

Re CONSIDERATIONS

DIETRICH VON HILDEBRAND

Beauty in the Light of the Redemption

WHAT IMPORTANCE IS TO BE ATTRIBUTED to beauty in the life of a Christian? What role *should* it play in the life of those who have been redeemed? What is the relationship between redemption and beauty? Did beauty lose its significance after the redemption?

Here we are not speaking of beauty in the general sense of the word or, as I may say, about metaphysical beauty. When we are profoundly affected by the beauty of purity, when the Church in her liturgy exclaims, “How beautiful is the chaste generation with splendour,” or, again, when we speak of the beauty acquired by a soul through humility, then we are concentrating on metaphysical beauty, which is an aura, a refulgence, a radiance of the inner qualities of these virtues. It is a beauty which St. Augustine calls “splendor veri,” and which is, as it were, a radiation of every genuine quality that adheres to every good in the sum of its qualities.

This beauty is not our problem. Its relationship to the redemption, its function in the life of the Christian is not problematic. The

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liturgy leaves no doubt in our minds as to the role due to this beauty in the light of revelation. Again and again it is spoken of in a great variety of phrases, thus:

“Listen, daughter, and see, and incline thine ear, for the king
has greatly desired thy beauty.”

“Give ear with thy countenance and thy beauty.”

“Beautiful in countenance and more beautiful in faith.”

There are many similar references in the liturgy. This beauty is not to be severed from the quality, whose reflection and aura it is. Therefore, it naturally has a conspicuous function in the life of the Christian, for this beauty is the foundation of love. The divine beauty of Jesus, the beauty of the Saint of all saints, inflames our heart. It shone resplendent on the apostles on Tabor; the beauty of His divine mercy melted the heart of Mary Magdalen. The irresistible divine beauty of Jesus not only moves our will, but it attracts our heart; as St. Augustine says, “We are attracted not only by the will but also by affection.”

The great Lacordaire says that virtues become irresistibly victorious and constrain us to love only when, as in every saint, they are manifested in their beauty, when their inner nobility is revealed in their beauty.

In its dignity, this beauty, which is the reflection of the inner excellence and dignity of one who exists, is dependent on the dignity of the object. The beauty of a rich, profound mind like that of a Plato or an Aristotle, is greater than the beauty of an Achilles, which is peculiar to the vital fullness of an exuberant vigor, and the beauty of humility or love is greater than that of an eminent and profound intellect.

The status of this beauty with regard to the redemption, as we have already said, is not our problem, nor is this beauty really our primary theme. The beauty of humility is not the primary theme of humility, just as the beauty of truth is not the primary theme of truth. It is an excess, yet connected essentially with these values, an

efflorescence of them, their quintessence, their “countenance.” Therefore, it is so much a part of redemption, that redemption is also a restoration of the original paradisaical beauty, of an even much greater beauty, as the liturgy maintains: “Who has wonderfully created human dignity and more wonderfully restored it”; and as a mystic says: “We would die of love if we could see the beauty of a soul in the state of grace.”

Our problem is concerned with beauty in a narrower sense of the word, of beauty which radiates from visible and audible things. It is the beauty which unfolds before us when we look out from the Capitoline Hill upon the Roman Forum with the Campagna and the Alban Hill in the distance, or the beauty of the Medicean monuments by Michelangelo, or the beauty that is revealed when we listen to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. It is the beauty of the visible and the audible with which we have contact in nature and in art, which, for want of another expression, we shall call the beauty of form by way of contrast with metaphysical beauty.

