



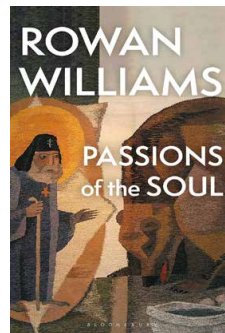
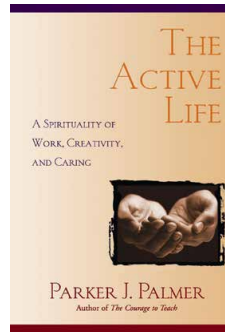
Benyamin (Indonesian), **Pentecost**, 1992. Source: Many Faces of Christian Art in Indonesia (Jakarta: Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia, 1993)

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.  
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
 And though the last lights off the black West went  
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

**Recently I have been considering** the importance of contemplation, and frankly trying to sort out just what it is. Some years ago I read a book by Parker Palmer *The Active Life*. In that work he notes the tension in his own life between action and contemplation. Palmer concludes that it is not to be an either/or but a both/and. Action may be understood as *instrumental* or *expressive*. The instrumental view sees our activity as a means to an end and it is measured by success or failure. Expressive action is linked to our inner life and is more organic, not measured by success or failure but by its resonance with our identity, or with our calling, our vocation in life. He observes that “to be fully alive is to contemplate”. The contemplative turn is not characterized by the effort to employ some technique, rather it is a reaching within ourselves to engage our capacity to discern and to unmask our illusions (a spiritual exercise at its best).



Much in modern society militates against contemplative practice. We easily become trapped in the prevailing (frenetic) patterns of society. Unfortunately we often love our captivity and want to hold on to our illusions. After all they are familiar, we are used to these patterns and the invitation to an alternate way of living threatens our comfort. Rowan Williams in his book *Passions of the Soul* (2024) insightfully notes that “Perhaps we should think of nous” [not as intellect or mind as the Greeks did but] “as the instinct in us for seeing and loving what’s real, what’s true ... a kind of magnetic turning toward the real.” “*Nous*, then is the capacity for



*contemplation*, the capacity for seeing, loving, absorbing, being transformed by what is supremely real—the life of God the Holy Trinity.” (pp xx–xxi)

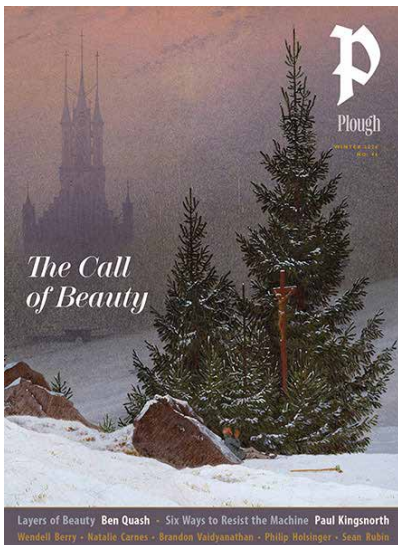
Similar themes show up in Thomas Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation*. It is Merton’s view that much is delivered to us in this world that can nurture our spiritual vitality but in our distracted lives we are ill-prepared to receive these cues from ordinary life. Merton writes: “Contemplation is ...the response to a call: a call

*Continued on page 4*

## On Beauty

Some months ago I subscribed to a quarterly magazine called *Plough*. It's a publication by a Christian group known as the *Bruderhof*. They have been active for about a century and though a small community they have a large vision. The magazine is a rich resource of thoughtful engagement with issues relevant for contemporary life. A couple of issues ago the theme was *The Call of Beauty* which contained several excellent articles exploring this important topic. Here I offer a sampling from that publication.

Quoting David Bentley Hart; "Nothing else impresses itself upon our attention with at once so wonderful a power and so evocative an immediacy. Beauty is there in the order of things, given again and again in a way that defies description and denial with equal impertinence." (p.12)



Theologian Ben Quash notes: "A belief in beauty may be awoken in us by what we experience around us and sustained by ongoing ways of relating to what's around us. ... I think that often—as with faith—to live *in* it [beauty] and to live *into* it is a way to find confirmations of it. And that changes the way you live. The belief that beauty seeks to speak to us should

make us more gently attentive, more patiently attentive, more optimistically attentive,—more hopefully attentive actually. For hope is more than optimism. Its a disposition not a feeling, a disposition that sometimes we need to hold ourselves to. ... Relationship in a sense is beauty. ..that includes relationship between two notes ... in a composition. The relationship between two colours in a painting, the proportions of an architectural space. ... and in the forms of mutual and reciprocal care and the distribution of responsibilities that any human family or society needs." (p.32)

