

“Recovering the Sacred by Opening Wide the Door of Beauty”
Presentation for the Annual Monsignor Herron Dinner
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Introduction

Our gathering this evening is very timely for offering reflections on our Catholic traditions, for we are at the beginning of Advent, the season in which we prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas. That is, we make preparation to celebrate the great feast of the Incarnation. The Incarnation, is, indeed, the defining truth of Christianity, for it is the Incarnation that distinguishes the Christian religion, setting it apart from all others. It is the unique claim of Christianity to be rooted in history. The Incarnation is an historical fact: the eternal Son of God, Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, entered into our human history, he was born at a certain time in a certain place.

The Sacramental Principle

Of course, at one and the same time the Incarnation is more than an historical fact, for it is a mystery of our salvation: the invisible God became visible by taking on human form, a human body, so that in that body he could die for our sins and reconcile us back to him. This, then, sets up the principle of sacramentality. The sacramental principle can be neatly defined as “the invisible is made visible through the physical.” The invisible God takes on a visible form through a physical body; this physical body of Jesus of Nazareth was more than a human body like anyone else’s, for it points to a reality beyond itself and makes that reality present: God Himself.

This all has to do with the power of symbol: a physical object which both points to a reality greater than itself and makes that reality present in the here and now. And this gets to the essence of the entire Catholic way of looking at the world. A Catholic world view is a sacramental one; the Church sees the world through the lens of this sacramental principle. Both before and after his election to the See of Peter, Joseph Ratzinger wrote often and eloquently about this principle. In an essay on the sacramental foundation of Christian existence written in 1965, the young theologian observed:

‘Water’ is not just H₂O, a chemical compound that one can change by an appropriate method into other compounds and use for all sorts of purposes – in the water from a spring that the thirsty traveler encounters in the desert, something becomes visible of the mystery of refreshment that creates new life in the midst of despair; in the powerful waves of a river, on whose crests the brightness of the sun is reflected, something becomes visible of the might of the glory of creative love and also the deadly force with which it can hit the man who gets in its way; in the majesty of the sea glimmers something of the mystery that we designate with the word ‘eternity’.¹

This, then, is why our Church is so rich in symbols and ritual; the Catholic mind has always understood that transcendent truths are taught much more effectively through symbol than with words. Unfortunately, in our post-Christian age the idea of symbol – as with just about

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Collected Works, Vol. 11: Theology of the Liturgy*, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. John Saward, Kenneth Baker, S.J., Henry Taylor, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), p. 161.

everything else of the sacred – has been trivialized. Symbolism is seen as something superficial, other than reality, rather than that which plunges us into the depths of reality. This goes a long way in explaining why it is becoming increasingly difficult to convey the truths of the Christian faith in a convincing and compelling manner in our contemporary culture.

Yet, the human person has an instinctive need of symbol, and as desensitized as our society has become to the power of symbol, we still have remnants of this sensitivity in the culture. Just look at the debate over flag-burning: people on both sides of that debate know that we are not talking simply about a piece of colorful cloth. No self-respecting American, for example, would dream of tearing up a flag and using it to wash his car. No, much more than a piece of colorful cloth, the flag makes present to us all that our nation stands for: its values, its founding principles, and all those who have made it great, especially at the cost of such great sacrifice, most especially the supreme sacrifice of giving their lives to defend our freedom. In fact, just the other day I heard a story on NPR about the “flag sergeant” in the Civil War. The flag sergeant was the one who had the honor of carrying the flag into battle. If he was hit, another would take his place and assume that honor, at great risk to his own life. No, this is something far more than – in fact, quite different from – the idea of “just a symbol, not reality.” And that is why – have you noticed? – when we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, we pledge our allegiance not only to the republic for which the flag stands, but *to the flag itself*.

Or, to give a more personal and provocative example: let’s say you’re driving down the freeway keeping to the speed limit and the driver behind you is tailgating and obviously in a hurry; he then finds the opportunity to switch lanes to cut ahead, and as he speeds past you he gives you a special greeting that involves making a fist and raising his middle finger. Would you think, “Oh, that’s just a symbol of how he’s feeling”? Wouldn’t you feel the impact of that anger in a deep, personal way (even more than if you read his lips as he sped past you uttering the sentiment that that gesture conveys)? And yet, that anger was communicated to you not with words, but through symbol. And what if, instead of his middle finger, he raised his index finger, and glances upward? A subtle difference in physical gesture but a world of difference in meaning: pointing to the sky, to God, indicating that we are all children of God, even if we get on each other’s nerves.

