

On a Remedy to Western Depression

The Western world is the most depressed it has been in the history of studying depression. In America at least, “lifetime prevalence for an anxiety disorder is nearly 30 percent” and “about 20 percent of Americans will experience a major depressive disorder... in their lives” (1). Some of this depression is cultural. As the Church has held since her foundation, to lead a truly happy life, a person must be oriented towards his supernatural end: Christ. To help in this orientation the Church has cultivated, often with the help of civic authority, a culture of Catholicism so intrinsic to Western identity that an increasingly secular, atheist society still celebrates solemnities. Despite the atheist celebration of Christmas, the West continues down a postmodern path of deconstruction, destroying objectivity in all fields including morality, beauty, science, and even the concept of reality. As Pope Benedict XVI identified, “the decline of a moral conscience grounded in absolute values is still our problem, and left untreated, it can lead to the self-destruction of the European conscience” , today manifesting as a “peculiar Western self-hatred” expressed in an “abandonment and denial, a flight from one’s own things”(2). In prime Western style, millions flock to Europe to gaze at Catholic cathedrals, bastions of beauty, and then reject the ideas that drove their ancestors to construct the pinnacles of Western culture and art. Through St. Thomas Aquinas’ ideas of objective beauty, Western secular culture must be made beautiful again, a process which begins as it did when the Church began: Christians in a hostile empire and culture manifesting true goodness externally. While a complete answer to depression and despair in all places can only be found in heaven, a remedy can be applied through restoring the Church’s and even the government’s role in promoting the construction of art grounded in true virtue. In being surrounded by beauty, people are drawn to the source of it, and ultimately form a more well-ordered culture.

To understand Aquinas’ ideas of beauty as a system of aesthetics, we must also cover the foundation of his ideas found in St. Augustine’s Platonic expressions of them, which cannot be separated from any scholastic theology. For St. Augustine, and for the Church after him, “everything is beautiful that is in due order” (3). The most well ordered, and therefore beautiful being, is God, from which all other beauty emanates. Due order is also applicable to all of creation. As being given more “form” is more beautiful, Augustine identifies matter in its initial unformed state to be without beauty. Only once it has been crafted by God into the creation we now inhabit does it take on beauty, even if it is low compared to that of God. The population of creation itself is also beautiful, as each thing exists in its form, and is as itself a whole unit. Being whole and unified is important. As before, God is the most beautiful being, being the ultimate unity in the Trinity, with creations that preserve unity ordering themselves to the Origin of their good attributes. Keeping unity in mind, principles that offer a visible unity such as symmetry and thematic cohesion become vital to art, as “in all the arts it is symmetry[proportion] that gives pleasure”(3).

Understanding the only true pleasure to be delight of God, with beauty lessening the further something or someone is from God, we can understand Aquinas’ expression of beauty: “beautiful things are those which please when seen”. To see really means to perceive, or to contemplate. When a person

contemplates something beautiful, he is only truly pleased when it lifts his mind up to God, since “beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally”(4). St. Thomas, inheriting from St. Augustine, also related the proportion and wholeness of a form to its beauty. Therefore, people should typically find more beauty in forms with a good proportion to their own nature and with a good physical or geometric proportion. For example, a large Gothic cathedral is both good in relation to human nature, since it makes man feel his relation to God, and good geometrically, since Gothic architecture is designed around usage of symmetry and light.

Given the Thomistic and Augustinian formalizations of beauty, the Church has always used beautiful mediums in worship. Art, both visual, architectural, and musical, all exist to support devotion to God. As Pope St. Pius X said, speaking about liturgical music, it exists such that “through it the faithful may be the more easily moved to devotion and better disposed for the reception of the fruits of grace belonging to the celebration of the most holy mysteries” (5). The same principles are applied to liturgical art, or art present in churches, including the construction of the church itself. Since some art, especially churches are essentially public, all who perceive the art can be moved to devotion throughout their day. As masses of people walk by a church and, if the church is beautiful, drawn to beauty and therefore God, it can be said that person by person a culture, even a secular one, is disposed to grace. Through virtuous art “we are brought into contact with the power of the truth”(6). In the contact with truth, a culture can be purified and evangelized.

