

Beauty in the Sacred Liturgy

Southwest Liturgical Conference, Houston

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Your Eminence, Reverend Fathers and Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Introduction

Thank you so much for your kind introduction and for the invitation, made through the good graces of Fathers James Burkhart and Norbert Maduzia, to address you this evening for this opening talk of the 57th Southwest Liturgical Conference Study Week. It is a great pleasure for me to be back in Houston, where I spent nearly twenty years of my life, beginning in 1979, at the University of St. Thomas.

Topic

The topic assigned to me is “Beauty and the Sacred” but, in light of the nature of this conference, and with your indulgence, I have renamed it “Beauty in the Sacred Liturgy.”

If I were to ask you, “what is beauty?”, like most people you would probably answer, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” – or something similar. Typically we call “beautiful” what we like, what is pleasing to us. When confronted with a contrary opinion about whether or not a sculpture, painting or piece of music is beautiful, we often respond, “You have your view, and I have mine; after all, who is to determine what is beautiful?” And when it comes to a discussion about what a “beautiful” liturgy is, we surrender to the same aesthetic relativism. Because each of us has their own idea of beauty, it seems that trying to reach any

agreement on what is “beautiful” is futile.

Undoubtedly notions of what is “beautiful” do have a subjective element and are culturally rooted, but I want to suggest to you that there is an objective quality to beauty because it is “a reflection of the Divine.”¹ Discussion about beauty in the liturgy need not end in arguments about taste. While I will not attempt to define “beauty” in a rigorous way, I do hope to suggest to you some ideas about the necessary connection of beauty to the sacred liturgy, ideas that might be helpful in your deliberations in the coming days.

Beauty, Truth and Goodness

Let me begin by recalling the classical understanding of beauty as it appears in the Tradition. Together with truth and goodness, beauty is held to be a manifestation of being; that is, it refers in the first place to God, the origin and sustainer of all that exists. He himself is not only the fullness of truth and the supreme good but he is also beauty itself. In the language of metaphysics, truth, beauty and goodness are the “transcendentals.” To the degree that any reality – for example, art, architecture or music – participates in being, and ultimately in the being of God, that reality is true, beautiful and good. This is why Pope Francis can speak of “the inseparable bond between truth, goodness and beauty”²

1 USCCB, Committee on Divine Worship, “Stewards of the Tradition: Fifty Years After *Sacrosanctum Concilium*” (2013), 3.1.

2 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 167.

And St. John Paul II wrote that “in a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty.”³ Beauty in the liturgy makes manifest what is true and good.

But in a culture where relativism holds sway, in what is now referred to as a “dictatorship of relativism,”⁴ talk of goodness and truth is often met with a yawn or incomprehension. This lack of interest has serious consequences for how we understand beauty.

Indeed, western culture has lost its conviction that beauty is intrinsically related to truth and goodness. To maintain that something is “beautiful” no longer refers it to God. The meaning of beauty is restricted to the aesthetic experience that it produces in the beholder. When beauty is removed from its connection with truth and goodness, it becomes merely a matter of feeling.⁵ This contemporary alienation of beauty from what is good and true has led many to reject describing anything as beautiful. A widespread attitude of our generation is that of “an all-

3 St. John Paul II, Letter to Artists (4 April 1999), 3.

4 Cf. Benedict XVI, Glasgow (16 September 2010): “The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times, when a dictatorship of relativism threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man’s nature, his destiny and his ultimate good.”

5 Cf. Roger Kimball, “The End of Art,” *First Things* (June 2008): <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/06/the-end-of-art>.

pervading distrust of every kind of beauty.”⁶

This decoupling of beauty from truth and goodness has had its effect on liturgical expressions in sacred art, architecture and music. Some critics have even suggested that the Church should not at all be concerned with beauty in her worship.⁷ They stigmatize as elite aestheticism – taking pleasure in beauty for its own sake – if any special attention is paid to fostering beauty in the liturgy.⁸

The Beauty of God

On the contrary, the Church’s Tradition holds that, as well as being true and good, God himself is beautiful. St. Augustine calls God “the beauty of all beauties,”⁹ and he prayed, “Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient and ever new: late have I loved you!”¹⁰ Indeed, God is “the supreme Beauty,”¹¹ “the surpassing, invisible Beauty of Truth and

6 Martin Mosebach, *The Heresy of Formlessness*, rev. ed. (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2018), 68.