Because symbol makes present that which it represents, it has the power to speak to the deepest core of who we are like nothing else: our values, our cherished beliefs, even our identity, and at its most profound level, what we live for and are willing to die for. This is our human experience, but also – or perhaps better, *therefore* – it is also deep in Scripture. Very early on in Scripture there are a number of passages in which the “angel of the Lord” appears to the Lord’s chosen servant, but the angel is God Himself. One of them is the famous passage of Moses and the burning bush in the Book of Exodus, in which the text moves indistinguishably from mention of the angel of the Lord to the Lord or God Himself, and Moses reacts in the typical biblical manner of those who realize that God has appeared to them – deadly fear of looking at God. Another of the many examples of this phenomenon early in the Old Testament is the story of the foretelling of the birth of Samson in the Book of Judges. Here again the expressions “angel of the Lord” (or “of God”) and “the Lord” or “God” appear synonymous:

God heard the prayer of Manoah, and the *angel of God* came again to the woman as she was sitting in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. The woman ran quickly and told her husband. ‘The man who came to me the other day has appeared to me,’ she said to him; so Manoah got up and followed

his wife. When he reached the man, he said to him, ‘Are you the one who spoke to my wife?’ I am, he answered. Then Manoah asked, ‘Now, when what you say comes true, what rules must the boy follow? What must he do?’ The *angel of the LORD* answered Manoah: Your wife must be careful about all the things of which I spoke to her. She must not eat anything that comes from the vine, she must not drink wine or beer, and she must not eat anything unclean. Let her observe all that I have commanded her.

Then Manoah said to the *angel of the LORD*, ‘Permit us to detain you, so that we may prepare a young goat for you.’ But the *angel of the LORD* answered Manoah: Though you detained me, I would not eat your food. But if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it up to the LORD. For Manoah did not know that he was the *angel of the LORD*. Then Manoah said to the *angel of the LORD*, ‘What is your name, that we may honor you when your words come true?’ The *angel of the LORD* answered him: Why do you ask my name? It is wondrous. Then Manoah took a young goat with a grain offering and offered it on the rock to the LORD, who works wonders.

While Manoah and his wife were looking on, as the flame rose to the heavens from the altar, the *angel of the LORD* ascended in the flame of the altar. When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground; but the *angel of the LORD* was seen no more by Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah, realizing that it was the *angel of the LORD*, said to his wife, ‘We will certainly die, for we have seen *God*.’

God appears under the guise of an angel: the appearance is that of an angel, but it is God. And once again Manoah reacts in the typical biblical fashion: dread of dying for having seen God.

The Sacramentality of the Body

This and the many other such biblical accounts early in the Old Testament call to my mind a commentary I once read in a catechetical text many years ago in which the writer referred to the body as a symbol of the person. Very insightful. As a symbol, the body is a sign which both points to something greater beyond itself and makes that greater reality present: the body is a symbol of the totality of the person. So, for example, an attack on the body is an attack on the person, but it is not the only way to attack a person. There are other vile techniques, too, such as character assassination, humiliation, identity theft, property theft, and so on. Wouldn’t it be ludicrous, though, for someone to punch you in the stomach and then say, “I wasn’t attacking you, I was only attacking your body”?

This is why the Church has always regarded the body with such great reverence. Indeed, St. Paul teaches that the body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), and all throughout his writings he uses the image of the Body of Christ in reference to the Church. This explains, for example, why until recently the Church always prohibited cremation, and why the Church still prefers burial over cremation in celebrating the funeral rites. A few years ago the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an instruction on cremation in which it stated: “By burying the bodies of the faithful, the Church confirms her faith in the resurrection of the body, and intends to show the great dignity of the human body as an *integral part of the human person*”

whose body forms part of their identity”²; therefore, “The Church continues to prefer the practice of burying the bodies of the deceased, because this shows a greater esteem towards the deceased.”³ In other words, the body is a sacred symbol, and so it should be treated accordingly. (Notice that when cremation is chosen, the preference is for the body to be present at the Funeral Mass and then cremated later, and when it is cremated beforehand the ritual calls for the remains to be treated in the same way that the body is.) So if we look at the body from the standpoint of the sacramental principle, we can learn a lot about our human nature from it.

