

THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY: A WAY TO UNITY?

by
+ Bruno Forte
Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto

Between utopia and disenchantment, a renewed nostalgia for Beauty

The rediscovery of beauty as a way to Truth and as a possible contribution to the building of a better world is the result of a double crisis: on the one hand, the crisis of the pretensions of the modern ideological utopia; on the other hand, the critical process of renouncing larger horizons of meaning, so frequent in post-modern cultures. If the utopia of ideological dreams advanced the pretension of grasping the *Whole*, to the point of becoming totalitarian and violent, post-modernity seems to surrender itself exclusively to the *fragment*, by giving up every search for meaning and a larger hope.

There is a need, therefore, to rediscover *the Whole in the fragment*, the meaning of little things in the context of a trustworthy hope – and it is precisely Beauty that offers us the Whole in the fragment, as a gift, as surprising as it is free. This is why beauty is more necessary than ever today so as to offer a reason for life. Beauty will save us, because it will teach us to be faithful to fragments, and at the same time to sustain a larger hope by which we may live. Between modern utopia and post-modern disenchantment Beauty offers itself as a possible way of salvation, capable of evoking the Whole, without falling into the pretensions of totalitarian ideologies, and at the same time able respecting the dignity of fragments without being enslaved by them. In this sense, indeed, “Beauty will save the World” (F. Dostoevskij).

This rediscovery of the way of Beauty can also be applied to Christianity: facing the crisis of ideologies and of nihilism, and often following on from it, it is no longer enough to witness to the Otherness of God, a task which was both necessary and precious in previous times. To humankind today, which has made the lively discovery of the worldliness of the world and the value of emancipation, to this very humankind, tempted by the loss of meaning and hope, it is more than ever necessary to propose God in human form, the Whole in the fragment as offered to us in the humanity of the God-with-us. All this means rediscovering the aesthetic dimension of the Christian message. Only those who have the sense of Beauty, and so of the paradoxical advent of the Whole in a fragment, can also announce a God who has meaning for this humanity in our post-modern and post-ideological times.

As often stressed by the theologian of Beauty, Hans Urs von Balthasar, only the awareness that the Infinite offers itself in the Finite, and so only the aesthetic understanding of revelation, will be able to speak effectively of the Christian God to the world of today. Theological meditation on Beauty - understood as the perception of the presence of the Whole in the fragment - offers itself as a privileged way to announce to post-modern culture the salvation that was given to us in the eternal Son made flesh. Revisiting the voices that speak of Beauty in the theological history of Western and Eastern Christianity is therefore a possible way of answering the decisive question about where and how it will be possible for modern thought to rediscover the sense of God as the foundation and the source of the unity of the disciples of Christ and of the whole human family. This is what I will try to do – even if only in an evocative way – in the following reflections.

1. Beauty as “ordo amoris”: Augustine’s understanding of Beauty

What is the relationship between God and beauty?

Augustine’s entire life was a response to this question: it might be said that the whole of his thought was dominated by the twin themes – which he considered intimately intertwined - of God the Trinity and beauty.¹ His interest in the latter was at its most intense in the period preceding the decisive moment of his conversion. Augustine himself recognized this in the deeply moving words of his *Confessions*, where the “You” he invokes is the One he has come to know as beauty itself: “Late have I loved You, O beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved You!”².

Augustine admits that it had been precisely the beauty of creatures that had kept him far from their Creator; he confesses that in the end the Creator and His beauty broke through to him through those very senses by which we perceive beauty in its every appearance: “Behold, you were within me, but I was outside myself: I sought You here and, in my degradation, I threw myself upon the beautiful things that You had made. You were with me, but I was not with You. Keeping me far from You were those very things which, if they did not exist in You, would not exist at all. You called, you cried out, you overcame my deafness; you lit up my life like lightning, you shone forth and put my blindness to flight; you breathed forth your sweet smell, I took it in and yearned for you; you touched me, and I burned with longing for your peace”³.

¹ Cf. the well documented research of J. Tscholl, *Dio e il bello in sant'Agostino*, Ares, Milano 1996 (German original: Leuven 1967).

