It Was Just My [Catholic] Imagination . . .

Carol A. Walters

What does a Rolling Stones concert have to do with Catholic imagination and good liturgy? Walters shares her experiences, insights and suggestions for making Catholic liturgy a profoundly engaging experience that enlivens religious imagination and solidifies community.

There are some days I will never forget. I remember where I was when I heard that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. I remember the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I remember the telephone call I received to inform me that a Polish cardinal had been elected pope. I remember 9/11. There is another day, though, that I will not forget—February 6, 2003—the day I participated in a liturgical event with the Rolling Stones. Liturgy and the Rolling Stones? Really? To paraphrase a song by the Temptations, “It was just my [Catholic] imagination, running away with me. . . .”

What Is Imagination?

William Blake once said, “Imagination is evidence of the divine.” What, then, is imagination? We can define imagination in several ways—as “the productive process of art” (Tracy, 128) or “the power of the mind” to form vivid and

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realistic images that are present to the senses (Bruteau 44, 48). Regardless of how we define it, imagination plays a critical role in our lives. For through our imagination, we can construct a whole world—a world that does not distinguish between sacred and secular images (Greeley 1988, 27).

Culture and Religion

Culture and religion originate in the imagination. Both are about experiences—both deal with symbolic expressions of the meaning and value of life; both provide a worldview (Greeley 1988, 9, 19, 27; Tracy, 11). Every culture has its “classics”—those people, symbols, events, and works of art with a “recognizably public meaning.” The “classics” are timeless—they have a meaning within their own historical context and challenge each succeeding generation to reinterpret them in light of the current situation (Tracy, 7, 102, 134). For Catholics, the “classic” is the life event of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Catholics are thus challenged to look for “signs of the times” (Tracy, 310) in which the life event of Jesus is revealed in the modern world. These “signs” are not limited to experiences that take place in church or a church-related setting. Our “secular” world also serves as a “locus for Christian self-understanding” and is a theological reality (Tracy, 23, 49, 58, 310).

The Development of Catholic Imagination

At the beginning of the Common Era, three types of religious imagination existed: Paganism (good and evil spirits inhabit objects; human work is a continuation of the spirits' work of creation), Transcendental Religion (God, the ultimate power, exists apart from physical matter; the body is evil) and Prophetic Judaism. In the tradition of Prophetic Judaism, the transcendent God entered into a loving relationship with each person. This relationship made spirit and flesh holy. Jesus of Nazareth was born into this tradition (Greeley 1988, 33, 44, 46). New Testament writings contain the experiences of the earliest Christian communities with the person of Jesus. Written in literary genres common to that historical period, those writings employed ritual, symbol and imagination to disclose the person Jesus as the Christ to people of that age (Tracy, 249; Greeley 1988, 46). Because of the limits of the human condition, these religious expressions could partially state the reality of God and could do so only through metaphor and analogy—relating the religious dimension of an experience to everyday occurrence (Greeley 1988, 93; Tracy, 160).

Early Catholics adapted pagan and Jewish worship practices as their own—with a new “Christian” meaning. Fertility symbols, such as the evergreen tree, came to
represent “the cross on which hung the light of the world”; the Passover festival became a celebration of the ultimate victory of life over death, the resurrection of Jesus (Greeley 1988, 14, 43–44, 54).

Medieval Christians attempted to build “the perfect human commonwealth, in which Church and State lived in harmonious marriage” (Haughton, 61). It was their intent to “make every aspect of human experience an expression of Christ’s kingdom” (Haughton, 61). To this end, the myths of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table represented Catholic spiritual development. Church members were dedicated to the common good and supported each other, but failed in their attempt to shape a society that more closely resembled the perfection of the City of God. Their failure was not a cause for despair, though; it simple meant they needed to try again (Haughton, 115–16).

