

## The Chaplain asks...*where is the line between art and pornography?*

I have always thought of myself as quite liberal in matters of art and literature. One of my heroines in the field of literature is the American Catholic writer Mary Flannery O'Connor, whose life was tragically cut short through inherited disease (she died at the age of 39 after a complication of the chronic disease *systemic Lupus Erythematosus*). She was in her lifetime a staunch defender of traditional Catholic doctrine and devotion. But a fierce critic also of any attempt by the Church to inhibit creative art, particularly in her case, the art of novel and short-story writing. Belief, she wrote, *adds* a dimension to what is seen; it does not take anything *away*. And that in turn means that, for O'Connor, nothing but nothing is off-limits. In turn, she would add, because there is nothing that, for all its horror, has not been found worthy by God to be worth dying for.

That being so, O'Connor continues, the Catholic writer has imposed upon her a dangerous task, dealing with matters that may indeed be 'occasions of sin' (in the old vocabulary), subjects that expose fully the worst in humanity. And whilst this may be for the (Catholic) writer no more than an act of trust in God, for the reader it may be a source of danger.

In other words, it all depends upon your viewpoint and perspective. *To the pure, all things are pure* as S. Paul might have said to Titus!

But is it quite as simple as this? I ask the question because at Palexpo Geneva is currently being shown *Body Worlds*, a frankly sickening exhibition of cadavers which have been treated by an anatomist, one Gunther von Hagens, by a technique of plastination which he perfected some time ago in the 1970s. This technique preserves the dead body from decay, and can be used to accentuate certain physical characteristics, such as muscle structure, or the internal organs or blood vessels.

The cadavers in von Hagens' display are not exhibited for anatomical knowledge purposes, however, since they are shown in

a variety of poses – riding a horse, taking part in a basketball match, playing a saxophone, engaging in sexual intercourse.

The source of the cadavers for this bizarre and nauseating exhibition remains unknown, though there have been suggestions that some at least have come from prisons, psychiatric institutions and hospitals in Kyrgyzstan. Some time back, a shipment of about 200 cadavers from Kyrgyzstan was stopped and attempts made to prevent any further transactions. A Siberian pathologist was charged in connection with another mysterious disappearance of bodies which subsequently reappeared in von Hagens' exhibition. And although it was eventually dropped, there was a long-standing case against von Hagens in Germany for claiming certain academic qualifications whilst visiting China, though the circumstances of this are unclear.

The Body Worlds exhibition has been seen by millions of people around the world. In 2008 when it was housed at the O2 exhibition centre in London, von Hagens claimed that he wished to promote health. He argued that his exhibition showed the complexity and fragility of the human body, and also destigmatized death. That is certainly one possible interpretation, though personally I believe that there much better ways of fulfilling those laudable aims.

Von Hagens, perhaps needless to say, is a professed atheist. He has expressed a desire for his own body to undergo plastination on death, and (hopefully as a joke) adds that it will enable him to teach in more than one place at once which he has not been able to do as yet.

Is his work *Art*? Is it a project of *Health Education*? Or is it, as I suspect, a rather sick and perverted form of necrophiliac *pornography*? None of us perhaps may be completely sure, but one thing we can know is that this (I believe scandalous) exhibition has made von Hagens a very great deal of *money*.

Since the earliest days of human civilization, one of the marks of being human was that we looked after our dead with reverence and varying degrees of awe. Different cultures have done this in different ways. But none allowed the display of dead bodies except when an oppressive regime wanted to make the point that their

authoritative power should not be crossed. And that is hardly a good precedent. Display of dead *people* for the world's prurient gaze seems to indicate yet another step in the breakdown of civilization, which alas is becoming increasingly evident at very many levels.

Von Hagens is right about the body being *fearfully and wonderfully made*. He is right about its intricacy, fragility and beauty. I believe he is most profoundly wrong to unnecessarily interfere with its own processes of decay, and with his irreverent and unseemly displays of bodies which should be laid to rest. Not least because, as we of faith maintain, humanity is created in *God's* image, incarnated in flesh, and when that flesh has completed its earthly work, it should normally be allowed to return peacefully to its dust.

At present, there are moves afoot to stop the exhibition based upon the need for proper legal process in moving bodies across country boundaries. Perhaps that is the only way open to authorities. Though if that is so, it really *is* a sad day for civilization when we cease to treat human remains with dignity and instead as a means for making more money. That *in itself* seems to me to be a grave obscenity. At *any* level of ethical thinking – Christian or otherwise. I am certainly far from convinced that this can describe itself as *art* although perhaps at one level it does fulfil one criterion. That of laying before us the depravity of the human condition. A condition that – in Mary Flannery O'Connor's words *God considered worth dying for*.

*Aluc Gordon*