BEAUTY IS NECESSARY FOR PRAYER

Randall Smith

Photo: wikimedia.org/Los Angeles

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles, 2002

"Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love."

So wrote Hans Urs von Balthasar in the early pages of his majestic work, *The Glory of the Lord: Seeing the Form*. His warning, written in 1961, has been sadly prophetic. A culture that sneers at beauty soon can no longer pray.

C.S. Lewis once wrote: "We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst." So too, we have for the last fifty years built ugly modernist church buildings and filled them with ugly art and music, and are shocked, *shocked* to find that people are leaving the Church in droves.

Why are we shocked? Do we think the desire for beauty is shallow? While it is true that we should be drawn ultimately by the Word of God present in the scriptures and in the Eucharist, is physical beauty unimportant? Is it somehow unworthy of the glory of God? Are people somehow to be criticized for wanting it, for thinking it appropriate to prayer and worship?

When people criticize those who want beauty in their church, I always want to ask: "If someone painted the house next to yours black with big purple polka dots, would it annoy you? Would it make you want to move? Would you want to buy that house and repaint it? If so, why would you consider the equivalent tarting up of your church less annoying?"

I once heard a priest bemoan a woman having come to him and *begged him* not to destroy their church, saying: "I was baptized in that church; I was married in that church; I had my First Communion and Confirmation in that church: I baptized my *children* in that church, *please* don't destroy it." He insisted he hadn't. I saw the renovated church; he had. The large, glorious stone altar had been replaced with a tiny wooden table. The wooden confessionals along the side of the church had been taken out and replaced with a single chair. The large crucifix had been replaced with a small processional cross on a stand. The tabernacle was God knows where, but it wasn't visible to anyone entering the church. Room had been made behind the priest for the members of the music ministry. No longer would they be using the large, prominent choir loft. I imagine that for this poor woman who grew up in this church and had celebrated so many sacraments there, this was the equivalent of painting it black with purple polka-dots. To insist that she not be annoyed because it was "artistic" or that these changes were required by the Second Vatican Council only rubbed salt into the wound because: (1) it wasn't "artistic," it was dull, boring, and so obviously an attempt to copy what was considered "enlightened" and *au courant* with people "in the know" in certain sectors of the Church, and (2) it certainly *wasn't* required by the Second Vatican Council, as anyone who has read the documents knows. It was, rather, what was deemed to be required by the minimalist ideology of architectural Modernism.

Architectural Modernism styles itself as the "avant-garde," as the architecture of the artistic "rebels" who are moving the Church beyond its "bourgeois" past. But it has been over seventy years since Le Corbusier and architectural Modernism came on the scene. Perhaps it's time to move on. Please move on.

Modernists are the hide-bound group stuck in the past. Traditional architecture is the thing of the future because its allure is perennial. It is not the architecture that expresses "the spirit of our age," because that "spirit" comes and goes. There are few things more dated-looking (in the sense of dull and outdated) than the "modern" buildings of the 1970s. But there are few buildings, by contrast, that can match the outpouring of love and devotion seen when the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris caught fire. Would people from around the world contribute the $250 million it cost to build that pile of awkwardly stacked boxes that make up the Modernist cathedral in Los Angeles? Or would people cheer, give thanks to heaven, sing a *Te Deum*, and ask that the insurance money be spent on a new, classical building like the new church

Photo: wikimedia.org/Ken OHYAMA

Unité d'habitation *in Firminy-Vert by Le Corbusier, 1967*

of *Santa María Reina de la Familia in* Cayalá?

Ralph Waldo Emerson once denounced "buildings so depressing they harm people's spirits." He had much better buildings than we see being built now in mind when he wrote that line. Here is another line from the same essay: "It was for Beauty that the world was made." The line is often associated with him, but he was quoting from a play by Ben Jonson called *The Masque of Beauty*, in which he expresses powerfully—and beautifully—the nature of the relationship between love and beauty that von Balthasar wished to explore in his work. Here is the relevant section:

> When Love at first did move
> From out of Chaos, brightened
> So was the world, and lightened
> As now!
> Yield, night, then, to the light,
> As blackness hath to beauty,
> Which is but the same duty.
> It was for Beauty that the world was made,
> And where she reigns, Love's lights admit no shade.

