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MARY AND THE WAY OF BEAUTY

*Johann G. Roten, S.M.**

The way of beauty (*via pulchritudinis*) is an expression coined by Paul VI on May 16, 1975.¹ In his closing address to the participants of the Mariological Congress held in Rome, he outlined a twofold approach to the figure and reality of Mary: there is first the way of the learned ones, mariologists and theologians of various colors (*couleurs*), who reach out to Mary in biblical, historical, and theological speculation. They walk the way of truth (*via veritatis*). There exists a second way accessible to everybody, simple souls included, which Paul VI called the *via pulchritudinis* (way of beauty). Did Paul VI intend with these distinctions some sort of programmatic declaration, as commentators thought and still believe?² This does not seem likely. The scope of the Pope's address was to highlight the specific theme of the 1975 Roman Marian Congress, which dealt with the relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit.

According to Paul VI the stupendous and mysterious doctrine about Mary and the Spirit leads *into* the way of beauty. He could have said more bluntly, "leads to beauty," for Mary is the all beautiful (*tota pulchra*) creature, the mirror without stain, and the supreme ideal of perfection. She is also, in the pontiff's words, the "woman clothed with the Sun" (Ap. 12:1), in whom the pure radiance of human beauty meets the

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¹Paul VI, "Allocutio. In auditorio Pontificii Athenaei a Sancto Antonio in Urbe ob coactos Conventus, VII Mariologicum atque XIV Marianum, 16 maii 1975," in *AAS* 67 (1975): 334-449, quoted here according to *Marianum* 37 (1975): 491-94, esp. 493.

²S. de Fiores, *Maria nella teologia contemporanea* (3. ed.; Roma: Centro di Cultura Mariana "Madre della Chiesa," 1991), 361.

tremendous but accessible beauty of divinity.³ Articulating the theme of Mary's beauty, Paul VI links it explicitly to Mary's relationship with the Spirit, and, although not explicitly stated, derives from it not only beauty but also the purity and perfection of creaturely being. Thus, the icon of the apocalyptic woman is invoked in an attempt to visualize the complementarity and harmony of human and divine beauty.

The way of beauty, then, is in fact the way of the Spirit. Mary's beauty is first and foremost a modality of her being in and through the Spirit. Paul VI's intent was not so much to propose a new method based on theological aesthetics, as to point out that a Spirit-centered mariology invariably leads to a theology of beauty. A further concretization of this teaching can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁴ whose mariology bears the unmistakable marks of Paul VI's humanistic aesthetics. In contrast to John Paul II's action-oriented Marian personalism, the *Catechism* adopted the descriptive and typological symbolism dear to Paul VI's Marian teaching, itself heavily indebted to the non-argumentative and phenomenological approach used by the authors of *Lumen gentium*.

Mary as Aesthetic Reality

It is in the *Catechism* that we find the first magisterial mini-treatise on the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary. Its formulation has strong aesthetic undertones and reads like the practical implementation of Paul VI's *via pulchritudinis*. This short doctrinal development (covering articles 721-26) presents Mary in various circumlocutions as *aesthetic* reality par excellence. Not only is she called generically the *masterpiece*⁵ of the joint mission of Christ and the Spirit, but in her the Father has also found the *Dwelling Place*⁶ and temple

³Paul VI, "Allocutio," 494.

⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 191-92 (CCC 721-26).

⁵"Mary, the all-holy ever-virgin Mother of God, is the masterwork of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the fullness of time" (CCC 721).

⁶[In Mary] "the Father found the *dwelling place* where his Son and his Spirit could dwell among men" (CCC 721).

where Son and Spirit may dwell among humans, which makes Mary in the eyes of the Church the true *Seat of Wisdom*.⁷ Intended by the authors of the *Catechism* or not, I would like to insist on the importance of these three symbolic expressions: *masterpiece*, *dwelling place* and *seat of wisdom*. Indeed, all three of them stand for characteristic features of theological aesthetics. Most importantly, each one of them points to a divine origin and has mediating character.

1. Mary as God's Masterpiece

As *masterpiece*, Mary is a direct reference to the divine *artifex*; she is part of the creative manifestation of God's marvelous deeds, which the Spirit (as the *Catechism* reminds us) initiates and accomplishes in Christ and the Church. At the outset of salvation history, the Spirit creates the masterpiece called Mary of Nazareth. And so, in more than one way, Mary's beauty is the beauty of beginnings and new beginnings. She embodies a new beginning of God's covenant with humanity. In her existence, the original concept of human being is reinstated. Mary stands at the beginning of Christ's ministry of salvation; she marks, with the beloved disciple, the humble beginnings of the Christian era and its utter dependence on the Spirit's fire and light at Pentecost. As the one assumed into heavenly glory, Mary represents the beginning and the eschatological icon of all Christian fulfillment.

