



Diálogo

Volume 16 | Number 2

Article 11

2013

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Recommended Citation

Casarella, Peter J. (2013) "Beauty and the Little Stories of Holiness: What Alejandro García-Rivera Taught Me," *Diálogo*: Vol. 16 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol16/iss2/11>

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Beauty and the Little Stories of Holiness: What Alejandro García-Rivera Taught Me

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I found out about the passing of Alejandro García-Rivera through an email I received from Roberto Goizueta while undertaking a pilgrimage from a conference I was attending in Oxford (United Kingdom) to the village of Littlemore. Besides the shock of grief, I felt immediately at a loss and needed to make sense of the place in which I found myself. As a result, my memories of this trip are sharply etched.

Littlemore was a small retreat house on the outskirts of Oxford that the theologian and convert, John Henry Newman, used as a refuge for himself and other members of the Oxford Movement as they prayed, read the Church Fathers, and contemplated entering into communion with the Church of Rome. I discovered on this bus ride that Littlemore stands in the vicinity of a community that is almost entirely Muslim. Newman's retreat in 1842 from the din of Oxford to the quiet country parish is today a journey from the Victorian classicism of the Christ Church (the college of young Newman) to an exurb of fully globalized hybridity. At Littlemore, I prayed for Alex in a baroque interior chapel where the young John Henry Newman had also prayed. The room had the size and feel of a photographer's darkroom.

In 1863, a sensitive young Englishman with an interest in the classics visited Newman's chapel at Littlemore, describing afterward with great pleasure, in a letter to his mother, the "exquisite" nature of its "altar and *reredos*."¹ That year, this man—the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins—entered Oxford to nurture his interest in literature. Three years later, he sought out an elderly Fr. Newman (now at the Oratory in Birmingham) in order to ask to be received into communion with the Catholic Church. The mature theological aesthetics of this poet, particularly the finely tuned vision of the unity of difference in his remarkable poem "Pied Beauty," lie at the very center of Alejandro García-Rivera's work.²

We live through our collective memories, especially of the dead and of those whom we admire. These recollections help me to see more clearly something of Alejandro García-Rivera's legacy for theologians today. He was no ordinary thinker. He would have taken delight in each one of the stories I narrated to myself. He would discern a mosaic from these fragmented vignettes, expandable to the size of

a Sistine Chapel. My vision is probably less wholistic. The three protagonists dwell in communion in many ways. Like Newman and Hopkins, García-Rivera possessed a deep, humble, and personal sense of conversion/*metanoia*, and thought deeply about the existential significance of ecclesial belonging. Like them, he was a thinker who could move easily through complex philosophical and scientific discourses and focus on what needed to be said in order to articulate the sense of the faithful. His own Littlemore was, I suspect, more Californian—namely, that of the Camaldolese monks at Incarnation Monastery in Berkeley and at New Calmaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur (a huge improvement over British weather, I must say). His reverence for the contemplation of beauty and his deep sense of tradition were in this sense still very much in the spirit of the men who retreated from the individualistic, Anglo-Saxon culture of Oxford. Unlike his British counterparts from the nineteenth century, however, he was even better equipped to think about the problem of cultural difference in the world in which we find ourselves today.

García-Rivera and I met in 1997 on the occasion of a conference that Raúl Gómez, S.D.S., and I organized at The Catholic University of America on the Hispanic Presence in the U.S. Catholic Church.³ We bonded out of a mutual admiration for Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, and this bond led shortly afterwards to my being invited to serve as a reader of the dissertation of Michelle González at the Graduate Theological Union—a work that undertook a comparison of von Balthasar and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The three of us (Alex, Michelle, and myself) soon discovered we were all interested in bringing the theological aesthetics of von Balthasar into Latina/o theology and vice versa. Before I met Alex, I thought I was quite alone in thinking about theology in this way. Through him and his students, I discovered myself in dialogue with a community.⁴ My experience was not at all atypical. Alex had a gift for making connections work.

