
#4 – CONVERSATIONS



The Young John the Baptist Goes into the Wilderness (1454) by Giovanni di Paolo (born c. 1399; died 1482)¹ kept in The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London.

¹ *Grove Art Online* (Oxford) at “**Giovanni di Paolo (di Grazia)**”, article by Giovanna Damiani - Italian painter and illuminator. With Sassetta and Domenico di Bartolo, he was one of the greatest Sienese painters of the 15th century. He created a lyrical figural style capable of conveying both exaltation and pathos. ... Castiglione, a Milanese professor of law at Pavia, was from 1400 to 1404 a member of the supervising board of works of Milan Cathedral. He and his wife lived in Siena c. 1415–19, and it is possible that they introduced Giovanni to Lombard book illumination. Throughout his career Giovanni executed book illuminations as well as panel paintings. ... He had an intense, fertile imagination and a highly individual way of using line – nervous and impetuous – which boldly distorted and abstracted natural forms. ... In the 1450s Giovanni’s style seems to show a stronger influence of Sassetta, with more clearly defined volumes and spatial relations. These features are already evident in the architectural

THE PAINTING

John 1 (NJB): ²² So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' ²³ So he said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied:

*A voice of one that cries in the desert:
Prepare a way for the Lord.
Make his paths straight!'* ²

Let us look at the painting.

First, I know of no other painter who has contemplated this moment in John's young life: the moment when John left home. Our painter is able to give us the impression that John was still quite young, perhaps even a teenager. In light of our chapter 4 of the *Imitation of Christ*, John's disappearance into the wilderness (did he know that he would never return home?) might seem to us, and certainly to his parents (!), an incautious action. John seems to lack "patient care", possibly unwilling "to weigh up the pros and cons of the business as God's sees it." And the boy goes all alone!

Melvana Jelaluddin Rumi³ (1207-1273; translated by Coleman Barks):

This moment
This LOVE
comes to rest in me,
many beings in one being
In one wheat-grain
a thousand sheaf stacks.

Inside the needle's eye
a turning night of stars.

backgrounds of his most ambitious narrative cycle, **the scenes from the *Life of St John the Baptist***. The 12 panels, of which 11 survive (Chicago, IL, A. Inst.; Münster, Westfäl. Landesmus.; New York, Met.; Avignon, Mus. Pet. Pal.; Pasadena, CA, Norton Simon Mus.) were originally arranged in four vertical rows, perhaps as part of a cabinet (custodia) housing a sacred object or reliquary.

² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 1:22-23.

³ See: <https://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/R/RumiMevlanaJ/>

This moment –
This LOVE.

Second, we notice the over-built castle from which John emerges. This detail is not meant to spark a question: “Did John’s family actually live in a place like that?” Rather, we are meant to feel that John is leaving a predictably safe and well-defended place, exchanging that for a location – the harsh and trackless Wilderness – that is a *least* safe and predictable place. And the young John goes wearing only his unkempt curls and a beardless face that never looks back.

Wilderness denotes a range of landscapes, from open plains and rugged mountains offering seasonal pasturage, to scrub or nearly barren desert, to scorched, toxic land incapable of supporting vegetation. The term typically refers to unsettled and uncultivated land, the natural habitation of wild animals but not of humans, a place through which shepherds and Bedouin pass following pasturage, and travelers hasten to safer havens.⁴

Third, we wonder why his parents are not there at the door to see John off. Think for *how long* that they both had had to wait to get pregnant (like Abraham and Sarah)!⁵ And now this impetuous boy had decided to leave his parents while still so young and never to return to them. Do we not see them at the door, because they were hurt and had refused to offer a blessing to their son, or is it that they had been so old when he was born that they were already dead? Anyway, we wonder whether the parents sought and obtained trustworthy counsel about how to understand their remarkable, *and only*, child, as our author considers it prudent to do:

Find out some wise counsellor to advise you, a person of enlightened conscience, and be prepared to go by his or her better judgement, instead of trusting your own calculations.

Fourth, there are not two boys in this painting but only one. It is the painter’s way of marking the passage of time: whatever time elapsed from the moment when John

⁴ Brian C. Jones, “[Wilderness](#),” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 849.

⁵ The Lukan narrator initially describes her [Elizabeth] as righteous before God and blameless in following God’s commandments, but she is childless and beyond child-bearing years (1:6–7). Elizabeth’s story parallels the stories of childless women in the OT who, after disappointment, become the mothers of outstanding figures in biblical history. Elizabeth’s story especially resembles Sarah’s (see Gen 17:15–22; 18:9–15; 21:1–7) because they are both advanced in years and in both cases, there is a divine announcement of the birth before the child is conceived. [Robert C. Tannehill, “Elizabeth,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 247.]

stepped through the open gate (still close enough to turn back) to when he was completely gobbled up by the severe Wilderness (he is almost there) – notice the knife-like edges on those mountains: they look so austere and threatening. I am not sure, but it appears to me that the fancy boots that he is wearing when he leaves his home have left his legs and feet by the time he has come fully into the Wilderness. We also recognize that his little bag of food that was dangling at the end of his stick when he set out is empty – so quickly! – before he gets very deep into the Wilderness.

