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THEOLOGICAL Studies

Article

The Aesthetics of Tradition and the Styles of Theology

Theological Studies
2014, Vol. 75(4) 795–815
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DOI: 10.1177/0040563914548654
tsj.sagepub.com
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Abstract
This article attempts to bridge the post-Vatican II "conservative–liberal" divide in theology by appealing to the interpretive category of aesthetics. It delineates two aesthetical sensibilities toward Catholic tradition in the contemporary Church—a classical sensibility and a developmental sensibility for the traditionally beautiful. Regarding both as authentically Catholic, the author explores the differing styles of theology that issue from each aesthetics, and argues for the need on the part of each style to appreciate the efforts of the other to capture the beauty of tradition.

Keywords
aesthetics, Catholic aesthetics, divine immutability, development of doctrine, styles of theology, theological interpretation, tradition

Hans Urs von Balthasar's impressive achievement in *Herrlichkeit* has led theologians to appreciate the value of aesthetics for theological interpretation. Balthasar's magnum opus draws on the category of beauty in order to contemplate God's divine life as beauty itself and the incarnation as the consummate revelation of finite beauty. The subplot of *Herrlichkeit* unfolds in an extended meditation on modernity's loss of a faithful sensibility for the beauty of the incarnate form, a reflection on the insidiousness of sin viewed through the lens of aesthetics.[1] The richness of

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols., ed. Joseph Fessio, S.J. and John Kenneth Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982).

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Balthasar's multivolume work appears in a plethora of discrete studies that advance an accomplished argument for the divine glory as the plenitude of beauty, of which, he insists, modern theologians are as obliged to take account as the ancients.

Balthasar's work has since prompted interest in putting the category of beauty to theological service, even if not necessarily in the manner of his particular project. Richard Viladesau, for example, has proposed a transcendental argument that finds God's infinite beauty posited in the conditions for the possibility of beauty's finite apprehension.[2] Alejandro García-Rivera has developed a Latino theological aesthetics that sees the beauty of a faith-filled community in its capacity to appreciate difference, including cultural difference, within the unity of God's redemptive order.[3] Mirjam-Christina Redeker has offered a theological aesthetics that understands itself as a perception theory of faith, keen to explain both the beautiful and truthful nuances of the human relation to God that the act of faith grasps.[4]

In the pages that follow, I would like to join the company of these aesthetical-theological interpreters, albeit in a much more limited and modest way, by bringing an aesthetical perspective to bear on the theological concept of tradition itself. A number of monographs on tradition have appeared in recent years, and none has parsed the notion of tradition by appeal to the category of aesthetics.[5] The advantage of such a perspective is that it will elucidate different kinds of Catholic sensibilities about the nature of doctrinal truth, clarify an aesthetic dimension to contemporary disagreement in the Church about the authentically Catholic, and provide understanding too about competing notions of the proper task of theology in our present ecclesial moment. We live in a time in which Catholic theology is polarized by traditionalist and progressive sensibilities that both rather facilely valorize their own approach to theology as though it were exclusively authentic. Indeed, I want to warn my readers at the outset that they will be tempted judgmentally to do just this in making their way through my account

2. Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University, 1999).
3. Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999). See also Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).
4. Mirjam-Christina Redeker, *Wahrnehmung und Glaube: Zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Ästhetik in gegenwärtiger Zeit* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2011).
5. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (New York: Oxford University, 2000); John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University, 2000); Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). Brown's volumes might seem an exception to my judgment that none of these works examines tradition through the lens of aesthetics, since he attends to art as a dimension of the content of tradition. Yet, in Brown's work aesthetics is not invoked as a perspective for appreciating the beauty of tradition itself.

of the two Catholic aesthetics of tradition that are respectively associated with more conservative or more liberal approaches to theology, namely, the classical aesthetics of tradition and the developmental aesthetics of tradition. I, however, assume that both of these aesthetics present the "Catholically beautiful," as do the theological styles that serve these two aesthetics. My aim in this essay is irenic. Hence my goal is to cultivate a deeper appreciation of the range of the Catholically beautiful and, through it, to offer a more welcoming understanding of how theologians might represent it well, even when capturing its beauty from different perspectives.

Tradition and Aesthetics

Catholic belief has long held that the act of faith encounters God's revelation in Scripture and tradition, even if this particular way of conjunctively formulating the belief only appeared in the aftermath of the Reformation. According to the Council of Trent (1545–1563), Jesus Christ is the one source of the truth of the gospel message that was faithfully promulgated to the church by his apostles. Yet this saving "truth and rule [of conduct] are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions which were received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on, as it were, from the apostles themselves at the inspiration of the holy Spirit."[6] The pressing concern for the Council Fathers at Trent was to define the Catholic teaching on divine revelation in the face of Luther's claim that God's revelation was communicated in Scripture alone, and that ecclesiastical tradition was humanly invented corruption and nothing more than the popery Luther identified with all that was wrong with the Church of Rome. In defining a dimension of revelation that exceeded the biblical page, the Council Fathers found expression for the medieval Catholic belief that the truth of God's revelation appeared in the teachings of ecumenical councils, whose definitions were inspired by the Holy Spirit, in papal teachings, and in the writings of recognized, orthodox theologians who, it was assumed, pronounced on dogmatic loci with unwavering agreement that reflected the unity of divine truth. This tradition of *sacra scriptura* was complemented further in the teaching of Trent by all the time-honored beliefs and practices that did not take written form but that, invested with the authority of apostolic teaching, communicated the truth of the gospel.

In the aftermath of Trent, Catholic theologians advanced the distinctiveness of the Tridentine teaching against the Protestant Scripture principle by accentuating both the truth and authority of Catholic tradition as a mode of revelation. As time passed, this accent resulted in the development of a theology of the magisterium that found a proliferating content for its interpretation in a marked increase in the publication of papal encyclicals since the late 18th century and the definition of the dogma of papal

6. Council of Trent's "First Decree of Session 4" (April 8, 1546), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 2:663. For a more detailed discussion of the Catholic belief in the authority of tradition as a mode of revelation, see Thiel, *Senses of Tradition* 13–25.

infallibility at Vatican I (1870). Thus tradition achieved a certain integrity in Catholic belief that prevented its reduction to Scripture or even to the history of the interpretation of Scripture, even to the point that tradition could sometimes be understood as partly conveying God's revelation that was partly conveyed as well in the Bible. This "partly . . . partly" (*partim . . . partim*) conceptualization of the relationship between Scripture and tradition was considered by the Fathers at Trent and rejected for its disjunctive implication that there were two sources for the truth of revelation that remained incomplete in each.

