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Religious as Artist: The Meshes of a Sempiternal Ambivalence

by Louis Reile, S.M.

God has charmingly shared the act of creating with his creature man. This sempiternal act of reducing inspiration to a concrete or precise image is another way of saying "you shall be as gods." That we, in this age of space victories — satellite launching and missile maneuvering — are concerned with another kind of creative act is refreshing. The first man on the moon, or the last, for that matter, will be a sorry man, more alienated than he already is off the moon, were he to go without benefit of the creative spirit. No song in his heart, no reflected beauty about him, the moon-conquering astronaut will be a mockery to man's creative spirit. Merely to mention the space race, the continuous roar of the flaming trajecting capsules and missiles, is to evoke a kind of awe in our hearts. Almost too much awe, some say, and so we shall find, if this be true, an even greater literature of the absurd, that is, man loose from his authentic moorings, having no center, no goal, or even a hint of objective.

Ghelderode wrote about his hero Pantagleize:

The moral is . . . that in our atomic and auto-disintegrated age, this age from which dreams and dreamers are banished in favor of scientific nightmare and the beneficiaries of the future horror, a fellow like Pantagleize remains an archetype, an exemplary man, and a fine example who has nothing to do with that dangerous thing, intelligence, and a great deal to do with that savior instinct. He is human in an age when all is becoming dehumanized. He is that last poet, and the poet who believes in heavenly voices, in revelation, in our divine origin. He is the man who has kept the treasure of his childhood in his heart, and who passes thru' catastrophes in all artlessness. He is bound to Parsifal by purity and to Don Quixote by courage and holy madness. And if he dies, it is because particularly in our time, the Innocents must be slaughtered; that has been the law since the time of Jesus. Amen. (*Ghelderode*, Hill & Wang, p. 146-7)

I would not like to concur in every detail, explicit or implied, in this lyrical description of an archetype, but I would suggest that Pantagleize has much to offer us by way of an introduction. Like his creator, Pantagleize is pleasingly ambivalent, ambiguous, and thus smacks of the mystery that sets artists apart from mere craftsmen. For a lark, even the unbelieving can take an excursion up the magic mountain of

art and revel, at least momentarily, in the fascinating cult of worship. And this excursion-type trip is diversive enough to sap the ennui from many who are otherwise not meant to scale the magic mountain, much less to behold the treasures of its temple.

Recently my own alma mater, Johns Hopkins, had an entire issue of its magazine devoted to the humanities. Perhaps I was guilty of judgment, which is not mine, but judge I did. It seemed to me that this issue of the Johns Hopkins magazine was something of an excursion, and more, an exculpation, to cast off the implied guilt of the millions of dollars spent upon Hopkins' justly famous scientific research. As though to give an off-hand *raison d'être*, an explanation to the comparatively limited sums devoted to the arts and humanities, the responsible parties printed a beautiful issue, rolling out carpets of words worthy of a sanctuary floor. I mention this incident of the special humanities issue, for I greatly hope, as the dedication of the issue implies, that somewhere art does find a cubby hole within this distinguished branch of human endeavor, the academic community.

Such excursions, I say, are typical of the twentieth century man who is not necessarily a devotee of art, but a dabbler, or a refuge from ennui — ennui of scientism and/or of experimental religion.

The ambient circumstances in which today's artist finds himself are a challenge to him, worthy of another spirit hovering over the chaos of formless mass. This figure is apt, for the artist, like the Holy Spirit, must create, at least in this, that he establishes order, selecting and rejecting what will not redound to the total pleasing result.

No less an authority than the Bishop of Rome has given this description of today's artist:

. . . You have this special virtue, that in the very act of making the world of the spirit accessible and comprehensible, you preserve the ineffability of such a world, its transcendence, its aura of mystery, its necessity to be grasped with ease and at the same time with effort. (May 7, 1964)