What is the relationship of *this* beauty to the redemption? What is its status in the life of the Christian? What importance is due to it in the light of revelation and of our transformation in Christ? Some maintain that beauty of form belongs to the sphere of luxury, to that part of life which, in the light of Christ, cannot make demands in real earnest. Certainly, it is nothing wicked, but something innocent. But to these people the question whether a building is beautiful or not, whether there is one work of art more or less, is really something secondary and external. They argue that for the esthetes and pagans it may seem like something great and important; for the Christian who, with holy sobriety, knows that the serious things of life are to be sought in the moral and social fields, beauty of form is something relatively trifling and unimportant. Certainly, they say, it belongs to human life as do amusements and games of every kind. It is, however, much more important that a knife cut well than that it have a pleasing appearance. It is more important that a person have a roof

over his head than that his house merely satisfy an exquisitely artistic taste. They believe that art, the whole cultivation of beauty of form, is something only for the upper ten thousand after all. This consideration in itself proves that beauty of form is something that does not really belong to the seriousness of existence. In former ages of princely courts and of feudal organizations, the whole cult of the beautiful flourished; our times are too serious for that. They conclude that today the Christian must concentrate upon great economic, political and social problems. Love of a neighbor must show him that it is much more important for every person to maintain an existence worthy of a human being, that the sick and the poor must be cared for, than it is to hang a beautiful picture some place or other or to have *Figaro* brilliantly performed. They apply the same criterion to churches. Of importance are the tabernacle, the altar, the Holy Sacrifice which is celebrated there, for which a structure must be provided. Whether this structure be beautiful or not, is secondary. Only esthetes can find this essential. Therefore, in the minds of these individuals, beauty of form in the light of Christ, is something unessential and destitute of genuine seriousness; so much so, that there might even be the danger of weakening us, of making sensualists of us, of turning us away from the real duties of a Christian and from those things which, from the viewpoint of Christian charity, are indispensable. In the life of the Christian it should, therefore, play a secondary role.

Respondeo:

This utilitarianism is by no means the spirit of the Gospel. Certainly, in the light of the "unum necessarium," our eternal salvation, beauty of form is secondary, but this is equally true of economic and social problems. Does not our Lord say, "Therefore be not solicitous saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or wherewith shall we be clothed?" In the light of the Gospel, then, it is not possible to

play off the “useful” and practically obligatory things of life against the beautiful by emphasizing the fact that beauty of form does not belong to the “*unum necessarium*,” for this is also valid for the sphere of the “useful.” It is, rather, of consequence to understand that practical and absolute necessity is not the only standard for the value of things. Christ’s saying, “Man does not live by bread alone,” is to be applied, in the first place, to the religious sphere. However, it can also justly be extended to every spiritual realm.

An estimate of all things from the viewpoint of their practical and absolute necessity, restriction to that which is absolutely necessary, a spirit which is legitimately master of the technical sciences, is to be found neither in God’s creation nor in the revelation of Christ. In these, on the contrary, the principle of superabundance rules. Is God not lavish in His creation? Do we not meet this divine profusion in the realm of propagation? Is beauty in nature not the clearest proof of this divine profusion, since it is in no way practically indispensable in the economy of nature? Is creation itself, as such, not the fruit of this divine profusion? Is it not the pure emanation of the infinite love of God and in no way necessary? The first miracle of Christ at the wedding feast in Cana reveals to us in a glorious manner the superabundance of divine love, which shows no restriction to that which is necessary. The wine was not at all indispensable for the wedding feast. It was not even entirely wanting, but there was simply lacking a sufficiency. Certainly, the primary purpose of this miracle was the manifestation of Christ’s divinity, but it is a fact that the content of the miracle has reference only to heightening the resplendence of the feast, not a radical renunciation of all forms of utilitarianism. And when Our Lord says, “The poor you have always with you, but Me you have not always,” may we not discover in His words a *Magna Charta* for the importance that should be conceded to beauty? Is the ointment, whose waste was criticized by the apostles, not an exalted symbol of the things which, without being indispensable, are yet good and pleasing to God? No, the indispensabili-

ty of a thing is *one* point of view, the value of a thing another. The fact that beauty of form is not indispensable does not affect its value and its importance. Later we will speak of the deep significance that dwells in beauty of form.

Sometimes, however, we hear objections to beauty of form that are to be taken more seriously. Certain individuals say that it is something external, that it is attached to material and corporal objects, to that which is visible and audible. It is, therefore, much more external and less sublime, to say the least, than metaphysical beauty which, for example, is attached to the beauty of truth or of virtue, as we have mentioned above.