There is much that can and should be said about García-Rivera's distinctive approach to theological aesthetics. I would like to say three things about this, and especially about his use of von Balthasar's categories. First and foremost,

theological aesthetics for Alex is tied to cosmic liturgy. This is an insight he shares with von Balthasar, who titled an early book on Maximus the Confessor in this way.⁵ In his last book, he returned to this theme and retraced his vision of the cosmos through a critical engagement with the Jesuit cosmologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁶ Alex's title, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (2009), was a contemporary Latina/o rewriting of Augustine's *The City of God*. He admired Augustine's vision of uplifting beauty; but had been speaking for many years of showing why this classical vertical approach needed to be surpassed.⁷ Alex was no foe of innovation. He had worked as a physicist investigating mechanical problems of jets at Boeing's home plant in Seattle. But after discovering Boeing was also making provisions for a nuclear bomb under construction, he recognized in modern technology a tragically untamed capacity that made it possible for humanity to annihilate the Earth. He felt modern humanity would remain lost in the cosmos if it did not find a spiritual way to tame its own instincts towards Promethean self-destruction. Humanity's "place" within the cosmic liturgy, in the sense of the topographical phenomenology developed by the French philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard, needed to be reexamined.⁸ García-Rivera challenged the Fathers of the Church in the same manner that thirteenth century painters like Giotto and Cimabue, influenced by a new Franciscan aesthetic, approached older Byzantine art: A more human, variegated, and concrete form was needed to fill out these luminous archetypes.

Second, Alex developed a theology of the visual arts, which is a topic that drops out completely in the mature works of von Balthasar.⁹ Most practitioners of a theology of beauty do not attend to the production of the work of art in the same way that García-Rivera did. He wanted to valorize artistic form, but this valorization was part of a much larger program, one that Newman and his beloved Hopkins barely glimpsed, if at all. García-Rivera writes in his last testament:

The key to the garden of God will be finding a true, human technology. Such technology will be as much art as it is craft. Its aims will be less utilitarian than they will be spiritual. Such technology will continually keep before its proper mission: to create a life-giving place for human becoming. Such technology will

be a disciplined creativity addressing our human frailty.¹⁰

The beautiful work of art is a figure for the spiritual remaking of a humanity that dreams of blowing up the gift of Creation. This blindness leads to a very sterile theological aesthetic, one that reveres ancient forms with a nostalgia for the past that von Balthasar himself tried vigorously to avoid.¹¹ The blindness exists equally with the dream of an "American Eden."¹² Aesthetics cannot be separated from either ecology or the social community.

Third, García-Rivera defended a theory of signs. Beauty resided in semiotic relatedness for García-Rivera, and this community leads to concrete form and not vice versa. He envisioned bringing the Americas into genuine communion. This vision is dedicated to the Latin American, Gustavo Gutiérrez, the U.S. pragmatist, Charles Sanders Peirce, the medieval Franciscan, John Duns Scotus, and Josiah Royce ("A Californian, not a Hegelian," as Alex insisted).¹³ A cultural clash gives rise to an even deeper level of difference. Von Balthasar was, by contrast, a thinker of European harmony dedicated to Goethe, Thomas Aquinas, Rudolph Allers, and the literary giant, Reinhold Schneider.¹⁴

But this is more than a stylistic difference. There is a potential disagreement here about the nature of reality. Von Balthasar adamantly defended the analogical nature of being, as a stark alternative to Scotist realism. As a theory of naming, analogy highlights the unity in difference between the being of God and the being of creatures. The fourteenth century Franciscan thinker, John Duns Scotus, argued that being was not analogical but univocal. This means that there is more commonality between that which is signified by being in the case of creatures and the being of the Creator than St. Thomas wanted to allow. One formulation of Scotus' argument against Aquinas was that the univocity of being depends upon the fact that "the difference between God and creatures, at least with regard to God's possession of the pure perfections, is ultimately one of degree."¹⁵ García-Rivera (through Peirce, Hopkins, and especially Scotus) defended the univocity of being. It is not for him a simple question of distance as opposed to nearness, or one of redemption as opposed to incarnation. García-Rivera defends a medieval doctrine of formal beauty in a new key:

Is beauty, for example, to be found in the unity or the variety of form? Once you ask that question, a more profound

element of beauty becomes evident. It is that element which somehow brings the varied into a unity without losing either the variety or the unity.¹⁶

