

Beauty at the Heart of Everything

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

Our family recently had an overnight visit from a Colombian priest. Fr. Antonio was in town visiting a seminarian friend and unexpectedly needed a place to stay. When he called to ask for our hospitality, we were happy to oblige.

I must admit that when I got the call, I panicked a bit. The house was a mess and there was nothing but a bit of tomato sauce in the refrigerator for dinner. My husband was working late, the kids had homework assignments and our toddler was cranky and overtired. Right before the priest arrived, we scrambled around getting things as ordered as we could. But the filthy family room rug and the broken pantry door were heavy on my mind when the doorbe-

SEEING BEAUTY

Throughout the evening, Fr. Antonio smiled into our eyes and started listening intently to our conversations. He marveled at our peaceful neighborhood and savored the simple meal we offered him. Oh, I'm sure he saw the dirty rug and the broken door, the excess of our suburban lifestyle, the way the kids and I occasionally sniped at each other. Yet even in the midst of this ugliness, he saw our whole, truly blessed, life in its totality.

In our home that night, Fr. Antonio recognized something infinitely beautiful. As a lover of Jesus Christ, he was able to see in us—and in all we'd been given—the presence of the One he loved.

"We know [Christ] will appear suddenly and blissfully to all his lovers," observed Blessed Julian of Norwich, "for his working is secret, yet he will be

perceived...!" Recognizing his mysterious Presence is the secret to seeing infinite beauty in every aspect of reality.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

The 20th century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once wrote that the image and likeness of God is most obvious in the human person when he or she is in love. When we are in love, there is nothing more attractive to us than things that remind us of our Beloved. Suddenly, songs, places, expressions—a thousand things—are cherished in a new way when they become linked to this person who has become everything.

In exactly the same way, the lover of Jesus Christ

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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cherishes the Lord's link to every person, event and circumstance. These lovers see his beauty everywhere. "The soul which has been fully illumined by the unspeakable beauty of the glory shining on the countenance of Christ overflows with the Holy Spirit," said Macarius the Great, "It is all eye, all light, all countenance."

The greatest saints of the Church saw beauty as a tangible sign of the Lord's presence in all of reality—from the most glorious sunset to the anguished face of a leper. How did they get there? And why do so many miss the connection between the beauty in their everyday lives and the Presence of a Lord who lives and loves us constantly?

"From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator," notes Pope John Paul II, but "if human beings with their intelligence fail to recognize God as Creator of all, it is not because they lack the means to do so, but because their free will and their sinfulness place an impediment in the way" (*Faith and Reason* #19).

When we place an "impediment" between ourselves and the Lord, when we do not see his hand in the *creation immediately* surrounding us, all we see is a fallen, ugly world.

THE FOG THAT IMPEDES

The Pope says that the central tragedy of our culture is the eclipse of the sense of God in relationship to each human person. "Once all reference to God has been removed, it is not surprising that the meaning of everything else becomes profoundly distorted," he observes (*The Gospel of Life*, #21). Because we can no longer see the

beauty of the Lord's Presence in everything we've been given, life becomes enveloped in a kind of fog that impedes our ability to see past our selves.

It is easy to locate this fog in a culture that increasingly focuses on the grotesque, hopeless and chaotic. Especially in the arts, many creative people insist that this ugliness is the "real world"; it is the truth. Yet, it's a narrow world-view without redemption. Sadly, this cultural focus on the ugly and base has become so prevalent in recent decades that any true expression of beauty and transcendence is often mocked as an unattainable dream, a sentimental look at the past, or a disembodied spirituality that rejects everything that is fully human.

Yet while we can see the poverty of this cultural view, are we still missing how this same fog seeps under the doors of our hearts, into our homes, neighborhoods and workplaces? Do we, too, fail to see the Lord's beauty in the midst of personal trials, family and neighborhood squabbles, work troubles, sickness, and even death? Do we, too, dismiss the religious people we know for a perception of the Lord's beauty that seems unattainable, sentimental or disembodied?

GIFT OF GRACE

True lovers of Jesus Christ do not shirk from the ugliness of the fallen world. Instead they see the beauty of the Lord's redemption at the heart of all of reality. How do they do this? It is sheer grace—a gift from the One they love—received through a life of openness in his Church.

Let us ask our Blessed Mother, the woman full of grace, for the help to respond to the Lord's Presence in our lives. "When God sees that we are prepared to receive

his grace, his generous goodness is ready to give us the gift that will give us his likeness," Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity once wrote. "Our aptitude for receiving his grace depends on the inner integrity with which we move towards him."

