

Beauty and the Liturgy: A Program for the New Evangelization

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When my son was a newborn, we brought him to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at the University of Notre Dame for a Sunday Lenten Eucharist. Unable to comprehend the theologically rich prayer texts, he nonetheless was fascinated by the drama of light and darkness playing out in the stained glass windows, together with the choir's sublime interpretation of a Palestrina motet. Such beauty was formative of his identity, teaching him something essential about the splendor of the triune God even before he could begin to understand the meaning of such words.



Nonetheless, for many Catholics worshipping on a regular basis, the experience of liturgical beauty is noticeably absent from their lives. Churches, rather than eliciting awe and wonder from the worshipper, are too often designed as monuments to suburban banality. The narrative of

salvation, once tangible and substantial in mosaics, frescos, and statuary, is traded in for bare walls and empty spaces. The highest standards of musical excellence relative to composition sometimes give way to mere sing-ability. Preaching and liturgical presiding can be performed clumsily. The problem with such inattention to liturgical beauty is not merely a concern of the aesthete; rather, a liturgy without beauty stifles the joy of the Gospel itself. As Pope Francis writes, “Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.”[i] A non-beautiful liturgy is not about bad art; it is about a failure of the Church to evangelize.

Attending to liturgical beauty must be a significant part of the Church’s approach to the new evangelization. In this essay, I offer three fundamental theses about the evangelizing gift of liturgical beauty. First, liturgical beauty makes possible a distinctive way of knowing, one that is necessary for a renewal of catechesis as a whole. Second, liturgical beauty, as it is made incarnate in art, is an important aspect of the Church’s tradition that must be learned. Third, the beauty of the liturgy is not ultimately oriented toward itself but rather discipleship.

Liturgical Beauty and Knowing

It is normative, for most of us, to find ourselves moving from day to day without attending to the world around us. We follow the same route to work on a daily basis without much awareness of the natural or architectural beauty that we encounter along the way. The relationships that are dearest to our identity become so much a part of our lives that we no longer wonder at the gift of these women and men, who surround us on a daily basis. To abide in a world in which there are bills to be paid, children to be fed, and

work to be accomplished, means that it is difficult for us to assume a perpetual posture of wonder.

In these circumstances, we risk losing the desire to wonder at anything at all. We do not stop and contemplatively gaze upon the seasonal transformation of that tree that we pass each day. We can become so distracted by the business of caring for our children, that we no longer have time to be grateful for the sheer presence of these remarkable human beings in our lives. Everything in the world exists as an object to be trammled upon, owned, or made more efficient. Hans Urs von Balthasar, describing this de-mythologized way of knowing, writes:

The moon, which for Goethe was the symbol of man's purest emotions...is now merely a target for American and Russian missiles. This is called demythologizing but it is much more. It is in fact the elimination of the sacred and the loss of the "power of the heart"...to sense the "majesty of being"...in the immediacy of God.[ii]

The path to atheism in the modern world is not necessarily reading sophisticated philosophical texts about the implausibility of God's existence; rather, it is letting this de-mythologized way of knowing become our primary way of understanding reality.

Liturgical beauty offers the possibility of a restored way of seeing the created order as sheer gift. In beautiful liturgy, the purpose of our prayer is not a matter of efficiency, of technical innovation, but wonder at the gift of the created order. It would be far quicker to read the words of Psalm 51 in the context of our prayer, but to pray with Allegri's *Miserere* within the liturgy is to encounter a musical text that reveals to us what penance sounds like. It invites us to participate in this act of penance not merely through a cognitive assent. Instead, penance is "performed" in our presence, if we have the ears

to hear.

In this way, liturgical beauty offers us an imaginative way of perceiving both the world and ourselves. Music in the liturgy is not simply about an interesting way of presenting words to the hearer. Instead, as the aesthetic philosopher Roger Scruton notes:

Just as we learn about the human face from painting, so do we learn about movement and life from music. Not that we learn new *facts*; rather that we come to see movement and life in another way; to sense its inward meaning, and to respond to it as in a dance. Our own life is transfigured as we listen, sensing the movement in ourselves, and the other in appearance that life can achieve.[iii]

In the context of the Church's worship, then, liturgical beauty forms us to know the world anew. We learn to see the created order for what it is, as matter intended to be eucharistically offered to God.

Of course, the attention to beauty and to the arts in liturgical worship has extensive implications for catechesis. In the case of liturgical catechesis, it is not simply a matter of paintings serving a decorative purpose. Rather, the encounter with great art is itself an invitation toward personal and social transformation, toward an encounter with Jesus Christ. Relative to catechesis, this means that our pedagogy must employ the arts as a way of inviting Christians into a contemplative way of knowing. If the definitive aim of catechesis "is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ,"[iv] then the liturgical arts are a privileged way to foster this encounter.

