

Thoughts on Guy Ferrer's T.O.L.E.R.A.N.C.E.

by Fr Matthew Charlesworth SJ



"T.O.L.E.R.A.N.C.E.", by sculptor and artist Guy Ferrer, is composed of nine bronze sculptures, each representing a letter of the word "tolerance" and depicting an aspect of a religion, belief or spirituality. It is currently on display at St Stithians College and I went to visit it this past weekend. I thought I would share my impressions about this intriguing artwork.

The artwork is on loan to the school from the Everard Art Gallery in Johannesburg. It's website states that: "Guy Ferrer is French, of Catalan descent by his father and Italian descent by his mother. He was born in 1955 in Algeria, and this work has been exhibited in France, Germany, Poland, the United Arab Emirates, and South Africa. Conceived in the aftermath of 9/11 and in reaction to contemporary humanist religious tensions, this artwork presents Guy Ferrer's reconciliatory vision. It is a message of hope stating that the communal and shared spiritual quest, inherent in our humanity, should be a source of convergence. Key to an essential commitment for respect and peace in the world, tolerance exists thanks to an effort of reflection, openness to others and imagination.

This major sculpture received wide acclaim through its exhibitions in La Monnaie de Paris (January, 2008) and in the Jardins du Luxembourg, French Senate (summer, 2008). It has also been installed at the Goethe University in Frankfurt (Germany, 2009), the city of Poznan (Poland, 2009), the Palais des Rois de Majorque (2011) and the Campo Santo (2014) in Perpignan (France). Three of the eight editions of this work have been installed on a permanent basis at: the François Mitterrand's park (Saint-Ouen, France); the forecourt of the Government Palace in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates); and the district of Port Marianne in Montpellier (France)."

The artist believes that each installation of this artwork "serves as a landmark, a focal point for welcoming other artists, students and entire communities to join in spreading the fuller message of Tolerance, Compassion and Brotherhood", which is the artist's intention behind creating an artwork that is truly greater than the sum of its parts. The placing of the figures next to each other represents how each can be pursued without threat to the other and yet stand together as testament to the importance and relatedness of all.



My impressions of the T artwork.

Some people may immediately be drawn to the cruciform shape, and the branches that grow out of the figure's head might remind one of a crown of thorns. But these thorns appear to have grown and appear more like living stems, and perhaps that is why the figure is not attached to the 'crucifix' but appears in front of it. There are some types of crosses, like the Franciscan Tau cross which has a T-shape too. I admit this could be something one can read in the artwork, but looking behind it there is no vertical beam, and so no cross, so whilst I think it's tempting for Christians to read a cross into this and see Christ, and growth where there was death, I see in it allusions to an earlier spirituality that is more naturalistic and elemental and sees the deity in nature, and how each of us are connected to the creation, not just as a part, but as a potential source

for the growth (or decline) of the natural world.

For me, the outgrowths of branches from the head reflect a growing understanding of our mind and reflect an ability to comprehend the relationships and links in all of creation. For lack of a better word, the beams behind the figure's head, remind me both of flight – the wings of a plane (or perhaps, in an abstract way, an angel?) – and so the element of air, the boughs of a tree, and so nature, or even something metallic, and the link to what is deep in the earth. This creates a vertical tension that goes from the depths to the heights and provides the necessary boundaries for considering the divine. The figure appears robed and its hands are joined in an act of contemplation. The growing outcrops represent creativity, and like antennas, a desire to sense the beckoning unknown.



My impressions of the O artwork.

