The Sacramental Nature of Beauty and Liturgical Worship

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The Power of Beauty Conference
Dietrich von Hildebrand Legacy Project
Franciscan University of Steubenville
Steubenville, OH
October 24, 2014

"Simone Weil sought flight from nature as well as from society: reality had become intolerable to her, and for her, God was the power which led her away from it."[1] Such was Martin Buber's judgment on the "Self-Exiled Jew," as Thomas Nevin named her.[2] While the emphasis on detachment is indeed part of her thought, Weil was not a hater of the universe and its beauty: indeed, she saw deeply how God can lead men to Himself through it. Her concept of beauty will serve as a springboard for the reflections in this paper.

The fundamental question to any topic is always the definition, for, as Weil herself saw, channeling an aspect of St. Basil, precisely defining vocabulary "might be a way of saving human lives."[3] Thus, let us be pro-life even in our terminology. What is beauty? For Weil, "the beautiful is the contact of the good with the faculty of sense."[4] It has a fundamental connection with matter and sensibility.[5] It is in its greatest sense seen in universal beauty, that is, the beauty of the universe; the beauty of any particular thing exists only indirectly. The source of this universal beauty is God's work in creation, particularly in "the co-operation of divine wisdom" in that work; thus, "the beauty of the world is Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter."[6]

For St. Thomas, the Scholastics, and those drawing from that tradition, beauty is one of the transcendentals, along with goodness, truth, unity, and a host of others, depending on the

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[1] Martin Buber, "The Silent Question: On Henri Bergson and Simone Weil," in *At the Turning: Three Address on Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952); quoted in *The Writings of Martin Buber*, ed. Will Herberg (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1968), 306-314, here at 312.
[2] Cf. Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
[3] Cf. St Basil the Great, *Περι του Αγιου Πνευματος* §2, in *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson, *Popular Patristics Series* 5 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 15-17: "Those who are idle in the pursuit of righteousness count theological terminology as secondary….To scrutinize syllables is not a superfluous task….If a man spurns fundamental elements as insignificant trifles, he will never embrace the fullness of wisdom."
[4] *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977) , 437.
[5] For instance, see the following: "The beauty of the world is not an attribute of matter in itself. It is a relationship of the world to our sensibility, the sensibility that depends upon the structure of our body and our soul," ibid., 474.
[6] Ibid., 474.

enumeration within a particular individual's thought. The transcendentals are those attributes that have their fullest reality in God but that everything, every entity, participates in to some degree. Weil has some concept of the transcendental nature of beauty in her thought. What specifically separates beauty from the other transcendentals? While there is a unity among all of them, as they all have their fullness only in the God Who is One, beauty could be defined, in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, as

> "the inexplicable active irradiation from the mid point of being to the expressive surface of the image, irradiation reflected in the image itself and granting it a unity, depth and richness far beyond its own power to contain."[7]

Aidan Nichols, whose work on interpreting Balthasar will be a large influence on these reflections, summarizes this view by saying that beauty is "the splendour of form."[8] Other writers who have a sense of this "epiphanic" nature of beauty, as Nichols would say, would be Sergius Bulgakov, Leonid Ouspensky, and St. John Paul II, who describe beauty, respectively, as the "flowering of the creature," "the radiance of the Holy Spirit," or (sounding very similar to Weil) "the visible form of the good."[9] All of these definitions include a commonality: beauty involves a shining-forth, an epiphany. We could even connect this to one of the three aspects of beauty in Thomas' thought: beauty involves *consonantia*, *integritas*, and *claritas*. In a beautiful entity, all the various elements are in harmony (*consonantia*), they all unite in one being that has wholeness (*integritas*), and they shine forth (*claritas*). The fullness of harmony, union, and

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[7] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik*, I:156. Qtd. in Aidan Nichols, *Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide Through Balthasar's Logic* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 38.

[8] Aidan Nichols, *Lost in Wonder: Essays on Liturgy and the Arts* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 178. For more of Nichols' writings on beauty as epiphanic, see his *Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996). Regarding Balthasar's views on beauty, see Aidan Nichols, "Balthasar's Aims in his *Theological Aesthetics*" in *Beyond the Blue Glass: Catholic Essays on Faith and Culture*, 2 vols. (London: The Saint Austin Press, 2002), I:87-106, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), and *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011).

