

Introduction: Unexpected Glass

Encountering the St. Francis Windows at All Souls

Is it true, prince, that you said once that ‘beauty’ would save the world? Great Heaven! The prince says that beauty saves the world! And I declare that he only has such playful ideas because he’s in love! Gentlemen, the prince is in love. I guessed it the moment he came in. Don’t blush, prince; you make me sorry for you. What beauty saves the world?¹

On my first visit to All Souls I entered the building through a door underneath the bell tower and stepped around a large snow blower. Once inside, I found myself in a small chapel, set apart from the main worship space. The inside matched the outside: English Tudor with touches of Gothic, stone with dark wood, rich stained glass, and a sense of reverence that was almost palpable. Two candles on the altar were lit and preparations for the Eucharist had been made, but there was no one in sight. I sat in the little chapel and waited.

Straight ahead, over the altar, was a stained glass window with a man staring intensely at me. He was dressed as a monastic and had one finger raised to his lips as if to say, “Shhhh. Be quiet. This is a holy place.” When I looked to the left, I saw that the entire wall of stained glass seemed to be about St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2—1226). In the very middle panel, larger than the others, was Francis showing the stigmata (the five wounds of Christ’s crucifixion, said to have been received mystically by Francis). As I looked at the small window of Francis preaching to the birds, the birds seemed to come alive and I heard chirping. As I listened, I gradually realized that what I heard was not in

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky and David Magarshack, *The Idiot* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1955, 1955), 660.

my imagination, but came from somewhere near the main altar of the church, up under the eaves, outside.

The windows, the light, the proportions of the space, and the birds singing their own praises nearby—all of this combined in a powerful way. As I wondered whether I might be called to be a priest in this parish I thought, “This is definitely a place where I could pray.”

Just before the noon hour, the side door of the church opened and about a dozen people came into the chapel for Mass. They evidently had arrived earlier and had been visiting and chatting. They knew each other, seemed to like each other, and welcomed me. The priest, an older woman who exuded peace and wisdom, celebrated a simple Mass with great care and reverence. That afternoon, “Spy Wednesday” of 2007, I fell in love with All Souls.

As I reflect on six years of ministry at the parish, I realize that several aspects of that first experience have developed into themes that continue to characterize life at All Souls. They work their way into this thesis in the hope that they might further be unearthed, explored, and approached with new energy. These themes are 1) beauty, 2) worship, 3) community, 4) reserve, and 5) an under-utilization of resources.

1) When asked about their initial attraction to All Souls, many people will mention the word, “beauty.” Though I will explore more deeply exactly what I mean (and don’t mean) by the word in Chapter 2, for now, I use “beauty” in its general, popular sense: that which pleases, delights, surprises, and invites; that which captivates one or more of the senses and calls for a response of some kind.

Our stone church sits in the middle of a lush and well-tended garden of annuals, perennials, and a small lawn. It looks like it could be a movie set for a BBC production or a film by Merchant and Ivory. The inside is larger than one expects, yet is warm and inviting. Many of us would say that the beauty of the place attracts and allures, but I wonder whether our initial attraction is only the beginning, while beauty lies beyond in a way that is larger and more complex. Moving beyond what might strike some as pretty or pleasing while leaving others unmoved, is there a beauty beyond the immediate, a beauty that is from God, seeking to change us, convert us, and bring us closer? Can we possibly come to see such beauty in the stranger, the enemy, the poor, the unattractive, and even in what St. Francis knew as Sister Death?

2) The worship I experienced that first Wednesday was exquisitely led with a mixture of care and warmth. Gestures were carefully made, words were well-chosen, and the Mass was offered in graceful simplicity. And yet, I noticed that a number of the people worshipping with me did not seem familiar with the liturgy. At first, I thought this might be because the weekday service used Rite I, and perhaps those fumbling through pages were used to Rite II. But over time, I have come to realize that while many people attend and take part in the liturgy, some have not been very deeply formed in worship. They have no idea what we do or why we do it, nor do they have enough information to evaluate whether what we do is good, appropriate, or needs to be changed. Can we be more deeply formed in our worship and spiritual practices?

