Art in Exile

by Makoto Fujimura

A Letter from God to the Contemporary Church

A painter does not merely reproduce what is thought to be seen by the eye. An artist's task is to train the eye first to truly see and to disregard previously imposed categories—those easy preconceived notions that lure us to think we are seeing when we are merely looking. An artist's task is to see through the eye into the eternal, into the invisible.

A musician's task is to hear, to listen to the sounds of the world. Bach, created out of the fabric of faithfulness to his community and to his church. He created through generational wisdom. He heard the echoes of the music of the spheres and sought to synthesize what he heard.

Do you not see what I see in a dancer's leap? It can never be repeated, even in eternity. Yet, eternity's echoes ring throughout the body, and I dance with them. Precisely because that act is ephemeral, I make them permanent.

A poet's task is to reveal through intuition the knowledge of reality and an emotional state that is at once mysterious but made accessible through her or his word.

One of your exiled poets wrote in 1864:

Love—is anterior to Life— Posterior—to Death— Initial of Creation, and The Exponent of Earth—

Who is this love? Who is "anterior to life," and "posterior to death"? "Initial of creation, and the exponent of earth"?

This poet, as a teenager, was told by your leaders in a seminary in Amherst that she had "no hope to be saved." We know from these poems that Emily always desired to know her Creator. I do not celebrate waywardness, but I am here to seek the lost. I will leave 99 church members to seek the one lost poet.

One of your exiled painters who lived in Arles, France, created a work called "The Starry Night" in 1889. In the middle of the painting, a Dutch Reformed Church (that does not belong in Arles) holds the visual balance. Vincent grew up in the church. He even wanted to be an evangelist. But notice that the church is the only building in the painting that doesn't have light shining inside. He's trying to tell you through this visual parable that though the church still holds these disparate matters of the spirit and nature together in the world, the Spirit has left the church and went swirling into nature and the cosmos.

When you exiled them, the Vincents and Emilys of the world, you exiled me.