

Aesthetics, Catholic

A useful and customary way of understanding the meaning of aesthetics is to remember that the German thinker Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), writing in Latin in 1735, coined the word “aesthetica” (from the Greek adjective *aisthētikos*, pertaining to sense perception) to designate the science of knowledge related to the senses. In Baumgarten’s system, beauty is perfect sensuous knowledge, the ugly defective sensuous knowledge, and the arts embodiments more or less perfectly of knowledge related to the senses. Aesthetics, then, has come to mean in broad terms the science or study of beauty (and related experiences like the ugly), the arts, and criteria to judge art as good or poor, beautiful or ugly, and so on. Catholic aesthetics, as a significant subclass of aesthetics, groups the important contributions made by early Christian and then Catholic thinkers and artists over the past two millennia. (The “Catholic” designation applies more appropriately after the Reformation of the 1500s.) At the heart of Catholic aesthetics lies the mystery of the Incarnation—God becoming flesh, dying on the cross, rising from the dead, and ascending to the heavens. Indeed, Pope John Paul II (r. 1978-2005) in his 1999 “Letter to Artists” claimed that the Incarnation “unveiled a new dimension of beauty,” and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI after John Paul II), in a 2002 message sent to a meeting of the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation, pointed to the face of the crucified Christ—slapped, spat upon, bleeding from a crown of thorns—as the face displaying “the genuine, extreme beauty.” This brief essay presents an overview of Catholic aesthetics, inspired by the Incarnation and related tenets of faith, in the areas of criticism, the arts, and beauty.

CRITICISM

Controversy over the role of the arts was most acute in the early history of the Church. The debate did not center so much on the quality of an art piece as on its function. Early Christian

thinkers like Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215) and Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220) believed painting and sculpture could lead to idolatry, whereas John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 394) held more positive views of the visual arts, arguing they could enhance religious experience. The controversy reached a climax around 600 when Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles, ordered that images in his churches be destroyed, since church-goers were adoring them. Pope Gregory (the Great) (r. 590-604) objected, and in a letter to Serenus set the direction for the use of the visual arts in the Church. He agreed that adoration of images must not be tolerated, but the arts could educate believers and even deepen their faith: “Pictorial representation is made use of in churches for this reason: that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books.” This statement has guided most popes after Gregory—and every modern pope—in their pronouncements on the role of the arts in the Church. For example, Pope Paul VI (r. 1963-1978) in his 1965 “Address to Artists” said, “You have aided her [the Church] in translating her divine message in the language of forms and figures, making the invisible world palpable,” and John Paul II in his address to artists explained that art “has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation” and has served as “a concrete mode of Catechesis”; finally, Benedict XVI in his 2009 “Address to Artists” acknowledged that the Church, since its earliest days, “has made wise use of their [artists] varied language to express her unvarying message of salvation.” In Catholic aesthetics, then, criticism has focused on the function of the arts, especially in the way the arts have communicated the mysteries of faith to believers.

ARTS

The Church, understood broadly to include the Vatican and the world of Catholic believers, has provided the impetus, inspiration, financial support, and narrative (especially what Benedict XVI

has called the “‘great codex’ that is the Bible”) for the creation of extraordinary art during the past two millennia. John Paul II in his address to artists identified as part of a Catholic art corpus artistic forms such as the Gothic cathedral and sacred music, especially plainchant (also known as Gregorian chant), and he included in the corpus exceptional individual art works like the poem *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the paintings *Creation to the Last Judgment* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), and the sacred music of composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c. 1526-1594). These examples are by Italian artists, but for nearly each country and art form John Paul II could have selected dozens if not hundreds of art works inspired by the Church.

Perhaps the history of one art work can illustrate the influence the Catholic Church has exerted over artists and their creations. In the late 1400s Italian Catholic Ludovico Sforza (1452-1508) established himself as the Regent (1480-1494) and then Duke (1494-1498) of the city-state of Milan. A man of power and wealth, he chose the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, founded in 1463, as the location for a mausoleum for himself and his family, and he proceeded to enlarge and decorate the Church as well as the refectory adjacent to the Church’s monastery. For one wall of the dining hall, he commissioned painter Giovanni Donato da Montorfano (c. 1460-1502/1503) to fresco “The Crucifixion” on it; for the opposite wall, he turned to an artist who had been in his employ since 1482, Leonardo da Vinci, who covered the wall with a Catholic masterpiece, *The Last Supper*. The Catholic Church supported in every sense—from impetus to narrative—the creation of Montorfano’s *Crucifixion* and da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, and it has provided this kind of defining support for tens of thousands of art works over two millennia, thus creating a Catholic art corpus.

BEAUTY

As far back as the Medieval era, thinkers like Saint Augustine (354-430), Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c.650—c.725), and two Italian saints, Bonaventure (1221-1274) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), focused on the beauty of God in their works, but unfortunately they left underdeveloped their comments on the beauty of creation. For example, in his discussion of the Trinity in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presented beauty as a property of the Son, and he identified three conditions of beauty: *integritas* (integrity or wholeness), *consonantia* (sounding together or harmony), and *claritas* (brightness or radiance) (1, q. 39). However, he also identified beauty with pleasure, suggesting that beauty pleased the senses (“*pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*”—1, q. 5). In another text, *Quaestiones Disputatae: De Potentia Dei*, Aquinas created a bridge from the beauty of God to the beauty of creation with the phrase “*formositas actualitatis*,” the beauty of actuality (4, 2, ad 31), but he left the insight for others to develop. For Aquinas and other Medieval thinkers, the issues related to the existence and characteristics of God predominated their thoughts.

