

California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia on the Poetry of Life

In an interview with the Register, Gioia described how his Catholic faith informs his art and why beauty is vital to evangelization. This autumn, Dana Gioia, California's poet laureate, has resumed his teaching duties as Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Culture at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. He is currently teaching "The Art of Poetry" to undergraduates and the graduate course "Arts Leadership and Arts Entrepreneurship." At the same time, Gioia is spreading the love of poetry across the state.

"I first fell in love with poetry as a little boy," Gioia said. "My mother used to recite poems to me. She was a working-class Mexican-American without much education, but these poems, which she had learned in school, meant a great deal to her."

Poetic Calling

As for his own calling, he commented, "It happened quite mysteriously, just as I turned 20. I found myself constantly reading and memorizing poems. I kept scribbling in a notebook. Nothing else gave me such pleasure. Without planning to, I had become a poet. That's how a vocation happens: You don't choose your calling. It chooses you."

As California's poet laureate, Gioia said his duties are a "few public appearances each year to celebrate and support poetry. But anyone who accepts public office, even one as humble as mine, should try to serve the public in a meaningful way." His goal is to reach all 58 counties. Gioia gave an example of an upcoming event in Orange County: "I will read with my Vietnamese translator, who is also a poet and editor. A Vietnamese-American musician will accompany us on the bamboo flute. She will also perform Vietnamese folk songs. ... It is important to bring literature beyond its small academic subculture and reach new communities. I think that is a very Catholic point of view: Everyone deserves a seat at the banquet."

Gioia, who started the "Poetry Out Loud" competition in 2006 when he headed the National Endowment for the Arts, considers poetry to be essential to culture.

"Poetry is the most concise, expressive and memorable way of using words to describe our existence," he said. "It is a special kind of language hidden inside our everyday speech. The music of poetry creates a sort of enchantment that allows us to feel emotions, images, sensations and ideas more intensely."

As an educator, Gioia collaborated with composer Lori Laitman for the children's opera *The Three Feathers*.

"The role of the poet in opera is to create the story, words and lyrics that the composer sets to music. ... We chose a little-known folk tale by the Brothers Grimm. ... Like the best fairy tales, it is a story of courage, fortitude and loyalty. But those virtues unfold in a narrative full of suspense, wonder and humor. The kids see one aspect of the tale;

their parents see another. I loved seeing an opera house full of kids. The arts won't survive unless we bring in the younger generation."

Catholic Perspective

No matter what he is writing, his faith is part of his work.

Gioia explained his Catholic poetics by saying, "Poetic inspiration is a mysterious and involuntary thing. ... What Catholicism does is inform my work. Whether the poem is about an angel or an alleyway, my way of seeing the world (and sensing what lies beyond the visible world) is always Catholic.

"For me, Catholicism is not a subject matter; it is about how I understand my existence and lead my life, not just how I write."

He continued, "The Catholic artist sees humanity struggling in a fallen world. We long for grace and redemption, but feel a deep sense of our own imperfection. Evil exists, but the world is not evil. We experience reality as sacramental: The world is shimmering with signs of sacred things. All reality is mysteriously charged with the presence of God. We also perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when we bear it in emulation of Christ's passion and death."

Beauty is also important to Gioia's Catholic perspective.

"Catholics believe in beauty as a fundamental mode of perception. For us, beauty is not about the external attributes of being pretty or decorous. Beauty is the exhilaration of perceiving the true shape of a thing in a way that lets us look into the center of its existence. It is our most powerful and natural way of knowing reality. As Thomas Aquinas observed, 'Beauty makes us delight in the very act of knowing.'"

According to Gioia, postmodern culture has a jaded view of beauty, saying this attitude sees beauty as "a social construction, an illusion in the eye of the beholder, conditioned by class, race, gender or ideology."

Gioia added, "Even Catholics fall prey to this neat-and-tidy theory. They want to reduce the beautiful to an attractive means of religious messaging, a sort of theological ad campaign. But the experience of beauty transcends ideology. What is the ideological content of the Grand Canyon?"

Gioia sees beauty as playing an important role in evangelization, too. "One of the glories of Catholicism has been that it understood the ability of beauty to speak to people directly. Since the end of the 19th century, Catholicism and the arts have gone in different directions. That separation has diminished both the Church and artistic culture. The Church has lost one of the most important ways in which it speaks to the world."

Gioia continued, "Parishioners are incarnate beings whose senses are dulled by pedestrian liturgy, banal art, amateurish music and graceless architecture. ... When we worship, should we not exult in the glory of God? Should we not offer God our best? 'My soul doth mediocritize the Lord' is not an inspiring motto."

He elaborated, "Let's be as literal as possible and take the example of a beautiful church. The architecture of a church creates a space that physically and imaginatively allows a certain posture of spiritual attention and alertness to occur. It doesn't dictate the theological content of that attention. ... Art awakens and enlarges our spiritual hunger. It doesn't force-feed us. Art acknowledges the intelligence and volition of its audience."

Gioia discussed the poetry of liturgy and prayer: "Poetry is indispensable to Catholic liturgy. Much of the Old Testament is poetry: the Psalms, Song of Songs, Job, the prophetic books. The Psalms are used in Mass, and they play a central role in monastic worship. When Mary responds to Gabriel, she speaks the Magnificat, one of the most beautiful poems in Latin or English. ... The first significant poet in Italian was St. Francis of Assisi."

'Speech Raised to Song'

Gioia's favorite poets include William Shakespeare, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, Dante, Horace and Rainer Maria Rilke.

As he said, "The greatest Catholic poet of the past century was the Italian Mario Luzi, whom John Paul II admired, but who remains unknown among American Catholics."

Gioia enjoys reading poems aloud, especially those of Edna St. Vincent Millay and E.E. Cummings. "What appeals to me most in poetry is the sound: the tune of the words. A poem should be speech raised to the level of song." As a poet, Gioia said he hopes to "revive rhyme, meter and narrative in American poetry. By bringing back music and storytelling, I've also helped reconnect the art to a larger audience."

He recently penned the poem *Marriage of Many Years*, dedicated to his wife.

"It's also important to celebrate the positive and balanced aspects of life, which are often more difficult to achieve and maintain," said Gioia. "It's simpler to create an ugly divorce than a happy marriage. In *Marriage of Many Years*, I explored the secret aspects of a marriage, those things we share that no one else can see or hear. Every marriage develops its own private language and rituals. I wanted to praise the 'tribe of two' that every long-term marriage has at its heart. And, on a personal note, I wanted to end 99 Poems with a love poem to my wife."

When it comes to the relationship of beauty and evangelization, Gioia said, "Most people are drawn to Catholicism by beauty. It could be the beauty of someone's life, such as Dorothy Day or Mother Teresa. It could be the beauty of a cathedral they visited or a Mozart Mass they heard for entirely secular reasons. People experience

something powerful and mysterious that they can't easily explain. A hunger awakened that must be satisfied. ... Satisfying this hunger will lead them to the ultimate source of beauty, the Creator and his creation."

He continued, "We should try to lead such exemplary lives of faith, hope and charity that people notice we are different and want to know why. Second, we should worship God in ways that communicate his glory and beauty. 'Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness,' as Psalm 96 instructs us. A nonbeliever should be able to feel the truth and majesty of the Church."

Acknowledgement

Anna Abbott. "California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia on the Poetry of Life." *National Catholic Register* (October 30, 2016).

Reprinted with permission of *National Catholic Register*.