Beauty

The Light of Joy

David f. White and John leedy

One of my (David) first memories, from around the age of three, is of peering through a rusty screen door onto a tree-lined gravel driveway as the late afternoon breeze gently stirred the autumn leaves in the golden light of the setting sun. The path of translucent stone chippings set aflame by the red Mississippi clay beneath it snaked from the edge of the unpainted wooden steps below my naked feet to the widening horizon. This is not only my very first conscious memory but also my first recollection of astounding beauty. Even now the scene stands out as extraordinary in my faded reminiscence. Something about it—its brilliance, complexity, or depth—commanded my attention. According to my parents, I pressed against the screen door each day and played endless hours in the stone chips under that sky and under those trees, enveloped by a sense of wonder, an intuition of a mystery. I suspect that we all have such experiences, however deeply buried in our memories.

My Mississippi childhood was filled with such moments of being "caught" by epiphanies of beauty—by dust motes dancing in sunbeams, languid lakes and rippling streams, noble black dogs, cooing doves, and chirping crickets, my mother's ruby red lipstick and my father's beard stubble tickling my face. I found beauty in the soulful

twang of my uncle's country singing; my church's a cappella harmonies; the lustrous paintings of my middle school art teacher, Mr. Quinn; the adorable girl in my seventh-grade class; and, somewhat obviously, in a well-thrown curveball. As an adult I came to perceive beauty in the faces of children and nurturing mothers, the selfless work of teachers, and the bravery of civil rights heroes, and I am oddly haunted by the beauty of the story of God's self-giving love in Jesus Christ.

Since the dawn of modern youth ministry in the late nineteenth century, churches have relied upon didactic instruction intended to lead young people along a path of conceptual logic to evident conclusions and intellectual assent, followed by their will and consequent behavior. Today youth ministry finds itself suffering an erosion of confidence in such rational truth alone. Postmodern thought reveals reason as contextual, fluid, and indeterminate—what we perceive as true is conditioned by our gender, ethnicity, class, and relation to power. The prominence of fake news, political talking points, partisan press releases, and hyperbolic advertising renders truth anything but transparent. Truth turns out to be more slippery than we imagined. Sociologist Christian Smith has observed that many young people today are left with little more ethical language than the notion of "banal tolerance"—if truth is indeterminate, all that remains is for us to tolerate each other's experimental pronouncements about what is true "for us."[1] No one can be allowed to speak definitively about truth—and certainly not for others.

Advertisers, parents, teachers, and churches that try to argue a young person into truth know that it is a losing proposition; youths seek something more. They seek a more trustworthy form of truth that touches their soul. Such yearning is, from the perspective of Christian theology, not coincidental. Christian truth speaks of transcendent mysteries that cannot be fully captured by concepts or intellect but in which all being participates. As St. Augustine knew, we are who we are not by virtue of what we know but because of what we desire.

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1 Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25–27.

In this book our authors recommend joy as an important Christian virtue that should be reclaimed by youth ministry. In this chapter I argue the somewhat obvious point that beauty elicits great joy but also the not so obvious point that beauty and joy are inseparable aspects of how Christians know and, finally, the unthinkable: that such beauty and joy are features of adolescence and as such are parables of God. Before exploring how joy and beauty are implicated in youth ministry, we must first inquire as to the nature of beauty. What is beauty, and what are its features? How does it relate to joy?

Beauty's Singularity

Throughout history a chorus of voices across all cultures has acknowledged the importance of beauty. Although today we tend to think of beauty as an effervescent rarity found in extraordinary places—in great art, movie stars, fashion models, an astonishing sunset, or in the visage of a romantic partner—the ancient Greeks and early Christians perceived beauty in everything, as a feature of sheer being. For those who can see, beauty appears on the vastest scales (as the amazing photographs taken by the Hubble telescope of our beautiful blue earthly orb show) and the most minute (as in a floating dust mote in a sunbeam).

