



Pastor's Pen

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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

THE POWER OF BEAUTY

Passing through art museums is something I like to do when given the chance, especially when I am visiting somewhere new. I have no formal education in art, nor do I have any artistic skills in any form. For a substantial portion of my teenage life, I had no appreciation of artistic expression of any kind. At age 18, I was exposed to the most beautiful art in the world at the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel, and I half wondered what the fuss was about as I wandered the halls, overwhelmed more by its size and history than its beauty.

Age and exposure change things, and when Pope Benedict mused that civilization would be “saved” by beauty, it didn’t surprise me. Whatever is godly is true, good, and beautiful, and the more we get to know God, the more we know that to be true. Perhaps it’s because what is true, good, and beautiful can be found within us as creations of God, but also, I think that because they also call us out of ourselves into a place of awe and wonder. The true, good, and beautiful bring order into a world that is too often chaotic. Whether that beauty comes in the form of architecture, paintings, sculpture, music, or anything else, if done well they will represent the order that we long for and are made for.

Order brings peace, and when Benedict was referring to being rescued by beauty, I believe he was alluding to the universal attraction to beauty in the human experience and its ability to connect people. Whenever I am in a museum with religious or other art, I am fascinated by the mix of people there. Even in places like Vatican Museums, many people with no or even hostile affiliations to faith gather to appreciate the artistry in front of them.

Faced with the sadness, chaos, and distortions of the world, it is easy to become blinded to the beauty that surrounds us and can lead us to discouragement. But beauty lends itself to hope and the best we can accomplish, rather than sinking into the dregs of what we see too often.

I was taken aback by a brief article in the *Magnificat* about Dave Brubeck, an accomplished and well-known jazz composer who died in 2012. Brubeck was not Catholic until later in life, and he never shared much about his own conversion. It was well known, however, that his experiences in World War II shaped his vision and forced him to confront some really ugly things about humanity. His music was part of his response and bringing something orderly, if unusual in the genre, and beautiful into a disordered and sometimes evil world. The article described his music as his “search for an aesthetic and vital bridge over the gap (between God and man.)” The beauty of his music was intended to be a connection between the weakness and shortcomings of humanity and the completeness and mastery of God. Maybe that’s what Pope Benedict was thinking when he told us that beauty will save the world.

Advent doesn’t get the attention that Christmas does, but the season is beautiful in itself, and maybe more importantly, prepares us for beauty. Besides the raw lack of maturity, my failed appreciation of the artistic masterpieces in Rome was largely due to a lack of preparation for them. Any normal person should be awed by the overwhelming beauty, but if no one helps them to prepare for it, it might feel like a storm blew through rather than being overcome by the art. Advent prepares us to receive beauty, truth, and goodness. If we are to be saved by beauty, we must appreciate it first.

The fast-paced and often chaotic lives we live are not conducive to receiving or appreciating beauty, truth, and goodness. They need time to sink in, time to be learned, and time to be appreciated. The power of the beauty in art is not its sheer size or even its place in history, but in its beauty that both reflects and leads us to God.

For Advent, we can slow down and appreciate the beauty that is to come.