When this happens, we will begin to see the full beauty of every aspect of life around us with the eyes of a people in love. ❖

Life After Sunday

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A Beautiful Image and Likeness

The sacramental life of the Church is where we receive the gift of grace to participate in the fullness of the Lord's beauty. "Grace is *favor*," says the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1996), "*the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and eternal life.*"

The Lord's desire to enfold us into his beautiful life—for no reason other than gratuitous love—is a fact that never ceased to amaze his saints. "He desires nothing for himself, since he has no need," marveled St. John of the Cross. Yet, through the personal gift of sheer grace, the Creator calls each of us to be transformed into his image and likeness—all truth, all goodness, all beauty.

TRANSFORMING OUR DISFIGURATION

The life of the Church provides everything we need for this transformation. Baptism washes

us clean from disfiguring original sin. It makes of us vessels able to receive grace from the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These acts of Christ through the Church transform us—since they are the events where he pours his life and love into our



hearts. There, he begins to interiorly convert our finite sinful humanity into an immortal body and soul of beauty and light. But only if we allow it! If we stay away from Mass and Penance, we cannot receive the fullness of the grace he offers.

In her classic work *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Avila compares the soul to a mansion with many antechambers. In the center, dwells the Lord, all beauty and light, like "a very clear crystal." But, she insists, the transforming beauty of his Presence will be completely obscured if we do not allow him to draw us into union with him by grace.

St. Teresa says that our free decision to remain in sin will keep us stuck outside the mansion, living a dark, unsettled life, with-

Getting There

Through the life of the Church, grace moves us to a deeper understanding of how utterly dependent we are on the Lord to transform us into the person we were destined to be. "If up to now, a person has been more or less contented with himself, the time for that is over," wrote St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein). "He will do what he can to change the unpleasant things he finds in himself, but he will discover quite a bit that can't be called beautiful and yet will be nearly impossible to change. As a result, he will slowly become small and humble, increasingly patient and tolerant towards the specks in his brothers' eyes, now that he has so much trouble with the beam in his own. Eventually, he'll be able to look at himself in the unblinking light of the divine Presence, and learn to entrust himself to the power of the divine mercy." ❖

out ever realizing the glorious Attraction who radiates within. "O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ!" she urges. "Surely, if you understand your own natures, it is impossible that you will not strive to remove the pitch which blackens the crystal."

On Sunday, we ask the Lord to restore the original beauty intended for each human person by pouring his transforming grace into our hearts. Through the full reception of his Body and Blood—unimpeded by the ugliness of sin—let us ask him to transform our hearts, minds, bodies and souls into his image and likeness in the world. ❖

A Transforming Beauty

"O ineffable love, although in your light, you saw all the sins that your creature would commit against your infinite goodness, you acted as if you did not see. Instead you kept your eye fixed upon the beauty of your creature with whom you fell in love, as if you were mad and inebriated with love, and through love you drew her from your self and gave her being in your image and likeness."
—St. Catherine of Siena ❖

Filling the Beauty Within

BY JOHN CAPOBIANCO

One enormous challenge of parenthood is helping our children see and appreciate the full beauty—including the interior beauty—of everyone they encounter, especially siblings! For my wife and I, this challenge is complicated by the fact that our children tend to follow and imitate what we do (especially our bad habits), and strategically ignore what we say. When I rant and rave about some apparently insignificant flaw that they have developed (say, dropping their shoes, books, jackets and toys right inside the door so that I trip every time I walk in the house), I repeatedly teach them by my hot words to focus on those flaws. The cumulative effect of such a parenting strategy can cloud our children with an inability to see anything beautiful.

IS THE GLASS HALF FULL?

So is this merely a question of our kids picking up our positive or negative views of life? If we look at the glass half full, will they also? I think teaching our children to recognize the full beauty of themselves and others is a much more subtle art. First, recognizing there is a *glass*, not to mention how much it contains, is a major achievement. How do you see the full size of the “glass” when it comes to seeing the full beauty of persons you know? Can you see the fullness of their life? Can you see their unique destiny? The capacity to see this “glass” is, in fact, an amazing gift. Imagine how Mary felt when Simeon greeted her with his prophetic words

about the “glass” of her life. I’m sure she heard quite enough after he said “a sword shall pierce your heart” (Luke 2:35). Yet to hear and see the entirety of one’s life—to see one’s full destiny laid out—is an amazingly beautiful gift to receive. For Mary, the encounter with Simeon, confirmed what she already knew, yet still needed to ponder in her heart and bring to fulfillment in this world.

