

## Christian Art and Culture

Some years ago at a museum located near the University of St. Thomas in Houston, there was an art exhibit which created somewhat of a stir. It consisted of several cars, flattened and set up on end. The cars were painted various colors and as it turns out the exhibit was rather costly: each smashed car cost the art museum \$100,000. When I first heard this, I thought of the missed opportunity since I could have gone to a salvage yard, put some cars through a compactor and then painted the cars, not much differently than they were. I sat for a few minutes contemplating the revenue that could have been mine, particularly in light of the name of the exhibit, which was “the Emperor’s New Clothing.” A better title could not have been chosen. It reminds one of the common adage, “a fool and his money are soon parted.” All of this demonstrates the necessity of possessing knowledge of what art truly is.

In order to understand the relationship of Christian art to culture, which is the topic of this address, one must have a grasp of four things. The first is the nature of art; the second, connected to the first, is: what is beauty? Third, what is truly “Christian” and lastly, what is culture? It appears, at least to me, that our contemporaries are so confused about all four of these that we should briefly discuss each.

The first is art. St. Thomas Aquinas says that “art is nothing other than right reason of some produced works.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, art is the application of right reason toward producing some kind of work. There are different kinds of work and so there are different kinds of art.

While *mechanical* arts aim at the production of things useful, the *fine* arts aim at the production of something beautiful, i.e. of works which by their order, symmetry, harmony, splendor, etc., will give apt expression to human ideals of natural beauty as to elicit esthetic enjoyment in the highest possible degree.<sup>2</sup>

The mechanical arts are there to produce things which we can use for the sake of our physical and spiritual benefit, such as cars, modern kitchen appliances, computers, etc. Here we see that

---

<sup>1</sup>ST I-II, q. 57, a. 3.

<sup>2</sup>P. Coffey, *Ontology or the Theory of Being*, p. 204 (Peter Smith, New York, 1938).

technology is a branch of the mechanical arts.

The fine arts, on the other hand, are there to give expression to the beauty of the natural order which we see around us. This comes from Aristotle's observation that "art is the imitation of nature." It is fact that any art whatsoever is always in some way imitative of nature. For even the most creative of artists take things which they have experienced and use them in different ways to express some idea or image which they have in their minds. For in order for us to have anything in the imagination, it must in some way come from what we sense in reality. Even those works of art which seem to have nothing in common with reality, the artists takes colors and shapes which he gets from real things and fashions them according to his concept or idea. Nothing is in our imagination that was not first in the senses and so art has a connection to reality which is not able to be denied.

We therefore ask ourselves this question. If art is the imitation of nature, how are we to imitate it? Is good art merely a replication of some real thing? Is good art merely the art which expresses most clearly the conception of the artist? What if the artist is morally depraved and so his mode of thinking tends to distort everything according his bad character? In order to address this, we must answer our second question: what is beauty?

There are a number of definitions of beauty; many of them are true since they express different aspects of beauty. However, the best definition of beauty, in my opinion, is that used by St. Thomas Aquinas, viz. "beauty is that which is pleasing to a cognitive faculty."<sup>3</sup> Sometimes St. Thomas says it is that which is pleasing to sight (*visa*) but sight is of different kinds. There is physical sight which is a type of sense knowledge and there is intellectual sight and so we may say that beauty is that which pleases something which has the capacity to know. To demonstrate the truth of this definition, let us consider the following example: most women, in my experience, desire to be beautiful in order to please their husband or fiancé and that is why at their wedding women dress in a fashion to accentuate their beauty in such a way as to appear acceptable and pleasing so that he will say "I do" at the altar rail. I know of no normal person who wants to be ugly and this is natural to all of us: we desire to be beautiful in order to be pleasing to ourselves and others.

While all agree that we want to be beautiful, very few can agree on what is beautiful and for

---

<sup>3</sup>See ST I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3 and Coffey, op. cit., p. 193.

that reason we must take a look at what the attributes of beauty are so that we can identify them in art. Beauty is called, according to some metaphysicians, a transcendental. A transcendental, without going into all of the abstract details, is something that can be said of everything that exists. Metaphysicians do not always agree regarding the number of transcendentals, but we will only concern ourselves with just a few. We can say that of all things that exist, everything that exists is a being, i.e. it is something which has existence. Everything that exists is also one and by this we understand that everything that exists as an individual. We are distinct from each other and that is because we are separate beings. Everything that exists is good and this is because God created it and since everything that God creates reflects some perfection in God, then everything that exists is good since God is all good. We say that something is bad because it lacks some good or perfection and so we can say that insofar as something lacks being, it is evil. Some metaphysicians hold that beauty is a species of the good and without going into all of the complexities of the issue, I think it is possible to say that beauty is different from the good. For example, one might see a beautiful painting and recognize it as such, but that does not mean that person desires to possess the painting. “The good is that which all things desire” and with respect to the painting, we do not necessarily desire to possess it.