García-Rivera believed firmly in the transcendent character of beauty. For example, he insists in *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (1999) on a contemplative approach to reality. He revived the ancient Christian term *anagoge*, which means a “lifting up” of the mind based upon a reading of the mystical sense of Scripture. But his theory of Scotist formal realism is radically different from that of von Balthasar.¹⁷ Alex was always discerning “wholes” (“wholes” in the spiritual vision of a community) in the transformation of a technocratic mode of urban dwelling into a garden, and “wholes” within our own souls as we try to make sense of reality. These “wholes” are neither abstract concepts nor mere particulars. Like Scotus, Alex considered them to be formal realities that have to be discerned in their very “thisness.” Von Balthasar, a great admirer of Hopkins (another Scotistic realist), nonetheless recoils from the seemingly romantic belief that formal wholes are so easily discernible in life and in history. Influenced by Karl Barth and Gustav Siewerth, von Balthasar decries Scotus’ metaphysics as a mere conceptualism, one that has the unintended consequence of excluding every pre-grasp of the self-revelation of the free God.¹⁸ Von Balthasar’s metaphysical position is meant to safeguard the radical epiphany of incarnate form. The revelation of Jesus Christ comes into history as a wholly new reality, not as a preexisting whole. García-Rivera’s position foregrounds the presence of such form in the very midst of the life of the people of God. Clearly, the two positions complement each other and can stand in creative tension.

By starting with Newman, I have already indicated that Alex was a holy person *and* a theological mind of a remarkable caliber. He was also a theologian of holiness, one who tried to recover the connection between theology and a life lived in pursuit of God’s holiness.¹⁹ Above all, he taught us to look for marks of holiness in the midst of the lives of the people of God. In a sense, he developed an epistemology of holiness. What is the epistemology of sanctity? What knowledge is derived (either through acquisition or a gift) by participating even now in the communion of saints?

García-Rivera started neither from eternal beauty nor just from the social history of empirical communities. He

wrote about holiness *in medias res*—about the little stories in which the poor proclaimed the beauty and holiness of the saints. These stories include the witness articulated in the form of a semiotics of culture of San Juan Martín de Porres, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, and la Virgen Caridad de Cobre (who floats—he writes—at the middle of the cosmos). I would like to recall the story he tells of Estefanía (in his piece in a volume of *The Many Marks of the Church*, edited by William Madges and Michael J. Daley, 2006). She was a two-month-old child of a Puerto Rican couple. She died of AIDS in a shabby housing project. Alejandro was called as a Lutheran pastor to perform a burial in a barren lot overrun with weeds. The father of Estefanía was also buried in this lot. Alejandro recognized a pauper’s grave and a seed in the faith of these people for what was to become the San Martín de Porres Lutheran Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He then relates how this experience called him back to his Catholic roots and enabled him to recognize the Church as beautiful and holy:

From an unmarked gravesite to a church with a mark, that is, a name, I saw in this experience God calling me back to my Roman Catholic roots. Eventually, I did return and am now a Roman Catholic lay professor of theology at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. I have written several books including one on St. Martin as well as several on the theology of the beautiful such as, *The Community of the Beautiful* and *A Wounded Innocence*. I wrote these books out of this experience. I had learned something profound about the reality of the church: it has marks. More important, these marks are often unrecognized by academic theology, but are seen quite easily by the poor. There is one special mark, however, that by its very visibility truly defines the church. It is *kalokagathia*, the union of the beautiful and the holy.

Kalokagathia is a Greek word for which we have no modern counterpart. It is a word that grasps an intrinsic connection between the good (*agathos*) and the beautiful (*kallos*). I see that mark in

that statue of St. Martin de Porres. As such, *kalokagathia*, as represented by this simple statue, calls to question what the world has come to know as either beautiful or holy. It also recovers one of the lost marks of the church.

We used to see them, after all, in every church. I mean statues. Now, they are often found in dark corners, or church basements, or attics. When the church made its peace with the modern world, it also became embarrassed by its devotional art. Placed in the light of modern tastes and scholarship, much of the church's art fell out of favor. A modern church, for example, puts much store in the historical study of the Bible. It would allow artistic depictions of Biblical stories. Unfortunately, much of the church's art dealt with non-biblical, or more accurately, non-canonical stories. By this, I am speaking of the legends surrounding the apostles, Mary, and Jesus that are known by Bible scholars as the Apocrypha.

When you see a statue of St. Joseph holding a staff with lilies growing out of it, what you see is an artistic depiction of a story found in what is known as the Proto-gospel of James. This gospel never made it into the Bible but it did make it, physically, into the church. As such, it has formed the imagination of innumerable Christians who saw this statue and wondered about the mystery of Joseph's election to be the husband of Mary by having his dead, wooden staff suddenly flower forth with lilies! Such stories and the art that depicted them were an embarrassment to a church that thought it had come of age by developing a critical consciousness of the historical origins of its sources. Perish the thought that the life of the church could be marked by childlike imagination rather than responsible scholarly critical thought!