Sister Wendy Beckett,⁶ *Sister Wendy's One Hundred Best-Loved Paintings* (2019), page 79 – Giovanni di Paolo is inspired to show us the little John, setting out from his parents' house with its fancy frontage, and leaving all the comforts of home so that he can live alone with God. It is a very rare depiction of a lovable and even charming John. He is still in his pretty pink garment, and, like all young adventurers, he carries on his shoulder a stick from which hangs a small bag of provisions. This image suggests that he did not anticipate the full rigours of what would be his vocation. He launched himself upon it with a full heart, and it would be in the years ahead that God would unfold to him the true dimensions of his vocation.

Sometimes *not* being cautious in our undertakings when it comes to what God asks of us to do is what is necessary.

THE TEXT (KNOX & OAKLEY)

4. ON CAUTION IN OUR UNDERTAKINGS

1. We do wrong to be influenced by every rumour we hear, every suggestion that comes to us; patient care is needed if we are to weigh up the pro's and con's of the business as God sees it. Unfortunately – such is our frailty – people are often ready to believe the worst, instead of the best, about others, and to hand the story on. A fully formed

⁶ I am deeply grateful to Sister Wendy. It was she who taught me how to see, not just to look at paintings but to engage them with a complete and honed alertness. *Britannica*: "**Sister Wendy Beckett** (born February 25, 1930, Johannesburg, South Africa – died December 26, 2018, East Harling, England) was a South African-born British nun who appeared on a series of popular television shows and wrote a number of books as an art critic. Nicknamed the "Art Nun," she offered eloquent and down-to-earth commentary that made art accessible to everyone. ... The piece caught the eye of a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) producer, and in 1992 *Sister Wendy's Odyssey* made its debut. The series followed a simple format: Sister Wendy stood next to an artwork and gave her reaction to the piece. With humour and a gift for storytelling, she brought life and drama to the work. The series was a hit, and Sister Wendy, a habit-wearing consecrated virgin with a speech impediment, became the unlikely of stars."

Christian does not believe everything he hears; he realizes how weak human nature is, how bent on mischief, how untrustworthy in its statements.

2. Here is a very wise rule: never act in a hurry and always be ready to alter your preconceived ideas. And here is another principle that goes with it; don't be too ready to accept the first story that is told you, or hand on to others the rumours you hear, and the secrets entrusted to you. Find out some wise counsellor to advise you, a man of enlightened conscience, and be prepared to go by his better judgement, instead of trusting your own calculations. Believe me, a holy life gives a man the wisdom that reflects God's will, and a wide range of experience. The humbler he is, the more submissive in God's service, the more wise and calm will be his judgements on every question.

CONVERSATION

Point One

I chose to consider St. John the Baptist (our painting above) as a way into chapter four of the *Imitation*. The author of the *Imitation* knows from experience how perilous it is to be a human being among other human beings and so did John the Baptist. We are a messy lot who often "prefer darkness", which we choose, as Aristotle would insist about the choices humans make, because we think that we can lay hold of something good for ourselves, or at least something that gains us an advantage over others – leverage.

John 3 (NJB):

¹⁹ And the judgement is this:
though the light has come into the world
people have preferred
darkness to the light
because their deeds were evil. ⁷

And when we so choose, our "bent" personality *influences* others, forcing them into adaptive distortions in their own personalities to protect themselves, to deal with the damage that our decision has caused.

⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 3:19.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “to influence” – 4.a. – 1598 – The exertion of action of which the operation is unseen or insensible (or perceptible only in its effects), by one person or thing upon another; the action thus exercised.

Originally const. *into* (cf. 3); now *on, upon, in*. **undue influence**..

Our author in chapter four warns us about the effects “bent” people will have on us, who traffic in rumors, who gossip about the defects of others, who genuinely enjoy knowing the worst about someone, who disclose as an act of power secrets entrusted to them to keep, who have lost their ability, or desire, to recognize how deceitful they have become.

In St. John’s case, he gets up and leaves the company of human beings, and it appears, for *years*. But he goes not in order to reject people (his later ministry among the thousands who came looking for him proves this) but so that he might learn to listen to God, to be able to distinguish God’s voice from all the voices competing, too loudly and often with such vulgarity, for his attention.

The humbler he is, the more submissive in God’s service, the more wise and calm will be his judgements on every question.

It is telling that when the cowardly King Herod ordered that John be killed, it was his head – the clarity of John’s mind; its luminosity – that the King attacked, wanting to obliterate its light.

