

The Christian in the Arts

By Father Gregory Elmer

[Audience applause]

Thank you for your warm welcome. It means a lot to me. I start with a question. Is there anyone here, who does not have, a, mind? It's no fair volunteering your neighbors.

[Audience laughter]

Alright, knowing you're [*inaudible*] minds. Is there anyone here who does not have feelings? I know the ideal for American men is to be chrome plated, macho, feeling-less, and some of you ladies may have experienced this. You have grave doubts. But in fact is there anyone here without feelings? Ah, no volunteers. Anyone without a body?

[Audience laughter]

Hmm. Is there anyone here like the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz*, who has no "haht." Also called on the West Coast a "heart." But in Boston it's a "haht." Anyone here without a heart? Hmm? That's what it is, to be human, with minds, with feelings. We have our bodies with which we sense the world, the beautiful world, that God made. We have our hearts. And, you and I are human because we have all of them. God created spirits, just with minds, and he created rocks, and oceans, and other things. Bodies, St. Paul speaks about the, celestial bodies, but you and I, are the convergence of, everything. That's what belongs to us uniquely. The other marvelous

things my friend, is that God has not finished with us. When God created human beings, he created them in a way different from everything else. We're not finished. Neither is the physical universe but, we're called upon to finish that creation, freely, by using our hearts, our minds, our souls, our strength. Everything the Lord has given us. In a curious way, this, is why art, is so important. Have you met people who live only in their minds? Hmm? Who pay no regard to their bodies? Are there any kind of, floater types, like that? Living only in the mind. What is a person like that, like? Aren't they a bit grotesque? How about those who live only for their feelings? Those who live only, for the sense life, the body? Or those who live only, if you will, in a kind of mystic state, in the depths of the soul? To be human is to be all of the above, and to be free.

03:16 Now, when, we, sinned, God did not take away, that capacity, 'cause if he had, we wouldn't have wrecked the earth, as badly as we have. Human beings have been able to lay waste to society and to the earth to such a degree because there's a tremendous, capacity left in us. The Bible calls it, that we were made in the image of God. In the summer time have you ever turned the garden hose on in the front lawn before you reached it, and watched it snake all over the grass? Hmm? The human being, out of union with God, has this tremendous energy. Without a union with God it is, destructive, and what we create is not a work of beauty and of art called the, the earth. What we create and can create is hell, on earth. Jesus said it. "Without me, you can do, nothing." He did not say, without me, you can't do anything. He said we can do something. Without him we can, do, nothing. We can create, hell, on earth. We can create, nothing. When we take all those marvelous four dimensions of being human, out of union with God, we can lay waste to our own lives. The world around us, and all of nature.

05:00 But Jesus gave us gave us a commandment, and I would like to explore with you, an interpretation of that. I don't propose this is the only one. And you know the commandment. "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and your mind, or your strength, and all your soul." Sometimes we understand that is a commandment to a kind of gung-ho love of God that I'd like to suggest, Jesus has preciousy commanded us to love God, with all, the dimensions of being human. To love God, with our whole, soul. That's our intuitive ability. Our ability to, see into the heart of things. To love God with our whole strengths. The senses, the body, the vitality, of being a human being alive. To love God with our whole mind. All, the reaches of the mind. Not just logic. Paradox, poetry, and all the rest. And to love God, with our whole heart. All of our feelings, intuition, sensing, mind, feelings. Christ has commanded us to love God, wholly, as human beings. Not, just with the mind. That's for angels, and that's for Plato.

06:43 I like Plato. I read Plato late at night. It's one of the cures for insomnia or one of its causes.

[Audience laughter]

He discovered his mind could go to God, and then he left the rest behind. Minds only go to God. Matter is bad. That's the drift of Plato's thought. Are we Plate-Platonists or we Christians? That's not in the Bible. The line in the Bible is not spirit verses matter. That's the Greeks. The line in the Bible is all spirits, angels; all humans, mixtures spirit and physical; and all, the rest, all the cosmos, the physical. They're all created, and God alone is, uncreated. That's the line of the Bible. We have to take a hard look at our own life with the Lord to make sure that we're not Greeks, just sending our minds to God and leaving the rest down below. That means if we're

really with the Scriptures, that, of this creation is to enter into union with God, then you and I have to follow that commandment, to bring our whole, intuitive, gift, our whole, vital, strength, our whole mind, and all of our feelings, into union with God.

08:15 To love the Lord God this way, and it is art and art alone, which is the synthesis of all of these ways. Art and art alone is the comprehensive, way of knowing it. That's a shock especially if you're a philosopher. And I have a B.A. in Philosophy, and know my fellow graduates will be gunning for me, later for having said that. It's true. In philosophy, the mind, works, but not the rest. In art, the whole. And the Lord has given us the command, among the ten, against graven images. This, is not a command against art. This is a command against the abuse, of art. Graven image that is forbidden, is a work of art that we know, abused by using it to try to manipulate, God. And let us remember that the second, is a commandment against, the abuse of religious language. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Sometimes Christians have been very sensitive about the abuses through physical art, but not, very sensitive about the use of religious language, which profanes the mystery of God by covering it up with clichés. Any language that does not worship God in the fullness of his mystery, is an abuse, and also forbidden by God.

10:01 All I am proposing for you to think about today and perhaps to take as a tool, is that these four ways of knowing come together in art. And that creative work of art, my intuition has come to the heart of something. I use physical things, perhaps acoustical things, things that belong to the body. The feelings are there, giving it life, texture, color, and the mind, to shape it. In the work of art, I can worship my creator, wholly, if I dedicate it to him. And I would even suggest

to you that, prose and all the work of, words and writing is actually a form of art. You and I have been taught the opposite. Words, data, bytes. Heh? Data bytes, are you ready for data bytes? Our monastery has been computerized.

