

# **Can Beauty be a Catalyst for an Encounter with God?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Can Beauty be a Catalyst for an Encounter with God?**

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This thesis leverages the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar and others to explore beauty's essential role in one's spiritual life and how it can come to be viewed as central to one's relationship with God. According to Balthasar, beauty, glory, and love are inseparably linked, and when beauty is restored to the rank of a transcendental, on par with truth and goodness, God's love can be experienced in a new and empowering way. The thesis explores the possibility that beauty is accessible to all and is not reserved for the few. The perception and experience of beauty is a skill that can be learned by training our physical and spiritual senses. The thesis explores how beauty can be found everywhere, in the microcosm and the macrocosm, in sadness and joy, in art and in nature. It also explores the possibility that, from a Christian perspective, the pinnacle of beauty, where it is most visible and most transformative, is in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and culminates in Christ's kenotic self-giving on the cross.

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## Introduction

*“The human longing for God for the transcendent runs very deep”<sup>1</sup>.*

### The Journey

Mysticism and mystical experiences have always been a passion of mine. The dictionary defines mysticism as, "the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics."<sup>2</sup> Making a first-hand connection with a higher power has intrigued me for many decades. I believe that having a direct experience of the sacred, whether or not one goes through conventional religious rituals or intermediaries, can result in a profound transformation. To reach this sacred or divine experience, one must transcend established belief systems and allow the intellect to play a secondary role. Mystics are known to cultivate these experiences through meditation or contemplative prayer, but can a mystical experience be triggered by beauty?

I chose this topic because of my interest in art, beauty and mysticism and the relationship between them. This thesis began with an interest in how arts activities can help vulnerable children grow in healthy ways and regain faith in themselves and thus in God. Initially I was focused on the benefits of art and the relationship between art making and religious experiences and its benefits on young children. I was very intrigued by the transcendental experience and the experience of unconditional love and peace that professional artists and non-artists can have while creating art. I wanted to explore in depth how vulnerable children can benefit from this experience. However, as I researched further, I discovered that what I was really interested in was the relationship between beauty and the experience of an encounter with God. I began asking questions such as: What is God's beauty? What did theologians write about God's beauty? Can we see God's beauty? Can we feel it? If we go looking for God's beauty in Scripture, what are we looking for? If we go looking for God's beauty in creation, where do we find it? I know that aesthetically, most people are moved by beautiful music, beautiful paintings, and beautiful images. Even though we respond to beauty instinctually, divine beauty is for most of us an abstract concept. As I researched more about this topic, my scope expanded from the beauty created by art to all beauty, including that of the natural world, scripture, religious symbolism, and others.

The question that is at the heart of my thesis research is the following: “Can beauty be a catalyst or a channel for the realization of the human longing for God?” At first glance, in the context of our contemporary materialistic society, such a question may seem superficial and unimportant, leading to concise and unreflective answers such as "yes", "no" or "what's the point"; but granted a second glance, it opens onto millennia of deep research and contemplation. In ancient Greece, in early Christianity, in medieval times, in the great renaissance and in the contemporary world, beauty is considered by some of the greatest theologians, philosophers and thinkers as a path to God. Plato, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Von Balthasar,

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 5, Kindle.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mysticism>.

Dostoyevsky, Von Hildebrand, David Hart, and many others consider beauty as one of the three transcendentals (the other two being goodness and truth).

I soon realized that theological aesthetics for its own sake does not attract much interest, but what has interested theologians is the way in which beauty can be a gateway to love and a means of allowing the experience of an encounter with God. Moreover, it is argued that beauty has the power to orient the subject towards truth and goodness. Beauty is an experience of the good, which can be associated with God, creation, faith, truth, harmony, or many other notions. For some thinkers, beauty begins with God. God is that which is ultimately beautiful and God's nature, God's very being, or who God is, is beauty.

### What is it to Encounter the Divine?

Before addressing the question "can beauty be a catalyst for an encounter with the divine?", it is important to define what I mean when I speak of God and what I mean by "having an encounter with God." In his book *The Experience of God*, David Hart offers a definition of God that can be found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Baha'i, Buddhism, various late antique paganisms, and so forth. Hart defines God as: "the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things"<sup>3</sup>. God is not a "demiurge" whose role is to take care of humans and make sure that the universe does not collapse, nor he is the "daddy in the sky" as some fundamentalists think, who rewards the good and punishes the bad. Hart even goes as far as to say that God is not a supreme being in the class of beings, nor the sum of all beings, but the source from which all beings come<sup>4</sup>. Hart speaks of God as "being", "consciousness" and "bliss"<sup>5</sup>. Through these three descriptions, the reality of God can be known and experienced by humans.

What is the experience of transcendence? In her article "Music Making, Transcendence, Flow, and Music Education," Rhoda Bernard describes the experience of transcendence as feeling part of something larger than oneself and being part of a greater force in the universe<sup>6</sup>. According to Maslow<sup>7</sup>, the experience of transcendence is an experience of "ecstasy, rapture, bliss of the greatest joy". It is an experience that transcends the mind and goes beyond what words can describe. In its simplest form, it is an experience of oneness that manifests itself primarily as an experience of love felt by the body, senses, mind, and soul. During these moments, everything makes sense, including our deepest wounds and struggles, and a deep sense of love and appreciation for life prevails. The experience of transcendence and the depth of its transformative power are vast and beyond the scope of this research.

An encounter with God is not limited to the experience of transcendence and the temporary experience of bliss. In her article "Beauty as a Road to God", Eleonore Stump argues that the road to God cannot be reduced to the experience of transcendence, the road to God

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<sup>3</sup> Hart, 2013, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Rhoda Bernard, "Music Making, Transcendence, Flow, and Music Education." *Boston Conservatory, USA* (2009): 4.

<sup>7</sup> Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper and Row. As cited in Bernard, 4.



should lead to a deep and intimate relationship with God<sup>8</sup>. The purpose of this thesis is to study how beauty and aesthetics can lead to those moments of transcendence that are moments of "awareness," "bliss," and "truth", but more importantly, this thesis will draw on great theologians and thinkers, both traditional and contemporary, on how beauty can be a transformative force that can ignite and nurture a relationship with God.

## Method and Overview

The method I use for my thesis is the inductive method. The inductive method seeks to arrive at general conclusions through the consideration of specific facts. I begin by posing the question "can beauty be a catalyst for an encounter with the divine?". I then explore the evidence used by contemporary researchers in relation to my question. My research can be identified as qualitative research and not quantitative. I am listing people's opinions, understanding, and reasoning and not numbers or statistics.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will give an overview of the theology of aesthetics. In chapter 1, I first look at **what is beauty**. Defining beauty is not an easy task. For every definition of beauty, we can find an example that makes that definition flawed. We can find four categories of definitions of beauty: classical, subjective, transcendental, and theological. Each of these categories are examined, as well as those of some of the great theologians and philosophers, including Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Descartes, Hildebrand, Balthasar, Hart and Lonergan.

The most familiar basic question in the theory of beauty is whether **beauty is subjective or objective**. Is it located in the eye of the beholder or is it an objective feature of beautiful things? A simple argument for either position is unlikely and different eras have different opinions about it. For example, Plato and Aristotle considered beauty to be objective in the sense that it is not localized in the response of the beholder, while thinkers such as Hume, Kant, and Voltaire considered beauty to be a purely subjective characteristic. These are just two examples of the variety and contradictory nature of opinions about the objectivity of beauty. In the first chapter of the thesis, I present several views on the objectivity and subjectivity of beauty.

Once I have defined beauty, I ask the question "what is aesthetics and what is theological aesthetics?" Aesthetics involves the study of beauty, taste, and art. Theological aesthetics is the interdisciplinary study of theology and aesthetics. In his book *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*, Jonathan King groups theologies of aesthetics into four basic categories: natural theology of beauty, theology of the arts, religious aesthetics, and biblical aesthetics<sup>9</sup>. In theory, these categories can be considered separate and independent from one another, but in practice they overlap and in some cases are interdependent.

**Natural theology of beauty** "seeks to give an account from the perceptible beauty of the natural world in attestation of God"<sup>10</sup>. This statement raises many questions that this research will explore: Is beauty sensory, intellectual, or mystical? Is beauty a synonym for prettiness?

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<sup>8</sup> Eleonore Stump, "Beauty as a Road to God." *Sacred Music* 134, (2007): 15.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics: Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology*. (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 3. Kindle.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Where can beauty be found? What does it mean to experience natural beauty and what kind of response do we have when we do? Who is empowered to judge whether something is beautiful or not? Can we learn to perceive beauty or is it a talent that only a few possess? Can the nature of beauty be a window into the divine being? Is natural beauty a clear indication of the existence of an intelligent creator? Can the contemplation of natural beauty be a way by which one could be moved to the contemplation of the divine nature?

**Theology of the arts** seeks to understand the place of the arts in the life of faith. “It seeks to reach conclusions about how all authentic art can function in its own way as a source of theology and spirituality”<sup>11</sup>. I think the creative act is sacred because it is a channel for God's spirit to pass through the artist and be reflected in the artwork. Artists often view art making as a meditative approach that brings them closer to the creator. The arts have the capacity to communicate the paradoxical, "glorious-miserable" nature of reality, which can be essentially summarized in the event of the Cross, which is both beautiful and ugly. These statements lead to many questions and reflections: Why do human beings have an aesthetic and creative sense? Can we say that God is the ultimate artist? Can art be seen as a catalyst for change?

**Religious aesthetics** “attempts to understand the nature of aesthetic phenomena in relation to one's participation in religious traditions and expression”<sup>12</sup>. Visual arts and music are used in many religions to help people worship and grow closer to God. As an example, the purpose of music ministry is to invite the congregation to join in the singing and bring them into a state of contemplative prayer. The purpose of the visual arts is to enhance and support the oral message. What role does beauty play in worship? How can the beauty of God be witnessed through devotional music in churches? What is the role of aesthetics in cathedrals?

**Biblical aesthetics** “derives from the systematic biblical and theological work concerning or relating to the aesthetic dimension as an integral part and as understood through the Scriptures”<sup>13</sup>. Art is mentioned many times in the bible. From Genesis to Revelation: painting, sculpture, poetry, dance, music, and drama are mentioned in the Bible. Why does art have such an importance in the bible? How can the contemplation of great art help us to better understand the Bible?

In chapter 1, I examine how each category of the theology of aesthetics can be a channel for an encounter with the divine. Chapter 2 is dedicated mostly to the transformative power of beauty with Balthasar as the main theologian. Balthasar has written extensively about various topics, including beauty. Balthasar's trilogy begins with aesthetics because that enabled him to make it evident that love is the very heart of both God and the world. For Balthasar, aesthetic experience is a gateway to an agapic theology. Balthasar expects aesthetics to perforate theology and not only ice it. Of the three transcendentals, Balthasar thinks that beauty is the one that is least troubled by our fallen condition, as beauty is disinterested and has no agenda. Balthasar asserts that the beauty of God is manifested the most perfectly in Jesus Christ. In this chapter, I begin with **Who is Hans Urs von Balthasar** before analysing the **transformative power of beauty**, and **beauty as a force that leads to God**. I think the Balthasarian approach is important because we live in a time where there is a lot of skepticism and relativism about the true and the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

good. The Balthasarian approach begins with the radiant, the splendid, the luminous, the beautiful. The splendid then leads us to the true and the good and a deep encounter with God.

After covering the transformative power of beauty, I ask the question: “Is beauty only a life-giving force and does it only lead to God?” Dostoyevski said through one of his characters in the brother Karamazov masterpiece that “beauty is the battlefield where God and Satan contend with each other for the hearts of men”<sup>14</sup>. How can the pursuit of beauty lead an individual and an entire society down a dark path? An argument can be made about the dark path that could occur in the pursuit of beauty. In the second half of chapter 2, I examine the **dark side of beauty**, how beauty can lead to a path of darkness, and what elements are necessary to ensure that beauty remains in **balance with truth and goodness**.

I begin chapter 3 by asking the question “Can the perception of beauty by our senses distort the higher reality of God? Can beauty be an impediment to a relationship with God?” Some highly developed mystical paths avoid form and image, which are considered not suitable for the higher stages of the spiritual path<sup>15</sup>. As explained by Gawronski in his article “The Beauty of the Cross: The Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar”, many mystical traditions teach the concepts of the ultimate reality without form and how the ultimate reality is beyond form. The Jesuit Anthony de Mello said “what do I gaze into when I gaze silently at God? An imageless, formless reality”<sup>16</sup>. In this chapter, I reflect on one of the essential characteristics of Balthasar's theological aesthetic and what I think is the most important message of this thesis: **the beauty of the incarnation and the beauty of the cross**.

None of the questions posed in this section have easy and direct answers. The purpose of this thesis is to draw on the great theologians and thinkers and show that beauty is not a mere distraction used for entertainment purposes only, but that beauty is one of the three transcendentals that can have a transformative force and can lead us to a deep and intimate relationship with God.

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<sup>14</sup> As cited in Dubai, 19. Thomas Dubai, *The Evidential Power of Beauty* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Gawronski, “The Beauty of the Cross: The Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar.” *Logos* 5, (2002): 187.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God* (St. Louis, Mo.: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 26. As cited in Gawronski, 187.

## Chapter 1: Aesthetics and Theology

When I started my research project, I had a hard time defining what beauty is. Most of the common definitions of beauty seemed incomplete. For every definition of beauty, I was able to find an example that made that definition flawed. For example, if beauty is something aesthetically appealing and feels good, then the cross of Jesus, which could be considered as the ultimate form of beauty, cannot be beautiful because it was filled with pain and horror. If beauty is a sensory experience, then ideas cannot be beautiful since they are primarily perceived by the intellect. Defining beauty is not an easy task. Beauty cannot be defined with mathematical precision because its definition can be perceived as abstract and vague, and there is no universal definition that could be accepted and adopted by all.

In this chapter, I explore how theologians and philosophers defined beauty over the past 2000 years, the objectivity and subjectivity of beauty, and the four categories that define the theology of aesthetics.

### What is Beauty

*“All the beauty to be found is but the reflection of the diffused beams of God”<sup>17</sup>.*

We can find four categories of definitions of beauty: classical, subjective, transcendental, and theological. Except for this section, which covers all four categories, the other sections in this paper focus primarily on the transcendental and theological definitions of beauty.

It is useful to start by listing what beauty is not. Dana Gioia who is a contemporary American poet and writer, outlined what beauty is not. The word beauty is often misused, as in the expression’s beauty salon, aged beauty, beauty contest and many other forms. Beauty is not a synonym for prettiness or any kind of external qualities of being pleasantly attractive, it is something much deeper and more comprehensive<sup>18</sup>. Beauty is not something that can simply be recognized mentally; it requires the response of the whole person. In art, beauty is not desire but an object of contemplation. Beauty is not solely objective, nor it is solely subjective; beauty has both an objective and subjective component.

The classical definitions of beauty originated in ancient Greece and were developed by Plato and the Platonists. Classical theories define beauty as essentially a proportion where the distinguishing pleasure of beauty is the harmony of parts in relation to a whole. Beauty is symmetry between compound parts to form a unified and whole form. This symmetry is the cause of delight to the person who encounters it. Whether it is visual symmetry, musical harmony or mathematical elegance, this theory identifies the heart of beauty in man's desire for order, pattern, symmetry, unity, and equality<sup>19</sup>. Many Christians theologians, including Thomas Aquinas were influenced by the classical definitions of beauty.

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue: A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 252.

<sup>18</sup> "Why Beauty Matters!" YouTube, uploaded by Dana Gioia, 3 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAlMjfMfbB4>, 03:18.

<sup>19</sup> De Bruyn, David. "Doxology: A Theology of God's Beauty". Religion Affections Ministries, 15 Sep. 2020, <https://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-aesthetics/beautys-definition>.

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and appreciation of art, beauty, and good taste. It was introduced into the philosophical language during the 18th century. It has also been defined as "critical reflection on art, culture and nature". The word "aesthetics" derives from the Greek "aisthetikos", meaning "of sense perception"<sup>20</sup>. Aesthetics did not exist as a field of study in early Christianity and the early Middle Ages, but influential thinkers discussed the nature of beauty, and their writings therefore provide insight into medieval aesthetics. Balthasar said that the Church Fathers regarded beauty as a transcendental and did theology accordingly<sup>21</sup>. Overall, "Beauty in antiquity and the Middle Ages was viewed as revelatory of some deeper principles in reality, in particular of truth, goodness, and divinity"<sup>22</sup>. According to Augustine, beauty is a name for God<sup>23</sup>. In his Confessions, Augustine referenced "lower beauties" or "passing beauties" and "absolute beauties". Augustine's thinking on beauty encourages the soul to rise from the sensible things of the world, which are not evil or unworthy of attention, to intelligible beauty and ultimately to God.

Thomas Aquinas lived in the Middle Ages, a time of great beauty and art. During Aquinas' century, great cathedrals were being built: Notre-Dame, Amiens, Rouen, and many others. Aquinas defines beauty, as "that which pleases when seen."<sup>24</sup> Aquinas says that beauty is one of the modes of goodness, which is itself a transcendental, encompassing not only moral goodness but all goodness related to being. Aquinas proposes three main characteristics of beauty: fullness, harmony, and radiance, and goes on to say that beauty has a likeness to the property of the Son, Jesus Christ. For Aquinas, Jesus is not only beautiful, but Jesus is the representation of all that is beautiful.

During the Enlightenment and modern era, beauty lost the venerable position it held in classical, medieval, and Renaissance thought<sup>25</sup> and beauty fell out of favor in modern philosophical discourse<sup>26</sup>. The development and popularity of reason, science, skepticism, and subjectivism have all contributed to this decline. The distinction between the beautiful and the sublime that occurred in the eighteenth century reduced the scope of the beautiful to the pretty, the decorative, and the innocuously pleasant. Descartes considered beauty to be totally subjective and dependent on the individual condition, while Voltaire goes further to assert that beauty, due to its relativistic nature, is not only difficult but impossible to define and has no common core.