Yet, as late as the initial draft of Vatican II's *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, this "partly . . . partly" formulation was still seriously considered by its authors as a viable way of insisting on the integrity of tradition as a distinct dimension of God's revelation. Continued dissatisfaction with this schema, however, led the Council Fathers to approve a much-revised final version of *Dei verbum* that insisted that "sacred tradition and Scripture . . . are bound together in a close and reciprocal relationship," that they "both flow from the same divine wellspring, merge together to some extent, and are on course towards the same end." The "partly–partly" conceptualization was excised from the final text of *Dei verbum* since "tradition and Scripture together form a single sacred deposit of the word of God, entrusted to the church." This teaching of Vatican II on the unity of revelation in the truthful coherence of Scripture and tradition does not mean that tradition can be reduced to the reception of Scripture's truth in the history of faith and its transmission. Moreover, the council affirms that "the church's certainty about all that is revealed is not drawn from holy Scripture alone," but also from sacred tradition. Thus, repeating the teaching of the Council of Trent, *Dei verbum* teaches that "both Scripture and tradition are to be accepted and honored with like devotion and reverence."[7]

It is this integrity of tradition in Catholic belief that I wish to explore through the interpretive lens of aesthetics. And since this lens can register a broad, visual range, I would like to focus the aesthetical perspective that will be put to hermeneutical use here.

Any number of ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians addressed aesthetical issues and questions, but the appearance of the discipline of aesthetics as a dimension of philosophical inquiry is usually dated from Alexander Baumgarten's 1735 dissertation *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, which addressed the poem as a work of art. This work introduced the word "aesthetics," which Baumgarten defined as "a science of how things are to be known by means of the senses,"[8] a formulation he would expand some years later in his 1750 work *Aesthetica* to include the phrase "the art of thinking beautifully."[9]

7. *Dei verbum* no. 9, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 2:974–75.
8. Quoted in Paul Guyer, "The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711–35," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 15.
9. Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Ästhetik: Lateinisch–Deutsch*, 2 vols., trans., intro., annot. Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2007) 1:11.

The epistemological orientation of Baumgarten's early definition has ever remained a concern for philosophers interested in aesthetics, though the discipline has since developed to include an extensive range of issues. Writing a generation before Baumgarten, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury, and Frances Hutcheson strove to describe the nature of beauty itself, as well as its proper regard, by human sensibility. Growing attention in the 18th century to the workings of creativity and genius led to the inclusion of these themes in the scope of aesthetic concerns, the most systematic treatment of which appeared in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), specifically in part I, which advances a "critique of aesthetical judgment."[10] The concerns of the philosophical subdiscipline widened further under the influence of Hegel's judgment that beauty appears most truthfully not in natural phenomena but in works of art that manifest the movement of Spirit in history. Hegel's influence has led to the consideration of aesthetics as a discipline devoted to the criticism of art and artistic judgment.[11] With the advent of the avant garde in various forms of modern art, the scope of aesthetics widened further as artists intentionally eschewed responsibility for representing the beautiful, and the aesthetical task turned to explaining exactly what made art art.

In these pages I will focus on aesthetics as a theory of the beautiful. My goal is not to define the nature of the beautiful as an objective state. Aesthetical thought has long recognized in the notion of taste that aesthetical judgment is pluralistic and, as a consequence, that there are differing perceptions of the beautiful and the qualities that configure it. Along similar lines, I argue that there are different Catholic perceptions of the beauty of tradition, and that these differing perceptions are grounded in different Catholic sensibilities about the beauty of God and the believer's encounter with that divine beauty in faith. I wish to reiterate, by way of introduction, that in the next two sections I describe sensibilities in the Catholic imaginary, and I attempt to describe them in a manner faithful to their own particular values, without offering criticisms of their limitations. Talk of limitations appears in my concluding discussion of how these aesthetics are appropriated theologically.

A Classical Aesthetics of Tradition

A classical Christian aesthetics measures any instance of the beautiful against faith's affirmation that God is consummate beauty itself. Christian aesthetical judgment, however, is always exercised in the midst of the created conditions of existence where experiences of beauty offer imaginative entry to transcendent beauty. Thus, in faith, created beauty is judged to be so because it participates in the divine beauty. Even more pointedly, qualities that faith ascribes to the divine nature will be qualities judged to be beautiful in God's creation. Divine qualities like mercy and love

10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans., annot. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951) 37–202.
11. Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 388.

can be found in the realm of human virtue where they may be judged beautiful, not only because they are emotionally poignant and relationally redemptive, but also because human mercy and love share finitely in the beauty of these qualities as divine attributes. The divine attribute of goodness behaves like the moral attributes of mercy and love, not only in the sense that it admits of analogical construal but also to the degree that faith finds goodness beautiful, a judgment affirmed most strikingly by both Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas who agreed that goodness and beauty are the same.[12]

Not all divine qualities, however, admit of this analogical translation as readily as others, and, as a consequence, they resonate less aesthetically in the Christian imagination. God's power and presence are examples of attributes that resist analogical construal and so elude Christian appreciation as the beautiful. Medieval Christian theology held that all created being possesses the transcendental qualities of oneness, truth, goodness, and beauty since these are qualities of the Creator. All being as being is beautiful, as are the conditions under which being appears, such as its power or presence. Yet, power and presence are not moral qualities like mercy, love, and goodness. The power and presence of finite being stand less easily in analogical relationship to the utterly divine qualities of omnipotence and omnipresence, even to the point that Christian discourse would be disinclined to speak specifically of creaturely power and presence as beautiful.

