

# *RESTORING BEAUTY IN THE LITURGY*

Rev. Scott A. Haynes, S.J.C.  
The Canons Regular of St. John Cantius



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Jesus Christ has chosen the Church for his Bride. In nuptial love, the Bride of Christ looks into the eyes of the Bridegroom and calls out: “Splendor and majesty are in his presence; power and beauty are in his sanctuary.”<sup>1</sup>

The Wedding Feast of the Lamb described in the Book of Revelation actually describes the Sacred Liturgy of the Church.<sup>2</sup> In the climax of her heavenly worship, the Bride reflects the image of the Bridegroom – the image of the Word-Made-Flesh, who is Beauty-Incarnate.

For the world, the maxim, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,”<sup>3</sup> is a subjective statement. For the Bride of Christ, this is a concrete reality of the Incarnation!

Sadly in our own times, the banal and vulgar have invaded our sanctuaries, following “a misguided sense of creativity.”<sup>4</sup> Nothing, therefore, is more important today than the restoration of the beauty of the Sacred Liturgy, the restoration of the sacred.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, the 20th century's most notable writer on the theology of beauty, said: “We can be sure that whoever sneers at Beauty's name...can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.”<sup>5</sup>

In order to celebrate the Sacred Liturgy with due reverence and beauty, the Church must be able to “distinguish between the sacred and the profane.”<sup>6</sup> When false types of “inculturation” pollute liturgical worship we must be mindful that “all is not valid; all is not licit; all is not good.”<sup>7</sup> The secular, the cheap, the inferior and the inartistic “are not meant to cross the threshold of God's temple.”<sup>8</sup>

In order to “restore the sacred” we must, first and foremost, contemplate the beauty of Christ in the Sacred Liturgy – “a sacred action surpassing all others.”<sup>9</sup> This begins with external fidelity to the rubrics, but leads to internal union with Christ, for “those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”<sup>10</sup> The spiritual beauty of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 96:6.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. 1:10-13; 4:4-8; 5:14; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4.

<sup>3</sup> Anon. Greece. 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Preface to *The Glory of the Lord*.

<sup>6</sup> Ez 44:23.

<sup>7</sup> Address of Pope Paul VI to the Italian Society of St. Cecilia, Rome, April 15, 1971, *Sacred Music*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Summer 1971), p. 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Jn 4:24.

Sacred Liturgy transforms the lives of Catholics. Indeed, “the encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes.”<sup>11</sup> This spiritual beauty forms the Christ-like heart in moral beauty. And when the spiritual beauty of the Sacred Liturgy has transformed a soul, man can then create things of beauty, such as art, architecture, poetry, and music.

This manmade beauty, formed by the beauty of Christ in the Sacred Liturgy, imitates the creative genius of God who gave this world an inherent natural beauty. When the beautiful and radiant face of Christ our Savior becomes the center of sacred worship, all creation longs to cry out with the psalmist: “every work that He does is full of splendor and beauty.”<sup>12</sup>

If the beauty of Holy Mass does not, in essence, rely upon the splendid beauty of iconography, ornate vestments, Gregorian chant or Baroque architecture, why then has the Church invested so much of its patrimony in fostering these sacred arts? God has placed a legitimate desire in the human soul to create beautiful things because he wants man to share in his masterpiece of creation, a creation that is good and beautiful.

Beauty in the Liturgy results from order. This is why the Liturgy, by its very nature, demands order, and so Liturgy cannot exist without rubrics or ceremony. Beauty shines through the gestures of the Sacred Liturgy. Thus, the external acts of worship, such as making the Sign of the Cross, genuflecting, kneeling and bowing, become ways to internalize reverence and beauty in our human lives.

“Every liturgical gesture, being a gesture of Christ, is called to express beauty.”<sup>13</sup> And so the transcendent beauty of the Liturgy permeates the hearts of men, and forms us to have proper relationships, not only with God, but also with our neighbor, and therefore empowers us to transform human culture. This is the genuine meaning of “inculturation.” If we Catholics want the inherent beauty of the liturgy to convert the “culture of death,” we must permit the Sacred Liturgy to form us by its spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ.

This means that, in humility, we must, renounce any desire to make the Liturgy conform to changing whims. Consequently, let us renounce unauthorized innovations, rubrical improvisation, banality, and misguided-creativity.

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. *Message to Communion and Liberation*, August 2002, Rimini, Italy, made available May 2, 2005, [www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org).

Hence, "...the Old Rite becomes a living treasure of the Church and also should provide a standard of worship, of mystery, and of catechesis toward which the celebrations of the *Novus Ordo* must move. In other words, the Tridentine Mass is the missing link. And unless it be re-discovered in all its faithful truth and beauty, the *Novus Ordo* will not respond to the organic growth and change that has characterized the liturgy from its beginning."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ps. 111:3.

<sup>13</sup> *Liturgy and Beauty*, by Most Rev. Piero Marini, Titular Archbishop of Martirano, Master of Papal Liturgical Celebrations. March 15, 2006. [www.vatican.va.edu](http://www.vatican.va.edu)

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Michael John Zielinski O.S.B. Oliv., Vice-President of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church and of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology. [www.pecosmonastery.org](http://www.pecosmonastery.org).