Beauty is also mysteriously singular among human experiences. Beauty has impressed many throughout history as essential, restorative, and even redemptive. Navajo tribes long used beautiful sand paintings to restore the sick to harmony with the universe. Albert Einstein once remarked, "I have deep faith that the principle of the universe will be beautiful and simple."[2] Fyodor Dostoevsky once said that "man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live."[3] Alexander Nehamas observes that beauty mani-

2 "Albert Einstein Quotes," Quotes.net, STANDS4 LLC, 2020, accessed February 3, 2020, https://www.quotes.net/authors/Albert+Einstein+Quotes.

3 Quoted by Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Artists," Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, 21 Nov. 2009.

fests a hope that life would be better if the object of beauty were part of it.[4] For theologian David Bentley Hart, "Beauty seems to promise a reconciliation beyond the contradictions of the moment, one that perhaps places time's tragedies within a broader perspective of harmony and meaning, a balance between light and darkness; beauty seems to absolve being of its violences."[5] Beauty appears in quality and abundance far greater than is necessary for natural selection. Dutch biologist F. J .J. Buytendijk states: "To put it simply, the birds are singing much more than Darwin permits."[6] Whatever we make of beauty's significance, we ought to at least be intrigued by its qualities.

The Joy of Beauty

Many Christian theologians have understood beauty as an aspect of the goodness (the Hebrew term is *kavod*, which connotes something like "dripping with glory") bestowed in God's act of creation (Gen. 1:1–31) as analogue to the perfections of God who is beauty—corresponding to what the psalmists describe as God's sensual holiness ("taste and see that the Lord is good"; Ps 34:8). Such created beauty is glimpsed in a spectacular sunset, a child's face, a painting, or an occasion of sacrificial giving—all of which involve a lingering moment of delight (or en-JOY-ment).

Simone Weil insists that beauty requires us to "give up our imaginary position at the center" of the world.[7] British novelist Iris Murdoch tells of a day when she was anxious, resentful, and brooding,

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4 Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

5 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 16.

6 Quoted by Jürgen Moltmann in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life* eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin Crisp, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 5.

7 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 111.

preoccupied with her problems; but upon seeing a beautiful kestrel flying above her, all of this fell away.[8] All of the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, and advancing the self was now free to be in the service of something else. Harvard aestheticist Elaine Scarry observes that "in the moment we perceive beauty, we are absorbed into the world, joining the community of beauty."[9] As others in this volume observe, joy is an experience that decenters and enlarges our sense of self (*ekstasis*). And beauty is a prime example of joyful *ekstasis*.

Joy, like beauty, is completed and continued when shared.

Beauty's authority is manifestly a public announcement, not a gnostic secret for only a few scholars or mystics. As witnessed by endless Facebook arguments, reason is subject to endless charges of subjective bias, while beauty remains surprisingly objective. We may quibble over how to interpret it, but we cannot doubt its existence or quality.

Importantly, beauty does not remain closed in upon itself or leave us isolated. Our joy at encountering beauty is completed and continued in sharing it with friends and strangers. According to owners of galleries or museum gift shops, one of the most common responses to beautiful art is a postcard or phone call to a loved one expressing sentiments such as "The impressionists are breathtaking; I wish you were here! Come as soon as you can."[10]

Our connection and joy with others is deepened when we respond to beauty by gratefully duplicating and sharing our gifts with them. When we experience beauty, we want to bring replicas into being for others to see. "The philosopher Wittgenstein," Scarry notes, "says that

8 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," in *Studies in Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1970), 369-371.

9 Scarry, *On Beauty,* 113.

10 Scarry, 6.

when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it."[11] Such encounters with beauty make us want to reproduce it—to draw it, paint it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes this imitative impulse of beauty crosses sensory modes, such as when the smooth cheek of a child prompts a caress or inspires us to play with or care for them. This crisscrossing of senses prompted Augustine to love God when he touched something smooth and pleasant; and Dante, inspired by the beautiful Beatrice, to write sonnets of the landscape of God's salvation in which all things are finally caught up in the beauty of God.

