

Editorial

The Way of Beauty as a Path to Good and Truth

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This Special Issue is dedicated to the topic of religious education and aesthetics, or the path of beauty (*via pulchritudinis*). It is a topic that can be understood very broadly, encompassing different dimensions of the relationship between religion—especially the Christian faith—and art.

Culture and art have always been woven into theological considerations. Numerous contemporary authors, as well as Catholic institutions, have emphasized the complementarity of art and religion, highlighting the importance of the *via pulchritudinis* for dialogue and the transmission of faith. Throughout history, the relationship between art and the Church has been rather intense. Despite the fact that certain historical periods witnessed a “certain split” between the Church and artists, the natural connection between the two never ceased to exist: artists were often inspired by sacred themes, and the Church did not desist from working with artists. In 1964, in the astonishing surroundings of the Sistine Chapel, Pope Paul VI asserted that “the Church needs art and artists”, but also that “artists need the Church”. Pope John Paul II addressed a letter to artists (Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists, 4 April 1999) in which he pointed out that “beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart” (n. 11). A particularly important and compelling document on this topic was also published by the Pontifical Council for Culture in 2006 titled “The Via Pulchritudinis. Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and Dialogue”. All these recent church documents once again confirm and testify, on the one hand, to the inextricable connection between religion and culture, and on the other, to the connection between beauty and truth. Even ancient philosophy promotes the ideal of the unity of truth, good and beauty as a path towards the greatest Good. A work of art can open the eyes of the mind and heart and direct the human spirit towards transcendence. For believers, however, beauty goes beyond the question of aesthetics. Every work of Christian art, such as paintings and mosaics, sculptures and architecture, works of poetry and prose, music and dance, as well as photography, film and theatre pieces, is a reality that points to the admiration of the Absolute and, thus, to a deeper discovery of meaning.

Works of art of Christian inspiration, which constitute a significant part of the artistic and cultural heritage of humanity, arouse considerable interest among people of different origins. At the same time, there is a growing lack of knowledge of the content and meaning of religious culture, which is also true for Christian art. Religious education plays an indispensable role in understanding the depth of the symbolic meanings of religion and art. Therefore, within the framework of religious education, special attention should be paid to the path of beauty.

In this Special Issue, the relationship between religion and beauty is contemplated from different scientific perspectives: philosophical, theological, religious–pedagogical, catechetical, artistic and communicational.

Antonia Čačić focuses her study on the origin of art and the relationship between art and religion, trying to find an answer to the question of whether art can tell us anything about God. The scope of this study is elaborated within three methodological units, serving as a sort of an algorithm: (1) if art is an ontic event occurring between the absolute and the contingent, then (2) art, unavoidably, through its form, (3) reveals something to us



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about God. The conclusion is that art reveals something about God through its forms and through co-creation between contingency and the absolute, but the question of what exactly art reveals about God remains open. However, if there is no absolute as a guarantee of the ultimate criterion, all of our norms must be based on some criterion that has been contingently formed. But such norms do not oblige us to the truth if they are formed contingently. The Absolute and the ultimate criterion are indivisible. The best “example” of this is the Trinity’s dynamics. Namely, if the immutable essence (referring to both ontology and art) is co-creative freedom, then the only “determinations” are co-creative transformation and growth. The observability of (artistic) forms is not in their objectivity, but in the relationship between contingency and the Absolute, which consequently leads to the infinite dynamics of a work of art. A work of art is artistic only as a form, and it stands as such in the relationality that takes place between contingency and the Absolute through the artistic form’s visibility and manifestation. The conclusion is that the origin and “specification” of art is ontic, as co-creation between contingency and the Absolute.

Ivan Dodlek questions the spirituality of artistic service in the context of educational art as a contribution to the life of individuals and society from the perspective of Christian theological aesthetics. The author offers the theoretical framework of the spirituality of artistic service. It is based on three dimensions of Christian artistic creation. The first represents Christian artistic creation that points to the depths of the mystery of the sacred through Christian symbols. The second dimension relies on the contemporary form of religious imagery, in the changed cultural circumstances, to adequately present a transcendent perspective of the meaning of existence. The third dimension of Christian artistic creation awakens admiration in the recipients through artistic contemplation, thus enabling a spiritual transformation and serving as the bearer of eschatological hope. Finally, it is shown that these three dimensions of the theoretical framework can serve as an implementation of three new dimensions of Christian art suitable for the contemporary cultural environment: mystagogic, existential and contemplative.

Considering the richness of artistic creation and its diverse utility in Christianity, Nedjeljka Valerija Kovač examines, particularly from the Catholic perspective, various reasons why Catholic theology should actively engage with artistic images and explains how these images could serve as a valuable resource for theological knowledge and content. The author asserts that images have the potential to expand and concretize abstract topics within dogmatic theology. They can also facilitate the re-integration of fragmented theological disciplines and forge a more direct link between theology and the lived experience of faith.

Taras Barščevski explores the relationship between the beautiful and the religious from a biblical perspective. The study delves into terminologies associated with beauty within biblical contexts. Drawing from Dyrness’s examination of “Aesthetics in the Old Testament”, the focus is primarily on seven Hebrew word groups needed to understand the multifaceted nuances of beauty. The exploration further extends to two foundational Hebrew terms, *kābôd* and *tôb*, essential for grasping the essence of beauty in the Old Testament. Additionally, three Greek terms from the Septuagint—*agathós*, *kalós*, and *chresós*—are explored, bridging the understanding between the deuterocanonical books, the New Testament and their Hebrew counterparts. The author concludes that even though the Bible lacks a single term to express the aesthetic aspect of beauty and does not demonstrate a significant interest in the concept of beauty, it still offers us rich terminology capable of describing the various aspects through which beauty is perceived.

