

**Saving Beauty: Renewing Moral Theology in Light of
Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics**

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Saving Beauty:
Renewing Moral Theology in Light of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics

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Responding to the call of Vatican II for a renewal of Catholic theology, this thesis makes an argument for the foundational role of beauty in moral theology. The thesis draws upon the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar to achieve this task. The introduction presents the statement of the problem, namely the prevailing legalism of Catholic moral theology prior to Vatican II. It also sets forth the state of the question. Here we see how the relationship between aesthetics and ethics has been neglected in recent times. Chapter one demonstrates the historical antecedents of the aesthetic-ethic connection in both ecclesial and ancient philosophical thought. The first chapter also sets forth the anthropological dimension of beauty for human action. Chapter two presents von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. His insistence upon the role of beauty—which in theological terms is God's glory—as the central theological method, necessarily has implications for moral theology. The third chapter elaborates the implications of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics for moral theology. The aim of chapter three is not to set forth a 'Balthasarian' ethics, but to demonstrate how his theological aesthetics serves as a foundation for moral theology. The thesis is thus primarily meta-ethical. Finally, in chapter four we present some of the practical implications of a moral theological aesthetics by drawing upon Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty,
Give unto the Lord glory and strength.
Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name;
Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

– Psalm 29:1-2

Christ draws me completely to himself, so great is his beauty!

– Jacopone da Todi

Those who aspire to a life of beauty must,
in the first place, strive to be truthful and good.
If a life is true it will automatically become beautiful,
just as light shines forth when flame is kindled.

– Romano Guardini

For beauty exists that we might be enticed to work,
And work, that we might be resurrected.

– Cyprian Norwid

If the beauty of Christ is sought in a glorious Christ who is not
crucified, the search will always be in vain.

– Karl Barth

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ABBREVIATIONS

WORKS BY HANS URS VON BALTHASAR:

E	<i>Epilogue</i>
GL1-7	<i>The Glory of the Lord</i> , 7 vols.
LA	<i>Love Alone is Credible</i>
MW	<i>My Work in Retrospect</i>
TD1-5	<i>Theo-Drama</i> , 5 vols.
TL1-3	<i>Theo-Logic</i> , 3 vols.

WORKS BY OTHER AUTHORS:

HA1-2	<i>History of Aesthetics</i> , 2 vols. (Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz)
ST	<i>Summa Theologiae</i> (St. Thomas Aquinas)

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to demonstrate how the theological aesthetics of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) can be used as a foundation for moral theology. Acknowledging this will enable us to contribute further to the genuine ongoing renewal of Catholic moral theology.

The title of this thesis can be divided into two parts. The second part, “Renewing Moral Theology in the Light of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics,” is self-explanatory. In this work we will examine von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics to see how it can contribute to the genuine renewal of moral theology called for by the Second Vatican Council.

The first part of the title, “Saving Beauty,” has a double meaning. In the first instance “Saving Beauty” denotes a retrieval of the aesthetic dimension within moral theology. Here, beauty has a passive sense being the direct object of the action. This work is an attempt to rehabilitate the role of beauty within the domain of moral reflection.

The second meaning of “Saving Beauty” is active. In this instance the word “saving” qualifies the word “beauty” and therefore signifies the power of beauty to save. One has only to recall the famous words of Dostoyevsky, “Beauty will save the world”

to grasp the dynamism that is meant.¹ Here we are closer to von Balthasar's notion of beauty, namely the glory of God revealed in the kenotic act of love by his son Jesus Christ through his incarnation, death on the cross, and resurrection. It is in the encounter with *this* beauty that human reason is renewed and opened up. The theological aesthetics of von Balthasar demonstrates this broadening of reason and can serve as a model for the renewal of moral theology. In fact, Joseph Ratzinger has stated that the new knowledge brought about through the encounter with the beauty of Christ is "in truth the essential element of [von Balthasar's] whole work" and that "we must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time."²

Statement of the Problem

For nearly 400 years—from the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)—the dominant frame of reference for Catholic moral theology was one of legalism. Under the influence of nominalism, casuistic moral theology tended to distort the Aristotelian-Thomistic accent upon human fulfilment, replacing it with a more rigid deontology. Emphasis was placed upon judging acts "not in terms of good and evil but in terms of the permitted and the forbidden."³ During this period morality was perceived as the fulfilling of an obligation. This ran contrary to the

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part III, chap. 5.

² Joseph Ratzinger, "The Beauty and Truth of Christ," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 6 November 2002, 6.

³ J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "Veritatis splendor: Moral Life as Transfigured Life," in J. A. DiNoia, O.P. and Romanus Cessario, O.P., eds., *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1999), 4.

classical conception, which understood ethics in the context of the human person's pursuit for happiness and the good life. The historical factors that shaped moral theology prior to Vatican II were varied and complex.⁴ Suffice it to say that moral theology was influenced above all by the practical concern of forming priests for the sacrament of confession. The focus, therefore, was placed on various scenarios that might arise in the confessional and the appropriate response and penance required of the penitent. These cases of conscience were written up in manuals and highlighted in the presentation of moral theology.⁵ While the intention was meant to be positive and pastoral, the result was more negative and tended towards a two-tiered spirituality of Christian life: i.e., an élite way of involving the perfection of charity lived out according to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, and a lesser way of observing the commandments.

The theoretical, speculative foundation of casuistic moral theology was ultimately deemed less important than the practical issues at hand. What mattered most was not the “theological foundation of morality” but the practical implications of a morality supported by “the study of minimal obligations based on natural law.”⁶ When obligation becomes the primary focus of moral theology, there is a danger of conceiving morality as an external imposition of commands and rules. Developing ethics in this

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ For a brief history of the ‘manualist’ tradition, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 254-279.

⁶ Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 35.

way exhibits an extrinsicism that eventually perceives the following of a moral law as an estrangement of what is truly human.⁷ Recognizing the deficiency of such a portrayal of morality and desiring to remedy this situation, the Council Fathers specifically called for a renewal of moral theology. The conciliar document, “The Decree on the Training of Priests” (*Optatam totius*) states:

Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of holy Scripture and should throw light upon the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.⁸

The renewal of moral theology envisioned by Vatican II entails a restored relationship with and reflection on the theological foundation of morality.⁹ This emphasis upon the theological foundation was affirmed earlier in the same conciliar document when it insisted that moral theology be renewed “through a more vivid contact with the Mystery

⁷ This extrinsic conception of ethics ultimately leads to a false notion of God’s law as a heteronomy as Pope John Paul II states: “Such a heteronomy would be nothing but a form of alienation, contrary to the divine wisdom and to the dignity of the person” (*Encyclical Letter “Veritatis splendor” Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teachings* [6 Aug. 1993] [Sherbrooke, QC: Éditions Paulines]), no. 41.

⁸ English translation taken from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., “The Decree on the Training of Priests” (*Optatam totius*), no. 16 in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Revised Edition* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), 720. The inclusion of obligation in the Council Fathers’ call for a renewal of moral theology does not constitute, in my opinion, a reiteration of the deficiencies of the pre-conciliar approach but must be seen in its connection to “bring[ing] forth fruit in charity for the life of the world” (“in caritate pro mundi vita fructum ferendi” [“Decretum de Institutione Sacerdotali,” in *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II. Constitutiones. Decreta. Declarationes. Cura et Studio Secretariae Generalis Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis: 1966), 378]). In this sense obligation is more like the concept *noblesse oblige*. Von Balthasar presents obligation in the life of the Christian in a similar manner. He writes: “‘Obligation’, then, is a word that pure love does not know. Or rather: its ‘obligation’ is always a ‘choice’. It experiences the necessity it is under of loving the beloved as the highest and most perfect freedom—a freedom not to be exchanged for all the goods of this world” (*The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983], 28).

⁹ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 34.

of Christ and the history of salvation.”¹⁰ With a stroke of the pen roughly 400 years of legalism “slipped away,” in the words of one theologian, “without so much as an obituary notice.”¹¹

Since Vatican II there has been a genuine renewal in moral theology. One of the most important magisterial documents for this discipline has been the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*. While it was written to address the crisis of problems in contemporary moral theology with regard to some of the fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine, the encyclical is at the same time profoundly rich in that it is a return to the foundations of Christian morality.¹² Building upon these foundations enables us to set out on new paths for pursuing and teaching moral theology.¹³ One new direction suggested by the encyclical is the way of beauty. Although not directly treated, the incipit from which the encyclical takes its popular title, “The splendor of truth [*Veritatis splendor*],” reveals in a seminal way the role of beauty for moral theology for this sacred science must demonstrate the beautiful truth about the good to be pursued and done. One could say that there is almost a Balthasarian quality to the theme of the encyclical since we are dealing with the trilogy of transcendentals: beauty, truth and the good.

¹⁰ *Optatam totius*, no. 16.

¹¹ DiNoia, “*Veritatis splendor*: Moral Life as Transfigured Life,” 3.

¹² *Veritatis splendor*, no. 5.

¹³ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis splendor*,” in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 11-12.

This topic, the dimension of aesthetics and its relation to ethics, has not been fully explored within the domain of moral theology. In his monumental multi-volume work on moral theology, *The Law of Christ*, Bernard Häring writes:

If the moral theologians of the past two centuries were convinced that the discussion of the beautiful had no place in moral theology, the reason lies in the scope and intent of their work. They were preparing practical guides for the confessor. However, if we have in mind a moral doctrine wider in scope and based on holy scripture, the liturgy, the Fathers of the Church and the Saints, we must provide a tract on beauty. Such is our answer to the question: Does the “beautiful” belong in moral theology?¹⁴

In fact, the noted Dominican moral theologian Servais Pinckaers has remarked that the theme of beauty has completely disappeared from Christian moral teaching.¹⁵ At first glance it would seem that beauty has nothing to do with morals and yet our language reveals the connection between beauty and human action. There is the popular saying: “Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said that “together we can do something beautiful for God.” Language such as this, which intuitively attributes a moral dimension to beauty, is nothing new but goes as far back as the ancient Greeks. This, however, is not simply a juxtaposition of one category with another: aesthetics with morality. Beauty is more than ‘skin deep’; it permeates the very depths of human action. Therefore, continuing to neglect the role of beauty in moral theology will only be done to the further detriment of this sacred science. Häring’s thought regarding the absence of beauty in moral theology is echoed by

¹⁴ Bernard Häring, C.Ss.R. *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, vol. 3, *Special Moral Theology: Man’s Assent to the All-Embracing Majesty of God’s Love*, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, C.PP.S (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 584-585.

¹⁵ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 30.

Pinckaers. He points out that the failure to attribute a moral dimension to beauty is, in the first instance, a failure to take into account the importance of Sacred Scripture's witness to the glory of God and to the beauty of all of his works. Secondly, the eclipse of beauty in moral theology contributes to an impoverished reading of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church who recognized God's beauty as being identified with his glory.¹⁶ To ignore beauty is to be forgetful of the rich tradition that is the Church's heritage. As Christopher Steck puts it: "The shift away from a theology of divine glory raises at least a *prima facie* concern that theological discourse has undergone a distortion."¹⁷

Beauty, it would seem, should occupy a primary place in moral theology. We could say that the prominence given to the role of beauty in moral theology is a retrieval of tradition, a *ressourcement*. It is, in fact, a most radical *ressourcement* because it is a return to the ultimate source of theology, Jesus Christ. In presenting beauty as being decisive for moral theology, we are situating ourselves within the Second Vatican Council's call for a renewal of this discipline by contemplating the "Mystery of Christ."¹⁸

It is the beauty of Christ that attracts the human person leading him to follow the

¹⁶ Although it is anachronistic in some sense to speak of the 'moral theology' of the early Church Fathers, this does not mean that their theology is irrelevant to our argument. Pinckaers sees a danger in the tendency of some authors to pejoratively regard the Patristic era "as the infancy of moral theology"; in fact, he considers this period the "Golden Age of Moral Theology" observing that there is much to learn from the Fathers (*Sources of Christian Ethics*, 195, 207). On the Patristic era see 195-215.

¹⁷ Christopher W. Steck, S.J., *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 10.

¹⁸ See *Optatam totius*, no. 16.

Lord.¹⁹ As St. John Paul II reminds us, this following of Jesus, the *sequela Christi*, constitutes “*the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.*”²⁰ By highlighting the Christological foundation, John Paul II broadens the perspective of moral theology so that it is not focussed narrowly on rules of conduct but more widely on the meaning of life itself.²¹ It is precisely Jesus Christ, the supreme beauty, who reveals the meaning of life to the human person.²²

State of the Question

The relationship between aesthetics and ethics has a long history. The ancient Greeks attributed a moral sense to beauty. The correlation between beauty and the good is also manifested in the Word of God. Beauty is a key element in the theological reflections of the Church Fathers; it is, for them, associated with creation, Sacred Scripture, and with the divine. The Fathers also attribute a moral dimension to beauty. Despite the deep-rooted connection between these two ideas, modern ethics in general has not been influenced by aesthetics. Philosophers have begun to re-examine the link between aesthetics and ethics.²³ It is a correspondence that needs to be further considered by theologians as well.

¹⁹ See *Veritatis splendor*, no. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, no. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, no. 2; citing *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

²³ See, for example, Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

We propose to study the role of beauty and its foundational aspect in relation to Catholic moral theology. In doing so, our work will contribute to the renewal of this discipline requested by Vatican II. The rediscovery of beauty's fundamental role for moral theology is, however, not merely an appropriation of theological tradition. Rather, the argument for the decisiveness of the aesthetic foundation for moral theology is more than just a recovery; it contains something that is truly new. This novelty has much deeper implications than a simple retrieval of the tradition.

Our thesis will draw upon the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. This Swiss theologian has contributed more than any other person to the renewed attention of aesthetics within theology. Von Balthasar's theological aesthetics focuses on the "confrontation of beauty and revelation in dogmatic theology."²⁴ His proposal has ethical implications since the encounter with beauty elicits a response that calls for action. The enrapturing power of beauty is not meant to remain at the level of a static contemplation but is a dynamic invitation to change one's life.

It is important to note that the principal beauty that informs this thesis is, paradoxically, revealed in the moment of extreme ugliness: in the ignominious death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The supreme beauty of God's glory is revealed in this act of unconditional love. All other forms of beauty are measured in light of this beauty: God's glory as love. It is this beauty, God's glory revealed in the "supreme love crucified,"²⁵

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed., Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press; New York: Crossroad Publications, 1982), 9. Hereafter cited as GL1.

²⁵ Mark D. Jordan, "The Evidence of the Transcendentals and the Place of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1989): 407.

that will “save the world.” It is in this double sense that beauty is crucial to moral theology: as a foundation and above all as formed by the Cross of Christ.

The unity of theology as a whole allows us to appropriate von Balthasar’s claims and apply them to the field of moral theology.²⁶ Through the encounter of beauty and the good via the thought of von Balthasar we aim to demonstrate the constitutive nature of aesthetics for moral theology. A moral theology that does not build upon the foundation of beauty is going to be incomplete, disproportionate and unappealing.²⁷ This sacred science must truly reflect the radiant beauty and glory of God. Only a moral theology impressed by the form of the glorious Crucified Christ will have the convincing power to give expression to the truth it enunciates.²⁸

Methodology

We shall begin with an historical and theoretical approach. **CHAPTER ONE** will start with a concise survey of the role beauty has played in the Church’s theological tradition particularly the Church Fathers and the Franciscan and Dominican Scholastics. Next, we shall briefly examine the moral notion of beauty as it is found in the Greek philosophical tradition. This chapter will also examine the anthropological dimension of beauty and its relation to the genesis of human action.

²⁶ On the unity of theology see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summae Theologiae* 1.1.3. Hereafter cited as ST.

²⁷ Cf. ST 1.39.8.

²⁸ See *Veritatis splendor*, no. 85.

The purpose of chapter one is to: (1) show the historical relevance of beauty in moral thought and (2) demonstrate the anthropological dimension of beauty pertinent to human action and the subsequent moral theological reflection. These presentations are only preliminary reasons for a recovery of beauty in moral theology. They point out the need for such a retrieval. At the same time, the recovery of beauty that we envision is not just a restoration. We do not wish to merely highlight beauty's role, but rather demonstrate its essential nature for moral theology.

The next part of the thesis will be theoretical and analytical. Since this thesis is dependant upon the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar, **CHAPTER TWO** will investigate what he means by beauty and its relation to glory. While beauty is a central part of the Catholic theological tradition, the priority that von Balthasar gives to beauty underscores its inadequacy in current theology. The decisive nature of beauty in von Balthasar's theology is a further development and therefore what he says about beauty brings something that is authentically new to theology. This examination of beauty in the thought of von Balthasar is not meant to be exhaustive. The goal of chapter two is to see how he deepens and develops the role of aesthetics in theology.

CHAPTER THREE will demonstrate how von Balthasar's theological aesthetics is fundamental to moral theology. By drawing upon his theology, which insists that beauty/glory is the sure method for theology, the recovery of beauty proposed in this thesis will bring something genuinely new to moral theology. It is important to insist that our aim in chapter three is not to present an exposition or development of the ethics in the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar. This has already been proposed by several

authors. We will, however, briefly look at these authors' theses in order to differentiate our own work from theirs. What we are attempting is to present von Balthasar's claim that theological aesthetics is the central method for theology and the subsequent implications this has for moral theology. In this sense, our work is not so much an ethics but is rather meta-ethical in nature. We are dealing with the foundation of ethics and moral theology.

In setting forth the foundational element we shall examine the two moments that make up von Balthasar's theological aesthetics: "vision and rapture" and apply them to moral theology.²⁹ The first moment, vision, is not just an apprehension of beauty, but also entails comprehension. The new knowledge that beauty brings does not lead to static contemplation but to a dynamic ecstasy leading to transcendence. Von Balthasar's concept of form (*Gestalt*) is meant to move us from seeing to being. In his language we are formed by the Christ-Form. Thus in order to fully become ourselves, the persons we are meant to be, we must first be able to perceive his Form and then allow ourselves to be formed by his Form.³⁰ The third chapter will therefore demonstrate the implications of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics for moral theology.

CHAPTER FOUR will briefly present an outline of some of the possible directions and practical implications of the moral theological aesthetics as set forth in the previous chapter. Starting from a global perspective and moving to the personal and anthropological dimension, these pastoral suggestions ultimately take place within the

²⁹ GL1, 125.

³⁰ GL1, 466.

context of the new evangelization.

Von Balthasar's claim that theological aesthetics is the method that leads to the heart of theology is quite radical. The implications of this assertion as it applies to the area of moral theology are precisely what this thesis is trying to set forth.

CHAPTER ONE

RECOVERING BEAUTY: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

I. Introduction

This study, which covers a vast historical scope, can only be introductory in nature, touching upon the most common elements. Our goal in this chapter is to highlight the role of aesthetics and its long association with ethics as articulated in the history of Christian faith and human reason. To illustrate this relationship we shall also present the role of beauty in human action as understood by St. Thomas Aquinas. Chapter one briefly examines beauty as seen in the tradition of the Catholic Church and as it is first expressed in the history of human thought. The material presented in this first chapter aims at documenting the connection between aesthetics and ethics in order to emphasise the crucial nature of recovering this relationship for the ongoing renewal of Catholic moral theology.

Since we shall be covering an extensive time period, to simplify our study of aesthetics in the tradition of the Church, we shall divide our study into two main sections: the Fathers of the Church and the Scholastics. Our investigation into aesthetics

within the tradition of the Church thus embraces, for the most part, the Medieval Era.¹

In the first part of chapter one, we shall begin with a general historical overview of the role of beauty in Patristic theology. The extensive number of writings by the Fathers on beauty necessitates a thematic presentation of some of the key aesthetic ideas rather than a chronological presentation. Our purpose is to give a broad overview of patristic aesthetics. (We shall not, therefore, explore in detail the distinction between the Latin Fathers of the West and the Greek Fathers of the East.)² Included in this short account will be the Fathers' reflection on the beauty of creation, beauty in the Bible, moral beauty, supernatural beauty, and finally divine beauty. We shall then examine Scholastic aesthetics, drawing upon the two most influential schools of medieval theology: the Franciscans, whose theology culminates in the work of St. Bonaventure; and the Dominicans, for whom St. Thomas Aquinas is the chief representative. Finally, we shall conclude the first part of chapter one with an ontology of beauty.

The second part of chapter one examines the role of beauty in the writings of the ancient Greeks. This will include the understanding of beauty as presented by the poets, tragedians, and Pre-Socratic philosophers. The aesthetics of Plato and Aristotle will conclude our study of the ancient Greeks' conception of beauty. Our investigation of Greek aesthetics and its relation to ethics can only be a succinct presentation due to its extensive scope.

¹ We say "for the most part" since the Medieval Era dates roughly from the fourth or fifth century to the fourteenth or fifteenth century. The Middle Ages, therefore, begins later than the early Patristics and ends later than the Scholastics.

² In general, the Greek Fathers' views on beauty were expressed earlier than those of the Latin Fathers (Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *Medieval Aesthetics*, ed. C. Barrett [The Hague: Mouton; Warsaw: PWN-Polish Scientific Publishers, 1970], 14). Hereafter cited as HA2.

In the third and final part of the first chapter, we shall study more closely the relation between beauty and human action. Consequently, our previous metaphysical description of beauty will be complemented by an anthropological account. Here we shall develop the fundamental role of beauty as given in St. Thomas Aquinas' psychology of human action. These three parts constitute chapter one.

The aim of this first chapter is to establish the historical relation between aesthetics and ethics as set forth in both philosophical and theological reflection. These are only preliminary arguments meant to support our claim for the recovery of beauty in the ongoing renewal of moral theology. At the same time, this gives us a foundation with which to compare and contrast von Balthasar's presentation of beauty, which will be set forth in the second chapter. Only after analysing von Balthasar's development of a theological aesthetics in chapter two will we undertake a synthesis for moral theology in the third chapter.

II. Beauty in Church Tradition

A. Church Fathers on Beauty

The early Church had to defend herself from a society that was influenced by pagan philosophies and religion. With regard to beauty, the initial thinkers in the Church were not concerned so much with developing new and original ideas as they were with presenting and explaining Christianity.³

Although the newness of the Christian faith caused some believers to approach

³ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1966), 89.

philosophy with caution⁴ and at times with hostility—as seen in Tertullian’s famous remark: “What has Athens to do with the Jerusalem? The Academy with the Church?”⁵—the early Church Fathers were undoubtedly influenced in their conception of beauty by Greek thought. This was only natural since many of them, from Origen and the Cappadocians in the East to Ambrose and Augustine in the West, were schooled in the classical traditions; the Eastern Fathers drew upon Greek foundations, while the starting point for the Western Fathers were Roman sources.⁶ Through their own writings, many of these classically trained Fathers passed on the heritage of their education thereby bridging antiquity with the medieval era.⁷ The Fathers were generally favourable to the literature of their classical formation, viewing it as beneficial for the development of theological knowledge.⁸ They drew upon their classical schooling to distinguish several types of beauty: natural, human, moral, supernatural, and divine. Ultimately, however, it was the Word of God which shaped their understanding of beauty. In fact, some of the Fathers, starting with Clement of Alexandria, believed that Greek philosophers were influenced by the biblical text.⁹ Regardless of this historical

⁴ See John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Fides et ratio” On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* [14 Sep. 1998] (Sherbrooke, QC: Médiaspaul, 1998), no. 38; HA2, 1.

⁵ *De praescriptione haereticorum*, VII, 9; cited in *Fides et ratio*, no. 41.

⁶ HA2, 4-5.

⁷ Edgar De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, trans. Eileen B. Hennessy (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1969), 43.

⁸ Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, 90.

⁹ See Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, II, 5; V, 14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 352-353 and 465-476.

error, patristic reflection on beauty was influenced by Greek philosophy and above all by the Bible.

Since the aim of the Fathers was primarily catechetical, they saw beauty as a cipher that points to God, who as Creator and supreme beauty, infuses everything with beauty. Moreover, the patristic presentation of beauty was hierarchical. The Fathers taught that we must not remain at the level of natural and visible beauty, but rather, we must raise our minds to the intelligible, spiritual beauty until we reach the supernatural divine beauty. In the words of St. Leo the Great (c. 400-461): “But as the world attracts us with its appearance, and abundance and variety, it is not easy to turn away from it unless in the beauty of things visible the Creator rather than the creature is loved.”¹⁰

Finally, for the Fathers beauty is salvific: the human person is called to be transformed and transfigured fully into the image and likeness of God, the supreme beauty. In short, we are called to be deified, as the Eastern Church reminds us. St. Clement of Alexandria (157-210) expresses it this way: “But that man with whom the Word dwells does not alter himself, does not get himself up: he has the form which is of the Word; he is made like to God; he is beautiful; he does not ornament himself: his is beauty, the true beauty, for it is God; and that man becomes God, since God wills it.”¹¹

¹⁰ Leo the Great, *Sermon 90*, 3, trans. Charles Lett Feltoe, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 12, *Leo the Great, Gregory the Great*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1895; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 200.

¹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, III, 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 271.

Beauty is made manifest on several different levels. Patristic beauty is presented in a hierarchy: from the natural beauty of creation to the supreme divine beauty of God there exist intermediate levels of beauty: the beauty of the arts, the moral beauty of good actions, and the supernatural beauty of the spiritual life. Every beauty participates in some manner in the supreme beauty of God. It is important to keep this in mind when we examine the various types of beauty found in the Patristics writings, since this notion—beauty as a sign and symbol of the divine—is a common thread that runs through all forms of patristic beauty.

There are a number of major aspects of beauty in patristic thought. The first feature of beauty is the measure of something; thus, beauty exhibits an order and harmony. The latter element can refer either to the auditory dimension or the ocular characteristic. In reference to sight, beauty displays a certain brightness of colour and is pleasing to the eye. The category of light is a key element of beauty in the patristic presentation of beauty. There is a brilliance to beautiful objects. This feature, which is Platonic in origin, is further developed and amplified by the biblical revelation which presents God as the God of glory who dwells in unapproachable light. God's glory radiates and transforms all that it touches. This transformative power, the light of God's glory as represented in the Old Testament, finds its fulfillment in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline corpus, and culminates in the high theology of the fourth Gospel attributed to John.

1. *Beauty in Creation*

The first Christian writers to address the theme of beauty were the Greek Apologists of the second century. As their name specifies, they were concerned with giving an *apologia* for Christianity. Their arguments were against the pagan philosophies and also against the beliefs held by the Gnostic sects. More often than not, the Apologists used the word beauty, *kalos*, in the ethical sense to denote the good, rather than in the properly aesthetic sense to denote beauty.¹² This was, since the time of Greek philosophical aesthetics, a common way of translating *kalos*; beauty as synonymous with the good. When referring to the aesthetic aspect of beauty, the Apologists spoke primarily about the beauty of creation, the cosmos.¹³ This topic, the beauty of creation, is constant through all of Patristic writings from the early Apologists until the later Fathers. Beauty, as a fundamental characteristic of theology, is made visible in the “book of nature.”¹⁴ The affirmation of natural created beauty has its foundations in Platonic and Stoic philosophy, but more importantly for patristic thought, it is rooted in Sacred Scripture. From the creation accounts in Genesis to the book of Wisdom, the beauty of creation is seen as a work of God. In the account of creation, the

¹² Bernard Pouderon, “Le concept de beauté chez les Apologistes grecs,” *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 111 (2008): 5. On page 6 of the same article, Pouderon gives several examples by the Apologists: Aristides in his *Apologia* 13, 5; Justin Martyr in his famous *Apologia* I, 7, 5; II, 1, 2; II, 9, 3; II, 11, 7; and Theophilus of Antioch in his *Apology to Autolycus* II, 17, 5.

¹³ Pouderon, “Beauté chez les Apologistes grecs,” 6.

¹⁴ See *Fides et ratio*, no. 19.

Septuagint translates the Hebrew word for good (*tov*) as the Greek word *kalos*.¹⁵

Clearly, this translation is not just aesthetic, but contains a wider meaning that includes both the concept of praiseworthiness and the moral sense. God sees that his creation is good (*kalon*). It is not only because creation is pleasurable that it is beautiful and good; the beauty of creation lies also in its appropriateness. According to the ancients, these are two main features of a thing's beauty: that it is pleasing to the senses of sight and sound; and that it is suitable to its purpose. This latter feature, the appropriateness of a thing (*aptus*), was, according to antiquity, another form of beauty and, as maintained by St. Basil of Caesarea (329-379), how God judges something to be beautiful.¹⁶ The great Cappadocian Father says: "God does not judge of the beauty of His work by the charm of the eyes, and He does not form the same idea of beauty that we do. What he esteems beautiful is that which presents in its perfection all the fitness of art, and that which tends to the usefulness of its end."¹⁷

The authentication of natural beauty by the Fathers serves a dual purpose. First, it is an argument for God who is all good and the source of beauty. Second, the beauty of creation is also an ontological assertion of the goodness of creation that counters the "relativism of pagan philosophy" and the negative outlook on the material world by

¹⁵ Gen 1:4: "καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ φῶς ὅτι καλόν", vv. 10, 12, and 18: "καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι καλόν", vv. 21, 25: "καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι καλὰ", and v. 31: "καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς τὰ πάντα, ὅσα ἐποίησεν, καὶ ἰδοὺ καλὰ λίαν."

¹⁶ HA2, 16.

¹⁷ Basil, *Hexaemeron*, Homily 3, 10, trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 8, *Basil: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1895; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 71.

Gnosticism.¹⁸ The world is beautiful because it is a reflection of divine wisdom. As an expression of divine reason it exhibits a purpose. Creation and all that is in it tends to God as a final cause. “In the measure that it is called into harmony by the final cause, the universe becomes beautiful.”¹⁹

The particularly Stoic idea of *pankalia*—that all of creation is beautiful and therefore pleasing—is transformed by the Fathers. As a result, the notion of *pankalia* is enriched to encompass not only the notion of creation as being pleasurable due to its beauty; rather, it includes the idea of purposefulness which, in turn, points to God, who as the creator of harmony and order is the ultimate source of beauty. In patristic thought, the concept of *pankalia* is therefore developed both teleologically and theologically. The teleological dimension leads to the theological element: just as the end (*telos*) of a work of art is to be contemplated, so too the world, as a work of beauty, has an end, a *telos*. The world as a beautiful artwork is to be contemplated. The novelty that the Fathers introduce is primarily theological. Creation is not only to be enjoyed; it also reveals the artist behind the work of art. God is therefore seen as the cause of beauty.²⁰ St. Athanasius (c. 296-373), echoing the Apostle in his letter to the Romans (2:19), says: “For often the artist even when not seen is known by his works,” and “it is further possible to attain to the knowledge of God from the things which are seen, since Creation, as though in written characters, declares in a loud voice, by its order and

¹⁸ Pouderon, “Beauté chez les Apologistes grecs,” 6-7.

¹⁹ Robert Barron, “God as Artist,” *Angelicum* 80 (2003): 410.

²⁰ HA2, 17, 18.

harmony, its own Lord and Creator.”²¹

St. Aristides writing in the second century says that he “marvelled at the beauty of the world” (literally “marvelled at the orderly arrangement of these”)²² and that he understood that it was by God’s power that all of creation was moved.²³ Lactantius (c. 240-320) commenting on the stars writes: “But if men admire the effects of these, if they admire their courses, their brightness, their regularity, their beauty (*pulchritudinem*), they ought to have understood how much more beautiful, more illustrious, and more powerful than these is the maker and contriver Himself, even God.”²⁴ Finally, St. Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310-c. 367) in his *De Trinitate* writes:

The Creator of great things is supreme in greatness, of beautiful things in beauty. . . . Thus heaven and air and earth and seas are fair: fair also the whole universe, as the Greeks agree, who from its beautiful ordering call it κόσμος, that is, *order*. But if our thought can estimate this beauty of the universe by a natural instinct . . . must not the Lord of this universal beauty be recognised as Himself most beautiful amid all the beauty that surrounds Him? For though the splendour of His eternal glory overtax our mind’s best powers, it cannot fail to see that He is beautiful. We must in truth confess that God is most beautiful, and that with a

²¹ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 35 and 34, trans. Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 4, *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1892; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 22.

²² “Ἐθαύμασα τὴν διακόσμησιν τούτων.”

²³ Aristides, *Apology*, 1, 1, trans. D.M. Kay, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, *The Gospel of Peter, The Diatesseron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Vision of Paul, The Apocalypse of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen’s Commentary on John, Books 1-10, and Commentary on Matthew, Books 1, 2, and 10-14*, 4th edition, ed. Allan Menzies (Christian Literature Publishing, 1896; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 263.

²⁴ Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 26, trans. William Fletcher, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, *Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, 2 Clement, Early Liturgies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Christian Literature Publishing, 1886; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 231. (Latin in PL6 1033-34).

beauty which, though it transcend our comprehension, forces itself upon our perception.²⁵

In these examples, we see the various elements that constitute the patristic theory of the beauty of creation: light, order, and joy; all of which, when considered properly lead the person to God. Von Balthasar expresses this patristic idea in a similar fashion, when he says: “The reality of creation as a whole has become the monstrosity of God’s real presence.”²⁶

2. *Beauty in the Bible*

Patristic aesthetics drew upon two sources: ancient philosophy and Sacred Scripture. As we noted above, many of the Fathers considered the Bible to be earlier than Greek philosophy. In the words of one medieval scholar: “Patristic exegetes found the (unacknowledged, misunderstood, and misappropriated) source for neo-Platonic aesthetics and indeed for all Greek wisdom in the Hebrew scriptures, which they argued, antedated Plato.”²⁷ The opposite, however, was true; aesthetic concepts in Greek philosophy found their way into Hebrew scripture. This is especially so in the Old

²⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, I, 7, trans. E.W. Watson, L. Pullan et al., in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 9, *Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1899; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 42.

²⁶ GL1, 420. Similarly, there is a popular quote attributed to St. John Damascene: “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.” This quote is, unfortunately, a very loose paraphrase. The actual words are: “We see images in creation which remind us faintly of God, as when, for instance, we speak of the holy and adorable Trinity, imaged by the sun, or light, or burning rays, or by a running fountain, or a full river, or by the mind, speech, or the spirit within us, or by a rose tree, or a sprouting flower, or a sweet fragrance” (*On Holy Images*, I, trans. Mary H. Allies [London: Thomas Baker, 1898], online, Fordham University, available: <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamascus-images.asp>, 30 Apr. 2015).

²⁷ Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2006), 45.

Testament, where we encounter various Greek aesthetic themes of Platonic, Pythagorean and Cynic origins. We have already seen the idea of *pankalia*, the beauty of creation; other aesthetic topics include the beauty of created works of art. Here the mathematical aesthetic theory of “measure, number, and weight” found in the Book of Wisdom (11:21) greatly influenced medieval aesthetics.²⁸ Another important biblical aesthetic theme taken up by the Fathers is the danger of beauty. The vanity of beauty—a theme original to the biblical author, but also found in the Cynics—is displayed prominently in Ecclesiastes.²⁹ The Fathers recognize beauty as something that is truly good. And although there are various levels of beauty, in patristic thought the hierarchy of beauty can be divided into two fundamental categories: the human and the divine. According to the Fathers, human beauty is subjective due to the limitation of the human person to judge beauty solely on pleasure, while divine beauty is real and objective.³⁰ There is a reticence and at times antagonism among some of the Fathers with regard to the arts and physical beauty, especially concerning the female body.³¹ Among certain Fathers, human beauty can be a hindrance to the person’s capacity to recognise true beauty.³² The perception of beauty that relies only on the senses can be transitory and

²⁸ HA2, 6, 7.

²⁹ HA2, 10, 11.

³⁰ HA2, 17.

³¹ Tertullian is the most insistent in this matter. One must bear in mind the historical context in which he lived. He was concerned with the safeguarding the faith, thus for him, true beauty is exemplified in the virtues and spiritual beauty which leads to God. See Jeannine Siat, “La beauté aux yeux des hommes, la beauté aux yeux de Dieu chez Tertullien,” *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 111 (2008): 19-27.

³² Patrick Laurence, “La beauté chez les pères,” *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 111 (2008): 4.

capricious. We can even speak of a false beauty that is focussed solely on the exterior manifestation and which fails to apprehend the spiritual dimension of beauty. Access to the true and eternal beauty requires the person to transcend the senses and contemplate interiorly with the heart and soul.³³ “Blessed is the intellect that transcends all sensible objects and ceaselessly delights in divine beauty,” says St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662).³⁴

Beauty is manifested in Sacred Scripture; it gives witness to the beauty and the glory of God and to all of his works:

The Church’s Scriptures offer a second approach to our enjoying the beauty of God in our lives. They serve as a matrix for learning both to recognize and to enjoy the goodness of God in all things. The Church employs its Scriptures for helping us to become the friends of God and of one another under the sovereignty of his love. The Bible serves the Christian community not so much as a book to be read, but as a scriptural iconography for contemplating its Lord with both “the eye” and “the look” of love.³⁵

This expresses the patristic approach to aesthetics in the Bible. Indeed, for the Fathers, not only does the Bible testify to God’s beauty, but as the very Word of God it is beautiful itself. As Aphrahat (c. 280-367), an early Syrian bishop, said: “For the word of God is like a pearl, that has a beautiful appearance on whatever side you turn it.”³⁶

³³ Laurence, “La beauté chez les pères,” 3.

³⁴ *The Philokalia. The Complete Text*, vol. 2, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 55.

³⁵ John Navone, S.J., *Enjoying God’s Beauty* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), vii-viii.

³⁶ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 22, 26, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 13, *Part II: Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1898; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 411.

The *Book of Wisdom*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Ecclesiasticus*, the *Song of Solomon*, and the *Psalms*, all speak of beauty. The authors of these books were most likely influenced by Greek aesthetics. And yet they are marked also by a strong Hebraic aesthetic that differs very much from Greek thought. The main difference between the two is that for the Greeks, beauty had an immediateness that inhered in the properties of the object, while the Hebrew mentality viewed beauty as symbolical and indirect.³⁷ The *Book of Wisdom* (which mentions beauty the most often in the Bible) states: “For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator” (Wis 13:5). Thus as we saw above, the whole of the created universe is symbolic of the divine. This is a theme which the Fathers frequently mention in their work.

Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament does not include any aesthetic theories. In fact, the New Testament does not really have an aesthetic content.³⁸ When beauty is mentioned in the New Testament, it never has a purely aesthetic meaning. Rather, it almost always conveys a moral sense. The word *kalos* occurs several times in the New Testament.³⁹ Although it properly means ‘beautiful’, it is most often translated as ‘good’ and denotes moral rectitude. In the Gospel according to Matthew (5:16), we are told to let the light of our ‘good works’ (*kala erga*) shine before men. Here the ‘beauty’ spoken of is not aesthetic but moral. Beauty and goodness are wed together when the Christian acts out of love. A purely aesthetic interpretation does not make

³⁷ HA2, 8.

³⁸ HA2, 12.

