

- 11 Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World: Foundations for a Christian Approach to Justice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) p. 176, fn. 61.
- 12 Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1972).
- 13 Jean Porter, 'De Ordine Caritatis: Charity, Friendship, and Justice in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, *Thomist* 53 (April 1989) pp. 197–213.
- 14 Enda McDonagh, 'Love, Power, and Justice', in *The Making of Disciples: Tasks of Moral Theology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982) pp. 112–27.
- 15 Outka (24–34) analyzes the difficulties that arise for an understanding of justice when love is understood as self-sacrifice. See also Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986) pp. 83–99.
- 16 Hollenbach (18–22) argues that the modern Catholic tradition on justice has emphasized the relational nature of justice and its connection with mutuality, reciprocity, and love.
- 17 John P. Langan, 'What Jerusalem Says to Athens', in *The Faith That Does Justice; Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist, 1977) pp. 152–80.
- 18 Stephen J. Pope, 'Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity: An Interpretation and Reassessment', *Heythrop Journal* (1991) 170.
- 19 My understanding of spirituality is dependent on definitions of spirituality and of Christian spirituality offered by Sandra Schneiders in 'Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?' *Horizons* 13 (Fall 1986) p. 266.
- 20 Francis X. Meehan, *A Contemporary Social Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982).
- 21 Terry Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul: Four Mystics on Justice* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1989) p. 113.
- 22 Tastard, pp. 95–115.
- 23 For discussion of the implication of this text for Christian spirituality, see Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*, pp. 8–18; Brown, pp. 67–72.
- 24 Walter Brueggemann, 'Voices of the Night—Against Justice', in *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: An Agenda for Ministers* by Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks, and Thomas H. Groome (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist 1986) p. 2.
- 25 Brueggemann, pp. 14–17.

## Under the Starry Night

Denis J. Billy C.SS.R.

I once had the opportunity to travel to St.-Rémy-de-Provence and to celebrate Mass in the chapel of the convalescent home where Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) spent two years of his life painting some of his most striking canvases (e.g., *Cypress Trees*, *The Sower*, *Starry Night*). An epileptic who suffered from erratic bouts of depression, Van Gogh

came to this former abbey-turned-sanatorium in a futile attempt to ward off the disquieting shadows that haunted him in both his sleeping and waking hours and which eventually caused him to take his own life. The space created by the stone walls of the chapel's romanesque nave has a chilling effect on the heart. It seems haunted by the spirit of a man whose delicate sense of life's inner beauty was strangely (and inexplicably) heightened by the tragic circumstances of his waning sanity.

The spirit of Van Gogh haunts the air and environs of his one-time place of refuge. During my short time there, I half-expected to catch his passing shadow in the corner of my eye ducking behind a column or escaping upon human detection into the lonely spaces of the nearby cloister. He lurks there, yes, in the chapel and adjoining gardens, down the long row of sycamores and beyond, in the surrounding fields. He lurks there, yes, in solitary isolation, always on the periphery—and never without evoking a deep sense of sadness. This place of healing could do nothing for the very man, whose brilliant swirling strokes and swift, contrasting colours continues to awaken a sense of wonder and yearning for transcendence in millions upon millions of searching admirers. It may very well be that Van Gogh's thirst for beauty was too fragile for the likes of our rough and ready workaday world. That his works continue to evoke such deep emotions may point to a desperate need in all of us of the same sort of healing.

### **A Restless Spirit**

More than a century after his death, Van Gogh has become a symbol of postmodern man's restless search for transcendence. If the vying voices of his fragmented inner life could not bring him to believe in the God whose passion, death, and resurrection were daily celebrated in the cold, stony nave of the sanatorium chapel, they nonetheless led him to affirm with rare saint-like passion the hidden beauty of the visible world around him. Ever since his youth, Van Gogh had waged his tragic struggle to articulate his impressions (some may prefer the word "vision") of life beneath the surface of life. This artistic *passio* cost him many things: his family, his security, his health, his sanity and, finally, his life. If Van Gogh was a man without faith (at least in the traditional sense of the term), his life, his death, his art, and his memory remind us of the deep yearning we all have to transcend the limitations which, at one and the same time, confine us and make us what we are.