And so, a new type of religious imagination—Catholic imagination—had taken shape. Catholic imagination was characterized by (1) a transcendent God, present in creation, who took human form and lived a human life (Jesus Christ); (2) the holiness or sacramental character of creation; (3) the “extraordinariness” of the ordinary; and (4) the use of analogy and metaphor to express the religious dimension of an experience (Tracy, 312–13, 408–16; Greeley, 8–9).

**Manifestation**

Catholics today are also faced with the challenge of reinterpreting the tradition in light of contemporary society and culture (Tracy, 58). Since Catholics believe the event and person of Jesus Christ “serves as the classic Christian focus for understanding God, self, others, society, history, nature . . .” it is possible to encounter God in the ordinary experiences of life (Tracy, 233).

How, then, do we experience the religious dimension of such simple activities as shopping for groceries, walking the dog, working, attending a sporting event, or listening to music? Typically, the religious dimension of such experiences takes the form of manifestation. In his seminal work *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy acknowledges that manifestation is certainly not planned—it “happens” (Tracy, 101). And when it happens, Tracy describes this overwhelmingly powerful, transforming, and graced experience as:

I am “caught up” in the [experience]. I am in the presence of a truth of recognition: recognition of what is important, essential, real beyond distractions, diversions, conventional opinions, idle talk, control, and use of objects, techniques of distancing myself and manipulating others. . . . (Tracy, 112)

In such an experience, “[t]he secular has been disclosed as religiously significant” (Tracy, 118, 371).
**Characteristics of Liturgy**

For Catholic Christians, liturgy defines who we are as a people—it is worship that is faithful to our religious tradition and “adapted to the culture” of the people assembled to meet their spiritual needs (Ostdiek, 40, 45). Liturgy, thus, expresses and enlivens the values of the community (O’Connell, 159). And as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states: “In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else” (no. 14). The participation of the assembly (including priest) “engages the mind and spirit” by blending the stimulation of the senses and allowing the assembly to express, as a corporate body, the beliefs and feelings that are central to their lives (O’Connell, 134; Ostdiek, 38, 83). This engagement allows one to “give in” to the liturgy and enter God’s time—*kairos* (Schilson, 65; Ostdiek, 95–96). When we enter God’s time, we feel “a sense of timelessness. We are caught up in the flow. And when such a celebration ends, we do not want to leave. . . . We have to give up centering our own time and allow it to be centered on another, with others (Ostdiek, 98).

Further, participation in liturgy includes the interaction of three components: word, gesture, and music (O’Connell, 155). This interaction marks the rhythm, balance and movement between the parts, so that the assembly experiences moments of intensity and relaxation and a buildup to properly chosen peaks (Ostdiek, 40).

Of these interacting components, it is music that instigates “the highest form of communication . . . worship” (Thielemann, 8). Why? Because music, just like Catholic imagination, “is a language of metaphors” that

> has its own meaning which we then associate with personal memories, inner states and images evoked by our other life experiences. The musical expression serves as a metaphor for our experiences, setting its meaning alongside theirs in free, creative association. (Ostdiek, 169)

And, when these interacting components “are in balance and . . . provid[e] their contribution, the result is that dynamic, Trinitarian phenomenon that is genuine, authentic, transformative, and inspiring liturgy. When they are not, the result is the mess we do often endure” (O’Connell, 155).

**The Role of Art**

Art also originates in the imagination—it provides a vehicle to participate in and interpret the symbols (and “classics”) of a culture (Tracy, 11). Tracy has noted that artists serve as “antennae of the race.” They *are* antennae to new visions
of human possibility, new values and forms of personal and communal life, new fuller theories of the good (Tracy, 12).

With its rich tradition of sacrament and symbol, Catholicism has embraced the arts as “essential because the arts make sacraments. The arts reveal to us the presence of God lurking in His/Her creation” (Greeley 1988, 297). Since “art and music teach about God,” our shared cultural experience expressed in art becomes a theological locus for Christian self-understanding (Greeley 2000, 169; Tracy, 49).

