



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#213 - May 1, 2024

A Best Practice: Beauty and Adult Faith Formation (Part 1)

In an adult faith formation setting, have you ever asked the participants:

- What images immediately come to your mind when you hear the word "beauty"?
- Is there an event, or even a moment, that you have always cherished as a beautiful experience in your life?
- Please bring to our gathering something beautiful to you that you could share with or show all of us (e.g., a picture, a painting, a poem, a song, an object, etc.)

Throughout our Christian history, we have known that truth, goodness and beauty are the way to God. Therefore, how do we pay attention to beauty within our church life, within our faith formation efforts? Our last issue that is to come in this series will focus on some practical ways we can focus on the beauty constantly around us. Ideas, too, will be sprinkled throughout these beginning issues. **These beginning issues will provide some background on the role of beauty as a way to God** – hopefully making us more sensitized to the remarkable role of beauty in our life.

Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything
that is beautiful;
for beauty is God's handwriting ~ a wayside sacrament.

Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky,
in every fair flower,
and thank God for it as a cup of blessing.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

What is Beauty?

In *Adventure of Ideas*, Alfred North Whitehead views beauty as distilled in two words: intense harmony. Beauty is not just harmony, which can sometimes be shallow and exclusive. Beauty is not just intensity, which can be stormy and discordant and chaotic. Beauty, at its most divine, integrates both elements into a larger frame: Beauty as intense harmony is a celebration of contrasts within a larger, harmonious whole. In this way, Beauty is the yearning of God for our evolving world -- and our evolving spiritual lives, as well.

Patricia Adams Farmer in *Embracing a Beautiful God* wrote that "Beauty is that which glistens on the edges of our yearnings and lures us into the depth of things." When we are immersed in beauty do we feel an intense glistening on the edges of our yearnings, do we feel our yearning for God?

The Importance of Beauty throughout the centuries

- Plato singled out three transcendentals that open us to the one transcendental (God): truth, goodness and beauty.
- Most Bible concordances show 49 instances of the word beauty and 25 instances of the word beautiful. (For instance: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one bringing good news... {Isaiah 52:7}.)
- St. Augustine wrote, "Since love grows within you, so beauty grows." Augustine's name for God was "Oh, beauty, ever ancient and ever new."
- Meister Eckhart said: "This then is salvation, to marvel at the beauty of created things...."
- St. Thomas Aquinas says God is a "fountain of total beauty" and "beauty itself beautifying all things." God who is "supersubstantial beauty, is called beauty because God bestows beauty on all created beings."

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- The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in one of his novels, “Beauty will save the world.”
- Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian connects goodness and beauty. “The Hebrew word for good, tov, also means fair or beautiful. Thus God said on creating the universe, “Behold, it is all very beautiful.” Furthermore, “one cannot love God if one does not know what beauty is.”
- “Before the beautiful—no, not really before but within the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*)

"Beauty matters.
It is not just a subjective thing but a universal need
of human beings.

If we ignore this need we find ourselves
in a spiritual desert."

~ Roger Scruton

The Recognition of Beauty in recent Church thinking

- “The more we seek truth, goodness and beauty in the Lord, the godlier we become. All that’s true, beautiful and good will grow if it is conformed to God.” (Pope Leo XIII)
- “God created the world to show forth and communicate his glory. That his creatures should share in his truth, goodness and beauty - this is the glory for which God created them.” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #319)
- “The practice of goodness is accompanied by spontaneous spiritual joy and moral beauty. Likewise, truth carries with it the joy and splendor of spiritual beauty. Truth is beautiful in itself.” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2500)
- In 2001 Cardinal Godfried Danneels wrote in an article: “The human person hesitates before the True, is impotent before the Good, but loves Beauty.”
(<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/325/article/contemporary-person-and-church>)
- “Beauty pulls us up short, but in so doing it reminds us of our final destiny, it sets us back on our path, fills us with new hope, gives us the courage to live to the full the unique gift of life. (Meeting with Artists, Address of Pope Benedict XVI, November 21, 2009)
- “Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus. This has nothing to do with fostering an aesthetic relativism which would downplay the inseparable bond between truth, goodness and beauty, but rather a renewed esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #167)
- During the November 2019 USCCB meeting, echoing a 2006 statement from the Pontifical Council for Culture (<http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/pub/documenti/ViaPulchritudinis.html>), the bishops were encouraged to use the “Via Pulchritudinis” - The Way of Beauty. Young people don't like to be told what to do or how to think. But showing examples of beauty -- in art, in literature -- attracts young people. Beautiful church spaces; yes, beautiful websites too.
- The word of God, mediated by catechesis, illuminates human life, conferring its deepest meaning upon it and accompanying human beings on the paths of the beautiful, the true, and the good. (*The Directory for Catechesis*, #172)

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Truth, Goodness and Beauty

“What is real? What is right? What is lovely? Human beings ask these kinds of questions because we long for at least three things: truth, goodness, and beauty.”