The postmodern era is marked by a resurgence of the importance of beauty. In this new century, there is a new resonance with the beautiful. In his book *Beauty*, Roger Scruton draws from cultures across the world, to state that truth, goodness, and beauty are attributes of the deity

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.phil.uga.edu/research/content/aesthetics>

<sup>21</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics V 1 Seeing the Form*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Pr, 1982), 38. Hereafter cited as GL 1.

<sup>22</sup> Oleg V. Bychkov; Jim Fodor, *Theological Aesthetics After von Balthasar (Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts)*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 149, Kindle. Hereafter cited as Bychkov.

<sup>23</sup> As explained by Carnes: "On Beauty" YouTube, uploaded by Dallas Theological Seminary, 2 November 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9Xs\\_1gNg\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9Xs_1gNg_k), 07:00.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1. As explained in Stump, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa*. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 27, Kindle.

<sup>26</sup> Hart, David Bentley. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Michigan, 496, 2003. Kindle, 4.

and that beauty “can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling”<sup>27</sup>. Scruton rebukes the argument that beauty is useless and makes a case that beauty is useful for the health of the spirit. In his book *The Beauty of the Infinite*, David Hart states that beauty is an infinite music, drama, art, completed in but never bounded by the termless dynamism of the Trinity’s life. In the beautiful, God’s glory is revealed as something communicable and delightful<sup>28</sup>. The American contemporary philosopher Peter Kreeft states that beauty is profound and mysterious, and infinite because it is an attribute of God. God invented visible matter to show forth the beauty of invisible spirit<sup>29</sup>.

Two theologians well known for their contribution to the theology of beauty are: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Dietrich von Hildebrand. According to Balthasar, beauty is grounded in the being of God and God is the central fount and origin of beauty<sup>30</sup>. To shun beauty is not merely to reject an object’s “prettiness”, rather it is an assault on the being of God. Of the three transcendentals, Balthasar thinks that beauty is the one that is least troubled by our fallen condition, as beauty is disinterested and has no agenda. What Balthasar means by this is that Beauty can transcend our arguments about what is true and what is good and can carry with it the rays of the beatific vision. Beauty can pierce our hearts with the transcendent glory of God. In addition to asserting that beauty is embedded in God's being, one of Balthasar's main convictions is that God's beauty is most perfectly manifested in Jesus Christ.

In his book *Aesthetics: Volume I*, Hildebrand defined beauty as: “a reflection of God, a reflection of His own infinite beauty, a genuine value, something that is important-in-itself, something that praises God.”<sup>31</sup>. From this premise, Hildebrand develops his guide to establish a clear understanding of how to appreciate beauty and its expression in art, music, fashion, and other fields, as well as the transformative force that beauty can have on us if we learn to surrender to its power.

How do we decide between these competing definitions of beauty? Since the question of this research is “how to encounter God through beauty”, the definition of beauty cannot be abstracted from God and beauty must be defined in relation to God. I think Jonathan Edwards, who was an American revivalist preacher, philosopher and congregationalist theologian, provided the most exquisite and complete definition of beauty: “*All the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of God who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory*”<sup>32</sup>. So, beauty is the reflection of God in his creation. This definition of beauty will be the foundation of the following sections.

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<sup>27</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), ix, Kindle, ix.

<sup>28</sup> Hart, 2004, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Wisdom of the Heart: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful at the Center of Us All*. (Gastonia: TAN Books, 2020), 184, Kindle.

<sup>30</sup> As explained in Welbaum, 254.

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Aesthetics: Volume I*. (Steubenville: The Hildebrand Project, 2016), 2. Kindle.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, 252.

## Is Beauty Objective or Subjective

*Beauty is not subjective, but a universal human need*<sup>33</sup>.

The most familiar basic question in the theory of beauty is whether beauty is subjective, located ‘in the eye of the beholder’, or whether it is an objective feature of beautiful things. A simple argument for either position seems unlikely. Until the 18th century, most philosophical analyses of beauty treated it as an objective quality. As John-Mark L. Miravalle explains, Plato and Aristotle considered beauty to be objective in the sense that it is not localized in the response of the beholder. In “*De Veritate Religione*”, Augustine states that things give delight because they are beautiful<sup>34</sup>. During the Enlightenment era, rationalism and subjectivism became very popular among 17th, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, including Hume, Kant, and Voltaire. For Hume<sup>35</sup>, seeing an object as beautiful is a matter of gilding or staining it with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment. The subjectivity of truth, goodness and beauty made beauty a subjective and inconsequential shade. 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theologians and philosophers, including Hildebrand, Balthasar, Scruton, Hart, Carnes, Stump, and many others are trying to restore beauty to what it once was. One of the common tasks of all these theologians is to argue that beauty is not only a subjective value but also an objective reality. They all state that although beauty has an objective component, that does not mean everyone sees it.

One of the first objectives in Hildebrand's book is to re-establish beauty as an objective quality and to abandon the idea, born during the enlightenment era, that "beauty is the eye of the beholder" and that beauty depends entirely on the prejudices or other limitations inherent to the beholder. The value of beauty, Hildebrand argues, is independent of the subject's experience. The beautiful object is not merely a matter of perception of the senses, reducible to the experience of the encounter. Instead, beauty exists as a metaphysical value, a value that transcends the physical order<sup>36</sup>. It is important to note that Hildebrand does not make the argument that beauty is only an objective value. He takes the middle way between the hyper Platonism and the subjectivism of the enlightenment era.

According to Scruton, beauty is something we perceive both externally and internally, but he also states that art and beauty are not subjective. If beauty is subjective, then there is no reason for beauty to have any exalted place in our lives. As we will show in subsequent sections, art and beauty stands on the threshold of the transcendental. They point the observer to another realm. If all art and beauty is merely subjective, then it does not point anywhere other than inside oneself.

For Balthasar, beauty is an objective reality, and the accurate perception of that objective beauty, which is grounded in God, leads to sanctification and the transformation of the beholder<sup>37</sup>. Since beauty is inherent to God, beauty is objective and brings with it the sublime's metaphysical power. So, what is the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this

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<sup>33</sup> "Roger Scruton: "Why Beauty Matters?" Vimeo, uploaded by Leonardo Faccioni, 2 September 2014, <https://vimeo.com/128428182> , 03:00.

<sup>34</sup> Miravalle, John-Mark L. *Beauty: What It is and Why It Matters*. Manchester, Sophia Institute Press, 118, 2019. Kindle, 26.

<sup>35</sup>“The standard of taste.” Hume’s essay dates from 1757, and is available in any collection of his essays. Quoted by Scruton, 145.

<sup>36</sup> Hildebrand, 71.

<sup>37</sup> GL 1, 19. As explained in Welbaum, 246.

section “Is beauty objective or subjective?”. King gives a complete answer “beauty is objectively real, subjectively experienced”<sup>38</sup>. How do we answer, “Is beauty then in the eye of the beholder?” Welbaum argues this statement can be true if and only if we understand by this that beauty is contingent to a new and transformed way of seeing<sup>39</sup>.

## Natural Theology of Beauty

*“Saint John of the Cross saw the whole of creation as a splendid symphony of many beauties unified in a surpassing concert flowing from the divine composer’s mind”<sup>40</sup>*

Natural theology of beauty seeks to give an account from the perceptible beauty of the natural world in attestation of God. The German theologian Meister Eckhart said “Every Creature Is a Word of God”<sup>41</sup>. In Jeremiah 31:35, we read: “Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord of hosts is his name”<sup>42</sup>. Beauty being the reflection of God in his creation, clarifies many things. First, since God is infinite and we are finite and beauty is a characteristic of God, beauty cannot be described in finite terms; “to use something in finite creation to speak about the infinite God is myopic and perhaps laughable, for it presumes that the Being who is Being itself can be represented in any way by a tiny part of being”<sup>43</sup>. Second, since beauty is the reflection of God on God’s creation, then beauty can be found everywhere, in the macrocosm and in the microcosm, in nature and in animals, in the material and in the spiritual, in what is seen and in what is unseen, in religion and in science and, to the surprise of many, beauty can be found in sadness, misery and folly. All around us, we can see evidence of a creator God.

Thomas Dubay makes extensive use of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology to show how the world is electrified by God's greatness and beauty and that beauty has the power to convince people of the truth. In his book *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, Dubay shows how God's majestic beauty is evident in the macrocosm, such as the galaxies, stars, sun, and moon<sup>44</sup>. There are over fifty billion galaxies in the universe and each one has two to four billion stars, all of which operate with mathematical precision. Dubay argues that even on our planet, there are countless reasons to marvel, “Our planet’s ecosystems are not only of remarkable efficiency, but their service value to our lives and pocketbooks are far beyond both our technological and monetary resources.”<sup>45</sup>. In Psalm 19:1 we read: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork”. The incredible vastness of the universe gives glory to the ultimate Artist.

In addition to the macrocosm, Dubay explains how God's perfect beauty is found in the microcosm, such as the atom, cells, and photons. Dubay uses the complexity of human cells to demonstrate how breathtaking the complexity of the microcosm is. He defines it as awe-

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<sup>38</sup> King, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Welbaum, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Dubay, 55.

<sup>41</sup> <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1463001-meister-eckhart-every-creature-is-a-word-of-god>.

<sup>42</sup> All biblical quotes, unless specified otherwise, are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, new revised standard version, eds. Mark Z. Brettler and Carol A. Newsom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, *Everyday Glory: The Revelation of God in All of Reality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 49, Kindle.

<sup>44</sup> Dubay, 129-149

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.



inspiring, amazing, astounding, and incomparable. Even the incredible smallness and complexity of the microcosm is a reflection of the infinite beauty of God<sup>46</sup>.

Between the immensely vast and the incredibly tiny, Dubay highlights the beauty of what he calls "the midpoint." Pascal saw humanity as the convergence of two infinities, one unimaginably large, the other unimaginably small<sup>47</sup>. The midpoint is the world we live in, which is easily accessible to our senses. The midpoint includes animals, plants and especially nature. It is estimated that there are up to 10 million different species of living plants and animals<sup>48</sup>. Albert Einstein marveled that our universe is comprehensible<sup>49</sup>, a fact that most people take for granted. There is something greater than us expressed in nature, the strength of the mountains, the miracle of this one flower, infused with sunlight. The revelation of a tree, rooted deep in the earth, reaching to the sky, and silently witnessing the world around it. Trees are not geometrically perfect and may look strange, as they tell the story of their lives: the storms they have encountered, the birds that inhabited them, the branches they have lost... and life is beautiful.

In his book *Everyday Glory: The Revelation of God in All of Reality*, Gerald McDermott draws on the thoughts of Jonathan Edwards and John Henry Newman to show how the world is a place of wonder, studded with beautiful and mysterious signs pointing beyond itself. McDermott believes that the Christian imagination has become impoverished and calls our attention to expand our views and be open to see God everywhere. According to McDermott, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, God's beauty is revealed and radiated in the Bible, nature, science, law, history, animals, sex, sports, and the world's religions. There are signs of God's glory in the human consciousness and cultures of the world, and signs of God's glory in the world of animals, sports, and human sexuality<sup>50</sup>.

In his book, *Nature's Case for God: A Brief Biblical Argument* John Frame shows how God's greatness, oneness, wisdom, goodness, and presence is revealed in everything that God created. Frame encourages Christians to learn about God from his creation and not only from scripture. Creation for Frame is both the cosmos as well as human nature, and we can witness God's greatness, oneness, wisdom, goodness, and presence in both. "If our thinking were straight, we would see God's mind in every event and every natural process"<sup>51</sup>.

It is not difficult to convince someone that beauty is found in the macrocosm, the microcosm and everything in between. However, can beauty also exist in extreme sadness, misery, and madness? We tend to think that beauty can only be found in joy, pleasure, recreation, and delight, but if beauty is God's reflection on his creation, then why wouldn't beauty be present in sadness, pain, and misery? To clarify, I am not stating that sadness, madness, and misery are beautiful, but that beauty can be found in all situations, including the most painful and least pleasant. In his article "Beauty appears in sadness, misery and folly: an ethical perspective", Chris Jones explains that beauty does not have to be made exclusive and that it can be found in

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<sup>46</sup> Dubay, 175.

<sup>47</sup> *Pensees* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), no. 737, p. 333. As cited in Dubay, 335.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-165.

<sup>49</sup> Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 313, cited in NSS, p. 43. As explained in Dubay, 39.

<sup>50</sup> McDermott, 45-151.

<sup>51</sup> John M. Frame, *Nature's Case for God: A Brief Biblical Argument* (Washington: Lexham Press, 2018), 22, Kindle.

everything and everyone around us, including extreme sadness, misery, and madness<sup>52</sup>. Baudelaire<sup>53</sup> said “all beauty eventually stands in the sign of extreme sadness and melancholy”. Archbishop Desmond Tutu<sup>54</sup> said “that nothing beautiful in the end comes without a measure of some pain, some frustration, some suffering”.

Pain can be an engine of creativity and, according to Plato, madness, if it is a gift from heaven, is the channel through which we receive the greatest blessings. Here are some examples: the French writer and poet Victor Hugo wrote some of his most beautiful poems after the death of his daughter; in the grip of hallucinations, nightmares and intense anxiety, Van Gogh created the heartbreakingly beautiful *Starry Night*; Beethoven composed the Ninth Symphony after becoming completely deaf; afflicted by melancholy and an oppressive sense of his own mortality, John Keats composed the exquisite and passionate *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Jones argues that beauty and ugliness are often intertwined with each other. The beauty of God, according to Jones, is most visible in the ugliness and suffering of the cross<sup>55</sup>. The cross represents the utter horror but also the extreme beauty of life, it is a kind of strange beauty in which darkness and light are close. The cross does not represent Jesus in his prime, strong, and physically perfect, but Jesus dying, suffering excruciating pain, and subjected to the most excruciating humiliations. So how can this represent beauty? The cross is not just a display of moral and aesthetic ugliness. It is the moment when the full beauty of God's love is most profoundly revealed in its victory over that ugliness. The cross is beautiful because it reveals the nature of God to an unprecedented degree; for many Christians believers, it is the perfect proof that beauty is nothing but the reflection of God. As we will see later, beauty gives rise to contemplation and wonder, and the cross allows us to encounter God in the person of Jesus.

Beauty is everywhere, there is a splendor that surrounds us on all sides that can be noticed, appreciated, and contemplated by anyone willing to open their eyes and ears.

## Religious Aesthetics

*The highest art is that which supports the highest purpose: the worship of God in the sacred liturgy*<sup>56</sup>

Religious aesthetics attempts to understand the nature of aesthetic phenomena in relation to one's participation in religious traditions and expression. The Church and the arts have had a seesaw relationship over the past few millennia. At times, the Church has been a patron of the arts, supporting and encouraging sculptors, painters, and musicians. At other times, the Church has been distant from the arts, viewing them as a waste of time or, worse, as an expression of

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<sup>52</sup> Chris Jones, “Beauty Appears in Sadness, Misery and Folly: An Ethical Perspective,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 5, (2019): 193–211.

<sup>53</sup> Baudelaire. 1909. *The Flowers of Evil*. London: Elkin Matthews. As cited in Jones, 196.

<sup>54</sup> Tutu, D. & Abrams, D. 2016. ‘Nothing Beautiful Comes Without Some Suffering In, Dalai Lama, Tutu, D. & Abrams, D. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. Hutchinson, London. As cited in Jones, 198.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>56</sup> David Clayton, *The Way of Beauty: Liturgy, Education, and Inspiration for Family, School, and College* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2015), 4, Kindle.

hedonism and sensuality. The most fertile period for Christian art was the medieval and renaissance era, during which the Catholic Church assumed a powerful position in Europe.

During and after the Reformation, art played a much less important role in the Protestant churches. Not all Protestant branches share the same view of beauty and the function it should have within the church. The major Protestant denominations, namely Anglican, Evangelical Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Calvinist, Pentecostal and Presbyterian, share different backgrounds and perspectives on beauty. But in general, the Protestant tradition, which was born of a desire for moral righteousness, has given itself over more and more to a preoccupation with the good, with the moral life, at the expense of the beautiful. The reasons for this decline are many. Some Protestant branches believed that religious imagery should be banned from churches because it encouraged idolatry of icons. “During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, art largely disappeared from most Protestant churches”<sup>57</sup>. In addition, the forms of the Reformation emphasized God as He is, and his Word as revealed in the Scriptures. This is not to say that the Reformation had a negative impact on the arts in general: “Without the shift in thought, theology, and practice presented to the West by the Reformation, Bach and Rembrandt would not have made the contributions to music and art that they most certainly made”<sup>58</sup>. Yet, the Protestant churches of Western Europe, in their zeal to purify themselves from the perceived idolatry of the Catholic church, doomed many works of art to destruction. Calvin sought to purge the church of images that encouraged idolatry but did not have a negative view of art in general. Balthasar<sup>59</sup> explains that the Protestant tradition understands God in such a way that we cannot touch or grasp him: it is all taken on faith and there is no such thing as "seeing God". Karl Barth<sup>60</sup> recognizes that the Reformation totally discounted the aesthetic element and viewed the notion of beauty as secular and "extremely dangerous" because it brings our contemplation of God suspiciously close to that of the material world. The differences in the importance of art can be easily noticed by going to a Protestant or Catholic church. Protestant churches tend to be simpler and focus primarily on the Word, while Catholic cathedrals emphasize beauty and art. “Hymns, worship choruses, readings, visual art, and symbolism are all designed to help us draw close to a place where our heart is lifted in worship”<sup>61</sup>. All our senses can be used in coming to God, and that includes the use of sight to experience religious art. In this section, I examine how religious aesthetics can enable a worshiper to experience an encounter with God. Visual art, music, and church architecture are covered.

