

BEAUTY EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW



Reflection given by James McCrery

February 1, 2015

St. Mary Help of Christians Church, Aiken, South Carolina.

Beauty is an elusive subject for we mere humans. It is difficult to nail down, hard to fix in any one place. And yet, when we see and experience beauty, it is indisputable, it is self evident, and always our very intellects and wills are surprised!

Beauty is very frequently linked to goodness by the philosophers. For when beauty is found, there too you find goodness. Beauty is good.

Truth is the third member of this great triumvirate. For goodness and beauty are traits of truth. Indeed, Christ teaches

very plainly, “I am the way, the TRUTH and the life”. Understanding Christ as TRUTH, it is easy to see Him as the source of goodness and of beauty.

And yet, for all that, I have brought us no closer to an understanding of what beauty is! So allow me to suggest a few ways to think well about beauty.

First off, let's put away the truly unintelligent notion that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder"; that each and every one of us gets to decide for ourselves what is beautiful and what is not. If we recall the strong bonds between beauty and goodness and truth, not one of us would dare to suggest that each and every one of us gets to determine what is good, or to define what is true! Equally absurd is the notion that we each get to decide what is beautiful. Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, nor goodness in the will of the do-er, nor truth in the judgment of the thinker. These things do not abide in man. Truth Goodness and Beauty are of God and of God alone.

Aquinas teaches that the human's mind and eye are uniquely enabled to recognize beauty when beauty is encountered. This is the key for Thomas: beauty lies outside of us. It is not in us. It is not a self-developed opinion or set of opinions.

Beauty then is not subjective. Beauty exists quite apart from us. Though mysterious, it is fully objective. Beauty is not for us to think up, it is for us to recognize.

And here lies what I think can be an aid to the recognition of

beauty. In our fallen states and in the fallen state of nature, there are nonetheless moments, instants, examples, hints and indications of our once and future-perfected states and the once and future-perfected state of nature. Where the God-created universe is restored by God to its ever ancient and ever new state of perfection. Where the God-created souls of the many are restored by God to their ever-new and ever-ancient perfection, in true, in good, and in beautiful Union to the will of the Creator.

And so beauty, being of God, is ever ancient, and ever new. Now there is a paradox! Ancient and new at once? How can this be? And yet we have the wonderful word "timeless". Goodness truth and beauty are themselves timeless. They exist outside of time. And think of this: each of us is called to be timeless as well! For happy are they who are called to the supper of the Lamb!

Tomorrow we will all together have the unique privilege of experiencing for the first time ever a singular, unique manifestation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church instituted by Christ Jesus 1,972 years ago in the 33rd year of His life.

There are a great many kinds and forms of manifestations of the Catholic Church in this world. They are both visible and invisible. The particular manifestation of the church that we will see tomorrow is itself a church building - a built image of Christ's Church.

How wonderful that this church will take the name of Our Lady, the very mother of Christ Jesus. On its facade, above the triumphal arches that lead to the interior, you will see and read the name of Our Lady: "Saint Mary Help of Christians".

Mary, Christ's mother, and ours, has been with Christ since the moment of her humble "yes" to the message of the ArchAngel Gabriel 2015 years ago. In the privacy of Her most Immaculate Heart, She has been *our* Help from that very moment. And from the day of the wedding feast at Cana, Mary has been quite clearly *THE* Help of Christians.

The church building named for Her should emulate Her and be a true "Help of Christians". Thus this church is designed to foster Faith, Hope and Charity in the souls of those who see her and visit her. It is designed to portray and inspire in the Faithful the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord.

It is designed to encourage and strengthen all in the Faith. Through its architecture, its decoration, its visual art, its sculpture and its paintings, it is designed to show you that Faith in all its clarity, magnificence and mystery.

Primarily, it is a place of deep prayer and the celebration of the great gifts that Christ gave to us that are the Sacraments. Souls will be Baptized and Confessed, joined in most Holy Communion, Confirmed in the One True Faith, consecrated to each other in Holy Matrimony, and exercise their offices in Holy Orders within its Sanctuary. At their earthly ends, these

souls, blessed with the privilege of a death sanctified by the Last Rites, will be buried from this church, while their souls will continue to be prayed for from within it.

This church is intentionally made to be beautiful. Externally beautiful as an outward sign of the inner beauties of the Christian Faith; of the manifest beauty of Our Lady, Mary; and also as a means of calling the wayward and those outside the Faith to draw near and within to Christ and His Church. The facade and its garden beckon all to enter. The initial call to holiness is simply grounded in Beauty as a means to draw all towards Goodness and ultimately to the Truth that is Christ Himself.

The church is designed to be Catholic, that is, to be universal. Being universal, its design draws on several geographical influences. And yet the church's universality is not merely global. The church also enjoys a universality throughout time. She, like truth and goodness and beauty, is ever ancient and ever new. This *temporal* universality can be difficult to grasp all at once, but we can sense the truth of it when we see it. When we see things that have this quality we call them timeless, and this church captures and communicates a catholic timelessness for all, most especially within its interior.

There you will see grand architecture, beautiful paintings, magnificent statuary, glorious altars, baldacchinos, shrines, ciboriums, tabernacles, candlesticks, choir stalls, fonts, crucifixes, lanterns and lamps. Each is really very, very nice. They are for you and yet, they are not quite for you. They are

for you as means to the proper end of being able to recognize and glory in the truth goodness and beauty of the mysteries the Most Holy Trinity and of our Holy Mother the Church.

Here, then, is my prayer to God for you members of this good Parish: In embracing this church and all of its manifest beauties, may you always call to mind and live the words of Mary *THE* Help of Christians: May this church be a means for all you who enter it that *your* souls may magnify the Lord, and that *your* spirits may always rejoice in God our Savior.