An element of the legacy of the Church's Pope emeritus

Benedict XVI and the architecture of beauty

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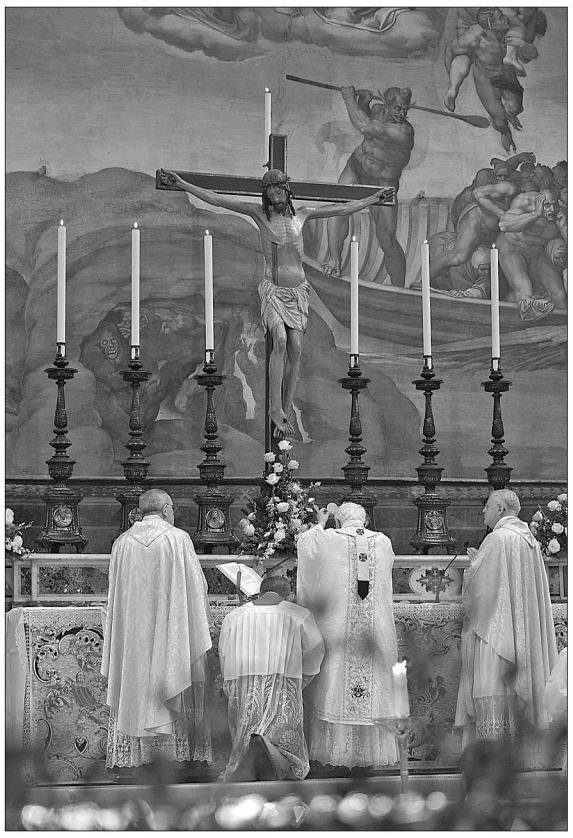
When one surveys the architecture of Rome, the eternal city, it is clear that the instigators of much of its beauty were the Popes. In modern times, there has not been another Pope so outspoken on the topic of art, architecture, and music as Pope Benedict XVI. Central to his thought is the idea that art and architecture, properly done, have a great ability to speak to people. He taught us that architecture should make visible the invisible and point us toward the infinite. The arts are also great witnesses to the truth of Catholicism. "I did once say that to me art and the saints are the greatest apologetics for our faith" (Meeting with the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone, 6 August 2008). In his Homily on the 500th anniversary of the Sistine Chapel ceiling the Holy Father exposited, "With unique expressive intensity, the great artist draws God the Creator, his action, his power, to show clearly that the world is not the product of darkness, chance, or senselessness, but comes from an Intelligence, from a Freedom, from a supreme act of Love. In that moment of contact between the finger of God and the finger of man, we perceive the point of contact between heaven and earth; in Adam God enters into a new relationship with his Creation, man is in direct relationship with Him, he is called by Him, he is in the image and likeness of God" (31 October 2012). During his Homily at the dedication of the Church of the Sagrada Familia in November 2010 the Pope said, "Gaudi, by opening his spirit to God, was capable of creating in this city a space of beauty, faith and hope which leads man to an encounter with him who is truth and beauty itself". In fact, during his travels Pope Benedict XVI often commented on the architecture of the great churches and its meaning for believers. Even in less attractive buildings, the Pope employed the church building as an analogy for the need to build up the Church through the use of "living stones".

In celebrating the liturgy, Pope Benedict modeled a vision of beauty. Under his eight year reign, a number of new liturgical elements were designed for St Peter's Basilica that reflected continuity with tradition: a cathedra canopy for outdoor masses, a new ambo, and beautiful vestments. In his use of the altar rail for giving out communion and his employment of the now-called "Benedictine arrangement" of a large crucifix and candlesticks placed on the altar he inspired many Bishops and priests to follow his lead. The intention of these initiatives, as expressed in the Pope's prolific writing and addresses, were to assist in refocusing the celebration of the liturgy on Christ rather than on the community. His insight was that Mass *versus populum* had become man-centered. "The turning of the priest towards the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself" (*Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, 2000, p. 80). The self-enclosed circle with its emphasis on the immediate community seemed to drive a number of architectural solutions: fan shaped churches, sloping floors, undefined sanctuaries, minimalistic altars, throne like chairs and the iconoclastic removal of sacred art, altarrails, devotional areas and even the blessed sacrament. Pope Benedict offered a remedy to the self-enclosed circle, by returning the crucifix to the center of the altar and "whenever possible, we should definitely take up again the apostolic tradition of facing the east, both in the building of churches and in the celebration of the liturgy" (*ibid.*, p. 70). Papal liturgies were models of both, including Mass *ad orientem* in the Sistine Chapel and the Pauline Chapel.



