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Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Role of Beauty in the Restoration of Catholic Culture

by Bishop James D. Conley, STL



When I began my seminary studies, I had only been a Catholic for a few years. I had converted to the Catholic Church during my undergraduate years at the University of Kansas through a course of studies in the Great Books called the Integrated Humanities Program. When I started seminary, I was still learning the ropes of Catholicism.

In my first semester, I discovered that new seminarians needed to find a spiritual director. A number of my brother seminarians recommended Fr. Anton Morganroth, one of our professors.

Fr. Morganroth was a Jewish convert to the Catholic faith who fled Nazi Germany with his family in 1938. He was a tall, imposing figure. He was both

loved and feared by the seminarians.

One day I mustered up the courage to introduce myself to Fr. Morganroth and I asked him if he would take me on for spiritual direction. He gazed down at me in silence, sizing me up, and then simply said “report to my quarters next Tuesday at 7pm.”

After dinner in the refectory, Fr. Morganroth would return to his room to play his piano—he played brilliantly. If you had an appointment with him he would leave the door ajar. You were to simply push the door open and take a seat in a chair next to the piano.

I remember making my way down the hallway toward Fr. Morganroth’s rooms for the first time, hearing beautiful classical piano music coming from his room. The door was ajar. I stood outside the door for a moment and just listened to the music. Eventually I pushed the door open, entered the room and took a seat. He looked over at me from the piano and nodded in approval.

I sat there, listening to the music. There was a musical score on the piano—a Mozart sonata—but Fr. Morganroth had his eyes closed the whole time. He was not reading the music. A few minutes went by. Then five minutes. Then seven minutes. Finally ten minutes went by. He completed the piece and there was silence.

I’ll never forget that silence.

We were both caught up in the beauty of the moment. It was probably the first time I had ever really heard classical music at such close range. It was something like perfection.

After a few moments of silence, eager to get started, I broke the silence and said “so, Father, are we going to have spiritual direction?”

Fr. Morganroth turned. He stared right through me and said “son, zat was your spiritual direction, you can go now.”

I returned the next week and we began our regular sessions, which were wonderful. But it was the beauty of that music that led the way; that opened my heart and mind to the realities of the spiritual life.

Most of us love the truth and beauty of our Catholic faith, and we want to share it with others. Most of us also know that our culture is headed in an alarming

direction—toward a crisis that cannot be averted without Jesus Christ and his Church.

In fact, those two concerns—salvation and culture—are deeply related. The Gospel involves more than our individual salvation: it is also a universal mandate to, as Pope St. Pius X said, “restore *all* things in Christ.” Such a mandate extends beyond our own personal sanctification.

When we speak of evangelization, we mean not only the conversion of individuals, but also the transformation of culture. Christ is Lord of the public square, and our common life, just as he is the Lord of our homes and hearts. Thus, the Church’s evangelistic mission is also a mandate for cultural conversion.

The Second Vatican Council confirmed this cultural mandate, in its decree on the lay apostolate. Chapter II of *Apostolicam Actuositatem* taught that “Christ’s redemptive work, while essentially concerned with the salvation of men, includes also the renewal of the whole temporal order.”

“Hence,” the council said, “the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel.”

Cultural renewal is essential, because the Catholic faith is not just a private conviction. The mystery of the Incarnation changes everything. Our faith is meant to be the basis of a culture—a shared way of life that uses the things of this world to glorify God.

The great theologians teach us that grace does not abolish the good things of this world. Christ brings them, rather, to their fulfillment. Our faith is incarnational. All truth, all beauty, and all goodness, are “through him” and “for him.” These things are part of God’s redemptive plan. Truth, beauty, and goodness are integral to our salvation.

Faithful Catholics care about truth: like our Lord, we want all people “to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” We care, too, about goodness—especially moral goodness, the life of virtue so often spurned by contemporary culture.

But what about beauty? Where is the place for beauty in our evangelization of the culture?

This is an important question, and one we sometimes overlook or misunderstand. It is this question, the role of beauty in evangelization and cultural renewal that I want to consider.

The title of this essay is *Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Role of Beauty in the Restoration of Catholic Culture*. The title is taken from a passage in Book X of the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*. In Chapter X, Saint Augustine laments the fact that it has taken him 33 years to discover the beauty of the divine. In those immortal lines he cries out: “Late have I loved thee, O beauty ever ancient, ever new.”

Beauty is both ancient and new: we are at once surprised and comforted by its presence. Beauty exists in a sphere beyond time. And so beautiful things expose us to the timelessness of eternity.

This is why beauty matters, in an eternal sense. Beauty was part of God’s creative plan in the beginning, and it is just as much a part of his redemptive plan now. God has placed the desire for beauty within our hearts, and he uses that desire to lead us back to himself.

Truth and beauty are both gifts from God. So our New Evangelization must work to make truth beautiful. By means both ancient and new, we must make use of beauty—to infuse Western culture, once more, with the spirit of the Gospel.

