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Un Destello de Belleza: Beauty and the Transformative Power of Human Interaction

Facundo González-Icardi

*“Where there is charity and love, there
the God of love abides.*

*The love of Christ has gathered us as one,
Rejoice in him with joy which he imparts;
Let us revere and love the living God
And love each other with unfeigned hearts.*

*Where there is charity and love, there
the God of love abides.*

*And so when we are gathered here as one,
Let quarrels die and envious rancor cease;
Be our resolve all bitterness to shun
And in our midst be Christ, his love and peace.*

*Where there is charity and love, there
the God of love abides.*

*Oh, lead us, Master, by your saving grace,
To where the blessed glory in your sight;
There let us see and love you face to face,
Gathered once more in everlasting light.”¹*

¹ I was first introduced to this poem in the form of a song. Singing has always been a key element of my spirituality; when one day at mass I heard the words, “*Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est*,” I was overwhelmed by the power behind those words. I believe this poem a beautiful beginning to my article, since it conveys the idea that we can reach God through the power of charity and love: we can be transformed by our encounter of charity and love.

The Garden of God

In his bestselling book, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, Fr. James Martin, S.J. uses the following analogy: “Faith is like a garden: while you may already have the basics—soil, seeds, water—you have to cultivate and nourish it. Like a garden, faith takes patience, persistence, and even work.”² The concept of the garden of God is one explored in depth by theologian Alejandro García-Rivera. To conclude his book, *The Garden of God*, he writes, “We will know beauty as a sign known only by being enjoyed, enjoyed into abundant life. We must create a place built by gifts, not commodities. Indeed, we must build a place that is also a gift. In doing so, we will have found our place in the cosmos. We will have built and received the garden of God.”³

Human Interaction

In 2002, a research article on millennials and their thoughts on the attitudes that they and their peers had towards different fields that encompass the life of a human being, shed light on their views about service.⁴ In the results, the authors found that although 96% of those interviewed took part in some form of community service, merely half of them engaged in altruistic behavior. Moreover, a large number of students questioned the reasons behind their peer’s participation in community service, stating that the real reason was, among others, “to build their high school resumes.”⁵

However, there is a fundamental element that was not made evident in the abovementioned research; namely, the beautiful transformation that can happen through the power of human interaction with those on the margins. The root of this transformation can be looked at through two theological categories: liberation theology and theological aesthetics. The Jesuit tradition has long preached about the importance of self-sacrifice, of giving oneself for and with others. In Jesuit terminology, the Society of Jesus has always been an advocate for, “the service of faith and the promotion of justice.” Abiding in the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the aim of this article is to theologially express the transformative effect that individuals who engage in a meaningful service experience may encounter. Most importantly, I seek to convey that such effect is brought about by the existence of an element oftentimes disregarded, but

² James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 31.

³ Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: a Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2009), 132.

⁴ Melissa H. Sandfort and Jennifer G. Haworth, “Whassup? A Glimpse Into the Attitudes and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation.” *Journal of College and Character* 3, no. 3 (2002).

⁵ Ibid.

that can be argued as the source of every transformation: the presence of beauty amongst chaos.

Liberation Theology and Theological Aesthetics

Known as one of the fathers of liberation theology, Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P. argues that true Christians must restlessly work toward a more just society, bringing about social and political changes in the environment around them. In his groundbreaking work, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez analyzes three of the pillars of liberation theology, one of which concerns us here: salvation. Gutiérrez suggests a movement from what he calls a quantitative view of salvation, to a qualitative one.⁵ Moreover, he asserts that salvation is not just a salvific act, but a re-creation and complete fulfillment.⁶ The way in which this fulfillment is achieved is through human hands, and the human effort to both create and connect community; in this way, an individual can attain the final “liberation.”⁷ In order for this to happen, an individual is required to step out of what in the vernacular many millennials would call their “comfort zone,” and challenge themselves by allowing their hearts to be transformed by the beauty of those who are poor.

