

The Beauty of the Truth

Thomas Storck

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
—Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

As the good denotes that toward which the appetite tends, so the true denotes that toward which the intellect tends.

—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

When I converted to the Catholic faith early in 1978 at the age of 27 I was motivated by only one thing: my conviction that Catholicism was true, that Catholicism’s account of reality was in fact the way things really are. But long before that date, when I did not yet believe that the Catholic religion was true, I found myself increasingly attracted by the beauty of the Faith. And though I would never urge anyone to become a Catholic simply because of the beauty of the Faith or of Catholic life, nevertheless I am still convinced that not only is the Faith true but that it is compellingly attractive and beautiful, even exciting. Moreover, I think that the beauties of the Faith are not merely accidents, but are close to the heart of what God has done for us.

Though I had little contact with Catholics or Catholic things while I was a boy, my father’s library did contain a few important Catholic books. These included Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles*, Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*, Ronald Knox’s *The Belief of Catholics* and the Baltimore Catechism. As I was growing up I read some of these books and parts of the others. And two things about the Catholic Church gradually impressed themselves on my mind. The first was the fondness of Catholicism for clear thinking. Distinctions were distinctions. If A was A, then, dammit, A was not B. If something was proved true, then it was true, whatever we felt about it. In contrast I found most of the other religious ideas I encountered, either in people or in other books, mushy and vague. (I exempt C. S. Lewis from this charge.) But though it is easy to see how I became aware of the tight logic and clear distinctions of the Catholic mind, I am less clear on the second thing. Indeed, I am not sure I can even define or name it very well. But I must try, for I think it is one of the most salient features about Catholicism, and something that ought to be attractive, especially to those of my generation.

What is this second thing? It is simply that at some point in my adolescence and early manhood I began to find the Faith attractive, exciting, beautiful. Catholicism gradually became to me a vision of things at once more vibrant and full of life than the culturally Protestant world in which I had always lived. I say here deliberately ‘Catholicism’ rather than ‘the Catholic Church,’ not because I felt any coldness toward

the Church itself, but because my vision was broader. In the center of it indeed stood the Church, but around that Church stood Catholic civilization, Catholic life. The latter obviously came from the former, but the latter also made manifest what was often hidden and latent in the former: the beauty and vibrancy of Catholicism.

Now, as I say, I do not remember how this conception arose in my mind. As an undergraduate I read some more in various Catholic authors, especially Chesterton and Belloc, and I am sure that they helped strengthen this image of the Faith. I remember at the time reading some of Chesterton’s *The Catholic Church and Conversion* and accepting without demur his words about Catholicism being the new religion, one of the “enthusiasms that carry young people off their feet and leave older people bewildered or annoyed,” the very reverse of an old, feeble or stodgy affair. As he writes here,

It is perhaps no longer the custom to regard conversion as a form of dissipation; but it is still common to regard conversion as a form of revolt. And as regards the established convention of much of the modern world, it is a revolt. The worthy merchant of the middle class, the worthy farmer of the Middle West, when he sends his son to college, does now feel a faint alarm lest the boy should fall among thieves, in the sense of Communists; but he has the same sort of fear lest he should fall among Catholics.

For a time as an undergraduate I was also part of a folk choir that sang regularly at a Saturday evening Mass. It was certainly not the music nor even the liturgy (by 1970 already in English) that especially reinforced my attraction to the Faith, but rather parts of Catholic life that I was now beginning to experience. Although it is a caricature that Episcopalians are all crusty, rich and stuck-up, nevertheless it is true that among Catholics I saw a popular and familiar side to religion that I did not see among Episcopalians or other Protestants. This Catholic atmosphere is touched on by Ronald Knox in *The Belief of Catholics*.

There is among Catholic saints a familiarity which seems to raise this world to the level of eternity. There is among Catholic sinners a familiarity which seems (to non-Catholic eyes) to degrade eternity to the level of

this world. The point is most clearly demonstrated in connection with that attitude toward religious things which we call "reverence." For good or for evil, the ordinary, easy-going Catholic pays far less tribute to this sentiment than a Protestant, or even an agnostic brought up in the atmosphere of Protestantism. No traveller fails to be struck, and perhaps shocked, by the "irreverence" or "naturalness" (call it what you will) that marks the behaviour of Catholic children wandering about in church. Even grown-up Catholics will usually *talk* in church if anything needs to be said, while [Anglicans] will usually whisper.

