

“Beginning with Beauty”

Introductory Remarks: *Called to Love* Conference

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We would like to begin with a “beautiful introduction,” that is by beginning our attempt to understand better the “Theology of the Body,” with *an experience of Beauty*. And we propose this beginning because we think that it is *integral* to the work of educating others (and ourselves foremost) in the truth about love.

Beauty leads us into the truth of love because, as the Greeks said, it shocks us and attracts us to what is *other than ourselves*. By saying this we immediately purify Beauty of its cheap imitation, the superficial aestheticism of “pretty pictures,” and anesthetizing sounds. To be seized or “taken” by Beauty is to be *wounded*. Beauty inflicts in us a thirst or longing that cannot be satisfied easily. And it draws us painfully away from the normal way of possessing things (according to the will to power/domination/exploitation). In a word it requires “sacrifice.”

But for us, we can say even more about Beauty. We can say that Beauty (with a capital “B”), the one who inflicted in us the wound of longing, the “Bridegroom” (as the Song of Songs calls him), became *himself* wounded and disfigured. The “fairest of the children of men” the Bible says “had no beauty, no majesty to draw our eyes.”

In this paradox of Christ’s “appearance” we see the *realism* of Christianity which takes into account the overwhelming experience of the pervasiveness of evil and ugliness. (That experience puts into question just how real and true Beauty and Love are. Are they not, in the end, illusions, romantic projections covering a reality defined ultimately by evil and ugliness?). When Beauty himself allows Himself to become disfigured this cynicism is challenged.

Not long ago Cardinal Ratzinger, remarking on the Christian understanding of Beauty, said the following:

“The experience of the beautiful has received new depth and new realism. The One who is the Beauty itself let himself be slapped in the face, spat upon, crowned with thorns; the Shroud of Turin can help us imagine this in a realistic way. However, in his Face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes ‘to the very end’; for this reason it is revealed as greater than falsehood and violence. Whoever has perceived this beauty knows that truth and not falsehood, is the real aspiration of the world. It is not the false that is ‘true,’ but indeed, the Truth.

It is, as it were, a new trick of what is false to present itself as ‘truth’ and to say to us: over and above me there is basically nothing, stop seeking or even loving the truth; in doing so you are on the wrong track. The icon of the crucified Christ sets us free from this deception what is so widespread today. However it imposes a condition: that we let ourselves be wounded by him,

and that we believe in the Love who can risk setting aside his external beauty to proclaim, in this way, the truth of the beautiful.

“Is there anyone who does not know Dostoyevsky’s often-quoted sentence: ‘The Beautiful will save us’? However, people usually forget that Dostoyevsky is referring here to the redeeming Beauty of Christ. We must learn to see him. If we know him, not only in words, but if we are struck by the arrow of his paradoxical beauty, then we will truly know him, and know him not only because we have heard others speak about him. Then we will have found the beauty of Truth, of the Truth that redeems. Nothing can bring us into close contact with the beauty of Christ himself other than the world of beauty created by faith and light that shines out from the faces of the saints, through whom his own light becomes visible.”¹

It is with *this* Beauty that we wish to begin our work of probing the truth about love.

¹ “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” 2002.