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Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters

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Written from a Catholic and Christian perspective, *Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters* is a timely and novel reminder for Christians to review their moral obligation to pursue beauty. It is the writer John-Mark Miravalle's conviction, as a theologian, that the imperative to pursue and take delight in the beautiful accompanies, and is essential to, living a Christian life. In doing so, we are led to our salvation, filled with Truth, Goodness, Beauty, and God. It is possible to lead a virtuous life that is a beautiful or "beauty-full" life as well.

Miravalle asserts that beauty is "... for everyone. Beauty is like happiness, love, understanding—it's what the human person was made for" (pp. 3-4). It is, as he says, an intrinsic part of our nature (p.4). By the end of the book, the reader is convinced, and has gained a reasoned account of beauty as a reality we are made for: objective, not merely a mirage borne of certain psychological states. It is not that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"; nor that beauty is merely skin-deep. Beauty permeates the created world, art, and the supernatural world. And why not? God is Beauty, the source of all the beautiful in creation. That fullness of beauty becomes accessible to us in the Person of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. Beauty is real. The experience of beauty leads us to profound human realities and to God.

This world is filled with beauty, a spiritual good that leads us back to God, the source of all reflected splendor. Is there a problem seeing this beauty-filled world? While "beauty" has not disappeared from popular discussions, the idea of beauty as subjective and relative might just as well be a dismissal of it despite the enthusiasm accorded to it in the popular imagination. A survey on the discourse of art will reveal that art's relation to the idea of the beautiful has but disappeared. The idea of beauty itself has collapsed into taste or preference, as found in popular utterances like "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

The author clearly states the intent of the book which is to show to the reader the essential role of the beautiful in one's life and in the afterlife. He does this by covering all planes of existence that intersect in each one's life: nature, man-made objects, and for the believer, the supernatural plane.

Miravalle aims to show to the reader, in “clear, practical language” that beauty is everyone’s moral responsibility (p.4).

Part I: The Nature of Beauty

In part one, Miravalle discusses the nature of beauty, the beauty of nature, and the doctrine about beauty in relation to the transcendentals goodness and truth. He explains why truth is also an integral part of beauty and that, without truth, beauty becomes subject to mere manipulation. He affirms the objectivity and reality of beauty in contrast to a seemingly deeply entrenched contemporary tendency to dismiss beauty as subjective. In medieval philosophy, the transcendentals are affirmed as interchangeable and present in anything that exists. As long as any existing thing *is*, it is true, it is good, and it is beautiful. These are realities. Beauty then is real and objective, like truth and goodness.

The senses crucial to our navigating the world for our survival, which are instrumental in perceiving the world around us, are faculties by which we also experience pleasure and delight in the presence of the beautiful. The beauty most accessible to us is sensible: “In aesthetic experience, the goal is to delight in the spiritual reality precisely as it is present in the sense image” (p.10). The senses connect to passion. States Miravalle, “[t]he connection between beauty and passion ... [is] ... evident ... ; as creatures both physical and spiritual, we have physical reactions to spiritual beauty when it’s incarnated in a sense image ... you’re not having an aesthetic experience—you’re not *appreciating beauty*—unless you feel something” (p.12). That something is joy, delight. There are two reasons why we should pursue beauty according to Miravalle: “(1) it is good in itself to experience beauty; and (2) beauty draws a person toward immaterial truth and goodness” (p.13). Beauty is itself a kind of good, and the good, St. Thomas Aquinas assures us, is what we all seek and what we naturally desire. Truth, goodness, and beauty are after all, co-extensive with one another, but it is beauty that makes the passions move toward that which is good and true.

To experience beauty, Miravalle notes, virtue is needed; thus the necessity of temperance and fortitude. It is easy enough to imagine how self-indulgence and a lack of discipline go hand in hand in leading to being jaded in the pleasures of sense and mind. To paraphrase the author, the pursuit of beauty is part of living well, just as a moral life is needed to make our lives beautiful.

For Miravalle, Order and Surprise characterize beauty in the natural world. Order relates to notions of essence, nature, form. Miravalle quotes the

Scholastic “*Agere sequitur esse*” meaning “The way a thing acts reveals the kind of thing it is” (p. 31). This stability of the nature of a thing, which makes a thing what it is, makes it function according to what it is; and is a basis to knowing, via “form,” which is another name for essence or nature. Form then relates to organization, pattern, order; the order of a thing is beauty as a perfection of its nature.