Childhood theorists believe that prior to the age of three, before the onset of language, all children perceive stimuli cross-modally—synesthetically crossing two or more senses. The warmth and color of a sunbeam alive with dancing specks is felt globally in our infant bodies and senses—only to be later reduced by the onset of language to the mere term "sunbeam." Daniel Stern observes that "child-directed speech" by which parents communicate with infants involves aesthetic, rounded, affect-laden words, such as "hellllll-ooooo—bayyyyy-beeee."[12] Such singsong words offer a musical embrace that invites the infant's attention and draws it near. Child-directed speech can be seen as a response to the fragile beauty of the infant, joyfully connecting parent and child. Recently researchers at a university ran an endless loop in a special screening room of a video recording of Chinese mothers cooing to their infants. Those conducting the experiment were surprised to find that stressed-out graduate assistants came to sit in the room to listen and comfort themselves. The infants' beautiful faces evoked the mothers' beautiful cooing, which even in an unknown (to the students) dialect traversed fields and crossed modes, affecting the weary hearts of the graduate students.

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11 Scarry, 3.

12 Daniel Stern, The Intersubjective World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 138–41.

Recently, in my church, as I listened to a sermon by one of my pastors, I felt my whole body relax and my spirits lift. I realized that she was speaking in rounded, singsong words that mysteriously spoke to my weary heart. Only later did I remember that she was a new mother and that her speech was surely conditioned by the child-directed speech she employs habitually with her daughter. As I scanned the congregation, their softening eyes revealed that others were also affected by this boundary-crossing beauty.

According to Elaine Scarry, when we encounter beauty, we experience a surplus of aliveness, a wake-up call to the plenitude of life: "Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living worth living."[13] In beauty's many forms, we find ourselves inexplicably caught in a state of joyous grace. We take pleasure in created things—their form gives us delight. Beauty is a tangible and joyful reminder that the world cannot be reduced to its efficient causes or reasons, that all things exist within an invisible nimbus of gratuity—given as gift and calling forth our own gift giving.

This brief sketch points to the uniqueness of beauty and how it evokes certain virtues and values—joy, connection, community, *poiesis*—which, even at first glance, hold theological significance but which should also make us curious about the role of beauty in Christian thought.

Theological Clues to Beauty

The beauty of God's delighted and delightful act of creation reflects God's own inner joy and splendor that marks the Trinity. As David Bentley Hart states,

> God's beauty is delight and the object of delight, the shared gaze of love that belongs to the persons of the Trinity; it is what God beholds, what the Father sees and rejoices in in the Son, in

13 Scarry, *On Beauty*, 24.

> the sweetness of the Spirit, what Son and Spirit find delightful in one another, because as Son and Spirit of the Father they share his knowledge and love as persons.[14]

God's inner beauty and delight does not remain closed upon itself but opens out into God's creation. Genesis tells us that God created the world out of sheer nothingness, as a deliberate act of artistry, an invention of delight, an expression of love, a gift of grace. In this doctrine the world's beauty is revealed as gift, for it might very well not have been this way—or any way at all. Beauty announces God's glory and creation's goodness with equal eloquence in each moment. Beauty is there, abroad in the order of things, given again and again in a way that resists description and denial with equal boldness. The Bible declares that created beauty is the delighted vision of what is other than oneself—of difference, created by the God who differentiates and pleasing in the eyes of the God who takes pleasure. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, created beauty speaks as a pleasing form but also in each case shines as a light from the depths of being, drawing us in wonder toward God.[15]

God's inner beauty and delight joyfully opens out into God's creation.

In Christ, God uses created being to fashion an image, an expression or exegesis of God's self. The light of God's surprising beauty blazes especially from the cross of Christ bathed in the light of resurrection. There we witness the plenitude of God's self-emptying love reunited with creation. For Balthasar love is the highest form of beauty. In the form of Christ, he saw aesthetic values of proportion, balance, and harmony everywhere—in the relationship between the Son and the Father, the distance of humanity and the nearness of the Son; the relationship between servant and lord, exaltation and humiliation; the relationships

14 Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 177.

15 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics III Studies in Theological Style* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 118.

between promise and fulfillment, judgment and grace, master and disciple. Each of these seems irreconcilable, but in the Christ image they are objectively harmonized to the eyes of faith.

