The Visual Image as a Means of Prayer

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Silence. Light sifting through the curtain filters across the young woman’s face, revealing head and eyes lifted, lips barely parted. Artist Shin-hee Chin’s image—woven and stitched from threads and recycled fabric—conveys the mystery, the inner movement, the focused stillness, the silence of prayer. As viewers our response echoes the young woman’s intensity: we lean forward, listening to the silence, straining to know her prayer, perhaps even moved to pray beside her. Yet, with or without our own words, Silence simply is a prayer.

Shin-hee Chin, Chinmokuu—Silence

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Shin-hee Chin’s Chinmoku: Silence\(^1\) was the lead image in Women at Prayer, a juried online exhibition mounted by the Episcopal Church and the Visual Arts (ECVA), an internet community of visual artists initiated in the year 2000 with the mission “to encourage artists and organizations to engage the visual arts in the spiritual life of the church.”\(^2\) Women at Prayer accompanied the work of “Anglican Women at Prayer,” the international gathering of women held at Virginia Theological Seminary in 2014 that honored women’s prayers as an essential presence in the life of the church. The eighty-one ECVA images were projected as a continuous loop before every plenary session, with a number of the plenary speakers referring to the images and alluding to themes raised in the artwork. And a smaller selection of sixteen images—projected at a slower pace and paired with poetry, song, and prayer—was used for a contemplative prayer service. The conference organizers, including Phoebe Griswold (one of the founders of ECVA), elected to integrate these images into the work of the conference out of their conviction that art constitutes a valid form of prayer, and out of their awareness that the prayers offered by images—much like the prayers of women—often go unremarked.

The art in Women at Prayer (which is comprised of images of women’s prayers but not limited to images by women) exemplifies both those convictions. These images stand in that long tradition in the Western church of art used as a means of prayer (what we might term visual prayer). Women at Prayer, however, enlarges that tradition to encompass prayers that embody the lives and experiences of women. Women’s prayers have so often remained hidden, although the remarkable response to Women at Prayer (indicated by the number of submissions to the online exhibition) is evidence that this is a significant omission. In much the same way, visual prayer has passed unremarked in theological discussions and in manuals on prayer. I propose to offer a theological model for visual prayer by applying the more general descriptions of prayer to the act of praying with images

\(^1\) http://ecva.org/exhibition/WaP/001-Shin-HeeChin-WAP.htm. Shin-hee Chin is Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas. See www.shinheechin.com.

\(^2\) http://ecva.org/about/about.html.
and to locate the images from *Women at Prayer* within the larger Western tradition of visual prayer.

We might begin by asking how the work of the artist can be regarded as prayer. Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and herself indefatigable in prayer, complained about a narrow understanding of praying. “Since when,” she argued, “are *words* the only acceptable form of prayer?” She maintained that people “pray through the witness of their lives, through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people.” Might we not add that artists have prayed through their work and, through their art, offered the faithful a way to pray?

Theologian Karl Barth, in a small volume titled *Prayer*, writes: “At this point it is also important to remark with Calvin that prayer uttered in a language that we do not understand or which the congregation at prayer does not understand is a mockery to God. . . . We must think and speak in a comprehensible tongue, in a language which has meaning for us.” Might we include the visual arts as one of those “languages” that Calvin mentions? In his letters to Bishop Serenus written around the year 600, Gregory the Great famously argued that the image was a means by which the unlettered might be taught. As I was finishing this essay I heard a Pentecost sermon in my own church where the preacher, the Reverend Anne Turner, remarked on all the ways that God speaks to us. She spoke of the many “languages” we use, including those that are “beyond words.” For her, this includes the language of color taught to her by her artist grandmother. “There is no language,” she concluded, “that is useless to God.” Indeed, for some, the visual arts are the most accessible language of prayer.

Barth further comments that “it is prayer that puts us in rapport with God and permits us to collaborate with him.” This is remarkably similar to Roger Hazelton’s description in *A Theological Approach to Art* of the ways that we experience a work of art: “There is another sense . . . in which what artists do is never finished, as their work only begins to live when they have brought it to creative completion. Then

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5 Barth, *Prayer*, 20.
it calls us into something like a colloquy or running dialogue with itself.”6 Perhaps we might say that when we stand with an image in prayer, we are called through our colloquy with that image into rapport with God.

