} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.
capacity of using language so effectively. Some people are clearly more in touch with “their deepest experience and have a greater ability to verbalize it: the poet and the mystic, for example. Others are in close existential contact with the mystery of life but have very little ability to either reflect on it or verbalize it.” Mystagogues are justified in turning to artists and others outside the explicit church for help and guidance in leading people to deepen their lived religious experience of God.

With this more specified conception of mystagogy, we can now see more clearly where we are headed in the next chapter with respect to Rahner’s “aesthetics” and the disclosure of mystery through film. Only touched upon in this chapter is the question of where our transcendental openness to Holy Mystery in fact leads us—abandonment, worship, love of God and neighbor—the norm of which love and knowledge (itself unified) is Christ himself. Mystagogy done transcendentally discerns in the many aspects of human experience, including aesthetic experience, those signs that direct people toward the need for Christ in their lives. Conversely, with a more acute transcendental awareness, sensitive mystagogues who turn to secular culture can discern inconsistencies and other problems that render cultural “answers” to the deepest human questions invalid and thus demonstrate even further the credibility of the gospel. Thus in the next chapter we shall bring this transcendental consciousness to bear on cinema, to see how it can serve the disposition of openness toward holy mystery. For film reaches a kind of religious transcendence precisely by its awakening of the sensibility and can even prepare for faith by arousing a potential receptivity for an encounter with greater mystery—the Deus semper maior present at the center of everything we are and do.

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233 Ibid., p. 37.
CHAPTER 6

Introduction

This dissertation has attempted to provide stronger theological foundations for Catholic-based approaches to cinema. For guidance and principles apropos of this goal the initial chapters turned to sources from the Roman magisterium, patristic mystagogy, and individual Catholic film scholars and theologians. The previous chapter sought further support of this project in the ideas of Karl Rahner. Elements of his fundamental theology provided further justification and encouragement for Catholic theology’s turn to secular sources like film for critical reflection and learning. The current chapter looks directly at those writings of Rahner that make explicit his conviction that theology and the arts are integral to one another. Before engaging this material, however, it is helpful to take stock of the placement of this inquiry within the larger framework of his thought.

The thrust of Rahner’s theology is the initiation of people into their foundational experience of sacred mystery as pedagogy for interpreting God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Rahner continually emphasized the need for theology to actively search out points of contact between human experience and Christian teaching in order to bring the two into closer proximity. This is the mystagogical orientation of his theology: a process of awakening into the unfathomable mystery at the heart of existence as a prerequisite to faith and the expounding its doctrines. Mystagogy, however, should not be understood as only a prelude to theology, to be jettisoned once the “real business” gets started. It is theology’s abiding quality, for theology must always return its thinking back to the
original encounter with mystery that stands as “the condition which makes possible the
knowledge by which we conceptualize, distinguish, and define” the experience of God.¹

Operating with this notion of mystagogy in mind, the dissertation’s main thesis,
that film is a promising locus mystagogicus, suggests a twofold implication. First, film is
an important source of theology since it can reveal the religious dimension of human
experience in concrete, imaginative forms beyond what conceptual theology can
accomplish on its own. Film as art potentially illuminates the mystery element
underpinning every aspect of human life by telling particular stories in very particular
ways. Film serves to sharpen people’s sensibility and responsiveness to God’s universal
offer of self, which Rahner believes is made precisely in the particular—in human history
and individual experience. Second, theology is a required hermeneutic for disclosing the
religious dimension in film. Though film art is incommensurable, it still needs to be
interpreted by way of methods outside itself. Theology brings to film a rich lode of
interpretive resources that span centuries and cultures; these facilitate critical perception
of possible religious themes in film. When theology is done through film, it can
creatively and effectively accomplish its task of relating church doctrine to daily life and
helping people get in touch with the mystery dimension of human existence.

The present chapter is thus something of a proving ground for the theory that film
is a reference point for mystagogy. From the time of the gospels Christian mystagogy
has given primacy to the symbolic and analogical. In their mystagogical homilies the
church fathers used poetic imagery to evoke the sacramental presence of mystery.
Rahner insists this practice be recovered not only for liturgical pedagogy but also for

initiation into the mystery of daily living—as preparation for the explicit encounter with God therein. A Catholic mystagogy that uses film as a source aims to lead people through film’s form, dramaturgy, images, and symbols into awareness of the sacred principle of human life as a preliminary step to fuller initiation into the gospel.

Building on the foundation blocks of last chapter, this chapter further substantiates this theory by drawing on principles for theological aesthetics that Rahner sets down in several articles on theology and the arts. Until recently these writings have received minimal scholarly attention. The articles are thematic in nature and each is itself quite systematically presented. However, one does not get the sense that Rahner intended them to build upon one another. Certainly, he did not develop a highly formed theological aesthetics in the manner of a Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Dillenberger, or Richard Viladesau. Still, these essays form an important aspect of his fundamental theology—not merely an appendage—and advance his conviction that Catholic theology remains incomplete without the arts. It is not the intention here to provide a comprehensive analysis of all of Rahner’s positions on aesthetics. What is possible, however, is to use the conceptual lens of mystagogy as a point of entry for clarifying some of the main themes of his writings on aesthetics. And while the term “mystagogy” is mentioned only a few times in these discourses, from the perspective of the dissertation

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2 Most notably, Richard Viladesau and Gesa Thiessen have surfaced these works for theology’s attention. See Richard Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art (New York: Oxford UP, 1999); and Gesa Thiessen, “Theological Aesthetics,” The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner, op. cit. While primary sources are mainly used in the chapter, these secondary studies are highly valuable for interpreting an area in Rahner about which very little is written.

these discourses can be profitably read as providing further theoretical warrant for the turn to film as source material for theology’s mystagogical initiative. Indeed, mystagogy is what holds together many of Rahner’s insights on the arts. Again, the previous chapter laid down necessary foundations for our exposition here, since Rahner’s aesthetics cannot be comprehended without some knowledge of the principles of his fundamental theology. Thus, the current chapter will help to flesh out certain theoretical aspects of Rahner’s transcendental method.

Having established the theory that film (its experience and analysis) can be an introduction to the mystery of God the chapter attempts something of a practicum by applying this mystagogical approach directly to the interpretation of Babette’s Feast (1987, dir. Gabriel Axel). This film has been selected for several reasons:

(i) It has been the subject of several excellent essays by theologians of film and our analysis builds upon these writings. Yet an even deeper sense of the film’s theological substance can be extracted through greater critical attention to its structure, its verbal text, and the painterly mise en scène.

(ii) Because the exegesis of the film follows discussion of Rahner’s reflections on the arts, it is important to make clear the critical consensus that Babette’s Feast is not merely a work of diversionary entertainment but, rather, a superb example of cinematic art. This fact is attested to on many fronts, from the high praise it has garnered by reviewers and acclaimed filmmakers, to its many awards, to the scholarly works written about the film.

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4 A fuller treatment of Rahner’s aesthetics would include analysis of his insights on poetry; a sense of the implications of St. Ignatius’s Exercises on his aesthetics; more on his notion of “primordial words”; explanation of the possibility he sees for piety in the experience of art; and a deeper study of his interpretation of analogia entis.
(iii) Babette’s Feast is adapted from an eponymous short story by Isak Dinesen (the pen name of Karen Blixen). Whereas the present discussion does not include a thoroughgoing intertextual component, some reference will be made to this original source. Such reference will help to contextualize the film analysis as well as and validate some of the judgments made throughout. Few (if any) theologians who have published articles on Babette’s Feast have referred to the novella; they have thus missed out on an important interpretive dimension, namely the adaptations Axel makes to Dineson’s story. The chapter demonstrates that many of the adaptations he makes are christic in form or quality and need to be taken into consideration in any theological reading. While Christian symbolism abounds in Babette’s Feast, still it is generally received as a secular “food” film and not, as will be argued, a profound meditation on one woman’s experience of God’s goodness.

(iv) Finally, the most practical rationale for the selection of Babette’s Feast is this writer’s familiarity and experience with the film. It is a work that requires several viewings and even some independent research beyond the film before its deepest riches can be mined.

Examination of the film will involve two closely related steps which correspond to the conviction that theology and art are interdependent and that each can enlarge the other’s sensibilities and capabilities. The first step is to present an aesthetic evaluation of Babette’s Feast. This means allowing for the film to “speak for itself” as a work of art and requires that the evaluation remain focused on interpreting the signals the film communicates. Such a descriptive approach intends to guard against theological
eisegesis without precluding the need to submit the film to a Catholic theological reading. It is precisely this perspective that remains sensitive to symbols that other interpretive strategies might overlook or misinterpret. The further advantage of a Catholic semiotics is that it can help disclose possible religious messages latent in the film and aid the exegesis of symbols that others may be less equipped to assess.

Having described as carefully as possible what the film communicates on its own, and judged that it has theological meaning in its own right, the second and intrinsically related step is an explicitly theological evaluation of the film. This stage takes the interpretation to another level in the sense that it sees the film as a touchstone for deeper theological engagement. Application of theology’s hermeneutical tools—the determiners of gospel and tradition—can serve to discern the validity and genuineness of the Christian message already expressed in the film but it can also provide a reading that the director and his collaborators might not have anticipated. One theological perspective that has received little critical attention is to see Babette’s Feast as a meditation on the vindication of God’s goodness in defeating personal participation in evil. To help articulate this position, the film is placed into direct conversation with the thought of Marilyn McCord Adams on the subject of theodicy.

In the case of both stages of evaluation, Babette’s Feast is approached as a locus mystagogicus, both in itself and as a reference point for doing theology mystagogically.

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5 The analysis of Babette’s Feast applies some of the practical ideas espoused by Richard Blake on approaching film from a Catholic perspective. In chapter three of this dissertation, Blake’s hermeneutical approach to “uncovering the sacred element” in film was examined. He submits a baseline of criteria to which those interested in evaluating the religious dimension of film ought to adhere so as to obviate any eisegetic tendencies. It may be helpful for the reader to return to that section to recollect Blake’s insistence that film analysts consider especially (i) the background of the director (artist); (ii) the film as it stands on its own (artifact); (iii) how the film has been received and interpreted (audience); and (iv) the uniqueness of film as an artistic medium (art form).
Thus, the intention is to provide a better sense of how the words and images of this impressive film are preparative of the nonpareil Word and Image of God, Jesus Christ.

**Karl Rahner on Theology and the Arts**

Rahner never tired of insisting upon theology’s mystagogical task and his writings on poetry and the arts reveal the scope of his contention. As the enterprise that reflects explicitly on the personal and spiritual relationship between human beings and God, theology must first put people in touch with the interior depths of religious experience where grace itself prepares people for God’s revelation in history. For theology to helpfully mediate God’s communication to human subjectivity, i.e., that it aid the graced assent to lived faith and the intellectual and existential appropriation of church doctrine, it should begin by mystagogically evoking those experiences where the catholic offer of grace to the whole person is most palpable. Rahner’s position is that a theological concept does not immediately make present the reality to which it points but is rather “the expression of what has already been experienced and lived through more originally in the depths of existence.”\(^6\) In this sense theology accords with the workings of grace, which “does not only start to work for the first time, when the word of the gospel reaches man through the official preaching. It precedes this word, it prepares the heart for this word by every experience which takes place in the life of man. It is, in diverse ways of course, secretly and powerfully active in what we call human culture . . ..”\(^7\) When mystagogical theology operates with a transcendental orientation, it aims at initiating people into

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deeper faith by evoking their experience of grace, the permanent universal condition of
mystery and freedom that makes possible every particular expression of knowledge and
relationship. Mystagogy does this by tracing, as it were, the organic line connecting
human expressions back to their origin in grace. Thus, mystagogy cultivates faith by
scrutinizing culture for words/symbols that arouse religious experience and prepare
people to appropriate the gospel in meaningful ways.\textsuperscript{8}

Mystagogy is indispensable to the theological task of interpreting faith because, in
delivering doctrine, theologians must at once strive to reach greater levels of conceptual
clarity (\textit{fides quaе}) and retrace the pathway back to the primordial experience that
engenders doctrine (\textit{fides qua}) so as to invoke its magnificence. The difficulty, Rahner
asserts, is that too often theology has developed without this mystagogical initiative.
When it no longer describes, elicits, and puts people in touch with the incomprehensible
mystery of God encountered prior to any conceptualizing or defining the experience,
when it “becomes ‘objective’ in a false sense, this is not good theology, but bad
theology.”\textsuperscript{9} Again, because theology aims to mediate an existential encounter with God,
Rahner asserts that it must recover its mystagogical method as a \textit{reductio in mysterium
Dei}, a methodological principle of his that is “based on the insistence that the concern of
theology can be nothing but God, and that the reality of God is missed if it remains for us
merely an idea.”\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[8] Mystagogical discernment should also be poised to expose symbols of deceptive religiosity and
to trace any abominations of human freedom to its origin in sin.
\item[10] Richard Viladesau, \textit{Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art}. New York:
\end{footnotes}
Whereas theology that proceeds according to strict scientific methods may become intellectually sophisticated, an adverse consequence is that it can lose “so much of its poetry.”

According to Rahner, theological rationalism is a severe deficiency in modern theology, for it misses the “poetic touch” and precludes the kinds of questions and experiences to which faith must attend and the means by which it attends them. Just as Hans Urs von Balthasar believed the church of late lacks a kniende Theologie—a theology done with knees bent in praise and supplication before the Lord—Rahner contends that we also lack in our time a “poetic theology.”

Theology faces a task especially today which is not new, but has been greatly neglected in recent centuries, namely, that it be in some way a “mystagogical” theology. By this I mean that it must not speak only in abstract concepts about theological questions, but must also introduce people to a real and original experience of the reality being talked about in these concepts. To this extent what I have called “poetic theology” could be understood as one of the ways, although not the only way, of doing this kind of mystagogical theology.

Rahner protests that modern theology is rarely practiced in this holistic sense and thinks the arts can help the church recover the mystagogical function prevalent in much of early and medieval Christian theology. His assertion that we are lacking a poetic theology is

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11 Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” ibid., p. 26. Underlying this conviction is the epistemological presupposition that the human intellect is to be understood more fundamentally as “the capacity for the incomprehensible, as the capacity to be grasped by something which ever eludes our grasp. It must not be understood in the first instance as the capacity for the kind of comprehension which masters the object and subjects it to us” (ibid., 20). That is to say, human reason is more precisely understood as the condition of possibility for encountering mystery.


14 In his volume Heaven in Stone and Glass: Experiencing the Spirituality of the Great Cathedrals (New York: Crossroad, 2000), Robert Barron points out that because we are heirs to Enlightenment consciousness, theologians have tended to develop something of a prosaic cast of mind: we “like our ideas clear and distinct, and we like our words direct and unambiguous” (p. 11). This is a liability for theologians, who are in the business of attending to the divine mystery that is beyond categorization and yet that reveals itself in nature and history. Theologians must retrieve the mind of their medieval counterparts, suggests Barron, and become “comfortable with a relentlessly symbolic imagination” (p. 11).
based in part on the opinion that a purely “abstract” theology remains just that: disconnected to the things of this world, to our bodies and senses—to the very materials through which the God of mystery calls us to covenant. His reintroduction of mystagogy is in part an attempt to heal the historic rupture between the scientific and kerygmatic poles of theology and restore the bond they shared, for instance, in the early church’s catechumenal pedagogy. Richard Viladesau remarks that Rahner’s call for the restoration of the poetic dimension of theology means that not only should theology “take account of feeling, beauty, and art as aspects of religion and of primary religious language, but also that theology itself should speak ‘with feeling’ and in images, integrating the religious and poetic elements into its mode of discourse.”

