

THE BEAUTY OF THE CHURCH

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IN ACADEMIC circles, the beauty of the Catholic Church often gives rise to some very illuminating speculation. Not infrequently, it has been suggested that this characteristic could be placed on a par with the four notes of unity, sanctity, apostolicity and catholicity which are proper to the Church. This is the whole point of the present discussion. It is asked whether there is any manifestation of beauty in the Catholic Church which is tangible enough to treat as a proper attribute. Concerning that religious society which Christ instituted as the indispensable instrument of man's salvation, we ask, "Is it beautiful and how evident is its beauty?" It must be kept in mind that this discussion is restricted to the apologetic point of view in contrast to the purely theological angle which starts from faith as a principle and considers the Holy Spirit as the soul of the Church. Proceeding in this latter manner, the esthetic urge doubtless finds much to captivate it but we must deny to ourselves that approach and restrict our contemplation to the more rational aspects of the Church considered as a visible society aiding men to heaven. Proceeding thus, we can, I think, substantiate the proposition that the Church has real beauty but it is of such a nature that only Catholics can *fully* appreciate it.

Beauty is a kind of goodness. A good thing is that in which any appetite rests. A beautiful thing is that good in which rests the intellect considered as a natural appetite. This definition is classically stated in the words of St. Thomas; the beautiful thing is that which pleases when seen (intellectually).

This notion can be explained by noting the differences between the true, the good and the beautiful. Truth is a certain congruence or agreement between some object and its conceptual counterpart in the intellect. The good is that which has a relation of fittingness to the will. The beautiful is distinguished from the good because its proper faculty is the intellect. The only difference between the true and the beautiful is the peculiar delight which the intellect derives from the knowledge of a beautiful thing. Beauty, then, has its roots in the intellect since this pleasure is had from certain objects as

known. Its basis, however, is in the external thing as causing the knowledge and the pleasure.¹

Beauty as it is found in external objects needs to be more fully discussed. Beauty in general has already been defined as that special goodness in which the intellect as an appetite finds its rest. Since all goodness is based on perfection, that special perfection which we call beauty must be something which fits the natural tendency or inclination of the intellective faculty. This inclination, as we know, is a trend toward unity and order in knowledge. Disorder both in knowledge and in things makes for unintelligibility. Hence it follows that an object derives its beauty from its *order*, i. e. from the *harmony of its parts* which are so proportioned to each other and so naturally conjoined that they constitute one thing. The degree of beauty in a thing corresponds to the degree of its variety and the perfection of its unity. Accordingly, God, possessing every perfection in utter simplicity, is at the zenith of the beautiful.

Some difficulties now become apparent which must be considered in order to clarify our subject. All things, in some degree at least, have this quality of unified parts but all things are not beautiful. The world abounds with ugly things; the asylums are full of monstrosities. So, to the notion of unity in variety, there must be added the note of *integrality*. This quality belongs to those things which possess all their *due* parts and in their proper proportions.

Again, some things are universally admitted to be beautiful, a brilliant sunset, for example, or the cathedral of Rheims. But, it might be asked, "Why are not all apparently normal things beautiful; or, as in the case of artistic masterpieces, beautiful to all men?" These difficulties lead us to the final qualification of beauty.

No matter how perfect the order in an object may be, it avails nothing unless it is easily perceptible. It is necessary that the harmony of the parts stand out and shine forth. This is the quality of *clarity*,—"the splendor of order" (St. Augustine), "the effulgence of the form" (St. Thomas). For such universally admired beauties as sunsets, etc., the perfect harmony is immediately apparent. In other words, that special perfection called beauty is clearly and easily perceivable.

But this is the answer to only one of our difficulties. The case of art masterpieces is not so easily solved. The haze of mystery which surrounds them seems to contradict what has been said about

¹ Although intellectual pleasure is the essence of the esthetic experience, the approval of the will and the movement of the emotions follow as a necessary property.

the necessity of clarity. If there is beauty in the fine arts, why is it so obscure to most people? The difficulty is explained thus.

