

The Rediscovery of Moral Beauty, Truth, and Hope: Awakening the Moral and the Religious Sense

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articolo

Much of contemporary culture seems to be fixated on a superficial beauty, only on what the eyes can see; the emphasis is on sensible beauty, on cosmetic beauty. There is what may be called a cult of beauty, as is evidenced by the “extreme makeover” television shows in the United States and by the recourse to cosmetic surgery both among the young and the not so young. And yet this cult does not make people happy, for as we know beauty is fleeting; it is ephemeral. Perhaps our taste for this type of beauty is an indication of the nihilistic philosophy which pervades so much of our culture today.

The cult of beauty that I am referring to here tends to enclose the person in herself since the person seems to care only for her things, for her outward appearance, for the approval of others. At the basis of such an attitude is a disordered self-love; we could even say that there may exist in such a person an inability to love which gives rise to a “lethal boredom”¹, to the recognition of values that are only quantifiable; this inability to love accounts for the contemporary “devastation of the soul”².

Another example of this insidious cult of beauty may be found in contemporary attempts to refashion the human being by means of new altering genetic technologies. Parents want to have “perfect” children and so, for example, will have recourse to Nobel Prize sperm banks in the hopes of producing an extraordinarily intelligent child, or will through genetic manipulation produce an extraordinarily handsome child that is blond, blue-eyed, and fair skinned. No

longer are we content with the good and the ordinary; we want the best and the extraordinary, without recognizing that human freedom must have limits and that the best is often the enemy of the good. What underlies the attempt to create the “perfect” human being is, I think, a fundamental discontent with the human condition, a non-acceptance of reality, and the inability to marvel, to wonder, at the ontological goodness and beauty of the universe and of the human person. Nowhere perhaps is the scientific and technological attitude of dominating and manipulating the universe and the person more prominent than in contemporary reproductive and genetic technologies and in cosmetic surgeries of all types to produce the beautiful or perfect face, the beautiful or perfect body.

This rampant cult of beauty with its emphasis on image, on “the look”, and its misunderstanding of what and who the human person is, does not allow the person to experience other dimensions of beauty—dimensions such as the beauty of self-sacrifice, the intrinsic beauty of persons that radiates from their practice of virtues, from their dedication to an ideal greater than themselves. Examples of such beauty abound in history, but the recent figures of Mother Teresa or John Paul II certainly attest to the greatness of the human soul with its capacities for understanding and loving and for making the gift of self.

Since beauty in its many forms does delight us, it is important for us to examine what type of beauty we are attracted to, what types of things delight us. Thomas Aquinas in his wisdom saw clearly that the human



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person cannot live without delight and that when the person is deprived of spiritual joys then carnal delight will take their place³. Perhaps this is the reason for the contemporary cult of beauty that we have been speaking of, and also the reason for much of the sadness and despair that have invaded human life. If this is so, then there is an urgent need to recover the spiritual dimension of beauty. Despite the bleak situation of contemporary culture that I have briefly depicted above, there is hope that moral beauty—the beauty of moral action—and the beauty of the contemplative life, as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas understood it, can awaken in human persons their moral sense and with this awakening point them in the direction of real change for themselves and for society. It seems important here to consider why it is that even an immoral person can still see the beauty of moral action.

Someone like Oscar Wilde in his depraved period might see Martin of Tours cutting his cloak in half for a beggar as a noble or beautiful gesture, albeit a foolish one⁴. The reason for this recognition of moral beauty, even in the immoral person, is given, I think, by Aquinas when he says that «virtue is natural to man according to a kind of beginning»⁵. In man's reason, according to Aquinas, «are to be found instilled by nature certain known principles of both knowledge and action, which are the nurseries of intellectual and moral virtues», and in man's will «a natural aptitude for good in accordance with reason»⁶. Because of these natural principles which are the «seeds of virtues» and are found in every man's reason, we can understand how the immoral person is capable of recognizing the beauty of moral action. The intelligibility and attractiveness of virtue is thus recognized and appreciated not only by the good man. As Aquinas says, «[A]lthough not all men have virtues in the complete habit, yet they have them accord-

ing to certain seminal principles in the reason, in force of which principles the man who is not virtuous loves the virtuous man, as being in conformity with his own natural reason»⁷.

Given then the presence in man of a natural inclination to act according to reason, and the «seeds of virtues» found in every man's reason, which can be interpreted as a moral sense, it behooves us to think of ways in which this moral sense can be awakened in present-day culture.