At first glance, it would seem that much the same could be said of the divine attribute of immutability. Like omnipotence and omnipresence, divine immutability does not easily admit of analogical translation to creaturely existence, which is enmeshed in time and change. Nevertheless, it is this divine attribute more than any other that epitomizes God's beauty in the Christian imagination.[13] God's immutability offers no homology to the created conditions of temporality and marks the divine transcendence with the absolute perfection that changelessness and timelessness logically require. True analogy may fail between the beauty of eternal perfection and the vagaries of created time, and yet classical Christian definitions of beauty readily imagine the qualities of beauty against the backdrop of divine immutability. Aquinas, for example, delineates three conditions that characterize beauty: "clarity," "proportion or harmony," and "integrity or perfection" (*integritas, sive perfectio*)."[14] The perfection he ascribes to finite beauty, though, cannot approach the perfection of the immutable God, and conveys much more an aesthetic sense of the "wholeness" of what is judged beautiful. Too distant a comparison to be judged analogy in any strict sense, the aesthetic quality of *perfectio* dimly hints at the divine quality most attractive to Christian aesthetical judgment. However much some divine attributes susceptible to analogical construal encourage the believer to find some limited coherence between finite and

12. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* 115.
13. One of the most famous testimonies to this classically aesthetical judgment is found in Augustine's account of the mystical experience of God's timelessness that he and his mother Monica shared in Ostia shortly before her death, as recorded in the *Confessions* 9.
14. *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1, q. 39, a. 8 (Blackfriars edition, 1964 –).

infinite beauty, the attribute of immutability captures the Christian imagination with a divine beauty marked by its utter difference from all that is worldly.[15]

Having offered such judgments about the attribute of immutability, I wish to make a qualification that has some bearing on our present topic. As I have indicated, Catholic belief maintains that tradition, along with Scripture, is a mode of divine revelation, the means by which God has chosen to communicate the sublime and saving truth of the Christ event to the world. In a classical aesthetics of tradition, the doctrines and practices that make up tradition possess a definitiveness that defies time, since they are imagined to be—in the words of the fifth-century monk Vincent of Lerins—what has been believed "everywhere, always, by all." It is Vincent's "always" that carries the banner of immutability onto the field of tradition. Tradition, of course, is in time and, as the very process of "handing down" the faith, is characterized by change. Yet, a classical aesthetics of tradition finds the beauty of tradition in its abiding truth as divine revelation. The teachings and practices of tradition identified as the apostolic heritage are seen in this sensibility as fixed. The words of the Nicene Creed, for example, are as permanent as the truths about the nature of God and the saving drama they express. The practice of the eucharistic real presence is timelessly repeated in the devout reception of the sacrament. Papal infallibility ensures the certainty of those dimensions of tradition that are not subject to change and so, in the judgment of the Church's teaching authority, are worthy of the entire Church's appreciation as the timeless truth of revelation. Since revelation, and thus tradition as revelation, communicates God's providential plan to save the world, and since that plan issues from God's eternal love and unchanging will, tradition, of all that dwells in the creaturely realm, can be represented in faith as a finite reflection of the divine immutability. Its beauty, like God's, lies in its difference from the ordinary conditions of temporality that, in this Catholic sensibility, are saturated with relativity and doubt.

Immutability as a quality of God's being by definition transcends anything in creation including tradition, which as a dimension of divine revelation must conform to the human capacities for its subjective recognition and reception and so must be enmeshed in time and culture. Tradition cannot be immutable in any strict sense. For a classical aesthetic sensibility, though, its beauty lies in its ability to capture a sense of God's unchanging truth, the very content of divine revelation. In this respect, tradition's unchanging truth possesses a beauty that is more distinctive than the unchanging truth of Scripture. Christians believe that the inspired words of the Bible convey God's timeless truth. The revelatory power of Scripture *and* tradition, however, is a peculiarly Roman Catholic belief. Moreover, the immutability of a classical aesthetics of Scripture appears not only in its unchanging content but also in the fixed character of the words on the page, ever the same and ever conveying the once-and-for-all events of the Savior's life that bring the world to redemption. Tradition, though, offers itself

15. See the discussion of the beauty of God's unchanging perfection in David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 178–249.

in a great variety of aesthetical forms that capture the Catholic sense of tradition's permanence, itself a reflection of God's unchanging beauty. Tradition appears in such literary forms as the teachings of ecumenical councils, papal encyclicals, and the writings of authoritative theologians. Tradition appears in such unwritten forms as the celebration of Mass, Marian devotions, and the pastoral leadership of the local bishop. This variety, which includes so many other manifestations of tradition, extends the permanence of traditional truth into every dimension of Catholic life, unifying the experience of the traditionally beautiful. In this classical aesthetics, the transcendental quality of beauty radiates in tradition in a way that illuminates the other transcendental qualities of tradition—its unity, truth, and goodness.

Beauty functions mimetically in this classical aesthetics of tradition. Early in its history, Christian theology embraced the Platonic categories that served as the intellectual lingua franca of the Mediterranean world, and that satisfied the Christian desire to think and speak well of God's otherness. Like the Platonic forms or ideas, the divine nature transcends time and change, and dwells in a state of metaphysical perfection. For Plato, the things of this world are merely shadowy copies of the supersensible ideas. They stand in mimetic relationship to the eternal truths to which they correspond. Yet, the absence of a doctrine of creation in ancient Greek philosophy makes this mimesis disappointing. Mimesis registers its imitation in the ambit of physicality. It implicates the senses, which distract the intellect from the true objects of knowledge. Plato expresses this misgiving about mimesis most notably in Book X of the *Republic* where Socrates advocates the censoring of art in the ideal state on the grounds that, as a physical imitation of a physical imitation, it lures the mind away from the contemplation of the immutably true and beautiful.[16]

Christian mimesis transforms these Platonic categories in every respect by ascribing immutability and its consummate beauty to the Creator God and by positing a rich correspondence between the physical universe and its Creator. This transformation was facilitated all the more in the late antique world as Plotinus's later interpretation of Platonism was appropriated theologically by Augustine and through his influence came to be embraced as normative in the medieval theological tradition. This variety of Platonism eschewed Plato's disjunctive regard for the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds and saw finite being as sharing in the power and qualities of consummate being itself, a metaphysical resonance most acceptable to the Christian affirmation of the goodness of being and God's providential presence to creation.[17] Mimesis in this Christian ontology is enabled by the participation of created being in the uncreated being of God. The exercise of sensibility in this kind of mimesis can be an occasion of sin, since the reflection of eternal being in finite being could be idolatrously distorted

16. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues, Including the Letters*, trans. Lane Cooper et al., ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1961) 819–33 (Book X, 595a–608a).

17. See Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2002) 313–43.

by human volition.[18] But even while susceptible to sinful corruption, Christian mimesis properly falls within the scope of creation's sacramentality in which finite being is metaphysically receptive to, and conveys the graceful presence of, God.

