

“You are Beauty”

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)



In the fall of 1224, St. Francis of Assisi spent forty days on the cold and windy heights of Mount Laverna in Tuscany. It was at that time that he experienced the vision of a six-winged Seraph, after which the wounds of Christ's crucifixion appeared on his body. In the aftermath of this extraordinary experience, Francis took a small piece of parchment and wrote, on one side of it "The Praises of God."¹ He begins by addressing God: "You are the holy Lord God Who does wonderful things."² In twenty lines or so he names attributes of

his Heavenly Father and King, who is "the good, all good, the highest good." On some points he repeats himself. For example, twice he says, "You are beauty, You are meekness."

The inspiration to call God *beauty* is one of Francis's insights. Francis had an innate appreciation for true beauty. We know from his "Canticle of the Creatures" that he saw beauty in the natural world, and he describes the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Fire as "beautiful." His own taste for beautiful music and poetry were plain for all to see. Working in his father's cloth business, he would have developed an appreciation for the beauty present in human design and craft. But it was his spiritual insight—his gift and grace—to see true beauty as emanating from God's divine beauty.

We live in a culture that often promotes the ugly and vulgar as trendy and stylish or uses the unbeautiful to obscure and diminish true beauty. With St. Francis as our Seraphic Father, Secular Franciscans should claim love for God who is beauty as a spiritual inheritance and use it to evangelize our world.

In doing so we certainly are not alone. Bishop Robert Barron in his documentaries on Catholicism has identified beauty in Catholic art, architecture, music and writing as a way to reach people who hunger for truth and who seek meaning in their lives. In this he echoes Pope Benedict XVI who sees the Church's legacy of beauty and the lives of the saints as central to the spread of Christianity in the 21st century. "The only really effective apologia for Christianity," Pope Benedict says, "comes down to two arguments, namely the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb."³ In speaking to a group of clergy, he said, "All the great works of art, cathedrals—the Gothic cathedrals and the splendid Baroque churches—they are all a luminous sign of God."⁴ And to a gathering of artists he added, "the experience of beauty...leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, liberating it from darkness, transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful."⁵

How can we as Secular Franciscans respond to beauty to grow spiritually and to evangelize those around us? Consider a few that are simple and obvious:

- *In the splendor of nature.* Clouds, sunsets, storms, mountain vistas, fireflies, birds, streams of water, night skies—the manifestations of natural beauty are endless. St. Francis has given us the perfect formula for responding to such beauty: “Be praised my Lord for Brother/Sister...” Join with him often in that hymn of praise.
- *In the beauty of liturgy, scripture and sacred art and architecture.* There is a sublime beauty in the Mass, in the parables of Jesus and in the Psalms and hymns of praise throughout Scripture. Be attentive also to the beauty of sacred art and liturgical spaces, especially those that have stood for a long time and which echo with the prayers and praise of generations.
- *In the honest handiwork of men and women.* A well-cultivated garden, food lovingly prepared, a magnificent suspension bridge, light through a stained-glass window, a pitcher’s curve ball. God may be glorified through the beauty of human works both humble and grand.
- *In the lives of others.* St. Francis said of his encounter with lepers that, “when I left them, what had seen bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.”⁶ The priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in one of his great sonnets: “Christ plays in ten thousand places,/ Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.”

Finally, be open to the great effect of beauty, which is joy. Jesuit theologian John Navone wrote, “Joy, as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, always evidences the experience of God’s beauty.”⁷ By living the gospel life, we participate in God’s beautification of the Church and the world. Let us join with Francis and utter joyfully to our Lord with awe and deep gratitude, “You are beauty.”

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- Trusting the Father, Christ chose for Himself and His mother a poor and humble life, even though He valued created things attentively and lovingly. Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children. [Rule, 11]
- They should love and practice purity of heart, the source of true fraternity. [GenConst., 15.4]

For discussion or reflection

- Read aloud St. Francis’s “Praises of God.” How does his impassioned prayer move you?
- Think of a moment in which you encountered beauty today. How might such an experience inspire you to give praise and thanksgiving to God. What form would your praise take?

¹ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., et al., editors, *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Volume I, The Saint* (New City Press, 1999), 108.

² Armstrong, 109.

³ <https://www.benedictinstitute.org/2018/01/the-splendor-of-holiness-and-art/>, accessed August 12, 2019.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone, Cathedral of Bressanone, August, 6, 2008.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with Artists, Sistine Chapel, November 21, 2009.

⁶ Armstrong, 124.

⁷ John Navone, SJ, *Enjoying God’s Beauty* (The Liturgical Press, 1999), 7.

Image: Crucifix in the Basilica of Santa Croce. <https://travelpast50.com/basilica-santa-croce-florence-italy/>