

‘Enlarging the Mind’: Michael Paul Gallagher and the Imagination

by NICOLAS STEEVES SJ

One of the paradoxes Henri de Lubac’s witty wisdom wrought in his waning years ruefully runs, ‘Our ideas grow old with us, that is why we pay no particular attention to them, and we are quite astonished at younger minds not falling in love with them in their turn, as we did’ (Lubac 98). With all due respect to the great French Jesuit, in the case of Michael Paul Gallagher, things seem to be happening today in quite a contrary fashion. Gallagher had a wonderfully wry sense of humour and would doubtless have enjoyed a tongue-in-cheek Continental *hors d’oeuvre* of contrariness. But the claim that is being made here goes deeper than mere rhetorical flourish. In the aftermath of Fr Gallagher’s death, many students and staff at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, in public or private conversations, shared their admiration, enthusiasm and deep love for him, as a person, priest and thinker. As far as one can tell, younger minds are still falling in love with his ideas. But why is that so?

Let us first recall a basic fact: many of us mere mortals plod along in life with one or two ideas at most, as the great German theologian Karl Rahner is said to have quipped. The narrowness of our pursuits and creeds, or just sheer lack of time, lead us, more often than not, to that quick obsolescence that seals the sorry fate of today’s electronic devices. By contrast, Gallagher’s thought demonstrates a remarkable ‘freshness’ which one has good reason to believe will keep in years to come. To pursue the line of geeky, techie metaphors, the Irish Jesuit’s thought might well be branded ‘self-upgrading’.

In great part, this is due to the fact that Gallagher himself was on a constant quest for more light and knowledge within the varied realms of the intellect, the arts and the faith. In the course of a lifetime, he managed to summon and engage a variety of authors and themes few people today can claim to match. Not only that, he made those novelists, theologians, philosophers, mystics and artists enter into real or imaginary conversations. He made them spark off each other in various genres, as one would in a play, a musical, a sit-com or a rap battle. Such a talent was to be expected: in his early years as a lecturer in English literature at University College, Dublin, with the help of students and staff, Dr Gallagher had staged many plays, including Shakespeare’s best comedies.

The obvious risk of such an approach – and one Gallagher did not avoid entirely throughout his career – is eclecticism; consequently, readers are left somewhat bewildered or bedazzled on rare occasions. Its obvious benefit, however, one he very often elicits from his many readers, is wonder, gratitude and joy. Who expects to enjoy a

verbal sparring match between St. Thérèse de Lisieux, the ‘Little Flower’, and the great, gruff Nietzsche? In the dialogue Gallagher imagined between them, she bests him with a Gallic surprise: her sincerely topping his atheistic feelings, so she can finally coax him out of his German gloom. Every year in Rome, during Gallagher’s class on atheism and unbelief, he would get two students to act out that dialogue, often stirring lasting emotions in those who watched Mercy take on Despair.

The quiet but dogged determination with which Gallagher delved into the knowledge of human life, and of human life with God, is quite exceptional. This may suggest that his quests and thoughts will live on. They will do so in both explicit and implicit ways. Thus, they will sometimes feed overt research on his own written works and numerous conference papers. More often, though, they will probably operate in less obvious ways, discreetly but powerfully lending realness and breadth to contemporary thinkers, thanks to the strong cultural and theological currents he uncovered and gladly made available for others. Given Michael Paul’s admiration for John Henry Newman’s *University Sermons*, and in particular for the one entitled ‘Implicit and Explicit Reason’ (Newman, *Fifteen Sermons* 251–77), it is likely that he would draw greater satisfaction from humbly fuelling other people’s research work and beliefs than from being republished himself for the tenth time.

One of Michael Paul’s favourite wishes, for people and for cultures, he drew precisely from Newman: the sincere wish that, for their own good and the good of others, they would ‘enlarge their mind’ (*Fifteen Sermons* 283). He also often pointed out that Benedict XVI had invited our post-modern cultures to experience a similar change, most prominently in his famous Regensburg address, namely the experience of daring to ‘broaden the concept of reason’ (Benedict XVI). Now, both these expressions of change are parallel to ‘Dive Deeper’, the title of a book published by Gallagher in 2001 which was picked as the name for a two-day conference in November 2016 at Heythrop College, London, where this article was originally delivered as a paper. ‘Enlarging the mind’, ‘broadening reason’, ‘diving deeper’: all these expressions point to change, progress, growth and dynamism. And therein lies the key to the attractiveness and discreet staying power of Gallagher’s thought.