Masterpiece of the Spirit's grace, Mary's beauty is a beauty of promise and hope. In her person, realization and expectation meet in a wonderful paradox which is entirely the work of the Spirit. The Spirit prepared Mary, making her the one conceived without sin, full of grace, and most capable of receiving the ineffable gift of Self from God Almighty. He accomplished in her virginal womb the beautiful and bountiful plan of his Son's incarnation among us. We may call Mary a masterpiece of God, because in her we detect a surplus of the divine—the overflowing presence of God's goodness in an earthen vessel.

⁷"Mary is acclaimed and represented in the liturgy as the 'Seat of Wisdom'" (CCC 721).

2. Mary as God's Dwelling Place

Mary is not a masterpiece for herself, established in splendid isolation, but a dwelling place for the Spirit and the Son among humans. Whatever the title to designate this Marian theophany—temple of the Spirit, sanctuary of the Trinity, *theotokos*, burning bush of God's definitive self-revelation—Mary is, in St. Cyril of Alexandria's word, the *kallitokos* (the bearer of him who is true beauty), the mother of beauty.⁸ Mary's beauty is neither usurped nor the reward for personal excellence. It is neither self-sustained nor self-directed. Ingrained in the very concept of Mary's beauty, we find the idea of service and mission. Paradoxically, but not surprisingly, Mary radiates the beauty of the servant or handmaid. This is how she understands and defines herself, and this is how she figures in God's plan of salvation.

We are reaching here the very roots of theological aesthetics, where beauty lies in the intimate "syntony" between divine call and design, between free human answer and execution. This means that beauty is never static or removed from action; it even has to contend with a little edge of holy utilitarianism. Contemplating Mary's beauty, we intuit that beauty has a purpose. It makes God's coming among us visible and final—a divine promise come true and cast forever in human flesh and blood. But again, it is the Spirit who manifests the Son of the Father who became the Son of the Virgin. The Spirit manifests the *Verb* in the humility of Mary's humanity, revealing it both to the poor⁹ and to the first representatives of the nations.¹⁰ Calling Mary the dwelling place of God, the *Catechism* leads our attention and interest beyond the person of Mary. She does not allow for aesthetic fixation on herself, but points to the *Deus semper major* and the Church *semper reformanda* for which she stands.

3. Mary as Seat of Wisdom

It is at this juncture that we come upon the third characteristic of Mary's relationship with the Spirit. The *Catechism* calls

⁸*De recta fide ad reginas*; PG 76, 1213C.

⁹Lk. 1:15–19.

¹⁰Mt. 2:11.

her *Seat of Wisdom*. Wisdom in Christian tradition has always been a composite or twofold notion. Although different from Sybilline prophecy and common sense pragmatism, this notion takes after both insofar as it attempts to shed light from on high on daily existence. Wisdom's ultimate purpose and challenge is to endow the human person with meaning for itself, but not by and through itself. In other words, the role of wisdom is to situate and root human destiny in the ultimate reality of divine origin and finality.

This is precisely what Mary, *seat of wisdom*, represents. She exemplifies both divine origin and finality for each one of us. In the words of the *Catechism*, the Spirit through Mary begins to establish communion between Jesus Christ and human persons who are the "objects of God's love." Mary's mediating role is evidenced in the metaphor *seat of wisdom*. She does not replace wisdom; she is not, strictly speaking, a personification of wisdom. Wisdom is the child in her womb, the toddler on her lap, the book in her hand. Undue aggrandizement of Mary diminishes wisdom and obscures the source of divine light. Not least, it dims the radiance of her own beauty, which alights at the merging point of receiving and giving. Mary is not wisdom; she is the seat where wisdom is visibly and definitively enthroned. Mary is the juncture where the *communion* between divinity and humanity effected by the Spirit occurs. Mary, seat of wisdom, is the meeting place between the two; not neutral or unconcerned, she is herself a living embodiment of communion between the human race and God. At the term of this mission entrusted to her by the Spirit, Mary becomes, according to the *Catechism*, "the Woman, the New Eve ('mother of the living'), the mother of the 'whole Christ.'"¹¹