³⁹ For a complete list see William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), s.v. “καλός, ἡ, ὅν”, 262.

sense. In John's Gospel we do not say the 'beautiful shepherd' but the 'good shepherd' (Jn 10:11, 14, *ho poimen ho kalos*). The Gospel exalts moral beauty to the exclusion of other Hellenistic conceptions of beauty.⁴⁰ John Navone expresses this idea well: "Through its scriptural iconography, the Church calls us to contemplate the beauty of God's true goodness in Jesus Christ, God's perfect image, that we might become living icons of the same beauty for others."⁴¹

Beauty in the New Testament is not disparaged, as seen in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:28-29). But the content of the Gospels and the New Testament serves as a foundation for a whole new view vis-à-vis life and the world for the early Christians. The aesthetics of the early Christian thinkers draw upon the heritage of antiquity, but it is transformed by the Word of God. Earthly beauty is thus subordinate to heavenly beauty; the physical is inferior to the spiritual; and the moral good is above other goods.⁴²

3. *Moral Beauty*

There are many examples of moral beauty in the writings of the Church Fathers. The Fathers never cease to praise moral beauty, extolling it above physical beauty. True beauty is not simply skin deep but radiates from the soul's beauty. One of the recurring places whereby moral beauty is exalted is in the Fathers' treatment of the virtues. The

⁴⁰ HA2, 12.

⁴¹ Navone, *Enjoying God's Beauty*, viii.

⁴² HA2, 12.

beauty that comes from a virtuous life reveals the beauty of the soul. The beauty of virtue, unlike natural beauty, is not transitory or superficial; rather, it participates in the sure and everlasting beauty. Moral beauty is a spiritual beauty bestowed by the Holy Spirit and is therefore more greatly to be desired than natural, physical beauty.

St. Maximus the Confessor says: “But when the virtues, through the power of the Spirit, are interwoven in accordance with the intelligence, they form a garment of incorruption for the soul: dressed in this the soul becomes beautiful and resplendent.”⁴³

Unlike corporal and natural beauty, which is perceived by the senses, moral beauty is incorporeal and spiritual and is not perceived by the senses of sight or hearing. The spiritual dimension of moral beauty means that it must be apprehended with the spiritual senses of the heart and soul.

While the Fathers praise beauty, especially interior beauty, they preach against the dangers of what could be termed aestheticism. An overconcern for the beauty of one’s attire and personal adornments can hinder the beauty of the soul, while the soul’s beauty, perfected by virtue, enhances corporeal beauty.⁴⁴ Spiritual beauty makes a person even more beautiful than does natural beauty. St. John Chrysostom (347-407) preaches: “Wouldest thou appear comely? Clothe thee in alms; clothe thee in

⁴³ Maximus the Confessor, *Philokalia*, vol. 2, 177. Clement of Alexandria states: “For in the first place, the best beauty is that which is spiritual For . . . the soul is adorned by the Holy Spirit, and inspired with the radiant charms which proceed from Him—righteousness, wisdom, fortitude, temperance, love of the good, modesty” (*The Instructor*, III, 11, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, 286.)

⁴⁴ While the Fathers do warn against the risk of vanity, “beauty [is] not to be feared” as Tertullian remarks; it is, however, “still to be shunned as unnecessary and vainglorious” (*On the Apparel of Women*, Bk 2, ch. 3, trans. S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 20.

benevolence; clothe thee in modesty, humbleness. These are all more precious than gold; these make even the beautiful yet more comely; these make even the ill formed to be well formed.”⁴⁵ Some of the fathers disparage women from adorning themselves with makeup and jewellery, saying that these do not add to their beauty, but hinder it. The true embellishments that will enhance natural beauty are the virtues. As St. Ambrose of Milan (338-397) writes: “You, too, have indeed your own beauty, furnished by the comeliness of virtue, not of the body, to which age puts not an end, which death cannot take away, nor any sickness injure. Let God alone be sought as the judge of loveliness, Who loves even in less beautiful bodies the more beautiful souls.”⁴⁶ The idea of the virtues as being a form of beauty, especially for the Latin Fathers, comes from Cicero.⁴⁷

Just as the life of virtue beautifies the soul, so too is the soul made ugly through sin. St. Basil the Great says: “If you cannot behold without sadness the moon losing its splendour by gradual and imperceptible decrease, how much more distressed should you be at the sight of a soul, who, after having possessed virtue, loses its beauty by

⁴⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily 10 on Colossians*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 13, *Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff (Christian Literature Publishing, 1889; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 308.

⁴⁶ Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, Bk. 1, ch. 6, par. 30, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin and H.T.F. Duckworth, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 10, *Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1896; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994, second printing 1995), 368.

⁴⁷ “And as what is called beauty arises from an exact proportion of the limbs, together with a certain sweetness of complexion, so the beauty of the mind consists in an equality and constancy of opinions and judgments, joined to a certain firmness and stability, pursuing virtue, or containing within itself the very essence of virtue” (Cicero *Tusculanae Disputationes* 4.13.30 [*Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations*, trans. C. D. Yonge (New York, 1877, 140)]; cited in Piotr Jaroszyński, *Beauty and Being: Thomistic Perspectives*, trans. Hugh MacDonald with the collaboration of the author [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011], 242).

neglect”⁴⁸ This thought is echoed by Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) when he says that “the beauty of other virtues is also hereby marred” by the sin of avarice.⁴⁹

Since the Fathers stress the importance of the virtues as a way of becoming beautiful, the virtues that are most recommended are those of chastity and continence (virginity). All of the Fathers, both Greek and Latin, are unanimous in their praise of the beauty of virginity. Of course, we must not take the admonition to live chastely—and also the virtue of continence, since the Fathers most often speak of the virtue of chastity in the context of living a life of virginity—as reflecting a negative view of human sexuality (although there can be at times a strain of this). Rather, the call to live the virtues of chastity and continence must be seen further in the light of the call to live the commandment of love perfectly.

It is not any of the virtues in themselves that render a person spiritually beautiful, but only insofar as the virtues are truly acts of love that they can beautify the soul. As St. Ambrose said, “Charity is the form of the virtues.”⁵⁰ It is the theological virtue of charity which truly makes one beautiful, for through charity a person participates in the

⁴⁸ Basil, *Hexameron*, Homily 6, 10, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 8, 88.

⁴⁹ Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, Bk 1, ch. 11, trans. James Barmby, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 12, 9 (page number refers to second half of vol. 12).

⁵⁰ This quote is attributed to St. Ambrose (in his *Comments on First Corinthians*, 8, 2) by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2.23.8 (hereafter cited as ST) and in his earlier work, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard (In III Sent.)*, d. 27, q. 2, a. 4, qa. 3. Recent scholarship reveals that Ambrose did not specifically say that charity is the form of virtues, but describes charity as being the “mother of all virtues” (see Thomas Aquinas’ *On Love and Charity: Readings from the “Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard,”* Trans. Peter A. Kwasniewski, Thomas Bolin, O.S.B., and Joseph Bolin. With Introduction and notes by Peter A. Kwasniewski [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008], 164, n. c). It is in this sense however, that as “mother of all virtues” charity is the form of the virtues as set forth by Aquinas’ teaching.

very life of God. Augustine says that only “by loving God [does] it [i.e., the soul] become[] lovely. What a love must that be that makes the lover beautiful!” Adding shortly after: “As the love increases in thee, so the loveliness increases: for love is itself the beauty of the soul.”⁵¹ The person who, motivated by love (*caritas*) lives a life of virtue, is beautiful with the very beauty of God, for as Augustine says only “by participation in the light of God, can any soul possess beauty.”⁵² St. Maximus the Confessor reiterates this idea by saying: “In goodness the beauty that is according to God’s likeness is made manifest.”⁵³ It is in this way that a person practicing the virtues lets the beauty of their “good works” (*kala erga*) shine before everyone to see (Mt 5:16). To do the good is to be made more and more into the image and likeness of the Glorious One who alone is good.⁵⁴ As St. Ambrose says: “It is in souls that the Church is beautiful.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Augustine, *Homily 9 on the First epistle of John (1 Jn 4:17-21)*, no. 9, trans. H. Browne, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 7, *Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff. (Christian Literature Publishing, 1888; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 518.

⁵² Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, Bk 12, no. 13, trans. Richard Stothert, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 4, *Augustin: The Writings against the Manichaens, and against the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff (Christian Literature Publishing, 1887; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 188.

⁵³ Maximus the Confessor, *Philokalia*, vol. 2, 215.

⁵⁴ See Gen 1:26-27; Mt 19:17; Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19.

⁵⁵ *On the Mysteries*, 7, 39; cited without reference by Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Herder & Herder, 2001), 220.

4. Divine Beauty

As we stated at the beginning of our study on patristic aesthetics, the Fathers' reflections on beauty serve an evangelical and catechetical purpose. The Fathers see both physical and spiritual beauty as signs that point to the divine artist. All that is beautiful in creation comes from the Creator God, who is, as St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) says, the "Source of all beauty."⁵⁶ As such, the true and objective beauty, that beauty which is not transitory but eternal, comes from God alone. Eventually, not only is God recognized and admired as the source of beauty, but God is identified *with* beauty. God is the greatest and truest beauty; he is the Supreme Beauty. This idea, that God is the Archetypal Beauty, comes to the fore around the fifth century under the influence of Plotinus.⁵⁷

St. Augustine (354-430) is well known for his statements on God's beauty. He says in his *Confessions*, "Your beauty drew me to you"⁵⁸ And more famously:

⁵⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ch. 4, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 5, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing, 1893; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 351.

⁵⁷ Tatarkiewicz states that the identification of God with beauty is not found earlier than the fifth century, but only evolves in the fifth century (HA2, 18). It could be argued, however, that this idea does appear earlier; for example, Methodius (d. 311) writes: "[E]very creature falls short of the beauty of God. For He draws all things to life by His Word, from their universal substance and nature. For whether He would have good, He Himself is the Very Good, and remains in Himself; or, whether the beautiful is pleasing to Him, since He Himself is the Only Beautiful, He beholds Himself, holding in no estimation the things which move the admiration of men (*Three Fragments from the Homily on the Passion and Cross of Christ*, fragment 2, trans. William R. Clark. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, *Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Christian Literature Publishing, 1886; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 400. And also in the fourth century Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) sings: "Glory to the Beautiful, Who conformed us to His image!" (*Hymns on the Nativity*, Hymn 2, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 13, 227.

⁵⁸ *Confessions* 7.17, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 151.

“Too late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever new, too late have I loved you!”⁵⁹ The bishop of Hippo’s ideas on beauty were so influential they became the foundation for aesthetics during the Middle Ages.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most influential Father on aesthetics besides Augustine is the late fifth to early sixth century writer who styled himself Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500). The fourth chapter of his book on the Divine Names had a lasting impact on later medieval theologians, especially St. Thomas Aquinas. The Areopagite transforms Plotinus’ vision of the Supreme Beauty theistically and theologically. Pseudo-Dionysius’ dominant idea is that of absolute beauty.⁶¹ He modified the pantheistic notion of beauty by conceiving it theistically. “God is ‘supersubstantial beauty’ (*to hyperousion kalon*), ‘superbeauty’ (*hyperkalon*), the source of all beautiful things.”⁶² Thus “beauty is of the absolute, in the absolute and tends to the absolute.”⁶³ Dionysius’ successors expressed this theologically: “Beauty is of God, in God and tends to God.”⁶⁴

If the Fathers’ reflections on beauty begin from an evangelical and catechetical perspective, we could say that they end in a redemptive perspective. All created beauty is meant to lead us to God, the Supreme Beauty. We are called to participate in the

⁵⁹ *Confessions* 10.27; cited in Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 31.

⁶⁰ HA2, 54.

⁶¹ See HA2, 27-32.

⁶² John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 50. The expressions are from Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, *De Divinus Nominibus*, cap. 4, no. 7; PG, 3, 701 CD.

⁶³ HA2, 31.

⁶⁴ HA2, 31.

transformative beauty, making our lives a work of art. Perhaps the best way to express this is with what the Eastern Churches call *theosis*, that is, deification. In the words of St. Athanasius of Alexandria (293-373): “For He [i.e., the Word] was made man that we might be made God.”⁶⁵ Only God’s beauty or more properly, God, the Archetypal Beauty, has the power to save and transform us; we become by grace what God is by nature (cf. 2 Pet 1:4). Let us end our investigation into patristic aesthetics with the words of St. Maximus the Confessor: “To reconcile us with the Father, at His Father’s wish the Son deliberately gave Himself to death on our behalf so that, just as He consented to be dishonoured for our sake by assuming our passions, to an equal degree He might glorify us with the beauty of His own divinity.”⁶⁶

Many more examples could be given to demonstrate how the Church Fathers underscored beauty in their theology. The ideas on beauty put forth by the Fathers are not new, but they draw upon Christian faith to transform a classical aesthetic heritage for evangelistic and catechetical purposes. Apart from Augustine, who, in his youth (in 380 AD), wrote a specific treatise on beauty (*De pulchro et apto*),⁶⁷ most early Christian writing on beauty echoes what the Greek philosophers and the classical tradition had said previously. Even Pseudo-Dionysius does not so much present a new theory of beauty as does he transform and ‘baptise’ the neo-Platonic presentation of beauty by

⁶⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54, 3. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 4, 65.

⁶⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Philokalia*., vol. 2, 248.

⁶⁷ See Augustine *Confessions*, IV, 13.

Plotinus and Proclus.⁶⁸

The originality of the Fathers is found in how they use beauty as an argument for the existence of God, who as the creator of all that is beautiful is the supreme beauty. There is also a moral dimension due to the hierarchy of beauty: moral and spiritual beauty is greater than natural beauty because the former allows us to participate in and become images of the divine beauty.

B. Scholastic Aesthetics

Early medieval aesthetics flourished under the influence of Basil, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius. But after the barbarian invasions in the West and the rise of Byzantine autocracy in the East, reflection on aesthetics dwindled. A renewed interest in aesthetics came about in the eighth and ninth centuries arising from the Iconoclastic controversy in the East and the Carolingian Renaissance in the West.⁶⁹

Like the early Church Fathers before them, the Medievals and the Scholastics were not concerned with developing new aesthetic theories. Rather, drawing upon the classical heritage of the earlier authorities, the writers of the Middle Ages presented aesthetics as it had been handed down to them. The historical context, however, in which the medieval thinkers lived, was quite different from their earlier counterparts. This difference led to innovations in the presentation and understanding of beauty. We see in late medieval and scholastic aesthetics a development with regard to the theory of

⁶⁸ Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, 111.

⁶⁹ HA2, 107.

beauty due to a novel analysis of the arts, particularly with regard to poetry, music, and the visual arts. This analysis, beginning around the twelfth century, was original in its reclassification of the arts. Meanwhile, philosophical reflection on beauty reached its zenith in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and then waned after the fourteenth century. These two currents of thought— aesthetics through an analysis of the arts and aesthetics arising out of a philosophical method—account for the diverse opinions on aesthetics during this era.⁷⁰

Unlike the mystical aesthetics of the Cistercians which stressed spiritual beauty over material beauty⁷¹ and the descriptive aesthetics of the Victorines which focussed on experience and art, Scholastic aesthetics tended to be more philosophical in nature.⁷² Aesthetics was ancillary in the work of the schoolmen, being treated within the conceptual framework of the theological *Summae*.

Scholastic aesthetics comes from the Platonic and neo-Platonic theories of beauty. These sources are, however, filtered through Augustine and Basil (for Plato) and Pseudo-Dionysius (for the neo-Platonist tradition). The latter is the most influential authority for scholastic aesthetics through his work *On the Divine Names*. Aristotle is the other major influence for scholastic aesthetics. Even though his main work on

⁷⁰ HA2, 112-113.

⁷¹ While medieval writers warned against the dangers of beauty, they were not puritanical. Their admonitions against the hazards of sensible beauty were meant to serve as a safeguard for spiritual beauty. This emphasis upon spiritual beauty over physical beauty can be seen in the staid church architecture of the Cistercians and Carthusians, both contemplative orders that flourished during the middle ages. Earthly beauty is good, but it can become a distraction and therefore a rival to the higher good of spiritual beauty. In St. Bernard's words: "Interior beauty is more comely than external ornament, more even than the pomp of kings" (*Sermones in Cantica*, XXV, 6 [PL, 183, col. 901]; cited in Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin [New York: Yale University Press, 1986], 9).

⁷² HA2, 214.

aesthetics, the *Poetics*, was unknown to the schoolmen, they most likely construed the Stagirite's ideas on aesthetics from his other writings such as his *Metaphysics* and the *Rhetoric*.⁷³

The key element of scholastic aesthetics lies in its methodology. After defining beauty, the schoolmen pose a number of questions to clarify their understanding of beauty. These questions range from the specific properties of beauty; how beauty is related to other concepts, such as the good; to how we apprehend beauty; whether beauty is objective or subjective; to what are the causes of beauty.

In general, scholastic aesthetics follows the division of the two major schools of philosophical thought: Augustinianism derived from Plato via Augustine and Thomism derived from Aristotle via Aquinas.⁷⁴ The question of beauty was, for the most part, agreed upon. These two schools of thought regarding beauty were represented by the two major orders at the time: the Franciscans, who were more Augustinian in their approach, and the Dominicans, who were more Aristotelian.⁷⁵

The key figures in scholastic aesthetics to whom we shall look are Alexander of Hales, Robert Grosseteste, St. Bonaventure, St. Albert the Great, Ulrich of Strasburg, and finally St. Thomas Aquinas. The first three represent Franciscan aesthetics and the latter three Dominican aesthetics. We shall begin with the Franciscans since their examination of beauty appears prior to that of the Dominicans.

⁷³ HA2, 214; Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 22.

⁷⁴ HA2, 181.

⁷⁵ HA2, 232.

1. Franciscan Aesthetics

Of the two great mendicant orders during the Scholastic era, it was the Franciscans who initially examined the question of beauty. An influential work for scholastic aesthetics was the *Summa Universae Theologiae* of Alexander of Hales (1185-1245) an English Franciscan. This work, which appeared in 1245, was the first major scholastic work to address aesthetics.⁷⁶ It contains a whole chapter devoted to beauty entitled “On the Creature according to its distinguishing quality or on the beauty of created things.”⁷⁷ Although attributed to Alexander—it is most often entitled the *Summa Fratris Alexandri*—it was certainly co-authored by two others: John de la Rochelle (d. 1245) and a third Franciscan brother.

The Franciscans were the first to address the transcendental nature of beauty. Umberto Eco remarks that John de la Rochelle understood beauty and goodness to be identical. This does not mean, however, that they are the same thing. The good and beauty are identical within a specific object. The difference between beauty and the good resides in the intentionality of the person observing the object. We could say that on an objective level, beauty and goodness are the same; while on a subjective level, that of *intentio*, they are different⁷⁸: “Beauty and the good, nevertheless, differ: for beauty is called an orderly arrangement of the good, according to which it is pleasing to apprehend; the good, however, considers the arrangement of things, according to that

⁷⁶ Eco notes that Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253) seems to have been acquainted with Alexander’s *Summa* before 1245 (Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 23).

⁷⁷ “De creatura secundum qualitatem seu de pulchritudine creati.” HA2, 213.

⁷⁸ Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 23.

which pleases the affections.”⁷⁹

The *Summa* of Alexander also introduced a differentiation between beauty and goodness using a distinction that would be commonly used afterward: namely, the notion of causality. The good is related to final causes; in other words, it is that which we desire in itself as an *end*. Beauty, on the other hand, is related to formal causes since it is the form of a thing that is beautiful to apprehend.

Although not a Franciscan, the Englishman Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253), Bishop of Lincoln, could be called a true son of St. Francis. His relationship with the new order had begun when he was chancellor at Oxford. Like Alexander of Hales, Grosseteste affirmed the identity of beauty with the good: “If everything desires the good and the beautiful together, the good and the beautiful are the same.”⁸⁰ Both men, however, conceived the logical or notional (*ratione*) distinction between beauty and goodness in different ways. As was noted above, for Alexander beauty and goodness reside concretely in the form of the object, the differentiation between the two attributes being situated within the knowing and perceiving subject. For Grosseteste, the conceptual discrepancy between beauty and goodness, both properties which exist in the object, is established in God. In his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius’ *De Divinis Nominibus*, Grosseteste writes:

⁷⁹ “Pulchrum et bonum differunt tamen: nam pulchrum dicit dispositionem boni, secundum quod est placitum apprehensioni, bonum vero respicit dispositionem, secundum quam delectat affectionem.” *Summa Alexandri*, I, [n. 103] (Quaracchi, 162); cited in HA2, 224. [Translation mine.]

⁸⁰ *Comm. In Div. nom.*, IV; cited in Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 23 (original citation from Henri Pouillon, “La Beauté, propriété transcendente chez les Scolastiques (1220-1270),” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, XXI [sic] (1946), 263-329.

God is called good because He confers being on everything, and being is good, and He increases and perfects and preserves. But He is called beautiful in that all things, both in themselves and together, produce a concordance in their identity with Him.⁸¹

Thus for Grosseteste, God is good because he is the source of all being and he is beautiful in that all things are ordered by him. “The beauty of God, we say, signifies himself as the cause of all things beautiful.”⁸²

Finally, in this short survey of Franciscan aesthetics, we cannot overlook the important contribution of Giovanni de Fidenza, more popularly known as St. Bonaventure (1221-1274). Scholastic aesthetics finds its comprehensive expression in the works of both the Seraphic Doctor and his colleague St. Thomas Aquinas.⁸³ Unlike his contemporaries who only commented briefly on the subject of beauty in passing, Bonaventure’s aesthetics is much more detailed.⁸⁴ Although he does not have a separate treatise on beauty, he develops his aesthetics in such works as *The Journey of the Mind to God* and the *Breviloquium*.

As with the other representatives of the Franciscan school, Bonaventure’s attitude toward beauty exhibits an aesthetic optimism for his aesthetics is ontologically grounded in God who is the supreme Beauty. In this the seventh Minister General of the Franciscans followed his own Master, St. Francis, who saw all beauty as bearing

⁸¹ *Comm. In Div. nom.*, IV; cited in Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 22 (original citation from Pouillon, “La Beauté, propriété transcendente,” 263-329).

⁸² “Pulchrum de Deo dictum significat ipsum omnis pulchri causam.” *Comm. In Div. nom.*, IV, (Pouillon, 321); cited in HA2, 232.

⁸³ HA2, 232.

⁸⁴ HA2, 232.

evidence to God the Supreme Beauty.⁸⁵

There are three elements of Bonaventure's aesthetics that are important for highlighting the relation between beauty and goodness. These are his aesthetics of light, his transcendental aesthetics, and the hierarchical structure of beauty.

The metaphysics of light which appeared in the thirteenth century was due in part to the influence of the physics of the Arab scientist Alhazen (965-1040).⁸⁶ The other major authority that contributed to the Scholastics interest in light was Dionysius the Areopagite.⁸⁷ For Bonaventure both light and form are beautiful: "Light is the most beautiful, the most pleasant and the best among physical things."⁸⁸ And: "Everything that is existence has some form, and what has form has beauty as well."⁸⁹ His idea of form is not, however, restricted to sensible things, but includes the spiritual as well.⁹⁰ The same can be said of his understanding of light which he understands as "primarily and fundamentally a metaphysical reality."⁹¹ He remarks: "Souls are beautiful, because they are luminous substances."⁹² And commenting on Sacred Scripture he "declared that the Bible bestows upon us all the esthetic delights of light; its expression may be

⁸⁵ HA2, 230.

⁸⁶ De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁸ Bonaventure, *In Sap.*, 7, 10 (Quaracchi, VI, 153); cited in HA2, 237.

⁸⁹ Bonaventure, *II Sent.* d. 34 a. 2 q. 3 (Quaracchi, II, 814); cited in HA2, 237.

⁹⁰ HA2, 233.

⁹¹ Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 50.

⁹² De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, 61.

compared to the most beautiful objects: *est enim ejus incontaminabilis pulchritudo propter claritatem inobfusabilem* (“For its beauty cannot be defiled because of its clear brightness”).⁹³ Finally, for Bonaventure, “God is the most excellent light.”⁹⁴

Another feature of Bonaventure’s aesthetics is his inclusion of beauty as one of the “universal properties of being.” Although the idea of these transcendental properties attributed to being have ancient roots, they were first listed by Philip the Chancellor (c.1160-1236) in his *Summa de bono*.⁹⁵ To the standard list of *unum, verum, bonum*, Bonaventure added a fourth transcendental: *pulchrum*. It is true that Alexander of Hales and others previous to Bonaventure had spoken of the convertibility of beauty with the good, but none of these writers had ventured to include beauty in their list of the transcendentals. With the addition of beauty as a transcendental, Bonaventure explicitly unites it to being and its attributes: “For the beautiful presupposes the good, and the good the one, and the one presupposes being itself.”⁹⁶ Eco summarises Bonaventure’s

⁹³ De Bruyne *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, 208. The text from the *Principium Sacrae Scripturae* as it is found in the *Opera Omnia Sancti Bonaventurae*, vol. 9 (Ludovicus Vivès edition published in Paris) is not referenced by De Bruyne in his *Études D’Éthétique Médiévales*, vol. 2, *L’Époque Romane* (Édition de Bruges, 1946; reprint, Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1975), 316, n. 4 (page reference to reprint edition). The text was originally cited in H. H. Glunz *Die Literaturästhetik des europäischen Mittelalters*, 190-191. The Ludovicus edition has *charitatem inobfusabilem* which is clearly an error.

⁹⁴ “Deus est excellentissima lux.” Bonaventure, *I Sent.* d. 1 a. 3 q. 1 (*Opera Omnia S. Bonaventurae*, Quaracchi, I, 38). English translation, online, Franciscan Archive, available: http://www.franciscan-archive.org/bonaventura/opera/bon01038.html#QUAESTIO_1, 16 Jul. 2012.

⁹⁵ HA2, 288.

⁹⁶ “Nam pulchrum praeintelligit bonum, et bonum verum, et verum unum, unum autem ipsum ens.” “Tractatus de transcendentalibus entis conditionibus,” a. 1, q. 1; edition by Dieter Halcour in *Franziskanische Studien* 41 (1959): 41-106, here at 65, lines 14-15; cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 2, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, et al., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press; New York: Crossroad, 1984), 334, n. 359. Hereafter cited as GL2. Not all scholars hold this text to be authored by Bonaventure nor is there a consensus on the inclusion of beauty

position on beauty using Jacques Maritain's expression that beauty is "the splendour of all the transcendentals together."⁹⁷ Indeed, Bonaventure says that "beauty encircles every cause and is common to them (i.e., to the one, truth, [and] the good)."⁹⁸

The final feature of Bonaventure's aesthetics is characteristic of medieval and scholastic aesthetics, namely that it is hierarchical. Our attention must not rest at the level of physical beauty; rather, we must go beyond to the spiritual summit of beauty if we desire to contemplate the supreme Beauty: "Likewise, beauty delights and greater beauty means greater delight, therefore the highest beauty means the highest delight. But we enjoy that in which we take the greatest delight, therefore, God is to be enjoyed."⁹⁹ The hierarchical composition—from created to beauty to the beauty of the Creator—is expressed well in these words of Bonaventure:

For there is great beauty in the construction in the world, and far greater beauty in the Church, which is adorned with the beauty of the gifts of grace of holiness, but the greatest beauty lies in the Jerusalem above, and the beauty greater than the greatest (*supermaxima*) is in the highest and most blessed Trinity.¹⁰⁰

This hierarchical arrangement also demonstrates the objective nature of beauty as grounded in a Trinitarian ontology.

among the list of transcendentals. For a list of relevant literature see D. C. Schindler, "Beauty and the Analogy of Truth: On the Order of the Transcendentals in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Trilogy," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2011): 298, n. 3.

⁹⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London, 1930), 132, n. 63b; cited in Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 24.

⁹⁸ "Pulchrum circuit omnem causam et est commune ad ista (i.e., ad unum, verum, bonum)." "Tractatus de transcendentalibus entis conditionibus," a. 1, q. 1, lines 19-20; cited in GL2, 334.

⁹⁹ "Item pulchrum delectat et magis pulchrum magis delectat, ergo summe pulchrum summe delectat. Sed eo fruimur in quo summe delectamur, ergo Deo ets fruendum." Bonaventure, *I Sent.* d. 1 a.3 q. I (Quaracchi, I, 38); cited in HA2, 236-237. [Translation mine.]

¹⁰⁰ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium prol.* 3 (V205a); cited in GL2, 267.

2. Dominican Aesthetics

St. Albert the Great (1193-1280) was the first Dominican to consider aesthetics. The scope of his knowledge was encyclopedic and during his own lifetime he was called Albertus Magnus. He was also the teacher of the two other figures in our brief survey of Dominican aesthetics, Ulrich and Thomas. Like many other scholastic theologians, his discussion of aesthetics emerged from his commentary on the fourth chapter of the *Divine Names* by Dionysius the Areopagite. In this work, *De Pulchro et Bono*, the Universal Doctor wrote: “Among things existing at present, there is none which does not have a share in beauty and good.”¹⁰¹ Although St. Albert does not list beauty as a transcendental, we can infer the transcendental nature of beauty by the very fact that he considers every being to have a share in beauty and in the good.¹⁰² Albert’s aesthetics is built upon the theories of the Greeks and the Areopagite. That is, the foundations of beauty are proportion (harmony or *consonantia*) and brilliance (*splendor*).¹⁰³ What is original to Albert’s aesthetics is how he explains the relation between these two elements. Drawing upon Aristotle’s hylomorphic theory, Albert replaces the proposal of light in its physical expression with “the idea of the illumination of the ontological form.”¹⁰⁴ He thus unites Aristotelian *form* with the *splendor* of Dionysius (and Neo-

¹⁰¹ “Non est aliquid de numero existentium actu, quod non participet pulchro et bono.” *Opusculum de pulchro et bono* [q. 10 expos.] (Mandonnet, V, 436); cited in HA2, 243.

¹⁰² Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 25.

¹⁰³ HA2, 240.

¹⁰⁴ De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, 65.

Platonism).¹⁰⁵ Albert defines beauty as "the radiation of the substantial or actual form upon the perfectly proportioned and defined parts of matter."¹⁰⁶ His definition of beauty, however, is not limited to the physical or corporeal: "The essence of beauty in general consists in the resplendence of form over proportionally arranged parts of matter or over various capabilities and actions."¹⁰⁷ Moral actions, therefore, according to Albert are also beautiful because of their radiant form. As he states in his commentary on the *Divine Names*: "Virtue has a certain brilliance in itself, by which it is beautiful, even if none is aware of it"¹⁰⁸

Ulrich Engelberti (c. 1225-1277), a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas, included a chapter on beauty, *De Pulchro*, in his unfinished work, the *Summa de Bono*. Drawing on the teachings of his Master, Albert, Ulrich of Strasburg also uses Aristotelian *form* to define beauty: "Form is the beauty of every thing. Thus beauty is also called shapely, from shape, for shape is the same as form."¹⁰⁹ Unlike Albert, however, Ulrich "continually slips back to the Dionysian doctrine of light" and "sets light above form: *lumen est prius pulchro est causa ipsius* [light is prior to the beautiful because it is its

¹⁰⁵ HA2, 240.

¹⁰⁶ "Pulchrum (dicit) splendorem formae substantialis vel actualis supra partes materiae proportionatas." *Opusculum de pulchro et bono*, [q. 6, a.1, ad 1] (Mandonnet, V, 436); cited in HA2, 243. English translation from De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, 65.

¹⁰⁷ "Ratio pulchri in universali consistit in resplendentia formae super partes materiae proportionatas, vel super diversas vel actiones." *Opusculum de pulchro et bono*, [q. 1, a.1 co.] (Mandonnet, V, 421); cited in HA2, 243.

¹⁰⁸ "Virtus claritatem quandam habet in se, per quam pulchra est, etiam si a nullo cognoscatur." *Super De div. nom. (De pulchro)*, q. 4 a. 1 ad 3, online, Corpus Thomisticum, available: <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/xdp.html>, 30 Apr. 2015.

¹⁰⁹ "(Forma) est pulchritudo omnia rei . . . Ideo etiam pulchrum alio nomine vocatur speciosum a specie sive forma." *De pulchro* (Grabmann, 75); cited in HA2, 244.

cause].”¹¹⁰

We now focus our attention upon the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) whose work is proposed as the model for Catholic theological investigation.¹¹¹ Despite his sparse treatment of beauty, Thomas is considered by many to be the greatest contributor to aesthetics.¹¹² Nowhere in his voluminous writings does the Common Doctor examine beauty on its own.¹¹³ His longest treatment of beauty is found in his commentary on Dionysius’ fourth chapter on the *Divine Names*. The other important references are taken from Thomas’ mature work the *Summa Theologiae* (ST). In the *Summa*, Thomas gives two definitions of beauty (at ST 1.5.4 ad 1 and 1-2.27.1 ad 3).¹¹⁴ Although they differ in some respects, they are fundamentally the same, so that we can assume that he gives only one definition but formulated in two different ways.¹¹⁵ In typical scholastic fashion, Thomas’ concern is not so much with giving a novel definition of beauty as it is with presenting a precise definition. In doing so, he draws

¹¹⁰ *De pulchro*, 80 1.20; cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 4, *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V., et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 390. Hereafter cited as GL4.

¹¹¹ See Leo XIII, *Encyclical Letter “Aeternis patris” On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy According to the Mind of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor* [4 Aug. 1879]; *Optatam totius*, no. 16; *Fides et ratio*, nos. 43, 61.

¹¹² HA2, 245.

¹¹³ “Thomas Aquinas not only did not write a treatise about beauty, he did not devote even a single chapter to it in any of his works; yet he said more on the subject in scattered remarks than others have said in books devoted entirely to the subject” (Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, ed. J. Harrell [The Hague: Mouton; Warsaw: PWN-Polish Scientific Publishers, 1970], 5). Hereafter cited as HA1. [Emphasis added.]

¹¹⁴ We follow here Tatarkiewicz’s enumeration of St. Thomas’ definitions of beauty. Although his treatment of beauty in ST 1.39.8 is often considered a definition, we treat it separately in the section describing the hallmarks of beauty on pages 49-51.

¹¹⁵ HA2, 247.

upon what others have said before him. Thomas' definition of beauty therefore has many elements that are characteristic of the aesthetics of the Middle Ages. At the same time, his definition is thoroughly novel and is truly his own even though he makes use of elements taken from Plato, Plotinus, Dionysius, Augustine, Aristotle, and Albert.

The first definition says that beauty is that which gives pleasure when seen.¹¹⁶ The second definition is similar: "let that be called beauty, the very perception of which pleases."¹¹⁷ Here, there seems to be both a restricted definition limited to the sight of visible things and a broader definition that encompasses perception or apprehension but is not limited to visible things. Although these two definitions seem to be different, it is Thomas' understanding of sight that unites them, so the two are in reality one.¹¹⁸ He states:

The name "seeing" indicates that it is used first and foremost to denote the activity of the sense of sight; but because of the dignity and certainty of this sense, the name is extended, in accordance with linguistic custom, to all cognition by the other senses, and ultimately, even to cognition by the mind.¹¹⁹

For St. Thomas, then, sight is "the most perfect of the senses" and therefore "stands for all the senses."¹²⁰

We must not, however, conclude that Thomas held beauty to be something that is only subjective. For Thomas, beauty is not simply subjective, but it is also objective.

¹¹⁶ "Pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent," ST 1.5.4 ad 1.

¹¹⁷ "Pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet," ST 1-2.27.1 ad 3.

¹¹⁸ HA2, 245.

¹¹⁹ ST 1.67.1; cited in HA2, 245.

¹²⁰ HA2, 245.

In other words, beauty is not merely a person's reaction to something beautiful; it is not only the result of an 'aesthetic experience.' If this were the case, then one could argue that beauty is simply subjective and that beauty does not exist as an objective quality or property inherent in the thing itself, but rather that beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder. The absurdity of such a position becomes quickly evident: anything—however ugly or abhorrent—can be called 'beautiful' because it elicits in the perceiving subject a pleasurable psychological response, i.e., it generates an aesthetic experience. Thomas—with the whole of Christian tradition—affirms the objective nature of beauty and he reiterates St. Augustine's teaching by saying that "[a] thing is not beautiful because we love it, but is loved by us because it is beautiful."¹²¹

How then are we to speak of the objectivity of beauty? Here we turn to the Angelic Doctor's metaphysics. For Thomas, the perfection of a being (*ens*) is found in its existence (*esse*).¹²² The greatest perfection a thing can have is to *be* (*esse*) or in other words, that it *is*. Every other perfection a thing has can only exist because the thing itself *exists*. In his commentary on the *Divine Names* by Dionysius, Thomas writes: "The beauty of the creature is nothing else than the likeness of the divine beauty participated in things."¹²³ Just like divine beauty, which is its source, the creature's beauty "will lie in the actuality of being or existence."¹²⁴ It is, as St. Thomas notably articulates it, "the

¹²¹ "Non enim ideo aliquid est pulchrum et quia nos illud amamus, sed quia est pulchrum et bonum, ideo amatur a nobis." In *De div. nom.* C. IV lect 10 (Mandonet 398); cited in HA2, 259.

¹²² "Now perfection of a thing is threefold: first according to the constitution of its existence." ST 1.6.3.

¹²³ In *Div. Nom.*, c. 4. Lect. 5. Nn. 352-4; cited in Navone, *Enjoying God's Beauty*, 108.

¹²⁴ Navone, *Enjoying God's Beauty*, 108.

beauty of actuality' (*formositas actualitatis*)."¹²⁵ Another way of saying this is that since everything that exists comes to be in, through, and for the Son (Jn 1:3, Col 1:15, Heb 1:3) who *is* Beauty itself,¹²⁶ all things, because they exist, are beautiful.¹²⁷ Of course the beauty that each thing possesses is a beauty that is in accordance with its own character and form.¹²⁸

What then is beauty? How can we recognise something as being beautiful? How do we determine that beauty exists and what are the objective properties by which we call something beautiful?

In ST 1.39.8, St. Thomas enumerates three hallmarks of beauty: *integritas* or *perfectio*, *debita proportio* or *consonantia*, and *claritas*. The full text reads:

Beauty must include three qualities: integrity or completeness—since things that lack something are thereby ugly; right proportion or harmony; and brightness—we call things bright in colour beautiful.¹²⁹

Thomas most often speaks of *two* requirements for beauty:¹³⁰ *claritas* or *splendor*, that is, radiance or brightness and *consonantia* or (*debita*) *proportio*, that is, harmony and

¹²⁵ *De Potentia Dei*, IV, 2, ad 31m; cited in Armand A. Maurer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), 8.

¹²⁶ ST 1.39.8.

¹²⁷ Barron, *God as Artist*, 408.

¹²⁸ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Exposition of Dionysius on the Divine Names*, Ch. 4, Lect. 5-6, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, in *The Pocket Aquinas* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), 270.

¹²⁹ English translation taken from the Blackfriars edition, vol. 7, trans. T.C. O'Brien (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 133.

¹³⁰ In Mark Jordan's opinion we should not treat the three qualities as being part of a 'canonical definition' ("The Evidence of the Transcendentals and the Place of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 [1989]: 396).