To describe the artist, to delineate him completely has been the goal of many a writer, both scientific and non-scientific. Artists themselves have written about the artist, at length. It is the in-group thing to do, and comparatively few writers and other artists have been strong enough to repel the temptation. But just as often as he has entered into temptation to explain his role, the artist has failed to bring his client to the grasp of an embrace with the creative process. Catch-phrases are dangerous. Snatching a phrase from a poet not particularly in vogue today, we, the artists, might summarize our role: "to paint the thing as we see it, for the God of things as they are." All art is a communication of the beautiful, as Pope Paul said above, a communication by evoking of a message or effect through the instrumentality of mood, feeling, and the human plight in general. Surely this is a God-like role. Artists, of whatever medium,

can be thus anointed with the sacerdotal oils. Pardon me if I happen to lean, with decided favor, in the direction of the user of words. The poet, for certainly the artist can be generically designated, has the edge. When the Almighty deigned to communicate Himself with His creatures, He who was Omniscience and Wisdom and Beauty Itself, chose the *Word* of God as the principal vocation of His beloved envoy-Son. This Divine Poet Himself thrilled all generations with his lyric use of words: "Behold the lilies of the field . . . The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl hidden in a field . . ."

Briefly, so that I do not try your patience, the artist is the creative person, whatever his medium of communication of the beautiful might be.

The prodigality of Providence and the required normalcy of applying candidates who survive the screening of religious life demand then, that this group of Christian witnesses finds itself well populated with the creative person. Having felt his love for his God so compellingly, this Christian witness freely chose to become a professional religionist by deliberately and publicly pronouncing the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience within the assembly of God. This person called a religious, be he priest or brother, or she sister, takes his or her place in the chanting ranks of mankind, praising God in word and in deed. Given the normalcy of personality and the prodigality of grace alluded to above, this same religious sooner or later faces a realization: here I am a religious, but I cannot deny I am also endowed by God with certain creative talents. What am I to do? — And he is caught up now in the sempiternal ambivalences of the meshes of human creaturehood. Singer and son, singly or together, become a cause for tension, even trauma perhaps.

Denying that sometimes a problem exists in these creative personalities adapting to the demands of religious life would be unrealistic. To dismiss the possible examination of the phenomenon would be short-sighted, to say the least. It is a fact that this person, the creative soul, has found it "a hard saying" to be chaste, poor, and above all, obedient according to present church-condoned rules and constitutions. Many of these gifted people have turned their backs on religious life and have sought to serve their God elsewhere in His vast creation. There has been great defection. This paradisaical residue of creativity adhering within their beings has led them to desire exemption from the human condition. This manifesting of their creativity, they reasoned, could be achieved only by severing their ties with the Congregation. I do not dare to risk a statistic in evidence of the occurrence. The fact belies the need of statistics. We are humans, and we would be godlings, and to complicate the goal, we would be artists too. Garbed in various robes and dedicated by vows that still ring with the gospel freshness, these religious-artists still attempt to incarnate what Pope Paul described as the prerogative of the artist: "to snatch the treasures of the world of the spirit and to clothe them in words, colors and accessible forms."

Religious life subjects — *demands* — that each candidate reduce himself or herself to a common denominator first, that of a naked lover caught in the glare of self-introspection, and burning with a divinely-inspired goal of resembling only the

Crucified Christ, not necessarily the *Poet* Christ whom the Father called his Incarnate Word. Or at least this is the projected image generations of religionists would have us accept as the one-and-only image of the aspiring Christian in search of evangelic perfection. Yet upon examination of the same ascetical texts and monastic-chaste methods sacred to these image projectors, the inquirer would find one searing reality most evident: that all texts and all methods insist on the individuality of the subject upon which the Divine Spirit will build His fleshly tabernacle.

A dichotomy does seem to exist between one's being faithful to one's Christian duty to perfect his modest talents and the demand of conformity dictated by interpreters of the Holy Rule. Phrasing the question robs the dilemma of its intended complexity and tempts amateurish prescriptions. Again to quote Pope Paul, there *has* been estrangement between the artist and the Christian witness.

We have placed a leaden hood over you. We may as well say it, pardon us! And then we have abandoned you, we too. We did not explain our side to you. We have not led you to the secret cell where the mysteries of God makes man's heart dance with joy, hope and happiness and rapture.

These words to artists are indicative of the plight of the religious-artist, as we have identified him, although they were not directed to him explicitly. We shall return to this point again, but let it be said now, that religious superiors, most of the time unknowingly, have estranged their creatively-inclined subjects. In an heroic effort to be true to *what* the customs of the congregation, which dictate a matrix of conformity, superiors have promoted crisis which leads to difficulty. Estrangement was not always the result. Obviously not! But while it was not an absolute rule of thumb, it was unfortunately, the rule rather than the exception. And for the record, it must be said, and I shall come back to this point, the estrangement was not always a downward action. Subjects themselves contributed, often greatly, to their own estrangement or alienation.