In *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*, contemporary Roman Catholic theologian Richard Viladesau writes specifically about the sacramental power of the arts. Although he concedes the “intrinsic limits of every language, whether spoken or non-verbal,”7 he nevertheless claims that music and the other arts can “serve in the apprehension and service of the sacred.”8 Viladesau argues that “religious art mediates grace,” adding the qualification that “grace is not ‘inherent’ in the image in an objective way, but the image can be a medium of grace insofar as its beauty and/or aesthetic intensification of experience points beyond itself and engages the viewer in dialogue with its subject matter.”9 John Booty makes a similar defense for the power of the image when he writes of religious art as “a way of knowing which is different from mere verbal communication, superior to mere copies of material objects.” Booty notes that the finest works of art are “revelatory, opening a window to eternity, engaging the spectator in a kind of communication which is holy communion, in which the spectator becomes a participant not only in the work of art, but in the meaning, the essence the work reveals, so that as a consequence the spectator, now a participant, experiences some further understanding . . . previously unknown.”10

This kind of “communication which is holy communion” has stirred viewers to prayer since the earliest centuries of the church. These visual prayers have included familiar modes of praying: petition, adoration, lament, contemplation. Among the greatest of the visual prayers of petition are Matthias Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* and *Resurrection*. These paintings are part of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*

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(1516, Colmar, France), a multi-layered and powerfully compelling altarpiece located in a hospice for victims of the disfiguring and invariably fatal lesions of ergotism (“St. Anthony’s Fire”), a disease of the poor who subsisted on bread infected with the ergot mold. The altarpiece was offered to patients as treatment and consolation: the crucified Christ shared these sufferers’ gangrenous wounds, while the resurrected Christ—flesh cleansed and healed—reassured the dying that they, too, would be whole in the resurrection.

Anneke Kaai’s *Hannah’s Prayer* expands our experience of prayers of petition to encompass the disgrace that only a women can suffer: the humiliation of barrenness in a society where a woman’s worth is measured by her fertility. On the right side of the image Hannah lifts her face in urgent, anguished appeal. On the left we see her blood-red arms, stretched heavenward, beseeching God from out of the shame of her childlessness. And just as we see an answer to prayer in Grünewald’s luminous *Resurrection*, so here we discern God’s gift to Hannah in the faint image of an embryo hovering within Hannah’s pleading arms. God has answered her petition with the promise of her son, the prophet Samuel.

Rembrandt’s moving explorations of scripture—surely visual prayers—were informed by his sensitive and sympathetic observations of the lives he saw in the streets around him. These he recorded in countless sketches, taking particular notice of the lives of women and children. One such prayer, the small etching of *The Adoration of the Shepherds: With the Lamp* (1654), depicts Mary and Joseph as humble peasants in a broken barn. They spread their arms to welcome plain, working shepherds out of the cold and darkness. The shepherds—worn and weary men and women, accompanied by one lively and curious child—seem to tiptoe, reverently, prayerfully, into a space that is hallowed and illuminated by the radiance of the Christ Child. Mary’s gesture, as she lifts her cloak to reveal the holy child, is an invitation to our own prayers of adoration. And the etching embodies as well that great prayer from the Prologue to John’s Gospel, “And the light shines in the darkness” (John 1:5).

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Tessa Garver-Daniels’s lithograph *Little Thing*\(^ \text{12} \) echoes Rembrandt’s attention to the seemingly insignificant details of everyday life. As a woman, however, she is able to observe, from inside her own experience, the small ritual of painting her daughter’s fingernails. Indeed, she describes the print as a meditation on the intimacy of motherhood. She pictures herself and her daughter nestled together, intent on their task. Where Rembrandt creates a dramatic contrast of light and dark with dense passages of hatch marks, Garver-Daniels’s print is lighter and sparer. She draws the image with a simple and

\(^{12}\) http://ecva.org/exhibition/WaP/059-TessaGarver-Daniels-WAP.htm. Tessa Garver-Daniels has a B.A. in Art Education from Kent State and is working toward a master’s degree in printmaking at West Virginia University. Her work often has a liturgical and spiritual focus.
Fritz Eichenberg, who worked closely with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, created in his many prints and drawings visual prayers that express his solidarity with the poor and suffering. His wood engraving *The Lamentation of Jeremiah* (1955) shows the prophet standing in shackles, his head raised in a cry of lament. A women cradling an infant huddles at his feet, while a wan and ragged child grasps his hand. Behind the figures we glimpse the ruins of a city which could be any city shattered by war: Jerusalem, Dresden, Coventry, Sarajevo, Aleppo. We can scarcely look at Eichenberg’s timeless image without Jeremiah’s prayer of lament rising in our hearts: “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become!” (Lamentations 1:1).

Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga, like Eichenberg, fuses religious imagery with reflections on social justice to create prayers of lament. In *Prayers of Deliverance 2012* he depicts a mother and child, caught between their village and a border that impedes their entrance into the uncertain safety of the city in the distance. How often are the victims of oppression women and children! We see them, threatened by looming officials and their dogs, but held under the protection of an angel. Lozada-Uruziaga tells us that the mother’s mantra is, “Father deliver us from all evil.” The artist describes the figures as simply “mother and son,” but the suggestion of a halo around her head reminds us that Mary and the infant Jesus were likewise refugees, fleeing from state-sponsored violence. And that our Lord, born in a barn and executed as a criminal, stands as one of us, as one of the least of these, our sisters and brothers.

In contrast with these figurative works, many of them offering stark and wrenching visual prayers, Mark Rothko’s paintings for the non-denominational Rothko Chapel (1971) in Houston move many viewers to contemplative prayer. The fourteen monumental paintings are non-representational and predominantly monochromatic. But the viewer who sits in silent attention begins to discern films of color that move and shimmer through the black and grey, and over time these silent observations give way to a sense of awe and moments of wordless

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Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga, *Prayers of Deliverance 2012*
prayer. Deborah Sokolove, in *Sanctifying Art: Inviting Conversation between Artists, Theologians, and the Church*, relates the reactions of students who were asked to sit in silence before a Rothko canvas. She compares their responses to the experience of singing simple Taizé chants or practicing forms of contemplative prayer: “They had made the connection between the more familiar experience of breath and sound leading them into a place of connection with the divine and the new sensation of visual contemplation taking them to the same edge of awareness.”

Cathie Meighan, SSJ, appropriates this mode of visual meditation, transmuting it through the lens of one woman’s spiritual life. Her painting—fiery red, shot through with shapes of blue and gold—is accompanied by a poem in which she listens for God’s presence and prays that in the challenge of these moments of contemplation she may “find God’s invitation / to be birthed anew.” It is telling that she titles her painting after that most intimate moment between God and woman: *Annunciation*.

Lil Copan’s *Hildegard of Bingen* honors the great twelfth-century German mystic and polymath who served as abbess, philosopher, writer, and composer. Copan depicts Hildegard in a pose characteristic of a saint in an Orthodox icon, but the distortions in the rendering of her face and hands, the multiple lines that outline her halo, the thick impasto of the paint strokes are all signal deviations from Orthodox tradition. Copan infuses the image with her own individual vision, drawn from her training in contemporary art and her interest in the folk art tradition. These imbue Hildegard’s figure with an energy that reflects the creative force of the artist and calls to mind Hildegard’s own prayer:

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15 http://ecva.org/exhibition/WaP/045-CathieMeighanSSJ-WAP.htm. Cathie Meighan, SSJ, is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia. She has served as a teacher for almost forty years.

The fire has its flame and praises God.
The wind blows the flame and praises God.
In the voice we hear the word which praises God.
And the word, when heard, praises God.
So all of creation is a song of praise to God.\(^\text{17}\)

It is important to note that Lil Copan’s image of Hildegard would never be acknowledged as an icon in the Orthodox Church, nor would any of the other images we have explored in this overview of visual prayer. The Orthodox Church honors the image (icon) as equal to scripture and as an integral and essential element of the church’s liturgy and of the prayer of individuals. But this high theology of the image allows no room for an artist’s individual creativity; the icon painter works within a “sacred Tradition,” which is “the power of the Holy

Spirit and of continuity in the spiritual experience of the Church, the power of communion with the spiritual life of all the preceding generations back to the time of the apostles.”18