[9] Sergius Bulgakov, *Uteshitel'. O bogochelovechestve II* (Paris, 1936), 233, qtd. in Aidan Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2007), 76; Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 2 vols. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), I:160-161; Pope St. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* §3.

epiphanic character, and thus the fullness of beauty, is found in God; His beauty is so much greater than the beauty shared in by all things that von Balthasar gives God's beauty the separate term glory or, one might better say, *Herrlichkeit*. To draw from these various sources and give a working definition of beauty for this paper, we could say: beauty is the harmonic union of aspects that shines forth from the being of an entity. To use other words, it is the symphonically-integrated epiphany that radiates from an entity's core, making its intrinsic goodness visible.[10]

As a transcendental, beauty is shared by all beings. We can see this in the Septuagint's use of καλός in the creation account: "And God saw that it was beautiful." Even the devil, inasmuch as he was created by God, would have some modicum of beauty; however, there can be barriers put in place to occult the beauty of an entity. Thus the devil's fall and his continuous evil acts makes his beauty virtually impossible to see. One task of an artist is thus to remove the barriers to the epiphany of a being's beauty; as the famous anecdote regarding Michelangelo states, he would see a piece of marble and then sculpt to free the form within from the extraneous stone. But before delving into the realm of art, we must first answer the question my title gives rise to: "How is beauty sacramental?"

First, we must remember that all created things have a sacramental quality; in this context, "sacramental" means "capable of revealing God and His attributes and actions" (or "energies and operations," if we wish to use language more familiar to the Byzantine tradition). As the Wisdom of Solomon says, "From the greatness of the beauty of creatures, analogously the generator of them is seen," and the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Romans echoes this, stating how

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[10] Cf. similarly Nichols' definition in his "Balthasar and his Christology," found in *Scribe of the Kingdom: Essays on Theology and Culture*, 2 vols. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1994), II:20-28, here at 23: "The beautiful is the radiance which something gives off simply because it is something, because it exists." In addition, Balthasar describes beauty as *sich-zeigen*, "self-showing" (cf. Nichols, *Say It Is Pentecost*, 202, 204). In summarizing Balthasar's view, Nichols writes, "[beauty] best represents the epiphanic character of the world's being" (*Say It Is Pentecost*, 206).

the invisible things of God can be seen from the world's creatures.[11] Yet the verse in Wisdom already mentions beauty in particular as a way to see God. As the great Pseudo-Dionysius comments, using a word play on the Greek καλός, beauty, and καλέω, to call, beauty is that "which all things to itself calls."[12] Dionysius specifically states here that he is talking about the fullness of beauty, God, who is also the fullness of good; thus, through the beauty of creation, God is calling all to Himself, the Beautiful One. The beauty of creatures is sacramental both because it partakes of God's Beauty and also because God calls to Himself and reveals Himself to all through it.[13]

Now, this sacramental quality inherent in all things due to their beauty cannot be equated with two other ways for something to be "sacramental." The first category is a sacramental, defined by the *Catechism*'s glossary as "sacred signs which bear a certain resemblance to the sacraments, and by means of which spiritual effects are signified and obtained through the prayers of the Church."[14] While the relevant section of the *Catechism* speaks most about blessings, blessed objects are also usually included under the heading of "sacramental": crosses, icons, altars, rosaries, chotki, etc.[15] The second category is a Sacrament, which is "an efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed

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[11] Wis 13:5 LXX, "ἐκ γαρ μεγέθους καλλονης κτισμάτων ἀναλόγως ʽ γενεσιουργ ς αὐτων θεωρειται"; cf. Rom 1:20.

[12] Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* §IV.7, in *Patrologia Graeca* III:701C-D, "ὡς πάντα πρ ς ἑαυτ καλουν." The word play is pointed out by Paul Rorem in a note in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 76, n. 145.

[13] Cf. Nichols' words: "The world speaks to us of beauty. In Christian language, the world is 'sacramental'" (*Lost in Wonder*, 178).

[14] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 898; cf. ibid., #1667.

[15] The issue of whether any of these items could, in and of themselves, be conveyers of grace, in particular copies of the Scriptures, crosses, and icons, is beyond the scope of this essay. In particular, the debate among Eastern Christians as to whether icons need to be blessed or whether they are blessed by their very nature as icons would be too far of a tangent, and it is a firestorm of an argument I would rather not ignite.

to us through the work of the Holy Spirit."[16] The Sacraments are actions, always involving material things, that in themselves confer grace; in addition, the Holy Gifts of the Eucharist are themselves called simply "the Blessed Sacrament" as well. To distinguish these three categories: the sacramental nature of all things *qua* beautiful can bring us to God by the fact of their sharing in the transcendental of beauty which has its fullness in God, and an encounter with this beauty can also be a motive for God to pour His grace upon us; sacramentals *qua* sacramentals give grace solely through the prayers of the Church; Sacraments confer grace by their nature as Sacraments, for they are efficacious.

