

We appreciate true beauty when we contemplate the divine glory of God

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If there is a purpose in Art, it is that it serves to simplify not to complicate. This is one of the lessons of the greatest theologians of modern times, Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

Pope Benedict, amongst others, considers Balthasar to be the very greatest of Catholic intellects since Thomas Aquinas.

Described by De Lubac as “perhaps the most cultured man of his time”, Balthasar’s life spanned the course of the 20th century and his work, by any measure, is immense in volume and in influence.

The centre piece of his theology is an exhilarating trilogy that was written over the course of 30 years, covers 15 volumes and extends to over 10,000 pages.

The first part of this trilogy, *Glory of the Lord*, is a study of Balthasar’s renewal of foundational values as seen by an approach to aesthetics framed through the prism of the classic transcendental values – Truth, Beauty and Goodness.

My own path to Hans Urs Von Balthasar emerged through the age-old debate of “reason vs revelation”. I was 18 when I first came across his writings at Netherhall House, and too ill formed in my philosophical grounding to take more than a superficial ‘dividend’ from those readings.

As my career has progressed – I spend most of my time in science, particularly mathematics and quantum computing – what once were sharp edges have become softened – but in wholly unexpected ways.

Balthasar brooks no compromise, and this certainty has helped me to see that there was, is and ever shall be Christ at the core of everything that we try, in our own way, to rationalise. From the very largest to the infinitesimal, God is the only constant.

Balthasar provides a beautiful counterpoint to the 19th century philosophy of “L’art pour l’art” – itself an inevitable outcome of what he describes as the anthropocentric tendency of Western thinking since the time of the renaissance – where objectivity and form drift away from each other.

Vast industries have been built on the back of this shallow tradition where artists, galleries and curatorial staff all jostle in an echo chamber where they tell each other how wonderful they all are.

Balthasar draws a line in the sand, as it were, and brings us back to the patristic approach of the Church fathers, with an elegant pre-Thomist reminder of what the modern world has all but forgotten – that beauty (and art) can only be appreciated when it leads us to an appreciation of the splendour of God. “Beauty is



Hans Urs von Balthasar

the disinterested one, without which the ancient world refused to understand itself – a world which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world, a world of interests, leaving it to its own avarice and sadness.

“No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to man.

“Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.”

Balthasar’s “line in the sand” goes deeper than reminding us of the indivisibility noted above. In the early stages of the first book of his trilogy, Balthasar focuses on Beauty and draws our attention to the fact that the aesthetics of beauty cannot possibly be understood unless we also understand that the role of beauty is to draw us to a deeper purpose; that there is no “form” of earthly beauty that can be truly beautiful unless it withstands this deeper scrutiny.

“The awareness of inherent glory gave inspiration to works of incomparable earthly beauty in the great tradition of the Church. But these works become suitable for today’s liturgy only if, in and beyond their beauty, those who take part are not merely moved to aesthetic sentiments but are able to encounter that glory of God to which the Creator wanted to lead such works.

“Those who hear only the beautiful and are moved only by that can have a quasi-religious experience – like the many who listen to Saint Matthew’s Passion on Good Friday – but they are deceived regarding the true meaning of what they are hearing.”

Balthasar’s position on the sacred within aesthetics is not to try and differentiate between liturgical or



Madonna of the Edelweiss, c. 1500 Photo: by permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College

church art and ‘normal’ art. He avoids simplistic differences between, for instance, the beauty of a great painting, a Mozart concerto, or a poem.

Here, his views run contrary to the intuition of the modern world and are in stark contrast with the vested interest that has grown up and surrounds the so-called “Art world” in its broadest context.

As G K Chesterton said: “Every Artist knows that the form is not superficial but fundamental, that the form is the foundation. Every sculptor knows that the form of the statue is not the outside of the statue, but rather the inside of the statue, even in the sense of the inside of the sculptor. Every poet knows that the sonnet-form of the poem is not only the form, but the poem.”

This quote by Chesterton is a refreshing reminder of the depth that Balthasar refers to. All of us draw on the role of icons, beautiful liturgy and gorgeous vestments, but Balthasar states something much more fundamental.

His message is that beauty always has meaning and this meaning is credible only when the link with divine splendour is first and foremost. In fact it is the study and contemplation of questions such as this that I hope will be part of the

freedom itself.”

Only in this way, Balthasar says, can we unite the (necessary) subjectivity of our individual circumstances with an all encompassing objectivity that God provides. Art, after all, is merely human or earthly and even at its best can only hint at the splendour of the beauty that is God. After all “in the liturgy, everything is relative to and oriented towards God’s glory”

He goes on to say: “But whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed ... then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of ‘knowledge’ and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics ... a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique.”

The story of Christianity is ultimately the story of God’s love for mankind. Our Christian heritage reminds us of the power of that love, and in celebrating the beauty of that heritage we should not forget that beauty, for beauty’s sake, is merely a fragment of the whole.

When we start to chase beauty, and become drawn in the outward aesthetic, we participate in one of the failures of modern life.

This article provides a glimpse of Balthasar’s teaching. He wrote in equally direct, compelling and simple ways on many other subjects. Prayer, the structure of the Church, the sacred covenant that Christ Our Lord has made with mankind. He wrote about music, about literature, about history and is a towering influence in the modern Catholic Church.

I hope that for those who have yet to discover the beauty of his work, this article serves as a prompt for further reading.

“Quia per incarnati Verbi mysterium nova mentis nostrae oculis lux tuae claritatis infulsit: ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur.”

“Because through the mystery of the incarnate word the new light of your brightness has shone onto the eyes of our mind; that knowing God visibly, we might be snatched up by this into the love of invisible things.”

Ilyas is a Patron of the Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst, and also the Chairman of the Stephen Hawking Foundation.

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst is home to unique Catholic collections – items which draw on this country’s Christian story. This registered charity is currently creating accommodation for scholars, retreatants and those wishing to deepen their Christian Faith. Theodore House will be followed by a Visitors’ Centre which will enable parishes, schools and the general public to have greater access to these amazing collections. For more details please visit www.christianheritagecentre.com or contact info@christianheritagecentre.com