

## *Giotto's Ratio*

*The following remarks were given at Villa Agape in Florence, Italy, on the opening evening of Image's Florence Seminar, September 14, 2008.*

IMAGE IS A JOURNAL devoted exclusively to contemporary literature and art—to the present moment—but here we are in the cradle of the Renaissance. We have not come out of mere antiquarian curiosity, but in search of parallels to our own time and the insights we can glean from them. As an organization interested in the cross-fertilization of art and faith, and the ways that these two fundamental human experiences can renew lives and communities, we believe that the Renaissance offers a model of cultural transformation that is highly relevant to the present.

Last year, the inaugural year of this program, we concentrated our attention on the classic period of the quattrocento, the emergence of the art and architecture that would later lead to the high Renaissance. The Florentine figure who stands at the summit of this period is Masaccio, and one of the high points of the seminar last year was our visit to the Brancacci Chapel, where his dramatic frescoes ground faith in a powerful, even raw, psychological realism.

This year we have opted to turn our gaze to an earlier time, a time typically considered medieval: the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries. There are several important reasons for doing so. For one thing, we kept bumping into it last year. Masaccio, we learned, was called Giotto reborn. Then there were the vital presences of the two great mendicant orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, and their magnificent churches here in Florence, Santa Croce, and Santa Maria Novella, with all the art they commissioned and still contain.

Another crucial motive for turning to the duecento and trecento is to dispel the still pervasive myth that the Renaissance constituted a secular turning away from the pious Middle Ages. For nearly fifty years now,

scholars have been systematically dismantling the thesis made popular by Burckhardt in the nineteenth century that the Renaissance was a triumph of secular individualism. These scholars now see far more continuity between the two eras than difference, including the persistence of faith.

By the same token, it is possible to observe the seeds of the Renaissance in this earlier period, hence the theme of this year's seminar: "The First Renaissance." It was a rich, tumultuous time. In the realm of philosophy, the rediscovery of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas and others stimulated an outburst of creative thought. And then there are the three figures we will focus on this week, three figures who would transform the face of Western culture: Saint Francis of Assisi, Giotto di Bondone, and Dante Alighieri. In so many ways, the world we know would be unthinkable without them.

Quite by accident, I happened to come to a renewed appreciation of the achievement of these three individuals when I dipped into *A Secular Age*, a masterful and challenging book by Charles Taylor, winner of the 2007 Templeton Prize. Taylor's book is nothing less than a systematic critique of modern secularism from the standpoint of a rigorous philosopher. His thesis is that the greatest myth attending secularism is the notion of its inevitability. He speaks of what he calls the "straight path" model of secularization, the idea that as Western culture evolved it gradually subtracted religion and transcendence from human thought until all that was left was mere nature and natural processes.

Taylor takes issue with the argument that the newfound medieval interest in the dignity and order in nature was a first step in turning away from the supernatural—as if Thomas Aquinas were unconsciously a modern secularist who just hadn't quite come to terms with it. I admit to being relieved, though, when Taylor shifted his discussion from philosophy to art. Turning to "the new realism in painting and sculpture," he examines the issue of nature in the work of artists like Giotto.

That the portrayal of the Virgin and Child shows real observation of contemporary models, that there is variety and individual portraiture in religious painting, that what is represented is no longer just some universal, normative feature of the person or being encountered, as in the awesome Christ Pantocrator on the cupola of the Byzantine churches, but the traits of live individuals begin to appear: all this is frequently taken as the emergence of an extra-religious motive, alongside the religious purpose.

Not so, Taylor holds. The new celebration of nature was understood as a deeper appreciation of the doctrine of the incarnation, of Christ as the perfect fusion of human and divine natures. And this was so not only in the rarefied atmosphere of philosophy and theology but on the very concrete level of devotional life and spiritual practice. Specifically, Taylor notes that the rise of the mendicant orders signaled a shift away from the monastery as the locus of faith. The Franciscans and Dominicans brought spirituality to the lay people in the newly thriving towns of the medieval era. "A devotion grows during these centuries," he notes, "to the human Christ, the suffering Christ, where before it had been the Christ of Judgment," the Pantocrator or Divine Emperor of those Byzantine churches.

This "new vision of nature, as we see in the rich Franciscan spirituality of the life of God in the animate and inanimate things which surround us . . . brought ordinary people into focus . . . ordinary people in their individuality." Taylor believes that this is nothing less than a turning point in the history of the West, a decisive step toward the primacy of the individual that underlies nearly all our current moral and political presuppositions.

