

The Beauty of Woman

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Gift of Beauty

The Catholic Church teaches that men and women are different but equal in dignity. "In creating men 'male and female,' God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity."¹ Created in God's image, they have both been endowed with the beauty of the Creator. As creatures they have been given the capabilities of thinking, reasoning and loving. They are indeed the crown of God's creation and together they reflect the inner beauty of God's love, the Trinity. Yet, in a special way, the woman has been given the gift of beauty.

It is no mere coincidence that throughout human history the woman has been a central theme of great works of art. Whether art, literature, music, poetry or the many other ways in which man manifests his love for beauty, woman has inspired the arts through and in a vast array of mediums. "Artistic beauty provokes interior emotion, it silently arouses astonishment and leads to an "exit from self, an ecstasy."² Why is it that a woman's beauty inspires such great human feats?

Woman is beauty! "In a unique way, beauty belongs to women. In His affection for His daughters, God bestowed on women the gift of beauty and equipped us to perpetuate beauty."³ It is precisely because we are made in the image and likeness of the Creator that we are capable of manifesting beauty. However, the woman shares in something quite unique that sets her apart from man and gives her a beauty unlike any other, the gift of bringing forth life.

Custodians of beauty and life

The body of a woman is a mystery. Unlike man, a woman's sexual organs are veiled; they are interior and therefore unseen. Her ability to carry life is a most intimate experience that can only be lived by her. It is a special bond that occurs between her and the secret life she carries. For a time, all others are excluded from this most intimate and sacred union. There is even a certain sense of mystery

¹Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2234. Latin text copyright. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Citta del Vaticano, 1993. Web.

² Pontifical Council for Culture. Plenary Assembly Final Document-*The Way of Beauty*. March 27, 2006. The Beauty of Arts, section III.2. Web.

³ Hartline, Jennifer. A Reflection on Beauty: God's Chosen Gift to Women. *Catholic Online.com*. Catholic.org. August 2, 2011. Web.

to the unique relationship that is formed between a woman and those children she has not born. A woman's vocation to motherhood emanates in all her relationships whether she is a mother physically, spiritually, or both. The mystery and beauty of a woman is unequivocally tied to the fact that she bears life.

In Genesis we read that Adam names Eve "mother of the living" (3:20). Alice Von Hildebrand, wife of the late and great philosopher, Dietrich Von Hildebrand, highlights that on the other hand, Mary is the mother of Life itself. Von Hildebrand bridges Mary's motherhood to the Son of God and Jesus' words "I am the way the truth and the life"! (John 14:6) She goes on to emphasize the sacredness of all women and their bodies: "They're sacred vessels touched by God himself, the cradles of life... which brings with it an extraordinary dignity and beauty."⁴

Hence, women are the custodians of both beauty and life. The body of the woman was and still is an essential part of God's salvific plan. Through Eve God generated "all the living"; through Mary's yes, God brought about Salvation through Jesus Christ to a fallen world. The bodies of both man and woman are stamped with the image of God so that by and through their bodies they reveal God to one another.⁵ But it is the body of the woman that brings forth life and perpetuates beauty. Life and beauty are so integrated in woman that they become one, especially in her.

Beauty points towards God

How is it that this beauty of the body points us towards God? The body is created to express that which is deep in the human soul. We are embodied souls. Therefore, the body reveals God's divine life as we are "created in His image and likeness" (Gen. 1:27). Beauty in fact, just like truth and goodness, point us towards the transcendent, towards God, because they are attributes of God himself. Even Christ pointed towards God the Father when speaking of these. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Luke 18:19). Furthermore He said "I am the way the truth and the life", again pointing towards his heavenly Father as he uses the Words God himself used to speak to Moses, "I AM who I am." (Ex. 3:14). God is truth, goodness and beauty.

Pope Benedict XVI often spoke of beauty. Beauty was also a theme much loved by his predecessor, Saint John Paul II and a subject that

⁴Von Hildebrand, Alice. *A Woman's Role and Mission*. EWTN Live. Fr. Mitch Pacwa, S.J. Aired on Eternal Word Television Network on May 23, 2012. Web.

⁵ West, Christopher. *Theology of the Body Explained*. Pauline Books and Media. 2nd Printing Ed. 2003. Print.

Pope Francis himself has touched upon in his own words. Pope Benedict, during his meeting with artists explained the meaning of authentic beauty:

“Authentic beauty unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond. If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence.”⁶

Man is in a constant search for beauty. Man is constantly yearning for what is beautiful because he is earnestly searching for God, whether he realizes it or not.

Beauty is essential to our humanity, to our salvation. Man cannot live without beauty. “Man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live, because there would no longer be anything to do to the world. The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here.”⁷

Beauty will save the world

There is a famous quote from Dostoyevsky’s novel entitled *The Idiot*: “Beauty will save the world”. How is this possible, particularly in a time where beauty seems to escape us? We live in a world where we are constantly deluged with a myriad of vulgar images and what is most sacred has become most profaned. We are also witnessing an era in which the body of the woman is at the center of a great tension between beauty and ugliness, good and evil. How is it that beauty can save the world?

If authentic beauty helps us to discover the “profound meaning of our existence” and whether man realizes or not, beauty leads us to the transcendent, towards God, then beauty indeed can and will save us. Furthermore, the woman, being the custodian of beauty, holds a special responsibility to help guard and protect beauty not only within herself and her body but also for the world. Jesus himself says in the Gospel of Luke “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more” (Luke 12:48).

Woman’s special mission

Woman has a special mission that is unique only to her. She is at the center of a great battle: a battle for man’s heart and the true

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Artists*, November 21, 2009.

⁷*Ibid.*

meaning of our bodies and authentic beauty. Pope Benedict underlined the strain that today's counterfeit beauty causes man:

“Too often, though, the beauty that is thrust upon us is illusory and deceitful, superficial and blinding, leaving the onlooker dazed; instead of bringing him out of himself and opening him up to the horizons of true freedom that draws him aloft, it imprisons him within himself and further enslaves him, depriving him of hope and joy.”⁸

Beauty is powerful! Authentic beauty leads us to the transcendent while counterfeit beauty imprisons and enslaves. Pornography is but one of the many examples of this counterfeit beauty. Pornography has taken what is most sacred, the human body and sexuality, and has turned it into what is most vile and distorted, profane. Yet beauty is not lost!

As long as we exist, as long as we seek truth, goodness and beauty, there is still hope. The greatest of all beauties is Christ himself. He is victorious over all that leads man astray. He is victorious over our bodies and over the beauty of women. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20). So all is not lost and we as women have an important role to play in this human drama.

This war that has been waged on the woman's body, her beauty and life itself should be of no surprise to us as Christians. The Proto-Evangelium, Genesis 3:15, warned us of this: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel.” Mary is *the* woman, but in her femininity all women are encompassed. God restored our fallen nature and Mary became the *new* Eve. We are to emulate Mary as women. It is through this imitation of Mary that we also, together with her, receive the mission to “strike at evil's head”.

Simply by living out authentic femininity with joy, we unquestionably begin to extinguish the effects of counterfeit beauty. Furthermore, in living out genuine motherhood in all its aspects, whether biological or spiritual, we also help to begin snuffing out the culture of death that at times seems to be taking over our world. Beauty is powerful and a woman's beauty is even more powerful because she has been given the unique gift and extraordinary beauty of bringing about life.