Van Gogh lived in an age when philosophers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the so-called "masters of suspicion" were developing the theories that would undermine reason's pronounced

self-confidence and set in motion the forces that would bring about the gradual and timely demise of the entire Enlightenment project. Maybe it was Van Gogh's extremely sensitive spirit (a blessing and a curse by most standards) that enabled him to reflect in his art the precarious dilemma of an entire century to come. Maybe it was his ability to feel with his brush and to sense in his own heart the hidden turmoil of the world without that enabled him to reveal with canvas and oils, the deeply repressed emotions that lurked just beneath the calm, rational veneer of civilized life. Maybe it was his restless spirit which forced him to fly in the face of established convention and to forge his own solitary way of becoming one with the world around him.

Van Gogh the mystic was besieged by powerful inner demons, who turned his dreams into nightmares and who slowly gnawed away at his rich inner life. Is it sheer coincidence that many of us feel much the same way? Change a few of the circumstances and Van Gogh's dire story is not very different from our own. In his life, we find a faint resemblance to our own troubled yearning for transcendence and inner disquiet among the ruins of reason's tumbled edifice. Even those of us who follow the light of faith along the decaying roads of reason's former glory find the solitary figures of doubt and self-deception as constant (albeit unwelcome) companions. No profession of faith, however strong, no expression of hope, however great, no admission of love, however deep, can long escape their merciless interrogations. They whisper constantly in our ears and barely give us time to think things through. The results confirm the suspicion that faith in the postmodern age rarely comes without great cost and personal sacrifice. Belief no longer presents itself as a priceless pearl to the inquiring mind. Our age of innocence has come and long since passed. With the Enlightenment now an all but distant memory, the door through which we have stepped has closed irreversibly behind us. Amidst the ruins which faith must now inhabit, we long for the shelter of former times and tremble at the thought of what the future will bring.

### **Exorcising the Demons**

To ward off the impending darkness, Van Gogh threw himself into his work. For hours on end, he stood fixed in place, as if in a trance, immersing himself in colour and motif, shade and perspective, movement, line, contrast and shape. Again and again, he crossed his brush across the unwilling canvas, seeking to let loose the inner life of what he instinctively felt was just within reach. Time vanished as he created a world where eternity passed with every stroke of the brush and where space was measured by the short distance from the canvas to his heart.

Van Gogh's art reveals a highly sensitive ear, one that was able to listen to the visible world and allow it to sing its song across the blank space in front of him. Through his oils and pastels, he was able to unite the visible world with the world of his heart. This union was experienced within in the very act of painting, but was also mediated onto the canvas before his eyes by his highly refined artist's sense. Van Gogh's art resounds with a dynamic juxtaposition of countervailing forces: brightness and darkness, movement and stillness, background and foreground all rush together to form an impression of the inner life of the visible world. Intense contemplation of his motif enabled him to paint the imprint that the visible world had impressed upon his soul. His humility before nature calmed his own soul and produced in his great moments of creativity, something for which generations since have been for ever grateful.

If canvas and oils, easel, brush, and palette were the instruments used by Van Gogh to quiet his inner beasts, it was not long before the very limitations of time and space which he struggled so valiantly to overcome, began to take their toll. Try as he may, no artist—not even one as great as Van Gogh—can sustain the creative moment indefinitely. The mind wanders and ponders rest; the eyes grow heavy and lose the precision of their gaze; the body tires and is in need of refreshment. It was during these periods of inactivity when Van Gogh's inner demons did their greatest damage. Weakened physically and mentally on account of long, strenuous hours before his canvases, he no longer had the energy to deflect their biting and taunting barbs. His weak disposition eventually brought on a physical and emotional breakdown from which he would never recover. His health and sanity moved in steady decline. It got so that he could not pick up a brush without painful headaches and frightening hallucinations. Vincent Van Gogh died broken and poor; he thought of himself as a failure; his art is a fitting testament to his delirium.

### **Venerating Madness**

I had come to St. Rémy with a group of pilgrims, whose faith, by that time, had already been quietly affirmed by visits to more traditional sites of pilgrimage. A visit to St. Bernadette's tomb in Nevers, to St. Margaret Mary's shrine in Paray-le-Monial, or to St. John Vianney's final resting place in Ars transports one back to a simpler, less sophisticated age, to a time when faith and miracles and even the saints themselves could be accepted and gloried in at face value. Van Gogh's place of convalescence evoked a very different set of strong, vying emotions. Used today as a private retreat for mentally-ill women, it put

us in touch with the vulnerable side of human existence. Laughter was upset by sadness; wonder, by painful yearning; anger, by tears of repressed grief. Our emotions ran the gamut of possibility and had a cleansing effect on the soul few of us had experienced before. And, yet, something else was different. What was it about this place? Why did it seem so strangely familiar? Why did we feel more at home here (of all places!) than in our other points of pilgrimage?

