

# Beauty in Catholic Churches

David Jones

Among those people who are conscious of and annoyed by the complete badness manifest in the building and decoration, in use in the Catholic Church in our days, there are very few who regard the matter as anything more than a superficial defect that can be, with care, remedied. There are few who realise the essentially malignant and even mortal nature of the infection that so ails us.

Most of these people speak with varying degrees of confidence about ways and means of 'improving the taste of the Faithful,' of educating people up to this or that notion. Again, others propose the copying on a vast scale the works of certain respectable and accredited masters of the past centuries, thereby improving the 'outward appearance' of churches and images. By this manoeuvre they hope to get the unsuspecting worshipper used to the form and comeliness of the Italian primitives and other work of men who lived in more civilized periods than our own so leading them on until, after a very few years of this aesthetic welfare-work, the most suburban Catholic will revile the pink and white-Madonnas as supplied by the 'church-furniture shop' and have nothing less than exact reproductions of Giotto or sixth century Byzantine.

Whatever may be said for these sincere attempts of pious people, the root of the matter is left untouched; it is not even approached. The issue is usually confused by a notion of 'giving the best to God.' I say confused because it creates in the mind the notion that there can be constructed a kind of scale of beauty, extending from the merely useful objects required for a church (like shelves or pipes or rubber door-mats) to the culminating point in the vestments and the sacred vessels.

It is subconsciously felt that the searching eye of Almighty God will overlook the radiator casing and the electric button so long as the priest's chasuble is graceful and costly. This particular superstition is widespread and deep-rooted.

One unique thing has been achieved in our days: quite large groups of men in Europe and America, and now in Asia and all the New World, north and south (in fact quite universally), owing to the peculiar conditions of our times and our particular habit of mind, find themselves entirely deprived of the normal ability to create, as a matter of course, a thing of beauty.

In the primitive society of any time or of our own day, this we can

observe e.g. in Central Africa or the Polynesian Islands, &c. not one article made, of any size or sort for any purpose whatsoever, but is a work of considerable aesthetic merit, as any sensitive person may see. Among ourselves, as we know, the precise reverse prevails universally, *in spite of the very considerable number of persons among us of real 'appreciation'*.

In the great empires of antiquity, of Greece in her decline, when the last riot of naturalism and trumpety academism had killed the fine arts, there still remained a large population who made small things of superb merit, quite unspoilt by the decline of the Schools of Art in Athens or elsewhere. But we have no such undercurrent of genuine art left us. In England it died in the middle of the nineteenth century. To-day the dead body stinks.

Man of his material tends to make objects of beauty. The lack, therefore, of this quality, is the sure sign of an imposed tyranny. Civilizations are always subject to some such subjection in varying degrees. In our day, and particularly in our country and daughter countries, the subjection is complete. Yet even if one took a modern English village smith of the more typical sort, and locked him up in his shop for a week with instructions to make an image in iron of, say, the Mother of God, it is probable that his finished work at the week's end would be (of this I am sure) infinitely more in the universal tradition of an image than anything that the frantic efforts of all the Arts and Crafts centres in England could produce. It is unlikely that the smith himself would approve of his work, because even village smiths are blasted by the conviction that beauty has wedded the camera, and that there can be no beauty when there is no verisimilitude. Nevertheless, what this man produces, in so far as he is free from obnoxious influences, will be in fact a thing of beauty and beloved of God, and therefore fit for use in the house of God.

The issue is this: we are faced by the situation of living in a civilization that has particularly incapacitated one of the normal faculties of man that of making, without conscious effort, works possessing the quality called 'beauty.' We see that in no other civilization has there existed a similar condition of things. It is the price we pay for 'modern conveniences.' Probably it is a small price: that depends upon one's scale of values.

There are, at any rate, some of us who are conscious of the 'pain of loss.' We are, so to say, in hell. 'What,' you ask, 'is beauty then, Your God? No, but 'the beauty of God is the cause of the being of all that is.' These have no place in the modern world. The cure on the lines suggested above—having a game with the blacksmith will be said to be impracticable. The answer to that is surely that no great revolution in our

present aesthetic expression is practicable outside the collapse of ordered society or something equivalent to it, such as the growing up within modern civilization of another civilization with a conscious determination to 'eschew evil and do good,' to avoid being trapped in the general decline. This may not be humanly possible, but it was in some such fashion that Europe first became Catholic. The odds against us, however, are ten times greater now, owing to the unusual grasp of the industrial system.

Not until civilization turns about on her tracks can the visible Church of God be clothed in beauty; for the Church is composed of men and must reflect the life and temper of mind of those men who compose her.

To have a Church in suburbia apeing the restraint and dignity, and the solemn abandon, of the age of Faith is far more hateful than having tip-up plush seats and electric altar lights as favoured in the States (vide *The Universe*). If Tooting likes the *ensemble* of its drawing-rooms, let Tooting give what it most likes to God: this would be just and right. If we do not like our churches to reflect the sort of life we have, let us have a different sort of life, and the churches will change inevitably.

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## Intimations

Cats almost imperceptibly  
thicken night, no creature ever  
possesses its landscape more.  
We pour out moons of milk  
for their delight.

Nor can we tell them of death  
for they are quite impervious  
to the words that build such awe;  
we meet but do not mingle  
in our plight.

Which leads to presences  
uncomprehended, bright postulation  
of angels opening a door.  
Do we drink, not questioning  
their bowls of light?

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## Angels Come to Church Stretton

It was night:

the angels climbed Helmeth  
chatting in twos and threes  
like walkers coming to call  
for a guest.

Radiance interleaved the dark  
as if overcoats quelled their light,  
ambience muted — no harps, no fierce quills.

A few bent over the bed,  
others went on talking,  
an event diffuse and tender  
rather than holy.

I strove to make myself seen.  
I'd become a wraith,  
a ghost  
who clung to the wall.

Later, odd bits of music  
floated like feathers;  
a friend said it was trauma,  
biochemistry — due to a death?

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