There was, however, another reason accounting for the church's embarrassment. As the church entered the modern age, the notion of holiness began to change. The modern world increasingly identified holiness with morality. Holiness has to do with setting apart and it is God who sets apart. With the new emphasis on human freedom that came out of the eighteenth century, this setting apart became associated more with those who had achieved moral purity rather than with those whom God had set apart. Christians, however, have resisted seeing this setting apart in terms of moral purity. Did Mary Magdalene, for example, become holy in spite of her sins or because of her sins? Indeed, Magdalene's holiness is measured less by her moral purity, but by her ability to become innocent again. And such innocence is beautiful. It is beautiful because it is a work of art, God's art. God fashions Magdalene's soul out of her former sins into a new innocence that is beautiful. If I were to translate the word *kalokagathia*, it would be wounded innocence.

The church has marks. I saw this as I stood in front of the unmarked gravesite of little Estefania. I sensed then that God would not leave that place unmarked. In the ecumenical miracle of a St. Martin de Porres Lutheran Church, I saw that a very special mark of the church transcends the sins of the human church. It is the innocence of those who stand at an unmarked gravesite yet hope for things unseen. Such hopes then become marks, marks that have filled the church with music, color, tapestries, statues, paintings, dance, drama, and a thousand other forms since its beginning. It is the mark of a wounded innocence. It is the mark of *kalokagathia*. It is a mark of the church.²⁰

García-Rivera recovers the doctrine of the communion of the saints by exploring the convergence of two truths that have sadly become separated in our contemporary discourse and experience: a theory that explains how beauty and goodness are perceived in the wounded innocence of the poor of Jesus Christ, and a theology of cultural difference rooted in a semiotic understanding of faith and culture. Before outlining these two elements, I want to underscore the claim for convergence in García-Rivera's work. Cultural difference is exalted by virtue of the perception of beauty and goodness in the concrete lives of the faithful. Likewise, beauty and goodness are neither descending nor ascending. Those transcendentals of being come to light as refracted through difference in both nature and culture.

What kind of theory of aesthetic perception does García-Rivera defend? His fullest statement is found in *The Community of the Beautiful*. The book begins with Hopkins' poem "Pied Beauty," which is transformed into a theory of praise for the cosmic community of signs in both nature and culture. Through (and beyond) von Balthasar, he embraces the radical difference between creator and creature, namely, the metaphysical notion that divine beauty flows rhythmically in, through, and beyond Creation. Through C.S. Peirce and Duns Scotus, he embraces the formal distinction as a lens for grasping the semiotic community of difference in created reality as a created good. Here is the creative tension just mentioned, as presented in his own work.

His theology of cultural difference builds on this semiotically construed ontological realism. The key insight in *The Community*, which is buttressed by Josiah Royce's extension of pragmatism into the social domain, concerns the continuity between the experience of San Juan Diego, and the call at Medellín in 1968, and by contemporary Latina/o theologians to recognize the preferential option for the poor. Popular Catholicism, theological aesthetics, and solidarity with the poor all stem from a single, unified vision of faith grounded in the concrete perception of beauty and goodness.

What did Alejandro García-Rivera contribute to theological aesthetics? An aesthetic imagination makes judgments about reality based upon the perception of beauty and goodness. Drawing upon the Magnificat of Mary, as well as the liturgical canticle of the three youths in the furnace (Daniel 3:57-88), he suggests that an inculturated "lifting up of the lowly" will establish an aesthetic mode of interpretation that is not only doxological (offering praise for God's grandeur) but also redemptive and liberating:

"Redemption, in light of God's ordaining power, is less a state of mere existence or an invisible inner reality than an ordained existence, a common reality in the midst of marvelous differences, a community where the invisible becomes visible by the power of a bold and daring spiritual imagination which makes manifest communities of Truth, Goodness, and *above all*, the Beautiful."²¹