Beauty of form is certainly something that belongs to the realm of the senses and is, therefore, necessarily something relatively inferior within the compass of that which exists. May it, for this reason, still claim to have an important function in the life of the Christian? Does not all asceticism strive toward a detachment from the senses, to draw us back more and more into our spiritual nature, to become indifferent to that which pleases the senses and to advance beyond? Does not this beauty, therefore, also belong to the specially mundane things which, without being evil, yet divert us from God, from the Kingdom of God, and from our eternal destiny? Does not much become sweet for mystics, that was bitter to the senses, and much bitter that was sweet to the senses? Does it not belong to the revolution of revelation, to the new eyes with which we are to behold everything according to the redemption, that this beauty of form loses its significance, that it proves to be one of the "vanitates" of the earth, as we read in the Book of Wisdom, "Appearance is deceitful and beauty is vain." Is this beauty, consequently, not something specially *mundane*? In itself it is something absolutely positive, nothing wicked; yet, is it not perishable, attached to the perishable? Is it not something that loses its significance the more we are united with God, the more we live in Christ "through Him, with Him and in Him"? Does not Our Lord say to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are

worried and troubled over many things, one thing alone is necessary”? Is this not also valid in the case of beauty of form in nature and art? For a pagan who recognizes only natural goods, whose mind is entirely directed toward earthly things, this beauty may be the goal; for him, however, who has been illuminated by the light of Christ, it can no longer be essential. Neither is this beauty indispensable for sanctity. The question of St. Aloysius, “What does this avail for eternity?” is incompatible with beauty of form. Must we not admit, then, that it is rather an obstacle in the process of dying to ourselves and of being transformed in Christ, and that it has, consequently, lost its significance through the redemption?

Respondeo:

No. This concept is erroneous, and the error can be attributed to a multiform misunderstanding of the essence of beauty of form. The comprehension of this beauty presupposes the use of the senses. A blind person cannot grasp the beauty of Bernini’s Colonnade or that of the Church of San Marco in Venice. A deaf person cannot be moved by Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* or by one of his quartettes. It is necessary, in cases such as these, to understand the function of the senses as well as the relationship of these visible and audible objects to their beauty. Although beauty of form presupposes sight and hearing, yet, in itself, it is by no means something belonging to the realm of the senses, something, as it were, congenial with this realm which bears the stamp of the corporeal-sensible. In the concept mentioned above, beauty of form was spoken of as if it were a pleasurable sensation of the eye and the ear. That is, manifestly, a gross error. If a light blinds me, my senses experience displeasure, yet no one will say that this light is ugly or in bad taste. If I behold something indistinctly or with great effort, perhaps with spectacles that are no good, then this is a displeasure for my eyes, but that which I see does not necessarily thereby become ugly; when I put on good spectacles and

experience the clear and distinct vision as a pleasure, then that which I see can be ugly, base, or trivial, and appear to me to be so. The same is true for the ear. That which is pleasant or unpleasant to the senses is congenial with the sphere of the senses; it bears the stamp of the incorporally apparent; it is not, however, beauty or ugliness, which are clearly distinct from these sense experiences. The pleasure and the displeasure of my eyes are experienced in connection with my body; it is a sense experience. The beauty of the Palazzo Farnese, however, certainly has nothing to do with my body, and its comprehension is separated by a world from sense perception. It is also characteristic that beauty of form be found only in the realm of the visible and audible and not in the sphere of smell, taste, and touch. Even though there is, without a doubt, not only the difference of pleasant and unpleasant, but also such qualities as ordinary, rich, delicate in these latter, yet here we cannot speak of beauty in the full sense of the word. That is due to the fact that beauty is not attached to mere realities of sense but in definite visible and audible creations, which, even as such, represent something much more differentiated, more richly constructed and formed. Fragrances cannot fashion a new product as tones do a melody. Briefly, beauty of form is not sensuous like the agreeable taste of food, and it does not, therefore, bear the stamp of the corporeal like these.

It is not sufficient however, to distinguish beauty of form from the sensation of pleasure in the senses; within this beauty itself we must make some important distinctions.

