

Is Faith Beautiful?

By Andrea Lonardo

The situation is dramatic — however not tragic, on the contrary optimal for freedom and commitment. The drama is that theatrical style in which action is decisive, while history is being played out and written, and protagonists, not walk-on actors, are needed. Tragedy, instead, is when the — distaster — has already happened.

In drama one needs direction, one must identify the crucial questions that need to be solved. It is worth our while to identify those, in this dramatic time, that are still open to every possible solution, at least from the human point of view.

1. Education has become difficult because everything has been transformed into action.

An initial issue of prime importance is that everything has become activity, overlooking the value of in-depth content and experience. This is not only true of education in the faith, but firstly in education in general. It is imperative be enlightened on this decisive point.

In fact, it is still mistakenly said that catechesis — but the same applies to the formation of consecrated people or school education — would be over-burdened with content and consequently one seeks to streamline it.

Actually those with some knowledge of catechesis notice that it often no longer has any content. Catechists seem to be absolutely incapable of dealing with any important content with clarity. Very few of them would be able to say something logical about God the Creator,¹ the soul, original sin, the difference between the religions, the Trinity, the relationship between grace and nature, and so on.

However, the lack of knowledge of these themes means being unable to transmit the beauty of the faith, its inspiration, its novelty, its greatness. The fact is that these themes are beautiful and to internalize them does not necessarily mean to speak of them but to enthuse others. As though it were not self-evident that Christ is very beautiful, that the Trinity deserves glory, that sin is ugly and that the devil is sad.

Evangelii Gaudium invites one to demonstrate its beauty not to remain silent: beauty alone attracts. Theology is never fully explained if it does not touch the heart. The escalation of methodological debate has led one to forget to reflect on why the Christian faith is absolute beauty. Authors such as J.K. Chesterton, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, A. Manzoni ² and Dante Alighieri ³ provide theological test cases for reference, in order to understand the beauty of the faith, to fall in love with it ever again and to be able to transmit it. For example no one better than Dante has shown that sin is to freeze, to be cold, to be detached with not even a flame of love to warm it, with the image of Lucifer in the glacia, which Lewis drew on for the White Witch. He alone was able to show what it means to perceive in a woman, in Beatrice, the divine promise that the world is good: not simply love, but love that opens the way to God.

One might say that what the proclamation and catechesis lack from the theological point of view is the practical application of the fundamental work of theology, which aims to show the credibility of the faith. Because a truth that is not beautiful as well as good is not the truth.

However the chance to have a real practical experience is limited. ⁴ Often when one speaks of experiential catechesis (a term in fashion in various ecclesiastical spheres) it might only mean the elaboration of some

project, a game, some action that one can “do”, “build”, “dynamic management”, whose scope is far from the sharing intended.

Instead experience combined with content give education wings. Only the experience of: meeting a large, loving family; the impact experienced on perceiving masters of faith who pray; of a lively parish community that worships on Sunday; dependable politicians; labourers whose work respects the “proper method”, attract and convince.

Martin Luther King said a year before being assassinated: “... my friends, even if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, go on out and sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures; sweep streets like Haendel and Beethoven composed music; sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. In short sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well’”.⁵

In the absence of practical experience one has recourse to the “workshop”. Although this is not a “real” *experience*, it may be useful. Experience is not artificial it is the emission of a reality that educates by example, like a summer camp or a long pilgrimage on foot or like entering a religious community the beauty of whose lifestyle attracts one. A workshop is artificial but it is well organized: what is decisive is the impact with reality.

Here, beauty means goodness that exerts attraction, because goodness that fails to attract is moralistic pretension. Pieper has stressed that in modern times morality is not something “to do”, it pertains to the essence of the human being.⁶ Whoever is unjust is less human, whoever does not love impoverishes his/her own humanity. A good, beautiful life belongs to a person’s heart, it is not an appendage.

One might say that education today is inflated with activities, while it has very little true, beautiful content and really enthusing experience. This is why, when a Christian community offers high level content and experience, everyone is fascinated.

2. Education is difficult because everything has been over-simplified

A second knot to be undone is to rectify the over-simplification that has overtaken the Christian educational method in general and, more broadly, society as a whole. This simplification is so widespread that at times instruction’s main concern seems to be to set exercises to colour in, crosswords to complete, sentences in which to insert the missing letter, things to cut out and so on.

However, besides children, young people and adults ask important questions.⁷ Children for example, ask “metaphysical” questions; they are interested in big things. They are in search of the Infinite not of a fragment. They ask about the origin, evil, justice, death and happiness; whereas Catechesis sometimes offers them unimportant historical notions and sundry facts.

This may happen to engaged or married couples too, who at times are merely offered some advice or psychological reflection. Although psychology is certainly helpful, it is mistaken and misleading to seek to build up a person’s, a couple’s, “maturity”, — even that of a novice or a postulant — before faith. Faith alone can make a person mature. Faith alone can confer the capacity to decipher the world, only the awareness that the world is in need of faith can sustain a vocation.

