

Contemplating Beauty

An interview with Rev. Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott

Fr Peter, thank you for this interview. Is beauty important to us?

The premise must be Dostoevsky's quote that "beauty will save the world". Dostoevsky had a tragic vision of life and this is only natural given the tremendous industrial revolution and wars that he lived through. He had to endure the triumph of materialism and of ugliness. If we were to take an eschatological look at Dostoevsky's quote, we would see the eternal saving beauty at the end of time. One must ask however, what kind of beauty are we dealing with? In reality the period of Dostoevsky was extremely decadent, and people thought that aesthetics should replace the mystical. Instead however the artistic life should be an expression of salvation.

What is beauty? The famous treatise of Cardinal Martini of Milan is that beauty should be the beauty as explained in the Bible. Things are beautiful when they are as God intended them to be. In fact the Hebrew word TOB, which means 'beauty', is the root of the Maltese word tajjeb, meaning 'good'. In creation when God 'saw that it was good' one could also read this as 'and God saw that it was beautiful'.

Is beauty relevant for all cultures and peoples?

For all believers there are different artistic traditions. Between the Eastern and Western Churches there have been differences of artistic expression with the East having a big devotion to Icons. For the Western tradition there is a greater emphasis on the Bible and on its teaching and understanding. For the East the beauty of the Church is seen as an anticipation of heaven with nostalgia for the garden of Eden. With ecumenism these ideas began to meet and exchange between the different Churches.

Of course this is all very relevant for the environmental movements of today where people have a great appreciation and love for the beauty of nature. On this theme, I am preparing a book together with Miriam England on the art of Japanese flower arrangement and its

many philosophical insights. Art in all its forms often has a religious and philosophical root as expressed beautifully in the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Here we learn of aesthetics as a full sensory experience that we can enjoy, and in this way art can be an sensory expression of the God who cannot be otherwise seen. The transfiguration of Christ is the source of this expression, where God's beauty was at one point visible to a few.

Is Pope Benedict XVI going to write an Encyclical on the topic of beauty?

Pope Benedict XVI has said that he will write an encyclical that deals with the road to God through beauty. Already Benedict XVI has shown a love of Baroque art with beautiful Baroque clothes and music. Non-believers can be drawn to God therefore through this road of beauty.

Baroque art is not anti-protestant. The mystics like St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross will help us to comprehend this more. There is a deep ecumenical discourse on beauty. On one level there is a superficial glory of the Church in some forms of art. On another deeper level however, there is a mystical level to art where the sensory experience of the beauty of God can be real. It is not an intellectual experience, but a real sensory experience.

In Malta we have a very beautiful work of Eastern art - the icon of Our Lady of Damascus in the Greek Catholic Church in Valletta. There is no doubt that Caravaggio would have seen and studied this icon in his time in Malta, and it is evident too that he was influenced by this icon in his future works. Here therefore is a link between the two seemingly opposite styles of Byzantine and Baroque art. Both these forms of art in truth show the glory of joy - the glory of the Church.

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