He concludes: "And so it seems to be no coincidence that one of the first reflections of this focus in painting should have been Giotto's murals in the church at Assisi. This interest in the variety and detailed features of real contemporary people did not arise alongside and extrinsic to the religious point of the painting: it was intrinsic to the new spiritual stance to the world."

It is impossible to understand Giotto and Dante without reference to Saint Francis, who died several decades before they were active. It is as if the spirit of *il poverello*, "the little poor man," had to incubate in the culture before it could be birthed in the visions of painter and poet.

The saint from Assisi is famously known as a lover of nature, but this risks sentimentalizing him. We would be wise to heed G. K. Chesterton's take on this question. For Chesterton, a "lover of nature" is already at a remove from it, making it into a pretty picture. But this is to drain the presence of grace from nature, to take it out of context. Francis saw "everything as dramatic," Chesterton writes, "distinct from its setting, not all of a piece like a picture but in action like a play. A bird went by him like an arrow; something with a story and a purpose."

And here we encounter a paradox that many have forgotten, or prefer to ignore, about Francis and his times. As Chesterton puts it, Francis can revel in nature because he has seen it in the context of the nothingness

out of which it was created. As a mystic, Francis had entered the darkness of the cave and had a vision of the world turned upside down, not as resting on solid ground, but as something radically dependent—literally, hanging—on its creator. Until the emptiness of that cave becomes our own inner emptying, an embrace of poverty and simplicity, our relationship to the world is askew. The practice of self-denial known as asceticism is, for Francis, not a form of masochism, but the making of space within ourselves so that we can receive the world again, fresh as on the first day of creation.

The asceticism of Francis is often treated in the fashion Charles Taylor noted: as an unfortunate remnant of an earlier age that the saint did not know how to forsake. But it is essential to his vision, as it is to that of Giotto and Dante. It was Dante who reminded us that when we find ourselves in the dark wood, lost and confused, we must go down before we can go up; we must know the darkness in ourselves and the world before we can disown it and embrace the good. The trick, Dante says, is not to be captured by the darkness but to stand inside it looking out at the light, as Francis did. Moreover, you cannot look at a single painting by Giotto, however vibrant with color and the warmth of human love, and not sense the tragedy of sin in the shadows. Without that tragic sense we could not see the poignance and sweetness in his paintings.

Knowing those shadows—that *chiaroscuro*—Francis, Giotto, and Dante were able to depict the human condition in three dimensions, which is precisely what enables us to see not types, but individuals. At the same time, the saint, the artist, and the poet changed our understanding of God; without detracting from his majesty, he could no longer be seen as a radically otherworldly emperor and law-giver, but had to be experienced as brother and fellow sufferer of the world's drama. Like Dante, we are pilgrims because Christ himself walked the pilgrim road to Jerusalem, where he entered the darkness on our behalf.

But what is the relevance of all this to our own time? After all, we are not inheriting an otherworldly religiosity but centuries of secularism. It is one thing to say that the great figures of this “first Renaissance” brought us a rounded, warm humanism after generations of more abstract faith, but how does that compare to our own situation?

I believe that there is a deep pertinence to be found here. In the modern era the union of nature and grace achieved in the medieval era has been put asunder, with terrible consequences. Those who embrace nature alone find it becoming opaque and ambiguous: it becomes either something to

be manipulated and conquered or a force to be worshipped. When it comes to the environment, nature is pure and inviolable, but when nature stands in the way of our desires to reshape it, particularly with regard to our own bodies, nature is an obstacle we must overcome. In short, nature no longer has a purpose and a story.

But to those who attempt to cling to grace alone, which includes most of those who consider themselves religious, faith becomes abstract, a bolt of lightning from the ether, once again a matter of rules and regulations, more like a weapon to be wielded against the ungodly than a call to love.

And so many secularists and believers float away from the world, from flesh and blood. To compensate, they adopt their own versions of a frenetic moralism, a self-righteousness imposed on the world rather than a story discovered within it.

One of the most striking innovations that Giotto introduced into the history of Western painting was to change the ratio characterizing the depiction of the human body. Whereas in earlier generations the figure was elongated, with a ratio of head to body of 1:7, Giotto reduced it to 1:6, reflecting our actual proportions. In his magnificent crucifix in Santa Maria Novella, the corpus of Christ sags with a human weight never known before in Christian art. We need to regain the burden of our humanity, that unity of nature and grace. This week I hope we will find out exactly how Francis, Giotto, and Dante can help us do just that.