To be sure, Rahner was not out to diminish the importance of the scientific element in theology, the need for linguistic accuracy in the honing of doctrine, and the cultivation of intellectual virtue. There is certainly something “poetic” about striving to find the most precise language possible to communicate Christian teaching:

[W]e have to be reasonable and balanced about this. There is also a kind of theology which is perfectly justified in taking a deep breath and proceeding patiently through the long and arduous reflections of conceptual theology which cannot be expected to lead immediately to some kind of religious or mystical experience.

He references St. Augustine’s teaching that “the mind curiously delights in a truth that comes in an indirect and symbolically evocative way” (pp. 12-13).

15 Recall that pre-baptismal catechesis was discursive and conceptual and post-baptismal catechesis (i.e., mystagogy) was more evocative and phenomenological. The fathers considered both pedagogical modes essential and essentially linked.

16 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics, op. cit., p. 12.

Yet the problem is that this unity has not always obtained in much of modern theological practice. Only the conceptual aspect of theology has become refined, and that at the expense of the poetic sensibilities of the whole. Rahner wants theology to achieve a greater degree of equilibrium among its pastoral, speculative, aesthetic, and doxological aspects—a lasting integration of fides qua and fides quae. This entails doing necessarily rigorous scientific work that issues in language that is as clear and distinct as possible about questions of faith; and it entails finding non-conceptual, emotive, and sensuous ways of approaching inscrutable mystery. When these two modes are synchronous theologians operate within a larger sphere, one in which they may discover highly creative and relevant ways of communicating Christian faith.

It is here that Rahner inquires more specifically into the nature of theology in relation to the arts. His reflections on this relationship are founded primarily on his transcendental anthropology and theology of revelation. Rahner considers theology and art already linked because they both arise from out of humanity’s transcendental nature: whatever is “expressed in art is a product of that transcendence by which, as spiritual and free beings, we strive for the totality of reality . . . . [I]t is only because we are transcendental beings that art and theology can really exist.” More specifically, it is only because

the human person is a being who by his very nature pushes beyond every given boundary, a being for whom every end is a new beginning, a being who encounters the unfathomable mystery of things, only because and insofar as the

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human person is a transcendent being can there be both art and theology in their real senses. Both art and theology are rooted in man’s transcendent nature. Building on his doctrine of grace, Rahner holds that not only does grace operate in all people, stirring in their hearts a restless search for God, but that something of God is disclosed in authentic acts of transcendence. Every positive human response to the offer of God’s friendship, however implicitly made, contains an inherent theological motivation. Accordingly, genuine works of art represent concrete, “categorical” expressions of the human person’s transcendental orientation. Simultaneously, such artistic expressions are revelatory of God who is the mysterious inspiring presence behind them. It is in this sense that Rahner recognizes the arts as modes of theology and thus intrinsic to the theological task. For if is true that theology is “man’s reflexive self-expression about himself in the light of divine revelation, [then] we could propose the thesis that theology cannot be complete until it appropriates these arts as an integral moment of itself and its own life, until the arts become an intrinsic moment of theology itself.” Rahner’s broadly construed vision of theology suggests that it is not solely propositional, that theology already transcends conceptual strictures and will necessarily take on diverse forms, including poetry, music, painting, sculpting, and film, among others.

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21 The dissertation has tried to call attention to the need for Christian discernment in evaluating human experience. This need is no less important in the experience of art. A work of art may be a “genuine” experience of transcendence, both in its making and in its reception. But art may also be “genuine” in another sense: its execution may be technically and aesthetically brilliant, but what it ultimately expresses is “genuinely” demonic and idolatrous. In these cases, the Christian perspective is still necessary—not only to condemn the work as anathema but to lead viewers to an alternative position from the one objectified.

The following passages encapsulate Rahner’s perspective that the arts are integral to theology as well as theologically constitutive in themselves:

[W]hat comes to expression in a Rembrandt painting or a Bruckner symphony is so inspired and borne of divine revelation, by grace and by God’s self-communication, that they communicate something about what the human really is in the eyes of God which cannot be completely translated into verbal theology. If theology is not identified a priori with verbal theology, but is understood as man’s total self-expression insofar as this is borne by God’s self-communication, then religious phenomena in the arts are themselves a moment within theology taken in its totality.\textsuperscript{23}

[W]hy should a person not think that when he hears a Bach oratorio, he comes into contact in a very unique way with God’s revelation about the human not only by the words it employs, but by the music itself? Why should he not think that what is going on there is theology? If theology is simply and arbitrarily defined as being identical with verbal theology, then of course we cannot say that. But then we would have to ask whether such a reduction of theology to verbal theology does justice to the value and uniqueness of these arts, and whether it does not unjustifiably limit the capacity of the arts to be used by God in his revelation.\textsuperscript{24}

Several assertions made here regarding Rahner’s valuation of the arts vis-à-vis theology are key to generating an understanding of film as a legitimate source for and of mystagogy.\textsuperscript{25} These can be thematized under the following headings: (i) the revelatory nature of the arts; (ii) the theological nature of the arts; (iii) the autonomy of the arts; and (iv) the meaning and function of religious images.

i. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Rahner’s transcendental method translates the Roman Catholic tradition’s consistent affirmation that God encounters humanity in creation, history, and personal experience. Grace prepares the human person

\textsuperscript{23} Ib\textit{id}.

\textsuperscript{24} Ib\textit{id}.

\textsuperscript{25} Here we shall limit the query to the reception of art (viewing, listening, etc.). How to construe the question from the artist’s side, i.e., the production of art as a religious activity, is beyond the scope of this chapter.
for this encounter by awakening in mind and heart the sensibility needed to perceive the
word that God speaks to all creation through Jesus Christ. Though grace operates outside
visible Christianity, the Spirit of God mysteriously works to conform all persons to the
likeness of Christ. Thus, Rahner maintains that Jesus Christ and his gospel remain the
sole criterion for theological discernment of the religious experience of God wherever
and however such experience is expressed. He applies this same principle to theological
interpretation of the arts. The statement in the second passage above that God uses the
arts “in his revelation” must be understood within this context. From his perspective art
is genuine qua art as well as theologically genuine when it makes people “aware of their
original religious experience.”

When art elicits religious experience it simultaneously
reveals the presence of God’s Spirit indwelling all people as grace. Art is revelatory of
God insofar as it reveals the mysterious depths of human existence, for it is there that art
“reaches the realm where true religious experience takes place.”

Rahner submits that
“in both hearing and seeing we can have experiences of transcendence and that these
experiences may become genuine religious experiences of divine self-communication.”

When art is approached with sensitized “eyes to see” and “ears to hear” it can lead us
transcendently to perceive something new and different (at times in provocative ways),
or it can bring us to a newfound awareness or appreciation of what has been true all
along. Artistic exposition of beauty, wonder, lament, resignation to the mystery of life,
faithfulness, responsibility, forgiveness, righteous indignation, and joy, when done with

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28 Ibid., p. 227.
integrity, reflects and thereby magnifies people’s understanding of the meaning of these experiences in their own lives. The emotive power of art can train the emotions and intellect and so lead individuals into closer proximity with the heights and depths of their own selfhood and the transcendental context made possible only by the Spirit of God who dwells deep down and still yet beyond all things. Art is mystagogical in that it can evoke the experience of mystery that is its inspiring source. When this occurs art reveals the mystery and splendor of God. This is the sense in which Rahner means that God uses the arts “for divine purposes.”

It is important to understand exactly what Rahner means by the revelatory nature of the arts. He is not suggesting that art made of human hands is God’s revelation itself. As he writes, “that something more which belongs to [art] and from which it lives cannot come to art from itself. The openness to infinity which constitutes art does not itself give the infinite; it does not bring and contain the infinite.” Thus the artist who is driven forward by the transcendence of the spirit “has already been overpowered secretly and quite unknown to himself by the longing which the grace of the Holy Spirit has implanted in the human heart.” In other words, a work of art “cannot simply ‘contain’ an immediate and genuine religious experience, for that is quite impossible, [yet it] perhaps evokes in me my own experience of the religious . . . something which reflexive, purely conceptual and rational theology is not able to accomplish.” Whereas a work of art may


31 Ibid.

be borne of grace and profoundly redolent of this experience, it does not itself manufacture the experience of grace. To put it plainly, one may experience God in the experience of art, but art is not grace itself; art may be revelatory of God, but it is not itself God’s word. The arts, like theological concepts, (potentially) mediate the graced mystery that has already been experienced in the course of human existence. Art is a mode of theology because it translates or conveys God’s invitation to human subjectivity. And it is precisely in this sense that art constitutes a mystagogical source: for “it describes and evokes directly or indirectly [the] personal spiritual relationships of persons with God [and] introduces them mystagogically into those relationships.”

ii. This leads to a second theme that can be extracted from the above quotations, one that has to do with the nature of theology, its articulation, and the complementarity of verbal and non-verbal artistic expressions. As Rahner has put it, theology is the self-awareness of the human person about his or her totality made possible by the illuminating quality of grace. The point being made here is that because theology concerns the whole individual in relation to the whole of reality, theology cannot be reduced to verbal or even explicitly religious modes of expression, since people frequently communicate what is most valuable to them without words and in symbols that are not traditionally religious. Theology’s scope as the total self-expression of the human person necessitates the use of idioms that communicate the historical particularity of a person’s or a people’s religious experience. Rahner admits that there is a prevailing honor accorded to verbal expressions in much of western theology, a pride of place which is justified since Christianity, as “the religion of the word proclaimed, of faith which hears and of a sacred scripture, has a

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33 Idem., “Art Against the Horizon of Theology and Piety,” ibid., p. 165.
special intrinsic relationship to the word and hence cannot be without such a special relationship to the poetic word.”

Still, one of Rahner’s chief concerns in his treatment of aesthetics is a recovered sense of the theological value of non-verbal art. As he says, there are unique and irreplaceable modes of expression “which cannot be substituted for by words or by some form of verbal art.”

While much of occidental theology has historically privileged written texts, still, a word-less work of art can nonetheless present itself as a highly significant theological statement when it opens people to the religious experience of God in a way that “reflexive, purely conceptual and rational theology is not able to accomplish.”

Rahner distinguishes the verbal and the non-verbal in art as incommensurable; but he is careful not to separate the two. To him they form a unity and he cites aesthetics itself—the hermeneutics of art—as one instance of their necessary integration. Though a work of art is evaluated through verbal means, interpretations do not reduce non-textual art to words, since this might suggest that the original work is secondary to its interpretation and not the other way around. Art transcends interpretation because it is polyvalent: its experience elicits a surplus of significances. A poem or painting is always “more” than the cumulative load of opinions it generates. The non-verbal arts “can never be fully captured in words. If one were to attempt such a translation, the


35 Rahner mentions painting, music, and sculpture in this regard. While he does not consider the performing arts, architectural design, or, indeed, film, his reflections on the arts are generally applicable across artistic genre.


uniqueness and autonomy of the non-verbal arts would lose their whole *raison d’être.*”

Still, art is never independent of interpretation. Indeed, a musical work, a painting, or a film is already to some degree comprehended at both visceral and intellectual levels upon an initial viewing. When this original experience is contemplated, critiqued, and communicated, such articulation is most often done verbally. The exegesis of art can elucidate the meaning of a work as viewers learn to see things perhaps even the artist did not anticipate. Whereas the “message” an artist intends to send through his or her work is expressed first and foremost through the artistic form itself, an essential aspect of the work’s meaning—how it is “received”—is also conveyed through verbal reviews.

iii. This brings us to a third theme in Rahner’s aesthetics and that is his desire to maintain the autonomy of art with respect to theology. Speaking as a theologian and not a trained artist (although Rahner’s writings often exhibit tremendous artistry), his emphasis is on the need for theology to interpret the arts in a way that does honor to their distinctive form and that allows artists the freedom to operate independently of theology. Though the arts constitute, as he says, an “active element of theology,” they are nonetheless “autonomous ways of human self-expression that cannot be adequately translated” into theological statements. Theologians, therefore, should not evaluate art only with reference to its capacity to catechize. And although theological interpretations might increase the meaningfulness and reach of a work of art, art is never an accessory to

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39 Rahner, “Art Against the Horizon of Theology and Piety,” *ibid.,* p. 163.

Theology. Theology may claim to study the God who is author of all things, yet it cannot facilely claim that all disciplines fall under its headship. Rahner holds that art is not to be understood merely as an *ancilla theologiae*, as an aid or an illustration of a religious truth, but it can in itself become a source of theology, a *locus theologicus*. Rahner reflects thereby the modern idea of imagination, i.e. the stress on the creative power of the human being, and thus of originality in a work of art.²¹

Precisely because art comes to be from out of the transcendental reaches of the human imagination theology accords a dignity and autonomy to the arts as having a “special and irreplaceable religious significance.”²² Rahner insists that theologians keep firmly in mind that whereas they may have sophisticated interpretive tools which can aid in disclosing the religious dimension of art, it is the original piece that must first be allowed to “speak for itself.” An image is not merely an illustration of the spoken word, but has its own independent value. People “may naturally speak of this significance, interpret it, and thus once more explain the image by means of words. Yet these words are no substitute for the viewing itself and as a religious activity.”²³

iv. This leads us to our final theme for inquiry in Rahner’s aesthetics, namely, the question of the religious meaning of images. Of particular interest is how he determines the religious significance of secular art. To understand this point it is important to bear in mind Rahner’s anthropological imperative that there is a radical unity between transcendental and categorical experience and between spirit and matter. The path to

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faith and its articulation is inclusive of the entire person and is never a solely intellectual journey.

Ordinary Christian anthropology is convinced that in human knowledge two levels must be distinguished: sense knowledge, that is, one having a strictly material component, and spiritual conceptual knowledge, that is, one reaching out to being as such. . . . Christian anthropology has always clearly insisted that sense knowledge and spiritual knowledge constitute a unity, that all spiritual knowledge, however sublime it may be, is initiated and filled with content by sense experience.\textsuperscript{44}

The spiritual experience of grace is a mediated reality, one that comes to people in history and through the senses. Thus, it is possible to give a Christian account of the religious meaning of images only if this notion of “corporeality” is understood properly, for persons are “fully themselves only when all their sense powers work together.”\textsuperscript{45}

Possession of the gospel is equally an intellectual and sensuous experience. As Rahner states, Christianity “can be present in persons fully and completely only if it has entered them through all the gates of their senses, and not merely through their ears, through the word.”\textsuperscript{46} Here Rahner notes a “certain antagonism” in the Christian tradition between the corporeality of religious activities on the one hand and transcendental reference to the nameless and invisible God on the other. Catholic doctrine and the history of devotion speak “of a mystical ascent to contemplation, which is experienced as being without images, without object, as being engulfed in the incomprehensibility of God. They emphasize that we will one day contemplate God directly, without the help of any created concepts or images.”\textsuperscript{47}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 150.
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 153.
\item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 153-154.
\item \textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 151.
\end{itemize}
Theology may lead some Christians to think that images, and the possible religious meanings they generate, are merely provisional and that they have no eternal significance; or, at the very least, they are of minor importance in the doing of theology.

