

# INTERRUPTIONS OF BEAUTY

## PRAYER, ARTISTIC WONDER, AND PREACHING

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY

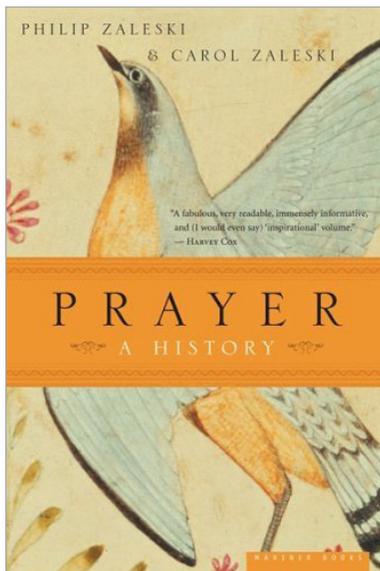
As I pass by the Main Building (a.k.a. The Golden Dome) at the University of Notre Dame, I often think back to my freshman year on campus. How often I found myself interrupted by the extraordinary beauty of this building throughout the year. The shimmering gold on a football Saturday framed against the outline of leaves ablaze; the more muted tones of the gold against the snowy, grey sky of late winter; the brilliant, even transcendent light that the Dome provides on the darkest of nights, visible in all of its grandeur from St. Joseph Lake.

Inevitably, as I became used to perceiving this building throughout the seasons, wonder ceased. It wasn't that the Dome was any less beautiful. Rather,

it was me who had changed. Abiding on campus over the years, the building became part of my home, my "dwelling." And as the work load increased, as the extra-curricular responsibilities grew, the Dome devolved into the building I passed on the way to class, to a football game, to this practice or that meeting. Perhaps once or twice a year, normally after a long absence, the beauty of the building would strike my eye. But for the most part, the campus monument had become "background noise" that invited my attention only now and again.

The great temptation of the Christian life is that the Scriptures, our spiritual practices, our liturgical prayer, even our spaces for worship will become the

"background noise" of a life that has become comfortably Christian. When the Gospel is read at Mass, we immediately become distracted, knowing already how the story turns out. The gorgeous art that adorns the walls of the church is passed by, without eliciting in us the desire to pray. Prayer itself, the recalling of our attention to God, devolves into half-hearted words of obligation. So how do we receive an inoculation against this forgetfulness of wonder? To once again attend to the interruption of beauty that characterizes Catholicism in particular? Might I suggest the reading of the following three books?



**Philip Zaleski and  
Carol Zaleski**  
***Prayer: A History***

Boston  
Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005  
\$15.95

Prayer is dramatic; a strange statement for those of us, who more often than not fail in our prayer. *A Few Good Men* is dramatic. *Schindler's List* is dramatic. Even, *Harry Potter* is dramatic. My prayer life is nearly devoid of drama. It is me fumbling through half intelligible words uttered before the break of dawn. It is me overlooking prayer until the very end of the day; when exhaustion wins out, and my closing prayer is *Lord, forgive my neglect*. It is me praying the rosary and forgetting what mystery I

am on. It is me attending Mass and only later recognizing that rather than lift up my heart to the Lord, I have been considering the possibility that the Cubs could finally win the World Series. If my prayer is a “drama,” then it is more akin to a critically acclaimed independent movie about a slacker in his early thirties, waiting to make a new start to his life, but continually running into the force of his own inertia.

Philip and Carol Zaleski’s *Prayer: A History* reminds the reader that, despite the often non-dramatic nature of our own prayer, the very fact that human beings pray at all is a remarkable phenomenon worthy of contemplating. The opening lines of the text inform the reader that *Prayer* is a work of deep

spiritual depth and admiration: “The story of prayer is the story of the impossible: of how we creatures of flesh and blood lay siege to heaven, speak to the Maker of all things, and await, with confidence or hopeful skepticism, a response” (3). The Zaleskis’ are not phenomenologists or religious historians, presenting a systematic account of prayer in world religions. Instead, they are interested in the mystery of prayer itself: “We can describe the visible world of prayer in sumptuous detail, and a resplendent and fascinating world it is; but the most intimate dance between God and the soul occurs at a level beyond human perception” (354). The reader, then, should treat *Prayer* less as a typical historical introduction to a religious topic, and more as the contemplation of a mystery: “Why do we pray, and what do we pray for? How do we pray, and how does it change us? What does prayer say about us, as separate cultures and as a species” (32). *Prayer* is a love story, told from the perspective of the various cultures, who have reached out to God through words, through silence, and through ritual practice.