As a parent, do you see the whole glass of your child’s life? Can you help them ponder the glorious destiny the Lord has in store for each one? You can, if you see your children through the eyes of Christ.

DO YOU FILL THE GLASS LIKE A SERVANT?

Christ helps us look at others so we can see and help fulfill the glory of their destiny to be one with him. By asking us to be the servants of the people in our lives, Christ places us in a position to see not only the size and present contents of each glass, but also to fill it to the brim through the power of his love. It is one thing for us to look at a glass, see it half empty (or half full for that mat-



ter), and do nothing. It is quite another to be standing by with a pitcher of water—like a servant—ready to replace everything that is incomplete. For some, this may

seem like a burden. For those who know and love Jesus Christ, however, this is what makes him so beautiful. The posture of being his servant changes everything. We are ready to serve, not because we

GETTING THERE

Teaching children to recognize the full beauty of their peers is an important part of bringing them up in a life with Christ in his Church. While the culture tells them to dismiss people whose interests or values they do not share, the Church asks them to see the divine destiny of each human person linked to Jesus Christ. With this vision of life, kids can recognize the intrinsic beauty of the entire “glass” of each person in their lives. ❖

enjoy lowly service, but because we know by faith that he will bring to fulfillment everything that is incomplete. To be standing by him—holding his pitcher of living water—ready to fill every glass he shows you, is a stunningly beautiful participation in his divine life lived here and now. It is a wonderful gift, an amazing privilege to live knowing him.

Lately, when I slowly open the door to my house, I don’t trip and yell. I stop short, gather my composure, reach down and pick up the books or shoes or jackets or toys and place them where they belong. Then the following morning, when I hear, “Dad, I can’t find my shoes!” I simply say, “Did you check your closet?” Some things take an eternity to fulfill, but filling the beauty with-in begins here and now. ❖

Living the Beatitudes

Sometimes, it is difficult to find any beauty in desperate personal circumstances. Cancer, mental illness, alcoholism, loss from natural disasters, violence, financial worries, habitual sin and other deep sorrows in family life can be a constant source of pain and heartache.

Yet, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ gave us the guidelines for recognizing his beauty in even these saddest of human events. “Poor in spirit,” completely dependent on him for everything, we can go to the depths of human sickness, sorrow and despair and still experience the “kingdom of heaven” right now. “Clean of heart,” we can “see God,” his living Presence at work in every person, event and circumstance.

A CRY OF THE HEART

How do we get better at this? “Pray always without becoming weary,” the Lord urged his loved ones (Luke 18:1).



St. Therese of Lisieux called personal prayer “a cry of the heart.”

Sometimes, this cry is the only comfort we can find in times of true desperation. Yet, there is beauty even here. A cry of the heart is a cry

to what Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Giussani calls the “hidden companionship” of God, the only One who can satisfy our longings for love, security and peace. Through prayer, the beauty of his living Presence is waiting to be recognized—even in the midst of our ugliest personal circumstances. ❖

THE BEATITUDES

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.
- Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of God.
- Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:3-12)

MOTHER TERESA ALWAYS SAW BEAUTY

When I was a member of the Board of bishops who serve on Catholic Relief Services (CRS), I had the privilege to go to Calcutta in 1987 to visit the Ministry of Service in Calcutta that CRS had sponsored for Mother Teresa for many years. I saw first hand the extraordinary love this religious woman had for everyone.



Mother always encouraged people to love others. One of the sisters told me about the great soup kettle Mother had in the courtyard at their house. The poor brought the ingredients for the soup. Maybe a carrot, a piece of potato, something. The richness depended on how many people contributed.

Each afternoon, they would line up to get that hot nourishment. Mother Teresa usually had the youngest nun ladle out the soup. The poor came with all kinds of containers, tin cans, jars, bowls, cups, anything.

One day, a small boy came up with a tin can and sister filled it. The nun noticed that the boy walked half way down the alley—stopped and poured half of the soup into the bowl of an old lady. Mother Teresa was present, as usual. That evening the young sister asked Mother Teresa if she had seen what the boy did. Mother said she had. The young sister said, “Wasn’t that too bad, if he had brought me the lady’s bowl, I would have filled both her bowl and his tin can.” Mother Teresa said, “Sister, you missed a wonderful lesson. You gave the boy from an abundant kettle; he gave half of all he had in this world. Which was the greater? Never hinder anyone from showing their love for those in need.” —Bishop Robert Mulvey, Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island ❖



A Beautiful Place

When we take our parish youth group on retreat, we go to a beautiful place in the Maryland countryside called Our Lady of Mattaponi. Although it is the youth retreat center for the whole Archdiocese of Washington, “Mattaponi” is deeply connected to the people in our parish—many of whom are continually responsible for its growth and beauty.

