

Discernment and the creative process of art-- Continued

Part II: Receiving

In raising my children I guess you could say I got by with a little help from my friends. One of those “friends” is C.S Lewis and this quote of his on viewing art from *An Experiment in Criticism* made a deep impression on me:

“We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.”

Lewis made a distinction between “using” art and “receiving” art. He argued that “using is inferior to receiving, because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it.”

I ran across this quote again recently and it struck me that this is like the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In order to understand the work of the Spirit in our lives we must be willing to “stand under” her/him. When we open ourselves to the Spirit it is in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with the Spirit. The first step is to surrender. We get ourselves out of the way in order to look, listen and receive.

My husband participated in a group art session once that was meant to help the group learn more about themselves. Everyone in the group pretty much knew whether they were “good” at art or not, whether they had the ability to interpret art. So, what were they about to learn anyway? They spent some time in quiet meditation and then painted whatever images came into their minds. The facilitator then had them walk from painting to painting and describe what they saw. They all wanted to interpret the paintings they were looking at. “This is about...” they would start to say, only to be cut off by the leader who would remind them that they couldn’t interpret, only describe what they knew for sure they were looking at. They could not even say they were looking at a building when that was clearly what was on paper in front of their eyes. It was extremely frustrating until they let go of all preconceived labels and focused on things like color, light, shapes, lines, soft, hard, etc. This exercise served to remind them all how quickly we rush to interpret and impose our own ideas about what we see. This is true with the Spirit as well. We rush to interpret before we have taken time to really look, listen and receive. We need to get ourselves out of the way, says Lewis.