Beauty is attributed to realities in several orders. We commonly speak of material and spiritual beauty accordingly as it is found in material and spiritual things. Of the spiritual, we distinguish also intellectual and moral beauty which is moral honorableness. Although all of these are really distinctive, they are not found separated in this life but always in combination.

The beauty of music and painting, etc., is properly in the intellect. Through the medium of his art and our senses, the artist conveys the beauty of his conceptions to our intellects. Artistic beauty, then, although involving a subordinated combination of the intellectual and the sensible, is fundamentally intellectual.

The human mind, which is fitted and given satisfaction by the beautiful object, always operates in two steps. Starting from a confused notion of the whole, the mind analyzes it into its parts so that they become clearly seen. Then these parts are synthesized into a whole once again but now more perfectly known. This analysis and synthesis takes place in all our knowledge but it is usually a long and laborious process.

In works of art, the ordering has been done by the artist for his own special purpose. Emphasized order and harmony is the distinctive feature of the great masterpieces. Even the uninitiated may perceive it to some extent, but how insignificant is this vulgar appreciation compared to the truly refined taste. Art critics can perceive intellectually the parts (and they are surprisingly numerous) and their synthesis, and they do so with such rapidity and ease that it does not affect their more intense enjoyment. However, if this speculative analysis and synthesis is not done easily, if it requires too much work, tends to destroy the esthetic pleasure. On the other hand, this deeper appreciation of the beauty of art need not be instantaneous. One does not have to be smitten suddenly by beauty. It may grow upon one gradually, but must always be without laborious effect. This gradualness of perception is particularly true of the beauty of architecture. It works rather slowly but most surely on the soul. But this is more or less true of all beauty both natural and artistic. Plato's words about the refining effect of beautiful surroundings on even a rude man are known to all.

A summary of what has been said about beauty will facilitate our understanding of its application to the Catholic Church. Beauty is that, the apprehension of which pleases the intellect considered as an appetite. This intellectual pleasure is properly accompanied by

a sympathetic response from the will and the sensible emotions, all contributing to the esthetic experience. Beauty is said to reside in that object which has a harmonious unity of diverse and congruous parts. This order in unity, moreover, must usually have integrity and always have clarity which is called the effulgence of the form. This is manifestly present when the appreciation of the beautiful is effortless and almost spontaneous, although it need not be immediate, but may, so to speak, grow upon one. The final culminating fruit of the esthetic experience is an ennobling and almost exquisite pleasure. We may add parenthetically that, according to Albert Steiss,² this pleasure is a sample of the joy of heaven. It becomes for struggling mankind a most vivifying inspiration and encouragement, and from this, it takes its proper place in the moral ordination of all things to man's ultimate end.

Much has been written about beauty in a speculative way which is comparatively simple. But when it is a matter of analysing the beauty of a particular thing, great difficulties present themselves. With reference to the Catholic Church, however, it can be established that it has all the elements necessarily found in any beautiful thing. To state it after the manner of a thesis, it can be said that the Church of Christ, considered as a society, possesses true beauty at least for those who are its members.

For any thing to be beautiful, as we have said, it must have the splendor of integral order. All of this is found perfectly in the Church. There is, first of all, a harmonious whole of diverse parts. Judging from the nature of a society, this unity in variety is essentially found in the relationship of means to end; the end of any society being the principle of its unity and the measure of the fittingness of its means. The end of the church is proximately the sanctification of man and ultimately his eternal salvation. The fittingness or congruity of the means proper to the Church is found in their unique aptness. Rightly made use of, they infallibly lead to salvation. The Church alone offers the necessary means capable of giving sanctity. Out of it no one can attain his final end and happiness. This is because sanctification is God's work and it has pleased His infinite wisdom to make His Church the instrument and channel of His help and grace.