Mary's ultimate wisdom is to be mother not only of Jesus Christ but of the "total Christ." We discover in this universalization of Mary's person as mother of the "total Christ" still another dimension of theological aesthetics—the transformation of an individual figure into one of universal significance—without destroying the essential link between the mother of the "total Christ" and Mary of Galilee. Indeed, there is beauty

¹¹CCC 726.

at its best where a particular and limited reality is expressive of and conducive to a maximum of unlimited significance. In this sense, the historical figure of the "Servant of the Lord" does not oppose the trans-historical representation of the "Queen of Heaven," because, essentially, the connection and continuity between the two is the Spirit's own work.

Mother-Child Image as Aesthetic Synthesis

All of these considerations on behalf of Mary as *masterpiece*, *dwelling place* and *seat of wisdom* lead us to a humble and beautiful truth which happens to be also the key to the *via pulchritudinis*. There is no better description of theological aesthetics applied to mariology than the image or icon of mother and child. The metaphors of *masterpiece*, *dwelling place* and *seat of wisdom* are summarized in this image. Indeed, the icon of mother and child is probably the most powerful symbol and one of the best syntheses of Christianity. It brings together in a single and most attractive image the many facets of God's self-revelation to the world. It stresses in particular the unbreakable unity and complementarity between God and humankind. Symbol of the Incarnation, the icon of Mother and Child suggests and anticipates in subtle ways the semantics of redemption. In redemption, God gives himself away (manifests himself as a child); he identifies with the little ones to give them new stature and heightened self-understanding (represented in the adult figure of a mother).

Thus, the figure of mother and child is not only an icon of revelation past, but also presents us with a whole spiritual doctrine, teaching us how Christ is growing in us so we might be able to grow in him. Above all, the image of mother and child is a living testament of love. It speaks without ceasing of God's loving self-giving, and the loving reception this gift was given in Mary's heart and womb. Mother and child are a manifesto of love directed to the whole world at all times. A constant and living witness to the Divine-human unity, the mother-child icon is the highly visible center and living source of the communion of saints. Finally, the mother-child representation is a beautiful memento of the ever-active presence of the Spirit in Mary's life.

Mary's Beauty: Her Relationship with the Spirit

Let us retain the major conclusion from these developments. Engaging in the *via pulchritudinis* does not lead to Mary's beauty directly, but it takes our inquiry to deeper insights into the mysterious relationship between her and the Spirit. One of the results of these insights is the experience of Mary's beauty. This sounds and looks like an ironic twist or clever sleight of hand. How can it be that where the faceless woman of Nazareth meets the One whom we compare to the wind, there happens to be beauty—something we assimilate with visual or, at the least, sensible experience? Could it be that both Mary and the Spirit needed each other so much, that only in unity and complementarity they could come into their own? To be present and active in history, the Spirit "depends," so to speak, on sensible forms. Mary was one of these forms—after Christ, the most perfect realization of the Spirit—the Spirit's masterpiece. The Spirit owes Mary his visibility, one of his "incarnations"; where God becomes present and visible, there is beauty. Likewise, it is only in the Spirit that Mary has a face—meaning not only visibility but also and (primarily) a personal identity. Whatever Mary's face, it would be forever forgotten had it not been modeled by the hand of the Spirit to match and reflect God's plans of self-revelation. Icon painters attest the authorship of their art to the Spirit. Where the hand of God touches a human being, there again is beauty.

This concept, not a shallow one of physical beauty, constitutes the *via pulchritudinis*. Why is Our Lady of Vladimir reputed beautiful? For many people, this icon will never be able to compete with Raphael's *Madonna Tempi*. Nonetheless, very few people would deny beauty where they consciously or unconsciously sense holiness. There are hundreds of so-called miraculous images of Mary, many of them hardly beautiful in a conventional sense. They do not attract people with physical beauty but through spiritual power. Their primary purpose is to assure and secure active divine presence in this world through Mary. If beauty is holiness, if we may speak of the beauty of the Spirit, then beauty is not an exclusively visual category. Several art theories of this century confirm this observation. In true aesthetic experience, the visual form does not

necessarily produce a visual experience, but one that is largely trans-visual. Not without intent did Kandinsky seek an art that would be able to produce an "inner sound." While Brancusi wanted art to embody the "essence" of things (who has ever seen a visual essence?), and Mondrian sought to communicate the awareness that the "universal towers above us," Matisse's art was said to convey the impression of "a stable and luminous equilibrium beneath changing appearances."¹² In all of these examples, the visual form and physical beauty are never the end-product. They remain of the order of the medium which carries the all important and beautifying message.

