

Faith, Fungus, & Spalted Beech

Three years before I became Vicar at Holy Comforter, Atlanta, my seminary sent me there as a student intern. At the time Fr. Mark Moline was Vicar and my field supervisor. The parish is small and poor, but with the aid from the Diocese of Atlanta and some grants it runs art and gardening programs for persons with disabilities, mostly related to mental illness.

One day early in my placement, Fr. Mark suggested that I work in the art studio alongside program members. I could imagine discovering a shape hidden in a block of wood, but not what I might create left with nothing but acrylics and a blank canvas. So, I started in the woodworking shop, where retired Bishop Frank Allan taught woodturning.

Bp. Allan welcomed me and searched through a pile of wood. Finally, he held up a five-inch slice of a small log. Its exterior was gray and heavily weathered. The bark had fallen away long ago. It was not rotten, but that fate could not have been far away when Bp. Allan saved it from someone's brush pile. "He's pretty smart," I thought. "He knows I'll destroy my first piece and is giving me a throw-away for practice."

Never suggesting that my efforts might waste a more precious wood, Bp. Allan showed me how to fasten the block to the lathe and how to hold the knives to cut away the exterior as the wood spins on the lathe. The wood twirled; the knives did their work. The wood was more solid than it appeared. It pushed back against the knife and revealed its shape.

The gray repugnancy of its exterior disappeared in a shower of chips. A smooth bowl emerged, a motley of tan, black, and gray, as the turning and cutting revealed not only the shape but also the grain of the wood and the spalting, discoloration caused by the growth of fungus inside deteriorating wood. Spalting is a corruption of a sort, a degradation, but it enhances the value of wood for art, for new creation.

The cutting complete, the sanding and polishing began, and a scrap not fit for the fireplace turned out to be a delicate, a lovely, wooden bowl, a vessel fit for the altar.