² *Conf.*, X, 27, 38: «Sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi!».

³ *Ib.*: «Et ecce intus eras et ego foris et ibi te quaerebam et in ista formosa, quae fecisti, deformis inruebam. Mecum eras, et tecum non eram. Ea me tenebant longe a te, quae si in te non essent, non

Hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch: beauty takes over them all - and takes them to itself. At first, it is the beauty of created things, but then ultimate Beauty, the source of all beauty in creatures. Augustine's whole story thus becomes a journey from beauty to Beauty, from the penultimate to the Ultimate: only at this journey's end is he able to re-discover the meaning and measure of the beauty of everything that exists in the light of the Beauty which grounds it.

One may thus understand how for Augustine to think about God, and about all things in God, was one with thinking about beauty: when this theologian speaks of God, he speaks of Beauty, and when he speaks of what is beautiful in this world, he constantly points to the One who is the source and goal of all that is beautiful. For Augustine, too, these two themes of God and beauty are held movingly together by the motif of love: in fact, beauty has such power over us because it draws us to itself with the leading strings of love.

As Augustine understands it, the call of beauty has such power over us because it bears within it love's unifying strength. This is why theology occupies itself with beauty: because theology is both originally and constitutively concerned with the revelation of love, and with what love means for us. The *Confessions* again: "In those days...I loved a lesser beauty, I was rushing towards the abyss, and saying to my friends: Is it not true that we only love what is beautiful?"⁴.

It was to remain Augustine's unwavering conviction that we can only love what is beautiful: "Non possumus amare nisi pulchra"⁵. Whether beauty is enthralling us, or delighting us with its harmony, it is doing nothing other than dancing to the music of love: beauty is to be sought in the "ordo amoris"...⁶

Where does beauty's power of attraction lie? Why does it draw forth love? Augustine poses these questions with the greatest of rigor, and certainly also in the light of his own personal experience: "What is beautiful? And what is beauty? What is it in the things we love that wins us over and attracts us? Since if there were no harmony and beauty in these things, they would not draw us to themselves at all"⁷.

essent. Vocasti et clamasti et rupisti surditatem meam, coruscasti, splenduisti et fugasti caecitatem meam, fragrasti, et duxi spiritum et anhelum tibi, gustavi et esurio et sitio, tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem tuam».

⁴ *Ib.* IV, 13, 20: « Tunc... amabam pulchra inferiora et ibam in profundum et dicebam amicis meis: "num amamus aliquid nisi pulchrum?" ».

⁵ *De Musica*, VI, 13, 38.

⁶ See R. Bodei, *Ordo amoris. Conflitti terreni e felicità celeste*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1991.

⁷ *Conf.*, IV, 13, 20: "Quis est ergo pulchrum? et quid est pulchritudo? quid est quod nos allicit et conciliat rebus, quas amamus? nisi enim esset in eis decus et species, nullo modo ad se moverent".

Two different answers suggest themselves here: first, that the formal reason for beauty lies in the things themselves that appear beautiful to us; second, that the reason why we find something beautiful lies in the subject who finds pleasure in them. In other words: is beauty that which is beautiful, or that which gives pleasure? Is it beauty itself that draws us, or is the attraction itself, and thus the pleasure enjoyed, the origin of our fascination with beauty? “In the first place, I will ask if things are beautiful because they please, or if they please because they are beautiful”⁸.

For someone like Augustine, who has worked through to a strong sense of the objective truth which shines forth in the very depths of the world of the subject, there can be no doubt or hesitation in choosing between these two alternatives: “Things please because they are beautiful”⁹. The beauty of that which is beautiful is not dependent on the taste of the subject, but is inscribed in the things themselves; it has an objective force. And in what does this original structure of beauty consist? The beautiful is that which evinces a deep, harmonious “convenientia” between the different elements of which it is composed, a “con-venire” issuing from the depths: “Ask yourself what it is that attracts you to physical pleasure, and you will find that it is nothing other than harmony: indeed, while what is disharmonious causes pain, that which is harmonious gives pleasure”¹⁰.

