

Wonder

Volume: 2 Number: 5 Theme: **Faith and the Creative Process**

Title: **Mediocrity Revisited: The Sacred, the Secular, and the Artist's Soul**

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About ten years ago (I can't recall if it was from the suggestion of a friend, my wife, a pastor, or a review in one of the Christian art/music magazines I read at the time), I picked up and read Frank Schaeffer's book "Addicted to Mediocrity." At the time I was still on my journey to Orthodoxy (as was Mr. Schaeffer when he wrote it). I was also involved in the local and regional independent music scene in and around Indianapolis. I was writing, recording, and performing original songs as often as I could, in the spaces between family, work, and church obligations. For years I had struggled with the place of the "Christian artist." I played in Church halls and I played in bars. I never felt comfortable "leading worship" in a protestant sense, nor could I ever embrace the "party scene" often associated with playing in bars and clubs. This struggle often presented a difficulty in making any kind of career out of music, because, with a few exceptions, you pretty much had to figure out what "scene" you were going for and dive in.

Even as a fan of music I wrestled greatly and often with the place of music and art in the life of the follower of Christ. What did it mean that, for me, the stuff on Christian radio, even the music we would play and sing during "worship" didn't actually move me as deeply as, say, certain U2 or Bruce Springsteen songs? Was my faith not strong enough? Was I allowing the world to take too central of a place in my heart? Why did I hate the question: "So, do you write Christian or secular music?" so much? Was it pride? Was it my Gen-X rebelliousness rearing its ugly head again? Well, the answer to the latter two questions, I found, were, to some extent, "yes." But that was just part of the equation, part of the new perspective that began with the reading of Frank Schaeffer's book, and which continued, and, in truth, *continues* to develop, even to this day, as I grow in my journey as an Orthodox Christian.

Divided and Conquered

The premise of Schaeffer's book, for those who have not read it, is that relatively recent developments in Western Christian thought, namely some prominent and influential Protestant movements in the 19th and early 20th century, led to what Schaeffer calls a "strange, truncated, unscriptural view of spirituality..."^[i] He continues:

"First spirituality was seen as something separate from the rest of real life. It was above ordinary things; it was cut off from the everyday working out of our lives. Spirituality became something religious and had a great deal less to do with truth, daily life, and the application of Christian principles through that life. It became something in itself, both the means to an end and the end in itself. Spirituality became a thing separated from the rest of life. Thus, certain things increasingly were regarded as spiritual and other things as secular."^[iii]

The result of this "compartmentalization" was a lack of honest expression, artistically and otherwise from Christians, along with a fear of appreciating the beauty of creation, art, and free

thought lest one be snagged by “the world.” A later result would be the strange commercialization of “Christian art,” which, Schaeffer argues is mostly just sloganeering, propaganda, reasonable (or not so reasonable) facsimiles of secular art, commerce driven mediocrity. His imagery and cutting wit resonated in my searching heart. It is interesting that, at the time, I was just learning about the Orthodox Church. I soon found out that the author of this book that seemed to give voice to what I had felt for so many years also converted to Orthodoxy ten years after writing it.

You Give What You Get

As an artist who wrestled with the question of how to engage the world honestly, while striving to “keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27b),” entering the Orthodox Church was unexpectedly liberating. Explaining this to friends was difficult. How could a very traditional, liturgical, “we don’t even use instruments in worship,” church be a place of great freedom for an artist’s soul? Aren’t there restrictions on what you can do? Doesn’t the fact that “church art” is a very specific, very traditional, prescribed thing stifle creativity? How is the Orthodox Church not compartmentalizing things “sacred” and “secular” by not allowing contemporary styles of music and art into worship?

