Epiphany Reflection Two

Finding God through Art

“Looking at art is one way of listening to God.”

Sister Wendy Beckett

This week’s reflection will use the medium of art in seeking the manifestation of God in our lives and in the world. Religion and art are two ways that humans exhibit their understanding of the spiritual, those things seen and unseen that have eternal significance.¹ In the past, the Church used the visual arts to teach the Christian religion. Few people in the early church could read. Art was used to teach Bible stories and doctrine. Icons have been used in worship for centuries and are considered “windows” to the Divine. Christian symbols are used in sanctuaries to create an atmosphere of worship and as vehicles for education. For example, use of three interwoven circles can be helpful in explaining belief in a Triune God.

Growing closer to God through art requires two things, imagination and effort. By using imagination, we are able to put our own beliefs of what is true on hold for a while and consider possibilities beyond our current knowing. Through imagination we are also able to try on the beliefs of another. This is where effort comes in because laying aside our current way of thinking is not always easy. Using art as a vehicle for growing in our relationship with God and in our ability to recognize God in our lives requires effort because it takes practice. Some may be discouraged because an insight or new awareness is not forthcoming. Be patient with yourself and the process. As in any relationship, it takes time to get to know each other.

Epiphany Practice 2

For this week’s reflection, you will need a piece of art. It may be Christian art. It can also be a painting, photograph or piece of sculpture from your favorite artist -- one of the great masters, your grandchild or your own. A few suggestions may be found below under resources.

Begin by quieting yourself in a spot where you will not be interrupted. Open your awareness to the closeness of God by offering a prayer which express your intentions for this time, asking God for help in opening your heart, mind and imagination to what God wishes to express to you.

Opening Reflection -- reading slowly through the following prayer-poem, preparing yourself for meditative gazing at the artwork.

¹ McClinton, Katherine Morrison, Christian Church Art Through the Ages, (MacMillan Company, New York, 1962), 1
Teach Me Your Ways, by Ted Loder, from Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may be open to the same Spirit
   who moved over the face of the waters
      in the first day of creation
      and moves also over the chaos of this time
         to fashion a day like this,
            a world like ours,
               a life like mine,
           a kingdom like leaven in bread,
               like a treasure
                  buried in the fields of the daily I plow;
and make me aware of the miracles of life,
   of warm and cold,
   of starkness and order,
      of streaming wind and impenetrable silences,
         and of the unfathomable mystery of amazing grace in which I am kept.

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may praise you
   for all the surprising, ingenious ways you bless me,
      and for all the wondrous gifts you give me
         through artists who introduce me to the beauty of holiness,
            who usher me into awesome worlds in which I begin to live anew
               in a fullness of pain and joy not possible before.

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may accept my own talent openly,
     nurture it hopefully,
     and give it freely.

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may love the kindness of the prophets
   and practice it toward the hungry of the world,
      the poor and sick and oppressed
that I may learn the healing humility
   which responsibly tends the earth and all creatures therein.

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may be swept up in worship with the saints,
   which surges in wonder, gratitude and obedience,
      and shapes by life into an irrepressible YES to you,
         to all my sisters and brothers,
            and to the presence of the kingdom among us
until the ancient vision of mothers burns in me
with a fire to light the world
    and warm its heart,
    through Jesus Christ,
    the singer of passionate songs,
    the teller of powerful stories,
    the artist of daring ways.

Amen.

I. Gaze upon your piece of art for a time -- at least 5-10 minutes, longer if you like.

   After you have spent some time studying the piece of art consider these questions --
   What is going on in the piece of art?  What do you see that makes you say that?¹
   What more can you find?

   Repeat these questions until you have spent some time noticing what story is being told by the artwork.

II. Spend some time, 10-15 minutes, reflecting on the artwork with a sense of wonder.  What questions does the piece of art raise in you? Are there connections that come to light between the artwork and your own story? What thoughts and feelings are awakened? Is there a story from Scripture which comes to mind?

III. Move into a time of meditation, about 5-10 minutes, clearing your thoughts. Enter into a place of stillness.

IV. End with a closing prayer.

You may wish to journal about the experience.  If you are part of a small group, discuss the questions in the first step as a group, learning from the insights of others, before moving into an individual process for steps II and III.  If you wish, come back to the group and share your insights.

Resources
There are many ways to use art as an instrument for growing closer to God. Below are several books and web sites that may be helpful.

Books
Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God, Sybil MacBeth, Paraclete Press, Brewster, MA  2007
Sybil MacBeth, a mathematics instructor, has written an enjoyable book which instructs the reader in using pen and paper in a prayer-filled way.  In the method MacBeth describes, there is no need for artistic ability, just the desire to know God better through a fun and stimulating process.

Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons, Henri J. M. Nouwen,
This book provides an accessible approach to learning to pray with icons.  Nouwen shares his own experiences of praying with four different icons.

¹ These questions come from a process called Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS). To find out more about VTS and how it is used in education, visit this link http://www.vtshome.org/

Ms Martin discuss the history of icons, how they are created and describes their visual language. She also offers guidance on praying with icons.

Sister Wendy has made art accessible to many through television and several books. In this book, she has chosen paintings to discuss the elements of a life lived in truth and love -- respect, understanding, forgiveness, and listening, to name a few. A resource for children of all ages.

Web Sites
Episcopal Church and Visual Arts - www.ecva.org - from the web site, “The mission of The Episcopal Church and Visual Arts (ECVA) is to encourage artists, individuals, congregations, and scholars to engage the visual arts in the spiritual life of the church.” Here you will find exhibitions, resources and more.

Prayerwindows.com www.prayerwindows.com Here you will find the work of artist Bob Gilroy S.J. Trained in art therapy and as a Jesuit, Bob has combined creative activities with the spiritual tradition of the Jesuits providing a way to express experiences of God through art. The site includes online retreats and the description of several different activities one might use to integrate art and prayer.

Created by Christianne Humphrey for The Episcopal Church. Christianne is a Spiritual Director and Minister of Spiritual Care at St. James, Groveland, MA.