It is worth noting that for centuries, access to God's words in Scripture was limited to a privileged few. For this reason, artistic decorations in churches, such as stained-glass windows, paintings, and other iconography, were used to teach the stories of the Bible. The images told the stories because people could not read the book. In his book *The Way of Beauty: Liturgy, Education and Inspiration for Family, School and College*, David Clayton argues that quality art in churches can lead individuals to God. Visual art can point to God because it opens new perspectives on the experience of God. Visual art can be compared to parables, simple stories that teach deeper principles.

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<sup>57</sup> Jones, 199.

<sup>58</sup> John D Wilsey, “The Impact of the Reformation on the Fine Arts,” *Faith and Mission* 23, (2006): 33.

<sup>59</sup> As explained in Bychkov, 5.

<sup>60</sup> As explained in Bychkov, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Terry Glaspey, *Discovering God Through the Arts* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), 67, Kindle.

The purpose of visual art is not just to add beauty to a place of worship, although it does that, but to add depth and inspiration for prayer in that space. In his book, *The Ethics of Beauty*, Timothy Patitsas explores beauty and the benefits of beauty from a Greek Orthodox perspective. Patitsas states that “Christian theology began with Beauty rather than with Truth or Goodness.”<sup>62</sup> Orthodox churches tend to be filled with icons and beautiful representations of Jesus, Mary and the saints. In the Orthodox Church, beauty is recognized as a very important dimension of the liturgy. The beauty of creation is an extremely potent form of praise to God. According to Patitsas “Orthodox Christian spirituality has always followed a Beauty-first path uniting the mind with the heart, rather than taking an approach focusing on the intellectual powers of the soul.”<sup>63</sup> Images have the power to make prayer more guided or tangible, and pictures can inspire us to think about God in new ways. The stories of Jesus, the disciples, and other characters in Scripture can be drawn and brought to life in living color in the prayerful hands of an artist, which can have a profound impact on the viewer, especially in a church setting. In Colossians 3:2, we read, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" and that is exactly what visual art allows us to do in the church. Paintings in churches call the viewer to a posture of prayer by connecting him to God with the help of holy figures and scenes. “A profound personal contact with God is made when we pray with an icon”<sup>64</sup>.

In addition to visual art and icons, Clayton argues that music is capable of evoking powerful emotions and communicates and expresses a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of God. Music is one of the most powerful spiritual tools that shapes people's imaginative faculty, because it uses a symbolic language that transcends the barriers of the mind. The symbolic communication of music is immensely powerful as it communicates directly with the heart. The impact of the music ministry often occurs on an unconscious level and allows the listener to expand their sight and their beliefs, even if it is something new and unfamiliar. Music ministry is a form of contemplation, and its purpose is to invite the congregation to join in singing. The goal of the singing is to move the congregation into a state of contemplative prayer.

Music ministry unites people by breaking down cultural and religious barriers. Worship, which is often done through music, has a unique way of unifying people. Different voices, different instruments, different parts are blended to offer a single, living, and unified work of beauty. Music ministry in the church is not a collection of people singing random devotional songs to fill the space of the Mass and make it more enjoyable. Music ministry is a form of service that enables what is often considered one of the most important parts of the Catholic Christian life, namely the Mass. There is no doubt that music is divine beauty, and that beauty is one of the great sources of joy in human life. Sacred music is a beauty that prepares us to receive the fullness of grace of God. “Music can express things that words cannot”<sup>65</sup>. Sacred music is that beauty which prepares us to pray, which opens our hearts to receive the Word within us.

Finally, in his book, Clayton addresses the impact of church architecture on the worship experience. He argues that the architecture of the church building should point us to what lies beyond and give us the real sense that we are praising God with all his creation and with the saints and angels in heaven. Some of the greatest architectural works in the history of the Church

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<sup>62</sup> Timothy G. Patitsas, *The Ethics of Beauty* (Maysville: Road to Emmaus Foundation / St. Nicholas Press, 2022), Location 82, Kindle.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. Location 935.

<sup>64</sup> Clayton, 25.

<sup>65</sup> Clayton, 77.

were motivated by the need to build spaces where humanity could connect with a higher power. The effects that these buildings convey were timelessness, awe, silence, and devotion. A beautiful sanctuary expands the soul; it is a space filled with beauty used to open our minds and hearts to an encounter with something beyond ourselves, something holy or sacred. Clayton analyzes how Gothic and Baroque architecture has had a profound effect on our experience of God. "Baroque art deliberately makes strong use of cast shadow and external light sources ... The light with which it was contrasted represented the hope that lay in the Light, Christ."<sup>66</sup> Notable for its vaulted ceilings and incredibly detailed facades, the Gothic style symbolized the glory of God and the church's central place in European society for hundreds of years. Gothic cathedrals were the visual representation of God's kingdom and, as such, provided spiritual education. A key aspect of the widespread growth of Gothic architecture during the Middle Ages was a belief that beauty was the spiritual path to God. The union of beauty with power, money and religion was what gave rise to some of the most sprawling and detailed structures ever built.

This section was a brief exploration of how religious aesthetics, whether visual art, music, or church architecture, can be a conduit for an encounter with God. Religious aesthetics should not be used to replace the Word or the core Christian values of charity, humility, and love. Religious aesthetics are not meant to replace the divine but are a powerful tool that orients the congregation toward God.

## Biblical Aesthetics

*"Christian life should produce not only truth—flaming truth—but also beauty"*<sup>67</sup>

Biblical aesthetics derives from the systematic biblical and theological work concerning or relating to the aesthetic dimension as an integral part and as understood through the Scriptures. Art and beauty are mentioned many times in the Bible, either directly or indirectly. In this section, I examine what the Bible says about beauty and art, how art in the Bible can add a new dimension that prose cannot, and how art in the Bible can help the reader experience the presence of God.

In his book *Art and the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer uses the Bible as the main source of arguments to affirm that the Christian life must not only produce truth, but also beauty. From Genesis to Revelation, painting, sculpture, poetry, dance, music, and drama are mentioned to glorify God. Schaeffer writes "A work of art can be a doxology in itself"<sup>68</sup>.

Let us explore some verses that deal with the theme of art. In Genesis 1:1, we read "In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth." The Bible begins to recognize that God is the ultimate artist of all things. Genesis gives the origin of all things because God created. In Exodus 31, God commands Moses to create a tent for the ark of the covenant, and God mentions several craftsmen he chose to create "artistic designs" to beautify the tent. God says, "I have put skill in the hearts of all who are skillful." Later, in 1 Kings 6, we see Solomon creating a temple for the Lord. In verse 4, "artistic frames" are made for the house. This reinforces the fact that God desires beauty and likes to be surrounded by it. Again, in the Song of Solomon, the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>67</sup> Francis A Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 48, Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 18.

beauty of the bride is compared to "the work of an artist's hands". In 1 Chronicles 15:16 we read, "David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their kindred as the singers to play on musical instruments, on harps and lyres, and cymbals, to raise loud sounds of joy." David, himself a skilled musician, instructed the Levites to appoint musicians and singers to lift a sound of joy to the Lord.

The book that not only mentions art but is a work of art is the book of Psalms. It is worth mentioning that the Psalms are the longest book in the Bible, if we consider the number of verses. The book of Psalms is a collection of poetry that tells the story of Israel and God's covenant promises. The book of Psalms takes up the whole biblical story in a poetic way. The fact that the longest book in the Bible is mostly poetry, suggests that the Judeo-Christian God cares about art and beauty.

So how can art in the Bible help the reader experience the presence of God? First, art in the Scriptures is a way for the reader to praise and worship God, as it reflects the exquisite beauty of God. The worship experience that comes from reading poems, parables (that tell stories and can also be considered an art form), or artistic visualizations is far more powerful than reading prose. Art in the Bible can add a new dimension to the worship experience that prose cannot.

Second, Poetry and art do an excellent job of not only informing our intellect, but also stirring our emotions, stimulating our imagination, and appealing to our will. The Bible should not be used as a fact checklist that informs our intellect. The purpose of poetry in the Bible is to suggest the emotions of the event, rather than to give a detailed description of how the event occurred. Poetry and art rely more on metaphor and allegory, on painting pictures with words. The symbols used in the bible, which are widely used in art and poetry, allow the experiencer to transcend his or her mind and to have an encounter with the divine. For example, when reading the prodigal son parable, the reader may associate with the prodigal son and experience the intense love of the Father.

Third, the use of poetry, metaphors and images in the Bible encourages the reader to have a personal relationship with God. The path to God cannot be an isolated experience, but a relationship with God<sup>69</sup>. Here are some representations of God that have been used in Scriptures: In Hosea 11:3-4, God is described as a mother; in Hosea 13:8, God is described as a mother bear; in Psalm 23, God is compared to a shepherd; in Psalm 47, God is compared to a king; in Isaiah 66:13, God is described as a comforting mother; in Matthew 23:37, God is described as a mother hen; in Luke 15:8-10, God is described as a woman looking for her lost coin; in Luke 15:11-32, God is seen as a good father. When God is represented through metaphors and images, the Bible becomes a place where God can meet and speak to us. The relationship and the encounter are in this communion.

Finally, there is a correlation between the appreciation and contemplation of art and the contemplation of the Bible. When we are introduced to great art, we tend to come back to it again and again and notice all the subtleties. We are surprised each time and experience the power of its beauty. The same effect can happen with the Bible. If our senses are sharpened, even after many readings, we can be surprised and amazed by the sacred text. The words of Jesus,

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<sup>69</sup> Stump, 15.

when read with a devoted heart, an open mind, and sharpened senses, often elicit new insights and understanding each time they are read.

## Theology of the Arts

*At its root, faith is a mystery, the deeper you delve, the more questions you discover*<sup>70</sup>.

Theology of the arts seeks to understand the place of the arts in the life of faith. It seeks to draw conclusions about how all authentic art can function in its own way as a source of theology and spirituality. In his letter to the artists, the late pope John Paul II recalled the ancient understanding of beauty as an integral part of the spiritual life of man<sup>71</sup>. He covered the role of sacred art from the origin to the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance and finally to the current time. Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and for John Paul II, the role of art is to make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible of God. John Paul II is inspiring artists to pass on to generations to come a beauty that will stir them to wonder. The role of beauty is to activate this enthusiasm for life which will both lift spirits and set humanity back on the right path. However, John Paul II warns that the beauty of created things can never fully satisfy and should therefore be used as a pointer to the divine and not as a substitute for God.

The theology of the arts is extremely broad, at its core it is based on the premise that human beings are created in the image of the creator God and are intended to create music, poetry, fiction, dance, and other works of art. “We find joy in artificial beauty too, i.e., art, especially in creating it, for creating is joyful. Again, God is the reason: creating art is joyful to us because we are created in the image of our Creator”<sup>72</sup>. The purpose of this section is not to provide a complete understanding of the place of the arts in the life of faith, but to examine how the arts can be a channel for an encounter with the divine. Two main topics are discussed. The first attempts to answer the question: how to discover God through the arts. The second theme aims to show how the arts have the power to destabilize and reshape deeply held religious beliefs and practices that could be obstacles to a mystical experience<sup>73</sup>.

Glaspey argues that paintings, films, music, and other art forms are more than wall decoration, entertaining distraction, or cultic devotion. Glaspey shows how the arts can play a prominent role in the Christian life. The arts can be tools for spiritual formation that builds faith and changes the lives of all Christians. In addition to theoretical concepts, Glaspey provides a practical application of how to participate in the arts as a spiritual exercise. According to Glaspey, the arts can be companions on our spiritual journey. The arts allow us to pay attention to the present moment and free ourselves from distractions. They help us rediscover a sense of wonder and have the power to awaken us. The arts can bring Scripture to life and can be a way to

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<sup>70</sup> Glaspey, 85.

<sup>71</sup> John Paul II, Saint, Pope. “John Paul II, Pope (1999-04-04) Letter of Pope John Paul II to Artists.” *Antiphon* 4, (1999): 19–27.

<sup>72</sup> Kreeft, 183.

<sup>73</sup> Philip Francis, S. *When Art Disrupts Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 203, Kindle.

engage with the Bible and gain new perspectives. The impact of art can help us go beyond mere intellectual understanding and engage more fully with the Bible on an emotional level. In addition, the arts can help us manage our emotions, find comfort, and discover courage, make us more empathetic, awaken a passion for justice, and help us in prayer and contemplation.

Glaspey discusses two ways of traveling. The first is that of the pilgrim and the second that of the tourist. The pilgrim is committed to fully experiencing the culture he or she is visiting, while the tourist brings his or her own world with him or her, hoping not to be overly burdened by the habits of the locals. The pilgrim is surprised by the unexpected, while the tourist has a precise agenda, trying to check off as many sites to see as possible. Above all, the pilgrim is transformed by the experience of the journey, while the tourist has just collected a few good memories. “The arts can be one of the most effective tools for helping us overcome the stock responses of the spiritual tourist and embrace the world as a pilgrim”<sup>74</sup>. The arts can move us from being tourists in our own lives to being pilgrims by 1- awakening us to the present moment, 2- fostering a sense of wonder, 3- going beyond a purely rational response and seeking to move us emotionally and helping us feel a connection with the transcendent. I develop these three points in the next three paragraphs.

In a world where human attention is so divided, it becomes increasingly difficult to be devotional. Without attention, devotion is not possible. First and foremost, Art, in all its forms, has the power to awaken us. We often miss out on the little wonders that come our way each day. The arts can act as a wake-up call to keep us from being inattentive in our lives. Jean-Pierre de Caussade wrote “The attitude of awareness is the sacrament of the present moment. And the sense of living in the present is also a sense of living in the **Presence**”<sup>75</sup>. The arts can help us learn to pay attention. Looking at a painting, listening to music or poetry, reading a meaningful passage in a novel can cause us to slow down, to quiet our restless thoughts and to open ourselves to a moment of revelation. They teach us to open our eyes and ears.

Second, one of the great powers of art is to create wonder. In Matthew 18:3 we read “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” One of the main characteristics of little children is their sense of wonder and awe. Glaspey argues that we cannot discover God without igniting this sense of wonder within us. He says, the Bible is a book of wonder, it is filled with stories where people are confronted with things too big to explain<sup>76</sup>. Wonder cannot be forced or faked but must be desired and nurtured. Our encounters with art transform the usual routine of looking into a sacred act of seeing, they offer an experience of “mini-awakening.” The experience of art awakens us to our essential unity with the mystery of life. We forget ourselves and our problems for a few blissful moments as we stand in awe, fascinated by the beauty in which we participate as conscious beings. Art breaks the boredom and makes life rich and interesting again by igniting in us this sense of wonder and awe.

Finally, “Art brings the right brain and the left brain together to create a more holistic understanding of our lives. Great art weds thinking and feeling in the context of creating an

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<sup>74</sup> Glaspey, 31.

<sup>75</sup> See his book *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggeridge (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982). As cited in Glaspey, 41.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



experience, but that experience usually begins with honest human feeling. In that way, art can help us feel our way toward the truth”<sup>77</sup>.

This brings us to the second theme of this section. In his book, *When Art Disrupts Religion* Phillip Francis demonstrates, through extensive research, how exposure to great art has the power to destabilize and reshape deeply held religious beliefs and practices. Francis shows how expanded exposure to the arts can cause us to rethink our own beliefs, opening us to a more nuanced and complex way of seeing ourselves, our world, and our faith. Francis draws on the memoirs, interviews, and field notes of 82 evangelical fundamentalists who have experienced a radical shift in religious identity through the intervention of the arts. Francis presents compelling evidence of the role art plays in freeing followers from the structures imposed by orthodoxy. The pros and cons of evangelical fundamentalist beliefs are beyond the scope of this article, but I draw on Francis' research to highlight the power that great art can have.

Let's reference again the definition of God as outlined in David Hart's book: “God is the source from which all beings come that is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things.” Using Hart's definition, we can conclude that God is greater than any concepts or ideas we may have, therefore, divinely assured certainty could be an obstacle to an authentic and fulfilling encounter with God, because it sets a limit to a being that is infinite. Moreover, since God is immanent to all things, then God is everywhere and not only present with the "insiders" of a specific fundamentalist group. The all-or-nothing view of religious commitment can also be a barrier to experiencing God, for God is much more than any one type of religious commitment.

For many of the students Francis interviewed, an expanded exposure to the arts led to a rethinking of their beliefs, opening them to a more nuanced and complex view of seeing themselves, the world, and their faith. It made them resistant to a belief system that was simplistic in its attitudes and approach to life. The arts have disrupted their once triumphant certainty of having it all figured out. They have raised questions that had no easy answers. The arts have the potential to create an earthquake of insecurity, which is often a very good thing because it leads to a more authentic relationship with the divine. In the next few paragraphs, we build on Francis' research to show how an aesthetic experience can create the initial desire and inner space to resist fundamentalist methods. I address how the arts can destabilize practices of certainty and offer comfort to practices of uncertainty. I also discuss how the arts can disrupt the practice of an insider identity making a rigid moral distinction between "us" and "them" intolerable. Finally, I discuss how aesthetic experience can enable people to overcome the requirement of an all-or-nothing commitment to faith.

Many students asserted that uncertainty, mystery, and doubt are essential aspects of authentic aesthetic experience. Some students stated that the best works of art are those that they did not plan. They felt the creative spirit flow through them. Coleridge<sup>78</sup> wrote “art must have about it something not understood to obtain its full effect.” The French sculptor Auguste Rodin wrote “Great works of art say all that can be said ... and they convey that there is something

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>78</sup> Coleridge as quoted in John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree Books, 1980), 194. As cited in Francis 64.

more that cannot be known.”<sup>79</sup> Francis states that aesthetic experiences destabilize practices of certainty and allow the subject to embrace uncertainty, because aesthetic experiences, through the arts, ask us questions for which we have no conclusive answers. In disrupting our practices of certainty, aesthetic experiences remind us to “look attentively at the world and see how little we see.” Paradoxically, when we see how little we see, or realize how little we know, it creates a humbling feeling, it brings an openness and a desire to contemplate the infinite that we can never fully grasp with our conscious mind. It puts us in a state of surrender and letting go and it is in this state that an encounter with God is possible. The arts, Francis concludes, offer these men and women (in their journey away from evangelical fundamentalism) the experience of mystery, unity, presence, and transcendence without demanding the absolute certainties for which they had developed a distaste.