Now, let’s reflect a little further on this. So think about the human body for a moment. First of all, right there, there is a tipoff: you cannot think of a generic human body, only of a male body or a female body. But in both cases think about how the body, whether male or female, comprises a whole complex of systems. There is, for example, the cardiovascular system, the pulmonary system, the nervous system, the digestive system, the skeletal system, and so forth. Each system is complete unto itself, it has all of the means it needs to attain its end. So, for example, the cardiovascular system, in conjunction with the pulmonary system, is complete in and of itself: the heart pumps the blood which flows to the lungs where it obtains oxygen, and then is pumped out to the arteries into the capillaries and to every cell of the body, and then returns through the veins back to the heart and then to the lungs. So the body obtains the oxygen it needs. Same thing with the digestive system: it absorbs the food which has passed through the esophagus into the stomach where it is broken down and then passed into the small intestines where it is broken down some and the nutrients passed throughout the body and the waste sent to the large intestines where it is stored and eventually passed out of the body. And so forth. You get the picture.

But there is one system in each of the two types of bodies which is not complete unto itself, it cannot attain its end except with the assistance of the system of its counterpart, and which is why there is no generic human body: that is the reproductive system. A baby can be made only when the two systems are joined together in accordance with the way they were designed. And this goes back to the very beginning of creation.

As Genesis 1 tells us, God made them male and female. The very design of our bodies shows the complementarity that God intended from the beginning. Why did God do this? He could have designed us another way, He even could have designed the reproductive system to also be complete in and of itself just like the other systems of the body. And that is actually the case in some lower life forms. But the higher life forms, and especially human beings, God did not design this way. He designed the body to work in a complementary manner in order to bring new life into the world.

The Primacy of the Sacrament of Marriage

The principle of the sacramentality of the body, then, leads to the sacrament that is the key to understanding all of revelation: marriage. That is, we each have our own unique identity: every system of the body is complete unto itself except for one. But God created us for communion, not isolation: the one system that is not complete unto itself – the reproductive system – is the one that needs the complementarity of the opposite sex to attain its end, which is new life and the union of the spouses. This is how God designed the physical body, and so this

² Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, August 15, 2016, n. 3.

³ *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, n. 4.

is how we realize our spiritual fulfillment as well: a communion that is comprehensive and life-giving – ultimately, a communion with God that gives eternal life.

Of course, here we are facing a huge challenge in our contemporary society, due to the demise of marriage and even the most basic understanding of marriage; indeed, the very concept of the complementarity of the sexes for many is an idea long ago relegated to a bygone era. Yet, everyone knows deep down inside that the differences between men and women are more than anatomical. This reminds me of an amusing story I once heard some years ago about a French teacher who, when computers emerged on the scene and there was not word for it yet in the French language, asked his class their opinion on whether the gender of the noun in French should be masculine or feminine. So he divided his class into two groups, the women in one and the men in the other. The women opined that the noun for computer should be masculine, because, first of all, in order to get them to do what you want, you first have to turn them on, and also as soon as you commit to one you realize that if you had waited a little longer, you could have gotten a better model. The men, on the other hand, thought that the noun should be feminine, because you have to keep buying accessories for it in order to keep it working properly, and, in addition, they speak a mysterious, incomprehensible inner language known only to themselves.

That is the way everyone reacts to this little story: laughter! It demonstrates that everyone does know, deep down inside, that the differences between the sexes go beyond the anatomical. The differences allow for complementarity, which is indispensable to God's whole plan of salvation! This is because God has used marriage as the primary sacred sign of our relationship with Him, for the Incarnation is a marriage: God marries His divinity with our humanity in the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity taking on our human flesh in order to redeem us. Marriage is about the two becoming one: they become one flesh in a comprehensive union of persons, while each retains their own identity. This corresponds to the ancient Church Fathers' teaching on "divinization," and why, for example, St. Basil the Great could say something so bold as, "Through the Spirit we acquire a likeness to God; indeed, we attain what is beyond our most sublime aspirations – we become God."⁴

This mystery goes back to the very beginning, reflecting what is already obvious from physical observation of the world: God made them male and female. This sets the pattern for all of revelation and the economy of salvation, for it is all the story of a marriage. As we know from the teachings of St. John Paul II, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage: Adam and Eve, and the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. And it is replete with nuptial imagery all throughout. God's Covenant with Israel is a *marriage* Covenant, so much so that when God's people violated the Covenant by worshipping the false gods of their pagan neighbors, the prophets excoriated them for being an unfaithful bride. This also explains how a book of love poems, that does not even mention the word God, was entered into the canon of Scripture. As Pope Benedict XVI explains in his first Encyclical, *God is Love*:

... the reception of the Song of Songs in the canon of sacred Scripture was soon explained by the idea that these love songs ultimately describe God's relation to man and man's relation to God. Thus the Song of Songs became, both in Christian and Jewish literature, a source of mystical knowledge and experience, an expression of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God – his primordial aspiration. But this union is ... a unity in which both

⁴ Cited in the Roman Breviary, Office of Readings for Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Easter.