Copan’s image is an indication of a remarkable surge of interest in the icon in the Western church, even in those denominations that have long been the most resolutely aniconic. Ordained and lay people alike are integrating these ancient images into their own spiritual practices, although usually not in accordance with Orthodox rubrics. Likewise, it is not uncommon for artists working in the Western church’s tradition of visual prayer to draw upon the idiom of the icon, as does Copan, but bypass many of the rules established by Orthodox tradition. Working out of their own creative vision, these artists may depict as saints such figures as Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., who are not part of the Orthodox canon, and may introduce visual elements from contemporary art. Roger Hazelton offers a justification for just such adaptation of the icon tradition: “If the substance of Christian art is the re-presentation of the gospel, its styles may be as free and various as the ingenuity of man can devise. There simply is no one form that is proper or correct for conveying the meaning of what God does for us in Christ.”19

These “Western icons,” like the other visual prayers we have discussed, bear the imprint of the individual artist and the stamp of their particular era. And all of these visual prayers—part of that long-established practice in the Western church—are made possible precisely because the Western church does not assert the Orthodox Church’s high theological claims for the image and does not impose such stringent demands on painters. That does not mean that the Western church is uniform in its approach to images. Roman Catholic churches welcome the employment of art—in the sanctuary and in private devotions—as a stimulus to devotion. The sixteenth-century Council of Trent affirmed this use in 1563 when it counseled that “in paintings and other representations the people are instructed and confirmed in the articles of faith.” Indeed, the decree affirms that “great profit is derived from all holy images,” with the result that the faithful

19 Hazelton, A Theological Approach to Art, 78.
“may fashion their own life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God and cultivate piety.”

By contrast, the marked iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation led to widespread distrust of art in the sanctuary and in private prayer—although images for instruction were considered acceptable in such forms as illustrated Bibles. But in recent decades these prejudices have waned, and there has been a resurgence of interest in the image as an aid to prayer in Protestant churches, colleges, and seminaries.

Another significant development has enlarged the body of the art that comprises visual prayer. Catholic and Protestant theorists have been united for at least a century in arguing that even non-believers can create art for the church. The twentieth-century French Dominican Marie-Alain Couturier, in his influential journal *L'Art Sacré*, famously argued that “it would be safer to turn to geniuses without faith than to believers without talent.” More recently, Deborah Sokolove draws an analogy between the spiritual state of the artist and the priest at the altar. Just as the sacrament is valid regardless of the sanctity of the priest, so “the moral or spiritual condition of the artist need not affect the value of an artwork. It is enough that the art work serve the purpose for which it is made.”

We encounter a signal instance of this perspective in the work of the Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio. A pathological brawler, he spent the last years of his life fleeing from a vendetta that followed his murder of a young gentleman in a dispute over a tennis game. Yet he managed to create an astonishing body of work. He drew on his familiarity with the Ignatian spiritual exercises to create vivid, powerfully tactile interpretations of scenes such as the *Conversion of Saint Paul* (1600) and the *Entombment* (1603–1604). This seeming contradiction between life and work should not surprise any reader of scripture: throughout history God has often chosen to speak and work through the unlikeliest of agents.

So while the Western church cannot boast an overarching theology of the image equivalent to that of the Orthodox Church, it can

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claim a long-standing practice of visual prayer; descriptions of prayer that might be extended to encompass the use of images; and a renewed interest in images as a means of praying. And, among those visual prayers, images of and by women surely merit a significant place.

Finally, while we have argued for the image as a means of prayer for the viewer, we have not explicitly asked whether making the image is a prayerful experience for the artist. This is a harder question to address: while many artists who submitted work to ECVA’s Women at Prayer describe their work as a form of prayer—note both Garver-Daniels and Meighan above—for countless other artists—among them Grünewald and Rembrandt—we have scant written records of any kind. Clearly works such as Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece or Rembrandt’s Adoration of the Shepherds: With the Lamp demanded the artists’ skill, training, and focused intention. These qualities are not incompatible with prayer; indeed, manuals on prayer sometimes use similar words. But while we may be tempted to ascribe to the artist the prayerful responses of the viewer, the truth is that without the artist’s direct testimony we cannot be sure of the artist’s conscious intentions. We might turn here to Flannery O’Connor. In her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” she describes the creative act as having “its source in a realm much larger than that which [the artist’s] conscious mind can encompass.”23 And I think we can argue that when an image stands as prayer, it has its origins in a prayerful consciousness—we might say under the working of the Holy Spirit—whether or not the artist would acknowledge this.

But at the end of any discussion of visual prayer we must return to the image itself. To the wordless prayers that art offers us. To silence.