In fact, the multi-religious approach to *Prayer* contributes to the authority of the work. A diverse assortment of human beings has sought to speak to God. In chapters four through seven, the Zaleskis offer portraits (or archetypal figures) of humanity at prayer.

- The prayer of the refugee (chapter four) is the cry for help, addressing “the raw fundamentals of life—sin and illness, suffering and death, fear of evil and the longing for redemption” (97).

- The prayer of the devotee (chapter five) is the regular, routine of prayer practiced by the believer as a sacrifice to God, one that serves to sanctify both time and the cosmos (129).
- The prayer of the ecstatic (chapter six) is the engulfing, total prayer of pure bliss: “it is sharp, precise, engulfing; it turns one inside out; there is nothing vague about it at all. And for this very reason it remains under descriptive embargo” (161).
- The prayer of the contemplative (chapter seven) is a life become prayer, “a pattern of behavior that embraces all modes of prayer but is characterized above all, by *openness*: to God and to the world” (197).

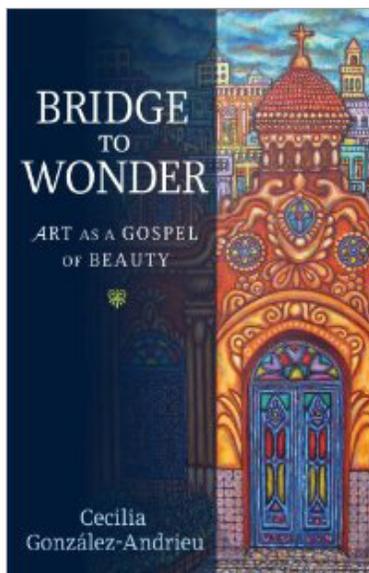
Just as a reviewer of a novel is careful to not give away too much of the plot, it would be an injustice to over-summarize the Zaleskis’ portraits of prayer. What makes these archetypes so remarkable is that they take seriously, without the slightest tone of disbelief, the particular religious convictions of the Hindus, Pentecostals, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and Christians under examination. Simultaneously, they do not reduce Catholic prayer to Hindu prayer. But, if the reader of *Prayer* is a Catholic, who takes the life of prayer seriously, that reader cannot help but admire a fellow sojourner in the spiritual art of prayer. Even more important, these archetypal figures of prayer awaken in the reader the desire for a more serious engagement with the traditions of prayer. Reading the text, *I wanted to pray like the refugee, the devotee, the ecstatic, and the contemplative*. Every time, I enter into the simplest of prayers, because of the Zaleskis’ text, I cannot help but realize the spiritual adventure I am undertaking.

And perhaps, that's the subtle undercurrent of the work as a whole; to reawaken human beings to the mysterious wonder of seeking God through prayer. The two chapters on magic that begin the book (chapters two and three) subtly challenge the disenchantment brought about by modernity. Quoting the Zaleskis:

The early Christian portrayal of Jesus and the sacraments draw upon a tradition of magical language and practice to convey a deeper, redemptive magic that Christians believes to be the core mystery of faith. Deeper magic it may be, but recognizably magic nonetheless. It was necessary and inevitable...that the magic of the gospel would partake of the magic of the many cultures to which Christianity spread. The relics, rosary beads, statues, icons, medals, and votive offerings that line the old highways of Europe, and especially the great pilgrimage routes; the magical use of familiar prayers; the vigils, pilgrimages, processions, novenas, and litanies of the faithful—all these are sign not of atavism or degeneration, but rather of a fully realized culture of prayer (56).

The magic of Christian prayer does not manipulate the gods, but rather enters one into “a relationship to living persons: the three Persons of the Trinity, the incarnate Redeemer, the Mother of God, the heavenly companies of saints” (56). The later chapters of *Prayer* (chapters eight through thirteen) seek to negotiate the “deep magic” of praying in light of a forgetfulness of tradition, the relationship between prayer and the modern arts, the legal challenges to prayer in the public square, and the efficacy of prayer vis-à-vis science.

