

P. Friedhelm Mennekes S. J.

“How Do I Attain Knowledge of Love?”: Artistic and Mystical Aspects of Devotion

Devotion, ...

... meaning, adoration, or rather, the art of dedication, is, after all, the only thing that makes anybody interesting, the painter Francis Bacon (1909–1992) once said in an interview. As long as there was religion, people could be dedicated to their religion, he continued—and in it, to other things in life, the beloved, life, belief in one God ... Such a life is much more interesting than the modern sort of hedonistic and drifting life. Bacon, however, nevertheless despised these pious people, because they were living by a total falseness, which came from their religious views. Bacon was convinced that in comparison to this, a person totally without belief, but totally dedicated to futility would be the more exciting person.¹ Religious or not, there is one thing that unites such people in what they think is central to life: devotion.

Devotion, adoration, dedication, the constant search for knowledge of love—this is also the path that Korean artist Young-Jae Lee follows in her life. Her ceramic oeuvre lives from this, resulting in her vessels and, above all, in her many bowls; and it is here that the spiritual attitude of her activity is grounded.

In the beginning ...

... a vessel is, to start, a round container of solid material; it is created for content that on its own does not have solid form and to which the vessel—temporarily—lends its shape. As an enclosing, load-bearing shell it contains the not continent, an amount of individual grains or fluids: anything that is not able to contain itself. Vessels are of service in everyday use: giving and receiving, or keeping safe. They are designed for chosen contents. Empty, as they initially are, they wait to be filled. That is their purpose.

Fired clay ...

... is what carries the form of a vessel. One of the ur-myths of Western civilization narrates it as such in the Bible. Worth noting is that in Hebrew the same word is used for *mankind* and clay: *adam* and *adamah*. Like a potter, God fashions mankind out of clay—out of water, earth, fire, wind. Under the creating hand, the clay is shaped into a vessel. And this process is a model for another act of divine creating, namely, the creation of man. The prophet Jeremiah varies the image later when he describes the relationship of God to his people Israel as being like that of the potter to his work. God sends the prophet to a potter's workshop: “Then I went down,” we read in Jeremiah,

“to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make” (Jeremiah 18:3–4).

The German word *Gefäß* (English: vessel) comes from the German verb *fassen*, which means to *take hold of, catch, enclose, package, load, dress, even decorate ...* and in Old English, to *fetch home*, in Old Norse, even to *find the gaze*. This common basis then leads to the German imperative *fass!* used in the command *etwas in ein Gefäß zu tun* (to put something in a vessel): *fasse etwas ab* (formulate something), *put it in written form; deal with it*. If we leave the Indo-European languages and go even further back, to Latin and Greek, for example, then the Latin *continere* defines *fassen* rather materially as *hold together, enclose, and surround*, but also as *hold fast, curb, or stop*; the Greek *skeuos* also emphasizes the implemental to start, and then the metaphorical—as an image for body and soul; in the language of the Bible, the *Torah* is often described as a precious vessel, a description then extended to man himself, who has been created as a vessel of God. This idea is justified in the Bible not only linguistically, but also mythologically, especially in what is known as the second creation story. When God created the world, heaven and earth were the first to exist, followed by man: “... in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven. Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. But a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2: 4–7). Man, thus, received his form in a sort of vessel—which provided him with an outside shell that preserved, inside, the invisible breath of life. The vessel allowed the space in the seemingly empty middle to appear.

Space as content ...

... is the counterpart to the vessel’s form; both are an image for man. It is no coincidence that man distinguishes between the individual parts and sections of a vessel with words that he otherwise uses to describe his own body; he speaks of neck and collar, of shoulder and belly, of leg and foot. In our everyday life, a vessel is first useful, then beautiful; many a secret or treasure of life is told or preserved in its interior—and be it the memory of someone who has died. Thus anthropomorphized through language, the vessel quite often functions as man’s mirror image. Through the breathing of creative breath into inner, imaginary space, God fills this with life and with the appearance of the divine in its being and comprehension of meaning. But it is always man himself who formulates this meaning. Again and again it slips away from him, just as he himself gets lost. But he always refills this imaginary space by asking about meaning: first with old relics, then with new knowledge, and finally, by composing with old ideas and fresh visions.