This article will now verify this hypothesis in three consecutive points. The first point is biographical: it seeks to grasp how Michael Paul’s personal exploration of vaster horizons – geographic, cultural, literary and theological – sustained his own growth, intellectually, theologically and spiritually. The second point beckons great friends that Gallagher made along his quest. These friends matched his dynamism and fuelled it, and he loved to introduce them to others. The third and final point identifies sub-currents of the main tow pulling us out to sea with Michael Paul. There, we will meet the God-who-walks-on-waters (see Matt. 14:22–33) and who bids us to trust him that we, too, can do so. This open invitation is one of Gallagher’s enduring gifts, beyond his untimely death.

Living Beyond Limits: Biographical Callings

In 'Roots and Horizons', the epilogue to *Clashing Symbols*, Gallagher recounts how, in middle age, he revisited the village of his childhood, Collooney, Co. Sligo, in the North West of Ireland. He was born there as World War II was starting, in August 1939. He comments, as he did in several other books, on how closely knit and protective the culture of his childhood had been. 'We were as Danes in Denmark all day long' is a line from Wallace Stevens to which Gallagher turned time and again to describe the traditional Catholic Irish culture of his youth. Back then and there, not attending church on Sunday was simply unthinkable. Great cultural upheavals on the European continent were happening too far away to have a real impact yet.

It is no surprise, then, that Gallagher's gap year in Normandy as a twenty-year old student of literature in 1960 came as a big cultural and religious shock. For the first time in his life, atheists and nonbelievers became very real. Nonetheless, they turned out to be not as evil or disagreeable as he had probably been brought up to believe as a boy. Love for a French girl, to which Michael Paul discreetly alludes in his posthumous book *Into Extra Time* (144), doubtless added depth to his experience of being taken outside of himself, not only geographically, but also culturally and emotionally.

Back in Ireland in 1961, his joining the Jesuit novitiate took him to new places, spiritually and culturally. His pursuit of literary studies as a Jesuit after the novitiate led him on a long path where he got to know and love many poets, playwrights and novelists. For his doctoral work at Oxford, he eventually focused on the great Welsh-born preacher and poet George Herbert. This growth in mind, heart and horizon was furthered yet by over ten years of teaching literature at University College, Dublin. Dr Gallagher's academic service to his students often took on a deeper human and spiritual dimension, bringing them to expand the horizons of their faith and culture simultaneously.

Later trips that took the priest and professor to India and Latin America did this in a different way, removing social blinders and religious prejudices. One trip brought him particular joy: his time in Vietnam, towards the end of his life, teaching the Jesuit scholastics and delighting in their fraternal welcome, respect, energy and youth.

A major turn in his life happened in 1990: an unexpected call to Rome to work for the Secretariat for Non-Believers – later integrated into the Pontifical Council for Culture. Gallagher used this new opportunity not only to benefit from the Vatican's international character, but also to make several deep and lasting friendships with local Italians, yet again enlarging his mind. His obituary on the Pontifical Council for Culture's webpage is an eloquent portrait and a heartfelt tribute: 'He was known for sporting his deep learning lightly, for his diligence in work and friendship, his dialogical approaches to difficult issues, and his gentlemanly disposition' (Pontifical Council). Gallagher eventually returned to academic life in 1995, now as Professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome where he worked with fellow Jesuits and taught academic theology for the first time. This led him once again to stretch his knowledge and expand his geographical and cultural horizons as he met younger, post-modern and multicultural students, staff and faculty.

After retirement, in early 2015, Michael Paul's third encounter with cancer suddenly brought him home to Ireland, upsetting plans for his retirement in Rome and his mission as the much-loved Rector of the Collegio San Roberto Bellarmino. His posthumous book, *Into Extra Time*, reveals how much he revelled in returning to his own culture, having been exposed to so many others, although he recognized how much it had changed, and not always for the better. But what was there was there: sweet Irish banter from friends and soft-spoken care from nurses lent new light to his last months, with an ever-growing sense of wonder, and 'at-one-ment', as he moved toward the threshold. He passed away quietly on 6 November 2015.