Imagine: "It was for Beauty that the world was made." We rarely think this way anymore. Perhaps because we associate *beauty* with *appearance* and mere *sentiment*. This was not always the case. The ancient Greek word *kallos* (κάλλος), often translated "beauty," often connoted more than mere surface beauty. Especially when it was paired with the Greek word *agathon*, meaning "the good," as in *kalos kagathos* (καλὸς κἀγαθός), this phrase was used to communicate the highest form of human excellence. To be *kalos* in this context meant to live a life that was well-ordered, commendable, and excellent. We get closer to the meaning when we hear people say of someone like Mother Teresa that she was "such a beautiful person." Others, looking at pictures of that smiling, wrinkled face might wonder: "Beautiful? Really?" But for those who have eyes to see, the answer is a vigorous and forceful "yes." (I've tried this experiment with students. Trust me, their answer is unequivocal.)

"The question of beauty takes us out of surfaces, to thinking of the foundations of things." That's Emerson again. And then there's this: "Any real increase of fitness to its end is an increase of beauty." You'd think this man had been reading von Balthasar if he hadn't lived a century earlier. Allow me just two more for good measure. "Beauty is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world," and "Beauty is the pilot of the young soul."

Common people love beauty. They desire it and seek it out. If you doubt this, find out where most people want to get married. And find the places the poor gravitate to. One of the most maddening things about Modernist church architecture is when it poses as something for "the poor" or "the working classes." But Modernist buildings rarely, if ever, appeal to the poor. The working poor can usually be found gravitating to the older, more beautiful churches in town, the ones Modernist architects despise.

In this issue, the reader will find articles celebrating the church architecture of Latin America. If you go to those cities and towns, you will find the poor not in Modernist churches stripped bare, but in the beautiful chapels, basilicas, and cathedrals built by their ancestors. An epic tragedy is that the same Modernist ideology that purports to favor them has left them without the beauty they seek and that should rightfully be theirs.

In too many Latin American cities, the older, more beautiful sections of town are the preserves of the rich, whereas the poor are forced to live in the socialist, worker housing projects built for them after the Second World War on the pattern of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation*. Why would good socialist workers want anything more than their place in the beehive? That would be bourgeois! All that ornamentation! All that classical nonsense. All that *beauty*. Those were things of the past, to be swept away by the new industrialization. Or so Le Corbusier and his fellow Modernists assumed.

Did the working poor *want* to live there? No one asked them. Did they want stripped-bare Modernist churches? It was clear from their complaints that they did *not*. But why would anyone listen to them? They're the ignorant poor. Modernist architects and