Augustine goes on to develop this idea through an understanding of beauty as the presence of the Whole in the parts of the fragment, where each of these parts is in harmony with the others, and where together they relate to that which is other than themselves¹¹. The whole appears by way of the proper mutual inter-relationship between the parts which compose the fragment, and so by way of a form which reproduces this harmonious composition of the elements in unity, and in which the essence (or *species*) of the thing in question becomes evident: “It is no accident that when we praise something we use both the terms *speciosissimum* (that which has the essence to the highest degree) and *formosissimum* (that which has the form to the highest degree)”¹².

Unity is beauty: division is scandal, a wound. Beautiful is the Church of love, whose unity is an icon of the divine Trinity: scandal is the fruit of heresy and schism. Only the Church, which is united by faith and charity, is credible in proclaiming God’s

⁸ *De vera religione* 32, 59: “Et prius quaeram utrum ideo pulchra sint, quia delectant; an ideo delectent, quia pulchra sunt”.

⁹ *Ib.*: “Hic mihi sine dubitatione respondebitur, ideo delectare quia pulchra sunt”.

¹⁰ *Ib.*, 39, 72: “Quaere in corporis voluptate quid teneat, nihil aliud invenies quam convenientiam: nam si resistentia pariant dolorem, convenientia pariunt voluptatem”.

¹¹ Cf. *Conf.*, IV, 13, 20.

¹² *De vera religione* 18, 35: “Neque enim frustra tam speciosissimum, quam etiam formosissimum in laude ponitur”.

beauty. The question, though, remains: is it really true that this kind of beauty can coexist with the disorder and evil that devastate the world? Has the death of Beauty at the hour of abandonment on the Cross already been completely taken up and for ever resolved in the victory of Easter? Or does the paradox of the Crucified One challenge us to seek out other paths towards Beauty? Here, Augustine himself seems to urge us to go beyond Augustine...

2. Beauty as “crucified Love”: Aquinas’ idea of Beauty

The way which leads beyond the analogy of forms between this-worldly and divine beauty to an explicitly Christological aesthetics, is the path traveled by Thomas Aquinas. In the creative power of his genius, he took up and developed this second line of thought, without neglecting the gains made by Augustine. Here, the key employed to understand beauty is not only the idea of the abyss that draws us into itself, or the unspeakable otherness, or the mysterious and tranquil transcendence that calls out to us. Here again beauty is perceived as making itself present and perceptible in a fragment: yet here it hides *sub contraria specie* in the face of the One before whom we cover our faces, but whose countenance is yet the most beautiful among the sons of men (cf. Is 53,3 and Ps 44,3). Here beauty is “crucified love”.

In the *Prima Pars* of his *Summa Theologiae* he writes ¹³: “*Pulchritudo habet similitudinem cum propriis Fili*” – “Beauty has a likeness to what is proper to the Son”. As a further explanation of this statement he adds that three things must be present for beauty to exist: *integritas*, *proportio* and *claritas*: “*Nam ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur. Primo quidem, integritas sive perfectio... Et debita proportio sive consonantia. Et iterum claritas*” - “Thus for beauty to exist three things are required: integrity or perfection...due proportion or harmony. And luminosity”. Thomas perceives how these three realities are present in the Son, beginning obviously from how He revealed Himself as sent by the Father, as the incarnate and crucified Word. In beauty it is the whole that renders itself present and perceptible: “The integrity of a work is only perceived by those who know how to see the whole *in the very act* of breathing a soul into the various parts, building them, as it were, into itself, reclaiming them for itself, and disposing them in an harmonious order”¹⁴. In this way, the whole of the divine mystery dwells in the Word made flesh, because it is the nature common to the Three that is present and at work in the person of the incarnate Son. In Him the divine Whole is present in a fragment: the right proportion and harmony of the eternal Whole is

¹³ *Summa Theologica* I q. 39 a. 8 c. On the aesthetics of St Thomas cf. U. Eco, *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino*, Bompiani, Milano 1982².