But before doing so, I consider it important to also refer the moral sense to the religious sense, since the natural habit of the first

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practical principles which incline us to the good and draw us away from evil have been divinely implanted with us, such that as Aquinas says, «God speaks within us»⁸. An awakening of the moral sense and more specifically, a life in accord-

dance with the moral sense, opens the person to listen to the voice of God, as it were, and to recognize that from the depths of her being the person is radically related to God, and so a religious being. This is also why good moral dispositions can prepare the way for conversion to belief in God. Here I would like to recall a marvelous anecdote from one of Robert Hugh Benson's most celebrated books, which is illustrative of how the truth already lives in the human heart—of how the man who follows the «seeds of virtues» implanted within him, which is to act in accordance with the truth of his nature, can recognize the fullness of truth that is God, that is Christ himself: «An old Hindu, it is related, after hearing one sermon on the life of Christ, begged for baptism. “But how can you ask for it so soon?” inquired the preacher. “Have you ever heard the name of Jesus before today?” “No”, said the old man, “but I have known him and have been seeking him all my life”»⁹. We can see here the close relationship

between the moral sense and what I am calling the religious sense, the sensitivity, as it were, of hearing God's voice within us because we are naturally inclined to the good and because we are cultivating those «seeds of virtues» within us.

Now our age, which has been labeled a «civilization of the image», is in need of images and stories that will radiate the «splendor of truth» and the beauty of moral action—images that do not reduce the person to material existence but which speak rather to the interiority of the person, making her realize the spiritual dimension of her life. The images presented in films such as *It's a Beautiful Life*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Passion of the Christ* profoundly touch us. The person viewing these films will be moved by the sort of love that is depicted, a self-sacrificing love, which can undoubtedly bring about a questioning of one's own loves and a moment of conversion. Genuine images of grandeur and heroism, either through films or other artistic media, or through biographies of persons who serve as examples of a loving and dedicated life, all play a decisive role in directing our affections and our will to the right things, to a beauty that is not merely a beauty of appearances, as is the apparent good, but rather the beauty of the moral good, of the true good. Intellectual constructions are not sufficient to take hold of the whole human person, to move not only the person's intelligence but also the will and the sensitive appetites. Truth is grasped first under the aspect of its goodness, nobility, and beauty; it is not only apprehended analytically by the mind. It is for this reason that great works of art and literature have a strong impact on us, pulling us toward them with the totality of our mind, heart, and senses, taking possession of us, as it were. An American professor recounts his experience teaching a course to high school boys, which consisted in reading ancient classical authors—Homer's *Iliad* was one of the books read—and then early Christian writers, ending the course with St. Augustine's *On the Trinity*. With each noble figure studied in the course and finally with

Christ himself, the students were being led to truth, and were affectively disposed to the grandeur of the Trinity even before they could grasp any part of its meaning¹⁰. This example is not unlike the case of a teenage girl who in the atheistic Soviet Union came across a copy of the Gospel of St. Luke, read it, and was fascinated by the message having encountered therein the beauty of its truth, and declared: «I fell in love with him»¹¹. Of course, both of these examples enable us to see that the beauty of truth is especially convincing for people who are receptive and have good will, and this is generally, I think, the case with many young people. Hence, the wonderful adventure of teaching and forming young minds!

Instructive here also are the stories of those who have undergone profound conversions; while the *Confessions* of St. Augustine do not cease to edify, there are also contemporary accounts of conversions which enable us to reflect on the impact of truth on a human life—on the beauty and plenitude of the truth. Alasdair MacIntyre's book on the life of Edith Stein prior to her conversion shows how Stein's «remarkable character» and her openness to questions of religion prepared the way for her conversion to belief in God and more specifically to Catholicism¹². Her pursuit of the truth permeated her life, brought unity to it and gave it that «singleness of purpose» of a «unitary life»¹³. For her, conversion was not a Kierkegaardian «leap of faith», but rather the enhancement of her rational powers¹⁴. The truths of faith were to inform her philosophical work since as she clearly saw: «If faith makes accessible truths unattainable by any other means, philosophy cannot forego them without renouncing its universal claim to truth»¹⁵. Would that Martin Heidegger, Stein's contemporary, had thought the same. And so in the case of Edith Stein we have an example of reason and faith working together to inform human life. Moreover, her love of truth, of Christ, brought her to freely sacrifice her life for that truth. She understood that the love of God and human freedom are intrinsically related, that love and truth are intertwined.

