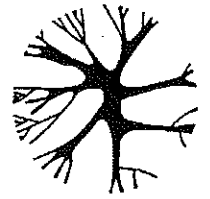


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Digital Media Art-Making in Small Group Faith Formation: An Occasion for Experiencing *Communio* in Today's Participatory Cultures

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In today's "participatory cultures" amateur photography has exploded. "Participatory cultures," a term coined by Jenkins (2009), refers to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others' opinion of what they have created" (p. xi). . . .

Because of camera phones, digital media art-making and sharing—of photos and video—has become an integral, taken-for-granted, daily practice for people who want to communicate with friends and family. A vivid example of this phenomenon occurred when the newly elected Pope Francis came out to the St. Peter's Square balcony to greet the waiting crowds. Hundreds if not thousands of people instinctively lifted up their camera phones, e-tablets, and digital cameras to capture that historic moment and share it (Zhang, 2013). On average, Facebook users upload 350 million images each day. For 2012, that resulted in 240 billion images being shared (Smith, 2013). . . .

Although uploading images online, via email and multiple social networking sites, is a common practice, so is sharing images when people are physically together. Who has not seen someone simply handing a smartphone to another for that person to see images stored on their "camera roll." Either way, online or face-to-face, people use digital images to weave their web of relations and to create their community of people who care about their lives.

Dioceses and parishes have yet to realize the potential of this phenomenon for helping people con-

nect with the faith and the faith community and to weave their web of relations in a way that leads them to our Triune God. How many dioceses and parishes have a space on their websites where parishioners' own photos are featured? . . . Even though this phenomenal explosion of visual creativity and popular image-sharing has been progressing exponentially over the last decade, the churches seem hardly to have noticed. To put it bluntly, they are missing the boat. . . .

I see the potential for image-making and image-sharing in small group settings as having the potential to become a regular spiritual practice within a faith community. As anyone who has grandchildren will report, photography can potentially be of interest to almost every age-group, down to the three-year-old who already is "snapping" images on her parents' smartphone or on her own toy version of it. Doing photography with a group can be attractive to active as well as to marginally active church members. . . .

What's more, when the baptized gather in small groups in the context of prayer and deep respectful sharing of their photographs, they can experience not only community, but also *communio*, the phenomenon of the Spirit creating the "Gifted We." Scharer and Hilbereth (2008) describe beautifully this advent of the "We" that can occur in a group process done in a faith context. In leading workshops and seminars, they have watched with gratitude and awe as the "We" emerges among a group of individuals who may never have known each other before. Within such groups, "'Successful' communication is not something 'made' but something 'given'; it is a gift given by the Other, who is relationship and who spiritually indwells in each of us" (p. 45). As Hilbereth and Scharer report, the dynamics and outcome of the sharing within a gathered circle of the baptized can be a powerful and meaning-filled experience of church:

[G]roup experience is something that belongs to the core of our faith, the experience of God's gift calling so many different people to the disciple-

This essay comes from a longer presentation to the conference on social media and theology.

ship of Jesus Christ and giving them life in his Spirit. Precisely because this gift is not of our making, because we can't control it, it liberates and enriches us. We are gift for one another; therein is rooted the free character of the We that constitutes church. (p. 94).

In this essay, . . . I report on my research into how one form of digital media art-making—digital photography—can become a spiritual practice for the baptized, and even for those thinking about becoming baptized. (I have experimented with other media art possibilities, as well, such as digital storytelling which can combine first-person narration with photographs, sounds, music, graphics, and video to create a video digital story that can be shared online and face-to-face.) I will make the case for why digital media art-making and sharing could, and even should, naturally become an integral spiritual practice of a church that calls itself sacramental.

What is at stake?