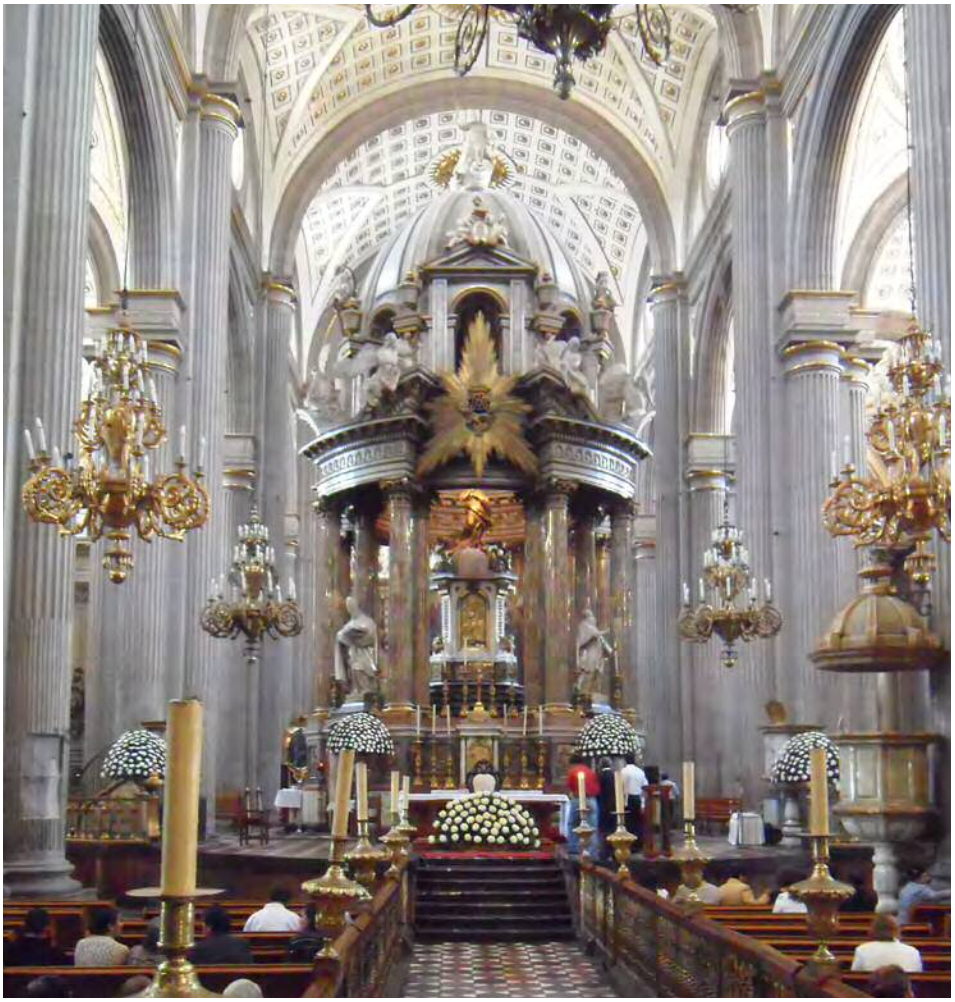

Photo: wikimedia.org/Patricia Alzuarte Díaz

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of the Archdiocese of Puebla de los Ángeles, Mexico, 1649

church planners knew what was best for them. "Star architect" Peter Eisenman once summed up the view nicely in a famous 1982 debate, proclaiming that the role of the architect is not to give people what they want, but what they *should* want if they were intelligent enough to have good taste.

Everyone who has been on a church renovation committee since the 1950s knows the story. Can't we please keep our altar rail, our statues, our beautiful painted walls, our side chapels? Can't we keep the organ, the chant, the painted Stations of the Cross? Oh no, that's all done now. Whitewash the walls. Take out the altar rail, the statues, the side chapels, and the wooden confessionals along the walls (we've got a broom closet in the back that would be much better). We've got some felt banners that will be much better than those Baroque paintings, and we're taking out some pews so that we'll have room for a piano and a place for the guitar group to do their singing. It's all part of the plan for an updated church that will appeal to the "modern man" (and woman).

But what if the "modern man" doesn't like it, as declining participation seems to suggest? What if we find modern men and women gravitating to the old classical churches rather than your new ones? Would it perhaps be time for a course correction, for a return to beauty?

"Certainly not" is the response I often hear. "Oh no, the architecture of the church and the character of the music can't be the culprit! I mean, we've read books about what it is to be 'modern' and what 'modern man' wants and needs. No, it must be the Church's teaching on contraception"—which would be odd since very few people have heard it mentioned from the pulpit in years.

