

TEACHING BEAUTY

Randall Smith



Annunciation by Fra Angelico, c. 1430, commissioned for San Domenico in Fiesole and currently in the Prado Museum in Madrid

There are many reasons people come into the Catholic Church, but a common one is their experience of beauty: the beauty of the art, the architecture, the music, and the liturgy — when they can find it. Too often, those whose goal is “evangelizing” — even those who talk about “evangelizing the culture” — largely ignore the beauty expressed and embodied in the Church’s long and noble artistic tradition. Why? Could there be more effective tools for encouraging people to take the Church seriously than the angelic sound of Monteverdi’s *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*, Josquin des Prez’s *Missa Pange lingua*, and Bach’s *Saint Mathew Passion*; the superb art of Fra Angelico, Caravaggio,

Raphael, and Michelangelo; or the transcendent beauty of the Cathedral of Chartres, Notre-Dame in Paris, or the Duomo (Santa Maria del Fiore) in Florence — to name a precious few? Experiencing these would be a good first step, but there is so much more that this step would be like dipping your toe in a vast ocean that stretches out beyond the horizon.

I teach theology. I believe in the importance of helping young people gain an “understanding of the faith.” But I can’t do what great art and architecture can do to inspire the awe appropriate to the transcendent mysteries of our faith. I once mentioned to one of my STEM colleagues, a devoted

Catholic, who understood why we had required theology classes but not why we required so many classes in literature, that I would prefer that our students take more courses on Dante, Chaucer, and the poetry of John Donne rather than simply taking yet another course to satisfy a theology requirement. We need to form the Catholic imagination, I told him. “No, no, no,” he replied. “All they need is a course on composition and writing.” He was daily communicant at Mass, but he clearly saw no need for any formation of the Catholic imagination or any need to move their passions and fill their hearts with the glories of the Christian artistic tradition.

Even many “conservative” Catholic institutions spend precious little time introducing their students to the artistic treasures of their Christian tradition. Let’s read a few more books, seems to be the guiding principle. Reading is great. But people in universities, professors and students both, can get “lost in their heads.” We need to be brought back to earth. I don’t mean that in the way it is often meant. “Being brought back to earth” means becoming more pragmatic, reading a few more business books or books of cultural commentary. That rarely brings people “back to earth” in the way that a deeper appreciation of the incarnation does. Rather, there are few ways better to help students enter into the mystery of the incarnation—of what it means for the Word to become flesh and its marriage of the eternal and the material—than to introduce them to the beauty embodied in Christian art and architecture.

We wonder why young people leave the Church. Could it be because we haven’t connected them emotionally and spiritually to the Church’s beauty? Young couples come back to beautiful churches when they want to get married. They travel to places around the world and visit the beautiful churches there. Have we done anything to move people’s deepest longings by connecting them to its beauty?

When universities want to build a sense of devotion to the school, they inculcate their students with a sense of the history and tradition of the institution, and they make sure to get them emotionally attached to the beautiful traditional buildings on the campus, because those are the ones the students will proudly keep coming back to visit. They will bring their friends and say things like, “I had several classes in that building,” knowing that their friends will consider them to have been fortunate to have enjoyed that beauty even if for a short time. What a privilege it must have been to spend

time on such a beautiful campus with such beautiful buildings!

We teach our Catholic young people so little about the history of their Church. We introduce them almost not at all to her great artistic treasures. We rarely let them sit and contemplate the beauty of a great Catholic painting, sculpture, or cathedral. When they can take pride in their Church, they will find it much harder to leave it behind. They may not know how to respond effectively to criticisms of the Church’s moral teaching; their colleagues may say things like, “the Catholic Church is

just stupid”; but if they have pride in the Church’s beauty, they will know that she can’t be as “stupid” as people claim. “You come to Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, and you tell me that the Church that built *that* building is *stupid*!” “You look at the *Pietà* of Michelangelo, and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and you tell me that the Church that inspired *that* is a bunch of silly fools! Really? Show me anything more impressive.”

It’s time to stop building buildings that embody a modernist aesthetic ideal. They are “ideological” buildings, not buildings built to be beautiful. Beauty draws people in. Ugliness drives them away. Once they come in through those doors, they need to hear the word of God preached solemnly and beautifully. They need to take part in a Mass that is solemn and beautiful, something that makes clear the people involved take it *very seriously*, as though their very lives depended on it. They need to hear good, orthodox theology, not childish ramblings. But let’s be practical for a moment (since that seems to be something people say they want): You won’t get them in the doors unless the place is beautiful. I am one of those stuck-in-my-head academic theologians, and even I understand that. Shouldn’t people who consider themselves so much more “practical” and “pastoral?” You can rarely do anything better for the poor, the depressed, and the disaffected young than to offer them beauty. The rest of their world may be falling apart, but being enveloped in real beauty is like water in the desert.



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Portal of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence

Photo: wikimedia.org/Czen92