The limited scope of this brief paper might be only a few remarks on the vast and complicated subjects juxtaposed in the title of these remarks: "The Religious as Artist, the Meshes of a Sempiternal Ambivalence." These remarks are not the result of research, in the accepted sense of that term. Rather they are subjective remarks in the strict sense of that term also. The cogency of these remarks may bear more witness to the plight of the creative person aspiring to love God in religious life, simply because I am *not* a psychologist or a scientifically orientated scholar. If anything, I am a modest word-stringer of sorts who hopes now and then he has mastered a minimum of craftsmanship and hopes some day to produce at least one artistic work. In fact I labor in the medium of fiction, realistic fiction I hope. Rather than to speak on this topic, I would prefer to try my luck at stashing all these remarks into a novel and projecting all these observations in dialogue form through the mouths of

fictional characters.

Probably more valuable still has been my experience in the preaching of not a few retreats to religious communities, serving as the conference maker and hearing confessions. In this pastoral capacity I have had occasion to note the universality of this problem of the religious-artist in his adjusting to the duties, needs and demands of the institute. On many a day there has come a new insight because a religious posed a question to me. Still at other times I have, like other creatively-inclined religious, *felt* some of what I have tried to reduce to paper here. But I would be misleading were I to say that I personally have experienced all the realities I remark about. Yet I am conscious that I have given myself a large amount of poetic license to frame this paper, much in the spirit of the sub-title, and so I seek refuge in the ambivalence which the very topic affords me. Already I can visualize theologians, dogmatic ones as well as those given to ascetical and mystical treatises, writhing in their professorial chairs, chafing at the audacity of a man who would not first check his sources — Sources as they understand this scientific term. I admit that their fears are founded, but were I to proceed more cautiously than I have, this paper would have no value at all. As it now reads, it has at least the vestige of spontaneity.

The creative person, the artist, bound by his vows to strive for a kind of maximal reproduction of the Word Incarnate, has also to measure up to his community's estimation of what a "good" religious is or should be. I mean that he must perform externally. Therefore this artist-religious finds himself a teacher, pastor, counselor, administrator, and all the other hyphenated roles a religious can and does share with his confreres. No superior has the luxury of waiting upon the muse to strike his or her subject before the breakfast is served, the class supervised, the laundry is done, and records posted. Multiple are the slogans of convent life to ward off any disillusioned soul who would claim priority for the urge of artistic creativity. Living in a practical world, the dreamer has to take second or second-hundredth place. Praise the Lord he must, but at vespertide and not only when the creative muse nudges him at high noon or quiet midnight in his cell. The bell and the book — this is his bane. The very profession of vows as conceived and approved by the Church makes the religious by definition to dwell in community. He can never be wholly alone. But paradoxically he finds himself so much alone — lonely — in the bosom of the community, the community where such Evangelic dicta as "God is Love," "My brother is Christ to me," "Where two or three are gathered" seem to abound and make a screaming sarcasm of the predicament.

The artist is lonely. But this is not his prerogative solely. He is human and as such shares this lonely mode of existence with all his fellow human beings. While it may chafe him, wear him down, he would not, in his more rational moments, even wish to exempt himself from this fruitful feeling of momentary isolation. This is a fruitful feeling, I maintain, for it is a slowing down of all his other powers so that he can concentrate upon the vision. In poetic language this is the prelude to contemplation. To the artist is granted the vision. All seers must bear with loneliness

and this implies a kind of exception, a type that is conspicuous and therefore sometimes as galling. For paradoxically no one more than the creative person wishes often that he were as thick-skinned and unperceptive as the common man is reputed to be. This sensitivity is requisite for the artist, so that he can magnify the vision and refine it, and then transform it into a word, a shade, a line. But to behold this vision he must be brave enough to look with his eyes, and to peer with all his strength. And once having beheld this vision, to let it touch him, consume, and then help him to transform others with its mystic magic. Loneliness is the lot of all creative souls. The Incarnate Word even from the redemptive (and therefore creative) gibbet of the Cross uttered words of loneliness. In his vision of the redemption at Gethsemani, he begged for sharers of the bitter vision.