The reflections on theological aesthetics offered above are not without solid philosophical foundations. The concept of beauty, as developed by philosophers of the *philosophia perennis*, is closely related to splendor, radiance, or plenitude of light (as Plato early pointed out).¹³ Beauty can also be related to harmony and proportion¹⁴; hence, for Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, the concept of beauty becomes *splendor of form*.¹⁵ Form refers to the shape and the size of material reality; it is the outward appearance of inner reality, also called the sensible form. There is beauty in sensible form, but greater beauty still in inward form, since it enlightens the mind and constitutes the nature of a being.¹⁶ Where the essence of a being or thing manifests itself in outward appearance, there is beauty. The shining light of its essence has to overcome the opacity of its material density in order to make a thing beautiful.¹⁷

Mary's Splendor of Form: Work of the Spirit

Applying our reflections on the *via pulchritudinis*, we ask: What makes Mary truly beautiful? It is the *splendor of*

¹²R. Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-century Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 1-16.

¹³Phaidros, 250, d.7.

¹⁴Dionysius, *De Divinis nominibus*, 4,7; PG 3, 701c.

¹⁵3 Sent., d.23, q.3.a1, sol.1, ad 2; ST Ia5, 4, ad1.

¹⁶Thomas Aquinas, ST 3a, 13,1.

¹⁷St. Albert, *De pulchro et bono*, qI, a.2.

form. Only the splendor of the form outshines the actual form in Mary. Mary's "form" is graced with the surplus of the divine. Mary's form is the work of the Holy Spirit, modeling cause of all that is. He is responsible for the curiously but breathtakingly paradoxical beauty of Mary's being. What we see and perceive in her—at first glance—is the servant of the Lord, meaning the outward form of her personality. Her outward form is bathed in and literally drowning in the splendor of the inward form—her immaculate conception and fullness of grace. In Mary there is far more than what meets the eye. The overwhelming splendor of her figure reveals the trinitarian groundedness of her being, both as immaculate and servant, since she is predestined and called to be *theotokos*.

There is an ancient tradition which propounds the fundamental identity of the beautiful and good. According to this tradition, beauty is the splendor of the one, the true and the good.¹⁸ It is against this background of *kalokagathia* (beauty of goodness) that Mary's beauty should be read. There is also a dimension of freedom in beauty; it gives itself freely and without personal regard. Beauty introduces one to the inexhaustible riches of being and makes one experience the gratuitous character of all being. True beauty is the privilege of love, because love alone is able to detect beauty as gift freely given. Beauty conveys meaning, amazement, joyful and grateful understanding. Even Wittgenstein had to admit: "The beautiful is precisely that which makes happy."¹⁹ All of these characterizations apply to Mary. She is the living embodiment of the scholastic axiom "Ens et amor convertuntur."

Mary's Beauty: Revelation of God's Goodness

Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is currently the oft-quoted "star witness" to the *via pulchritudinis*,²⁰ placed his major treatise on Mary not within the context of theo-aesthetics, but in that

¹⁸Thomas Aquinas, *ST* Ia 5, 4, ad 1.

¹⁹*Schriften*, Bd. 1, 179.

²⁰See S. de Fiores, *Maria nella teologia contemporanea*, 353–62.

of theo-dramatics.²¹ He did this not at all to deny or oppose a theo-aesthetic reading of her person. Theo-aesthetics stresses the phenomenological quality of God's self-revelation. It is, among other things, a methodological device to highlight the factual primacy of descending theology. The figure of Mary can be properly understood only within this directional context. She is part and parcel of God's gift of self to the world but meaningless without it. However, the figure of Mary comes truly alive only in theo-dramatics, where not the beautiful but the good is the organizing principle. In the theo-dramatic context the splendor of form takes on a personal dimension.²² Its shining becomes a dialogical event, where the form of unlimited freedom meets the form of limited freedom. This means that beauty is revealing goodness. The encounter of divine and human freedom can be understood as a dialogue of love, and the proper *Sitz im Leben* of beauty is located where the divine and human person meet in loving encounter. The ultimate expression of beauty in this world is, thus, the one we call *concretissimum ens*, Jesus Christ himself.²³ By the same token, all beauty according to Evdokimov is "figure of the Incarnation."²⁴ This takes us back to and reconfirms our initial remarks about Mary as masterpiece of the Spirit, dwelling place of God and seat of his wisdom.