7 Cf. Cardinal Raymond Burke, “Beauty in the Sacred Liturgy, According to the Teaching of Pope Benedict XVI” (19 March 2011): https://www.catholicaction.org/beauty_in_the_sacred_liturgy_according_to_the_teaching_of_pope_benedict_xvi.

8 Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Trojan Horse in the City of God* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1993), 229-230.

9 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 6, 10: *PL* 32, 687.

10 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10, 27.

11 Benedict XVI, General Audience (31 August 2011).

Love.”¹²

Together with the truth and goodness which are readily recognized in Christ, the beauty of God is made visible in his Son. St. Francis of Assisi, after receiving stigmata on Mt. La Verna, cried out to Jesus, “You are beauty. . . You are beauty!”¹³ Francis’s papal namesake has likewise written of Christ that “his riches and beauty are inexhaustible.”¹⁴ In the radiant light of the Resurrection the splendor of the Son’s glory surpasses all worldly beauty.¹⁵

Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s assertion in *The Idiot*, which he puts into the mouth of his Christ-like hero, Prince Mishkin, has become famous: “I believe the world will be saved by beauty.” But the words are often mistakenly interpreted. Dostoyevsky is not referring here to artistic or natural beauty but to the redeeming beauty of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

Before the Conference takes up the various liturgical expressions of

12 *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 526.

13 *Fonti Francescane*, n. 261 (Padua, 1982), 177; cited in St. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (4 April 1999), 6. St. Bonaventure, speaking about St. Francis, wrote: “In things of beauty, he contemplated the One who is supremely beautiful, and, led by the footprints he found in creatures, he followed the Beloved everywhere” (*Legenda Maior*, IX, 1: *Fonti Francescane*, n. 1162 (Padua, 1982), 911.

14 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 11.

15 Cf. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 35.

16 Cf. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” Message to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini (24-30 August 2002).

beauty, let me propose that beauty in the liturgy should draw its sap “from the mystery of the Incarnation. In becoming man, the Son of God has introduced into human history all the evangelical wealth of the true and the good, and with this he has also unveiled a new dimension of beauty, of which the Gospel message is filled to the brim.”¹⁷

The “Way of Beauty”

Even if the transcendental understanding of beauty is widely rejected today, discussion of beauty nonetheless engages our conversation. Many are still attracted by beauty – in nature, art, music, and love.¹⁸ They are open to a beauty that goes beyond mere feeling and the purely subjective judgment of taste. We call this opening the *via pulchritudinis* or the “way of beauty.” It invites us to see beyond perceptible beauty to eternal Beauty, to God himself.¹⁹

An experience of authentic beauty in any area “unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond.”²⁰ Furthermore, beauty,

17 St. John Paul II, Letter to Artists (4 April 1999), 5.

18 Cf. John R. Cihak, “Love Alone is Believable: Hans Urs von Balthazar’s Apologetics”: <https://shannantaylor.wordpress.com/2013/03/04/love-alone-is-believable-hans-urs-von-balthasars-apologetics-monsignor-john-r-cihak-ignatius-insight/>.

19 Cf. Pontifical Council for Culture, Post-Plenary Document, “The *Via Pulchritudinis*, Beauty as a Way for Evangelisation and Dialogue” (Vatican City, 2006), II.2.1.

20 Benedict XVI, Address to Artists (21 November 2009).

whether in nature or art, because it broadens the horizons of human awareness, points us beyond themselves. It gives us wings, “lifting us up so that we may soar to the transcendent and rise to greatness.”²¹ Beauty brings us face to face with Infinity, and so “can become a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God.”²²

Where our claims to truth and goodness fall on the deaf ears of skeptics and non-believers, beauty enjoys an authority to which people respond, because it is non-threatening. For this reason, “we need to find ways of disclosing God’s beauty to our contemporaries.”²³ If the Church can answer their desire to encounter beauty, it just might lead them to discover the origin of this beauty in God. The road to faith might well first be found through an experience of beauty,²⁴ one often found in the

21 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” Message to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini (24-30 August 2002); Benedict XVI, Address to Artists (21 November 2009).