(due) proportion.¹³¹ In fact, the notion of *integritas* (integrity, completeness or wholeness) is already contained in *proportio*. For a thing is ugly because it lacks something, it is not only incomplete, thereby lacking *integritas*, it is also disproportionate, i.e., lacking the quality of *proportio*.

The most important quality of beauty, however, is *claritas*.¹³² For “as Plato and Plotinus saw, as indeed the whole philosophical and poetic tradition of the West has seen, beautiful things *shine*.”¹³³ Here Thomas is following the example of his own master St. Albert the Great who sees that “the radiance of beauty is the splendour of *form*.”¹³⁴ Thus *claritas* is the brilliance or radiance of the form shining forth. It is therefore related to light; only in the light can we truly see something for what it is.¹³⁵ *Claritas* is also associated with God’s glory because it makes manifest his revelation.¹³⁶ In St. Thomas’ words: “Radiance, however, has a certain beauty and manifestation.”¹³⁷

St. Thomas says that the three hallmarks of beauty are properly ascribed to Jesus. The Son, as the fullness of the Father’s revelation, wholly shares his nature thereby satisfying the notion of *integritas* (*perfectio*). Jesus expresses the Father’s image perfectly thus fulfilling the idea of *debita proportio* (*consonantia*). Finally, as the Word of the Father, Jesus is the “light and splendor of the intellect [*lux est, et splendor*

¹³¹ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 43.

¹³² Jordan, “The Evidence of the Transcendentals,” 397.

¹³³ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 43.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ See ST 1.67.1.

¹³⁶ Jordan, “The Evidence of the Transcendentals,” 398, with reference to ST 2-2.132.1.

¹³⁷ “Claritas autem et decorem quendam habet, et manifestationem.” ST 2-2.132.1 *corp*.

intellectus]” and this corresponds with *claritas*.¹³⁸

Finally, as with his teacher Albert, the notion of *claritas* in Aquinas’ work also corresponds with moral beauty. St. Thomas describes virtuous actions as being beautiful: “In like manner spiritual beauty consists in a man’s conduct or actions being well proportioned in respect of the spiritual clarity of reason.”¹³⁹ Although he does not specifically develop the aesthetic/ethic relation, Aquinas does affirm it. Citing the authority of St. Ambrose, Thomas says that it is through the moral virtues that the soul is beautiful.¹⁴⁰ We shall also see in the third and final part of chapter one, how beauty is at the origin of human action according to St. Thomas.

Summary of Beauty in Church Tradition

The examples provided sufficiently demonstrate for our purpose how beauty in all its dimensions was not marginal to the theological tradition. Our brief survey of Patristic thought revealed how the Church Fathers’ understanding of beauty—undoubtedly influenced by Greek philosophy—was nevertheless transformed by their encounter with the living Word of God. The Fathers were later held as authorities for the medieval and scholastic theologians who presented beauty by drawing upon their

¹³⁸ ST 1.39.8.

¹³⁹ ST 2-2.145.2. Apropos the notion of moral beauty, Servais Pinckaers remarks, “Beyond visible forms, this beauty radiated from the inmost being of persons and their actions and qualified their substance. This is why good actions were at the same time beautiful” (*Sources of Christian Ethics*, 31). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that catechesis in Christ should be “a catechesis of the human virtues which cause one to grasp the beauty and attraction of right dispositions towards goodness” (no. 1697).

¹⁴⁰ “Sed pulchritudo animi attenditur secundum virtutes morales.” ST 2-2.180.2. arg. 3, with reference to Ambrose *De Offic.* i. 43, 45, 46.

patristic heritage.

The ontological status of beauty as set forth by the Fathers is grounded in the very source of being. The Scholastics reiterate this metaphysical grounding of beauty in being and the Universal Doctor shows us that beauty is most proper to the Son, Jesus who is the very ‘object’ of theology. Beauty is therefore not only a metaphysical transcendental property of being, but it is also a theological transcendental since all things have been created in Christ (Col 1:16, Jn 1:3). The metaphysical connection between beauty and goodness accentuates the moral characteristic of beauty. The hierarchical structure of beauty, leading from the physical to the spiritual and supernatural, emphasises the priority of moral, spiritual beauty over natural beauty. And while both the Patristic and Scholastic eras do not have a moral theological aesthetics per se, the seeds for its future development are implicitly contained therein.

A final point needs to be mentioned before looking at how the best of human reason has reflected on beauty. The question might arise as to how our investigation into the role of beauty within Patristic and Scholastic theology can support our thesis that ultimately, beauty is essential to the ongoing renewal of moral theology since for the Fathers and the Scholastics, theology was not separated into various disciplines. Moral theology proper, as a distinct science, did not exist in this period as we know it today.¹⁴¹ From its very inception, however, Christianity was concerned with right action and

¹⁴¹ The term ‘moral theology’ was probably first used by Allan of Lille in his *De virtutibus et vitiis* (Thomas Deman, O.P., *Aux origines de la théologie morale* [Montréal: Inst. D’études médiévales, 1951], 62). Regarding moral theology, the renowned Dominican scholar Lawrence Dewan notes that “Fr. Thomas Deman used the history of moral discussions by theologians to present [St.] Thomas as the founder of moral theology, establishing its order and its place within the unity of *sacra doctrina*” (“Jean Porter on Natural Law: Thomistic Notes,” *The Thomist* 66 [2002]: 275).

proper conduct. Reflecting on life in Christ was not only a matter of the faith but of morals; it was not only a matter of the mind, but also an affair of the heart; and finally, it was not only a question of *gnosis* but above all, of *metanoia*. Recovering the ‘moral theology’ of the Fathers and the Scholastics allows us to avoid the dual pitfall of legalism and extrinsicism. This vision of morality can only take place if we return once again to the royal road of beauty, the way that leads to the heart of theology and the path that is “ever ancient and ever new.”

III. Beauty in Ancient Greek Thought

We have examined the role of beauty and its association with the good in the theology of the tradition of the Church. We have seen how the Fathers and Scholastics developed aesthetics based upon a metaphysical understanding of beauty and how this influenced their conception of beauty. As was mentioned, they drew upon the philosophical sources of classical antiquity. Now, we must enquire into these sources, which historically served as part of the genesis of this aesthetic comprehension. We shall do so by looking at the works of the ancient Greeks.

For the ancient Greeks, beauty was an essential ideal.¹⁴² In setting forth examples of the unique relationship between beauty and the good in human thought, we shall first look at the Pre-Socratics, which will include the poets, tragedians as well as philosophers. Our study of the Greeks shall conclude with Plato and Aristotle.

Obviously, this depiction of the relation between aesthetics and ethics in early human

¹⁴² Nicholas Riegel, “Beauty, ΤΟ ΚΑΛΟΝ, and Its Relation to the Good in the Works of Plato” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2011), 1.

thought can only be painted in broad strokes. Our purpose is to examine the historical foundation so as to present a preliminary argument for the retrieval of beauty in moral theology.

There are two main challenges in studying the historical question of beauty in ancient Greek thought. The first difficulty is that the ancient Greeks understood beauty, τὸ καλόν, in a completely different manner than we do today. Their idea of beauty contains not only aesthetic elements, but also encompasses moral elements and is intimately related to the good, ἀγαθόν. In his magisterial study on the history of aesthetics, Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz remarks that beauty for the ancient Greeks “signified moral rather than aesthetic virtues.”¹⁴³ They even coined a term that embraced the two concepts of beauty and the good that denoted moral beauty: *kalokagathia* (beauty-goodness).¹⁴⁴ The earliest use of this compound term—*kalos te kagathos*—is found in Herodotus (fifth century BC).¹⁴⁵ Its lineage, however, dates to Homer and eventually it came to represent an ideal of the model citizen who was beautiful in both body and soul.¹⁴⁶

The second difficulty regarding Greek aesthetics is the problem of translation. Often passages in the ancient Greek text suggest a moral context and translators have used words such as ‘fine’, ‘honourable’, or ‘noble’, rather than ‘beautiful’ to translate

¹⁴³ HA1, 5.

¹⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, [4 April 1999], no. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Danielle Allen, “Talking about revolution: on political change in fourth-century Athens and historiographic method,” chapter 8 in *Rethinking Revolutions in Ancient Greece*, ed. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 186.

¹⁴⁶ Jaroszyński, *Beauty and Being*, 241.

the Greek word καλός. The Greeks, however, had words such as γενναῖος, which we can translate as ‘noble’ and τίμιος, which can be translated as ‘honourable’.¹⁴⁷ Nicholas Riegel has argued convincingly that in most instances it is best, even in such moral contexts, to avoid imposing such translations and remain faithful to the text by translating καλόν as ‘beauty’.¹⁴⁸ That the ancient Greeks identified beauty with the good is undeniable. In fact, “the pervasive use of καλόν in what we might call moral contexts could very well be taken as at least some indication that the Greeks were more inclined than we are to evaluate moral actions in terms of beauty.”¹⁴⁹ This also presents a challenge when examining beauty in ancient Greek thought. The two main deficiencies of studies that touch upon the problem of beauty are that either the relationship with the good is not sufficiently treated or that beauty is simply equated with the good. For our purposes here, we simply wish to establish the historical precedence of the relation between beauty and the good or, in other words, between the aesthetic and the ethical. The historical evidence presented serves as a foundation for developing our thesis that there is a unique bond between these two transcendentals and that a theological aesthetics as set forth by von Balthasar is in fact essential to the ongoing renewal of Catholic moral theology.

¹⁴⁷ Riegel, “Beauty, TO KALON,” 7, 34.

¹⁴⁸ “[I]t seems the desire to translate καλός otherwise is motivated by preconceptions as to what sort of things can be thought beautiful.” Riegel, “Beauty, TO KALON,” 19.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 14, n. 20.

A. Pre-Socratics

In his study of beauty, Riegel notes the paradoxical relation between beauty and goodness as depicted by the Greek poets and tragedians. That beauty should be associated with goodness seems to be something they understood as being a matter of fact. That it was not always the case then gives rise to a dramatic tension within the tale being told. This is evident in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Here we see Zeus who creates Pandora as a punishment on humanity for the betrayal by Prometheus. Pandora is "καλόν κακόν", the beautiful evil.¹⁵⁰ The discrepancy between her great beauty and treachery is made even more intense because of the implicit connection of goodness to beauty. Other examples of the paradoxical relation between beauty and goodness are found in Homer's epic poem on the Trojan War, the *Iliad* and also in Euripides' play, *Helen*. This incongruity can be seen in Helen of Troy; her beauty is at once so great and yet the cause of so much evil.¹⁵¹ There is, in the works of the poets, the conviction that beauty should entail virtue. In the *Iliad*, Hector disparages Paris's lack of courage even though the Achaians believe him to be the bravest because of his beauty.¹⁵² The association between beauty and human action is not only portrayed by the poets, but also in many instances by the tragedians. The most notable example that illustrates this correlation can be found in Sophocles' famous tragedy *Antigone*. The eponymous heroine explains to her sister, Ismene, that even though she should be punished with

¹⁵⁰ Hesiod *Theogony* 585; cited in Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 26.

¹⁵¹ Homer *Iliad* 3.154-60; cited in Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 24-25; Euripides *Helen* 260-66; cited in id., 25, n. 38.

¹⁵² Homer *Iliad* 3.39-57; cited in Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 27.

death for burying her disgraced brother Polynices, nevertheless, Antigone considers her actions to be καλόν, that is, beautiful.¹⁵³

The poets and tragedians were not the only ones in ancient Greece to see a correspondence between beauty and goodness. It was the pre-Socratic philosophers (and Sophists) who undertook a more critical examination of this correlation. Among the pre-Socratics, there was the Pythagorean view that beauty is found in terms of mathematical proportions. For the Pythagoreans, beauty relates to a quality of measure or order. Applying this concept to the moral life signifies the proper ordering of one's actions such that the good life is the beautiful life.

The explicit link between being good and being beautiful is addressed specifically for the first time by the poet Sappho.¹⁵⁴ In her words: "For he that is beautiful is <beautiful> as far as appearances go, while he that is good will consequently also be beautiful."¹⁵⁵ This sentiment is echoed in the Delphic oracle's famous pronouncement that "the most just is the most beautiful."¹⁵⁶

A further example of the moral dimension of beauty is found in the ancient text *Dissoi Logoi*. The anonymous author of this work never uses the word ἀγαθόν, 'the good' in a moral context, while at times he does use the word καλόν, 'beauty' in a moral context. Another feature of this text is that the good is more particular while beauty has

¹⁵³ Sophocles *Antigone* 72; cited in Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 45. Riegel makes a strong argument for translating καλόν as beautiful rather than honourable. See id., 45ff.

¹⁵⁴ Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 64.

¹⁵⁵ Fragment 50, 1-2; cited in Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 64.

¹⁵⁶ HA1, 25.

a more universal character; what is beautiful is beautiful for all of a given society, while what is good may be so only for an individual rather than all of society.¹⁵⁷

B. Plato

The works of Plato (c. 427-347 BC) reflect the same ideal of ancient Greek culture with respect to beauty. His thought on beauty is especially influential; he was not concerned simply with what *appeared* to be beautiful, but with beauty *itself*. Unlike the Sophists, who alleged that beauty was simply subjective, Plato believed that beauty is objectively constitutive as a property in the thing itself.¹⁵⁸ His writings are permeated with reflections on beauty. The early dialogue *Hippias Major* deals exclusively with the question of beauty. Other works such as the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Philebus* contain profound insights for constructing Plato's understanding of beauty. Nor could we fail to mention the ascent from natural beauty to the vision of true beauty as found in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.

In order to fully appreciate Plato's doctrine on beauty, we need to have recourse to his understanding of the good. Indeed, in Plato's thought, beauty and the good are intimately related. This can be seen in two of Plato's statements on beauty, goodness, and virtue. Both statements are declared by Socrates. The first is perhaps the most well known: "And now the power of the good has retired into the region of the beautiful; for

¹⁵⁷ Riegel "Beauty, TO KALON," 74.

¹⁵⁸ HA1, 116.

measure and symmetry are beauty and virtue all the world over.”¹⁵⁹ The second statement comes in the fourth book of Plato’s *Republic*, where Socrates tells Glaucon: “Virtue, then, as it seems, would be a certain health, beauty and good condition of a soul, and vice a sickness, ugliness and weakness.”¹⁶⁰

That Plato held the good to be beautiful is aptly demonstrated by Riegel who states that Plato asserted this position without any argument.¹⁶¹ All of the proof texts supporting this position, *Symposium* 201c, *Timaeus* 87c, and *Lysis* 216d, mention in some way that the good or even all that is good is beautiful.¹⁶² The correlation between beauty and the good mentioned in the *Timaeus* deals specifically with the soul/body relation. In his speech, Timaeus argues that a person must develop both soul and body in order to be truly good and beautiful. For the soul, this cultivation is accomplished through “μουσικῇ καὶ . . . φιλοσοφία.”¹⁶³ Here music and philosophy represent the nurturing of the mind through the intellectual and moral virtues. It is evident then that Plato believed the good to be beautiful. It is also demonstrable that he held the beautiful

¹⁵⁹ Plato *Philebus* 64e, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1937), 400.

¹⁶⁰ Plato *Republic* 444d-e. English translation from *The Republic of Plato*, 2d ed., trans. with notes and an interpretive essay by Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991), 124.

¹⁶¹ See Riegel “Beauty, TO KALON,” 93-98.

¹⁶² “Πᾶν δὴ τὸ ἀγαθὸν καλόν” Plato *Timaeus* 87c; cited in Riegel “Beauty, TO KALON,” 95. Riegel also mentions the *Republic* 457b which states that “the beneficial is beautiful” as a possible support for the case that the good is beautiful due to the relation between the beneficial (τὸ ὠφέλιμον) and the good in Plato’s writings (idem, 97).

¹⁶³ Plato *Timaeus* 88c.

to be good.¹⁶⁴ The mutual relation between beauty and goodness in Plato is corroborated in the famous passage in the *Symposium* where Socrates relates Diotima's account of the ascent of Beauty. We cite here only the conclusion of the passage: "Or haven't you remembered, she said, that in life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty)."¹⁶⁵ And Socrates is persuaded by Diotima's account as he says to Phaedrus and the others (at 212b). Here, Plato explicitly expresses the connection between beauty and virtue. In fact, beauty is for Plato—along with justice and goodness—the proper goal of life.¹⁶⁶ As Riegel concludes: "Everywhere in Plato in the search for goodness it always turns out that justice, courage, wisdom, and

¹⁶⁴ The demonstration of this corollary, however, is more complex and involved. For our purposes here, we need not go into all of the details of the explanation. It will suffice to briefly summarize Riegel's argument in Chapter 2 "On the Coextension of Goodness and Beauty in Plato," (Riegel "Beauty, TO KAAON," 91-133). A number of texts are adduced as supporting the thesis that Plato held the beautiful to be good: *Alcibiades* 113d-116d and *Protagoras* 349a-362a. These texts, however, are the weakest links in the chain of the argument. The contextual ambiguity in the *Protagoras*—Socrates is advocating hedonism, hardly a position that seems compatible with the idea that beauty denotes goodness—and the questionable historical authenticity of *Alcibiades* coupled with the case set forth in the *Gorgias* 474c-477a, which does not support the claim that Plato held the beautiful to be good, seem to nullify the idea that the beautiful is good. Several additional texts are marshalled by Riegel to support the "if beautiful then good" thesis: *Charmides* 160e-161a, *Laches* 192c-d, and *Meno* 77b. The strength of the argument lies not only with these texts, but with the substantiation of the reciprocal relationship between beauty and the good as found in the *Hippias Major* which clearly refutes the interpretation as found in the *Gorgias*. This conclusion (at *Hippias Major* 297b-c) is further bolstered by *Meno* 77b whereby Socrates seems to substitute goodness for beauty and more explicitly in the *Symposium* 204e where Diotima, the wise woman of Mantinea, substitutes goodness for beauty. There is strong textual evidence that Plato also held that the beautiful was good.

¹⁶⁵ Plato *Symposium* 212a, trans. Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato. Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 494; cited in Riegel "Beauty, TO KAAON," 203-204.

¹⁶⁶ Riegel references *Euthyphro* 7e, *Crito* 47c, *Phaedrus* 75c, *Republic* 476a, 506a, 593b, and *Laws* 731e as examples ("Beauty, TO KAAON," 47).

moderation are the human good, in other words, it always turns out that what is supremely beautiful is what is good.”¹⁶⁷

C. Aristotle

The ideas on beauty that Aristotle (c. 384-322 BC) held are very similar to Plato's in many ways. Both philosophers agree that beauty consists in order and proportion.¹⁶⁸ More importantly for our study, they both hold that beauty is the true goal of the virtuous man. In Aristotle's work, however, beauty does not achieve the same independent status as in Plato's philosophy. Nevertheless, “for Aristotle, Beauty is always linked with the rational and the moral.”¹⁶⁹ And just as Plato states that the good finds shelter within the beautiful (*Philebus* 64e), so does his most famous disciple closely associate beauty with the good. Aristotle describes moral beauty as *kalokagathia* in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1248b8-1249b25). In chapter three of book eight, the Stagirite, who had previously examined the virtues (in book three), now looks at the virtue that comes out of all the virtues (ἐκ τούτων, 1248b10), what he calls the beautiful (or noble) and good (καλοκάγαθίαν, 1248b10-11). He says: “A man is noble (καλός) and good because those goods which are noble (καλὰ) are possessed by him for themselves, and because he practises the noble (καλῶν) for its own sake, the noble (καλὰ) being the

¹⁶⁷ Riegel, “Beauty, TO KALON,” 237.

¹⁶⁸ Μετρίότης and συμμετρία in *Philebus* 64e; τάξις and συμμετρία in *Metaphysics* 1078a36-b1. References from Riegel, “Beauty, TO KALON,” 51.

¹⁶⁹ J. G. Warry, *Greek Aesthetic Theory: A Study of Callistic and Aesthetic Concepts in the Works of Plato and Aristotle* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962), 91.

virtues and the acts that proceed from virtue.”¹⁷⁰ Aristotle concludes by saying that *kalokagathia* is the perfection of virtue. The beautiful-good man, that is, the “gentleman”, has the quality of complete virtue (“ἔστιν οὖν καλοκάγαθία ἀρετὴ τέλειος” 1249a16-17).

The identification of beauty with moral goodness is reiterated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1099a13-14) where Aristotle remarks that “the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such.” The “lovers of what is noble”, literally lovers of the beautiful—φιλοκάλοις—are good precisely because they take pleasure in virtue. Aristotle emphasises the association between beauty and virtue so strongly that he further states that anyone “who does not rejoice in noble actions is not good.”¹⁷¹ Virtuous actions, he says, are not only pleasant by nature, but they are also good and *beautiful* (καλαί) and they are good and beautiful to the highest degree as they are judged well or nobly (καλῶς) by the good man (1099a23). Aristotle uses this same terminology later at 1143a15-16 when he says that what is done well is also done beautifully (καλῶς).

The theme of virtue and beauty is revisited by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (1366a33) where he says that beauty is good, praiseworthy, and intrinsically desirable. Later in the second book of the *Rhetoric* (1389a34-36), Aristotle states that young

¹⁷⁰ *Ethica Eudemia*, (1248b34-37) trans. J. Solomon, in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 9, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 524-525. The Greek text runs: “καλὸς δὲ κάγαθος τῷ τῶν ἀγαθῶν τὰ καλὰ ὑπάρχειν αὐτῷ δι’ αὐτὰ καὶ τῷ πρακτικῷ εἶναι τῶν καλῶν καὶ αὐτῶν ἔνεκα. καλὰ δ’ ἐστὶν αἱ τε ἀρεταὶ καὶ τὰ ἔργα τὰ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς.”

¹⁷¹ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a17-18; noble actions, literally beautiful actions, καλαῖς πράξεις. English translation from David Ross, *Aristotle. The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

people prefer beautiful actions over the advantageous for the latter aims at profit, but beauty is the goal of virtue; a statement that he repeats in chapter nineteen of the *Magna Moralia* (1190a28).¹⁷² Indeed every virtue can be said to have “what is morally beautiful as its object (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b3, 1179a1, 1179a29).¹⁷³ We could say that according to Aristotle, beauty is virtue.

Summary of Beauty in Ancient Greek Thought

The history of aesthetics and ethics can be traced as far back as the ancient Greeks. While beauty obviously denotes aesthetic elements, for the ancient Greeks, it also contained a moral characteristic. As John R. Betz states:

For Plato and Aristotle . . . beauty stands not only at the theoretical beginning of philosophy, but also at its theoretical *and* practical end. Thus Plato has Diotima say to Socrates in the *Symposium*, ‘the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder . . . until at last he comes to know what beauty is (211c); thus in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle’s prime mover moves all things by being loved, as that which is beautiful and desirable in itself (1072a); thus in the *Republic*, Plato, the Pythagorean, conceives of the moral life ultimately in terms of a beautiful harmony of the soul (400d); and thus in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—though this is something often mistranslated and therefore overlooked—Aristotle conceives of the moral end (*telos*) of virtue, remarkably enough, in terms of beauty (τὸ καλόν) as the very thing at which the moral life consistently aims [1115b].¹⁷⁴

The Platonic notion of beauty embraced both moral and cognitive values as well as aesthetic values.¹⁷⁵ Apart from the Sophists, the traditional ancient Greek understanding

¹⁷² “ἀρετες δὲ γ’ ἐστὶ τέλος καλόν.”

¹⁷³ Jaroszyński, *Beauty and Being*, 242.

¹⁷⁴ John R. Betz, “The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination,” in Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler, Jr. London, eds., *Belief and Metaphysics* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 45-46.

¹⁷⁵ HA1, 114.

of beauty was not only associated with the person's perceptive (*aisthesis*) powers of vision and hearing, but also embraced "wisdom, virtue, noble deeds and good laws."¹⁷⁶ These exemplify the characteristic association of beauty with goodness in ancient Greek thought.¹⁷⁷ To use more recent terminology, we could say that according to the ancient Greeks beauty was not simply 'skin deep', but was a concept that also encompassed the ethical dimension of the human person.

IV. Beauty and Human Action

The question remains as to how beauty is related to human beings and their actions. In other words, what is the anthropological significance of beauty? We shall now look at the fundamental anthropological dimension of beauty as it is described in St. Thomas Aquinas' account of human action.

To make explicit the adequate philosophical anthropology required for moral theology, we shall proceed in three stages. First, we shall draw upon the Doctor of Humanity's exposition of human action. We will begin by examining human desire, for as Aristotle says all humans desire happiness and all humans act to attain this goal. Next, we shall look at love, for according to St. Thomas "love precedes desire."¹⁷⁸ Finally, the relationship between beauty and love will be studied for "love is provoked

¹⁷⁶ HA1, 115.

¹⁷⁷ HA1, 34.

¹⁷⁸ "Amor praecedit desiderium." ST 1-2.25.2; cited in Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 28, n. 22 and 41, n. 9.

by beauty,”¹⁷⁹ or as the Angelic Doctor states, beauty is the origin of love.¹⁸⁰

A. Desire: Foundation for Human Action

As a practical science, moral theology deals with human actions. Why do humans act? What is the ‘motor’ that propels a person to do something? Obviously there are many different reasons for the human person’s actions. Various ‘forces’, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, impel a person to act. Nevertheless, whatever we do, we always act with some end in view for all persons act for some end says Aquinas.¹⁸¹ Following Augustine and Aristotle, Thomas also says that the ultimate end, the last end for which all persons act is happiness.¹⁸² It is this universal desire for happiness, which is the thread that leads to beauty.

Ultimately, the desire for happiness is a desire for fulfillment. It is via desire that the human person proceeds towards fulfillment.¹⁸³ Examining the relationship between the commandments and desire, Livio Melina tells us that desire is etymologically related to the Latin *sidera*, the stars, and was, for the ancients, associated with the human person’s sacred looking to the stars in search for some sure indication that would satisfy

¹⁷⁹ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 28.

¹⁸⁰ ST 1-2.27.2.

¹⁸¹ ST 1-2.1.1 *corp*.

¹⁸² ST 1-2.5.8; citing Augustine *De Trinitate* 13.3; see also the *sed contras* in ST 1-2.1.7 & 8.

¹⁸³ Barron, “God as Artist,” 410.

the longings and hopes of the human heart.¹⁸⁴ There is thus an ambiguity that is characteristic of desire. In searching the stars, the person is longing for the infinite and yet this longing can never be adequately satisfied because all that he turns to is finite and so his hopes and aspirations never find a sure ground of being fully realized. In Melina's words:

The category of desire, therefore, shows itself to be anthropologically revelatory of the creaturely indigence constitutive of the human being, a being thrown into the world with the original promise that his thirst for the infinite will be quenched, but who inevitably runs up against disappointment.¹⁸⁵

What is it that the human person searches for? What is it that can fill him so that his desire is satisfied? The longing for happiness is a desire for that which is good because "whatever man desires, he desires it under the aspect of some good."¹⁸⁶ And all humans desire the good.¹⁸⁷ What this good is in truth and how it can be attained are fundamental issues of morality.¹⁸⁸ It is not just any good that can satisfy the human person. As Melina remarks: "The aspiration for individual goods is rooted in the desire of a full and complete Good; thus the pursuit of particular goods necessarily refers to the pursuit of

¹⁸⁴ Livio Melina, "Desire for Happiness and the Commandments in the First Chapter of *Veritatis splendor*," in J. A. DiNoia, O.P. and Romanus Cessario, O.P., eds., *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1999), 144-145.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 145.

¹⁸⁶ ST 1-2.1.6. "quia quidquid homo appetit, appetit sub ratione boni."

¹⁸⁷ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1, 1; ST 1-2.8.1. As Plato stated, when it comes to the Good man does not settle for second best but he wants the real thing (*Republic* 505d, 508e). This reference comes from Kenneth L. Schmitz "From Convertibility to Convergence: The Absoluteness of Truth and the Realization of the Person in God's Plan," *Anthropotes* 15/2 (1999): 371-372, n. 2.

¹⁸⁸ Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 44.

the ultimate end.”¹⁸⁹ Nothing but the Ultimate Good will satisfy: “God alone satisfies.”¹⁹⁰ This desire to see God, the *desiderium naturale* [natural desire], or the *desiderium naturae* [desire of nature] as Henri de Lubac has called it,¹⁹¹ is the human being’s true desire.¹⁹² According to St. Thomas, the true “final and perfect happiness [that the human person desires] can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence.”¹⁹³ As the psalmist expresses it: “Let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps 80:3).

Desire reveals the paradox of a person’s existence and calling: he longs for something that is utterly beyond him and which he cannot achieve on his own. Rather, he receives and freely participates in his fulfillment as a gift from the One who alone can bestow it. As the foundation of the human being’s acting, desire propels the person toward transcendence and transformation. In Melina’s words: “Therefore the desire for happiness, which is an expression of creaturely indigence and the beginning of the moral journey, culminates in charity, which is the affirmation of the Other and the perfect availability to receiving its form.”¹⁹⁴ Desire, then, is at the dawn of the human being’s journey to become the person he was meant to be. It is the beginning of

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹⁰ “Deus enim solus satiat,” Thomas Aquinas *Expos. In sym. Apost. I*; cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1718.

¹⁹¹ *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1946), 433.

¹⁹² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2557.

¹⁹³ ST 1-2.3.8: “ultima et perfecta beatitudo non potest esse nisi in visione divinae essentiae.”

¹⁹⁴ Melina, “Desire for Happiness,” 156.

fulfillment and of divinization and this desire for fulfillment, to be truly oneself, is awakened through love.

B. Love: Source of Desire

At the foundation of the human person's actions is the desire for happiness. This desire is an expression of the person's longing for fulfillment. Desire reveals the mystery inherent in each human being: although a finite being, the human person longs for the infinite. Humans are made for a fulfillment that they cannot achieve on their own. They cannot even perceive fully the content of this desire unless it is revealed to them. The revelation of the human person's deepest desire and the fulfillment of this desire can only come about through grace, that is, as the gift of God.

The paradox of the Christian moral life is that it is precisely through welcoming the initial need for fulfillment and in allowing oneself to be educated by the presence of God in Christ that the human being is guided beyond himself, to be fulfilled in the gift, receiving from God even his very capacity to love.¹⁹⁵

Christ is the teacher of humanity (see Jn 3:2); it is he who enlightens humanity.

As the Council fathers state in a passage that John Paul II truly made his own:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come (Rom 5:14), Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹⁹⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

Christ reveals to the human person his vocation to love.¹⁹⁷ In his inaugural encyclical,

John Paul II wrote:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.¹⁹⁸

The meaning of a person's life and the desire for happiness make sense only in the revelation of love.

The most fundamental passion is love, caused by the attraction of the good. Love causes a desire for the absent good and the hope of attaining it; this movement finds completion in the pleasure and joy of the good possessed.¹⁹⁹

Thus, to desire something is to love it for "desire of a thing always presupposes love of that thing."²⁰⁰ Melina says that desire is "preceded by and animated by the experience of a love gratuitously offered, an anticipatory promise, as it were, of his fulfillment as a person."²⁰¹ At the root of our actions, then, there is this primordial experience, an encounter with love that promises the person fulfillment through a communion of love with other persons.²⁰² Thus Melina says (with Thomas) that desire is preceded by love:²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ See John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation "Familiaris consortio" The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* [22 Nov. 1981], no. 11.

¹⁹⁸ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter "Redemptor hominis"* [4 Mar. 1979] (Ottawa: CCCB, 1979), no. 10.

¹⁹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1765.

²⁰⁰ ST 1-2.27.4. ad 2m: "desiderium rei alicujus semper praesupponit amorem illius rei."

²⁰¹ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 8.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰³ ST 1-2.25.2.

In this original situation the subject also has an initial and singular experience of fulfillment that precedes desire and explains it. This experience is utterly singular because it is given to him prior to any deliberate intention as a foretaste or promise more primitive and greater than his own will and the will of others.²⁰⁴

Melina uses the example of friendship to illustrate the above. Even before the decisions and choice of the subjects as friends, there is a call to transcend oneself in the free gift of oneself. Thus freedom is not first a choice but an assent to “the promise of personal communion.”²⁰⁵ The encounter with Christ through grace illustrates this point more clearly. The encounter with Christ is a call to follow him, to assent to his Lordship. To listen to Christ the Teacher is to be drawn out (educated) by him. To be drawn out (*educare*) of oneself is to participate in the love of Christ so that one may in turn love, as God has first loved us. Again the Council fathers illustrate this Gospel truth when they state:

For He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and in the union of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness, reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.²⁰⁶

Desire, which is preceded by love, orients the human person to fulfillment. “All Christian moral theology is fuelled by the splendid intuition of Thérèse of Lisieux, who came to understand that Love alone enables the Church’s members to act.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 41.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁰⁶ *Guadium et spes*, no. 24 (with a reference to Lk 17:33).

²⁰⁷ Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 47.

C. Beauty: Primary Cause of Love

Beauty is at the genesis of human action. St. Thomas Aquinas says that beauty is “the first and specific cause of love.”²⁰⁸ Thomas’ friend St. Bonaventure expresses the same thing when he says: “Beauty, by its very nature, arouses the soul to love.”²⁰⁹ Aquinas, building on Aristotle’s thought with regard to beauty as the source of love, states: “For this reason the Philosopher (*Ethic.* IX 5, 12) says that bodily sight is the beginning of sensitive love: and in like manner the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love.”²¹⁰ The Common Doctor is not alone in his affirmation; he is in fact simply repeating what the Church Fathers said before him. St. Basil also sees God’s beauty as the cause of love. He writes:

In receiving God’s commandment to love, we immediately, from the first moment of our existence, possess the ability to love. The command does not come from outside of us . . . , it is part of our nature to seek what is beautiful, though ideas of it differ from one person to another. Now, what could be more lovable than divine beauty?²¹¹

Why does beauty cause love? St. Thomas following Aristotle, says that love is a passion since a “passion is the effect of the agent on the patient.”²¹² Commenting on St. Thomas’s anatomy of love, Paul Waddell writes:

To love something is to have suffered its goodness; it is to have felt, been moved, and even changed by its loveliness. The moral life turns on this ongoing

²⁰⁸ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 30.

²⁰⁹ “Pulchritudo naturaliter animum attrahit ad amorem.” Bonaventure, *IV Sent.*, 30, dub. 6 (Quaracchi, IV, 713); cited in HA2, 238.

²¹⁰ ST 1-2.27.2.

²¹¹ St. Basil, *Moralia*, q. 2; cited in Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 31.

²¹² ST 1-2.26.2: “passio est effectus agentis in patiente.”

dynamic of being touched and responding. Thomas's account of the passions of love taught us that human beings are made to receive something: the goodness of the world, the preciousness of another person, the everlasting beauty of God.²¹³

Beauty is "the expressive, commanding power of the object to draw forth a response of love."²¹⁴ To behold beauty is to be moved by it and marked by it. Encountering the beautiful object, one is overpowered by its uniqueness.²¹⁵ St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Augustine state that beauty has an erotic power that causes us to love it.²¹⁶ The beautiful is attractive and whatever is beautiful is also good. It is the beautiful good as a sign and an "anticipatory promise" of fulfillment that a human being loves and desires. Beauty gives us a glimpse, a foretaste of that to which we are called. The human person loves the beautiful because it is a cipher pointing to Supreme Beauty, the Ultimate Good who alone can satisfy the human being in his fundamental state of existential poverty. But it is above all in the personal encounter with the risen Christ that we see how beauty, his attractiveness, calls the human person to love. "Ethics is born from aesthetics, from grasping the beauty of Christ, who provokes us to love, anticipating as a promise the fulfillment of self."²¹⁷

²¹³ Paul J. Wadell, C.P., *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992), 146.

²¹⁴ Christopher W. Steck, S.J., *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 8.

²¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 52-53. Hereafter cited as LA.

²¹⁶ See *Philokalia* vol. 2, 280.

²¹⁷ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 9.

V. Conclusion

This first chapter examined beauty and its relation to the good. Historically, the connection between beauty and goodness goes back to classical antiquity. The ancient Greeks' conception of beauty included both aesthetic and moral characteristics. From the writings of the poets and tragedians on through the philosophy of the Pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, Greek aesthetics is defined by its ethical dimension. The close association between beauty and the good in the writings of the ancient Greeks is substantiated both in the linguistic and philological disciplines and in the domain of metaphysics. It is within the latter, the realm of metaphysics, that this has significant consequences for the retrieval of beauty within moral theology. Unlike modern aesthetics which examines the question of beauty as a distinct discipline, beauty in classical antiquity (as in Patristic and Scholastic theology also) is always a part of a wider philosophical reflection, either on culture, art, or Being. As constitutive of metaphysical reflection, beauty is intrinsically united with the good. Beauty is, therefore, in Greek thought, accorded an objective status due to its ontological grounding. The metaphysical correlation between beauty and the good leads, then, to an ethical consideration in ancient Greek philosophy. Beauty is not something simply to be admired. It now becomes the goal of the virtuous man, the *kalokagathia*.

We began chapter one by investigating the place of beauty in Patristic theology. Here, we saw how the Church Fathers' understanding of beauty—shaped by their heritage from classical antiquity—was further transformed by the Gospel. The ontological foundation of beauty and its concomitant relationship to the good took on

new status as the Fathers revised the metaphysical grounding of being in The Being (ὁ ὢν) of the Living One. In the Fathers, beauty is no longer simply a high ideal, but the very face of God made visible in the supreme work of art, the image of the living God. The radiant Sun of Beauty of ancient philosophy is reflected newly in the person of Jesus, the Son of God. All of creation, from the lowest level of the natural world to the highest ranks of the spiritual realm reflects the Divine Beauty. The Supreme Beauty is at the same time the “one who alone is good.” By following the one who is good, we also become more beautiful by reflecting his glory.

Scholastic theology incorporated both the aesthetics of classical antiquity and that of the Church Fathers while further deepening them. This can be seen in the development of the transcendentals. In this doctrine, the unity between beauty and goodness is elaborated more fully. Once again, the relation between these two transcendental properties of being at the metaphysical level advances an ethical reflection upon beauty. For the Scholastics—as well as for Plato, Aristotle, and the Church Fathers—virtue is beautiful. The aesthetic/ethic connection is further accentuated in the anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas as articulated in his teaching on beauty as the genesis for human action. All of the examples we have provided in this first chapter serve as an initial argument for the retrieval of beauty within moral theology.

CHAPTER TWO

RENEWING BEAUTY: HANS URS VON BALTHASAR'S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

I. Introduction

My objective in this thesis, which is to argue for the decisive nature of beauty for moral theology, is based upon Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. Now that we have taken a brief look at the relationship between aesthetics and ethics we can examine von Balthasar's aesthetics. First, we will look at the retrieval and understanding of beauty in his theological studies. This examination is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, the goal of this second chapter is to highlight what von Balthasar has in common with tradition regarding the notion of beauty and to see how he deepens and develops the idea of beauty and the role it plays in theology. Once this introductory step is taken we will be able to elaborate, in the third chapter, a synthesis of the implications of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics as they apply to moral theology.