Balthasar's view of Mary raises questions about the place and importance of the *via pulchritudinis* in contemporary mariology. Personal observation suggests that there are no major treatises based on this approach in explicit fashion.²⁵ Forte, whose symbolic-narrative method comes closest to a theology of beauty, considers as his primary concern a new theological

²¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Dramatik*. Bd II/2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1978), 260-330.

²²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Dramatik*. Bde I & II (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1973 & 1976).

²³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Der anti-römische Affekt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 164-170.

²⁴Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (Redondo Beach, Calif.: Oakwood Publications, 1990), 73-95.

²⁵See: D. M. Turollo and S. de. Fiore, "Bellezza," in *Nuovo dizionario di mariologia*, (Milano: Edizioni paoline, 1985), 222-31.

synthesis about Mary.²⁶ Saward, who writes on the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty, accords ample space to the figure of Mary, but his primary objective is to show that art, sanctity, and Catholic truth coincide and complement each other.²⁷

However, if we compare the *via pulchritudinis* with other methods used in contemporary mariology,²⁸ we note important points of convergence. As is well known, post-Vatican II mariology presents a strong typological emphasis. It is rooted in *Lumen gentium's* ecclesiotypical stance of mariology: Mary typifies the Church; she is a representation of the Church. Representation is an aesthetic category—not only so, but also. It makes visible and describes what is otherwise difficult or impossible to grasp and set in simple form. Conversely, a representation never separates from the original; it prevents dissociation and isolation—again elements familiar to the aesthetic discourse. This typological and representational vision of Mary operates in concert with the symbolic approach to Mary.

The symbolic method basically adopts a similar representational mode of picturing Mary. Its fundamental question—when truly symbolic—asks for the meaning behind the facts or the factual reality. What does Mary stand for? What is the deeper meaning of her virginity? What does the figure of the Immaculate tell us about human essence? These are some of the objectives of symbolic inquiry. Representatives of liberation and feminist theology frequently operate on a *reversed* or *inverted* symbolic model. Their question is not so much *what* Mary stands for but *how* she may represent and justify what liberation and feminist theology stand for. Still, even in this context, the affinity with aesthetic categories is perceptible.

There exists in contemporary mariology a further convergence with the *via pulchritudinis*. I would like to mention the

²⁶B. Forte, *Maria, la donna icona del mistero: saggio di mariologia simbolico-narrativa* (2. ed.; Milano: Edizioni paoline, 1989).

²⁷John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

²⁸S. de Fiores, "Le vie della conoscenza di Maria: panoramica generale," in *Como conoscere Maria* (Roma: Centro di cultura mariana "Mater Ecclesiae," 1984).

largely descriptive and expository modes of dealing with Mary in current Marian discourse. The root of this approach is again to be found in *Lumen gentium*. Opting for a salvation history model, the presentation of Mary in *Lumen gentium* refrains largely from discursive or apologetic incursions. It uses instead narration and description, going so far as to picture Mary as the *verbum abbreviatum*²⁹ of salvation history. We find a similar intent in the recently retrieved manualistic tradition, which caters mainly to a newly discovered need to find and present again the whole picture of Mary. Like a red thread going through all of these attempts, there is the presence of an *irenic* pattern or streak. Aesthetic theology and related approaches are mostly peaceful and conciliatory. They want people to see for themselves and do not seek to be right at all cost. Here is the point where ecumenism meets aesthetic theology.

Critique of the *Via Pulchritudinis*

Evidently, the aesthetic mode of post-conciliar mariology presents some undeniable shortcomings, two of which I would like to consider.

1. Contemplation puts the inquisitive mind to rest. Mary, for the representational approach, is mainly an object of contemplation and not of discursive theology. This approach shows and presents her but engages in little explanation. There exists thus a danger of facile ontologism, where the representational categories (Mary as prototype and archetype of the Church, etc.) are confounded with Mary's reality as person. There is further the danger of aestheticism when contemplation of the Marian symbol or symbolisms is regarded as an end in itself. Finally, the aesthetic reading of Mary's figure tends to disregard or dismiss her historical reality. Recent developments in Marian theology may be, indirectly at least, a reaction against this lack of discursive enterprise. The attempt to promote a final Marian dogma provokes theological discourse. It focuses on doctrinal issues, something theological aesthetics do not spontaneously favor. Especially in the case of the Mary-as-

²⁹S. de Fiores, *Maria nella teologia contemporanea*, 532.

