

Beauty in Laudato Si': The Urgent Need for Aesthetic Education

Laudato Si' Week 2020

Prov. Virgen de Guadalupe-América CMT

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I live in a small rural town, lost somewhere in the plains of Argentina. We live a simple life, my wife and I. And as we await the birth of our first child, longing to hold her in our arms, the question proposed by Pope Francis in his message summoning Laudato Si' Week pops into mind: "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who will come after us, to children who are growing up?"

Now to be honest, just like a lot of other people, things like ecology, global warming, climate change, and the politics and economics they imply, are not things I worry too much about. Now don't get me wrong, I do my share: we recycle, we don't own a car, I ride a bicycle, we even eat organic vegetables. But something deep inside tells me this isn't enough. But what could a simple person like me do? Not much, not anything at all...

But a small ray of light has come to shine in on my sometimes indifferent, and sometimes pessimistic mind. It's true, there's nothing I can do. But it isn't about me, it's about us. Preparing myself for Laudato Si' Week, I realized that the main thing in all of this is trying to discover the beauty behind it all. Beauty can be such a subjective thing, but because I believe all creation has a unique origin in God, I believe that beauty is ever-present in all that is created, along with truth and goodness. Now, just to make it clear, the beauty I'm talking about is not a visible one. This invisible beauty can only be seen by eyes illuminated by some means of another light. And it is only when people discover this invisible beauty in our world that they will be willing to do everything in their power to preserve it and make it shine. The task at hand is not only conveying the inner beauty in nature itself but also communicating the dream of the beauty mankind, alongside nature, can bring forth in a more sustainable world which would provide a better life for all.

I believe this is Pope Francis' inner intuition in his ecological encyclical. In the English translation of the document, the words "beauty" and "beautiful" appear forty-four times spread out through all its pages. In his appeal towards the end of the encyclical, he states that "by learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism" (Laudato Si', 215).

Now then, this aesthetic education the Pope mentions isn't about physical beauty, even if you do find nature in itself to be visibly beautiful. It's about learning to see what is not

seen. And in this sense, I believe the slogan for this Week is quite adequate: "Everything is connected". True beauty appears when we discover the unseen ties, connections, and relations things and persons have with one another. Today's ecological evangelization benefits so much when we incorporate an aesthetic theological perspective.

One such benefit of an aesthetic theology would be discovering the power of beauty even outside Christian circles. If we were to consider Nicholas of Cusa's concept of the Holy Spirit as *conexio*, i.e., "connection", we could see that the discovery of beauty as connection is a work of the Third Divine Person. Any discovery, independent of where it comes from, of this true and inspiring beauty that allows us to contemplate the relationship between and among all things is the work of the Holy Spirit.

A bit before Laudato Si' first came out I came across an author walking a similar path as Pope Francis. The Canadian journalist, Naomi Klein had recently published a book on climate change activism: *This Changes Everything*. Just like the Pope, she had found that the ecological crisis is the product of unregulated and unscrupulous capitalism. And to be honest, I'm really not into taking sides on things like politics and the economy. But what did catch my attention, was something Klein wrote in the introduction of her book. She mentioned that what inspired her was coming into contact with someone who shared with her a dream where a mindful ecology and social justice could make our world more sustainable. She started seeing the "connections" between the different ecological, political, and economical factors that could make the world a more beautiful place. She states that:

"if these various connections were more widely understood, the urgency of the climate crisis could form the basis of a powerful mass movement, one that would weave all these seemingly disparate issues into a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilized climate system". (Klein, 2014:7)

Curiously, in 2015, she co-chaired a conference in The Vatican organized by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

It would seem that in a world where logic and ethics aren't enough to persuade we should desperately cling to the power of beauty as our only hope to bring humanity together. For we know that things perceived as beautiful pro-

voke strong sentiments in us, and these sentiments guide our reason and will, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Traces of this understanding can be found in many places. One such relevant example is the Chilean biologist/philosopher, Humberto Maturana. In the prologue for a book on human development and ethics for sustainability, he summarizes his thought on this topic (Elizalde, 2015). Because human beings are driven by their emotions, and not reason, we can't expect to convince others of the urgency of the current ecological crisis with reason alone. We can only hope to inspire others, and we would do this seduced by the conscience that a better world can only come about if we all collaborate on a day-to-day basis as if we were working together on a work of art. Maturana's main argument is that human beings are above all animals capable of love.

Pondering on the importance of aesthetic education and love, we come across Plato, who viewed eros as love for beauty. It is through the love for beauty that we can raise ourselves, one step at a time, from physical beauty to higher standards of beauty, such as beauty found in goodness and truth, but above all, it is a path to contemplating beauty in itself (Plato, Symposium, 211c-211d). Promoting eros through Christian teaching is something Pope Benedict XVI had already foreseen. He invited us to embrace eros as an initiation to true love.

"Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to 'be there for' the other". (Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 7)

Dostoevsky's famous quote from his novel *The Idiot*, "beauty will save the world", obviously comes to mind. The constant mention of beauty in *Laudato Si'* is an indication that the spirituality Pope Francis invites us to live requires not only a new way of seeing but also new ways of sharing our love for our planet. We can all collaborate passionately in creating and promoting an aesthetic education that has its aim in touching the hearts of all to love deeply our planet and all its inhabitants.

This ultimately calls for a renewed mysticism that anyone can practice. This is a call that has been made for quite some time but has now become radically urgent. As Leonardo Boff reminds us, mysticism is not an escape from reality (Boff, 1996: 146-147). Quite the contrary, it is veneration, delight, and humility in the face of reality. It is an attitude towards reality as mystery understood in the original theological sense, i.e., reality as the bearer of occult transcendence. Those who have perceived reality as mystery can truly understand that "everything is connected".

References

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