What would it mean to learn to be *influenced*, centrally and foundationally, by God alone? Chapter four begins to articulate how to identify competing influences of the world and its ways and the necessity to learn how to name and then to reject them. The whole of the *Imitation* is about learning how to be influenced by God alone.

Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples* (2016), page 20: “A holy person makes you see things in yourself and around you that you hadn’t seen before; that is to say, he or she enlarges the world rather than shrinking it . . . They allow you to see, not *them*, but the world around them.”

Point Two

Our author addresses how we must grow in our ability to make our openness to experiences more discriminating. In particular, he means what we allow ourselves to look at; what we allow ourselves to hear. An old expression from books on the

cultivation of religious maturity insists on a practice of “*modesty*⁸ of the eyes and *custody*⁹ of the senses”. One author puts it this way:

The core meaning of this traditional phrase from our Catholic spirituality is simple to grasp. *It means taking care of what we pay attention to.* Our senses put us into contact with reality. But in this fallen world, some realities can be unhealthy for us – these are the ones we want to guard against (“custody” comes a Latin word, *custos*, which means “a guardian”). Our senses let sounds and feelings and images into our minds and hearts. Just as we don’t let just anyone in through the front door of our house, so we should not let just anyone into our minds through the doorways of our senses.¹⁰

It is foolishness to let flood into our awareness *everything* that is out there – that would be *indiscriminate*; it can also harm us at the very least by fragmenting our concentration, overwhelming our capacity to deal with so much clamoring for our attention, finally exhausting us. Thus, the significance of cultivating a habit of modesty of the eyes and custody of the senses.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “**indiscriminate**” - 1. – 1649 – Of things: Not marked by discrimination or discernment; done without making distinctions; confused, haphazard.

Consider why it is that we install on our computer virus/malware software. Its programming, constantly (even daily) being updated against new threats, can discriminate what is allowed to enter our computers and what is not. This is not *censorship* (!); this is an intelligent capacity to select from all that is *out there* what we let gain access to our attention, and therefore to enter our imagination and mind.

My favorite example of *this refinement of our attention* is a mother and her baby. By what extraordinary power and discrimination can a mother, while conversationally engaged with guests in the house for dinner, pick out from all the noise the tiny voice of her baby in his or her room upstairs, down the hallway, and behind a closed nursery door? She has become capable of *filtering out* (i.e., discriminating) all that gets in the way of

⁸ “**modesty**” – How quickly Americans want to confine this word to being something about our bodies and our sexuality. The word has a much broader and more significant reach. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**modesty**” - I. - **Modest quality or character** - I.1. - 1531-1839 - † Moderation, temperateness, self-control; freedom from excess or exaggeration; clemency, mildness of rule or government. *Obsolete*.

⁹ “**custody**” - The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**custody**” - 2. - c1450 – The charge or care of something or someone; protection, defence; guardianship.

¹⁰ See: <https://spiritualdirection.com/2015/10/12/what-is-custody-of-the-senses>.

keeping her ears attuned to the sound of her baby upstairs. It is not *censorship* that she is practicing in relation to all that she is seeing and hearing around her; it is *a trained and refined attention* to what matters most, to what gives her life and purpose.

We wonder how helped each of us would be if we developed such a degree of discrimination through a practice of *modesty of the eyes and custody of our senses*, allowing into our awareness only those things that give us life, letting in only those experiences that give our mind the chance to think about what is true and good and beautiful.

Point Three

Our author writes: "Find out some wise counsellor to advise you, a person of enlightened conscience, and be prepared to go by his or her better judgement, instead of trusting your own calculations."

A question worth asking ourselves is "How is it that you or I conclude that this or that person is *wise*"? We need to know this so that we can find, and know that we have found, a *wise* counselor, not a person merely clever or with a title and a credential (gaining a title or credential never, ever, makes a person "wise").

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective "**wise**" – **1.a.i. - Old English** – Having or exercising sound judgement or discernment; capable of judging truly concerning what is right or fitting, and disposed to act accordingly; having the ability to perceive and adopt the best means for accomplishing an end; characterized by good sense and prudence. Opposed to *foolish*.

The one thing that for certain our author knows is that among all those born of women, Jesus Christ has been the wisest. Sure, He was smart as a whip (his quickness and deftness of humor!); but it is His wisdom that we long for. Best to get to know Him ... by learning to imitate Him.

John 15 (NJB):

¹⁴ You are my friends,
if you do what I command you. [i.e., to imitate]¹¹
¹⁵ I shall no longer call you servants,
because a servant does not know
the master's business;
I call you friends,
because I have made known to you

¹¹ Jesus never asks us to do what He himself has not already done, consistently done.

everything I have learnt from my Father.¹²

¹² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 15:14–15.