



THE CARDINAL NEWMAN SOCIETY

Promoting and Defending Faithful Catholic Education

Background Information on Beauty

By Denise Donohue EdD

What was the most beautiful thing that you ever saw? Was it a sunset? a mountain range with fresh snow? clarity of ocean water? a spotted cheetah? or the perfections of a newborn baby? There are some images that are intuitively appealing and universally attractive. There are some things that instantly move the heart to an “ah” moment or even a physical response of “breath-taking.”

Take a minute and think about some of the things you are attracted to and then ask yourself why you are attracted to them? Is it because you have never seen anything so pristine, so perfect, so unified and complete as what was in front of you? St. Thomas Aquinas suggests that your response may be in part to the beautiful thing’s, harmony, proportion, wholeness, and radiance.¹

We seem by nature to be attracted to things possessing these qualities and as well to those things that are without imperfection or limit. For Plato, men move through stages in an ascent to perfect beauty. They move from beauty of the senses (such as worldly beauty) to beauty of the ideals (such as justice, freedom, the common good) to the beauty of integral concepts, expressed as practices or notions such as beauty of a musical composition or a mathematical equation. Beauty touches our soul in a way that, when we give-in to it, it leads us beyond ourselves to a beholding of the real; to something even beyond tangible experience. We have a notion to continually search for that which is more beautiful - for ultimate beauty.

Beauty awakens in us a desire for the transcendent and a desire to know the truth and meaning of a thing. What we are in awe or wonder about, because it is so beautiful, we desire to know and spend time with. Something that is beautiful is also good insofar as it also possesses the properties of wholeness, order, and fulfillment.

While individual taste will influence to a degree what some find beautiful, it is also safe to say the beauty does not strictly depend on the eye of the beholder. The lack of the beholder to “see” beauty because of a lack of knowledge or exposure, or because of immaturity does not mean the beauty does not exist. Beauty can judge us as much as we judge it.

¹ Aquinas, T. *Summa Theologica*, I, 5, 4 and *Summa*, 1q.39.a.8.

Teaching to the transcendent means teaching about beauty as a means of touching the human heart and, according to Pope Francis “enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it.”²

3

Thank you to Dr. Roger Nutt and Dr. Joseph Trabbic from Ave Maria University for their professional reviews.

Copyright © 2022 The Cardinal Newman Society. Permission to reprint is hereby granted provided no modifications are made to the text and it is identified as a publication of The Cardinal Newman Society. Note: The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Cardinal Newman Society.

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, p. 167.