The idea that integrity or perfection, order or proportion, and splendor or light constitute the beautiful is a metaphysical notion of beauty from St. Thomas Aquinas. Splendor or light is not just beautiful. It is the light that attracts our eyes, illumines our mind with understanding, and the light of faith that makes our life good as well as beautiful.

To this Miravalle adds the notion of “surprise.” Surprise is also wonder, accompanied by delight. The author writes, “Aquinas, when discussing how wonder causes pleasure, provides this citation from Aristotle: The mind is more inclined by desire to act intensely in things that are new” (p. 33). If beauty is order, disorder leads us away from beauty; if beauty is surprise, banality leads us away from beauty. The important thing is to find surprise in order, and order in surprise; to look for one without the other is the necessary condition of the beautiful.

Miravalle refers to Nature as “God’s art,” as when he says “... the beauty of God’s art, evidently, should serve as a paradigm for other forms of art and beauty” (p. 27). The idea is that nature is a model and inspiration to artists. It seems unproblematic to most people that God is likened to an artist, and nature is God’s art. In some other texts perhaps, this idea might need more discussion, as it may obscure matters, rather than enlighten the reader. How can one pose the comparison of God to the artist? It is the artist being compared to God. Think of the idea of the “analogy of the artist to God.” It is the artist being likened to God. God is the measure of the creative power, not the artist. Divine making is “creation,” a making “something from nothing”—creation “ex nihilo.” Art by people need cognition of some basics, like the necessity of medium, the conditions of time and place, making the discussion of art more insightful about the human condition.

The last section of Part 1 is a reflection on the human body. It is worth repeating what Miravalle says: “1. The human body is the most beautiful thing there is; 2. This truth is recognizable by human reason, not just by faith; 3. This truth is a dangerous truth” (p.58). What makes the human body beautiful is that

it reveals a person and a self. This spiritual reality is the basis of the dignity and beauty of the human form. Thus the grave moral obligation that respect be given to human persons. It follows that in the treatment of the human form, in art, there are moral and immoral representations. St. Pope John Paul developed this idea in his sermons. Ultimately both artist and viewer have responsibility with respect to representations of the human form, which ought to be such that it allows the spiritual reality to be made manifest through the form. In ending the section, Miravalle reminds us thus: “One of the chief obligations that come with being human is to respect the humanity of everyone else. When a visual fascination with the human body blinds us to the spiritual, personal beauty that the body expresses, it’s time to direct our gaze elsewhere” (p.66).

Part II: Man-Made Beauty

Miravalle is concerned also with beautiful artworks. Beautiful images and beautiful patterns in art imitate the beauty of God’s handiwork in nature. An attack on beauty and an insistence on disorder for its own sake, according to Miravalle, has unfortunate psychological effects on us. Beauty is order and an attack on order is an attack on form. This brings about “... a process of dehumanization, through the systematic assault on order and the deprivation of beauty” (p.81).

The section “Beautiful Representations” is a discussion of the power, beauty, and goodness of art, music, and literature. Music is known to affect our emotional states: “But such power over the human psyche requires responsible use” (p. 83). This is reason for Plato and Aristotle to censor music. Art is never to be thought of as an end in itself; its value ought to be subordinated to the good of humanity. Miravalle agrees with Plato and Tolstoy on the importance of the moral sphere to the artistic. As with the visual arts, both musician and listener have a moral obligation to be sensible about the music we listen to as it affects our emotions and sensibilities. If music, nonrepresentational as it is, has the power to affect us, representation, including in literature, “is a powerful means of communication” (p. 89). The artistic image represents not just the appearance of things but also truth and virtue.

Here is a reminder for those immersed in television, movies, and videos: TV watching brings on hyperactivity. The visual arts, on the other hand, have a salutary effect on the senses and the mind. Joseph Pieper, as quoted by

Miravalle, states: “Noticing is a moral faculty, which appreciation of the plastic arts increases. It gives a ‘deeper and more receptive vision, a sharper and more discerning understanding, a more patient openness or all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for things previously overlooked’” (p.93). The visual arts, music with its orderly patterns of sound and sight, literature with its rhythm and imagery of words: these artworks exercise such an effect on us, making it wise to be mindful in our selections.