This second chapter is divided into three major sections. We shall proceed in the following manner. In the first section of the chapter we shall examine von Balthasar's theological starting point: beauty. This exploration of von Balthasar's insistence upon the critical nature of beauty for theology will lead us to further study two aspects of

beauty. The analysis of these features will be presented as answers to two serious questions regarding: a) the metaphysical nature of beauty and b) the theological foundation of beauty. Therefore after first examining beauty as the starting point for von Balthasar's theological investigations, in the second section we shall look at the metaphysics of beauty and finally, in the third section we shall examine the theological 'dimension' (or 'analogue' to be more precise) of beauty, what von Balthasar calls 'glory'.

II. Von Balthasar's Cultural and Intellectual Formation

Before we enquire into the precise reasons for von Balthasar's theological starting point, it would be beneficial to describe both the cultural *milieu* in which he was raised and the intellectual education in which he was formed. Both of these factors contributed significantly to the Gestalt of von Balthasar's theology and are therefore important for grasping more fully the originality of his work. The first element that can help us understand von Balthasar's aesthetic predilection is his family background. Born into an ancient Lucerne family at the turn of the twentieth century,¹ von Balthasar's aristocratic lineage came from both his Swiss father and his Hungarian mother.² Hans' father Oskar was the canton architect responsible for the maintenance and construction

¹ Peter Henrici, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch of his life," *Communio* 16 (1989): 318.

² Von Balthasar's relatives include such notable figures as Johann Anton von Balthasar (1692-1763), Jesuit missionary to the Indians of California, his cousin Baron Gabor Apor Hungarian ambassador to the Holy See from 1939-1945 and the baron's brother, the now Blessed Baron Vilmos Apor (1892-1945), Bishop of Győr, shot by Russian soldiers on Good Friday 1945, he died several days later on April 2 (Elio Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, trans. Frances Georges-Catroux [Paris: Desclée, 1993], 16-18).

of buildings including the famous church of St. Charles; Hans' mother Gabrielle was head of the Swiss League of Catholic Women.³ He was schooled in both Benedictine and Jesuit schools with magnificent churches that dated to the Medieval era; beauty both visual and harmonic surrounded him.⁴ Von Balthasar's upbringing was highly cultured. German, French, and English were spoken in his family and music filled the house. He writes:

The years before I went to high school were taken up mainly with music. From the time of my first, overwhelming musical impressions (Schubert's Mass in E-flat major when I was about five, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* when I was about eight), I spent endless hours on the piano; then at Engelberg College I had the opportunity of taking part in orchestral Masses and operas."⁵

The importance of the arts, especially music and literature, in von Balthasar's approach to theology, cannot be overstated. His first monograph, published when he was twenty, was entitled *The Development of the Musical Idea. Attempt at a Synthesis of Music*.⁶ Already we can see the aspiring and all-encompassing nature of von Balthasar's thinking. His work defies the typical classification of being systematic. Like the title of one of his small books, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch: Aspekte des christlichen*

³ Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 19-22, and Henrici, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch," 307.

⁴ He states: "I can still remember the silent and very moving early Masses on my own in the choir of the Franciscan church in Lucerne and the ten-o'clock Mass in the Jesuit church, which I thought was stunningly beautiful (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Our Task: A Report and Plan*, trans. by Dr. John Saward (San Francisco: Communio/ Ignatius Press, 1994), 35.

⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁶ *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee. Versuch einer Synthese der Musik* (Braunschweig, 1925) (Aidan Nichols, OP, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998], ix).

*Pluralismus*⁷, his work is ‘symphonic’ in nature. Major theological themes are presented interwoven with various theological ‘movements’ and secondary themes. Another art form that was influential in the shaping of von Balthasar’s theology was literature. An anecdote from his high school days illustrates well his love for both music and literature: “I was spending all my time on music and Dante and standing on my bed in the dormitory at night trying to get enough light to read *Faust*.”⁸ Although music was always present in his life, it was literature that was the dominant influence in his work. After transferring from the Benedictine high school of Engelberg in Lucerne to the “much less musical” Jesuit College in Feldkirch Austria,⁹ von Balthasar then enrolled in *Germanistik* studies (a combination of German literature and philosophy) at the University of Zürich.¹⁰ He divided his learning between Zürich, Vienna, and Berlin. In Berlin von Balthasar was impressed by the lectures of Romano Guardini (1885-1968) on Kierkegaard; and in Vienna von Balthasar first had access to theology in a circuitous way through Hans Eibl’s lectures on Plotinus.¹¹ It was also in Vienna that von Balthasar became friends with “Rudolf Allers [1883-1963], doctor, psychiatrist, philosopher and

⁷ English translation, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

⁸ “Über Amt und Liebe in der Kirche. Ein offener Brief an Alois Schenker, “*Neue Zürcher Nachrichten*, supplement on “Christian Culture,” no. 29 (Jul 17, 1953), cited in Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch,” 309.

⁹ Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch” 308-309.

¹⁰ Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, x.

¹¹ Von Balthasar, *Our Task*, 36.

theologian” who “was an almost inexhaustible source of stimulation.”¹² This period of studies in von Balthasar’s life culminated in 1929 with his doctorate, *The History of the Eschatological Problem in Modern German Literature*,¹³ which he eventually developed into three tomes, entitled *Apocalypse of the German Soul. Toward a Theory of Fundamental Orientations*.¹⁴ A work of “implicit theology,”¹⁵ von Balthasar stated that “its fundamental impulse was the desire to reveal . . . the ultimate religious attitude, often hidden, of the great figures of modern German literature.”¹⁶

The next phase in von Balthasar’s intellectual development is critical to understanding his theology. On November 18, 1929, von Balthasar entered the Jesuit novitiate.¹⁷ Prior to entering the Society of Jesus, von Balthasar already had an impressive intellectual formation. Von Balthasar’s training with the Jesuits was typically neo-scholastic in its method and content. His formative philosophical-theological education, however, came about through key friendships he developed during this time. Two men, above all, need to be mentioned as important mentors: Erich Przywara (1889-

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press and Communio Books, 1993), 88. Hereafter cited as MW.

¹³ *Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur* (Zurich, 1930) (Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, x).

¹⁴ *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele. Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen*, vol. 1: *Der deutsche Idealismus*; vol 2: *Im Zeichen Nietzsches*; vol. 3: *Die Vergöttlichung des Todes* (Salzburg: A Pustet, 1937-1939) (MW, 12-13).

¹⁵ Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, x. In the foreword to his dissertation, von Balthasar states: “It may seem strange, in an historical investigation, to use philosophy and theology to explain works of art, and *vice versa* works of art, without much reference to their aesthetic qualities. The results of this method will be its only justification” (cited in Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch,” 310-311).

¹⁶ Von Balthasar, *Our Task*, 37.

¹⁷ Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch,” 312.

1972) and Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), both fellow Jesuits. During his studies in philosophy at Pullach, near Munich, the young Jesuit novice met Erich Przywara. Von Balthasar called Przywara “an unforgettable guide and master” and “the greatest spirit whom I have been permitted to meet.”¹⁸ High praise indeed, but justified by von Balthasar’s claim that the major themes in his work can be traced back to things suggested by Przywara.¹⁹ Von Balthasar says of him that he was “an excellent and unrelenting mentor. He forced one patiently to read scholastic philosophy and to engage at the same time (as he did) in modern thought. We had to confront Augustine and Aquinas with Hegel, Scheler and Heidegger.”²⁰ It was Przywara who first introduced von Balthasar to Augustinian thought and more importantly to the principle of the *analogia entis*.²¹ This scholastic idea, the analogy of being—that all creaturely being bears a resemblance to uncreated divine Being, keeping in mind at the same time the teaching of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), that the difference between the creature and the Creator is always greater than the similarity²²—is given a dynamic interpretation

¹⁸ MW, 89, 10.

¹⁹ MW, 19.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Test Everything: Hold Fast to What is Good*, trans. Maria Shradly (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 11.

²¹ Mario Saint-Pierre, *Beauté, bonté, vérité chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1998), 130.

²² “For between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude [*maior dissimilitudo in tanta similitudine*]” Fourth Lateran Council (1215), Denzinger-Schönmetzer 806. [Hereafter cited as DS.] English translation taken from J. Neuner, S.J. and J. Dupuis, S.J., eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church. Revised Edition* (New York: Alba House, 1982), 109.

by Przywara, a view shared also by von Balthasar.²³ According to Przywara, the *analogia entis* is not simply a metaphysical doctrine, but is also a mystical truth related to the spiritual life. He sees the analogy between creaturely being and the Being of God as an invitation to enter more fully into Divine Being, which reveals, paradoxically, the ever greater difference between the soul and God.²⁴ From Przywara, von Balthasar also learned “how to read the ‘figure’, the mobile dynamic *Gestalt*. The *Gestalt*, like a musical figure, is not something fixed or circumscribable, but defines itself from its movement.”²⁵ Finally, it is through Przywara that von Balthasar came into contact with the idea of the transcendental properties of being and their relation to the Triune God, a fundamental theme of his work.²⁶ (These three concepts—the *analogia entis*, the transcendentals, and *Gestalt*—all foundational for von Balthasar’s theology, will be explored more fully later in this chapter.)

It was his friendship with de Lubac, however, that would prove to be most influential for von Balthasar’s theology. In his own words:

In Lyons, during my theological studies, it was the encounter with Henri de Lubac that decided the direction of my studies. Because exegesis was weak, the Fathers easily won the upper hand. Origen (who was for me, as once for

²³ John S. Bonnici, *Person to Person: Friendship and Love in the Life and Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Alba House, 1999), 10. It must be noted that von Balthasar did eventually elaborate his own personal notion of the *analogia entis*. See James V. Zeitz, “Przywara and von Balthasar on Analogy,” *The Thomist* 52 (1998): 473-498.

²⁴ Aidan Nichols, OP, *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide through Balthasar’s Theology beyond the Trilogy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 80.

²⁵ Peter Henrici, S.J., “Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Cultural and Theological Education,” chap. in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Bede McGregor, O.P., and Thomas Norris, eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 14.

²⁶ Saint-Pierre, *Beauté, bonté, vérité*, 135.

Erasmus, more important than Augustine) became the key to the entire Greek patristics, the early Middle Ages and, indeed, even to Hegel and Karl Barth.²⁷

From de Lubac, von Balthasar learned “what theology really was and could be.”²⁸ The French Jesuit’s own theological work aimed at revivifying theology. The dominant neo-scholastic theology of the day—which relied heavily on the commentators on Aquinas, operated with an ahistorical perspective, emphasized the pure nature hypothesis and therefore tended to have an overly rational extrinsic approach to God—was in de Lubac’s opinion “insufficiently attuned to the mystery of God’s love.”²⁹ What de Lubac and other sympathetic theologians who were part of the so called “nouvelle théologie” proposed was a *ressourcement*, a return to the sources, i.e., Sacred Scripture and the Church Fathers, as a way of overcoming neo-scholasticism.³⁰ (This is, of course, stating it in the simplest of terms.)

What von Balthasar received from de Lubac was a profound respect for the rich theological tradition as represented by the Fathers and the great medieval theologians. The Swiss theologian was also greatly influenced by de Lubac’s biblical interpretation,

²⁷ MW, 89.

²⁸ Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch,” 314.

²⁹ Kevin Mongrain, “Von Balthasar’s Way from Doxology to Theology,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 60.

³⁰ Although he was not the first person to use the term ‘nouvelle théologie’, Dominican scholar Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange popularised it in his article “La nouvelle théologie où va-t-elle? (*Angelicum* 23 [1946]: 126-145). For a history of the ‘nouvelle théologie’ see Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie- New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), especially 3-7 for a history of the genesis of the term. See also Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Marcellino D’Ambrosio, “*Ressourcement* theology, *aggiornamento*, and the hermeneutics of tradition,” *Communio* 18 (1991): 530-555. The terms ‘nouvelle théologie’ and *ressourcement* are often used interchangeably today; we prefer to use the latter, which is a French neologism and finds its roots in the work of Charles Péguy and means a “return to the sources.”

which was a retrieval of medieval exegesis that stressed the unity of the two Testaments and regarded Scripture theologically.³¹ Finally, we cannot fail to mention de Lubac's "willingness to grapple with alien metaphysics, from Buddhism to the French socialist Proudhon, in the service of faith."³² This openness to the universal, to investigate current philosophical issues—not simply to refute them—but to encounter them and search out what is true in them, became a part of von Balthasar's search for 'catholicity' that shaped his theology. He remarks: "Throughout my patristic studies, what I longed for, with the strong encouragement of Henri de Lubac (cf. his major work *Catholicism*), was a catholicity that excluded nothing."³³ Let us hear von Balthasar elaborate on this point:

At this point I would like to express a conviction, formed during my peregrinations and shared by the great men I was privileged to know, namely, that the Catholic Church, if she is to impart her highest values to the modern world, must not meet it as a stranger or as an adversary but rather encounter it from within, assimilating whatever may be valid with its new systems. Not extrinsically, but in such a way that whatever is new would recall older treasures, treasures, which have always been present, but were forgotten or which have not yet even been discovered.³⁴

Related to this search for a catholic perspective was von Balthasar's recovery of the Church Fathers, a recovery which he owed to de Lubac's influence. Von Balthasar's early writings on the Fathers were innovative and rigorous enough that had he not written anything else, he still would be recognized as a Patristic scholar of the first

³¹ Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 65.

³² Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, xiv.

³³ Von Balthasar, *Our Task*, 44.

³⁴ Von Balthasar, *Test Everything*, 13

rank.³⁵ His return to the Patristic sources however, was not simply an uncritical appropriation of the theology of the Fathers. In an early article, “Patristik, Scholastik, und wir,”³⁶ von Balthasar analyses Patristic theology and sounds a note of caution with regard to the neo-platonic tendency (particularly of the Alexandrian school) to highlight the spiritual element of Christianity while downplaying the Incarnational reality.³⁷ What von Balthasar was advocating (as set forth in his essay) was a theology done in a similar vein as that of the Fathers and the Scholastics. Both ‘movements’ employed current philosophies to better understand and present the truths of the Christian faith. We too, argued von Balthasar, should use the contemporary philosophical tools at the service of theology. These philosophical tools, however—and this is the critical point—should not be used uncritically. Another element crucial to von Balthasar’s theology that he recovered from the Fathers is the vital relation between theology and sanctity.³⁸

³⁵ See Edward T. Oakes, “Balthasar and the Church Fathers,” chapter 4 in *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 2d ed. (New York, New York: Continuum, 1997), 102-130; and Brian E. Daley, “Balthasar’s reading of the Church Fathers,” chapter 14 in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Edward T. Oakes, SJ, and David Moss, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187-206.

³⁶ Originally published in *Theologie der Zeit* (Wien) 3 (1939), 65-104; English translation, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” trans. Edward T. Oakes, *Communio* 24 (1997): 347-396.

³⁷ See “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” 373-376.

³⁸ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 181-209. In this famous essay, originally written in 1948 and published simultaneously in French: “Théologie et sainteté,” *Dieu Vivant* 12 (1948): 17-31, and German: “Theologie und Heiligkeit,” *Wort und Wahrheit* 3 (1948): 881-896, (reference taken from Aidan Nichols, OP, *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Theology beyond the Trilogy* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007], 141, n. 34), von Balthasar advocates not merely that the theologian be smart *and* holy, but more fundamentally, his claim is that theology must start from, and let itself “be normed by, the uniquely Christian revelation of God’s trinitarian love in Christ” (Adrian J. Walker, “Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as a Master of Theological Renewal,” *Communio* 32 (2005): 520.

Commenting on his writings, von Balthasar says: “Once again it is Church Fathers, above all, Origen, Maximus and Augustine, who serve to establish the chief aim: that *Theologie und Heiligkeit* (“theology and holiness”) ought to contribute a deeper fruitfulness to one another.”³⁹ Perhaps the key element in this *ressourcement* is the desire to recapture the architectonic of the Fathers’ and the Scholastics’ vision of theology.⁴⁰ The revelation of God is not or should not be something that can simply be systematized, dissected, and categorized like some dead thing. Theology, for the great Patristic and medieval theologians was always an encounter with the revelation of the God of Glory, hence the title of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, *Herrlichkeit*, the Glory of the Lord.

In this short exposition of the Swiss theologian’s cultural and intellectual formation, we can see how the role of the arts and the friendships that von Balthasar made (with personages both present and past)⁴¹ played a pivotal part in the form of his theology, particularly his decision to develop a theology centered on the transcendentals, starting with beauty.

³⁹ MW, 31.

⁴⁰ Because of his actual knowledge of theological tradition, Fr. Oakes states that “Balthasar can be regarded as perhaps the premier representative of the *ressourcement* school” (Edward T. Oakes, “Balthasar and Ressourcement: An Ambiguous Relationship,” chapter 18 in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal*, 283).

⁴¹ “Son itinéraire est et sera marqué par une série de rencontres, soit de génies de l’humanité comme Origène, Goethe ou Mozart, soit de maîtres vivants avec lesquels le [*sic*] liera une profonde amitié” (Bernard Sesbouïé, “La genèse d’une oeuvre ou comment sortir de la ‘néoscholastique’?,” chapter 3 in *Balthasar, Rahner. Deux pensées en contraste*, Henri Jérôme Gagey and Vincent Holzer, eds. (Bayard, 2005), 55-56.

III. Beginning with Beauty

Hans Urs von Balthasar begins his theological studies with beauty.⁴² He states his intention in the foreword of the opening volume of his trilogy, *The Glory of the Lord*: “We attempt here to develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful (*pulchrum*).”⁴³ Stressing the importance of beginning well, von Balthasar says that he “desires to choose as his first word one which he will not have to take back, one which he will not afterwards have to correct with violence, but one which is broad enough to foster and include all words to follow, and clear enough to penetrate all others with its light.”⁴⁴ He is looking for a truly *catholic*, i.e., universal word: one that is rich enough to sustain and encompass all that “is not anticipated in principle in the beginning.”⁴⁵ He says therefore, “Beauty is the word that shall be our first.”⁴⁶

Von Balthasar sees beauty as being fundamental to the task of theology, yet it would be an oversight to extrapolate his understanding of beauty solely from the first part of his trilogy, namely the seven volumes of his theological aesthetics, without referencing the other two parts, the theo-dramatics and the theo-logic. Key to von Balthasar’s notion of beauty is its intrinsic relation to the other transcendental properties

⁴² While von Balthasar wrote many and various works of theology prior to his massive trilogy (*The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama* and *Theo-Logic*), it is primarily to this work that we refer when we speak of his “theological studies.”

⁴³ GL1, 9.

⁴⁴ GL1, 17.

⁴⁵ D. C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 28.

⁴⁶ GL1, 18.

of being: the good and the truth. We cannot therefore overlook the other two parts of the trilogy, the theological dramatics and the theological logic, if we desire to have a complete picture of how he comprehends beauty. These two parts, theological investigations developed in the light of the transcendentals of the good and truth, go hand in hand with his theological studies on beauty. Only by situating beauty/glory within von Balthasar's major oeuvre, that is when it is complemented by his studies on the good and the truth, shall we be able to get a better grasp of his theological aesthetics.

With this in mind we can now ask the question, "Why beauty?" To state the question more concretely: Why does von Balthasar not only begin his theological studies with beauty, but more importantly, why does he consider beauty to be crucial for theology?⁴⁷ These are questions that the Swiss theologian himself had to address since his insistence upon beauty was criticized as being an arbitrary and even illogical imposition within theology.⁴⁸

Of course the answers to these questions are multifaceted. Perhaps the most straightforward answer would be that von Balthasar begins with beauty because it reveals Being. Beauty discloses the gratuitous nature of Being. Therefore, beauty speaks of Being's giftedness; it shows forth Being as pure gift since it evokes wonder. In von Balthasar's words:

⁴⁷ One only has to examine the contents of von Balthasar's trilogy and see the number of pages devoted to his *Theological Aesthetics*: 3502 pages in the original German compared with 2480 pages in the *Theo-Drama* and 1069 pages in the *Theo-Logic*.

⁴⁸ See, for example, von Balthasar's reply to Karl Rahner's theological objections in *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 1, *The Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 19-20. Hereafter cited as TL1.

A moment of grace lies in all beauty: it shows itself to me far beyond what I have a right to expect, which is why we feel astonishment and admiration. This already happens in the simple realization that Being has already been “given” in an immeasurable, flowing fullness that is nonetheless poured into finite essences, coming to perfect realization in them. This is especially true in my own case: For I owe my existence, not to myself, but to Being (to my everlasting astonishment).⁴⁹

The beauty of Being also gives birth to joy as von Balthasar expresses in his famous example of the child brought to self-consciousness through its mother’s smile: the child encounters the beauty of being through the mother’s love, a love that calls forth joy.⁵⁰ Thus beauty—as witnessed to by the wonder before Being and by the joy in the presence (of the beauty) of Being—not only indicates the giftedness of Being but points beyond the gift to the Giver of the gift.⁵¹ The presence of beauty reveals both the gift (of Being) and the Giver of the gift. But it does more than this, for the only real reason for bestowing a gift is love, and so beauty reveals the ‘why’ (i.e., the *ratio*) of the gift. Being is best understood in terms of love. Thus von Balthasar gives prominence to beauty since it is ultimately revelatory of Being as love. This is a key point, one which we shall elaborate more fully later on in this chapter when we examine von Balthasar’s metaphysics of beauty.

It is evident then, that the “mystery of being” is at the heart of von Balthasar’s

⁴⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 66. Hereafter cited as E.

⁵⁰ MW, 114.

⁵¹ Von Balthasar says, “Natural theology can only take the form of allowing all creaturely Being to become an indicative utterance about God (since everything derives from him and may thus bear his image and trace)” (GL1, 448).

work.⁵² Reflecting on the mystery of being is a *conditio sine qua non* for the theologian says von Balthasar, since it involves “the question of how God’s absolute being, which . . . can occur only in trinitarian form, is reflected in the world’s being.”⁵³

Von Balthasar states matter-of-factly:

Since the question about being as such is the question of metaphysics, the theologian cannot get around it. For him, then, there is only one conclusion: He cannot be a theologian *ex professo* without at the same time being a metaphysician, just as conversely (the Greeks were well aware of this, nor was the theology of the Fathers and of High Scholasticism any less so), a metaphysics that refuses to be theology would thereby misunderstand and repudiate its own subject.⁵⁴

This also is, according to Peter Henrici, one of the “often forgotten” ways that von Balthasar shares an “intellectual kinship with [St.] Thomas” who “is in the first place and above all a theologian and ‘thus wants to understand all metaphysics as ordered to ‘theology.’”⁵⁵ In the fifth volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, at the beginning of the final section entitled “The Christian Contribution to Metaphysics,” von Balthasar says, “A Christian has to conduct philosophical enquiry on account of his faith. Believing in the absolute love of God for the world, he is obliged to understand Being in its ontological difference as pointing to love, and to live in accordance with this indication.”⁵⁶ Thus

⁵² Schindler, *The Dramatic Structure of Truth*, 28.

⁵³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2, *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 173. Hereafter cited as TL2.

⁵⁴ TL2, 173.

⁵⁵ Peter Henrici, S.J., “The Philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in David L. Schindler, ed., *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Communio Books/Ignatius Press, 1991), 163 (with internal citation from *Herrlichkeit* III/1:1, 357; [English translation, GL4, 396]).

⁵⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 646. Hereafter cited as GL5.

von Balthasar's insistence "that the Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics in our time."⁵⁷ For von Balthasar it is precisely the encounter with the Mystery of Christian Revelation that allows us to overcome the enigma of the ontological difference whereby finite Being suspends undefinedly between the abyss of alienation and abandonment from Being (as in some Oriental thought)⁵⁸ or a sheltering accompaniment of Being without collapsing these two poles into an identity (as does Heidegger)⁵⁹ and to see the *ratio* of Being as best understood in terms of love. Paradoxically, then, according to von Balthasar, metaphysics can only attain fulfillment if it is founded on this "theological a priori element."⁶⁰ But conversely as was mentioned above, theology needs philosophy. In the opening volume of the *Theo-Logic*, von Balthasar states succinctly and emphatically, "Without philosophy, there can be no theology."⁶¹ This is

⁵⁷ GL5, 656.

⁵⁸ This abandonment from Being is not only limited to Eastern philosophies. Von Balthasar writes: "And if it [i.e., the finite entity] experiences the incomprehensible alienness which prevails within the distinction and yet still gives precedence to its encompassing character, must it not then necessarily petition for its own self-elimination and, in so far as this is its concern, also strive for it, as happens in India and in so many areas of Western metaphysics too?" (GL5, 628).

⁵⁹ GL5, 643.

⁶⁰ GL5, 628; see also 628-634. Von Balthasar explains this fulfillment thus: "In other words, the formal object of theology (and, therefore, also of the act of faith) lies at the very heart of the formal object of philosophy (along with the mythology which belongs to it). Out of those mysterious depths the formal object of theology breaks forth as the self-revelation of the mystery of Being itself; such a revelation cannot be deduced from what the creaturely understanding of itself can read of the mystery of Being, nor, even in the manifestness of the mystery of God, can such a revelation be grasped by this intellect without the divine illumination of grace. Nevertheless, the self-revelation of God, who is absolute Being, can only be the fulfilment of man's entire philosophical-mythological questioning as well. As such it is an answer to men's questions which comes to us in God's revealing Word (who becomes history and flesh) and which is, therefore, to be heard in a particular existent. But it is no less a Word from God, an intelligence concerning Being itself and thus, at the same time, philosophy. As the highest personal authority of the self-revealing God (to whom 'every created intellect is wholly subject' as to its Lord, Vatican I, Dz. 1789), this intelligence challenges man essentially in his act of faith and brings philosophical knowledge, along with its *eros*, to its interior goal" (GL1, 145-146).

⁶¹ TL1, 7.

so because of the *analogia entis*, which is the operating principle within (von Balthasar's) theology whereby there is an analogy between Divine Being and worldly, creaturely being. This correspondence—which von Balthasar examines successively in his trilogy via the transcendental properties of Being—between divine glory and earthly beauty, between divine freedom which is infinite and the creature's finite freedom, and finally, between divine truth and the truth of the world “presupposes an *ontological*, and not merely formal or gnoseological, infrastructure of worldly being.”⁶² Philosophy then, is not meant just to provide conceptual tools for framing theology, but is a necessary requirement for authentic theology precisely because of the “ontological infrastructure of worldly being.” For von Balthasar, the “serious theologian” must first be a philosopher who remains awestruck before “the mysterious structures of creaturely being,” continually examining these in the light of revelation.⁶³ Only within this supernatural light does (natural) being emerge as “the object of an unquenchable interest, indeed, of a reverent, astonished wonderment.”⁶⁴ Just as wonder is the beginning of philosophy, so too must it be the starting point for theology.⁶⁵ But if astonishment is the *terminus a quo* of theology, we could say that in a certain sense its *terminus ad quem* is adoration. Therefore, theology, in the final analysis, according to von Balthasar, must be a doxology:

⁶² TL1, 7.

⁶³ TL1, 8.

⁶⁴ TL1, 9.

⁶⁵ See Adrian J. Walker, “On ‘Rephilosophizing’ Theology,” *Communio* 31 (2004): 143-167, especially 161-167.

Each theology in the Church, as a response to the infinitely free and gratuitously given word of God, must have the character of adoration, of thanksgiving. In other words, it has to be a doxology . . . we cannot even in a moment transform and reduce the infinite subject of the [divine] Word into a neutral object of our study.⁶⁶

Theology is, for von Balthasar, a human answer (*Antwort*) to God's Word (*Wort*) spoken to humankind, a word that is glorious and reveals the divine glory to humankind. As such, for theology to be fruitful, it must be an expression of the divine glory that is impressed upon it. Here the theologian from Basel uses the terminology of St. Bonaventure (and St. Thomas Aquinas):⁶⁷ the theologian can only express (*expressio*) his theology faithfully if he has been truly impressed (*impressio*) by the Lord's glory. Although theology is concerned with expounding the truth of God's glorious revelation, von Balthasar insists on the doxological character of theology because even though "God is eternal truth," even "eternal truth . . . is grounded in love."⁶⁸ "If the truth were ultimate in God," says von Balthasar, ". . . our yearning for truth would have free

⁶⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Od teologii Boga do teologii kościelnej," *Podstawy wiary – Teologia* (Poznan: Pallottinum, 1991, Kol. Communio, 6), 240 (Polish translation of "Von der Theologie Gottes zur kirchlichen Theologie," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 10 [1981]: 306-315, here at 314), cited in Wojciech Giertych, O.P., "The Dominican Order's Intellectual Service in the Church," *The Thomist* 73 (2009): 139.

It should be noted that this quote is an English translation of the Polish translation of von Balthasar's article. Reference is made (in footnote 10 of Giertych's article) to the English version "From the Theology of God to the Theology of the Church," *Communio* 9 (1982): 195-225. This quotation (as found in the original German on page 314) is *not* in the English version which is an elaboration and translation (by Msgr. Richard Malone and Hans Urs von Balthasar) of the French translation ("De la théologie de Dieu à la théologie dans l'Eglise," *Revue catholique internationale Communio* 6 [1981]: 8-19).

⁶⁷ St. Thomas speaks of sacred doctrine (what today we refer to as theology) as being "a type of impression of the divine knowledge" ["sacra doctrina sit velut quaedam impressio divinae scientiae" ST 1.1.3 ad 2], which is "the knowledge of God and the blessed" ["scientiae Dei et beatorum" ST 1.1.2 corp.].

⁶⁸ TL1, 272.

rein.”⁶⁹ The result of such a scenario would be that this ongoing quest for knowledge would leave little or no room for the creature’s proper stance before its Creator. But since God is ultimately love and reveals himself as love, theology, as a loving response, becomes worship. In other words, if theology is an impression of the knowledge (*scientiae*) of God and the blessed (*beatorum*), albeit one that is subaltern to the divine knowledge, and the blessed continuously venerate God in his glory—as von Balthasar eloquently states in the finale to the first volume of the *Theo-Logic*: “[B]ecause love is ultimate, the seraphim [who make up at least part of the *beatorum*] cover their faces with their wings, for the mystery of eternal love is one whose superluminous night may be glorified only through veneration”⁷⁰—then how much more ought theologians strive to make of their work a true act of worship?

One can, however, ‘short-circuit’ the “apologetic thrust” by simply presenting God’s glory *tout court* without “the ‘metaphysical depth of being’ that is, in principle, accessible to everyone, believer or no.”⁷¹ That is the reason for von Balthasar’s emphasis upon the light of Being, a light that can rightly be called the ‘glory’ of Being and the radiance of which has been attested to (as he demonstrates historically) by the likes of Homer, the Greek tragedians, Virgil, Plotinus, Augustine, Dionysius, Aquinas, and Heidegger, to name only a few.⁷²

⁶⁹ TL1, 272.

⁷⁰ TL1, 272.

⁷¹ Nichols, *The Word has Been Abroad*, 128-129.

⁷² See GL4 and GL5.

Von Balthasar approaches Being analogically, that is, via the *analogia entis* of its concrete properties rather than looking at abstract Being itself. He does so because these properties (*pulchrum*, *bonum*, and *verum*) always accompany Being; they express Being in a way that (the word) Being does not and cannot fully do. Hence the reason for his trilogy: aesthetics, dramatics, and logic, which correspond to Being's transcendental attributes of beauty, goodness and truth. These attributes or concrete properties transcend Being, which is simply another way of saying that "they permeate all Being."⁷³ Because these attributes transcend Being, von Balthasar holds that they are able to better express the richness of Being rather than considering (abstract) Being itself.⁷⁴ We could say that the concrete attributes in a certain fashion allow us to encounter Being in its full flowering. The transcendentals for von Balthasar (and contra Kant as will be demonstrated below) truly grant us access to the thing in itself. Angelo Scola explains it this way, "[T]he more deeply I delve into the transcendental in the individual essences in which Being reveals itself, the more deeply do they reveal Being to me."⁷⁵ This is an important point for von Balthasar holds that access to the thing itself, that is "[t]he entity in its essence . . . [be truly] represented in its appearance," otherwise the "appearance without something that appears empties its identity into mere seeming."⁷⁶

⁷³ E, 46.

⁷⁴ MW, 115-116.

⁷⁵ Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 27.

⁷⁶ E, 83.

Another way of looking at why von Balthasar structured his theological triptych under the rubrics of beauty, goodness, and truth is to see it as a direct reversal of Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) trajectory of thought as presented in his three renowned *Critiques*: the *Critique of Pure Reason* (truth), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (the good), and the *Critique of Judgment* (which deals with the foundation of aesthetics).⁷⁷ Kant eliminated (or replaced) traditional metaphysics with his own "scientific metaphysics" in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁷⁸ Thus philosophy, with Kant, was effectively reduced to epistemology and in one fell swoop the philosopher from Königsberg eradicated (traditional) metaphysics from both philosophy and theology.⁷⁹ In von Balthasar's words, "This forgetfulness of Being [which began with Descartes] takes its revenge as the loss of Being in *Kant* With this, metaphysics comes to an end and, at the same time, all metaphysical love."⁸⁰

Reversing Kant's order of reflection—epistemological, ethical, and finally aesthetic—is essential for von Balthasar, for it is only when the human person perceives God's glorious revelation in Christ (aesthetics) that she can then respond to the call of discipleship (ethics) and it is only within the *sequela Christi* that she can verify the validity of revelation (epistemology). As Edward Oakes puts it: "[W]e cannot render a

⁷⁷ Oliver Davies "The theological aesthetics," chapter 10 in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Edward T. Oakes, SJ, and David Moss, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 135.

⁷⁸ Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, "Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*," in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

⁷⁹ Louis Dupré, "Belief and Metaphysics," in *Belief and Metaphysics*, Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler, Jr., eds. (London: SCM Press, 2007), 1.

⁸⁰ GL5, 643.

judgment on the truth of revelation outside a prior obedience to Christ's call, which will never come (at least in any lasting sense) until we are first drawn out of ourselves by the beauty of the life of Christ."⁸¹

Therefore in his "anti-Kantian starting point" we can see another reason why beauty is central to the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁸² As he says at the beginning of his *Theological Aesthetics*, beauty "is a word with which the philosophical person does not begin, but rather concludes."⁸³ And shortly after he states, "Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another."⁸⁴ In this veiled reference to Kant, who examines beauty lastly (in his third *Critique*), von Balthasar's own work turns the Prussian philosopher on his head. As was mentioned above, von Balthasar is concerned with the epiphanic manifestation of Being, which ultimately reveals the glory of the Lord (*Herrlichkeit*). But Kant's philosophical turn to the subject empties any possibility of an objective knowledge of the *Ding an sich* since he "interprets reason not as the organ that is able to grasp the ex-pression of being, but as the organ of im-pressing certain forms that stem from itself upon the matter of sensation."⁸⁵ Thus according to von Balthasar,

⁸¹ Edward T. Oakes, S.J., "The Witness of Balthasar," *America*, August 1, 2005, online, America Magazine, available: <http://americamagazine.org/node/147362>, 30 Apr. 2015.

⁸² Oakes, "The Witness of Balthasar."

⁸³ GL1, 17.

⁸⁴ GL1, 18.

⁸⁵ Michael Waldstein, "Expression and Form: Principles of a Philosophical Aesthetics According to Hans Urs von Balthasar" (Ph.D. diss., University of Dallas, 1981), 126.

“Whatever the nature of Kant’s concluding emphases, ‘critical Idealism’ no longer permits space for an experience of worldly Being as an epiphany of God’s glory.”⁸⁶

And what of the transcendentals, how do they fare at the hands of Kant? Von Balthasar says that they are “by the time of Kant . . . a venerable but ‘empty’ idea.”⁸⁷ According to John R. Betz, “[W]ith Kant’s transcendental gutting of the theoretical realm in the first *Critique*, the transcendentals had been so radically sundered that a monumental and arguably unsuccessful effort was required (in his second and third *Critiques*) to put them back together again.”⁸⁸

For Kant, the term ‘transcendental’ is understood neither in the Aristotelian sense of transcending the categories (of Being)⁸⁹ nor in the mediaeval sense as properties that transcend Being, but is used rather to express the *a priori* mode of cognition.⁹⁰ Of the transcendentals, Kant says, “These supposedly transcendental predicates of *things* are, in fact, nothing but logical requirements and criteria of all *knowledge* of things in general.”⁹¹ In his elaboration on Kant, von Balthasar remarks:

In Kant the ‘transcendentals’ relate to the transcendental constitution of reason in its critical self-understanding, and the individual aspect emerges clearly only when we disregard the others. This is so because reason, taken in its purity, *hovers indeterminately* in its finitude (as interrelationship of finite perception and finite concept) and loses every anchorage in in-finite *esse*. Therefore beauty,

⁸⁶ GL5, 483.

⁸⁷ TL1, 15.

⁸⁸ John R. Betz, “The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination,” in *Belief and Metaphysics*, 46.

⁸⁹ Aristotle *Categories* 1b25.

⁹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, revised second edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Introduction V, A12, 149.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, B114, 118.

whose essence is the pure interrelationship of the powers of the subject (an interrelationship which prescind from the true and the good), possesses exactly the same indefinite character of the finite in itself which, when the rigour of the ethical imperative wanes and is no longer seen, can at some point lead to the pure play of finite existence in nothingness itself, a play which is not only disinterested and without purpose (*l'art pour l'art*) but also ultimately lacking in meaning.⁹²

Therefore, in Kant's German Idealism, beauty "confers a unity on the other two *Critiques* that is 'regulative' and explicitly not metaphysical."⁹³ For von Balthasar, however, the transcendentals clearly contain metaphysical significance since "they surpass all the limits of essences and are co-extensive with Being."⁹⁴ He begins with beauty since it bestows a metaphysical unity upon goodness and truth, which is similar to the mediaeval notion of unity as found in the Scholastic presentation of the Platonic-Aristotelian transcendentals of unity, goodness, and truth.⁹⁵ The transcendentals share an inseparability based on their relation to Being,⁹⁶ it is this commonality (in being) that enables them to be differentiated from one another; they possess (a) *difference in* (the) *unity* (of being).⁹⁷ The distinctness of each of the transcendentals in Kant's presentation, however, is not (indeed, *cannot* be) based on any mutuality in the ground of being.

⁹² GL5, 507.

⁹³ Schindler, *The Dramatic Structure of Truth*, 362.

⁹⁴ MW, 115.

⁹⁵ Schindler, *The Dramatic Structure of Truth*, 362.

⁹⁶ Unlike the "[c]ategories [which] have a finite content and so can be de-fined over against one another . . . [t]he transcendental, by contrast, are all-pervasive and, therefore, mutually immanent qualities of being as such" (TL1, 15).

⁹⁷ "At this point we can look back at the connection of the transcendental *modi* of worldly Being. Everywhere their mutual penetration was clarified, although they remain distinct from one another as modalities," (E, 83).

