

# Beauty is the antidote for ‘spiritual worldliness’

“People need beauty. They need the sense of being at home in their world, and being in communication with other souls,” writes the world-famous philosopher Roger Scruton.

“In so many areas of modern life – in pop music, in television and cinema, in language and literature – beauty is being displaced by raucous and attention-grabbing clichés,” laments Scruton. “We are being torn out of ourselves by the loud and insolent gestures of people who want to seize our attention but to give nothing in return for it.”

Scruton has written many philosophical books. But those on art, architecture, and music make especially important contributions. One of his books published with Oxford



University Press has the elegantly simple title: *Beauty*.

In 2009, at a philosophical conference in Rome inaugurated by Pope Benedict XVI, Scruton delivered a significant speech about beauty. He spoke of beauty as a way of access to God.

“In creating beauty, the artist gives glory to God’s creation,” said Scruton. But he also spoke of the trend in art today that instead worships ugliness and desecration.

Applying his philosophical skill, Scruton discovered the reason for this lamentable trend: “Desecration is a sort of defense against the sacred, an attempt to de-



Pope Francis kisses a disabled man after spotting him in the crowd and having his popemobile stop as he rode through St. Peter’s Square March 19 ahead of his inaugural Mass at the Vatican.

L’Osservatore Romano / CNS

stroy its claims.”

“Our lives will be judged

before sacred things; and in order to escape that judg-

ment, we destroy the thing that seems to accuse us,” Scruton explained. “And since beauty reminds us of the sacred – and is even a special form of it – beauty must also be desecrated.”

Scruton has spoken on the topic of beauty in not many places. In a rare trip to the West Coast, Scruton will be speaking about beauty on Sunday, May 5, at 7 p.m. at Regent College in Vancouver at an event co-sponsored by Redeemer Pacific College.

One thought of Scruton’s in particular has been running through my mind over the past few weeks as we have begun to get to know Pope Francis on the world stage. Writing in *The American Spectator*, Scruton noted the presence of desecration in our world and the absence of beauty: “Much of our public art is a loveless art, and one that is also entirely without the humility that comes from love.”

The reason I associate this thought of Scruton’s with Pope Francis is because, before he became Pope, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ, gave an interview in 2007 as Archbishop of Buenos Aires in which he spoke about the beauty of the gospel:

“To me, apostolic courage is disseminating. Disseminating the Word. Giving it to that man and to that woman for whom it was bestowed. Giving them the beauty of the Gospel, the amazement of the encounter with Jesus ... and leaving it to the Holy Spirit to do the rest. It is the Lord, says the

Gospel, who makes the seed spring and bear fruit.”

In that same interview, the Jesuit who is now Pope cited the writings of Cardinal Henri de Lubac, also a Jesuit, in order to answer the question, “what is the worst thing that can happen in the Church?”

Cardinal Bergoglio replied that the worst thing is what De Lubac calls “spiritual worldliness,” which presents “the greatest danger for the Church, for us, who are in the Church.”

“Spiritual worldliness is putting oneself at the centre,” said the future Pope Francis. “It is what Jesus saw going on among the Pharisees: ‘You who glorify yourselves. Who give glory to yourselves, the ones to the others.’”

That was in 2007. But in 2013, in handwritten notes from the morning of Saturday, March 9, when Cardinal Bergoglio addressed the penultimate congregation of cardinals that preceded the conclave, he had an outline of his thoughts on the danger of a “self-referential Church.” Such a pharisaical attitude, said the notes, “gives rise to that evil which is so grave, that of spiritual worldliness (according to De Lubac, the worst evil into which the Church can fall): that of living to give glory to one another.”

Perhaps you can see why I connect Scruton’s thought about beauty with this concern of the Jesuit who has become Pope. To do so, you have to realize two things. First, what the Jesuit motto See GLORY – Page 22

# *Glory and beauty are one*

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is. Second, that glory and beauty are the same thing.

First, this concern of Pope Francis (and of the cardinals who heard him express it and were thereby inclined to elect him) – namely, the concern to avoid a pharisaical “self-referential Church” – is already addressed in the Jesuit motto and way of life: *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (“for the greater glory of God”).

To glorify yourself? No, that would be desecration. To glorify God? Yes, that would be the way of beauty.

Second, the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar points out that, although most theologians rarely talk about it, the Scriptures constantly speak of the divine “Glory” – which is another

word for Beauty.

In the first volume of his *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics – Seeing the Form*, von Balthasar says, “We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past – whether he admits it or not – can no longer pray and soon will

no longer be able to love.”

Thus, we can see the wisdom in Scruton’s grim assessment of today’s art world: “Much of our public art is a loveless art, and one that is also entirely without the humility that comes from love.”

And perhaps we can even catch glimpses of how the dissemination of the Word, by the Gospel gestures of Pope Francis, will inspire a new generation of artists.

*C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. Roger Scruton’s talk, “Beauty,” will take place on Sunday, May 5, at 7pm at Regent College, 5800 University Blvd., in Vancouver, B.C. More information at: [moreC.com](http://moreC.com)/Scruton.* □