<https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/reflections/the-3-transcendentals-truth-goodness-beauty>

Often, throughout the centuries, philosophers and theologians have reminded us beauty, goodness, and truth are triplets. At the same time, many have pointed out that beauty is the first in priority and impact. Beauty attracts us to goodness which embodies truth.

“The Beautiful is primary in that we encounter it first. It overwhelms us, enchants us, fascinates us, calls us. As we ponder it, we see that it is good and are attracted to the Goodness it represents. Finally, bemused by the appeal of goodness, we discover that it contains truth, and we listen to the Truth we hear from it.”

<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/380/article/apologetics-beauty>

Yet, sometimes, it seems that much of our emphasis has been and continues to be on truth and goodness (yes, so desperately needed). In recent times, some theologians have sought to shift attention to beauty as a much-needed balm for our weary souls.

- The theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar: “We no longer dare to believe in beauty, and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past, whether he admits it or not, can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.” (“The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,” Vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*)
- Cardinal Godfried Danneels asks: are we “using sufficiently one of the doors that leads to God—the door named Beauty. Indeed, God is Truth, Holiness and Moral Perfection, but God is also Beauty. One can find God through the door of truth, for truth attracts us. But many of our contemporaries are little Pilates who ask: What is truth? and remain outside the door without entering. God as Moral

Perfection and Holiness also attracts us. But many will say: Moral perfection attracts me, but I’m incapable of it, and they remain outside that door marked by their moral weaknesses. But beauty disarms: it is irresistible for contemporary men and women.

Young students discuss and study courses on questions of dogma (the True) and morality (the Good). But after a performance of the Passion According to Saint Matthew by Johann Sebastian Bach, they are disarmed and left speechless. The church has so many beautiful things to say and to show to the world, not only in its artistic heritage, but also in so many saints who shone with beauty. (To name only two, there are Francis of Assisi with his Canticle of the Sun and John of the Cross and his poems.)

There is much more here than aesthetics. For those who would still doubt, allow me to remind them that beauty has everything to do with truth: Beauty is the splendor of truth. And beauty has everything to do with the good. The Greeks even made it into one single word: kaloskagathos. Beauty can make a synthesis of the true and the good. Truth, Goodness, Beauty.

Here are three names and three access roads to God. But Beauty has as yet been explored very little in theology and catechesis in our day. Is it not time to attend to this lacuna?
<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/325/article/contemporary-person-and-church>

Beauty is at the heart of God, and the beauty that we see
- and even create -
is like the trailing wake from God's hand across the ocean
of the universe.

This is why, in attending to beauty,
we become open to the mystery of God.

~Marjorie H Suchocki

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Ways to explore and find God in beauty

Here are a few steps to become more aware of God through beauty. We will continue to explore them in the coming issues. For right now, you might want to ask yourself:

- Which of these ways am I attentive to? Which ones might I want to concentrate on a little more?
- How do I incorporate these ways into adult faith formation?

- **Cultivate Awareness:** Practice mindfulness and being fully present in the moment. Pay attention to your surroundings, noticing the beauty in nature, art, music, and the people around you.
- **Spend Time in Nature:** Nature is a powerful source of beauty that can inspire a sense of wonder and awe. Spend time outdoors, whether it's in a park, forest, or by water. Observe the intricacies of plants, animals, and landscapes.
- **Engage with Art and Creativity:** Art can be a reflection of the divine and can evoke powerful emotions. Visit museums, art galleries, or attend concerts to appreciate the creativity of others and find inspiration.
- **Seek Beauty in the Ordinary:** Beauty can be found in the simplest of things. Look for it in everyday moments, like a sunset, a smile, or an act of kindness.
- **Meditate and Reflect:** Set aside time for quiet reflection and meditation. Allow yourself to ponder the deeper aspects of life and existence, and contemplate the beauty that lies within and around you.
- **Gratitude Practice:** Cultivate gratitude for the beauty you encounter. Expressing gratitude helps us acknowledge the divine presence in our lives.

- **Connect with Others:** Share your experiences of beauty with others, and listen to their perspectives. Engaging in meaningful conversations about beauty and spirituality can deepen our understanding.
- **Read Scripture and other readings:** Scripture and much spiritual reading contain references to beauty as a reflection of God. Explore passages that discuss beauty, art, and the wonders of creation.
- **Serve Others:** Acts of service can be a way to experience beauty in selflessness and compassion. Engage in charitable work and help those in need.
- **Embrace Awe and Wonder:** Allow yourself to be amazed and wonderstruck by the beauty you encounter. Embrace the sense of awe and let it lead you to a deeper understanding of the divine.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Studio: <https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com/>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
 - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
 - https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_af_f_-_journal_special_issue.pdf