
Beauty Will Save the World

This startling line comes from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, and is spoken by the central character, Prince Myskin, an epileptic, the Christ-figure in the novel, who seems to have clearer vision of the world than those around him.

The saving power of beauty in the prince's life could not overcome his sickness, but it did change his perspective and illumined his world. In the midst of his darkness and suffering, he glimpsed the heart of reality where he found true beauty.

Pope Francis, in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, quotes Dostoyevsky's novel:

In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Prince Myskin sees a painting by Hans Holbein the Younger depicting Christ dead in the tomb and says: "Looking at that painting might cause one to lose his faith." The painting is a gruesome portrayal of the destructive effects of death on Christ's body. Yet it is precisely in contemplating Jesus' death that faith grows stronger and receives a dazzling light; then it is revealed as faith in Christ's steadfast love for us, a love capable of embracing death to bring us salvation. This love, which did not recoil before death in order to show its depth, is something I can believe in; Christ's total self-gift overcomes every suspicion and enables me to entrust myself to him completely (§16).

This is the challenge, the battle we each must face on our journey of faith: How can we who are surrounded by and immersed in a world with so much suffering and evil not succumb to despair but rather be able to see in the midst of it the beauty of transforming love and the light of hope? The power of beauty is capable of redeeming the darkness in the light of faith.

As Pope Benedict XVI writes in his *Meeting with Artists*:

Authentic beauty unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond. If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence.

For many, the wrestling match between beauty and suffering gives rise to a crisis of faith. How can these two co-exist in our human reality. God and the devil are fighting for the victory over our hearts. Sometimes what appears to be beautiful, may not be, or may be simply an illusion, while at the same time something that appears to be terrible, may reveal the power of the Love that transforms it into something magnificently beautiful.

For good or ill, beauty has power. This power can be used to illumine the path toward the truth and goodness, or to pull one down in the pursuit of self-interest. If beauty does not point toward the true and the good, it becomes a darkness, a turning inward rather than nudging us out of ourselves and into the light.

Both Francis and Benedict chose the line from *The Idiot* on Holbein's painting for a reason. It is precisely in its realistic portrayal of suffering that it challenges the characters in the novel. Facing the truth of our lives can be a scandal, but also an opportunity. As we contemplate our own disfigurement in the modern world, we have the same dilemma. We must overcome the darkness imposed by false beauty, along with the spiritual disfigurement it has created. Maybe our perception of beauty must begin with a more truthful embrace of the experience of suffering. In contemplating the suffering of Christ, in particular, we are drawn to a beauty that took on our infirmities and overcame their darkness. It is undoubtedly, a challenging beauty, but a powerful one—with power to transform our own suffering and brokenness. It is a beauty that shakes us to the core, which transforms us, and ultimately is the beauty that will save the world.