Mattaponi is run by a priest who was an associate at our parish during the 1970s. His gift was—and continues to be—working with young people. During his assignment with us, Father Robert Mordino ran one of the most successful youth groups in the Archdiocese, so successful, in fact, that James Cardinal Hickey put him in charge of plans for a new retreat center for all the young people in his flock.

Although Our Lady of Mattaponi was bought and built as an Archdiocesan project, the

love and gifts of the people who personally embraced the beautiful vision of the Cardinal and Fr. Mordino, made it into the small jewel it is today.

GOOD STEWARDS

Along with many others in the Archdiocese, the people of our parish stewarded their many gifts of time, talent and treasure to help build Our Lady of Mattaponi Retreat Center. The chapel is filled with beautiful statues, altar linens, candle holders and stained glass windows. Small brass plates throughout the place chronicle the names of many families in the parish youth group during Fr. Mordino’s days at St. John’s. The fullness of their stewardship has been an inspired response to the gift of this generous priest at a pivotal time in their lives.

Today, his former “teens” and their children still steward their gifts at Mattaponi doing carpentry work, roofing, landscaping, plumbing, cleaning and keeping the physical plant up to code. Each year at the fundraising bazaar, our parishioners staff the booths, selling crafts and foods they have spent countless hours making by hand. Happily, the Lord has blessed Fr. Mordino with additional volunteers and supporters from neighboring parishes, as well. From among these groups are many young people and adults

BEAUTIFUL ART

“Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”—Pope John Paul II, Jubilee Letter to Artists, #10 ❖



PIETA BY MICHAELANGELO

who also find in Mattaponi a “spiritual home.”

Given all of this outpouring over the years, it is no surprise that today our St. John’s parish retreats for the children of Fr. Mordino’s “teens” are weekends of tremendous grace. The beauty of the surroundings is a manifestation of the interior beauty of a Presence who dwells there both in the heart of a wonderful priest and in the golden tabernacle donated by a parish family. The original stewardship of Fr. Mordino, the outpouring of his gifts for our parish youth group, has continued in his “teenage children,” yielding abundant fruit and a startling beauty. —MBN ❖

GETTING THERE

The beauty of our architecture, statuary, artwork and music can greatly enrich our experience of the Lord’s Presence in parish life. But, what happens when parishioners and/or their priests have differing views of aesthetic beauty? Sometimes, we need to humble ourselves and accept the beauty that only other parishioners can see! This gracious “yield to the other” can be a path the Lord uses to create the most profound beauty of all: interior union among persons. “We must forget [the self], abandon it, and when the soul has made this break, when it is free from all that, the King is enamored of its beauty,” instructed Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity. “For beauty is unity, at least it is the unity of God!” ❖

Stewards of His Beauty

The gift you have received, give as a gift,” Christ told his disciples (Matt 10:8), as he sent them out into the world. This gift is the Presence of Christ, his glorious image and likeness living in you.

The ability to see the beauty in every person, event and situation is a great gift of Christian faith, hope and love. It is an embrace of all of reality that brings a glimpse of joy into the lives of people who are still enveloped in a dull fog of ugliness, insecurity and despair.

How can we bring his stunning beauty into the world? By living like men and women in love. Not just any love, but Christ’s love, the Love that transforms suffering into intimate passion, the Love that notices everything and seeks to bring it all to fulfillment. By bringing the startling beauty of Christ’s mysterious Presence to people who do not know him, the Christian becomes a great steward of eternal life for the least among us. Who are these “least”? Those who do not know

the full beauty of Jesus Christ. “The Christian who bears the image of Christ in his heart,” observed theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, “will recognize the same features of Christ in his suffering brothers and sisters.”

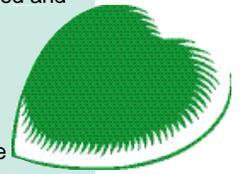
THE RELIEF OF SUFFERING

How can you steward the gift of your life with Christ to the “suffering brothers and sisters” in your world? Bring the full vision of human life to people who have never lifted up their eyes and hearts to the One for whom they are destined. Clinging to Christ, the Christian not only sees the beauty of life in all its glory, but recognizes the real needs of those who are suffering, and seeks to fill up what is injured, unfulfilled or incomplete.