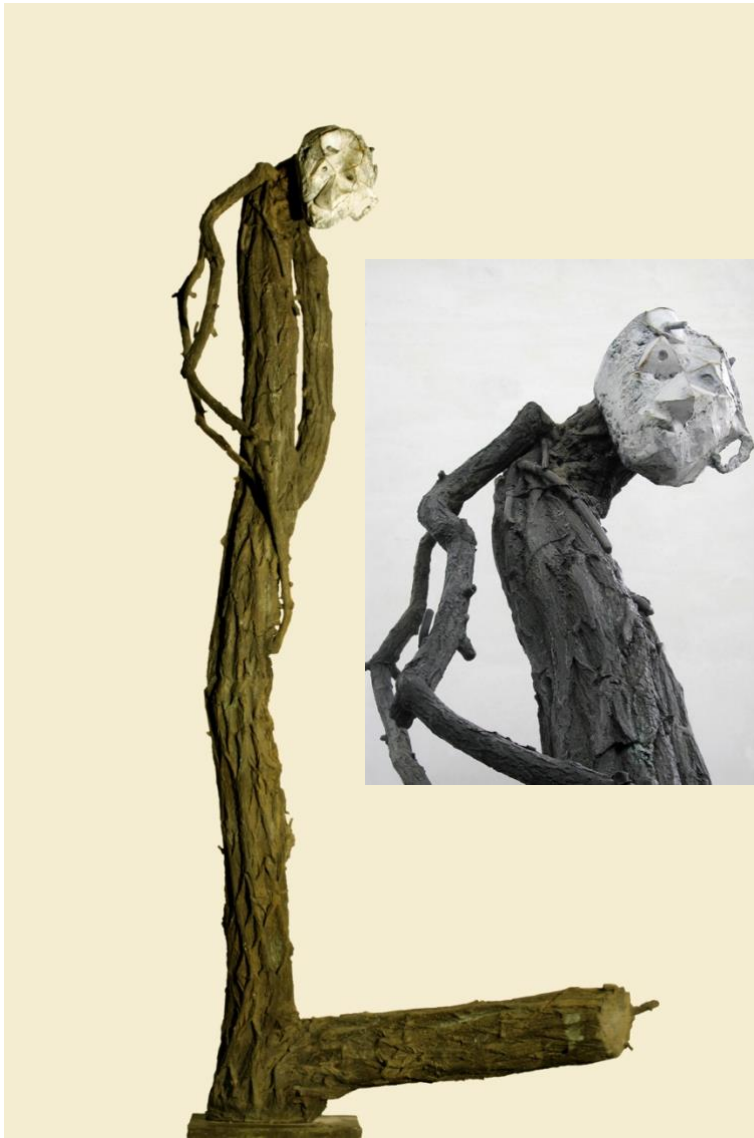
What strikes me here is that the focus is on the head, which is large, suggesting intellectualism and the source of reason. The focus here then is the tension between what one thinks and what one does. The hands form a circle that pass through the mind which reminds me of karma, the belief that one's actions in the past might impact one's future.

The thoughts in one's head are translated into actions represented by one's hands, and how habits of virtue or vice are formed through attention or inattention to what one contemplates. The cyclical nature also reminds me of the religious belief in reincarnation and there is also a resonance with Ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its tail, signifying eternity in Gnostic imagery.

The eyes appear open but there is no mouth, and the actions enter the head through the ears. This reminds me of the ill-effects of gossip on others, and of St Ignatius' observation that love shows itself more in deeds than in words.

There is also the allusion to a halo, a traditional artistic depiction of holiness, which was borrowed in a way from the ancient Egyptian religion sun or nimbus. The gnarled image created by the hands is also reminiscent of antlers which is also suggestive. In English folklore, Herne the Hunter is adorned with an antler like headdress in imitation of the Celtic pagan religion image of the antlered god Cernunnos.

On the other hand, the absence of a body, and the presence of hands can also allude to the need to listen and help those who cannot help themselves. There is an element of compassion here for those who are not fully aware or physically fit. Without being able to voice what one feels, one can only observe one's actions, and yet recognise how there is much going on in the mind that one can never be aware of, and so compassion to all is what is important.



My impressions of the L artwork.

This bronze figure is sculpted to depict the texture of wood, again suggesting a spirituality that is in tune with nature and the world. The sexless figure speaks to me of how gender is not a barrier to communication with God.

The central feature in this image is the face that appears askance, as you can see from the inset image, recalling the need for humility to ponder the divine, to be awakened not by answers, but by questions that divinity poses to humanity and – in this case – the whole created world.

One ear that is enlarged, depicting the emphasis on listening in all contemplative spiritualities. The protruding eyes suggest the art of truly seeing.

The hands hold nothing, again suggesting the act of listening and seeing without distraction. The ear to God and the eyes confronting the onlooker speaks of Prophecy, another important part of religion. The figure is upright, representing all that is moral, good and upstanding. It is not bent or burdened by sin or moral compromise. There is no wagging finger or violently resistant upraised hand, but rather just the askance glance that questions, persistently, the status quo and queries the place of justice and moral uprightness in our current situation.



My impressions of the E artwork.

