That They Might Have Hope:

The Crying Need for Catholic Imagination

You know, the more I reflect on it, the more unlikely I realize it is that I should be up here speaking to you, and even more that I should be the one in the black suit. You see, I grew up in the 60s and early 70s. I would say that up until 5th Grade, I lived a pretty conventional Catholic school kid life—the nuns all knew me by name—Mr. Van Dyke—and Sister Ethelrita, who was several thousand years old, had me memorizing the Baltimore Catechism to the beat of the band—I still use it, even though I lost my copy several decades ago—all on the back of my eyelid, as they say. But then came 5th Grade, and Catholic schools discovered *collages* as a means of teaching catechism. I have to admit, I didn’t love memorizing the Catechism, and I did love paper and pencils and crayons and scissors and paste, but I pretty quickly realized that the art of collage-making was of somewhat limited utility, and to think that I was learning anything...well… But then I discovered something: you could treat it all as a wonderful game! So I developed a fool-proof method for getting an A on a collage. You just needed five magazine covers: Time, Life, Look, People, and Us. And you just put the mastheads up across the top of your big sheet of butcher paper in an arc:

*Time...Life...Look...People...Us.*

Bingo! An Ace!

Then I began to push the envelope a little: I began to wonder what else you could put on the page and still get an A. And I found that it really didn’t matter as long as you had those magic words:

*Time...Life...Look...People...Us.*

I believe that on one such work of art I even included some statuesque women and attractive pictures from liquor ads—I was in 7th Grade! But those words worked their magic. I even went further once: I put the words across the bottom of my collage:

*Time...Life...Look...People...Us.*
Fortunately I happened to paste in a couple of pictures where the predominant color was yellow, and my teacher thought it was a very happy collage; apparently he thought that I was trying to create an impressionistic smiley face, which were very big in the day. And that was my freshman religion teacher.

So I guess what I’m telling you is that I really don’t remember much of my Catholic school religion classes from 5th Grade through sophomore year. But in my junior year I finally had a teacher who was as interesting as my English and science and music and math and history teachers. He was also incredibly cool. I actually remember two of his classes.

In the first of those two memorable sessions, Mr. Nunes talked about his first serious date with the woman he was destined to marry. He called her a week ahead of time. He made a reservation at a real restaurant. He got a haircut. He planned topics to talk about that evening. He worked on his wardrobe, even checking to see that everything was clean. He polished his shoes. And then…he came down with a cold. Happily, however, he did manage to get some medicine, and it did help. He was only half congested, he explained to us, which was much better than being completely congested. And the big evening came. He picked her up at her folk’s house—the girl he was destined to marry—and they drove to the restaurant. She was very impressed. The food was wonderful, and the service. Why he’d even made a reservation. And the conversation sparkled. Finally, at the end of the meal after dessert, as they were sipping their coffee, he leaned back and lit a cigarette—remember, we all still smoked in the 70s. He inhaled deeply, meditatively, as though he were Henry Fonda in a serious moment, and then slowly exhaled through his nose. And the girl he was destined to marry, the light of his life, leaned forward in complete fascination. “How did you do that?” she asked. Do what? “Why you just blew the smoke out of just one nostril! How did you do that? What a cool trick! Teach me!” she said, reaching for his pack of Marlboros. Well…he was only half congested.

Now I don’t rightly remember what the lesson behind the story was. It might have been to illustrate why we shouldn’t smoke. Or maybe to remind us that you’re never half as cool as you think you are, especially when you have a cold. Or maybe Mr. Nunes just needed some filler that day. But I do remember it.
The other class I actually remember even better. It started very quietly...he asked us to be quiet, and we were. He explained that he was going to ask us a question, and he wanted us to close our eyes and think about it for several minutes. And then we would discuss our response. The question: Is the world a fundamentally good place, or fundamentally evil? ... Is the world a fundamentally good place, or fundamentally evil? After a few minutes we did begin our discussion, even our argument. At the end of the class he summed it up: How you answer that question is going to determine everything. It’s going to make all the difference in the world. It’s going to determine how you live your life.