22 Benedict XVI, Address to Artists (21 November 2009); cf. Pontifical Council for Culture, Post-Plenary Document, “The *Via Pulchritudinis*, Beauty as a Way for Evangelisation and Dialogue” (Vatican City, 2006), II.2.3: “The way of beauty replies to the intimate desire for happiness that resides in the heart of every person. Opening infinite horizons, it prompts the human person to push outside of himself, from the routine of the ephemeral passing instant, to the Transcendent and Mystery, and seek, as the final goal of the ultimate quest for well-being and total nostalgia, this original beauty which is God Himself, creator of all created beauty.”

23 Timothy Redcliffe, “The Throne of God,” A Talk for the Congress of Abbots, Sant’Anselmo, Rome (September 2000), manuscript.

24 Cf. Matthew J. Ramage, “Pope Benedict XVI’s Theology of Beauty and the New Evangelization,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (29 January 2015): <https://www.hprweb>.

contemplation of the beauty of creation.

By opening people to the transcendent through the “way of beauty,” we foster the Church’s evangelizing mission: “Every expression of true beauty can [thus] be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus.”²⁵

For many, therefore, the way of beauty is “a privileged and fascinating path on which to approach the Mystery of God.”²⁶ The sacred liturgy has real evangelizing power when it is celebrated in such a manner that its beauty opens to an experience of transcendence. Whenever the Church’s liturgy departs from the mundane and instead highlights a sense of God’s majesty and beauty, it can be experienced as

com/2015/01/pope-benedict-xvis-theology-of-beauty-and-the-new-evangelization/; cf. Benedict XVI, Address to Artists (21 November 2009): “Dear friends, as artists you know well that the experience of beauty, beauty that is authentic, not merely transient or artificial, is by no means a supplementary or secondary factor in our search for meaning and happiness; the experience of beauty does not remove us from reality, on the contrary, it leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, liberating it from darkness, transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful”; St. Paul VI, Message to Artists (8 December 1965): “This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart, and is that precious fruit which resists the erosion of time, which unite generations and enables them to be one in admiration. And all this through the work of your hands . . . Remember that you are the custodians of beauty in the world.”

25 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 167.

26 Benedict XVI, General Audience (18 November 2009).

“a window open to heaven.”²⁷

Important as the “way of beauty” can be for those still in the Court of the Gentiles, it also serves worshipers within the household of the faith. According to Pope Francis, “The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy.”²⁸ As Plato rightly wrote, “At the sight of beauty, our souls grow wings.”²⁹ An encounter with beauty lifts up the soul to God in praise and adoration, thus spiritually transforming a person. We are not drawn heavenwards in our worship only with our minds or with symbols that appeal primarily to the intellect. Much more, we are drawn to God by the beauty of a church’s architecture, its sacred atmosphere and art, and the magnificence of its music. When the liturgy is beautiful, it disposes the heart and spirit to meet God, who is Beauty itself, and so be interiorly sanctified by grace.

The Sacred

At the Second Vatican Council, the Fathers affirmed that “every liturgical celebration is a sacred action surpassing all others.”³⁰ Why sacred? Because the liturgy is the *opus Dei*; it is Christ’s action. Above

27 Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff, “Beauty and the Liturgical Rite” (3 November 2010).

28 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 24.

29 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d.

30 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), 7.

all, the liturgy is about God, not about us.³¹ It is a gift, a work of art, which comes to us from on high. The Eastern Churches get it right by referring to it as “the Divine Liturgy.” Romano Guardini, Joseph Ratzinger’s liturgical inspiration, wrote that the liturgy “does not exist for the sake of humanity, but for the sake of God. In the liturgy we are no longer concerned with ourselves; our gaze is directed toward God. In it we are not so much intended to edify ourselves as to contemplate God’s majesty.”³²

A significant consequence follows from maintaining that the liturgy is sacred and God-centered. It should not be the “subject to the sporadic modifications and arbitrary inventions of one individual or group”³³; that is, it is not to be manipulated by those who stitch together a liturgy on their own authority. While the result of such an exercise might be pleasing to some, the liturgy would then have become the property of those who celebrate, a terrain given over to their creativity, in which a sense of the sacred is readily forgotten.³⁴ Ratzinger, ever attentive to the

31 Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, Collected Works, vol. XI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 593.