In support of sanctifying a culture, the Church for her whole existence has started entire movements of art, and was the largest patron of public art for at least 1400 years. Beginning with icons and frescoes hidden in catacombs while she was being persecuted, the legalization of the faith eventually shifted to erecting large basilicas with even civically supported mosaics. The art of the Church took on a public character to evangelize the pagan masses, and combat iconoclast heresies, aggressively producing statues and devotional depictions to educate the illiterate public. In the Middle Ages, icons were translated to stained glass and illuminated manuscripts, helping transition into new art movements which drove the Renaissance. When pagans no longer had to be converted the Protestant schisms broke the Church, leading her to develop even more beautiful visual art and architecture manifested especially in the Baroque. The Baroque highlighted the beauty of Truth found only in the Church, contrasting with the new iconoclast Christian communities. Essential to the Counter-Reformation, all art produced for it is held in numerous museums and churches, considered an essential moment of Western aesthetics.

In keeping with the Thomistic principles of unity, proportion, etc. objects that contradict or attempt to contravene these ideas are necessarily not beautiful, and do not lead people to truth. Art can be treated in the same way that St. Thomas treats natural and moral goodness. Similar to how some moral acts are intrinsically evil due to lacking their object (7), art can be intrinsically bad, and cannot be ordered towards God. Unlike a moral act though, works of art cannot be affected by intention. The primary object of art is the physical beauty of it. Any art that is made ugly on purpose to highlight some other idea, no matter how great the idea, remains ugly. For example, ‘art’ made to critique war, like in the dadaism movement, is a worthy thought. Unfortunately, it is still objectively bad art. In demonstrating the relationship between physical beauty and goodness, art that communicates evil is typically *not* physically beautiful. Since architecture is art, architecture can also be terrible, and not suitable for reflecting the transcendent goodness of God, even with good intentions. While Christ can “make all things new” (Rev 21:5), Christ cannot baptize evil.

The treatment of art considering primarily form needs to guide the Church, as it has historically in using art movements for her own ends. The Church, when dealing with non-Christian visual art, has destroyed that which is bad and kept that which is good. The most prominent example is found in the rededication of the pagan temples for true religious use. All idols in the temple, while physically beautiful, were obviously not suited for right worship and so destroyed. The temples themselves also had to be remodeled for true sacrifice. However, the general form of the temple was kept, highlighting the support of the Church for good proportion. The temples also had good form in relation to the divine, reflecting the divinely-inspired belief of the Greek and Roman pagans in objective beauty. In building the pagan temples, the Greeks obviously communicated the relationship between the divine and the human. Despite their pagan intentions, their works remain beautiful. Since intention does not affect the beauty of an object, the temples could be repurposed. As St. Paul uses Greek religious practice of worshiping the Unknown God to reorient them to the God now known: Christ, the Church reorients the temple to True Worship. A modern example of temple Christianization can be seen in the Diocese of Orange's Christ Cathedral. In being owned previously by Christians, although Protestant, the building does not need to be demolished, only remodeled for True Worship.

Therefore, since good form, usually flowing from good intentions, is required for beauty, especially in publicly perceived architecture, it is necessary that the Church discern which art movements to apply to herself. In trying to 'baptize' postmodern architectural styles, some in the Church may not realize that many styles are totally incompatible with goodness itself, and cannot be Christianized. With churches being made this way, the faithful are not spurred towards devotion. They unite themselves less with the Mass, thereby not fulfilling their vocation to baptismal priesthood. The general public feels the effects of ugliness as well, as we can see in increasingly secular Western cultures, with fruits of depression and self-hate.

While some in the Church discern which modern art can be utilized, the Church at the same time can host a return to form and encourage the development of art which we already know to be grounded in virtue. The Churches throughout the world can host art contests, and encourage civic offices to do the same, calling the secular world to truth. In constructing new parishes and cathedrals, the Church can employ architects who build with holy intentions and good form. If we believe in the teachers of the Church regarding beauty, especially as formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, then with beautiful edifices comes not only the increased devotion of the faithful but the sanctification, even if subconscious, of all who perceive them. The Western masses should not have to travel to ancient cities to view their great cathedrals, the Church can still build them today. Only through Christ, and therefore the Church as his body, can a culture be sanctified.

References

1. Ludden, Dr. David. *East-West Cultural Differences in Depression*.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-apes/201711/east-west-cultural-differences-in-depression#:~:text=Western%20nations%20report%20high%20levels,also%20experience%20fewer%20emotional%20disorders>.
2. Pope Benedict XVI. *Europe and Its Discontents*,
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/01/europe-and-its-discontents>.
3. St. Augustine of Hippo, *Of True Religion*.
4. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, Question 5, Article 4.
5. Pope St. Pius X, *Tra Le Sollecitudini* (On Sacred Music), Instructions on Sacred Music, General Principles. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius10/tra-le-sollecitudini.htm>.
6. Pope Benedict XVI, *The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty*.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html.
7. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Secundæ Partis, Question 18, Article 2.