

The Liturgy and its Expressions

Material and Very Concrete Beauty

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The sapiential tradition of the bible acclaims God as "the very author of beauty" (Wisdom 13, 3), glorifying him for the greatness and beauty of the works of creation. Christian thought, drawing mainly from sacred Scripture, but also from classical philosophy, has developed the concept of beauty as an ontological, even theological, category.

St. Bonaventure was the first Franciscan theologian to include beauty among the transcendental properties together with being, truth and goodness. The Dominican theologians St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas, although they do not count beauty among the transcendentals, make a similar discourse in their commentaries on the Treaty of Pseudo-Dionysius *De divinis nominibus*, where the universality of beauty emerges, whose first cause is God Himself.

Under the conditions of modernity, what is disputed is precisely the transcendent dimension of beauty, exchangeable (sc. insofar) with truth and goodness. Beauty has been deprived of its ontological value and has been reduced to an aesthetic experience, even to a mere "sentiment". The consequences of this subjectivistic turn are felt not only in the world of art.

Rather, together with the loss of beauty as a transcendental, the self-evidence of goodness and truth has also been lost. The good is deprived of its power of attraction, as the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has noted with exemplary clarity in his magnum opus on theological aesthetic, *Herrlichkeit* (The Glory of the Lord).

Certainly the Christian tradition knows also a false kind of beauty that does not raise towards God and his Kingdom, but instead drags away from truth and goodness, and causes disordered desires. The book of Genesis makes it clear that it was a false kind of beauty which brought about original sin. Seeing as the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden was a real pleasure to the eyes (Genesis 3, 6), the temptation of the serpent provokes Adam and Eve to rebellion against God. The drama of the fall of the progenitors is the background to a passage, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) by the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), in which Mitya Karamazov, one of the protagonists of the novel, says: "The frightening thing is that beauty is not only terrible, but it is also a mystery. It is here that Satan fights against God, and their battlefield is the heart of men." The same Dostoyevsky, in his novel *The Idiot* (1869), puts on the lips of his hero, Prince Myshkin, the famous words: "The world will be saved by beauty." Dostoyevsky does not mean just any beauty, on the contrary, he refers to the redeeming beauty of Christ.

In his masterly message to the Meeting of Rimini in 2002, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reflected on this famous dictum of Dostoyevsky, addressing the topic from a biblical-patristic perspective. As a starting point, he used Psalm 44, read in the Church's tradition "as a poetic-prophetic representation of Christ's spousal relationship with his Church." In Christ, "fairest of the children of men", appears the beauty of the Truth, the beauty of God Himself.

In the exegesis of this psalm, the Fathers of the Church, like St. Augustine and St. Gregory of Nyssa, took up also the most noble elements of the Greek philosophy of beauty, through the reading of the platonists, but they did not simply repeat them because with the Christian Revelation a new factum has entered: it is Christ Himself, "the fairest of the children of men", to which the Church, recalling His suffering, also applies the prophecy of Isaiah (53, 2): "He had neither beauty, nor majesty, nothing to attract our eyes, no grace to make us delight in him." In the passion of Christ a beauty is found that goes beyond the exterior and it is learned "that the beauty of truth also embraces offence, pain, and even the dark mystery of death, and that this can only be found in accepting suffering, not in ignoring it," as the then Cardinal Ratzinger indicated. Therefore, he spoke of a "paradoxical beauty", noting however that the paradox is "contrast and not contradiction", hence it is in its totality that the beauty of Christ is revealed, when we contemplate the image of the crucified Saviour, Who shows His "love unto the end" (John, 13, 1).

The redemptive beauty of Christ is reflected above all in the Saints of every age, but also in the works of art which the Faith has brought forth: they have the ability to purify and raise our hearts and, thereby, to transport us beyond ourselves to God, who is Beauty itself. The theologian Joseph Ratzinger is convinced that this encounter with beauty "which wounds the soul and in this way opens its eyes" is "the true apology of Christian faith." As Pope he reiterated these thoughts of his in the meeting with the clergy of Bozen-Brixen of 8 August 2008 and in his message on the occasion of the recent public conference of the Pontifical Academies of 24 November 2008: "This" - the Holy Father said on the first occasion - "in a certain way is proof of the truth of Christianity: heart and reason find one another, beauty and truth touch each other."

In addition, for Benedict XVI, the beauty of truth is manifested above all in the sacred liturgy. In fact, he resumed his reflection on the redemptive beauty of Christ in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), where he reflects on the glory of God, which expresses itself in the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. The liturgy "is, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth. (...) an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendour."(n. 35). The beauty of the liturgy manifests itself also in the material things of which man, made up of soul and body, has need to reach the spiritual realities: the building of worship, the furnishings, images, music, the dignity of the ceremonies themselves. The liturgy requires the best of our abilities, to glorify God the Creator and Redeemer.

At the general audience of 6 May 2009, dedicated to St. John Damascene, known as a defender of the cult of images in the Byzantine world, Benedict XVI explains "the very great dignity that matter has acquired through the Incarnation, capable of becoming, through faith, a sign and a sacrament, efficacious in the meeting of man with God."

In this regard, the chapter on "The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration" in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 April 2003), the last encyclical of the Servant of God John Paul II, deserves to be re-read, where he teaches that the Church, like the woman of the anointing at Bethany, identified by John the Evangelist with Mary, the sister of Lazarus (John, 12; cf. Matthew, 26; Mark, 14), "has feared no 'extravagance', devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist"(47-48).

The liturgical question is also essential for the appreciation of the great Christian heritage, not only in Europe but also in Latin America and other parts of the world where the Gospel has been proclaimed for centuries. In 1904, the writer Marcel Proust (1871-1922) published a famous article in "*Le Figaro*", entitled *La mort des Cathédrales*, against the proposed laicist legislation that would have led to a suppression of state subsidies for the Church and threatened the religious use of the French cathedrals. Proust argues that the aesthetic impression of these great monuments is inseparable from the sacred rites for which they were built. If the liturgy is no longer celebrated in them, they will be converted into cold museums and become truly dead. A similar observation is found in the writings of Joseph Ratzinger, i.e. that "the great cultural tradition of the faith has an extraordinary strength that also applies for the present: that which in museums can only be witness of the past, admired with nostalgia, in the liturgy continues to become living present" (The Spirit of the Liturgy).

During his recent travel to France, the Pope referred to this idea in his homily for Vespers celebrated on 12 September 2008, in the splendid cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, which he praised as "a living hymn of stone and light" for the praise of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was right there, where the poet Paul Claudel (1868-1955) had had a singular experience of the beauty of God, during the singing of the Magnificat of the Vespers of Christmas 1886, which led him to conversion. It is this *via pulchritudinis* that can become a way for the proclamation of God also to the man of today.