A Host of Friends: A Challenge to Open Up Horizons

It would be a daunting task to try and size up exactly how many poets, playwrights, pundits, philosophers and theologians Gallagher introduces to his readers in his many, varied writings. Most of his works are short; some even tend toward the aphoristic. His reader's impression is often close to being taken through a large party by a gracious host who helpfully stands by your side and introduces you to people you never would have dreamed of talking to in a personal, trustfully open way. Although in real life, Gallagher was friendly and personable, but far from being a socialite, his writings attest to a vivid imagination when it came to making minds meet.

To pursue the metaphor of such a social setting, some guests at Gallagher's parties stand out more prominently; they are his staple clients and stable friends, hanging out in bunches. Obviously, various readers of Gallagher will single out and mingle with different such bunches. This writer's favourite crowd would include John Henry Newman and William Lynch among the theologians, and Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and Flannery O'Connor among the *literati*. Most of these guests are giants, but they are not so in a way that shames those who dare to approach them with Gallagher at their side. Why? Because they are truly great minds with inspiring lives; because they accepted the dare to move beyond their comfort zones; because they rose to the challenge to enlarge their minds. These authors therefore struck Gallagher's fancy, or more accurately, his *imagination*, his trust and his Catholic faith.

Now, this is a key element to understanding Gallagher's thought and method. His choice of conversation partners was never a mere whim, but rather a decision guided by that ability to which the old word 'fancy' points, i.e., the imagination. Gallagher was no ideologue. Both in real life and on paper, he would not decide ahead of time who, in a crowd, was worth speaking to. His determination to remove cultural blinders and reject predeterminations lent him a *largeur d'esprit* that made him genial in his life and books. This open-mindedness gave him an uncanny ability to pair up odd bedfellows.

Dive Deeper thus offers the most outlandish dialogue combinations: Jane Austen and D.H. Lawrence, Flannery O'Connor and George Eliot, William Shakespeare and Oscar Romero, Rahner and Rilke, and most strikingly of all, as mentioned above, Thérèse de Lisieux and Friedrich Nietzsche. It takes a pretty enlarged mind, indeed, to make

such people listen to each other and converse in a quiet mode or even in angry flashes. Gallagher's imaginary dialogues have an eerie conjuring power that certainly flesh out one of his favourite lines from Emily Dickinson: 'the Possible's slow fuse is lit by the Imagination' ('The Single Hound' xxvii).

It is essential to understand, however, that to make such giants converse is not to stage mere intellectual fencing or downright name-calling; it is to call these men and women of strong convictions – and their sometimes over-zealous disciples – to leave their usual entrenchments. Such dialogues weave something quite like a vocation, where great minds are lured out of their dens by the prospect of encountering a strangely heart-warming love. This graced encounter is obvious in their patient dialogue with someone who, till then, may have seemed an ardent opponent. The theological quality of these talks is made stronger yet in the one which closes and crowns *Dive Deeper*: an inner conversation between the self and Jesus, where post-modern self-centeredness is drawn through its frailty and limitations to a burning encounter with God's incarnate, down-to-earth mercy.

If one stops to think about it, Gallagher's drive toward enlarging the mind and making the imagination real is a true Christian work of *reconciliatio oppositorum*. It is that etymologically 'Catholic' work, a work for 'the whole', a work to which the human imagination is beckoned by Jesus Christ, 'who hath made both one, and breaking down the middle wall of partition, the enmities in his flesh...that he might make the two in himself into one new man' (Eph. 2:14–6). It is a vocation to let one's mind be enlarged enough so that it can be receptive to the reality of a creation reconciled with itself and with the Creator. It is a call to dive deeper in hope and love, to receive this divine Revelation and, in response to this Revelation, to make our faith more real.

To conclude with the social imagery that has fuelled this second point, one feels that if two guests had broken out into a fistfight at one of Michael Paul's imaginary parties, he would not have called security to take them out. He would have broken up the fight with Irish wit and kindness, and brought the warring factions to sit down, calmly express their views, and listen to each other over a glass of good whisky. This is a talent not easily found in our antagonistic age, and one that requires great personal convictions. It leads one to see God at work in wondrous ways and in places unexpected both for religious believers and professed unbelievers.