Art, in all its forms, then, becomes religious communication since

the artist attempts to activate in the imaginative memory of the consumer experiences that parallel the artist’s own so that the consumer can say (implicitly in ordinary circumstances), “Oh, I know what that’s about. Something like that once happened to me.” (Greeley 1988, 27)

Artistic communication is evidenced in four ways: through the artist who created the work; the work itself; the world the work creates or reveals; and the audience the work affects (Tracy, 49).

**The Concert Experience**

In late December 2002, the Rolling Stones announced they would perform a concert to “turn up the heat” against global warming. The concert would take place on February 6, 2003, at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. Tickets to the performance were free and would be distributed by on-line raffle. I submitted a raffle entry and was later notified that I was selected to receive two tickets to the concert. The notification provided explicit instructions detailing how and when I could pick up the tickets. I called my sister, and she agreed to accompany me to the concert. We made arrangements to travel to Los Angeles on February 5, the day before the concert.

When we arrived in Los Angeles, we went directly to the Staples Center to retrieve our tickets. Security guards directed us to a ticket window, and we were asked to provide identification and a copy of the “winning” e-mail. The ticket attendant fastened a green and white wristband on each of us and gave us our tickets.

Now, my sister and I were able to take advantage of some free time to travel around Los Angeles. As we walked through the streets, we noticed others wearing the green and white wristbands. While we didn’t know these people, we realized that we would share a common identity with them—we would share the concert experience.

After a little more sightseeing, it was time for the concert. My sister and I had never attended a Stones concert, and we went to the concert with no preconceived notions of what the experience would be like. We just wanted to be there.
On entering the Staples Center, we were overwhelmed with sensory stimuli—there were souvenir stands, people speaking a multitude of languages, the smell of a variety of foods, cigarettes, and incense. We walked around for a bit, then went to our seats.

When seated, we observed two stage areas—the main stage area and a smaller stage in the center of the arena. The stages were connected by a narrow walkway. Slowly, others arrived for the concert. As more people arrived, the atmosphere became electrifying. It seemed like an eternity until the house lights dimmed to signal the beginning of the concert.

President Bill Clinton was introduced and spoke briefly about the importance of ecological conservation. Then, he introduced the “World’s Greatest Rock and Roll Band.” We heard the opening bars of “Start Me Up.” The audience stood as one—and roared. There were large screens on the main stage that projected giant images of the band as they performed. It didn’t matter if you sat in the far reaches of the Staples Center. You felt as if you were on stage with the band.

The audience remained standing, while singing and dancing at their seats. One song ended, and another quickly began. The energy in the air did not permit you to sit—this was just the beginning of a wild and fast-paced ride.

After several songs, the band slowed the pace. Everyone in the audience sat and caught their breath. The music continued song after song, hit after hit. Audience members rose to dance and sing—no cues were needed—everyone knew what to do.

Then, the music stopped and band members processed down the walkway to the small stage. Once there, the music started again. Members of the audience responded with a renewed vigor, cheering even louder. After several songs, the band returned to the main stage—red confetti shot into the air; everyone was on their feet, singing “Brown Sugar” with the band. The music stopped. The house lights went on. The concert was over.

No one wanted to leave, but when the band didn’t return to the stage, we knew it was time to go. The audience didn’t leave quietly—everyone buzzed about the experience. When my sister and I were outside the Staples Center, I looked at my watch—the concert had lasted three and one half hours. But, the whole experience seemed like just an instant, as if time stood still while we listened to the music.

My sister and I returned home. I continued to replay the concert in my mind. I couldn’t stop talking about the experience: the endless energy, the rise and ebb of intensity, the timeless quality, the rituals, the sensory stimuli, and the music. Then I realized what I had experienced—the concert was a liturgical event!
The Concert Experience for the Band

The Rolling Stones have performed in concert for more than forty years. During that time, they have sung their hit songs, written by band members Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, thousands of times. Yet, in spite of that repetition, it is apparent that the band members have a passion for music and a passion for performing. How do they view the art of songwriting? Do they feel the thrill of the audience at a concert and what is that experience like for them?