Ružica Razum and Nenad Malović examine one specific aspect of the issue of shaping human beauty/goodness, that is, people’s “humanity”, from philosophical and notably educational aspects, in connection with the challenges of increasingly complex diversity and coexistence. One of the specific questions related to education for beauty refers to the education of a person who is called to transform their life into a “work of art”. The article presents the results of research carried out in the Republic of Croatia which aimed to examine the presence of curriculum content that enables the acquisition of religious–dialogical competence using the method of textual analysis. The results reveal a different,

mostly insufficient, openness of the curriculum to the religious dimension of intercultural education. That is one of the reasons why the education system does not seem to be open to the development of the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for a harmonious and “beautiful” coexistence in modern society.

Mateja Pevec Rozman and Tadej Strehovec explore the question of beauty and the aesthetic value of the image of the Mother of God in pastoral care and catechesis. In more concrete terms, they find that all aspects of the life of the Virgin Mary could form the basic concepts of the Christian understanding of beauty. Distinguishing transcendental beauty and aesthetic beauty, the authors claim that beauty appeals to the human being and opens the heart to the transcendent, to God, who is the source and fullness of beauty, beauty itself. The Mother of God, Mary, as a reflection and carrier of beauty, with different perspectives of her life, addresses the modern human and leads them to the highest beauty, to God. The meaning of Mary’s beauty revealed through the holy images of Mary lies in the believing Christian’s identification with the divine. From that perspective, the beauty of Mary can be an excellent catechetical tool, addressing humans not only intellectually, but also existentially and emotionally. The beauty of Mary reveals not only Mary but also the fundamental dimensions of the life of a believer and the main messages of the faith.

Considering the significance of images and artwork in shaping personal, cultural and religious identity and reading the signs of the times, Denis Barić reflects on the presence of images and artistic expressions in catechesis and their role in education and growth in faith throughout a person’s life. His reflections aim to answer the following: Do visual and artistic expressions contribute to a better understanding of faith, or does catechesis contribute to a better understanding of Christian art? Do we need education in aesthetics and the arts?

Jadranka Garmaz and Sara Dodig Baučić contemplate the connection between music and religious education, i.e., on the possibility of creating a model for implementing music content efficiently in the subject of Catholic Religious Education (RE) in Croatia. Their research reveals the necessity to unite experts from three fields to make interdisciplinary teaching efficient and progressively constructive: religious education, pedagogy and music pedagogy combined with music practice itself through professional conductors. The research findings showed that the advantages and specifics of choral chant could be integrated into the religious education curriculum, making RE more dynamic and challenging for students.

Irena Sever Globan and Marin Pavelić start from the hypothesis that Andrej Tarkovsky, a Russian film author, uses the characters of children to express something supernatural. After the analysis of nine characters of children that appear in the six full-length feature films, using qualitative content analysis, description, comparison and synthesis, the authors conclude that, although children are supporting characters, they have a powerful impact on other characters. Tarkovsky uses child characters to express the transcendent by assigning them defined recurring characteristics: a deep and penetrating gaze, supernatural powers, mysterious surroundings, a strong influence on other characters, posing religious questions, a sense of solitude resembling hermits and, sometimes, an allusion to Christ-like figures. The article ends with an interesting note: Tarkovsky ends his last film in the same way he began his first film: with a child in the foreground. This demonstrates how important depicting children and childhood was to him. Thus, the image of the child becomes the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega of Andrei Tarkovsky’s entire filmography.

Danijel Labaš, Lana Ciboci Perša and Ivan Uldrijan engage with the beauty ideals from Christian, educational and media perspectives. Investigating how much the topic of beauty is incorporated within the Croatian formal education system, it is shown that most such content is presented in the subjects of Visual Culture, Visual Arts, Croatian Language and Informatics. The paper also presents such contents in the Catholic religious education curricula. The scientific contribution of this paper, in its theoretical aspects as well as its research results, is, in fact, the introduction of an important topic, namely, the link between critical aesthetics and media education. It also presents an encouraging reflection on its

more systematic approach, both on a theoretical level and even more so on the research and practical levels. Namely, dealing with these topics thoughtfully and systematically at all levels of education could contribute to fewer cases of abuse based on physical appearance in the future.

Ivana Gagić Kičinbači examines the potential of art as a means of expressing transcendental realities, with a particular emphasis on the artistic creative process. The author points to the fact that an artist possesses the capacity to apprehend a transcendental reality, which manifests itself gradually and exclusively through the act of artistic creation. The paper leads to the conclusion that a form of artistic asceticism is essential for an artist so that they do not waste the forces available to them, but rather channel them into expression. Her research also found silence to be a prerequisite for the mental state of heightened awareness that the artistic process requires if it aims to express the transcendent.

This Special Issue provides valuable observations and findings about the relationship between philosophy, theology, religion, art and religious education. The very fact that the authors of these texts belong to different scientific and artistic domains, which we recognize as an exceptionally valuable feature of this Special Issue, testifies to the importance of this topic not only for religion and theology, but also for many other fields of science, art and life. We believe that all these different perspectives, through which we contemplate the connection between beauty, goodness and truth, will encourage other authors as well to explore this current topic, especially in the light of numerous instances of “ugliness” that blemish today’s world.

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