The essence of this Catholic atmosphere, at least as it attracted me, was this easy intermingling of the sacred and the secular. In our conventionally Protestant culture piety is associated with an overtly "religious" sort of behavior. And when one is not being religious one is being entirely secular. The twain do not meet. But among Catholics I was seeing that the twain do indeed meet, in fact, that the twain are intertwined. Religion is not something apart from our everyday lives, requiring a special and sanctified kind of comport-

ment. I saw this same thing during a visit to a popular pilgrimage site, the Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio, on Assumption Day in 1974. Here were crowds of pilgrims of many ethnic groups, Chaldean rite Catholics (originally from Iraq) prominent among them. Now the pilgrims at Carey are by no means all pious in the conventional understanding of that term: they mill around talking with friends, teenagers parade around the streets, little children dart about playing. People come to Carey for a pilgrimage to a shrine of the Mother of God and yet this act is not cut off from the rest of their lives by some kind of wall, a wall

which sharply demarcates the sacred from the secular. As it was for Chaucer's pilgrims, journeying to a shrine unites much of what some might seek on a vacation with what would clearly be accounted works of piety.

While still an undergraduate I took my first tentative steps toward affiliation with the Church and the Faith. But the priest I consulted, who assured me that now that we had finished demythologizing Scripture we could begin to demythologize dogma, was not exactly what I had in mind, and I stayed out of the Church for several more years. During these next few years I made my first visit to Santa Fe (in 1975). I immediately fell in love with the Spanish culture, with its buildings, its art, its people, its life. Twentieth-century New Mexico can hardly be called a Catholic culture in its fullness, but enough of the externals of the Faith remain so that it helped to build up in my mind this image of Catholicism. One of the most memorable things that I saw was an exhibit at the Museum of New Mexico of colonial religious art from the 17th through the 20th centuries. Here I saw religious art as a living and popular tradition, for the exhibit included a

few paintings done well into this century, pictures depicting answered prayers. That is, a painting might show someone lying on a sickbed with others praying and perhaps a saint above receiving the petitions. And the next panel might show the invalid up and about again. These were paintings done by or on behalf of families living in New Mexico in the 20th century to commemorate some actual answered prayer. Here was Catholic culture alive and well and part of the lives of ordinary believers.

But something else in Santa Fe that at the time created a maybe even bigger impression on me involved less authentic Catholic art. This was the rosaries and plastic statues of the Infant Jesus of Prague for sale at the Woolworths on the Plaza. Here again was a sign of the matter-of-factness Catholics felt about the Faith. Though doubtless for Woolworths it was simply a means of making a buck, for one brought up in a Protestant culture it was a revelation. I had never seen anything like it and it delighted me. Here was another example — to me refreshing — that among Catholics religion was not something to be put in a little box, something separate from life, something so special that it was

almost unreal. No, religion was a part of life. Why? Because God, the Virgin, the angels and the saints, were all as real as, and as close as, the other things Woolworths sold, such as soap, hangers or underpants.

About this time I began to develop devotion to our Blessed Lady. Around 1973 or 1974 I began to pray to her and she was definitely part of this undefined sense of romance that always pulled me toward the Faith. As I will explain below, I think it was quite natural that attraction to the Blessed Virgin should be mingled with this attraction to the Faith in the world, for I think her historical role in salvation history has had much to do

with the creation of these aspects of the Faith that so enchanted me.

Now what do I think was behind all this? Some, perhaps, in view of Chesterton's words about "conversion as a form of revolt" that I quoted above, might be inclined to dismiss my conversion, at least, as my own version of the revolt of the 1960s, a revolt which happily for me did not end up either in Zen or in crystals. I revolted against Protestant culture and ended up a Catholic. But I think there is much more to it than this. For just as St. Thomas tells us that the good is what attracts us, and that ultimately goodness and being are the same, so I think there is something objective that was always at the root of my attraction toward the Church and toward Catholic life. This is the Incarnation.

"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." From the doctrine and fact of the Incarnation, the taking of a human nature by the Eternal Logos, come, I think, those aspects of the Faith that so attracted and excited me, and still do. In the first place, the Incarnation was surely the most wonderful and startling intermingling of the divine and

So much of modern life in industrialized countries is drably uniform. It attempts to witness to the supposed universalism of secular industrial capitalism by creating a sameness wherever it goes. It paints the world a dull dark green or gray. But Catholic places are painted in bold and bright colors, each different, a localism that will forever war against industrial drabness.