For Balthasar the epitome of beauty in the world is Jesus Christ, who is the form of all forms, the measure of all measures. This can be seen in the many biblical terms for Christ—shepherd, physician, vine tender, light, living water, peace, truth, word, prince, deliverer, gate, friend, way, among others. All created things find their perfect measure in the beauty of Jesus Christ. Christ, as God's supreme beauty, therefore restores and reveals the truth of creaturely beauty by making the beautiful yet more beautiful and the exceedingly beautiful more beautiful still." For Hart, Christ's miracles "repeat God's gift of creation by imparting joy in the good things of the world—food and wine, fellowship and rejoicing, life and vision and health—to those in whom such joy is lacking," and thus testify to his nature as the "creative Word who can command and restore all the words of creation."[16]

Theologian John Milbank suggests that, as God's creatures, we are, like God, made for a pattern of mutual "gift giving."[17] As opposed to commercial transactions, where the gift and the return are specified and predictable, for Christians gift giving and receiving are unpredictable, joyful responses to one's own resources and the beautiful other. As opposed to a transaction in which the exchange is mandated, the gift truly given is thoughtful and surprising and timely. Exchange in capitalist arrangements operates by expectations of quid pro quo, while Christian gift giving deepens our mutual connection by means of gratitude. Milbank suggests that we and all creation are gifted by God, whose Trinitarian nature is gracious giving. And we are created for such gift giving sociality in patterns of joyful feasting and friendship that connect us

16 Hart, Beauty of the Infinite, 18.

17 John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995), 119–61; John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

to each other and God. The Eucharist is foundational and emblematic of the kind of gift exchange that is key for restoring Christian community in joy and love.

If God's gift to us is the beauty of created being, then our appropriate response is to craft our gifting expressions in surprising and artful forms—as our worship and our practices. Jesus Christ—God's *poiesis*—was the paradigm for such expression, since in Jesus created being was beautifully crafted and offered back to the Father as gift. In the incarnation, Hart holds, God brings about a return of the gift that He has given in creation, by Himself giving it again, anew, "according to the Trinitarian dynamism in which donation and restoration are one."[18] If Christ was the firstborn of the new creation, then we, the later born, are called to participate with God in *poiesis*—returning to God our lives crafted in response to God's own beauty.

Joy is our grateful response to God's beauty.

We must acknowledge that the true significance of Jesus Christ can only partially be articulated in words, concepts, or logic—and never comprehensively. Artful or liturgical expressions of beauty seem more suitable for communicating the Incarnation and creation's glory, since they reveal what is true alongside what is mystery. The church is squarely within its scriptural logic to respond to God's created and incarnated beauty by crafting its own forms of beauty in joyful response—as liturgies, paintings, sculptures, music, and the lovely practices of the church's life.

Secular Flattening

If there are theological reasons for reclaiming beauty, there is also a crying cultural need. Modern secularity has served to disenchant the Western world. Beauty, mystery, and joy have been supplanted by technical

18 Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 325.

reason, which reduces God's creation to usable objects—as calculations of usable economic advantage, as raw materials, bosses, consumers, or competitors. Such disenchantment has prompted alienation, incivility, and environmental degradation. Philosopher Charles Taylor observes that since the late medieval era, the secular Western world has suffered a diminishment of our "palette of such points of contact with fullness."[19]

Among the most troubling losses, according to Taylor, is the systematizing of ethical codes, prompting a kind of distancing from our embodied ethical feelings. Taylor points to the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a traveler is beaten, left by the roadside, and ignored by religious officials, but ironically cared for by a Samaritan—a people commonly thought to be immoral and untrustworthy. Taylor insists that in Jesus's telling of the story what is emphasized is not an ethical category or idea but the gut reaction of compassion by the Samaritan. Taylor thinks that by rationally codifying our ethics, we miss what is most important—that is, contact with the good via the flesh. He observes that the New Testament calls for a return to our "gut"—an enfleshed response to an enfleshed situation. The Samaritan's charitable response is not a better ethical conception but instead a response of the heart. He perceived the stranger as more than a negative category—as one whose beauty was violated, to whom he responded with gut immediacy in a beautiful act of care and reconciliation.[20]

Additionally, according to Taylor, we have lost the capacity for poetic language, a genre nearer to our embodied experiences. Poetic verse no longer sits easily on our tongues or in our ears. Instead we imagine that all things in the world are directly mappable onto our language as nouns. Hence we grow impatient with poets who could, we imagine, say things more directly but instead speak coyly in obscure circles. Poet Billy Collins says that too often the poem is like a prisoner

19 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 729.