There are two kinds of beauty of form. One of them is comparatively primitive as, for example, the beauty of a circle as opposed to an arbitrarily irregular figure, the beauty of a clear musical note as opposed to a noise, a chord as opposed to a discord, or the beauty of certain faces with regular features, let us say "Hollywood-beauty." This beauty, though it is no mere pleasure for the eyes, is still comparatively close to the world of the senses. The other is an immeasurably higher one. It demands not only the coordination of

many more factors but, qualitatively, it is something entirely new. It is the beauty which unfolds before us when, on a glorious day, we look out from the Janiculum upon Rome and the mountains beyond, or when we contemplate the *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, or when we are uniquely absorbed in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. This beauty, wherever it appears, calls into being in our minds a whole spiritual world which is laden with a host of spiritual elements: the poetic as opposed to the prosaic, necessity as opposed to arbitrariness, inner abundance as opposed to every falsehood and affectation, inner greatness as opposed to everything mediocre, breadth and depth as opposed to all that is insipid and trivial.

Our problem has reference to this sublimely higher beauty of form, which so evidently rises above the world of the sensuous and discloses a sublime incorporeality, and about which it is impossible to say that it is directed to the lower part of our soul. What is the position of this beauty of form with reference to the redemption?

Attempts to rescue the incorporeality of this beauty of form by maintaining that it is not at all attached to the visible and audible have not been wanting. Ideas or thoughts, to which the audible and visible stimulates us, are the true bearers. If, for example, we view a lofty mountain range bathed in gleaming sunlight, it is not that which we see directly before us to which beauty is attached, but the thought of God's creative power is the real beauty. In a word, the real bearer of beauty is something incorporeal which we connect intellectually with the visible and audible by means of analogies; or, it is said, the visible has a function similar to that of the symbol in the liturgy. This attempt at rescuing the incorporeality of beauty is well-meant, to be sure, but it is false, for the beauty of the Campagna Romana or that of the Seventh Symphony by Bruckner is intuitive, linked directly with that which is seen and heard, and no intellectual ascent to something else is necessary in order to grasp this beauty. We must not try to evade the mysteries in reality, but in a complete *thaumazein*

at the mystery, we must try to understand it by means of a deeper penetration. This higher beauty of form is also bestowed directly and intuitively by means of the visible and the audible, and in spite of its connection with the senses, it is of a spiritual sublimity which qualitatively completely transcends the sphere of the senses. How can this be explained?

This beauty (and we here arrive at one of the most important points) adheres directly to the visible and audible, to be sure, but it is not *the expression of the essence* of these visible and audible objects as is metaphysical beauty, but it is on a much lower plane and could not explain the sublimity of beauty of form. This higher beauty of form in its quality transcends by far the sphere of these objects. The beauty of the Bay of Naples is of the highest incorporeality and does not speak of that which mountains, trees, water signify ontologically, nor of that which they signify to a scientist or a philosopher of nature, but of a higher world which is reflected in it. It is a great mystery which God has entrusted to visible and audible capacities: to be able to place before us sublime, spiritual qualities, a beauty which, in its quality, reflects God's world, and which speaks of this higher transfigured world. The function of the senses and of the visible and audible capacities in this is of a modest, humble kind; they are a pedestal, a mirror for something much higher. Therefore, this beauty in its dignity is not bound to the ontological dignity of the object. As a consequence, a flower is incomparably more beautiful than a worm, a Monte Pellegrino in Palermo, bathed in a sunset glow, is more beautiful than an animal, though the animal ranks higher ontologically. As soon as we understand that beauty of form (to be sure, adhering directly intuitively to the visible and audible and in no way a result of reflections, analogies, or symbolic connections) is not due to the object in the same manner or does not speak of it, but is the ontological reflection of something incomparably higher, then we will also understand that it is absolutely false to designate it as sensuous, external, and particularly *mundane*. The beauty of the Italian

landscape, of Tuscan villas, of Assisi, the beauty of the Tempesta by Giorgione, the frescoes of Masaccio in the Carmine, the beauty of the dome of Florence or of St. Peter's, the beauty of the first chorale in St. Matthew's Passion, or of Mozart's *Figaro*—all these are, to be sure, immediately attached to audible and visible things; they are not connected with beauty of form merely by thoughts; they are not ideas that these express thereby, but in their quality they speak about another, higher reality—they make God known.