It is in such movements that man rediscovers his inner space—in the words of Eduardo Chillida (1924–2001), he loads this inner space with intuitions and impressions and, in the process, takes pleasure in his ability to record and create this space intellectually and artistically. In this way, the physical space transforms into the artistically ideal space: it is the embodiment of will or desire, of attraction or love, of vision or image. Here, man circles around that open middle that operates like a spiritual center and activates the optical powers in the viewer—but that is not all. For infinite possibilities are paradoxically reflected into him, including the shaping of his freedom. To restate via Chillida, “Space?” he says “I might perhaps compare it to the life-giving breath which causes the form to swell up and contract and makes visible that inner psychic space which is hidden from the outside world ... It must be as tangible as the form in which it is revealed, for it has a character of its own. It sets in motion the matter which encloses it; it determines its proportions and scans and regulates its rhythms. It must find a corresponding echo in us and it must possess a kind of spiritual dimension.”²

If the original function of the vessel is in safekeeping, then its philosophical significance is to store our ideas and questions about being and meaning, the questions about life and future, about artistic form or musical sound. The artist who creates the vessel, like the person who lives with it, keeps his thoughts and his questions in it. For this reason these vessels are filled in a particular way even when they are empty. Almost as if of their own accord they extract their being from the questioning eyes of the people viewing and, like breathing, are always and forever filling up the void.

The bowl belongs ...

... along with the dish and plate to the category of vessels with wide openings. What unites all three forms is the outward-opening or wide rim. The bowl, like the dish, has a shallow belly into which it shapes its hollow space; compared with the horizontally defined plate, the bowl asserts a need for height, held in check by its form; its essence lies in both. Bowls strive upward. They present their content skyward in a way that is nothing short of gestural, even when the inside is empty—which is why these shallow vessels have, in addition to their utilitarian character, an aesthetic, a communicative, indeed, sacred character. In the middle of the explicit horizontality of these vessels, the vertical opens up. Among vessel types it is bowls in particular that are released from the tightly drawn sphere of their purely utilitarian function. They have an autonomous character and thus become artistic objects. The bowl gets its form-idea from the strictly geometric shape of the half sphere, a shape the bowl plays about with ceaselessly, creatively transforming and individualizing it. As a usable object it is what bears, at times as sumptuous receptacle, the welcoming drink to the guest, stores delicious, exquisite ingredients, or—empty, as it usually is—it surrenders itself to the varied possibilities to fill it with content.

The filling of bowls has always been linked to certain symbolic acts, whether everyday ceremonies or religious rites. For this reason, bowls have ranked among sacred

vessels since the beginning of human history. They are mentioned a number of times in the Bible. In Exodus, for example, there is a bowl (*saf*) filled with blood to be applied to the doorposts (Exodus 12:22); in 2 Kings, the prophet Elisha orders a bowl (*sallahat*) to be filled with salt, which he then, in a symbolic act, throws into a spring to purify the water (2 Kings 2:20–21); and in Revelation seven angels pour the wrath of God out over the earth from seven bowls (*phiale*) (Revelation 16: 1–21).

Bowls of this sort stand on a flat foot and extend far into the horizontal. They are held in both hands and emptied slowly and deliberately. As objects with a specific purpose they are assigned to that in-between realm of craft and art—in usage, they belong to religion, in their ornament, to aesthetics. They lie around in stacks and wait to be used, or they are deliberately placed in space because they themselves contain internal spaces and form a particular unity with their surrounding spaces.

The spiritual heritage ...