In his contemplation of the beautiful, the artist is alienated. This is a fact. While he is thus silent and peering with all the accumulated forces of his being into the vision, he is sober, but not necessarily sad. Those about him will surely say he is pensive or sad or blue. He is not. But it will often be of little avail to tell others what he is experiencing. "I'm only thinking," is the weak defense he makes, and this defense is taken by his confreres in some apologetic manner. It is dangerous for the artist now to wonder about his status. Like Ghelderode, the artist, the religious artist, will have to "rethink the essential problems of life, when faith becomes diverted, these essential problems of our human condition — what all things would become and what would be their end." (p. 14)

When these moments are upon the artist-religious, he will be tempted, sometimes through indolence — the creative person knows he is vastly capable of nurturing it — to indulge and then to become prey to the guilty little monster of self-pity, knowing he has squandered a priceless moment of insight and depth. Depression, if he is so prone to it, is just around the corner. He is caught red-handed being exactly what he knows he cannot be. His conscience smites him on a double-count: as a dedicated religious and as a privileged seer of the great vision. Emotions flood him and he instinctively knows he cannot handle all the flood, and, spent from wallowing in his self-pity, he cannot — because he will not — face any single one emotion for what it is, but lets himself, like a false martyr, be sucked down into the funneling slurp of this bilging mood. Anything but face up to my deficiencies. What next? Intolerance then vindictiveness. I belong to another country. These rude and barbaric people about me are not really my fellow religious, but unfeeling calibans intent only upon their own ease and feelings. Or, having recognized this most un-subtle of ruses for what it is, he may play the equally false role of being submissive and refuse to be hurt, because he *fears* to be hurt. Careful though he might be, sarcasm tinges his thoughts and finds its way up into his words and now will gush such uncharities as only the righteous just can inflict, upon themselves and those around them. Behold the antithesis of the school of love which religious life, by definition, is! Man is not always lovely. But this is what makes him so lovable. The Christian knows this truth, the religious-artist should excel in plumbing the depths

of its reality. Like Ghelderode, he does not despair of his fellow man, but rather “marvels that man is not the uglier. The artist must be buoyed up by the realization that man is most interesting precisely because he is so capable of being at once everything and its opposite.” (p. 26)

At the risk of documenting, let me state the following. During the past year I experienced this so-called alienation and its dangers to such a marked degree that I will not soon forget it.

Early one morning, a Wednesday, just prior to Thanksgiving, I forced myself to compose a story which had been gestating in my imagination for some thirteen years. Between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. the story fell out upon the paper. Often during previous composition I have become physically nauseated from prolonged concentration. This day even that type of nausea escaped me at first. I was caught up in this state of concentration. Somehow I was able to remember I had to be at the University for poetry seminar at 4 p.m. Literally I wrenched myself up from my desk and went to the seminar. But I was uneasy there, and found it most difficult to control my emotions, particularly when brick-bats of criticism began to fly. Although none of my work was on the block, I nonetheless felt all the jarring sensations of the criticism, or some other kind of shock I could not identify. I tried later, when I returned home and sat for some hours without moving in the quiet of my room, to account for this unseemly breach of emotional calm. It was, I concluded, the effort I had expended in trying to pull myself back into the world of physical reality, having so completely immersed myself in the phantasy world of my little 2-1/2-year-old character, Tammy Dru. Need I say that mature people can control their emotions? The religious works hard at this through his examens — endless examens — resolutions, interviews, directions, counseling periods. He works at silencing imagination, so that this mental prayer can be more fruitful, be the real contact with God that it should be. Any system of virtues will appear to the artist-religious as a maze of nonsense, given the glow of his alienation. But to his accustomed consciousness springs the thought that he must mingle again with his brother-religious, for it is the hour of recreation. He must concern himself with their interests, not his own. How often I have during this past year burdened my fellow Brothers with observations on Giraudoux, Proust, Camus and Dostoevski, garnered at the seminars of J. H. U.

Not seldom will the artist religious agree with many of the current commentators who argue against religious life and especially the pre-aggiornamento kind, that seals off religious from real life. The premise being that religious life is some kind of phantasy, and that only direct involvement makes for reality. Which brings up the greatest, possibly, of all the horrors, the enforced time a religious has to spend in those ungodly places called “*houses of formation.*” They are all desert and no oasis, except for the lapses of some beleaguered superior who gets caught off guard and permits his subjects to be with “people” for a change.