Rather, their differentiation comes about when they are separated one from another through logical abstraction; they possess a *difference in disunity*. Thus for Kant the transcendentals are vacuous of any concrete content and remain purely formal. As von Balthasar commenting on Kant's understanding of beauty puts it:

Pure beauty is *formal* in a double sense here: in so far as it ignores the link between the true and the good (which is unheard-of with respect to the classical Christian tradition), and in so far as it correspondingly 'abstracts' (this word is Kant's own) from every object and every ethical interest, in order to enjoy the form, as unrelated and possessing meaning only within itself with the pure formal harmony of our cognitive powers. In this Kant is without a doubt the first theoretician of *abstract art*.⁹⁸

Von Balthasar's starting point, then, can be read as a reversal of Kant's schema that is meant to retrieve and safeguard the intelligibility of Being. Concomitantly, von Balthasar's presentation is a concretization of the transcendentals, keeping them from being formalized, again with a view to their fundamental relation to Being.

Von Balthasar begins with the *pulchrum*, using it as a theological method. Indeed, he claims that beauty is *the* authoritative method for theology.⁹⁹ This is not a denigration of the *verum* or *bonum*; neither is it a substitution of the logical and ethical perspectives in theology with the aesthetic.¹⁰⁰ Rather, what von Balthasar insists upon is that speculative (i.e., theoretical) and practical reason will find their completion only with aesthetic knowledge.¹⁰¹ Therefore, although von Balthasar gives priority to beauty, he does not neglect the good and the true. In fact, beauty is only the beginning; a

⁹⁸ GL5, 506.

⁹⁹ LA, 11.

¹⁰⁰ GL1, 9.

¹⁰¹ GL1, 152.

theology of the beautiful will be supplemented with both a theology of the good and a theology of the true.¹⁰² Thus the structure of von Balthasar's *magnum opus*, his triptych: *Theological Aesthetics*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*. He writes, "One both can and must consider the revelation of the living God, as the Christian understands it, not only from the point of view of its truth and goodness, but also from that of its ineffable beauty."¹⁰³ Consequently, von Balthasar's focus on beauty is meant "to complement the [theological] vision of the true and the good."¹⁰⁴

Concentrating upon beauty, von Balthasar attempts to set forth what he calls a 'theological aesthetics'. He warns us that the preeminence he gives to beauty does not mean that his endeavor is an 'aestheticism': he is not concerned with beauty simply for the sake of beauty. His theology is not aesthetic in a negative Kierkegaardian sense.¹⁰⁵ Nor is von Balthasar's work an 'aesthetic theology' either in the sense of being baroque or florid.

To underscore the importance of not confusing aesthetic theology with a theological aesthetics, von Balthasar first explains what he means by the former and gives the historical reasons for its development. He then critically examines a few key figures of Romantic theology who are proponents of an aesthetic theology. Von

¹⁰² GL1, 11.

¹⁰³ GL1, 11.

¹⁰⁴ GL1, 9.

¹⁰⁵ By "negative Kierkegaardian sense," I mean aesthetic in the sense that the Swedish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard saw it as negative attribute of the person who was only interested in the pursuit of pleasure for the sake of pleasure and was therefore not an ethical or religious person. See his *Either/Or*.

Balthasar's overview of aesthetic theology also serves as way of acquiring "a more precise notion of what the concerns of a *theological aesthetics* may be."¹⁰⁶ For our purposes here, we do not need to examine the historical instantiations of aesthetic theology. Rather, we shall explain the difference between theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology and reiterate the historical grounds for the latter.

Simply put, the difference between aesthetic theology and theological aesthetics is that the former attempts to grasp the whole of Biblical revelation from "extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetics (above all poetry) . . .", while the latter "develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself with genuine theological methods."¹⁰⁷

Thus aesthetic theology endeavours to read revelation from an artistic perspective, a perspective that is negative according to von Balthasar for it proceeds from a worldly aesthetic, that is, beauty interpreted in a secular and therefore limited sense. In fact, he contends that this understanding of aesthetics "cannot be considered as a Biblical value at all."¹⁰⁸ Such a secular aesthetic is to be taken in a restricted sense unlike the broader concept of beauty as found in ancient Greek thought which conceived of beauty "from the unreflected position within a totality," that is, within a comprehensive vision of reality as a whole that included both the secular and divine realms.¹⁰⁹ With the growing separation between theology and philosophy, philosophy

¹⁰⁶ GL1, 79.

¹⁰⁷ GL1, 117.

¹⁰⁸ GL1, 79.

¹⁰⁹ GL1, 79.

comes to be more autonomous in nature. Beauty considered in this manner stands alone as the object of its own proper science.¹¹⁰

Like the earlier “great attempts to see Biblical revelation . . . within the total form of a theology that organically includes philosophy . . .”, aesthetic theology is a positive, albeit failed, attempt “to bring together the theory of beauty, which by now had become self-conscious, with Christian revelation, and, beyond this, to identify the two if at all possible.”¹¹¹ According to von Balthasar, there was a double impetus for this: the first was a humanistic response and the second was a response to the Reformation. The humanistic response sought the preservation of Christianity as a positive characteristic of humanity’s tradition. The response to the Reformation was a conscious effort to make Christianity presentable once again “after it had been denuded by the iconoclasm of Luther and Calvin and had had to take refuge in naked pietistic interiority.”¹¹² Although aesthetic theology was essentially a positive attempt to unite the Bible with (Idealistic and Romantic) aesthetics, “Romantic theology ultimately failed because of a deep theological inadequacy, namely, that it did not sufficiently distinguish between creation and revelation, or, to formulate it in the terms of our enquiry, we can say that Romantic

¹¹⁰ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) is generally acknowledged as the originator of aesthetics as a separate philosophical discipline in his work *Aesthetica* (1750-58), although he had first used the word aesthetics as it is now understood in his earlier (1735) work *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Form and Shape from Pygmalion’s Creative Dream*, ed. and trans. by Jason Gaiger [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002], 7).

¹¹¹ GL1, 79.

¹¹² GL1, 80

theology foundered on a kind of aesthetic and religious monism.”¹¹³ One could say that aesthetic theology collapsed the supernatural into the natural in such a way that the two realms were too closely identified with one another.

A theological aesthetics, von Balthasar says, is a theology that subjectively perceives (aesthetics in the Kantian sense of seeing) the “objective self-interpretation” of the beauty and glory of God’s self-revelation.¹¹⁴ Von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is aesthetics in a dual sense. On the one hand it denotes a theory of perception according to the original meaning of the Greek work *aesthesis* and on the other hand it is also a theory of beauty. But unlike the typical understanding of the science of aesthetics as it was first developed by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, von Balthasar’s theory of beauty does not simply stand alone nor is it only “self-conscious.” By this, we mean to say that his theory of beauty cannot be set forth separated from the whole—which is, as we saw earlier, what von Balthasar calls “the unreflected position of a totality”—a whole that not only incorporates both philosophy and theology, but takes its measure not solely from a subjective position but ultimately from the objective divine self-revelation and interpretation.

By using beauty as a lens for theology, von Balthasar also shows how beauty is intrinsically related to truth and goodness. As “constitutive of the very texture of being,”¹¹⁵ beauty, goodness, and truth are properties that transcend all things and so they

¹¹³ GL1, 104.

¹¹⁴ GL1, 125; LA, 11.

¹¹⁵ The phrase is from Kenneth L. Schmitz. See also his article “From Convertibility to Convergence: The Absoluteness of Truth and the Realization of the Person in God’s Plan,” *Anthropotes* 15/2 (1999): 73.

are called transcendental properties of being.¹¹⁶ Not only do they “penetrate all being” they also compenetrates one another so that “there is an element of ‘goodness’ in ‘beauty,’ in ‘truth,’ and so on.”¹¹⁷ Beauty, then, is inseparable from truth and goodness. In von Balthasar’s words: “The light of the transcendentals, unity, truth, goodness and beauty, a light at one with the light of philosophy, can only shine if it is undivided.”¹¹⁸ Von Balthasar insists that the essential connection between beauty, truth, and the good has to be maintained for an objective conception of the transcendentals. “A transcendence of beauty alone is not viable”.¹¹⁹ To disregard one would bring about disastrous harm to the others: they stand or fall together. Without beauty, truth and goodness ultimately lose their significance; they lose their “evidential power.”¹²⁰ Von Balthasar views beauty as the forgotten transcendental.¹²¹ The eclipse of beauty in modern thought has dire consequences for the other transcendental properties of being.

¹¹⁶ Traditionally, the transcendentals are listed as *unum, res, aliquid, bonum, verum*, (one, thing, something, good, truth). Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21.

¹¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Earthly beauty and divine glory,” *Communio* 10 (1983): 203.

¹¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, 107.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ This term comes from the title of the book by Thomas Dubay, S.M., *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

¹²¹ Beauty, says von Balthasar, “is a word that has never possessed a permanent place or an authentic voice in the exact sciences, and when it is chosen as a subject for discussion, appears to betray in him who chooses it an idle amateur among such very busy experts. It is . . . a word from which religion, and theology in particular, have taken their leave and distanced themselves in modern times by a vigorous drawing of the boundaries” (GL 1, 17). He states further: “No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to man. 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” (GL1, 18).

Truth pursued without beauty becomes a logic that is cold, hard and mechanical.

If the *verum* lacks that *splendor* which for Thomas is the distinctive mark of the beautiful, then the knowledge of truth remains both pragmatic and formalistic. The only concern of such knowledge will then merely be the verification of correct facts and laws, whether the latter are laws of being or laws of thought, categories and ideas.¹²²

This truth, in the end, lacks the power to convince. And the good, what happens when it is separated from beauty? Von Balthasar says that

if the *bonum* lacks that *voluptas* which for Augustine is the mark of its beauty, then the relationship to the good remains both utilitarian and hedonistic: in this case the good will involve merely the satisfaction of a need by means of some value or object, whether it is founded objectively on the thing itself giving satisfaction or subjectively on the person seeking it.¹²³

In other words:

the self-evidence of why it [i.e., the good] must be carried out [is lost]. Man stands before the good and asks himself why *it* must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. For this, too, is a possibility, and even the more exciting one: Why not investigate Satan's depths?¹²⁴

These are words to ponder. But von Balthasar does not stop there; he follows the argument to its logical conclusion. In a world where beauty can no longer be perceived, being itself "becomes untrustworthy."¹²⁵

Unfortunately, today, the role of beauty in both philosophy and theology has often been overshadowed.¹²⁶ Without beauty's radiance we cannot have a true picture of the good, nor can we have a good picture of truth.

¹²² GL1, 152.

¹²³ GL1, 152.

¹²⁴ GL1, 19.

¹²⁵ GL1, 19.

Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself 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.¹²⁷

To ignore beauty is to eventually commit ‘spiritual suicide’. And such is the state of affairs for many people today. Nihilism is a predominant ethos of our Western culture.¹²⁸ If a person can no longer pray or love, what sense does life have? We are all too rapidly witnessing the bitter fruit of such blindness.

Von Balthasar therefore proposes a theology that is developed in the light of beauty. It is an antidote for spiritual blindness and a “dry bones” theology.¹²⁹ His proposal can be seen as an effort to reunite theology and spirituality thus counteracting an overly rationalistic theology that tended to stifle the very object of theology.¹³⁰ Of his early theological studies von Balthasar wrote: “My entire period of study in the Society was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the

¹²⁶ Apropos the role of beauty in philosophy, John R. Betz comments: “And surely it is also of note that from its historical inception the metaphysical imagination, in Plato and Aristotle especially, has been concerned, almost preoccupied, with the question of beauty. By contrast, one could characterize the inception of modern philosophy (and modernity in general) precisely in terms of *the loss of the metaphysical imagination* and a corresponding boorish failure to appreciate beauty’s transcendent significance (“The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination,” 44-45).

¹²⁷ GL1, 18.

¹²⁸ See *Fides et ratio*, nos. 90, 91.

¹²⁹ Von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 208.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 194 ff.

glory of revelation.”¹³¹ The primacy that von Balthasar assigns to beauty does not represent a novel attempt to move theology onto some less “travelled side-road”. His work is a restoration and a *ressourcement*: it is a return to the very heart of theology via a “main artery.”¹³² On this point he is emphatic: “[T]his theological method, far from being a negligible and dispensable by-product of theological thought, *cannot but lay claim to the center of theology as the only valid approach*”.¹³³

At this point in our description, two questions come to the fore. The first question is philosophical and deals with the relationship between beauty and Being. If we take at face value von Balthasar’s statement that “[t]he witness borne by Being becomes untrustworthy for the person who can no longer read the language of beauty,”¹³⁴ then how can the neglect of beauty—which along with unity, truth and goodness, is one of the transcendental attributes of Being—lead to (what von Balthasar seems to be saying) the demise of metaphysics? Is this not an exaggeration of beauty’s role in philosophy? Posing the question more concretely, how does beauty reveal Being and what does it reveal about Being? The second question is theological. How can we say that beauty is the “only valid approach” to theology? Is this not also placing undo emphasis upon the theological aspect of beauty? Answering these questions will help explain how von Balthasar understands beauty.

¹³¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, ‘Einleitung,’ in Adrienne von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel, Ein Tagebuch. Zweiter Teil, II: Die Zeit der grossen Diktate* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1975), 195; cited in Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, xii.

¹³² GL1, 9.

¹³³ LA, 11. [Emphasis added.]

¹³⁴ GL1, 19.

IV. The Metaphysics of Beauty

To answer the philosophical question let us look at how von Balthasar interprets beauty. Following tradition and expressly using St. Thomas's terminology, von Balthasar says that beauty is constituted in the coincidence of two components: '*species*' (form) and '*lumen*' (splendor).¹³⁵ To see something as a whole is to see its *form*. Form makes something to *be*; it "gives being."¹³⁶ With material things we could say that form *informs* matter. Thus form (which comes from the Latin *forma* meaning shape)¹³⁷ shapes matter. It gives a thing its outer appearance substantially ("makes a thing to be the very thing it is" as in what makes a human a human and not a horse) and accidentally ("makes a thing the way it is" as in this human is Caucasian rather than Asian).¹³⁸ Form is the "intelligible structure"¹³⁹ that makes a thing apprehensible both to the senses and to the mind. Therefore to see the form of something is to see more than meets the eye because the form 'shapes' not only the exterior of a thing but also its interior.

Visible form not only 'points' to an invisible unfathomable mystery; form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting it and veiling it.¹⁴⁰

How do we see this interior form? It is, in a way, visible for material things in its exterior manifestation. But the form is not only visible in a thing's outer appearance, but

¹³⁵ GL1, 10, 118.

¹³⁶ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 45.

¹³⁷ GL1, 19.

¹³⁸ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 46.

¹³⁹ Dagobert D. Runes, ed. *Dictionary of Philosophy*, revised ed. (Savage, MD: Littlefield, Adams Quality Paperbacks, 1983), s.v. "Form," by Glenn R. Morrow.

¹⁴⁰ GL1, 151.

also in its intelligibility. It is this intelligibility, its interiority that truly makes a thing to be what it is. This “inward form . . . [is a] light that enlightens the mind.”¹⁴¹ And it is this *lumen*, the splendor of the profound interiority of the form, the “radiance of the inner being [, which] is the chief element in the beautiful.”¹⁴² When the brilliance of the inner form (*lumen*) is manifested in a thing’s outward appearance (*species*) we see its beauty. And so “the form of a thing is its beauty (*decor*).”¹⁴³ In von Balthasar’s words:

The beautiful is above all a *form*, and the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form’s interior. *Species* and *lumen* in beauty are one, if the *species* truly merits that name (which does not designate any form whatsoever, but pleasing, radiant form).¹⁴⁴

Beauty is a light that shines forth from the form and at the same time reveals the form. But it can only do so when it is united with truth and goodness. The “light of the transcendentals” which can only shine when they are undivided, is in reality the light of Being. Being itself is a light, or we could say more properly, Being *is* light. Therefore, when beauty shines forth it also reveals Being. “In the luminous form of the beautiful the being of the existent becomes perceivable as nowhere else”.¹⁴⁵ The external appearance of the form and its intelligibility, that is the rich interiority and depth of the form, are, in the form itself, inseparable. “The content (*Gehalt*) does not lie behind the

¹⁴¹ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 44.

¹⁴² Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, 35.

¹⁴³ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 43.

¹⁴⁴ GL1, 151.

¹⁴⁵ GL1, 153.

form (*Gestalt*), but within it.¹⁴⁶ It is this interiority, the inner radiance, the *lumen*, which reveals the form and also gives the form the power to attest to itself. According to von Balthasar:

Along with the seen surface of the manifestation there is perceived the non-manifested depth: it is only this which lends the phenomenon of the beautiful its enrapturing and overwhelming character, just as it is only this that insures the truth and goodness of the existent.¹⁴⁷

In its appearance, beauty possesses a dual polarity: it “binds and frees at the same time.”¹⁴⁸ It binds because in appearing, beauty cannot be grasped; it eludes being controlled. Beauty “cannot be perceived through the application of general rules, nor by some accidental quality, but by the impression it gives of complete inevitability with perfect freedom, overwhelming the beholder, and making him say: it could only have been thus.”¹⁴⁹ Von Balthasar uses the example of Mozart’s *Jupiter* symphony; its form cannot be other than it is.¹⁵⁰ One can only assent to the beautiful form as it appears gratuitously. This binding nature of the beautiful form also releases paradoxically the power of its opposite pole. The experience of beauty enables the human person to transcend his finite nature. An encounter with beauty is ecstatic. Persons are taken out of themselves when they behold beauty. As a sign that points to the infinite, beauty reveals, in an incipient way, the human being’s call to transcendence.

¹⁴⁶ GL1, 151.

¹⁴⁷ GL1, 442.

¹⁴⁸ LA, 53.

¹⁴⁹ Von Balthasar, “Characteristics of Christianity,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, 180.

¹⁵⁰ LA, 53.

Von Balthasar's aesthetics is consonant with philosophical aesthetics as it is presented throughout the history of the tradition and especially as it culminates in the Angelic Doctor's account of beauty. However, von Balthasar explicitly transforms this philosophical aesthetics into a theological aesthetics, something, which he says, Thomas failed to achieve.¹⁵¹ Therefore, although von Balthasar's theology is a return to a long-forgotten royal road, his work represents at the same time something legitimately new.

Before examining the order chosen for von Balthasar's trilogy, we need to take a step back and see the context in which he places his work. Although the trilogy could be described as von Balthasar's systematic theology¹⁵² (if we can use the term here for his radically unsystematic work),¹⁵³ the whole oeuvre is set against the fundamental philosophical question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

But why ask this question in the first place? The answer to this question, simply put, is because of the radiance of being, in a word: beauty, or more properly, glory. Von

¹⁵¹ GL2, 21.

¹⁵² In actual fact, the central part of von Balthasar's trilogy, *Theo-Drama*, is probably the most 'systematic' in terms of a presentation of the major 'treatises' of the Catholic faith such as Christology, Mariology, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology.

¹⁵³ Von Balthasar's work can be more accurately described as 'symphonic' than 'systematic'. He explains, "In his revelation, God performs a symphony The unity of the composition comes from God. That is why the world was, is and always will be pluralist Of course, the world cannot get an overall view of its own pluralism, for the unity has never lain in the world either formerly or now. But the purpose of its pluralism is this: not to refuse to enter into the unity that lies in God and is imparted by him, but symphonically to get in tune with one another and give allegiance to the transcendent unity" (*Truth is Symphonic*, 8-9). Furthermore, von Balthasar was mistrustful of theology that attempted to systematize the super-abundance of God's revelation. Again in his own words, "There is a central Light that illuminates everything, but we can glimpse it only from its different rays. Perhaps some eager soul thirsty for systematics would like to make something out of these fragments, putting the stones in order and assembling them into a mosaic. The author, however, mistrusts such undertakings. Such constructions merely try to yank the mystery from its seclusion and cast it into the glare of *our* light. But God dwells in inaccessible light" (Introduction to *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 11).

Balthasar sees every attempt to answer the question of Being and nothingness as a result of the wonder evoked by the radiant glory of Being. This wonder is not simply the wonder at the order and beauty of things as they exist, but more fundamentally, it is wonder *that* they exist at all in the first place, since there is no *necessity* that they exist.

This wonder throws us back to the very question of Being and the foundation of Being. There are several ways to answer the question about Being, but in the end, according to von Balthasar, they ultimately fail to answer the question in a satisfactory way without becoming conundrums. One way of answering the question is along the lines of Buddhism (and also in a similar fashion by Plotinus) which collapses the difference between Being and beings into an illusion so that non-being (Nirvana) becomes (is) the real.¹⁵⁴ This, however, is a contradiction for if nothingness is the really *real* (only nothingness really *is*) then, as that which really is, i.e. being is also only an illusion (i.e., *not* real!). Another way that the question is answered is along the lines of Heraclitus who says that everything is in a state of flux, such that all is movement. But this reduces everything to its opposite (Being is non-being, love is hate, etc.) and in the final analysis renders any answer or argument unintelligible.¹⁵⁵

There is yet another way of addressing the question of the fissure in being. Plato's answer to the riddle of absolute Being and contingent being is to posit real being not in sensible reality, but in the realm of the Ideas or Forms. In this way becoming (i.e.,

¹⁵⁴ Here, the first solution to the enigma of the ontological difference is that "the finite and limited will be non-being as such, thus an illusion that one must detect: this is the solution of Buddhist mysticism with its thousand nuances in the Far East. It is also the Plotinian solution: the truth is only attained in ecstasy where one touches the One, which is at the same time All and Nothing (relative to all the rest that only seems to exist)" (MW, 112).

¹⁵⁵ MW, 113.

contingent being) does not contradict the absolute. But this answer also fails to adequately address the problem of the infinite (absolute Being) and the finite (contingent being).

In fact, prior to Christianity, we cannot properly answer the question of the problem of Being without ending up in pantheism. Either finite being must attain infinite Being through some form of purgation so that all that exists in the end is the absolute, or absolute Being is the source of contingent being out of some need, but this renders the former deficient and therefore not absolute.

Thus to reiterate, the basic answer as to why von Balthasar begins his work with beauty is that it denotes the wonder that is evoked in the presence of Being. This wonder before the mystery of Being and existence is something that von Balthasar sees as being neglected by many people today. He states:

Our idea was that today's positivistic, atheistic man, who has become blind not only to theology but even to philosophy, needed to be confronted with the phenomenon of Christ and, therein, to learn to 'see' again—which is to say, to experience the unclassifiable, total otherness of Christ as the outshining of God's sublimity and glory.¹⁵⁶

While von Balthasar's primary concern is theological and with the ability to perceive (aesthesis) the form of Christ, he bemoans the plight that seems to affect many of his contemporaries with the inability to perceive even at the philosophical level. This philosophical 'blindness' is not necessarily a loss of the sense of wonder per se, but rather a focusing on the object of wonder as something that is taken for granted. That is, it is something that is simply seen as a given; the object of wonder is something that is just there. For von Balthasar, this is a type of 'metaphysical' blindness to the richness of

¹⁵⁶ TL1, 20.

Being itself that displays a bias of a (logical) positivistic attitude that views any questions of a metaphysical nature as being irrelevant and nonsensical (*Auguste Comte*). It is in this sense that the stance of ‘atheistic man’ tends to pass over “the fundamental questions of human life” and thus fails to recognize the full extent or disposition of human wonder.¹⁵⁷ Yet it is precisely this wonder that is the beginning of philosophy.¹⁵⁸

A. The Philosophical A Priori Element of a Theological Aesthetics

Von Balthasar’s presentation of his theological aesthetics, indeed the whole of his theological investigations (and for our purpose here, in particular, the trilogy), needs to be seen against the background setting regarding the question of being. In fact, von Balthasar’s work here echoes Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) philosophical explorations.¹⁵⁹ Both men are concerned with the question of Being. To put it again in the form of a question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” This question is addressed by both von Balthasar and Heidegger, but their respective answers to this question are quite different.

For Heidegger, this is the critical question in philosophy. His whole “thought pivots around . . . the ontological difference, the difference between Being and

¹⁵⁷ *Fides et ratio*, no. 1.

¹⁵⁸ Socrates remark in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (155d): “For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy” is echoed by philosophers from Aristotle (*Metaphysics* [982b12]) to Martin Heidegger (*Was ist das—die Philosophie?*).

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Oliver Davies, “The theological aesthetics,” 137.

beings.”¹⁶⁰ Or as William Barrett puts it, it is “the estrangement from Being itself [that] is Heidegger’s central theme.”¹⁶¹ John O’Donnell says that for von Balthasar too, “the Being-question is the dominating leitmotiv of his thought.”¹⁶² Angelo Scola reiterates this point in his critical analysis of von Balthasar’s brief presentation, “Retrospective,”¹⁶³ whereby the Swiss theologian sets forth “the rational structure underlying the movement of thought from which his whole work takes its impetus and unfolds.”¹⁶⁴ Scola states that

Balthasar’s aim is to show how the distinctive element in his thought fits in with the ontological patrimony inherited from classical philosophy. Ontological language, with its constituent components—such as, above all, the problem of the ontological difference, as it is called in contemporary metaphysics, or of the real distinction, to adhere to the terminology of classical metaphysics—is seen as the modality, at once more synthetic and more rigorous, of restating the problem of the relationship between essence and being.¹⁶⁵

Von Balthasar’s answer to the perennial question of Being progresses in a very different direction than Heidegger’s answer. It is this answer to “the question of who or what gives (*gibt*) Being” which separates these two influential Germanic thinkers.¹⁶⁶

We shall now briefly examine how Heidegger answers the question of Being in order that, by means of contrast, we can elucidate von Balthasar’s answer. This

¹⁶⁰ John O’Donnell, S.J., *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992), 6.

¹⁶¹ William Barret, *Irrational Man* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), 207.

¹⁶² O’Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 6.

¹⁶³ In MW, 111-19.

¹⁶⁴ Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style*, 17.

¹⁶⁵ Scola, *A Theological Style*, 18.

¹⁶⁶ O’Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 6.

comparison should enable us to grasp more fully the Swiss theologian's own presentation of Being.

*B. Heidegger on Being*¹⁶⁷

To the question of Being (*Sein*) and the enigma of being (*Dasein*), that is to say the riddle of human existence—I exist but I do not create my own existence therefore I am a finite, contingent being and as such I need not necessarily exist, which infers that as a finite being I am open to the infinite—Heidegger gives an enigmatic answer. He claims that the givenness (thrownness) of Being cannot be referred to any other thing or existent other than the groundlessness of Being. The being-ness of Being which gives or bestows being to some thing or, in other words, the Being that makes some thing being-there (*Dasein*), cannot “regress from Being back to existent,” a charge that Heidegger levels at Christian theology.¹⁶⁸ His “accusation [is] that a Christian metaphysics necessarily contracts Being and misses its grandeur by focusing not upon Being as such but rather upon an individual object that exists (notably the incarnate Christ).”¹⁶⁹ Thus to posit the giving of Being to another supreme existent is to be guilty of onto-theology. For Heidegger, the gift of Being rests with Being itself; it lies ultimately on its why-lessness. He compares the givenness of Being to a child that plays. This givenness is, finally, groundless; it is in his words the ‘sending’ of Being, the *Geschick* of Being.

¹⁶⁷ In this following section, I am drawing upon Matthew A. Daigler's article “Heidegger and von Balthasar: A Lover's Quarrel over Beauty and Divinity,” in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1995): 375-394 and also von Balthasar's presentation of Heidegger's thought in GL 5, 429-450.

¹⁶⁸ GL 1, 158.

¹⁶⁹ Oliver Davies, “The theological aesthetics,” 138.

He states:

The *Gesckick* [sending] of being, a child that plays, shifting the pawns: the royalty of a child—that means, the ἀρχή, that which governs by instituting grounds, the being of being. The *Gesckick* of being: a child that plays . . .

Why does it play . . . ? It plays because it plays.

The because withers away in the play. The play is without “why.” It plays since it plays. It simply remains a play: the most elevated and the most profound.

But this “simply” is everything, the one, the only.¹⁷⁰

In the final analysis “there is no giver beyond the giving for Heidegger; there is just the giving and withdrawal of Being in its epochal determinations.”¹⁷¹ In Heidegger’s enigmatic words, “It plays because it plays.”

Von Balthasar rejects Heidegger’s accusation, seeing in his presentation an impeding of the full blossoming of Being.¹⁷² According to von Balthasar, Heidegger’s concept of Being remains too impersonal. Although Being gives being, there is a kind of collapsing of being with Being. Within this collapse, the personal self (as an existent finite being) is eradicated by being immersed in infinite (anonymous) Being.¹⁷³

While Heidegger’s answer to the question of Being is essentially negative, von Balthasar’s answer is positive because for him, in the end, Being is best interpreted as love. How does von Balthasar come to this conclusion? He begins by casting a penetrating gaze on Being in order to get to the bottom of thing(s), i.e., he attempts to

¹⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 113; reference taken from Daigler, “Heidegger and von Balthasar,” 391.

¹⁷¹ Daigler, “Heidegger and von Balthasar,” 391.

¹⁷² Von Balthasar says, “In the work of Heidegger, the true wonder at the fact that something exists rather than nothing does not run its full course, for it points to a freedom which he does not wish to perceive” (GL5, 448).

¹⁷³ Davies, “The theological aesthetics,” 138.

get at the foundation of Being. In doing so, von Balthasar presents us with what he calls four different ways in which Being is opened up to us.

C. Von Balthasar's Fourfold Distinction of Being

Von Balthasar remarks that the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” is often not sufficiently examined in philosophy. Rather, the wonder that Being evokes is too often simply described or philosophy moves too quickly from the wonder that beings exists to “the fact of their existing in such and such a way.”¹⁷⁴

Von Balthasar then describes a paradoxical situation. Since the “phenomenal world” has an *a priori* objective order, i.e., an order not derived from human construct, it exhibits beauty. He then draws a parallel between the sciences and philosophy. According to von Balthasar, the objective ordering of things as they are seems to be demonstrated to a greater degree the more one penetrates into the nature of things and thus displays a type of necessity. Philosophy, he says, then draws upon this *a priori* necessary objective order within nature and makes the assumption that such a “totality of sense” exists also for Being in its totality. In so far as Being now necessarily exists, there is no place for wonder at the existence of Being or beings (things) at all. Wonder is relegated to the fact that beings exist in an orderly (i.e., beautiful) fashion “within the necessity of Being.”¹⁷⁵ In von Balthasar’s words, “Wonderment is constantly on the point of turning into a marveling at the beauty of existence as a whole, of that order and

¹⁷⁴ GL5, 613.

¹⁷⁵ GL5, 613-614.

orderliness of what is already ‘adorned’ and ‘equipped’ (κόσμος)”¹⁷⁶

But this necessitating of Being misses the point. Von Balthasar says:

Wonder at Being is not only the beginning of thought, but—as Heidegger sees—also the permanent element (ἀρχή) in which it moves. But this means—contrary to Heidegger—that it is not only astonishing that an existent being can wonder at Being in its own distinction from Being, but also that Being as such by itself to the very end ‘causes wonder’, behaving as something to be wondered at, something striking and worthy of wonder.¹⁷⁷

Von Balthasar attempts to answer the fundamental metaphysical question concerning the “miracle of Being” using a fourfold distinction. In so doing, he claims that these distinctions, when taken “together reveal for the first time that which in the realm of metaphysics deserve the authentic name ‘Glory’.”¹⁷⁸

We shall now briefly examine von Balthasar’s presentation of the four different ways in which the metaphysical question is opened up. The first stage is the awareness of the fact that I exist as a being alongside other beings that exist; I am *conscious* of my existence as an entity among other existing entities. To illustrate this awareness, Von Balthasar uses the example of a mother’s smile. The child’s consciousness is awakened through the ‘I-Thou’ encounter, which is paradigmatically represented in the child-mother relationship. In the mother’s smile and loving embrace the child is granted access to the realm of Being. In von Balthasar’s words, “It [i.e., the child] *is*, in so far as it is allowed to take part as an object of love.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ GL5, 646.

¹⁷⁷ GL5, 614-615.

¹⁷⁸ GL5, 615.

¹⁷⁹ GL5, 616.

The second stage is the recognition that every other thing that exists “stand[s] in the same relation to Being as I do myself.”¹⁸⁰ The totality of finite beings added together cannot exhaust Being as such; they “have also been granted access to Being.”¹⁸¹ Therefore, Being possesses an abundance that must be understood as something that is always ‘greater than.’

The third distinction is the ontological difference. Created Being (i.e., non-subsistent Being) needs the existent (the existing thing/being) to exist just as much as the existent needs Being for its own existence. Thus there is difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seindes*), (which, as von Balthasar says, is not too different in its consequence from Thomas’ differentiation between essence (*essentia*) and existence (*esse* or *actus essendi*).¹⁸² Even though there is a richness and fullness to Being, in so far as it is non-subsistent, it remains poor in that it cannot impart being. The mutual interdependence between (non-subsistent) Being and being points to the need for a sure foundation for Being. This leads finally to the fourth level.

The fourth distinction is the God-world difference which comes to light by looking deeply beyond the Heideggerian ontological difference or Thomistic *distinctio realis*. It is only when we penetrate beyond the ontological difference to the difference between God and the world, says von Balthasar, that we can then ground both Being and

¹⁸⁰ GL5, 618.

¹⁸¹ Nicholas J. Healy III, “The World as Gift,” *Communio* 32 (2005): 397.

¹⁸² GL5, 624.

the existent in God. Subsistent Being is therefore grounded in God.¹⁸³ Being and beings *are* through subsistent Being. Only then can we secure the possibility of sustaining wonder at the glory of Being.

To recapitulate, the four levels of distinction are: first, I exist, I am conscious of my existing, that is, I have been given admission into Being; second, it is not just I, but every other thing that has also been granted access to Being; third, the fullness of Being as found in the richness and multiplicity of beings is still too weak to form the basis of Being as such since the mutual dependence between the existent and Being displays the latter's non-subsistent character and therefore its reliance on a primordial foundation. This leads to the fourth distinction, that subsistent Being must be acknowledged as "sovereignly and freely responsible for both being and the existent."¹⁸⁴

To summarize briefly what has been presented so far: von Balthasar's theology, developed in the light of the transcendental properties of Being—pulchrum, bonum, verum—is ultimately founded on a phenomenological and metaphysical exploration of the question of Being.¹⁸⁵ The answer to the question of Being is rooted in the very nature of Being as self-radiating glory. Historically, the radiance or beauty of Being has been the subject of metaphysics.¹⁸⁶ This is why von Balthasar holds that "all human

¹⁸³ St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching is that God is subsistent being itself, *ipsum esse subsistens* (this phrase is taken from his *Commentary on the Book of Causes* (*Expositio Super Librum de Causis*), prop. 7a. [and ST 1.4.2])

¹⁸⁴ Healy, "The World as Gift," 400.

¹⁸⁵ See D. C. Schindler's remarks on von Balthasar's method which is at once phenomenological and metaphysical, *The Dramatic Structure of Truth*, 31 and 141, n. 131.

¹⁸⁶ Von Balthasar explores the whole history of metaphysics from this perspective in GL4 and GL5.

philosophy (if we abstract the biblical domain and its influence) is essentially religious and theological, because it poses the problem of Absolute Being, whether one attributes to it a personal character or not.”¹⁸⁷ In the final analysis, however, it is only through revelation that we can truly answer the enigmatic question concerning the rupture in being. Human reason, although finite, is open to the infinite, but paradoxically as finite beings we can never attain the infinite on our own. The becoming from finite to the infinite can only come about through a gratuitous gift in the participation of Being. Thus the answer to the primordial metaphysical question can only receive its true answer in the God who reveals himself as love. Only through love can the whylessness of Being receive an adequate answer. In fact, von Balthasar claims provocatively that Being is co-extensive with love. This claim and all of its implications goes, in fact, to the heart of the argument proposed by this thesis. We shall, therefore examine this claim closely to verify its validity.

D. Being Interpreted as Love

What follows is a brief sketch of von Balthasar’s very dense presentation of Being interpreted as love. In his article, “Being interpreted as love: Reflections on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,”¹⁸⁸ Werner Löser notes that after surveying the vast writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, one might be tempted to conclude that although the Swiss theologian did have many things to say, in the end his work remains

¹⁸⁷ MW, 112.

¹⁸⁸ Werner Löser, “Being interpreted as love: Reflections on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 16 (1989): 475-490.

simply “a conglomerate of things” without a real unity.¹⁸⁹ This is, however, a misreading of the great Swiss theologian’s work, one that, in Löser’s words “does not correspond with reality.”¹⁹⁰ He states:

For von Balthasar, the “one thing necessary” was always crucial, and the immense variety of things he said and wrote only has meaning insofar as it brings this “one thing necessary” to ever new expression. This “One” can be summarized in its pithiest form in the sentence: “Being and love are co-extensive.”¹⁹¹

To equate Being with love is, of course, provocative in the least. But it must be admitted that there are times when “the co-extensiveness of Being and love” does appear to be true and that life’s longing for fulfillment will not be thwarted. Such would seem to be the case in a great human love for another, but the implicit trace of the relation between being and love is far from being conclusive and needs to be thoroughly followed and made explicit. This making explicit of the implicit is, according to Löser, what the theologian from Basel attempted to do in all of his work: “Von Balthasar’s life and work desired to be a pointer to this: that what we long for and occasionally suspect to be true *is* nothing less than the final and most comprehensive word on Being and reality as a whole.”¹⁹²

In presenting von Balthasar’s guiding insight, Löser first lays out the historical development of this Balthasarian idea and then presents us with the features of the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 475.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 475-76; internal citation from Hans Urs von Balthasar “Der Zugang zur Wirklichkeit Gottes,” in *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. II, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Einsiedeln, 1967): 15-45, here at 17.

¹⁹² Ibid., 476.

convertibility of being with love. Löser remarks that von Balthasar's insight, being interpreted as love, had "been part of . . . [his] thought for decades."¹⁹³ The critical moment of insight came when von Balthasar as a young man in 1929 made the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. So decisive was the call, that thirty years after the event, he would remark that he could still find the place in the Swabian forest where he was struck as it were by lightning. "The only thing worth noting about this is that this living law that shatters us and, by shattering us, also heals us (like St. Ignatius's wounded leg), has seemed to me even from the very beginning to be a kind of invisible theme of my life."¹⁹⁴ This insight—being interpreted as love—came to fruition because of the fertile intellectual preparation von Balthasar received from people like Romano Guardini, Rudolf Allers and Hans Eibl.¹⁹⁵ All three men were instrumental in preparing the way for von Balthasar's insight which occurred with his election to follow the Lord when he undertook the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. This election came about through von Balthasar's own experience of God who, out of love, freely communicates himself to his creature who waits with an attitude of (Ignatian) indifference. In Löser's words: "Here Being is unveiled as love and no longer needs to be interpreted in the framework

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Han Urs von Balthasar, "Pourquoi je me suis fait prêtre," *Editions Centre Diocésain de Documentation* (Tournai, 1959), 19-22, here at 21-22; cited in Löser, "Being interpreted as love," 480.