Whereas he admits this historical tension (indeed, much of his own theology underscores God as “incomprehensible mystery”), still he rejects the notion that the body is, as it were, a launch pad for the soul. The body (the senses, materiality, etc.) is not a “provisional instrument.” Rahner’s theological valuing of images appeals to the Christian doctrine that God became man, died, and was raised bodily from the dead. By emphasizing

the resurrection of the flesh, the lasting incarnation of the eternal Logos, Christianity remains the religion that can conceive of human fulfillment only as the consummation of the whole human being, in which that being, although transformed in a way that we do not understand, reaches its consummation with all the dimensions of its reality in their unity, hence not by shedding some dimensions that would belong to it only in this life. For Christianity, human beings take with them, in their consummation, albeit in a way that we can neither conceive nor imagine, their whole reality, hence also their body, their senses, their history.\textsuperscript{48}

Rahner extends to the arts this incarnational principle, that God taking flesh in Jesus Christ discloses history and matter to be bearers of divine meaning; that the seen can evince the unseen; and that what is known can lead to what is unknown. He further supports the contention that images are not provisional or ancillary to speculative theology by referencing the tradition of ocular language in Christian theology: the “eyes of faith”; Christ as God’s “image”; eternal happiness as beatific “vision”—the “seeing of the triune God face to face, not as a hearing.”\textsuperscript{49} It is therefore imperative, he asserts, that a Christian be trained not only to hear the word of God but to clearly “see” the world with

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 154.
and discern experience within the illuminating light of grace. Indeed, it “is an ‘elevated

task’ and a ‘sacred, human and Christian art to learn to see’ with loving eyes if we

confess Christ not only as the Word but also as the image of God.”50 Thus, Rahner

returns to an earlier point that “word” and “image” are irreplaceable and inseparable in

theology when he teaches that images are not mere illustrations of the spoken word but

have their own religious significance. Again, one “may naturally speak of this

significance, interpret it, and thus once more explain the image by means of words. Yet

these words are no substitute for the viewing itself and as a religious activity.”51

Whatever the artistic genre (poetry, music, film, painting), determination of the

religious meaning of the experience will, for Rahner, depend on the person and the

overall context in which he or she experiences the work of art. If a “religious reality is

truly such only when it helps us to refer directly to the absolute God,”52 then even “an

image that does not have a specifically religious theme can be a religious image, when

viewing it helps to bring about, through a sensory experience of transcendence (if we

may call it so), that properly religious experience of transcendence.”53 It follows that a

picture, a poem, or an acoustical phenomenon (film is a confluence of all three) will be

“religious or not depending on the disposition and the concrete situation of the person”

doing the seeing or hearing.54 This requires discernment, for the question about the

possible religious significance of secular art will depend on whether the experience can

50 Thiessen, “Theological Aesthetics,” ibid., p. 228.


52 Ibid., p. 157.

53 Ibid., p. 159.

54 Rahner, “Art Against the Horizon of Theology and Piety,” ibid., p. 167.
be situated “into a larger context, into a larger human context so that the religious question does arise.”

For it could be

that a painting of Rembrandt’s, even if it is not religious in its thematic, objective content, nevertheless confronts a person in his total self in such a way as to awaken in him the whole question of existence. Then it is a religious painting in the strict sense. It can be religious in this sense even if it does not have an explicit, thematic religious content.

A work of art without explicit religious content can be discerned as having religious value when its viewing (seeing, listening) leads to a more profound experience of human transcendence, since it is precisely the religious experience of transcendence that opens us and prepares us for the historical manifestation of God’s eternal covenant. Poets and artists often give expression to religious statements in a different set of analogous symbols than those of traditional piety. This situation calls for theologians to carefully scrutinize these symbols to determine the possible religious meaning of a work of art since, as Rahner suggests, not every material representation of a religious symbol necessarily falls under the heading of true art and not all secular works of art are inimical to Christian faith. Whether the authentically religious is presented unequivocally or anonymously in art, when it awakens in participants an encounter with ultimate mystery and strengthens in them a resolve to deepen relationship with the God whose grace makes that awakening possible, we can see why Rahner believes that theology is incomplete without the arts.


57 Cf. chapter three of the dissertation and Michael Gallagher’s comments on the Christian discernment of film, which he bases on Rahner’s insights on the arts.

Rahner does not simply collapse theology and art. Whereas theology may express itself in highly symbolic and evocative ways, most theologians are not artists, nor are they always consciously creating art when “doing” theology. Theologians must admit that, “on the practical level there are perhaps others who can speak to faith with feeling better than academic theologians, who cannot all be poets and artists.”\(^59\) Art, in seeing deeply into life, may be profoundly theological, but artists are not trained theologians. What Rahner does, however, is blur the line of distinction between the two enterprises. The arts provide something essential to the overall task of theology, for they put us “into contact in a very unique way with God’s revelation about the human.”\(^60\) In so doing they affirm the Christian theological claim that God is one who encounters us in history and speaks to us as one who has been involved in that history. The following passage summarizes how Rahner conceives the arts as theological sources:

The realm of aesthetic experience (or the aesthetic level of experience) may serve as a source for both historical theology and systematic theological reflection in at least two ways. First, it is a locus of explicitly religious (and theological) experience, expression, and discourse; second, it is a locus of secular human experience that is either (a) “implicitly” religious or (b) susceptible to correlation with the sacred. That is, the aesthetic realm provides theology with “data” concerning its three objects (God, religion, and theology itself), as well as with knowledge of the cultural matrix to which these are related in reflection.\(^61\)

And this leads us full circle to the dissertation’s thesis that film is a source for and of mystagogy. If the objective of a mystagogical approach to the arts is to help people perceive in their artistic experiences semina verbi—the intimations of grace—then what we have learned in Rahner’s reflections on theology and the arts is that the experience of


\(^{60}\) Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” *op. cit.* p. 25.

art is something of a prerequisite for Christianity. That is to say, there is a preparation which a person “must undergo to be or become a Christian, which turns our to be a receptive capacity for the poetic word.” Such a preparation is the meaning and method of mystagogy as Rahner has recovered it from its origins in scripture and the church fathers. The poetic theology that he advocates in the articles we have studied is one mode of mystagogy: theology needs the arts because they disclose the permanent, permeating presence of the mystery toward which human beings reach out in transcendence; and art needs theology to render comprehensible the structures that make possible the human receptivity of God’s abiding word. The dissertation’s attempt to bridge theology and film via an understanding of film as a locus mystagogicus draws its inspiration from the Catholic tradition of mystagogy with its hermeneutical and pastoral motivation. The task of film mystagogy is to evoke and deepen transcendental experience through cinematic experiences. This thesis affirms film’s capacity to reveal the human condition in ways that cannot be completely translated into verbal theological statements. It presents film as a mystagogical source capable of reflecting the existential dimension of life and its mystery, of exciting in us a boundless sense of beauty, curiosity, and awe. Film mystagogy spotlights where and how film discloses anthropology and is instructive in the permanent and perennial questions of life; or, in Rahnerian argot, the totality of the single question each human life remains until death. The thesis also suggests that Catholic theology can facilitate the process of discerning authentic religious themes within film and of perceiving when the religious experience of God has genuinely expressed itself in film. A film mystagogy is capable of extracting messages of deeper

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meaning perhaps present in film but overlooked by others unequipped with the interpretive tools that theology makes available. In particular, when a transcendental sensibility is brought to film analysis, the interpreter remains poised to discern whether and how a film’s reflection on human experience discloses the intimations of God’s revealing presence within that experience. A film’s artistic examination of life can help persons remain attentive to “the significant ‘signals of transcendence’ in and through which one is summoned to appropriate a grace already given, a grace beyond anything particular, a grace which is really the divine ambience in which all particular experiences take place. What really matter are the experiences which awaken the person to respond freely to God’s ever-present offer of self.”63 Such a theology correlates film narratives with the gospel so as to lead people through particular film experiences to a more meaningful embrace of their encounter with Christ in their own life story. Film mystagogy’s application of the tools of Christian discernment should also perceive specious religious phenomena that secular approaches to film interpretation might either ignore or accept as religiously normative. In each case, a film mystagogy that remains conscious of human transcendence serves to open a film’s deeper riches and extend its interpretive reach. And in so doing it can help lead audiences to a more profound appropriation of the religious experience of God already at the center of their lives. Approaching film with sensitivity to the transcendent is a crucial interpretive framework for cinematic analysis that can complement other hermeneutical approaches. The remainder of the chapter will specify the advantages of this approach through an analysis of Babette’s Feast.

Babette’s Feast

O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
Psalm 34:8

Introduction

Except for Babette's Feast, director Gabriel Axel (b. 1918) is relatively unknown outside his native Denmark, and yet his name is billed to several dozen productions made over the course of six decades. He wrote the screenplay based on a short story of the same name by Isak Dineson (Karen Blixen), first published in 1950 in the Ladies Home Journal and later in the collection of her stories titled Anecdotes of Destiny. Babette's Feast was a labor of love, for it "took Axel fourteen years to fulfill his ambition to film [Dineson's] story."65 It is often placed in the category of “foodie” films; yet, like many of them, Babette’s Feast is concerned about much more than food.66 The film has been studied on a number of scholarly fronts, and is a particular favorite among those making theological forays into film.67 It appears on the Vatican’s Film List under the category of “religion.”

The film tells the story of Babette Hersant, a Parisian gourmet chef forced to flee the (offscreen) violence of the Communard uprising in 1871 during which her husband


67 A sample listing of available works can be found at <http://www.karenblixen.com/babette.html> (last accessed 12/28/09).
and son are killed “like rats.” Arriving fatigued and bewildered at an isolated village on the rugged seacoasts of 19th century Jutland, in desperation she begs two senior women to employ her as their servant. Martina and Philippa are kind-hearted, poor spinsters who sustain a now dwindling Lutheran sect founded by their late father. As shown in flashback, both have forfeited lives of love and prestige to remain in their father’s charge: Philippa declined a potentially stellar career as an opera singer and life with a world-renowned baritone who desired to be her husband and manager; and Martina’s lover, a nobleman and rising military leader named Lorens Löwenhielm (who will figure later in the story), called off the relationship because he felt foolish in the puritanical community. When the sisters tell Babette—a Catholic—that they have nothing to pay her, she pleads, offering to work for no wages. If they cannot take her in, Babette tells them she will “simply die.” Out of compassion, they employ the refugee knowing only, from a letter penned by her guarantor, Achille Papin (Philippa’s former lover), that she “can cook.” Her duties include preparing the staple repast of the women and the shut-ins they care for: split cod with bread and ale gruel. Babette also manages all the buying. With her taste for quality and her business savvy, the food is better and there is more coin in the sister’s coffers.

All of this allows Martina and Philippa more time to attend to the pastoral needs of the septuagenarians, among whom there is much infighting due to old disputes and infidelities. Babette works as their house servant without complaint or vacation for fourteen years. Over the course of this time Babette has a marked effect on the community.

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68 As the film states, they are named after Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon—Luther’s student and successor.
The parishioners meet regularly for prayer and a meal in the sisters' home. But their meals are as filled with grumbling and bickering as they are with prayers and hymns. They harbor resentment and grudges against each other for wrongs committed long ago. Interestingly, their bickering always stops when Babette enters the room to serve their simple meal. A disapproving glance or a clearing of the throat is enough to bring shame and silence. Her mere presence is a rebuke to unworthy words or thoughts.

Often pictured forlorn in her room or on a field, Babette harbors something dark. The sisters are always respectful of her and never pry into her past for the reason she had to expatriate so quickly. Neither does Babette reveal her secret: that in Paris her talent at *haute cuisine* was sought out by nobility.

One day Babette wins 10,000 francs in the French lottery via a ticket that an old friend renews for her each year. Martina and Philippa share her joy, but fear that now she will move back to a better life in Paris. To their surprise Babette requests permission to prepare the memorial supper honoring the minister's one-hundredth birthday. Reluctantly, the sisters agree and Babette begins preparations for a multiple-course French dinner, the likes of which the poor parishioners could never imagine. When the imported victuals arrive the sisters are horrified: live quail, a massive turtle, alcohol. They are convinced that Babette, a foreigner and "Papiste," plans to concoct a meal for a witches’ sabbath. Those attending the commemoration make a secret pact that they will endure the dinner for Babette's sake and not mention what is being served.

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70 In Dineson’s story, Babette is more formidable than Axel’s portrayal. She writes of Babette’s “dark eyes,” “quiet countenance,” and “strong hands”; that her “steady, deep glance had magnetic qualities; under her eyes things moved, noiselessly, into their proper places” (Dineson, “Babette’s Feast,” *op. cit.*, p. 31). Dineson calls Babette a “dark Martha in the house of two fair Marys. The stone which the builders had almost refused had become the headstone of the corner. The ladies of the yellow house were the only ones to know that their cornerstone had a mysterious and alarming feature to it, as if it was somehow related to the Black Stone of Mecca, the Kaaba itself” (*ibid.*, p. 33).
Twelve guests in all are invited to the extraordinary "feast" of the film's title—a clear reference to the twelve apostles gathered at the Last Supper. One of them is Lorens Löwenhielm, Martina's shunned suitor. Now a distinguished general in the Guard Hussars, he returns, perhaps expecting to show her up a little. Though Löwenhielm has obtained everything that he had striven for in life he is nevertheless profoundly unhappy. He returns to see if he made the right choice when he originally left Martina: to reject the vision he had of a purer life with her, leave such “pious melancholics,” and focus entirely on his career, so as to one day “cut a brilliant figure in the world of prestige.” He anticipates a modest, peasant's meal which he will deign to eat. Instead, Löwenhielm and the rest are treated to fare quite fit for royalty: Potage à la Tortue (turtle soup); Blinis Demidorff (caviar blini); and a chef-d'œuvre of Babette’s own creation, Caille en Sarcophage (quail in sarcophagus). Each course is complemented by the finest amontillado, champagne Veuve Clicquot, and burgundy from the famous Cistercian vineyard Clos de Vougeot, respectively. Whereas the camera records their clear enjoyment of the food, the group keeps their promise to “cleanse their tongues of all taste,” and not say a word. Since he was not in on the pact, Löwenhielm openly marvels at the spread. He names each dish and freely comments on its exquisite flavor. As a member of the martial upper class, he spent time in the finest restaurants in Paris. All of the guests savor the same food, though he is the only one who truly knows the care, quality, and expense that went into every detail of the dinner.71 Indeed, the group’s

71 Löwenhielm has been likened to a priest presiding over Mass. He wears different “vestments,” quotes the words of the sect’s founder in something like a sermon, and, throughout, interprets the meal. In this sense he is a kind of “stand-in” for Babette, who, though “unseen,” is nonetheless experienced in the meal. From our perspective, Löwenhielm is a kind of mystagogue: a learned and experienced leader who initiates the awestruck (“speechless”) neophytes into a fuller meaning of what they are experiencing.
decision not to speak takes on a double meaning: they simply do not know what they have before them. Löwenhielm himself is equally baffled at the apparent nonchalance of the parishioners with respect to what is being served—as if they had been eating like this every week for thirty years.