¹⁴ L. Pareyson, *Estetica*, Turin 1954, 284.

reproduced in the reality of his human history. He is the *Verbum abbreviatum* of the *Verbum aeternum*, the icon of what is unseen, the Word who in words offers a faithful echo of the eternal self-communication of the divine Silence. This is beauty understood as “form”: this is Augustine’s approach, which in turn carries forward the Greek tradition.

According to Thomas, however, there is also another way in which the Whole makes its dwelling in the fragment, and so effects the event of beauty: the way of *claritas*. This is no longer a matter of the Whole rendering itself present and perceptible in the harmony of the parts: here the Whole bursts forth. Here the event of beauty is understood as a light shining brightly in the darkness of the night; here beauty shines through the fragment that offers no resistance. This is beauty as *splendor*, beauty celebrated as brightness. This is beauty that breaks upon us, a beauty which is glorious and overwhelming. Thomas perceives how this beauty came to be in the Son, splendor of the Father: *claritas* “convenit cum proprio Filii, inquantum est Verbum, quod quidem lux est, et *splendor intellectus*” – Brightness “corresponds to that which is proper to the Son, inasmuch as He is the Word, the *light* and *splendor* of understanding”.

Thus the Whole makes itself present in the Word not only in the harmony of the form, but also as a perfect reflection of the Father’s glory. It is precisely at this point that we can lay hold of the deepest meaning of St Thomas’s approach to beauty, where his life’s two worlds, the twofold wellspring of his intelligence and his soul, meet. It is in the Word’s being made flesh that Thomas perceives the irruption of the Other, the Silence of the Word becoming present and perceptible, to the supreme cry at the ninth hour, the ecstasy of the living God in love with His creatures. And it is here that Thomas senses that there must exist another relationship between the Whole and the fragment which surpasses the “Greek” approach of proportion and form, even as this was reworked from a Christian point of view by Augustine: Thomas senses a relationship that includes brokenness, scandal, and transgression. It is the “kenosis” of splendor in the form, and the form of splendor in “kenosis”, which is for him the event of the revelation of beauty which theology translates into thought and word: form and harmony, certainly, but also irruption, splendor, and life contemplated and possessed in vision, and, still further, death experienced as sharing in the infinite pain of the Cross. This is the beauty of Crucified Love! In the abandonment of the Beloved, beauty is also hiatus, brokenness and death; in the incarnate Son, who dies on the Cross, above all, beauty is “agápe”.

3. The Tabor-like light: Orthodox East and transfiguring beauty

Pavel N. Evdokimov is an outstanding witness to how passionately the Orthodox

East longs for the last things as they are anticipated and promised in the revelation of the crucified Lord. As in the whole great Eastern Christian tradition, in Evdokimov too it is the light “of Tabor” which guides the theological enterprise, that light which shines from the mountain of the Transfiguration, where time’s dark path is lit up by the splendor of the beauty from on high, perceptible only to the eye of faith¹⁵. In this kind of theological thinking, contemplation precedes and nourishes speculation, mystical experience founds intellectual activity, and doxology pervades and molds the exercise of the *logos*. The bright darkness characteristic of revealed mystery touches all things with the kiss of its light: in it, we are given to attain the hidden depths of all that exists.

This light, which shines forth from the depths both of creation as it first was and now continues to be, as well as from the riches of the redemption offered to every creature, holds together beginning and fulfillment, like a hidden web which keeps in existence everything that exists. There thus emerge the main lines of a true “metaphysics of light”, in which all things find the place set aside for them both at their origin and in their destiny¹⁶. This light which shines from the abyss of the beginnings and of the eighth day is nothing other than a mysterious sharing in the life of God the Trinity, the womb and guardian of everything that exists: all things are created by the Father in the eternal generation of His Word, the Son (“All things have been created through Him and for Him”: Col 1, 16), and the Spirit is the manifestation of this Word, the light shining from the Word, in which each of the creatures called to existence finds light.

It is thus not knowledge that creates or “sees” light, but it is the light that comes from above which allows us human beings to see original truth and beauty, to share in the way God sees. This Trinitarian “metaphysics” of light is not an arbitrary Eastern development of biblical revelation: on the contrary, according to Evdokimov it is founded on what is most characteristic in the identity of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Since God entered history – to the point of pouring himself out entirely in the incarnation of the Son and His paschal mystery – the visible has offered the invisible a home, even if without taking the invisible prisoner, in a way at least analogous to how human words have been inhabited by the Word of God and by His Silence.