Coredemptrix movement, the christotypical dimension of mariology is again more explicitly highlighted.

2. This leads us to the second potential major shortcoming of the *via pulchritudinis*. The aesthetic approach is in danger of limiting itself to a two-dimensional perception of Mary in which the identity of the person is absorbed in its representation. Detached from history and personal destiny, the figure of Mary is transformed into a free-floating entity and becomes an easy prey to ideological interpretation. The anthropological or personalist approach counterbalances such danger. In this sense, John Paul II's mariology of the acting person³⁰ represents a welcome complement to Paul VI's typological mariology.

Looking beyond these potential shortcomings of the *via pulchritudinis* and similar ways to go to Mary, I would like to point out some of the major theological conclusions we can draw from the observations made so far.

Theological and Spiritual Possibilities of the *Via Pulchritudinis*

1. The *via pulchritudinis* points to the historical priority and systematic primacy of descending theology. Theologically speaking, there is no visible form without revelation, no splendor of form without the priority and primacy of form-giving causality. Of course, this does not amount to a dismissal of ascending theology which points to the importance of the visible form without which there would be no focal point for divine radiance in time and space.

2. The *via pulchritudinis* attempts to overcome theological fragmentation and compartmentalization. An authentic aesthetic approach is a call for synthesis, the deep-seated conviction that there exists in reality a convergence toward a maximum of meaning and significance. In this sense, the *way of beauty* helps to heal wounds inflicted by limited views of theology and resituates partial views of Mary within her global and trans-historical context.

³⁰J. G. Roten, "La foi de Marie à la lumière de la théologie actuelle," in *Études mariales* (Médiaspaul, 1996): 193-205.

3. The *via pulchritudinis* is a guardian of Mary's mystery. This does not mean that God's mystery or the work of the Spirit in Mary need protection. Rather the *via pulchritudinis* helps to protect the ineffable character of Mary's being in and through the Spirit. To accomplish its mission, the way of beauty does not erect walls nor install metal detectors. It takes the adept of beauty by the hand and leads him or her deeper into the mystery of Mary.

The ultimate answer to *Virgo immaculata, theotokos* and *assumpta* lies in the realm of mystery. At first glance this sounds like a cop-out and looks like a cheap cover-up. In fact, there is nothing facile about mystery. *Lumen gentium* describes Mary's perpetual virginity as a personal *habitus* that was not "diminished but consecrated" in childbirth (*non minuit sed consecravit*).³¹ The phrase does not shed light on Mary's biological integrity, but says in unmistakable terms that this birth is shrouded in the cloak of God's intimacy and grace. Whatever the exact circumstances of Christ's birth, they will only deepen and strengthen Mary's exclusive relationship with the Spirit. The formulation of this truth (*non minuit sed consecravit*) is itself a prime example of theological aesthetics. It affirms and protects, leading simultaneously to greater depth of understanding of God's own hermeneutics.

4. The *via pulchritudinis* retrieves a theological tradition which we might call *sapiential* or *wisdom tradition*. According to this tradition there is no split between theology and spirituality, between sitting and kneeling theology. Faith leads to understanding, and deeper understanding to greater faith, both alternating and growing constantly. Faith is a constitutive element of theological aesthetics, because it is only in the light of faith that we can truly see the glory of God and the splendor of out- and inward form. Sapiential theology is sometimes compared to circular methodology, meaning that the same realities are mulled over continuously, the whole of revelation being pondered over and over again from different angles. Sapiential theology indicates communion between object and subject. In other words, aesthetic experience is a contempla-

³¹LG 57.

tive act in which communion is established between splendor of form and committed spectator. The site of this communion is "being as love" (*ens et amor convertuntur*).

5. The *via pulchritudinis* strikes a delicate balance between Incarnation and Redemption or eschatology. One of the most typical aesthetic realizations of this aspect of the way of beauty is to be found in Mary's apparitions. Mary's appearance—commonly described in terms of light, radiance and beauty—attests in the first place to the incarnational dimension of Christianity. It reminds us that truth is concrete, that God needs human reality to be present to humanity, that there is no way to bypass human reality in order to go directly to God. At the same time, Mary's apparitions remind us of the eschatological dimension of our life. Mary is the icon of new creation, the model of accomplished humanity in God. She puts us face-to-face with our own eternal and definitive destiny. Mary's beauty articulates incarnation because it affirms finite reality and relates it to the infinite. Her beauty has also a redeeming quality because it is steeped in gratuity and freedom *for* God.