A classical aesthetics of tradition presupposes this understanding of Christian mimesis, regarding finite beauty as a mirroring of God's beauty facilitated by its created participation in the fullness of being. A classical perspective on Christian mimesis assumes that this finite mirroring of the divine beauty occurs statically, since tradition reflects the divine immutability. This stationary beauty of tradition appears in interesting ways—in commonly affirmed iterations of the Creed, in the iconic lives of the saints, and in the repetition of the sacramental life of the Church. In each of these examples and all the others that might have served, the Catholic imagination delights in the immovability of tradition's mimesis, ever the same in its mirroring of the divine immutability. This static mimesis is truly beautiful as a representation of what is authentically Catholic and of what enduringly abides as the apostolic faith of the tradition.

As we have seen, mimesis implicates the senses, and in Christian mimesis the senses, responding well to grace and resisting the pitfalls of sin, are the experiential modes of apprehending sacred beauty. Catholic Christianity richly appreciates the role of sensibility in religious experience and in that respect is especially open to the aesthetic dimensions of the encounter with God. In a distinctly Catholic aesthetics, all the senses have a share in the experience of created beauty and its transcendent arc toward eternal beauty, at least to the degree that the senses mutually draw each other into the apprehension of the world. Aquinas, though, argued that of all the senses those most cognitive—seeing and hearing—especially apprehend the beautiful. The beautiful, he claims, "is that which calms desire, by being seen or known," and it is the senses of sight and hearing that particularly minister to reason, the faculty that conceptually grasps the beautiful. Thus, he observed, "we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds," but "we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors."[19] Although Thomas singled out the senses of seeing and hearing as inclined to the experience of the beautiful, it is interesting to note that vision has a prominence in this aesthetic grouping. Early in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas defines beauty as that which

18. In her study of Augustine's aesthetical thought, Carol Harrison highlights Augustine's abiding concern that the materiality of finite beauty easily becomes a source of sinful temptation. See Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 271.

19. *ST* 1–2, q. 27, a. 1. If the project here were a fully developed theological anthropology, then I would be obliged to give account of the aesthetical dimensions of all the senses and the ways each contributes to the experience of God. My project, however, is not anthropology but aesthetics. I have chosen to focus here on a theological aesthetics of seeing and hearing, not only because, following Aquinas, I judge these senses to be aesthetically paramount, but also because an aesthetics of these senses captures the ecclesial aesthetics that flourish in the Church today. Nevertheless, as I note above, all the senses have a share in the experience of created beauty and, through it, in the apprehension of divine beauty.

"consists in due proportion" and beautiful things as "those which please when seen (*quod visum placet*)."[20]

Aquinas voices widely held Catholic assumptions in the aesthetic primacy he assigns to the sense of sight. Of all the senses, vision has pride of place in a classical Catholic aesthetics. The sense of sight unifies the other senses by construing possible objects of experience, and so of aesthetic experience, in a spatial field, there to be engaged by the other senses. Viewed as a theater of creation, this field offers a host of images upon which faith-filled vision might gaze in order to contemplate the mimesis of divine beauty. Unlike a Protestant aesthetic sensibility, which is iconoclastically wary of the visual and far more attracted to the beauty of a faith that comes from hearing the Word of God purely preached (*fides ex auditu*), a Catholic aesthetics turns to the visual apprehension of creation—in Aquinas's apt phrase "*intellectum nostrum . . . convertendo se ad phantasmata*"[21]—in order to behold finite concrescences of divine beauty, an optics supported by the ancient Christian claim that God is light (1 Jn 1:5). A Catholic visual aesthetics embraces the values of an Orthodox theology of the icon, which sees the static, painted image as a window to eternity and the supernatural mysteries of the faith. Latin Catholicism, however, widens this window and, with it, the religious efficacy of vision by regarding three-dimensional objects—religious statuary and the crucifix—as its conventional art forms that represent the sacred for visual apprehension, an aesthetic commitment that reflects a readiness to find the divine beauty in the wider realm of ordinary physical things. The openness of Roman Catholicism to the reality of extraordinary visionary events, of appearances of the Savior, the Virgin, or the saints to believers, bespeaks the primacy of vision in a classical Catholic aesthetics, as does the more ordinary Catholic experience of gazing in veneration at the consecrated bread and wine elevated by the celebrant at the ritual climax of the Mass and in the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.[22]

A classical Catholic aesthetics values all the senses in grasping the specific beauty of tradition, though here again the sense of sight has prominence. The Christian paradigm of visual beauty is the beatific vision, the consummation of eschatological meaning in the vision of God. Paul spoke of this visual experience movingly early in the

20. *ST* 1, q. 5, a. 4. The priority accorded to vision as the aesthetical sense also stems from the medieval belief that color is the cause of beauty. See Umberto Eco, ed., *History of Beauty*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2010) 99–129. See also Eco's detailed study of Aquinas's aesthetics, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1988).

21. *ST* 1, q. 84, a. 7. Even though Aquinas speaks more generally in this article of sense images, it is interesting to note that visual experience prevails in the examples he offers of how the senses inform acts of understanding.

22. Caroline Walker Bynum notes an extreme form of this pious practice in late medieval German devotion. In the practice of what scholars have come to call *Shaufrömmigkeit*, some believers were satisfied to "receive" the Eucharist simply by encountering the host visually. See Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007) 10.

tradition, expressing for the first time the aim of Christian yearning: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12 NRSV). Benedict XII articulated the hope of believers more fully in his 14th-century teaching that the souls of the blessed in heaven "see the divine essence with an intuitive vision" immediately, even before the resurrection of the body and its future reuniting with the soul at the end of time, and that in this vision God is seen "nakedly, clearly, and openly" so that in the vision the theological virtues of faith and hope disappear.[23] In remarkable poetry, Dante in the *Paradiso* captures the hope of believers for this wondrous sight as he recounts the final steps of his heavenly ascent:

> Thus my mind, all rapt, was gazing, fixed, motionless and intent, ever enkindled by its gazing. In that Light one becomes such that it is impossible he should ever consent to turn himself from it for other sight; for the good, which is the object of the will, is all gathered in it, and outside of it that is defective which is perfect there.[24]

In Dante's supernatural imaginary, which articulated the very Christian assumptions it both confirmed and profoundly influenced, it is the beauty of the divine immutability that brings the believer to rapture, a state that shares finitely in the immutability of God. Dante describes this heavenly participation by portraying his mind as "motionless" (*immobile*), transfixed by the vision of the impassible God. It is the sense of sight in its eschatological register that enjoys this redemptive encounter with the glory of God that radiates from the unchanging perfection of the divine nature.