I’ve never, ever forgotten that.

And that brings me to my topic: the crying need for Catholic imagination. Because I think it’s something we’ve forgotten, something that has been pushed out of our classrooms not so much by government edict as by our own forgetfulness, by our own lack of imagination, by our own emphasis on efficiency at the expense of efficacy, by the fact that—and here I mean no offence to any accountants in the room—we have all become in our souls bean counters—keeping count, keeping track, reducing everything to numbers, to SWOT analysis, to cost/benefit. We look for scores and outcomes. In the meantime, our faith—our personal faith has become private and privatized, something we hold on to for a distant heaven, having little to do with how we view the world itself. Here I am not saying that we do not do good things—we do, and this group emphatically does. Rather I mean that it is how we tend to view the world, and how we view people.

To illustrate what I mean, you may have noticed that our nation, our public discourse, our social media, our larger media, and even our relationships with friends and family and at work have become increasingly polarized and vitriolic. The lens through which our culture seems to read everything is that of suspicion; everyone has a motive, everyone wants something, everyone is hiding something. Sometimes it’s benign, but often it is not. Our politicians, our business people, our clergy, our relatives….they all want something. The world itself…that’s beautiful—the mountains and seas, the rivers and lakes, the seasons, the flowers, the sunshine and the ponies. Lovely. But people? Maybe my people—my friends, my loved ones…are okay, but people?
In Shakespeare’s final play and one of my favorites, *The Tempest*, he places in the mouth of one of his most beautiful characters one of his most marvelous lines: *O brave new world, that hath such people in it!* (*The Tempest* V.i.217b-218) It is meant to be a cry of simple wonder and amazement—calling us to see the truth about ourselves and each other—but we more frequently read it as ironic commentary, or worse still see that same world through the dystopian view of Huxley’s novel, the title of which is derived from the line.

And this is our tragedy: that we have lost the simple awe and wonder of Miranda. Some claim that Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic—I can’t say, and I doubt the claim will ever be proven—but of all his beautiful poetry, this is a most Catholic sentiment. *O brave new world, that hath such people in it!*

Now truth be told, there are good reasons—even compelling reasons—to be skeptical, if not cynical. We do not have to look far back into history to find the horrors of slavery, the ravages of colonialism, the sin of the Holocaust, the maleficence of Nazism and Fascism, the mass murders of Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot. Nor do we have read too far past the headlines to find the corruption of leaders in our government, our businesses, our church, our community organizations. We do not need to wander far down our highways to see the trash alongside them, or washed up on our beaches, or cluttering our gutters. And I do not need to dig too deep into my own soul to get past my common sins and vices to mine a mother lode of pride, wrath, envy, lust, greed, gluttony, and sloth. So I do not want to sell you any Pollyannaish idyll about a golden age of Catholic imagination. Nor would I advocate a return to a gauzy vision of growing up Catholic in the 1930s, or the 1940s, or the 1950s. We must understand that those eras, for all their virtues, also gave rise to the ills we now confront in our government, our church, our business world, our environment, our souls.

But I do propose that there is something we do need to recover, something that really has been lost, something we need desperately and which our world desperately needs as well. And that thing is precisely the awe and reverence and wonder that our faith proposes, that our faith uniquely proposes.

You see, it takes nothing to see the realities of our world—the hardship, the sin, the negligence, the corruption. It takes nothing to add up the medical bills that sickness brings. It takes nothing to feel
the heartbreak of parents who learn that their baby will be born less-than-perfect and will live a life that will never include the things we hope for our children. It takes nothing to understand how poverty destroys families, leading kids, and adults too, into all sorts of desperate straits, wasting lives and love. It takes nothing to read about the criminal and to ache at the damage he has done to his victims. It takes nothing to see how I have failed and how far I am from the people who love me and from God. But it takes enormous imagination, enormous creativity, enormous hope to see that these are each moments of incredible grace, that the realization of sin is an opportunity for reconciliation, that the moments of pain can give rise to compassion, that the less-than-perfect child is an invitation to incredible love, that the worst place we can find ourselves opens the possibility of finding God there.