32 Romano Guardini, *The Essential Guardini* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1997), 148.

33 Guido Marini, “A Reform of the Reform of Liturgy,” *Origins*, 39:32 (21 January 2010), 522.

34 Cf. Cardinal Godfried Danneels; cited in Archbishop Wilton Gregory, “The 50th Anniversary of Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” *Origins*, 43:26 (28 November 2013),

need for beauty to convey the sacredness of the liturgy as a divine action, deplores all improvisation in this regard. Here is a typical polemical comment of his on such situations: “What is being offered here is certainly the work of a few clever and hard-working people who have made something up. But what I encounter in that is no longer the Wholly Other, the Holy One being offered to me, but rather the cleverness and hard work of a few people.”³⁵

But Christian worship *is* sacred. Jesus Christ, the “high priest of the good things that have come” (Heb 9:11), and “the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15) established in his blood, did not bring the sacred dimension of worship to an end, even though he did inaugurate a new form of spiritual worship. Nonetheless, as long as we are journeying in time, our worship must still make use of signs and rites, which will be abolished only in the new Jerusalem.³⁶

Relationship of Beauty to the Liturgy

Now I would like to say something about why the liturgy which is

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35 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 202), 415; cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, Collected Works, vol. XI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 320: “Whenever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and has been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment.”

36 Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily for *Corpus Christi* (7 June 2012).

sacred in itself must be beautiful in its celebration. A good place to begin is with Benedict XVI's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* of 2007, where he writes in a now classic paragraph:

Like the rest of Christian Revelation, the liturgy is inherently linked to beauty: it is *veritatis splendor*. The liturgy is a radiant expression of the Paschal Mystery, in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to communion. . . . The beauty of the liturgy is part of this [Paschal] Mystery; it is a sublime expression of God's glory and, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth. . . . Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendor.

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There is a great deal to unpack in this statement, but I will concentrate on three major points: why the liturgy is “inherently linked to beauty”; why it is called “a radiant expression of the Paschal Mystery”; and how “the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendor.”

Disregard for Beauty in the Liturgy

37 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 35.

However, before delving into these considerations, it is necessary to deal with a serious objection often raised by those who find any discussion of beauty in the liturgy to be ill-advised or a waste of time.

They oppose it as elitist and irrelevant. These naysayers invoke the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which called for the revision of the liturgical rites to “be distinguished by a noble simplicity.”³⁸

Admittedly a good number of post-conciliar liturgists did interpret “noble simplicity” in such a way that the liturgy should no longer be considered “sacred,” and therefore deserving of being “beautiful” in its place and manner of celebration.³⁹

But the very opposite is the case. The “noble simplicity” desired by the Fathers was in no way intended to impoverish the beauty of the celebration. Rather, all the elements involved in the liturgical action “must be easily grasped but carry the greatest possible expressiveness.”⁴⁰

In order to respond to those who minimize the place of beauty in the liturgy, because they consider it to be out of place in a world

38 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), 34: “The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s power of comprehension and normally should not require much explanation.”

39 Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, Collected Works, vol. XI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 587.

40 St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (4 December 1988), 10:cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), 22.

suffering from so much poverty, St. John Paul II wrote in his encyclical on the Eucharist:

Like the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany, the Church has feared no “extravagance,” devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist. . . . With this heightened sense of mystery, we understand how the faith of the Church in the mystery of the Eucharist has found historical expression not only in the demand for an interior disposition of devotion, but also in outward forms meant to evoke and emphasize the grandeur of the event being celebrated.⁴¹

Beauty in the liturgy is “the concrete way in which the truth of God’s love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us.”⁴²

Besides those who downplay the importance of beauty in the liturgy by arguing that “noble simplicity” demands it, another group invokes the classical axiom of sacramental efficacy: that the Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato*, and not *ex opere operantis*. In other words, regardless of how well the choir sings, the church is architecturally beautiful or the music is awe-inspiring, the valid celebration of every

41 St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 April 2003), 48-49.

42 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 35.

sacrament, even the Eucharist, is a cause of grace. While it is true that a beautiful liturgy is not essential either to our worship or to the efficacy of the sacraments, this does not mean that the beauty accompanying the celebration can be dismissed as insignificant. Rather, our love for the liturgy “should make us attentive to every work of art placed at the service of the celebration.”⁴³

