

Holiness and beauty

The Christian tradition, especially in the West, has interpreted holiness in essentially moral terms. Understood in these terms, holiness does not imply absence of sin, but rather trust in the mercy of God, which is stronger than our sins and able to lift up the believer who has fallen. The holy person is a song sung in thanksgiving for the mercy of God. He or she gives witness to the victory of God three times holy and three times merciful. Holiness is grace; it is a gift, and what is asked of each of us is the fundamental openness that will allow us to be flooded by the divine gift.

The Christian tradition, especially in the West, has interpreted holiness in essentially moral terms. Understood in these terms, holiness does not imply absence of sin, but rather trust in the mercy of God, which is stronger than our sins and able to lift up the believer who has fallen. The holy person is a song sung in thanksgiving for the mercy of God. He or she gives witness to the victory of God three times holy and three times merciful. Holiness is grace; it is a gift, and what is asked of each of us is the fundamental openness that will allow us to be flooded by the divine gift. What holiness tells us above all is that our Christian existence has a responsorial nature - and our response consists more in who we are than in what we do, more in giving than in accomplishing, more in freedom than in legalism. We can say that the nature of Christian holiness, even in its ethical dimension, is not legalistic or juridical, but eucharistic. It is a response to the *châris* (grace) of God manifested in Jesus Christ, and because of this it is marked by gratitude and joy. The holy person, the saint, is the one who says to God, "Not I, you." If we think of holiness from the point of view of grace freely offered, we can give it another name: beauty. Yes, in the eyes of the Christian holiness is also beauty. The New Testament already makes this association: in the First Letter of Peter, the "holy conduct" to which Christians are called is also described as "beautiful (or 'good' - Gk kalos) conduct" (cf. 1 Peter 1:15 and 2:12).

Seen as beauty, holiness is no longer an individual effort, the result of a (perhaps heroic) personal struggle, but an event of communion. It is the communion represented in the icon-like image of Moses and Elijah "in glory" (Luke 9:31) and of the disciples Peter, James and John gathered around Christ radiant in the light of the Transfiguration. It is the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints - in other words, the communion of those who participate in the life of God *communicantes in Unum*, living in communion with the One who is the only source of holiness (cf. Hebrews 2:11). How can we forget the cathedral of Chartres with its statues representing the holy men and women of the Old and New Testaments gathered around God like countless rays sent forth by the one sun? The glory of the One who is "the author of beauty" shines on the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6), the Messiah celebrated by the Psalmist as "the most beautiful of the sons of men" (Psalm 45:3). This glory is poured forth into the heart of the Christian by the Holy Spirit, who transforms our face into the image and likeness of the face of Christ and our biological individualities into events of relationship and communion. In this way we as Christians come to know something of the beauty of the divine life of the Trinity, a life that is communion, a pericoreosis of love. Holiness is the beauty that challenges the ugliness of being closed in ourselves, of egocentrism, and of *philautía* (self-love). It is the joy that challenges the sadness of those who do not open themselves to the gift of love, like the rich young man of the Gospel who "went away sad" (Matthew 19:22).

As Léon Bloy has written, "The only sadness is that of not being holy." This is the holiness, and the beauty, offered to every Christian both as a gift and as a responsibility. In a world called "beautiful" at its Creation in the Genesis account (the Hebrew *tor* means both 'good' and 'beautiful'), men and women are created by God in a relationship of sexual alterity and are made suitable partners for God, capable of receiving the gifts of his love, and this work of creation is praised as "very beautiful" (Genesis 1:31). In a world called to beauty, we who have been given responsibility for creation are also responsible for the beauty of the world, of our own lives, and of each other's lives. If beauty is "a promise of happiness" (Stendhal), every gesture, every word, and every action inspired by beauty is a prophecy of the redeemed world, of the new heavens and new earth, of all humanity reunited in the heavenly Jerusalem in endless communion. Beauty becomes a prophecy of salvation. "It is beauty," Dostoevsky wrote, "that will save the world. Christians, called to holiness, are also called to beauty, and so we can ask ourselves this question: how have we answered the call to protect beauty, create it, and live in it? There is a beauty that we are called to create in our relationships, a beauty that is capable of making the Church a community in which true relationships, based on freedom, mercy and forgiveness, are possible. In such a community no one can say to another member, "I do not need you" (1 Corinthians 12:21), because every time the communion of the Church is damaged, the beauty of the one Body of Christ is disfigured.

This beauty we create through our relationships should be capable of making the Church a place that is luminous (cf. Matthew 5:14-16), a place of freedom and not of fear, of full expression - and not restriction - of all that is human, of understanding and not opposition, and of sharing and solidarity, especially with the poorest of the poor. It is a beauty that should pervade our living spaces, the liturgy, our physical surroundings, and especially the living temple of God that is each human being. It is the beauty that emerges from simplicity, poverty, and the struggle against idolatry and worldliness. It shines forth where communion triumphs over consumerism, and where contemplation and the free gift of oneself are victorious over possessiveness and greed. Yes, Christianity is *philocalía*, love of beauty, and concealed within the Christian vocation to holiness is a vocation to beauty, an invitation to make our life a work of art, a masterpiece of love. The command "Be holy, for I, the Lord, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2, 1 Peter 1:16), is inseparable from the command, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Christian beauty is not an object but an event. It is an event of love that narrates again and again in history, creatively and poetically, the folly and tragic beauty of the love with which God

has loved us by giving us his Son, Jesus Christ.

From: ENZO BIANCHI, *Words of Spirituality*,
Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London 2002