At the conclusion of the work, one gets the impression that a society without any form of visible prayer, of seeking God through word and practice, of silent waiting and ritual, is one without a culture. In fact, if evangelization includes the transformation of culture through an encounter with the Gospel, then Christians have a significant amount to learn from the Zaleskis' treatment of prayer. To enter into the drama of prayer is to become a sign that there are still those, who dedicate themselves to a way of life that refuses to accept the greyness of a disenchanted world. It is to nurture a culture of prayer. The Zaleskis' *Prayer* also should draw the attention of the American Catholic Church, coming to a deeper realization of the public spiritual practices of Hispanic Catholicism. Rather than dismiss such practices as “mere” popular piety, the attentive reader of *Prayer: A History* will come to recognize that Latino Catholicism may be an opportunity for a spiritual renewal in Catholicism itself, a reclamation of the deeper magic intrinsic to the drama of prayer.



**Cecilia González-Andrieu**  
***Bridge to Wonder: Art as a***  
***Gospel of Beauty***

Waco, TX  
 Baylor University Press, 2012.  
 \$29.95

Judgments regarding beauty are exceptionally problematic. This is particularly the case in matters of liturgical prayer. On one hand, the high liturgical aesthete might argue that the truly beautiful rite is one with incense, suffused with Gregorian chant, golden vestments, and laced albs. On the other, the low liturgical aesthete will judge the beauty of a rite by means of the spontaneous, the informal, and the sparse. In both cases, a prior concept of the beautiful trespasses upon the Eucharistic performance. And as the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has made clear in his *God Without Being*, “To justify its Christianity, a theology must be conceived as a *logos* of the *Logos*, a word of the Word, a said of the Said—where, to be sure, every doctrine of language, every theory of discourse, every scientific epistemology, must let itself be regulated by the event of its redoubling in a capital, intimate, and anterior instances” (143). The

Eucharistic celebration is that event in which the Christian is taught to perceive the beautiful and thus become a site of beauty (sainthood). And as the horrors of the twentieth century make clear, many have participated in the Eucharistic rites without perceiving the presence of a beautiful God, who loves unto the end.

Cecilia González-Andrieu’s stunning *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* is an antidote to the wars of aesthetics, embroiling liturgists. It is simultaneously a prophetic challenge to those who seek in beauty a way to cover over the horrors of injustice. Undoubtedly, González-Andrieu’s approach to theological aesthetics is influenced by her early immersion into the theological art-forms of her native Cuba, her immigration to the United States, and her later “grafting” into the Mexican American community of Los Angeles. Her life has been immersed in the arts, from her father’s painting to her deep appreciation for music. And thus, as a theologian, how could she not turn to the arts as a source of “theology”?

For González-Andrieu, beauty is not a category denoting the pristine, the splendid, or the popular. Instead, the category of the beautiful comes to be known fundamentally through the paradoxical sign of Jesus Christ himself:

In Christ, the exquisite Prince of Peace and the despised, battered, and bleeding man are paradoxically united, constituting the deepest insight into the nature of the beautiful. What is beautiful can be so most powerfully in that it wounds us and directs us to the longing our wounds reveal. In this beauty that is most fully revealed in Christ, the good and true are woven together and made sensible, so we may want them, grasp them, inhabit them, and love them (24).

When we recognize that Christ's wounded aesthetics is the source of all beauty, we are awakened to wonder, or what González-Andrieu refers to as "*asombrado*." *Asombrado* is not strictly speaking a "positive" category alone. Instead, "wonder stops what is routine and causes *asombro*. When we become *asombrados* we are no longer able to cling to the illusion of control and omnipotence. We have been made small and take on the characteristics (in ourselves) of our awe-filled response" (36). The Gospel is beautiful, not because it is saccharine, safe, and acceptable, but because it continually invites the human being to *asombro*, to wonder infused by humility. González-Andrieu's viewing of Luis Valdéz' *La Pastorela* serves as a kind of "icon" into this sort of wonder in which "the story of salvation plays out on stage and inside each heart" (32), inviting the viewer to see anew the "unexpectedness of being" (32), and thus come to a renewed perception of Jesus' poverty

vis-à-vis the marginal state of farm workers today. Here, a hallmark of González-Andrieu's writing surfaces. Her very language, her way of writing, invites the reader into a play that one has never seen, coming (however inadequately) to "see what she saw." González-Andrieu's narrative itself elicits this wonder (and the images of paintings included in the text are an extension of this invitation)!