The other benefit of art is that it can help people overcome the divide between insiders and outsiders, or the "us" versus "them" mentality. As mentioned earlier, God is immanent in all things, so the tendency to think in terms of polar opposites, i.e., better and worse, black vs. white, good vs. evil, us vs. them, without accepting the possibilities that lie in between, becomes an obstacle to encounter because it puts God in a box. Dewey writes:

“The sense of communion generated by a work of art may take on a definitively religious quality... Art is the extension of the power of rites and ceremonies to unite men through a shared celebration, to all incidents and scenes of life... That art weds man and nature is a familiar fact. Art also renders men aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny.”<sup>80</sup>

Religious identity can be very complex and the need to belong to a group that claims to hold the truth is very profound, but according to many of the evangelical fundamentalist students on whom Francis based his research, it was an aesthetic experience that allowed them to resist (at least temporarily at first) conceptualizing a polarized world. In addition to breaking down the wall between "insiders" and "outsiders," aesthetic experiences can allow the individual to see through the eyes of "outsiders." Great novels or films have the ability to create solidarity and empathy between characters and readers or viewers. When the character represented by the novel, film, or painting fits the profile of an "outsider," then the experience of the "outsider" can be shared by the reader or viewer and deeper empathy can be created.

Finally, Francis shows how aesthetic experience can enable people to overcome the requirement of an all-or-nothing commitment to faith. Francis argues that the requirement of an all-or-nothing commitment to faith functioned primarily as a method of identity preservation. Aesthetic experience through the arts, played an important role in the process of overcoming this method of identity preservation. Aesthetic experience creates a “generative passivity”, which is a productive relaxation of the conscious activity<sup>81</sup>, and this creates a space for the all-or-nothing attitude to loosen. This state of “generative passivity” is parallel to the experience of an artist in the act of creation. Art brings the artist to the place of creation, the place of not knowing and the place of wonder, it is a place of infinite possibility, love, abundance, discovery, and expansion. An all-or-nothing commitment creates rigidity and removes the fluidity necessary for an

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>80</sup>Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 271. As cited in Francis, 77.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 99.

encounter with God. I believe that doubts and questions can strengthen the relationship with God, while rigidity can create unnecessary fears.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how theologians and philosophers defined beauty over the past 2000 years. The definition of beauty has changed over the past few millennia. On one end of the spectrum, beauty was seen as one of the three transcendentals and is revelatory, transformative, and participatory. At the other end of the spectrum, it was reduced to the pretty, the decorative, and the innocently pleasant. The definition most appropriate to the theme of this thesis is that beauty is the reflection of God in his creation and can therefore be found everywhere. This definition of beauty will be the foundation for the next two chapters. We also explored the objectivity and subjectivity of beauty and concluded that beauty is objectively real but subjectively experienced.

The bulk of the first chapter was devoted to the four main categories that define theology and aesthetics: The Natural Theology of Beauty, Religious Aesthetics, Biblical Aesthetics, and Theology of the Arts. The goal of each section was not to provide a complete understanding of each category, but to examine how aesthetics in each of these categories can be a channel for an encounter with the divine.

With this understanding of the definition of beauty, we explore in the next chapter what I believe to be the most powerful characteristic of beauty: its transformative power and the force that can lead to God.

## Chapter 2: The Transformative Power of Beauty According to Balthasar

Does beauty have a purpose? One can argue that beauty has no vital use for the well-being of our physical self, but as we have explored in chapter 1, it is hard to ignore the inherent need for beauty for the well-being of our spiritual self. Beauty whether experienced in nature, in the arts, in religious aesthetics or in the Scriptures can lead to a powerful transformation. Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology shows how beauty, glory and love are all interconnected<sup>82</sup>. Balthasar presents a conception of beauty that is transcendent, one in which the incredibly beautiful takes possession of the observer<sup>83</sup>. By and large, the turn to aesthetics within the discipline of theology at the end of the twentieth century was prompted by a desire to extend theology beyond theory. According to Elizabeth Vasko, Balthasar's work was central to the return of beauty to theological discourse, for it allowed a reconfiguration of particularity and universality in aesthetic terms<sup>84</sup>.

This chapter draws on Balthasar and other theologians to show that beauty, being the conduit of God's love and glory that radiates throughout creation, leads the beholder to a profound transformation. Balthasar asserts that man has the choice to reject beauty or to embrace it and be transformed by its divine power<sup>85</sup>. In this chapter, I present a brief biography of Balthasar, focusing on the major events and encounters that shaped his aesthetic theological thinking. I then explain how beauty can be a transformative power that can lead to God. I next explore the dark side of beauty and what elements are necessary to ensure that beauty remains in balance with truth and goodness.

### Who is Hans Urs Von Balthasar<sup>86</sup>

When Balthasar began his journey into theological studies (in the 1920s and 1930s), there was a growing dissatisfaction among philosophers and theologians with the approach to the study of God. For Balthasar, theology had long lost the passion he felt should be present in the approach of God and had become a mere “turning of pages in a desiccated catalogue of ideas, a kind of butterfly collection for the mind.”<sup>87</sup> Balthasar believed theologians had betrayed “even the very Master they claimed to serve.”<sup>88</sup> He set about to provide a way to address this situation, beginning with what he felt the Church and the world had gotten away from or become confused about: the concept of beauty. Balthasar’s principal thrust is to “restore theology to a main artery

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<sup>82</sup> GL 1, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Elisabeth T. Vasko, "Suffering and the Search for Wholeness: Beauty and the Cross in Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theologies" (2009). Dissertations. 282, 9.

<sup>85</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*; VII. Theology. The New Covenant, trans. by Brian McNeil (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1989), 543. As explained in Welbaum, 262.

<sup>86</sup> The information in this section is derived from the twelve-lesson course on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar offered by the Word on Fire Institute:

[https://wordonfire.institute/?\\_ga=2.57483242.1552095160.1653495102-1105034989.1653495102](https://wordonfire.institute/?_ga=2.57483242.1552095160.1653495102-1105034989.1653495102)

<sup>87</sup> Stratford Caldecott, “An Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Catholic World Report*, (2001), <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/an-introduction-to-hans-urs-von-balthasar.html>

<sup>88</sup> Caldecott, “An Introduction,” 1.

which has been abandoned”: the beautiful which ultimately compliments the “vision of the true and the good.”<sup>89</sup>

It is important to note that for Balthasar, theological aesthetics is different from a theology of aesthetics. Both types of aesthetics entail an analogy between infinite and finite modes of being, but the latter, gives priority to worldly standards of beauty, from which it then draws inferences about God. The starting point of theological aesthetics is God and, if done adequately, it leads us more and more to the glory of the living God. In contrast, the theology of aesthetics starts from the world's standards of beauty and risks confusing “the giver” with “the gift”, thus forgetting the creator in its focus on creation. Theological aesthetics uses the methods of theology to study beauty, always having God as its central focus. It argues for a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world<sup>90</sup>.

Balthasar was, at heart, a man of aesthetics. As a child, Balthasar studied piano and became a very proficient musician. Balthasar's musical background is essential to understanding his theology. Balthasar's starting point is not philosophy or theology, but aesthetics and the arts. Balthasar studied “Germanistik” which is a combination of philology, German literature, and philosophy of language letters. Whether through music, such as his love and mastery of Mozart, or the beauty of the written word, found especially in his deep love of German literature, Balthasar expertly experienced and illuminated the thrilling quality of beauty.

This section is not a complete biography of Balthasar; the focus is on the influences and experiences that shaped Balthasar's theology of aesthetics. I will cover his love of Scripture and the church fathers, his deep encounter with mysticism and his two foundational principles about the nature of God.

### **Love of Scripture and the Church Fathers**

Balthasar was born in Lucerne, Switzerland in 1905. Switzerland is a politically neutral and a religiously very divided country where Protestants and Catholics live side by side. Balthasar's Swiss origins and his cohabitation with devout Protestants would make a great difference in his life. Balthasar was highly influenced by Henri de Lubac and Karl Barth, and he felt compelled to revivify the patristic tradition and advocate a greater reliance on Sacred Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers<sup>91</sup>. In explaining the central role of the Scriptures in the patristic period, Balthasar wrote that the vitality of the Holy Scriptures “underpinned the whole period of the Fathers and nourished it like a fertile field. Faced with the challenges of the time, such as Gnosticism, Arianism and Manichaeism, the young Church, and therefore patristic theology, was marked by the virtues of youth: greatness, depth, boldness, flexibility, certainty and an ardent love.”<sup>92</sup>

Barth and Balthasar became close collaborators; it was Mozart's music that brought them together, so the initial link between these two great theologians of the 20th century was

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<sup>89</sup> GL 1, 17.

<sup>90</sup> GL 1, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Vasko, 50.

<sup>92</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves.” *Communio* 24 (1997): 347–96.

aesthetic<sup>93</sup>. Barth considered Balthasar one of his earliest and most accurate interpreters of his work; equally Balthasar's theology reveals the influence of Barth. According to one of Balthasar's correspondents, whenever Barth was asked about the significance of his biblical theology, he replied, 'Read Urs'<sup>94</sup>. I think the influence of Karl Barth emphasized for Balthasar that only Scripture has the power and authority to point authentically to the highest figure that has ever walked the earth, the figure of Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup> I think we can state that the theology of Balthasar can be categorised as a Biblical theology.

### The Mysticism of Adrienne Von Speyr

In addition to scripture and the influence of Karl Barth, Balthasar was very influenced by Adrienne Von Speyr and her deep mystical experiences. He was so influenced by Speyr's experiences that he considered much of his work to be an elaborate commentary of the mysticism of Speyr<sup>96</sup>. Speyr was a Swiss physician who had been raised in the independent Reformed Church but had been received into the Catholic Church under the supervision of Balthasar. In his article "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr's Ecclesial Relationship", Matthew Lewis Sutton states that: "After von Speyr's conversion, many mystical experiences took her by storm."<sup>97</sup> Speyr claims to have been visited by an angel, the virgin Mary, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and various other saints. She also had mystical experiences of Christ's passion<sup>98</sup>. The influence of Speyr on Balthasar's theological aesthetic is very palpable. Speyr dictated to Balthasar what she experienced in her visions and contemplations and Balthasar could understand what she saw and transcribed it into shorthand without much difficulty<sup>99</sup>.

Until his death in 1988, Balthasar continued to place Speyr's works and mission at the center of his writings, publications, and work.<sup>100</sup> Balthasar stated, "I want to prevent any attempt being made after my death to separate my work from that of Adrienne von Speyr."<sup>101</sup> According to Sutton, "what Speyr experienced mystically did not just influence him spiritually, but she also influenced him theologically"<sup>102</sup>.

### Two Foundational Principles

There are two principles that shaped Balthasar's understanding of the nature of God and informed his ethos of theology, both drawn from the writings of Erich Przywara<sup>103</sup>. The first principle is *Deus Semper Major*, "God is ever greater." The second principle is that of *in tanta*

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<sup>93</sup> Gawronski, 199.

<sup>94</sup> Roccasalvo, 5.

<sup>95</sup> GL 1, 32.

<sup>96</sup> Matthew Lewis Sutton, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr's Ecclesial Relationship." *New Blackfriars* 94, (2013): 51.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>101</sup> Von Balthasar, *Our Task*, p. 13. As cited in Sutton, 54.

<sup>102</sup> Sutton, 54.

<sup>103</sup> Joan L. Roccasalvo, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: Theologian of Beauty." *The Way* 44, (2005): 50.

*similitudine, maior dissimilitude*, “in however great a similitude, there is an even greater dissimilitude”. In other words, God cannot be categorized, placed in a genus, or completely understood. If we say, quite rightly, that God is perfectly just, yet we look at the Passion and Death of Christ, we come to realize the inadequacy of our most earnest interpretation of what justice is. Balthasar expresses this truth most specifically in the practice of kneeling iconic theology. Instead of purely systematic analysis, true theology calls us to kneel in God’s presence and allow him to shape us while we hold a faith seeking understanding<sup>104</sup>. I think these two fundamental principles that shaped Balthasar's understanding of the nature of God are at the heart of his theological aesthetics: God cannot be fully grasped by the mind and God is always greater than anything we can label or imagine him to be. Aesthetics is a way of experiencing, albeit to an infinitesimally small degree, that which we cannot grasp with our minds.

### Beauty as a Transformative Power

The three main characteristics of aesthetic experience in Balthasar's work are: revelatory, transformative, and participatory. In this section I focus on the transformative power of beauty. Later in this chapter, I focus on the revelatory aspect of beauty.

In the *Glory of The Lord I, Seeing the Form*, Balthasar explains how beauty as splendor is not only an object that needs to be perceived, but an active movement that transforms all those who encounter it<sup>105</sup>. Beauty is manifested in the world as “an outpouring, self utterance” of the divine<sup>106</sup>. Thomas Aquinas argues that beauty makes us delight in the very act of knowing<sup>107</sup>. Beauty does not simply illumine, but it also transforms. As it pleases and illumines, beauty elicits love. Beauty leads us by pleasure to wisdom, and through wisdom to love and love transforms us. So, love is at the core of the transformative power of beauty. For Balthasar the perception of beauty leads to a change in the beholder because God implanted in our very being the desire for love<sup>108</sup>.

True beauty, for Balthasar, is the wedding of form and splendor. All beauty is “objectively located at the intersection of two moments which Thomas Aquinas calls *species* and *lumen* (‘form’ and ‘splendor’).”<sup>109</sup> Form is what gives an object its shape, its uniqueness, but this does not mean that all forms are beautiful. On the contrary, form is beautiful only because the delight it arouses in us is based on the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality are manifested<sup>110</sup>. Splendor expands and transforms itself if one is ready to be captivated by it. One must experience this “ecstasy”, one must leave everything behind, one must be willing to leave oneself and unite with the other. Balthasar's perception of the splendor that lies behind all the specific manifestations of beauty allows him to affirm the particularity and the carnal

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<sup>104</sup> Raymond Gawronski, “The Beauty of the Cross: The Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar.” *Logos* 5, (2002): 195. In this article, Gawronski states that: “Balthasar notes that the greatest tragedy in the history of Christianity is the split between a “kneeling” and a “sitting” theology.

<sup>105</sup> GL 1, 18.

<sup>106</sup> GL 1, 120.

<sup>107</sup> As explained in Gioia, 2020 15:30.

<sup>108</sup> GL 1, 39.

<sup>109</sup> GL 1, 37. As cited in Vasko, 37.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

character of the created order. For Balthasar, God is not an abstract absolute who destroys all individual forms. Therefore, all reality, however limited and transitory, participates in beauty. It is only through form, through the integrating principle of unity and proportion, that beauty can radiate. For Balthasar, the form of a phenomenon manifests the real presence of the depth of being in it<sup>111</sup>. In the next few sections, I reflect on how the perception and the experience of beauty can lead to a deep transformation.

### Perceiving Beauty

There is no doubt that the perception of beauty, whether in nature, in the arts, in religious aesthetics or in Scripture, can lead to a powerful transformation. However, the perception of beauty and the degree to which it is perceived varies greatly from person to person. For example, one person may be totally transformed by the beauty of poetry, while another person may find it boring and insignificant. Why is this so? Is our inability to see beauty the result of a cruel trick played by God?<sup>112</sup> Are some people genetically superior to others and therefore able to perceive beauty more easily? The obvious answer is no, as God is infinite love, compassion, and justice. The essence of the problem according to Vasko, lies with our perception, in our inability to see the world as it is in its essence: to see that all existence is a work of love<sup>113</sup>.

According to Stump, aesthetic perception will vary from one person to another, but it is something that can be formed in us. Experience and education can form our ability to perceive beauty<sup>114</sup>. I think that the perception of beauty is an attitude of surrender (surrendering to the beauty around us). The perception of the beauty of an object is often dictated by past experiences and the associated emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. For example, if a person has been raised with the idea that art is useless and a tool to manipulate others, it will be very difficult for them to appreciate art unless this negative association with the arts is resolved. I can speak from my own experience and have often thought that given all the suffering that surrounds us, the contemplation of beauty is shallow and hypocritical. For most of my adult life, I have lived in a fast-paced environment where results and achievements were most valued. It is really hard to perceive beauty, let alone appreciate it, if we are constantly multi tasking and focusing on being efficient.

Multiple studies have been made to determine if the perception of beauty can be trained. A recent one was made and documented in the article “Appreciation of Beauty Training: A Web-Based Intervention”<sup>115</sup>. The study presented qualitative findings from a three-week intervention that consisted of exercises aimed at increasing the awareness of beauty. The researchers concluded that participants overwhelmingly experienced some increase related to an aspect of the appreciation of beauty<sup>116</sup>. A full analysis of the perception of beauty is beyond the scope of

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<sup>111</sup> GL 1 , 435-525.

<sup>112</sup> Vasko, 45.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Stump, 18.

<sup>115</sup> Martínez-Martí, María Luisa, María Dolores Avia, and María José Hernández-Lloreda. “Appreciation of Beauty Training: A Web-Based Intervention.” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 9, (2014): 477–81.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 480.



this thesis. My point in this section is that the perception of beauty can be trained and in many cases is a learned skill that results from our past conditioning, influences, and education.