***Duc in altum* (Lk 5:4): Dive Deeper**

It has become a fruitful trend in certain theological circles to single out hospitality as a hallmark of the Gospel (See Theobald). In this vein, Michael Paul Gallagher was more one to walk the walk than talk the talk. It should be quite obvious by now how hospitable his horizons were – if the reader will forgive this use of 'clashing symbols' – but Gallagher did not gather his guests merely to engage in garish navel-gazing. Michael Paul, in the experience of those who met him, was a friendly man, a fraternal Jesuit, but also a fatherly figure who sometimes rather sternly forced his conversation partners out of their natural and supernatural haunts. They were called to let out into the deep.

His involvement with the Scientific Committee of the *Istituto Paolo VI* in Brescia reveals how close his mindset was to Papa Montini's tireless appeal for dialogue, as evidenced in the late pope's 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* or in his tragic negotiations for the release of Aldo Moro. More largely, Fr Gallagher's mindset, as evidenced by his writings and personal relationships, discloses how deeply he integrated the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and of recent popes into his efforts to engage in true, respectful dialogue with men, women and children of every creed and culture. It is easy to claim 'openness' in the name of Vatican II, but Michael Paul was one who really lived it out, albeit quietly.

Dialogue, in fact, is not a way for the weak. Fr Gallagher's soft stubbornness in this realm betrays an especially graced use of that old Latin virtue *fortitudo*, or courage—a rare gift. He knew that men's minds are not in the least enlarged by rape, wrath and plunder; they are only effectively moved by a constant, courageous call to dive deeper. This was an experience that John Henry Newman had as he grew older, and one that Gallagher shared and put to good use.

Ploughing chronologically through Gallagher's many short volumes, it becomes clear that his invitation to imagine a world of new possibilities expanded gradually. In his early years, further to his doctoral research and his job at the Pontifical Council for Culture, he mainly addressed non-believers (See Gallagher 1983, 1987, 1995). As he grew older, and as Western culture took the turn towards secularism, he sought to extend that same invitation to men and women steeped in Christianity from their youth, but who had lost touch with the real Gospel, even though they might still nominally consider themselves Christian, or even practicing believers (See Gallagher 1997, 2001, 2010).

In 1974, the young Fr Gallagher had already stirred up a fuss when he published a controversial article, 'Atheism Irish Style'. As his friend Tom Casey put it,

at a time when the general consensus held that Irish Catholicism was in a thoroughly healthy state, he alarmed many by suggesting that it was actually dying a slow death. He claimed that Irish Catholics (most of all young Irish Catholics) were becoming increasingly disillusioned with many of the externals of Church life – religion taught impersonally or in an authoritarian manner in school, dull Sunday rituals, and boring sermons. ('Messenger of wonder & wonderful messenger')

Whereas Christians might be tempted to consider smugly that only the 'disbelieving' or the 'unchurched' should enlarge their minds to welcome the dogma and mores of the Roman Church, Gallagher, like Newman before him, also invited cradle Catholics to 'be real,' as he jokingly put it. He knew that the great tides of cultural change were bringing everyone out of their depth. Yesterday's unquestioning believers would be tomorrow's comfortable agnostics, at a high, but often unspoken, personal and social cost. Gallagher took stock of changing tides, and, neither opposing them nor submitting to them unreflectively, sought to make the best of expanding horizons and sometimes dizzying currents. Having often lived by the sea, he knew that choppy waters sometimes offer the best fish. There was the place to let out one's nets in the deep.