You know, on my first day as an assistant chaplain up at Roswell Park, the great cancer research hospital up in Buffalo, I met a patient named Linda. Linda was an absolutely crazy fundamentalist Christian. I remember introducing myself to her that first day, which was her first day in the hospital too: Hi, I’m Fr. Jim Van Dyke from the chaplain’s office and I just wanted to say hello and see if there was anything we could do for you. She squinted at me suspiciously and quoted the Good Book, King James Version: “Call ye no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven (Mt 23:9). Surely you’ve heard that.” Sure I have, I answered. “Can I call you Jim?” she asked. Absolutely, I replied. “Then get in here, and let’s pray,” she said. We became fast friends. I never missed stopping to see her.

Well, just before she passed and shortly before my last day at Roswell, I stopped in to see her. “Jim,” she said, “I have something to tell you.” What’s that, Linda? “Jim, this cancer is the best gift God has ever given me.” Okay, I thought. How’s that? “Jim, when I got this cancer, I realized I had to put myself in God’s hands.” I nodded, knowing I had heard something really profound, one of those deep, deep insights that occasionally, just occasionally we are privileged to share. But she interrupted my musings abruptly: “No, that’s not it, Jim; there’s more. You see, only once I put myself in God’s hands, did I understand that I had been there from the beginning.”
“Only once I put myself in God’s hands, did I understand that I had been there from the
beginning.” I’ve never forgotten that one either. Linda, like Mozart’s music in Salieri’s ear, was the
voice of God for me.

So what is this Catholic imagination I’m talking about? As I was thinking about it, I realized that
it has something to do with what St. Ignatius calls consolation in the Spiritual Exercises. Consolation, he
says, is that which moves us closer to faith, to hope, to charity. It moves us toward God and His will.
And obviously desolation is the opposite—that which moves us away from faith, hope, and charity. It
moves us away from God and His will.

A friend of mine summed that up a little differently, but accurately, I think: When we are
consoled, we see the world and all its possibilities through God’s eyes, through His love. But when we
are desolate, we forget those, and we only see the hard and cold facts before us. The devil, “the enemy of
our human nature,” as Ignatius calls him, will tell us true things, but he tells them without love, without
the final truth of God’s love. Because he does not want us to see that “all things are indeed possible with
God,” as the angel told Our Lady just a few weeks ago in the Advent Gospels. That “all things are
possible in God” is the core of the Catholic imagination. Living with that changes everything. It
determines how we live our lives.

And that brings me to my real point after all the stories and the musings, namely that we need to
build this hope, this consolation, this imagination in our world again. And we need to build it in our
children because if we do not they will live in a world where lives, a la Thomas Hobbes, that most terrible
of truth-tellers, will be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, Ch. XIII).
They will live in a world with all our present vitriol without the benefit of pleasant memories of a simpler
time. Sadly, we already see it in the hook-up culture, the on-line bullying, the Neo-Nazism, the epidemic
of youth suicide, the opioid crisis, the retreat into virtual reality.

But how do we build a sense of hope, how do we sow the seeds of imagination, how do we
inspire our kids to God’s own wonder and reverence and awe of creation that led Him to exclaim on an
evening so very long ago, “It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good!”? How do we do that? How
do we explain to them the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist when reality is seen as a dark and malevolent place?

You know, I began by telling you about how little I learned in religion class as a kid, but what I did not mention was how much I learned about God in all my other classes. I can to this day take you to the spot in a little classroom in Nativity of Our Lord Grammar School where I suddenly realized as a first grader, that I could read. There were words on the board—Sr. Eileen Rose had written them up there. And I could sound them out, all of them save one. And I looked at it and suddenly I knew what it was—the word *you*. And I knew, and I knew that I knew, and I knew that something amazing had just happened.

