

Catechism on the Liturgy I,12

b. The second kind of beauty is Specific (from *spectare*, “to see”), which means “something beautiful to look at.” When the church in which we celebrate the Mass is beautiful to look at, inside and out, it can teach as eloquently as any sermon, though perhaps on a subconscious level. So if one takes the time to look at a church which grew from the Gregorian Rite, and really reflects on what he sees, then he will understand the teaching of the Church somewhat as he would in studying a text about a particular subject of theology, though not in the same way.

For example, when Mr. Henry Adams (a Protestant and an amateur student of architecture) visited the cathedral of Chartres in France, he learned a great deal about what the Church taught about the Blessed Virgin Mary, just by looking at the stone. For the builders of Chartres expressed the theology of the Church in a remarkable way in the very stone of the edifice, and it is impressive that a Protestant man could open his eyes enough to see this teaching.

To the Church, no doubt, its cathedral here has a fixed and administrative meaning, which is the same as that of every other bishop's seat and with which we have nothing to do. To us, it is a child's fancy; a toy-house to please the Queen of Heaven – to please her so much that she would be happy in it – to charm her till she smiled. The Queen Mother was as majestic as you like; she was absolute; she could be stern; she was not above being angry; but she was still a woman, who loved grace, beauty, ornament – her toilette, robes, jewels; - who considered both light and color; who kept a keen eye on her Court, and exacted prompt and willing obedience from king and archbishop as well as from beggars and drunken priests. She protected her friends and punished her enemies. She required space, beyond what was known in the Courts of kings, because she was liable at

all times to have ten thousand people begging for favors – mostly inconsistent with the law – and deaf to refusal. She was extremely sensitive to neglect, to disagreeable impressions, to want of intelligence in her surroundings. She was the greatest artist, as she was the greatest philosopher and musician and theologian, that ever lived on earth, except her Son, Who, at Chartres, is still an Infant under her guardianship. Her taste was infallible; her sentence eternally final. This church was built for her in this spirit of simple-minded, practical, utilitarian faith – in this singleness of thought, exactly as a little girl sets up a doll-house for her favorite blond doll. Unless you can go back to your dolls, you are out of place here. If you can go back to them, and get rid for one small hour of the weight of custom, you shall see Chartres in glory. (Mont St. Michel and Chartres)

Thus, when we attend Holy Mass in a beautiful church – and by that I mean one which accurately reflects the constant and traditional teaching of the Church – then we will be learning that teaching in a marvelous way, like the plant soaking up the sunlight. That a Protestant could understand our theology so well just by looking at the stone is a great testimony to Specific beauty and its power to teach.

c. The third kind of beauty is Decor (from *decere*, “to fit”). It is the beauty that results when accidents are recognized as “fitting.” It is an often recognized fact that formal and specific beauty can be botched by bad taste in otherwise beautiful persons, because they are wearing clothes which are unfitting or unsuitable to them.

I hope you will pardon another anecdote, related to me by my spiritual director when I was in seminary. My director was a convert from Judaism, and one day

brought a Jewish friend of his to Mass. The Church was beautiful, the music being played was good, but when the priest came out from the sacristy for Mass, he was holding a number of balloons tied to strings in one hand, and a hymnal in the other, and on his chasuble was a depiction of Snoopy (the cartoon character). The priest who celebrated the Mass was a very likeable man as it turns out, but the Jewish man who saw him stood and said to his friend (my director), "I came here because you told me I would learn about God. You have insulted me. I am leaving."

It seems to me that the cartoon character on the chasuble was so unfitting, spoiling whatever formal and specific beauty there was to the beginning of the Mass, or to the likeableness of the priest, that one could say that the Jewish man who left the Mass knew more about God than the priest did. Of course, there will be some who might try to defend what the priest was wearing, according to the old saying, '*de gustibus non est disputandum*' (there is no dispute over matters of taste). Indeed, arguments about what is fitting are hard to present, since the opponent will often insist on the subject at hand being simply a matter of one man's taste as opposed to another. But if the Mass is the proclamation of the death of the Lord, as St. Paul said it was, then there are things which are fitting to such a proclamation, and things which are not.

An example of what is very fitting to such a proclamation, is the work the medieval

monks did not only in their illuminated manuscripts, but in their commentaries. The Cistercians used to write long explanations in the prefaces of their antiphonaries. In these explanations, ideas on musical techniques were adapted to spiritual considerations.

One of these concepts is explained by the theme of the "region of dissimilarity," so dear to St. Bernard: in this context, the regio dissimilitudinis is the confusion of poorly organized chant. The remedy is found in Scripture: the authority of the Psalter restores dignity to each note by suggesting the use of the ten-note scale. This biblical norm, unknown to pure musical science in combination with the laws established by Guido Arezzo, was to make it possible for the Cistercians as well as all the other monk-musicians to achieve their ends: to add to the holy words of the Gospel the color and beauty of song. The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, Dom Leclercq

Thank heaven we have a magisterial Church, which can teach us which songs are beautiful (*quid decet*) and have just the right color for the Mass. Heaven help the poor parish in which the songs used for the Mass do not form the parishioners, but actually deform them, with ugliness, or more commonly, unfitting music for a proclamation of the death of the Lord... music better fitted to a picnic.