All of this explains why our opening quotation from Henri de Lubac's *Paradoxes* fortunately runs contrary to the life and thought of Michael Paul Gallagher. In a way, Gallagher's thought stays youthful because its strength lies less in its material content than in its dynamic form and force. His youthfulness is linked to his playfulness. That is not to say that he was creedless by any standard; in agreement with Ratzinger, although somewhat less explicitly, relativists made him rueful. Christ the reconciler always stood at the centre of the Irish Jesuit's mind and heart. Here again, Gallagher echoed Newman, who grounded his theology of Revelation in the dynamic 'idea' of Christ (Newman, 'Preface' xlvii). He also echoed Balthasar, who sung the luminous form of Christ, 'image of all images' (419) and Karl Rahner, who marvelled at the sense-driven perception of Christ's Spirit at work in the world (Rahner). At the crossroads between faith and culture, Michael Paul left future generations a powerful testimony, not just as a memorial of his own forays into the deep, but as an invitation that we ourselves dive deeper.

'Faith itself,' wrote Gallagher, 'is a God-given way of imagining existence – not a cold truth, easily captured in concepts. And my conviction,' he continued, 'is that imaginative writers, like biblical prophets, can deepen our angle of seeing.' (*Dive Deeper* 6). Michael Paul never quoted poets for mere purposes of aestheticism, nor did he name-drop theologians to dazzle his readers. He strove calmly, but vigorously, so that everyone who crossed his path would leave with a deeper faith and a more realistic imagination. Those who were fortunate to meet him would grow paradoxically both more questioning and more trusting. The surface of things would not suffice where salvation was at stake.

Conclusion

Any *confrère* writing on Michael Paul would be remiss not to mention one final feature – his being a Jesuit. His knack for preaching and his wisdom in spiritual direction and conversation – as witnessed by many after his passing – testify to his faithful affiliation to the life and spirituality of St Ignatius Loyola.

One of Ignatius's key words is the Latin adverb *magis*, a word that has undergone a revival in recent years in the international youth ministry of the Jesuits. The word *magis* can be traced back to the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, in which the retreatant begins to contemplate the life of Christ. The grace to ask for in those contemplations is 'ut magis ipsum amem, eumque sequar' (*Exercitia Spiritualia* [104]), or as the musical *Godspell* has it, 'to see him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly.' This *magis*, this 'more,' is a call to see, love and follow Jesus with an increased intensity, with a larger mind, with a more real imagination.

As a Jesuit, Michael Paul strove to live this out and to bring others to do so, to live more intensely as Christ might want us to. His invitation to imagine and realize our lives according to the Ignatian *magis* finds great poetic expression in the well-known words of G. M. Hopkins (19):

I say móre; the just man justices
Kéeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Works Cited

- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I. *Seeing the Form*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982.
- Benedict XVI. 'Apostolic Journey to München, Altötting and Regensburg: Meeting with the representatives of science in the Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg'. *The Holy See*. 12 September 2006. Accessed 11 March 2017. <w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html>.
- Casey, Thomas. 'Messenger of wonder & wonderful messenger'. *The Irish Catholic*. 13 November 2015. Accessed 11 March 2017. <<http://irishcatholic.ie/article/messenger-wonder-wonderful-messenger>>.
- Dickinson, Emily. 'The Single Hound'. In *The Poems of Emily Dickson*, part v. Eds Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1924.
- Gallagher, Michael Paul. *Help My Unbelief*. Dublin: Veritas, 1983.
- . *Free to Believe: Ten Steps to Faith*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987.
- . *What Are They Saying About Unbelief?*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995.
- . *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997.
- . *Dive Deeper: The Human Poetry of Faith*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001.
- . *Faith Maps: Ten Religious Explorers from Newman to Ratzinger*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *A Hopkins Reader*. Ed. John Pick. London: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- Ignatius of Loyola. *Exercitia Spiritualia Sancti Patris Ignatii de Loyola*. Ed. Jan Roothaan. Turin: Marietti, 1928.
- Lubac, Henri de. *Paradoxes of Faith*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.
- Newman, John Henry. *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*. London: Longmans & Green, 1909.
- . 'Preface to the 3rd edition [1877]'. In *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*. London: Longmans & Green, 1911.
- Pontifical Council for Culture. 'RIP Michael Paul Gallagher'. 9 November 2015. Accessed 11 March 2017. <<http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/organico/personale/gallagher.html>>.
- Rahner, Karl. *Spirit in the World*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1968.
- Theobald, Christoph. *Le christianisme comme style: une manière de faire de la théologie en post-modernité*, (coll. Cogitation Fidei) 2 vols, vol. 1 (260). Paris: Cerf, 2007.