20 Charles Taylor, "Foreword" in *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich As Told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005) x-xiv.

captured by modern readers: "All they [the readers] want to do is tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it."[21] Such a reduction misses entirely the point of poetic truth, which is much more paradoxical and mysterious and felt more deeply than the intellect. For example, the breed of new atheists views biblical literature as nice but untrue stories—as botched pieces of social science. We should be offended not only as theists but also as people who understand the revelatory power of language and good literature. Poetry makes our enfleshed experiences articulable by crafting new words and resonant phrases drawn from creation's plentitude and mystery. Poetry opens up new paths: It sets free new realities and allows for an ontological indeterminacy that is, for mystery, wonder, and paradox. As such poetry exceeds the limits of instrumental reason and broadens our affirmation of ordinary life. Poetic language allows us to see new and astonishing things and new aspects of old things. Taylor argues that language does not merely designate objects already recognized in the world but also has the power to create new realities and new worlds.

In a modern world disenchanted and evacuated of poetic and ethical fullness, joy is impossible. We and our young people must reclaim our vision for the beauty of God's gifts, our ears and tongues for poetic fullness, and our gut responses of compassion. Only in such a renaissance will the modern world learn to rejoice.

Youth and Beauty

What precisely have beauty and joy to do with adolescence? A moment's reflection will reveal that youths throughout history have played poetic roles—in crafting new genres of music, fashion, poetry, and language. While scholars theorizing adolescence commonly emphasize young people's growing cognitive capacities, observers who live with or

21 Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry" from *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 58.

minister to youths know that they are not driven by mere cognition. Young people are also naturally inclined to wonder and joy. In fact, prior to the late nineteenth century, youth was seen as a stage uniquely attentive to beauty. The Romantic poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries observed youth as a stage of wonder and discovery. In 1904 G. Stanley Hall, the first theorist of adolescence, observed adolescence as the "vernal season of the heart"—the springtime of the heart when "life glistens and crepitates."[22] He held that adolescents are caught up in the wonder of all creation—peer friendships, created things, culture, art, God, and the world unfolding around them, now opened before their hearts in beauty. He saw adolescents as ready to be recruited by epiphanies or encounters with the good creation that serve to prompt them toward future vocation. He traced the success of famed scientists, artists, professionals, politicians, and businesspeople back to the wonder and romance of their adolescence.

Today adolescence is a complex and contested status that often involves confusion, alienation, and pain—and it is risky to over-romanticize. Nevertheless those close to young people observe in youth a resilient hunger for wonder and joy. Their affinity for imaginative fantasy literature such as the Harry Potter series or Marvel movies and their many imitators, for example, suggests that young people somehow know that things are fraught with magic and perhaps a bit of joy. Their fittingness for wonder can also be seen in their endlessly creative efforts in music and art, language, love, religion, and social justice. Even as young people find joy in these endeavors—the church's affirmation is that their search finds its fitting end in Jesus Christ, God's *poiesis*.

Adolescence is the springtime of the heart.

22 G. S. Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1904), 131.

We can affirm that the joy of youth—in their intellectual and bodily discoveries, newfound connections to God, the created world, and beloved friends—constitutes a vivid parable of Christ's joyous redemption of ordinary things. When we truly see young people, we see God's own beauty refracted in them; we catch them on their way back to God, God's perfections, and their true *telos*. Churches that long for life with God do well to draw alongside their young people, who in their beauty and joy point toward God.

