



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - May 2013

Beauty and the New Evangelisation

Love beauty, which is the shadow of God upon the universe.

(Gabriela Mistral, Chilean poet, 1889-1957, *Decalogue of the Artist*)

There is something about beauty which has the power to touch us deeply, to leave us breathless in wonder, to move us to the very depths of our being. The beauty of sun rays bursting through the clouds, of the starlit heavens on a clear night, of swallows darting effortlessly through the summer sky, of the sound of waves lapping against the seashore, of a piece of poetry or music or a work of art which speaks to us in ways beyond our ability to explain, of the almost infinite variety of human beings of so many different shapes and sizes and qualities.

To those whose hearts are attuned, the beauty of creation is a sign pointing beyond itself. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky urges: 'Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things'.

In a wonderfully evocative passage, St. Vincent also speaks of this sacramental dimension of creation: God 'has given us light, so that we might aspire... to understand and contemplate forever that Inaccessible Light, which is God, ... the darkness of the night... so that we may prepare for the eternity of rest in heaven, ... sweet scents so that we may elevate our souls to the eternal sweetness of God... different sounds, so that we may fall in love with the eternal canticles of glory in the splendour of the saints. He has given us innumerable varieties of delicious food and drink, so that we may fall in love with the eternal joys which are in God, ... garments of immense varieties, so that we may seek to be clothed in all the virtues which will prepare us to be clothed with eternal glory in heaven, ... riches, gold, silver, jewels, precious stones and pearls, so that we may aspire to the eternal riches, which are God himself in the manifestation of his glory. All these things he has granted us in a temporary corruptible and limited way,

in order that we may aspire to the eternal, immortal, infinite, immense, and incomprehensible God himself... You have given me all that is visible to help my soul to keep alive and ever-growing in the kingdom of your holy love and thus come to be wholly immersed and transformed in your divine love, in your infinite charity and in yourself' (God the Infinite Love, Meditation VI, OCCC XIII, pp. 51-53).

We are invited to be attentive this dimension of beauty also in our efforts to bring the Gospel to others. Cardinal Godfried Danneels said that our contemporary world 'doubts the truth, resists the good, but is fascinated by beauty'. At the deepest level of our being, we already 'resonate sympathetically' with beauty because we ourselves are beautifully created in the image and likeness of God, the source of all beauty (von Balthasar). 'To say that God is the author of beauty not only means that he created all the beautiful things in the world but that he also created the very sense of beauty, putting a love for and a capacity to recognise it in the hearts of human beings... He wanted beauty (together with goodness) to be a ladder on which to ascend to him, the "one who attracts", the magnet' (*Contemplating the Trinity*, Raniero Cantalamessa, p. 75).

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, says that we 'mustn't be surprised if we find the reflection on beauty located within the theme of the New Evangelisation. The [way of beauty] belongs in a privileged way to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel because love, of its very nature, is expressed through beauty... Beauty communicates the mystery of faith better than other forms' (*La Nuova Evangelizzazione*, pp. 113, 115).

Dostoyevsky famously said that 'beauty will save the world', but immediately asked 'what kind of beauty'? Beauty is ambiguous: 'there is a beauty that can save the world and a beauty that can lead to its perdition' (Cantalamessa, p. 77), a beauty that can act as a springboard to freedom, lifting us out of ourselves and drawing us towards incorruptible Beauty and towards a deeper humanity, and there is also a beauty which can seduce and enslave us and lead us to degrade ourselves and others. Dostoyevsky is referring 'to the redeeming Beauty of Christ. We must learn to see him. If we know him, not only in words, but if we are struck by the arrow of his paradoxical beauty, then we will truly know him, and know him not only because we have heard others speak about him. Then we will have found

the beauty of Truth, of the Truth that redeems' (The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 2002).

The Son of God came in the flesh to teach us where true beauty lies. Out of love, he allowed himself to be stripped of all outer beauty during his Passion (cf. Is 53:14), and in this way redeemed beauty itself, revealing that there is 'something superior to the very *love of beauty*, and that is the *beauty of love*' (Cantalamesa, p. 83).

It is this love of Christ shown forth in all its fullness on the cross that most deeply reveals the beauty of the love which is the eternal communion of the Blessed Trinity. It is the beauty of this infinite love of God that we seek to incarnate in our personal and community life, that we seek to communicate to others, and this is possible only if we allow our hearts to be truly captivated by it, because only hearts and communities which are themselves aflame can inflame the hearts of others.

This Gospel beauty retains a paradoxical quality, because Christ, divine beauty become one of us, identified himself with what seems far from beautiful by ordinary standards: with the poor, the suffering, the lost, the rejected, the marginalised, the sinner - and so we too are invited to seek God's beauty in those same unexpected places - and to allow the beauty of the love of Christ to come to concrete expression in every situation and in every relationship.

St. Vincent was profoundly aware of this truth, and sought to communicate the beauty of this divine love to others in every possible way, but first and foremost in his burning commitment to do everything in his power to allow the beauty and power of this love to touch and transform his own life and the lives of others. He was also very much aware of the power of tangible signs to draw people more deeply into this relationship of love, commissioning paintings such as Mary Queen of Apostles and the Mother of Divine Love along with organising popular celebrations, most notably the Octave of the Epiphany, in order to help people experience in tangible ways and be drawn more deeply into this mystery of love.

We too are invited to follow him with childlike hearts along this path of beauty, to contemplate anew the beauty that surrounds us and allow it to draw us towards the One who himself is Beauty, to let our hearts be pierced anew and healed by the paradoxical beauty of the crucified and Risen Christ and made capable of perceiving him and of serving him also today in the poor and the suffering, the marginalised and the despised with

whom he identified so deeply. We are called to create community, to build a family, which is rooted in and gives profound concrete expression to the generous, self-giving, tender, passionate, beautiful love which is the heart of the Blessed Trinity, and to communicate this love in every possible way, making creative use of the gifts and talents which themselves are reflections of the beauty and action of God within us and in our world.

Questions for personal and community reflection

- Do we ever take time to contemplate the beauty of God's creation with wonder and gratitude?
- Do we really believe profoundly that we are beautifully created in the image and likeness of God? How does that affect our attitudes to ourselves, to others, to God, in daily life?
- Is our relationship with beauty truly human, truly wholesome, truly at the service of our own human dignity and that of others, or do our hearts need to be freed in any way from attachment to beauty that enslaves, beauty that leads ultimately to death rather than to life?
- Does the paradoxical beauty of the love of Christ still pierce and touch our hearts profoundly or do we in some way need to recover the capacity to be moved deeply and personally by this extraordinary love?
- In what ways are we invited to use our gifts and talents creatively and generously in order to communicate the beauty of the love of Christ to others?
- Do our hearts need to be purified in order to be able to perceive the paradoxical beauty of Christ in the poor, the suffering, the marginalised, the rejected, and to commit ourselves to accompanying and serving him in the least of his brothers and sisters?

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