God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one. As Saint Paul says: ‘He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him’ (1 Cor 6:17).⁵

Is this nothing other than the nuptial mystery, that is, the two becoming fully one, yet remaining themselves, each retaining their unique individual identity?

In the New Testament, we have various sayings and parables of Jesus alluding to this imagery, such as the parable of the ten virgins (five wise, five foolish) who took lamps with them to *go out and meet the bridegroom* (Mt 25:1-13). It is also significant that Jesus chose the occasion of a marriage feast to perform his first miracle; his response to his mother, “My hour has not yet come,” is a reference to the consummation of God’s marriage to His people that will be accomplished by his death on the cross. And of course, we are all familiar with Ephesians chapter five, which explains that the prophecy from the creation account of Genesis, “For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh,” is fulfilled in Christ and the Church.

It’s all the story of a marriage: God’s marriage Covenant with Israel is fulfilled in the blood of Christ on the cross, establishing the new and eternal Covenant between him, the bridegroom, and his bride, the Church.

The Nuptial Mystery in Liturgy

This imagery is then taken over in the Christian liturgy, which traces its inspiration back to the Jewish liturgy in the Jerusalem Temple. There, the altar stood behind a veil marking off the Holy of Holies, where the priest would enter on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) to offer sacrifice for his sins and those of the people. In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth, Volume II*, Pope Benedict speaks of how the definitive destruction of the Temple, and therefore of the Temple sacrifices, coincided right at the moment that Christianity was established, and the Christians understood the sacrifice of the Eucharist as replacing the provisional Temple sacrifices, as the Eucharist is the re-presentation to us of the one, perfect sacrifice of Christ.⁶

The Christian liturgy is, in fact, heavily influenced by this Temple theology. As the Jewish-Catholic art historian Helen Ratner Dietz explains, the “fourth-century Christian altar hidden by its canopy and curtains had a deliberately nuptial meaning ... reminiscent of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple.”⁷ Understanding their Covenant with God to be a marriage covenant, the canopy and curtains in the Temple represented for the Jewish people a “chuppah,” the bridal chamber used in Semitic marriage rituals.

The Christian practice of hanging a curtain between the columns of the baldacchino to veil the altar continued throughout the first Christian millennium.⁸ This served as a “sacred tent,” sheltering the divine presence, harkening back to the Ark of the Covenant located within the Holy of Holies. The veil “sheltered” the divine presence. The purpose of a veil is to conceal. What is concealed is what is most sacred, and it is most sacred because it is most intimate – thus, the appropriateness of sheltering it.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 10.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), p. 36.

⁷ Helen Ratner Dietz, “The Nuptial Meaning of Classic Church Architecture,” in *Benedict XVI and Beauty in Sacred Art and Architecture*, ed. Vincent Twomey and Janet Elaine Rutherford (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2011), p. 122.

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 85.

Think about our human experience, keeping in mind here that revelation builds on what is already in the created order, it does not superimpose itself upon it: clothing is a veil, it shelters what is most intimate, that is, what is most sacred to us about our bodies, which is why we always keep that part of our body veiled. But the veil has to be removed – unveiled, revealed – in order for a marriage to be consummated. So we can understand the meaning of the veil in the Temple being torn in two from top to bottom at the moment of Christ’s death (Mt 27:51): it symbolizes that, through the sacrifice of His Son, God has now revealed what before was concealed to us – His intimate, inner life – and has granted us access to it. The veil, then, conceals what is most intimate – and therefore most sacred – precisely so that it can be revealed to allow the nuptial communion of Christ and the Church.