The answer, to my surprise was found *precisely* in Orthodox Church’s unflinching embrace of sacred space, which beautifully and paradoxically coexists with the understanding that the sacred space is there to bear witness to the sanctification and even renewal of all life, all creation in Christ. Perhaps there is no greater expression of this than the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy. Anaphora (Greek: ἀναφορά) means to “carry up” or “offer up.” During the prayers leading up to and immediately following the invocation of the Holy Spirit to change the offered bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, many prayers of remembrance are offered. We remember God’s love for us. We remember the fact that He is Creator. We remember the salvation He offers all of us. We remember our bishops, those who serve the Church in various and unique ways, and all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We remember the president, those placed in civil authority, and those in the armed forces. We remember the sick, the suffering, the homeless, and the forgotten. We remember those who have died. In truth, all of our daily lives, messy and heartbroken and real, are lifted up, along with all creation, as the priest lifts the gifts high in to the air, proclaiming, “Thine Own of Thine Own, We offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all!”^[iii]

Among the many profound truths revealed in the Anaphora prayer is the boundary in which the artist can operate. The boundary is precisely that all is God’s – all talent, all beauty, all art, all creation and creativity. It is all His gift, lovingly bestowed on His creatures. Our very lives, our stories and our relationships are gifts from God – and this includes those things that would fall into the category of “secular” things. In the anaphora prayers we are given the highest example of the only truly sane and “creative” response to this gift: to offer back to God what He has given, in thanksgiving, having participated in the gift by giving our very best.

More Like the Person You Were Made To Be

In a worldly sense, boundaries are often perceived as shackles that bind freedom. But, to the contrary, the boundary we find in Christ and His Church liberates the person, the artist, from the shackles of one’s own limited reasoning and understanding. In God, each life, each moment is

boundless and created for eternity. The artist also has the potential, by God's Grace, to be liberated from the chains of ownership and ego that can become a pervasive but destructive force in the artist's soul. The maddening drive to create something "new", which is actually wrapped up in the false notion that man can create on his own is transformed into awe and wonder at the goodness of God's creativity and gratitude for His desire to share that creativity with mankind. Human invention, which is finite, becomes participation in the source of all creation and creativity, the life of God Himself, which is infinite.

The artist's primary work then becomes the participation in the purification of his own heart. All formulas for what constitutes "Christian art," all false dichotomies and earthly parameters become irrelevant. The work is not easy, and requires the very difficult, lifelong task of learning and practicing humility. But it is real work, based in the actual Gospel of the God-Man Jesus Christ, not based in worldly categories. It makes the artist approach the creative process concerned more with praying for God's mercy and help than with how to cater or "angle" the message. Honesty before the face of God becomes the engine for expression, an honesty which often resonates with others. This perspective allows for many unique expressions of the One Truth. As many as there are unique and unrepeatable persons. Within these boundaries the Christian is also free, inasmuch as it does not interfere with the work of purification of one's heart, to appreciate the ways that God's Truth "breaks through" even in popular expressions of art.

Saint Diodochus of Photiki said, "All of us who are human beings are in the image of God. But to be in his likeness belongs only to those who by great love have attached their freedom to God." The call of the artist is to do just this – to attach his or her freedom, talents, and creative spark to the One who gave it in the first place, and through whom it can bear fruit. This is the antidote to mediocre, derivative, bland "Christian" art.

We need look no further than the example of the poetry of David, which teems with the honest expression of a struggling, sometimes even broken man before the face of His Creator. A man, though, who because of his openness and acknowledgment of the source of his freedom, talents, and life, is called "a man after God's own heart."

^[i] Schaeffer, Franky. *Addicted to Mediocrity*. (Crossway: 1981), p. 27.

^[ii] *ibid*.

^[iii] Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann puts it this way: "So the only natural (and not "supernatural") reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to see the world as God sees it and – in this act of gratitude and adoration – to know, name and possess the world. All rational, spiritual and other qualities of man, distinguishing him from other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God, to know, so to speak, the meaning of the thirst and hunger that constitutes his life. "Homo sapiens," "homo faber" ... yes, but, first of all, "homo adorans." The first, most basic definition of man is that he is the priest. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God – and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him." (Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World*, SVS Press:1997).

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Discussion Questions:

Father Joel harmonizes two seemingly opposite notions: the boundaries offered by our faith in Jesus Christ, and the impulse to innovate. How, precisely, does he see innovation and creativity flourishing within a bounded, restricted (and conservative) environment?

What is Sacred Space, and how does the Church's sanctification of time and matter free the artist?

What harm comes from so-called "Christian art" that the author is criticizing? And what makes art proper or fitting, in a Christian sense?

How can we resolve the separation of spiritual and secular (discussed in the author's reference to Francis Shaeffer's book on *Medriocrity*), both personally and socially?