How then is the human being understood within this “metaphysics” of divine light? In their most fundamental structure, human beings are a thirst for beauty, a thirst occasioned and kept strong by the “Light of the Word”, who is the Spirit. We creatures would, however, be unable to recognize this call of ours to beauty, as well as the work accomplished in us by the Consoler, if the image of the new human being had not been offered to us in Christ. The truth about human beings does not originate in human

¹⁵ Cf. P. Evdokimov, *La conoscenza di Dio secondo la tradizione orientale*, Paoline, Rome 1969.

¹⁶ Id., *La teologia della bellezza. Il senso della bellezza e l'icona*, Paoline, Rome 1971, p. 17.

beings: in their deepest being, they are made to receive the love that created them and that continues to renew them in the act of giving them life, the love revealed by the incarnate Son.

What we have here is the exact opposite of the arrogant attitude found in Western modernity: here the subject as central character in the human drama is overwhelmed by the splendor of the light which alone gives human beings back to themselves. And this light comes to human beings, and shines on them and hence not from them: Christ is the place where Beauty came to shine among us in all its splendor.

In this world of divine light shared with human beings the *icon* takes on its full meaning: the icon is the fragment that gives a home to the divine Advent, the tiny reality ready to receive the irruption of the infinite, the image of the impossible possibility which God comes to accomplish in the world. In the icon – contemplated in receptive silence – the asymmetry of the encounter between the human and the divine shines forth and draws the beholder in: on the one hand, the icon is a song of praise and glory directed towards the divine; on the other, the icon is transparency of light, an instrument of the irruption of the Other and his Tabor-like splendor.

It is thus not the subject who sees the icon or sees by means of it, but it is the icon which floods with its light all those who place themselves receptively before it, disposed to see what cannot be seen: and this is why it is Christ – the invisible God made visible, the incarnation of the Word – who is the true source of the icon’s Tabor-like light. The icon is a mysterious yet real sharing in the victory over the infinite distance created by sin, in the power of the redemption achieved by the Son who came in the flesh, who transfigures this flesh in himself and in us.

In order truly to read the icon we must thus share in the new life of the redeemed: it is only there that the eye of faith awakens and – purified in the Easter mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in us – is able to see the otherwise invisible. The icon offers itself to the vision of faith while at the same time it teaches the soul to see: in the encounter with the icon the unity of the divine plan shines out in maximum concentration. The gift “already” received in Christ and in the Spirit is offered as anticipation and pledge of the fulfillment “not yet” realized. Between the beginning and the end there is this Tabor-like light, condensed in the fragment where Beauty irrupts and draws us to itself.

At the beginning and in the final fulfillment of all God’s ways stands the beauty of Trinitarian love, shining with light: of this light, which transfigures the heart and history, the icon is a powerful presence, which invades and fascinates, dwelling in our ordinary days but with the splendor of celebration. In it – a fragment pervaded by the

Whole, a tiny reality into which the Infinite irrupts – we are offered the dawn of the Kingdom which comes...

4. Beauty: a way to unity?

If beauty can be understood as revealed and hidden love, “crucified and risen agàpe”, it can also be the bridge which unites eternity and time, ultimate and penultimate reality. Precisely thus, beauty can offer a way to unity: in the fragment it allows us to meet the Whole, and in this way Beauty simplifies and brings us to the core of what exists. In this way, too, Beauty purifies the heart and unifies what is dispersed by concentrating on what is essential. The contemplation of Beauty helps us to distinguish what is necessary from what is contingent, Tradition from traditions, Truth from opinions.