3) Community is of vital importance to All Souls and yet the definitions of community are fuzzy. What it means to be a Christian and what it means to worship in the Anglican Tradition are questions that have not always been asked out loud, much less

answered. We approach growth with ambivalence. While most parishioners would agree that a few more people in the pews and the Sunday school would be a nice thing, most would also quickly agree that something would be lost if we grew too large. When one visits, one gets the feeling that this is a parish in which people know one another. And yet, my experience over the years tells me that this impression is not necessarily the case. People connect quickly and deeply with a few others, but many do not get to know people beyond their small circle. As with any parish in the twenty-first century, relationships and community are challenging, but at All Souls, it seems we could do much more to figure out who we are and how we might grow in Christ as a community that welcomes newcomers.

4) Though only a handful of parishioners might be able to say much about the Anglican Doctrine of Reserve (as expounded by the Tracterians² in the early nineteenth century), there is a sense of reserve in the air, water, wood, and glass of the parish. Priests and theologians in the early wave of the Oxford Movement like John Henry Newman, John Keble, and Isaac Williams used the notion of “reserve” to describe how God seems to hide truth from us (especially when the truth can be too much for us) and then, in God’s good time, gradually reveals. God withholds not to conceal but to show compassion, they claimed. They pointed to the ways in which Jesus too, lived and taught with a kind of reserve, holding back the truth of his mission, his glory, his purpose, until such time that each person could understand. The Tracterians argued that the early

² The Oxford Movement called the Church of England to remember and reclaim its Catholic roots. Leaders were called Tracterians because they set forth many of their ideas in tracts or pamphlets, the most famous of these being *Tracts for the Times*, published between 1833 and 1841.

church used an understanding of reserve as it gradually led people into the mysteries of faith, as people grew more eager and more ready to receive them.

In some ways the parish's openness itself encourages a reserved approach to faith as we are careful not to speak too much of our faith, lest we offend someone and appear intolerant. Perhaps because of its reactionary and exclusionary past (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s), once All Souls began to be open to people of various perspectives, the parish began to take special care to protect this openness. Particular religious beliefs—like particular political beliefs—are kept close and guarded, with the idea that something precious might be lost if faith were made too explicit. Though the sense of reserve at All Souls is attractive to many, I question whether we are being too timid with our faith and evangelism. Are we too limited in our conversations, reflections, and growth? Are we too afraid to offend, ending up like the church at Laodicea, “neither cold nor hot,” but simply “lukewarm.”³

5) We do not take full advantage of our location, our resources, or our social capital. As a church with a parking lot, two blocks from a Metro (subway) stop in the middle of Washington, D.C., the church is under-utilized as a meeting place and community center. I have sometimes joked that All Souls practices evangelism not so much by going out and “fishing for people,” (Luke 5:10) but more by being a “lobster trap” for Jesus. We open a door, hope that people wander in, and then we keep them, they having been dazed and dazzled by what they see, smell, taste, and feel. Can our doors be opened wider and with more frequency? Can we learn to fish better?

³ Revelation 3:15, (New Revised Standard Version).