### **The Experience of Beauty in Four Stages**

The transformative power of beauty lies in one's experience. It is what happens when we experience beauty that transforms us. Poet Dana Gioia states that the experience of beauty occurs in four stages<sup>117</sup>. The first stage is the arresting of attention, a moment of deep stillness. This can occur in many situations and, in most cases, unexpectedly; for example, we can experience a moment of deep stillness when listening to beautiful music that moves us tremendously, when witnessing the beauty of nature, or when observing a painting. Balthasar does not see beauty as something that is only mentally acknowledged; beauty demands the response of the whole person<sup>118</sup>; the arresting of attention allows the whole person to be engaged in the experience.

The second stage is a thrill of pleasure, a mysterious joy; what is interesting about this stage is that the pleasure is often disproportionate to the object that triggered it, for example we can experience a mysterious joy simply by observing a bird. The pleasure can be physical and mental, and it has a selfless quality. The possession of the object is not important, being in its presence is what counts. St. Augustine said: "If I were to ask first whether things are beautiful because they give pleasure, or give pleasure because they are beautiful, I have no doubt that I will be given the answer that they give pleasure because they are beautiful."<sup>119</sup>

The third stage is a heightened perception of the shape or the meaning of things. At this stage there is a sense of unity, an insight into the inner workings of reality. There is this incredible surge of knowledge of how reality works.

At the fourth stage, the epic experience is over. We have the memory of the moment, but the intensity and duration of the experience cannot be controlled; it is a return to a more mundane or common reality. The four stages of an experience of beauty indicate that we may be dealing with a reality larger than ourselves.

### **The Elements of the Transformation**

One of the transformative powers of beauty is the diminution of our own ego, which is necessary for an authentic encounter with the divine. The typical reaction to an authentic aesthetic experience is awe and wonder. The brightness of beauty overwhelms our intuitive capacities. In many cases, this awe and wonder triggers a sense of humility. For example, in contemplating the Grand Canyon, its beauty can make one realize its insignificance amid the glory of creation. According to Scruton, the beautiful overwhelms us with a vision of nature's infinite power, and infinite extend<sup>120</sup>. Thus, to experience true beauty is to experience true humility, it is to recognize that something greater and more powerful than us is all around us.

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<sup>117</sup> Gioia, 2020, 04:55.

<sup>118</sup> GL 1, 220.

<sup>119</sup> Augustine, *Earlier Writings*, J.H. Burleigh, ed., New York: WJK Publishing, 1953 [4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century AD text]. As cited in King 7.

<sup>120</sup> Scruton, 73.

The other transformative power of beauty is its ability to develop concern for others. The more we experience beauty, the more we want to share that beauty with others as humankind has an inherent need to share beauty. Balthasar said “God’s beauty not only gives us a desire to share His love, but it transforms us and makes us capable of true love”<sup>121</sup>. In Genesis 1:27, we read “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Through exposure to God's beauty, Balthasar sees this image restored to what it once was<sup>122</sup>. Beauty, especially divine beauty, inspires movement and action; when someone experiences beauty as described in Gioia’s four stages, he will have an increasingly tough time closing his eyes to the need of those around him. The experience of beauty can lead to sanctification and holiness. There is a relationship between ethics and the aesthetic experience. In most cases, when a person is moved by a profound aesthetic experience, their desire to do good naturally increases.

### **Transformation Through Poetry**

An example where beauty proved to be very transformative for the artist and the readers is Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Dante is an Italian poet who was born in the same century as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. Dante lived in an era where beauty was particularly important. Dante is best known for his poem "The Divine Comedy". In this poem, Dante describes his own spiritual journey. He describes the journey of a pilgrim who goes to the pit of hell, goes up the struggle of purgatory and ends with the journey to heaven. The poem includes sections representing the three levels of life after Christian death: hell, purgatory and heaven. Dante's work has stood the test of time and 700 years after his death, the *Divine Comedy* is still considered one of the most beautiful poems ever written. Dante's poem is an excellent example of how beauty can be a path to God. This poem is full of spiritual symbolism that transcends the barriers of the mind. The symbolic communication in this poem is immensely powerful because it speaks directly to the heart and soul of the reader. Dante says at the end of the poem: “I felt my will and my desire impelled by the love that moves the Sun and the other stars<sup>123</sup>.” The poem begins where he is alone and lost in a dark wood having wandered from the straight path. And then the whole story of the poem, hell, purgatory, and heaven, is designed to bring him into line with the divine love, and its beauty that brought him back to this divine love.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* shows readers the redemptive power of beauty. This power is conveyed by Beatrice, who serves as Dante's guide in the heavens. As a woman Dante loved in his real life, her goodness and purity helped the poet glimpse the heavenly world. Thus, in the *Divine Comedy*, a poem written in her memory, Beatrice serves as a symbol of beauty.

Balthasar wrote: “Beatrice looks at God, Dante looks at Beatrice and sees in her, as in a clear mirror, the sign from God ... The beloved does not imprison the poet within herself; on the contrary, she opens up for him the perception of all reality.”<sup>124</sup> Dante's *Divine Comedy* conveys

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<sup>121</sup> GL 1, 242. As cited in Welbaum, 260.

<sup>122</sup> GL 1, 151.

<sup>123</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy (Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with an Introduction by Henry Francis Cary)*, (New York: Digireads.com, 2015), 480, Kindle.

<sup>124</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 3: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles* (California: Ignatius Press, 1986), 63-64.

the objectivity and redemptive power of beauty. In other words, it makes clear that beauty is clearly more than a pleasure judged by the senses and that it is more than a subjective taste. On the contrary, beauty is a transcendental, an attribute of being insofar as it reveals the splendor of the good and the true that permeate reality.

Bonney and Richard Schaub, psychotherapists who lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, use Dante's *Divine Comedy* with all its beauty and symbolism to chart a path of personal transformation. Inspired by Dante's work, their book, *Dante's Path, A Practical Approach to Achieving Inner Wisdom*, is a work of practical spirituality. The Schaub's address the heart of human struggles, such as depression, anxiety, addiction, lust, pride, rage, violence, greed and betrayal, and their relationship to the higher potential of human nature. The authors draw remarkably interesting parallels between the pilgrim's journey described in the *Divine Comedy* and the spiritual journey of a person living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Dante's hell is a catalog for our fears, his passage through purgatory was the road to freedom from those fears, and paradise was the realm in which we explore a higher consciousness<sup>125</sup>". The *Divine Comedy* is used as a metaphor for the psychoanalytic process. The spiritual path traveled by the poet in Dante's masterpiece provides the perfect road map to inner wisdom and peace. The Schaub's book uses medieval wisdom thoughts blended with 20<sup>th</sup> century Jungian psychoanalysis and provides practical exercises for communing with the divine. Imagery meditation on sacred symbols, such as a painting or sculpture, is a recommended practice. The book harnesses the beauty of medieval poetry and art to show how beauty is a transformative power.

Another example where the beauty in poetry proved to be very transformative is in the poems of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi<sup>126</sup>. Rumi was a 13th Century poet who lived in different parts of the Persian Empire. He was a mystic, a philosopher, and top Islamic Scholar of his time. He is most popularly known for his timeless Poetry that sprang from his yearning for the Divine. Rumi wrote more than 60,000 verses of poetry. Why can Rumi's poetry be a journey to meaning and transformation? One reason is that his poems are filled with metaphors and condensed images, and the imagery in Rumi's poetry makes it easy to understand the insight of his teaching<sup>127</sup>. I believe that Rumi's poetry is a very beautiful and powerful spiritual tool that shapes people's imaginative faculty, because it uses a symbolic language that transcends the barriers of the mind. The symbolic communication in Rumi's poems is immensely powerful as it communicates directly with the heart.

Fariba Enteshari, founder, and Executive Director of Rumi Educational Center studied the impact of Rumi's poetry on the lives of those who studied it. Her research was centered around the following question "What impact does Rumi's poetry have on the lives of individuals who study his poetry?"<sup>128</sup>. She invited two groups of people to take part in this research. The first group includes people who had been studying Rumi's poetry with her. The second group had little or no knowledge about Rumi's poetry before taking part in a workshop. Enteshari taught and interviewed both groups. This research sheds light on how Rumi's wisdom relates to people's lives in contemporary times, and reveals the useful elements involved in the teaching of

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<sup>125</sup> Bonney G. Schaub, Richard Schaub, *Dante's Path, A Practical Approach to Achieving Inner Wisdom* (Gotham Books, 2003), 8.

<sup>126</sup> Jalal Al-Din Rumi, *The Illuminated Rumi* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

<sup>127</sup> Fariba Enteshari, "Rumi's Poetry: The Journey toward Meaning and Transformation." *ProQuest LLC*. ProQuest LLC, (2013): 18.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

his poetry. Enteshari concluded that the experience of beauty in Rumi's poem is a major catalyst for profound transformation and that Rumi's poetry has a positive effect on the lives of people who study his teachings<sup>129</sup>. Here is a comment made by one of Enteshari's student "I remember my first encounter with Rumi's poetry clearly because of the great wave of peace that came over me as I finished reading. Rumi's poetry carries a message that is both beautiful and timeless, it encapsulates the truest love, bringing a massive wave of peace over those who read it."<sup>130</sup>.

A common theme among many of the theologians cited in this thesis, especially Balthasar, is the benefit of connecting to the beauty that is available to each of us. I think Rumi's poetry is an excellent way to connect to the goodness of life as it is a form of beauty.

A final example where the beauty in poetry proved to be very transformative is in Cecilia González-Andrieu's article: "How Does Beauty Save?" This article helps us explore the redemptive power of beauty. It draws on the work of Von Ogden Vogt, John Paul II, and the poet and musician Federico Garcia Lorca. González-Andrieu refers to the texts of John Paul II where the late pope assigns a "priestly" task to artists as mediators of beauty and facilitators of the opening of the human soul to the sense of the eternal. González-Andrieu analyzes Lorca's "theory and play of the Duende" and uses his insight to propose a constructive soteriology of beauty. She argues by showing thirteen reasons why beauty saves. In creating something beautiful and in the aesthetic experience of receiving that creation, we will be broken by beauty, by its power and our desire to be one with it, and in the process, we are also resurrected and transformed.

### **Healing Trauma in the Orthodox Tradition**

The healing of trauma through psychology and traditional medicine gained great popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The era of enlightenment gave intellectualism an importance that it rarely had in earlier times. The Freudian method which could be labeled as "the autopsy of the broken self"<sup>131</sup> has become the most common way to treat trauma. Patitsas proposes another approach, an approach that starts with beauty: "the initial focus of soul-healing must be on Beauty rather than on truth"<sup>132</sup>. How can beauty be so helpful in healing trauma and why can trauma be a barrier to an encounter with God?

It cannot be generally stated that if a person has experienced severe trauma in his or her life, that trauma will necessarily be an obstacle to a relationship with God. In some cases, the trauma may be a steppingstone that will lead the individual to God. The study of the relationship between trauma and a relationship with God is very complex and beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is accurate to state that, in most cases, traumatic events breed fear, shame, guilt, and other feelings that are contrary to the nature of God, which is love, acceptance, and compassion. As Patitsas explains, it is very difficult for a soldier who has experienced war trauma to embrace God's love<sup>133</sup>. As we have explored previously, beauty is the reflection of God's love on God's creation and according to Patitsas, the traumatic event is an experience of anti-Beauty and of

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>130</sup> This testimonial and more can be found at: <https://www.rumieducationalcenter.org>.

<sup>131</sup> Patitsas, location 108.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, chapter 2: The opposite of war is not peace.

ugliness<sup>134</sup>. If trauma is an experience of ugliness, it is logical to affirm that its antidote is the experience of beauty. Patitsas explored studies with war veterans and survivors who have learned through art to love beauty again. The study concluded that the exposure to beauty awakened in the subject empathies for themselves and others.

Dogma can give the impression that God is coming down on us, rebuking us, telling us how bad we are and how badly we have behaved, while Beauty awakens in us the love that makes us forget ourselves. Patitsas calls this love Eros<sup>135</sup>. This deep love is the best healer for trauma.

## Beauty as a Force that Leads to God

*When enraptured in beauty, man becomes a “sounding box” or a mirror reflecting the divine love<sup>136</sup>*

In the previous section, I discussed the transformative power of beauty in relation to our lives. I talked about the power of beauty to create in us a sense of humility and the social benefits when beauty is part of our daily lives. However, I believe that the profound transformative power of beauty lies in its transcendental power. Albert Einstein said that the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious, which is the source of all true art and science<sup>137</sup>. All humans aspire to the infinite, and beauty can be a catalyst for the experience of the infinite. We are all attracted to beauty, it is part of our nature. It is a spark of the Divine given to us by God. Beauty is part of God and as such, it is a way to connect with God. Many theologians and Saints consider beauty as one of the transcendentals.

What are the transcendentals? Transcendentals are properties of being that transcend the limits of time and place and are rooted in existence or reality. Transcendentals do not depend on culture, religion, or personal ideologies. Transcendentals are objective features of everything that exists, they are in a sense attributes of God. Kreeft states that everyone wants all three transcendentals without limits, but beauty is the most powerfully appealing because it is irresistible and there is no defense against it<sup>138</sup>. In a culture increasingly skeptical of the true and the good, beauty is one of the best ways to experience the infinite. In this section, I reflect on the transcendental power of beauty.

## Beauty as a Mediator

Our drawing to God is a matter of surrender to the divine and beauty mediates that surrender. Augustine said: “You have us for yourself, our hearts are restless till they rest in you.<sup>139</sup>” But how do people come to God? How does the desire for the divine awaken in us? Our analytical mind tends to think that people are attracted to God because of intellectual evidence, or because of a desire to follow the path of righteousness and goodness. Although intellectual proof and the desire to follow the path of righteousness are important to some people, it is a

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, location 960.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, location 1081.

<sup>136</sup> Welbaum, 11.

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/190>.

<sup>138</sup> Kreeft, 76.

<sup>139</sup> Saint Augustine (Confessions 1.1.1)

common misconception that people come to God primarily because of evidence or truth. In her article "Beauty as a Road to God," Eleanor Stump asserts that people come to God not because of a compelling argument for God's existence, but because of a desire or longing within them<sup>140</sup>. It is this longing, which often manifests itself as a void, as an unexplainable thirst for something different than the material world, that creates the desire to come to the divine.

How does beauty lead us to God? It does so by awakening in us a desire, a great desire, an insatiable desire for something. The longing that beauty creates in the individual mediates a desire to surrender to the source of that beauty. A person, touched by the presence of beauty, will be restless, as Augustine said; the only thing that will finally satisfy the hunger of this unrest is the intimate presence of God himself. Stump references this longing to "painful longing"<sup>141</sup>, a mixture of pain and peace that Stump calls a redeemed pain. Beauty arouses in us feelings that make us long for the presence of God or that produce peace in us, even in a broken world, or that make us joyful for the good we find around us. Beauty will draw us nearer to God only if what moves us is the beauty itself, not something about our own reactions to that beauty. True beauty, and often the most powerful beauty, is found in things that strike us in ways we cannot fully understand.

According to Balthasar, the form of beauty has such a transcendental power, that it is the perfect mediator from the natural into the supernatural world<sup>142</sup>. Beauty, whether through music, visual art, drama, story telling, films, nature have the power to lift us out of our day-to-day mundane task and invite us to contemplate something bigger and greater. "When we hear sublime and beautiful sounds emanating ... These earthly harmonies suggest to our inner religious ear that there must be an eternal harmony shared by saints and angels in another world."<sup>143</sup> Contemplating beauty the soul rises from its immersion in merely sensuous and concrete things and ascends to a higher sphere.

### **The Road to a Relationship with God**

Relationships are complex and attempting to rationalize them by laying down a set of rules or dogmas has proven to be repeatedly flawed. Relationships are fluid, they require commitment, and most importantly, they are dynamic. There are degrees of relationship, some are superficial, some are deep. In the same way, a relationship with God can have many different degrees and beauty can bring a person closer to God to a greater or lesser degree. "Beauty as a road to God will have both an objective and a subjective component. It will be a subjective matter what a particular person finds beautiful. But it will be an objective fact of the matter whether what is taken as beautiful does actually lead to God and how close to God it brings that person."<sup>144</sup> It explains why the thing which one person takes as beautiful may really move that person closer to God even if some other person finds the same thing only trivial or boring or repellent<sup>145</sup>.

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<sup>140</sup> Stump, 13.

<sup>141</sup> Stump, 23

<sup>142</sup> GL 1, 34.

<sup>143</sup> McDermott, 14-15.

<sup>144</sup> Stump, 16.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

How can we define a path to God and what are its characteristics? A path to God is a way for a person to get from where he or she is to God. A road to God, must meet people where they are and move them forward toward God. A road is a way to get from one place to another. Since everyone starts from a different point of departure, the path to God is not a single road but a network of roads that lead to the same destination. Some people will be more attuned to natural beauty, some to religious aesthetics, some to the arts and some to the beauty present in scriptures. Within each discipline there will be an infinite number of roads, for some music will lead them, others visual art, others poetic art will be their road.

The German word translated in theological contexts as experience is *Erfahrung*. It is connected to the German word for ‘to go’ or ‘to travel and it thus conveys the notion of going out of oneself, of travelling to a different place: geographical, intellectual, or spiritual<sup>146</sup>. The path to God is a road, certainly there is an external and community aspect of this road, but it is above all an internal road. Balthasar said: “The enjoyment we derive from the experience of beauty depends on our moving away from the self.<sup>147</sup>”. To perceive beauty is more than a sensory and mental experience; union with the beautiful brings with it a kind of internal transformation. In the most simplistic way, we can describe the internal path necessary to experience the transcendental power of beauty as the path from our intellect to our heart, from our mental concepts and ideas to that place within us that is more open and in tune with our spirit.

How might one discern if beauty is moving us into an authentic encounter with God or into a form of a delusion based on extreme sentimentalism? Many well renowned philosophers and psychologists including Freud, Nietzsche and Marx were very skeptical of religious experiences. Discerning the fruits of the experience is vital, as Jesus said, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit”<sup>148</sup>. The extent to which beauty leads a person to God can be determined by what it produces in the life of the person and their community. Is the person moving toward love, charity, humility, inner joy, and peace? Or does the person become self-centered, power-hungry, and judgmental? A true experience of God will lead the individual to a greater appreciation of creation, a deeper love for one's fellow man, and a genuine desire to serve.