Discovering the absolute greatness of faith is to experience beauty. We must return to using superlatives: the faith is immensely beautiful; Christianity is absolutely new; never will anyone be greater than Jesus

Christ. This is not rhetoric, it is the reality. Instead, it is belittling to speak of the faith as a small thing, of the “Our Father” as a simple prayer, of the “sign of the cross” as a common gesture, but not as the greatest sign that has ever existed on earth, of “doing” this or that action of ecclesial renewal in an “organized way” as though it were in need of marketing methods.

Either the faith is a matter of life and death, or faith is of no interest to anyone.

Here too, one should recover the beauty — also the drama — of being an adult. Adulthood means to live for other people and no longer to care about self. A father or a priest is adult. Adults are those who are concerned about the future generations who will come later, more than their own. A father is ready to die so that his son may live. Those who have no one to die for are still somewhat immature.⁸

Thus, the alliance between generations is strengthened. There is no point in discussing whether one should give priority to catechising adults or children. If an adult is an adult, the parents’ priority will be to help the child to discover happiness and beauty. This is why catechesis for children and youth in Italy today consists in experiencing the first overwhelming proclamation ever made. In this way adults/parents re-discover the faith precisely when they perceive the “mystery” of life of their offspring and seek light to enlighten them, understanding that without Christ the life of their beloved children would lack sure hope and true reference points.

Pope Francis, with his continuous reference to a truly “popular” vision of the Church, invites us to recognize that this experience is authentic, and not to despise it when parents recognize that the faith is a good for their own family.

3. Education is possible because it leads man back to the beauty that endures in time and, at the same time, makes him creative

The on-going invention of the web network has rendered the situation even more dramatic. The huge supply of pictures, videos, messages, that it makes available calls beauty into question ever more radically. Here, it is not possible to analyze the negative and positive aspects of the web.⁹ Nevertheless, we wish to highlight one single aspect: the fatigue that it produces. Some researchers have reported that the advent of the *smartphone* has caused everyone to sleep an average of at least one hour less a day. Everyone continues to work and to communicate at night too and so rest is reduced. This physical reduction is to be added to the fatigue of living on different levels of life simultaneously. Accessing the *Second lite* app is not merely a “game”, but also a regular practice of those, who, while speaking to one person, are looking at ‘Face Book’ and other media programmes.

Precisely in this context it is even more meaningful to be someone who leads others to go star-gazing at night in silence, or leads them on a pilgrimage on foot, or helps them to celebrate the *compieta* [the last prayer after Vespers] in a monastery. To experience beauty is all the more amazing for those who are accustomed to ride on the crest of the wave of simultaneous communication.

The question about what is classic, about what endures in time, about what will remain after us and even more about eternity, strikes those who are accustomed to see every technological instrument become obsolete in the space of a year.

Once Hadjadj, the great French Catholic philosopher, explained with simplicity that the latest model of *smartphone* will doubtless be a fossil within two years, whereas the Crucifix that he wore around his neck would still be new in 2000 years time.¹⁰

The media system wants to oblige everyone to live on news, but that is not the way life is. "*Gaudium et Spes*" invites one to recognize man's continual mutation, but also what endures in time, what is immutable, what remains when what is transitory has passed. Precisely what endures enables one to appreciate what changes and not to be afraid to be creative and innovative. Modern studies, just to cite one example, rightly insist on the fact that Caravaggio became that great man he was also because he studied Michelangelo Buonarroti.¹¹ The references to "Adam's arm" in "The Calling of St Matthew", in the Church of St Luigi dei Franceschi, or to the fresco in the Pauline Chapel in the Apostolic Palace, which inspired the canvas on the same subject in the Cerasi Chapel, in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, tell us that Caravaggio was not that ingenuous artist superficial criticism ascribes to him. Tradition only seems to have been rejected or superseded to those who compare it to daily life, because no scientist can do less than listen to the Masters who have preceded him and every good inn boasts its date of foundation, asserting that the food served is cooked according to the genuine old recipe, even though presented in a modern style.

4. The Via Pulchritudinis

Now, it would seem clear that one must not confuse the *via pulchritudinis* with aestheticism. Beauty is neither reserved to authorized workers nor is it a hobby of intellectuals. Art is not affected but the expression of some incredible truth and newness. Early man was distinguished from all the other creatures for two simple reasons: because he painted, that is, he depicted himself in life while he was considering the world, and because he buried the dead, i.e. had nostalgia for the infinite. No animal can pray or swear or depict itself in a poetic form.

