

Excerpt from *Beauty for Truth's Sake* by Stratford Caldecott

From pages 31-34

...Who will not admit that harmony is more beautiful than dissonance, health more beautiful than sickness, kindness more beautiful than cruelty? If you push the postmodern relativist, you will almost certainly be able to get an admission that he would prefer to look up at a gorgeous sunset than down into the latrine. Now why is that? Is it really just a matter of taste? The artist, architect, and designer Christopher Alexander once designed an empirical test to train people in their perception of beauty and of what he calls the quality of "life" in things. In comparing any two objects chosen at random, Alexander shows how different types of questions determine the level of our response to the objects. For example:

1. Which is the more attractive of these two objects?
2. Which do you like best? Why do you like it?
3. Which gives you the most *wholesome* feeling?
4. Which of them better represents your *whole self*?
5. If you had a choice, which would you *spend eternity with*?
6. Which of them would you be happier to *offer to God*?

Questions 4,5, and 6 evoke a deeper response, and he finds that ninety percent of his students end up selecting the same objects when asked these questions.

According to Socrates, "The object of education is to teach us to love what is beautiful." He meant, of course, what is *objectively* beautiful. We have been taught that beauty is a matter of feeling. That is not entirely

wrong. The perception of beauty had to do with feelings, but this does not mean it is "purely subjective." Feelings, if properly refined and educated, can help us tell the difference between true and false.

It is not just the artist who needs to orient himself in a dimension of objective truth and beauty. The same applies to the scientist, as I have already suggested. Physicist David Bohm emphasizes the relevance of beauty to science.

Now, there is a common notion that beauty is nothing more than a subjective response of man, based on the pleasure that he takes in seeing what appeals to his fancy. Nevertheless there is much evidence that beauty is not an arbitrary response that happens to "tickle" us in a pleasing way. In science, for example one sees and feels the beauty of a theory only if the latter is ordered, coherent, harmonious with all parts generated naturally from simple principles, and with these parts working together to form a unified total structure. But these properties are necessary not only for the beauty of a theory, but also for its truth.

Of course, in a narrow sense, no theory is true unless it corresponds to the facts. But as we consider broader and broader kinds of theories, approaching those of cosmology, this notion becomes inadequate...In the broad sense with which cosmology is concerned, the universe as a whole is to be understood as "true to itself" - a unified totality developing coherently in accordance with its basic principles. And as man appreciates this, he senses that his own response with feelings of harmony, beauty, and totality is parallel to what he discovers in the universe. So, in a very important way, the universe is seen to be less alien to man than earlier excessively mechanistic points of view seem to indicate.

Another quotation will emphasize why beauty is essential, and what happens when it is neglected. This is

from Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has had the courage to rewrite the history of theology from the point of view of beauty in his seven-volume work *The Glory of the Lord*:

We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order to more easily dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.

Elsewhere he describes what happens when the relationship that should exist between nature and grace is destroyed, and beauty is lost after all:

Then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of "knowledge," and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are over powered and finally suffocated by science, technology, and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation - a world in which power and the profit margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated-a world in which art itself is forced to wear a mask and feature of technique."

Thus the person who sneers at beauty "can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love." Prayer can only be motivated by a love that reveals the beauty we long for, denial of which cuts off at its root the ability to pray.