The world is permeated by the grace of God. . . . The world is constantly and ceaselessly possessed by grace from its innermost roots, from the innermost personal center of the spiritual subject. It is constantly and ceaselessly sustained and moved by God's self-bestowal even prior to the question (admittedly crucial) of how creaturely freedom reacts to this "engracing" of the world . . . the question, in other words, of whether creaturely freedom accepts the grace. . . . Whether the world gives the impression . . . of being imbued with grace in this way, or whether it constantly seems to give the lie to this state of being permeated by God's grace which it has, this in no sense alters the fact that it is so. (Rahner, 1973, pp. 166ff.)

While the world may be grace-drenched as Rahner claims, how might people today stop long enough to notice? "We hardly take a long look at anything these days. In our day-to-day lives we often move at such a hurried pace that the best we can do is tender a brief glance" (Cannato, 2006, p. 12). Rahner (1977) gave this warning about our inability to stop and notice. Christians of our day "will either be a 'mystic,' one who has experienced 'something,' or (we) will cease to be anything at all" (p. 15).

The churches today need to foster spiritual practices that help the baptized develop the capacity to tender the world more than a brief glance—to experience the world "engraced," as sacrament. . . . The Roman Catholic liturgical rites presume that participants come

to our worship services with the capacity to experience "something." To experience that "something," though, somewhere along the way worshipers need to have mentors and guides who help them realize, as St. Ignatius of Loyola taught, that we are all capable of "finding God in all things." There is a mutual correlation between our spiritual awareness while we are "inside" liturgy and our spiritual awareness "outside" of it. Strengthen one, strengthen the other. Hughes (2013), explains what is at stake:

Alas, in the 40-plus years since the council fathers conceived a renewed sacramental life, and despite the vision of an engaging sacramental spirituality found in the introduction to the individual rites, we have not yet clearly forged the bonds between rites and life. *We haven't learned to make the connections.* We have rolled out the reformed sacramental rites. In fact, we can do them very well. But we did not sufficiently ground them in the larger sacramental reality of our daily lives. We may enact the rites very well, but we miss the meaning altogether. Ultimately, until we can make the connections between the stuff of our daily life and the sacramental life of the community of believers, the implementation of the liturgical reform will remain sadly truncated . . .

How do we learn to make the connections? How do we learn to see with "sacramental glasses"? How do we learn to pay attention? (pp. 60–61, emphasis added).

DeLisio (2007) proposes that we help the baptized develop "sacramental imaginations": "A human faculty by which we are enabled to see, experience, interpret, trust, hope, envision and expect that the Creator is eternally for, with, and within the cosmos, and that everything in the cosmos bears the sacramental presence and promise of God" (p. 269). For what Hughes calls "sacramental living" we need sacramental imaginations. Just as Christians are "made, not born," as Tertullian pointed out, their sacramental imaginations are a human faculty that needs nurturing. "There is nothing profane here below for those who know how to see," wrote Rahner's fellow Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin (1960, p. 66). Ah, but there's the rub . . . "for those who know how to see." Baptism does not automatically instill a sacramental imagination. Garon points to the dilemma the church faces when members have no "sacramental glasses":

From soap bubbles to galaxies, and even beyond, everything everywhere is alive with

meaning. . . . But not everyone discerns the finer, more elusive whisperings of nature. Such discernment requires a willingness to take the road less traveled, to slow down and listen attentively, to read with good judgment, to reflect in wonder on life and its meanings. In a day and age when we address the visibles of this world with much fervor, all is not well between ourselves and the invisibles. (p. 1)

So how do the baptized learn to see the “invisible” in the visible? How do we learn this sacramental way of seeing all of life? Building on the work of Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin, and other theologians ancient and contemporary, DeLisio proposes that we take on liturgical and spiritual practices that will enhance and stretch our sacramental imaginations in liturgy and life. Photography can be one of the spiritual practices that can enhance our sacramental imaginations.

Why do photography as a spiritual practice?

