



RINO FISICHELLA: THE BEAUTY OF THE IPAD AGE

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The path of beauty meanders through the whole of humanity's history. A mere phenomenological description would clearly show that in addition to their intention to communicate the living experience, the graffiti to be found in the caves of our distant forebears show a man bent on contemplating the work of his hands. He could not of course be content with this alone. What he created by intelligently rubbing a stone on the rock face wall of the cave he had chosen as his dwelling was an expression of his desire to reproduce what his eyes perceived every day in the surprise of contemplating nature, with which he was in close contact.

It is difficult to imagine that the wonder stirred by sunrise and sunset, by the sun rising behind the towering peaks of mountains or dipping into the horizon of the sea would not leave man stunned and full of questions. If these emotions are still to be found in our contemporaries, who have unfortunately and inexplicably distanced themselves from their relationship with nature – thereby diminishing their understanding of themselves – it means that the contemplation of beauty, in any context, is a human action and a characteristic of human nature.

Nothing and no one will ever be able to exhaust the wonder that beauty awakens in human beings. A passage by a teacher of past decades, Hans Urs von Balthasar, “the most cultured man of the 20th century”, to quote Henri-Marie deLubac, enables us to penetrate this thought further. In his work *Herrlichkeit*, [the beautiful] from its title identified with “glory”, the principle of rapture that beauty offers, he lingers over the condition of the modern world deprived of beauty: “In a world that lacks beauty – even though people fail to do without this word and have it constantly on their lips – in a world that is not perhaps deprived of it but can no longer perceive it or come to terms with it, goodness too has lost its magnetic force and men and women are left perplexed, asking themselves whether

they should not rather prefer evil. In fact this is also an even more exciting possibility. In a world that no longer believes it can affirm the beautiful, arguments in favour of truth have exhausted the force of logical conclusion”.

This is tragic but, unfortunately, true. Trivializing beauty or making it solely an ephemeral effect, brings deleterious consequences. In these years we are living a paradoxical condition. It seems that the more we refine our taste for beauty, the more clearly we perceive situations of degradation.

Beauty enables us to overcome the fragmentation which, especially today, holds sway in our culture, unable to grasp unity or the foundation of knowledge. However paradoxical it may seem, our eyes have lost their strength and like the compound eyes of insects take in only the sufficient quantity to respond to the immediate questions, without being better able to put the basic question, which asks that existence be given a meaningful answer. When reality – and personal life itself – crumble, beauty makes it possible to understand unity because it demands goodness and truth as indispensable references. However paradoxical it may seem while we seek the knowledge of ancient sculptures and, with them, of the civilization that produced them, today for those who have been born in the last two decades and who constitute the digital generation, contemplation seems to stop at the beauty of iPad, iPod, the latest cell phone or PC model. The queues seen when a new technical instrument comes out can no longer be distinguished from the queues of tourists who want to visit the Louvre, the Vatican Museums or the Prado. The wish to wait is in some respects identical. The yearning for beauty motivates the former and the latter with an equally strong desire to contemplate the work of art. None of us can deceive ourselves that we can marginalize this form of beauty as being secondary or totally irrelevant.

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