Formation is saddling restraint for most artistic persons. Attention he craves.

Cabin fever is almost an unavoidable catastrophe, often and with the cyclic persistence of moods and months. Unicorns and ogres wear familiar faces much resembling those of present superiors. Satyrs, kobolds, and non-descript monsters don the cowl and coif, parading in primly-reverential procession to the choir. It is the hour of the Mime. All is fake and there is nothing real, except the swording reality of the contradiction: I am trying to live this preposterous set of rules and prescriptions when my heart is given to my art, and that is suffering, too. Even the trusted spiritual counselor is now suspect as a man of the establishment. Taking my problem to him is useless.

To recall sanely that such moments harass the most prosaic of mortals is almost impossible for the artist-religious now. He is bleeding and cannot stanch the flow, because he really does not want to. The treadmill of dilemma is preferable to a moment of clear decision. Granted that it may take him a few decades of years in religious life before he can realize that he has not yet really mustered up the courage to respond to the grace that is there waiting for him. He has heard about the seed that must fall and die to blossom with life, he has hurdled the dark night of the soul, and has worn brown the pages of meditation manuals on oblation, holocaust, God's Will, and all that. Suddenly this person endowed with such clarity of insight about the human comedy is begging for exemption from being part of it. He is maudlin when he should be clear-eyed.

He is the most difficult of spiritual children to guide, unless he has somehow conquered much of this escalating suffering which normal contradiction can purify. Multiple insights appear contradictory to his guides. His artistic inclinations surely will clamor for expression, but he can and will have to contain them and channel them into less than preferred expressions of his artistic choice. That this is possible is borne out by the dozens and even hundreds of creative religious who have come to terms with both their desire and pursuit of perfection within the vows and their artistic talents. Recall Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Henry Newman, and in our own day witnesses like Hubert Van Zeller, Srs. Mary Julian Baird, Jessica Powers, Maura, Hester, Carita, Frs. Daniel Berrigan, Henry Setter, Brothers Luke Grande, Melvin Meyer, James Roberts and many others, not to mention the anonymous religious writing under pseudonyms. These have committed themselves to the proposition that their less gifted brothers and sisters will not die without a dream.

If the glorious creature man were less complicated and individual, he would be the more easily catalogued, and then monastery shelves would be even more cluttered than they already are with methodology: how-to-handle-a-sanguine-artist-novice, how-to-rid-exceptional-novices-of-desire-to-be-involved, etc. And life would be drab, as drab as some of the modern writers claim it is, devoid of the complicating splendor and richness of the Resurrection mystery. The artist's urbanity and sensitivity will mark him out for certain afflictive inquiries. The litany grows.

Harried superiors and weary confreres will prefer any one else to the creative confrere. His creativity and unquiet drive to make and to do will bring up the mys-

tery of contradiction — another disturbing element for the cloister to cope with. So away with him, goes the temptation, bring in the craftsmen, like the literary plumbers who can connect joints and spouts and clog the slopsinks of our libraries and corridors with less artful but more functional “creations.”

Enter now the *entreact*, the one brief shining moment in the life of the artist-religious. By a stroke of meditation-induced inspiration someone in authority decides to let the artist have his way. Produce for the monastery, possibly even a genuine original water coloring or a batch of promotional literature. See, Sister Mary Artista, beloved child of our community, we have solved your problem. You now belong. Welcome into the joy of the Lord. You are very important now, Sr. Artista, and your estimated income from your artistic endeavor will approximate the amount of our community’s assessment to pay off the new motherhouse annex.

If this too-familiar picture makes anyone of my hearers uncomfortable, I would direct his attention back to the artist-religious himself. He has already been acutely aware of the odium of his fellows, because he possesses this many-hued talent. “Behold the dreamer comes,” he repeats, then a bit sardonically wishes he could join his fellow religious in detesting himself for the coveted gift. The artist-religious can well be another Joseph who will eventually save his family from famine, at least famine of the spirit, if not of the body.