For these reasons—beauty's theological significance, its sociocultural evacuation, and young peoples' fittingness for beauty—beauty may helpfully be a part of our approach for forming youths as joyful Christian disciples. Below is an outline suggesting particular ways congregations might engage young people with beauty as a source of wonder and holy mystery, to which they are invited to joyfully respond. I suggest three different modes of aesthetic pedagogies for youth.

Beauty in Creation: Lingering in *Tov*

> "And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so. God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. (Gen. 1:30, 31, NASB

Genesis tells us that God created the world and called it good (Tov, translated beautiful, in harmony with God)If theologians are right that creation, in its beauty, speaks of God—not exhaustively or literally but poetically—then congregations engaging youths in Christian formation cannot ignore the created world, view it as inert, or allow young people to escape into a mere digital existence. If, as suggested above, the created world is an expression of God and the source of our own *poiesis*—a gift to which our only response is giving gifts of our words, images, songs, or work—then Christians must attend to its speaking. If,

as Charles Taylor states, our sense of the world has been flattened by technical reason, then the way forward must involve restoring our palettes for fullness—by reconnecting our created being to the goodness of God's world. Educators have long known the importance of experiential learning that begins with encounters with the created world, including wilderness education, art and narrative therapies and pedagogies, and praxis pedagogies. Historically, contemplative practices have involved, as Walter J. Burghardt suggests, "a long, loving look at the real."[23] Of course, this is rarely easy when our vision is consistently clouded not only with busyness but also with our fear, anxiety, anger, and despair. Contemplative practices help to clear away the fog of such distortions in order to see the glory of God's creation and the beam of holy light that shines from beyond it. Here are some of the questions that a curriculum of beauty in created being must attend to.

- Where do we see ordinary and surprising beauty in the created world?
- How does such beauty speak to us? What does it say to us?
- How does this beauty recruit us to wonder?
- How does it spark our imaginations about the possibilities for human and created flourishing?
- How does our encounter with the beauty of creation allow for unexpected reversals in our assumptions about the world? God? Ourselves?
- Where and how do we find joy in observing, working, and playing in and with created beauty?

23 Walter J. Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real," *Church*, no. 5 (Winter 1989): 14–17.

The Beauty of the Christ Form: Seeing the Light Come into This World

> And the Word became flesh and took up residence among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the one and only from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified about him and cried out, saying, "This one was he about whom I said, 'The one who comes after me is ahead of me, because he existed before me.'" For from his fullness we have all received, and grace after grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the one and only, God, the one who is in the bosom of the Father—that one has made him known. (John 1:14–18, LEB)

Christ, in the perfectly meaningful, expressive unity of his significant form, discloses the nature of the divine Artist. The unity of his form emerges from the scriptures, from a multiplicity of perspectives and authors. He is the image, icon, or artwork of God—the "characteristic qualities" of his actions reveal a particular "style," which in turn shows his relationship to the Father. He discloses the infinite, ungraspable mystery of God's (Trinitarian) love. In Jesus Christ we do not find a set of rational principles or a universal ethical system. Christ incarnate is a form given to us upon the canvas of creation—more like a story or a song or a painting than a system of principles. In Christian faith the captivating force of the artwork that is Christ takes hold of our imaginative powers; we enter into the painterly world that this discloses and, entranced by what we see, come to contemplate the glory of sovereign love of God in Christ as manifested in the concrete events of his life, death, and resurrection. So entering his glory, we become absorbed by it; but this absorption sends us out into the world in sacrificial love, emulating his beauty, giving and receiving God's gifts, finding joy in communion with God and neighbor.

Representing the Christ form in its eternal brilliance must involve more than reading scriptural accounts, which can become flattened

over time into simple portrayals. Throughout history, painters, sculptures, musicians, playwrights, and poets have provided glimpses of the art of God in Christ. Paintings by El Greco, Leonardo da Vinci, Peter Paul Rubens, and Paul Gauguin; music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johann Sebastian Bach; plays such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, and *Cotton Patch Gospel*, as well as *Les Miserables*; and movies such as *Jesus of Montreal*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The Robe* all represent glimpses into the art/truth of the Incarnation. Moreover reading Gospel accounts in contemplative ways allows for deeper insight, which may be supplemented by young people's crafting their own art—poetry, paintings, drama, and music. In this way the significance of Incarnation does not become flattened to routine interpretations, but through artifice wonder is allowed to do its work of speaking beyond our reason or intentions. Here are some of the questions that a curriculum of beauty focused in the Christ form must attend to.