This most profound of Christian hopes finds an analogue in the visual apprehension of the many forms of tradition, which offer a beautiful mimesis of the divine immutability. Catholic belief in the permanence of tradition encourages this connection, as does the status of tradition as a dimension of divine revelation itself. Like great works of visual art, the forms of tradition endure, defying effective change. Their beauty lies not only in their capacity to please when seen but also in their timeless availability to sight, to be seen and to please in the unchanging beauty of their sacred form again and again. Great works of visual art, of course, are only imaginatively and not literally timeless. They can be diminished in their beauty, much in the manner of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco, sullied in its appearance with the passage of time. Corruption here is put right through restoration, in the recovery of the most beautiful original by erasing the deleterious effects of time. Along similar aesthetic lines, the forms of tradition possess the perfection of orthodoxy that presents itself in all its clarity before the devout eyes of believers, its beauty appearing in the abiding and ever-familiar doctrinal formulations, rituals, beliefs, practices, and authorities that convey the saving truth of redemption. Corruption in this classical aesthetics is deviation from

23. *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Heinrich Denzinger and Adolfus Schönmetzer, S.J., 34th ed. (Freiberg im Breisgau: Herder, 1967) 297 (1000–1001).
24. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 6 vols. in 3, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1975) *Paradiso*, Part 1, 377 (Canto 33).

the beauty of orthodox perfection, itself a reflection of God's unchanging being. And here too, heterodox corruption can only be addressed through restoration, in the recovery of the beautiful original by erasing novel interpretations that occasionally claim false authority, disrupting the familiar field of tradition's fixed, observable beauty.

A Developmental Aesthetics of Tradition

Before considering the features of a developmental aesthetics of tradition, I would like to state that my identification of this sensibility does not assume that the two aesthetics are mutually exclusive, as though commitment to one necessarily precludes a commitment to the other. Each of these aesthetics can accommodate the values of the other. Nevertheless, a classical Catholic aesthetics is basic to Catholic sensibilities. Any other Catholic sensibility is a variation on its theme and issues from a sense of compatibility with it. Compatible tastes, though, often proceed from an experience of preference, and the same typically applies to these kinds of Catholic taste. Moreover, any kind of taste can be held so strongly that it judges its grasp of the beautiful alone to be adequate to its object, and so rejects other aesthetical judgments that claim validity. These various allegiances and alignments of Catholic taste present themselves in the encounter between a classical and a developmental aesthetics of tradition.

A developmental Christian aesthetics of tradition has appeared only in the modern period as a post-Enlightenment sensibility. It is a recent arrival in the history of Catholic taste and for that very reason is regarded suspiciously by the classical sensibility. A product of historical consciousness, a developmental aesthetics of tradition finds divine beauty in the providential unfolding of events in time that slowly clarifies the fullness of tradition's truth. Beauty in this aesthetics is judged by believers to dwell not only in the truthful content of tradition but also in the process that brought it to be, as well as in the anticipation that this process is occurring in the present moment.

This sensibility was first expressed theologically in the notion of the development of doctrine that first appeared in the early 19th century, initially in the work of Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and then, through his influence, in the work of Catholic theologians at the University of Tübingen, most notably in the early writings of Johann Sebastian von Drey (1777–1853). All these theologians, Protestant and Catholic, found in the theological principle of doctrinal development an effective response to the historical-critical interpretation of Scripture and the history of doctrine that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers presented as proof of Christianity's falsity. Historical-critical interpretation exposed all the differences in Scripture that a canonical reading of its pages easily glossed over. Historical-critical interpretation of the history of doctrine likewise demonstrated that the earliest Christian Church—the foundation of what Christians devoutly called the apostolic tradition—was characterized by a vast plurality of beliefs that settled on orthodox unity only over the course of centuries of Christian infighting and through the vagaries of historical events. In these respects, historical-critical interpretation,

motivated by Enlightenment disdain for Christian meaning, was a direct assault on a classical aesthetics of Scripture and tradition that delights in what it judges to be the lovely permanence of Christian mimesis. The principle of doctrinal development enabled theologians to acknowledge the facts of historical data marshaled against Christianity by its "modern cultured despisers" while yet interpreting the facts theologically to demonstrate the ways the tradition gradually came to its orthodox clarity, the development itself now placed within the ambit of divine providence at the prodding of the Holy Spirit.

Johann Sebastian von Drey sketched the first Catholic understanding of developing tradition in his brief work on theological method, *Kurze Einleitung in das Studium der Theologie* (1819). Here Drey averred that conceptualizing the system of doctrine "not as a dead tradition from a time gone by" but instead "as the development of a living tradition" requires thinking of it as defined by two dialectically related elements: one that is *fixed* (*ein* fixes) and one that is *mobile* (*ein* bewegliches).[25] The fixed element takes shape as dogma, which Drey portrayed as "the single objectively . . . valid criterion of Christian *truth*."[26] The fixity of dogma is a function of its truth being "closed" or "completed," not from any privileged state of givenness but only, Drey insisted, through a process of doctrinal development in which the finally settled state of dogma has been proven in the abiding faith of the Church. This mobile element of doctrine ever dwells in the ongoing life of the Church as a quality of engaged faith that "in the development . . . is still conceiving [doctrinal truth]."[27]

For Drey, an authentic understanding of tradition is one in which the fixed signposts of dogma guide the proper development of doctrine in consonance with the orthodox past. This direction, however, does not produce an utterly reflexive mimesis of authoritative dogma. Even when it lacks the recognized validity of orthodoxy, the mobile element in doctrine "can yet be Christian truth that has not yet developed to the level that can be recognized generally as such."[28] Indeed, Drey pointed out that truthful tradition can be misrepresented through the error of "hyperorthodoxy," which "finally denies any mobility" to doctrine.[29] In an astonishing judgment expressing the Romantic assumptions that enabled this modern conception of tradition, Drey observed that persons can "distance themselves from the truth either by falling away from it or by lagging behind it (*Zurückbleiben hinter ihr*)." The latter prospect, he continued, is "inertia, a consequence of the expiring activity of the (religious) principle in its progressive development."[30] For Drey, this developmental understanding of history is the

25. Johann Sebastian von Drey, *Kurze Einleitung in das Studium der Theologie mit Rücksicht auf den wissenschaftlichen Standpunct und das katholishe System*, ed. Max Seckler and Winfried Werner (Tübingen: Francke, 2007) 133 (§ 256). To clarify the quotation's orthography: in Drey's text, *fixes* and *bewegliches* are italicized for emphasis. Translations of this text are mine.
26. Ibid. 134 (§ 258).
27. Ibid. 133 (§ 256).
28. Ibid. 134 (§ 258).
29. Ibid. 135 (§ 260).
30. Ibid. 127 (§ 240).