Extrapolating on this, we can see even more clearly the nuptial meaning of the sacrifice of the Eucharist: just as the consummation of a marriage is preceded by the unveiling of what is intimate and therefore most sacred to the spouses, so in the liturgy the marriage feast of the Lamb to his bride the Church is consummated by him giving us his flesh to eat and blood to drink, drawing us into a mystical nuptial union. The Church’s insight into this truth can be seen from the Vulgate translation of the verse recounting Christ’s last words on the Cross, “it is finished” (in Greek): *consummatum est* – literally, “it has been consummated.” The drawing back of the curtain before Communion signifies this entering into nuptial union with Christ.

All of this is indicative of a movement away from paganism toward worship of and allegiance to the one, true God; and, it is a movement that happens by way of marriage. As Pope Benedict XVI explains *God is Love*, there is a connection between monotheism and monogamy evident at the beginning and determined by love as *eros*. He says:

From the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfill its deepest purpose. Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. *Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa* [emphasis added].⁹

Picking up on this theme, Helen Ratner Dietz explains it this way:

... as the ancestors of the Jews gradually emerged from paganism, God let them know that ... polytheistic worship of nature deities was unacceptable to Him.... [T]he God of Israel is hetero, ‘other’. He is beyond and before the universe. His bride Israel yearns for Him because He is other. And God, in His own way, yearns for Israel in her earthliness because she, too, is hetero, other than Himself. When King Solomon in his later years lapsed into the worship of Ashtoreth the earth goddess, thereby denying the oneness and otherness of the divinity, God let him know that there would be deleterious consequences in the next generation. It was with great effort that Israel emerged from pantheism. Pantheism was like a vortex, tugging at Israel to suck her back in, *just as today pantheism is like a vortex tugging at the Church* [emphasis added].¹⁰

⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 11.

¹⁰ Dietz, “The Nuptial Meaning of Classic Church Architecture,” pp. 141-142.

When you consider that the entire Judeo-Christian religious tradition is premised on the concept of sexual difference and complementarity in marriage, then you will understand that, if we lose that concept, nothing of our faith tradition will make any sense in the culture. Precisely because revealed truth is not superimposed on nature but builds on it – that is, builds upon truths that are accessible to reason alone from the observation of nature – when the culture can no longer apprehend those natural truths, then the very foundation of our teaching evaporates and nothing we have to offer will make sense. The result is a societal reversion to the paganism of old but with a unique post-modern variation on its themes, such as the practice of child sacrifice, the worship of feminine deities, or the cult of priestesses. Since the Church cannot but be immersed in the contemporary society, this is that pantheism tugging at her like a vortex to which Ratner Dietz refers. This certainly explains a lot about the situation in which we find ourselves at this time!

Opening the Door of Beauty in Worship

The truth that revelation builds upon what is in the created, physical order, just as grace builds on nature, will always be there, whether we notice it and thereby benefit from it or not. Noticing it and benefitting from it has to begin with our worship. However, genuine liturgical renewal is not a matter of external ceremonies, new or old. Liturgical asceticism is a work of conversion, and conversion must not remain superficial. That is why the reclaiming of the practices of penance in the lives of individual believers is so important, practices such as Friday fasting, fasting before Communion (one hour being understood as a minimum when necessary, not the norm to aim for), frequent Confession, and so forth.

Educating our people to appreciate beauty and understand the deeper meaning of the Church's liturgy is also critical. As you may know, we have established in San Francisco the Benedict XVI Institute for Sacred Music and Divine Worship. Its mission is to open the door of sacred beauty to God's people by offering practical resources to parishes for more beautiful and reverent liturgies, and by revitalizing a Catholic culture of the arts.

The vision is evangelizing through beauty. It is part of the Church's vision from the beginning: evangelizing through the three transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness. We have known from the times of the ancient philosophers that these are the three noblest parts of our human nature. From our Judeo-Christian perspective, which understands the human person created in the image and likeness of God, this then tells us something about God. These are attributes of God, and so are three paths to the encounter with the divine, or as Bishop Barron would put it, the three doors of evangelization. To evangelize the culture, we need to have all three doors wide open, because some people will be attracted to pass through one door, and others to another door. There are people who actually read themselves into the Church: they read the Fathers, they read the great saints, they read Scripture from a deeper perspective. There are also wonderful new catechetical resources available, as well as the lead the Church has always taken in the field of science. So the door of truth is open, and I believe it is opening wider over time. The door of goodness has always been wide open: the Church has always been the largest provider of social services in the world, and certainly in our nation. It's the door of beauty, though, that seems to have been closed, or at least barely ajar, for over the last fifty years or more. The Church needs to reclaim its rightful and traditional place as the great patron of the arts and creator of beauty.