The moral and the religious sense are thus brought to fruition in friendship with Christ. Only in this friendship are our capacities to know and to love truly maximized, and only in this friendship do we experience true life, beauty, and freedom¹⁶. In addition to MacIntyre's splendid account of Stein's quest for truth, there are other stories of conversion that can serve to awaken in men and women their moral and religious sense. In the twentieth century the adventures of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain which led them to friendship with God also brought about a spiritual revival in their midst¹⁷. How they came to know and love the truth and how their life became a service to the truth show on the one hand the inherent attraction that all men have to the true and the good, and on the other hand the importance of friendship. The life of the Maritains permeated by their love of truth, by their love for Christ as the fullness of truth, was in effect a service to joy and to hope.

Finally, I have spoken briefly of images and stories of conversion which can facilitate a personal encounter with the beauty of moral action and of truth and ultimately with Christ who is truth itself, an encounter which enables the person to truly love, because the person knows herself unswervingly affirmed and loved by God, no longer in need of having her worth affirmed by either material goods or other human persons, no longer obsessed by the cult of beauty to which we referred in the beginning of this paper. The unwavering affirmation and love which Christ who reveals God's love offers us is the joy which only faith can give us. In a world that has become joyless and boring, faith in Christ extends to all men and women the real possibility of a life far more beautiful than any contemporary ideology can fathom. The encounter with Christ, with the God who is man, gives life a different orientation, and when this encounter is communicated and truly lived, it will produce a different life-style and a different culture. At the end of an interview with Peter Seewald, Cardinal Ratzinger said

that what God really wants from us is that «we become loving persons, for then we are his images. For [God] is, as Saint John tells us, love itself, and he wants there to be creatures who are similar to him and who thus, out of the freedom of their own loving, become like him and belong in his company and thus, as it were, spread the radiance that is his»¹⁸.

Given the imperative need in our non-metaphysical age for metaphysics and for the metaphysical foundations of ethics, I think that metaphysicians and ethicists would do well to meditate that repeated phrase of Genesis: «And God saw that it was good», which is in effect God's own affirmation of being and life. As Benedict XVI put it in his inaugural homily: «We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary»¹⁹. The God who is Love creates us from love for love and he has revealed the way to us in Christ, who is the beauty of Truth and of Love. It is this beauty alone that the human person longs for and loves, not the counterfeit beauties that our civilization of the image is offering us. We need to create new avenues of authentic beauty, since the good—both the true and the apparent goods—have a beauty or splendor about them, according to the moral dispositions of the person. This St. Augustine clearly saw in his *Confessions*, and so it is not surprising that he said: «What can we love if not beauty?»²⁰

NOTE

¹ J. RATZINGER, *A Turning Point for Europe?*, trans. Brian McNeil, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1994, 175.

² *Ibid.*

³ S. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 4. St. Thomas is quoting here from the Philosopher in *Ethics* X, 6 (1176b19).

⁴ I am indebted to my colleague Marie I. George for this example.

⁵ S. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 63, a. 1, resp.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 27, a. 3, ad 4.

⁸ ID., *De Veritate*, q. 11, a. 1, ad 13.

⁹ R. H. BENSON, *The Friendship of Christ*, Scepter, New York 1991, 51-52.

¹⁰ T. DUBAY, *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1999, 121-22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹² See A. MACINTYRE, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue, 1913-1922*, Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., Lanham, Maryland 2006.

¹³ See ID., *After Virtue*, 2nd edition, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 1984.

¹⁴ A. MACINTYRE, *Edith Stein*, op. cit., 143-44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Inaugural Homily*, in www.zenit.org.

¹⁷ See R. MARITAIN, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace*, trans. Julie Kiernan, Doubleday, New York 1961.

¹⁸ J. RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1997, 283.

¹⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *Inaugural Homily*, in www.zenit.org.

²⁰ ST. AUGUSTINE, *De musica* 6, 13, 38, quoted in *The Via Pulchritudinis*, working document of the PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, March 27-28, 2006. See my article «La Confrontación entre el amor y la incapacidad de amar», in *Identidad Cristiana*, ed. Antonio Aranda, EUNSA, Pamplona 2007, 117-28.