If there is something lacking which should be in the thing, it is bad and this is also applicable to beauty, insofar as if there is something lacking in something that should be there, it is not beautiful. In fact, something is ugly because it lacks beauty. For example, we would say that a person who has one eye that is significantly lower on his face than another or whose nose is bent to one side is ugly. This is because the person’s face lacks symmetry which is one of the attributes of beauty. In fact, there are three categories of attributes which a thing must possess in order for it to be beautiful. The first being symmetry, which is an attribute in things in which two or more parts are well arranged according to a proper order. It is sometimes called proportion and, in music, we call this harmony.

The second attribute is integrity, sometimes called perfection. Integrity or perfection means that the thing is whole; that there are no parts of it missing that should be there. For example, if we see a person who is missing part of his face, we say the person is ugly, whereas the person, who has all of the parts of his face, assuming he has the other attributes of beauty, is beautiful. The third

attribute of beauty is clarity or splendor. This attribute is present when something is beautiful is easily known or makes itself known. We can see this when we are in a crowd of people that someone who is very beautiful tends to naturally draw our attention. Aristotle used to call this amplitude insofar as a thing had to be of a certain size in order to make itself easily known. Things that are too small are hard for us to know.

The reason we have gone into all of this is to point out that beauty is in the *thing*. In other words, beauty is the existence of these three attributes in the thing. All know the dictum “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but the common understanding of this phrase is actually false. For we have just seen that beauty is something in the thing itself, for something is beautiful because in *it* are symmetry, proportion, clarity, etc. Let us do a short test to see if beauty is in the thing and not in the eye of the beholder: I ask all of those men who are married and whose wives are present tonight to tell their wives that they are not REALLY beautiful. Each husband should tell his wife that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and so it is merely in his mind, not in her. If beauty is in the eye of beholder, women ought to forget doing all those things which accentuate their beauty and just find some guy dumb enough to think they are beautiful. No. The fact is that beauty is in the thing and so the husbands can reassure their wives that they are beautiful, provided they really are.

The problem is that people do not distinguish between beauty which is in the thing and the aesthetic sense which is in the person beholding the beauty. The aesthetic sense consists in the person’s ability to grasp what is truly beautiful. Some people, as Aristotle says, are depraved and this affects their ability to see what is truly beautiful. There are several things which affect our ability to see what is beautiful. The first is our disposition; if we are in an angry mood, what we think is beautiful may be different from when we are in a good mood. We see disposition playing itself in that some people are naturally more attracted to people who are blond haired than they are people who have black hair. Another thing that can affect what one thinks is beautiful is one’s virtue. For certain virtues temper our appetites which have a capacity to affect our intellectual judgment. We often see people who are angry doing things they would not do outside that moment of anger and so the passion of anger tends to affect their judgement. Now beauty is something which we grasp or understand intellectually, so if our passions are disordered, it will affect our ability to judge whether something is really beautiful or not. This is why a good character in an artist is

absolutely critical for him to be able to produce truly beautiful art. The last thing that we will discuss regarding those things which affect our aesthetic sense is our mental habits. If we are prone to error and we are habituated in thinking erroneously, our judgment about what is truly beautiful will be affected. This is why mental hygiene is important for grasping what is beautiful. Many of us have watched movies where the mentally disturbed villain observes that something is beautiful when in fact it is grotesque. It is here that we can also say that the more mentally ill members of a society become, the more they are prone to error. The more they are prone to disordered passions and life living, the more will their art become grotesque.

Another attribute of beauty is that it naturally draws one to contemplation. Whenever we see something really beautiful, it naturally draws out intellect into considering it. For example, take the average male. If a beautiful woman walks into a room full of men, the men will follow her around the room with their eyes. If an ugly woman walks into the room, they will tend to keep doing what they are doing. The point is that beauty naturally draws us to consider the thing which is beautiful. This is also why we can sit for a long period of time looking at a sunset or a view of a range of mountains. On the other hand, we tend to ignore or be repulsed by things that are really ugly.