The elements upon which beauty of form depends, i.e., when and under what circumstances it appears in visible and audible objects, are multiform and mysterious. There is no recipe, nor could any one make rules to be followed to create something beautiful. Every individual case must have new individual inspiration. One thing, however, we can determine, that the conditions be in the sphere of the visible and audible, like proportion, composition, harmony, rhythm, etc.

Here there is again revealed the whole mystery of the beauty of form, the transcendence in this sphere. Conditions, which are apparently trifling and external, have a strongly, profoundly and significantly spiritual effect. It depends on outward conditions, so to speak, when a window opens, but that which we see through the window when it is once open, is weighty, significant, and by no means external. Again and again it is necessary to understand the mystery of this beauty of form. It is directly attached to visible and audible things, but the reality about which it speaks qualitatively, the substance, whose quintessence it is, is a spiritual world which towers high above everything corporeal. This must also be brought out distinctly in the answer we give. The metaphysical beauty of a saint awakens in us a desire for closer association with him, for we know that this beauty is a reflection of his personality.

With beauty of form, on the contrary, it is otherwise. The beauty of Monte Pellegrino in Palermo does not arouse the desire in us to caress it but, as we behold its beauty, our heart is filled with a

desire for loftier regions about which this beauty speaks, and it looks upward with longing. In order to behold this beauty, we need not know God, much less think of Him for, objectively, there is a reflection of God in these things, not merely in the manner with which all that exists portrays God, but by having something *appear* in things of a relatively low ontological rank, which in a special manner announces God in its quality. Only when we have understood this quasi-sacramental function of the visible and audible, this mystery which God has entrusted to it, can we do justice to the function of this beauty in the life of the redeemed. It is not true that this beauty distracts us from God and is specifically mundane. On the contrary, it contains a summons; in it there dwells a “*sursum corda*”; it awakens awe in us; it elevates us above that which is base; it fills our hearts with a longing for the eternal beauty of God.

A misunderstanding also arises from the fact that all beauty is seen in the light of the beauty of the human face or body, and from the moral danger that can emanate from this, conclusions are drawn about the “sensuality” of all beauty of form. These are, manifestly, false deductions. This beauty is accidentally attached to things that can appeal to the sensual appetites. It is possible that here beauty of form can psychologically aggravate the kindling of the sensual appetites; in the case of the beauty of a landscape, a work of art, a symphony, it can no longer come into question. To see beauty of form, in general, as an arousing of the sensual appetites is nonsense. If any one has a feeling for it, there resounds a sublime voice from above in the beauty of the adagio of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony; its quality speaks of a world of purity and incorporeality; and he who hears it, senses the incompatibility of all that is base and morally bad with this world. Yes, the exalted beauty of form is so far removed from drawing us down into the “world and its pomp,” that there is a profound connection between this beauty and the realm of moral values. The breath of a more exalted world, that dwells in beauty of form, is also a “*sursum corda*” from the moral point of view.

Neither has all this been left behind and discarded by the redemption. On the contrary, our relationship with all this beauty of form in nature and in art, to be sure, becomes something *different* and something new in Christ and through Christ, as does the relationship with all created values; however, it does not grow less but becomes more profound and much greater.

Here we come upon a mysterious paradox: the more we give ourselves entirely to God, the more we love God above all else, the deeper and truer is our love for all created things that really deserve our love. The inordinate attachment to earthly possessions, which can even degenerate into idolatry, is not a greater love, but a lesser, impurer, perverted one. The love of creatures, whether it be father, friend, or wife, can reach its full measure only in Christ, only by loving them in Christ and with Christ, indeed, only by partaking of the same love with which Christ loves them.

