

TEACHER RESOURCES

Sacramentality refers to the ability to see that the material world represents the attributes of the Creator. All the universe is a series of signs leading one to a knowledge of God. Sacramentality can also refer to the experience of a journey, whereby we learn how to truly see and move beyond creatures and creation to the God that they signify. All of the readings in this unit reflect these two aspects of the universe as sacrament. The following pages reflect some teaching strategies of teaching the themes found in this unit. We suggest the use of films to illustrate the themes of the unit because our students are such visual learners. All of these films are readily available at an inexpensive price.

SEEING

“Epistemology” is the name that philosophers and theologians give to the branch of study that examines “how we see.” This question about the levels of seeing is most clearly seen in the story of The Allegory of the Cave that is found in Plato’s great philosophical dialogue, The Republic.

In The Allegory of the Cave, Plato tells the story of a group of men who are imprisoned in a deep cave. They are chained in such a manner that they cannot move their heads. Behind them, out of their sight, there are candles and in front of the candles there are cut out puppets representing men, and animals, and trees. All the prisoners can see are the shadows of these puppets that are cast on the wall in front of them. Because they can see nothing else, the prisoners believe that the shadows represent “real” things. One day, however, a prisoner breaks free. As he moves behind the candles and the puppets, he sees that the shadows are “not real. They are only poor images of true reality which is found in the puppets. Eventually the man works himself out of the cave and sees men and animals and horses on the earth. He now realizes that the puppets are also shadows and are equally poor representations of “live and real” men, trees and animals. He is at first blinded when he looks at the sun, but then he comes to realize that the sun, as the source of light, is the highest “reality” and that all other reality is only shadows and imagery.

This idea that the world of reality is made up of different levels and that the task of the individual is to move out of the shadows into the light is one that is similar to the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures, where the central event of the history of the Jewish people is recounted in the book of Exodus where it is told how God led the people out of the slavery and fleshpots of Egypt into the freedom of the children of God in the promised land. This idea of life as a journey from darkness to light resonated with Christian thinkers and is a central theme of Catholic theology. Christ is the “Light of the world”. His cures of those afflicted with blindness are a metaphor for the grace given to all of us so that we can truly see with our hearts and our souls what is real and important.

All of the literary selections in this unit involve the act of seeing and this is what should be stressed with students. Below are listed some resources that will assist teachers in getting across this basic but difficult idea that there are many levels of seeing and that the goal of the Christian life is to see truly, to liberate ourselves from living with shadows

and images and instead learn to see what is really real: to encounter and see the God who is all good, all true, all beautiful.

The sacra mentality of the universe is a major element of Catholic theology. It means that all of nature speaks to us about God if we have the eyes to see him.

FILMS

Because films are a visual medium they are an ideal vehicle for helping students how to see. The following two films are most effective in illustrating the ideas of seeing found in the literary selections found in this unit on sacra mentality.

CITY LIGHTS

DIRECTOR: CHARLES CHAPLIN

Charles Chaplin is considered the greatest of the silent film directors. City Lights was his last silent film. It was made just as talking pictures were replacing silent films. The cinematic techniques of silent films demanded that the primary medium of communication be totally visual. Without words the narrative of the silent film had to be told totally through pictures.

City Lights is a film about how we see. The plot is very simple. A tramp (Chaplin's trademark hero) sees a beautiful but blind flower girl selling her flowers on the street. He falls in love with her not only for her simple beauty but because her blindness has protected her from seeing the evils of the world and she possesses an aura of innocence that enchants him. He courts the girl leading her to believe that he is a man of great wealth and sophistication.

The tramp also has an encounter with the other major character of the film: a wealthy man who is plagued by drunkenness. In one of the early scene the wealthy man tries to commit suicide while intoxicated but he is saved from death by the little tramp. The wealthy man rewards the tramp with money, the use of his Rolls-Royce, and expensive parties. The problem is that he only sees the tramp as his friend when he is drunk; when he is sober he does not know him and has him thrown out of his mansion.

During his stay with the wealthy man Chaplain has been seeing the blind girl regularly. She falls in love with him and her simple goodness increases his love for her. When he finds out that her blindness can be cured, Chaplain asks the rich man (now drunk) for money. He gives the money to the girl for an operation but he himself is sent to jail because in his sober state the rich man no longer remembers him. He says farewell to the girl who is left alone and heartbroken.

The final scene of the film shows the blind girl as the owner of a flower shop. She can now see and is made up with cosmetics and wears the most fashionable clothers.

Now that she can see she pursues the goals of wealth and beauty and pleasure. She fantasizes about the tramp as a young, handsome young man of wealth and refinement. She has gained her physical sight but has lost the moral sight that made her so enchanting.

The little tramp is released from jail. He wanders the city in shabby clothes, the picture of the homeless man of poverty. One day he passes the flower shop and sees the girl. When he indicates his affection for her the girl and her companions are amused. She thinks that it is comical that such a person would be attracted to her. In a moment of pity she offers him a coin. As she places the coin in his hand her sense of touch tells her that this homeless, impoverished tramp is her benefactor. In one of the great scenes of movie history, her face registers her recognition of her benefactor. In the closing sequence, the tramp points to her eyes and says to her, "You can see now." Claspings his hand the flower girl regains her moral vision and says to him, "Yes, I can see now."

City Lights offers a great opportunity for students to see that there is more than one way of seeing. That there is more to the world than the surface of things and that for those who have moral and contemplative vision the world is a mirror of God. The film will help them understand the experiences of Hopkins, and Sexton, and Bonaventure, and St. Francis and show them how the Christian journey is essentially a matter of learning to see.

ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES

Director: Michael Curtiz

Angels with Dirty Faces is a story about the journey of a group of street kids from a life of crime to a life of grace. The film tells the story of two boys living in a slum who attempt a robbery. One boy is caught and sent to reform school; the other boy is never caught and eventually becomes a priest.

Eventually the criminal played by James Cagney returns to his old neighborhood as the chief of a crime gang. He has money, attends nightclubs and parties, and is favored by beautiful women. Most of all he is the hero for slum kids living in the neighborhood. (The bowery boys) He's "made it" and they seek to emulate him and share in his success.

The priest (Pat O'Brien) seeks to steer the boys away from this life of crime and base their lives on the teachings of the Church. However, he is a failure. He begins a campaign against gangs and corruption and is successful. Eventually his childhood friend is arrested and sentenced to death for murder. In the climatic scene of the film, the priest and the gangster meet on death row just minutes before the gangster's death in the electric chair. In one of the great scenes in film history, the priest pleads with the gangster to get himself "right with God". He tells the gangster that he is a hero to slum boys and that they can never be saved from his fate unless they "despise his memory", until they see him not as a glamorous figure but as a cowardly punk. He asks the

gangster to fake cowardice at the time of his execution. To give up “all he has”, his honor, for the sake of the boys in the slum. The gangster refuses but at the moment of execution, in a chilling scene, he complies with the request of the priest and goes screaming to the electric chair, a groveling coward. In the last scene of the film, the boys, heartbroken about the cowardly death of their hero, listen to the words of the priest and follow him up the stairs to go to church and say, in the words of the priest, “a prayer for a boy who couldn’t run as fast as me.”

Angels with Dirty Faces is a film that is filled with symbolism. The boys plan all of their evil deeds in an underground cellar. At the end of the film they move out of the cellar and climb up the stairs into the light. It is a visual representation of The Allegory of the cave.”

The music in the film is critical to an understanding of the theme of the film. The boys are first scene in Church singing a hymn under the direction of the priest. The gangster when he enters the church to meet his priest friend hears the hymn and silently mouths the words symbolizing his own membership in the church and the baptismal innocence he has left behind. At the end of the film as the boys leave the cellar and return to church the music of the hymn is heard as a triumphant strain.

PRAYER, SEEING, AND CONTEMPLATION

There are a variety of ways of praying. One of the highest levels of prayer is contemplation. In this form of prayer, the person “looks” at the natural world or at his life or the life of the world and allows God to speak to him through these different experiences of “looking”.

Discuss with students this form of prayer. Talk with them about “contemplative” religious orders of the Catholic Church where monks and nuns live lives of simplicity and silence. Are they wasting their lives by giving up material things and living in silence? Or are they doing this so that they can free themselves from shadows? Does one have to live in a religious community to experience contemplative prayer or is this possible for all Catholics?

Show the students a copy of Bellini’s painting, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*. (Google image search) What is the painter trying to say in this work? It takes place on Mount Alvernia where Francis had retired to pray in solitude. The painter shows the solitude by having Francis experience ecstasy with no other person present. He experiences the ecstasy on the top of a mountain. This represents the journey of the soul from images to true reality as seen in Saint Bonaventure’s, the Journey of the Mind to God.

The great American Contemplative and member of the Trappist Order, Thomas Merton, lived for several months by himself in a cabin in the woods. When people asked him what he did there and how he prayed, he said that his experience of looking at a rabbit had enabled him to see “the rabbitness of God.” What did Merton mean by this?

Discuss Merton's comment with students in conjunction with the readings about Saint Francis of Assisi and his relation with animals.

Discuss the experience of Buddhists and yogis and Native American and members of other world religions to show that this manifestation of God in nature and the experience of contemplative prayer is a universal experience of humanity.

GOD AND GENDER

God is pure spirit. He has no body. We are created in God's image. It is said in the Book of Genesis that "male and female he created them". Discuss this idea of gender difference as a reflection of God in Hopkins's poem, God's Grandeur, where he says the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods" and thus gives us an image of God as a mother hen gathering her chicks under her bosom.

The ideas of seeing gender in God is also illustrated by St. Francis where he refers to creatures as his brothers and sisters, sister birds, brother wolf. It is especially seen in his great poet, The Canticle of Creatures, where he describes all creation in terms of gender i.e. Brother Sun and Sister Moon."

MUSIC

The popular hymn, Amazing Grace, was written in the 19th Century by John Newton, a former slaveholder who became an Evangelical preacher after an experience of Grace opened the eyes of his soul and allowed him to see the evil of his way of life. Grace allowed him to see truly that all men are our brothers and for the remainder of his life, Newton preached the power of Grace to turn one from sin to God. We have just finished a unit on "seeing". How do the line in the hymn that state:

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Express in musical and poetic form the philosophic and theological truth that there are many ways of seeing and that some people lead their entire lives in moral blindness?

There are numerous recordings of the psalms of creation. These can be found in the recordings of Taize, and the Gelineau Psalms, and the recordings produced by the Oregon Publishing.

To sum up the lesson one could play a recording of St. Francis's poem, Canticle of the Creatures, (All Creatures of Our God and King), and have students sing along with the recording.

ALTERNATIVE READING

As a summary reading students could be presented with the poem I thank you god for most this most amazing because it illustrates the presence of God in nature, stresses the joy of contemplation, shows the use of the senses in apprehending God and ends with a scriptural allusion, (now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened). In other words we have spiritual ears and spiritual eyes as well as physical ears and eyes and we must open these to truly see. As Jesus says, "Let he who has ears, hear! Let he who has eyes, see!"

i thank You God for most this amazing

e.e. cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits
of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural
which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun's birthday; this
is the birth day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay great
happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any—lifted from
the no of all nothing—human merely being doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes
are opened)