Creation achieved excellence in man alone. Sirius (Dog star) and Andromeda are very beautiful, but neither ever showed gratitude to, or envy of, the other. The human being is not characterized so much by the opposing thumb of the hand, but rather by the not opposing big toe that allows man to contemplate the stars and to wonder at them. Ovid wrote: "If the other creatures contemplated the earth with head bowed, man raised his face, for [God] ordered that he should see the sky, that he gaze erect at the firmament".¹²

This vision of beauty is also critical of the historiographical trend that always considers art in the light of propaganda, of power and of economic struggle. One cannot fully appreciate the art of the Baroque or Mediaeval periods if one views them solely as reflecting the economic conditions of the time and as a formal expression of dominion. Instead, the people who lived in those times, just as in our own, really sought to express their faith and love in their works, creating architecture and masterpieces that would touch the heart.

La Via Pulchritudinis requires that one leave aside a predominantly materialistic vision of history so as to capture the vitality of a people in the artworks. In this regard it is extremely significant that Christian art did not begin through a concession to power, but rather the first representations, well before Constantine, sprang from the community's internal need to tell its own story, and even earlier to gather to celebrate.¹³ The earliest known church in Dura Europa, in Syria, was earlier than the year 256 A.D., when the Persians reached it.¹⁴ At that date frescoes already adorned it although it was in a small outlying village. Most of the buildings and the decoration of the first centuries have been lost, but it is amazing to think that in those works the people, although still subject to persecution, wished to express the beauty of their faith with charity, with vitality, embellishing it with inscriptions and with material art too.

F. Boespflug, art historian and theologian, has stated: "I believe in what I would define as the expressive dynamism of strong intuition. A religion lived in an intense way by a civilization must be expressed. And

after words, Christianity achieved in a logical way other levels of expression, from the plastic arts to drama, from music to literature. Later it began to influence more specific areas, such as reflection on certain Gospel passages, in particular in John, in which Jesus uses the verb “to see”.¹⁵

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 To recover Creation in the proclamation of the faith, cf. A. Lonardo, *La bellezza originaria*. The narratives of the creation in Genesis, Castel Bolognese, Itaca, 2017.
- 2 Pope Francis has stated more than once that he keeps the “*I Promessi Sposi*” on his bed-side table and has promised to talk to young people and engaged couples about Renzo and Lucia.
- 3 In this regard, Giovanni Scifoni and don Andrea Cavallini read Alessandro Manzoni-s *I promessi Spos* for thier encounters on the Masters of spiritual charity (file audio of the meeting on/line on the site of Gli scritti). Cf. On Dante, see the encounters Franco Nembrini held throughout Italy.
- 4 Cf. Gadamer wrote: “It seems to me that the concept of experience – although this may seem paradoxical – needs to be listed among the least clarified one we have. Because of the fact that, in the logic of induction, its function is to act as a guide for the positive sciences, it has ended up being closed in a gnoseological framework that seems to harm its original content”. Furthermore, “one cannot think that experience was initially wordless [...]. Instead experience itself sought to find the words that could express it” (from H.G. Gadamer, *Verità e metodo*, Milan, Bompiani, 1995, pp. 715 and 479).
- 5 Cf. *Martin-Luther King, Discourse in the New Covennt Baptist Church, 9/4/1967 (on-line on site Writings)*.
- 6 Cf. J. Pieper, *La luce delle virtù. In quest of the Christian image of man*, Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 1999.
- 7 Cf. M. Botta – A. Lonardo based three volumes on this idea: “*Le domande grandi dei bambini. Itinerario di prima Comunione per genitori e figli*”. Castel Bolognese, Itaca, 2016-2017.
- 8 M. Recalcati’s interpretation of the end of Aedipus’ time, and the presence for a time of Telemachus, Ulysses’ son, who invokes his father’s return, is valuable even though some parts are questionable.
- 9 Cf. On this see section “Educazione e media” on site www.gliscritti.it, coordinated by A. Lonardo.
- 10 Cf. F. Hadjadj, Meeting in Rimini, 25.8.2011.
- 11 Cf. refer to A. Lonardo, “Caravaggio: un pittore controriformista?” (pp. 73-80). The Pauline Chapel in miniiature for Cardinal Cerasi (pp. 129-136). In the Madonna dei Pellegrini classical art meets modern art (pp. 171-178).
- 12 Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphosis* I, 76-85.
- 13 Cf. A. Lonardo, *La via pulchritudinis*. Where the Popes are elected. Guide to the Vatican Museums, Sistine Chappel, Raphael Rooms, Pio Christian Museum, EDB, Bologna, 2015, pp. 135-158.
- 14 Cf. A. Lonardo uses literary sources (pp. 47-54) in. P. Filacchione – C. Papi (eds.), *Christian Archeology. Coordinate stooriche, geografiche e culturali (secoli I-V)*, LAS, rome, 2015.
- 15 *Globalisation of the Cross*. Interview with the theologian F. Boespflug, by Daniele Zappalà, in *Avvenire*, 4. 12. 2008.

In SEDOS Bulletin, Vol. 50, nn. 3 – 4 — March-April 2018. (Reference: *Religiosi in Italia*, Luglio-Agosto 2017, n. 421, pp. 121-128).