¹⁹⁵ Guardini suggested that von Balthasar examine Nietzsche in relation to Kierkegaard. A seed of von Balthasar's insight can already be seen in his in doctoral dissertation. Here, contra the prophet of the death of God, von Balthasar proclaims Kierkegaard's paradox: "God is dead, he has sacrificed himself, but he has never ceased to live . . ." (*Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modern deutschen Literatur* [Zurich, 1930], 31; cited in Löser, "Being interpreted as love," 481.) The Swiss theologian also mentions Allers' influence: "The philosophical truth of the psychotherapeutic method lay for him in this turn from the ego to the reality of the full Thou" (*Rechenschaft: 1965* [Einsiedeln, 1965], 34; cited in Löser, *Being interpreted as Love*, 481.) Von Balthasar was also deeply impacted by Eibl's lectures on Plotinus's perception of Being as "self-emerging and self-communicating" (ibid.).

of a pantheistic intellectual vision of identity.”¹⁹⁶ The truth of this provocative proposition was, for von Balthasar a “liberating alternative—entirely determining his life and thought from then on—to what he encountered in modern thought as it was presented in art and philosophy.”¹⁹⁷ What von Balthasar encountered in his *Germanistik* doctoral studies was a subjective anthropocentrism that formed the basis for constructing an epistemology and metaphysics that eventually led to “a pantheistic thinking of Identity.”¹⁹⁸

The truth of the assertion that Being is coextensive with love cannot be based upon an anthropocentrism. A worldview that reduces the whole of reality to the sum of humankind’s efforts and achievements cannot form the foundation for interpreting Being as love. Rather the truth of Being’s coextensiveness with love is built upon a theocentric vision of reality. As Löser says it is only “if a Wholly Other, who is himself love, [and] allows his love to become so effective in the world that all values will thereby undergo a transvaluation.”¹⁹⁹ This “transvaluation” is not only unattainable by the efforts of humanity; it is also, in some sense inconceivable. That is, it is something that humankind cannot anticipate. This salvific, healing manifestation comes then to humanity unexpectedly, undeservedly and unreservedly. The theological affirmation that Being is coextensive with love is based on a fact: the event of Jesus Christ. It is in this saving event that God manifests his love for the world in and through the life, death

¹⁹⁶ Löser, “Being interpreted as love,” 480.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 476.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 478.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 482-483.

and resurrection of Christ.

V. From Beauty to Glory: Theological Aesthetics

To answer the question as to why beauty is the “only valid approach” to theology, we need to see how von Balthasar approaches theology, or more accurately, how he approaches revelation.

God, or more properly, God as he has revealed himself to humanity, is the formal object of theology.²⁰⁰ Therefore theology is a human activity carried out in faith that is a rational, prayerful reflection upon God’s self-revelation. “All theology,” von Balthasar reminds us, “is an interpretation of divine revelation.”²⁰¹ Or as he succinctly states, “Theology is the expression of an expression.”²⁰² That is to say, it is human ‘words’ (*logoi*) about the one eternal divine Word (*Logos*) ‘spoken’ by the Father. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Heb 1:1-2). Von Balthasar remarks that “in revealing himself in Jesus Christ, God interprets himself—and this must involve his

²⁰⁰ See also the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith’s “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian *Donum veritatis* [24 May 1990]” (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 8, 8, which states: “The object of theology is the truth which is the living God and his plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ.”

²⁰¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 91. Hereafter cited as TD2.

²⁰² GL2, 28.

giving an interpretation, in broad outline and in detail, of his plan for the world.”²⁰³ He further says that “when God, acting in Jesus Christ, utters, expresses himself, his language must be intelligible to the world, or at least *become* intelligible through the divine Spirit, who teaches men’s hearts to listen and to speak so that they can utter a word in reply.”²⁰⁴ Precisely because it is a divine word spoken to the human person, von Balthasar begins his theology not by imposing human categories upon revelation, but rather by using the very form with which revelation is concerned, namely God’s glory as it appears in Jesus Christ. He states:

The subject of enquiry is then exactly this: the glory of the divine revelation, as it is presented and unfolded in the length and breadth of the theology of the Church. Therefore not immediately (and more narrowly) the form and beauty of theology, but the ultimate, objective ground which lies in the biblical revelation, as it gives shape and form to theology.²⁰⁵

If theology is to have an impact upon the world it must truly reflect God’s glory. The human words will necessarily reflect the glory of the Word, he “who is the refulgence of his [Father’s] glory” (Heb 1:3).²⁰⁶ “Divine *beauty*—the glory of the Lord—is *the* primary lens for interpreting God’s work in Christ.”²⁰⁷ Therefore, a hermeneutics of glory is crucial to the task of theology. In von Balthasar’s words: “There neither has been nor can be any intrinsically great and historically fruitful theology which has not

²⁰³ TD2, 91.

²⁰⁴ TD2, 91.

²⁰⁵ GL2, 14.

²⁰⁶ As Von Balthasar remarks: “Thus theology in the strict sense of the word cannot do any abstracting at all; all it can do is to display the normative content shining out from the irreducible fact” (*A Theology of History* [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963], 16-17).

²⁰⁷ Christopher W. Steck, S.J., *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 10.

been conceived and born under the constellation of the *kalon* and of *charis*.”²⁰⁸ Or again: “There is in the time of the Church no historically influential theology which is not itself a reflection of the glory of God; only beautiful theology, that is, only theology which, grasped by the glory of God, is able itself to transmit its rays, has the chance of making any impact in human history by conviction and transformation.”²⁰⁹

To support his argument for a theological aesthetics, von Balthasar points out various theologies that bear the impression of God’s glory and that also give expression to that glory.²¹⁰ He stresses that one does not need to focus on beauty in a slavish manner:

In order to feel where a great theology has been moved centrally by the glory of God it is in no sense enough merely to gather together those passages (often paltry or conventional or dependent on alien philosophies) where the subject of the beautiful is expressly considered. Rather, what is decisive for a theological aesthetic occurs most centrally in the heart, in the original vision and in the middle point where the basic forms crystallize.²¹¹

In the second and third volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*, von Balthasar demonstrates the above with theologies that truly reflect the splendor of the form of revelation. He states that his choice of theologies that historically substantiate his claim for a theological aesthetics is somewhat arbitrary. Although there are many theologies that truly reflect God’s glory, some of these will obviously have to be passed over. The main

²⁰⁸ GL1, 10.

²⁰⁹ GL2, 13-14.

²¹⁰ See GL2 [*Clerical Styles*] and *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986). Hereafter cited as GL3.

²¹¹ GL2, 14.

criteria guiding the choice of his illustrative theologies are that not only have they been grasped by the glory of the Lord, but that in expressing this glory they have also truly influenced the Church.

Glory is the form of God's self-revelation and it is this form that chiefly concerns von Balthasar. But what exactly is this glory? In explaining what is meant by glory, we need to be reminded that in the final analysis, glory, like the transcendental characteristics of being, cannot be fully defined. Although it escapes definition, we can describe glory. Glory is the theological analogue of beauty. Therefore, von Balthasar states:

What is involved is primarily not 'beauty' in the modern or even philosophical (transcendental) sense but the surpassing beauty in 'glory' in the sense of the splendor of the divinity of God himself as manifested in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus and reflected according to Paul, in Christians who look upon their Lord."²¹²

The theologian from Basel also remarks: "One of the main tasks of our *Aesthetics (The Glory of the Lord)* was to demonstrate the difference between the inner-historical phenomena (even religious phenomena) and the epiphany of God in Jesus."²¹³ When we speak about God's supernatural beauty we are referring to his divine glory. In theological terms, beauty is the glory of the Lord, his *kābôd*, *doxa*, *gloria*.²¹⁴ The Hebrew word *kābôd* originally referred to weight and heaviness, thus expressing a

²¹² MW, 96-97.

²¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 206, n. 6. Hereafter cited as TD3.

²¹⁴ GL1, 38. See also von Balthasar's "Earthly beauty and divine glory," 202.

person's importance, the 'weightiness' of his stature that commands respect.²¹⁵

Eventually, *kābôd* was also conceived in a similar manner as the Greek *doxa* and the Latin *gloria*, signifying "the idea of radiant light."²¹⁶ Glory is the "spiritual radiance" of the person.²¹⁷ This is why St. Thomas associates *claritas* (radiance, brilliance), the chief property of beauty, with God's glory.²¹⁸ This glory radiates; it is a light shining in the darkness.²¹⁹ This light, however, is so brilliant that one can only see it properly with the eyes of faith (*oculata fides*) for "what dazzles to the point of blinding is precisely what is most perfectly evident."²²⁰ Glory is that which is most intelligible, but it is also that which is veiled and remains hidden to the eye that is not 'trained' to see it. And just as the beauty of natural form contains both an exterior and interior manifestation (the unity of *lumen* and *species*), so also does the form of God's glory. The form of God's self-revelation appears most brilliantly in the form *par excellence*, Jesus Christ. He is the super Form, who in his appearance reveals the unfathomable depth of God. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30). And yet at the same time that he is the image (*eikon*)²²¹ and form (*morphe*)²²² of God, "he is

²¹⁵ John L. McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), s.v. "Glory," 313.

²¹⁶ Von Balthasar, "Earthly beauty and divine glory," 202.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

²¹⁸ ST 2-2.132.1.

²¹⁹ See Jn 1:5.

²²⁰ GL1, 511.

²²¹ See 2 Cor 4:4.

²²² See Phil 2:6.

what he expresses—namely God—but he is not whom he expresses—namely, the Father.”²²³

The appearance of God’s glory, his surpassing beauty, does not appear at first as a glory that overwhelms. Its appearance is anything but glorious. This glory, as it is manifested in the Christ-form, reaches its zenith paradoxically in the most horrific of all acts, the crucifixion and death of the Innocent One. Here in the “seeming absence of all beauty [we can see if we have assented to the gift of seeing,] the breakthrough of the flaming mystery of the glory of love: *fulget crucis mysterium*.”²²⁴ The revelation of this glory contains a double paradox for God’s revelation of himself appears precisely as something that is hidden. The glory of God is made manifest in concealment; and this glory is not something exalted but on the contrary it is the exact opposite of the human conception of glorification, rather it is abasement and utter humiliation. In fact this glory is anything but humanly beautiful: it is one of the most utterly horrible desecrations of beauty. We have here a reversal of categories for God’s ways are not the ways of humanity. God’s absolute glory is also his absolute humility.²²⁵ The glory of the Lord is revealed even as it is veiled by the ignominy of the Cross and descent into hell. This concealment of God’s glory on the Cross reveals the ever greater love of God, a love that knows no bounds, a love that loves to the end and beyond. Revealed in the crucified Christ, God’s glory is his power; it is his total, free, self-emptying love. God is love (1

²²³ GL1, 29.

²²⁴ Von Balthasar, “Earthly beauty and divine glory,” 206.

²²⁵ See Von Balthasar, “Characteristics of Christianity,” 177.

Jn 4:8). His self-revelation is a self-disclosure of who he is (love) and what he does (love-deed), which in God are one and the same.

All beauty is revelatory of Being and points in the direction of the divine, but it is divine beauty, God's glory displayed in the kenotic, obedient form of the crucified Son that most eminently reveals Being as love. This beauty radiates with a light that is blinding. Only those who have the eyes of faith can perceive the gift of the Father's love which radiates like a glorious light from the Cross. Because it is a revelation of God's glorious love and therefore a revelation of his very self and Being, it can only be seen by the heart that truly loves. It is this beauty, the glory of Trinitarian love as it is shown forth from the Cross of Christ that is von Balthasar's main focal point. It is beauty as it revealed in the complete abandonment of the Son to the Father's will. It is the Father's total letting go of the Son, giving him up, out of love for the life of the world. It is the beauty of the life of holiness for those who, in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, are truly sons and daughters of God. Using the terminology of St. Bonaventure, von Balthasar speaks of the *impressio* that this beauty/glory makes upon the human person. Only when a person is 'impressed' by the Form of revelation can he then give expression (the Bonaventurian *expressio*) to this glory. And that is why von Balthasar claims this beauty as the valid theological method.

This means that God does not come primarily as a teacher for us ('true'), as a useful 'redeemer' for us ('good'), but to display and to radiate himself, the splendor of his eternal triune love in that 'disinterestedness' that true love has in common with true beauty.²²⁶

²²⁶ MW, 80.

What happens to natural beauty? Can we speak of it in the same way now that it is eclipsed by the glory of the Lord or must we remain silent?

Gazing upon *this* glory does not eliminate or replace the beauty that is revelatory of being in the world. If it did then

God would be canceling his own plan for the world, together with the conditions he laid down for its fulfillment. On the contrary, the paradoxical events of with which God “shocks” sinful man are seen as an invitation and stimulus to overleap the bounds of a closed world of finite ideas and to share in God’s self-manifestation and openness, something to which the creaturely condition itself points, though unable to attain it.²²⁷

There is, however, a vast difference between natural beauty and supernatural beauty. It is important to keep in mind that God’s beauty is not univocally predicated from our idea of natural beauty. As von Balthasar says, “Nowhere does theological aesthetics descend to the level of an inner-worldly aesthetics.”²²⁸ God’s beauty is infinitely greater than any natural beauty. The difference between created beauty and its analogue, the glory of the Lord, is always greater than the similarity.²²⁹ While we speak of similarity there is always an ever-greater difference, so much so that Aquinas says there is no proportion between earthly and divine things. So great is the difference that the only way we can speak about God’s beauty is through the language of analogy. This language is vitally important because it allows us to speak in a meaningful way of God’s glory, which surpasses earthly beauty.²³⁰ At the same it safeguards earthly beauty from

²²⁷ Von Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful,” 114.

²²⁸ GL1, 417.

²²⁹ DS 806.

²³⁰ As Von Balthasar says: “Thomas’ doctrine of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* is a philosophical thesis but it enables us once again to make a clear differentiation between the ‘glory’ of

being completely eclipsed by divine glory. It is precisely “in and through the form of the world” and not merely beside it or behind the being of the world that God’s glory is made manifest.²³¹ Analogy enables us to speak of beauty and glory not in exclusive terms (‘either/or’) but inclusively (the Catholic ‘both/and’). The guiding principle here is the hypostatic union, the “mystery of unity in duality”²³² whereby the Son contains both divine and human natures “without confusion or change, without division or separation.”²³³

Glory does not destroy natural beauty but brings it to fulfillment. It is only when beauty is fulfilled, brought to itself by being filled over, by divine glory that not only do we perceive the reason ‘behind’ the gift of being but at the same time we learn that the reason for being is identical with the Giver of being: God *is* love.

Earthly beauty contains a mystery, the depth of which is unfathomable precisely because it is a cipher that points to divine glory. We cannot forget, as Henri de Lubac once remarked, that mystery is not all on the side of God.²³⁴ One can never completely grasp beauty. Contemplating beauty and above all the Supreme Beauty reveals a mystery that is, in St. Augustine’s words, something “ever new.” Perhaps St. Catherine

God and the beauty of the world” (GL4, 395; cited with some modification in Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 47.)

²³¹ GL1, 431, see also 430.

²³² Neuner, Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 145.

²³³ Council of Chalcedon (451), DS 302. English translation taken from Neuner, Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 154. We must remember, however, that “the supernatural is not there in order to supply that part of our natural capacities we have failed to develop. *Gratia perficit naturam, non supplet*. [. . .] In fact God’s Incarnation perfects the whole ontology and aesthetics of created Being” (GL1, 29).

²³⁴ Henri de Lubac, “The Mystery of the Supernatural,” in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 314.

of Siena best summarizes this when she writes: “You are a mystery as deep as the sea; the more I search, the more I find, and the more I find the more I search for you. But I can never be satisfied; what I receive will ever leave me desiring for more.”²³⁵ As the ancient maxim states: “*Si comprehendis non est Deus.*”²³⁶

Now that we have given a brief exposition of von Balthasar’s understanding of beauty/glory, we can attempt a synthesis by applying what he says about beauty that makes it crucial for moral theology.

²³⁵ *On Divine Providence*, Cap. 167, Gratiaram actio ad Trinitatem: ed. lat., Ingolstadii 1583, f. 290v-291; cited in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 2, *Lenten Season. Easter Season* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1976), 1794.

²³⁶ GL1, 450.

CHAPTER THREE

SAVING BEAUTY: SEEING AND SUMMONS

I. Introduction

The connection between aesthetics and ethics has been implicit throughout history but it has, nonetheless, not been fully elaborated. We have given sufficient evidence, in the first chapter, of the intrinsic relationship between beauty and the good. In von Balthasar's work, the correspondence between aesthetic and ethics is often mentioned, but here also, it is never fully expounded. Now that we have examined Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, we need to demonstrate how it is beneficial, indeed, crucial for the renewal of moral theology. Before we begin this task, let us recall that our goal in this chapter is not to present a development of von Balthasar's ethics. The presentation of a Balthasarian ethics has already been set forth in several works. We shall briefly examine these works so as to distinguish this thesis from them.

What our own work attempts is to present the implications of von Balthasar's claim—that theological aesthetics is the central method for theology—for moral theology. Our own endeavour, therefore, is not primarily a work of ethics, but is rather meta-ethical.

In this chapter we will attempt to answer the question, What does Hans Urs von Balthasar say about beauty that makes it crucial for moral theology? In other words, What is the significance of beauty for understanding the *motus* of the creature, the movement of the person back to God?

In the first volume of his *Theological Aesthetics*, von Balthasar states why he begins his theological studies with beauty. First of all, beauty “is a word with which the philosophical person does not begin, but rather concludes,” for it “is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach.”¹ This being so, von Balthasar asks if beauty should not be the Christian’s first word.² We too, then, shall make beauty our “first word.”

As a prayerful and rational reflection upon God’s revelation, theology has a cohesive unity. The reflection on what has been revealed to us and what we believe—dogmatic or systematic theology—is intrinsically related to how we are called to act as human beings made in the image and likeness of God—moral theology. Moral theology, therefore, can never be completely separated from theology as a whole.³ The fundamental unity intrinsic to theology as a science allows us to take von Balthasar’s thesis—beauty/glory is essential for dogmatic theology—and apply it to moral theology. Therefore, like von Balthasar’s work, this study proposes to be a theological aesthetics

¹ GL1, 17, 18.

² GL1, 18-19.

³ Romanus Cessario’s remarks are pertinent: “Unfortunately, the actual fragmentation of theology segregates moral theology from instruction about the dynamics of the participated divine life available to each believer through union with the Risen Christ.” (*The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* [Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991], 169, n. 16.)

and not an aesthetic theology. By developing a theological aesthetics of moral theology, a moral theological aesthetics, we are also placing ourselves firmly within the context of Vatican II's call for renewal in moral theology "through a more vivid contact with the Mystery of Christ and the history of salvation."⁴ The mystery of Christ in all its richness is best approached not through the eyes of the cold calculating clinician but through the eyes of the lover, one who beholds with wonder the beauty of the beloved.

The title of this chapter suggests the two moments that make up von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, "vision and rapture."⁵ We will examine these two phases in this chapter and show how they are fundamental to the moral life of the human person and the subsequent theological reflection. The first argument—Beauty gives us a new knowledge and allows us to see the whole of humanity's moral life—corresponds with the moment of vision. Beauty first appears and enables us to see things as they truly are. The second argument—Beauty is a divine summons to conversion—corresponds with the stage of rapture. The appearance of beauty is something ecstatic; it takes the human person out of himself and at the same calls him to change.

II. Balthasarian Ethics

Before setting forth our argument, which considers von Balthasar's theological aesthetics and the implications it has upon ethics, we must examine those theses which set forth a 'Balthasarian ethics'. It is important to do so to demonstrate how this present work differs from them. As we mentioned above, there are several works that explicitly

⁴ *Optatam totius*, no. 16.

⁵ GL1, 125.

set forth an ethics derived from the theology of von Balthasar. The first two works are similar in their methodology, while the third work that examines von Balthasar's contribution to ethics differs from the first two. We shall examine all three theses that deal with von Balthasar's theology as it is engaged in the area of ethics in order to sufficiently demonstrate how this present work is substantially distinctive from those three works.

A. Christopher Steck: Ethical Thought of von Balthasar

The first prolonged attempt at developing an ethics from the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar comes from the Jesuit theologian Christopher Steck. His book, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, is an expanded reworking of his doctoral dissertation.⁶ Steck's work has a double aim, first to make explicit the implicit ethical theory in von Balthasar's theology, and second, to demonstrate the normative character of such a Christian ethics.⁷ This is no small task since von Balthasar's "writings offer little in the way of an explicit reflection on theological ethics."⁸ In fact, the only work that explicitly deals with ethics is his essay, "Nine Propositions on Ethics."⁹ Steck contends, however, that this work does not sufficiently represent the implicit moral theory in von Balthasar's other writings, particularly the theological aesthetics and the

⁶ Christopher W. Steck, S.J., *The Ethical Thought of Hans von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ In Heinz Schürmann, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 77-104.

theo-drama.¹⁰ Clearly, this is a difficult task as Steck himself remarks:

Since von Balthasar provides no systematic treatment of ethics, we must attempt to assemble a coherent theory of ethics out of his approaches to related concepts—e.g., human agency, anthropology, and freedom. The theory I present below is indicated in his writings, though never made explicit. Given the richness and depth of von Balthasar's ideas and their unsystematic presentation, however, there probably can be no definitive interpretation of his ethics.¹¹

This last point is extremely important to remember when we are dealing with von Balthasar's ethics. It is precisely because of his symphonic rather than systematic approach to theology that we can expect differing views regarding von Balthasar's ethics.

Steck draws primarily on the first two parts of von Balthasar's trilogy, *The Glory of the Lord* and the *Theo-Drama*, to develop a Balthasarian ethics. In fact, the theological dramatics whereby von Balthasar elaborates a theology from the perspective of the Good is the logical place one would assume to find a Balthasarian ethics. The reason for this is that it is here in the second part of the trilogy that von Balthasar explores the relationship between the divine freedom of God and the finite freedom of the human being. The *Theo-Drama* is perhaps the most 'systematic' work of the trilogy. In it we find von Balthasar's ecclesiology, Christology, Mariology, theological anthropology, and soteriology. It does not, however, set forth a moral theology. In fact, as Edward T. Oakes remarked, according to von Balthasar, trying to construct an ethics

¹⁰ Regarding von Balthasar's article on ethics, Steck writes, "His theological aesthetics is almost completely absent from this essay. In particular, the essay glosses over how Christian action is a response to the *perceived* (i.e., aesthetically) appearance of divine glory (*The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 5).

¹¹ Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 5.

from the *Theo-Drama* would be unsuccessful.¹² So how does Steck resolve this seeming theological impasse? He does so by proposing that von Balthasar's theology implicitly contains or is best elaborated as a divine command theory of ethics. This method clearly goes against the grain of most Catholic approaches to moral reflection. Steck argues, however, that von Balthasar's theology allows for "an 'Ignatian reconfiguration' of divine command" theory.¹³ The Christocentric element of Balthasarian ethics—which draws upon Karl Barth's theology—is further deepened and centered in the Trinitarian dimension of the mission of the Son by the Father through the Spirit. Co-missioned by the Father, human agents participate in the Son's mission by following him in their own personal mission. This, according to Steck, is a radical transformation of divine command theory that safeguards the finite freedom of the human person in his encounter with the divine infinite freedom. In other words, this Ignatian reconfiguration gives sufficient room for the encounter between divine freedom and human freedom without denigrating or negating either.

B. Melanie Barrett: Love's Beauty

The next significant treatment of von Balthasar's ethics is Melanie Barrett's work, *Love's Beauty at the Heart of the Christian Moral Life: The Ethics*

¹² Oakes writes, "Imagine my surprise, then, when I got to Basel and, upon telling Balthasar of my interest in working on the ethical implications of his Theodramatics, I got the instant reply that such a project was bound to be a failure from the outset! He had nothing to say about ethics in this second part of the trilogy and would only allude to the related 'problem of norms' in the *Theologik* (Part III of the trilogy)" (Edward T. Oakes, "Ethics and the search for God's will in the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 17 [1990]: 410).

¹³ Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 5; 152.

of *Catholic Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar*.¹⁴ Barrett appreciates Steck's development of a Balthasarian ethics but finds fault with his overall treatment. She writes:

Steck's seminal treatment of Balthasar's ethics is a *tour de force* deserving of much careful study. However, certain aspects of Balthasar's thought are neglected by placing it into a divine-command paradigm, even one carefully reconfigured to accommodate uniquely Balthasarian insights. In particular, the paradigm's central preoccupation with the interplay between divine will and human freedom make it inattentive to questions of moral formation and unable to do justice to the central place of love in Balthasar's overall theology.¹⁵

As the title of her book suggests, what Barrett proposes is an ethics centered on love and on its orientation toward perfection.¹⁶ Her work seeks to demonstrate how von Balthasar's theology is amenable to a virtue theory of ethics.¹⁷ Barrett highlights several positive aspects of the Swiss theologian's work with regard to virtue ethics. She does, however, critique the theologian from Basel for not going far enough with regard to the practical dimension of ethics.¹⁸ It is true that vis-à-vis moral reasoning, von Balthasar's work has been criticized as being too theological and not sufficiently 'moral', i.e., it is not practical. Barrett sees this deficiency in von Balthasar's thought stemming from what she perceives as two shortcomings in his work, first "an excessive reliance on the

¹⁴ Melanie Susan Barrett, *Love's Beauty at the Heart of the Christian Moral Life: The Ethics of Catholic Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2009). The book is a publication of her Ph.D. dissertation: Melanie Susan O'Hara, "Love's Beauty at the Heart of the Christian Moral Life: Constructing the Ethics of Hans Urs von Balthasar," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Chicago, 2005).

¹⁵ Barrett, *Love's Beauty*, 193.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 302-303.

scriptures” and second “an overly romantic view of love-excess.”¹⁹ Both of these aspects are important, but according to Barrett “they are insufficient for guiding the moral life.”²⁰ Ultimately for Barrett, von Balthasar’s theology fails to translate into an ethics because it suffers from an inadequate practical philosophy, particularly, an inadequate practical anthropology. She writes:

What is needed is either a more thorough-going philosophical anthropology, one which is able to account for legitimate self-love, or a more concrete set of secondary principles that can supplement the basic moral imperative to love and the general principles that I culled from his more occasional insights. What is really missing, in other words, is a more rigorous and fully integrated philosophy. I do not mean to suggest that Balthasar has no philosophy whatsoever, only that the one he does rely upon, particularly in the three volumes of the *Theo-Logic*, simply does not go far enough. . . . Balthasar does have a rich metaphysics and epistemology, informed by Romanticism and (Heideggerian) Thomism. But as far as I can tell, he lacks a genuinely *practical* philosophy. Because of this methodological deficiency, both scripture and love-excess become overburdened, stretched to the limit, unable to go any farther.²¹

While von Balthasar’s theology does not present us with a moral theory, Barrett says that it does provide “a *trajectory toward* a moral theory.”²² She suggests that “a framework of virtue ethics” is best suited to the Swiss theologian’s work.²³ So even though his theology does not have an adequate ethics, von Balthasar’s theology can be ethicized by imposing an external ethical theory upon it. It is Barrett’s claim that a divine command ethics does not do justice to the richness of von Balthasar’s theology.

¹⁹ Ibid., 299.

²⁰ Ibid., 299.

²¹ Ibid., 302-303.

²² Ibid., 191.

²³ Ibid., 193.

Rather, only a virtue centered ethic or, as she calls her theory, an aesthetic virtue ethics can more fully accommodate the various aspects of von Balthasar's theology.

C. Tobias Nathe: Love's Form

The final work that develops a Balthasarian ethic is Tobias Nathe's doctoral dissertation, "The Form Love Takes in the World: On Hans Urs von Balthasar's Contribution to Ethics."²⁴ While the first two works developed the ethics of von Balthasar by using different ethical theories applied to his theology, Nathe offers a different perspective. He suggests that if we want to expound an ethics according to von Balthasar we must follow the internal logic of his theological investigations and allow the ethical implications to flow from that logic. Nathe is more concerned with demonstrating how the logic of von Balthasar's theology can be used as a foundation for moral theology. In so doing, he draws upon two theologians of the *Communio* school, David L. Schindler and David Crawford, as examples of what an ethics shaped by the logic of von Balthasar's theology could look like.

The main critique that Nathe levels at both Steck and Barrett is that they impose an external ethical model to von Balthasar's theology. To be fair, Nathe does recognize that according to Steck's intention, his work is strictly speaking not an imposition of an external ethical theory but rather a making explicit what is implicit in the theology of von Balthasar.²⁵ Nathe is critical of Steck's development of a Balthasarian divine

²⁴ Tobias John Nathe, "The Form Love Takes in the World: On Hans Urs von Balthasar's Contribution to Ethics," (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 2012).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42, n. 64.

command theory ethic. The main reason for Nathe's critique is that the very little that von Balthasar wrote concerning ethics—most significantly, the short treatise, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics”—clearly states that for the Christian “Christ is the concrete categorical imperative.”²⁶ In other words, “the key term in the Balthasarian proposal is not ‘virtue’ but rather ‘norm’.”²⁷ For Nathe, both Steck and Barrett, then have not delved deeply enough. While both have significant contributions to add to the discussion regarding moral theology, their interpretations of von Balthasar's ethics, are not, according to Nathe, sufficiently rooted in the theology of von Balthasar. Nathe sees his own work as reflecting the proper interpretation of von Balthasar's theology for the development of moral theology. His reasoning is that both Steck and Barrett focus on “defining parts of the integrative whole” thus failing to let the logic of von Balthasar's theology speak for itself.²⁸ Nathe's work, rather than imposing an external theory of ethics upon von Balthasar's theology, elaborates an ethics from the perspective of the Swiss theologian's oeuvre as a whole. This, says Nathe, is how “Balthasar can contribute to ethics without being an ethicist in the conventional sense.”²⁹ While Steck and Barrett impose an ethical form upon von Balthasar's theology, Nathe, on the other hand allows or follows the form of von Balthasar's theology, which is the form of Christ and thus the norm of ethics for the Christian. For Nathe this norm is the form love takes

²⁶ Von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” 79.

²⁷ Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 127-128.

²⁸ Nathe, “The Form Love Takes in the World,” 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

in the world, namely, the self-giving love of Christ in obedience to the Father as an act of love, saving deliverance and worship, all of which are part and parcel of the Son's mission. Thus, for the Christian to act morally we must do as Jesus did, to live out our own personal mission.

Summary of the Examination of Balthasarian Ethics

Both Steck and Barrett examine von Balthasar's writings and develop an ethics each according to their preferred rubric: one along the lines of a divine command ethics (Steck), the other according to a virtue theory (Barrett). There are strengths and weaknesses to both ethical models. The point here is not to debate the merits of one theory over another. In fact these ethical systems are not antithetical. Indeed, it has been argued that not only are they complementary, but that both ethical approaches are meant to be united synthetically.³⁰ Nathe's work differs from the first two in that he eschews imposing an ethical model upon von Balthasar's theology. He embraces a more global perspective with a view to obviating the ethical implications within the Swiss theologian's work. While all three authors differ in their respective conclusions, each presents some type of ethics 'according to' von Balthasar.

Although this thesis differs from the three previous works we have just examined, there are, to be sure, many shared themes and points of contact—themes such as the perception of God's glory, the ecstatic going forth once this vision of glory is sighted, and the subsequent notions of mission and personhood to name only a few. All

³⁰ See Basil Cole, O.P., "Commandment or virtue: which is it?" *Angelicum* 87 (2010): 557-567.

of these are central to von Balthasar's theology and the ethics derived from his thought. Once again, however, we must insist that the major distinguishing feature of this thesis, as compared to the other works examined, is that while they are primarily ethical in their focus, our own work is more fundamental in nature and is therefore more properly considered to be meta-ethical in character.

It has not been our intention to develop von Balthasar's ethics as did the previous authors. In contrast, we want to see how the claim—that a theological aesthetics is *the* method that leads to the heart of theology—plays out for moral theology. This work is not, then, an ethics according to von Balthasar but is rather more foundational. Ethics deals with the question of how to achieve the good. Meta-ethics examines the prior fundamental question—"Why be good?"³¹

III. Vision: Seeing as Knowledge

Beauty allows us to see. We must first capture sight of beauty. Only once we have captured sight of beauty can we then be enraptured by beauty. The rapturous power of beauty draws us out of ourselves. This is quite obvious on a natural level when we consider examples of beauty that cause us to be in awe: a glorious sunset or sunrise, the majesty of nature in the mountains or of the oceans. We can also marvel at a work of art or be moved by a piece of music or a dramatic production. These are just a few

³¹ As Joseph Ratzinger remarks, "In the process of encounter and mutual penetration of cultures, ethical certainties have largely disintegrated. The question of what the good is (especially in the given context of our world) and of why one must do the good even when this entails harm to one's own self—this fundamental question goes generally unanswered" ("That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State," in Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. with a Foreword by Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006], 56).

examples of how beauty, in its various guises, can lead us to wonder. The beauty that we want to focus on, however, is that beauty which is the measure of every beauty, namely God's beauty, his glory. Von Balthasar speaks of two moments that make up beauty: vision and rapture. Vision corresponds with the sighting of beauty. We perceive beauty, thus aesthetics in its etymological sense. This vision, this catching sight of, is something that is also given to us. On the natural level we see and know things through the light of human reason. With the object of faith we see through grace; the supernatural light is given to us so that we will have the capacity to see. Von Balthasar remarks that even the natural light we possess is given to us since it "is not properly speaking man's own light but rather his openness to the light of Being itself which illumines him."³² Through the grace of this supernatural light we are able to perceive that which is hidden, namely God.

This seeing, therefore, is not something that ultimately we can claim as our own, and yet because it is given to us, we can say that it truly is our own. The perception of the form of Glory, the beauty of God, is, however, not simply an intellectual perception but, is something that embraces the whole of the person. When we speak of vision, we do so in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas' view as standing for all of the senses.³³ Vision, therefore, is not simply seeing with the eyes, but an understanding that encompasses all of the human person's faculties. Vision includes cognition. We must not, however, limit ourselves to the intellectual faculties. Human knowing is not restricted only to the

³² GL1, 165. (All is grace as St. Thérèse of Lisieux reminds us.)

³³ ST 1.67.1.

intellectual or rational but includes the faculty of feeling, which encompasses the heart as well. It is this dimension or faculty—that of the heart—which is perhaps the most difficult to elucidate.

It is important to note the profound unity of these faculties. Von Balthasar draws on Aquinas' psychology to highlight the unity of our faculties in our perception and knowledge of the whole of reality, which includes God:

Indeed distinctions of this kind, [i.e., of the soul's faculties] such as are drawn by Thomas Aquinas, should always be ventured only for the sake of better understanding the underlying unity. What is termed 'feeling', in contradistinction to intellect and will, lies neither 'beside' nor 'beneath' the spiritual faculties. This is evident already from the fact that animals are not men from whom intellect and will have been removed; rather, animals exhibit a totality analogous to man's, but one which has not advanced to the degree of spiritual reflection attained by man In man we can distinguish between, on the one hand, predominantly sub-spiritual acts or states (whether the specific acts of the sense organs or those of the *sensus communis*, or the acts and states of the soul's total disposition) and, on the other hand, acts that predominantly belong to the whole person and into which the expressions of the sensitive-vegetative sphere are incorporated without however being able to lay claim to a monopoly of feeling over all else. Otherwise, feeling and disposition would be primarily sub-human and we could no longer understand why Sacred Scripture characterises the 'heart' and even the 'bowels' (σπλάγχνα), from which is derived σπλαγχνίζεσθαι, 'to have mercy') as the seat both of man's deepest personal reactions and of God's own profound attitude with regard to the world. It is not by means of one isolated faculty that man is open, in knowledge and in love, to the Thou, to things and to God: it is *as a whole* (through all his faculties) that man is attuned to total reality, and no one has shown this more profoundly and more thoroughly than Thomas Aquinas.³⁴

Just as in Aquinas' thought vision represents knowledge, here in von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, the vision he speaks of with regard to beauty, is also knowledge, but it is a knowledge that surpasses the rational because it grounds one more concretely in reality.

³⁴ GL1, 243-244.

Reflecting on this type of knowledge, Joseph Ratzinger, drawing from the works of Plato (*Phaedrus*, *Symposium*) and also from the fourteenth century Byzantine theologian, Nicholas Cabasilas, remarks that the encounter with beauty wounds the human person creating nostalgia. Beauty wounds the person and gives him wings, so to speak, to reach the transcendent. Ratzinger writes, “What Plato said, and, more than 1,500 years later, Cabasilas, has nothing to do with superficial aestheticism and irrationalism or with the flight from clarity and the importance of reason. The beautiful is knowledge certainly, but, in a superior form, since it arouses man to the real greatness of the truth.”³⁵ This knowledge comes from our experience with reality. That is why Ratzinger states that “[b]eing struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction.”³⁶ Following Christ comes about as the result of an event, a personal encounter with the Risen Lord. Attracted by his beauty, we are drawn into his Presence and Mystery. Without this form of knowledge our faith withers, thus “[w]e must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time.”³⁷ Ratzinger also notes that this is what is essential to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work.³⁸ Struck by the beauty of Christ, the human person and reason are opened up to vistas that were hitherto unavailable to it.

Let us recap briefly this idea of aesthetics as knowledge. For von Balthasar, what

³⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Beauty and Truth of Christ,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 6 November 2002, 6-7.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

is essential is catching sight of the Form, (*Schau der Gestalt*, the title of the first volume of his *Theological Aesthetics*). Being is present before the human person. In its unity it appears as some *one thing*; as something desirable it is *good*; the correspondence between the thing and the mind shows that it is *true*; and as a cause of wonder it is *beautiful*.

Von Balthasar's work is concerned with the question of Being. For von Balthasar, only the revelation of the Triune God in the event of the Incarnation can adequately answer the problem of the 'fissure' of Being. The ontological difference (the real distinction) between *esse* and *essentia*, existence and essence, finds its ground in the One who reveals himself as He who is, the God who is love. Only a God who is Love, who has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a God who is in himself a communion of persons, a communion of love, only can such a God—as non-subsistent Being—have the power to create. Only can such a God be the foundation who gives forth being freely as a gift. Only the Triune God who is in himself Love can overcome the idea of Being as necessary, a notion which in the end leads back to a collapsing of the One and the many and ends in pantheism (or panentheism). The Revelation of God as Love, who is a Trinity of Persons overcomes this collapsing of Being into an identity as (a) monad. Being then is a free gift of love and while God is "all in all," this immanence of God's Being within all being is not pantheistic for He Who Is is at the same time completely and utterly transcendent giving space for his creation. His creation is a gift which culminates in beings as personal others or of other persons.