Since beauty is a characteristic of God and God is infinite, the experience of beauty does not fully satisfy the need for beauty to the point that this need diminishes or disappears, but it does simultaneously satisfy and arouse a greater desire.

## The Other side of Beauty

*"Developing a love for the Arts will not necessarily make you a better Christian. In fact, there is always the danger that it might just make you an insufferable aesthetic snob<sup>149</sup>"*

In the previous chapter and in this chapter, we saw how beauty can lead to a mystical experience and hold a transformative power. But is beauty only a positive life-giving force, and

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<sup>146</sup> GL 1, 222.

<sup>147</sup> GL 1, 34.

<sup>148</sup> Luke 6:43.

<sup>149</sup> Glaspey, 248.

does it only lead to God? Does beauty have a dark side? Dostoyevski<sup>150</sup> said through one of his characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* masterpiece that “beauty is the battlefield where God and Satan contend with each other for the hearts of men”.

An argument can be made about the dark path that could occur in the pursuit of beauty. The leaders who caused the most harm in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were artists and they were fascinated by beauty and art: Hitler was a painter and was fascinated by architecture and aesthetics; Stalin was known as a poet and at age of 17, he was studying for the priesthood in Georgia; Mao Zedong was a poet known to have a sensitive soul, as his poetry proves it; and Mussolini was a musician who played the violin and accompanied several family orchestras with his musical talent. The Nazis were great lovers of art and beauty and tried to create a master race in their own twisted image of beauty.

In addition to these extreme cases of horror and cruelty, even in mundane, everyday events, the perception of beauty can have negative consequences. Because of the mainstream media, people buy harmful products to become beautiful, starve and harm themselves to fit a specific image, and lose touch with the good things in life in the name of beauty. Carnes said, “beauty has been leveraged in ways that wounds us, with legacy of misogyny, class hatreds and racial injustice”<sup>151</sup>. How can the pursuit of beauty lead an individual down a dark path and a path of destruction? Theologian John Saward<sup>152</sup> states that the devil does not usually present himself as truth or goodness but prefers to deceive with false beauty.

In this section, I examine the dark side of beauty, how beauty can lead to a path of darkness, and I explore what elements are necessary to ensure that beauty remains in balance with truth and goodness.

### **Beauty’s Dark Side**

It is easy to look around us and see all that is good when it is beautifully wrapped: a newborn baby; a peaceful lake reflecting the image of a golden sunset; trees swaying gently in a warm breeze. As we’ve seen in previous chapters, God has used the beauty around us to draw us closer to Him. He is an artist who uses a variety of means to create stunning and timeless works of beauty. However, evil can also present itself as something beautiful and attractive. In Ezekiel 28:12 we read “Mortal, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, thus says the Lord God: You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty”.

Evil often presents itself as a beautiful package hoping to appeal to our senses. In 2 Corinthians 11:14, we read “And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light”. Whether we know it or not, and whether we want it or not, we may be attracted to the beauty of evil. Often the conflation of morality and beauty can have disastrous consequences. Things that are irreverent, rude, hurtful, don’t seem so bad because they appeal to our senses as something beautiful and attractive. Sin is colorful, and in many cases, it is beautiful. It has a very strong

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<sup>150</sup> As cited in Dubay, 19.

<sup>151</sup> On Beauty, 2017m 06:27.

<sup>152</sup> John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 36. As explained in Gawronski, 186.



appeal to the sensory organs. In other words, sin is very attractive. If sin is not attractive, no one will commit it.

I will explore a passage in the bible that describes the first sin that was committed. In Genesis 3.6 we read: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” In this passage, the physical beauty of the fruit is described. The Bible says that it was pleasing to the eye. In other words, it captures the sense of sight. In addition to the sense of sight, all other human senses were captured. Eve heard those sweet words from the devil, the sense of hearing is captured. The fact that it is already said that "the tree was good for food" means that it could not have a disgusting smell such as something rotten; the sense of smell is captured. From the description, we can deduce that the fruit is smooth, or sweet. It was a beautiful fruit. It was pleasing to the eye because it appealed to the sensory organ of the skin; the sense of touch is captured. All we have left is the sense of taste. It is obvious that she ate the fruit and never complained, on the contrary she must have given it to her husband as well. The description of the fruit, as we have already said above, says that it "looked delicious". There is no doubt that the sense of taste was also captured. This passage in Genesis shows that sin can be colorful, beautiful and can have a very strong appeal to the sensory organs.

I think the main risk with beauty is when beauty, the artist, or the recipient of the beauty, seek self glorification. Unless art, music, poetry, architecture, scripture points to God or to something higher than itself, such as the virtue of love, the pursuit of beauty can become corrupted and lead to darkness. “If beauty does not express some truth, then it is nothing but the manipulation of our feelings”<sup>153</sup>. This can lead to the deification of beauty itself, which can become very destructive and separate the individual from the ultimate truth that is God.

In Leviticus 26:1 we read “You should make for yourselves no idols and erect no carved images or pillars, and you shall not place figured stones in your land, to worship them for I am the Lord your God”. This is a clear law against idolatry, glory and deification should only be given to God. Carnes said: “Beauty is a name of God, but we must not deify the conception of beauty”<sup>154</sup>. If art, beauty, or its enjoyment are placed above God, virtues, and human happiness, it risks becoming idolatry.

Besides the deification of beauty, another pitfall that artists or beauty seekers must be aware of is that the pursuit of beauty can lead to elitism and the excesses of selfishness. Many great artists began with authentic experiences of God and use their gift for the greater good, but unfortunately, they became addicted to the fame, power and success that came with it. The glory of the experience or their success was not returned to God and the internal attitude of the artists, or the consumer of beauty changes. The internal attitude changes from gratitude, love, humility, and service to pride, entitlement and selfishness. As a result, the aesthetic experience led to delusion, loss of authenticity and the arts became a badge of superiority. When the arts are seen as a badge of superiority, the artist or the recipient of art can become an aesthetic snob<sup>155</sup>.

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<sup>153</sup>John-Mark L. Miravalle, *Beauty: What It is and Why It Matters* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2019) 36, Kindle.

<sup>154</sup> On Beauty, 2017, 07:32.

<sup>155</sup> Matthew Kieran, “The Vice of Snobbery: Aesthetic Knowledge Justification and Virtue in Art Appreciation,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60, (2010): 243–63.

Participating in art does not automatically make one a better person. Some of the men who worked as guards and administrators in Nazi concentration camps went home at night and listened with serene pleasure to their recordings of Mozart and Beethoven<sup>156</sup>.

### **Beauty's Balance with Truth and Goodness**

What are the elements necessary for beauty to remain a powerful force for good and a road to God and not lead the individual or an entire society down the path of darkness? Beauty needs goodness and truth. C.S. Lewis<sup>157</sup> explains the importance of the relationship between intellect (truth), will (goodness), and passion (beauty). In his book *Beauty: "What It is and Why It Matters"*, John-Mark Miravalle draws on the writings of Plato, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Paul II to illustrate the dark path that the pursuit of "false" beauty can take and what must be done to keep beauty in check. Since beauty can easily be linked to passion, Miravalle argues that two virtues are necessary to guard against the dark side of beauty: temperance and fortitude. Temperance involves strengths that protect against excess, it allows us to resist a disordered passion. The excess of indulgence dulls our sensitivity to beauty and risks corrupting it. Constantly overwhelming our senses with lights, pictures, movement, sounds will create a sensory addiction and deprive beauty from its divine force.

Fortitude encourages the person to pursue difficult and arduous goods. It will allow our passions to be cultivated and ordered. "Creating beauty is really hard. It involves insight, organization, and intellectual sympathy with others, and a lot of time."<sup>158</sup> The virtue of temperance is therefore not sufficient since temperance deals with the greatest pleasures and not with the greatest difficulties. It is rather the task of fortitude to remove the obstacles that withdraw the will from following reason because of the difficulties that give rise to the corruption of beauty.

The other notion Miravalle explored is that beauty must consist of order and surprise. Order is often described as that which has a certain measurement or proportionality. Beauty has an order to it; it has a set of determined principles that make it beautiful. Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine<sup>159</sup> insist particularly on regularity and adherence to the numerical principle and on the fact that order is itself the result of the inner essences of things. Surprise leads to delight and wonder and creates newness and splendor. Newness and splendor are a common theme in the bible. In Isaiah 43:19 we read "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." In Revelation 21:5 we read "See, I am making all things new." Aquinas<sup>160</sup> includes splendor, as one of the characteristics of the beautiful.

It is the order and surprise components of beauty that attract and keep it on the path to holiness. The temptation to seek surprise without order (which leads to disorder) and order without surprise (which leads to banality) can lead us to the "dark" side of beauty. The pursuit of surprise without order is often due to a lack of temperance and, over time, it takes more and more

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<sup>156</sup> Glaspey, 248.

<sup>157</sup> As explained in Kreeft, 20.

<sup>158</sup> Miravalle, 16.

<sup>159</sup> Augustine, *De Ordine*, chap. 15. As cited in Miravalle, 26.

<sup>160</sup> Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, chap. 1. As cited in Miravalle, 29.

surprise and stimulation to achieve the same level of pleasure. When surprise becomes the only goal, it can easily turn into perversion as the essence of things is ignored. For example, if surprise is sought without order, it is very easy to destroy nature and subject it to our own pleasure. The order or "essence" of nature, which is very rich, including a habitat for animals, oxygen for the planet and many others, will be ignored and sacrificed. On the other end of the spectrum, pursuing order without surprise leads to boredom and banality. The interest in wonder and delight disappears, and beauty becomes a mere "cliché". This attitude is often due to a lack of fortitude and an excessive emphasis on efficiency. Roger Scruton calls it the "cult of utility", which leads to monotony, mass production and automation.

God and his creation, such as nature, are filled with order and surprise. Jesus's Words are also full of order and surprise. Man-made beauty must serve to direct the viewer or listener to something beyond him. When an artist's primary goal is not to communicate a truth but to make a name for himself, the artist will end up displaying a flaw or an excess of order or surprise.

Everything that is good, from sports to education, from medicine to law, can be used for destructive purposes. Beauty is no exception. The deification of beauty, elitism, the excesses of individualism, the lack of temperance, fortitude, order or surprise, and the imbalance between truth, goodness and beauty can lead us down a dark and destructive path.

## Conclusion

The main focus of this chapter has been on the transformative power of beauty and how beauty can be a pathway to a deep and fulfilling relationship with God. The heart of this chapter is based on Balthasar's theological aesthetics. Balthasar's theological aesthetics were strongly influenced by the patristic Fathers, Karl Barth and the love of Scripture, and the mysticism of Von Speyr. For Balthasar, beauty can naturally guide one to truth and goodness. We have seen how the perception of beauty can vary greatly from person to person, and while some people have an innate talent for perceiving beauty, it is also a learned skill that is available to all. One of the key themes of this chapter is that the transformative power of beauty lies in one's experience. It is what happens when we experience beauty that transforms us. We have discussed the four stages of experience. The first stage is the arrest of attention, a moment of deep stillness; the second stage is a thrill of pleasure, a mysterious joy; the third stage is an increased perception of the form or meaning of things; and the final stage is the end of the epic experience. We have seen how beauty has elements of transformation. We've touched on several of these elements, including the lowering of our own ego, the ability to care about others, and the ability to have a forward momentum that sparks in us the desire to bring new things into the world. But the most profoundly transformative power of beauty lies in its transcendental power and how beauty can be a path to God. In this chapter, we have reflected on the transcendental power of beauty and how beauty can be a mediator between the finite and the infinite.

Despite the positive and transformative power of beauty, an argument can be made about the dark path that could occur in the pursuit of beauty. In this chapter, we examined the dark side of beauty, how beauty can lead to a path of darkness, and explored the elements necessary to ensure that beauty remains in balance with truth and goodness.

With an understanding of the transformative role of beauty, we explore in the next chapter what I believe to be the pinnacle of Balthasar's theological aesthetics: The Beauty of the Incarnation.

## Chapter 3: Beauty of the Incarnation According to Balthasar

*Seeing the form is the movement of man's whole being away from himself and towards God through Christ, a movement founded on the divine light of grace in the mystery of the incarnation*<sup>161</sup>

Can God be seen in the form or is God beyond form? Can created things speak to us of God? Can God make Himself known to us? Is God Himself ultimately formless? Many mystical traditions teach about the ultimate reality as without form and how the ultimate reality is beyond form. The Jesuit Anthony de Mello said: “what do I gaze into when I gaze silently at God? An imageless, formless reality”. Can the beauty and the perception of beauty by our senses distort the higher reality of God?

As seen in chapter 1 of this thesis, beauty is the reflection of God in his creation. If Jesus is God incarnate, it is reasonable to state that Jesus is the supreme form of beauty perceptible by humanity. As a result, the perfect beauty of God is now graspable because of the incarnation. When I refer in this chapter to the perfection of Jesus, I am not referring to Jesus' physical appearance. What I mean is that he was the perfect manifestation of God's love on earth. Humans cannot understand the transcendence of God, but because the incarnate God has become immanent, the perception of the fullness of his humanity, and thus the perception of the fullness of God's beauty dwells in Jesus Christ through the incarnation. The aesthetic presented by Balthasar is centered on the perception, through the eyes of faith, of the glory of God. The absolute form, the absolute essence of beauty is the self-revelation of God to the world. This is why Balthasar's work on beauty is called *Herrlichkeit* in German or “The Glory of the Lord”; In Balthasar's thinking, beauty and glory are synonymous<sup>162</sup>.

In this chapter, I reflect on one of the essential characteristics of Balthasar's theological aesthetic: the beauty of the incarnation. I begin by listing some of Balthasar's influences that may have led him to place so much emphasis on the incarnation, primarily the Johannine tradition and the mysticism of von Speyr. I then explore how humans can perceive God; is it through the bodily senses or the spiritual senses? I then reflect on why the beauty of the incarnation is important. I conclude this chapter by pondering the beauty of the cross.

### Balthasar and the Johannine Tradition

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Balthasar was strongly influenced by the mysticism of Adrienne von Speyr. Speyr wrote an acclaimed four-volume series of meditations on Saint John's Gospel. The insightfulness of her commentary emanates from the depths of her mystical union with God. Balthasar was her confessor and in 1944, he began to take dictation from Speyr. Most of Speyr's work, including her four volumes on Saint John's Gospel was channeled through Balthasar. The Gospel of John was the subject of her early dictations and she returned to it constantly, even when commenting on other sacred writers.

It is no coincidence that Balthasar favors the Johannine tradition, that can be seen as a mystical path that insists on the incarnation<sup>163</sup>. As many scholars have noted, John's Gospel

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<sup>161</sup> GL 1, 121.

<sup>162</sup> Welbaum, 247.

<sup>163</sup> Gawronski, 190.

proclaims a majestically high Christology, particularly when contrasted with the low Christology of the synoptics. In John 1:1, we read “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And in John 1:14 we read “And the Word became flesh”. This is the awesome mystery of the incarnation, that “When the word became flesh”, God became man. Thus, John’s depiction of Jesus as creator, life, light, glory, grace, truth, Messiah, and Son/Chosen of God, is essentially a falling action relative to the revelation that Jesus is God made flesh.

In the *Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar asserts that beauty radiates from the divine onto the beautiful, but that this beauty can only be known in and through the incarnation. In the figure of Jesus Christ, the self-disclosure of God in its full form and full splendor is revealed and received<sup>164</sup>. Balthasar rehabilitates the Glory of the Lord as it is revealed through the Scriptures, in a unique and definitive way in the history of Jesus Christ, the "form" in which the Triune God has chosen to incarnate himself in history<sup>165</sup>. When we speak of the beauty of God, we must do so not in abstraction, but in the light of the form of God's self-revelation in and through Christ incarnate in the power of the Spirit<sup>166</sup>. When Scripture speaks of the beauty of God, it uses words like radiance, splendor, beauty, holy beauty. These words can be summarized by trying to describe the ultimate form of beauty, the glory of the Lord. It is this culmination of beauty described as the glory of the Lord that Balthasar refers to as the unifying principle of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.

## Spiritual Senses

How can humans perceive the beauty of the incarnation? In the previous chapter, I argued that the perception of beauty can be trained, and that in many cases it is an acquired skill that results from our past conditioning, influences, and education. Balthasar holds that “eyes are needed that are able to perceive the spiritual form<sup>167</sup>.” At the heart of Balthasar's theological aesthetics is the idea that our perceptive faculties must become "spiritualized". This statement led to many questions: What does the spiritualization of our perceptual faculties mean? Will the perception of the incarnation come from our bodily senses? Or must humans become attuned to their spiritual senses? What are spiritual senses? Are spiritual senses a grace from God or a faculty available to everyone, that can be trained and nurtured? Are spiritual senses an important element of Balthasar’s theological aesthetic?

The spiritual senses and the "Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses" have been studied and argued by many theologians and saints, including Origen, Augustine, Bonaventure, Ignatius of Loyola, Karl Barth, Paul Claudel, and many others. A full analysis of the spiritual senses is beyond the scope of this thesis. In this section, I have highlighted a simplified version of Balthasar's articulation of the "Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses" and the role of the spiritual senses in perceiving the beauty of the incarnation.

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<sup>164</sup> GL 1, 109.

<sup>165</sup> Bychkov, location 1453.

<sup>166</sup> GL 1, 53-57.

<sup>167</sup> GL I, 24.

