

“A CLOUD OF WITNESSES”:
INTRODUCING
WHY WE NEED . . .

The editors of *Communio* are pleased to announce the inauguration of a new series entitled *Why We Need . . .*. The three dots stand for the names of philosophers, poets, scientists, painters, musicians, theologians, and others whom we think Catholics today ought to—need to—know or know better. This means that readers can expect a certain surface eclecticism: the articles in the series will appear at irregular intervals, will come in no particular order, and will present a disparate-seeming variety of people inside and outside the Church. Nevertheless, we aim to give the series a deeper coherence than may immediately meet the eye. The goal of *Why We Need . . .* is not disorderly, unreasonable abundance, but a demonstration *in actu exercito* of the proposition that “truth is symphonic.” Unity beyond uniformity, combined with plurality beyond pluralism: this is the “trinitarian” pattern we would like the new series to reflect.

In accord with the type of unity *Why We Need . . .* as a whole aims at, each individual article in the series should present its subject as what could be called a *Gestalt* or figure. For a *Gestalt* is precisely a many-sided, yet basically coherent whole. Obviously, the often messy complexity of concrete human lives forces us to ask how much basis in reality there can be for “reading” someone as a *Gestalt* in this sense. How much of the *Gestalt* of Samuel Johnson in Boswell’s *Life* or of Goethe in Eckermann’s *Conversations* is Johnson or Goethe, and how much results from the artistic genius of Boswell or Eckermann? But maybe *bios* and biography are not so opposed as we are inclined to think. Maybe remembrance—however fallible and prone to arbitrariness any individual rememberer is likely to be—is

the “medium” in which the objective *Gestalt* of individual human lives was always meant to achieve its full display.

One sort of remembering is reading, which means becoming acquainted with an author whose identity is inseparable from his “message” and the voice in which he delivers it: “person as mission,” as Balthasar would say. Above all, the articles in the series should aim to let readers hear their subject’s distinctive authorial “voice.” This means that, while not dilettantish or unscholarly, the contributions should appeal to more than just specialists. They should be examples of a kind of scholarship that is capable of integrating the specialized study of details (back) into the contemplation of the form of the whole, which alone makes the details intelligible and worth studying in the first place.

But why do we need a series of articles about the *Gestalten* that we, as readers, know as Plato, or Claudel, or Dorothy Day—to name just three of many possible examples? The answer to this question is the same as the answer to the question “why do we read?” There are, of course, many kinds of texts to read, but the ones that make for the most satisfying kind of reading are the ones we read because we *need* to. Just as we need to remember our dead, because they make us who we are, so, too, we need our authors because we need to become who *they* can make us be. Reading, like all remembrance, is a two-way street: it is not just we who give the remembered their *Gestalt*, but the remembered who at the same time give us ours. The main reason why we are proposing a *Why We Need . . .* series, then, is the main reason why we continue to publish *Communio* in the first place. Very simply, our goal is to provide solid food capable of nourishing readers’ growth into the full stature of Christ, which includes the full stature of their humanity. Life is too short for anything else.

As for the seeming disparateness of our choices, we are confident readers will notice that the apparent eclecticism of the *Gestalten* presented in these pages is actually governed by a rigorous criterion of selection: does this man or woman belong in one way or another to the “vision” that inspired Balthasar, de Lubac, and Ratzinger to found *Communio* in the early 1970s? This question may sound self-serving, but if we think of the mission the journal’s founders bequeathed to us, and not of our own record in carrying it out, the question really means this: does the given figure belong (at least in some way) to the “cloud of witnesses” who remind us that Catholicism is the Son of God’s taking possession of the human

condition in its height, depth, and breadth? In this sense, it is fitting that the first article in the series tries to explain "Why We Need Paul Claudel." For, as D. C. Schindler shows, Claudel has a lot to teach us about *the Gestalt* we want to present through all of the particular *Gestalten* that appear in the series: the figure of the *communio sanctorum*, which both owes itself to, and fulfills "from above," the human tradition of rememberers we need to be a part of simply in order to live.

—AJW