For Balthasar the question of Being can only be adequately answered through

the knowledge of Being, a knowledge which is fully revealed through the event of the Incarnation. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the God-Man, Jesus, the Christ of God, humanity can now fully ‘read’ being. Only through the revelation of the Incarnation and the Trinity do we now have a more secure access to Being. Prior to this revelation, humanity had access to Being but only dimly as through a mirror. Von Balthasar’s investigation of Being from the Greek tragedians, poets, and philosophers on through the history of Western metaphysics demonstrates that humanity’s experience with Being is an encounter with the beauty and glory of Being. This glory of Being is definitively revealed in the event of Jesus. This revelation of the Beautiful, a beholding of God’s glory, gives us a new and profound knowledge. This knowledge is not scientific-rational, nor is it a flight of fancy or an aestheticism. Rather, we could say it is a sapiential knowledge, that is, it is wisdom. This knowledge is life-changing for it is salvific. In the encounter with the God-Man Jesus, we are led in and by the Spirit to the Father. The Psalmist prays: “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps 80:3). Through the encounter with the God of Glory we come to know truly the good that needs to be done.

A. The Faculties of Knowledge: Head and Heart

What is this new knowledge? Before we examine the content of this knowledge, it would be helpful to demonstrate exactly what *type* of knowledge this is. Von Balthasar gives us some incarnate examples, which we shall set forth, but first we shall use the example of Msgr. Luigi Giussani. There are several reasons for using his

demonstration. Giussani and von Balthasar were well acquainted with each other.³⁹ Von Balthasar dedicated his book, *Engagement with God*, to Giussani and to the ecclesial movement he founded—Communion and Liberation (CL).⁴⁰ Anecdotally, von Balthasar remarked to Giussani that the lived experience of CL was what he was trying to accomplish through his writings.⁴¹ Giussani describes the various ways of human knowing in his book, *The Religious Sense*.⁴² He states that there are several ways of knowing: the mathematical, the scientific, and the philosophical.⁴³ There is a fourth method for knowing and this is the method dealing with moral certainties. This is also called an existential certainty. Giussani writes: “The demonstration of a moral certainty is the consequence of a complex of indications whose only adequate meaning—whose only adequate motive and whose only reasonable reading—is that certainty itself.”⁴⁴ The problem arises when we try to judge or reduce knowledge to simply the logical or in other words, when we fail to take into account the knowledge derived from existential certainty. This, however does away with, or reduces what is truly human in the person. A simple but profound example that demonstrates this is the notion of love. We cannot

³⁹ See Alberto Savorana, *Vita di Don Giussani* (Milan: BUR, 2013), 425 *et passim*.

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God. The Drama of Christian Discipleship*, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008).

⁴¹ As told to the author by John Zucchi, head of CL in Canada.

⁴² Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. by John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997). This is the first book of Giussani’s trilogy; the other two books are: *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, trans. by Viviane Hewitt (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998) and *Why the Church?*, trans. by Viviane Hewitt (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).

⁴³ Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 16-17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

simply reduce love to the physiological element, nor can we write it off as only psychological. The experience of love is not reducible to the first three methods of human reason (i.e, mathematical, scientific, and philosophical). Love, to the person who truly experiences it, gives us access to a different type of knowledge. Another instance whereby the way of moral certainty operates is in faith. Giussani remarks that faith is adhering “to what another affirms”, which may be reasonable or not. Faith is reasonable if there are adequate reasons. That is to say, faith is validated by “the certainty that another person knows what he says and does not mislead” the other.⁴⁵ This last method—moral or existential certainty—is key to the development of humanity. In Giussani’s words: “In this sense, the question of moral certainty is the main problem of life as existence, but, through it, also life as civilization and culture, because all that is produced by the other three methods we mentioned can become the basis for a new thrust forward only on the strength of this fourth method.”⁴⁶

Describing the person’s perception of the form of faith, von Balthasar highlights aesthetic reason. The beauty of faith not only radiates the form but also reveals at the same time its content. He writes: “Whoever is not capable of seeing and ‘reading’ the form will, by the same token, fail to perceive the content. Whoever is not illuminated by the form will see no light in the content either.”⁴⁷ Here, von Balthasar is not favouring aesthetic reason over the other modes such as Greek or Biblical thought. He is

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁷ GL1, 151.

concerned, above all with “the perception of form” as “a universal phenomenon” and to acknowledge “that the aesthetic ‘seeing of form’ is a fact beyond reasonable doubt.”⁴⁸

Of course the form to which von Balthasar is referring is the form of Jesus Christ.

Von Balthasar draws on such notable thinkers as Saints Augustine and Bernard, Pascal and John Henry Newman to illustrate what he means by this type of knowledge, which he seats in the ‘heart.’

In developing the notion of *raisons du coeur*, Pascal continued in the same direction as Augustine and Bernard, while at the same time he began to give this tradition more a personal than an affective bent. What he calls the ‘heart’ is the central organ of the person, something which is not contrasted with the intellect but which serves as common foundation both for the intellect and all other particular faculties. Newman perfected this tradition by understanding the central act of ‘realisation’ not in an anti-intellectualistic sense but as the deepening of a merely notional apprehension into an experiential apperception by the whole person. After all that has been said, it should be evident that precisely the ever deeper experience of the eternally incomprehensible God leads the believer into a special Christian *gnosis*, one, however, which by the same token becomes an ever more central *pistis*—an ever more total surrender to the ever stronger ascendancy of the free and sovereign God, indeed (as John of the Cross conceives it) an ever more radical abandonment of all our private, natural evidences and reasons for belief into the hands of God’s undivided and singular evidence.⁴⁹

Once again, it is imperative that we grasp that this type of knowledge cannot be reduced to rationalism. The certainty guaranteed by knowledge of the heart is not the same certitude that we have through science. It is, however, reasonable, and at the same time there is a justifiable certainty to this knowledge.

Now that we have briefly examined the nature of this knowledge, let us look at what the content of this new knowledge brings to us. The encounter with beauty gives

⁴⁸ GL1, 152.

⁴⁹ GL1, 166-167.

us access to a new knowledge. More specifically, the encounter with the *Gestalt* of Christ, the person of Jesus, the image of God, and thus the glory of the Father, gives us a very concrete knowledge, one which as Cardinal Ratzinger reminds us is so very necessary today. First, this knowledge as an encounter more fully with Being, allows us to see and know primarily that we are creatures. Secondly, as creatures we are created not by some impersonal being, but we are willed into existence by the love of God, our Father. Thirdly, because we are creatures, we recognize before He Who Is, the Holy Mystery (Rahner) that we are imperfect, i.e., we are sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. And fourthly, that it is precisely because of Jesus, Son of the Father, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, *pro nobis*, that we are saved. These four basic aspects of the new knowledge through our encounter with the Christ-Form impact how we live our lives. In other words, there are enormous moral-practical implications for our day to day living. In fact von Balthasar states that such knowledge is foundational for Christian ethics. This knowledge which comes about through faith in Christ is, as St. Paul reminds us, only possible through the working of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Von Balthasar's remarks on the faith and knowledge relationship in the Johannine writings are significant:

Together with the Spirit there is reference to the *knowledge* that, flowing from faith, is found in those who have been initiated by the Spirit. . . . This inseparable two-in-one of faith and knowledge constitutes the foundation of Christian ethics and what is called "theology" in the narrower sense. As far as ethics is concerned, the "Paraclete" sayings are so organically woven into the Farewell Discourses that they cannot be separated from the latter's total content; this in turn has a lot to say about Jesus' keeping of the commandments (which means, practically, his being pursued and his path to the Cross) and the

command to his disciples that they, too, must surrender their lives (Jn 15:13f.; 1 Jn 3:16) and be hated and persecuted without a cause (15:24; 16:1-4).⁵⁰

Through the anointed teaching of the Spirit, the followers of Jesus are disciplined in Christian day to day living. As von Balthasar states, “Here ethics is again linked with knowledge: ‘No one who sins has either seen him or known him’ (1 Jn 3:6).”⁵¹

B. Seeing the Whole

Another element of this new vision is a grasping of the whole. This is an important theme in von Balthasar’s theology: the whole contained within the fragment.⁵² Here the whole that we are concerned with is the perception of the human person’s moral life. To present a vision that encompasses the whole of human moral life may seem somewhat contradictory since morality examines specific actions. Indeed, it is impossible for moral theology to have a complete theory that covers the many and various types of moral dilemmas that human beings face.⁵³ However, there are certainly

⁵⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 3, *The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 77. Hereafter cited as TL3.

⁵¹ TL3, 78.

⁵² See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment: Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie* [*The Whole in the Fragment: Aspects of the Theology of History*] (Eisiedeln: Benziger, 1963). The English translation is oddly titled *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

⁵³ As St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, “Discussions about universal morals are less useful because actions are particular [sermone enim morales universales sunt minus utiles, eo quod actiones in particularibus sunt]” (ST 2-2, *prol.*).

governing principles and absolute moral norms.⁵⁴ Moral theology is not just speculative but practical, not merely descriptive but normative. John Paul II writes:

In the New Testament, human life is much less governed by prescriptions than in the Old Testament. Life in the Spirit leads believers to a freedom and responsibility which surpass the Law. *Yet the Gospel and the Apostolic writings still set forth both general principles of Christian conduct and specific teachings and precepts.*⁵⁵

The specific teachings “are meant to safeguard *the good* of the person, the image of God, by protecting his *goods*,”⁵⁶ but they also make sense only in light of the Ultimate Good which is the foundation of morally good action and the human person’s *telos*.⁵⁷

The Second Vatican Council’s call for a renewal in moral theology is clearly a summons to focus once again upon the theological foundation of morality.⁵⁸ *Veritatis splendor* explicitly does this. While it does examine current errors in moral theology, the encyclical’s primary focal point is the principles upon which moral theology rests.⁵⁹ In *Veritatis splendor*, John Paul rejects the legalism of manualist moral theology⁶⁰ and locates the moral life within the “all-encompassing mystery of communion and

⁵⁴ On moral absolutes see William E. May, *Moral Absolutes: Catholic Tradition, Current Trends, and the Truth* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1989); idem, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, revised ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994); John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes. Tradition, Revision, and Truth* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

⁵⁵ *Fides et ratio*, no. 68. [Emphasis added.]

⁵⁶ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 10.

⁵⁸ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 34.

⁵⁹ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 5.

⁶⁰ J. A. DiNoia, O.P., “*Veritatis splendor*: Moral Life as Transfigured Life,” in J. A. DiNoia, O.P. and Romanus Cessario, O.P., eds., *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1999), 4.

transfiguration.”⁶¹ The encyclical is not concerned so much with particular problems of morality as it is with presenting a complete vision of the human person’s moral life. “In effect, the question in the encyclical is not simply how to act morally in this or that situation, but the more radical question, Why act morally at all?”⁶² This is a radical move on the part of John Paul. It is radical in a two-fold sense; first it is a novel way of presenting moral theology and second, it is ‘radical’ in that it reflects a profound rootedness. When the pope says that morality is primarily about the full meaning of life, he is broadening the perspective of moral theology so that we are no longer simply in the realm of rules and regulations.⁶³ This does not, however, lead to relativism or subjectivism. We cannot choose arbitrarily what is right or wrong; human action is not left to capricious will. Rather, John Paul, following the directive of Vatican II, deepens the foundation of moral theology by emphasizing its Christological dimension.

As was stated in the Introduction to this thesis, *Veritatis splendor* opens up the path to developing moral-theological reflection in the light of beauty. Since beauty in theological terms is the glory of God, we could say that we are using a hermeneutics of glory. Looking through the lens of beauty/glory allows us to see the “truth of the whole”⁶⁴ of humankind’s moral life and the attendant theological reflection as it is proposed by Vatican II and *Veritatis splendor*. This truth is increasingly difficult to apprehend, says von Balthasar, because of the influence of the methodologies of the

⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁶³ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 7.

⁶⁴ GL1, 18.

exact sciences and their philosophical presuppositions.⁶⁵ In so far as theology adopts these methods uncritically, it aims for and purportedly arrives at precision. When the scientific method takes precedence to the point whereby a certain theological myopia results, it needs to be corrected so that the vision of the whole is brought once again into clear focus. Theology (moral theology included) suffers from a particular scotoma that can only be restored through the lens of beauty. Therefore, von Balthasar argues that a hermeneutics of beauty/glory is essential to the task of theology in order to get beyond the putative truthfulness currently espoused by some theologies that mimic the exact sciences. This is done not to disdain scientific study (in fact, it is needed and indeed is promoted),⁶⁶ but to show only that it is false to claim that such a methodology arrives at the whole truth. In von Balthasar's words:

since the exact sciences no longer have any time to spare for it [i.e., beauty] (nor does theology, in so far as it increasingly strives to follow the method of the exact sciences and to envelope itself in their atmosphere), precisely for this reason is it perhaps high time to break through *this* kind of exactness, which can only pertain to one particular sector of reality, *in order to bring the truth of the whole again into view*—truth as a transcendental property of Being, truth which is no abstraction, rather the living bond between God and the world.⁶⁷

The renewal of moral theology must be guided by an overarching vision of the human being's moral life as a whole if it is to be fruitful. Von Balthasar expresses this idea of seeing something in its totality in the following manner:

⁶⁵ "The terrible havoc which the 'historical-critical method' is today wreaking in the world of faith is possible only in a spiritual sphere from which the Church's Marian dimension has been banished and which has, therefore, forsaken all spiritual senses and their ecclesial communication" (GL1, 421).

⁶⁶ See *Dei verbum*, no. 12.

⁶⁷ GL1, 18. [Emphasis added.]

It was during this time that I found the keynote that later became central in my theology as *Gestalt*, an expression hard to translate: form, figure, shape. Hopkins introduced the word “inscape.” *The mind sees an organized whole, with all the articulation of detail necessary for the comprehension of the basic idea manifest in its fullness.*⁶⁸

To see the form of humankind’s moral life, i.e., to see what it is—its very nature—requires us to bring into focus those elements that are central to it. Only then can we truly expound a moral theology.

Both Vatican II and *Veritatis splendor* present a vision of moral theology that is resituated within the perspective of the human person’s lofty vocation—the universal call to holiness through the perfection of love (*caritas*) that we receive in baptism⁶⁹—which is “the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart.”⁷⁰ The pope reminds us that “the way and content” of this call to holiness and perfection is the *sequela Christi*.⁷¹ Beauty is the lens which enables us to see, in its entirety, the form of humankind’s moral life in all its truth and splendor.

The question is how does a hermeneutics of beauty give us a global vision of humankind’s moral life and what are the consequences for moral theology? Von Balthasar’s theory of vision implies the appearance of beauty in the world and the “perception of the form of God’s self-revelation” by the human person.⁷² Within this

⁶⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and aesthetic,” *Communio* 8 (Spring 1981): 63. [Emphasis added.]

⁶⁹ See *Lumen gentium*, no. 40; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2013.

⁷⁰ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, no. 19.

⁷² GL1, 125.

theory of vision there exists a paradox: God's self-revelation is also his greater hiddenness for "the Incarnation of the Word means the most extreme manifestness within the deepest concealment."⁷³ God's beauty, his glory, is revealed in the most perfect, complete and free act of love, Christ's death on the Cross. Beauty reveals through the Cross of Christ that the meaning of life (and therefore the meaning of morality) is love.⁷⁴ The Cross is the key that unlocks⁷⁵ and at the same time creates the meaning of God's revelation.⁷⁶ Therefore, all theology is theology of the Cross and theology from the Cross.⁷⁷ Only by meditating upon this great mystery shall we come to a deeper knowledge of the meaning of our own lives. Theological-moral reflection can only be renewed to the extent that it is formed by this central event of history. For this form to be sighted, "one must possess a spiritual eye capable of perceiving (*wahrnehmen*) the forms of existence with awe."⁷⁸ To capture this vision, we must see it with the eyes of faith. "And only the most living kind of faith, sustained by revelation, is capable of knowing him in precisely this form of revelation as the true living God"⁷⁹, for "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God something to

⁷³ GL1, 457.

⁷⁴ See *Familiaris consortio*, no. 11.

⁷⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O'Neill (New York: Herder & Herder, 2000), 35.

⁷⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 179.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ GL1, 24.

⁷⁹ GL1, 456.

be grasped.”⁸⁰

Jesus Christ is *the* form upon which theology gazes. He “is the form because he is the content”⁸¹ of theology. Theology that does not fix its eyes upon the Word of God will be soulless, sterile and self-serving. “Seeing the figure of Christ means that we see the Word of God in its essential organic wholeness.”⁸² It is Christ, the supreme beauty, who provides us with the vision to see the moral life of humanity in its total form. Not only does he give the answer to our moral questions; he is in his very person the answer to all of our moral questions.⁸³

Each day the Church looks to Christ with unfailing love, fully aware that the true and final answer to the problem of morality lies in him alone. In a particular way, it is *in the Crucified Christ* that *the Church finds the answer* to the question troubling so many people today: how can obedience to universal and unchanging moral norms respect the uniqueness and individuality of the person, and not represent a threat to his freedom and dignity? *The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; he lives it fully in the total gift of himself and calls his disciples to share in his freedom.*⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Phil 2:6.

⁸¹ GL1, 463.

⁸² Von Balthasar, “Theology and aesthetic,” 64.

⁸³ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 85. In reflecting upon the encounter between divine freedom and human freedom, von Balthasar examines the claim that the play has been rigged from the beginning, that finite freedom is not truly free and that infinite freedom is somehow limited in its encounter with finite freedom. This arises because of the paradox Christ himself is: as Alpha, he is the source and cause of world history, but as the Omega, he is caused by world history. Von Balthasar responds to this by showing how from God’s point of view his infinite freedom is immanent to finite freedom and gives to it an infinite quality by opening it up to the infinite freedom of *agapē*. From man’s point of view, his finite freedom longing for transcendence is doomed to remain unfulfilled. Only by encountering infinite freedom will man’s finite freedom find fulfillment in transcendence. Finally, from Christ’s point of view, it is he who expands the playing area (Alpha). Rather than limiting man’s freedom (as Omega), Christ is the One who makes it possible for man to truly act freely for or against God. Thus von Balthasar says that Christ increases both the closeness and the distance by making the drama possible (see TD3, *passim*).

It is Jesus Christ who reveals man to man;⁸⁵ it is he who reveals to man “the *ultimate purpose* of his life *to live ‘for the praise of God’s glory’* (cf. *Eph* 1:12), striving to make each of his actions reflect the splendour of that glory.”⁸⁶

IV. Divine Summons to Conversion

We have briefly examined the first phase of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, namely vision. Catching sight of the beautiful form, seeing things as they truly are gives us a new knowledge. This aesthetic knowing grants us access to reality in a deeper way. Beauty is not, as is commonly held today, a “mere appearance,”⁸⁷ rather, the ontological status of beauty is guaranteed by the very fact that it is a *divine* utterance. The experience of beauty is a hieroglyph that points to the infinite.⁸⁸ As the carrier of a divine message, it is not something neutral, but is pregnant with meaning. Therefore, beauty is not and cannot be something that is purely subjective. Instead, it is objectively grounded in the foundation of all reality and being, God. Every being is beautiful and possesses beauty proper to its own nature because it is a word uttered by the Father in and through the Word who is Beauty itself.

Beauty appears before the human person and in so doing births wonder in him.

In von Balthasar’s words:

⁸⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

⁸⁶ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 10.

⁸⁷ GL1, 18.

⁸⁸ “Every experience of beauty points to infinity” (Hans Urs von Balthasar cited on the cover and title page of Dubay’s *Evidential Power of Beauty*).

A being *appears*, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel. In appearing it *gives* itself, it delivers itself to us: it is good. And in giving itself up, it *speaks* itself, it unveils itself: it is true (in itself, but in the other to which it reveals itself).⁸⁹

Like the good and the true, beauty is revelatory of being itself. And being is best understood in terms of love, a love that is utterly gratuitous and reckless in its giving.

Already in the realm of nature, eros is the chosen place of beauty: whatever we love—no matter how profoundly or superficially we may love it—always appears radiant with glory; and whatever is objectively perceived as glorious—no matter how profoundly or superficially we experience it—does not penetrate into the onlooker except through the specificity of an eros.⁹⁰

Beauty reveals that all of creation, as good and true, is first and foremost a gift of love.⁹¹

“If God wishes to reveal the love that he harbors for the world, this love has to be something that the world can recognize, in spite of, or in fact *in*, in its being wholly other. The inner reality of love can be recognized only by love.”⁹² Von Balthasar illustrates this with an example that has become classic:

The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter, the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: (1) that he is one in love with the

⁸⁹ MW, 116.

⁹⁰ LA, 54.

⁹¹ David L. Schindler writes: “By beauty I mean the manifestation of the other—of the world—as gift. On the one hand, at the most radical level I am not the constructor of the world in which I dwell. Which is to say, the world at the most radical level is always-already *given to* me, or *co-given with* me. On the other hand, the world as given, seen in the light of creation, becomes the world as gift . . .

Beauty, then, signals this primitive experience of the world as fundamentally meaningful (true) and desirable (worthy of my desire, hence good). The heart of beauty lies in this coincidence (or better, circumincession) of (non-arbitrary) meaning and desirability in the prior gratuitousness of being as gift. Again, it is crucial to see, in the light of creation, that the coincidence of these two characterizes the world as a whole and everything that I encounter—thing or person—possesses in its depths at least some spark for inherent beauty” (“Beauty, Transcendence, and the Face of the Other: Religion and Culture in America,” *Communio* 26 [Winter 1999]: 916).

⁹² LA, 75.

mother, even in being other than his mother, therefore all being is one; (2) that that love is good, therefore all Being is good; (3) that that love is true, therefore all Being is true; and (4) that that love evokes joy, therefore all Being is beautiful.⁹³

The human person loves the beautiful because it is a cipher pointing to him who has first loved us.⁹⁴

To access the beautiful form is to have access also to the form's content. With regard to the form of faith and revelation, we can only properly read the form when we allow the light of the form to illuminate us. In this sense we must allow the scales of disbelief and sin to fall from our eyes to see correctly the form of revelation. Only when we have been truly wounded by beauty will we be able to see the radiant form. This wounding by beauty gives us first this new knowledge. Here we are speaking of the sapiential dimension and all that it obtains: the anthropological consciousness of our creaturely indigence; the awareness of God as Creator-Father, Brother-Redeemer, Advocate-Sanctifier; the recognition of our destiny to be with the eternal infinite Love in a communion of persons.

Although beauty is associated with human cognitive powers—"[it] calms the appetite, by being seen or known"⁹⁵—its appearance in the 'epiphany of being', is not meant to lull a person into quietude. Beauty has an ecstatic power; it breaks into a person's world, leaves its impression upon him and draws him out of himself. "One simply cannot experience a form or a phenomenon as beautiful without responding,

⁹³ Von Balthasar, "A résumé of my thought," *Communio* 15 (1988): 471.

⁹⁴ See 1 Jn 4:19.

⁹⁵ ST 1-2.27.1 ad 3: "aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus."

without *assenting*.”⁹⁶ The ecstatic element of beauty is a call to transcendence; to allow oneself to be taken beyond oneself. This ecstatic element has long been associated with beauty as witnessed by the etymological correlation of the Greek word for ‘beauty’ (kalos) with the Greek verb ‘to call’ (kaleo).

It is this rapturous power of beauty that makes up the second phase of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. His theory of rapture is “about the incarnation of God’s glory and the *consequent elevation of man to participate in that glory*.”⁹⁷ This rapture, however, is not simply a rapt contemplation, an ecstasy of spiritual mysticism (although it can comprise this). Beauty is not something static but dynamic for “where the aesthetic sphere does not reveal the ethical embedded within it, rapture turns into an irresponsible alibi.”⁹⁸ Von Balthasar further states:

The Christian *epiphaneia* of God has nothing about it of the simple radiance of the Platonic sun of the good; it is an act in which God utterly freely makes himself present as he commits to the fray the last divine and human depths and ventures of love: the ‘ethical’ is realised precisely in the figure of the ‘aesthetic’: behind the perfection of each word, each gesture, each encounter of the Son of Man there stands, making it possible and bearing it, the harmony of divine and human ‘existence’, life together with death, heaven together with hell.⁹⁹

It is in this sense that aesthetics gives birth to ethics. Beauty’s appearance elicits a response from the human person; it is a call to conversion. Von Balthasar warns us that “an apparent enthusiasm for the beautiful is mere idle talk when divorced from the sense

⁹⁶ Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 2d ed. (New York, New York: Continuum, 1997), 142.

⁹⁷ GL1, 125. [Emphasis added.]

⁹⁸ TD2, 31; T2, 29. Cited (and translation) in Edward T. Oakes, “Ethics and the search for God’s will in Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 426.

⁹⁹ GL2, 12-13.

of a divine summons to change one's life."¹⁰⁰ He reminds us that theology "has two faces: one is contemplative, turned inward to ponder what it has seen, which needs to be beheld anew each time it exceeds the capacity of the human eye: yet such beholding is not enough, with the result that *contemplation always draws the contemplative into action*."¹⁰¹ We should also recall that historically within the Church "[e]very contemplative, mystical speculation in Christianity has always had its active side, through which it participates in the Catholic struggle for the world's salvation."¹⁰²

The appearance of beauty/glory implies that the human being is capable of receiving this divine summons, which is to say he is open to the transcendent. This summons is an invitation to enter fully into the drama of life:

God's advent as Lord of the world and its history can release only the most prodigious drama, which indeed it already contains within itself; *there can be here no question of simply perceiving, contemplating, of simply registering what is shown; whoever is moved in faith must go out on the stage (theatrize) himself*: Heb 10.33, cf. 1 Cor 4.9).¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Von Balthasar, "Revelation and the Beautiful," 107.

¹⁰¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 126. Hereafter cited as TD1. [Emphasis added.]

¹⁰² Ibid., Von Balthasar reminds us that theology itself has a dramatic quality to it; even the great *Summae* with questions at the center between the responses for and against, present theology in the form of drama (see TD1, 127).

¹⁰³ GL2, 12. [Emphasis added.] Although von Balthasar begins his theological studies with beauty and insists on the aesthetic aspect as being the truly valid method for theological reflection (cf. *Love Alone is Credible*), it is his presentation of the encounter of divine and human freedom in dramatic terms that is considered to be his most original contribution to theology. This fact—the uniqueness of von Balthasar's theological dramatics—is sometimes overshadowed by the novelty of his theological aesthetics. For a systematic presentation of von Balthasar's theological dramatic theory see Aidan Nichols' *No Bloodless Myth. A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). For a critical analysis of some of the main theological themes that appear throughout the Theo-Drama see Achiel Peelman's *Le Salut comme drame trinitaire. La Theodramatik de Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2002).

When God's glory is truly seen and heard it is an invitation to "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."¹⁰⁴ God's beauty is not something only to be looked at. "God does not show himself to us only to be admired. He wants to draw us into his own life."¹⁰⁵ Von Balthasar stresses beauty "to preserve the connection between contemplation and action, or between truth perceived and truth done."¹⁰⁶ In his words:

We believe that what is beautiful in this world—being spirit as it makes its appearance—possesses a total dimension that also calls for moral decision. If this is so, then from the beautiful the way must also lead into the religious dimension which itself includes man's definitive answer to the question about God and, indeed, his answer to the question God poses to *him*.¹⁰⁷

John Paul II tells us that as a response to God's initiatives, the human person's "moral life, caught up in the gratuitousness of God's love, is called to reflect his glory."¹⁰⁸ In choosing to do good, a person responds to God's call and actively participates in the gift of fulfilling himself.¹⁰⁹ "We cannot be mere spectators of glory, but we are seized by it in order to become its co-workers."¹¹⁰ God's glory appears to the believer in such a way that action is called forth.¹¹¹ The believer must give expression to the impression made upon him by God's glory through a response that is total—"fiat mihi secundum verbum

¹⁰⁴ Mt 5:48.

¹⁰⁵ Von Balthasar, "Theology and aesthetic," 67.

¹⁰⁶ Steck, *Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 10.

¹⁰⁷ GL1, 34.

¹⁰⁸ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 11.

¹¹⁰ Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style*, 40.

¹¹¹ Von Balthasar says that the human person "experiences this [Christ-form] not as a vague eventuality, but with compelling force" (GL1, 459).

tuum.”¹¹² In this total submission, this losing of oneself¹¹³ the person truly finds himself and becomes the person he is meant to be.¹¹⁴

The call of beauty to transcend oneself is a *vocatio*. In this sense beauty wounds us in order for us to embark upon a journey. Here we can draw on the example provided by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical, *Deus caritas est*: “Love is indeed “ecstasy”, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.”¹¹⁵ The ecstasy of beauty is a call to journey to transcendence. It is a call to follow the person of Jesus; it is the *sequela Christi*.¹¹⁶ As von Balthasar reminds us, already in the theological aesthetics is the theological drama unfolding: “‘Catching sight’ of the glory (*die Erblickung*), we observed, always involves being ‘transported’ by it (*die Entrückung*).”¹¹⁷ For along with the perception of the beautiful form comes the knowledge of one’s self and more importantly of the person’s relation to and with the God who has revealed himself definitively in the Form of Christ. And this call to transcend oneself through the following of Christ is a call to conversion. Literally, it is to make an about face, to turn around and change direction or in the biblical Greek, to think anew, to change one’s

¹¹² Lk 1:38. [*Vulgate*.]

¹¹³ See Mt 10:39; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25.

¹¹⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 24.

¹¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter “Deus caritas est” On Christian Love* [25 Dec. 2005] (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), no. 6.

¹¹⁶ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 19.

¹¹⁷ TD1, 15.

mind (*metanoia*). This calling forth to conversion ultimately leads to a mission, to being sent: “. . . no one is enraptured without returning, from this encounter, with a personal mission. . . . God only shows himself to someone, only enraptures him, in order to commission him.”¹¹⁸ The encounter with beauty calls and as such evokes a response from us. We must respond to the call of beauty. Only then can we truly wonder and marvel at it. Without this response, without responding to beauty’s call, beauty will no longer fascinate us. We become the measure of beauty and paradoxically the true beauty will fail to fascinate us since we judge the form and thus the content. The danger here is that we can eventually disdain this beauty and settle for a counterfeit beauty. The personal response to beauty, then, is crucial, for paradoxically, in my free response to the call of beauty, I become freer. The more I allow myself to transcend myself, the more freely I truly become myself. The more I allow myself to be wounded by beauty, the more I bind myself to divine beauty, the freer I become. In von Balthasar’s words:

Where a thing of beauty is really and radically beheld, freedom too is radically opened up, and decision can take place. But what is ultimate here is not my decision but that I hand myself over to the deciding reality and thus am resolved, decided, to let myself be marked by the unique encounter offered me.¹¹⁹

This calling forth and sending is a key element of von Balthasar’s theology. For von Balthasar, mission is fundamental for understanding his theological anthropology. In the simplest terms, mission is what makes the person. To be a person in the fullest theological sense, according to von Balthasar, is to live out one’s personal mission; that is to be faithful to one’s being commissioned and sent by the Father. The most perfect

¹¹⁸ TD2, 31.

¹¹⁹ TD2, 31.

example of personhood is Jesus whose person is identical with his mission.¹²⁰ It is in this sense that living out the call of beauty, to be enraptured by beauty, is to journey more and more deeply into love. Wounded by beauty, we can attempt to faithfully live out our missions and in this way we become transformed from glory to glory. For what is our mission? Ultimately, we are called to bring all peoples to the knowledge of God and his love for all humanity.

Beauty speaks a word to humanity, but the word that is spoken is uttered not on humanity's level. Rather, it calls humans to dialogue at the divine level. Beauty calls the person to see reality from the divine perspective, to see the world as it really is:

¹²⁰ In TD3, von Balthasar presents a "sketch" of the characters who take part in the Theo-Drama. It is a sort of "program notes" on the players involved in the divine-human drama, the "play" in which finite and infinite freedom takes place. Because von Balthasar believes that ultimately an adequate anthropology can only be constructed analogously from and within the perspective of a Christology (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22), he begins with the central player, i.e., Jesus Christ. In the first part of his trilogy, the *Theological Aesthetics*, von Balthasar was concerned with the perception of and the elucidation of Jesus Christ as the Form, the *Gestalt*. What was presented was much more of a Christology from above. Now, in presenting his Christology in a more detailed manner, he "fleshes out" the person of Jesus beginning with a Christology from below.

Von Balthasar begins outlining his Christology by first examining the problem of method. This "problem" arises because of the "elliptical structure" of Christology since Christ "creates faith and is its object" (TD3, 59). Revelation and faith, content and form, form a circle. To answer this problem, von Balthasar examines the exegetical problems of the last two centuries. Is the form what it is or has something formless been transformed into the form, i.e., has the formless historical Jesus been transformed into Christ the Lord? Von Balthasar examines the chasm between Jesus (*historie*) and Lord/Christ (*Geschichte*) because it challenges his "concept of *Gestalt*...[as] applied to Jesus Christ" (TD3, 68). He is answering the question, "To what extent is the object of this proclamation an historical 'fact'?" (TD3, 77). In examining the exegetes who answer this question negatively he finds their answer(s) unconvincing. In fact their methods point to a positive answer, for how could something formless give rise to such a convincing form?

To explain this "continuity in discontinuity" (TD3, 78), von Balthasar examines Christ's mission and person. Here he demonstrates that Christ's mission is identical with his person. Because of his absolute consciousness of his mission as evinced by the New Testament, Jesus is also aware of who he is. As *missio*, the One sent from the Father, all that the Son is and has is from another. But once again this does not limit his freedom but gives him the most radical freedom. For von Balthasar, the notion of person is a theological concept: one is only truly a person when he has received a mission (from the Father). Jesus Christ, therefore, is the central character of the Theo-Drama and as such his role grounds and makes possible all of the other "actors" in the play even as he serves as a model for them. The other persons in the drama receive their role from the Author and Director, but in acting out the drama they truly and freely contribute to the action.

The realist in our time, contrary to currently popular opinion, is not the pragmatist, the cynic, or the utilitarian, but the saint. It is the saint, that is the lover, who alone sees the depths of meaning and goodness in what is given—sees the world as it most truly is: mysterious gift.

Only the lover sees the world as it truly is, because the first, last, and deepest word about the world is that it is beautiful.¹²¹

Perhaps the greatest witness to beauty's summoning power can be seen in the lives of the saints, they who have been grasped by the beauty of Christ. Holiness is beautiful.¹²²

It is so because the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in the hearts of the saints so that they radiate the love of Christ and become icons of God the Father's divine mercy.¹²³ The saints are those who have responded completely to the divine summons of beauty by contemplating the face of their beloved. This is, however, no mere passive contemplation. Contemplation is meant to move the human person to action. This action is not simply being busy for the sake of being busy, but is a response to Christ's call to follow him. This action becomes mission born of true contemplation, and mission in the von Balthasarian sense is that place where the person is truly himself because he is acting according to God's plan for his life. "The purpose of contemplation is to cause the life of the bride to be transformed: glory is the splendor of holiness".¹²⁴

Contemplating the beauty of holiness in the saints, we too are compelled to make of our

¹²¹ Schindler, "Beauty, Transcendence, and the Face of the Other," 921.

¹²² See John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

¹²³ In his masterful examination of some of the major themes set forth in the *Theo-Drama*, Peelman stresses the Trinitarian dimension that is present in von Balthasar's thought. Although Christ is the protagonist in this drama his "meteoric appearance" on the scene is never a solitary act, but is always an event that involves at the most profound level the Trinity (*Le Salut comme drame trinitaire*).

¹²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theology and Sanctity," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 203.

lives a work of art. “For the saints are not given to us to admire for their heroic powers, but that we should be enlightened by them on the inner reality of Christ, both for our better understanding of the faith and for our living thereby in charity.”¹²⁵ And is it not so that the lives of the saints resonate within us the call to follow Christ? Their witness (*martyria*) touches within us that deep desire to be fully human, to be all that we are called to be.¹²⁶ Only by living holy lives, reflecting the beautiful truth about the good, will we be able to give a credible witness to the world.¹²⁷ In the pope’s words, “The personal holiness of every individual gives added beauty to the face of the Church, the Bride of Christ. This enables our contemporary world to accept her message more easily.”¹²⁸

The world sometimes denies the truth that the Church proclaims and at times also proclaims that what is false is truth. Cardinal Ratzinger says:

The icon of the crucified Christ sets us free from this deception that 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.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Ibid., 204.

¹²⁶ The lives of the saints “embody the love of God revealed in Jesus and Mary—in them is realized the truth that “I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2: 20). But, and again, Jesus is the archetype here, the transfiguration of human nature occurs in the process of the saints’ being sanctified (being “supernaturalized”) does not destroy the integrity of their human nature but on the contrary releases its deepest dimensions. In a word, the saints, as they grow in holiness, come to display ever more fully the meaning of precisely “worldly” beauty and *human* personality” (David L. Schindler, “Sanctity and the intellectual life,” *Communio* 20 [1993]: 668).

¹²⁷ See Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii nuntiandi” On Evangelization in the Modern World* [8 Dec. 1975], no. 21.

¹²⁸ John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, trans. Walter Ziemba (New York: Warner Books, 2004), 47.

¹²⁹ Ratzinger, “The Beauty and the Truth of Christ,” 7.

This truth is exemplified most eminently in Mary the mother of Jesus, she who is *tota pulchra* [All Beautiful]. It is she who above all allowed herself to be wounded by the love and beauty of Christ: “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”¹³⁰ Like Mary, we are called to contemplate (dwell in the temple of) God’s glory. We are to let the Word of God in all of its splendor be impressed upon our very being so that we are transformed by it. The impression made upon Mary is of the most radical kind; she is impressed with the very seed of God (*sperma theou*).¹³¹ Contemplating, pondering this mystery of mysteries within her, she allows it (him) to grow inside of her until it is time to bring him forth. Mary is a mother as the Church is a mother; the Church gives birth to every newly baptized person. And Christians in turn are called to give birth to Christ in the world through their very actions and lives.

Beauty is crucial to moral theology because ultimately it is the beauty of Christ that beckons humans. Following Christ entails a radical interior transformation.¹³² “We reflect the beauty of God’s true goodness when we *conform* to it. Because God’s will for us is always God’s love for us, our conformity reflects the beauty of God’s love for us.”¹³³ Following Christ, imitating him and being conformed to him means that we are formed more and more into his image and likeness. We become ‘divinized’ as the Eastern Fathers say. As Christians we are called to become living icons of the “supreme

¹³⁰ Lk 2:35.

¹³¹ See 1 Jn 3:9.

¹³² See *Veritatis splendor*, no. 21.

¹³³ John Navone, S.J., *Enjoying God’s Beauty* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), 5.

beauty crucified.”¹³⁴ Using von Balthasar’s terminology, we could say that we are formed by the Christ-form. In order to fully become ourselves, we must allow ourselves to be formed by his Form.¹³⁵

For this reason, however, it is clear that in any age—and most especially in our own—the Christian will realise his mission only if he truly *becomes* this form which has been willed and instituted by Christ. The exterior of this form must express and reflect its interior to the world in a credible manner, and the interior must be confirmed, justified, and made love-worthy in its radiant beauty through the truth of the exterior that manifests it.¹³⁶

The paradox here is that the greatest love, the supreme beauty and glory of God is revealed in the ugliest of all acts, Christ’s death on the Cross. It is to *this* glory that we are called. Von Balthasar says that the Christian is a form. The Lord says “Servants are not greater than their master,”¹³⁷ therefore the true form of the Christian is *cruciform*. Like the Lord, we are transfigured, becoming formed into his image and likeness. “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Mark D. Jordan, “The Evidence of the Transcendentals and the Place of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1989): 407.