Although, come to think of it, I did hear a priest mention it in a homily a few months ago. The church was filled, the pastor much beloved. The facts don't seem to fit the theory. If odd teachings were the problem, I propose that the Church's insistence that Christ was God incarnate and that he rose bodily from the dead is a more likely culprit. Everyone from the very beginning has suspected that this was just crazy, which is why Saint Paul called it "a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks." No, no, I suspect people leave the Church not because the rules are too harsh (who even enforces them?), but because they suspect the news is too good to be true.

What if the problem haunting us isn't so much the Church's moral teachings, as it is that so many people have lost their wonder of the world and of its beauty? "The secret of ugliness," writes Emerson, "consists not in irregularity, but in being uninteresting. When people no longer find the world beautiful, when instead they find it dull and uninteresting, they will no longer love it. And if they cannot love the world, if they find existence itself dull and uninteresting, then they will cease to love the world, and they will have little interest in its creator.

In that 1982 debate, modern architect Peter Eisenman defended buildings that make people unhappy and uncomfortable, saying: "If we make people so comfortable in these nice little structures, we might lull them into thinking that everything's all right, Jack, which it isn't." Well, that's one view. I don't begrudge him his view, but I don't want him designing my church. Because what Catholics believe is that, at base, even in the midst of all the evil and ugliness in the world, there is an ultimate goodness and beauty.

Josef Pieper, in his wonderful book *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, argues that the origin of festivals and festivity is the praise of God in public worship. "Underlying all festive joy kindled by a specific circumstance," writes Pieper, "there has to be an absolutely universal affirmation extending to the world as a whole, to the reality of things and the existence of man himself," and this, he says, "remains the sole foundation for festivity" and festive joy, no matter what one happens to be celebrating in the particular circumstances. Who can

be happy at the marriage ceremony of a couple if one assumes that they'll just get divorced anyway, and if after a life filled with sorrows and misery, they simply fade away in death? What reason could there be for festive joy then?

We can admit that Peter Eisenman is right in one sense: everything is not all right. Not here, not now. Without God, what reason could there be for hope? Eisenman is just being honest about the world he sees. But this is why we can't build the sort of buildings he would want: because as 1 Peter 3:15 bids us, we must be ready to give reason for the hope that is within us. We are commanded to preach the Good News and not to hide our light under a bushel basket. As the temptations of nihilism grow greater, the proclamation of the Good News will seem more absurd. But it is precisely then that we must be most insistent. Here is Pieper again:

> As the radical nature of negation deepens, and consequently as anything but ultimate arguments becomes ineffectual, it becomes more necessary to refer to this ultimate foundation. By ultimate foundation I mean the conviction that the prime festive occasion, which alone can ultimately justify all celebration, really exists; that, to reduce it to the most concise phrase, at bottom *everything that is, is good, and it is good to exist.* For man cannot have the experience of receiving what is loved, unless the world and existence as a whole represent something good and therefore beloved to him.

If the world is not found beautiful, it will not be loved. And the only way anything can get better is if it is loved with a faith that can envision a reality beyond the limitations of the present reality—that is to say, with a faith that has "the assurance of things hoped for" and provides "evidence of things unseen."

If I may make a modest proposal, let's try beauty—again. A scientist might say something like this. You have a hypothesis, you test it, and if it fails, you try something else. We've tried Modernist architecture for the past sixty years. How is that working out? I can't predict whether building more beautiful churches will turn things around, but why not try it? Give it twenty years, and if things get worse, then I was wrong. But since our current attempts at the "New Evangelization" don't seem to be going anywhere fast, maybe a little investment in classical beauty would help. Not the ersatz "beauty" that is the result of an ideology, but real beauty, the sort that the Church employed for centuries. It seemed to work then; it might work now. Why not try it? Worshipers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but some ugly buildings.

⌖

Randall Smith is Professor of Theology at the University of Saint Thomas in Houston, Texas. He is also a Research Fellow in the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas in Austin. He writes regularly for The Catholic Thing*, and his latest book is* From Here to Eternity: Reflections on Death, Immortality, and the Resurrection of the Body *(Emmaus).*