... of her homeland is something Young-Jae Lee, with her characteristic honesty, has never forgotten or suppressed throughout the long years she has spent in Europe. Her identity is permanently shaped and fed by Korea's spiritual heritage, a place where art and religion are closely interconnected. This deep rootedness did not prevent her from developing a wide-ranging interest for the culture and art of the West. She has always seen herself as a ceramicist and, at an early stage, she emerged from the narrower domain of the applied arts to expand into the realm of the openly artistic. She values creative collaboration with painters and sensitive draftsmen and yet, remains committed to the strict rules of her own guild. She resists temptations to take her pots to the sculptural level; rather, she remains faithful to the classic basic forms of use, as well as to the aesthetics of ceramics. This may be precisely the reason art institutions are continually opening their exhibition spaces to Young-Jae Lee's work and why her works are found in important collections.

A receptiveness to Western culture ...

... is not limited to art, literature, and music in Young-Jae Lee's case. Religion must also be included, as part of her Korean background. As a result, early on, she turned her attention to the mystical writings of Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582).³ Teresa, a remarkable and complex figure from Spain's early modern period, was just as devoted to God's will as she was to the world. Articulate, highly imaginative, impressive in manner and in meeting, she knew how to help people of her time who, like her, sought to do justice to themselves and to the period in which they lived. She had a formative influence on many of them, drew them to her, and with them, set in motion one of the largest reform movements in monastic life. It was important to her that all piety be applied to God alone, but, nevertheless, that it be linked to earthly existence. Man was to learn to find God in all things and—no matter where—to have a positive outlook on life, the commonplace included.

Young-Jae Lee read these writings with interest and fascination and soon found her way to her favorite text, Teresa of Ávila's *Conceptions of the Love of God*, which Teresa set down in 1574 for the spiritual edification of her nuns in the reformed convents. This would become a text Young-Jae Lee would turn to over and over again, a manageable work that summarized the major features of Teresian spirituality.⁴

In the sixteenth century it was unusual for a woman—even a nun—to write about her personal experiences with a biblical book in her mother tongue and then to actually disseminate these thoughts as well. This was, after all, the era of book bans and the Inquisition. But Teresa was undeterred and wrote her meditations down, especially when they were rooted in thoughts of love.

The Song of Solomon is about the love of two people who repeatedly encounter and lose sight of one another again. They search for each other here, find each other there. On the one hand, we have the literary figure of King Solomon, and on the other, Shulammitte. In this biblical book, love is described as the elementary force of life: “For love is as strong as death ... many waters cannot quench love” (Song of Solomon 8: 6b–7a). In a very original exegesis that references only a few verses of the text, Teresa provides this love song, about the overpowering experience between man and woman, with an allegorical interpretation; accordingly, she sees the image as the love between the bridegroom Christ and the loving soul as bride. She simultaneously combines this image with an ascetic-mystical view in which the everyday struggle for the suitable form and insistent orientation of love can be understood. Love is thus raised to the basic principle of life to which everything else boils down. One’s entire way of life leads to this position. There are a few lines at the very beginning of this short text that enter into this yearning and that Young-Jae Lee also views as a permanent invitation to read: “For several years past, the Lord has been giving me such great joy in the hearing or reading of some of the texts from the Songs of Solomon that, ... they have caused me greater recollection and moved my soul more than the highly devotional books which I can understand.”⁵

This heightened mood is, however, constantly broken by daily experiences. Recollection fades, sobering diversion sets in. Even nuns and artists are defeated at that last high wall before the promised land of concentration and contemplation. Teresa, however, seeks to catch her nuns before the disappointment, providing both consolation and encouragement: “... hoping that I may succeed in making you realize how necessary it is, so that you may not grow restless and distressed. The clacking old mill must keep on going round and we must grind our own flour: neither the will nor the understanding must cease working. This trouble will sometimes be worse, and sometimes better, according to our health and according to the times and seasons.”⁶

Was it the mystic’s language or the incredible austerity of her attitude to life that so captivated Young-Jae Lee? It was not a pure meditative proclivity alone that may have awoken the particular affection for this simple text; rather, it was also likely to have been the obvious proximity of mystical and artistic concentration. The sameness

of action when throwing pots, the rapid onset of monotony, and the likelihood of a work failing when attention wavers left the artist seeking spiritual exercises. Teresa's writings became guideposts for her.

