

Beauty, Part 2

4. The three transcendentals are the true, the good, and the beautiful. Can the beautiful lead us to the true and the good?

Yes it can. Turning again to St. Thomas, transcendentals are properties of being as such (that is, every being). Each transcendental is convertible with being. In other words, the transcendentals are present wherever being is present. However, just like being can be found in varying degrees, the transcendentals can also be found in degrees. For example, every being is not perfectly or completely good, but every being is good to a degree. So, Aquinas' list of transcendentals consists of the following: thing, one, something, true, and good. He did not include beauty.

However, St. Thomas writes, "They [beauty and goodness] differ logically, for goodness properly relates to the appetite (goodness being what all things desire); and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind—because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every cognitive faculty. Now since knowledge is by assimilation, and similarity relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause." (*ST* I.5.4)

So, commentators such as Jacques Maritain on St. Thomas try to show that he saw beauty and goodness as conceptually different, but metaphysically identical. If this is true (I think it is), then beauty could count as a transcendental property of being. Therefore, in answer to your question: yes, if you see real beauty, you will invariably be led to goodness and truth. I heard a child (about six years of age) once say of a Mass, "It wasn't pretty. That wasn't a good Mass." Very young children can get this connection.

5. Is it important for the liturgy to be aesthetically beautiful? Why?

Henri Charlier once wrote, "It is necessary to lose the illusion that the truth can communicate itself fruitfully

without that splendor that is one nature with it and which is called beauty." The Church is the Bride of

Christ. It is both natural and expected that the Bride should adorn herself for her Groom. Beauty is of one nature with truth and goodness. The lack or even opposite of the transcendentals cannot reflect the nature of God. So, if a liturgy is chaotic (not one), false (riddled with heresy), evil (liturgical abuse) and ugly (monstrous disproportion, say), then it cannot lead to God. It will only lead in an opposite direction.

6. How can the beauty of the *liturgy*, specifically, lead us to God, and teach us Truth?

A book was written by a monk of Le Barroux, and in it is this passage: "Take a group of Japanese tourists visiting Notre Dame in Paris. They look at the height of the archways, the splendor of the stained-glass windows, the harmony of the proportions. Suppose that at that moment, sacred ministers dressed in orphried velvet copes enter in procession for solemn Vespers. The visitors watch in silence; they are entranced: beauty has opened its doors to them. Now the *Summa Theologica* and Notre Dame are of the same era. They say the same thing. But who among the visitors has read the *Summa*? The tourists who visit the Acropolis in Athens are confronted with a civilization of beauty. But who among them can understand Aristotle?"

"And so it is with the beauty of the liturgy. More than anything else it deserves to be called the splendor of the truth. It opens to the small and the great alike the treasure of its magnificence: the beauty of psalmody, sacred chants and texts, candles, the harmony of movement and dignity of bearing. With sovereign art the liturgy exercises a truly seductive influence on souls, who it touches directly, even before the spirit perceives its influence. But it is a delicate art, diametrically opposed to a certain kind of post-conciliar liturgy "rendered opaque and boring, thanks to its taste for the banal and the mediocre, to the point of making one shudder." (The Ratzinger Report)

7. Many people love the Traditional Latin Mass because of its beautiful aesthetics. What about this do you think draws people in?

Part of the answer may be found in the ugliness of our cities, of the advertisements, clothing, degraded music and speech. Entering a beautiful church with a TLM well celebrated is leaving that ugliness for a while. True, this can be done out in nature, where you find a lovely little stream to sit by and admire the sound of the water on the rocks. But the little stream is not the Sacrifice of the Mass. To make a good confession coupled with the beautiful worship of God is be shriven of interior ugliness as well.

And at the TLM you can experience integrity on a level that is extraordinarily hard to accomplish in the *Novus Ordo*. That is, no one would argue that Gregorian Chant and polyphony do not belong in the TLM, but it is easy to find those who argue that our Latin heritage has no place whatsoever in the N.O. If you walk into a modern church with the high altar left over from earlier times serving as a plant stand, you might think that it's a better use of the altar than demolition. But no one would think that a gothic high altar really goes with the N.O. So there is a sense that everything fits together – the high altar, the silence, the incense, the chants, Latin...all of it. The sense of integrity reaches to deep levels in those attending the TLM.

8. On the other hand, many people love the Novus Ordo because to them it feels more personal, more “homey.” Is there beauty in this, as well?

Yes. We are creatures of habit! On the whole, elderly Catholics who made the switch to the N.O. in the vernacular are usually quite opposed to “going back” to the TLM. But I've seen plenty of Masses in the N.O. where there is a great deal of beauty, from the decorum of the celebrant and the servers to a quality chalice. It's just that even the best of these Masses is weighed down by things like a translation which sounds as if it were done by the International Committee for the Abolition of Poetry.

9. Has the beauty of the liturgy played a role in your own faith throughout your life?

Yes. My first experience of the Mass was as a young college student (not Catholic – I'm a convert) at the

Benedictine abbey of *Notre Dame de Fontgombault* in France. There I heard Gregorian Chant for the first time in my life, and the guy next to me (he wasn't Catholic either, but later converted) leaned over and said, “I don't know what this stuff is, but it's real holy.”

I couldn't have agreed more.