It is clear enough even now that we like beautiful buildings and beautiful interiors. Architecture embraces us in everyday life and in worship. The beauty of architecture has repercussions on our pleasure and our interior and spiritual life. This is the rationale for all the splendor of Church and Temple architecture through the ages in all other cultures. The “core obligation” as Miravalle puts it, to infuse with beauty our human creations, extends to architecture. The resulting architectural gems are a testament to this, with tourists coming in, not in worship, but to marvel at various architectures dedicated to Deity.

This delight in beauty, its order and surprise, extends also to food. If it is true that we are what we eat, this counsel to pay attention to order and pleasure of palate is worth a close read as we are inundated with fastfood. This is most likely what Miravalle refers to when he criticizes food that is badly prepared, but cheap, given in big servings. The author writes, “The basic thesis of this book is that it is a core moral obligation to recognize the goodness of things and to take delight in that goodness. And I think it’s an obligation that holds as true in eating and drinking as in any other areas” (p.108).

Part III: Beauty and the Supernatural

Though it is a moral imperative to appreciate created beauty, we do not treat these as an end in themselves. They are always a pathway to God. In this section Miravalle writes about the beauty of the Trinity, the Beauty of Jesus Christ, and the “beauty of the Providential program” (p. 112).

The attributes of natural and sensible beauty apply also to Divine Beauty. It is just hard to understand how “surprise” figures in terms of the Almighty. If God is Beauty, Divine Beauty need not worry about being “surprised by its own perfections.” I would venture to say we shouldn’t try too hard to find equivalences in human experiences of the aesthetically beautiful, and if we could call it that, the Divine’s “experience” of Beauty. Isn’t “surprise”

essentially a condition of our own finitude and limitations? Miravalle thinks of it this way: "... it's technically true to say that everything is "unexpected" for God—not in the sense that He was expecting one thing and got something else, but in the sense that everything, especially His Triune goodness, is for Him eternally and delightfully new, absolutely engaging of His full attention" (p. 114).

Christ as the second Person of the Trinity has the marks of the beautiful according to St. Thomas Aquinas: Perfection, Proportion, and Splendor. But since the beauty most open to us is sensible, Christ comes to us in the Incarnation. Just as Christ is beautiful, so is the program of Salvation. It is an ordering of the world, the triumph of good over evil, the triumph of good despite the presence of evil, according to Miravalle. Calvary is beauty "at its most intense" (p.119), according to Cardinal Ratzinger. This idea mirrors Fulton Sheen's ideas on dissonance being integrated in the overall order of a symphony, or St. Thomas Aquinas on the idea that "Even an ugly thing well-represented is beautiful" (p. 119).

Beauty, as seen in Calvary, is neither "frivolous nor shallow"; there is depth to it, as part of the history of Salvation. The Popes in modern times in fact have called for attention to beauty and how it leads to God. Miravalle informs the reader that Pope Paul VI "encouraged a focus on what he called "the way of beauty" in understanding the relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit." Mary of Nazareth is traditionally called "*tota pulchra*, the wholly fair woman, the all beautiful" (p. 141).

Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters provides the philosophical and theological bases of the concept of the beautiful, thereby giving it the serious consideration it deserves. The end of this most serious responsibility, however, is delight: "Delight is the supreme passion... the ultimate destiny of every single human being" (p.147); and Miravalle asks "How do you develop a habitual attitude of delight?" He adds a Postscript on humor because "A sense of humor... is in some way the complement of a sense of beauty. If a full life demands both, it makes sense to round off a reflection on the morality of aesthetics by taking a quick look at the moral demands of the comedic" (p.150). Only the human being is capable of experiencing and asserting the presence of the beautiful. That same is true for laughter, for we are also the only ones capable of experiencing true mirth. For the philosopher, beauty and humor are marks of being truly human; for the Christian, they are avenues to cultivating

virtues needed to see God. The path to salvation then is marked by delight in the truth and goodness of the world, the human being, artistic creation, which are all pathways to God.

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