

Excerpts From the “The Mystery of Art”: Holy Madness & Art as Suffering, Prayer and Intercession (Jonathan Jackson)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



[Previous post: <http://bit.ly/2jr6PtY>]

Since I've shared my journey as a young artist and glimpsed the beauty of encountering the Orthodox Faith, we can now approach “The Mystery Of Art”. This book was born out of the synergy of my artistic journey and my love for the Ancient Faith.

God is the ultimate Artist and Poet. Being fashioned in His image means that we are also artists and poets, regardless of our vocation in life. We are artists in the way we love. We are poets in the way we pray. Everyone is an artist. We are cosmically bound to one another through a divine tapestry stretching across the ages. Each one of us has a unique part to play in the symphony of God's creation.

In our Orthodox Baptismal Rite, Christ is referred to as “the excellent Artist.”[1] What a profound expression of our Lord. Vincent van Gogh, stood in awe of the Eternal and Most Excellent Artist and said, “[Christ] lived a serene life, and was the greatest artist of all, disdaining marble, clay or colour, working with living flesh. That is to say that this unbelievable artist, one who is scarcely conceivable to such an obtuse instrument as the modern neurotic, worn-out brain, made neither statues, nor pictures, nor books; indeed, he said clearly enough what he was doing—fashioning living men, immortal beings... Christ... is more of an artist than anyone, he works in the spirit and the living flesh, he creates men not statues... Such considerations as these... take us a long way, a very long way: they raise us even above art. They enable one to catch a glimpse of the art of creating life, the art of living immortality. And they're not irrelevant to painting.”



That last line is amazing to me. These lofty considerations about Who Christ is raises us up even above art and yet, they are not irrelevant to painting.

The most important work of an artist is not what he or she creates. It is in the work of being created by the grace of God. The primary focus of the artist is the working out of his salvation. What the artist creates or produces in terms of works of art is always secondary to becoming a work of art in reality. The spiritual artist continually repents his ambition and becomes the poem. This happens by sitting at the feet of the Master and beholding His glory, as the woman Mary did.

The artist does not merely write or sing songs—he becomes the song. He does not simply paint on a canvas; he himself becomes a painting for the glory of God. As Saint John Chrysostom said, “If artists who make statues and paint portraits of kings are held in high esteem, will not God bless ten thousand times more those who reveal and beautify His royal image (for man is the image of God)?”[2]

The Orthodox Christian who, through grace, faith and spiritual labor ascends to the likeness of Christ and “reveals and beautifies God’s royal image” as Saint John Chrysostom says, he is the true artist. The Ascetic who labors in prayer for the life of the world. The mother who sacrifices all for the spiritual well-being of her children. The child of God who lives and breathes the mystery of Christ, he is an artist of the Eternal Realm.

The highest form of art is prayer: whether in the shape of a monologue, a soliloquy, or a stare: in the key of laughter or despair. Has it not fallen upon us to become living parables of life and death? Is it just a job, a paycheck, or a one-night stand with fame? Or is it cosmic, redemptive, and spiritually ordained? Is it simply pretend? Or is the fiction breathing life into reality, like a trusted friend, manifesting not only the motive of the means but also the consequence of the ends?

Is it merely the momentary entertainment of laughter and tears? Or is it, somehow mysteriously, enlightening our forgotten years, our present dreams and our future fears? Like Shakespeare and the Scriptures of old, are we not revealing the vanity of revenge and the sorrow of a love grown cold? Are we not projecting into the very hearts of our beloved audience the bliss of a sacred romance, the hope of restoration, and the grace of a second chance?

Have we not been fashioned in the image of the Trinity? We speak and so hope that some will hear it—knowing that the true artist within must be the Holy Spirit. For Christ is all and in all, and we encounter Him within each other—in the eyes of a sister or the wisdom of a mother, in the tears of a father or the embrace of a brother.

Rejoice, O artists, for you have all entertained angels unseen! How blessed are we to be children who believe, by vocation—and is it too dramatic to say—by destiny?