Theological aesthetics is a developing discipline that deals with the ethical and the aesthetic. Pioneered by theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, it has gained the respect and research of many theologians and scholars today. One of Balthasar’s main arguments affirms that, “the event of the beautiful becomes a pointer to the event of Christ.”⁸ In other words, theological aesthetics is a theological lens that centers on the idea that one can orient oneself toward God by recognizing that which is beautiful. Furthermore, its eschatological implications provide more insight on the discipline. In the words of theologian Cecilia González-Andrieu, “The theologically aesthetic is that beauty which speaks of God, and which by turning the human being toward God ‘saves’ or is redemptive.”⁹ Therefore, theological aesthetics can be viewed as a foundational discipline for exploring the transformative effect beauty has when direct interactions with the poor and marginalized occur.

⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. Translated by Sister Caridad Inda. Edited by John Eagleson. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 83-84.

⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. 1. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 65.

⁹ Cecilia González-Andrieu, “Theological Aesthetics” in Kurian, George Thomas, and Mark A. Lamport. *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the United States*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 2296.

Ensuing Transformation

Although it is impossible to provide a list of steps required for an authentic transformation, there are two elements that appear to always be present in any given meaningful service experience: direct contact followed by understanding. In order for these to trigger transformation, however, there must exist a recognition of beauty; such recognition is not always achieved, and hence transformation might not always derive from the process. A better understanding of these two elements might shed some light on the efficacy of beauty and, perhaps, provide proof of its existence for those who struggle in recognizing it.

Direct contact is the first and “easiest” step in the process of transformation through beauty. It is also the most indispensable. Direct contact is not merely exposure to the poor and marginalized; rather, it is the recognition of beauty within their environment. Without this, it is impossible for transformation to come about, and therefore impossible for someone to be truly renovated by such experience. In 2012, scholar Rebecca Berru Davis published an article in which she described her experiences working with women in a Peruvian shantytown. She describes how she *accompanies* the women, becoming, “not merely an observer but also a ‘witness’ in a theological sense to their struggles and joys, their wisdom and eloquence.”¹⁰ The elements of accompaniment and witnessing are crucial to the efficacy of direct contact; they not only support it theologically, but they also transform experience into a meaningful interaction, instead of just mere exposure.

In his address to Jesuit colleges and universities in 2000, former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Peter Hans-Kolvenbach, S.J., said, “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind might be challenged to change.”¹¹ Hans-Kolvenbach’s goal was to help others understand the value of direct experience with the poor and marginalized, because it is in this contact that an individual is able to really discover themselves. Hence, this first step requires empathy, patience, and openness; most importantly, it brings about understanding. “Understanding” in this case is more than just a descriptor for an intellectual act. In order for transformation to ensue, understanding is a holistic experience. In his book, *Foundations in Ritual Studies*, cultural anthropologist Victor Turner explores the term, *communitas*. He describes it as an unstructured community experience in which members share equal social status. This

¹⁰ Rebecca B Davis, “Picturing Paradise: Imagination, Beauty, and Women’s Lives in a Peruvian Shantytown” in Cassidy, Laurie M., and Maureen H. O’Connell. *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 145.

¹¹ Peter Hans-Kolvenbach, “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education.” Speech, Santa Clara University, October, 2000.

enables them to equally participate in the transition to a new phase as a community, facilitating the formation of deep bonds that will serve as foundation to a new path together;¹² although originally intended to help explain a ritual transition, the concept of *communitas* is highly applicable in this setting.

This understanding made possible through the formation of deep bonds, allows a genuine connection to emerge, and gives the individual the opportunity to become truly human. “Becoming human is recognizing our interconnectedness with others,” Gutiérrez argues in one of his spiritual writings.¹³ By acknowledging this bond that intertwines everyone, a person becomes more self-aware, increasing their own humanity. In other words, someone does not diminish their innate human dignity by acknowledging the humanity in their neighbors; rather, they increase both, their neighbor’s and their own. Commenting on Gutiérrez, Daniel Groody expresses that, “there is always a circular motion between gift and response, being loved and loving others, between contemplation and action.”¹⁴ This circular motion describes the process whereby beauty may be discovered in the midst of chaos.