By means of earthly beauty, we can help our contemporaries discover the truth of the Gospel. Then, they may come to know the eternal beauty of God—that beauty Saint Augustine described as “ever ancient, ever new.”

II. Encountering the Beauty of Christian Culture

As I mentioned, I am a convert to the Catholic faith. I entered the Church in 1975, under the guidance of one of the 20th century’s great teachers—the late John Senior, co-founder of the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas. John Senior was my godfather, and his ideas about faith and culture are a continuing inspiration to me.

My godfather loved beauty—not for its own sake, but for the sake of Jesus Christ, the creator and redeemer of beauty. Senior saw the beauty of this world in the light of eternity, and he helped others to acquire the same transcendent vision.

John Senior was not an evangelist, in the traditional sense of the word: he did not preach from a pulpit, or write works of apologetics. His goal in the classroom

was not to convert us, but to open our minds to truth, wherever it might be found. And he did that primarily through the imagination.

In his own unusual way, Senior was a remarkably gifted evangelist. He had a deep love for the Church, and for the beauty of historic Christian culture. And that love was infectious. There were literally hundreds of converts to the Catholic Church at the University of Kansas in the 1970's.

The Integrated Humanities program ran from 1970 to 1979, a decade that, with the exception of some really great rock and roll, was a cultural wasteland.

When I began the program, there was little of Christendom's rich history in my cultural formation. At the University of Kansas, my fellow students and I had very little sense of our own cultural inheritance. We were ignorant of Western civilization's founding truths, and we had only a passing acquaintance with the beauty they had inspired.

Our lives had largely been shaped by the crass appeals of the mass media, and the passing fads of popular culture. There was a lack of truth in our lives, certainly; but there was also a profound lack of beauty. Our souls were starving for both, and we did not even know it.

But John Senior knew what we were lacking. His fellow professors, Dennis Quinn and Frank Nelick, also knew. They knew that students had to encounter beauty, and have their hearts and imaginations captured first by beauty, before they could pursue truth and goodness in a serious and worthy manner.

Truth was the ultimate goal. But the search for truth involved certain habits of mind, and habits of life, which we—as students—did not have. Our pursuit of truth required an initiation into beauty: the beauty of music, visual art and architecture, nature, poetry, dance, calligraphy, and many other things.

Through these experiences of beauty, we gained a sense of wonder; and that sense of wonder gave us a passion for truth. The motto of the IHP was a famous little Latin phrase: *Nascantur in Admirazione* (“let them be born in wonder”).

The experience of beauty changed us. When we studied the great philosophers and theologians, we were open to their words. We no longer assumed that truth was found in the dictates of popular culture—just as we no longer saw modern fads and fashions as the pinnacle of beauty. Truth is perennial and beauty is timeless.

As I mentioned, a large number of students became Catholic through the Integrated Humanities Program. But this was not the result of proselytism in the classroom nor was it engaging in apologetics. It occurred because we became lovers of beauty, and thus, seekers of truth. Beauty gave us “eyes to see” and “ears to hear,” when we encountered the Gospel and the Christian tradition.

III. The Transcendent Language of Beauty

I know, from experience, that beauty can reach people who seem unreachable. It can open their minds to truths they might otherwise dismiss. Even hardened skeptics and postmodernists find it hard to deny the reality of beauty, when they encounter it in a setting conducive to contemplation and reflection.

We have to realize that our ambient secular culture has a tight grip on the imagination. It is hard to break through. But the power of beauty still has a force that can penetrate even the hardest of hearts.

The experience of beauty is transformative. It awakens a sense within us, that life is meaningful on the most profound level. Beauty can move us to humility, giving us a sense of wonder before the mystery of life. The encounter with beauty speaks to us about the true, awe-inspiring nature of existence.

This is why we speak of beauty as something “transcendent.” Every instance of real beauty points beyond itself, toward the infinite perfection of God. He invested this world with many forms of captivating beauty, so that created things would lead us to contemplate the transcendent glory of the Creator.

We can think of beauty as a kind of language, through which God speaks to our hearts and souls. He is always speaking in this way—to all of us—believers and nonbelievers alike.

The beauty of creation declares the glory of God, even to those who do not yet believe. In beauty, the Lord reveals himself. In a similar way, artistic beauty shows us that man is made in the Creator’s image—even if the artist himself does not acknowledge this fact.

The language of beauty is especially important in our time, because we live in a period of grave intellectual and moral confusion.

Beauty is not the only language God uses to communicate his glory. Our Creator also speaks to our souls through intellectual truth and moral goodness.

But these forms of communication have become problematic. Many people, especially in modern Western culture, are too intellectually and morally confused to receive such a message.

God still speaks to these individuals in the language of truth and goodness. But their understanding is blocked by popular misconceptions—especially the idea that truth and goodness are purely subjective, and thus relative to the individual or group. “To each his own” or “who’s to say.” What Pope Benedict called the “dictatorship of relativism.”