During our visit to St. Rémy, our veneration of sanctity paused momentarily before the living threshold of madness. We came there not to smell the odour of sanctity or to visit saintly remains of incorruptible flesh, but to sniff the natural scent of garden roses and to walk empty hallways that were haunted by the ghost of genius. We came there not to seek a special favour or to venerate someone who had won the crown of victory, but to surface the inner aching of our hearts and to remember one of life's fragile, beautiful, broken ones. We came there not to pray (although pray we did), but to ache over the open wounds of our souls and to find momentary respite from a hectic and, all too often, unkind world. There, at St. Rémy, we came in touch with the madness that haunts the heart of everyone who struggles to peer beneath the appearance of things and to ward off the griping blows of life's inner demons. There, we came in touch with our own difficult struggle to believe and encountered in our fragmented pains the very real need for healing.

The Mass I celebrated that day had a strange, surrealistic quality about it. There we were, pilgrims on a journey looking for healing off the beaten track, on a road rarely travelled by searching believers of any prior age. We came there to display our wounds beneath the small chapel's stone barrel vault and to ask the good God to help us find what Van Gogh so desperately sought during his years of residence there. Our prayer there was not of the usual kind: words were few; images, vivid and strong; sentiments, deep and heart-felt. Transformed by doubt and able to flicker in the shadows of its own uncertainty, our faith shone forth like a dimly-lit lantern in a black cavernous cave. This small, hungering flame cast out just enough darkness to insure our next feeble, hesitant steps; it promised little more by way of warmth and comfort, and not even that until it was needed. There, as we prayed, our own inner demons awoke from their complacent stupor and tried to divert our failing but still undivided attention. Their voices echoed off the stony walls of our hearts and filled our minds with a great cacophony of distracting images and unsettling noise. Only the horror of our open wounds could make them waver. There in this forgotten sanctuary of solitary madness, tears fell in the silence; our hearts

grieved, then quaked; we opened our eyes and felt the huge hovering vault of stone above us open out unto the dazzling brightness of the starry night. For the smallest part of a moment, we merged with the space around us and beyond us, eternity brushed across the canvas of our souls, and all was well.

## Conclusion

Because of Van Gogh, the starry night of the vaulted sky above has traversed lonely, distant spaces of desolation and impressed itself upon the solitary canvas of the human heart. His work inspires in those who behold it the same yearning for transcendence that, in previous epochs, drove sinners to their knees and mystics into ecstasy. If Van Gogh has today become more socially acceptable (a thought he doubtless would have found distasteful), the experience his art conveys remains all the more probing and disconcerting. His canvases disturb our shallow preconceptions of the way life is and reveal for us the uncharted waters of life's primordial sea. They provide a place for nonbelievers to ponder the mystical dimensions of life and for believers to delve beneath the surface of their sacrosanct formulations. They allow people of all walks of life to examine the unexamined and to look again at what they once thought commonplace.

Van Gogh, however, offers more than an aesthetic experience. He challenges us to contemplate the hidden life of the outer world and to find its faint reflection in the inner crevices of the heart. He bids us to cross (be it ever so briefly) our inner threshold of madness and to glory with delirium in the wonder of the present moment. He inspires us to be with our brokenness and to listen to the voices of colour, light, and movement as they struggle with our own inner demons and paint on our souls a vision of life large enough to live for with passion and to die for without regret. He arouses in us a different kind of prayer, one that ponders the dance of the stars above and sees their reflection in the turbulent movements of the heart. He also reveals to us a different sort of God, one whose revelation comes gradually to those who peer beneath the surface of things and who himself seems driven by a wild and wandering artistic gaze. While there will never be another Van Gogh, something of who he was and what he stood for lives on in each of us. His tragic life still moves us; his artistic vision still inspires us; his inner demons still haunt us. In one way or another, the heart of every postmodern pilgrim travels in awe under the brilliant, swirling canopy of his starry, starry night.