The Akathist Hymn “Glory To God For All Things” expresses the mystery of the artist. It says:

In the wondrous blending of sounds it is Your call we hear; in the harmony of many voices, in the sublime beauty of music, in the glory of the works of great composers: You lead us to the threshold of paradise to

come and to the choirs of angels. All true beauty has the power to draw the soul toward You and to make it sing in ecstasy: Alleluia!

Ikos 7

The breath of Your Holy Spirit inspires artists, poets, and scientists. The power of Your supreme knowledge makes them prophets and interpreters of Your laws, who reveal the depths of Your creative wisdom. Their works speak unwittingly of You. How great are You in Your creation! How great are You in man! [3]

The artist is placed within a spiritually dangerous cultural dynamic to bring about the return of the prodigal world to the beauty of life. When he creates, the artist seeks to transform the atmosphere. He seeks to affect the heart and infuse the mind with glimpses of beauty and darkness. Art is a form of transcendent communication. It is a reaching out from the depths of one's soul to engross the imagination and will of another. Art is both a medium and a prophecy.

Art As Holy Madness

There are two themes I would to touch upon today: Holy Madness and Art as suffering, Prayer and Intercession. First, we will explore the theme of madness. The most incredible artists and performers make you believe that at any moment, anything is possible. There is a transcendent quality to their work. It's soul-stirring and even transcendent to witness. Madness rivets an audience with its creative force. Anything is possible within this place of artistic madness.

Whether it's the poetry of Leonard Cohen or the live performances of the Radiohead or R.E.M. Or directors like Fellini, Kubrick, Polanski, Hitchcock, and Tarkovsky. There is madness present. Was Mozart normal? Was Beethoven balanced? Was Dostoevsky? Or were they mad on some level? Were they all outcasts to some degree? Were they able to cope with life? Or did they wrestle with demons just beneath the surface? Most of us are familiar with the story of Van Gogh cutting off his own ear?

In general, Artists do not feel balanced or normal. Nobody becomes an actor, painter, writer, musician, or dancer to play it safe (or make a steady income). Just ask my wife. Most of societies artistic heroes are self-destructive and deeply tormented. Because of this, many have grown up believing that in order to be a brilliant artist, one must become tortured as well. If one already happens to be a

lost soul, he must embrace it for the sake of his art—a sacrificial means to a glorious end. Our culture seems to believe that madness is a prerequisite for greatness, and so young artists accept this fate as their own—not just creatively, but personally.

This reality is partially true. But I want to challenge this assumption. I do believe that a kind of madness is required to be a genuine artist. But, perhaps there are two kinds of madness: one that is self-destructive, narcissistic, and tormented and the other, which is therapeutic, selfless, and holy. One leads to loneliness and death, the other to wholeness and life. One leads to chaos; the other leads to sanity. Both can produce brilliant art (and this is where it gets tricky), but only one can produce both brilliant art and a brilliant life.

The question I asked as a young teenager comes into focus again: Is it possible to render harrowing and earthshaking performances or write transformative songs without descending into turmoil and self-destruction? Could Dostoevsky write his dark themes and hold fast to the light? As I said before, Dostoevsky was a lighthouse on my journey. He wrote about murder, madness, and salvation—all from an inner place of illumination. But, I don't believe that he could have written what he did, had he not suffered so much.

Dostoevsky was a tortured soul in many ways. He endured a harrowing mock execution after being arrested for attending subversive political meetings. The experience haunted him the rest of his life. He suffered a lifelong battle with epilepsy in addition to imprisonment and the deaths of his first wife, brother, and two young children. He became a compulsive gambler, always struggling to pay off debts.



But somehow, Dostoevsky found a way to transform his suffering and give it meaning. The only way he could do this was through his faith in the suffering Christ. He glimpsed the madness of love. This glimpse inspired him to write some of the most profound literary works in history. In the darkness he found light. In death, he witnessed the Risen Christ.

