

# BEAUTY IS A PRIVILEGED WAY TO APPROACH THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Pope Benedict XVI | Vatican City, November 18, 2009

Dear brothers and sisters,

In the catecheses of recent weeks I have presented some aspects of Medieval theology. However Christian faith, profoundly rooted in the men and women of those centuries, did not only give origin to masterpieces of theological literature, of thought and of faith. It also inspired one of the loftiest artistic creations of universal civilization: the cathedrals, true glory of the Christian Middle Ages. In fact, for almost three centuries, beginning in the 11th century, Europe witnessed an extraordinary artistic fervor. An ancient chronicler describes thus the enthusiasm and industry of that time: "It happened that the whole world, but especially in Italy and in Gaul, churches began to be reconstructed, although many, being in good conditions, had no need of this restoration. It was as though one village and another competed; it was as if the world, shaking off its old rags, wished to be clothed everywhere in the white garment of new churches. In sum, almost all the cathedral churches, a great number of monastic churches, and even village chapels, were then restored by the faithful" (Rodolfo el Glabro, *Historiarum* 3,4).

Several factors contributed to this rebirth of religious architecture. First of all, more favorable historical conditions, such as greater political security, accompanied by a constant increase in the population and the progressive development of cities, of exchanges and of wealth. Moreover, architects found increasingly elaborate technical solutions to increase the dimension of buildings, ensuring at the same time their firmness and majesty. However, it was thanks primarily to the spiritual ardor and zeal of monasticism then in full expansion that abbey churches were erected, where the liturgy could be celebrated with dignity and solemnity, and the faithful could remain in prayer, attracted by the veneration of the relics of the saints, object of countless pilgrimages. Thus the Romanesque churches and cathedrals were born, characterized by their longitudinal development along the naves to house numerous faithful; very solid churches, with thick walls, stone vaults and simple and essential lines.

A novelty is represented by the introduction of sculptures. As Romanesque churches were the place of monastic prayer and the faithful's worship, the sculptors, rather than being concerned with technical perfection, took care above all of the educational end. It was necessary to arouse in souls strong impressions, feelings that could incite them to flee from vice and evil and practice virtue, goodness -- the recurrent theme was the representation of Christ as Universal Judge, surrounded by the personages of revelation. In general it is

Romanesque facades that offer this representation, to underline that Christ is the door that leads to heaven. The faithful, crossing the threshold of the sacred building, entered a time and space that were different from those of ordinary life. Beyond the main door of the church, believers in the sovereign, just and merciful Christ could -- the artists hoped -- anticipate eternal happiness in the celebration of the liturgy and in acts of piety carried out inside the sacred building.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, beginning in the north of France, another type of architecture spread in the construction of sacred buildings: the Gothic. This style had two new characteristics as compared to the Romanesque: the vertical thrust and luminosity. Gothic cathedrals showed a synthesis of faith and art expressed harmoniously through the universal and fascinating language of beauty, which still today awakens wonder. Thanks to the introduction of pointed vaults, which were supported by robust pillars, it was possible to notably raise the height [of these churches]. The thrust to the sublime was an invitation to prayer and at the same time was a prayer. The Gothic cathedral thus wished to translate in its architectural lines souls longing for God. Moreover, with the new technical solutions, the perimeter walls could be penetrated and embellished by colorful stained glass windows. In other words, the windows were transformed into great luminous figures, very adapted to instructing the people in the faith. In them -- scene by scene -- were narrated the life of a saint, a parable or other biblical events. From the painted windows a cascade of light was shed on the faithful to narrate to them the history of salvation and to involve them in this history.

Another merit of the Gothic cathedrals was the fact that, in their construction and decoration, the Christian and civil community participated in a different but coordinated way; the poor and the powerful, the illiterate and the learned participated, because in this common house all believers were instructed in the faith. Gothic sculpture made of cathedrals a "Bible of stone," representing the episodes of the Gospel and illustrating the contents of the Liturgical Year, from Christmas to the Lord's glorification. Spreading ever more in those centuries, moreover, was the perception of the Lord's humanity, and the sufferings of his Passion were represented in a realistic way: The suffering Christ (Christus patiens) became an image loved by all, and able to inspire piety and repentance for sins. Not lacking were the personages of the Old Testament, whose history became familiar to the faithful in such a way that they frequented the cathedrals as part of the one, common history of salvation. With their faces full of

beauty, tenderness, intelligence, Gothic sculpture of the 13th century reveals a happy and serene piety, which is pleased to emanate a heartfelt and filial devotion to the Mother of God, seen at times as a young, smiling and maternal woman, and represented primarily as the sovereign of heaven and earth, powerful and merciful.