Inherent Link of the Liturgy to Beauty

Beauty is demanded of the liturgy “since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation.”⁴⁴ It is to be imbued with beauty because it manifests the fundamental truths of Redemption; that is, the liturgy offers a palpable, visible, experience of the reality of salvation brought about by the Paschal Mystery.⁴⁵ For this reason, “The beauty of our celebrations can never be sufficiently cultivated, fostered and refined, for nothing can be too beautiful for God, who is himself infinite Beauty.”⁴⁶

Our liturgy is therefore rightly called “sacred” and is inherently beautiful because it is the “work” of a beautiful God. The liturgy’s

43 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 35.

44 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 35.

45 James D. Conley, "Some Good and Weighty Truths about Beauty: The Seriousness of the Liturgy: A Centenary of Romano Guardini's *Spirit of the Liturgy*, Part VI." *Adoremus Bulletin*, 24:3 (October 2018), 4.

46 Benedict XVI, General Audience (31 August 2011).

“intrinsic beauty is Christ himself, risen and glorified in the Holy Spirit, who includes the Church in his work.”⁴⁷

Liturgy as Radiant Expression of the Paschal Mystery

Jesus Christ “never ceases to act in the Church and in the world through the Paschal Mystery.”⁴⁸ In the Church’s liturgical action the Risen Christ makes the Paschal Mystery present and effective for the salvation of people today. The Church can carry out this redemptive work only because she forms a single subject with Christ, her Head, who “immerses us in the Paschal Mystery to make us pass from death to life.”⁴⁹ “The reality of faith finds here its matchless beauty.”⁵⁰ The principal reason, therefore, why the sacred liturgy calls for a celebration that is deemed beautiful lies in this act of Jesus’ redeeming love.⁵¹

If the Church is to fulfill her mission of transforming and humanizing the world, “how can she dispense with beauty in her liturgies, that beauty which is so closely linked with love and with the

47 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 36.

48 St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Spiritus et Sponsa* (4 December 2003), 16.

49 Benedict XVI, Address to the Neocatechumenal Way (20 January 2012).

50 Benedict XVI, Message for the Centenary of the Birth of Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar (6 October 2005).

51 Cf. Piero Marini, “Liturgy and Beauty” (2 February 2004).

radiance of the Resurrection?”⁵² In truth, we must do everything possible to ensure that the liturgy reflects the beauty and splendor of the Paschal Mystery.

What Makes the Liturgy Beautiful?

What elements, then, come together to make the sacred liturgy beautiful? The next three days of the Conference will take up a more detailed response to this question than can be offered here this evening. I will submit for your consideration just a few reflections on the importance of art and music in fostering a sense of the sacred that is the foundation of guaranteeing authentic beauty in the liturgy.

Imbuing the Liturgy with Beauty

Liturgical rites should be beautiful so that they can fittingly express both the glory of God and their sanctifying power for humankind. In keeping with the composite nature of human beings, that we are body and soul united together as one, the beauty of the rites must likewise be both physical and spiritual, having a visible and an invisible element. First and foremost, as we have already seen, the liturgy’s beauty is the beauty of Christ’s salvific action in all its grandeur: the truth of his love manifested in the Paschal Mystery.

Granted the primacy of this interior beauty in the liturgy, the way in

52 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 130.

which it is celebrated nonetheless does matter – and a great deal. Of course, if someone thinks that these externals are the most important element in the celebration, then that person easily falls prey to aestheticism. To love the beauty of the liturgy is a far cry from being a liturgical connoisseur who is totally absorbed by the externals, a beauty unconcerned with the truths of faith it is making manifest.

The beauty and the harmony of all the exterior actions and signs must be conducive to adoration, to the worshiper's union with God. This includes the music, the singing, the periods of silence, the manner of proclaiming the word of the Lord and of praying, the gestures used, the vestments and and sacred vessels and the church building itself with its furnishings.⁵³ All these elements together should constitute a true liturgical symphony of beauty appropriate to the awe-inspiring nature of the sacred liturgy. As Benedict XVI wrote in *Sacramentum Caritatis*: “The profound connection between beauty and the liturgy should make us attentive to every work of art placed at the service of the celebration. . . Everything related to the Eucharist should be marked by beauty.”⁵⁴

Sacred Art as a Window on Beauty

53 Cf. Guido Marini, “A Reform of the Reform of Liturgy,” *Origins*, 39:32 (21 January 2010), 524.

54 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 41.