Whether we are talking about the “Fine Arts” or “art with a small ‘a,’” art in general builds “effective bridges to the experiences of revelatory wonder” (González-Andrieu, 2013, p. 117). “Creative works engender wonder in us because they effectively pass along someone else’s experiences of wonder in a way that approximates that experience” (p. 43). Among the billions of images shared via the Internet, surely some of them qualify in this way. . . . When done in a contemplative manner, photography can sharpen our vision in more ways than just improved physical seeing. Valters Paintner, a spiritual director and photographer, explains that the act of doing photography can open “the eyes of the heart”:

Our human capacity to perceive is limited because God’s full glory is too radiant for us to bear fully.

Yet the graced eye can glimpse beauty everywhere, seeing the divine at work in the hidden depths of things. It is so easy to let our senses be dulled and to settle for the ordinary. Often, life seems to be just what it offers on the surface; as Ecclesiastes puts it, “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). The technology, speed, and busyness so prized by our Western culture foster a habit of blindness. For all the bustle, a dreary sameness comes to mark the places where we live. We forget that there is a vast depth beneath the apparent surfaces of things.

The eye of aesthetic spirituality sees more than other eyes. Art in general, and photography in particular, helps to facilitate this awakening

by granting us epiphanies through its transfigurations of the ordinary. We come to know more than what appears within our line of vision. (2013, p. 13).

Our image-making devices may or may not enhance our human capacity to perceive, depending on how we use them. The creative act of making a photo can potentially lead to our experiencing epiphanies, as Paintner indicates, and to our sharing that experience of wonder with others. When we use our image-making devices in this way we are engaging in “focal practices.” Using categories offered by Albert Borgmann, a philosopher of technology, Gaillardetz (2007) writes of the difference between a “device” that is a technological convenience and a “focal thing” that invites us into engaging “focal practices” with others:

These “practices” are often routine ways in which we engage the larger world in our daily lives. They are activities we undertake in order to obtain a desired good, but, and this is crucial, in some sense the goods we desire are internal to the practice—they cannot be separated. These practices, while often pedestrian, generally demand the cultivation of some basic discipline or skills, a certain degree of attentiveness, and they can be judged by some accepted standard of excellence. (p. 6)

Gaillardetz urges us to take on “focal practices” that will invite us to spend ourselves with and for others. “Focal things” can lead us to “focal practices” that can result in “focal living,” what Gaillardetz calls a manifestation of “communion” (p. 9). In the sharing that “focal practices” typically call for, these practices can enhance our relationships with each other and the rest of creation. Inseparable from their particular context, “focal things” and their related “focal practices” lead to “a multitextured, multilayered web of relationships with the larger world” (p. 3). “Focal things” provide a focus around which people interact. “Focal things” invite people to participate in “focal practices.” These practices require skills, ones intentionally honed and shared within a community. They tend to bring people together, by necessity and by choice. Through such “focal practices,” Gaillardetz says, we can transform our days and our relationships. Doing photography as a spiritual practice with a small group can become a “focal practice” that enhances and strengthens our web of relationships. This kind of readily available artistic practice can invite us to be at play in the Spirit, and this individual playing as a spir-

itual practice can then be shared with others in Spirit-filled experiences of *communio* in church-sponsored small groups.

Borgmann (2003) would likely count camera phones among the technological devices that have changed the cultural paradigm of how we live together, a shift in practices of daily life that he says requires a counterpractice: "Since technology as a way of life is so pervasive, so well entrenched, and so concealed in its quotidianity, Christians must meet the rule of technology with a deliberate and regular counterpractice" (p. 94). Paradoxically, a technological device in the hands of so many—a camera phone—can be part of a Christian counterpractice to the "rule of technology." Phillips, a photographer, describes what is possible:

The whole world changes for me when I walk through it with my camera. On days when I walk for the sake of walking, with no camera in hand, my mind is besieged with random thoughts, breaking like waves on the shore of my being. I am pushed and pulled by the surge of them, like a strand of kelp below the sea, always moving in the ebb and flow.