The idea is to reach deep into our Catholic patrimony in order to recover from the losses we have suffered from the demise of that sacramental sensitivity, which in turn is due to the loss

of the sense of the sacred. The two do go together. We can see this, for example, in the casual attitude and behavior that is prevalent at Mass, in the lack of reverence toward the Blessed Sacrament in so many different ways, in the almost complete disappearance of silence, and in many other ways. Cardinal Sarah, among others, has been quite outspoken in lamenting all this, and often issues a call to conscience to us about it, especially to us in the West. We are seeing the effects of what happens when the Church allows herself to be coopted by the dominant culture. In Ignatius Press' recently published book-length interview of the Cardinal, *The Day is Now Far Spent*, he says:

The modern world demeans the most sacred realities and makes them ugly: the child, the mother, death. And nevertheless, it will never be able to snatch completely from our souls the interior beauty that God has placed there. This beauty is inaccessible to it. Wherever holiness flourishes, a little of God's own beauty unfolds.¹¹

This is the ultimate vision of the Benedict the XVI Institute, which is really the whole point of why Christ founded a Church: a flourishing of holiness, to reveal God's beauty. We pursue this vision by initiatives such as our teaching choir, which works with parish choirs, school choirs, and other communities to teach them how to sing chant. In fact, the first request they had came from the chaplain of San Quentin State prison. They held a concert in the Catholic chapel at the prison, and thirty men signed up for the Gregorian chant schola! We also have chant camps for children, and workshops for parish music directors. Furthermore, we are promoting a culture of the arts in other ways as well, such as featuring Catholic artists in their fields of expertise, and putting on special events covering different areas of the arts in addition to music, such as painting, literature, screenwriting, poetry, and so forth.

One way we are pursuing both of these goals at once is by reviving the practice of new compositions of sacred music to be used for the purpose for which it is created: worship, not the concert hall! I am always perplexed at some people who have such great taste in classical secular music, but disparage classical Church music. With secular music, the great orchestras continue to play the great symphonies created by the great composers: Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Schubert, and so many others. At the same time, new compositions continue to be made in this genre of music. Why should it be any different with classical Church music? The great Masses of Renaissance polyphony by Palestrina, Byrd, Victoria, and so many others are just as beautiful today as they were when they were first created. But we can also create new sacred music that reflects the times in which we are living now, but is consistent with the tradition. I would compare this to great composers of classical music who incorporated the sounds and textures of the folk melodies of the cultures in which they lived but in a classical vein, such as Ralph Vaughan Williams and Antonín Dvořák. We now have a composer in residence – a very accomplished composer of sacred music who lives right in Oakland – Frank LaRocca, who has begun this project of new compositions of sacred music for sacred liturgy.

You may have heard of the first such composition, the “Mass of the Americas.” This was premiered last year at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. The inspiration for this idea came to me almost two years ago now. In the Archdiocese of San Francisco we hold an Archdiocesan-wide celebration for Our Lady of Guadalupe on the Saturday before the actual feast day. It

¹¹ Robert Cardinal Sarah, in conversation with Nicolas Diat, *The Day Is Now Far Spent*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), p. 201.

begins with a procession starting from a parish about twelve miles away at 6:00 in the morning, which arrives at the Cathedral at around 2:00, which is when we begin the Mass. It is accompanied by great festivities – vaqueros on horseback, bands, Mariachis, Aztec dancers. Early in 2018 I realized that, that year, that Saturday would be December 8, which meant that we would be celebrating the Mass of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – Patroness of the United States and a holy day of obligation here – while we honored Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of Mexico and all of the Americas. It occurred to me that this was a golden opportunity to hold up Our Lady as the mother of all of God’s children who unites us into one family of faith. And the music for the Mass would be the perfect way to do this.

I therefore asked Frank to compose a Mass of sacred music that incorporated the sounds and even the melodies of the popular songs the Mexican people sing to our honor Our Lady of Guadalupe, especially the *Himno Guadalupano*. This is very deep in the Mexican soul, and even Mexicans who are secular are moved in honoring our Lady of Guadalupe. So I wanted to elevate this into the sacred music tradition. To illustrate what I was looking for, I asked Frank to do with sound through music what the Franciscan missionaries did with sight through mission church architecture here in California: the missions here in California have given rise to this whole new school of architecture; it is clearly a traditional Catholic church, but also reflects the local culture by the building materials used and the whole style of art that has developed. Even special vestments were commissioned for the Mass of the Americas, which contain symbols reflecting the apparition of Guadalupe and its theological meaning.