In the assembly of God’s people, the seer has always had a ruddy go at his vocation. Isaias, whose inspired book opens with the very phrase “the vision,” ended up being sawed in halves, quite literally a dichotomous termination. The sad songs of Sion were more desirable later, and Jeremias the poet obliged, aided by the Spirit of God. When the dirge became too perfect, the same people found it needful to stone the prophet to death. The Greeks of one persuasion would expel the poet from the city, while yet another would make the ideal candidate for ruler be a poet as well. The discerning man of any age will eventually know the poet rules the world, even when he does not wear the crown, because the poet is master of the recesses of the human soul. Dostoevski said it thus:

While keeping faith with realism (in art) to find man *in men!* — People call me a psychologist: this is inaccurate. I am a realist in the bigger sense: that is to say, I indicate all the depths of the human soul. (*Ivanov*, p. 37)

The impact of the religious-artist can be shattering on the apostolate of his community, or, if he insists on indulging his own whims, can be a negative refrain that only scratches the disc and plays no music. To phrase it subjectively he might chorus: I have piped for you a tune and you have chaptered me for breaking monastic silence. It is conformity or suffer, if not perish. Flight is the most frequent temptation. The proper attitude for this artist-religious in community is to weigh his gift and to face the reality of his individual situation, not excusing himself for the voluptuous temptations to play the dilettante.

That this plight of the creative person in the church has massive implications, was aired recently by the Pope himself. What he addressed to the artists gathered before him he certainly meant for his religious-artists to absorb and gather inspiration from.

We have felt dissatisfaction with this artistic expression of yours. We have treated you worse, we have sought for oleographs and works of art of little artistic value, perhaps because we have not had the means of understanding great things, beautiful things, new things, things worthy of being seen, and we have walked along crooked paths where art and beauty and the worship of God — and it is worse for us — have been badly served.

In the spirit of the Vatican Council, it might then be prudent, fitting and just for competent authority to relax its centuries-old vigilance, seeped in throttling manichaeism, self-justifying jansenism, obfuscating prudery, and such like purple-tinged expressions which are reflections of the fox-holed fixations with certain areas of health, liberty of the children of God, where growth, vision, and artistry are concerned. The religious artist can conceivably be excused some participation in the artistic community of creative persons, but he cannot be dungeoned against all rightful associations. Long ago the poet King David chanted about the glories of God, in His creation, and of how all things praise the God of Infinite Wisdom. Two thousand years after the Divine Poet Incarnate died to free us from sin, we are still groveling, in many creative areas, for a gopher's breath of this fresh air He created. Plays, books, films, statuary, together with figurative timbrels, castanets, santuris, are all erroneously labeled — pathetically — as “worldly” and therefore harmful, or incompatible with the achievement of evangelic perfection.

What is the present position of the artist in modern monasticism, such as in my own religious family? In one summary statement: the position of the artist-religious in the Society of Mary is not bad. It is looking up, incredibly fast. There has been soul-searching aplenty among our superiors and not any the less among the inferiors. “We do not need to lose the artists.” One is apt to hear such-like comments in almost any recreation room of the Society here in America. This is in the right direction. The stigma of having been dipped by the Creator into the Magic-mix of God's own Hellespont has come to be accepted as a fact. Conformity is not the goal of our formational policies. I do not speak here, I remind you, as an officially delegated visitor who has had briefing chats with the higher echelons, or as a religious statistician who has worked out pages of charts to be fed into hungry machines. But I can say with surety that the artistic candidate and religious is being considered as God made him, as an individual.

Yet I am not ready to write off the statement without any qualifying riders. Since we are given to works of education, we find, like the TV industry, that we eat up more manpower than we can reasonably supply. So the artistic has to give way

to the practical, functional, and therefore religious-artists are employed as school-centered functionaries, major and minor. This may exist in some provinces, even for a decade or more. Art majors, music majors are re-routed to take up the slack in commercial subjects, economics and history, and the catch-all English, whatever that can and does mean in the shabbily camouflaged catalogues of our universities and colleges.

America is not exceptional for its dimensional cultural life. Our candidates and we religious having been drawn from this same American pattern of life will undoubtedly reflect, with notable exceptions, this lack of taste and value for the fine arts, and its incumbent sympathy for the creative artist. But hardly a chapter has gone by since I have been around, either General or Provincial, that has not had propositions submitted, and often approved, which make precise the need and the method for amplifying the cultural life of the members.

