**AN APPEAL TO BEAUTY**

***The Missing Ingredient***

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Recently, *Daily Wire*host Michael Knowles commented that of the three transcendentals—goodness, truth and beauty—American conservatives love to frame their arguments in terms of truth, often have recourse to [goodness](https://www.tfp.org/why-the-holy-innocents-are-martyrs-due-to-gods-goodness/) but give little importance to beauty. It is an astute observation that greatly affects their effectiveness.

However, what are the transcendentals and why are they important?

**Goodness, Truth, and Beauty**

The transcendentals are those properties that are common to all beings. As such, they go beyond, or “transcend,” individual characteristics. Since God is the origin of being and the only necessary being, He can be referred to in terms of these transcendentals. However, while His creatures possess a relative goodness, truth, and beauty, only God possesses them in an absolute way. That is why creatures can be described as good, true, and beautiful, whereas only God is Goodness, Truth, and Beauty.

Among all creatures, men and angels are destined to spend eternity with God. Indeed, this is why they were created. To help them achieve this end, God placed within them an insatiable appetite for Himself. That is why St. Augustine famously affirmed: “We are made for Thee, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

This appetite that humans have for God means that they also crave goodness, truth and beauty and need to experience all three.

**God and Beauty Are One**

Fortunately, beauty abounds throughout creation. Be it expressed through marvellous sunsets, brilliant flowers or majestic birds of prey, some form of beauty is accessible to everyone. When one experiences these marvels, they can transport the person’s mind directly to God.

Whittaker Chambers experienced this as a child. Although God was never discussed in his home, he had three religious experiences in his youth. This second of these was provoked entirely by [beauty](https://www.tfp.org/why-we-need-beauty-in-our-lives/). This is how he described it:

“One day I wandered off alone and found myself before a high hedge that I had never seen before. It was so tall that I could not see over it and so thick that I could not see through it. But by lying flat against the ground, I wriggled between the privet stems.

“I stood up, on the other side, in a field covered from end to end, as high as my head, with thistles in full bloom. Clinging to the purple flowers, hovering over them, or twittering and dipping in flight, were dozens of goldfinches—little golden yellow birds with black, contrasting wings and caps. They did not pay the slightest attention to me, as if they had never seen a boy before.

“The sight was so unexpected, the beauty was so absolute, that I thought I could not stand it and held to the hedge for support. Out loud, I said: ‘God.’ It was a simple statement, not an exclamation, of which I would then have been incapable. At that moment, which I remembered through all the years of my life as one of its highest moments, I was closer than I would be again for almost forty years to the intuition that alone could give meaning to my life—the intuition that God and beauty are one.”[1](https://www.tfp.org/the-missing-ingredient-an-appeal-to-beauty/?PKG=TFPE22341#easy-footnote-bottom-1-76529)

This demonstrates how natural beauty nourishes the soul. However, it alone does not suffice. Man wants to experience beauty in his fellow men as well. The beautiful things made by man should sate this appetite. Be it art, music, architecture, elegant furniture or the like, these man-made marvels are important because whenever someone makes something, he imprints it with something of himself. Indeed, the artist can only produce something if a model of that thing is present within him.

Thus, when man makes something beautiful, it is the expression of something beautiful that exists in his soul. Since [God](https://www.tfp.org/order-can-lead-us-know-god/) is the origin of all beauty, it proclaims that a reflection of God’s beauty shines in the souls of men. It attests that man is made in God’s image and likeness and therefore aids men in giving proper respect to each other, facilitating the practice of charity for one’s neighbour.

Unfortunately, this kind of beauty is lacking in modern society. It has been replaced by what some have called a “cult of ugliness.”

**The Cult of Ugliness: A Denial of God’s Existence**

In 2001, Fr. Anthony Brankin gave a lecture about this very topic sponsored by the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP). In it, he argued that contemporary man is surrounded by so much ugliness his capacity to identify something as ugly has been dulled.

He said: “When I say that you live cheek-by-jowl with this ugliness, I mean to say that in coming to and going from this hall, you are surrounded by miles and miles of unyielding ugliness: McDonalds and Burger Kings sandwiched between Amocos and tenements. You do not mistake that for beauty, but it is so ubiquitous that you may no longer recognize it as specifically ugly.