Keith Richards describes songwriting in this manner: “I am convinced that—being an artist—you pick up things for which you have acquired a sensitivity. You develop a sense for it, you grow antenna. The songs are already zooming through the room and I receive and transmit” (Bockris, 407).

Mick Jagger acknowledges that the band is aware of the all-consuming feeling that encompasses the audience during the concert experience. He believes the band “is the catalyst for this event in which people have come to one place and have been concentrating together to create some kind of feeling. It’s the same feeling you get from going to a revival meeting, for example, the feeling that you’re all there and you’re sharing” (Ehrlich, 61).

Keith Richards has added that the audience wants to “get lost in the music.” He agrees that the band plays a role in the audience attaining that feeling and describes it: “. . . I know what’s happening out there, that they want to lose themselves and to become one single entity like an amoeba. All you [the band] have to do is to be the glue” (Loewenstein, 325).

Richards has also discussed the reason the band still performs:

. . . I guess we're obsessed with showing that we can still make a better record than we've ever made, and go out and perform it as well as we ever did. Whether or not we really do doesn't matter. It's just going for it and thinking the possibility is there and we're still looking for the ultimate Rolling Stones. We're never going to find it, but it's like the Holy Grail. It's the quest that's important, not finding it. (Bockris, 381)

Pastoral Applications

Andrew Greeley wrote: “Liturgy ought to seek out the experiences of grace to be found in the secular world among those to whom it ministers” (Greeley 1988, 76). Further, Greeley notes that when one has experienced the “sacred” in the secular world, that experience must be correlated to the religious tradition and “re-present[ed] through liturgy” (Greeley 1988, 75).

How can the “graced moments” of the concert experience be “re-presented through liturgy”? I offer several suggestions.
1. Minimize Distractions

Beatrice Bruteau compared the spiritual life to an artistic performance and concluded:

The likeness lies in this quality of integral activity, the relaxed, natural, unified, vigorous, or ardent—full-powered—act. If the . . . artist is too tight or too self-conscious or too distracted . . . the performance will be impeded. . . . The extraneous tensions have to be relaxed, abandoned, renounced, forsaken, so that “everything we’ve got” can be directed to the one vital value. (Bruteau, 44)

While on a concert tour, a band plays one performance per day—to allow band members to give “everything they’ve got” to that one performance. For Catholics, the “one vital value” toward which we direct attention is worship. And, minimizing distractions applies to both presider and assembly members. For the presider, minimizing distractions can simply mean changing Mass times to allow a greater amount of time between liturgies. What does this do? Simply stated, it is a human tendency to lose enthusiasm for acts that are repeated within a short amount of time. Priests are no exception to this rule. A longer period of time between liturgies allows a presider to relax and restore his enthusiasm in order to give “everything he’s got” to the vital value of worship. In addition, this extended time between services eliminates a common cause for concern—whether a liturgy is concluding in sufficient time to allow members of the assembly to exit the parking lot before worshipers arrive for the next service. For members of the assembly, don’t “squeeze” Mass attendance between other activities. Allow some time to focus on worship.

2. Acts of Engagement

Edward Foley has described music and the concert experience as “acts of engagement” because

They are not only active events in and of themselves, but dynamic to the extent that they engage the other and captivate the listener. . . . Sound encounters are . . . personal encounters. . . . [S]uch acoustic activity is translated by the human imagination as evidence of animation, of life, and particularly of human presence. (Foley, 126–27)

Similarly, liturgy is an “act of engagement” that “speak[s] to us as one total language” blending visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory stimuli (Ostdiek, 59, 83). Sprinkling rites, the use of incense, processions involving the assembly, and church decorations are all ways in which to foster “full, active, conscious participation” of the assembly. Further, video screens can be used to project photographs or slide shows to allow members of the assembly to visualize images from readings, thus stimulating their imagination.
3. It’s in the Music