On days when I walk for the sake of seeing, the act of looking consumes my consciousness. The mind quiets down, giving way to the eyes, and the world enters through the silent portals. What thoughts occur in that timeless movement seem not to come from outside myself, but to surface from a place deep within, rising from a soul in search of expression. (2000, p. 73)

... Valters Paintner and Beckman (2010) recommend photography as one of many possible visual arts through which the churches can invite people to deepen their spiritual lives. In looking through the lens of a camera or at the screen of a camera phone, Valters Paintner notes:

We may find that beauty is truly shimmering everywhere, moving our hearts even in the midst of decay or destruction. This is the power of the lens—to help us make space in our field of vision for things regardless of their perceived aesthetic value, so we might discover a deeper landscape, full of unexpected beauty. (2013, pp. 20–21)

Photography as spiritual practice

... Intriguingly, the very same communication devices that may contribute to our being "alone together" (Turkle, 2011) have the potential to offer faith communities a new opportunity to bring people together to

create new webs of relationships in the matrix of a combination of physical face-to-face and virtual online presence.

... Small faith formation groups designed around the practice of photography could run for a different number of sessions or occur at different intervals throughout a season or year. At the very least, a group would need four sessions of at least one-and-a-half to two-hours duration, depending on the number of participants, in order to make sure everyone knew the basics of photography (that is, the elements of design and composition) and the fundamentals of participating in group spiritual reflection. Small groups might be formed around the practice of close-up, people, nature, landscape, or other categories of photography. They might meet once a month or for just one day. Even if a particular group will only be meeting for a specific number of times, nonetheless the experience is one that involves a creative process that needs to remain a creative process, not a program with a product:

In working with the expressive arts we are invited to place emphasis on the creative process over the creative product. We live in a very product oriented culture. The way we spend our time may only seem valuable if we have something to show for it, if we are productive and "busy." We often measure our own worth by how much we accomplish in a given time and how many goals we reach. In the expressive arts, however, much as in prayer, the focus is on the process of creativity and art-making itself rather than the creation of a beautiful product. Inevitably the art created will be beautiful as an authentic expression of the soul. The heart of the work, however, is to free ourselves from the expectations and goals that can keep us from entering deeply into our own creative longings and expressions. (Valters Paintner & Beckman, 2010, pp. 17–18)

An invitation to enter into the process of doing photography as a spiritual practice is an invitation to engage in creative expression. It is also an invitation to enter into a process that would fall into the broad category that Prechtel calls a "spiritual companionship group," one of whose purposes is "to provide an environment that invites and affirms a contemplative awareness of the presence of God in our midst" (2012, p. 36).

What might a group process look like?

... Because I saw the creation of media arts as a social practice—one that could be learned from others and that had community expectations and standards—I

proposed a highly inclusive process called communal co-creation of liturgical media art that would be open to people of all ages. Ideally, a core group that might foster this liturgical ministry would include some people already skilled in digital media art-making and some, regardless of their media skills, who were particularly sensitive to the metaphorical in liturgy and life (Crowley, 2006, 2007).

. . . I wanted my students to discover how photographs of daily life can potentially serve as “a portal to the mystery of God” (Evangelical, 2002). This is not a photography course. It is a course designed to help these current and future ministers of the church ecumenical to lead small groups in doing photography as a spiritual practice. Through the creating and sharing of photographs and the practice of contemplation of those photographs, an elementary form of *visio divina*, it gives them experience in the mystagogy of daily life and begins to prepare them to be mystagogues for their faith communities. “Mystagogy” is a term used to refer to reflection upon the experience of the “mysteries” that are the sacraments. A “mystagogue” is the one who would lead that reflection, as did the mystagogues in the patristic era with neophytes after Easter Vigil initiation. Photography done in the course of a small group experience, within a contemplative prayer-filled context, may result in local congregants creating images that appear on their parish website, in the church bulletin, in their worship, in catechetical classes, or in ongoing faith formation groups. Regardless of where or whether the images produced might ultimately contribute to the life of the community, that destination is not the *raison d’être* for the process. Creating a community of everyday mystics is the long-term goal.