¹³⁵ “If the form of Christ itself is what it shows itself to be *of itself*, then no particular age or culture can of itself be privileged in respect of this phenomenon. The decisively illuminating factor must lie in the phenomenon itself, and this in two senses. First, in the sense that the figure which Christ forms has in itself an interior rightness and evidential power such as we find—in another, wholly worldly realm—in a work of art or in a mathematical principle. And, second, in the sense that this rightness, which resides within the reality of the thing itself, also possesses the power to illumine the perceiving person by its own radiant light, and this not simply intellectually but in a manner which transforms man’s existence” (GL1, 466).

¹³⁶ GL1, 28.

¹³⁷ Jn 13:16; 15:20. See also Mt 10:24.

¹³⁸ 2 Co 3:18.

Just as beauty appears freely as a gift, so too are we called to live our lives freely in the gift of selfless love, but all of this can take place only if we have been given the eyes to see “the Johannine paradox of glory and humiliation: the beauty of the Three-Personed God shining from the crucified form of the incarnate Son.”¹³⁹ The impression of this beauty upon the human person summons him to change his life by reflecting God’s glory. Beauty is a gift freely offered to the human person that awakens in him the realization of his own poverty and inability to fulfill himself. This fulfilment of himself can only be accomplished by emptying himself, by giving his very self as a gift to others and the Other (neighbour and God). Beauty evokes wonder at the mystery of being and points beyond the gift of creation to the Giver of the gift and so the proper response is one of gratitude and thanksgiving (Eucharist). The true response then to beauty is not so much about fulfillment (although the human person is truly fulfilled when he responds freely by living his own life as a gift to others). Rather, the true response to beauty is one whereby the focus remains completely on the other. The response to beauty in the relationship between the human person and God then, in imitation of Mary and Jesus, is obedient, kenotic and Eucharistic. The true response to beauty is one that is done above all for God’s greater glory: “My soul *magnifies* the Lord”¹⁴⁰ and “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Saward, *Beauty of Holiness*, 47.

¹⁴⁰ Lk 1:46 [Emphasis added.]

¹⁴¹ Jn 17:4.

Beauty, along with the true and the good form “the basis of morality: the normativity that is perfective of us as persons”¹⁴² for “it is in and through the embrace of the true, the good and the beautiful that the perfection of the person takes place in God’s plan.”¹⁴³ With von Balthasar we could say that “when it is achieved, Christian form is the most beautiful thing that may be found in the human realm.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Kenneth L. Schmitz “From Convertibility to Convergence: The Absoluteness of Truth and the Realization of the Person in God’s Plan,” *Anthropotes* 15/2 (1999): 372.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁴⁴ GL1, 28.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESTORING BEAUTY: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

I. Introduction

The work we have presented so far has been mainly theoretical. It is purposely so since it is primarily a meta-ethical presentation. There is good reason for this if we are to contribute to the genuine renewal of moral theology. We must ensure that efforts in aiding the renewal are built upon a sure foundation. Only when we are certain of the foundation, can we then endeavour to do moral theology.

Saint John Paul II reminds us, “*Evangelization* — and therefore the ‘new evangelization’ — *also involves the proclamation and presentation of morality.*”¹ This final chapter is a presentation of the pastoral dimension and implications of ‘Saving Beauty,’ i.e., a moral theology presented in light of the theological aesthetics of von Balthasar. The practical implications of this work should ultimately be placed within the context of the new evangelization called for by John Paul II and reiterated by Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. The Polish pope also highlights that the intimate relation between aesthetics and ethics lived in the lives of believing Christians is a powerful testimony to the saving power of the Gospel. The attractiveness of the *kerygma* is

¹ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 106.

made concrete in the beauty of a life lived in faith.

Just as it does in proclaiming the truths of faith, and even more so in presenting the foundations and content of Christian morality, the new evangelization will show its authenticity and unleash all its missionary force when it is carried out through the gift not only of the word proclaimed but also of the word lived. In particular, *the life of holiness* which is resplendent in so many members of the People of God, humble and often unseen, constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord's law, even in the most difficult situations.²

Pope Francis repeats this teaching in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*:

Every form of catechesis would do well to attend to the “way of beauty” (*via pulchritudinis*). Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties. 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.³

A robust Catholic moral theology will include this missiological dimension which acknowledges this aesthetic element.

Before setting out possible directions suggested by von Balthasar's theological aesthetic as foundational for moral theology, we must ask ourselves: is such a Catholic ethic capable of speaking to the world? A considerable challenge in contemporary ethics revolves around the question of constructing an ethic that is both reasonable and universal in a pluralistic society. For the most part, contemporary ethics has typically

² Ibid., no. 107.

³ Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii gaudium” The Joy of the Gospel* [24 Nov. 2013] (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014), no. 167.

been shaped either by the Kantian respect for duty toward a moral law or by the utilitarian qualification that claims to bring the greatest pleasure to the maximum number of people. We live in a world that increasingly views technology as “the ontology of the age,”⁴ to borrow a phrase from the Canadian philosopher, George Grant (1918-1988). The idea that technology is not neutral is taken up by Pope Francis:

It can be said that many problems of today’s world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, *to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society*. The effects of imposing this model on reality as a whole, human and social, are seen in the deterioration of the environment, but this is just one sign of a reductionism which affects every aspect of human and social life. We *have to accept that technological products are not neutral*, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. *Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.*⁵

The technological ethos impacting our post-modern society has also given rise to an ethics dominated by what Charles Taylor calls “instrumental reason,”⁶ whereby morality is worked out in a calculus dominated by the method of cost-benefit analysis. Another philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, has challenged such a ‘scientific’ approach to morality by focussing on a classical conception of ethics that gives preference to the perceptive

⁴ George Grant, “The Computer Does Not Impose on Us the Ways It Should Be Used,” in *The George Grant Reader*, ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 431.

⁵ Francis, *Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si’” on Care for Our Common Home* [24 May 2015] (Frederick, Maryland: The Word Among Us Press, 2015), no. 107. [Emphasis added.] He also states: “All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution. *Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes*. Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but *we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way*, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur” (LS, no. 114. [Emphasis added]).

⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991), 5.

dimension of discerning the good to be pursued by the human person.⁷ The dominant ethical systems critiqued by Taylor and Nussbaum have a tendency to emphasize the obligatory dimension of morality (*x must be done* since it is based on the ‘more beneficial’ calculated outcome of a state of affairs or *x must be done* since it is technologically ‘do-able’ and thus ‘permissible’). Such ethical systems tend to flatten the moral perspective by failing to take into sufficient account the notion of the good that is perfective of the human person. Too often the answers given to the questions of morality are simply peripheral; they touch upon the consequences of ‘bad’ actions, but they do not address the fundamental issue at hand: why be good? Post-modern society exhibits both an impoverished sense of the meaning of life which can give rise to a fatal nihilism and to an ambiguous moral direction demonstrated by figures of authority and power. In the presence of such influences, the answers we give to young people today regarding questions of morality can never simply point to the effects or end results of bad actions; neither can the answers given be nothing more than a statement of rules to be followed. Morality is not simply about following rules, but rather about living the good life.⁸ To speak meaningfully on the question of ethics we need to demonstrate that morality is caught up in what it means to live an authentic human existence. This also implies a particular understanding of freedom.

What exactly shapes the freedom of the person? This is the crux of the moral

⁷ See Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality,” chapter 2 in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 54-105.

⁸ See *Veritatis splendor*, no. 7.

question. Pope Francis cautions us with regard to the modern notion that human freedom is somehow neutral before a technological ethos:

The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same. *Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic*, and those who are surrounded with technology “know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race”, that “in the most radical sense of the term power is its motive – a lordship over all.” As a result, “man seizes hold of the naked elements of both nature and human nature.” *Our capacity to make decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one’s alternative creativity are diminished.*⁹

Can we maintain that human freedom is totally independent of the good and in this way completely ‘autonomous’? Or is it rather that human freedom’s autonomy is already shaped by the good in which it participates? As von Balthasar puts it:

Ultimately it is a question of deciding between an (individual and social) ethics on the basis of autonomous freedom and an ethics (again individual and social) on the basis of “theonomous” freedom. There is no contradiction in this. A “theonomous” ethics would somehow see man’s moral decision making as enabled by, and hence in harmony with, an absolute freedom. The Stoics could provide an example of this. In the absence of an absolute Good, human freedom would be incapable of weighing up relative values and preferring the “objectively” better (that is, that which is more consonant with the absolute Good). Where this norm is missing, some relative value (the advantage of the party, the will-to-power) is posited as absolute, and ethics is trampled upon. It is both possible and necessary to maintain a Christian dialogue with non-Christian ethics, for, often enough, the path to orthodoxy can be found via orthopraxy.¹⁰

With von Balthasar, we affirm that it is possible for a Christian ethic to speak to the

⁹ *Laudato Si’*, no. 108; internal citations from Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 63-64 (*The End of the Modern World*, 56, and *ibid.*, 64 (*The End of the Modern World*, 56). [Emphasis added.]

¹⁰ TL3, 263-264. See also David L. Schindler, “The Significance of the World and Culture for Moral Theology,” *Communio* 31 (2004): 111-142, and David C. Schindler, “Freedom Beyond Our Choosing: Augustine on the Will and Its Objects,” *Communio* 29 (2002): 618-653.

world. In his words, “It is relatively easy to agree that, for ethical conduct, some transcendence beyond the ego is necessary; what is contentious is *which* is the highest value to which the ego must surrender.”¹¹ It is precisely here that the element of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics could be influential in elucidating a Catholic moral theology. For, in the final analysis, the good that attracts the human person must be above all trustworthy and as the title of his short treatise on theological aesthetics reminds us, *Love alone is credible*.

In drawing upon von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics for moral theology one could be tempted to remain at the ‘surface level’; using aesthetic ‘categories’ and applying them to moral problems and situations. The pertinent issue is to see how von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics affects moral theology not only from this ‘exterior’ position, but more fundamentally, how his theological aesthetics shapes our understanding from the ‘inside’ as it were. In other words, the very form-*Gestalt* of moral theology is shaped and formed by von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics.

What then must be the implications of such a renewed moral theology? What could be some possible directions for a moral theology rooted in theological aesthetics? We shall set forth a few potential lines of thought. These shall be brief sketches rather than a full elucidation. In setting forth how saving beauty can help in the new evangelization we shall examine three foci: (1) the global-cosmic aspect, (2) the social-communal dimension, and finally, (3) the anthropological-individual element.

¹¹ TL3, 264.

II. *Laudato Si'*: A Heuristic for Aesthetic Praxis.

We shall draw upon Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'* as a starting point using it as a heuristic for aesthetic praxis.¹² In this encyclical Francis addresses the care for our common home appealing to believers and non-believers alike. By the force of their reasonableness, the moral implications of what the pope presents are not isolated to Christians alone, but are accessible to all persons. It is precisely the *ratio* of these practical implications which renders them capable of being recognized by all people. The weight of their reasonableness is not due solely to their soundness or grounding in truth. They also strongly convince by the attractiveness of their argument. It is the beauty of truth which convinces. Beauty, truth, and the good are united and as von Balthasar insists, they stand or fall together.¹³ Reflecting on the ecological crisis before us, Pope Francis insists we have much at stake with regard to the situation we face.¹⁴ Citing the words of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, Francis writes, "The deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human existence."¹⁵ This raises critical questions: how do we conceive of human culture today? Furthermore, what is the culture that dominates contemporary society? If the current culture is deficient what is needed for an authentic understanding of culture? Finally,

¹² The term 'aesthetic praxis' is meant to convey morally good actions as founded on a moral theological aesthetic.

¹³ GL1, 18.

¹⁴ "Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 25).

¹⁵ *Laudato Si'*, no. 6, (citation of *Caritatis in veritate*, no. 51).

how might culture be the remedy which provides an ethic favourable to both nature and creation?

Although there is a growing international awareness that global ecological problems must be addressed, nevertheless we could characterize our present culture as being ‘mechanistic’ in its outlook; that is as reflecting a Baconian understanding of nature. According to this concept, nature is something that is to be manipulated and used. Thus in the words of Francis Bacon, what we have is “the triumph of art over nature (*victoria cursus artis super naturam*)”.¹⁶ Such a view naturally goes hand in hand with a utilitarian ethic and imports a faulty notion of progress. Here, progress is consigned primarily to scientific, technological, and economic development. Progress conceived in this manner fails to prioritize the human person as subject. In striving for greater benefits in the above mentioned areas, a great deal of good is accomplished but often with tremendous detriment to the human person. One need only consider the advantage of low price goods available to us as First World consumers which come at great cost to underprivileged labourers in Third World countries. “[P]rogress, in order to be progress, needs moral growth on the part of humanity,” as Pope Benedict XVI points out.¹⁷ Indeed, “the most extraordinary scientific advances, the most amazing technical abilities, the most astonishing economic growth, unless they are accompanied by authentic social and moral progress, will definitively turn against man.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* I, 117; cited in *Spe salvi*, no. 16.

¹⁷ *Spe salvi*, no. 23.

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Address to the FAO on the 25th Anniversary of its Institution* (16 Nov.1970), 4: AAS 62 (1970), 833; cited in *Laudato Si'*, no. 4.

How then, must culture be properly understood? In his 1977 address to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla stated: “Culture develops within . . . the dimension of self-determining subjects. Culture is basically oriented not so much toward the creation of human *products* as toward the creation of the human *self*, which then radiates out into the world of products.”¹⁹ Continuing his remarks the future pope asked with regard to the culture of a society rich in material elements “whether the threat is not greater where an overabundance of means, a superfluity of what people *have*, obscures who they *are* and who they ought to be.”²⁰ Drawing on the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid, Wojtyla remarks that culture cannot be equated with work simply but that culture finds its deeper roots in “the eternal sources . . . that spring forth from the human soul.”²¹ In a passage that is worth quoting in full, Wojtyla says:

It is necessary, therefore to go beyond all the confines of the various kinds of utilitarianism and discover the full richness of human praxis its deep relation to truth, goodness and beauty, a relation that has a disinterested—pure and nonutilitarian—character. This disinterestedness of the relation essentially conditions the enticement of which Norwid writes: enticement, wonder, *contemplatio*, forms the essential basis of the constitution of culture through human praxis.²²

Pope Francis echoes this thought. Drawing on his namesake—St. Francis—the Pope dismisses the idea that the *poverello*’s perspective is simply a “naïve romanticism.” The

¹⁹ Karol Wojtyla, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture Through Human Praxis,” in *Person and Community*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 263-275, here at 265.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

²² *Ibid.*, 270-271.

Pope warns us that “[i]f we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs”²³ The failure to cultivate a relationship of contemplation and wonder with the world can lead to a utilitarian and mechanistic worldview which in turn can advance a cynicism and pessimism:

There is also the fact that people no longer seem to believe in a happy future; they no longer have blind trust in a better tomorrow based on the present state of the world and our technical abilities. *There is a growing awareness that scientific and technological progress cannot be equated with the progress of humanity and history, a growing sense that the way to a better future lies elsewhere. This is not to reject the possibilities which technology continues to offer us.* But humanity has changed profoundly, and the accumulation of constant novelties exalts a superficiality which pulls us in one direction. It becomes difficult to pause and recover depth in life. If architecture reflects the spirit of an age, our megastructures and drab apartment blocks express the spirit of globalized technology, where a constant flood of new products coexists with a tedious monotony. *Let us refuse to resign ourselves to this, and continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything. Otherwise we would simply legitimate the present situation and need new forms of escapism to help us endure the emptiness.*²⁴

It is important to note that Pope Francis is not equating technology itself with this existential malaise that he describes, nor is he advocating an abdication of technology.

His critique, rather, is with the technological ethos. Canadian philosopher Kenneth Schmitz expresses it similarly:

We need . . . to decentre the primacy of the modern project by replacing it with other modes of thought and appreciation. Specifically, we need to recover a strong enough sense of natural things in order to decentre, displace (but not abolish) the present project that understands nature, not as a community of things

²³ *Laudato Si'*, no. 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 113. [Emphasis added.]

in which we participate, but as a field of mere objects, data, or phenomena for us to exploit.²⁵

Reality and nature are not something simply to be manipulated at will. Drawing on the thought of Roman Guardini, Pope Francis remarks that

[m]odern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since “the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.”²⁶

What is needed is a “liberation from the dominant technocratic paradigm,” a liberation which sees the benefits of technology being “directed primarily to resolving people’s concrete problems, truly helping them live with more dignity and less suffering.” In this way, “the desire to create and contemplate beauty manages to overcome reductionism through a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and those who behold it.”²⁷

The approach Pope Francis embarks upon in this encyclical is the *via pulchritudinis*; beauty as a hermeneutic for understanding and confronting the ecological problem of today. The methodology that the Pope employs in this encyclical enables us to draw on this document as a heuristic for aesthetic praxis. Indeed, there are many points of contact and convergence between von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics (as a foundation for moral theology) and the ‘aesthetic methodology’ of *Laudato Si’*.

²⁵ Kenneth L. Schmitz. *The Recovery of Wonder. The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005), xii.

²⁶ *Laudato Si’*, no. 115; internal citation from Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 63 (*The End of the Modern World*, 55),

²⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 112.

III. Global-Cosmic Implications

We begin with the global-cosmic perspective. This point of view is an examination of the whole (Seeing the Form). There are many parts that make up the whole, but the solutions to the problems—in order to be effective—must take into account the various problems and examine them from a global viewpoint. This global-cosmic perspective enables us to see how all the particular difficulties are related.

Without this ‘vision,’

[t]he specialization which belongs to technology makes it difficult to see the larger picture. *The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications, and yet it often leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant.* This very fact makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today’s world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests. A science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics; but this is a difficult habit to acquire today. Nor are there genuine ethical horizons to which one can appeal. *Life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence.* In the concrete situation confronting us, there are a number of symptoms which point to what is wrong, such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living. Once more we see that “realities are more important than ideas.”²⁸

Pope Francis is, in fact, urging us to “broaden our vision” and to engage our freedom “to limit and direct technology” so that “we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral.”²⁹ The Pope is calling for a more global vision but not one that succumbs to a “globalized logic.” We

²⁸ Ibid., no. 110; internal citation from *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 231. [Emphasis added.]

²⁹ Ibid., no. 112.

need, he says, a new perspective on reality in order to diagnose the root causes of our current crisis:

Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. *There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.* Otherwise, even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic. To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.³⁰

The pope's encyclical starts with this global approach. Our "common home" is global: the whole earth is the home of humanity. "The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all."³¹ How we treat the earth has consequences both ecological and anthropological. Pope Francis states: "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation."³² The notion of harmony (*consonantia*) and wholeness (*integritas*), two key elements that demarcate beauty, can be applied to the area of ecology. In many ways, we could say that part of the ecological crisis we face is precisely because the global environment is out of harmony; it is out of balance and therefore it is not complete or whole. By bringing about order, proportion, and *integritas* to the environment we can aid in restoring beauty to the whole.

³⁰ Ibid., no. 111. [Emphasis added.]

³¹ Ibid., no. 23.

³² Ibid., no. 48.

The environment is a major area of concern for today. The intersection of beauty and ethics has an evident role to play in how we approach ethical questions surrounding environmental issues. From a biblical perspective, humanity has been given dominion over the earth, but this authority is a call to properly steward all of the earth's bounty.³³ "Tilling" and "keeping" the earth, the Pope reminds us, "implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature."³⁴ We cannot simply plunder the natural resources of the earth without detrimental consequences to both the environment and society. "If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations."³⁵ The technological ethos dominated by a mechanistic utilitarianism is harmful not only to the natural world but to humanity also. In this way,

[t]he intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised. When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves: "Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given, but, man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed."³⁶

How we treat the earth depends on how we understand our relation to it. What is our vision of the earth and humanity's relationship with it? If we return once more to the biblical source, we see that humanity is called to draw forth sustenance from the earth.

³³ See Gen 1:26ff.

³⁴ *Laudato Si'*, no. 67.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Catechesis* [17 January 2001], 3 *Insagnamenti* 24/1 (2001), 178; cited in *Laudato Si'*, no. 61.

³⁶ *Laudato Si'*, no. 115; internal citation from John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter "Centisimus annus"* [1 May 1991], no. 38.

Humanity has dominion (râdâh) over the earth because the earth has been given to it. This is the primary and most important point. The earth does not belong to humanity even though it has dominion over it. The earth, indeed, the whole cosmos is a gift. We are called to a “thoughtful conversion through an approach to the world about us that responds to it as a gift and not simply as a given.”³⁷ This is not to deny that “the physical world does not also and at the same time bear an *instrumental* character.”³⁸ The world is to be used; the question remains: how ought we to use it? The ecological crisis we face has arisen in many ways because we have failed to examine this question. Pope Francis says, “[W]e have stopped thinking about the goals of human activity.”³⁹ Therefore, even before we begin thinking about remedying the ecological problems before us, we must first reflect on how nature’s “instrumental character” is related to the “goals of human activity.” And prior to this, we must examine what these goals truly are. If the earth is indeed a gift, then we must reflect on this fact and use the earth accordingly. “If the simple fact of being human moves people to care for the environment of which they are a part, Christians in their turn ‘realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty toward nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith.’”⁴⁰

³⁷ Schmitz, *The Recovery of Wonder*, xiii.

³⁸ Schindler, “The Significance of the World and Culture for Moral Theology,” 127.

³⁹ *Laudato Si*, no. 61.

⁴⁰ Ibid., no. 64; internal citation from John Paul II, *Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, 15:1 AAS 82 (1990), 156.

What, then, is the goal of human activity? As we saw earlier, the dominant ethos regarding human praxis is defined by the notion of progress. But as Benedict XVI rightly stated, true progress entails moral growth. In fact, when addressing the issue of human activity, it is probably better to speak of education toward maturation rather than progress. Such moral growth or being educated to maturity is, in the words of Luigi Giussani, “the education of the heart of man, just as God made it, for after all, ethics is nothing more than the continuation of the attitude in which God originally created humanity in its relation to all things.”⁴¹ This ‘original attitude’ is one in which “we transcend the confines of the merely useful and bring into the world, into the real arena of our lives, that which, apart from any *utile*, is purely and exclusively true, good, and beautiful.”⁴² Rooted in these eternal principles, human praxis is concerned not so much with the production of things but rather with making the world more human. A goal of human activity is to build a home for humanity, thus all that is in the world can be used according to its purpose. This home, however, also serves a purpose. In our quest for maturity, for moral growth we must remember that

[e]thics is of secondary importance. We must not let ourselves be caught in the spell of “sanctity of ethics.” In some ways, this is a sort of substitute for religion. In a society that has become increasingly secularized, the absence of morals leads to a kind of glorification of “values.” In face of this, we must assert the primacy of contemplation and the role of ethics as in the service of contemplation. Ethics is essential, but is not what is best.⁴³

⁴¹ Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education. Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, trans. by Rosanna M. Giammanco Frongia (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 7.

⁴² Wojtyla, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture Through Human Praxis,” 271.

⁴³ Lawrence Dewan, O.P., “Wisdom as Foundational Ethical Theory in St. Thomas Aquinas,” chapter 2 in *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue: Essays in Thomistic Ethics* (Fordham University Press, New York; 2008), 56-57.

The ultimate goal of human activity then, is contemplation through our adoration of the all-holy God who is glorified by our very lives (St. Irenaeus). In and through work, human persons elevate culture and at the same time renew themselves. Human praxis is therefore both transitive and intransitive. The exterior transformation of the world can only be adequate if the interior intransitive dimension of human work is grounded in the eternal sources of goodness, truth, and beauty.⁴⁴ Thus the work of the human person is meant to make all of creation partake in this glorification of God. Human praxis has not only global consequences, but more fundamentally, it has cosmic significance. Pope Francis states:

The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things. . . . The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.⁴⁵

Human persons are meant to recapitulate all of creation in their lives as an act of loving praise to God. As von Balthasar puts it:

New Testament *δοξάζειν* means therefore, first of all, that we do not praise God only by following his law, which (in the light of his trinitarian gift of himself) can never be *more* than a partial representation of himself; nor that we praise him only by the ‘sacrifice of the lips’ above all, by acknowledging his greatness in himself and the greatness of his powerful deeds and benefits for ourselves. Rather, we must praise him through our existence, inasmuch as this is

⁴⁴ Wojtyla, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture Through Human Praxis,” 271.

⁴⁵ *Laudato Si'*, no. 83.

an existence that is in him and therefore what is truly ought to be: an existence in the love that hands itself over.⁴⁶

The glorification of God comes about through our *lived* existence, but which is *in* him. For human existence to be *in* him, the person must first see the form of Christ who reveals the Father and his love. Only once we have seen—caught sight of the whole—can we be moved to act. This, then, is the goal of this fourth chapter: to demonstrate the rapturous element of beauty catching us up and allowing us to transcend ourselves in action. Von Balthasar's theology is not concerned with spelling out this dimension. But what is important for our consideration is that this fundamental element is first, i.e., the vision which includes rapture-ecstasy and leads to action.

Priority is given to contemplation, because as *Veritatis splendor* reminds us, the *sequela Christi* is the foundation of Christian morality (no. 19). How can we follow him without first having seen him? As Jesus says in the fourth Gospel, he does “nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing.”⁴⁷ Jesus' doing and acting flows from his 'seeing' the Father; praxis follows from *theoria*. Orthopraxis is preceded by orthodoxy, i.e., a right thinking (aesthetic vision which brings about a new knowledge). Orthodoxy is not only right thinking but proper worship (in spirit and in truth). So orthodoxy in terms of right thought and right worship leads to orthopraxis, proper conduct. Orthopraxis, upright human action, becomes *orthodoxa*. There is a circular relation here from vision, *theoria*, orthodoxy—to rapture, action, orthopraxis—back to

⁴⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil C.R.V, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 397. Hereafter cited as GL7.

⁴⁷ Jn 5:19 (NRSV).

vision and worship. The good that we are aiming for in our action is the loving vision of God; loving (beauty) vision (knowledge, in the Thomistic sense), but more fully in the biblical sense as a covenantal sharing and communion of persons with the Triune God of Love.

IV. Social-Communal Implications

The second area of moral theology impacted by the practical implications of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics relates to the social-communal realm. We saw in the previous section (on the global-cosmic implications) that humanity in its lived existence is called to bring all of creation to God in an act of thanksgiving and praise. We must keep in mind, however that

[t]his is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails. Nor does it imply a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility. Such notions would end up creating new imbalances which would deflect us from the reality which challenges us. At times we see an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure.⁴⁸

Pope Francis advises us that “we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships.”⁴⁹ In fact, if we examine “the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain” “we see how environmental deterioration and

⁴⁸ *Laudato Si'*, no. 90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 119.

human and ethical degradation are closely linked.”⁵⁰ We are reminded “that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*.”⁵¹ In other words, we cannot set about restoring the beauty of the earth without, at the same time, restoring the beauty of our neighbour. In Francis’ words:

Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered.⁵²

Such a work of restoration is, in fact, a recognising of the great dignity of the human person who is made in the image and likeness of God. Do we really recognize each person as bearing the *imago Dei*? Each and every person is a reflection of God’s glory. Each and every person bears the impression of the Trinity. How can we fail to recognize this reality? Do we not pray in the *Pater Noster* for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? Heaven, which is the eternal abode of the blessed who behold not only the most Holy Trinity, but also the myriad of saints and angels. This eternal perspective is what we are called to live and for which we pray every time we recite the Lord’s Prayer. The ramifications of living this mystery are staggering when we pause to consider them. Our neighbour truly is the other before me as Jesus demonstrates in the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37). The Pope laments that often the “cry of the poor” is

⁵⁰ Ibid., no. 56.

⁵¹ Ibid., no. 49.

⁵² Ibid., no. 70.

not heard: “Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”⁵³ We can no longer remain indifferent before the sufferings of others. How this plays out concretely in the lives of individuals will be uniquely different for every person. Individually, we cannot possibly attend to the countless number of problems and sufferings in the world. There is only one Saviour, Christ the Lord, but we are called to be his hands, feet, and his very face in the everyday circumstances of our ordinary lives. With this new vision we can see reality in a completely new way. Now, we too, like Jesus, are meant to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah as Jesus told the disciples of John the Baptist (cf. Mt 11:4-5).

V. Anthropological-Individual Implications

Finally, there is the anthropological dimension. Today the givenness of the human person in his or her bodily reality is no longer taken at face value. Gender is seen no longer as coming from the physiological makeup of the person but rather as a psychological construct. The moral theological aesthetic perspective can aid in presenting the Church’s teaching that all human persons are made in the image and likeness of God. This restoration or highlighting of the *imago Dei* in all humans can help counter the reduction of the human body to materialism. It can act as an effective

⁵³ Ibid., no. 25.

remedy against the dualism so prevalent today concerning body and spirit. We are bodied persons; a dual unity; a unity with distinction.

We have seen how a proper understanding of freedom is crucial for morality. We cannot be moved effectively by an external imposition or pressure. We can only be moved interiorly; that which moves me must, in calling me forth out of myself, correspond to my truest needs and deepest desires. Only the beauty of the infinite, of an infinite love, only such a thing can move me. If I am moved by some external rule or thing or rather, if my perception is that such a rule is external to me, then I end up in moralism. If I fail to grasp the commandments (the moral law) and the beatitudes for that matter, as an echo of what is interior to me, then I can fail to see them as my true orientation towards the fullness of life. They are perceived as something external to me and therefore as an imposition and hindrance to my freedom rather than the very foundation of my freedom, allowing me to be more myself in proportion to my adherence.

How does von Balthasar's theological aesthetics transform moral theology from the inside? The outer form reflects the inner form. So then, what does the outer form of a moral theology shaped by von Balthasar's theological aesthetics look like? It must radiate God's glory, therefore it must show forth the "vivens homo"—man fully alive. What or who is man fully alive? St. Irenaeus says the life of man is the vision of God.⁵⁴ The life of man consists in seeing God, seeing his form (*Schau der Gestalt*). What does man fully alive look like? If man fully alive is animated by the *visio Dei*, then the form of man fully alive will be diverse because God is infinite. No one single form can fully

⁵⁴ "Gloria enim Dei vivens, homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei." *Adversus Haereses*, 4, 20.

capture the *visio Dei*, therefore there will be an infinite number of forms in which the *visio Dei* manifests itself. This can be seen first and foremost in the communion of saints: there is and can only be one unique St. Francis of Assisi, just as there can only be one Thomas Aquinas or John Paul II. A question arises: does not holding the example of the saints as the model of man fully alive seem to be unrealistic? In other words, is this ultimately a romantic ideal that is in the end unachievable? This would seem to be a valid question, but in light of the words of Jesus—the Gospel injunction to “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect”—this objection quickly fades (Mt 5:48, see also 1 Pet 1:15). The goal of the moral life *is* the vision or contemplation of God. This vision is accomplished through the very actions we perform. As St. John Paul II quoting St. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us “*we are* in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions.”⁵⁵

The saints show forth God’s glory through their very lives; they give expression to God’s glory because his glory has been impressed upon them. They bear the very imprint of God, not only in their lives, but in their very being. They are transformed, sharing in the very nature of God (cf. 2 Pet 1:4). In light of this insight, moral theology needs to rediscover its spiritual and ascetical elements alongside its presentation of the virtuous life. The virtuous life, while being a truly human work, will ultimately remain lifeless if it is not animated by the vivifying Spirit of Christ. The ascetical dimension must also be presented not so much as work undertaken by the strength of human will—although it does consist partly in this—but it must be more fully realized as part of the

⁵⁵ *De Vita Moysis*, II, 2-3: PG 44, 327-328; cited in *Veritatis splendor*, no. 71.

sequela Christi, that is the *imitatio Christi* that is not simply an exterior conformation, but rather an interior transformation, realized through being transfigured by the beatitudes—those realities which make up the form of Christ.⁵⁶

Another important aspect of both the spiritual and ascetical elements arises from the fact that the Christological component is ultimately rooted in the Trinity. The *ascesis* of the Trinity, if we may speak so boldly, finds its expression in the Christological dimension, that is, in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The sending forth of Christ also reveals the kenotic reality of the Trinity. The Father's love is one that does not hold onto the Son, but sends him forth and lets him love to the very end. The Son's love is one of complete obedience to the Father's will. Both of these loves are so complete and self-emptying in their eternal giftedness that they find their eternal 'expression' in the one whose name is Gift, the Holy Spirit. The love to which we are called—the self-emptying kenotic love—must not be seen as a negation of the self or as a denigration of the self. One only has to contemplate this kenotic love in the Trinity to see that such a love does not forget or negate the person, but always brings forth life (in the Trinity this life is an eternal spiration from the love of the Father and Son).⁵⁷ Analogously, in the spousal relationship, this love is born in the co-creation of a new person. Similarly, the spiritual fruits of this kenotic love always bear new life in the Spirit.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Veritatis splendor*, no. 16.

⁵⁷ See ST 1.36.1.

CONCLUSION

How can Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics contribute to the genuine renewal of Catholic moral theology? It is this question that has guided our thesis. Beauty, we have seen, is central to moral theology, indeed to all of theology. It is not a new path, but is a main artery that leads to the very heart of theology. For beauty, theologically speaking is God's glory. This glory is revealed in its completeness, as St. John says, in the 'hour' of which Jesus speaks: it is the hour of his ignominious death upon the Cross. This paradox whereby God's beauty, his glory, is revealed at the moment of supreme ugliness, can only be seen by those who are willing to see with the eyes of faith. For the Cross is that place wherein God, who is totally Other and transcendent empties himself of all of his glory and identifies himself completely with humanity. In this kenotic act we see the absolute love that God has for us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). It is precisely because the Cross is the supreme act of love that it is also the place whereby God's glory is eminently revealed. The utter difference between divine glory and earthly beauty does not however render the latter ineffectual. Natural beauty, as we have demonstrated, is also a matrix through which God's glory can be manifested. By using the method of analogy, the ever-greater

difference between heavenly glory and earthly beauty is preserved, while at the same time its meaning is obviated thus allowing us to speak of it with intelligibility.

In the first chapter we examined the historical connection between aesthetics and ethics. We began with the ecclesial dimension. Starting with the Church Fathers, we saw how they reflected on beauty in its various conceptions. Patristic aesthetics—drawing upon classical elements—presented beauty in a hierarchical manner. They began with the beauty of creation which reflects the beauty of the Creator, through to the spiritual beauty of the virtuous person and finally reached the summit in the Supreme Beauty of the One who is first recognised as the author of beauty and eventually is identified with Beauty. Next, we explored the development of aesthetics in the two major ecclesial movements of the medieval era, the Order of Preachers and the Friars Minor. Both the Dominican and Franciscan schools offered their own distinct perspectives on beauty. While drawing upon the authority of the Church Fathers, both the Dominican and Franciscan schoolmen deepened the philosophical account of beauty and its relation to the moral life. The high point of scholastic aesthetics can be found contemporaneously in both schools. This was followed by a brief examination of beauty in the predecessors to the Church Fathers, that is, in the writings of the Ancient Greeks. This historical survey began with the Pre-Socratic philosophers who examined the connection between beauty and the good more critically than the earlier Greek poets and tragedians. Next was our analysis of beauty in Plato's writings. Here we saw the intrinsic connection between beauty and the good and more specifically the ethical connotation of beauty in Plato's thought. We looked at Aristotle's notion of beauty. Here, too, we saw the role of

beauty vis-à-vis the domain of morality. In fact, we showed how Aristotle (and Plato) held that beauty was the goal of the virtuous life. Finally, we concluded chapter one with an examination of St. Thomas Aquinas' anthropological understanding of beauty as the foundation of human action. Thus, the opening chapter laid a solid historical foundation, demonstrating the close relationship between aesthetics and ethics and providing us with a context for a further investigation of the role of beauty in moral theology.

In chapter two, we looked at von Balthasar's presentation of beauty in his theological aesthetics. His focus on beauty was not undertaken as a mere novelty. The Swiss theologian begins his theological studies with beauty because it gives us access to Being. Von Balthasar points to the fundamental metaphysical element in all Christian thinking. Beauty evokes the mystery of Being, a mystery witnessed to by all serious thinkers, beginning with the Greek poets and tragedians right up until our own era. The radiance of Being culminates in the Divine kenosis whereby the Word is made flesh (Jn 1:14). This divine abasement reveals itself paradoxically as glory. Here, for the first time in history, humanity has sure access to Being, which reveals itself as love. The radiant beauty of Being interpreted as love is revealed paradoxically in the glory of the Cross of Christ ("a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" [1 Cor 1:23]). The justification for Christianity is no longer primarily referenced by the cosmological or anthropological reductions, but rests on the sure foundation of the eternal ground of God who is love. All true theology will reflect this glory and thus will also be truly a theological aesthetics. Von Balthasar's claim—that theological aesthetics is the central

theological method—a claim he made vis-à-vis fundamental (i.e., dogmatic) theology necessarily has implications for moral theology.

The third chapter set forth some of the consequences of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics for moral theology. Here we insisted that our work is not primarily an ethics of von Balthasar—such as we saw presented by three recent authors—but rather, our focus is more fundamental and asks how von Balthasar's theological aesthetics can serve as a foundation for moral theology. The two 'moments' that demarcate his theological aesthetics, vision and rapture, were explored. We showed how the moment of aesthetic vision was not only a sighting of the form, but also included the idea of a new knowledge. This sapiential knowledge lead to the second moment in von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, namely rapture. The ecstatic element is a going forth in love. In fact, it is a participation in the kenotic love of Christ.

Finally, in chapter four we set forth some of the possible directions for moral theology pointed to by von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. Using Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, we identified some practical implications. We started from the global-cosmic perspective showing how the human person is called to gather together creation in all of his actions and to make of his life an act of praise to God. The social-communal implications highlighted the necessity of imitating God's self emptying love in order to see the face of Christ in our neighbour and enemies. Finally, we examined the anthropological-individual implications. Here too, the kenotic aspect of love was reiterated: we are called to imitate the poor love of Christ. "This ability to be poor is the human person's deepest wealth: this is revealed by the Christ-event, in which the

essence of being became visible for the very first time: as glory.”¹ The call of beauty is one of martyrdom: to witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Only by surrendering ourselves completely, by becoming a living flame of love and a gift to others shall we be “transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). “Christ truly ‘fulfills the human.’ God’s response to the ‘crises’ of our times is not a discourse but the event of a beauty, an unarmed beauty.”²

¹ GL7.

² “In your eyes shines the strangeness of a sky that isn’t yours,” Notes from the talks by Davide Prosperi and Julián Carrón at the Beginning Day for adults and university students in CL. Mediolanum Forum, Assago (Milan), September 26, 2015, *Traces* Version Bilingue, October 2015, 13.

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