The middle of the continually rotating clay mass proves to be the only constant on the way to the vessel. This tactilely felt center should have a determining influence on the shaping of the pot. To always achieve the same thing from this center and yet, at the same time, to give each individual vessel a being-of-its-own, always the same and always different—this is where the deep and inspiring mystery of this ancient technique is to be found. Constantly in search of the special in the many, of the unique quality—this is what emerges from this experience, an experience as artistic as it is mystical. To one day make the vessel worthy of causing all vessel-making to cease—an understandable dream—creative attentiveness has to tirelessly and constantly force its way into the rotating, wet mass, awakening in us love for a work, and creating it from inside out as something very special, something perfect.

Young-Jae Lee has gone down this path 1111 times for this exhibition: not just 1111 paths, but the search 1111 times for the one last bowl; this proves unattainable and is symbolically sublated in the multiple, complex attempts to achieve the one. The number is thus transformed into a single, living form of the path to the absolute. It is not a determinate quantity that matters here but a form for the spirit of near-ritual repetition on the path to perfection. Each one separately or altogether as a whole, the 1111 bowls graze perfection and, at the same time, the religious mystery of the world—no matter the religious denomination: “Non coereri maximo, contineri minimo, divinum est” (Not to be confined by the greatest, yet to be contained within the smallest, is divine) we read in Friedrich Hölderlin's (1770–1843) Romantic *Grabspruch des Loyola* (Loyola's epitaph).⁷

No sooner is the divine in view than the experience of powerlessness and one's own inconsequence returns. On the path to perfection man is forever relapsing into diversion and distraction. But Teresa is there at the ready with new encouragement; after all, she never tires of constantly showing her nuns the way to patience and pushing them to persevere in the search for a higher perfection: “Let us not, then, lament our fears, or be discouraged at the weakness of our human nature and at our lack of strength; let us try rather to fortify ourselves with humility and understand clearly how little we can do by our own efforts. We must realize that if God does not give us this favor we are nothing ...”⁸ This is part of Teresa's human admonitions to her nuns to never give up, to judge their own strengths rationally, not to lose hope or slacken efforts in the face of weaknesses and fears, and to expect special and great things in one's heart. She wants to understand man in the midst of that unity-in-tension between stationary center and animated margin in order to get from the outside to the center and from the center to the outside. For Teresa, the soul is man's center. It first needs, however, to be found and captured by him. If man has grazed the soul itself—experience suggests—then the soul continues the path to the innermost center as if of its own accord. Wherever he is on his path: he is only able to live from the

center of his soul out. That other attention-distracting and frequently confidence-subverting powers stand in the way is an inherent part of life. Teresa says, such ups and downs are normal and dependent on very ordinary things.

According to Teresa, many a disruption cannot be eliminated purely on command. It does not deserve, however, to then be the cause of feelings of conflict and frustration. The disruption should simply be ignored. What is important, she says, is the turning to God, the open dedication to him. Here, too, Teresa tries to pave the way to an inner calm, in order to take away man's sometimes desperate worries about his concentration and submission to the will of God. It is a simple thought, which she borrows from the Song of Solomon: the image that God himself is an ordering force within man and that man can therefore leave these worries to him: "He set in order charity in me" she quotes from the Song of Solomon (2:4) and later continues: "He sets it in order in such a way that the soul loses the love which it had for the world, and that which it had for itself turns into indifference."⁹

With these thoughts we confront Young-Jae Lee once more. In her, there is a merging of Teresa's spirituality with the pursuit of an appropriate spiritual attitude when creating open bowls. It was courage and perseverance that emerged in the reading of the writings of this Spanish mystic, so tremendously practical and yet filled with bold talents and intentions, and that accompanied and inspired Young-Jae Lee in her own creative activity. Both women are convinced that man's key purpose in life, in the final analysis, is that, as God's spiritual image, he accepts the created world in its entirety the way it is, and acknowledge it from the inside out as God's work. To receive this work with love and gratitude is the idea; the dedication to it in vocation, prayer, and love is its form. But the question arises again and again: How do I recognize this love?

"How do I attain ...