Which brings us to Christian culture. We cannot exhaust all of the dimensions of culture but we can say that the word culture is ultimately derived from the Latin word *cultus*, which means worship. It is a fact that the predominate cult determines the culture in which we live. The cult determines the culture because the cult specifies what are morally acceptable ways of behaving. If the predominate cult says that it is evil to lie, then members of the society will not lie, as a general rule. As a result, the culture would be different from one which says that lying is good. This also helps us to see in what culture consists. Culture does not consist in how many cheeses you have in your country, although that may be a small part of it. Culture consists in (1) the public habits of the society and (2) the effects of those public habits. In other words, the various artistic things we see in a particular culture, the buildings, the statues, the music, the fine arts, what people eat, how they eat, how they greet each other are actually the effects of the cult. If our cult holds that purity and modesty are good things to be pursued, then publically acceptable dress, the rules of courtship, the statues, etc. will all reflect modesty and purity. If our cult is the cult of the self, then the public dress will degenerate into what our passions want here and now.

The last question we want to answer before we tie it all together is what does it mean to be truly Christian. Since a Christian is one who follows Christ, this means that a Christian will follow the religion which Christ Himself established and told us to follow and that is the Catholic religion. A truly Christian culture is a Catholic culture and here we mean Christian in the fullest sense. To the degree that a specific culture is not *Catholic*, it is to that degree not *Christian*. Some Protestant cultures, one could argue, are Christian, and I would not dispute that, but I would argue that they do not possess the fullness of truth regarding the teachings of Christ and so their culture can never be fully Christian. Therefore, true Christian culture is one which adheres to the cult established by Christ which is the Catholic cult. This also indicates that we must submit to authority which has the right to interpret the deposit of faith so that we may know the truth. For that reason, only an orthodox Catholic faith hallmarked by its proper adherence to the Magisterium of the Church can be a foundation for a truly Christian culture.

How does all of the aforesaid fit together. As we mentioned, beauty is that which naturally draw us to contemplation. If our art has both a Christian theme, i.e. it is about Our Lord, Our Lady, an angel, a saint or some mystery of the faith, *and* it is beautiful, it will naturally draw people to contemplate that which is extolled by the art. The beauty of the art will draw them to contemplate the art and the Christian theme will provide the subject matter of contemplation. For example, how many of you have walked into a Catholic Church and seen a statue which lacked clarity, i.e. you could not figure out what the statue was? What happens? You end up spending all your time trying to figure out what or who it is rather than kneeling in front of the statue and the beauty of the statue naturally drawing you to contemplate the mystery or virtue portrayed. Contemplation and prayer are intimately connected, in fact sometimes prayer is called contemplation. Often contemplation has a more restricted sense within the various levels of prayer but the point is that contemplation is naturally an activity of the mind. Prayer is the lifting of the mind and heart to God and so if the statue is beautiful, it will naturally draw one's mind and so it is much easier for one's will to follow because of the beauty. But if the statue is ugly, then my prayer is done in spite of the statue, not because of it.

We must comment, therefore, on the current artistic and architectural practices of certain members of the Church. It appears as if some members of the Church have no aesthetic sense or

very little aesthetic sense because they are building Churches which are ugly and they are putting statuary in the churches which are equally hideous. We build churches which do not draw people to contemplation and then we wonder why mental prayer has collapsed among the laity. We put in statues that are unrecognizable and we wonder why the cult of saints has imploded. The fact is that people are moved by what comes into the senses. If we present people with statues that lack clarity, proportion and symmetry and then we wonder why people do not go up to the altar rail and pray before the statue, we only have ourselves to blame. Let us not forget that the aesthetic sense is often determined by our mental habits. Faith is a virtue which resides in the intellect by which one gives assent to those teachings revealed by Jesus Christ and taught by the Church, commonly called the deposit of faith. The Catholic cult teaches that purity, modesty, truth and temperance are virtues. If they are, why do some of the new churches being built not contain statuary to give one the impression of purity by the clarity of statues? Why aren't the statues representing modesty and humility by portraying saints with hands folded like the humble slave? We, as Catholics, believe that the desire to lead a life according to truth is necessary for salvation and yet we have statues and churches which do not have any resemblance to the true beauty of the doctrines of the Church, Our Lady or the virtues and perfections of the saints. We must conclude that the aesthetic sense of those who are uglifying the churches do not have the same habits of mind that we do. In fact, we dare say that they do not believe the same things we do. Here we see how crucial authentic orthodox faith in submission to the teaching authority of the Church is to Christian art. Art is, again, right reason applied to certain produced things. If we do not have right reason, if we do not have the right faith, we will not have the right art. There is an intrinsic connection between right belief and beauty. While it is possible for a pagan artist to produce beautiful art, true beauty is known when we are able to look at the natural order the way God sees it and this is done through faith. It is in this way that our aesthetic sense is perfected because we see things the way God sees them and so truly Catholic artists who lead lives of virtue have a much greater potential to produce beautiful art than someone whose beliefs are distorted, which in turn distorts their view of reality.

