



OFFICE FOR THE LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS
OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF

Beauty in Every Aspect of the Liturgical Rite



The Holy Father, [Benedict XVI](#), at number 35 of the Exhortation [Sacramentum Caritatis](#) writes:

This relationship between creed and worship is evidenced in a particular way by the rich theological and liturgical category of beauty. Like the rest of Christian Revelation, the liturgy is inherently linked to beauty: it is *veritatis splendor*. The liturgy is a radiant expression of the paschal mystery, in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to communion.

The beauty of the liturgy is part of this mystery; it is a sublime expression of God's glory and, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth. The memorial of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice contains something of that beauty which Peter, James and John beheld when the Master, making his way to Jerusalem, was transfigured before their eyes (cf. Mk 9:2). Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendor.

The beauty of Christ is reflected above all in the saints and in faithful Christians of every age, but one should not forget or underestimate the spiritual value of the works of art that the Christian Faith knew how to produce in order to place them at the service of divine worship. The beauty of the Liturgy is manifested concretely through material objects and bodily gestures, of which man – a unity of soul and body – has need to elevate himself toward invisible realities and to be reinforced in his faith. The Council of Trent taught:

And since the nature of man is such that he cannot without external means be raised easily to meditation on divine things, holy mother Church has instituted certain rites. . . whereby both the majesty of so great a sacrifice might be emphasized and the minds of the faithful excited by those visible signs of religion and piety to the contemplation of those most sublime things which are hidden in this sacrifice. (Denziger-Schönmetzer, n. 1746)

Sacred art, sacred vestments and vessels, sacred architecture – all must come together to consolidate the sense of majesty and beauty, to make transparent the “noble simplicity” (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 34) of the Christian Liturgy, which is a liturgy of the true Beauty.

The Servant of God John Paul II recalled the Gospel account of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany in order to respond to the possible objection concerning the beauty of churches and of objects destined for divine worship, which could seem out of place if considered before the great mass of the earth’s poor people. He wrote:

A woman, whom John identifies as Mary the sister of Lazarus, pours a flask of *costly ointment* over Jesus' head, which provokes from the disciples – and from Judas in particular (cf. Mt 26:8; Mk 14:4; Jn 12:4) – an indignant response, as if this act, in light of the needs of the poor, represented an intolerable “waste.” But Jesus' own reaction is completely different. While in no way detracting from the duty of charity towards the needy, for whom the disciples must always show special care – “the poor you will always have with you” (Mt 26:11; Mk 14:7; cf. Jn 12:8) – he looks towards his imminent death and burial, and sees this act of anointing as an anticipation of the honor which his body will continue to merit even after his death, indissolubly bound as it is to the mystery of his person. (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 47, emphasis in original)

And he concluded:

Like the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany, *the Church has feared no “extravagance,”* devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the *unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist*. . . . With this heightened sense of mystery, we understand how the faith of the Church in the mystery of the Eucharist has found historical expression not only in the demand for an interior disposition of devotion, but also *in outward forms* meant to evoke and emphasize the grandeur of the event being celebrated. . . . On this foundation *a rich artistic heritage* also developed. Architecture, sculpture, painting and music, moved by the Christian mystery, have found in the Eucharist, both directly and indirectly, a source of great inspiration. (*Ibid.*, nn. 48-49, emphasis in original)

Therefore, it is necessary to exhibit all possible care and attention, so that the dignity of the Liturgy would shine forth even in the smallest details in the form of true beauty. It is

necessary to recall that even those saints who lived poverty with a particular ascetical commitment always desired that the most beautiful and precious objects be used for divine worship. We mention here only one example, that of the Holy Curé d'Ars:

From the moment he saw it [the parish church of Ars], M. Vianney loved the old church as he had loved the paternal home. When he undertook its restoration he began with what holds the foremost place, the altar, which is the centre and *raison d'être* of the sanctuary. Out of reverence for the Holy Eucharist, he wished to secure as beautiful an altar as possible. . . . After these improvements, he undertook the task, to use his own picturesque and touching phrase, of adding to the household possessions of the good God – *le ménage du bon Dieu*. He went to Lyons to visit the workshops of embroiderers and goldsmiths. Whatever was most precious he purchased, so that the purveyors of church furniture would say with astonishment: “In this district there lives a little curé, lean, badly dressed, looking as if he had not a sou in his pocket, yet only the very best things are good enough for his church.”¹

¹Abbé Francis Trochu, *The Curé d'Ars* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1960), 127.