As the feast unfolds, a clear transformation takes place. In the book, the food and drink “agreed with their exalted state of mind and seemed to lift them off the ground, into a higher and purer sphere.” In the film, Axel employs cinematic tools to capture this heightened state. By way of “close attention to facial expression, eye-movement, and gesture . . . [the] film records the shift from the community's initial resolve to think nothing of the food . . . through their unavoidable enjoyment of food, drink, and general conviviality, to a newfound enjoyment of each other, via a process of healing and reconciliation of the wounds of scarred relationships between them.”72 The meticulously prepared meal consumes the vanity of some and the petty squabbles of others.73 Prior to the feast the monochromatic tones of the bleak Jutland landscape (exterior) and the rough tableware and austere furnishings (interior) symbolized something of the spiritual state of the parishioners: starkly beautiful (Axel does not portray them as purely vexed), yet needing a quality of tenderness and the reassurance of God’s love. Now their ashen faces


73 The film portrays the quarrels among the community with a distinct touch of humor; yet, this should not belie the fact that the past actions of certain members are quite grave: stealing, slander, adultery. Dineson’s story relates it as such: “The sins of the Brothers and Sisters came, with late piercing repentance like a toothache, and the sins of others against them came back with bitter resentment, like a poisoning of the blood” (Dineson, “Babette’s Feast,” op. cit., p. 34). More importantly, what haunts the community is their “worry about the possible terrible consequences through all eternity” (ibid., p. 35). Thus, the feast’s effectively putting to rest these past deeds and reconciling the community makes it all the more a “graced” event—or, as some commentators have put it, “miraculous.”
have mellowed and turned flush—slightly from alcohol but more fully with the joy of savoring the feast and a renewed communion with each other.

The final ten minutes of the film shows the effects of the extraordinary denouement: Löwenhielm finds that joy is still possible and he and Martina depart from each other tenderly; the parishioners gather in a circle under the stars to sing a hymn of thanksgiving; the sisters are moved to tears at the sacrifice Babette has made both in giving the feast and generously serving them for so long; and Babette finally reveals her true identity as the former head chef at the Café Anglais in Paris. She glows in the renewal of her power to create. Tonight has been her finale—a kind of “last supper” for Babette: for having spent the entire 10,000 francs on the feast she has intentionally ended her professional career. She cannot and will not return to France. She will stay on with the sisters and continue to cook simple meals for the community. So contented, the melancholy she hid so well from the sisters is lifted. There is the sense that Babette has finally come to terms with something . . .

Aesthetic Analysis

_Babette’s Feast_ is a rich and multidimensional film that may be interpreted on any number of levels—cultural, psychoanalytic, gastronomic. Several features of the film immediately lend it to a religious interpretation, especially the density of its Christian imagery.⁷⁴ Already scholars have analyzed its biblical parallels; its themes of sacrifice,
conversion, and communion; how “grace” figures in the film; and the eucharistic overtones of the meal. Much has been written on Babette as a “Christ-figure.” Interpretations vary and each provides its own justification for judging her as a type of Christ. In general, these studies regard Babette’s relationship to the community as allegorical to Christ’s actions and her feast a type of agape meal. Like the divine condescension, Babette enters into the community as a foreigner and empties herself (kenosis) for the sake of others, most especially in the memorial dinner—the participants of which undergo a radical conversion parallel to the Pentecostal experience of the early church. The structure of the film is thought to model salvation history, with the first part corresponding to the Old Testament (the pastor and his small sect are likened to Israel), the second part corresponding to the New Testament (Babette is likened to Christ), and the feast standing for the heavenly banquet in the New Jerusalem. Other writers note Axel’s juxtaposition of the religious sect’s pietism and “other-worldly” Protestant

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75 Essays that assess this theme might be supplemented by an intertextual study comparing film and short story, as Dineson uses the word “grace” numerous times.

76 Whereas several reviewers have made the connection between the ritual of the feast and the Mass, no analysis has been published on the uncanny resemblance the structure of the dinner has with that of the Japanese tea ceremony.


78 Defining what consists of a Christ-figure in film is itself a fairly involved study. In his volume Imaging the Divine, Lloyd Baugh assembles positions on this topic and then presents his own interpretation, which delineates “Christ-figures” along a continuum of meaning. His reading of Babette as a Christ-figure is governed by the following rubric: the “Christ-figure is the central figure of a narrative, which in all of its parts runs parallel to the Christ-story: the modality of extended metaphor or allegory” (op. cit., p. 110).
spirituality with Babette’s earthy, sanguine sensibility that is characteristically Catholic and “incarnational.”

Perhaps the strongest evidence of a christological-incarnational dimension can be perceived in two details: though Babette was a famous chef in Paris, she, “poor among the poor,” humbly “disciplines herself into patience” and submits to learning the unsophisticated method of cooking cod and ale-bread soup. Shortly after her arrival, her presence begins to have miraculous effects, suggested by the surprising reversal of the precarious economic situation of Martina and Philippa. Axel wants to suggest that in Babette, something new and wonderful, something salvific has entered into this community of believers and is quietly bringing about changes not possible under the old covenant of the Founder. Here a new covenant is establishing itself.

One important question that existing theological reviews of the film do not adequately explore, and which will drive our analysis, is this: Why does Babette choose to give everything she has to prepare the feast? The film does not give a direct answer to this question. Ostensibly the feast is a token of Babette’s gratitude to the sisters for having given her asylum. “Babette’s meal is a thank-offering: for her life, her very survival, her art, her being welcomed. It is not clear that she is giving thanks to God. But there is an inner need to give thanks, as strong an urge as her need to be artistic with food. Babette’s feast is thus clearly comprehensible in terms of a gift-offering.” A related viewpoint, one which corresponds in part to the judgment that Babette is a type of Christ, is that her meal is a generous act of self-donation—a sacrificial action which “knows no bounds,” for she has expended all she has for the sake of others. This position sees Babette as having “no ulterior motives. She seeks nothing for herself. She

79 Just as Israel was in need of deliverance from the letter of the law, so are the parishioners in need of liberation from their “world-denying asceticism” and resistance to God-given sensuality.

80 Baugh, op. cit., p. 139.

81 Marsh, op. cit., p. 213.

82 Baugh, op. cit., p. 141.
could easily have spent the entire ten thousand francs on herself. The motivation for Babette’s offering is sheer excess; it is, in the fullest sense of the word, a mystery provided for the benefit of others. It is sacrificial and unnecessary.” While doubtless the feast is extravagant and other-directed, the opinion that it is “unnecessary” and that Babette “seeks nothing for herself” needs to be measured against her own words:

Philippa: Babette, you should not have spent everything on us.

Babette: It wasn’t just for you.

Here she hints that the meal holds a deeper significance, one she does not disclose to the sisters. For who else did she prepare the feast—and why?

One response is that Babette has undertaken such an exhaustive task because she is at heart a gastronome of the highest order who cannot help but create. As she says in the film, “Throughout the world sounds one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me the chance to do my very best.” In the short story, Babette makes plain her motivation: “‘For your sake?’ she replied. ‘No. For my own.’ She rose from the chopping block and stood up before the two sisters. ‘I am a great artist!’ she said.” Her coming into fortune grants her the chance of creating with the finest materials available.

Babette pours everything she has and is into one final masterpiece:

Babette does not merely work over a hot stove to feed her friends because she wants to serve them and do something nice for them. Her motivation is much deeper. She is an artist. What she provides through her culinary art is a vehicle for offering her very own self to the community—for, as with all good art, the meal is quite literally an extension of Babette. Though she spends all she has on the meal, she is not depleted or impoverished. She is made rich, as is the community that benefits from her art.  


This view, that Babette gives the feast “in one sense for herself” is also confirmed in the film. When Babette confesses to the sisters that she has spent all her winnings on the feast, Philippa says, “Now you’ll be poor for the rest of your life.” With an air of great dignity, Babette responds: “An artist is never poor!” The sentiment is expanded in Dineson:

“Poor?” said Babette. She smiled as if to herself. “No, I shall never be poor. I told you that I am a great artist. A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing.”

The foregoing opinions concerning Babette’s intentions are persuasive and authenticated in the film. Yet they do not go far enough. Too little critical attention has been paid to the backstory of Babette and the significance her pre-exilic life has on her making the feast. Consequently, images in the film communicative of the deeper reason behind her actions are overlooked. Axel suggests this additional purpose with such subtle camerawork and editing that, admittedly, it is discernable only after multiple viewings and with knowledge of the sources of Axel’s own artistic inspiration. Our analysis will focus on three specific elements in the story that signify this “other” motivation: the person of Babette; the film’s Christian iconography; and the dish Cailles en Sarcophage. Each symbol is meaningful in se. And when they are interpreted in light of each other a thread of meaning can be detected that signifies Babette’s deepest motivation. Once that motive is illuminated, we can apply a particular theological hermeneutic that discloses reasons why Babette might in fact need to give her feast.


As discussed, several theological commentators have interpreted Babette as a “Christ-figure.” Certainly, the preponderance of visual and textual indicators evidences that Axel consciously makes the association between Christ and Babette—which is something of an extension of Dineson’s book. However, reading Babette first or only as a type of Christ can serve to color everything we see and know of her in the film. The judgment is problematic when it disregards Babette’s individual uniqueness. Taken too far, “analysis” of the film can become simply a matter of “symbol-hunting”—assigning christic significance to everything Babette is, says, or does. Because she plays “the part of the artist and, at points, of the unseen and self-giving host in the pattern of Christ (though never exactly or woodenly so),” as a corrective measure, more attention needs to be paid to how Axel honors the singularity of Babette and her experiences while simultaneously identifying her with Christ.

To demonstrate this, let us consider four scenes that match Babette directly with a Christian image. Since the film does not use the spoken word to make the identification between Babette and Christ (e.g., Babette never talks of Jesus, or her Catholic faith; she is not seen at prayer or worship; nor does anyone from the community ever comment about her faith), one must look deeply into the mise en scène to find the visual cues for

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88 When judging so-called Christ-figures in cinema, one must bear in mind that such a character “is neither Jesus nor the Christ, but rather a shadow, a faint glimmer or reflection of him. As a fully human being, the Christ-figure may be weak, uncertain, even a sinner, [who] may have all the limits of any human being in the situation at hand. The Christ-figure is a foil to Jesus Christ, and between the two figures there is a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, the reference to Christ clarifies the situation of the Christ-figure and adds depth to the significance [of his or her] actions; on the other hand, the person and situation of the Christ-figure can provide new understanding of who and how Christ is: ‘Jesus himself is revealed anew in the Christ-figure,’” (Baugh, Imaging the Divine, op. cit., p. 112). One important difference between Babette and many other Christ-figures in film is that she does not undergo “rejection” by a particular faction in the community. She is misunderstood, surely; but she is uniformly accepted by the villagers.

the christic association. Reviewers who regard her as a Christ-figure have overlooked or misread the scenes chosen for analysis. Here the attempt to fix our gaze on what the audience is shown allows us to more clearly see that the Babette/Christ association is already embedded in the imagery. Such a descriptive approach obviates any possible claim to theological eisegesis and does more to bolster the “Babette = Christ-figure” verdict.

I. The first time we see Babette is in the first few minutes of the movie. Although no explanation is given, the “moment” of the scene is sometime after the formal dinner of the film’s title. Babette is shown baking cookies and serving tea to the religious community who have gathered for prayer in the sisters’ house. She wears a crucifix around her neck and the camera frames this prominently in close-up. The film’s omniscient narrator asks how is it that two poor women on the western seashore of Denmark have come to have the service of a French maid. To explain, the montage takes us back some fifty years to the time when the founder of the community was still alive.

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90 Lloyd Baugh interprets the film’s four-minute prologue differently. He believes Axel has placed us in medias res, sometime after Babette has begun her work for the sisters but before the feast—and not, as is suggested here, sometime after the feast. There is no precise evidence either way. Babette’s wearing a crucifix provides little indication since she begins to wear it sometime before she wins the lottery anyway. The interpretation that the scene occurs after the meal makes better sense, however, for three reasons. First, because it foreshadows Babette’s decision to remain in the community, symbolizing her continuing presence after the meal (a possible eucharistic parallel). Second, we notice that the prayer meeting included in the scene is well-attended and that the members are participative and civil to one another, symbolizing the abiding effect of the feast. Indeed, as Babette enters the room to serve the group she gives them all a gentle, knowing smile. This contrasts to a later scene (yet earlier in the film’s time) whereupon entering the room to serve (only) tea she reproaches the bickering group: “Well, now! May we have some peace and quiet?” Third, Babette is shown making cookies for the community, something we do not see elsewhere in the picture. Could this not be a sign that after the feast the members become more open in their eating practices? Could the fact that desserts are now acceptable not symbolize that the integration of spiritual and sensual at the feast has had a lasting impact? Taken together, these changes, however subtle, suggest that this opening scene is actually the farthest in time that the movie ever takes us. In fact, the scene ends with a dissolve of a composite of the older sisters to a perfectly matched fade-in of the sisters when they were young. Thus, the furthest point in time stretches back to the earliest point. It is necessary to make this time sequence clear since impinges on an accurate reading of the film’s final scenes.
and when Martina and Philippa were young women. After the story of each lover is told, there is a flash-forward thirty-five years or so to when, as older, unmarried women, they (and we) are formally introduced to Babette.

A: Exterior, long shot: dark of night, rainstorm, village huts. Under a mysterious shaft of white light (which source is above/beyond the screen), an enigmatic figure appears in the middle of the screen, between two sets of huts, wearing a windswept cape. The person (we can't tell if it is a man or woman yet) is stumbling along in the maelstrom apparently in search of something.

CUT TO

B: Interior, medium shot: warm, soft light. In the middle of the frame, the elderly Martina and Philippa are seated next at a table in their home—Martina is reading; Philippa is sewing. On the table are a teapot and cups. There is a wooden corner cabinet in the shadow to the left. Atop it is a porcelain statue of Jesus, about a foot tall; his arms are slightly outstretched. Martina turns a page in her newspaper.

CUT TO

C: Close-up: newspaper detail. On the page there is an illustration of a middle-aged woman laboring over a steaming washbasin (a reminder of their years of service to the community? a foreshadowing of the servant Babette?).

CUT TO

D: Medium shot (same as B): Martina leans forward to show Philippa the picture. There is a wordless understanding between them. At once, a thunderclap is heard. Both look to the right of the screen, apparently toward the source of the sound.

CUT TO

E: Exterior, long shot (same as A): The figure is now with a man in front of a hut at the right side of the screen. The man says, "That's the house over there." Without response the figure trudges diagonally across the quad in the strong wind and rain. As the figure moves, the camera slowly pans to the left to follow. As the individual gets closer to the foreground we can see that it is a woman, wearing a full-length dress underneath a dark cape. She has a large bag in hand. The camera stops as she nears the house. Barely making it to the door, the woman collapses (upright) against the facade.