In the Heart of Scripture

One of the key principles of theological aesthetics is to concentrate on the beautiful, since beauty is a pointer to that which is good, and to that which is true. But how can someone go about finding such beauty? Especially in circumstances when and where the environment is so detrimental to so many, how is it possible to fall in love with such scenarios? Some might argue that there is an equally revelatory “heartbreaking absence of beauty”¹⁵ in those situations, given that such surroundings do not and cannot make room for any kind of beauty. But in order to notice the *absence* of real beauty, one must be able to recognize the *presence* of real beauty. Therefore, to respond to these claims, it is necessary to rely on Sacred Scripture to understand what is that at which beauty aims to point, namely, what is, “the true and the good.”

In the Gospel of John we read, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” (Jn 14:6)¹⁶ This statement affirms Jesus’ identity as the one who represents that which is true. Psalm 119 sings of God, “You are good and what you do is good.” (Ps 119:68) This second verse declares the goodness of God, who not only *is* good, but also *does* good, implying God as source of all goodness. (Gen 1:31) Before proceeding, it is important

¹² Victor Turner, “Liminality and *communitas*.” In *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship*, eds. Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 73-85.

¹³ Gutiérrez, 37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ This is a key distinction in the work of Cecilia González-Andrieu.

¹⁶ NIV.

to correctly understand the concept of the Trinity: one sole God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁷ So, how is this relevant? In his book, *Caminemos con Jesús*, theologian Roberto Goizueta articulates the importance of the person as a sacrament. “One cannot love the universal and supernatural,” he argues, “if one cannot love the particular and natural—and love these precisely *as* particular and natural.”¹⁸ Goizueta encourages individuals to accept the frailty and delicateness of human life as both vital and ordinary. He goes on: “One cannot love the Creator if one cannot love the creature—and love him, her, or it precisely *as* creature.”¹⁹ This implies that in order to truly love God—in order to fully and completely love that which is good and true, it is imperative to love God’s creation, which consists of, among other things, human beings.

Where is God?

“Heaven, in a theological cosmology, does not refer to some spiritual place outside of the creation but it is part of the creation itself. It is the invisible referred to in the Nicene Creed.”²⁰ God has left God’s imprint in all of God’s creation. Therefore, it is possible to find God in everything that surrounds each person. Christian singer Chris Tomlin begins a beautiful piece by praying, “From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea, creation’s revealing your majesty; from the colors of fall, to the fragrance of spring, every creature unique in a song that it sings.”²¹ Ignatian spirituality²² invites God’s people to find God in all things – the meaning behind this assertion is that, indeed, all of creation is a pointer to God, a pointer to that which is true and that which is good. “If the key to the universe is the human, then the key to the human is Christ.”²³ God became human so that in humanity all could find God. Therefore, it is possible to find God even in the most devastating situations, as long as there exists an acknowledgement of the role of beauty within such environments.

One way in which to go about finding beauty is simply by becoming missionaries. Twenty-first century theologian, Virgilio Elizondo, explains what it means to become a missionary in his book, *Christianity and Culture*. “The missionary,” Elizondo writes,

¹⁷ See: “Understanding the Trinity”,
<http://www.americamagazine.org/media/podcasts/understandingtrinity>

¹⁸ Roberto S Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 49.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ García-Rivera, 15.

²¹ Chris Tomlin, *Indescribable*, EMI, 2004.

²² “So, if anyone asked you to define Ignatian Spirituality in a few words, you could say that it is: 1. Finding God in all things, 2. Becoming a contemplative in action, 3. Looking at the world in an incarnational way, and 4. Seeking freedom and detachment.” Martin, 10.

²³ García-Rivera, 27.

“must have a willingness to suffer with those he works with.”²⁴ It is a task that goes beyond simple interactions, but requires what Ignatius refers to as consolation.²⁵ By standing in solidarity, the individual moves from a place of contemplation, to becoming a contemplative in action. In that instance, a piece of compassion is shared, and suffering and struggle begin to work together for both the liberation of the missionary, and of the one who is poor.²⁶ Moreover, as Gutiérrez argues, humans achieve their full humanity in harmony with the full grandeur of God when they recognize the humanity in one another. Elizondo also suggests this in *The Treasure of Guadalupe* when he says, “We are not what the sinful world says that we are. Through the encounter with Our Lady, we recognize ourselves for what we truly are: beloved children of God.”^{27 28} Later in his book, Elizondo refers to the idea of sin as arrogance. He writes, “[People] are called to no longer think of themselves as more important, nobler, more dignified, more worthy, and therefore authorized to insult, ridicule, and subjugate others.”²⁹ This can also be applied to the way in which individuals approach those on the margins. God calls God’s faithful people to foster unity through love and compassion, made evident in God’s incarnation through Jesus Christ.