“The realist in our time, contrary to currently popular opinion, is not the pragmatist, the cynic, or the utilitarian, but the saint,” writes Dr. David L. Schindler, editor of *Communio*. “It is the saint, that is, the lover, who

PRAYER TO OUR LADY

Blessed Lady, sky and stars, earth and rivers, day and night, everything that is subject to the power or use of man, rejoice that through you they are in some sense restored to their lost beauty and are endowed with new grace. The world, contrary to its true destiny, was corrupted and tainted by the actions of men. Now all creation has been restored to life and rejoices that it is controlled and given splendor by those who believe in God. —St. Anselm of Canterbury ❖



alone sees the depths of meaning and goodness in what is given— sees the world as it most truly is: mysterious gift. Only the lover sees the world as it truly is, because the first, last and deepest word about the world is that it is beautiful.”

A real steward embraces this beautiful gift in all of its reality and transforms it through the love of Christ into something just a little more beautiful than how it was found. ❖

GETTING THERE...

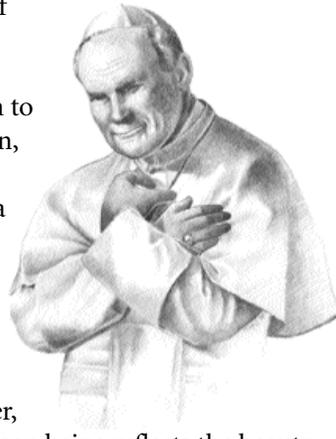
For a long time, sociologists have noticed the correspondence between an ugly environment and a suffering people. Broken windows lead to graffiti, trash, more broken windows and ultimately crime. Physical properties reflect the reality that the people who live in them cannot care for them—probably because they are not being cared for themselves. Sometimes, just one small sign of beauty can bring hope to the people who live there, whether it be fresh paint, a vegetable garden or a swept and cleaned vacant lot. As Christians, it is our privilege to bring the Lord’s beauty to the unkempt buildings and spaces in our neighborhoods. The Catholic HEART Workcamp does just that in communities all over the United States and now in the Caribbean. This week-long program helps young people “revitalize communities and beautify homes of the elderly, disabled and those who cannot afford needed repairs.” For more information on this work of grace, call (407) 678-0073 or visit www.heartworkcamp.com. ❖



FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

A Pope Who Sees This Beauty

Since the beginning of his papacy, John Paul II has put Jesus Christ at the center of every aspect of human culture. It is Jesus Christ, the pope tells us, who reveals man to himself. Every event, every sign, every face for this pope are reflections of the Presence of a great Mystery who lives, moves and offers himself everyday as “gift.” Beauty and gift are inseparable. Beauty is being as gift, existence as gift. Clinging to the Blessed Mother, who more than any other human being reflects the beauty of this gift, Pope John Paul II can say with certainty:



“It is Jesus [who] you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be grounded down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal.”

May we see the Beauty of God’s grace in the wonders of creation that surround us, allowing Christ to be all in all.

—Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete,

*U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation,
an international movement in the Church.* ❖

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This feature of Life After Sunday has been developed at the request of small groups that want to explore the theme of each issue. —The Editor

What is your definition of beauty? (p. 1 and 2)

- What kind of beauty attracts the most attention: surface or interior beauty?
- Do you see evidence of a “fog” that keeps the culture from expressing true beauty?

Are you able to link the beauty of Christ present in the sacramental life of the Church on Sunday to the beauty you experience during the rest of the week? (p. 3-7)

- Read Wisdom 1:16-2:24.
- Why is the “religious man” so often portrayed as unattractive?

Do you see the Lord’s beauty in the members of your family? (p. 4)

- Why is it difficult sometimes to see the fullness of the “glasses” that surround you?
- How are you called to serve the people in your life?

In what ways do you try to live the Beatitudes? (p. 5)

- Can you see the Lord’s beauty in the sorrowful situations in your own family life?
- Why does St. Therese call prayer “a cry of the heart”?

Do the people in your parish appreciate the Lord’s beauty? (p. 6)

- How is this appreciation manifested there?
- In what ways can you work together to steward this beauty into an “interior union of persons”?

What can you do to bring the gift of the Lord’s beauty to the world you live in? (p.7)

- Do you see his face in your neighbors and co-workers, the “suffering brothers and sisters” who surround you?
- Why is the saint, the lover, able to see the most beauty in the world?

Want to be part of a small discussion group but don't know how to get started? Check out our proven method!
www.lifeaftersunday.com/gathergroup.shtml