

Catechism on the Liturgy I,13

d. The fourth kind of beauty is Pulchritude (whose root means “power”). It is the force of things and persons. Solomon pointed out that the Blessed Virgin had this beauty when in the Song of Songs, he sang *Pulchra es, amica mea...terribilis ut castrorum acies ordinata* “Thou art beautiful my friend...terrible as an army in array of battle.”

Though a committed pacifist might object to the notion, there really is a terrible beauty to seeing and hearing a regiment of soldiers obeying the order to “Fix Bayonets,” and seeing the sun glint off the steel of the long row of blades. It is a powerful beauty, and in the Church, often deliberately ignored in vestments, architecture and sacred vessels, and music. It is certainly weak in the imagination of modern man. There is a whole generation of clerics who have imagined sacred things as cheap, in the guise of an affection for “noble simplicity.”

The power of imagination of the medieval man, on the other hand, was quite developed.

We are used to seeing, almost without looking at them unless with a distracted eye, printed or moving pictures. We are fond of abstract ideas. Our imagination having become lazy seldom allows us any longer to do anything but dream. But in the men of the Middle Ages it was vigorous and active. It permitted them to picture, to “make present,” to see beings with all the details provided by the texts: the colors and dimensions of things, the clothing, bearing and actions of the people, the complex environment in which they move. They liked to describe them and, so to speak, recreate them, giving very sharp relief to images and feelings. The words of the sacred text never failed to produce a strong impression on the mind. The biblical words did not become trite; people never got used to them. The Scripture which they liked to compare to a

river or a well, remained a fountain that was always fresh. The spiritual men of those days counsel the renunciation of carnal images; but this is in order to substitute for them a holy imagination. The sanctification of the imagination results in their attachment to the slightest particulars of the text, and not merely the ideas it contains. Dom Leclercq

So the vestments the priest wears, the candlesticks, altar cloths, Stations of the Cross, the music...everything one sees and hears in the church ought to have a certain power illustrating the majesty of God.

e. The fifth kind of beauty is Amenity (from *amoenitas*, “without walls”). It is usually translated as pleasantness, which comes from not needing walls, since there is no danger. Having formal, specific, splendid and powerful beauty in the Mass is of great advantage to the parish, but, one hopes, we will not neglect the pleasantness of beauty. A perfect example of how the liturgy teaches us Amenity or pleasant beauty is of course, the singing of Gregorian Chant.

At the monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland in the Middle Ages, there was a poet whose name was Notker. Around him grew a whole school of disciples to perfect the technique which had come to them from Jumieges, and the compositions which came from them and other monasteries were multiplied and amplified, resulting in tropes, sequences, versicles and *prosulae* – to mention a few kinds of their works, with each form having its own laws and its own history. And the monks loved these texts.

*And all loved to sing
The delightful kyrielles
The sweet and lovely sequences
With full voice and in rich tones.
(Leclercq)*

Going to Mass with the delight, the sweetness and richness of Chant then, is like reading a copy of the Bible or the Psalms, with excellent illustrations added. Nay, chant is even more than that, since the very melodies of chant come from the text of Sacred Scripture itself, and the soul is being formed by the music of God, and not mere human composers.

But what is beauty? What is a good definition of it? St. Thomas Aquinas gives this definition: "That which when seen pleases." This seems to go along with modern notions of beauty, such as Benjamin Franklin's famous line in Poor Richard's Almanac: "Beauty, like supreme dominion is but supported by opinion." Or as Margaret Wolfe Hungerford put in one of her novels, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Is it really? Or is there something objective to beauty which is independent of the eye of the beholder?

St. Thomas says it is objective. So though Andy Warhol might think that a crumpled up can of Schlitz beer is beautiful, he does so because he lacks right reason. No, beauty has three elements according to the Universal Doctor: Wholeness (or integrity), proportion (or harmony) and radiance (or shining). This is what the Church uses to determine if a thing or a collection of things is beautiful. A string of pearls is beautiful in itself, having all three qualities, but place it on the neck of a lumberjack, and it is not fitting, and there is a loss of integrity. An art deco altar might be beautiful in itself, but put it into a baroque church and the whole church suffers from the loss of integrity. A good rifle has pulchritude, but put it in a Christmas manger and again, the whole thing loses its harmony.