Thus, the sense of this natural, qualitative message from God is not suppressed by the redemption; it is set aright and transfigured by Christ. In all this beauty, which makes God known objectively, the redeemed will also consciously find God; he will draw out the line away back to its source; he will, indeed, seek and find in all the sublime beauty of the visible and audible world the Countenance and the Voice of the God-Man, Christ. The beauty of a landscape, of a great work of art is, thus, no less estimable but, on the contrary, its comprehension is immeasurably more profound; it discloses *more* than it would to the eyes of the esthete who idolizes it with an inordinate love. All possessions that appeal to our pride and our sensual appetites, indeed, all that are subjectively gratifying, lose their radiance for the redeemed, for him, who has found the pearl of great price of the Gospel. All possessions, however, that have real value, that in themselves are honorable, excellent, significant, which fall like dew from above and ascend to God like incense, achieve a higher and new radiance in Christ. It is true that beauty of form does not belong to the "unum necessarium"; it is true that a person who has no feeling for it or who admires trivial and bad art, can also become

a saint and enter into heaven, just as one who is incapable of grasping philosophical truths and of distinguishing them from philosophical errors, who is intellectually limited and weak, could yet become a saint. However, merely because something is indispensable, it is not thereby prevented from possessing a profound and exalted value.

It is true, that beauty of form does not belong to that which we must seek before all else. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things will be added unto you" applies here also. This does not mean, however, that all else is useless. In this case, also, we must not say that the redeemed do not seek beauty of form before all else, but that they are first seeking the Kingdom of God, and in the same measure as they do so, will they more and more appreciate this great gift of God and understand it. St. Francis of Assisi reveals this so beautifully. How profoundly did he not grasp the beauty of form in nature. How mysteriously did he, who sought only the Kingdom of God (I venture to say, *because* he sought the Kingdom of God), inspire the art and poetry of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. How greatly did his spirit become the seed for one of the most important periods of florescence in art.

To the eyes of him who is redeemed, however, not only are deeper dimensions of the beauty of form revealed; he also understands clearly the significance of the beauty of form in his life. He understands, first of all, that God is glorified by things with beauty of form. He understands how greatly the world has been enriched by a Mozart and a Beethoven. He understands that the appearance of the house of God is not a matter of indifference, whether it be a fitting structure such as we find in the Cathedral of Chartres or in San Marco in Venice, where beauty speaks of God's world, or whether it exudes a desolate and depressing atmosphere like the false Gothic of the eighties. He understands the claim, that wherever anything makes Christ known, there nothing can be beautiful enough in the sense of beauty of form. He also understands the significance which beauty of form possesses as a spiritual nourishment even after the redemption. It is not a matter of indifference whether a hymn to the Sacred Heart or

to Our Lady be sentimental and trivial, or whether it be of a sublime and exalted beauty like the *Ave Verum* by Mozart, for triviality falsifies the world into which we are here to be drawn. Here the liturgy is again our great model. The liturgy of the Mass and of the Breviary, as the prayer of Christ, as a participation of the sacred life of the Church, clearly indicates in its construction, its form, its rhythm, and its Gregorian chant what role beauty of form plays, how it is also fit to speak to us of God, to lead us to God, to glorify God.

No one, perhaps, so clearly recognized the transcendence of the beauty of form and the fact that it is a quintessence of a more exalted world than did the great Cardinal Newman, who also expressed it in these sublime words:

There are seven notes in the scale; make them fourteen; yet what a slender outfit for so vast an enterprise! What science brings forth so much out of so little? Out of what poor elements does some great master in it create his new world? Shall we say that all this exuberant intensiveness is a mere ingenuity or trick of art like some game or fashion of the day without reality, without meaning? Or is it possible that that inexhaustible evolution and disposition of notes, so rich yet so simple, so intricate yet so regulated, so various yet so majestic, should be a mere sound which is gone and perishes? Can it be that those mysterious stirrings of the heart, and keen emotion, and strange yearnings after we know not what, and awful impressions from we know not whence, should be brought in us by what is unsubstantial, and comes and goes, and begins and ends in itself? It is not so; it cannot be. No; they have escaped from some higher sphere; they are the outpourings of eternal harmony in the medium of created sound; they are echoes of our home; they are the voice of angels, or the Magnificat of the Saints, or the Living Laws of Divine Governance, or Divine Attributes; something they are besides themselves, which we cannot encompass, which we cannot utter, though mortal man, and he perhaps not otherwise distinguished above his fellows, has the gift of eliciting them. (University Sermons, XV)