Here we use the term *potential* because it is possible for someone who is morally degenerate to produce beautiful art. Yet, this is because there is something else compensating for their lack of good character. For instance, a right faith may help one to see reality properly despite one's lack of

moral virtue and so they can produce beautiful art because it flows from their faith. Or in those who do not have right faith, we cannot deny that there are some who can produce truly beautiful art, e.g. Mozart. But in these cases one cannot deny, at least it seems to me, that God has given them a particular gift or genius (not given to most) and so what may normally come through intellectual and moral virtues in some artists actually is able to be compensated for by the genius given to them by God. The problem today is that many artists think they are a genius (but really are not) and have no virtue and it shows in their art.

What of culture? If part of culture consists in the public habits of a society which is expressed in its art, then the art has a capacity to express the beliefs of a given society. If the society fills the public places with Catholic art, the art becomes something which all of the members of the society can contemplate. If the art is beautiful and Catholic, then it will have the effect of drawing people to think about what the art is portraying. Many of us who do not live in a Catholic culture have gone to other countries which were or are Catholic and the public devotion of the society which is manifest in its art is edifying and spiritual transforming. For example, in Bavaria, which is heavily Catholic, one often finds along the roads a beautiful crucifix with a small roof over it. It naturally draws one to think about Christ and for a good Catholic, seeing the statue brings great joy. If our statuary actually draws us to the truth and we are lovers of the truth, the statuary and art can actually contribute to joy and happiness of a society.

Our modern situation, however, is not so Catholic. Since the onslaught of modern philosophy, there has been a tendency to divorce man from reality. It is a fact that man comes to true intellectual knowledge of things by means of the senses. This means that what one puts in reality before men will often determine what they think. While men have free will and so they can choose to reject what they see in reality, for either good or ill, nevertheless, most men are formed, both when they are young and when they are old, by what they see day to day. As modern philosophy divorced us from reality, we have begun thinking things which are contrary to reality. Our way of thinking has become detached from reality and has led to art suffering from several defects. The first is that art has become abstract. Our architecture and art is no longer based on what we find in reality but abstract forms and shapes. Instead of having a building made of natural materials adorned with beauty, imitating things which we see, we are now seeing buildings made of glass and plastics in

abstract shapes and forms. Again, mental habits affect our aesthetic sense. As man began laboring under the bad ideas, he formed habits which resulted in his art becoming ugly and yet he thinks it is beautiful. It no longer has clarity as just mentioned; there is no proportion any more, there is no symmetry. In fact, art and architecture today seem to be hallmarked by their disproportion and dissymmetry: the more of it, the better, or so it seems. This abstraction in our way of thinking and in art has actually affected the members of the Catholic Church and it is one of the many factors which has eroded the Catholic subculture in this country and the Catholic culture abroad. If my art does not remind me of any Catholic doctrine or if I see no Catholic art at all, how is it going to encourage me to live a Catholic life?

This is the problem with modern society. The abstract way of thinking and the constant manipulation of created things has now intellectually formed two generations and is currently forming another generation because most of what they see is abstract architecture and art. The younger children are not having their imaginations filled with beauty and so they are less pleased and there is less joy. They are not having their senses filled with Christian art and so there is less of a natural tendency in them to seek those things pertaining to contemplation. The irony of it is that while we are not filling our senses or the sense of our children with beautiful art which naturally draws us to intellectual considerations, we are leading lives which are immersed in sensuality.