And in fact, this revelatory wonder is what makes art "theologically beautiful." Art interrupts our assumptions, forces us to re-examine ourselves, and thus to perceive anew the Triune God we confess to have faith in. Much of González-Andrieu's *Bridge to Wonder* is itself a contemplative examination of such moments of revelation. In chapters four and five, she treats the 2000 exhibit at the National Gallery in London, entitled *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art*. The noteworthy attendance at this exhibition, as well as scholarly commentary upon it results in a working methodology for making theological judgments regarding art: "An effective methodology for relating art and religion has to take seriously the faith experience of the communities producing and receiving the art, as well as to question overly rationalistic paradigms that remove the experiential from both art and theology" (84). Here, González-Andrieu makes an especially important point regarding the catechetical nature of art; art is "catechetical", not simply when it communicates doctrinal truths to a receiver-participant. Instead, art is catechetical when it opens up to a moment of *asombramiento*, of transformative wonder. For this reason, the theologian who seeks to analyze the revelatory nature of art will need to understand both the Christian tradition (and how it is practiced today), while also attentive to the

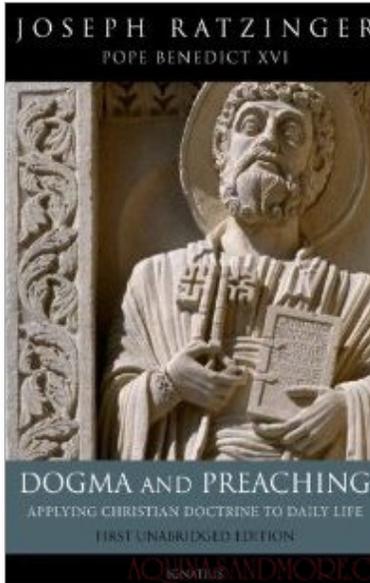
way that art makes transformative experience possible (84). This method is one that González-Andrieu calls *acercamiento*, a movement from far to near, “a moment when a multistranded cable is woven in order to connect me to the art and the art to me in intimate closeness” (90).

In chapter seven, González-Andrieu continues to practice this method of *acercamiento* in examining the nature of art; in chapter eight, as she treats the role of the commonplace in art, and how the artfulness of life is essential to theological aesthetics in a theological tribute to her mentor, Alejandro García-Rivera; and in chapter nine, as she turns to a particularly important case study for those interested in the role of the arts in the Church: the building of the Little Church at Assy. Here, the reader comes to see the subtlety required in assessing the theological function of the arts in liturgical space, in particular. The liturgical worshiper must recognize in the piece of art the depths of the tradition, while also being stretched to re-imagine their own images regarding this tradition. But, liturgical arts fail when they try to communicate a message unintelligible to the worshipers; or to provoke an experience, even if intelligible, that is manipulative of a community’s religious experience. González-Andrieu writes, “powerful arts must do more than expose problems; they must also make us *asombrados*, grateful and wonder-filled beings...” (150). Liturgical artists would be wise to keep a copy of *Bridge to Wonder* in their studios, as a constant reminder of their vocation as *liturgical* artists of wonder.

As the ninth (and final) chapter of *Bridge to Wonder* makes clear, our awakening to such wonder through the arts, places before our eyes the vulnerable and the needy. González-Andrieu concludes:

Through the work of our religious senses and our artistic making, we can come to know one another better, to value the gift of mystery bestowed through radical otherness, and ultimately come to love one another truly. How we share the wisdom of our ancestors, how we glimpse the struggles of our young, how we denounce what is wrong and celebrate what is right, how we build communities of compassion and instill compassion for the most marginal in our communities—all of this doing becomes possible when we come awake to the power of beauty (166).

Therefore, *Bridge to Wonder* is more than a methodological introduction to theological aesthetics. González-Andrieu provides a formation of the Christian imagination, wooing the reader into the transformative practice of *asombrado*. Our churches, our music, and our plastic arts will only become evangelical, catechetical, and liturgical, when the criterion of beauty is not simply a matter of “taste”, but a renewal of human perception through Christ himself.



**Joseph Ratzinger  
(Benedict XVI).  
*Dogma and Preaching:  
Applying Christian Doctrine  
to Daily Life (Unabridged  
Edition)***

Translated by Michael J. Miller and  
Matthew J. O'Connell. San Francisco  
Ignatius Press, 2011.  
\$31.95

I have often wondered why so little of Christian preaching or catechesis actually addresses the Scriptures or Christian doctrine. The narratives woven by expert preachers or catechists are stunning in their complexity; subtle in their use of imagery; and careful in their development of plot. When, the preacher or catechist turns to the Scriptures or doctrine itself, it's akin to moving from a digital Technicolor film to an old black and white movie. Indeed at times, it seems as if the preacher or catechist is applying the doctrine to the life of the assembly with the following proviso: "Sorry, I have to turn to the Scriptures, but we must!"

