

Beauty, Poverty, and the Salvation of Souls

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 21 January 2023

Those who witnessed the disastrous aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the liturgical revolution of the 1960s will undoubtedly recall the destruction of beauty during that period: high altars dismantled and replaced with picnic tables, Gregorian chant and polyphony set aside in favor of banal campfire songs, statues and stained glass removed and replaced with monstrous, abstract, conceptual art. To the simple faithful who had cherished these things, the hierarchy's characterization of beauty as superfluous and unnecessary must have seemed bizarre; who, upon surveying the cathedrals of Christendom, could fail to be impressed by their grandeur and the faith of those who contributed to their construction? Indeed, the simple people during the Age of Faith, who remain nameless today and are regarded as uneducated and unenlightened by the modern academic establishment, were aware of a fact that many today cannot see, namely, that beauty has a supernatural value.

God, the creator of all things visible and invisible, understands that man lives in an *embodied* reality on earth, and that he learns things not only through reading words, but also through his senses and experiences. Since the time of the so-called Enlightenment, there has been an excessive emphasis on what people think, rather than what they love and desire, and this concept still predominates in post-modern society due to the legacy of René Descartes' maxim "*cogito, ergo sum.*" This kind of soul-body dualism, which reduces the human person to a disembodied intellect, a ghost in a machine, ignores the fact that man's senses and experiences of physical things *do* contribute to his understanding of supernatural realities. This forms the very basis of the Church's sacramental life: the conferral of grace is not itself sensible, but the external signs aid human comprehension, such as by highlighting the connection between water and cleansing in baptism.

The liturgical revolution of the mid-twentieth century, spearheaded by rigid intellectuals who looked down upon the simple faithful from their ivory towers of academia, was the attempted codification of Cartesian anthropology into the liturgy. Whereas the traditional Latin Mass is replete with gestures, symbols, and rituals, the *Novus Ordo Missae* fabricated by the so-called experts excised many of these elements in the name of linguistic comprehensibility. It comes as no surprise, then, that the most ardent defenders of liturgical innovation will argue that the use of the vernacular will make the liturgy more comprehensible to the poor, the simple, and the uneducated who do not understand Latin. These same persons praise the new lectionary for its greater variety of readings, arguing that it makes the study of Scripture more accessible to the common people.

The reality is, however, that the past sixty years have not produced Catholics who understand their faith better; if anything, understanding of the faith has only diminished year after year. Prior to the Council, the liturgy was regarded as the primary *means* of catechesis: before even learning how to read, a child would become acquainted with the basic truths of the faith simply by attending Mass with his parents, experiencing beauty, symbol, and ritual. No one is capable of learning through words alone, for that would be contrary to human nature itself. Man possesses a body and a soul and learns through not only the intellect, but also through embodied

experience and the appreciation of beauty. Without the need for words, all people—rich and poor, educated and uneducated—can look to symbol and ritual for this common understanding.

With this in mind, a Catholic thinking with the Church cannot help but recognize the absurdity of the aforementioned post-conciliar trends. The same beauty that rendered the faith accessible to the poor was destroyed in the name of helping the poor, based on the false premise that the Church's use of beautiful and often expensive objects in her worship of God is somehow opposed to the corporal works of mercy. As Pope John Paul II argued in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*:

...part of the teaching and most ancient practice of the Church is her conviction that she is obliged by her vocation—she herself, her ministers and each of her members—to relieve the misery of the suffering, both far and near, not only out of her “abundance” but also out of her “necessities.” Faced by cases of need, one cannot ignore them in favor of superfluous church ornaments and costly furnishings for divine worship; on the contrary it could be obligatory to sell these goods in order to provide food, drink, clothing and shelter for those who lack these things.¹

Was this not the same argument that Judas made when he criticized Mary, who anointed Our Lord's feet, saying that the expensive oil ought to be have sold and the money distributed to the poor (Jn. 12:4-5)? Our Lord responded: “...the poor you have always with you; but me you have not always” (Jn. 12:8). Mary had ample opportunity to serve the poor in her day-to-day life, but now was a moment set aside for her to worship God. One should certainly recognize the spiritual presence of Christ in one's neighbor and act accordingly (Matt. 25:31-46), but no truly charitable work can possibly be undertaken without first recognizing the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, upon Whom the interior life is built up. The sacrifice at Calvary, renewed daily upon the altars in an unbloody fashion, is the source of sanctifying grace which is applied to the soul primarily through the sacraments—and without the state of grace, service to the poor, while naturally virtuous, is not *meritorious* to the person performing the service.²

While it is virtuous to serve the materially poor, and some are even called to embrace poverty as an evangelical counsel, *all* are called to practice poverty of spirit, which is nothing other than humility and the recognition of one's dependence on God. Regardless of what state of life one is called to, all people are equally in need of beauty, because these “costly furnishings,” far from standing in the way of acquiring poverty of spirit, are among the means to developing it. When presented with beauty directed to the glory of God, one is more inclined to humble oneself, and this humility is necessary for proper contemplation, without which no active apostolate—such as helping the poor—can yield fruit. The alleged incongruity between giving to the poor and using costly, beautiful things for worship is a figment of the modern man's imagination, as he can no longer recognize the true relationship between liturgy and Catholic action.

1 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 31.

2 L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1974), 234.

The modern rejection of beauty is nothing more than a resurfacing of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism: it denies the goodness of the union between spirit and matter, trying to reduce the human person to a Cartesian ghost in a machine. The isolation of the intellect from the other constituent elements of the human being leads to a mode of catechesis that relies primarily on words and language, rejecting the fact that beauty can serve as a means of education as well. With this in mind, there is no wonder why the post-conciliar destruction of Catholic architecture, art, and music has only accelerated the decline of faith in the Western world. This trend has inhibited the development of a true poverty of spirit, and without this spirit, it is impossible to undertake authentic Catholic action in the world directed toward the salvation of souls—or even to save one's own soul—for want of true contemplation.