CUT TO

F: Interior, medium shot (same as B): Martina and Philippa are surprised to hear a knock at the door. A voiceover tells us the year is 1871. The two get up and the camera pans left to follow them to the door. Martina passes in front of the statue of Jesus.

CUT TO

G: Close-up: The sisters are shown looking out the door to the mysterious figure. There is a bewildered look in their eyes. A reverse cut shows who it is they are looking at: In close-up we see it is a wearied, disoriented Babette. There is a short sequence of reverse shots alternating between Babette and the sisters as they invite her inside.

CUT TO

H: Medium shot, (same as F): As the sisters lead Babette into the house the camera pans right to follow them. As Babette passes in front of the corner cabinet, the camera pauses slightly to match Babette (shown in her dark cape from behind) first with the shadow of the statue of Christ and then with the statue itself. Philippa helps Babette sit down; she is completely exhausted.

CUT TO

I: Medium shot: Martina is standing screen left, the corner cabinet and statue are screen right. There are three shadows cast on the back wall: Martina’s, the statue’s, and Philippa’s (she moves into the shot). As the sisters decide in gesture to give Babette some tea, the camera moves to frame Martina and Philippa on opposite sides of the statue (at one point Christ’s hands appear to touch the heads of the women). Martina takes out a teacup from out of the cabinet. Its porcelain
color and sheen exactly match that of the statue. As the sisters comfort Babette and pour her tea, the statue remains in the background above them all.

The point of such a detailed study of this masterful scene is to demonstrate the care and precision which Axel brings to his direction. There is a great deal of intentionality present in this two-minute montage. The scene is an interesting study from a theological point of view, for we see how Axel, without voice-over narration or dialogue, associates not only Babette, but also Martina and Philippa, explicitly with Jesus Christ. This observation—that Martina and Philippa are also types of Christ—is missed when too much emphasis is placed on Babette and her redemptive role in the community.\footnote{91} Axel plainly illustrates the sisters’ Christ-like commitment to their father’s mission in long-standing service to the community, which comes at a great personal cost to both. Indeed, the charity the sisters show throughout the film constitute the seven corporal works of mercy: they shelter the homeless (Babette); feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; visit the imprisoned (shut-ins); tend to the sick; clothe the naked (they knit socks for the shut-ins). And, as will be explained later, they even help bury the dead. These acts of mercy are inspired, as the statue symbolizes, by their Christian faith.\footnote{92} At no time does

\footnote{91} It is surprising how little critical attention among theologians is paid to the sisters as Christ-figures. This is certainly due to the inordinate attention given to Babette in this capacity. It is as if they are treated in reviews the way they are treated by parishioners: their presence is taken for granted!

\footnote{92} The placement of the statue perhaps suggests Jesus’ presence “with” them and yet “above” them. Lloyd Baugh writes the following about the scene: “In the design of the film, Axel proposes a number of interesting details that are not mentioned in Blixen’s novella. For instance, in the background of several scenes in the house of the pastor, both in the past and in the present, a white ceramic statue of Christ is clearly visible on a high cabinet: a rather curious item in the house of a puritan Protestant preacher. But Axel never shows the statue of Christ in a composition with Babette: is it perhaps because he wants to avoid redundancy? Or because he wants to suggest that Babette is a living figure of the Christ represented in the ceramic figure?” (Lloyd Baugh, Imaging the Divine, op. cit., p. 144). Our analysis shows this to be a misreading of the scene, since Axel does show Babette directly in the presence of the statue. There may be some truth to what Baugh says here concerning redundancy since, as noted, Axel does not show Babette’s face and the statue in the same frame (an indication that her mission has not yet begun?). However, later in the film, when Babette enters the same room and sits down to announce to the sisters her wish to make the dinner for their father’s anniversary, the statue is clearly visible in the extreme top right corner of the frame. Perhaps showing Babette’s full face and the statue together at this point in the film is Axel’s way of
either sister contribute to the testy rows that have become typical of the sect; instead, they bear these wrongs and patiently counsel the others\(^93\) to “seek Christ” and look “for the signs of his infinite kingdom.”\(^94\) As the narration says in the film’s prologue, “They spent all their time and almost all their small income on good works.”\(^95\)

II. Still, considering that all the action in the story depends on Babette, the film’s focus is on her as the community’s “redeemer”—not the sisters. She acts in this capacity primarily through her sacrifice of an affluent life to give the dinner at the founder’s centennial. The camera gives us an up-close view of the painstaking preparations:

> Early in the morning of the day of the feast, Babette begins slaughtering, disemboweling, dismembering, skinning, plucking, and slicing. In the background, a fire crackles furiously. A monstrous tortoise breathes eerily while moving its head slowly from side to side. A flayed calf’s head, ghastly white, lies in a bowl, like a corpse laid out in a casket. A barrow full of bloody innards and flesh, feathers, shells, hide, skin, heads, and feet is wheeled away. The feathered quail, to which Babette had crooned affectionately “Ma petite caille” when carrying them in their cage from the boat, now lie limp and naked in a bowl. The viewer watches Babette, wielding a sword-like knife, ruthlessly decapitate one of the little bodies and slit its back, spoon stuffing onto communicating that Babette has fully become a figure of Jesus (like the statue behind her) in deciding to give away her life for the community. Here, however, Baugh’s argument for non-redundancy founders, for in the same frame we are shown the statue, the crucifix around Babette’s neck, and Babette—herself a Christ-figure. (Side note: Baugh published his analysis in 1997, before DVDs were commercially available. It is commonly known that many VHS transfers reduced up to one-third what viewers could see of the original film ratio. It is certainly within the realm of possibility that the version available to Baugh was as such, in which case the statue, and several other items throughout the film, would not be visible).

\(^93\) In this way they also practice the seven spiritual works of mercy: they instruct the ignorant; counsel the doubtful; comfort the sorrowful; bear wrongs patiently; forgive injuries; pray for the living and the dead. The seventh—to convert the sinner—is shown to a greater degree in the book: although the sisters are reluctant to invite a Catholic into their home, they nonetheless look forward to trying to convert her to their Lutheran faith.

\(^94\) Lines such as this have given some reviewers reason to claim that the Lutherans in the film are “world-denying.” Such a view, however, must be counterbalanced by the fact that in other places the doxology of the sect is quite “incarnational.” For instance, one of the hymns goes as follows: “Oh, Lord allow thy kingdom to descend upon us here, so that the spirit of mercy may wipe out all trace of sin. Then we shall know in our hearts that God lives here with us. And that Thou art dwelling with those that trust in Thee.” On this same point, the presence of the porcelain statue of Jesus—a kind of icon—must also be considered.

\(^95\) Earlier in the film the younger Philippa is matched directly with an image of Jesus. She is shown in close-up singing in the chapel. There is then a cut to an extreme close-up of the tortured face of Christ (the chapel’s main crucifix) followed by a return cut to Philippa singing: the implication being that she is looking at the wooden image of Christ while singing praises to him.
the flattened carcass, gently fit the little body into its “coffin” of pastry, and delicately insert the severed head. These preparations evoke the horrific animal and human sacrifices of the Old Testament or those of the followers of Dionysus.96

This interpretation highlights the “carnality” of what goes on in a kitchen manned by Babette and contrasts to the sisters’ “bland” preps.97 Missing in this reading however is the scene’s christic significance, for Axel makes an explicit visual association between these “fleshy” preparations and Jesus. After the parishioners have made the vow to remain silent about the food, in hushed voices they sing the hymn “Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” While they are singing, the film cuts to a close-up of a black and white print of Jesus at prayer that was shown hanging on the wall in the background moments before. Immediately after this image of Jesus, the montage cuts to a shot of the aforementioned wheelbarrow filled with the bloody debris of animal cuttings. Thus, not only might the preparations suggest Greek and Jewish temple sacrifices and therefore the meal’s association with death, they evoke something of Jesus. Babette’s sacrifice of “losing” her life for the community is likened to the price Christ paid for his commitment to the Father’s will. The scene is another “incarnational” moment that contrasts the community’s apprehension of “flesh” with Babette’s security with and love for earthy things.98

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97 This reading of the kitchen scenes itself needs a pinch of restraint. Axel’s showing the meticulousness of the preparations is surely also meant to demonstrate Babette’s proficiency as a culinary artist—not a butcher! Still, the “violence” of these scenes (such as the plucking of the quail) must be seriously considered. We will return to this idea later in the analysis.

98 Throughout the film Babette, more than any other character, is shown in natural settings: in a rainstorm; on the shore; in a field picking herbs; on a carriage riding along a rugged path. In this way, Babette is like the “rough and ready” Jesus of Mark’s gospel. Yet Axel balances this portrayal, as Babette also resembles Luke’s picture of Jesus, who is especially attractive to the fragile, elderly, sinners, and women: one who proclaims “liberty to captives” (Luke 4: 17-19).
III. A more subtle instance of the association made between Babette and Jesus occurs in the film sometime after Babette has begun working for the sisters but before she comes into the prize money. In this scene we are brought further into Babette's melancholy. It also explicitly confirms that she has positively impacted the community and thus already begun her “redemptive” work:

A: Interior, medium shot: Philippa is seated next to a woman from the community. They are wearing drab winter clothes. There is little color in the room or in their faces. Philippa counsels the woman to “Turn your eyes on the vault of heaven.” The woman slowly turns her face away toward the (offscreen) window. CUT to close-up of the woman. We hear Philippa say to her, "There you will see the signs of His infinite Kingdom . . . the eternal light." The woman nods her head and gives a slight smile.

CUT TO

B: Exterior, long shot: The screen is filled with a still shot of blue sky and clouds reflecting the pinks and oranges of the sun setting over a rugged mountainscape. In the distance we can hear a bell tolling. A man's voiceover begins, "For Thine is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory . . ."

CUT TO

C: Interior, medium shot: In a darkened room there is a table, a chair, and through a lone window above the table we look out over a field to the sun setting. The windowpane forms the shape of a cross, dark against the illuminated background. We hear the man continue his prayer “. . . forever and ever. Amen.” The camera pans left to show an older, bearded man in bed saying the prayer. He is one of the community’s shut-ins. He continues, "And thank you Lord for sending Babette to us." There is a slow close-up on the man as he finishes with the line, "She helps our little sisters so they can devote themselves to those most wretched in Thy little flock." In close-up we see him smile and, with his hands still clasped in prayer, he leans back into his bed into darkness.

CUT TO

D: Interior, close-up of Babette's face. She is framed left-of-center sitting alone and motionless in her Darkened bedroom. A single lit candle is shown extreme screen right. It is obvious that she is sad. With the camera still, and her face illuminated by the candle, we see a tear begin to well up in her right eye. Before it flows down her cheek however there is a dramatic CUT to a full-screen close-up of the intersection of four windowpanes. It is raining outside and the glass is streaked with raindrops: an associative match with Babette’s tears. Like the window shown in C the wooden intersection forms a full-screen cross. (A cut back from this window, however, shows that, unlike the window in C, its full shape is not a cross—a detail that expresses that Axel’s composition was deliberate to show a cross and not just the rain outside).

This scene has been interpreted in theological reviews as Babette “weeping over Jerusalem,” as Jesus does in Luke 19, the suggestion being that her sorrow is due to the community’s (“Israel’s”) infighting. For instance: “Axel makes it clear that Babette is aware of the precarious situation of the community. She prays about it, and in a gesture
that recalls Jesus grieving over the hard-heartedness of Jerusalem, she weeps.”

Here is an example of the analytical insufficiency that can stem from viewing Babette exclusively through the Christ-figure optic. In imputing Babette’s lament to frustrations in the community, the analysis does not take seriously enough into account that she herself has suffered incalculable personal tragedy. While there remains a certain legitimacy to reading Babette as “weeping over Jerusalem,” since the scene cuts to a prayer meeting during which the religious community is shown at the height of their bickering and hardheartedness, it is only against Babette’s backstory that her grief can be fully measured. Dineson’s narrative provides this context in the letter from Achille Papin. It reads that Babette herself was

arrested as a Pétroleuse—(which word is used here for women who set fire to houses with petroleum)—and has narrowly escaped the blood-stained hands of General Galliffet. She has lost all she possessed and dares not remain in France.

Babette left Paris amid such chaos and in such haste that she could not arrange for the burial of her murdered husband and son. Although we do not receive such detail in the film, there is enough to know that everything which helped to define Babette was cut to bits in the Communard revolt. She has lost everything dear to her, save her Catholic faith and skill as a chef. On the Jutland peninsula, she has no family, no friends, no money, and must learn Danish. In this new language and because Babette is in hiding she

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99 Baugh, op. cit., pp. 139-140. There is no explicit indication in this scene or others in the film that Babette “prays” over her situation.

100 Dineson, op. cit., p. 29. Indeed, nothing in the film suggests that Babette was a revolutionary. At the end of the novella, she admits to the sisters, “Yes, I was a Communard. Thanks be to God, I was a Communard! . . . I stood upon a barricade; I loaded the gun for my menfolk!” (ibid, p. 58).

101 The novella takes place in Norway, not Denmark. Dineson’s Babette does not learn to speak Norwegian. Thus, Axel’s decision to have Babette learn Danish must be considered. The choice is hardly incidental, as it links to the whole “incarnational” motif: much as Christ “descends” to earth as a
cannot adequately express all that befell her. As a Catholic in an isolated Protestant village, she is without a supportive sacramental system by which she may properly grieve. There, among the poor and simple, her talent as a gourmet chef is wasted (or so it seems at first). And this art, one of the only things salvaged from her recent chaos, Babette at first keeps secret out of fear that she will be misunderstood.  

IV. With this in mind, let us turn now to a scene that links the previous three and conveys what is perhaps Babette’s deepest motivation for giving her feast. Because the montage is protracted to a greater degree than the previous scenes, a simple description of what is shown will suffice.

After Babette has cashed in her lottery ticket, she and Philippa place the prize money in a wooden box. Babette thanks the sisters for all their help and leaves the room. The camera follows Babette as she walks up an exterior staircase to her sparse garret above the sisters’ house. On the soundtrack, there is piano music. There is a cut to a wide shot inside the room. Babette sits down in a single chair holding the winnings in her lap. For four seconds the camera holds this image of Babette in deep contemplation. It then cuts to a close-up of her bedside. Hanging on the wall just above her pillow are a photo of a man (we presume this is her husband) and a pocketwatch with a small ribbon in the colors of the French flag. There is a quick cut to Philippa playing piano (the ambient music we hear all along) followed by a shot of Babette outside walking on the shore toward the ocean. Though it could be the same day, there is a sense in the montage that some time has passed between Babette in her room to her standing on the seashore. She stops to look out onto the sunlit, clear blue waters (one of the “freshest” scenes of the film). There is an axial cut inward toward the sea as the camera follows what Babette is looking at: a lone white bird passing over the waters. The film then cuts back to Babette who promptly turns around from the sea and marches inland.

Axel indicates through composition, timing, and Babette’s purpose of step that she has made a decision: which we know will be to spend her entire fortune on a single dinner. 

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102 This gradual revelation of who Babette truly is can be likened to the Christ of Mark’s gospel, in which the “messianic secret” is disclosed progressively.