only legitimate way of rendering the mystery of God's presence to tradition, so much so that "any historical conception and account of the [temporal] appearances of Christianity that proceed from a principle different from [a developmental one] contradicts Christianity, is unchristian and untheological."[31]

The next generation of Tübingen theologians appropriated Drey's historical understanding of tradition, most notably his influential Catholic student Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838) who favored the imagery of organic growth for the development of tradition in his early work *Unity in the Church*.[32] It was John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), however, that brought the notion of developing tradition into the theological mainstream. Throughout the *Essay*, Newman compared the development of doctrine to the mental clarification of an idea. In this noetic analogy, the content of the idea represents the truth of the apostolic deposit of faith, which, like any objectively true idea, is always complete in itself. Yet, like any idea of depth, the apostolic tradition, as expressed in a variety of authoritative doctrines, comes to be believed, appreciated, and understood gradually in the conditions of time and culture. "This process," Newman claimed, "whether it be longer or shorter in point of time, by which the aspects of an idea are brought into consistency and form, I call its development, being the germination and maturation of some truth or apparent truth on a large mental field."[33] Like Drey, Newman thinks that the established doctrinal tradition provides an authoritative heuristic for development. And yet, like Drey, Newman regards historical development as the means by which established orthodoxy itself came to take shape, the means by which it is meaningfully enlivened in every present moment, and the means by which a presently obscure and only latent orthodoxy achieves clarity and manifest recognition.

Even though the notion of a developing tradition fell under the suspicion of church authorities during the Modernist crisis in the early years of the 20th century, its integrity has come to be regarded as axiomatic since the Second Vatican Council. In his famous address convening the council on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII himself referred to the work of the council as an exercise in reinterpreting and so developing the ancient faith for the present moment, a conceptualization of the workings of tradition that gave magisterial voice to this modern understanding:

> But from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness . . . the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern

31. Ibid. 97 (§ 175).
32. See Bradford E. Hinze, "The Holy Spirit and the Catholic Tradition: The Legacy of Johann Adam Möhler," in *The Legacy of the Tübingen School: The Relevance of Nineteenth-Century Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Donald J. Dietrich and Michael J. Himes (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 79–87.
33. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (1878; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989) 38.

> thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.[34]

Although John XXIII was reflecting here on the task of the Council Fathers, the understanding of doctrinal development that he articulated—what we might call the reception model—has come to be accepted as the normative way of imagining the changeability of tradition. Catholic theologians have come to understand their interpretive efforts as possible contributions to the development of doctrine that offer new ways of imagining both how the ancient truth of tradition might be received meaningfully in the present moment and how novel developments might themselves take shape as future orthodoxy. Even more broadly, this reception model envisions every believer's act of faith as a hermeneutical site for meaningfully reconciling the truth of ancient doctrine and the truthfulness of contemporary experience in the ongoing life of the Church.

In considering the aesthetics of this conception, it is important to note that the explicit sense that developing tradition is beautiful first requires awareness that tradition is developing, and such an explicit awareness presumes knowledge of the historicity of doctrine that can be acquired only through education. This is not to say that believers who have not been educated in the historicity of doctrine are incapable of the implicit awareness that the truth of the faith develops in their lives and in the life of the Church. The ongoing experience of deeper conversion into the mysteries of the faith is a good example of implicit awareness of development that believers share as a matter of course, especially as conversion is consciously shaped by events in life that are surprisingly transformative and prompt a sense of change. This kind of experience in turn can be broadened imaginatively to the entire Church throughout its history, so that this implicit sense of development extends beyond the life circumstances of the believer to tradition as such. Moreover, believers who are not educated in the historicity of doctrine often have the sense that the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives and in the Church in unprecedented ways. An implicit sense of development does not require education in the historicity of doctrine. Yet, this understanding of tradition, however it be aesthetically judged, most commonly comes through education and even specifically theological education. Aesthetical judgments about a developmental understanding of tradition, whether appreciative or unappreciative, are typically offered by those who are theologically literate.

Those who judge the developing tradition of the Church to be beautiful do so in a number of ways. If a classical aesthetics of tradition is inclined to identify the

34. Pope John XXIII, "Opening Address to the Council," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America, 1966) 710–19, at 715. John XXIII's formulation has since been supported by a teaching of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium ecclesiae* (June 24, 1973); see Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church against Certain Errors of the Present Day, esp. no. 5, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html (accessed July 8, 2014).

transcendental qualities of the beautiful and the good, a developmental aesthetics of tradition is inclined to identify the transcendental qualities of the beautiful and the true. Believers attracted to this modern aesthetics find special beauty in the developing conception's capacity to reconcile faithful claims for tradition's truth and the historical evidence of how doctrine actually developed. From the perspective of this Catholic taste, there is no opposition between truthful secular knowledge and the sacred knowledge that resides in the deposit of faith. The unity of truth enables the believer to embrace, rather than resist, the factual record of Christian events and yet to affirm authentic continuity amid what might otherwise be seen as time's corrosive threat to tradition.[35] This sensibility, then, finds beauty in the eventfulness of tradition imagined as a different kind of Christian mimesis, one that regards the development of doctrine as an ever-changing reflection of the eventfulness of the divine life, particularly in its providential outreach to the temporality of creation. This divine eventfulness mirrored in tradition can be imagined as the perichoretic dynamism of the divine life itself, as ways in which the impassible God may yet mysteriously move and be moved in love, or as the event of incarnation that unfolds in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Typically, though, a developmental aesthetics locates God's beauty in the many ways the Holy Spirit is believed to be eventfully present to time, and so accentuates the pneumatological immanence of God in history. The surprising ways the Spirit brings the world to sanctification is the imagined object of this kind of Christian mimesis, and mimesis reflects the eventfulness of divine providence.

