

November 29, 2009
Third Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I submit that the Gospel is first directed to man's native hope, that social hope attendant on his sense of being an *actor* on the stage of reality.

Let us speak of the foundation of this hope in human consciousness, and then let us speak of the Gospel:

First, the primal source of hope is man's persistent need to be a *persona dramatis*, to feel himself engaged in a story with a plot and resolution, to sense that his life pertains to a transcendent narrative, to believe himself *homo historicus* and not a mere spectator.

Certain schools of philosophy would dissuade him from entertaining this hope. They would discourage him from taking his shabby little existence seriously. Modern science, especially, adopting the unsentimental standards of objectivity and quantitative verification, hardly encourages man to think of himself as a significant *actor*.

Man, however, is not a detached disembodied intellect. He can know reality only as an actor within existence, where he is a participant.

For starts, he cannot discern reality objectively, for the simple reason that he is part of it.

And he cannot know himself objectively. The notion is self-contradictory.

Nor can man ultimately reduce even nature to a known independent object, for the plain reason that the consciousness of the knower *is* the discerning part of nature. The human being is the place where nature becomes conscious of itself.

Nor can the human knower be at all objective with respect to society, because society provides him with the interpretive language with which he reflects on it. He has no reflective cognition without that language. It is the means by which he steps into societal history as its heir and transmitter.

Above all, man cannot know God objectively, because he knows God only within the communion of God's knowing him. The objectification of the divine is arguably the essence of idolatry.

In short, man has access to reality by existing as a participatory being within it. In other words, "man is not a self-contained spectator. He is an actor, playing a

part in the drama of being and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed to play it without knowing what it is" (Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 39).

To speak of this primal human disposition---the need for a man to be an actor--as a source of hope does not mean that it favors optimism. Optimism, after all, is not necessarily related to narrative, whereas hope invariably depends on a story line.

In fact, one suspects there would not be such a thing as theatrical drama, were it not for this human need to feel oneself as "playing a part."

The verb "play" here means interpretive action, the human contribution---the particular "scene"---within a larger "act," in the theatrical sense. As the etymology of the word "theatre" indicates, something concealed is made visible on the stage.

The noun "part," in the theatrical sense, indicates a person's role within a catholic story. The actor has only his part; he is not the story. Still, if he plays that part, he is truly a "participant" in the catholicity of the narrative.

It is an important function of theatre to preserve and enhance man's sense of being an existential actor. "In this sense the theatre acts as a brake on all tidy philosophies; it maintains the existential character of existence against all attempts to relativize it; it shows that this existential character is a part of the all-embracing reality itself. How it does this, and with what result, is questionable, but at least it *holds fast to the question*. And so long as the question continues to be put, we can still hope for an answer" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 1.20-21).

Second, let us speak of the Gospel with respect to that primal hope, for the Gospel is its correct object, more akin to theatre than to the philosophies of being---and infinitely more akin than the supposed objectivity of science. The Gospel invites its hearers to become *personae dramatis*---as though "compelling" them to enter (Luke 14:23).

The Gospel beckons its hearers into communion with God, who redeems man's primal hope through the medium of redemptive and revelatory history. The Gospel inserts its hearers as active participants in that history. There Holy Scripture supplies both the foundational script and the dramatic *mis-en-scène*. Thus, informing history, the Gospel is what makes existence truly existential. This is why the early Christians called it the "way."

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