103 Baugh writes the following analysis of the scene: “Her lottery winnings and the feast of the Founder provide the appropriate context, a kind of kairos or moment of opportunity, and inspired by a seagull (there are no doves on the Jutland seacoast) as she walks meditatively along the beach, Babette makes an about-turn, a radical decision, christological in its quality, content, and effects” (Baugh, ibid., p. 140). It is unclear what Baugh means by the “christological” quality of this scene. Given that he reads the scene as a “kairos” moment, one might presume he is thinking of Christ’s baptism (the bird and water
At first the sequence does not appear to communicate more than what it shows, namely that Babette has weighed the many possibilities that her wealth now affords her and has chosen to give everything away in the memorial feast. However, a deeper reading of the scene provides a clearer indication of why she makes her decision. If we return to the four-second still shot of Babette in her room, the subject, framing, and lighting are highly reminiscent of James McNeill Whistler’s austere portrait *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist’s Mother*. Axel’s painterly design of his compositions is well-documented. In interviews, he has indicated that several artistic works guided the cinematography, particularly those of Vermeer and Rembrandt. As he says, “In *Babette* there is hardly a story. It’s just a series of portraits.” Though no critical attention has been paid to the possibility of Whistler’s influence on this particular scene, knowing Axel’s profound artistic acumen, there can be little doubt of his quotation of *The Artist’s Mother* here.

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104 Donna Poulton, *Moving Images in Art and Film: The Intertextual and Fluid Use of Painting in Cinema* (diss.), Brigham Young University, 1999, 179 pp. Poulton devotes an entire chapter to the artistic influences on the film *Babette’s Feast*; however, she does not reference Whistler. In fact, Poulton reads this particular scene as reflecting Vermeer’s style and that it echoes his *Lady Weighing Gold (Woman Holding a Balance)*: “The shot of Babette sitting in her room after she won the lottery, reveals the blurred edges of Vermeer’s camera obscura; the points of light that force the viewer’s eye to move expectantly around the room; the stillness of her character as time seems to have slowed. She holds in her hands a fortune of 10,000 francs, but directly in front of her, brightly illuminated, sits the milkmaid’s jug. It symbolizes her work in the parish and is a proof of ‘human loyalty and self-sacrifice’” (Poulton, *ibid.*, p. 89). Whereas Axel’s composition of Babette in her room more directly reflects Whistler’s painting, there is good reason to think he may have had both painters in mind.


106 Although it is only a supposition, Axel at the very least knew of Whistler’s painting. Axel, of Danish extraction, spent his formative in Paris. Whistler’s portrait hangs in the *Musée d’Orsay* on the left bank of the Seine.
But how is this quotation of Whistler a visual clue to the intentions behind the banquet? The date of the famous Artist’s Mother is 1871, exactly the year of the Paris Commune, and thus the same year that Babette’s husband and son are murdered. This could be purely coincidental, (though this is unlikely given Axel’s comprehension of art history and his own extreme attention to detail); or it might be precisely the bit of information that confirms why Babette prepares the memorial dinner. The montage from Babette sitting deep in thought, to the photo of her husband and the timepiece tagged with her country’s national colors, to her “kairos” moment on the beach: together these suggest that the feast is her way of coming to terms with the untimely death of her husband and son and escape from Paris. The dinner is a memorial for them as much as it is for the sect’s founder.

[Babette’s] departure from France was hasty and traumatic. A fugitive fleeing for her life, she was unable to bury her husband and son properly or to say goodbye to friends and place that made up her world in Paris. With no time to absorb her losses before plunging into an ascetic life likely to magnify any preexisting sense of loss, Babette is forced to forestall or suspend mourning in order to survive.¹⁰⁷

The feast is thus not only a profound gesture of gratitude, nor merely a venue for her artistry: it is her way of burying the grief that has been in suspension for fourteen years. Interestingly, Axel adapts from twelve years (in the book) the time period over which Babette serves the sisters. No explanation has been given for the change, but Catholics may make the numerical connection to the fourteen Stations of the Cross. The idea of Babette “carrying” her grief harks back to the scene of her “weeping”—along her own via dolorosa.

This interpretation, that the planning, preparing, and serving of the dinner is the ritual by which Babette will finally put to rest all that was taken from her—family, country, career—is corroborated by the symbolism of the dish *Cailles en Sarcophage* and its distinct connection to death and burial. This dish of her own creation at the *Café Anglais* consists of a single quail tucked into a pastry “sarcophagus” and “reshaped into a form that mimics the appearance of the living bird; and the name itself reminds the partaker of the sacrifice of life that makes the meal possible.”

When the ingredients for the feast arrive by boat, Babette picks up the cage of live quail and lovingly greets them, “*Alors, mes petites cailles!*” In French, the word *caille* or “quail” is also a term of endearment “used to refer to a loved one, as in the expression *ma petite caille*, translated as ‘my beloved, my darling, or my dearest.’” Thus, the quail that Babette “brings from France, kills, and then meticulously entombs in their sarcophagi are not just birds, but her loved ones. The quail function as the fleshly embodiment of her husband, her son, the French aristocracy, and her cherished life in France.”

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108 This connection to death was, as noted, present in Babette’s preparation of the meal. Now it is possible to better appreciate the “violence” of the preps. The plucking and skinning of quail intimates the death of her family at the hands of Gallifet. Except here, Babette’s “violence” leads to art and new life; Gallifet’s violence only led to death.


110 It is difficult to hear what Babette says exactly to the caged quails. The subtitles translate the French as “My little quails.” Rashkin claims she says, “*Allo, mes petites cailles*” (lit. “Hello, my little quails”). However, one might also hear “*Alors, mes petites cailles,*” which might be rendered, “So, my little darlings . . .” This latter possibility makes the line almost a kind of prelude to Babette’s swan song. It is as if she is conspiring with the quail for one final performance. (A note of gratitude is extended here to Dino D’Agata for the correct rendering of Babette’s words, their translation, and for this insight into why she says them).

111 Rashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

In his speech, Löwenhielm identifies the quail dish and, unwittingly, the true identity of Babette. He states that in Paris he was once invited by General Gaston Galliffet to dine at Café Anglais. There Galliffet spoke of the head chef—“surprisingly, a woman”—as having “the ability to transform a dinner into a kind of love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite.” He continued that there was “no woman in Paris for whom he would shed blood except this chef.” Ironically, this Marquis de Galliffet is the same man who would repress the Commune and shed the blood of Babette’s husband and son. Thus, the “love” meals that Babette made in Paris have taken on a new meaning here in the agape feast of the religious community: as they celebrate their founder, she grieves through and memorializes the ones she loved.113

There is a sense (made more explicit in the book) that Babette is also putting to rest the memories of those bourgeoisie, like Galliffet, who could appreciate her artistry. Though she fought against them, still, they were the people who gave her an identity. This detail also explains in part Babette’s suspension of grieving: her losses conflict with each other. Her need to mourn her family conflicts with the desire to mourn the French aristocracy who were the sine qua non of her vocation:

“You see, Mesdames,” she said, at last, “those people belonged to me, they were mine. They had been brought up and trained, with greater expense than you, my little ladies, could ever imagine or believe, to understand what a great artist I am. I could make them happy. When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy.”114

113 This is yet another possible connection to the Last Supper. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus and his disciples are gathered for the Passover seder, a meal that memorializes the events of the Exodus. Scripture suggests that Jesus institutes a new meaning to the meal, one connected to his own pesach from death to life, which Christians commemorate and celebrate in the Mass.

114 Dineson, op. cit., p. 68.
Though ultimately barbarous, the Parisian aristocracy recognized her talent and provided the means by which she could practice her art. Thus, to mourn her husband and son would mean recognizing that the society for which she lives and that gave her life and love as an artists was oppressive and murderous. To mourn the loss of this society and of her position as a culinary genius within it would be to express her love for those who mourned her husband and son and wronged the poor. Caught in an impossible, unspeakable double bind where mourning is tied to shameful love, Babette’s solution . . . is to mourn no one: to keep secret the drama of her loss, and to exclude from language any expression of her suffering.\textsuperscript{115}

This analysis, however, should not eclipse other issues behind the protraction of her grief: her loss of community (the need to grieve with survivors who also knew the deceased); the loss of her church (Catholic obsequies; a supportive pastoral system). Nevertheless, on this level, Babette’s Feast is a story “about overcoming an inability to mourn. It dramatizes the effects of a blockage to mourning and writes the prescription or recipe for transcending that blockage. The preparation and consumption of food serve as the medium of transcendence, as the means by which a shameful loss is swallowed and the process of digestion begins. The feast also functions as a vehicle for articulating a fundamental connection between artistic creation and bereavement . . . and the creation of art as a life-saving act.”\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{115} Rashkin, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., pp. 26-27. Rashkin writes specifically of the book, though she makes several references to the film. There is much more that can be mined in her theory that the story is about devouring loss—the “psychic indigestion and the unburied dead.” She details the “bird” symbolism throughout the story; extends the dimension of “loss” to the sisters, Löwenhielm, and the community; and interprets the feast itself in Protestant, not Catholic terms. On this last point, Rashkin presents a corrective to the idea “shared to some degree by most interpreters of the text, that the feast is a Eucharistic banquet or Last Supper in which twelve members participate in a ritual celebration of Babette’s sacrifice.” She writes: “The ‘Eucharist’ of Babette’s dinner, in sum, is a Protestant one in which the literal ingestion of bread and wine is understood as a symbolic or metaphorical communion with the flesh and blood of the dead. In this form, it is distinct from the Catholic Eucharist in which the bread and wine are believed to become the actual flesh and blood of Christ” (\textit{ibid.}, p. 42).
Theological Analysis

How, from a theological, and not only psychoanalytical, perspective, can the feast be interpreted as connecting artistic creation, communion, and bereavement? What Christian sense can be made of the link between Babette’s grief and her exquisite meal? Beyond the benefit it has for the community, why is the feast “life-saving” for Babette? To answer these questions this final portion of the analysis brings the film into conversation with certain ideas on the problem of evil presented by Anglican theologian/philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams in her text *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God.*

*Prima facie, Babette's Feast,* a G-rated movie, might not seem concerned with suffering and the question of evil. It is not an openly philosophic film; nor does it comprise the psychic angst and extraordinary circumstances characteristic of *noir* films. And yet *Babette’s Feast* is quite “dark,” for the reasons presented above—particularly the existential anxiety of Babette, which it only delicately implies. Adams’s book can serve as a tool for uncovering this darker element in the film and for appreciating the depths of Babette and her circumstances as well as the role her faith plays in her decision to make the feast—a point that deserves more critical attention. Adams looks at the fundamental dilemma in Christian thought of how participation in the evils of the world can be reconciled with faith in a good and loving God. Her concern is that when confronted by what she calls “horrendous evil,” even the most pious believer may question not only life’s worth but also God’s power and goodness. Although Babette never rails against God or loses her faith, her distress is apparent, however understated. Seen from Adams’s perspective, Babette is one who has indeed experienced

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horrendous evils. Correlatively, she has experienced the "goodness of God." To understand this interpretive possibility, we will examine the concepts and logical thrust of Adams’s argument and apply her insights to our theological evaluation of Babette’s Feast.

Adams argues that many existing theodicies have discussed the problem of evil using religion-neutral values and focused too narrowly on morals—an approach she finds both intellectually and pastorally inadequate. Not only do many theoretical approaches remain aloof from the real “problem,” which she takes to be the fact that participation in evil can leave persons in the position of absolute despair, but they overlook resources in the Christian tradition that are, to her mind, of essential importance in understanding God’s defeat of suffering. Adams attempts to marshal the "wider resources" in Christianity and deploy them in order “to formulate a family of solutions to the so-called logical problem of evil.”\(^\text{118}\) The details of her overall debate with logical positivism do not concern us here; and it is impossible, given the scope of the present study, to cover the many implications and questions her theory raises. This section is neither an exhaustive explication nor an apologetic for Adams’s theory. What we find in Adams’s Christian sense of suffering is a helpful resource for making Christian sense of the story and character of Babette.

Adams chooses the rather severe term “horrendous evils” quite deliberately. While the rubric connotes atrocious acts of collective trauma at the hands of some menacing power, she uses it to describe the acute personal consequences of individual participation in evil. Rather than begin with genocide, war, famine, or abject poverty, she

\(^{118}\) Adams, *ibid.*, p. 28.
starts more locally: “I do not equate horrors with massive collective suffering because I want to focus on what such evils do to the individual persons involved . . .”\textsuperscript{119} In other words, the rubric is not limited to a certain class of wicked deeds that would make their disastrous effect immediately; rather, the term suggests the insidious nature of evil, where its full impact often goes undiagnosed. For Adams, experiences of evil are “horrendous” insofar as they can potentially snuff out all significance and value achieved in a person's life. Participation in such experiences (by doing or suffering them) constitutes reason to doubt whether an individual’s life—given his or her inclusion in evil—can be a great good to him/her on the whole. It leaves “reason to doubt whether the participants’ life can be worth living, because it is so difficult humanly to conceive how such evils could be overcome.”\textsuperscript{120} Horrendous evil not only frustrates, it radically thwarts or practically destroys the well-laid plans made in the life of an individual prior to his or her actual participation. They are horrendous precisely because they leave one in the despairing position that perhaps no underlying meaning may be found in anything whatsoever. What makes horrendous evils “so pernicious is their life-ruining potential, their power \textit{prima facie} to degrade the individual by devouring the possibility of positive personal meaning in one swift gulp.”\textsuperscript{121}

Babette's multiple catastrophes constitute concrete participation in horrendous evils. There are the events that make their effect immediately: the Communard uprising; the death of spouse and child; exile; termination of her métier. Then there are the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 26.
\item \textsuperscript{121} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 27-28.
\end{itemize}
remnants of evil's whirlwind, the long-term consequences of those events that lead Babette into deeper anguish and isolation: loss of language, kinship, and status; the privation of church and sacrament; protracted grief due to her inability to “bury the dead”—literally and symbolically. Given this massive interruption in Babette's life, from Adams’s perspective the disproportion of these experiences relative to “human meaning-making capacities” furnish reason to doubt that Babette can “fit them into a life that would be worth living.”

Indeed, there is every reason to think that Babette is on the cusp of absolute despair when she arrives at the village: if the sisters do not take her in, Babette says she “will simply die.”

Having discussed Adams’s category of evil, how does she conceive of the “goodness of God”? Theodicy, simply put, is a particular way of conceiving the problem of how a good, omnipotent, and gracious God at once permits human beings to act evilly and vindicates or “makes good” the lives of those thrust into evil’s vortex. Although Adams maintains the doctrine that God is not obliged to humanity, she believes it would be “cruel for God to create (allow to evolve) human beings with such radical vulnerability to horrors, unless Divine power stood able, and Divine love willing, to redeem.”

Thus, she attempts to identify ways that “participation in horrors can be integrated into the participants’ relation to God, where God is understood to be the incommensurately Good, and the relation to God is one that is overall incommensurately good for the participant.”