- How do we perceive beauty in the form of Jesus Christ portrayed in scripture?
- Since over time traditions have a tendency to flatten the fullness of the Christ form by endless and same interpretations of texts, what ways can we find to see the texts afresh and the Christ form with new eyes?
- What new meanings and questions arise in fresh readings?
- How have artists through history portrayed Jesus Christ in art, sculpture, drama, and song? What can we learn by studying these renditions?
- How do fresh readings prompt reversals in how we think of the world? God? Ourselves?
- What new artistic forms can we envision to portray mysterious and unnamed aspects of the Christ-form?
- How do we find joy in new expressions of Jesus Christ?

Liturgical Beauty: Offering Our Gifts

> When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:
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> "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"
> "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"
>
> Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"
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> "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19:37–40, NIV)

Christian faith is rooted in a holy mystery in which God's beautiful gifts of creation and incarnation are given. By this we mean that we—along with the very stones (Luke 19:40)—are liturgically shaped for receiving God's gifts and returning unto God our worship in grateful emulation of Christ's and the world's beauty. Worship does not only involve the formal acts we perform in the sanctuary on the Lord's day. As D. E. Saliers has said, worship involves the liturgy *and* the liturgy beyond the liturgy—those responses to God's gift that we live out in our relationships, at work, in leisure, at home, and in public.[24] This too is worship. Rightly understood, Christians live in a joyous cycle of repeating in our own creativity the gift of God's beauty, bringing more beauty for each other on behalf of God.

As we have indicated, the capacity for *poiesis*, for example, in language, art, fashion, and social action, can readily be seen in young people. The key to forming youth for beauty in this mode is engaging them in joyful response to God's gifts of creation and the incarnation, without which we risk perpetuating a kind of autarky that is the essence of sin. True relationships thrive only if all participants are receiving and offering

24 D. E. Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1979): 173–89.

their gifts. Only in such gifting are our hearts enlarged and the Spirit of God shed abroad in the world.

We live in a time in which young people are socialized as passive consumers—of parental care and nurture, education, entertainment, material provision, and market commodities. Even youth ministry has too often assigned roles for them to passively consume youth talks, lock-ins, concerts, pizza, and unilateral adult attention. Key to this gift-giving mode of youth ministry is finding ways to encourage young people to give their own offerings of beauty—offerings of art, music, liturgy, relationships, and ecclesial responsibility, of practice and action. This is another way of acknowledging our lives as liturgically ordered by God's own gifts. The questions that give shape to this mode of youth ministry for beauty are such as these:

- What are the gifts of God that surround me? What would my world be like without these gifts?
- What new feelings or thoughts emerge with recognition of these gifts?
- How can I give words to my own responses of gratitude? What other ways can I imagine for expressing my responses to these gifts?
- How does receiving God's gifts prompt me to give gifts to others?
- What can I do to facilitate the flow of gifts between others, myself, and the world beyond?
- How can we together joyfully celebrate the giving and receiving of gifts and the love they foster?

The Christian life, according to Jürgen Moltmann, is to be envisioned not as a purpose-driven life but as a game of delight in the God who creates and redeems the world for nothing.[25] Hence the church as Christ's body can only convincingly speak of Christ as Lord not by

25 Jurgen Moltmann, Sam Keen, Robert E. Neale, David LeRoy Miller, *Theology of Play* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1972), 18.

our words alone, but only if our beauty resembles his—if our palette for fullness is enlarged to include empathy for the wounded traveler, tongues and ears hungry for poetry, and grateful hearts for gift giving and receiving in friendship and feasting. In conclusion, this chapter argues that joy might be restored to youth ministry in considering new possibilities for engaging young people in the beauty of God's world and the Christ-form, and in giving their own gifts of art. Thus they might participate with God in crafting a joyful new creation of beauty, goodness, and truth where God will be all in all.