In essence, the spiritual senses allow humans to perceive spiritual realities<sup>168</sup>. Our physical self uses the five physical senses to perceive the reality around us. It is argued that our spiritual self has five senses that can be developed to also perceive the spiritual reality around us. Sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell are all used spiritually to sense the presence of God in our lives. In his doctoral dissertation “*Perceiving Splendor: The "Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses" in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics*”, Mark Johnson McInroy claims that the "doctrine of the spiritual senses" is an essential element of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetic<sup>169</sup>. McInroy argues that Balthasar's articulation of the spiritual senses was influenced by the Patristic Fathers, medieval theologians as well as modern theologians, but that his greatest influence was from Ignatius of Loyola and Karl Barth. The doctrine of the spiritual senses as presented by Balthasar contradicts to a certain extent some of the patristic Fathers who believed that the "spiritual eye" of the human being opens only to the extent that the "physical eye" closes. The clear indication from Origen is not only that there is a radical disjunct between spiritual and corporeal senses, but that the development of one set of faculties is inversely proportional to that of the other<sup>170</sup>. Balthasar believes that unifying body and soul, the bodily senses and the spiritual senses together is a necessary step in perceiving the visible and the invisible.

The first element of Balthasar’s articulation of the spiritual senses is the anthropology of “unity-in-duality” between body and soul. The corporeal senses perceive the physical form, and the spiritual senses perceive the splendor and luminosity of the form<sup>171</sup>. The bodily senses cannot be dismissed or ignored because they are a necessary conduit for perceiving the splendor.

The second element is the recognition that God's grace plays an important role in improving one's spiritual senses, however, spiritual exercises and practices are not to be neglected. The emphasis on spiritual exercises to improve the spiritual senses is a strong influence from Ignatius<sup>172</sup>.

The third element is to refute the idea that the spiritual senses are reserved for only a few. This was the general understanding among the Patristic Fathers. Balthasar restates the doctrine in such a manner that the spiritual senses are accessible to all, for they are the fruits of divine grace and human willingness.

Finally, Balthasar claims that one receives the full spectrum of the spiritual senses after suffering with Christ, descending into hell, and being resurrected at his side in glory<sup>173</sup>. It is a difficult proposition to understand and to put into practice. Balthasar did not elaborate much on this feature of his doctrine of the spiritual senses. McInroy states that “Balthasar does not develop this feature of his model of the spiritual senses ... Ultimately, however, we are left with more questions than answers on this particular facet of Balthasar’s doctrine of the spiritual senses<sup>174</sup>”. What does it mean to suffer and die with Christ and be resurrected in glory?<sup>175</sup> Paul

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<sup>168</sup> Mark Johnson McInroy, “Perceiving Splendor: The Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics (2009)”. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Divinity, iii.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 176.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 102.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 162.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 160

<sup>175</sup> My writings on the meaning of dying with Christ, going down to hell, and rising in glory are my own speculations on what Balthasar may have meant by this.

wrote “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe ...<sup>176</sup>” and “we know that our old self was crucified with him<sup>177</sup>”. I think what Balthasar meant by “being co-crucified with Christ and descend to hell” is an invitation to let our old self die; the old self that is separated from God and attached to the things of the world.

“At the heart of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics stands the task of perceiving the glory of the divine form through which God is revealed to human beings<sup>178</sup>.” Balthasar urges the perception of form, and this form is composed of both a material and a spiritual dimension. God’s self revelation possesses both a sensory and a super sensory aspect. Therefore, in order to perceive the beauty of the incarnation, a spiritual dimension, experienced by the spiritual senses is necessary.

### The Beauty of the Lord

In his article, “The Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar” Gawronski concludes using Balthasar’s theology that God’s supreme work of art is Jesus: “and here, in the perfect wedding of God with the summit of His creation, man, glory radiates from the Incarnate One, even as it had hovered over the loci of holiness in the Old Testament”<sup>179</sup>. As Incarnate Love, he is not merely one object of beauty among others, but rather the perfection and measure of all worldly beauty<sup>180</sup>.

As mentioned in a previous section, Karl Barth had also a great influence on Balthasar’s theology. At first glance, it appears that Barth dismisses beauty from theological discourse, concluding that: “the concept of the beautiful seems to be a particularly secular one, not at all adapted for introduction into the language of theology, and indeed extremely dangerous”<sup>181</sup>. However, later in his life, Barth decided to incorporate the rhetoric of beauty into the doctrine of God only when seen through the person and work of Christ. Barth claimed that: “Jesus Christ is the form, the beautiful form of the divine being, such that this persuasive and convincing form must necessarily be called the beauty of God”<sup>182</sup>. For Balthasar and Barth, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment and perfection of all earthly beauty<sup>183</sup>.

Why is the beauty of the incarnation important to Balthasar and many other theologians and saints including Augustine? Why is it so central to Balthasar’s theological aesthetic? Why is the experience of the beauty of the incarnation through the senses so vital to our spiritual development? This section will reflect on these three questions.

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<sup>176</sup> Colossians 2:20-23.

<sup>177</sup> Roman 6:6.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 163.

<sup>179</sup> Gawronski, 194.

<sup>180</sup> GL 1, 177.

<sup>181</sup> Stephen M. Garrett, “God’s Beauty-in-Act: An Artful Renewal of Human Imagining.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14, (2012): 459–79. Garrett cites Barth on page 460.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 461.

<sup>183</sup> Balthasar, *GL 1*, pp. 17–23 and 441–62; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992). As explained in Garrett, 465.



The biblical experience of God takes place in the senses, physical and spiritual. In Christ, God appears to us right in the midst of the world's reality. In John 1:14 we read "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's son, full of grace and truth". Jesus uses simple things, bread and wine, fish and oil, water and basic things to convey his message and accomplish his mission. The encounter with the Incarnate Christ necessarily takes place through the senses, "through which alone humanity becomes aware of reality"<sup>184</sup>.

Experiencing beauty, especially divine beauty through the incarnation, has the capacity to solve the following problem about faith. Faith lives in both the objective and subjective realms. Christian faith naturally has a subjective disposition while claiming an objective content. Faith is the appropriation of the mysteries of God and God is infinitely transcendent, which means that he is beyond our capacity to understand. In order to share the Gospel, the Christian must communicate this infinite being in an understandable way, without reducing its mystery. The individual may react to this apparent problem by overemphasizing the objective or the subjective. One can attempt to systematize God, reducing him simply to man's ideas, or insist on the mystery of God, reducing him to an unknowable concept that has no claim on how we should live. On the one hand, man controls who God is, on the other, God is too unknowable to have any hold on us.<sup>185</sup>

D.C. Schindler, leveraging Balthasar's theology, explains how the beauty of the incarnation solves this problem; he said: "Beauty does not bring the infinite down but lifts us up into the mystery. Beauty has the capacity to reach down into our very real flesh with an infinite light."<sup>186</sup> Since the ultimate form of beauty is infinite because God is infinite, it is therefore unable to be absolutely known by humans. However, since the ultimate form of beauty is found in the unchanging nature of God, it has an objective nature. God created man in such a way that he desires to find perceptible forms, and God lovingly gave his Son to mankind so that he could grow in the perception of the ultimate combination of the physical and the eternal, the embodiment of the infinite in the finite.

As we saw earlier, the glory of God appears in history through the person of Jesus Christ. The manifestation of divine revelation is beautiful, attractive, and transformative. In Balthasar's theology, "seeing the form" is not simply passive observation. Seeing is like being caught up in the mystery of divine revelation. It is "the movement of man's whole being away from himself and towards God through Christ, a movement founded on the divine light of grace in the mystery of Christ."<sup>187</sup> In Colossians 1:15 we read "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation". For Christians, Jesus surpasses any other worldly beauty. Roccasalvo argues that there are parallels between our experience of beauty and our response in faith to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the radiant splendor of God in human form, and the light that shines through him is poured out on the senses. In the incarnation, Christ descended into our human flesh to show us the way to beauty, truth, and goodness<sup>188</sup>.

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<sup>184</sup> GL 1, 365.

<sup>185</sup> "Beauty in the Tradition: Hans Urs von Balthasar (D.C. Schindler)" YouTube, uploaded by Hildebrand Project, 12 October 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b26vvB3-97g>, 09:00.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 12:15.

<sup>187</sup> GL 1, 121.

<sup>188</sup> Roccasalvo 57.

Balthasar's work, especially his theology about the beauty of the incarnation, has become a common reference point for discussing the relationship between theology and beauty. However, his constant emphasis on the Glory and beauty of the Lord has been criticized from several angles. One viewpoint of criticism is the Protestant viewpoint.

According to Balthasar, Protestantism, especially in its Lutheran expression, has disregarded the beauty of Christ and adopted a soteriological approach that focuses on our need for justification and the benefits of the salvation brought by Christ<sup>189</sup>. Given the emphasis on justification, interest in the revelation of God's essential Being disappears<sup>190</sup>. Balthasar's emphasis on beauty, especially the beauty of self-giving love, might help rectify the Protestant inclination to promote a heteronomous duty ethic and an understanding of faith as a choice without criteria<sup>191</sup>.

Balthasar articulates the relationship between beauty and goodness in the following way: "In a world without beauty . . . the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out."<sup>192</sup> Ultimately, for Balthasar, those who can no longer relate to beauty lose the ability to love. The fundamental assumption is that in a world where we have lost the ability to recognize beauty, we also lose the ability to hear and respond to God's personal call. The true and the good have no attraction without beauty. Balthasar observes that without a sense of the intrinsic delightfulness of goodness, "Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil."<sup>193</sup> In short, for Balthasar, beauty is the conduit for truth and goodness.

The question that Lee Barrett<sup>194</sup> asks is: can we realistically and practically start with beauty and move toward truth and goodness as Balthasar suggests? If someone is so far away from truth and goodness, for example, as we saw in the previous section, the Nazis concentration camp guards that used to listen to a Schubert symphony prior to executing the prisoners, can their experience of beauty even be an authentic experience? And can this experience really lead the individual or the group toward truth and goodness? Isn't Balthasar oversimplifying the relationship between the three transcendentals, and viewing it in a very utopian way? Truth, beauty, and goodness are abstract concepts that nevertheless correspond to our deepest desires. To separate them and assume that one of them can be the conduit to the other two is to see things in an excessively one-dimensional way. In his essay, Barrett reflects on some of the shortcomings of Balthasar's theological aesthetic and argues that the Protestant approach can provide a correction to Balthasar's theological aesthetic that is in some cases one-dimensional<sup>195</sup>.

First, according to Barrett, the relationship between contemplation, which is a prerequisite for the aesthetic experience, and the intention to do good, which is determined by

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<sup>189</sup> GL 1, 45.

<sup>190</sup> GL 1, 46.

<sup>191</sup> This is based on Lee Barrett's essay "Von Balthasar and Protestant Aesthetics: A Mutually Corrective Conversation". This essay can be found in Oleg V. Bychkov; Jim Fodor. *Theological Aesthetics After von Balthasar (Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts)*. Burlington. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 272, 2008. Kindle. Location 1744. Future references to this essay will be referred to as Barrett.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Barrett, location 1682.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

our will, may be more complex and inconsistent than Balthasar suggests<sup>196</sup>. For some Christians, especially within the Protestant denomination, the duty to do God's will may be presented as an apparent necessity, not as the result of experience and pleasure. The fulfillment of duty brings a sense of satisfaction of an obligation fulfilled or a task well done. This feeling can hardly be identified with Balthasar's pleasure in the glory of the Lord. The accomplishment of duty itself, regardless of the aesthetic experience, can bring certain intrinsic joys.

Second, as Barrett argues<sup>197</sup>, the experience of failing to do God's will, the consequent moral dissatisfaction with oneself, and the yearning for mercy can provide a legitimate basis for a whole type of devotion completely separate from the beauty of the form to which Balthasar often refers. As with Luther, the experience of moral failure can precede any appreciation of the beauty of Love. Therefore, the art that moves individuals to action, self-criticism, and repentance, can play a role in the Christian life quite separately from the delight in the beauty of the Lord. "The exposure of the horrors of war by Callot, Goya, and Picasso, or the social critique of Otto Dix and Francis Bacon may serve a legitimate role in the Christian life rather independent of their capacity to open up Being's luminescence."<sup>198</sup>

The third point Barrett makes is: when we focus solely on the beauty and glory of the Lord, are we not missing an important part of the Christian life and growth path? A life of continual challenge and struggle? If we examine the lives of most of the saints, their journeys were often characterized by deep struggle and pain. According to Balthasar, after contemplating with sincerity and ardor the splendor of God's self-sacrificial love, we humans cannot help but reflect it with joy<sup>199</sup>. Having encountered the beauty of Christ, we then respond to this demonstration of overwhelming love with a greater desire to surrender ourselves entirely. There is no doubt that Balthasar's emphasis on the seductive power of Christ's beauty can serve as a counterweight to Protestant willpower or theories of mechanically irresistible grace. However, the continued focus on the attractive power of Christ's beauty makes it hard to comprehend the growth in the Christian life as an ongoing challenge. In Matthew 16:24 we read "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" The Christian life is not a life free of pain and in constant ecstatic mode. It can be said that pain and struggle are essential to the growth of Christians. Sometimes the ideals of Christianity are more likely to intimidate than to attract, and sometimes their approach demands much spiritual sweat and tears, even a cry of despair and a confession of defeat. As a result, Balthasar may not sufficiently value the dimensions of the distressed moral and spiritual struggle<sup>200</sup>.

The fourth point that Barrett argues is, can the beautiful really be appreciated without the good? And can beauty lead to goodness? As we have seen in the previous section, The leaders who caused the most harm in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were artists and they were fascinated by beauty and aesthetic. Protestant's rigidity toward the good and the desperate need for salvation will prove far more effective than beauty and aesthetic experience in cases where the individual or group has strayed so far from the path of righteousness.

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<sup>196</sup> Barrett, location 1744.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> GL 1, 459.

<sup>200</sup> Barrett, location 1820.

The next point that Barrett makes is that Balthasar views all of creation in a very sacramental way. Looking at all of creation in a sacramental way and showing reverence for all of creation is very powerful, however there are some caveats that we need to be aware of. Sometimes it may be quite appropriate to emphasize the radical distinction between Creator and creature and to encourage a sense of humility, in order to draw attention to the lack of self-sufficiency that humans so often try to hide. Moreover, grace is neither reducible to nature nor totally external to it<sup>201</sup>. Balthasar's model of grace leading nature beyond itself can serve as a corrective to any Protestant attempt to totally alienate natural beauty and detach it from the beauty of God. However, a constant analogical view of earthly and divine beauty could prevent the ability to accept individual creatures as gifts of God with value in themselves, regardless of their function as analogues or vehicles of divine love. In addition, the universe can reveal not only the beauty of creation, but also the power, order, fruitfulness, and creativity. Narrowing all of these divine attributes to the beauty of creation can reduce the many ways in which God's awesome majesty and graciousness is expressed.

To conclude with the Protestant views, the gaps that Balthasar detects in the historical forms of Protestantism are indeed serious shortcomings. However, by unilaterally emphasizing the beauty of the incarnation and the beauty of the cross as the index of all beauty, Balthasar may promote a form of theological simplification that could restrict aesthetic and Christian vision. Balthasar's theological aesthetic may not do justice to the complex and dialectical nature of the Christian life. As Barrett warns us, we must not isolate one experience and make it carry the whole weight of Christianity. To consider only the beauty of the incarnation and make it the central theme of Christianity risks reducing Christianity to a "feel-good" experience and ignoring the other pillars of this great religion<sup>202</sup>.

Although the Protestant point of view seems to me very valid, I think that the beauty of the Lord as described by Balthasar has the power to raise us to new heights. I want to conclude this section but referencing an outstanding historical example of a person who has been impressed with Christ's beauty: the apostle Paul. Through the story of Paul, we can see the three points that were discussed in this section: The perception of beauty through the senses, the embodiment of the infinite in the finite and the transformative power of the beauty of the incarnation. Paul on his way to Damascus had seen the highest beauty, and so "was snatched up into the beauty of Christ"<sup>203</sup>. He loved what he saw with his eyes (beauty was perceived through his senses) and began proclaiming the beauty of the Lord until his death (transformative power of the beauty of the incarnation). As Balthasar said "Such mysticism conveys the notion of having been touched from the outside and from above"<sup>204</sup> (the embodiment of the infinite in the finite).

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<sup>201</sup> Barrett, location 1769.

<sup>202</sup> Barrett, location 1833.

<sup>203</sup> GL 1, 33.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 246.

## The Beauty of the Cross

*The path to freedom is the Cross, which is the real conquest of tragedy; philosophy cannot equal the power of the Cross*<sup>205</sup>

Historically, Christian thinkers have interpreted divine beauty in the light of the cross through two main trajectories: spiritual beauty and moral beauty. In the previous section, I reflected on one of the essential characteristics of Balthasar's theological aesthetic: the beauty of the incarnation. In this section I reflect on another essential characteristic of his theological aesthetic: the beauty of the cross.

In the Johannine tradition, the cross and the glory are one<sup>206</sup>. In the Gospel of John, Jesus showed his power over life and death by laying down his life and taking it up again. For John, the cross and resurrection event are revelatory signs of the unique presence of God incarnate among his people.<sup>207</sup> Outside of the Johannine tradition, the cross also holds a very important place in the life of Christians. For example, in 1 Corinthians 2:2, we read “for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”. “Paul insists that the present significance of Christ, even after his resurrection, consists in nothing other than that he is crucified<sup>208</sup>”. How can the violence of the crucifixion be associated to the beauty of the cross? First, it is important to note that the beauty of the cross cannot be measured by worldly and mundane aesthetic measures. The cross will fail by mundane aesthetics because it is a revelation of absolute beauty<sup>209</sup>. While worldly aesthetics appeals to the harmony and form of the object, the aesthetics of the cross is not one of symmetry, but rather, one that breaks symmetry as divine beauty operates on a higher principle<sup>210</sup>. In Hebrews 2:9 we read “but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death”. Christ’s glory is most prominently revealed in his death and suffering and by implication in his resurrection and ascension<sup>211</sup>.