The faithful who filled the Gothic cathedrals wanted to find in them artistic expressions that recalled the saints, models of Christian life and intercessors before God. And there was no lack of "lay" manifestations of existence; hence there appeared here and there representations of work in the fields, in the sciences and in the arts. Everything was oriented and offered to God in the place where the liturgy was celebrated. We can understand better the meaning that was attributed to a Gothic cathedral, considering the text of an inscription on the main door of St. Denis in Paris: "Passer-by, you who want to praise the beauty of these doors, do not be dazzled either by the gold or the magnificence, but by the laborious work. Here shines a famous work, but may the heavens allow that this famous work which shines make spirits shine, so that with luminous truths they will walk toward the true light, where Christ is the true door."

Dear brothers and sisters, I now wish to underline two elements of Romanesque and Gothic art, which are also useful for us.

The first: the works of art born in Europe in past centuries are incomprehensible if one does not take into account the religious soul that inspired them. Marc Chagall, an artist who has always given testimony of the encounter between aesthetics and faith, wrote that "for centuries painters have dyed their brush in that colored alphabet that is the Bible." When faith, celebrated in a particular way in the liturgy, encounters art, a profound synchrony is created, because both can and want to praise God, making the Invisible visible. I would like to share this in the meeting with artists on Nov. 21, renewing that proposal of friendship between Christian spirituality and art, desired by my venerated predecessors, in particular by the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul II.

The second element: the force of the Romanesque style and the splendor of the Gothic cathedrals remind us that the *via pilchritudinis*, the way of beauty, is a privileged and fascinating way to approach the Mystery of God. What is beauty, which writers, poets, musicians, and artists contemplate and translate into their language, if not the reflection of the splendor of the Eternal Word made flesh? St. Augustine states: "Ask the beauty of the earth, ask the beauty of the sea, ask the beauty of the ample and diffused air. Ask the beauty of heaven, ask the order of the stars, ask the sun, which with its splendor brightens the day; ask the moon, which with its clarity moderates the darkness of night. Ask the beasts that move in the water, that walk on the earth, that fly in

the air: souls that hide, bodies that show themselves; the visible that lets itself be guided, the invisible that guides. Ask them! All will answer you: Look at us, we are beautiful! Their beauty makes them known. This mutable beauty, who has created it if not Immutable Beauty?" (Sermo CCXLI, 2: PL 38, 1134).

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord help us to rediscover the way of beauty as one of the ways, perhaps the most attractive and fascinating, to be able to find and love God.

[Translation by ZENIT]

[The Holy Father then greeted the people in various languages. In English, he said:]

My dear brothers and sisters,

I have been speaking in recent weeks about medieval theology, and would now like to turn my attention to how the Christian faith of the Middle Ages inspired some of the greatest works of art of all time: the cathedrals of Europe. Romanesque cathedrals are distinctive for their size and for introducing to churches beautiful sculpture, including the image of Christ as the Universal Judge and the Gate of Heaven. By entering through Him, as it were, the faithful enter a space and even a time different from everyday life, somewhere they can anticipate eternal life through their participation in the liturgy. Gradually, Gothic architecture replaced the Romanesque, adding height and luminosity to the previous style. The Gothic cathedral translates the aspirations of the soul into architectural lines, and is a synthesis between faith, art and beauty which still raises our hearts and minds to God today. When faith encounters art, in particular in the liturgy, a profound synthesis is created, making visible the Invisible, and the two great architectural styles of the Middle Ages demonstrate how beauty is a powerful means to draw us closer to the Mystery of God. May the Lord help us to rediscover that "way of beauty," surely one of the best ways to know and to love Almighty God.