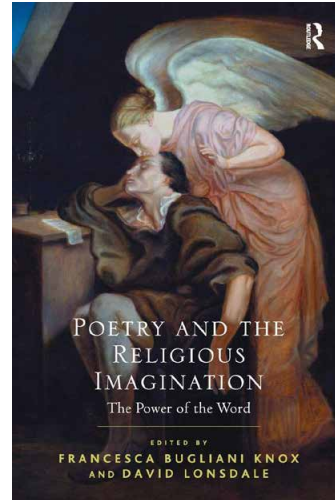
Composer Joanna Gill tells us, "True beauty can happen in any moment of sadness, happiness, failure, success, elation or weariness. It is in these places that the arts can draw out fresh meaning, open dark rooms and allow the light to come in." (p.89)

*"Artists have a vocation to reimagine and re-express the beauty of God to lift our sights and change our vision of reality..."*

—Theologian R. T. Kendall

## On Imagination

Many of us in the faith community have neglected the imagination, perhaps in part because it is difficult to manage. It is my view that imagination is a vital element for the journey of faith, a claim captured in the following: "On the theme of imagination, my favourite line comes from Emily Dickinson,

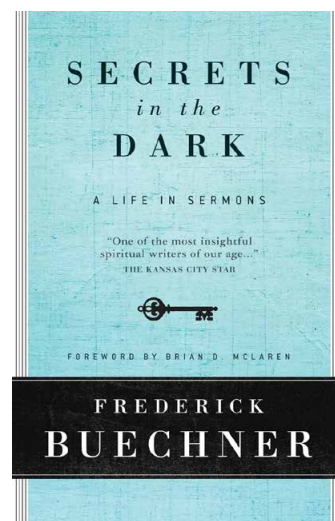


who wrote with her typical mixture of subtlety and simplicity that 'the possible's slow fuse is lit by imagination'. Here she herself fuses two horizons. Imagination carries us to thresholds of possibility but it becomes transformative when its fuse catches fire and causes an explosion of new perception. Another poet ... Margaret Avison of Toronto [a friend of Imago's founder Wilber Sutherland] suggested that if we are 'boxed, bottled

barrelled / in rows' then imagination has the power to unbox us, offering both 'a jail-break and re-creation'. Here lies a battlefield of our freedom. Although culture can kidnap us into smallness, imagination can offer a transfiguration, and Avison saw this as applying not only to poets but also to scientists and explorers of all kinds when they emerge from passivity into exciting insight." (Michael Paul Gallagher SJ, "Identifying a Religious Imagination" in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale.)

## On Silence

Toward the end of Lent I was drawn to the theme of silence that included a gentle longing to experience silence. It seems our culture is designed to keep the noise level high. The portals



through which the noise comes are many, loud speakers in places public and private, piping in music of one sort or another or the banter of human voices hocking commodities to make us happy. There are also the screens, TV, computer and phone each vying for our attention through cascading images and endless sounds. Deciding on a media "fast" of a few days was a gesture I made in the effort to engage the gift of silence. I welcomed the

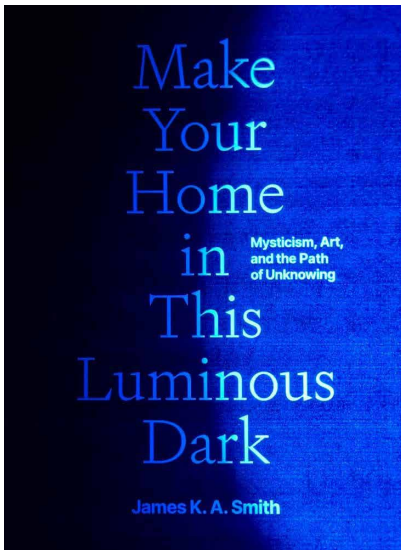
opportunity but it came with some minor pangs of withdrawal. We can get quite used to the “noise” in our lives and simply work to keep the volume at a familiar range. Silence is a great gift that can be understood in many ways. The words of Frederick Buechner are instructive. “Somebody should write a book someday about the silences in Scripture. ... For God alone my soul waits in silence,” the psalmist says (62:1) which is the silence of waiting. Or “Be not silent O God of my praise,” which is the silence of the God we wait for (109:1) And when the Lamb opened the seventh seal,” says the book of Revelation, “there was silence in heaven, (8:1)—the silence of creation itself coming to an end and of a new creation about to begin. But the silence that has always most haunted me” says Buechner, “is the silence of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate asks his famous question, “What is Truth?” (John 18:38) and Jesus answers him with a silence that is overwhelming in its eloquence. In case there should be any question as to what that silence meant, on another occasion Jesus put it into words for his disciple Thomas. “I” he said “I am the truth”. (John 14:6) *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, chp. 18, “The Truth of Stories.”

Visual art and the rich tradition of iconography invite us to silence where we take time to ‘gaze’ and in so doing nurture our inner life and open a path for discovery.

## On the Mystical

*Make Your Home In This Luminous Dark: Mysticism, Art and the Path of Unknowing*, Yale University Press 2026.

The much published Canadian author James K. A. Smith has a new book which speaks to a shift in his spiritual journey and in his thinking. The challenge of scheduling got in the way of IMAGO hosting a book launch for this volume, so I offer here a brief review.