6. The *via pulchritudinis* brings harmony to Mary's singularity and her universal significance. One of the most frequently raised questions in mariology deals with the possibility of reconciling the Mary of history with the Mary of doctrine. How can Mary be the simple Jewish girl of Galilee and, at the same time, be invoked as the mediatrix of graces? The way of beauty does not eliminate this Marian paradox but it helps us to discover the deeper truth about Mary. How does it achieve this? It makes visible her *spiritual profile*—the only personality profile we know of her—which is the same for Mary of Galilee and the Queen of Heaven. More specifically, it is the only personality profile that counts in the eye of God, for it is the work of his Spirit.

Mary's life is the history of a vocation, the Christian vocation, meaning the answer to a call and the many *fiats* needed to ratify the foundational "yes" of the Annunciation. The transformation from Jewish girl to eschatological icon is not the result of a personal journey in search of fulfillment, but a monument to God's own art. It is the expansion and realization

of personhood in mission, freed and fashioned by the hand of the Spirit.

The various facets here mentioned do not exhaust the theological and spiritual possibilities of the way of beauty. They present major articulations and some suggestions for a more sapiential reflection on the figure of Mary. They are an invitation to look at Mary not only with "eyes of flesh" but also with "eyes of fire": "Eyes of flesh focus on the thing itself, eyes of fire on facts but still more intensely on their participation in a larger meaning by which they are raised."³² Eyes of flesh will show us Mary in flattened profile and uni-dimensional contours, while eyes of fire will be able to perceive in her the masterpiece of the Spirit . . . and the Spirit himself. The relationship of Spirit and Mary, which we attempted to present as the cornerstone of the *via pulchritudinis*, does different things for both of them. In the case of Mary, it heightens the understanding of Mary as spiritual figure and gives us an essentially spiritual portrait of her person. In the case of the Spirit, the result is reversed. Thanks to Mary, we are gratified with a quasi-physical portrait of the Paraclete and a more specific and concrete understanding of his mysterious ways.

Artists and the *Via Pulchritudinis*

But let us take this reflection a step further. How does the *via pulchritudinis* relate to the artistic rendering of the figure of Mary in the visual arts? Christian tradition is filled with witnesses and attestations to the physical beauty of Mary, notwithstanding St. Augustine's warning: "Non novimus faciem Virginis Mariae."³³ St. Ambrose was more generous in attributing physical beauty to Mary, but he refers it to the beauty of her soul and sees in her outward beauty the expression of her virtues.³⁴ Venantius Fortunatus offered a dazzling description of Mary's beauty couched entirely in light symbolism.³⁵ Richard of St. Laurent ventured a detailed description of the

³²H. Corbin, "Eyes of Flesh and Eyes of Fire: Science and Gnosis," in *Material for Thought*, Nr. 8, 1980; see: R. Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*, 17.

³³*De Trin.*, 8, 5, PL 42, 952.

³⁴*De Virg.*, lib 2, cap 2, PL 16, 220.

³⁵*In laudem S. Matris Virginis*, PL 88, 281.

physical aspects of her person,³⁶ and St. Antoninus managed a scrupulous transposition of St. Albert's aesthetic criteria to the face and body of the Virgin Mary.³⁷

These few examples and many others, some scurrilous and of bad taste, show how prominent a role Mary's beauty has played in Christian theology and culture. Quite naturally it spilled over and inspired sacred art. Sacred art is true and beautiful, says the *Catechism*, if it corresponds by its expression to its true vocation which is to evocate and give praise to the transcendent mystery of God. The *Catechism* offers two examples on how to bring into focus the mystery of God: through Christ, in whom appeared the invisible beauty of truth and love, and through Mary, the angels and saints who are reflections of spiritual beauty.³⁸

This aesthetic program would have been easy to implement in pre-modern times, when beauty was still synonymous with being. With the Enlightenment, the concept of beauty changed. The world was no longer considered the many-splendored form of God's creative genius but human artifact, that is, the sum total of human experimentation and productivity. The eschatological tribunal of this world—the judgment of good and evil—was turned over to the forces of history and their thrust for progress and self-redemption in time. By the same token, the situation of art was changed. Its new role was to take the place of religion and offer temporary respite from the hardship of managing the earth; it was to become a moment or state of grace in a world without eschatology. The aesthetic program of modernity initiated by Baumgarten and perfected by Hegel attempted to domesticate ontology and eschatology by reducing it to art.³⁹ Beauty is no longer splendor of form, a witness for goodness and truth of reality, but the sensible shining of the idea (Hegel) limited to art, since impossible to detect in the impurity of natural forms. Art is expelled from the realm of beauty and is relocated in that of truth (truth understood as

³⁶*De Laud.* B.M., lib. 5, cap. 1 and 2.