The architecture and art that have their place in the liturgy manifest the beauty of God and draw us to him. They bespeak God’s goodness and the goodness of creation. Sacred art and architecture also express the splendor of truth, illustrating the connection between the truth and beauty, between the *via veritatis* and the *via pulchritudinis*.⁵⁵

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes what makes art not just “religious,” but “sacred”; that is, destined for a liturgical purpose: “Sacred art by being true and beautiful should evoke and glorify the mystery of God made visible in Christ, and lead to the adoration and love of God, the Creator and Savior, who is the surpassing, invisible Beauty of Truth and Love.”⁵⁶ Sacred art – paintings, mosaics, stained glass, sculpture – constitute a “visual Gospel” through which the faithful see and touch the mysteries of faith, and so are led to

55 Cf. Benedict XVI, Address on the Presentation of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (28 June 2005); Francis, Morning Meditation (13 November 2015): “Sacred art is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God - the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,” in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

56 *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 526; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2502: “Sacred art is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God - the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who ‘reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,’ in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.’”

embody these truths in daily life.⁵⁷

For Ratzinger, the liturgy must be celebrated, as far as possible, with worthy forms of sacred art. “Images of beauty in which the mystery of the invisible God becomes visible,” he writes, “are an essential part of Christian worship.” Moreover, “the complete absence of images is incompatible with faith in the Incarnation of God.”⁵⁸

Sacred Music

Discussion about the kind of music to be used in the liturgy is even more lively, as you can no doubt testify, than that on sacred art and architecture. What music can be regarded as beautiful? What precisely is sacred music? Yet, despite these challenges, we cannot ignore asking whether the music now widely played and sung in the liturgy contributes to its beauty. Sister Rosemary will address this in her plenary talk, “Beauty in Liturgical Music.” I will only say that three recent popes have drawn attention to the fact that much of the contemporary music used in the liturgy fails to qualify as beautiful. St. John Paul II commented that the “Christian community must make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the

57 Cf. Jem Sullivan, *The Beauty of Holiness: Sacred Art and the New Evangelization* (Knights of Columbus, 2012), 4-5.

58 Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, Collected Works, vol. XI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 81.

liturgy. They should purify worship from ugliness of style, from distasteful forms of expression, from uninspired musical texts which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.”⁵⁹ Benedict XVI has written and spoken so extensively on the role of music in the liturgy that no single quotation can do justice to his contribution.⁶⁰ Pope Francis, too, sees the need for “safeguarding and enhancing the rich and manifold patrimony inherited from the past” as well as ensuring “that sacred music and liturgical chant be fully inculturated’ in the artistic and musical language of the current time.” Then he adds, “At times a certain mediocrity, superficiality and banality have prevailed, to the detriment of the beauty and intensity of liturgical celebrations.”⁶¹

Beauty of Different Liturgical Expressions

Lest I leave you with the impression that beauty in the sacred liturgy can be found only in a certain of “traditional” worship, allow me to make a few final points that, I hope, will dispel any such notion. Indeed, a great challenge before us today is fostering beauty in the liturgy without falling into a kind of archeologism which insists that there is only one form of beautiful liturgical expression. Beautiful liturgy is

59 St. John Paul II, General Audience (26 February 2003), 3.

60 Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, Collected Works, vol. XI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 421-515.

61 Francis, Address to the International Conference on Sacred Music (4 March 2017).

neither for the elite nor for enclaves of the like-minded. No, the entire Church needs the beauty of the liturgy. Everyone needs the grace of a beautiful liturgy.⁶²

Because beauty in the liturgy depends first of all on the Paschal Mystery being celebrated, the external rites do admit of an ordered diversity in unity, already evident in the many different rites celebrated in the Catholic Church.