Gilbert Ostdiek noted “there is hardly a time or situation in life in which we do not put our words into music” (Ostdiek, 167). Music tells the story of life’s good times and bad times; it reaffirms who we are (Ostdiek, 168). Music is capable of “rais[ing] the mind and heart to God like little else. . . .” (O’Connell, 159). Further, liturgical music has been recognized as the “glue” that “supports the rite and . . . enable[s] the participation of the assembly” (McMahon, 34). Still, in many cases, “church music” doesn’t unify the liturgy; it fractures the liturgy. Could popular music “raise the mind and heart to God”? Yes. As Andrew Greeley opined, there must be a “spirituality of the secular” that “helps men and women recognize the sacred . . . in the wonders and graces and the renewals of hope in secular life” (Greeley 1988, 87). Popular music can serve as a vehicle for this spirituality.

Song titles, lyrics, and imagery can be correlated to our religious tradition. Examples include:

- Prince’s “I Would Die 4 You,” correlating to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for humanity;
- James Taylor’s “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You),” expressing gratitude for God’s love for all creation;
- Peter Gabriel’s “Solsbury Hill,” in which an eagle says “I’ve come to take you home,” as the voice of God at the moment of death;
- Celine Dion’s “Because You Loved Me,” expressing thanksgiving to God for life and everything experienced in it;
- George Harrison’s “Give Me Love (Give Me Peace on Earth),” offering a mantra of petitions to God as in a prayer of the faithful; or the Rolling Stones’ “Salt of the Earth,” celebrating the common humanity while challenging those who lead.

Certainly these songs, as well as many others, are available to stimulate the imagination when incorporated into homilies or used for meditation during a variety of settings for prayer.

Invitation to Deeper Relationship

Thomas H. Morris concluded that all human experience is an “invitation to a new relationship with the Holy” because “there are not two types of experiences: secular and religious. Rather, there is the religious dimension of human experience” (Morris, 25). Elements of pop culture, including rock concerts, then, are vehicles for a personal encounter with God. Catholic imagination allows an individual to look beyond the secular trinity of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll”; to
look beyond the image of a singer performing in lingerie; to look beyond vulgar song lyrics; and even to look beyond album covers with full-functioning zippers to recognize God’s invitation to a deeper relationship with Godself. And, in the words of the Rolling Stones, our response to God’s musical invitation will take us to “places [we’ve] never seen” (“Start Me Up,” 1980) and will “satisfy [our] every need” (“Let’s Spend the Night Together,” 1967).

Postscript

Following the February 2003 concert, I have attended four other Rolling Stones concerts—three of the concerts were in Chicago (two at an outdoor venue) and one was in Rome, Italy! Each concert has provided me with different and powerful religious insights. I am compelled to share two stories. Many Catholics laugh that when you enter a church for Mass, you can always find a seat “up front.” No one wants to sit in the front pew. At a 2006 concert, I was privileged to have tickets in the second row. Even though there were fifty thousand people in the stadium, there was a surreal intimacy present in the atmosphere—it was as if the band performed only for me. I was close enough to the stage to make eye contact with band members and even to share a few laughs. What an experience! The following Sunday, I reflected on that experience when I noticed the empty front pews at Mass. Perhaps sitting in those pews could provide the same intimacy when one spoke to God.

Then, there was Rome. Who would have imagined that the Rolling Stones would perform at the Olympic Stadium when I just happened to be in town for a seminar! Naturally, I got tickets. I don’t speak Italian; many of the people who sat around me spoke only broken English. But an amazing thing happened when the band played “Satisfaction”—everyone in the stadium sang the song in very clear and understandable English! The music had transcended language and cultural barriers. Isn’t that what Jesus did in his lifetime and continues to do today through us?

References