Our St. Francis windows can provide a way for conversion and transformation. In this thesis, I will argue that All Souls, since its founding, has been a place deeply steeped in what many would name as “beauty.” And yet, this attraction, this quality, has not always been followed towards something larger that might transcend taste or preference. Chapter 1 will describe the founding and development of All Souls and explain how we have come to a point of having tremendous energy and faithfulness, yet are somewhat stuck in size and mission. I will also argue that a similar phenomenon has been happening in the larger Episcopal Church, a church once known for its beauty and pageantry, and yet, in an effort to win newcomers, currently loses itself in the never-ending race for relevance and political correctness. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion about some of the problems in trying to talk about “beauty,” and explains how the stained glass windows might help us follow Francis as we explore beauty more deeply. This leads us into a discussion of Franciscan theology as it has to do with beauty, especially in the thought of Bonaventure and Duns Scotus. I will argue that a better way forward for All Souls (and the Episcopal Church) involves a Franciscan perspective, which also coincides with theories of Maxine Greene of the Lincoln Center Institute and theories of organizational frames. Chapter 3 describes the thesis project itself, **A Year with St. Francis**, which invited people to engage the St. Francis windows and begin to explore Franciscan themes in their own lives and the life of the parish. After each aspect of the project is outlined, the results of the project are presented. Chapter 4 brings additional theological and social theory to bear on these results, and Chapter 5 assesses how the **Year with St. Francis** has changed us and where it might be leading.

Our stained glass windows are greatly treasured, though not always truly seen. Among the various publications of the church, there was no comprehensive guide to the windows until very recently. We knew from our archives that The Life of St. Francis Windows were dedicated on April 23, 1916, given by the brothers of the Theta Delta Chi fraternity, the college fraternity of the founding rector, “In memory of the brothers of the Omega charge.” As of 2014, the exact provenance of the windows is still unknown, but research points to the Rudy Glass Company of York, P.A. Unfortunately, because of a fire at the Rudy facility, most records from the early 1900s have been lost.

An early clue that our windows might have secrets to share came when a friend of the parish was able to identify the window of the strange man over the altar in the Mary Chapel, adjacent to the Franciscan windows. He is the Dominican friar St. Peter Martyr (1206—1252), copied from a fresco bearing his image in the San Marco Monastery, Florence, done by Fra Angelico, the Dominican early Renaissance painter. As in San Marco, our St. Peter Martyr (even while he is bleeding from his head and has a dagger in his back) holds a finger to his lips, gazes out intensely, and encourages those who enter to be quiet. One art historian has suggested that the stained glass artists who designed the windows at All Souls probably placed St. Peter nearby because of a longstanding practice always to place a Dominican image near a Franciscan one, and vice versa, as a testament to the long and complicated history between the two orders.⁴

With Peter Martyr looking on, my curiosity about the Franciscan windows grew.

In an effort to identify the eleven Franciscan panels, I began by reading about Francis, his

⁴ Dominic de Guzmán (1170—1221), a Spanish priest, founded the Order of Preachers (*Ordo Praedicatorum*), known as the Dominicans, in 1215. Since the Franciscans were founded in 1209 and both orders were often active in the same geographical locations, the relationship between these two orders has included both cooperation and competition.

life, and his ministry. Yet several of the images were still baffling. It was only when I stopped reading words and began looking at pictures that I found an Italian book of Franciscan art in the library at Virginia Theological Seminary that eventually led me to a book named *Everybody's St. Francis* by Maurice Francis Egan. To my complete surprise and absolute delight, this book contained illustrations by Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel (1851—1913), ten of which were almost exactly copied to make the St. Francis windows at All Souls. An example of the original drawing compared with the stained glass window can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: St. Francis and the Turtle Doves



Boutet de Monvel Illustration



All Souls Window

Though there is no direct proof that the Egan book was the source for the All Souls windows, Maurice Francis Egan (1852—1924) was a diplomat, journalist, writer and intellectual, teaching English at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. when he

wrote *Everybody's St. Francis* in 1912. Egan and James MacBride Sterrett (founding rector of All Souls) were both members of Washington's Cosmos Club and as Christian intellectuals in the same city in the early 1900s, must have known one another. It is not difficult to imagine that when Dr. Sterrett's college fraternity offered to pay for a stained glass window and needed a subject, Dr. Sterrett simply reached for the Egan book off his shelf and suggested, "Why not model the windows on these?"

A Year with St. Francis uses our stained glass windows to explore the question of whether beauty can save, and if so, how can it save All Souls and help us extend salvation to others?