Of course, one should be careful not to dismiss such an approach to preaching or catechesis as a "modern" failure

of the imagination. Preaching and teaching Christian doctrine in any era is a difficult task, worthy of consideration by the best theological minds of the day. In *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, the preacher and catechist receive the essential handbook for the art of teaching Christianity today—an Augustinian *De doctrina christiana* for the modern world. This new, unabridged translation of Ratzinger's *Dogma und Verkündigung* is a significant contribution to both English-speaking catechists and preachers. Beginning with a theology of preaching, Ratzinger notes that "Christian preaching is not the proclamation of a system of doctrines that follow from one another but, rather, guidance to a reality that is challenge, gift, and promise all in one." (47). In the first part of the book, one then encounters a theory of preaching, which begins with the origins of preaching in the Church, standards for preaching the Gospel today, Christocentrism in preaching, and the relationship between theology and preaching in the Dutch Catechism.

In this last chapter of Part I, Ratzinger makes an indispensable contribution to pastoral theology as a whole. A theology of preaching (and thus catechesis) requires a two-fold translation—the first a discernment of the “matter” behind the formulas of faith; the second, “a further and separate step of translating what has been grasped through that reflection into the language of preaching” (73). The remainder of *Dogma and Preaching* performs precisely this two-fold task, emulating Augustine’s division of *De doctrina christiana*: a way of “finding” the truth and a way of communicating the truth.

And Ratzinger, as one has come to expect, is a highly capable translator of ancient theological formulae into the preached word. In Part II (major themes on preaching) I discovered one of the most successful introductions to Christian doctrine that I have read. Ratzinger considers how the contemporary person can understand the Triune nature of God; what role prayer has in theological discourse; the importance of Christology as the heart of the spiritual life; the doctrines of grace, creation, and the Christian’s relationship to the world; the often confused doctrine of the Church; and, eschatology, including a theology of death and resurrection. A reader familiar with Ratzinger’s corpus of writings will not discover anything remarkably new in these theological chapters. But, the brief, sustained attention to these themes would provide those “Ratzinger novices”, an imaginative, persuasive, and sophisticated introduction to a biblically-rich, philosophically sound, and prayerful approach to theology. Every undergraduate, every pastoral minister, every catechumen, every high school student seeking understanding of their faith, should read Part II of *Dogma and Preaching*.

In Part III, Ratzinger moves from the first translation of theology to the second translation of preaching. Here is where the imagination of the preacher and

catechist is truly formed. The meditations and sermons of Part III on topics ranging from the genealogy of Jesus to the Easter Vigil are theologically sound, spiritually rich, and contemporary in voice. In these sermons, one begins to notice how the entirety of humanity is transfigured through an encounter with the Word of God. In Ratzinger’s meditation upon New Year’s Eve, the celebration of the end of the year, becomes a stunning reflection upon the shortness of human life, and how Jesus Christ (the one who had time for God), “freed us from the dictatorship of time” (351). Each doctrine, each moment of the liturgical year, becomes a “sign” that leads the Christian to contemplate the reality of God in Ratzinger’s preaching. To renew the world itself through the Christian imagination!

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of Ratzinger’s *Dogma and Preaching* for pastoral theologians, including religious educators, liturgists, preachers, and catechists of the faith. The program of translation he sets out is the work of each pastoral theologian. And the art of this translation will require the full attention of theological faculties, seminaries, and doctoral programs in preaching and catechesis. Implicitly, in *Dogma and Preaching*, the reader encounters the outlines of a comprehensive approach to “catechetical theology,” one that takes up the mantle of Augustine’s *De doctrina* for a contemporary age. To be a pastoral theologian or Christian teacher, in the line of Ratzinger, would require the cultivation of a literary imagination, a deep appropriation of the biblical narrative, an astute philosophical mind, an awareness of the challenges posed by modernity toward Christianity, an openness toward beauty, and an immersion into the depths of the theological tradition. And when theological faculties give themselves over to cultivating this approach to catechetical theology, then our catechesis and preaching will cease being mere entertainment. It will be an invitation to wonder.