Contemplate the madness of the prophets and the saints. Some saints lived in the wilderness or on the tops of pillars for years on end. Some challenged kings and rulers. Moses was mad enough to repeatedly defy Pharaoh. Some prophets stood naked before crowds, hoping to awaken them to their own spiritual poverty. There is a whole category of saints known as “fools for Christ.” Saint Simeon, the “feigner of idiocy,” would skip, dance, and make up strange songs to reveal the truth to people. The Russian film *Ostrov* (The Island) is a powerful example of holy madness and the beauty of repentant prayer.[4] This is not normal behavior!

In contemplating the crucified Christ, we discover the most extreme madness of all. Picture the most innocent man ever to live carrying the Cross of humanity's sins, and as God destroying death by death. Picture Him hanging naked before a mocking world. Can you even imagine the depth of love He must have possessed to suffer the Crucifixion? Is it possible to comprehend the defiant nature of His love as He cried out, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do!" It is sheer madness on a cosmic scale!

What the artist learns from Christ is the madness of love: the extent to which the Divine will go to make us one with him. In the eyes of the world, God's love is the highest form of insanity. The Scriptures declare, "God is Love" (1 John 4:16); this means that in some mysterious and sacred way, God is mad! Not in the sense that He is disturbed, but in the sense that His love reaches beyond the borders of convention and decency, right into the flaming heart of eternity.

To love like Christ is madness to the world. The world teaches that liberation is to love oneself above all. The humility of God is a scandal to the world. The Monks of Mount Athos are madmen. Thank God for their prayers. Saint John Climacus wrote in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* that love "does not fall, does not stop in its course, and allows no respite to him who is wounded by its blessed madness." [5]

Artists who desire to create in the Spirit are invited to encounter the Source of their originality. There is a depth of compassion in the heart of Christ that reaches beyond the temporal means of artistry—a voice crying out in the wilderness of your spirit!

It is a holy madness.

The True Artist is the Holy Spirit. He is the Eternal Poet, Master of story, Creator of light and motion, and Lord of life.

The artist is called not merely to imitate, but to become. Only then will his imitation be true and genuine, not hypocritical, self-righteous, and vain. Only then will his performances, poems, and songs become actions of love and transformation. Only then will his craft become transcendent and reflect something of eternal beauty and worth.

Art as Prayer

They will keep the fabric of the world stable,
And their prayer is in the practice of their craft.
Wisdom of Sirach 38:34

The artist is called to embark on a life of ceaseless prayer (see 1 Thess. 5:17). This is what the Scriptures reveal. But what does this mean? How does this apply to the artist's life and craft? Here lies an ocean of possibilities. What does it mean to "pray without ceasing," as the Apostle Paul enjoined us to do? Ultimately, this is a revelation not of what the artist is to do, but what she is to *become*.

Christ cleared the Temple and said with unquenchable fire, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves'" (Matt. 21:13). His house shall be a house of prayer. St. Paul the Apostle wrote, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16).



The artist is God's temple. She must become a "house of prayer." Christ must cleanse the artist, as He did Solomon's Temple re-establishing the correct spiritual reality and the "right glory" within in her heart. It is an authenticity drenched in personal union with God. The artist's actions are merely manifestations of this inward reality. *The artist is to become a living prayer.*

The artist's performances and works of art are built from the inside out. At the

deepest level, they cease to be performances or works of art as such and become seamless acts of prayer. In this way, the artist fulfills the directive to “pray without ceasing.” There is no separation between the sacred and the secular when one is living in communion with the Trinity. Father Alexander Schmemmann proclaimed this in his seminal work, *For the Life of the World*:

The world is a fallen world because it has fallen away from the awareness that God is all in all. The accumulation of this disregard for God is the original sin that blights the world. And even the religion of this fallen world cannot heal or redeem it, for it has accepted the reduction of God to an area called “sacred” (“spiritual,” “supernatural”)—as opposed to the world as “profane.” It has accepted the all-embracing secularism which attempts to steal the world away from God.[6]

The role of the artist is to bridge this gap and fill the world with grace. Prayer is not relegated to church or to specific times of the day. The artist does not pray at the beginning and the end of the day; he prays always and everywhere, for everyone and everything. The stage or studio itself becomes sacred, because everything God made is for His glory. The blank page is a holy garden waiting to be cultivated by a son or daughter of God. The musical instrument is a spiritual weapon placed into the hands of a sacred vessel.