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item 122 Ibid., p. 132.
\item 123 Ibid., p. 157.
\item 124 Ibid., p. 155.
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I contend that God could be said to value human personhood in general, and to love individual human persons in particular, only if God were good to each and every person God created. And Divine goodness to created persons involves the distribution of harms and benefits, not merely globally, but also within the context of the individual person’s life. At a minimum, God’s goodness to human individuals would require that God guarantee each a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole by balancing off serious evils. To value the individual qua person, God would have to go further to defeat any horrendous evil in which s/he participated by giving it positive meaning through organic unity with a great enough good within the context of his/her life.  

This last point is an important implication of her theology, namely that for God to be good to a person, God must guarantee that individual a life that is a great good to him or her and one in which any participation in horrors is defeated within the context of his or her life. God’s goodness is pledged immediately and cannot be understood only as a post-mortem benefit. For Adams the idea hinges on “the notion that God works continually—both during our lives and after our deaths—to give our lives new and fuller meanings far beyond what we could orchestrate for ourselves.” 

But precisely how does God guarantee a life in which horrendous evils are not only balanced off but endowed “with positive meaning, meanings at least some of which will be recognized and appropriated” by the participant? Adams grounds her theory that God communicates “goodness” to persons caught in evil’s web on the Christian teaching that God has already vanquished evil by personally entering directly into its nexus and dramatically breaking its grip on human life through humility, poverty, obedience, and brotherly love. God “was not content to join Godself to material creation in relations of loving intimacy with created persons. God’s desire for it was so great, that

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125 Ibid., p. 31.
126 Ibid., p. 79.
127 Ibid., p. 205.
God decided to enter it Godself, to unite a particular human nature to the Divine person as God’s very own nature, to become a human being.”128 Adams speaks here of God incarnate, who learned obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:7-8), working God’s way through our developmental struggles. In God’s merely human personality, God gave Godself to persons of unstable loyalties who deserted and betrayed him. In the crucifixion, God identified with all human beings who participate in actual horrors—not only with the victims (of which He was one), but also with the perpetrators. For although Christ never performed any blasphemous acts in His human nature, nevertheless, His death by crucifixion made Him ritually cursed . . . and so symbolically a blasphemer.129

God in Christ crucified “cancels the curse of human vulnerability to horrors. For the very horrors, participation in which threatened to undo the positive value of created personality, now become secure points of identification with the crucified God.”130 The one cross and resurrection guarantees God’s solidarity with all creation: nothing that the world suffers can separate it from God’s covenantal, atoning, and intimate love-made-flesh (Rom. 8:31-39).

On this point, Adams emphasizes the insufficiency of merely created goods for shaping shattered lives into wholes of positive significance. Only divine goodness thoroughly defeats horrendous evil and its power “to stalemate human meaning-making efforts, to make it prima facie impossible for participants to integrate the materials of their lives into a whole filled with positive meaning.”131 Applying Anselm’s notion of atonement, she writes that if what does “the soteriological job of meaning-making is

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128 Ibid., p. 165.
129 Ibid., p. 166.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., p. 182.
God’s identification with human beings and God’s own participation in horrors, this value cannot be obtained by sending someone else, however exalted. It is God’s becoming a human being, experiencing the human condition from the inside, from the viewpoint of finite consciousness, that integrates the experience into an incommensurately valuable relationship.\textsuperscript{132} Though present participation in horrors may not be \textit{prima facie} meaningful, it is \textit{not meaningless} because such experience is “partially constitutive of the most meaningful relationship of all. [Adams’s] claim is that the Incarnation already endows participation in horrors with a good aspect that makes way for their objective, symbolic defeat, even if participants do not yet recognize or appropriate this dimension of meaning . . .”\textsuperscript{133}

In presenting her position, Adams bears in mind the question of the relevancy of theodicies in general. Critics of theodicy contend that, where horrors are concerned, it “world be morally wrong to say anything that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children at Auschwitz, anything that would be morally inappropriate to address to people at the most intense moments of their torture.”\textsuperscript{134} To paraphrase her point, “\textit{Emmanuel}” might not be the honest prayer in the presence of evil. Indeed, Mark’s gospel is telling in that Christ’s final words on the cross are “\textit{Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.}” Particularly “noxious are putative justifications of God, which—like the ‘consolations’ of Job’s friends—fail to respect the depth of suffering by domesticating it under some overarching scheme.”\textsuperscript{135} Theoretical theodicies qua \textit{theoretical} remain aloof

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 168.
\item \textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 167-168.
\item \textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 185.
\item \textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
and discuss evil at too abstract a level, treating “persons as things and human problems as topics for analysis instead of meeting persons as persons to be loved and healed.”\textsuperscript{136} As a corrective, Adams frames the problem of horrendous evil in terms of felt repercussions. Regard “for the suffering person calls for empathy that enters into that person’s predicament to ‘taste and see’ just how bad it is.”\textsuperscript{137} In one of her strongest remarks, she states:

I do not say that participation in horrors thereby loses its horrendous aspect: on the contrary, they remain by definition prima facie ruinous to the participant’s life. Nevertheless, I do claim that because our eventual postmortem beatific intimacy with God is an incommensurable good for human persons, Divine identification with human participation in horrors confers a positive aspect on such experiences by integrating them into the participant’s relationship with God. Retrospectively, I believe, from the vantage point of heavenly beatitude, human victims of horrors will recognize those experiences as points of identification with the crucified God, and not wish them away from their life histories.\textsuperscript{138}

But this leads back to the question of how God aids the personal integration of horrendous experience into a life that is worth living. Here, Adams turns to the category of aesthetics and claims that analysts have too often ignored the possibility that “aesthetic values” are not only instrumental, but essential in the overcoming of horrific involvement. A central intent of her monograph is to “sabotage” the trend in thinking that aesthetic goods have nothing important to contribute to the problem of suffering and its overcoming in an individual life. She proposes that aesthetic properties are the "currency" by which God benefits human beings who have participated in horrendous evils.\textsuperscript{139} Aesthetic properties “of the cosmos as a whole and of an individual’s life history

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. 166-167.

\textsuperscript{139} Adams reminds us that the rubric “horrendous” is itself an aesthetic category.
dramatically affect a person’s survival and sanity, the goodness and meaning of his/her life. It follows that furnishing a person with satisfying relationships to aesthetic goods is one way to benefit a person, and so one way for God to be good to us.”

To secure her point in tradition, Adams turns to moments in the history of Christian theology when interpretive modes operated aesthetically rather than strictly conceptually. For instance, she appeals to the aesthetically-conceived drama of scripture: Creator God as artist and orderer of chaos; the liturgical structure of creation with its Sabbath rest; its narrative tension (“multiple insurmountable obstacles, slapstick humor, and skin-of-the-teeth comic reversals”); the radiance of the shekinah glory; the psalmist’s invitation to “taste and see” God’s goodness; the manifestation of God’s divine word as light in the world; the dazzling brilliance of Jesus’ transfiguration; his lordship over darkness. Further, Adams references aesthetic values infused into Christianity via Platonism: the great chain of beauty; divine wisdom’s endowing creation with symmetry, harmony, proportion, weight, and number; the soul’s reflection of divine beauty; its journey to “pull itself into an ever more sharply focused image of God.”

Finally, she appeals to the aesthetic value of Christ as center. Using Bonaventure’s aesthetic symbol of the “medium” (middle/center/means) to sum up the meaning of the incarnation, Adams writes that Christ is “the medium of creation, in the sense of being the Exemplar through Whom all things were made (cf. John 1:1-2). Thus, all creatures are Godlike by being like the Son to Whom they owe their form and

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140 Adams, ibid., p. 147.
141 Ibid., p. 137.
142 Ibid., p. 140.
She points to the paradoxical beauty of the cross, upon which hangs the corpus of the one who takes up the un-beauteous (sin) by himself becoming *prima facie* un-beauteous:

When sin mars the image of God with our human nature . . . Christ is the *medium* [middle/center/means] of salvation. His Incarnate career takes its shape (humility, poverty, obedience, and brotherly love) form the requirements of our reform. Christ crucified is both an outward and visible sign of the caricature into which sin has contorted us and a symbol of the soul’s transformation through Christlike disciplines which “crucify the flesh and its desires.” Spiritually, the soul journeys to cruciformity, finds its destination in the arms of the crucified, where like is known by like, knows even as it is known. Thus, if Bonaventure draws on positive aesthetic values to characterize Christ’s role within the Godhead and in creation, the symbol of Christ crucified is bivalent, integrating negative into positive aesthetic values in the redemption and consummation.144

In establishing that aesthetic categories are vehicles for revelation and tradition, she evinces a divine and human “taste for modeling the world with aesthetic goods.”145 Adams then turns to the question of “how aesthetic valuables are implicated in ways for God to be *good* to created persons.”146 Prescinding from a discussion of how Adams comes to define a “good” and “meaningful” life, we can appreciate her sense that it be partially constitutive of a range of aesthetic goods: sensory pleasures; intimate personal relationships; some form of leisure and culture. For these aesthetic values to be meaningful, one must have the wherewithal to discern how they are intrinsically “good” and organically related to each other and the whole of one’s life. Life will have positive value for a person “only if s/he eventually recognizes some patterns organizing some

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143 Ibid., p. 141.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid., p. 143.
146 Ibid., p. 142.
chunks of his/her experiences around goals, ideals, relationships that s/he values.”

What is so “horrendous about horrors” is their disproportion and incongruity in relation to aesthetic values—their ability to overwhelm and disintegrate human meaning-making capacities. Horrendous evils stump us, and furnish

strong reason to believe that lives marred by horrors can never again be unified and integrated into wholes with positive meaning. Put otherwise, participation in horrors leaves us feeling in the position of postmodern artists, who juxtapose the incongruous without any unifying framework, so much better to send the despairing message that no underlying meanings are to be found.

If aesthetic goods are unqualifiedly ingredient to a wholesome life, then persons traumatized by evil must cultivate the ability to recognize and appropriate meanings sufficient to render their lives worth living through aesthetic means. God’s production of “a world whose ‘objective’ aesthetic properties are so proportioned as to be able fruitfully to be modeled by human beings in terms of aesthetic goods is one way God has of benefitting and hence of being good to human beings.”

Again, while Adams maintains that God does not have “any obligations to creatures at all,” revelation, she observes, seems to promise again and again that God overcomes horrendous ruin (the Hebrew exodus; Christ’s resurrection; the Messianic banquet). Revelation, moreover, operates at the level of narrative—itself an aesthetic property. Thus, Adams adduces, so must narrative play a role in the meaning-making required to make positive a life left in evil’s wake. When “horrendous evils leave participants floundering, what is needed is not ontological reflection but plot invention! . . . [I]ndividual sufferers are historically

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147 Ibid., p. 146.

148 Ibid., p. 148-149.

149 Ibid., p. 143.
situated and so require a response tailored to their particular circumstances, whereas theoretical theodicies sacrifice specificity on the altar of generality.”

The individual sufferer, who tries to shape the materials of her life into a meaningful whole, can scarcely be aloof, since she is the person being molded; she is working to become herself. Nor can she confine herself to a posture of analytical observation . . . nor one of aesthetic contemplation. She is both painter and canvas, her actions—to adopt and pursue goals, to relate herself to others, to change directions in such a way as to redeem failures—add content and determine form. Like the expert artist, however, she may bring theoretical knowledge to bear, step back and analyze where she has got up to now, appreciate what she has so far become, the better to know how to continue, to discern what she wants to do, how she want to develop next.

Adams goes on to say that such “self-invention”—reshaping the pieces of a life shattered by the horrendous—is usually “a collaborative project involving a wide variety of intimate and distant human relations,” with intimate friends and family, psychotherapists and spiritual directors being typically the closest collaborators. Christians, Adams explains, “would add the Holy Spirit” to this list. The Holy Spirit of God “is the personal environment that first pulls us into focus as spiritual beings capable of connecting with one another’s spirits, even of romancing with God.” Overcoming participation in evil is a collaborative and aesthetic process whereby the Spirit “functions as agency-enabler and –developer.” It is thus parcel of Christian faith to trustfully acknowledge that God’s Spirit leads persons practically destroyed by

\[^{150}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 185.\]
\[^{151}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 186.\]
\[^{152}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{153}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{154}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 104.\]
\[^{155}\text{Ibid.}\]
horrendous evils to see that their lives are already great goods to God—the quintessential meaning-maker. Christian faith believes the restorative Spirit of God gives the suffering eyes to see where, on the brink of ruin, they can gather leftover shards of meaning and how to reassemble them into a life worth living. Far from being merely therapeutic in this restorative process, aesthetic values (including but not limited to the traditional arts) symbolize a profound way in which God guarantees his loving goodness to persons:

[Like] the elegant composition of Picasso’s Guernica or Grünewald’s crucifixion, or the rhythms of color and stroke in Van Gogh’s Starry Night or Francis Bacon’s cadaverous forms, cosmic order houses horrors in a stable frame with the result that we can face them and hear the outrageous truths that they tell. This truth-telling capacity endows horrors with a positive symbolic value that cannot be taken away from them; like the blood of Abel, they cry out from the ground.\(^{156}\)

Interpreted within the larger context of her experience, Babette’s own masterpiece, Cailles en Sarcophage—itself a “cadaverous form”—is the “stable frame” which gives order and shape to her own horrors. Indeed, the entire feast is a vehicle for endowing the terrors of her past with a positive valence, however devastatingly they have made their impact. The quail dish in particular simultaneously signals her need and readiness to finally put her “little darlings” to rest and her resolution not to let the evils of her life have the final say.

**Conclusion**

*Babette’s Feast* is a singular artistic rendering of how God’s Spirit empowers individuals to "defeat" the vestiges of evil through aesthetic qualities. The film illustrates one woman’s integration of her participation in evil into a life that is for her a great good. In the end, her life proves meaningful, even if her horrendous experiences remain

inconceivable, because she takes up her experiences and confesses them with integrity through aesthetic goods, i.e., the feast itself and every element that goes into its conception and creation. Together Axel and Adams help us to see that these ordinary materials are truly graced goods to Babette, ingredients that in their assemblage become symbolic vehicles by which she may grieve through her loss and accord others a new sense of freedom. Babette is now twice the artist she has always been, for her "meaning-making and invention of integrative symbols are [themselves] artistic activities."\(^{157}\) As co-creator with the living God, she labors to shape the materials of her broken life into "wholes of positive significance."\(^{158}\) And whereas participants in horrors often have the resources of friends and family, psychotherapists and spiritual directors, as collaborators in such meaning-making, Babette has none of these. Her faith, however, gives her confidence in another collaborator: the life-giving Spirit of God. The traditional symbols of the Spirit—water, wind, dove, fire—present in various forms in the film signify the enlivening power of the Holy Spirit in Babette’s life. The film’s “discernment” and “announcement” scenes are particularly demonstrative of this: As Babette stands on the shore, the white bird that glides over the crystal blue waters symbolizes the inspiring presence of the Holy Spirit in her life—the “necessary enabling condition for drawing [her] into vocational focus”\(^{159}\); and as she requests permission of the sisters to prepare the memorial dinner, flanked by the porcelain statue of Christ, Babette gently embraces her crucifix necklace—as a sign of faith, a gesture of hope, and a prayer for strength as she

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\(^{157}\) Ibid., p. 134.

\(^{158}\) Ibid., p. 148.