³⁷*ST*, IV, t. XV, c. 11.

³⁸CCC 2502.

³⁹R. Spaemann, "Ende der Modernität?" in P. Koslowski, *Moderne oder Postmoderne* (Civitas, Bd. 10, 1986), 31.

personal truth)—a way to come to terms with one's historical significance. Henceforth, art's noblest role will be the pampering of the grandeur of subjective consciousness and noble human destiny. The clash between the aesthetics of modernity and post-modernity in the present do not change this basic thrust. In both modernism and post-modernism the primary focus is on the subject. Whereas the aestheticism of modernity attempts to reach the essence of self in ever more reductive forms of art, that of post-modernism leads the subject on to amalgamize with the world and absorb it in ogre-like fashion.

The contrast between sacred art as described above and the art theories of modernity is harsh. A painting by James Ensor typifies this clash. It shows the painter portraying Mary, but the central figure of the painting is James Ensor himself and not Mary. The painting could serve as a representative for the whole of expressionism.⁴⁰ Whatever its content or motif, expressionism all through this century has taught us to look at art with the eyes of the artist and to communicate with the state of his soul or the concept of his art, sometimes to the point where the shadow of the artist obscures his own work. This is what Merton meant when he said of Picasso, that he was "undoubtedly a great genius . . . but perhaps that is the trouble."⁴¹

Nevertheless, the great merit of twentieth-century art was to explore the deepest recesses of human subjectivity and to make it art-worthy. How important was its contribution to what we call sacred art? Redemption must assume the whole of reality and transform the very core of human selfhood. I see here one of most important contributions of twentieth-century art to the Church. It shows how deep the human need for redemption is, and how many different facets of personal and collective human history still need to be healed in salvation from God. From Nolde's *Entombment* to Picasso's *Guernica* and Baldung's *Last Supper*, there is hardly an aspect of twentieth-century history that has not been pinpointed as

⁴⁰See James Ensor (1860-1949), *De vertroostende Magd* (1892).

⁴¹T. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. W. H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 129.

wound, tragedy or open question. The great art of this century is permeated with the heaviness of human existence, and it is not without deeper significance that the *Pietà* appears as one of the most frequently represented Marian motifs for much of our century.

The shortcoming of expressionism lies in the fact that it states the need for redemption but does not seem to be able to promise salvation. This longing, and the relentless quest for the spiritual, seem to presage well for a more active exchange between Church and art world. Today, churches like Audincourt, Vence, Ronchamp, and Plateau d'Assy seem like an afterglow of past glories and look like dinosaurs of a distant past when institutionalized religion and the world of art were joined together. We need in our time a new opening for mutual respect, dialogue and artistic production. Religion has been in this century, as it was before, a powerful source of artistic inspiration, and has responded in more than one way to the artistic nostalgia for the spiritual in life, so typical of our time since Kandinsky.

The figure of Mary has a role to play in this encounter. Better than other religious motifs, the figure of Mary offers an aesthetic bridge to link religion and art. This is particularly true for the image of Mother and Child. It makes an eloquent statement about the culture of life as opposed to the culture of death, which has disfigured so many events and values of our time. There is common ground in Mary for sacred and secular art. Her figure represents a strong incarnational and multicultural thrust. Her icon celebrates life in all colors and shapes. However, it would no longer be the image of Mary if it were not an eschatological icon, too. The culture of life embodied in the figure of Mother and Child could not be truly celebrated if it were less than or only incarnational. To be more than incarnational, the artist needs to reconnect with the treasures of *iconographic*, representations. To make the image of Mary truly incarnational, the artist has to sample the many facets of human experience. There is no other way to give a complete vision of the culture of life and the need to be incarnational and eschatological; and there is no adequate representation of Mary without the Spirit leading the hand of the artist.