

Richard Viladesau. *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*. New York: Paulist, 2000. 270 pages. \$12.48.

Twenty years into a life of congregational preaching and teaching I continue to read, study, and experiment with curating worship<sup>1</sup> as I ponder the fate of the sermon in an image-driven world. Pastors and congregations struggle to commune and communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ in a postmodern intellectual, spiritual, and experiential marketplace of truths. The curating worship movement moves art from the screen above the pulpit to the foundation of the worship experience, where the people (perhaps) might perceive the implicit Good News beyond the guiding hands of the keepers of the keys. Richard Viladesau, a theology professor at Fordham University, in *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*, curates a exhibition of aesthetic theology that reconciles art and theology, and ultimately demonstrates how the beauty of this union manifests in the rhetorical art (and logic) of preaching.

Viladesau invites readers to experience the beauty of ancient and classical Western music and art (mapping out an extensive discography and an online gallery) as he demonstrates the power of aesthetic theology to realize in art a bridge language between the academy and popular (lived) theology. Along the way, this musician/art patron/theologian asks questions about how the grammar of musical proportion and art perspective speak to our bodies, minds, and spirits. Through Viladesau's eyes and ears, you hear the "polyphony in stone" of Gothic cathedral architecture (18) and draw back to perceive the story of Western painting (and theology) writ large as artists seek in color to resonate with viewers' souls (94).

Things get really interesting as Viladesau guides readers to consider how this conversation between art and theology plays out in a sermon around the Table. Like all conversations, this one goes both ways. Viladesau encourages theologians to reflect on beauty and art, but he also invites pastoral practitioners of "the arts of ministry" to "incorporate theology as an intrinsic part of their functioning" in order to commune and communicate the beauty and unity of God (218). This effort is no mere sketch. Drawing on Jesus' use of parables, Viladesau argues for a "correlational" strategy in preaching that mines cultural imagination (in "poetry, literature, film, and art") to articulate questions that only the Gospel can answer (193). He also offers an insightful collection of triads articulated by Augustine, J. R. R. Tolkien, Bernard Lonergan, and Paul Tillich/David Tracy as fertile ground for crafting sermons that appeal to head and heart (199).

It is easy to get lost in this maze. This sketch is deliberately incomplete and complex. Viladesau draws together the reflections of many deep thinkers and artists. Just as apophatic spirituality—the *via negativa* or way of denial—contents itself with implicit truth, Viladesau does not resolve the tension between explicit and intrinsic beauty/revelation. The beauty that is art "both enables and limits its revelatory power" he warns at the outset (5). As he explores art as theological text in the third chapter, Viladesau argues for the necessity of conversion—with a crucial "eschatological proviso"—to aspire to know God's beauty as we are fully known (148-149; and 1 Corinthians 13:12). This side of eternity, we see only dimly, even through the lens of theological aesthetics. While Viladesau acknowledges "the event and person of Jesus Christ" as the "Christian classic par excellence" (152), Christ's resurrection veils all ultimate meaning "in the transcendence of God" (162). This transcendent beauty incorporates the whole of creation, "including those whose lives at present are far from beautiful" (149).

Viladesau offers no easy answers, but he curates a gallery that displays the iconic, sacramental power of art as a language and text to experience and understand God’s beauty—“the unity of being” (220). With this exhibition, he calls on preachers and theologians, artists, activists, and those considered “far from beautiful” to experience the language of theological aesthetics as a community that is “nothing other than the achievement of common meaning” (188). While Viladesau’s gallery includes only Western/European art, his exhibition intentionally invites more contributions to preach, to sing, and to paint God’s story of magnificent and haunting unity that eludes, calls, and inspires us all.

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<sup>i</sup> See Jonny Baker’s anthology, *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2010) and Mark Pierson’s *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis, MN: Sparkhouse, 2010).