

In Search of Beauty

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"One thing I have desired of the Lord, that I will seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord."

Psalm 27:4

Beauty - what an incredible gift from the Lord.

We see it reflected in creation

- in the breathtaking natural wonders of the world.

We see it in literature, in art, in science.

We hear it in the song of birds, in music, in the roar of the ocean.

We see the Lord's beauty reflected in people,

- in mothers who have a gift of bringing beauty into the home

- in the innocent play and interaction of little children,

- in the eyes of an elderly couple who, for all those years, have tenderly loved and cared for each other.

We see it in the peace that comes after conflict.

In the *Genesis* story of creation, the Lord *invites* us to see as He sees,

- to see how good, how *very* good, creation is.

How can we not notice the sheer beauty and majesty of the fields and forests, the deserts and plains, the oceans and lakes, the mountains and hills, the trees, shrubs and flowers, the animals and insects.

- surely this is what prompted the British poet, John Keats to say,

"The poetry of earth is never dead,"

- and Henry David Thoreau to say,

"Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."

So where does beauty originate? What *causes* something to be beautiful?

Beauty, we learned in our lesson today, is of a *spiritual* origin which is why we are affected by it so deeply.

Since God has created us to live (and grow) in His image and likeness...
 - the beauty that originates in Him is transferred into the people of His creation, **so human beings become a living testimony** to what is beautiful (or ugly).

We're taught that "*all beauty comes from good...in which innocence dwells*" (AC 3080).

It is our spirit, not our body, that is moved and touched by beauty in all its forms.

Everything good, true, noble, and kind has an inner depth and beauty to it.

When we gradually, innocently (like a child), turn our lives over to the Lord,
 ...we invite more and more beauty into our lives.
 ...we invite into our hearts & minds beautiful, enduring qualities like faith, trust, honesty, kindness, goodwill

- these spiritual qualities become our daily sustenance,
 - our "daily bread."

This is how beauty is born in a person.

This also explains the phenomenon of beauty in the next life.

We're taught that those who have lived with faith in the Lord and charity toward the neighbor, in the next life, take on an "*inexpressible beauty*" (AC 553).

Another teaching says, "*the angels of heaven are of indescribable beauty because they are, as it were, forms or expressions of love and charity*" (AC 5116).

So we could say that on the highest level, all beauty is the result of the marriage of good and truth.

It's the result of a long journey in which we *patiently* and *faithfully* join that which we know to be true and honest with that which we know to be good and loving.

So this is beauty at its deepest, purest level...

But how do we find this kind of beauty in the world?

How do we find it in the midst of setback and disappointment, when there is so much suffering and hardship in the world?

The Chinese philosopher, Confucius said

"Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it."

We can be so busy wrapped up in our own lives, dealing with what's right in front of us, that we miss incredibly beautiful, poignant things.

Beauty is there, all around us, but we need to make a conscious decision, a deliberate effort, to go out in search of it...(or else we won't see it)

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

"Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not."

Still, in our search for beauty, it's not unusual to find ourselves fooled or tricked by things in this world we THINK are "beautiful" which turn out to be anything but beautiful!

One reason for this is because we live in a fast-paced, consumer-driven society that is constantly pandering to our natural wants, needs and appetites.

As one writer insightfully observes: *"That which is striking and beautiful is not always good, but that which is good is always beautiful."* (Ninon de L'Enclos)

Take glamor, in the Hollywood sense of the word...

"Glamor" is a human concoction, a poor substitute for beauty because it's artificial and fleeting and is driven by fickle consumer demands.

Glamor, when pursued as an end in itself, dulls and deadens the human spirit.

Or take materialism as another example.

Materialistic pursuits have the shiny allure and promise of making life appear "beautiful" and "glittery" but it becomes a hollow, empty pursuit when driven by greed and self-interest.

Such pursuits are a poor substitute for the deeper beauty written about by novelists, poets, and philosophers over the millennia.

And so we learn to separate the fake from the real.

Like the Prodigal Son, we "come to ourselves," come to our senses

We learn that real, lasting, permanent beauty comes from the Lord.