Fr. Robert Barron, the Rector of Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary in Chicago, a theologian and great communicator of the faith, has lately taught that in the New Evangelization we must “lead with beauty.” Fr. Barron says that postmodern man might scoff at truth and goodness, but he’s still enthralled with beauty. He says that beauty is the arrowhead of evangelization, the point with which the evangelist pierces the minds and hearts of those he evangelizes.

To say with the poet, “look up, look up at the stars” is to point to creation or even to an artistic achievement, invites the nonbeliever first to appreciate *what is* and then to consider the origin of *that which is*.

In a cultural environment bereft of wonder, beauty takes on an even greater importance than it would otherwise have. Something in the experience of beauty is almost undeniable, even for the person who rejects the idea of objective truth or goodness. Beauty can get through, where other forms of divine communication may not.

When we begin with beauty, this can then lead to a desire to want to know the truth of the thing that is drawing us, a desire to participate in it. And then the truth can inspire us to do the good, to strive after virtue.

In one of his pre-papal writings, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the experience of being “wounded by the arrow of beauty.” That is a wonderful image for an experience shared by believers and non-believers alike. God’s “arrow of beauty” can pierce through many layers of confusion and error.

When that arrow reaches its target, a way opens within the heart. The search for truth becomes possible, and an obstacle to faith disappears.

IV. Beauty in the New Evangelization

Clearly, beauty has a major role to play in the New Evangelization. I want to

conclude with three points of guidance, which will help us incorporate beauty in our re-evangelization of Western culture.

The first point—and the most essential—is that we must present the truths of faith in a beautiful way. Our liturgical worship, in particular, must reflect God’s own beauty and holiness.

Worship, after all, is the basis of Christian culture. The beauty of the sacred liturgy is meant to radiate outward into the world. Liturgical beauty shapes the common life of believers, and it can also help to attract those who are outside the Church.

A leading liturgical scholar, Monsignor Nicola Bux, has said that: “a mystical liturgy celebrated with dignity can be a great help for people searching to find God.”

“Historically,” he notes, “great converts were struck by grace while attending solemn rites and listening to extraordinary chants.”

Monsignor Bux is right. To renew Catholic culture, and evangelize our contemporaries, we must restore beauty to the sacred liturgy. If we cannot restore beauty and holiness to our sanctuaries, we will not be able to restore it anywhere else.

My second recommendation is that we familiarize ourselves with the beauty of historic Christian culture. We do not all have to be scholars like John Senior. But we should open our hearts and minds to the beautiful things that the Incarnation has made possible.

Recently the fledgling monastery of Benedictine Nuns north of Kansas City have recorded two beautiful CDs of Gregorian chant for the record label Decca and sales have gone through the roof. People recognize beauty when they see it and hear it.

The Benedictine Monks of Clear Creek, the founders of whom are fellow classmates of mine from the IHP, started the monastery with 12 monks in 1999 and now count 42—all young and living lives of prayer and work, *ora et labora*—centered on chanting in Latin the psalms throughout the day.

It is interesting to talk to the local Oklahoma farmers who have lived in the area for generations, an area which has very few Catholics. They are enamored with

the monks. Farming, and friendship, is an important point of common ground. Through dialogue and friendship, we can help the world to understand the Christian worldview that inspired the beauty we all appreciate.

Finally, I would suggest that we open our own minds to beauty, in all its manifestations. It is often said that all truth is God's truth, wherever one finds it; and the same can be said of beauty: all genuine beauty belongs to God, wherever it may be found.

Christian culture is a supreme expression of beauty in the service of truth. But there is beauty to be found everywhere, throughout God's creation and the field of culture. The Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, a favorite of Pope Francis, wrote that the whole world was "charged with the grandeur of God," for those with eyes to see it.

So we must develop our own appreciation of beauty, wherever it exists. Then we can help others to see beauty for what it is: an earthly reflection of God's glory—a glory that leads to truth and goodness.

V. Conclusion

In the midst of our present cultural crisis, we can take courage, knowing that God is not silent. He continues to speak powerfully by means of beauty, even to those who have become dulled to the realities of truth and goodness.

"Beauty will save the world," wrote Dostoevsky. It will. When it points to God's enduring love.

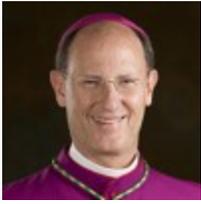
There are many souls to rescue, and a vast cultural wasteland to restore. Both tasks will require fluency in God's language of beauty.

To speak this language, we must first begin to listen. And to listen, we must have silence in our lives. I pray that God will open our eyes and ears to beauty, and help us use it in the service of the Truth.

Editor's note: This essay is based on an address given by Bishop Conley to the Catholic Answers conference in September, 2013.

The views expressed by the authors and editorial staff are not necessarily the views of Sophia Institute, Holy Spirit College, or the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts.

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