The beauty of eventfulness also appears in this aesthetics in the way the notion of a developing tradition enlivens the Council of Trent's teaching on the cooperative role of human agency in the encounter with divine grace. In its Decree on Justification, Trent formally defined the long-standing Catholic belief in the responsibility of free choice in accepting the offer of divine grace, and so affirmed the indispensability of human agency in contributing to the believer's justification.[36] Drawing on this Catholic anthropology, an aesthetics of development finds beauty in the ways that believers engage the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church to enact both the recognized truth of tradition and the truth of tradition that has yet to be fully grasped. Believers are perceived by those attracted to this aesthetics as the receptive means through which the Holy Spirit works in bringing to fruition the beliefs and practices that take shape as tradition in the course of time. But more, believers are perceived as gracefully endowed with a supernatural *sensus fidei* that enables them to discern and articulate the truth of sacred tradition that both they and the Holy Spirit bring to reality, albeit in extraordinarily unequal ways.[37] Catholic mimesis in this aesthetical style appreciates

35. On traditional continuity through the vagaries of time, see John E. Thiel, "The Analogy of Tradition," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 358–80.
36. Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, nos. 1–16, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 2:671–78.
37. Second Vatican Council's *Lumen gentium* no. 12, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 2:858.

the way the very temporality of tradition captures the truth of the economy of salvation that eventfully unfolds on this side of the Last Judgment.

Whereas the classical aesthetics of tradition privileges the sense of sight and imagines the objects of tradition beautifully visible in a field of sacred space, the developmental aesthetics of tradition values the sense of hearing, which apprehends the sound of traditioning in the sequence of sacred time. In a reflection on Catholic aesthetics, one might assume too quickly that the aural dimensions of tradition would be bound up in some way with the art form of sacred music. In point of fact, there are different styles of liturgical music that are more or less compatible with each of the two aesthetical sensibilities of tradition. The sound of tradition valued in the developmental aesthetics of tradition is the resonance of believers' voices giving expression to their faith, of talk in the Church about how the truth of the Holy Spirit takes shape as tradition. Often, this talk expresses the common faith of the Church, as happens in creedal recitation or in the prayer of the Mass. As much as the developmental aesthetics attends to the Church's common voice and finds its resonance beautiful, it finds beauty too in the sound of faithful voices expressing new perceptions of the Spirit's presence to the present moment and, through this act of hearing, beauty in the process of doctrinal development that faithful listening grasps and discerns.

These voices express themselves in different patterns of discourse that are heard in the Church in somewhat different registers of the traditionally beautiful. One common ecclesial discourse expresses a sense of what we might call "development-in-continuity," the customary reception of the age-old faith of the Church in the most recent circumstances of time and culture by which the tradition develops slowly and even imperceptibly, as past and present meanings encounter one another in the act of faith and prove to be mutually enlivening. At times, though, the voices that the community hears make claims to the faith that are strangely novel, since they are unfamiliar and even at odds with what has long been recognized and held as the orthodox tradition. For those inclined to the developmental aesthetics, such voiced claims are contributions to a genuine ecclesial dialogue about the Spirit's truthful presence, a dialogue judged to be beautiful even when, and perhaps even because, some of its voices clamor for the disruption of the traditionally given. In this dialogue, listening and speaking are practices that enhance an appreciation for the beauty of tradition that has been and will always be, as well as for tradition that may be in the process of coming to be.[38] Like any authentic conversation, this ecclesial dialogue is unpredictable in its direction and characterized by all sorts of twists and turns that authentic openness to the truth requires. For those whose Catholic taste is inclined to the developmental aesthetics of tradition, this truth-seeking conversation itself is beautiful both in its devoted efforts to name the purposes of the Spirit at work in time and, when truthfully founded on the *sensus fidei*, as a possible mimesis of God's revelation in and through sacred tradition.

38. On dialogue in the Church, see Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

Catholic Aesthetics and Theological Styles

Whereas the classical aesthetics of tradition is quite old, extending from the early medieval period to our day, the developmental aesthetics of tradition is a relatively recent arrival in Catholic history, appearing initially in the 19th century but not flourishing until the time of Vatican II. Thus, the effective engagement of these Catholic sensibilities is a post-Vatican II phenomenon. As we have seen, these aesthetics are not mutually exclusive. Contemporary Catholics who are especially inclined to the classical aesthetics often recognize and embrace the truth and beauty of the developmental aesthetics. The foundational status of the classical aesthetics ensures that its values are affirmed and appreciated by believers inclined to the developmental aesthetics. And yet, at times how these aesthetics are practiced in ecclesial life can become occasions for forming Catholic identities that are factional and exclusive. In such cases, they tragically reduce an encounter with the beauty of tradition and, through it, an encounter with the beauty of God to a fetish that is configured to represent all that is authentically Catholic.

Theologians share these same Catholic tastes and adopt interpretive styles that express their sensibilities. Those attracted to the classical aesthetics are drawn to a theological style that finds edification in the close description of the traditionally valorized reception of Scripture and tradition. In this approach, tradition itself becomes a kind of canonical structure that sets the boundaries for legitimate theological reflection. Theology in this style judges the tradition to be so beautiful that any other possible theological resource is at best distracting and at worst a deviation from its sacred truth. The tradition within which theology reflects is regarded as ostensible in its clarity, its teaching as manifestly visible as the revelatory genre itself. Theology in this style is configured as a mimesis of tradition's unchanging permanence, the beauty of its constructive art defined by its meticulous faithfulness. Those attracted to the developmental aesthetics are drawn to a theological style keen on exploring the truthful relations between Scripture and tradition on the one hand, and the changing circumstances of history and culture on the other. In this approach, the theologian often chooses some dimension of worldly wisdom judged to be truthful as a means of elucidating the meaningfulness of tradition for the present moment. This theological act of mediation is interpretively dialogical. It purports to capture the ecclesial dialogue about the Spirit's immanence to which the whole Church listens, and whose truth the theologian tries to discern, in order to articulate the authentic development of doctrine. The Spirit's activity and its moving mimesis in the life of the Church are what is judged beautiful in this aesthetics, and the beauty of theology in this style lies in the degree to which its constructive art captures the truthful dynamism of the Spirit's presence in developing tradition.

These theological styles, quite like the aesthetics they express, all too easily become markers of Catholic difference, and this is especially so among the theologically literate—theologians, the magisterium, and educated Catholics—whose knowledge of the historicity of tradition is a prerequisite for making explicit judgments about the comparative value of these aesthetics and their accompanying theological styles.

Conflict between the styles emerges when one regards the other as deficient in principle simply because the style negatively judged is not the one prioritized. The ancient status of the classical aesthetics and its foundational character in Catholic sensibility makes it especially susceptible to this sort of exclusive judgment, though both the classical and developmental aesthetics, each in its own way, can be myopic in their regard for the full range of the traditionally beautiful.