... knowledge of love?" Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) wrote this in 1966 in reference to a biography of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1555).¹⁰ The question points to a response that can be found in Loyola's book *Spiritual Exercises* where it appears in the form of a set of instructions for the contemplation of love and for its transference into practice.

The *Contemplation to Attain Love* is divided into four steps. It begins with a recollecting of God's gifts, the appropriate response to which is grateful dedication. This gift is then rendered to the present in its realized forms: in the elements, in creatures, and in man. But man is not idle here—according to the next step—but rather is himself active. Finally, it is contemplated how all gifts seemingly descend from above and how, in this way, the contemplator is given a new view of things, a changed self-image, and a profound sense of the unity of everything. This experience is conveyed through the feeling of gratitude and through the realization that it is love that makes all this possible. Love is also what invites us to enter into this work-context, and that means: to devotionally assist in this work. In this way, what previously *descended* then *ascends* again.

As love is practical, that is, its essence lies in its execution; it is a relationship, an exchange between the two sides. Each contributes what he has and what he can. Each gives to the other what the other does not have. It is a constant back and forth, to and fro, give and take. The love under discussion here, does not, however, occur between God (the Father) and the creature. In the scholarship on the *Spiritual Exercises* it is generally supposed that the subject is the *Creator and Lord* Christ, who, strictly speaking, is not spoken of in the text. For, according to Ignatius's theology, this *Creator and Lord* is Christ, the incarnate Word, inherent in all creations through work and nature, acts in his creatures like one who *struggles away*. It is in this *struggling* that the theological view that the story takes place between the Cross and the Last Days comes to fruition. In Ignatius, this interim period is portrayed mythologically in the conflict between Christ and Satan. As a result, the final aim of Creation has not yet been revealed. Elucidation is still to be gained. Christ's works are directed toward this, and Christ's follower seeks it. This work and assisting-in-work—and this is *strenuous work*—is now fulfilled in all of Creation: in the elements, in the celestial bodies, plants, animals ... and also in man, whom Christ inhabits, blessedly, as strength, as pure possibility. From this fact man realizes *justice, goodness, piety, mercy*.

For Ignatius of Loyola as for Joseph Beuys, for Teresa of Ávila as for Young-Jae Lee, this *contemplation of love* is not a theory. It is, for mystics as well as for artists, the result of an inner experiencing and struggling. For Ignatius and for Teresa, this involves the development of a sensory apparatus for the realization of the innermost movements and stirrings in man, and their differentiation in the question, "what does this mean for the life of the individual before God?" For artists, whether Bacon, Chillida, Beuys, Lee, or others, this involves expanding the perception and insight acquired from concentration and dedication. In word and work, in text and life-testimony, artists and mystics alike become guides for other people. For all, it involves the transformation of concrete processes of life, of nature, and of history. They all need patience and, again and again, the patiently practiced attempt to arrive at a new spiritual-intellectual start, in calm and risk, in long—magic or ordinary—number sequences, and in the keen perspective to still be able to graze perfection in the end after all. That would then be the path on which the knowledge of dedication catches up with the practice of love.

Notes

- 1 David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York, 1987), p. 134.
- 2 Eduardo Chillida, in Eduardo Chillida and Pierre Volboudt, *Chillida* (New York, 1967), pp. vii–viii.
- 3 Teresa of Ávila, *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, 3 vols. (New York, 2002).
- 4 Teresa of Ávila (see note 3), vol. 2, *Conceptions of the Love of God*, pp. 352–99.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 357.
- 6 Teresa of Ávila (see note 3), vol. 2, *Interior Castle, Fourth Mansions, Chapter 1*, p. 235.
- 7 See Hugo Rahner, “Der Grabspruch des Loyola,” in *ibid.*, *Ignatius von Loyola als Mensch und Theologe* (Freiburg, 1964).
- 8 Teresa of Ávila (see note 4), Chapter 3, p. 381.
- 9 *Ibid.*, Chapter 7, p. 394 and p. 395.
- 10 Verified and illustrated in Friedhelm Mennekes, *Joseph Beuys: MANRESA: Eine Aktion als geistliche Übung zu Ignatius von Loyola* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 40.

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