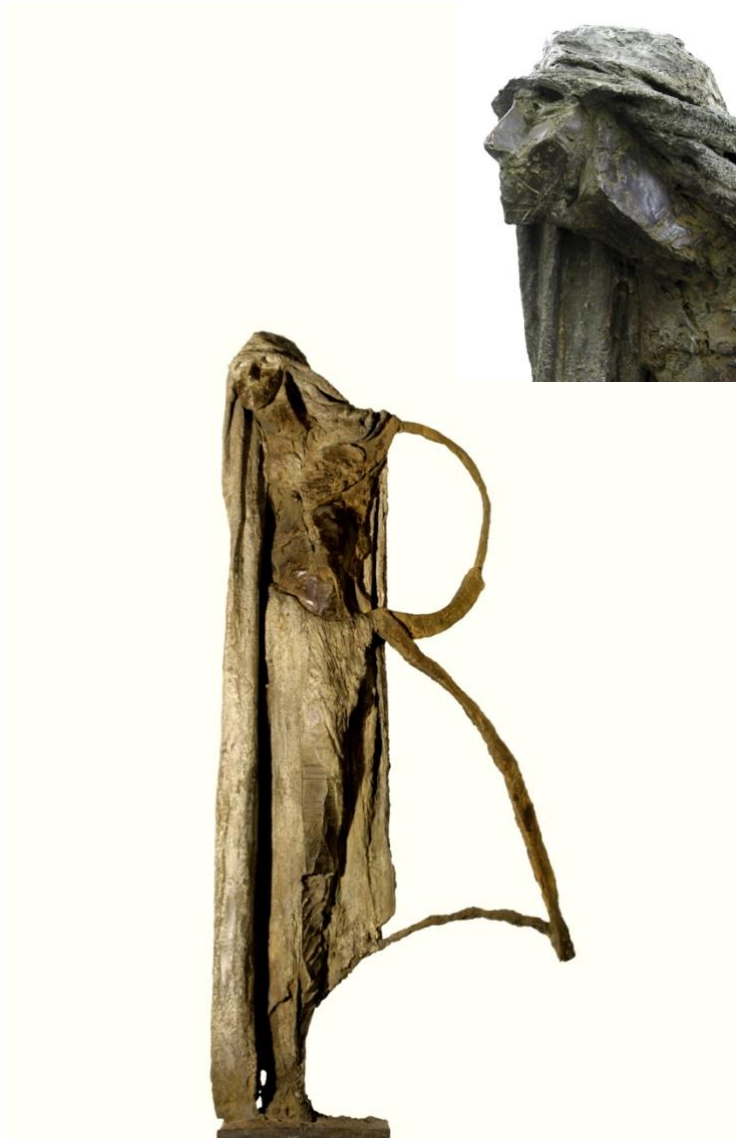
The golden crescent moon reminds me initially, and maybe naïvely, of Islam, but also of all the religions that ponder the awesomeness of creation, or contemplate the movements of the stars and planets. How one can find God in nature by observing the majesty and vastness of space, while simultaneously honouring patient attention of reason of science and the laws of nature in their interpretation of the origins of our universe.

The figure is seated in a contemplative pose, looking forwards. The mouth is open as if in awe as the figure contemplates wonder.

The crescent has represented Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, and by extension more popularly now Islam – though this is not universally accepted by Muslims. As a representation of the regular

movement of the solar system, it also represents time, and our understanding of how we are created in time and space, and the relative minuteness of our space in the universe. Yet we are gifted to be able to be aware of all this and contemplate it, and so be amazed and in awe of the Creator who created us.

This statue also evokes the notion of a teleology – a plan and purpose – that prompts us to contemplate the ends for which we were created in the first place. The mid-position in which the figure is situated also speaks to how one needs to be removed from the mundane pursuits to become aware of these great truths. One needs to separate oneself from the World, to create time and space for contemplation to recognise and understand the significance of what one becomes aware of. This is why prayer in spiritual traditions often privileges silence and separation, times of concentrated listening and seeing to shut out the distractions and become truly conscious, truly free, truly aware, and so in awe, and in gratitude for one's blessings in being created.



My impressions of the R artwork.

Whilst some might see in this face the image of a crone, I believe that this figure represents a pilgrim, and all the spiritualities that see faith as a journey. The figure is looking backward, reflecting on its past, but the staff and movement is forward, thus denoting movement and a desire to transcend the present.