At its best, the classical aesthetics highlights the beauty of the Christ event, which is the source of the very divine revelation that theology interprets. But this dedication to the clarity of the Christ event itself can sometimes lead to impatience with the ambiguous dimensions of a tradition that courses through time and so does change. This impatience can be and has been exercised in a variety of ways that attempt to reduce tradition's temporality, plurality, and ambiguity to a permanence, singularity, and clarity that it does not and should not have. These failures of the classical aesthetics take shape theologically in the expectations that authentic theology will be classically homogeneous and not pluralistic, that it will conform to the focused lucidity of the *Catechism*'s propositional formulae, and that the faithful work of the theologian involves explaining and defending the current state of the *Catechism* and the pronouncements of the magisterium. At its best, the developmental aesthetics of tradition appreciates the beauty of the Spirit's ongoing presence to the Church and the world, as well as the beauty of the graceful discernment of that presence by the community of believers. But this attunement to the mysterious character of tradition's truthful change that unfolds in ecclesial dialogue can sometimes lead to impatience with the clearly visible parameters of the ancient tradition, in which what was once dialogue has now become devout recitation. This impatience can be and has been exercised in a variety of ways that imagine the truth claims of the present moment to supersede the authority of proven tradition simply because of their contemporaneity, as though the permanence of tradition in its temporal expanse could be instantly eclipsed by the most recent novel claim for traditional truth. These failures of the developmental aesthetics take shape theologically in the expectations that human experience is the preeminent source of theology, that sinfulness is endemic in principle to the visible and hierarchical structures of the Church, and that the magisterium's conservative voice cannot find a place in the kind of dialogue that this theological style judges to be beautiful.

As Elaine Scarry has observed,

> beauty, sooner or later, brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors. The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true.[39]

Often, though, the pleasure of conviction leads those who enjoy it to narrow their conceptions of the true and the beautiful for the sake of a skewed sense of their complete

39. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1999) 31.

capture, a state of affairs that unfortunately prevails as much in the Church as it does in the world. The failures of each Catholic sensibility explain much of the polarization in the Church between believers; and the ways these failures manifest themselves theologically explain much of the polarization in the Church between theologians, and between theologians and the magisterium. All these parties—which is to say the entire community of faith—would do well to reflect on how these failures, as errors of aesthetical reductionism, are detrimental to the rich unity of the Church that only appears in the wholeness of tradition's beauty grasped by each Catholic sensibility in its own limited way.

Perhaps the analysis of Catholic taste offered here can help us both embrace the aesthetical pluralism that exists in the Church and enable us to appreciate the deep Catholic desire for the beauty of tradition and ultimately the beauty of God that both aesthetics share. My analysis can do so, I suggest, because, inspired by the Catholic commitment to the one body of Christ, it presses upon each sensibility its obligation to value the other sensibility and its theological style as a perspective on sacred tradition without which the Church's appreciation for tradition's goodness and truth would be diminished. The Church in our day needs believers to reflect on how the Catholic sensibilities and theological styles can and should be sources of mutual appreciation rather than markers of division.

We have seen that each of the two Catholic aesthetics prioritizes a particular sense experience to which it accords special powers in apprehending sacred beauty—seeing for the classical aesthetics and hearing for the developmental aesthetics. Aquinas, we should recall, concluded that the two senses of seeing and hearing are aesthetic by nature in their shared capacity to apprehend beauty, an ability that directly eludes the other senses. As senses in the service of an aesthetics of tradition, seeing and hearing turn to different kinds of objects in order to appreciate sacred beauty that is imagined in different ways. Yearning for the consummate sight of the beatific vision, the eyes of faith anticipate its beautiful and unchanging perfection in the permanence of tradition that appears in the space of tradition's sacred visibility. Enamored of the Spirit's living presence, the ears of faith strain to hear how God moves the Church in time, changing it ever—sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly—toward the fulfillment of the kingdom of God that will eschatologically encounter the depth of the divine mystery. Finally, faithful seeing and hearing apprehend the same divine beauty in the same sacred tradition and are engaged interpretively in the same theological task. The Church would be poorer were it to lack one of these aesthetics, just as it would be poorer were it to lack either of the styles of Catholic theology that serve these sensibilities. The Church is poorer now to the extent that these Catholic tastes tend to regard each other suspiciously rather than appreciate how each sensibility complements the other and how both together apprehend the beauty of tradition much more fully than either may alone.

As an aid in fostering this broader appreciation, I propose the fifth-century teaching of the Council of Chalcedon as a rule of faith that extends analogously beyond the nature of the incarnation to the proper relationship between the two Catholic aesthetics. The Chalcedonian decree condemned the Christological belief of the

monophysites who believed that only the immutable divine nature of Christ defined his person to the exclusion of his full humanity. The monophysites were scandalized by the thought that the Savior's unchanging divinity could dwell in real relationship to a created nature that was completely human, coursing in the finite conditions of time and change. In response, Chalcedon sanctioned the fourth-century Cappadocian theology that insisted on the hypostatic union of complete divinity and complete humanity in the incarnate person of Christ.[40] We might very well view the beauty of tradition and its theological interpretation in a similar way. The beauty of tradition lies in the mysterious union of its permanence and its development, of its unchanging and changing dimensions that together comprise the living unity of tradition. In much the same manner, the theological styles interpretively inclined to each of these traditionally beautiful qualities are themselves only dimensions of the unity of the theological task.

Even though the teaching of Chalcedon defines the orthodox faith on the person of Christ, many Christians throughout the centuries have been tempted to imagine the Savior in the manner of the monophysites, as fully divine but not as fully human. To some degree, this latent monophysitism stems from the status of divine immutability as an aesthetical paradigm in Christian imagination. Just as the tradition long resisted the notion that divine immutability enters the creaturely realm divorced in the person of Christ from the definitively human, so too should contemporary believers resist an aesthetics of tradition that finds beauty only in its permanence at the expense of its development. The theological styles inclined more or less to a classical or developmental aesthetics of tradition are obliged to foster an appreciation for both senses of Catholic beauty in their theologies, for only through such a comprehensive aesthetics can they do justice to what is beautifully old and beautifully new in tradition and, through it, all that is old and new in our encounter with the beauty of God.[41]

Author biography

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40. Council of Chalcedon's "Definition of the Faith," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:86–87.

41. I am grateful to Roger Haight, S.J., Jeannine Hill-Fletcher, Bradford Hinze, Paul Lakeland, Elena Procario-Foley, Michele Saracino, and John Slotemaker for their criticism of this article in its draft stages.