

POETRY AS PRAYER,
IMAGINATION THE SPARK
TO WORSHIP AND SERVICE:
ORDWAY'S REVIEW OF GERARD MANLEY
HOPKINS IN WORD ON FIRE'S *IGNATIAN*
COLLECTION

Seth Myers on Contemplation,
Poetry, and Missionizing

*"The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil"*¹

- Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*

Holly Ordway shows her commitment to the craft of imagination as a tool for one's devotion to God in her contribution to the Word on Fire Classics 2020 *Ignatian Collection*. Ordway reviews the work of poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1899), whose poems, though not published until nearly

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" in *Ignatian Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Press, 2020), 163.

twenty years after his death, established him as one of the premier poets of the Victorian era. Hopkins's poems not only celebrate God's glory imbued throughout creation, but also explore human "suffering and darkness . . . [which] made his voice more significant to the generation that had endured the First World War."² Ordway provides insightful guidance and commentary on over thirty of Hopkins' poems. Well-known works such as *God's Grandeur*, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, *Carrion Comfort*, and *Pied Beauty*, are supplemented by such poems as *The Windhover*, *Spring and Fall*, and *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (thirty-five stanzas on the five Franciscan nuns who drowned in 1875). Inasmuch as Hopkins was a talented poet turned Jesuit priest and struggled for a time between the two callings, his poetry illustrates the point of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit order, in their contemplation of Christ's calling as a model for our own.

The *Ignatian Collection* provides a threefold perspective on discerning one's spiritual calling by examining the writings of three Jesuit priests: Society of Jesus founder Ignatius of Loyola (1491 –

² Holly Ordway, "Introduction to Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins" in *Ignatian Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Press, 2020), 163.

1566); Ignatius's colleague Francis Xavier (1506 – 1552), a priest turned missionary to India, Japan, and China; and poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1899). All three were adventurers in their own way: Ignatius pursued an ambitious military career until cannonball wounds to his legs led him to devote himself instead to Christ and the church, after scoring “Firsts” in his Oxford examinations, Hopkins forsook a promising academic career for the life of a Jesuit priest and poet, and Francis Xavier applied the Ignatian disciplines as a missionary to India, Japan, and China. The collection captures the spirit of Ignatius, “restless, moving ever-onward, unsatisfied with the quality of his relationship with the Lord, always convinced that the divine love could be answered by a more expansive fidelity on his part.”³

Bishop Robert Barron likens Ignatius's *Exercises* to such landmark literature as the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas or the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, noting the distinct call of Ignatius's work to be practiced rather than merely read. The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola commence the volume, just as Ignatius and a band of friends

³ Bishop Robert Barron, “Introduction to *The Spiritual Exercises*” in *Ignatian Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2020), 3.

founded the Jesuit order in 1534, taking vows of poverty and chastity in the service of Christ. The exercises are comprised of four weeks of meditation, beginning with an examination of one's conscience, followed by a focus on the life of Christ, on the passion week of Christ, and on the resurrection of Christ. The exercises have guided Jesuits for five hundred years, and the translation given improves the clarity from previous editions.⁴

While the exercises of Ignatius help us focus our call to worship and serve God, it is in the poetry of Hopkins that we find the many clues hidden in nature of the character of this God we are to worship. Hopkins's poetry also illustrates the same spiritual struggle for which Ignatius designed his exercises to serve as a guide. Hopkins's poetic skill is elucidated by Ordway as she explains how the "sprung rhythm" of his meter and his use of the fourteen-line Petrarchan sonnet help him to explore "small, intensely focused scenes or ideas."⁵ Further Hopkins is unafraid to invent words to convey meaning, Ordway notes. For instance, in his "Spring

⁴ Translation provided by Louis J. Puhl, SJ of the Pontifical College Josephinum, Worthington, Ohio. Puhl explains that this new English translation incorporates a more idiomatic than literal translation from Ignatius's original Spanish version.

⁵ Holly Ordway, "Introduction to Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins," 164.

and Fall” poem, in the line, “Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?” the word “unleaving” portrays Autumn “as a reversal of the trees’ springtime life;” this mood is further evoked in the description of “worlds of wanwood leafmeal,” as the sadness of “wan” and fragmentation of “meal” (as in “piecemeal”) reinforce the unleaving of Autumn.⁶ Hopkins then connects this grieving of the seasons to human grief in the final couplet with, “It is the blight man was born for, / It is Margaret you mourn for.”⁷ In a few brief lines, Hopkins depicts the decay and death unleashed by sin, and the toll it takes on humanity. It is to other poems that we must now turn to see Hopkins’s depiction of God.

