

Featured Writer



Tamara Nicholl-Smith

Tamara Nicholl-Smith is a poet and spoken word artist living and writing in Houston, Texas. She enjoys collaborating with musicians, poets, and artists. Her poetry has appeared on two Albuquerque city bus panels, one parking meter, numerous radio shows, one spoken-word classical piano fusion CD, and in print and online publications including Kyoto Journal Issue 95, The Examined Life Journal (Volumes 8 & 9), Catholic Arts Today, and Mutabulis Press's anthology Enchantment of the Ordinary. Recently, she developed a workshop for writers on creative productivity called Making Space for the Muse. Tamara has been a member of Catholic Literary Arts since October 2020 and is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Saint Thomas in Houston, TX.

CLA asked Tamara to share a few of her thoughts on writing sacred poetry, particularly from the perspective of a convert to Catholicism. Her thoughts are below.

I converted to Catholicism from what I call "secular bohemianism" about 15 years ago. I had not been raised with any religion, nor had I been baptized. However, since I was young, I believed in the reality of things I could not see, and this has been reflected in my writing. My poetry has always exhibited a sense of some underlying unseen order, or force, which at its most basic could be understood as natural law. I always thought we had something to learn from trees, from the way the seasons turn from the lengthening and shortening of the days, from the turning of the constellations, and the way a volcano erupts. There was this sense of the "speaking earth" and my job as poet was to tune in and listen.

This sense was reinforced by a few lines of poetry by Dylan Thomas that I encountered in Junior High: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / drives my green age . . . The force that drives the water through the rocks / Drives my red blood." These lines stirred something in my imagination. They struck me as having an authority, of speaking truth, a truth of my own lived reality. The phrases burrowed into my conscious and subconscious, and I think that they helped start me on the path to becoming Catholic.

I knew when I became Catholic that it would eventually change my writing. I think it took about ten years for that change to work its way to the page, and even then, I would not say much of my work was explicitly Catholic. Instead, Catholicism became the ground of being for the poems. Sometimes ideas for poems come to me in Mass, sparked by the day's homily, or a statue or window in the church, and often these are, not surprisingly, somewhat more explicitly religious than other poems that I write.

Truth be told, it was becoming involved with Catholic Literary Arts (CLA) workshops and entering the CLA sacred writing contests that helped turn me towards writing poems specifically about sacred topics. The process of writing a poem for me often involves doing some research. This has been especially true of my more explicitly religious poems. Ideas for poems have led me to do research on things like the liturgical seasons, liturgical colors, certain saints, biblical stories, and the person of Jesus himself.

Poetry is an art, it requires skill. It is not enough to say something spiritually true; it must meet the criteria of being a good poem, and sometimes that poem may happen to be about something sacred. While the full meaning of my more explicitly religious work may be best understood by those steeped in the Catholic context, it is important to me that the poems make sense and be accessible to those outside that context. My biggest hope is that they can perhaps call to others in the way Dylan's lines called to me.

Below is Tamara's poem, "Stella Maris."

Stella Maris

*"We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid."
— Robert Frost*

You wear the night, shimmer with the
milk-light of Orion's Belt and
hold the North Star in your outstretched
palm. You once grew round and full to breaking,
your belly, a moon — full with promise,
small as a wink whispered into your womb.

I, filled with shadow song,
bloated with emptiness,
heavy with waiting,
fertile with want,
nearly missed your invitation,
written in the pointing stars:
 Make of yourself a manger.

At the foot of the Northern Cross
Albireo blooms orange and blue.
I turn my face to the flowering sky.