human that is possible. Here was the almighty Creator of the universe living among us. Here he was a suckling at his Mother's breast, eating his first solid food, playing, assisting Joseph, eating, sleeping. If the other little boys of Nazareth had known, they could have said to their mothers, "I'm going over to play at God's house now, okay, Mom?" or "Can God come over this afternoon and play?" Imagine the Eternal Infinite running around your backyard. Here is a juxtaposition that we would never have dared to imagine, had God not effected it himself. After this, nothing we do should be shocking if we mingle the sacred and the ordinary, indeed, if we make the sacred ordinary and the ordinary sacred. And this is exactly what the Faith had done. Medieval Catholics gave free rein to this instinct. A medieval Welsh poet wrote "I could hardly sleep a wink though God were to sing a lullaby." And a modern editor comments, "In Chaucer's age men spoke freely of sacred persons and things Of course such passages do not necessarily indicate lack of proper reverence. Sometimes they seem to show affectionate familiarity with objects of worship." Indeed they do. The English cycle plays, meant to be performed around the time of the feast of Corpus Christi, abound in instances of putting the sacred and the secular side by side, but even they cannot compare with what God himself did when he became man. But this is not how Protestant culture approaches such matters. The passage from Ronald Knox that I quoted above continues with this account of the agnostic, but culturally Protestant, Julian Huxley's behavior in a Catholic church.

Those who have read the statement of his beliefs made by my friend, Mr. Julian Huxley, will realise that he is not an exponent of orthodox Christianity. Yet I can recall — I am sure he will not mind my recalling it — his attitude of pained surprise when a Belgian friend of ours knelt down in a pew to pose for a photograph. I am passing no criticisms, one way or the other, in this matter of reverence; I am simply trying to put on record a difference of attitude. It is perhaps most succinctly stated when it is pointed out that in Catholic books of devotion Almighty God is sometimes addressed not as "Thou" but as "You." [Written in 1927.]

Although hardly able to put it into words, I discerned a difference between Catholics and Protestants, including cultural Protestants, in their approach to the sacred. Catholics had a familiarity with God and the things of God that others did not seem to have, a familiarity that, as I said, seems to me to be rooted in a wholehearted acceptance of the Incarnation and its implications and which, when translated into actual living acts and material objects, has created a culture of great beauty and liveliness.

There is another and related aspect of Catholic life that is likewise, I think, rooted in the Incarnation. This is the concreteness of Catholicism. After our Lord assumed flesh he was always in a particular place. Though, of course, he was also at the same time everywhere (since he is God), you could still find him in one particular place doing one particular thing. He might be preaching or eating or healing or sleeping or walking. As if two men who were arguing could say, "Well, let's go over and ask God what he thinks about this. He's staying in the third house from the corner." And the

means of grace and sanctification that God instituted in his Church are concrete and use concrete things: water and oil and bread and wine. Each is uniquely itself and uniquely different. So similarly I found the Spanish-Indian art of New Mexico concrete. It witnesses to eternal truths but does so in a very concrete manner. It was itself. Byzantine art and Romanesque art are also themselves. Unique and different from all others. So I found all Catholic culture and Catholic life to be. The more concrete it was the more universal it could be. Just as our Lord was the universal Creator of the universe, yet in one place at one time, so each Catholic culture, by being itself, witnessed by its uniqueness to the universal and the supra-temporal. Even the brightness and contrast of the colors of so much of Catholic art might be said to do the same. Each color was different and by being more itself, more concrete, was able to become part of the harmonious whole of the painting. So much of modern life in industrialized countries is drably uniform. It attempts to witness to the supposed universalism of secular industrial capitalism by creating a sameness wherever it goes. It paints the world a dull dark green or gray. But Catholic places are painted in bold and bright colors, each different, a localism that will forever war against industrial drabness. I saw this clearly in New Mexico and again I was attracted to the Faith and to what it had created.

Moreover, the vibrancy that I perceived underlying this colorful concreteness was the vibrancy of the Logos, the force that upholds all creation in the veins and bones of the God-man. If the divine life could pulsate within human flesh, as it were, then something of that divine strength could also lie behind Catholic life. It is certainly the principle on which our sacramental theology is based and in the Eucharist we have it in its most complete form. Indeed, there it is almost a second Incarnation, for again Almighty God comes down to dwell within the things of earth and to inhabit what is made by the hands of man.

So it was chiefly these two things, the daring juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular and the bold concreteness of Catholic life, both rooted in the Incarnation, that attracted me to the Faith, that made Catholicism seem exciting, especially in contrast to the cultural Protestantism of my childhood and of our surrounding society. And the Incarnation is also the reason why, I think, that the events of Christmas, and in fact all that concerns our Lady, have such compelling charm for us. Mary has no meaning for us apart from the Incarnation, and whenever we turn to her we are at least implicitly recognizing the Incarnation. And the Word becoming flesh is a fact astonishing, and attractive because it is astonishing, so that we never tire of repeating the stories of Bethlehem, of the stable and the shepherds, of the beasts and the angels.

*O magnum mysterium et admirabile sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum, jacentem in praesepe.*

*(O great mysterious and admirable sacrament
that animals saw the Lord born lying in a manger.)
To which we can only say, Amen, Amen.*

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