And I can take you to 1B9 at Canisius High School and point to the square in the parquet floor where my feet were resting during a music class with Mr. Scinta when something he said prompted in me the sudden realization that it was all connected—music and math and history and art and architecture and physics and poetry and geology and grammar. And I could go to another classroom at Canisius where I learned that *Might does not make Right* as I found myself unwillingly seduced into the story of the Wart in T.H. White’s retelling of the Arthurian legend in *The Once and Future King*. Or to the Library where I struggled to memorize—memorization: what a waste of time!—Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 for Fr. P.S. Naumann, the poem that still teaches me by heart how to love, what love is, as I see friends and loved ones fade away like the autumn leaves, the twilight and the last embers of a dying fire. Or to the moment when I realized in chemistry class that those little lines that connected the hydrogen to the two oxygens to make water, those little lines that represented electronic attraction, were precisely what was holding me together, were precisely what was holding everything together. Or to the chair I was lounging in as I parsed the *Spiritual Exercises* for a paper I was writing and suddenly finding myself in prayer and realizing for the first time my own incredible need for God.

And how did this happen for me? It was not by my own efforts, I assure you—remember that I mentioned earlier my passing familiarity with sloth. But it was through the imagination of those who came before me—of my folks who were pretty sure I’d find a job someday but were very worried about
what sort of person I’d become; the imagination of a country pastor who years before had decided to build
the school where I would learn to read; the imagination of those German Jesuits, exiled far from home by
Bismark’s *Kulturkampf*, who thought that kids in post-Civil War Buffalo should learn Latin and Greek;
the imagination of a St. Ignatius who, after he had firmly decided not to go into the education business for
all the right reasons, prayed and sent Peter Canisius to Messina to begin the Jesuit educational enterprise.
We need that imagination. Not because our kids need great SAT scores or good college prospects or
career prospects or a sense of discipline or time management—even if those are all important—but
because they need the imagination to see beyond the awful truths of our world and see all the possibilities,
all the hope, that our loving God sees in it—that our loving God sees in us. Because they will need the
sense of awe and reverence and wonder that makes life worth living, and people so worth loving, and
families worth raising, and marriages worth honoring, and priesthood worth celebrating, and that brings
an open heart “to know God, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for
ever” (*Baltimore Catechism* #3, Q. 150).

The John Carroll Society honors a man of that imagination. A man who in an anti-Catholic world
dared to dream of a Catholic Church—of a Catholic imagination—in America. But he did not just dream;
he committed himself to building it, laying the groundwork for parishes and orphanages and hospitals,
creating a system of ecclesiastical governance in a land far, far from Rome, befriending people who
wanted nothing to do with “popish superstition” such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson and the
prim Episcopal educators at my alma mater in Annapolis, and finally founding an academy in the virtual
wilderness to begin the Catholic education of youth in this city, and then up and down the East Coast, and
now across the globe. And inspiring others—Elizabeth Seton, Dagger John Hughes, Katherine Drexel,
and the country pastor who founded my school, to name but a few—to do the same. We need that
imagination.

We need it because it is finally God’s imagination—God, who saw the sad twilight of that first
seventh day but promised the dawn, God who sees all the terrible truths and yet loves, God who when
nailed to a cross prayed “Father, forgive them” (Lk 23:34), God who sees all the death but creates the resurrection that we might have hope, that our children might have hope.

They say that faith can move mountains, and I believe that. But you know, you and I—all of us gathered here—with some good John Deere equipment, we could move mountains, too. That’s the story of the Panama Canal. But to move a mind—to really move a mind, not just fill it with stuff—to move a heart, to set an imagination on fire with love—that’s God’s work. I know: that’s my story. That’s God’s work.

And he invites—he begs—each of us to join Him in it.

AMDG