“You may never even make a mental note of the ugliness of all the malls with their false fronts and even falser interiors or of the condominiums that are just as empty and sterile on the inside as they are on the outside. That’s just how everything looks now.

“And, of course, that’s just for starters, for there is likewise in our world a spiritual ugliness no less all-pervasive than and somehow related to the visual ugliness all about us.”

A bit later, Fr. Brankin continued, saying: “Now, you might think that at least on Sunday you could be rescued from all of this visual and spiritual ugliness by going to church; but ugliness is there, too, for chances are that your church has already been despoiled by modern Catholic [barbarians](https://www.tfp.org/barbarians-pagans-neo-barbarians-neo-pagans/) who haven’t even the artistic sense of the Unitarians who sit on your towns’ historic preservation boards.”[2](https://www.tfp.org/the-missing-ingredient-an-appeal-to-beauty/?PKG=TFPE22341#easy-footnote-bottom-2-76529)

This immersion in ugliness has detrimental effects on society. If the presence of man-made beauty reinforces the reality that God exists and is reflected in the soul of man, the prevalence of ugliness asserts the opposite.

Fr. Brankin expressed this in these terms: “The subliminal message in every confused and misshapen piece of modern architecture, art, music, or drama is that there is no God. The subliminal message in every deliberate mutilation of natural forms, in every tribute to physical and personal perversion, is that there is no God. The subliminal message in every celebration of the weird and deathly is that there is no God. This subliminal message is as surely the ‘Illuminated Gospel of Death’ as any culture could have ever proclaimed, and by virtue of its omnipresence in every aspect of modern life, we are constantly encouraged to accept this gospel.”[3](https://www.tfp.org/the-missing-ingredient-an-appeal-to-beauty/?PKG=TFPE22341#easy-footnote-bottom-3-76529)

So, a society that possesses beauty reflects God and one that rejects it also rejects God. This is a crucial point. It is why any solution to the modern Revolutionary crisis that does not include filling society with beauty cannot hope to be permanent or sufficiently profound.

**Beauty’s Direct Action on the Soul**

However, once a society is filled with beauty, it will necessarily influence those in that society. This is because beauty can act almost automatically on the soul, even with little reflection or intellectual effort. Everyone has experienced this. There are times when one encounters a beauty so profound that, almost involuntarily, the mind is drawn to God and higher realities. This is especially advantageous today because contemporary man shuns reflection.

Years ago, a TFP member reported visiting the Sainte Chapelle and seeing a shady character inside the shrine overcome with emotion. When he spoke to the poor man, all he could say was: “I feel like this place is cleaning my soul.” That is the effect that beauty can have.

While this “cleansing” or influence that beauty can have is often automatic, it does not mean its effects are ephemeral. The famous nineteenth-century author Joris-Karl Huysmans converted from the depths of vice to Catholicism by analysing the beauty of medieval chant and art. One could say that the apostle who brought him into the Faith was beauty.

**A Preferential Option for Beauty**

This begs the question: How many [souls](https://www.tfp.org/finding-the-real-soul-of-the-apostolate/) languishing under the cult of ugliness in contemporary society could benefit, or even convert, by being exposed to beauty? As Michael Knowles commented, few American conservatives are asking this question.

This is unfortunate because it is an issue that should be taken seriously. Furthermore, it is a problem that must be acted upon.

That is why it is imperative that American conservatives exercise a preferential option for beauty. As much as possible, they should expose their children to beautiful things; they should decorate their homes in as fine a way as possible; they should do everything they can to fill society with the kinds of beauty for which Christian civilization is still known and admired. In this way, they will reject the cult of ugliness that surrounds them and invite God back into society where He belongs.

Footnotes:

1. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington D.C., Regnery, 2014), p. 125, iBook.
2. Fr. Anthony Brankin, *The Cult of Ugliness in America*, July 14, 2009, accessed November 19, 2022, [//www.tfp.org/the-cult-of-ugliness-in-america/](https://www.tfp.org/the-cult-of-ugliness-in-america/).
3. Ibid.

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