Seen in detail, the great variety of parts and their connatural fittingness are more perfectly manifested. Through its *teaching*, the Church brings men to the knowledge of those truths necessary to

² "Outline of a Philosophy of Art" by Albert J. Steiss, *The Thomist*, Jan. 1940.

lead a life ordained to God. The profundity of her dogmas has enraptured the souls of the great Doctors through the ages. Also the moral code which she imposes on her children is at once a yoke sweet and light, and yet the only logically perfect code on earth. It is exactly suited to man's nature because it is based on nature and takes its great efficacy therefrom. Moreover, for man's natural and innate need for religion, the Church inculcates the highest and most perfect *form of worship*, again based on man's nature and suited to his necessities. To human weaknesses, it supplements the power and merits of Christ, working through the ministry of the *ecclesiastical hierarchy*. Under these three general notions of the teaching, ministerial and governing power of the hierarchy, there lies a detailed body of ecclesiological doctrine. There is amidst all this a natural co-ordination and harmonious unity which flows from its divine mission of populating heaven and which is the basis of its beauty. This harmony is not marred by the want of any means needful or useful to the attainment of its goal. On the contrary, there is a great abundance of helps, general and special, for all the requirements of men under the most varied circumstances and conditions of life. Hence it is quite evident that the Church has all those elements which are the basis of beauty.

It now remains to inquire about the ease of intelligibility of this most orderly society. Does it have the splendor of order? Is there an effulgence to its form? This question really asks whether the Church, having all the fundamentals, is truly beautiful. Many things have the material elements of beauty but are never called beautiful. The answer which seems most evident to us would distinguish between those in and out of the Church. The glory of the Spouse of Christ is most certainly appreciated by all Catholics to some degree. The more devoted they are to their Church, the more deeply they realize its beauty. But for those outside the fold, this is not so. However, there is frequently perceived a far-off glimmering of this beauty which may indirectly lead one into the fold.

For Catholics, the beauty of their heritage is always more or less evident in that broad sense in which Plato speaks of the beauty of architecture. Slowly but inevitably it works upon them. Even when they have perchance become immersed in sin, they realize that they cannot replace the splendor of that which by sin they have given up. The long experience from childhood under the care of the Spouse of Christ makes manifest a beauty that will always be acknowledged at least implicitly. Perhaps it is never quite so much valued as when it has been lost. And what is mourned is not only that loss of peace

which is the work of grace but also the loss of that something which, though close to it, is yet distinct from it. Between them there is a relation of means to end. Rest of soul and peace of conscience are the result of humble and faithful submission to the yoke of the Church; belief in her doctrines, participation in her worship and obedience to her precepts. It is a yoke which is, by divine promise, both sweet and light by reason of its concomitant consolations and eventual rewards. Truly, then, there is a beauty in the Catholic Church which is most manifest to all who are its members.

For those outside its fold, there is not infrequently found to be a strong appeal in the Church of Rome under some of its aspects. Perhaps it is an inspiring insight into the heroic labors of her children, as for example, those of the nursing nuns or of a Father Damian. Maybe it is the administration of the last rites to a dying friend with their consequent and sometimes visible consolations. Many such instances come to mind which are capable of throwing into high relief the external beauty and efficacy of the Church. This perhaps is particularly true when the strain of stirring circumstances,—death, sickness or despair—cuts through all sham and prejudice, and lays bare to the soul its real needs. Such incidents may be sufficient to lead the sincere person to investigate the Church more fully which is the first step in the right direction. However, they are not enough in themselves to convince the non-Catholic that this must be the true Church. Any of the four proper notes (unity, sanctity, apostolicity, and catholicity) is capable of doing so and this is their proper rôle, but not so the perfection of beauty. This is because these momentary glimpses of its beauty are only glimmerings of its true magnitude. To grasp and appreciate that fully one must be a living part of the Church. Moreover, it is not impossible to imagine a case where some work, as for example, Protestant missionary labor, would produce the same momentary awe and wonder. Because of such cases there is, as far as can be seen, no reason why a person should conclude that this is a peculiar beauty proper to the Catholic Church. In other words, the true beauty of the Church cannot be fully and perfectly known by those outside of its fold.

For these reasons then, and they are personal reasons, it would seem that the Church has, for its members only, a very great beauty. It is the glory of a perfect supernatural society. It rises from the harmonious ordination of all and every means necessary and useful to a supernatural end; namely, man's eternal salvation. This splendor of order is most evident to those who have lived by it, used it, and enjoyed it as an incomparable heritage.