Each week each student would upload an album of five to seven photographs to our online course site. At the start of class, after prayer that invoked the Holy Spirit, we would engage these photographs. Only after viewing the full set in silence would students then be free to indicate an image she or he wanted to go back to and comment upon. I instructed students to respond to what they saw and what that evoked within them, before they were to make any comment upon the particular photographic skill in evidence. The students learned how even a photograph of lines could evoke and provoke their imaginations. Once students had learned to respect this process—contemplate in silence, comment about the image and what it evoked, share what they had discovered in the act of making the image and in encountering the image with others—did

we move on to ask questions related to worship. . . . Eventually we reversed the process to the admittedly harder assignments of taking photographs for particular liturgical occasions.

The initial students, all ministers-in-training, . . . encouraged me to see that this process need not be limited to the purposes of creating liturgical media art. The process itself had value as a spiritual practice. It could work with any parish group. Each hour-and-a-half session adapted Prechtel’s basic structure for spiritual companionship small groups:

- simple opening ritual with prayer;
- brief check-in time;
- group focus, that is, contemplation and conversation about the photographs; and
- closing prayer (2012, p. 37).

Consequently, I adapted my classroom process for a small group of my fellow parishioners. At the start of each of the six sessions, we began with prayer that called upon the Holy Spirit to be present in our viewing and our sharing. We looked at the images each person had offered, person by person. Other members of the group would comment on what they saw or felt and what the images evoked in their memories and imaginations before the photographer whose images they were would speak of what she or he had discovered in the process of making the images. Over the course of an hour-and-a-half, the projection of the images lead to rich conversation and sharing about the grace the parishioners had glimpsed in their own neighborhoods that week because they were intentionally open to finding it. Phillips points to the importance of how the act of making images can lead to interaction with others and the Holy Other in our midst:

Our relationships with people are vital and constantly changing. The more we give, the more we receive. The more we seek, the more we find. Finding God at eye level takes little more than attention, intention, and commitment. (2000)

Having a group in which you can share where you found God and to whose members you are accountable leads to enhanced seeing of the divine in the daily. Each gathering closed with prayers of thanksgiving for these moments of finding and sharing God-at-eye-level with each other. . . .

Over time, I created a website that included short reflections designed to help the participants make spiritual connections between their taking images and their “receiving the light”: “Photography as a Spiritual

Practice,” <http://www.photogsp.weebly.com>. . . . What was very new about this mini-course was that many of the images shared, including my own, were taken on smartphones, a practice some have dubbed “iPhoneography.” Even though some of the people who used their smartphones also owned DSLR cameras, the smartphone was “there” when they glimpsed grace in their world and wanted to share it.

This whole process is a hybrid one—a mix of online and face-to-face interaction and contemplation—that only recently has been made possible because of the easy access of camera phones and the easy sharing of the Internet. . . . For the churches this means that through these kinds of small group interactions and creative efforts we have new possibilities for developing our sacramental imaginations and increased opportunities for more frequently putting on our “sacramental glasses.”

What are the implications for faith formation?

. . . . The subjects of what may be photographed, the people who may take those photographs (children, teens, young adults, adults, elders), and their particular circumstances will inevitably vary. The approach to engaging in digital media art-making, though, changes significantly and beneficially when these images can be viewed in small groups and become the focus of communal reflection. Then this focal practice can become a spiritual practice that leads to an experience that can be truly transforming—*communio*. . . . This is the possibility open to the churches that embrace the opportunity of leading their members, of whatever age, into deeper “sacramental living in a post-conciliar church” though participation in small groups engaged in digital media art-making as a spiritual practice.

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