In order to foster the “full,” “active” and “conscious” participation of all the faithful⁶³ in the liturgy called for by the Second Vatican Council, it is appropriate that adaptations to different contexts and cultures be made so that the beauty of the Paschal Mystery be more readily grasped by the minds and hearts of all peoples. Through the mystery of the Incarnation, the Lord Jesus showed us that God wishes to encounter people in their own concrete cultural situation.⁶⁴ The principle behind the movement to liturgical inculturation is this: “the liturgy of the Church must not be foreign to any country, people or individual, and at the same time it should transcend the particularity of race and nation. It

62 Cf. James D. Conley, "Some Good and Weighty Truths about Beauty: The Seriousness of the Liturgy: A Centenary of Romano Guardini's *Spirit of the Liturgy*, Part VI." *Adoremus Bulletin*, 24:3 (October 2018), 5.

63 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), 11, 14, 19, 21.

64 Cf. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 54.

must be capable of expressing itself in every human culture, all the while maintaining its identity through fidelity to the tradition which comes to it from the Lord.”⁶⁵

The inculturation of the liturgy in local Churches should be carried out in such a way, therefore, that it does not change any of its essential elements.⁶⁶ The Church allows, even welcomes, the living development of liturgical forms, but these cannot depart from what has been guided by the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 16:13), much like the great confessions of the early Church’s faith cannot simply be adapted without very careful discernment.⁶⁷

Diversity in liturgical expression cannot, therefore, damage the Church’s unity. To the contrary, it must express fidelity to the common faith, to the sacramental signs received from Christ of which the Church

65 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Fourth Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy (Nos. 37-40) *Varietates Legitimae* (29 March 1994), 18.

66 Cf. St. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (14 September 1995), 64; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Fourth Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy (Nos. 37-40) *Varietates Legitimae* (29 March 1994), 5: “Inculturation thus understood has its place in worship as in other areas of the life of the Church. It constitutes one of the aspects of the inculturation of the Gospel, which calls for true integration in the life of faith of each people of the permanent values of a culture, rather than their transient expressions.”

67 Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, Collected Works, vol. XI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 103.

is the guardian, and to the hierarchical communion of Bishops with the Pope.⁶⁸

In considering the local inculturation of sacred art, architecture and music, we must admit, as Pope Pius XII did in his encyclical on the sacred liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, that “modern art should be given free scope in the due and reverent service of the Church and the sacred rites”⁶⁹ – and I would take this to include architecture and music as well. The Fathers of Vatican II describe the proper use of sacred art in these terms:

The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites. Thus, in the course of the centuries, she has brought into being a treasury of art which must be very carefully preserved. The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence and honor; thereby it is enabled to contribute its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise in honor of the Catholic faith sung

68 St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (4 December 1988), 16.

69 Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (20 November 1947), 195.

by great men in times gone by.⁷⁰

This metaphor of a “wonderful chorus of praise” presupposes an existing harmony into which new voices can be inserted, as well as the possibility that certain voices will be cacophonous and therefore ineligible for joining this chorus of praise.⁷¹ All liturgical expressions, be they architectural, iconographical or musical, must be capable of being inserted harmoniously into the great Tradition of the Church’s worship.

This Conference will no doubt raise crucial pastoral questions as you take up the mandate of being missionaries of beauty in the sacred liturgy in your specific contexts. For example, some questions that occur to me: What are we doing concretely in our own parishes, schools, and dioceses to provide the faithful with opportunities to encounter God through the sacred liturgy from which his beauty radiates? How often do our parishioners and others present leave Mass remarking how their experience of beauty in the liturgy put them in touch with the transcendent? Do our sacred buildings, art and music lift our spirits out of the ordinary and toward God, or do they mimic the secular world around us and focus only on ourselves? For how many Catholics is their

70 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), 123.

71 Cf. Uwe Michael Lang, “A Chorus of Praise: Authentic Beauty in Sacred Art.” in *Art and the Crisis of Beauty*, vol. 22.

liturgical experience of beauty more moving than that of watching Netflix, visiting an art gallery or going to the symphony?⁷² And so on.

In conclusion, I hope, and even pray, that my reflections will make at least a small contribution to this conference on “Encountering the Sacred: Beauty and the Liturgy.” May these days be fruitful for you and the parishes, schools and institutions you are serving with such dedication.

Thank you again for your very kind invitation to address you this evening.

✠J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

72 Cf. Matthew J. Ramage, “Pope Benedict XVI’s Theology of Beauty and the New Evangelization,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (29 January 2015): <https://www.hprweb.com/2015/01/pope-benedict-xvis-theology-of-beauty-and-the-newevangelization/>.