\(^{159}\) Ibid.
walks her own *via crucis*. By virtue of God’s personal experience of the horrendous, symbolized by the cross, God confers dignity on even the most ignominious experience: After all, “an artist is never poor.”

The planning, preparing, and serving of the dinner is Babette’s gleaning the fragments of her shattered past and assembling them in such a way as to finally put her anguish to rest. The dinner vanquishes her participation in the horrendous and is her means of transcending the evils she has sustained. God actively collaborates in Babette’s defeat of evil by aiding the integration of horrendous experience into a new life where meaning is possible. The process by which Babette declines a life of pleasurable ease and decides to lavish her winnings on the community affirms her own free allowance of the Spirit to shape her life and, through her actions, the lives of those in the community. Both Axel and Adams might agree that for Babette God has become a "meaning-maker of extraordinary resourcefulness . . . a constant but often unrecognized teacher and collaborator, able to help [her] pick up and rearrange the pieces to make something new.”

Even more, Babette’s efforts “to cooperate with God’s ideas, and thereby contribute [her] best to cosmic beauty, is a way for [Babette] to love God back.”

It is now possible to interpret the film’s final scenes as filtered through our discussion. Axel uses visual bookends to express the narrative arc of the film. Recall the scene of Babette’s entry into the village quad amid a maelstrom of rain, wind, and lightening. In the film’s penultimate scene, Axel places the camera in the same position between the huts. After the meal, the parishioners gather peacefully under a starry sky

\[160\] *Ibid*.

and form a prayer circle around a well. The elements are the same (the quad, water, light), only reassembled to symbolize the transformation that has taken place: the Spirit’s rejuvenation of so many once distressed souls. Axel likewise confirms the Spirit’s stilling of Babette’s woes in the film’s final shot of a single candle lit on a windowsill. This image harks back to the image of Babette alone in her room, where the tears that welled up in her eyes were only visible because of the candle next to her. Deriving its meaning in part from what comes later in the film, the flame can suggest two things: her disposition—her soul ablaze with anguish; and the presence of the Holy Spirit, who stands quietly with her in her grief. Axel recapitulates this image at the film’s end with the candle on a windowsill. Without warning the flame suddenly goes out and a waft of white smoke rises from the wick. Babette’s anguish is extinguished, her spirit finally at peace. Her prayer that the cumulative load of sorrow be lifted has been answered and rises as gratitude toward heaven.

Though it may be the final shot, it is not the end of the story. The observant viewer knows this to be true since the film’s very first scene comes sometime after the feast and thus after the film’s final shot. However, this same final shot suggests that the story continues in another sense, for outside the window it is beginning to snow—yet another water symbol. Winter has set upon the village. It has also set upon the lives of the elderly parishioners. Just as Babette buried her dead at the feast, in the coming years they will have to bury each other. The simulacrum Caille en Sarcophage thus foreshadows the entombment of the sect’s own “dearly beloved.” Given the film’s unqualified and consistent “eschatology,” as sounded in the many hymns the group sings, the sisters’ pastoral counsel, and Löwenhielm’s speech, Axel (rightly) suggests the
transformation of the feast is only a beginning. It should not distract from the final redemption that the community will achieve only in the beatific glory of a New Jerusalem. And although the feast may have been Babette’s artistic coda, her artistry also remains incomplete. Philippa makes this belief plain in the final line:

But this is not the end, Babette. I’m certain it is not. In Paradise, you will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah, how you will delight the angels!
CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It is appropriate to end this dissertation by asking whether its overall goal has been accomplished. To answer that question, let us first trace the course of the study, from its conceptual germination to its fruition. The dissertation emerged from out of a desire to more substantially correlate Catholic theology and film. Whereas the two enterprises had already been fused there was need for greater tempering. From the beginning, the project was something of a gambit given its non-traditional subject matter in the conventions of Catholic systematic theology and the fact that there are few existing models on which it might be based. Moreover, several prerequisites would have to be satisfied by whichever approach was chosen to integrate theology and film more appreciably. For instance, there was the desire to neutralize, if not formally counter, mainstream approaches to film criticism that either ignore religious influences on film or otherwise neglect the need for religious and, in particular, Catholic interpretive frameworks. Also, the fairly substantive tradition of Vatican teaching on cinema would have to be considered along with the theoretical foundations laid down on smaller scales by Catholic writers on film. Further, given the relative novelty of the subject within systematics, any method for linking theology and film would need to demonstrate its ecclesial warrant and rootedness in Christian tradition. Finally, a constructive approach was sought, one that would build upon the existing infrastructure of church teaching on cinema and give foundation and facility to the analyst, the teacher, the homilist, and the catechist for making connections between theology and film.
To better illustrate the need and legitimacy for a more comprehensive approach, the first and second chapters expounded the teachings on cinema by the Roman magisterium and the third chapter profiled a cross-section of Catholic thinkers on film. Together, these initial chapters related a story that has not been sufficiently told, namely the narrative of the many ecclesiastical and theological inroads made into film appreciation by Catholics. They surfaced several theoretical features of what might justifiably be called a Catholic approach to film criticism. However, the exposé found the existing literature to be inadequate from the perspective of systematic theology in that too little theoretical attention had been given to what engenders and sustains the relationship between Catholic theology and film, i.e., the anthropological and doctrinal preconditions for their association.

The conceptual model chosen to help fortify these foundations and lead the conversation into new directions was that of mystagogy. The dissertation’s main thesis—that film is an important, contemporary locus for and of Christian mystagogy—was based primarily on Karl Rahner’s interpretation of the tradition. To appreciate how his retrieval expands the scope of what constitutes mystagogy, the fourth chapter examined mystagogy in Christian antiquity, highlighting especially the premium the church fathers placed on narrative, poetry, and imagination in evoking the mystery of God. The fifth chapter described the salient features of Rahner’s transcendental method in theology, a method that correlates anthropology and theology in the attempt to demonstrate the unity of Christian faith and human experience. This method was shown to be at once inherently mystagogical and a rich resource for the foundational principles demanded by a systematic exposition of theology’s relationship to a secular source like film. The sixth
chapter turned to Rahner’s theological aesthetics to substantiate that there is an inherent unity between theology and the arts. Rahner not only makes human expression in the arts a central theme for theology, he claims the arts have an implicit theological valence given their transcendental capacity. The arts are indispensable to theology for leading people to God; and theology is an essential hermeneutic for the exegesis of religious assets and limitations in the arts. These twin impulses underlie the dissertation’s theory that film is a source for and of the type of theology Rahner names “mystagogical.”

As a practical application of this theory, the final chapter turned to the film *Babette’s Feast*. The first part of the analysis was an exposition of the film’s aesthetic aspects. Attention was given to the qualities which make this multi-dimensional film a work of art whose visual and narrative tableaux—particularly its abundant use of christic symbols and analogues—require a Christian interpretation. This justified a second analytical installment, one that placed *Babette’s Feast* into a larger theological conversation, beyond the film itself, and which sought to probe more deeply the darker undercurrents of the story so as to better appreciate their gentle stilling. The film was considered in light of the ideas on evil and its overcoming presented by Marilyn McCord Adams and shown to succeed in communicating something of what human beings are at depth, namely in absolute need of God’s abundant goodness and blessed as capable of mediating that goodness to others. Conversely, the film put flesh on the bones of Adams’s theory that, from the perspective of belief in Christ crucified and raised, it is possible to trust God’s guarantee of goodness to victims of evil, in this life and the new life to come.
It is now possible to draw out some final implications for the whole of the dissertation and judge whether in fact the project has proved successful. One of the most important functions of theology is that it clarify and lead people more deeply into the mystery of existence as a preparation for their expression of faith. The mystery of grace abounds as the seeds of God’s salvific word in every human life. Theology’s task must be to furnish people with ways of perceiving these divine intimations in their concrete lives and relationships. To accomplish this, theology needs to address people in their historical and cultural condition and point out the particular ways that they encounter Mystery. If this is to occur, theologians must become mystagogues—novice masters familiar with those under their care and equipped with an inventory of means for orienting them toward transcendence.

The dissertation has argued that film is a crucial resource for theology’s mystagogical task. If theology aims at expounding Christian faith in as clear and intelligible a manner as its subject matter will allow, then it must adapt its modes of presentation to the hearts and minds of those to whom it is addressed—believers, skeptics, and detractors alike. Film presents human experience in ways no other art can and in styles particularly suited to contemporary sensibilities. Film can interpret human experience in ways beyond the capabilities of conceptual theology. It is thus a rich source for theological reflection, one that provides ever new perspectives for theological inquiry. When explicit theology looks at film and sees that it is capable of opening in wonder and humility to the ever-greater God of mystery, then it is incumbent upon theology to bear witness to this artistry—to name its transcendental capability and extol it.
At the same time the dissertation argued that theology is an indispensable resource for film. Theology is a natural dialogue partner for film because it probes the deepest dimensions of existence and comes equipped with its own critical apparati for measuring cinematic impulses. In particular, film needs theology as the hermeneutic that formally interprets religious experience—something that many human beings only vaguely sense, often misunderstand, and can easily misrepresent. With the help of film experts, theology can turn its discerning eyes to the stories and images of film and present viewers with a unique language by which they can articulate a response to religious experience in film—a living language that comes built-in with its own history, stories, symbols, and culture.

Theology, however, is more than yet another framework for understanding film, more than an instrument for detecting cinematic elements that might escape other modes of interpretation and for asking questions that might not otherwise be asked of a film. And this is why Christian mystagogy has been chosen as the conceptual link between the two. The intention behind understanding film as a locus mystagogicus is less a matter of leading people to better appropriate their film experiences as it is a matter of leading them to Jesus Christ. Theology has the duty to evangelize culture, cinema notwithstanding, and to bridge the gap between cultural experiences and faith. It is in this sense that film needs theology: because theology shows that when film pursues what is true it necessarily relies on the Incarnation. To return to John Paul II’s exhortation to artists: Art must not “cut itself off from the full truth about man, which is found in Christian revelation.” Whereas film may in fact open people to what is true in very profound ways, there is no mechanism within film that assures the direction that such
transcendental openness might lead viewers. Whereas film may have an implicit mystagogical intention, theology is explicit in its intention to lead people into the mystery of God. In short, the theologian is beholden to the task; whereas for the filmmaker it is optional. A Catholic film mystagogy accomplishes this task by encouraging people to discern the presence of the Spirit in their experiences of film. Such discernment requires a criterion, a normative model by which the experience might be measured and measured with accuracy. For the church this criterion is Jesus Christ. When theology perceives truth and beauty in film art it must be acknowledged; but theology must also point beyond it to that ultimate source of beauty and truth, of which art can only be a mere reflection. Therefore the mystagogical responsibility of theology vis-à-vis film is to convey this revealed, normative religious experience to viewers and even filmmakers.

I hope that this dissertation has further illuminated the promise film holds for theology and theology for film. In particular, I hope that the analysis of Babette’s Feast has shown the way film can be an occasion of mystagogy: how Babette’s story expands into our story. If the model that film is a locus mystagogicus demonstrates that the enterprises of theology and art should have the shared aim of disclosing what is authentically human, I hope to have shown that this film affirms—at times expressly, at times subtly—that the truly human is comprehensible only by virtue of Jesus Christ. Certainly, much more could be said about the film on its own. And writing from a Catholic theological perspective, there are any number of ways the film could be correlated with Christian doctrine.

Indeed, there remains the question of praxis. If theology and film is a form of practical theology, how does a theologian now use the material on Babette’s Feast in
actual processes of mystagogical formation? How might one lead people to better appropriate their film experiences as a movement toward Christ in connection with the tools of Christian discernment? As noted in the dissertation’s introduction, this study was commenced with four audiences in mind: academic theologians; film scholars with an interest in religious forms of film criticism; religious educators and catechists; and individual Catholics.

I speak from my own experience teaching college students and high school seniors at Catholic academies. Admittedly, Babette’s Feast is not the most accessible film for that age group. The fact that it is a foreign film with subtitles, has little dialogue and almost no “action,” and has a cast of seventy year-olds who sing lots of church hymns, does not attract a lot of enthusiasm. However, my experience is that the film is profitable even for young audiences, and that they are charmed by the film’s humor and beauty. With college students, it is possible (and ideal) to show the film in one sitting. However, this is not possible with high school classes and the film—any film in my opinion—loses its momentum when viewings are chopped up over days.

After watching the film, we then return to specific scenes and “read” them carefully (especially those four scenes discussed above). Again, my experience is that students really enjoy this aspect: of dissecting the mise-en-scène, of appreciating the many “layers” that form a scene and the time and intelligence that went into its making. Then they are given a worksheet with a series of questions about the film:

- What symbols do you remember most? (think about natural elements, colors, costumes, food);

- What role does the pastor (the father/founder) have in the film? Beyond the piety and heavenly hope of the religious sect, what was the religious vision of the film? Is the message particular to Christianity, or is its message more universal?
- How would you compare Babette’s role in relation to the sisters, Philippa and Martina? How do they contrast? What overall difference does Babette’s presence have on the community?

- Why did Babette want to prepare the feast? What was her purpose? Why didn’t she use the lottery money to return to France or in some other way for her own benefit?

- The hymn “Jerusalem” is sung often by the community. Clearly, the director wanted to communicate something through this theme. What might that be?

- Why did the community decided not to talk about the food?

- Do the types of food served hold any symbolic meaning? Give one or two examples.

- In what ways did the meal have a transformative effect on the whole community?

- Babette has often been described as a “Christ-figure.” What might this mean and how does the film suggest this?

Answers to these general questions are shared in an open discussion. The students are then given the assignment to read chapters 7 and 8 in the text *Doing the Truth in Love* by Michael Himes. These cover the topics “Sacramental Vision” and “Eucharist,” respectively. In an essay, students are asked to bring to bear the film and discussion on the doctrines presented in the book and vice versa. I find that in teaching the text and the film in conjunction opens the riches of both and makes the learning that much more relevant and, indeed, fun for the students.

The approach that I take with my students is mystagogical. I try to illustrate that the film and the doctrines of grace and sacrament uniquely disclose the sacred principle of human life by revealing where, how, and to whom God is present in the world.

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Whether Gabriel Axel and the many other collaborators responsible for the film intended to help audiences get in touch with their deeper, more primordial lived experience of mystery—that we may never know. Perhaps they are unwitting mystagogues. Nor can it be presumed that the film will educate every audience toward a spontaneous realization of the significance of the ever-present transcendental dimension of life. In the end, individuals who see the film must judge whether it succeeds in evoking their own religious experience and mediating knowledge of God. Hopefully, the evaluation has succeeded in pointing out the many ways Babette’s Feast intimates the religious experience of God in the lives of its characters and will sensitize viewers to the goodness of God in their lives. If my own analysis of the film has expanded the scope of critical theological reflection on the film, particularly on the point that it gives symbolic value to the belief that God is good to those who suffer the loneliness and passion of the search for meaning in the face of evil, then I feel the project has been worthwhile. If this study in any way helps individuals uncover and contemplate the sacred element in life through the experience of film, then I believe the project has accomplished its goal. In this dissertation, theology and film have met as mystagogical partners—guides which have led us just a little further down the path of human longing toward the Incarnate One through, with, and in whom we savor the Mystery of God.
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