

Beauty in Our Franciscan Tradition

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Beauty: the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit.
Merriam Webster Dictionary

And let the debate begin! I'm a member of The Art Institute of Chicago. Visitors come there from all over the world and it's beyond fascinating to watch and to hear people's casual observations and sincere interpretations of art. Ancient, classical, très moderne – everything is open season! And isn't it fun? Kids can be hilarious. I recently heard a four year old review a Picasso nude: "Oooh, she's made out of blocks!" An older person said Chagall's *America Windows* "kind of melted in the sun". An Italian friend of mine was shocked to see the AIC had 'so much good things,' as if Italy is the only country with masterpieces. I always remind people that life is one big interpretation and we all have our own ways to classify something as beautiful, no matter the artistic or natural form.

I want to explore **beauty** from a Franciscan perspective and our starting point is *The Major Legend of Saint Francis* by St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, chapter 9:

The love of the One who loved us greatly is greatly to be loved! Aroused by everything to divine love, Francis rejoiced in all the works of the Lord's hands and through their delightful display he rose into their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things he channeled Beauty Itself and through the footprints impressed in things he followed his Beloved everywhere, out of them all making for himself a ladder through which he could climb up to lay hold of Him who is utterly desirable.



Bonaventure's writing is mystical and rooted in the reality of Francis' lifelong experiences of being in the stunning terrain of Umbria (above). However, there are layers of theological and spiritual reasoning under that ascription for God: **Beauty Itself**. Let's explore some of them.

Reread the first sentence taken from Bonaventure's *Major Legend*. The word *love* is used three times! That is the key to understanding our Franciscan view of God, all of creation and the human person. The self-giving of God in both the universe and the gift of the only-begotten Son is capsulized in that one word, *love*. When a person begins to understand and know the generosity of God's care and desire to have us be part of the God self, the only natural response is to sing Ralph Vaughn Williams' setting of Psalm 47, "O Clap Your Hands" with full chorus, organ and brass quintet! (Actually, any praise will do.)

Francis learned how to *rise into their life-giving reason and cause*. Notice the verbs used to express his life with God. Action words. *He channeled beauty, he followed his Beloved, he made a ladder, climb up, lay hold of Him...* The language, verbs and imagery, Bonaventure uses gives the reader an extraordinary insight into the intensity of Francis' deep, deep love for God. It was intense and that is transparent in some of the writings of the Little Poor Man. For example, his *Praises of God*, composed in 1224 at the time he experienced the Stigmata, is a litany of ascriptions or titles for God. Among all of

them, he used *beauty twice!* In a period he had to contend with great physical suffering he still appreciated the gorgeous handiwork of the Creator all around him. That in and of itself is a lesson for all of us!



I've long cherished Bonaventure's image of a *ladder*. It implies movement upward and isn't that what is humanly natural when trying to express anything about the Most High? Heaven is above, God is on high, she's going up there, and so on. Jacob's ladder comes to mind and a Biblical concordance will list numerous quotes that talk of ascent and descent, ups and downs, celestial meanderings - movement!

It took Francis a number of years but he did reach a moment when he came to see and know the union of God with every single part of the universe. I believe he hit the apex of his mystical life as he wrote *The Canticle of Creatures* in the last part of his life; titles of Brother and Sister show that this man knew all creatures are interdependent on each other and mirror God's creative and generous love. This is why Pope Francis wrote *Laudato 'Si*; and it's THE reason to respectfully care for Mother Earth and all her resources.

When people think of Francis it often brings to mind a statue or picture with him surrounded by creatures. I recently saw a statue of him with his personal pony! There is a certain pietistic cuteness about such imagery but when one considers the galactic imagery of Bonaventure, the Francis of birdbaths dissipates quickly. **God is Beauty Itself.** Scripture is full of images of the transcendent Holy One surrounded by light to make it clear that God is wholly other. But this title, which I dearly love, expresses something that is transcendent, yes, but also very immanent. Those are words that try to explain that God is here and there, is above and within us, is tangible yet removed. Francis teaches us to

appreciate both, as in yin and yang of Chinese philosophy that explains how seemingly opposite forces are actually complimentary and interrelated. The transcendent and immanent aspects of Christ are expressions of the hypostatic union of Christ, who is fully divine, fully human.

Back to beauty... If you're lucky enough to travel and visit Franciscan places in the world you'll know why one of my brothers exclaimed in Assisi: "Man, you friars sure know how to pick beautiful places." And it is so true. My Mom could tell immediately if a church was staffed by Franciscans simply by observing "how pretty and clean everything is." The beauty of God, every creature and part of creation permeates every Franciscan and then, hopefully, oozes from within us to the people and places we care for. Simplicity is a gateway to beauty. A single rose in a vase is just as magnificent as a mountaintop friary that overlooks the Spoleto valley.

