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**Gerard Manley Hopkins and a Sacramental World**

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BY  
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

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## **Gerard Manley Hopkins and a Sacramental World**

This short paper addresses the question of how Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) shows the world to be sacramental.

To begin with, Hopkins has a *sacramental understanding of life*. He sees God as present beneath the surface of matter, things, events, and encounters, and drawing him deeper into the mystery of God's Presence.<sup>1</sup> In other words, God is in all things.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, in perceiving the world with a sacramental eye, Hopkins writes in his poem, “God’s Grandeur”, that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God”.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Hopkins realizes that *God's presence is hidden*. Nevertheless, God reaches us through matter, through one another – in fact through all Creation.<sup>4</sup> Hidden in sacramental signs, the grace of God may be found and received, and God worshipped.<sup>5</sup> Fittingly, Hopkins' translation of St Thomas Aquinas' hymn, “Adoro te”, begins with: “*Godhead here in hiding*, whom I do adore, Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more, . . . (emphasis mine)”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Cyprian's Clarence Gate, “Corpus Christi 2005”. <<http://www.stcyprians.org.uk/hom/homily-cc-2005.html>> (3 September 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Note: A book written by Gerard W. Hughes is entitled *God in All Things: Earthing Our Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. A sacramental understanding of life allows one to acknowledge something deeper below the surface of things. Indeed, one touches on what normally “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1Cor 2:9, NIV).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Based on the Eucharist, the extraordinary fact at the centre of reality is as follows: that because God is particularly and really present in the Bread and Wine, God is invisibly, particularly and really present everywhere. Focussing on God in the particular helps one to recognise God in the general.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

With a sacramental understanding of life, Hopkins understands that *the world is not junk* to be discarded at some future time; rather, it has been redeemed and visited by the incarnate Christ.<sup>7</sup> As the redeemed, we are to be, indeed we are, immortal diamonds.<sup>8</sup> Some of Hopkins' most magnificent lines capture this thought. In “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection” he writes:<sup>9</sup>

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal  
diamond, is immortal diamond.

Hopkins' sacramental vision of the world around us<sup>10</sup> plummets new depth through two related features of his poetic expression: *inscape* and *instress*.<sup>11</sup> These allow him to exceed the depth of evangelical devotional poets.

*Inscape* is the innermost being, or uniqueness, of each created thing or person.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it means the particular features, or distinctive and essential inner quality of something, which make it different from any other.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John H. Armstrong, “Gerard Manley Hopkins and the New Heavens and New Earth” (December 5, 2009). <[http://johnharmstrong.typepad.com/john\\_h\\_armstrong\\_/\\_2009/12/gerald-manley-hopkins-and-the-new-heavens-and-new-earth.html](http://johnharmstrong.typepad.com/john_h_armstrong_/_2009/12/gerald-manley-hopkins-and-the-new-heavens-and-new-earth.html)> (3 September 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008), reviewed in <[http://imagejournal.org/imageupdate/164\\_090218.htm](http://imagejournal.org/imageupdate/164_090218.htm)> (3 September 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy E. Hartsock, “Dangerous Beauty: The Poetry and Life of Gerard Manley Hopkins” (May 2006), <<http://www.eastern.edu/academic/cas/depts/english/PDF/writing/Nancy%20Hartsock%20dangerous%20beauty.pdf>> (3 September 2010). According to Hartsock, “the Ignatian invitation to enter the Gospels through imaginative prayer . . . was a natural exercise for Hopkins, fuelling the development of his concepts of inscape and instress” (page 11).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 11; Crossref-it.info, “Inscape and Instress”, <<http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/187/Inscape-and-instress>> (3 September 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Instress, on the other hand, means the experience (how it is received into the sight, memory, and imagination) a reader has of inscape.<sup>14</sup> It is the understanding, as well as emotional or spiritual response, demanded by the intrinsic quality of a created thing.

Accordingly, Hopkins believes that his task is to express images that will pin the inscape down for readers, so they can recapture his experience and perception (which is instress).<sup>15</sup> For him, *poetry is the best language for carrying inscape*, creating poetic channels through which Christ could be seen, known, and adored by His people.<sup>16</sup> In other words, poetry – through symbolism and metaphor – condenses an unseen reality into human words. And so for Hopkins, the poetic words address, reveal, and praise God and thereby become sacramental words because of the reality in them.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, in his poetry, Hopkins is able to contemplate down-to-earth objects such as trees, streams, flowers, and landscapes and see the very presence and energy of God.<sup>18</sup> To him, visible beauty is a reflection of the invisible beauty of God.<sup>19</sup> In short, *all of nature is sacramental* – being the visible sign of an invisible, creative energy that reveals the Creator.<sup>20</sup> This sacramental view of nature is central to Hopkins' poetry, and is derived from the Ignatian Exercises.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hartsock, "Dangerous Beauty, 12.

<sup>17</sup> John H. Armstrong, "Gerard Manley Hopkins: How Poetry Can Express Nature and Incarnation Sacramentally", (December 4, 2009), <[http://johnharmstrong.typepad.com/john\\_h\\_armstrong\\_2009/12/gerald-manley-hopkins-how-poetry-can-express-nature-and-incarnation-sacramentally.html](http://johnharmstrong.typepad.com/john_h_armstrong_2009/12/gerald-manley-hopkins-how-poetry-can-express-nature-and-incarnation-sacramentally.html)> (3 September 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hartsock, "Dangerous Beauty, 12.

Finally, in Hopkins' poetry are *glimpses of the incarnation*, that is, where the divine inhabits the earthly. For instance, his two poems, "God's Grandeur" and "Spring", hint at the divine presence in nature. In this context, McFague suggests that the Creation can indeed be understood as God's self-expression, formed in God's own reality.<sup>22</sup> "In a monotheistic, panentheistic theology, if one is to understand God in some sense as physical and not just spiritual, then the entire 'body' of the universe is 'in' God and is God's visible self-expression."<sup>23</sup>

In summary, this paper has addressed the question: How does Hopkins show the world to be sacramental? The response lies in that Hopkins has a sacramental understanding of life and recognizes that all of nature is sacramental. He realizes that while God's presence is hidden, the world is not useless. Hopkins believes, therefore, that the poet's task is to *perceive* (inscape) and *express* (instress) the sacramental and incarnate uniqueness of creation through the language of poetry.

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<sup>22</sup> Sally McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God's Body", in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches in Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eaken and Jay B. McDaniel (New York: Orbis Books, 1990, <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2324>> (3 September 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. McFague adds that "this body, albeit a strange one if we take ours as the model, is nothing less than all that exists."

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