Arts will probably continue to suffer. They are not lucrative and they demand efforts and sacrifices, neither of which items are popular, in the nomenclature of certain schools of commentators on religious observance. And creatively-inclined religious attempting with all their strength to conform to the community's existing needs have bridled their abilities, an act so continuous that is heroic and worthy of the Christian name they bear. Classroom, pulpit, laboratory, office, and workshop drain the initiative and energies of the creative religious. Back at his pallet or typewriter or studio on Saturday or holydays, he finds himself frozen in an hiatus that is all but permanent, a neighbor to creative paralysis.

The Marianist, and most probably his brother and sister religious of whatever Institute, must be a realist. He does see about *him* in his houses and residences and schools many more works of art than he formerly saw. He does know that more and more it is licit and even encouraged to enjoy the cultural assets of his city and country, that conventions and other gatherings of creative people are open to him, and that permissions, even some startling ones, are graciously given. So that I do not embarrass brethren, I will not name names. But it is widely known that some of these men have composed and executed statuary and stainglass that reflect most worthily the ancient tradition that the monasteries preserved culture and the arts throughout the barbaric invasions and ensuing civilizations. In my home province the artist is on the move. And the present speaker is probably the first religious, surely the first priest-religious, to have been granted a year of sabbatical to pursue his errant muses through the Writing Seminars of Johns Hopkins, and whose thesis was in realistic fiction. His writing of avant-garde verse was not only blessed with obedience, but was further sanctified with checks to pay his fantastically high cost of beatniking. I know that it is now inaccurate for the artist-religious in the Society of Mary to claim, as he could have in the past, that like Abel Melveny, he was a good machine that his community never used. Nor can he with a clear conscience now salve his self-pitying with a roguish cutting out of a string of paper dolls.

The dedication of an artist to his work is most commendable, the dedication of

an artist-religious is necessary. He, this man gifted to behold the vision and to find a medium of sharing it, must perfect himself and the peculiar talents God has given him. Were he to be so taken in by his immature undisciplined whims that he would thereby exempt himself from suffering in the process of perfecting this slightly more complicated personality, he would fail to win the goal of perfection in either sphere, as human being or as religious. The religious-artist has been granted a great capacity for suffering. He knows the redemptive value of it. He knows that suffering is good. He has, by his public profession of vows, declared himself to be a willing victim, a whole-burnt offering. In this oblation and all that this totality of victimship implies, he finds his greatest fulfillment. For fulfillment is achieved by donation. Not for a moment do I say that this kind of oblation is easily accomplished, but I should be the first to question how I could love my God with my whole mind and my whole heart and my whole strength were He in His delicate intimacy to deny me the privilege of sharing also His suffering.

This God of Beauty whom we serve has sent us into this world of mankind upon *His* errand to preach the beauty of God and of His world and Word — we have a mission! Reflecting this mandate His Vicar recently said: “And if I did not have your help, the ministry would become stammering and uncertain.”

If literature and the other arts, as Charles Braceln Flood indicates, is on its sickbed, then it is high time we religious got off our sanctified haunches and out of our sanctimonious cells and would come to the aid of our artist-brethren with the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. If the picture of the fine arts and lack of their being created is as dismal a heap of chaos as the gloomy commentators say it is, then it is for the religious-artist to hover over this miasmatic abyss, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and bring order and beauty back to the world of mankind and mankind’s spirit. For this act of heroicity the Incarnate Word speaks to the artist-religious as he did in the boat on the Galilean lake: Launch out into the deep. He asks for no rebellion against mores, no vindictive uncharities, but only that as sensible men, we follow His inspiration and put down our nets where the catch is to be made.

The religious-artist is thrilled that the gentle Christ has elected him to be a lyrical witness of the Gospel. This lyricism is a gift, to be shared, never to be indulged in for its own sake, or solely for the sake of the one possessing it. In giving the glow of artistry to the children of men, of whom he is definitely a member, he may find himself spurned, at times, and breathing hard as he treads the wine-press, alone. But he is anything but sad. He faces the tasks of labor with a will, as equally as he stretches out his hand to receive the nail — his vocation is that superbly real to him. This is how God wants it. Caught then in this ambivalence of being a humble child of the assembly of God, he shrinks not from rising above that anonymity to sing, to paint, to etch, to give God’s beauty to God’s children. With this free and easy heart he is eternally the contemplator of the phenomenon, for he is none the less intent upon the heaving of the net to catch, than he is absorbed in the mesh and weave of the net itself.