St. Bonaventure's philosophy was rooted in that of Plato and Aristotle; his theological vision is Augustinian and Christocentric. For Bonaventure creation "represents the primary mode of invitation, a gift from the hand of the divine Artist." [Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ: *Beauty in the Franciscan Tradition*, ch.3, p.2] And there is an intimate connection between beauty and delight; as we search for God (Beauty) we experience joy on the journey. The first time I ever heard Bernstein's recording of Mahler's *2nd Symphony, the Resurrection* I couldn't believe a composer could create such beauty that made me cry and afforded me a religious experience. The definition of beauty explains it as *a person or thing that gives pleasure*.

There has never, ever been a civilization without art, no matter how ancient. Never! The search for beauty and meaning is inherent in human nature. In a 1970 Nobel lecture, renowned Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn said: *those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force — they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.* He was expelled from his country for twenty years yet returned to

continue his search for truth and beauty. Art that ‘scoops up the truth’ and is ‘a living force’ must be encouraged, safeguarded and cherished by any and all civilizations. It is painful to have seen in recent years the mindless destruction of eons of historic structures and literature, especially in the Middle East. While doing research in medieval works of music I would sometimes see an entire illumination cut out of a page, ruining its sole purpose with that text. Art programs in schools are too often cut and our children lose the ability to express their hearts, dreams and desires for happiness. Must art be disposable like so much of our world? **When a civilization loses its art, it loses its soul!**

Franciscans have impacted my life and helped shape my own artistry. Our parish in Quincy, IL fostered great music with multiple choirs, a huge pipe organ and memorable liturgies. The education we were given in seminaries included the arts in many forms. My parents instilled in all five of us a sense of wonder and a fearless search for beauty through creative outlets. Individual friars nourished my musicality and creativity, drawing me deeply into the world of fine arts. All that was reinforced with superb education at five institutions of higher learning. I know my passion for beauty and respect/love for the arts completes my life. Understand my love for Francis and Clare and their gifts, and you may understand that I can’t live without beauty around me. It does bring delight and pleasure to our lives, whether a Shakespearean powerhouse or “refrigerator art” by my 9 year old friend, Lizzy.

As I write this article I remember Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153). In his **Opera Omnia** he wrote that *love gives pleasure by itself and because of itself. I love because I love, I love that I may love. Love is a great thing so long as it returns to its fountainhead, flows back to its Source.* Bonaventure echoed these words in his Life of Francis, as he recounted how the Saint gave praise and love to God because of the great delight and satisfaction he experienced in all creation. What we see is that enticing and exhilarating cycle of love that begins and ends with the Holy One. I have a series of conferences I’ve developed over the years on the arts; I titled them **The Arts: Avenues to the Divine**. Having explored the religiosity behind the concepts of beauty and

Beauty Itself, I do hope you come to an even greater appreciation for the arts in your spiritual development and life in the Church. There is beauty all around and within us; we just have to truly see. And in seeing beauty we see Beauty Itself. We come to know God through beautiful things and people. Bonaventure was so correct: **The love of the One who loved us greatly is greatly to be loved!**

Were it not for art, I doubt our imperfect Church would be who she is today. The earliest image of Jesus is the Good Shepherd, used over 120 times throughout the Catacombs outside Rome – 3rd century! Gothic cathedrals express the human desire and need to soar into God’s presence. Hymn texts can help us verbalize life with God by imagery. Every flower. A German Madonna I found in Mainz long ago. Verdi’s *Requiem*. Every newborn human being. Lalique crystal and George Jensen’s silverwork. My nieces on their wedding days.



The gossamer wings of a butterfly. My Mom’s face. A kaleidoscope of stained glass. A ballad by Cole Porter. An Umbrian field of poppies in May. An honest and practical homily. I could fill these three pages (and more) with my list of beautiful things. What does your list include?

Francis teaches us so many wondrous things about life with God. When we allow ourselves to see the endless beauty around us and in ourselves, we see more of God’s unlimited love for all creation. And knowing the love of Love Itself, our lives radiate the compassion and gentle power of Christ, Love Incarnate. Seek beauty in all things *yet know that beauty should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.* (1 Peter 3:4)

We friars pray that, in gratitude for your support of St. Peter’s, God fill all your days with unbridled beauty. May you be at peace.

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