

Hospitality and Beauty

The Catholic Hospitality Training Institute

The beautiful seizes you, it changes you, and then it calls you and sends you.
Hans Urs von Balthasar

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived in a heavenly garden, made for them by God. Complete with a breathtaking landscape, exquisite plants and flowers, marvelous animals of every fathomable variety. He made our hearts to be at home in a beautiful place. There are plenty of Scriptures that warn against reducing beauty to outward appearances of a person, but it does not dismiss the importance of beauty. This is why Catholic churches always feature sacred art, whether statues or mosaics, or frescoes, or icons, etc. This is why the architecture of a cathedral can be so grand and intricate, why liturgical music must never be banal, why Saint Brigid of Sweden taught the subjects of her kingdom to decorate their homes with curtains and throw pillows. Beauty invites a soul to rest – and we must experience quiet and stillness of heart to encounter God and hear Him speak.

In classical Greek philosophy, three transcendentals, (properties of being) often mentioned are: The True, the Good, and the Beautiful. Every human person longs to experience transcendence, and long to encounter truth, goodness, and beauty. When armed with the knowledge of universal human longing, we can begin to shape evangelization to correspond to those longings. In postmodern society, pervaded as it is by moral relativism, we are seldom able to begin sharing Christ with people by arguments about right vs. wrong or good vs. evil. Father Robert Barron of Word on Fire Ministries says the following: “I think that the best way to evangelize is to move from the beautiful, then to the good, then to the truth¹”.

It is not simply atheists or agnostics who are most powerfully influenced by beauty, but also those whose hearts are engulfed in deep sorrow. After losing his best friend in a fatal accident, author John Eldredge said of his grief, “only beauty helped²”. When a soul is burdened down with worries and even tragedies, their pain can be assuaged through a holy experience of pleasure. In fact, in his famous *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas lists five remedies for sorrow, which include contemplation of the truth as well as experiences of edifying pleasure. Far from a license to sin, Aquinas is encouraging us toward things like: listening to a piece of music that moves our heart, walking outside in a lovely wooded park, reading a novel or poem, working in a backyard garden, preparing a beautifully presented meal, or contemplating a painting in an art museum. To take in experiences of beauty is to allow our soul to breathe.

We know that hospitality, though perhaps not fixed in our minds as being evangelistic, undeniably serves to prime the human heart for receiving Christ. A perfect example of this is in Victor Hugo’s classic novel, *Les Misérables*. Convict Jean Valjean is welcomed into the home of Bishop Myriel. Hardened by the cruel treatment life has dealt him, Valjean is won over by the witness of the Bishop, beginning with a willingness to feed and shelter him. The holy prelate shows his

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBMOwZFpZX0>

² John Eldredge, *Desire: The Journey We Must Take*

detachment from worldly possessions when Valjean attempts to steal some silverware from the Bishop, Myriel gives them freely to him (detachment from worldly possessions is given as a prerequisite for observing hospitality well GIVE EXAMPLE). With this humble act, Myriel begins to pry open the heart of a jaded man, and Valjean becomes a virtuous hero by the end of the tale.

So, when we set about to make our parish offices a warmer, cordial place – a place that says, “‘Be still and know that I am God³’... ‘All shall be well⁴’”, beauty matters. It does not matter more than the inner disposition of our hearts, more than our attitude toward the stranger, but it can add so much when it is layered alongside the ‘doing’ of welcoming. So we should ask ourselves – how can we make the parish office more beautiful? If there is no sacred art on the walls (or the art you have on hand is not beautiful and uplifting), it is worthwhile to invest in some. If you can only fit one image in the budget, be sure it is an image that depicts Christ in an inviting, appealing way, or contains a depth which can draw us into contemplation.

Another environmental factor to consider about the beauty of your office is the furniture. Is it old, stained, shabby or ugly? Colors can affect a person’s mood heavily, so we probably want to select gentle, earthy tones rather than deep shades of red or very dark colors. We also want to consider that a clean, tidy space is helpful, too – orderliness is an aspect of beauty!

A vase of flowers or a potted plant, a framed poem – these decorative elements do not have to be expensive to have a powerful influence on a space. We may want to consider quietly playing music in our parish offices – recordings of Gregorian chant, polyphony, or even gentle contemporary Christian music can have a calming effect on the atmosphere. For a non-believer who has not yet come to value silence and might be uncomfortable sitting in silence while they wait to meet with Father, music can be a cushion that they don’t even perceive puts them at greater ease.

We can never dismiss the importance of beauty in welcoming a human heart into our parish. The added bonus of beautifying our parish offices is that it can uplift our hearts as much as the persons we serve. Even if the staff seem to be the only ones to benefit from the beautification effort, it still adds to a culture of evangelization in our parish – imagine the influence uplifted employees have on the people they interact with! However little you incorporate beauty into your parish environments, it makes a difference. It is worth it.

¹ Psalm 46:10.

¹ Julian of Norwich.