All three of these categories of "sacramental" quality can overlap in liturgical worship. As an example, let us take a Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in a Byzantine temple, as the church is traditionally called. The Eucharistic sacrifice is itself a Sacrament, of course. Many of the items in the temple, including many used for the liturgical actions, are sacramentals as well, as many have been blessed: the Holy Table, the antimension, the chalice, the diskos, the lance, the hand cross, the iconostasis, and numerous others. Yet the sacramental nature of beauty pervades all aspects of the liturgy. The music is beautiful and thus sacramental, for it is built of the physical vibrations of air molecules. The beauty of the language of prayers has the same aspect, and, we could say, even words in themselves are something earthly: as the Jews say, the Torah is the "words of God in the words of men." If we want to take a Confucian bent, ritual itself is "patterned on the earth," so it too can reflect beauty; mention could also be made of Pseudo-Dionysius' views on hierarchy.[17] What is most obviously physically beautiful, and thus sacramental, are all the many objects in the liturgy, from candles on the tetrapod to the ornate

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[16] CCC, 898; cf. ibid., #774, 1131.

[17] Cf. Confucius, *On Music* (*Yochi*) §II, in *The Wisdom of Confucius*, ed. and trans. Lin Yutang (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 260. As an example of Dionysius' view, see *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* §1.3, 198 of Luibheid's translation: "The source of this hierarchy is the font of life," i.e. hierarchy is intended by God and even patterned on heavenly things, as he says further on.

stitching on vestments. Here the multiple categories of sacramental quality can overlap, for an icon can be sacramental both *qua* sacramental and *qua* beautiful; we could even say that the Eucharist can be sacramental both *qua* Sacrament and *qua* beautiful, depending on the beauty of the accidents of bread and wine that remain, though the Sacrament overshadows by far any sacramental nature of the beauty within. All liturgical worship, then, leads men to God through a variety of different categories of sacramental quality. An increase in the beauty of the things used in worship, then, can increase the quantity, one could say, of sacramental quality existent there; however, the three categories are also different by type. In particular, one could never say that a beautiful Vespers service can objectively better confer grace than an ugly Divine Liturgy, as the efficacious nature of the Sacrament is always superior to the sacramental nature of beauty; however, an individual *could* receive more grace from the Vespers than the Liturgy depending on his internal disposition.

Let us now return to where we began: Simone Weil. We saw some of her views on beauty, particularly on the importance of the "beauty of the universe" as opposed to the beauty of any individual entity. She recognizes how this beauty can lead one to God, for it is "the trap that God most frequently uses to win [the soul] and open it to the breath from on high."[18] Earlier we also quoted her statement that beauty is "Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter," a truly epiphanic notion.[19] Yet some of Weil's words are even more explicit: "In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there is really the presence of God. There is, as it were, an incarnation of God in the world, and it is indicated by beauty…The beautiful is the real presence of God in matter...Contact with the beautiful is a sacrament in the full sense of the

[18] *Simone Weil Reader,* 473.
[19] Ibid., 474.

word."[20] While I would say beauty is sacramental in a qualified sense, as it is not in itself an efficacious conveyer of grace, Weil's thought still rings similar to my reflections drawn from the transcendentals and the nature of beauty as an epiphany of God's glory.

These ideas do not remain merely theoretical for her: she experiences them in life. Here we can connect her to the reflection on liturgical worship. Weil never received a Sacrament: she was never baptized because of her love of what was beyond Christianity, as she put it. Yet she experienced the sacramental nature of beauty firsthand. Two key religious experiences, related in her letter often called "the Spiritual Autobiography," are connected to liturgical worship. The first is simply the presence of a church building itself, in particular, the Porziuncula built by St. Francis. It was there, in that "incomparable marvel of purity" that she, for the first time in her life, fell to her knees, awestruck by the beauty of that blessed space, which is sacramental in two senses.[21] Her second experience was at the great Benedictine monastery of Solesmes, renowned for its role in the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement. She spent ten days, from Palm Sunday to Bright Tuesday, at the monastery, attending all the liturgical services, and she encountered "a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words."[22] Far from Buber's depiction of her as a despiser of reality, Weil was drawn to God by the material reality of a stone church and plainchant. Though she died outside the Church, we can still pray for her salvation, she who is an exemplar of the power of beauty to sacramentally draw us near to the One Whose glory it epiphanises.

As a final coda, however, I feel I must add a word of caution regarding beauty. Beauty has an immense sacramental power, yet it is still not a Sacrament: though it can draw people to God, it cannot, of itself, save them. It is Christ, and Christ alone, Who saves. Though He is the

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[20] Ibid., 379-380.
[21] Ibid., 15.
[22] Ibid., loc. cit.

Beautiful One, He is also the one Isaiah described as having “no stately form or majesty”: though by beauty He may bring men to Himself, it is His Love that truly saves them. Thus I will end with a poem commenting on Dostoyevsky’s famous prophecy, “Beauty will save the world,” a poem that redirects his focus:

> Oh Fyodor! I admire you
> for your hopeful claim
> that beauty is our salvation
> —and sometimes I believe the same,
> and then I remember
> what I hope you don't forget:
> God is Love and Love has died
> to save us all from sin.
> So place this truth above your hope
> and please, hold it fast:
> though beauty may save the world,
> love already has.