Smith, who teaches philosophy at Calvin College, notes how for much of his career he has been captivated by the desire to “know” and always on the hunt for a conclusion. This approach to life left little room for mystery. He has

in recent times discovered the “contemplative tradition” which is not about having answers but is more a “plodding openness” and a “dogged availability to mystery.” (p.34) He writes: “I see my first steps on the contemplative path began in the quiet of a cinema, in the bright hush of a gallery, in absorbed solitude

with poetry or a novel. Certain kinds of art-works both invited and demanded a kind of attention I hadn’t experienced before.” (p.35). In chapter 2 Awakening through solitude Smith observes that “Solitude is simply a way we refuse to let regnant stories about the world govern our attention.” It is essential to shed these stories “...to see the world for what it is—mysterious, needy, wonderful, broken, surprising, dependent, beautiful, and hungry...” (p.89)

At the heart of this book is the theme of “darkness”, an uncomfortable subject but essential to the journey. “The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.” (Exodus 20:21) Resources from the mystical tradition help to shape Smith’s understanding. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and particularly the anonymous late fourteenth century English work *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Darkness becomes the location for the birth of something radically new. It’s in the “dark” that we have to acknowledge our limits, the limits of our logic, of our knowledge, of our understanding, of our control of things all of which may open us to another way to live our life.

This book tells of a transformative journey that is both personal and spiritually insightful. I am not without some questions about where that journey has taken the author but the story told does the good work of provoking one’s thinking and nudging the reader to deeper self understanding.

## New Projects

### Sacred Music Singers

Directed by Robin Davis—Sacred music choir in performance.

### Shadow of the Sun (short film)

Directed by Marney Blom—A film that tells a compelling story of a Dutch missionary family separated by WW II Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies.

### Theopolis (still in process)

Directed by Eden O’Brian—An initiative whose mandate is to advocate for art done by members of the Catholic community.

## IMAGO Evening

Tuesday, June 23, at 7:30 p.m.

**Cameron Hall** at Yorkminster Park Baptist Church  
1585 Yonge St., Toronto

Program includes: Film-maker **Marney Blom**  
Poet and musician **Andrew Donaldson**



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### SON OF A PREACHERMAN 2026 Tour Dates

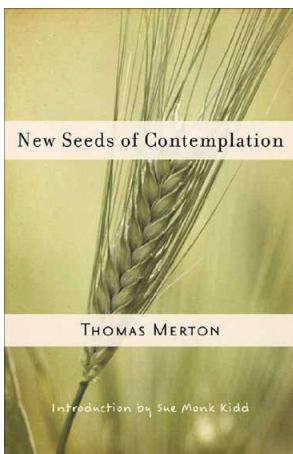
**Ottawa: Sep 16–26** Azrielle Studio Theatre, National Arts Centre.  
 Tickets: [www.nac-cna.ca](http://www.nac-cna.ca)

**Toronto: Opens Oct 1** Timothy Eaton Memorial Church.  
 Tickets: [www.pacifictheatre.org](http://www.pacifictheatre.org)

**Vancouver: Nov 10–14** Revue Stage on Granville Island.  
 Tickets: [www.pacifictheatre.org](http://www.pacifictheatre.org)

**Kamloops: Nov 18–29** Western Canada Theatre (Sagebrush Theatre). Tickets: [www.wctlive.ca](http://www.wctlive.ca)

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from Him Who has no voice, and yet speaks in everything that is, and Who most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His". He goes on to note that, "...contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real." (p.3).

Contemplation on this account, does not negate the ordinary or take us away from daily experience, however those experiences (our

illusions) do get lost only to be found again in a higher level of life once we discern the connection of all things to the divine. Our common practice is to engage with the world superficially the call to contemplation invites us to go deeper.

I have been asking myself how the arts play into the call to a contemplative posture in life. How might the arts be of value in cultivating a richer and deeper participation in the world? Let me suggest a few options. The arts may serve to unmask the limitations of our experiences. They invite us to see things in ways we have not seen before. They open us to fresh possibilities and ignite the imagination. The poem, the painting, the drama, the dance or the music can nudge us to a new perspective, give us a vantage point to discover things never known before. They also provide a pathway for us to walk away from those prevailing patterns of society which may imprison us. The arts can slow us

down and enable us to look beyond appearances where we are able to discern not just objects but meaning, not just surface, but depth. The arts facilitate the turn to the contemplative and may foster the very practice of contemplation.

The contemplative turn is not an alternative to the active life but is rather a complement to it. The practice of contemplation nurtures, strengthens and provides resources for us to carry out our activity with greater meaning and effectiveness. There is no formula for achieving a proper balance between these two elements of life. That "golden mean" will vary from person to person. In our fast-paced ever accelerating culture we would do well to pause and engage the way of contemplation. This could be seen as a gesture of resistance against the dehumanizing influences of our world—its distractions, its competing for our attention, its providing us with cheap alternatives rather than the real thing, and its suffocating bombardment of options which leave little space for the good, the true and the beautiful.

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