In Christ, everything man sees, touches and encounters becomes transformed and redeemed. He seeks to unite, not to separate. He longs to heal, not to condemn. There is no such thing as sacred art or profane art in this context. The world only becomes profane when it is approached as a thing in and of itself. The grace of the Church should fill the Christian to overflowing, whereby she reenters the world carrying within her the mystery of Christ’s love.

To the artist, this means that every song is a prayer. Every painting is a cry for transcendence and revelation. Every film is a parable of beauty or the emptiness of life without hope and meaning. We are all children drawing pictures to make sense of our pain. But we are also trying to make sense of the beauty we can’t seem to shake, irrespective of life’s ugliness. All of humanity is on its knees, every second of every day. Rebellion is a prayer; resignation is the desperate supplication for the end of disappointments. Laughter is the medicine of angels. Story is man’s participation in the brilliance of God. On some level, we are all crying out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (see Matt. 27:46). When Christ echoed this psalm on the Cross, He spoke for humanity.

It was a cosmic cry, wherein the cries of every man and woman from the beginning of time were lifted up to God at the perfect pitch of empathy, forgiveness, and grace. Life is prayer. Prayer is life. From this place of inner communion with God, the artist becomes (for the first time) truly open to others, both personally and cosmically. Prayer is not simply communion with God, it also, by its very nature becomes intercessory, for the life of the world.

Art as Intercession and Sacrifice

If Christ is the Excellent Artist, it is import to meditate on His Life's Work. The shocking reality of Jesus Christ is that He entered into humanity's sorrow and agony completely: into the silence of God. By entering into this harrowing silence—by experiencing it on behalf of all—He broke the silence. The Eternal One, by assuming humanity's anguish and dying in the garment of our flesh on the Cross, completely changed the epicenter of our relationship to the mystery of suffering. God was not silent in the Incarnate Christ. He transformed suffering and gave it meaning.

The Son of God knows what it feels like to cry out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" and receive only silence in response. The Innocent One took on the sins of the world. He did nothing to deserve crucifixion or the condemnation of others. Nevertheless, He suffered for the sake of our freedom and healing.

It is this divine fountain that the artist draws from in order to portray the sufferings and joy of humanity. She shares in the suffering of Christ. She immerses herself in the compassionate love of God. She approaches the mystery of the Crucified One and calls upon the power of the Resurrection. This releases mercy and healing upon everyone who encounters what is being portrayed through her performances, songs, and works of art.

(A quick story of intercession in the realm of acting)

Again and again in the Scriptures, we read about the intercession of a few on behalf of the many. Moses stood before God and pleaded to be killed so the people of Israel might be spared. An angel visited Daniel towards the end of the Babylonian Captivity, telling him to pray, because the time of deliverance was at hand.

"The time is at hand; therefore pray!" This is the spiritual vision of the Scriptures, and it must become the vision of the artist. God has chosen to operate in cooperation with humanity and with our prayers. He has chosen to interact with His

creation. He has chosen to be in relationship with humanity. The gift of fellowship with the Holy Trinity has given man an unparalleled blessing and responsibility. Moses prayed and the Lord had mercy. Daniel prayed and Israel was freed. Job prayed and his friends were spared. But all of these instances were only a foreshadowing of the ultimate act of prayer and intercession.



The Art of the Cross

The ultimate act of intercession for the world is the Cross of Christ. Everything before this event points toward it, and everything since refers back to it. It is the center of history. The artist is called to become a coworker with Christ in this profound grace (see 1 Cor. 3:9).

The artist's performances are destined to become not only seamless acts of prayer but also holy acts of intercession. The spiritual artist creates from a place of wounded love and humility—like Christ. She enters into the emotional, spiritual, and psychological plight of humanity, all the while praying that this living sacrifice would be acceptable and pleasing to God—that it would loose the bonds of the oppressed and give sight to the blind.