- it *feeds* our soul.
- it *shapes* our mind, our spirit, with order, symmetry, structure, truth, and goodness.

This brings us to the second reading you heard this morning which says spiritual beauty, true, lasting beauty, cannot be appreciated unless we see or experience it's opposite (see DP 24).

Of course, what we're talking about is evil and falsity which, stripped of its veneer, is shockingly ugly!

This is the world we live in, one of *sharp* contrasts, between...

- war & peace
- greed & generosity
- cynicism & optimism
- cruelty & kindness
- deceitfulness & honesty

As we do the work of regeneration, we come to see these "contrasts" - the bad, the ugly, the hollow, the immoral, the unkind - so that we may be shaken out of our slumber, so that our eyes may be opened, as the Psalmist writes, to the *"beauty of the Lord..."*

- *to the joys and delights of "dwelling in the house of the Lord!"*

One teaching in our church says when we actively shun the ugly, grasping demands of self, our spirit takes on a new countenance, *"a spirit which is bright and beautiful"* (AC 3425).

The ugliness of evil can blind us to the truly beautiful things in life by

- grabbing our attention with alluring promises
- or by stoking our fears & weaknesses
- or by inflating our pride and ego

Whatever the method, evil spirits have one purpose in mind...

- to attack, condemn, and torment us

In sharp contrast to this, good spirits and angels have one purpose in mind...

- to defend, protect, and instill hope in us (see AC 5036:2, 6097).

In other words, evil and falsity (in and around us) wishes to destroy our "landscape," whereas truth and goodness wishes to beautify it.

Sometimes, the way we discover the Lord's beauty is by going through the "refiners fire" - we can all point to chapters in our lives in which we have undergone terrible suffering, trial, and loss.

This is certainly one of the central themes in Scripture: ***out of our sorrow, out of our pain, beauty is born.*** We heard this in one of our readings this morning: the Lord gives us *"beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness"* (Isaiah 61:3).

This is surely what prompted Keats to say: *"A thing of beauty is a joy forever. It's loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness."*

So how do we find what's beautiful?

As it turns out, we don't have to look very far.

There's beauty in everywhere, in things great and small, in the abstract and in the concrete. Beauty is found in everything, in the simplest, humblest of activities.

In our search for beauty, we can do two things: **notice** that which is beautiful and **promote** that which is beautiful.

We can take *notice* of that which is beautiful by...

- slowing down,
- by forcing ourselves to stay in the present,
- by going outside and letting the wind blow on our face,
- by stopping to watch children at play,
- by listening to the laughter and friendly conversation of people around us
- by listening to the winds in the trees,
- the buzzing of insects,
- by watching birds in flight,
- by letting the sun shine on your face.

These are the types of things we can do to notice that which is beautiful.

And we can *promote* beauty by doing simple things like

- smiling at others since it can hardly be said that a smiling face isn't beautiful.
- by speaking kind words,
- by refusing to engage in negative, hurtful gossip
- by doing or saying thoughtful things for others,
- by reaching out through social media,
 - a text,
 - or phone call,
 - an offer to assist a neighbor or friend in need,
- by going on a bike ride,
 - or a stroll in the woods,
 - or by playing cards with our family,
 - by working through a difficult problem with a spouse, child or friend,
 - by saying we're sorry

These are the types of things we can do to promote a beautiful life.

Let us awaken ourselves to the call of beauty.

Sometimes we need the *contrast* of the bad, the ugly, the hollow, the immoral, the unkind to shake us out of our slumber and open our eyes to the beauty of the Lord (see DP 24).

Let us slowly,

patiently,

and methodically **reject ugly thoughts, words, and deeds** so that we may

"Dwell in the house of the Lord"

and make our corner of the world a little

gentler,

kinder,

and beautiful,

not simply for ourselves...

but for our loved ones, friends, and neighbors too.

"One thing I have desired of the Lord, that I will seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord."

AMEN.

Lessons: *Psalm 27; Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 15:11-24; AC 3080; DP 24*