In the twentieth century, thinkers such as Frenchmen Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and Etienne Gilson (1884-1978), Hungarian-born Francis Kovach (1918-2002), American Armand Maurer (1915-2008), Swiss Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), Benedict XVI, among others, applied the insights of Medieval thinkers on divine beauty to the created world. In particular, they found the concepts of Aquinas on beauty to be fruitful for their work. Maurer, for example, worked closely within a Thomistic philosophical context, whereas Balthasar—and to a much lesser extent Benedict XVI—launched a complex and detailed philosophy and theology of beauty from Aquinas’s insight on beauty as the Son of God.

In his 1983 *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation*, Maurer opened his explanation of beauty with the Thomistic phrase *formositas actualitatis*. The beauty of actuality (or being in act or action) carried multiple meanings—to be beautiful, a thing or person must *exist*, it must display a *form* so that it can be perceived, and it must participate in *action* (7-8). For example, a beautiful morning glory (flower) exists, its distinct form separates it from a tuft of grass or a climbing tea rose, and the fullness of its beauty shows when it blooms more than when it buds (the action is appropriate to the form). *Formositas actualitatis* functioned in Maurer’s system as a theory of reality since it presented beauty as a characteristic of existence, and a theory of knowledge since human beings perceived and knew beauty in the actuality of things or persons. Maurer also appropriated the three Thomistic conditions of beauty: the morning glory forms and is perceived as a whole (*integritas*); its light blue petals blanche toward the center where a yellow ovary shoots out a white style and stigma, and the colors and shapes work harmoniously with one another (*consonantia*); and the flower’s radiance in the morning light delights the eye (*claritas*) (9-13). This insistence by Maurer and others on the beauty of actuality opened the category of the beautiful to a new vision—the perception of a person or thing in action rather than frozen in a photographic pose—and to all persons and other created beings, including a withered flower (its form has changed and so its action is different) and persons often marginalized like the paraplegic (their beauty lies in the action appropriate to their form, which is humanness, not “leggedness”).

Other thinkers followed Aquinas by turning more directly to the Son of God to anchor their views of beauty. Jacques Maritain in *Art et scolastique* (1920, 1935) argued that the love of Christ must be present in the souls of artists if they are to create beautiful Christian art (67). But the thinker who explicated in great detail the significance of the Incarnation for a Catholic view

of beauty was Hans Urs von Balthasar in his magnificent seven-volume *Herrlichkeit: Eine Theologische Ästhetik* (1961-1969). In the first volume, Balthasar laid out a thesis similar to that of Maurer: beauty did not reside in outward appearances but in the depths revealed by form (118). His theological aesthetics encompassed a theory of vision—sense perception of the form—and a theory of rapture—depths revealed as God’s glory in the Incarnation and the elevation of human beings to participate in that glory (125). This deep beauty extended to all human beings (and other created beings), no matter the fault, imperfection, or brokenness; as Balthasar said, “the fact is that the glory of Christ unites splendor and radiance with solid reality” (124). Balthasar’s work has had such an impact on Catholic aesthetics that some thinkers present beauty and, more broadly, aesthetics as pre- or post-Balthasar.

The final thinker, Benedict XVI, has reflected the Catholic tradition on beauty but has also extended it in interesting ways due to Balthasar’s influence. Benedict XVI insists that beauty—whether artistic, natural, or spiritual—can open a privileged moment of encounter with God. Preaching at the dedication of Barcelona’s Church of the Sagrada Familia (November 7, 2010), he stressed art’s ability to bridge the supposed divides between human and Christian consciousness, between temporal and eternal life, and “between the beauty of things and God as beauty.” Beyond the arts alone, Benedict XVI has also discussed beauty in general at considerable depth and breadth. Beauty can shock people, even “wound” them, and therefore he believes it can draw them out of the mire of self-absorption into wonder and contemplation. In his 2009 meeting with artists, Benedict XVI posited that all true beauty expanded human awareness, pointed individuals beyond themselves, and in this way could “become a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God.”

The idea of beauty as a pathway to God—the *via pulchritudinis*—has become a distinctive mark of theological and philosophical reflection for Benedict XVI as well as for the pastoral focus of his pontificate. In 2006, following a plenary assembly on the topic, the Pontifical Council for Culture issued “The *Via Pulchritudinis*, Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and Dialogue,” suggesting how the experience of beauty could facilitate people’s encounter with God and the spread of the Gospel.

For Benedict XVI, however, beauty is not limited to things that are attractive or “pretty.” In “The Feeling of Things, The Contemplation of Beauty” (2002), then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger discussed the idea of “extreme beauty,” or “the beauty of love that goes ‘to the very end.’” This beauty presented a paradox, because it appeared most starkly in a gruesome (and in that sense “ugly”) moment: the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

As pope, Benedict XVI has not often discussed extreme beauty as such. Still, the concept has remained a crucial development for Catholic aesthetics. Viewing Christ’s passion and death as the “extreme” of beauty shifts the focus from a surface or superficial beauty to a deep beauty that appears in, not in spite of, human brokenness, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Individuals do not simply behold extreme beauty, or view it with detached aesthetic distance. Rather, it demands a response and can be a transformative moment for an individual. Extreme beauty therefore invites people to *become* the beauty they behold, to appropriate Jesus’s self-giving love in their lives. For Benedict XVI, then, Catholic aesthetics is not simply an objective, speculative pursuit, but one that has subjective implications for actual human lives. In other words, there is an integral connection between extreme beauty and the holiness that is the object of Christian life. As Benedict XVI said in his homily from October 23, 2005, “the saint is the one who is so fascinated by the beauty of God and by his perfect truth that he is progressively

transformed by it. For this beauty and this truth, he is ready to renounce everything, even himself."

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Note: Quotes in English in text refer to English editions.

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