Spiritualities that recognize that life is a journey are not paralysed by sin, nor forgetful of one's past even as they glory in the future. The craned neck represents effort and the covered head and cloaked figure evoke an image of a seer – that is to say, a seer, a person who sees clearly.

Without reflecting on one's experience one never learns and many religious traditions stress the importance of being able to learn from one's mistakes in order to move

forward. The forward-step cannot begin without first looking back, reflecting on one's experience and learning.

My impressions of the A artwork.



For me this is the most Christian image. The artist speaks of how each of these letters represent emissaries of religions and spirituality, and for me this is a classic depiction of the Virgin Mary, who was the emissary or envoy who bore Christ into the World, and is considered to be the Mother of God.

As mother, it is also representative of all the spiritualities that celebrate or honour the feminine. Her joined hands in the symbol of prayer, and what appears to be a sign of pregnancy, symbolize the willingness to accept life and bear it in a prayerfully accepting stance of co-creation with God, participation with God's will, and models how we should all allow God to work through us.

The habit that she wears, a sort of dress also speaks of the religious values of modesty. Her mouth is open, recalling the Magnificat of praise in recognizing the wonders that God has wrought. The shape of an arrow also alludes to an upward motion. This recalls for me the canticle Mary prays recorded in Luke's Gospel in which the Lord will lift up the down-trodden and pull the mighty from their thrones, and how he has raised Mary to this special honour of being the Mother of God, whilst at all times honouring the free will of each human person.

My impressions of the N artwork.



These figures remind me of the Yin and Yang of eastern philosophies. The interlinked arms reflect the intrinsic relationship between the progressing and declining figures that simultaneously pull-up and pull-down. There is thus a constant tension in this image between the figure that is moving forward and pulling upward, and the one that is falling and pulling downwards... The head of the figure standing and pulling is a skull, which seems to be a depiction of death to which we are all destined. But this journeying towards death becomes the support for new life.

The question of perspective is also raised here and how one's past is part of our ability to move forward. The figures are unclothed, suggesting that our nakedness reveals our connections

to each other and to our past.

There is also an element of balance in this image and many spiritualities help one to become more balanced. The strength and visible muscles on the figurines also reflect how religion demands stamina and how bodies are seen to be a temple of God. The falling figure also supports the advancing one and this is reminiscent of how one's faults might be the occasion for inspiring others and that true spiritual leaders are not perfect but rather conscious of their own wounds and defects, for perfection exists only in God.

This is also one of the sculptures with more than one figure, revealing how one is joined together to one's life partner and how triumphs or defeats, successes or failures, can lift one up or pull one down, but the journey forward is made possible together. Unlike the community emphasized in the ascent of prayer to God in the final letter E, this shows how the coupling of two humans can be an aid, or a burden in living well.

It might also represent the two sides in each of us, the public and private self, the side we show to the world, and the hidden self we're ashamed of, and yet by joining them together, we show what God sees – the total whole. The theme of compassionately uplifting the other, or oneself, is also reminiscent in these two figures. There's the flexibility within the image that might speak of the need to have an open mind within Spirituality, to see beyond horizons and thus be open to a God of Surprises.

My impressions of the C artwork.

There is a serpent-like sea creature that is curved in on itself, much like we are when we give into temptation and fall into sin. The tail contains a dangerous looking claw, which represents the total self-injuring nature of sin.

This represents for me how an inward looking, self-centered understanding of religion can lead to death, as represented by the face that appears to have been swallowed by the serpent. The fins and the sea creature again point to nature, but in certain faiths the recognition of God in creatures might also be represented here.

The fins also have a shell-like quality, representing the symbol of pilgrimage. The inward curvature of this image and cyclical nature on oneself also reminds one of the deathly nature of

embarking on a spiritual journey with oneself as the center. True religion, to be life-giving, must be other-centered, drawing oneself outwards into relationship, and not selfishly contemplating oneself. A drowning connotation of being at sea and chasing one's tail whilst forgetting to stop and breathe also comes to mind.

The interrupted curve, might also allude to the break in eternity which the O figure's nimbus or circular sign spoke of. This break might represent the experience of sin which interrupts the building of the Kingdom of God on earth that Christians are called to work towards, "as it is in Heaven", according to God's will.





My impressions of the E artwork.

This is my favourite piece. It makes me think of the contemplative tradition within community that is common in many religions, as represented by what seems to be a community of Tibetan monks. The figures evoke a movement together with one another but also a separation as they ascend.