Balthasar begins by affirming that the cross is beautiful because it is the self-manifestation of God. In doing so, he attempts to reconcile the awfulness of the crucifixion with the beauty of the divine splendor. There is no glory outside the darkness of the cross. He writes that “everything depends on the effects of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and especially touching the Word of Life, all of which culminates with the placing of the fingers in the wound on the side”<sup>212</sup>. For Balthasar, divine beauty culminates in Christ’s kenotic self-surrender at the cross. It is on the cross that the “form of Jesus Christ is most apparent” and most glorious<sup>213</sup>. The beauty of the cross has multiple dimensions. Let’s examine a few.

First, the beauty of the cross is expressed in its solidarity with the poor and the lonely. By dying a horrible and lonely death on the cross, Christ stands in solidarity with the abandoned,

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<sup>205</sup> Patitsas, location 1145.

<sup>206</sup> Gawronski, 194.

<sup>207</sup> Van der Watt, J G. (Jan Gabriël). “The Cross/Resurrection-Events in the Gospel of John with Special Emphasis on the Confession of Thomas (20:28).” *Neotestamentica* 37, (2003): 123–41, 124.

<sup>208</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 2039. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:2.

<sup>209</sup> Stephen M. Fields, “The Beauty of the Ugly: Balthasar, the Crucifixion, Analogy and God.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, (2007): 180.

<sup>210</sup> Gawronski, 202.

<sup>211</sup> Garrett, 468.

<sup>212</sup> GL 1, 313.

<sup>213</sup> Vasko, 14.

absorbing their sin and also embracing their loneliness and isolation. Jesus hangs from the cross stripped of his clothes, his dignity, his possessions, his power, and his strength. This self-emptying, this solidarity with the lowly, is really very beautiful, and reveals the divine love that animates the universe<sup>214</sup>. The crucified Christ is one with the abandoned, the oppressed, the despised, the powerless, the wretched and the outlaws. He has taken on their nakedness, their vulnerability, their hunger, their illness, and their shame.

Second, the beauty of the cross is both revelatory and redemptive. This interpretation of divine beauty has real implications for the life of the faithful and is not only a theoretical and abstract concept. The spiritual beauty of God is not a remote idea. For Augustine<sup>215</sup>, the suffering and death of Christ on the cross is the ultimate and most perfect revelation of love. This love does not only encourage Christians to confess their sins and to turn from sin to righteousness but is also a personal experience of God's love and the desire to praise God's love. By imitating Christ in faith and love, the Christian too becomes beautiful and partakes in the beauty of the divine. In this context, the beauty of Christ redeems all ugliness by transforming humanity<sup>216</sup>.

Finally, trinitarian love is the ultimate and absolute form of harmony and unity, being a symmetry not of objects but of the will and love of the three persons. Love within the Godhead is a free gift of self. The father gives Himself totally to the Son; in John 3:35 we read "The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands" and in John 17:24 we read "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world". Likewise, the Son gives Himself totally to the Father; in John 17:10 we read, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine and I have been glorified in them". The beauty of the cross is the self-sacrificing gift of Jesus. Jesus' self-giving demonstrates that the beauty of love is to give oneself unconditionally and without limit<sup>217</sup>.

To know the generous love of the Trinity, Christians must come and die with Jesus, and thus rise with him and know his beauty. At the heart of beauty, both in its nature and in its perception, is Jesus' most repeated words that we read in Luke, 17:33: "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it". Self-giving life is the deepest reality of all and the most beautiful<sup>218</sup>.

The beauty of the cross as articulated by Balthasar has also been the subject of criticism. In the remainder of this section, I explore some critiques of Balthasar's theological aesthetics from a feminist hermeneutic. Elisabeth Vasko said: "Adopting a framework in which divine beauty is identified with crucified love is potentially dangerous ... We must ask: how do claims surrounding the beauty of the cross inform the praxis of Christian faith, particularly for women? This is a critical task for feminist theologies, as both aesthetics and the cross have been used to legitimate and sanctify the silencing and oppression of women<sup>219</sup>".

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<sup>214</sup> GL 1, 611-616.

<sup>215</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. John Henry Parker (London: Oxford, 1848), 229-230. As explained in Vasko, 16.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>217</sup> Roccasalvo, 11.

<sup>218</sup> De Bruyn, section: Beauty's Definition: What About the Cross?

<sup>219</sup> Vasko, 28-29.

According to Vasko, from a feminist hermeneutical perspective, the greatest criticism of Balthasar's theological aesthetics is the central emphasis on the beauty of the cross. A range of feminist and feminist theologians have been criticizing models of atonement theology that make Christ's pain and death the place of salvation<sup>220</sup>. Balthasar's theological dramatic narrative provides us with a model of redemption that not only values suffering, self-denial, and obedient love, but also puts these virtues into an aesthetic setting. When the suffering and death of Christ is so exalted, it can lead to an acceptance of innocent death and suffering, making it acceptable, even praiseworthy<sup>221</sup>. Suffering does not necessarily result in a higher good. This is particularly true in circumstances marked by extreme inequalities. For example, in the midst of socially and sexually abusive relationships, claims about the redeeming character of suffering only strengthen the patterns of abuse. Based on her work with abused women, Sarah Bentley emphasizes that many women "will persist in returning to increasingly dangerous relationships citing this very model of Christian love as 'turning the other cheek' or 'following Jesus' example"<sup>222</sup>.

The second criticism of Balthasar's aesthetic and Theo drama from a feminist hermeneutics is the passivity that woman plays in this drama. The language of glory is often linked to the language of war. Vasko asserts that the woman is never the actor of the drama; she is only a pawn in a duel between two men: Christ and Adam<sup>223</sup>. In his dramatic and aesthetic interpretation of salvation history, Balthasar focuses his gaze on the cross of Christ and asks the reader to do the same. Vasko then asks the question, "what would the drama of redemption look like if we turn our gaze to those standing at the foot of the cross<sup>224</sup>"? In other words, what would the drama of redemption look like if women had an active role in it? There's an international Catholic movement "Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici", which seeks to encourage the definition of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as "Co-redemptrix". This movement advocates Mary's unique participation in the redemption accomplished by Jesus, in particular the fact that she freely consented to give life to the Redeemer, which means sharing her life, suffering and death, which were redemptive for the world.

In addition to the role of the feminine in the drama of redemption, Vasko also points out the damage that can be done to society, especially to women, when God is mentioned only in patriarchal language. God is neither male nor female as God transcends gender, but God is most often evoked in masculine language. Vasko states: "The exclusive and literal use of patriarchal language for God not only justifies the dominance of men by identifying patterns of "patriarchal headship" as God-like, but it also diminishes the dignity of women psychologically and socially by setting up an "unconscious dynamic that alienates women from their own goodness and power. When male imagery for God is used exclusively and literally, women have to abstract themselves from their "concrete, bodily, identity"<sup>225</sup>".

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<sup>220</sup> Rosemary Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross for the Sake of Subjectivity," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 93. Referenced in Vasko, 131.

<sup>221</sup> Vasko, 31.

<sup>222</sup> Sarah Bentley, "Bringing Justice Home: The Christian Challenge of the Battered Women's Movement for Christian Social Ethics," in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, eds. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 155. As explained in Vasko, 132.

<sup>223</sup> Vasko, 140.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Vasko, 151.

Over the past 2000 years, God has been portrayed primarily through divine masculinity, however, the divine feminine is very present in Jewish and Christian literature and had incredibly positive characteristics in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Women played a major role in the ministry of Jesus and of Paul. The early Jesus movement was very supportive of women. Then, as Christianity spread throughout the Greco-Roman Empire, the role of women and the role of the divine feminine was discredited and there was a drive to suppress the divine feminine to reduce the place of the feminine in the Christian movement. For Balthasar, the cross stands as a symbol of the *kenosis* of patriarchy, as the “self-emptying of male dominating power in favor of a new humanity”<sup>226</sup>. However, Vasko states that “in uttering female symbols into speech about divine mystery, we open up the possibility of recovering the dignity of women and rediscovering the beauty of the divine mystery”<sup>227</sup>. This is not to suggest that female imagery of God should replace male imagery. But the language used to refer to God should be used in both genders, for example by naming God as she in our prayer, religious practice, and theology. This will open up new possibilities for thinking about God that may not have been apparent to us previously. Feminine metaphors of God illuminate the depths of divine glory and, in turn, human flourishing. Given the way in which Jesus' masculinity has been elevated to the norm of Christ-like identity, the expression of feminine metaphors for the divine becomes an essential task in re-shaping the vision of Christian discipleship.

In sum, from a feminist perspective, if theological aesthetics is to be relevant to theology today, it must address the question of the incarnation and the cross in a way that is inclusive of the full development of both genders. The challenge of the beauty of the cross as developed by Balthasar lies in its gender favoritism and male centrality. Theologians like Rebecca Parker and Joanne Carlson Brown<sup>228</sup> challenge the significance of the symbol of the cross for feminist theology. They are responding to an abuse of power and authority that has been carried on in theological circles. In sum, the patriarchal naming of sin and redemption has contributed to the suppression of women's full subjectivity and, at times, has been used to legitimize violence against them. Sexism is a serious theological issue<sup>229</sup>.

In the past 100 years, a lot of progress has been made to recognize the divine feminine as an important expression of God. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared that the Assumption of Mary into Heaven was to be given its honour and respect, so much so that it became a doctrine of the Catholic Church. Carl Gustav Jung considered this event to be the most important religious event since the Reformation. Jung labeled it as a symbolic movement in the Catholic Church towards the acceptance of the feminine<sup>230</sup>. I think even to this day, God is still being portrayed mostly by divine masculinity traits, however more and more people are recognizing the feminine characteristics of God. I believe the masculine and the feminine will eventually come into balance.

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<sup>226</sup> Vasko, 164.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown, and Rebecca Parker. “For God So Loved the World?” In *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Source Book*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune, 36-59. New York: Continuum, 1995. As cited in Vasko, 153.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> See Paul Bishop, *Jung's Answer to Job: A Commentary* (London: Brunner-Routledge, 2002); and Ann Conrad Lammers and Adrian Cunningham, eds., *The Jung-White Letters*, Philemon Series (London: Routledge, 2007).



## Conclusion

In this chapter we explored one of the essential characteristics of Balthasar's theological aesthetic: the beauty of the incarnation. We started this chapter by exploring the importance of the spiritual senses and how according to Balthasar, the corporeal senses and the spiritual senses work together to perceive the beauty of the incarnation. The perception of the beauty of God is composed of both a material and a spiritual dimension, therefore, in order to perceive God's beauty, our senses play a central role. Unlike the Patristic Fathers, Balthasar affirms that the spiritual senses are not reserved for a few but are available to all as a grace from God and a result of devotional practices.

We then explored the beauty of Christ and how for Balthasar, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment and perfection of all beauty, including earthly beauty. The experience of divine beauty through the incarnation allows Christians to communicate the Gospel without diminishing the infinity and mystery of God, while allowing God to be experienced in a perceptible way.

Finally, we saw how divine beauty culminates in Christ's kenotic self-surrender at the cross. There are many elements that make the cross so beautiful; I think the most important is that it is on the cross that we encounter divine mercy.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have reflected on the importance of beauty and how beauty can serve as a catalyst for an encounter with God. I have explained that beauty can be understood as God's reflection on God's creation and that the ultimate form of beauty can be found in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Since beauty is the reflection of God on God's creation, then beauty can be found everywhere, and many things in creation can become a catalyst for a mystical encounter with God. Beauty can be found in nature, the microcosm, the macrocosm, and anything in between; it can be found in all forms of art; it can be found in religious symbols and rituals including scripture, devotional music, church architecture, painting, liturgy, and many other forms.

As we have seen, the power of beauty lies in its transformative force. True beauty, when experienced with an open mind and heart, can lead to a very profound transformation. For beauty to be experienced, it must be perceived by our senses and the perception of beauty varies greatly from person to person. I have covered how the perception of beauty can be a skill that can be learned by anyone. Beauty can be a transformative force in our daily lives, but I also showed how the ultimate power of beauty is the manner in which it can lead to an authentic and deep relationship with God.

Beauty can awaken wonder, returning us to a childlike way of exploring the world. Children are very connected to the spiritual world and are often in such a state of wonder. Beauty can bring us back to that place of infinite possibility, the place of creation, the place of not knowing and so accepting uncertainty, the place of love, abundance, discovery, and expansion. As we have also seen in this thesis, beauty and art can break down our rigid beliefs that are often an obstacle to an encounter with God.

Like everything in life, beauty, despite its positive transformative force, can also be used as a force of darkness. When beauty does not point to something greater than itself, it can become dangerous and destructive. When the artist seeks to glorify himself and thirsts for power and greed, then beauty can lose its purity and become corrupted. When the pursuit of beauty becomes an end in itself and not a means to something transcendental, then instead of transforming the individual into a being of love, created in God's image, beauty will become a force that will transform the individual into a self-centered being and an agent of darkness. In this thesis, I covered the importance of keeping beauty in balance with truth and goodness. Since beauty can easily be linked to passion, I covered how temperance, fortitude, order, and surprise are elements that are always needed to guard against the dark side of beauty.

This thesis was centered primarily on the theological aesthetic of Hans Urs von Balthasar. I think the Balthasarian approach is important because we live in a time where there is a lot of skepticism and relativism about the true and the good. The Balthasarian approach begins with the radiant, the splendid, the luminous, the beautiful. The splendid then leads us to the true and the good and a deep encounter with God.

The final chapter addresses the question "Can God be seen in form or is God beyond form?". In chapter 3, I argued that if beauty is God's reflection on God's creation and if Jesus is God incarnate, then Jesus is the supreme form of beauty perceptible to humanity. In that manner, God can be perceived through the form via the incarnation in Jesus Christ. The beauty of the incarnation is not just an abstract concept to be used only in the liturgy and in religious settings.

The beauty of the incarnation is the most perceptible beauty of God that is available for everyone. But in order to perceive that beauty, our spiritual senses need to be developed. As we have seen in this thesis, like our physical senses, Balthasar argues that our spiritual senses can be trained to perceive spiritual beauty. Finally, we have seen how divine beauty culminates in the kenotic self-sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This is also an essential characteristic of Balthasar's theological aesthetics. The cross is beautiful in many ways. It is the most profound manifestation of the scripture verse: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends<sup>231</sup>". Jesus gave his life for the sake of humanity in its entirety. It is on the cross that the "form of Jesus Christ is most apparent" and most glorious<sup>232</sup>. It is therefore on the cross that the beauty of God is the most apparent and the most tangible.

Balthasar's work has become a common reference point for discussing the relationship between theology and beauty. However, its continued relevance to theological aesthetics has been criticized from several angles. In this thesis, I have addressed two of Balthasar's critics, the Protestant view, and the feminist view. The Protestant point of view asks the following questions: "Can we realistically and practically begin with beauty and move toward truth and goodness as Balthasar suggests? Doesn't Balthasar oversimplify the relationship between the three transcendentals: beauty, truth, and goodness, and view it in a very utopian way?" For some Christians, especially Protestants, the duty to do God's will can be presented as an apparent necessity and can hardly be identified with Balthasar's pleasure for the glory of the Lord.

The greatest critique of Balthasar's theological aesthetics from a feminist perspective is its central emphasis on the beauty of the cross. As we have seen, some feminist theologians criticize models of atonement theology that make Christ's pain and death the locus of salvation because it sanctifies suffering and can, in some cases, justify the oppression and suffering of women. From a feminist perspective, if theological aesthetics is to be relevant to theology today, it must address the question of the incarnation and the cross in a way that is inclusive of the full development of both genders. The challenge of the beauty of the cross as developed by Balthasar lies in its gender favoritism and male centrality.

This thesis has answered many of the questions I had and has allowed me to gain a lot of new insights. But it also left me with several unanswered questions that may require further research. The most important insight I have gained is the realization that the ultimate form of beauty lies in the incarnation and the greatest manifestation of beauty is the cross.

There are several aspects of the incarnation that have not been addressed in this thesis and will need to be examined in greater depth. I have addressed the beauty of the cross, but not the beauty of the annunciation, the beauty of the resurrection or the beauty of the ascension. Breaking down the incarnation into parts, from the annunciation to the ascension of Jesus, and analyzing the beauty of each part fascinates me and deserves further research.

In this thesis, the beauty of the incarnation has been examined primarily from a Christian hermeneutics perspective, leveraging only Christian theologians. I believe that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ came for the good of all mankind, not only for those who adhere to the Christian religion. It will be interesting to explore the beauty of the incarnation from different

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<sup>231</sup> John 15:13.

<sup>232</sup> Vasko, 14.

viewpoints. Can people who adhere to a religion other than Christianity perceive and experience the beauty of the incarnation?

I have explored the spiritual senses and how it is through the spiritual senses that humans can perceive the beauty of the incarnation. The Balthasarian approach claims that being more in touch with the spiritual senses is something that can be acquired by everyone, but how? As we have seen, Balthasar was very much influenced by Ignatius of Loyola, and I wonder if Ignatius' spiritual exercises can be very beneficial in sharpening our spiritual senses. The relationship between Ignatius' exercises and the spiritual senses is an interest of mine that was ignited by this thesis and could be a topic for further research. What other means are available to help us sharpen our spiritual senses?

I explored the incarnation and the beauty of the incarnation from a masculine perspective. Is it possible to have a more gender-neutral approach when studying, perceiving, and experiencing the incarnation? What role did women have in the story of the incarnation and redemption?

Finally, this thesis stated the beauty of the incarnation and the importance of it. I believe that it is in the contemplation of Jesus' life, the contemplation of his Word and especially the contemplation of his death and resurrection that one can experience the most amazing mystical encounter.

Contemplating beauty can lead to a powerful mystical encounter and contemplating Christ can lead to the most amazing mystical encounter. It opens the flood of grace, and one will be “made capable of perceiving the forms of existence with awe.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> GL 1, 24.

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