[Audience laughter]

The monks have not been computerized among us. The monastery has been computerized. Well, we had scribes in the Middle Ages. We have, computers now. It's great. Words, are, actually, an art. Prose, the whole work. What we were taught the last 400 years in Western culture, is that art had nothing to say. Kant taught us. The drift of Kant's ideas, and you and I are all his children in some way, art does not tell the truth. Only logic, philosophy, words. Do you believe that? Do you buy that? Is that the way you live? Do you want to live just in words? Get rid of your bodies? Get rid of your feelings? Get rid of your hearts? What are the fruits of living only for words and logic? Pascal, said a long time ago, "Any man, who would become an angel, ends up a beast." And all the magnificent worship of logic and words and the enlightenment produced two world wars in a century more violent, than any in the record of the race. I suggest it's a, lamentably, incomplete picture, and that's what men been taught, in the West. And it's not the Bible.

12:34 The Word became flesh. We've already to understand that Word is a person, the Son. [It] wasn't a waste of time on God's part. God wanted to contact the whole of human reality. Jesus had feelings. He wept. He sighed. He groaned. He got angry. Jesus had a body. It's what it says in the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus evidently had a mind. A great soul and heart. God wants to contact us, wholly, and that's why the Word became flesh. So what I think you may be

celebrating this week is that wonderful whole, vision, in the Scripture, that is the beautiful inheritance of, Christian religion. We go to God, wholly, not just with the mind, like Plato, but wholly. And whenever we create a work of God, in art, it is to the glory of God. There's that freedom in union with God we can create. We can do something. We can make something beautiful for God, and exercise all four ways, of knowing. Comprehensive, human, ways of knowing. And we know more that way. Doesn't St. Paul, in the third chapter of his letter to the Ephesians speak of coming, to that knowledge of Christ, and his riches, which is beyond all knowledge? Beyond words. I was sitting with a dear friend in Minnesota once, watching one of these classic bank calendar sunsets in Minnesota. The geese, the forest, the clouds, the orange sunset, and I said, "Oh, isn't that, beautiful?" And my friend said, "Oh, wouldn't you shut up!" I was astonished, and in that moment I learned something I've never forgot. Let, the things, speak. You cannot read the psalms, and, miss this. "The heavens, proclaim the glory of God." Everything around us is communicating, in its native language which is not words. Just, being the praises of God. Look at that sunset, and be quiet. The psalms say, "Be still and know that I am God." We're kit and kin with all of nature. We, human, beings have got to learn to open our ears, to the rest, and this is part of the part of the work of art. We discover, and we've communicating truth, which includes the whole of the physical cosmos, and never forget, in Romans 8, St. Paul says, "The rest, of nature." The cosmos, is going to share in the same glory, that will be ours.

15:45 Do you realize that that's part of the high goal of the Christian artist? We begin the transfiguration, of the rest of the world. Out of union with God, we can create, nothing. "Apart from me you can do, nothing." We can make, hell on earth. In union with God, the Holy Spirit

filling us, and bringing alive, all four ways of human knowing. We can come to that knowledge of Christ, beyond mere words. Beyond mere logic. The knowledge you and I only get by being quiet, and beholding. The beauty of the world that's full and charged with the glory of God, and then we commune with that by creating works of art. We begin the transfiguration of the world. This I think is part of the, noble task, of Christian artists. Those four ways of knowing. Part of the great commandment, one way of understanding that great commandment, and one way of, obeying, that commandment, is by using all of our, vital energy in our body, all of our strength, all the intuitive power of the soul which can only develop in silence. That's what my friend was saying to me, "Shut up," and let your deep soul, open up, and listen. Jesus says the same. Behold, the lilies of the field. Behold, the birds of the air. Look, if you're busy yapping, you can't look. Exercise the whole intuitive power of our soul. Exercise all of our feelings. The feelings are not bad, but what we do with them, the way we can abuse them is bad. Bring them into the worship of God, by grounding them in a work of art. Create something with them. Do you feel horrible? Write a poem. Paint something. Sculpt, instead of wringing your friend's neck, get out the hammer and chisel. Carve a vision of paradise. You may think it, of, various moments of carving him up, but carve a vision of paradise. Use the vital energy, and the whole of our minds, forming, and making beautiful the work of art.

18:20 When I give retreats I often speak of a Swiss army knife. Are you admirers of such a thing? Do you ever go camping? So I make a true confession here. I occasionally take this off, and put on blue jeans, yes.

[Audience laughter]

I didn't give the company name, but I put on blue jeans, and I go with friends to the Anza Borrego desert, and I, dust off my Swiss army knife and it is useful for so many things. Yeah, everything you need in a Swiss army knife. I think it's certainly important to try to, impart a tool, a small, blade on the Swiss army knife. Most lectures and talks, have the half-life of about two minutes. Hmm? And I know they're professors here you don't want to admit anything about that [inaudible] okay. I respect your silence. But with a tool like this which can be remembered those four ways of knowing, we can, find one, of the ways, to obey, this great command, and I think that would be of great value. One of the works of art I would remind you too, is the writing of good prose. The using of the mind. The use of logic. It's not that logic alone is true and art's just kind of entertaining. Art, is the comprehensive human, way, of communing, and one of the ways of art is logic, and prose. So with this tool, and the use of your, intuition, which is your soul. The use of your, feelings, your heart. The use of all of your vital energy, and you have more than I do, which is your bodily and physical life, and the use of your mind, gives you a very holistic and balancing way, to commune with the Lord God. I just offer that tool to you. If you care to use it, it's yours, and I invite you to enjoy the Lord, through. Thank you for listening.

[End of message]

[Audience ongoing enthusiastic applause]