All this, however, would not be enough by itself to speak of Beauty as a way to unity; we need also to appropriate a double key-idea, present in the Gospel, which leads us to discover beauty as a challenge to overcome our divisions. The first key-idea consists in the fact that the Shepherd, who will bring all his sheep to the unity of his flock, is presented in the Gospel as “the beautiful Shepherd” (John 10,11: “ὁ ποιμήν ὁ καλός”). Easter will reveal the face of this Beauty in the suffering Servant, who delivers himself to death for our sake. “Two flutes - explains Augustine - play different tunes, but the same Spirit breathes through them both. The first: ‘You are the most handsome of men’ (Ps 45,2); and the second: ‘He had no form or majesty that we should look at him’ (Is 53,2). The two flutes are played by one and the same Spirit: so they play in harmony. Do not fail to listen to them, but try to understand them. Let us ask the apostle Paul to explain the perfect harmony between the two flutes. Let the first play: ‘the most handsome of men’, ‘though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped’ (Phil 2,6). This is how the beauty of the sons of men is surpassed. Let the second play: ‘that we should look at him’, he who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness’ (Phil 2,7). ‘He had no form or majesty’ so that he might give you beauty and form. What beauty? What form? The love of charity, so that you may run in love and love with the energy of one who runs... Look to Him through whom you have been made beautiful”¹⁷.

The love by which He loved us transforms the “man of sorrows” (Is 53,3) into “the most handsome of men”: crucified love is the Beauty which saves the world. If the way to unity is first of all that of the conversion of all believers to Christ, then the Beauty of his crucified love will be *par excellence* the way to unity: in his crucified and

¹⁷ Saint Augustin, *In Io.Ep.*, IX, 9: PL 35, 2051.

risen love the disciples meet the Beloved and let themselves be gathered by Him into the unity of one flock with one Shepherd. Spiritual ecumenism - founded on the continual conversion to the Lord Jesus – finds in the beauty of His divine charity the way to move on, the mysterious appeal to which we must respond always anew.

There is, however, another key-idea in the Gospel which helps us recognize in beauty a way towards unity: this is noted by Pavel Florenskij, the “Russian Leonardo da Vinci”, a genius in the realms both of science and of theological and philosophical thought, a priest of Christ, and a martyr under Stalin. Commenting on Mt 5, 16 – “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” – he observes that “‘your good deeds’ does not in any way mean ‘good deeds’ in a philanthropic and moralizing sense: *ymòn tà kalà érga* means ‘beautiful deeds’, luminous and harmonious revelations of the spiritual personality – above all the luminous, beautiful face through which shines out ‘the inner light’ of the person, so that, won over by this irresistible light, ‘men’ praise the heavenly Father, whose image thus shines out on earth”¹⁸. If *common witness* is a precious way towards unity, it is inseparable from the splendor of the beauty of the acts of the disciple interiorly transfigured by the Spirit: where love shines forth, the beauty which saves appears, praise is offered to the heavenly Father, the unity of the disciples of the Beloved grows, and they are united to him as disciples of his crucified and risen love.

The place *par excellence* where this love reaches and changes us is *the liturgy*, the source and summit of the journey towards unity. It is Florenskij himself who points to the beauty of the liturgy as the place of the mysterious becoming-present of divine love, and thus of the saving encounter of time with eternity, thanks to which the unity willed by the Lord is gradually built up. Recalling one of his celebrations in the church on the hill of Makovec, facing the great monastery (the “Lavra”) of Sergiev Possad, the heart of Russian Christianity, Florenskij describes the paradoxical beauty of the liturgy, symbol of the symbols of the world, in which heaven dwells on earth and eternity pitches its tent in time, and concludes: “The mystery of the evening was united with the mystery of the morning and the two became one”¹⁹. To unite the mystery of the evening – of the world wounded by evil and the Church wounded by division – with the mystery of the morning of humanity reconciled and the Church united as the Lord wills, is ecumenism’s task. To evoke, to seek, to welcome “this” Beauty – the Beauty which saves, experienced where eternity pitches its tent in time – can be an encouragement and a help on the journey of commitment to unity: only a beginning, certainly, but also a challenge and a promise for all.

¹⁸ P. Florenskij, *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona*, Adelphi, Milano 1999⁷, 50.

¹⁹ P. Florenskij, *Sulla collina Makovec*, 20. 5. 1913, in Id., *Il cuore cherubico. Scritti teologici e mistici*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1999, 260s.