“The Windhover” sonnet shows how Hopkins draws on creation to illustrate the nature of it. Describing a kestrel, a small type of falcon which hovers before diving to hunt, Hopkins shows Christ as not the “domesticated, undemanding, unthreatening” Lamb of God — “Hopkins will have none of that” Ordway declares — but as a princely and even knightly bird, a “chevalier” and “daylight’s

⁶ Holly Ordway, “Introduction to Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,” 165.

⁷ *Ibid.*

dauphin” replete with a kingdom.⁸ Like Aslan, of whom Mr. Beaver declares “He’s wild, you know” and “not like a *tame* lion,” or like the “Dove descending” which “breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror,” an image of seemingly contradictory aspects of the Holy Spirit in T.S Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” so is the Christly kestrel “lovely” but also “dangerous.”⁹ ¹⁰

*“Brute beauty and valour and act,
oh, air, pride, plume*

*AND the fire that breaks from thee
then, a billion*

*Times lovelier, more dangerous, O
my chevalier!”¹¹*

Hopkins further illustrates the nature of God, in its surprising if not paradoxical range, in his well-

⁸ Holly Ordway, “Introduction to Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,” 167.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1977), 180.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” IV in *T.S. Eliot The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909 - 1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1971), 143. The imagery is suggestive of a wartime bomber, a phenomenon known all too well by Eliot’s World War II era British audience.

¹¹ Hopkins, “The Windhover” in *Ignatian Collection*, 193.

known poem “Pied Beauty.” The ode’s opening intent of declaring “Glory be to God” is attested by both the whimsical, “dappled things” and “skies of colour as a brinded cow,” and the mundane, the patchwork of “landscape plotted and pieced” and “all trades” with their “tackle and trim.”¹² Ordway concludes by explaining how the final lines, “He fathers forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise Him,” show God as “not the distant Watchmaker of deism, nor the impersonal nature-force of pantheism, nor yet the random chance at work of naturalism, but the Father, who is active in the world here and now.”¹³

The struggle of heeding the call to follow Christ is seen in six sonnets of desolation (as they are known) of Hopkins included in the collection, including such works as “Carrion Comfort,” “Patience,” and “No worst, there is none.” These poems align with the introspective part of Ignatius’s exercises, and can serve as a devotional supplement to them. Lines such as “O the mind, mind had mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap / May who ne’er hung

¹² Hopkins, “Pied Beauty” in *Ignatian Collection*, 211.

¹³ Ordway, “Introduction to Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,” in *Ignatian Collection*, 169.

there”¹⁴ voice despair but also point to Christ who suffered for us.

Ordway provides helpful notes for all the poems included, and her selections and commentary reinforce the point of the Ignatian exercises, that we should behold the glory of God and so align our life’s calling. She advises that deeper observations from many of the poems will not surface on the first, second, or even fifth readings; the “astonishing body of poetry” created by Hopkins “is a gift for all readers, who can learn much about prayer in his school of poetry.”¹⁵

The final section of the *Ignatian Collection*, collected letters from Jesuit priest turned missionary Francis Xavier, reinforces the call to service as inspired by the devotional works of Ignatius and Hopkins. Francis’s call to service, as it follows Ignatius’s contemplation of Christ’s challenge to us, and Hopkins’s poetic show of the divine in nature, is reminiscent of Dorothy Sayers’s triadic modeling of the creative work of the divine artist in *The Mind of the Maker*.¹⁶ Just as Sayers casts

¹⁴ Hopkins, “No worst, there is none” in *Ignatian Collection*, 199.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁶ Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).

God the Father as the original, inspiring *idea*, Jesus as the incarnate *energy*, and the Holy Spirit as the animating *power* of God's work in the world, the triad of Ignatius, Hopkins, and Francis exhibit an analogous movement from contemplation to incarnation to service. Ignatius's spiritual exercise leads us to contemplation of the divine source or *idea*, Hopkins's poetry incarnates the *energy* of God in the world, and the mission work of Francis shows the *power* of God's redemption at work in the world.