After the Mass at St. Mary’s Cathedral, we decided to take this Mass “on the road,” in what we are calling a Marian unity tour. Some of you may know that I recently celebrated this Mass again at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., only this time in the traditional form of a Solemn High Pontifical Mass. This was in order to highlight unity in another way, that is, the unity of the Church’s worship in the two forms. It was important to me that this be a Mass with the same music (although adapted to an Extraordinary Form Mass) with the same vestments and the same theme, but in the traditional form. It was truly beautiful and sublime, and I believe it is generating a lot of momentum for recovery of the beautiful and sacred in our worship.

We have plans for other new compositions of sacred music as well. In the Archdiocese of San Francisco we have begun celebrating a Memorial Mass for those who have died homeless in November every year. I asked Frank to compose a Mass for this occasion, a “Requiem for the Homeless,” which he has now almost finished. I asked him to find ways to convey through sacred music the sense of fear, instability and chaos of life on the streets. We will be premiering it in our Archdiocese next year on November 7, and we are planning a series of events leading up to it to focus on addressing homelessness and also using sacred beauty to ennoble those who are our brothers and sisters of equal human dignity living on the streets.

Conclusion

Perhaps some people see all of this as frivolous; after all, with so many huge problems we dealing with, it would be easy to think that we should be focusing our energies and resources elsewhere, rather than on these extra add-on luxuries of life. Think, though, of what was going on in history during that golden era of Renaissance polyphony: the Protestant reformation, the wars of religion, the discovery and evangelization of the newly discovered continents and the conflicts that went with it. At a time of such great turmoil, in some ways unprecedented in the

history of the Church, the Church produced some of its greatest works of beauty which inspire us to the sacred still to this day.

Beyond this, though, is an even more fundamental reason to focus on sacred beauty at this time: God made us to worship Him, and when our worship is beautiful and reverent, we become who He created us to be. Beauty has a power to heal and unite way beyond what words can accomplish. In the current edition of *First Things* there is an article by Elizabeth Corey (associate professor of political science in the honors program at Baylor University) entitled, “Notes on Summer Camp.” In it she reflects on the meaning and purpose of tradition, based on her experience of returning as an adult to the summer camp she was so involved in as a girl. The camp has maintained and built upon the cherished traditions of the girls who have gone through it for very many generations. She observes:

We constantly judge present experience unsatisfactory. We hope for something better, sometime soon. Traditions do not look forward in this way. They preserve ‘pastness’ and attempt to make the past live. This is the real function of liturgy, of the Great Books, of the classical violin repertoire, of museums, even of a family’s Christmas morning routine. All these things deliver the past to us in the present, recalling what has gone before and what associations we’ve had.¹²

Cardinal Sarah makes basically the same point in the succinct definition he gives of “tradition” in *The Day Is Now Far Spent*: “Fundamentally, tradition is an agreement with the future that we find in the past.”¹³

Our Church is replete with such traditions, with rituals, with a rich cultural and spiritual patrimony, that unite us beyond our immediate circle of friends, way beyond: to a universal family of faith, to those generations of Catholics who have gone before us all the way back to the apostles, to the saints who now worship God face-to-face in heaven, and we are a part of that communion of saints. As Professor Corey goes on to say: “... traditions – unlike the superficial public culture that surrounds us – actually establish significant places for people at every age.... Some people serve as elder statesmen; those in middle age do the hard work of conservation and maintenance; children and young people are in training to inherit the institutions ...”¹⁴

This is the Church: a place for everyone, but only by holding onto and building upon the traditions that define us. And that definition, ultimately, brings us back to the Incarnation. The Incarnation has, indeed, changed history. Better yet, it has changed eternity, for us. May this season of Advent and Christmas renew us in our gratitude to God for this unsurpassable gift of revelation of His love for us, and may we express our gratitude by a flourishing of holiness in our lives that reveals God’s truth, beauty and goodness – for the unity of His people, and the healing and salvation of the entire world.

¹² Elizabeth C. Corey, “Notes on Summer Camp,” *First Things*, December 2019, p. 36.

¹³ *The Day Is Now Far Spent*, p. 205.

¹⁴ Corey, “Notes on Summer Camp,” p. 36.