If the actor's role is someone struggling with suicide, then she becomes a living prayer for those who are oppressed by this particular darkness. If it happens to be a heroin addict, the artist's soul begins to cry out for those who are bound by this affliction. It does not need to be this dramatic all the time—but there will always be

a place for some kind of cosmic compassion and intercession: whether in poetry, fiction, painting, sculpting, singing, dance, or any other artistic medium.

Without this dimension, the artist's performances and works of art remain self-indulgent. God will still use these works of art because He is "all and in all." But how much more occurs when the artist consciously partners with the Divine? When she enters into synergy with God?

The more the artist allows herself to be broken in the presence of God's love, the more available she becomes to the mystery of the Spirit. Christ said, "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). The artist must therefore shine—not through ego or self-righteousness, but through compassion, sacrifice, and love. Truth means nothing unless it is consumed with love. The artist must become "all flame," as one of the Desert Fathers proclaimed.[7] The soul is consumed by the passion of God's love for His creation.

The artist weeps all the time, not just when the cameras are rolling or when she's on stage singing a song. She sacrifices herself, not for recognition, but for the spiritual freedom of others. She weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice. She becomes truly meek, which means to become sensitive and vulnerable to the Holy Spirit. The best example of this, after Christ Himself, is Mary the Theotokos (which literally means "God-Bearer").

As a child of the New Creation, the artist is to become like Mary: a "God-bearer," fully open to the mysterious and challenging will of God. Through love, the artist begins to share in the sufferings of Christ, as did His Mother. The artist finds herself at the foot of the Cross, with Mary, weeping for the sorrow of her Son. This sorrow is the mourning of humanity itself.

If she allows herself to become open to God and suffer for the brilliance of love, then every moment of every scene or every note of every song becomes a prophetic offering of worship and thanksgiving. From this place of ceaseless prayer and compassionate intercession, the artist is transformed from a mere entertainer into a prophet—a humble vessel of clay for God's love to dwell in.

It may seem strange to portray events and characters that are not holy and beautiful or to write songs about troubled souls. But, in reality, it is not strange at all. Who better to prophetically enter into the depths of humanity than those who are living in ceaseless prayer with God? It is as strange as Dostoevsky writing *Crime and Punishment*, *Demons*, *Notes from the Underground*, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, or *The Brothers Karamazov*.

This creative engagement can only be done with a deep love for mankind. That's the brilliance of Christ: His holiness increases our love for man. It never diminishes it through shallow self-righteousness. The holiness of Christ brings us closer to humanity: closer to our true beauty and fearsome darkness. *Any talk of Christianity that displays a haughty distance towards the brokenness and vulnerability of humanity has nothing to do with Christ.*

He is the Divine Son who wept at the grave of Lazarus, rejoiced at the wedding in Cana, forgave the woman caught in adultery, sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, and prayed for forgiveness over those who were having Him crucified. (Cosmically speaking, that would be each one of us, through our blindness to Love.)

In the mystery of art and storytelling, something mystical takes place: man, in all of his broken madness, is brought into the holy madness of Christ. The artist discovers himself "in Christ." He discovers the mystery of himself in the mystery of Christ because the Eternal Artist belongs to both heaven and earth. Through Christ, the artist returns to Eden. Once again, he becomes the sacrament he was created to be. The artist becomes truly human in beholding the face of Christ.

(to be continued)

[1] The Service of Holy Baptism, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, http://www.goarch.org/chapel/liturgical_texts/baptism

[2] Saint John Chrysostom, Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson, trans., *On Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1986), p. 71

[3] Protopresbyter Gregory Petrov, *The Akathist Hymn, Glory to God for All Things*.

[4] *Ostrov (The Island)*, 2006, NTSC version with English subtitles

[5] Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Brookline, MA, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2012), Step 30, Paragraph 3, p. 244

[6] Schmemmann, Alexander, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1973), p. 16

[7] *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Benedicta Ward, trans. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian

Publications, 1984). Here is the excerpt: "Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'" (p. 103)