Liturgical Beauty and Tradition

On a recent pilgrimage to Rome, I was asked by a fellow traveler about a

common image, repeated frequently in iconography of Christ's nativity, in churches and museums alike. Just below Jesus in the manger, the viewer encounters Christ being bathed, presumably for the first time, by his mother. Jesus' first bath, absent from the Scriptures, presents to the viewer a moment for contemplating the mystery of Jesus' self-emptying love. Here, the Christ child enters into the fullness of the human condition. Those who have parented children know that this moment of the first bath is more than a pious motif of early Christian iconography. For the child, the first bath is a terrifying entrance into what it means to be human. The same waters that cleanse the child may also kill; and the newborn seems to have an innate sense of this fact. In encountering this iconographic motif, the Christian pilgrim is invited into a lived, tangible sense of Christ's self-emptying love, his total sharing in the precariousness of human life. What is proposed in the Scriptures is made visible in stone and mortar, and is encountered now in every eucharistic celebration.

Such iconographic motifs present in churches are part and parcel of the Church's understanding of Revelation itself. The revealed Word of God is not limited to the Scriptures alone but "Tradition and Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church." [v] And as *Dei Verbum* makes clear, Tradition is not simply a series of cognitive propositions:

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (see Lk 2:19 and 51). It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, have received the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the

plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in it.
[vi]

In other words, the Church's Tradition is not limited to the Creed. Rather, it includes those profound insights into the mystery of faith that liturgical art presents for the contemplation of believers.[vii] In some sense, ignorance of this tradition of liturgical beauty is akin to lacking knowledge of the term consubstantial or how to engage in contemplative prayer.

In liturgical catechesis, our inattention to the tradition of liturgical beauty has been profound. Few of our students learn the essential chants of the Church. They are not introduced to those classic mosaics or frescos that substantiate and pass on the faith of the Church to new generations. Many have never heard the polyphony of Palestrina, the Corpus Christi texts of Thomas Aquinas, or the brilliant liturgical music of the modern composer James MacMillan. Liturgical catechesis, if it is to be faithful to the robust sense of the Tradition presented by *Dei Verbum*, must form disciples in the artistic tradition of the Church. For it is within this tradition that we come to encounter not simply schools of artistic thought but also the very mystery of faith, which makes possible our salvation.

Liturgical Beauty Is Oriented Toward Discipleship

Of course, too great an emphasis upon beauty in the liturgy risks creating cultural aesthetes, who are more interested in the aesthetical dimensions of liturgical prayer than becoming a disciple of Christ. They attend not to the beauty of the crucified God-man but to the idol of the pretty and the pleasant. Hans Urs von Balthasar notes the intimate union that must accompany our encounter with the beautiful and discipleship in the life of the Church:

In the Christian scheme the joy and rapture experienced by the individual must ever and again be made subservient to the law of suffering on behalf of the community, and consequently the vision according to him must constantly submit to being obscured by the ordinary activities of life. In these the good to be done here and now, the sober truth, counteracts all that beguiles and enchants...[viii]

The greatest work of art in the Catholic imagination is not produced by a William Byrd, a Fra Angelico, or a Flannery O'Connor. Rather, the highest piece of art in the Catholic imagination is the God-man stretched out in love upon the cross. This God reveals to us that the meaning of human existence is the totality of self-gift and that to become this kind of beauty comes with the cost that we must give ourselves away entirely.

Liturgical beauty, then, does not exist for itself. Catholics should be profoundly suspicious of any sense of beauty divorced from life within the world. The beauty that is created in the liturgy should lead us to desire to become that beauty for the life of the world.

Perhaps this fact is realized most in the frescos that adorn the multiple layers of the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. Indeed, the colors of these frescos are riveting to the eyes. They present a series of scenes from Christ's own life interspersed with those of Saint Francis, providing a visual theology in line with St. Bonaventure's own life of Francis. Many of these frescos are important insofar as the artist, Giotto, is presenting a visual realism, which anticipates the artistic developments of the Renaissance itself; but to the one who prays within this space, who participates in the Eucharist, this art is not an invitation for aesthetic perception alone. It is instead an encounter with the stunning beauty of the Crucified One, as well as that of Saint Francis, who took upon himself this beauty and became it for the world to behold. Also, if the imagination is piqued (and it will be), then we

may begin to wonder in the course of this prayer, if we too could become *this* beautiful, if such beauty is meant not simply for those frescos but for every corner of the world.

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Notes

[i] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 24.

[ii] Hans urs von Balthasar, "Revelation and the Beautiful" in *Explorations in Theology, I. The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A.V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 109.

[iii] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 235-36.

[iv] John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, art. 5.

[v] Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, art. 10.

[vii] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art. 122-124.

[viii] Hans urs von Balthasar, "Revelation and the Beautiful," 119.

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