Kinship: A Pathway to Salvation

In the preface of his bestselling book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Father Gregory Boyle, S.J. challenges readers to, “change [their] lurking suspicion that some lives matter less than other lives.”³⁰ Boyle calls for an understanding that, only because some people have been privileged with abundant opportunities throughout their lives, does not make them superior in any way to those who have not. His privileged status, Boyle reflects, “does not make me morally superior to the young men and women you will meet in this book. Quite the opposite. I have come to see with greater clarity that the day simply won’t come when I am more noble,

²⁴ Virgilio Elizondo, *Christianity and Culture: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology and Ministry for the Bicultural Community*. Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1978.

²⁵ “I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move [him or her] to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God.” *Spiritual Exercises*, 316. Taken from, *Principles of Ignatian Leadership*.

²⁶ Elizondo, *Christianity and Culture*.

²⁷ Virgilio P Elizondo, , Allan F. Deck, and Timothy M. Matovina, *The Treasure of Guadalupe*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 76.

²⁸ To better understand how Mary leads the faithful toward Jesus, see: Letter of John Paul II to the Montfort Religious Family, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/2004/documents/hf_jpii_let_20040113_famiglie-monfortane.html

²⁹ Elizondo, *The Treasure of Guadalupe*, 77.

³⁰ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 2010), xiii.

have more courage, or am closer to God than the folks whose lives fill these pages.”³¹ Later, Boyle refers to a Buddhist nun who says, “[the truest measure of compassion] lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them.”³² Boyle expands on the idea of kinship as “not serving the other, but being one with the other. Jesus was not ‘a man for others’; he was one with them. There is a world of difference in that.”³³ Kinship is what is born when one experiences direct contact resulting in understanding. Kinship is one of the many ways in which God’s beauty manifests itself within the human environment. It is through kinship, that an individual can be transformed by the power of beauty – if, and only if, the connection between beauty and transformation is made. In this movement of the heart, an individual recognizes everyone else as his or her brother and sister, placing the acknowledgement of human dignity at the forefront of all his or her actions. It is then, when the individual is transformed, that community begins opening a path toward salvation.

Murri³⁴ activist on women’s issues Lilla Watson’s famous saying bears repeating here: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Meaningful service derives from the process of direct experience leading to understanding, and meaningful service is a two-way street. In his famous prayer, St. Ignatius of Loyola reminds the world, “Love consists in sharing what one has, and what one is, with those one loves. Love ought to show itself in deeds more than in words.” St. Ignatius reminds everyone that true love has two characteristics: it is shown in deeds more than in words, and it is a mutual sharing.

When referring to the former, it is safe to say that actions speak louder than words. But the latter statement is always ambiguous. The meaning behind love being a mutual sharing is more direct: the lover gives to the beloved as much as the beloved gives to the lover. God does not invite God’s creation to a series of intellectual questions; rather, God invites God’s creation to a relationship—a relationship of compassion, fidelity, trust, and solidarity. God reveals God’s self in God’s creatures. God constantly shows God’s self in the entirety of humanity, and when one interacts with those on the margins, where God is most fully present, is it that precise interaction that triggers transformation.

³¹ Ibid., xiv

³² Ibid., 71

³³ Ibid., 188

³⁴ Murri people are indigenous people from Australia.

A Broader View

The acknowledgement of God’s presence in another human being is the utmost recognition of beauty. Hence, that meaningful interaction becomes a two-way street. The liberation of the missionary, now acknowledged by him or her, has always been connected to the liberation of those being served. Furthermore, by recognizing one’s connection to the rest of humanity, the transformative effect of beauty extends beyond just one’s personal insights. As Pope Francis reminds God’s faithful people in his prophetic encyclical, *Laudato Si*, “a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings” (LS 91). Treating humans with the respect and reverence they deserve due to their inherent dignity is the first step towards a more just and beautiful world; it is the planting of the seeds in the garden of God. SST: LMU

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