Benedict XVI in the Sistine Chapel on 13 January 2013

Running through all of his teachings on art, architecture and music is Pope Benedict's theology of beauty. For the Pope, beauty is seen as fundamental to faith and to the perception of truth. Furthermore, beauty is the best expression of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. In 2011, he addressed the opening of an art exhibition mounted on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his priestly ordination: "Let truth shine brightly in your works and make their beauty elicit in the gaze and in the hearts of those who admire them, the desire and need to make their existence beautiful and true, every existence, enriching it with that treasure which is never lacking which makes life a work of art and every man an extraordinary artist: charity, love." Not surprising therefore that he often brought the concept of beauty into his homilies and addresses. He spoke a great deal about the "via pulchritudinis", or the way of beauty, whose deepest meaning must be recovered by men and women today. "However some expressions are real highways to God, the supreme Beauty; indeed they help us to grow in our relationship with him, in prayer. These are works that were born from faith and express faith. We can see an example of this when we visit a Gothic cathedral: we are enraptured by the vertical lines that soar skywards and uplift our gaze and our spirit, while at the same time we feel small yet long for fullness" (*General Audience*, 31 August 2011).

Yet, it is in his love for Baroque art and architecture (consistent with his love of Baroque music) that we find the revelation for English-speaking Catholics, who have often imbibed the Puritan bias of our culture. The Pope explains that "In line with the tradition of the West, the Council [of Trent] again emphasized the didactic and pedagogical character of art, but, as a fresh start toward interior renewal, it led once more to a new kind of seeing that comes from and returns within. The altarpiece is like a window through which the world of God comes out to us. The curtain of temporality is raised, and we are allowed a glimpse into the inner life of the world of God. This art is intended to insert us into the liturgy of heaven. Again and again, we experience a Baroque church as a unique kind of fortissimo of joy, an Alleluia in visual form" (*Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 130).

To those who see Pope Benedict's promotion of traditional art, architecture, and music as merely an act of nostalgia it must be pointed out that the Pope sees the great masterpieces of Western art as living witnesses to the eternal faith. The Sistine Chapel, Gothic cathedrals, and Baroque altarpieces continue to speak like a theology in stone to those who have eyes to see. The relation between tradition and innovation in Benedict's thought grows out of Vatican II in which we find that "there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them; and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 23). So how important is creativity in new works of sacred art and architecture? "An art that lost the root of transcendence would not be oriented to God; it would be a halved art, it would lose its living root; and a faith that had art only in the past would no longer be faith in the present; and today it must be expressed anew as truth that is always present... we must do our utmost to see that today too faith is expressed in authentic art, like Gaudi's, in continuity and in innovation, and to prevent art from losing its contact with faith" (*In-flight Interview*, 6 November 2010)

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A missionary of theology

Continued from page 13

Evangelization is therefore our daily work! (Sr Sara Butler is also a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization).

For 24 years you have been dedicated to another very important task: teaching dogmatic theology in seminaries. How did this come about?

As often happens in life, more or less by chance. After two mandates in the General Council of my community (1978 to 1988), I was asked to teach theology at a seminary, a post had become vacant at Mundelein Seminary, Illinois. I have now been teaching theology to men training for the diocesan priesthood for 20 years. I first taught at Mundelein from 1989 to 2003, then from 2003 to 2010 at St Joseph's Seminary (Archdiocese of New York) and now, once again, at Mundelein. This is certainly not what I expected when I left Toledo, Ohio, to enter my missionary religious community! Yet I have found that the seminary too has a missionary dimension.

In the autumn of 2009, the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars honoured you with the Cardinal Wright Award for outstanding scholarly service to the Church. Do you believe that it is important for women to teach future priests in seminaries?

It is extremely important, very important indeed. It is an enrichment for all, for individuals and for the Church as a whole. I think knowing and relating to women is a great help to the students, our future priests. Let us not forget that women account for a substantial part of humanity! I have always had fruitful and constructive relationships with my students and colleagues, even long after I taught them or taught with them. Despite the differences between the two seminaries at which I taught, the balance is decidedly positive. I also have several non-religious colleagues who teach with me.

But are these exceptions or is this the rule in your country?

In the United States each seminary has at least one or two women teachers so fortunately there is no question of this being a rarity. Nor of course should it ever be.