Francis, as much the pioneer as Ignatius, declared how futile a life of complete contemplation could be. In a letter to Ignatius, he implored for missions workers:

There is now in these parts a very large number of persons who have only one reason for not becoming Christian, and that is that there is no one to make them Christians. It often comes into my mind to go round all the Universities of Europe, and especially that of Paris, crying out everywhere like a madman, and saying to all the learned men there whose learning is so much greater than their charity, "Ah! What a multitude of souls is through your fault shut out of heaven and falling into hell!" Would to God that these men who labor so much in gaining knowledge would give as much thought to the

account they must one day give to God of the use they have made of their learning and of the talents entrusted to them!¹⁷

Despite his plea against the excess of knowledge, it was through teaching the doctrines of the Christian faith that he impacted tens of thousands of souls in India and Japan; he died while waiting to be smuggled into China. In India, Francis would first preach to the idle and the young, using songs and jingles (music, like Hopkins's poetry, an imaginative art) at times mixed with doctrines, then move onto adult audiences. Ten of Francis's letters to Ignatius are included, describing his work in India and Japan, and his plans for China. Besides reports of the work in general, Francis offers insights into methods of engaging the imagination of Indian, Japanese and Chinese minds. In India, provincial leaders could allow or discourage Christian faith, though answered prayers were often effective for the cause of faith; such incarnations of the work of God in the lives of Indians parallel Hopkins's poetic illuminations of the divine in nature. Nevertheless, just as C.S. Lewis warned that "it must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting for the

¹⁷ Francis Xavier, "Letter to the Society at Rome," Dec. 31, 1542, in *Ignatian Collection*, 313.

imagination as the organ of truth” — “reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning” — so did Francis’s engagement with Hindus involve matters of doctrinal truth.¹⁸ Even though Brahmins believed in a single God, Francis claimed that they encouraged idol worship to keep power and to exact offerings. In lieu of a Christian doctrine and story of redemption, Brahmin principles were just two: enforcing worship of cows and reverence for the Brahmins, who alone worshipped the gods (idols were in fact images of devils). Francis thus countered these with the Apostles’s Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the basic doctrines of heaven and hell. Despite many Brahmins declaring their admiration of the truth of Christian doctrines, they yet resisted conversion due to social pressure and the risk of their Brahmin livelihood; Francis spoke also of the “intensity and abundance of the joy of God” given to those at labor in His fields of harvest.¹⁹ Francis’s work shows how the imagination, by way of the arts, can serve the

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Falansferes” in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 265. Also online pseudepigraph.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CSL-Bluspels-and-Flalansferes.pdf.

¹⁹ Lewis, “Bluspels and Falansferes” in *Selected Literary Essays*, 319.

cause of the gospel, though it must be allied with doctrinal truth.

Francis's missionary work in Japan demonstrated even more strongly the need for imaginative engagement with pagan cultures. After ministry in the state of Goa in India as well as the islands of Malacca, Francis next considered the nations of Japan and China. The Japanese popular imagination, like that of India, was subject to the power and traditions of their own cultural elites, whether political or scholarly. Missionaries needed "the most remarkable strength of soul and patience" as they faced "the whole glory and reputation of a haughty people relying on its pride and its institutions;" "their boldness will expose them to a thousand sufferings when the hornets they have irritated shall fly upon them."²⁰ Francis's assessment affirms not just the call of Ignatian exercises to self-denial and taking up the cross of Christ, but also the importance of Hopkins's poetic work. Hopkins's scholarly sonnets vie with those of the native intellectual elites (the Japanese being well-known for their own nature poetry), the divine beauty that Hopkins finds rivalling the more

²⁰ Francis Xavier, "Letter to my holy Father in Jesus Christ, Ignatius at Rome," Jan. 29, 1552 in *Ignatian Collection*, 345.

naturalistic bent of Japanese aesthetics.²¹ Nevertheless, as in his ministry with Hindus, issues of doctrine were important as well. Francis called for missionaries to Japan to be philosophically adept to show the flaws in their typically Buddhist- and Shinto-leaning doctrines. Francis's letters were prescient, as he would later make headway into Japan by showing the parallels between Shinto and Christian terms of worship, though Japan would soon turn to persecution of Christians after he left. Francis died while waiting to travel to China, though since he felt that it was the source of the Japanese religions, one suspects his approach there would have been similar to that in his work in Japan.

In her discussion of the poetry of Hopkins, Ordway shows the role of the imagination to be vital in how we comprehend God. The imagination is fundamental in the exercises of Ignatius as we measure our introspections by the figure of Christ, as well as in the missionary work of Francis in engaging and enlightening the non-Christian mind.

²¹ The Eastern aesthetic emphasis on harmony in nature rather than transcendence is discussed in F.S.C. Northrop's *The Meeting of East and West* (New York: Collier, 1946). Christian artist and writer Makoto Fujimura discusses Japanese aesthetics and hints of Christian transcendence therein in *Silence and Beauty: Hidden Faith Born of Suffering* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2017), including a foreword by Philip Yancey.

Ordway's work on Hopkins is in the center of this triad of contemplation to calling, poetry as prayer, and the missionizing work of correcting misled imaginations.

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