At the bottom, the community of monks are gathered around a seated guru or master as they become disciples in prayer. They are focused on their lives and are situated on a spacious platform that is balanced on both sides (a horizontal ladder, which reminds us of the Ladder mysticism in certain Eastern and Western Christian spiritualities). To ascend they have to use the ladder, harnessing and transforming their surroundings, to reach the next level – a metaphor of prayer, and how one can ascend and descend and that the journey takes

place with deliberate steps forward and backward, up and down.

The middle section shows a couple of monks on a limb with one climbing to reach the height where the lone figure is. The 'out on a limb' notion represents the faith that one must leave the safety and security of certainty and allow oneself to risk belief. The figure on the top near the edge is windswept and to me is listening to that silent whisper of God away from the others in silence and solitude.

The top represents the mountain and mouth of the cave, which is an allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave, the movement from ignorance to spiritual enlightenment. This is also an allegory of prayer and the contemplative tradition, a part of religion and spirituality that appreciates the mystical and self-revelation of God to each of us. The community aspect here, where one can be held to account in one's spiritual ascent or descent, comes after the considerations of a couple and selfishness and perhaps ends with the assurance that with the support of true community it is easier to find God.

The three levels also bring to mind Dante's Divine Comedy which tells of the journey from Hell through Purgatory to Heaven.

Conclusion

Whilst individually there is much to appreciate in the individual statues, there is still yet much more to appreciate in the artwork as a whole. In standing side-by-side the individual sculptures point to how faiths can coexist, in support of one another's shared search and worship of the Divine in our natural world. Seen together, each part illuminates aspects in the other, thus offering a richer and even more prayerful encounter.

When I viewed this artwork with a friend, I made the remark that in my view, *tolerance* is a fairly low bar to expect from people. Tolerance does not demand as much as what is really required in our world, which I believe is rather *fraternity*, a stronger value which embraces 'One and All' (the school's motto) more completely. Rather than just being tolerant of another, fraternity demands that we see each other in relationship; that we be "our brother's and sister's keeper"; and that we see ourselves and our relationship to each other as impactful, with duties and responsibilities to not only to our God, but to each other, and to our world.

This important artwork emphasizes what is necessary, and though I feel it is not wholly sufficient to the true task at hand, it does lay the foundation for a future building of fraternity – where, in the Christian sense, we acknowledge and affirm, every person as being created in the image of God.

Reflecting on the different traditions, I also see, in history, how there has been a movement from animism to polytheism to monotheism, and how, from my perspective, Christians might recognize how the Triune God has gently sensitized humanity throughout history to God's true nature, which as Christians we understand to be Trinitarian. In recalling tolerance for these different religions, or more accurately, for different apprehensions of the Divine by other human beings, one can see in that act a recognition of God's patience with us throughout history as we come to understand God more deeply. As Christians, we believe in a Trinitarian God. Theologians would teach us that the Trinitarian reality is divine community, a multiplicity in singularity, pure relationship. We believe that in the Triune God one finds diversity without subordination, in the one Godhead we find distinction without separation or division. We believe that the Trinity is a model for human societies as well, showing us how we must relate in love without fear, competition or distorted power relations. In this sense, reflecting on the greater history of divine revelation, one can see the patient respect of God to each of us in our particular moment in our development. We should not therefore be threatened by other's view of God as the God we believe in desires only to reveal Godself, and has revealed Godself in ways that lead others to understanding various aspects that this artwork shows can be held in common.

As Christians, when we advocate for justice, we do so not because we are politically-correct but because if we are created in the image of God – and we take that seriously – then our differences can never be a cause for division or fear. Our differences should be something that are celebrated, and – I have to say – not merely tolerated, as they reveal parts of God hidden to each of us. This artwork is important for highlighting aspects of God that might have remained hidden to us. As Church, we must move beyond rhetoric, and create the policies that reflect a real honouring, prizing and cherishing of the diversity of the human family. Part of that diversity is in how we approach religion and our understanding of God. It is the same God, we believe, but, if we realise the progression mentioned above, then different people are at different stages of understanding and relating to our God. Tolerance is a necessary *first* step – but I hope it is not the *last* one.

Guy Ferrer's artwork is worthy of humble and patient attention since from every angle and in each encounter, there is something that speaks of God's desire to reveal Godself... if we but only have eyes to see.