

## A NEW SONG FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY CAROLYN PIRTLE, M.S.M.

# EPIPHANIES OF BEAUTY

Recently I assisted with the facilitation of a weekend retreat for young adults (the descriptor “young” defined as people in their twenties and thirties). Specifically, I helped plan and provide the music for the weekend’s liturgical celebrations: the Hours, Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and two Masses. Because the retreat took place over the final days of the Christmas season, familiar carols constituted much of the repertoire, with one notable exception. For the post-Communion meditation during the final Mass of the retreat, my colleague and I selected an ancient hymn, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” whose text dates from the fourth century and whose melody predates chant manuscripts from the tenth century. This hymn happens to be one of my all-time personal favorites, and I was looking forward to its inclusion in the liturgy; however, in the days leading up to the retreat, I began experiencing a degree of anxiety surrounding our musical decisions. We were singing a lot of “traditional” hymns, and had planned *a lot* of chant. Yes, the traditional hymns were Christmas carols, so surely no one would take issue there, but asking 60 twenty- and thirty-somethings to spend their weekend chanting psalms at Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer was risky. Many of these retreatants had never sung a text using a psalm tone before, some had never even encountered the Liturgy of the Hours before, and many were accustomed to hearing music of the “Praise and Worship” persuasion in their experiences of prayer. I worried that the relative unfamiliarity of this music might result in a certain awkwardness or discomfort in liturgical participation, leading to disappointment or alienation among the retreatants.





Antoni Gaudí. Interior,  
Basílica i Temple Expiatori de  
la Sagrada Família.

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So here they were, gathered together for Morning Prayer—the first item on the retreat docket—faced with a new (old) sonority and a new (old) way of offering sung praise to God. The sung greeting didn't quite go as planned, and I thought, that's it. We've lost them. To my relief, the retreatants merely giggled self-consciously at the interesting cluster of notes that rang through the chapel, and Morning Prayer continued on. By the end of the first psalm, they had gotten the hang of pointed texts and psalm tones, and by the end of the weekend, they had progressed from singing every syllable with robotic evenness to proclaiming the texts with rhythmic variety and nuance. They were becoming familiar with a language, and that language was beauty.

To get back to the post-Communion meditation. After a full weekend of “singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (cf. Col 3:16; Eph 5:19) in praise and thanksgiving to God, the retreatants were asked not to sing but to listen, as three women sang “Of the Father's Love Begotten,” unaccompanied and in unison. As the hymn was being sung, the air in the chapel seemed to expand with the focused intensity of the congregation's “full, conscious, and active” listening, and one had the sense that the flowing melody was a conduit of grace and a catalyst for a deeper contemplation of the Incarnation. When the last note decayed to nothingness, a pregnant silence hung in the expanded air, fragile and fleeting, yet ultimately fruitful. I have experienced this phenomenon many times in concert settings: the music creates a collective reverie in the listeners, and when the piece ends, no one wants to be the first to break the spell. In a liturgical context, I believe this phenomenon transcends mere aesthetic reverie and ventures into the realm of contemplation, of communion. Why? Musically, the presentation of this ancient hymn was as simple as it gets, yet it was not simplistic; it was unadorned, yet it was not unappealing. In comparison with the repertoire heard throughout the retreat, this

hymn was utterly different; it was entirely other. And in its other-ness, it opened up a space within the listeners for the entirely Other. The music became, as it were, an “epiphany of beauty,”<sup>1</sup> and this beauty in turn served as an aural icon, pointing beyond itself to the One who is the Source of all beauty.

In the concluding document for the plenary assembly of 2006, the Pontifical Council of Culture declared that the *via pulchritudinis*—the way of beauty—is a “privileged pathway of evangelisation and dialogue” for believers and non-believers alike.<sup>2</sup> For the Christian believer, all beauty points to Christ, the “Word made flesh and splendor of the Father”<sup>3</sup> who definitively reveals “the only beauty that defies evil, and triumphs over sin and death.”<sup>4</sup> For the non-believer, the *via pulchritudinis* can be the catalyst for an encounter with Jesus Christ, the first step along the pathway of evangelization:

Beginning with the simple experience of the marvel-arousing meeting with beauty, the *via pulchritudinis* can open the pathway to the search for God, and disposes the heart and spirit to meet Christ, who is the Beauty of Holiness Incarnate, offered by God to men for their salvation. It invites contemporary Augustines, unquenchable seekers of love, truth, and beauty, to see through perceptible beauty to eternal Beauty, and with fervour discover Holy God, the author of all beauty.<sup>5</sup>

To approach the mission of evangelization from the stance of convincing another of doctrinal truth often proves problematic, even unsuccessful; however, to approach evangelization from the convincing stance of beauty can provide an inroad by which others are led to discover Him who is the way, the truth, and the life (cf. Jn 14:6). It is here where the arts—visual, musical, theatrical, and literary—can play a significant role in

the New Evangelization. As articulated by the Pontifical Council for Culture:

Every true work of art is potentially a way into the religious experience. Recognizing the importance of art in the inculturation of the Gospel means recognizing that human genius and sensitivity are akin to the truth and beauty of the divine mystery.<sup>6</sup>

The word “potentially” is crucial here: not every artistic endeavor is capable of reflecting divine beauty. In order to pave the “privileged pathway of evangelisation and dialogue,” one must begin by discerning whether or not a work of art is worthy of being a stone in that pavement. The Pontifical Council for Culture provides criteria for such discernment: “Art, like every other human activity, looks beyond itself for its absolute goal: its nobility comes from being directed to the ultimate goal of every human person.”<sup>7</sup> This looking beyond the self that constitutes the goal of true art is also the *telos* of every human person, for all are called to look beyond the self, to die to the self, so as to live forever in God.

The encounter with beauty can be the *via* through which new generations rediscover this *telos*: “Opening infinite horizons, [the way of beauty] prompts the human person to push outside of himself, from the routine of the ephemeral passing instant, to the Transcendent and Mystery, and seek, as the final goal of the ultimate quest for well-being and total nostalgia, this original beauty which is God Himself, creator of all created beauty.”<sup>8</sup> This prompting can take place in an encounter that radiates with the transfigured glory of Mount Tabor (gazing at the Basílica i Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Família), or whispers with the simplicity of the breeze on Mount Horeb (listening to three women sing a unison chant a capella). Whatever its scale, beauty can be a catalyst for discovery, and those intent upon engaging in the work of the New

Evangelization must never underestimate this capacity of beauty—particularly the beauty of the arts—to serve as an inroad to encountering the divine.



## NOTES

- 1 See John Paul II’s dedication in the *Letter to Artists* (1999).
- 2 Pontifical Council for Culture. *Concluding Document of the Plenary Assembly: The Via Pulchritudinis: Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and Dialogue* (March 28, 2006). [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/cultr/documents/rc\\_pc\\_cultr\\_doc\\_20060327\\_plenary-assembly\\_final-document\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20060327_plenary-assembly_final-document_en.html)
- 3 Alternate Invocation II for the Penitential Act, *Roman Missal*
- 4 Pontifical Council for Culture. *The Via Pulchritudinis, Conclusion*.
- 5 *Ibid.*, II.1.
- 6 Pontifical Council for Culture. *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture* (1999), §17. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/cultr/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pc-cultr\\_doc\\_03061999\\_pastoral\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_pc-cultr_doc_03061999_pastoral_en.html)
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Pontifical Council for Culture. *The Via Pulchritudinis*, II, 3.



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