Ultimate realities are never far from view in this approach. Heaven, for example, is not dull, homogenous, or isolating. In the words of Hopkins, it abounds with "dappled things."²² Persons who offer a coherent glimpse of this community of the beautiful are rare. They teach us that humble lovers of justice can receive the gift of beauty in a rich variety of ways. They teach us that the genuine struggle for beauty is personal, communal, and *in our very midst*. Alejandro García-Rivera was just this type of person.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jeffrey B. Loomis, *Dayspring in Darkness: Sacrament in Hopkins* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1988), 44. "Reredó" is an ornamental wood or stone screen behind an altar.
- 2 Hopkins became a religious poet of some distinction. His remarkable poem, "Pied Beauty," offers a harmonizing philosophical insight into the unity and difference of a complex and highly differentiated visual landscape. Alejandro García-Rivera appropriated the vision of Hopkins and incorporated it into his own theological aesthetics. See, above all, Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 7-38. For example, he writes: "Hopkins ... finds beauty not in spite of the shadows but because of them" (26).
- 3 See *Cuerpo de Cristo: The Hispanic Presence in the U.S. Catholic Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). This volume includes an essay by García-Rivera titled: "Wisdom, Beauty, and the Cosmos in Hispanic Spirituality" (106-33). The focal point is a meditation on the Cuban devotion to Our Lady of Charity. This is one of the few places where García-Rivera began to thematize his own *cubanía*. His journey led him, I believe, to become a Californian (in the philosophical sense that Josiah Royce gave to that term) but *not* via an abandonment of his roots in Havana.
- 4 My first presentation to the Academy of Catholic Theologians in the U.S. (ACHTUS) was done alongside another student of García-Rivera from the Jesuit

- School at Berkeley, namely, Nancy Pineda-Madrid. Her semiotic and pragmatist reading of Our Lady of Guadalupe extended García-Rivera's vision into yet another domain. See also her book: *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).
- 5 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1988).
 - 6 Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).
 - 7 For his positive estimation of Augustine's anagogical aesthetics, see *The Community of the Beautiful*, 29-31.
 - 8 *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*, 70-74.
 - 9 See Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003).
 - 10 *The Garden of God*, 126.
 - 11 His most vigorous critique is laid out in Alejandro García-Rivera's, "On a New List of Aesthetic Categories," in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2008), 169-183.
 - 12 *The Garden of God*, 124-6.
 - 13 I gathered this comment from a personal conversation with Alex that took place in his home in California in the Spring of 2001.
 - 14 At the end of his life, von Balthasar was going to write a book about Thornton Wilder, but there is not space here to contemplate the implications of this hypothetical scenario. Generally, von Balthasar seemed to dismiss American culture for its slavish indulgence of television.
 - 15 Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.
 - 16 *The Garden of God*, 127-28.
 - 17 Richard Cross explains the Scotistic theory in his entry, "Medieval Theories of Haecceity," in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, as follows: "This gives us, in effect, three entities in addition to the common nature (the nature in itself): the nature-in-the-particular, the individual difference or haecceity, and the particular itself. Setting aside the common nature, since the nature-in-the-particular is simply an accidental modification of the common nature, Scotus holds that there is some sort of distinction between all three of these entities: the nature-in-the-particular and the haecceity are something like components of the particular itself. These two components are distinct, in the sense that one (the nature-in-the-particular) is merely denominatively one, whereas the other (the haecceity) is per se and primarily one (that is to say, essentially one in such a way that there can be no further explanation for its unity). Scotus here invokes his famous "formal" distinction. Clearly, the nature-in-the-particular and the haecceity are something like (necessary) properties or features of a particular. Scotus is, as we have seen, a realist about these features (on the grounds that, otherwise, they could perform no explanatory role of the kind they are supposed to perform). And they clearly are not the same feature. So there must be some kind of distinction between them. This distinction cannot be real: the features are not separable from each other any more than they are separable from themselves; neither are they anything like discrete parts of some whole. They are, as Scotus puts it, "formally distinct." Richard Cross, "Medieval Theories of Haecceity," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N Zalta (ed.).
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/medieval-haecceity>> [accessed on Oct. 11, 2011].
 - 18 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit* III:1,2 (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Johannes Verlag, 1965), 377-80.
 - 19 This question is treated more fully in my forthcoming essay, "The Communion of Saints and Social Solidarity," in *Concilium* 2013/3, an issue on "Saints and Sanctity Today" ed. Maria Clara Bingemer, Andres Torres Queriuga, and Jon Sobrino. What appears here is adapted from that article.
 - 20 Alejandro García-Rivera, "The Church is Beautiful and Holy," in *The Many Marks of the Church*, ed. William Madges and Michael J. Daley (New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), 71-73.
 - 21 *The Community of the Beautiful*, 195.
 - 22 The poem "Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins begins with the line: "GLORY be to God for dappled things—" See, for example, Aidan Nichols, O.P., Hopkins: Theologian's Poet (Ann Arbor, MI: Sapientia Press, 2006), 53-56, for the complete text of the poem and a brief commentary.