If our culture is to be healthy; if it is to be truly Christian, we must recapture a proper philosophy of reality, of how we know and of art. Art is not only the expression of Catholic culture; but it is also one of the causes of Catholic culture by placing before us those things which we are to contemplate. If we want a Catholic culture, we must produce beautiful Catholic art in all its forms. Which brings us to the practical aspects which we can implement in our own daily lives.

First, parents must remove any art which is inimical to the moral and religious formation of their children. This includes everything from the types of programs they watch, which is part of the fine arts to the music they hear, to the statuary that they have in the house. For the benefit of their children, they should adorn their houses with pictures, statues and other forms of art which will naturally draw their children to contemplate the mysteries of faith so that the children will develop the proper habits of mind and in turn will be able to judge what is beautiful from a properly developed aesthetic sense. Adults must do likewise, whether they have children or not. They should

have Christian art in their homes and if possible in their place of work. Nothing forbids art which does not have a specifically Catholic theme to be in our homes provided it is truly beautiful, for in the beauty alone it will reflect God and develop the aesthetic sense of the children.

Pastors must stop gutting the churches of their beautiful adornments. The vestments and other liturgical items should be beautiful as well. They should place in their churches those statues and pictures which will aid their parishioners in leading good Catholic lives. Sometimes you will hear people say that the churches must be very simple since the more simple a thing is the more Godly it is since God is strictly speaking simple. While it is true that God is absolutely simple in the sense that His being is absolutely simple, our churches must not be too simplistic. Clearly, some churches are simple because the people cannot afford much. But often, pastors will gut a church and then spend thousands, and in some cases hundred of thousands, of dollars beautifying the rectory. It logically moves one to wonder what they really think.

The problem with this notion is that while something that is simple is beautiful insofar as it is like God, we as humans find it difficult to contemplate beauty which is simple. The reason is that beauty has order and since we, who are complex beings both in our nature and in our way of understanding, need a certain amount of complexity in a thing in order for us to see the order among the various parts of the thing. So we need a certain amount of complexity in the art in order for us to easily see the beauty of it. Practically, this means that churches which have a certain degree of complexity actually aid the faithful more in their spiritual life than churches which are utterly bare. This also means that while moderation must be observed, pastors should ensure that their churches are adequately decorated with art which will aid their faithful.

Sometimes the faithful will complain that they are spending all this money on building a new church which is ugly. There is a moral of the story: the faithful control one thing and one thing only in the church and that is the money. If your pastor is spending money to rip out the statuary in the Church or to build an ugly church, give your money to support the building of other beautiful churches. If you are a major benefactor, insist that your money goes toward building churches that really are beautiful and encourage the pastor or bishop to do so.

Moreover, pastors must employ music in the liturgy which adheres to proper aesthetics. It must be music which moves us to contemplation, not to emotion. We said before that our passions

or emotions can blind us and so we must be sure that our music in the Church is based on orthodox teaching and true beauty and not one how much it placates or moves us emotionally. By doing so pastors will affect the aesthetic sense of parishioners who will in turn take that into their daily living in public. By doing so we will begin to affect the culture. If our music is truly beautiful, while taking its proper place in the liturgy by enhancing it and not replacing the worship as it often does, then we will affect people's attachment and love to the doctrines and liturgy of the Church. Parents must also not allow their children to listen to music unless it is truly beautiful. We cannot change the aesthetic of our culture over night but we can transform it by the aesthetic formation we give to our children who will one day be leaders in our society.

On the societal level, if we want to have Catholic culture in the United States of America, as strange as that may sound, there are two things, among others, which we must do. Obviously we must propagate the faith so that by teaching the faith others will follow it. The second is that we must erect churches that inspire even the pagan. We can erect statues of Our Lady, Our Lord or some other saint in own yards so that passers-by will be drawn to consider the Catholic faith and for Catholics to lead a public life according to the faith. We can erect beautiful statues along highways and in the streets. The moral of the story is that we can begin transforming this culture into a Catholic one by inundating the senses of the members of this society with art that is truly Catholic. If we want them to think in a Catholic way, we must fill their senses with Catholic things. We must see that beautiful art truly is a means of propagating the faith. We must see that beautiful Christian art is a means to shaping a culture into a Catholic one. We must see that all beautiful Christian art is ultimately there to lift our minds to God, Who is that for which all things strive.

Fr. Chad Ripperger, F.S.S.P., PhD.

Copyright © 2006