

Seeking Grace in the Chasm: Bridging Beauty and Virtue Theologically and Pastorally

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Abstract

A hermeneutic of unity between beauty and virtue, inspired by the work of Gregory of Nazianzus, offers a way to seek the Holy Spirit's presence in the apparent chasm between the church and the secular realm. This paper describes beauty's role in Gregory of Nazianzus' poetry and orations and analyzes how adopting Gregory's hermeneutic of unity between beauty and virtue can strengthen the church's relationship with the secular sphere. The paper's second part draws on Karl Rahner's conception of the anonymous Christian to detail how a willingness to recognize virtue's beauty in the public sphere can open the ecclesial community to the Holy Spirit's movement both within and beyond the church.

Text

A hermeneutic of integrating beauty and virtue, inspired by the theology of Gregory of Nazianzus, offers a *via media* for seeking the Holy Spirit's presence in the apparent chasm between those who belong to the church and those who see themselves as residing firmly in the secular realm. In this paper's first part, I briefly describe how Gregory understands the relationship between virtue and beauty and how the two function in his poetry and orations. Next, I analyze how adopting Gregory's hermeneutic of unity between beauty and virtue can strengthen the church's relationship with the secular sphere. In practice, this hermeneutic enables

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us to encounter others in a spirit of charity and so engage in constructive, mutually-enriching dialogue to build up both the church and the world for whose sake she exists.

Understanding Virtue and Beauty in Gregory's Theology

Before attending to Gregory of Nazianzus' use of beauty and virtue in his theology, one must first begin with his conception of virtue. He casts creaturely virtue as divine participation, or what Brian Daley describes as "participation in the goodness of God, who 'is himself absolute virtue'".¹ In his explication of Gregory's work, Daley reasons that a creature's growth in perfection "is always a process of growth in this participation—a growth that never comes to an end, precisely because the finite can never completely possess the infinite... This endless growth, in intelligent creatures, involves also the unquenchable desire for a greater share in the divine goodness".² Thus, to grow in relationship with God is to acquire an "unquenchable desire" for participation in goodness—namely, through virtue's development.

According to Daley, Gregory believes the human capacity for growth in perfection "to be simply qualitative change: the acquisition of some properties (ἰδιώματα) and the atrophy or deliberate alteration of others".³ Anyone is able to change qualitatively; this is not something limited to particular people with specific skills or gifts. Gregory's conception of virtue's accessibility to all people flows from the person of Christ. Via both the gift of grace and our striving to imitate Christ, we come to share in his life and, subsequently, are able to be virtuous.⁴ Human transformation "begins for us in the healing of weakness and sin, [and] flowers in the

¹ Brian E. Daley, "Apollinarius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa," in *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 140.

² Daley, "Apollinarius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa," 140.

³ Daley, "Apollinarius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa," 141.

⁴ John Behr, "Gregory of Nazianzus," in *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 389.

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virtues we develop by consciously imitating Christ”.⁵ Thus for Gregory, living a life of virtue is possible for all, and it is through imitating Christ that the Christian undertakes a life-long endeavor to bear God’s likeness and share in God’s goodness, that ever-receding yet ever-near horizon of perfection.

Gregory of Nazianzus’s recourse to beauty in his writing is distinct from that of other theologians of his time. His contemporary, Gregory of Nyssa, often references God as Beauty itself, echoing a Platonic philosophy built on ideal forms. Gregory of Nyssa also tends toward apophaticism, describing God as darkness. For Nyssa, as one comes to know God, one proceeds further into divine darkness, and God as Beauty remains beyond our grasp. While Gregory of Nazianzus also understands God to be unable to be fully known, his theological approach to God is distinct from the other Cappadocian fathers because he often references beauty in connection to virtue, such that one’s beauty is found in virtuous living, or virtuous living is described as something of beauty. For example, in his funeral oration for his friend Basil the Great, Gregory writes, “Basil’s beauty was virtue, his greatness theology, his course the perpetual motion reaching even to God by its ascents, and his power the sowing and distribution of the Word”.⁶ The beauty of Basil’s personhood is located in his virtue, his perpetual reaching for God and God’s goodness through both his way of living and his theological pursuits. While he engages beauty in a variety of ways in his work, describing one’s beauty as being found in virtue is a point of notable distinction between Gregory of Nazianzus’ conception of virtue and that of his contemporaries.

⁵ Daley, “Apollinarius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa,” 143.

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, “On St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea,” in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Martin R. P. McGuire and Leo P. McCauley (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 84.

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Beauty's presence as a marker of virtue in the Christian life is also a feature of Gregory's pastoral acuity as exemplified by the funeral oration he wrote for his father, Gregory the elder. Christopher Beeley describes Gregory of Nazianzus as, "in the truest sense of the word, a pastoral theologian par excellence," which, I argue, is demonstrated by the unique way he incorporates Christian virtue and beauty into his work.⁷ Gregory's own pastoral gift is apparent in his description of his father's priestly ministry. Gregory of Nazianzus describes his father's pastoral gifts in the following way: when assigned to a new parish, he "strove without harshness to soften the habits of the people, both by words of pastoral knowledge, and by setting himself before them as an example, like a spiritual statue, polished into the beauty of all excellent conduct".⁸ The gifts of gentleness and wisdom that shine through Gregory the elder's conduct and are valued by Gregory himself, as evidenced by the priority these traits assume in his father's funeral oration and by their prevalence in his other orations on ministry and the priestly office. It is the virtue motivating his excellent way of living that makes Gregory the elder's example beautiful, and Gregory of Nazianzus's artistic image of "a spiritual statue" further strengthens the connection he makes between beauty and virtue.

Gregory's poem "Evening Hymn" offers a final insight into his understanding of beauty and the Christian life. Gregory dedicates this poem to God as Creator, pointing to the gifts of creation, reason, and wisdom as those for which he offers his poetic hymn of praise. He writes, "Shaping unstable matter / Into a stable order— / This beauty that delights us. / Our human mind you lighten / With reason and with wisdom, / Forming in us an image / Of heaven's transcendent

⁷ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 269.

⁸ CPG 3010 (ET "Oration 18," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 7*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), accessed 20 October, 2019. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310218.htm>, paragraph 16.)

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brilliance, / That we, in light, may see light / And be ourselves its beacon”.⁹ Gregory acknowledges the beauty of creation and the gifts humanity has received from God. Yet he connects the beauty of creation to the delight it prompts in humanity, for human beings bear the likeness of God in their souls. God’s likeness in the human soul is an image of heaven’s transcendent brilliance which enables us in light to see light. However, this is not where the human *telos* ends. Humanity is called to be a beacon of God’s light, bearing God’s image to the world. In this way, we are beacons of both beauty and virtue, for beauty is found in the virtuous life, which reflects God’s own goodness to the world. Virtue’s beauty can also be attained by all people, for Gregory understands virtue as resulting from qualitative change, the acquisition of some qualities and the alteration or abandonment of others. Such a life can be undertaken by all people.

A Bridge of Grace: Applying Gregory’s Hermeneutic of Unity

Adopting Gregory’s unified hermeneutic of virtue and beauty offers us an opportunity to seek the Holy Spirit’s presence in the apparent chasm between the church and the public realm, especially when it is placed in conversation with Louis-Marie Chauvet’s ecclesiology and Karl Rahner’s conception of the “anonymous Christian.” Instead of perpetuating the divisive mentality of “us” versus “the secular world” or “the culture,” applying Gregory’s hermeneutic to the modern age enables the ecclesial community to appreciate virtue’s beauty and grace beyond the church.

In order to explore this hermeneutic’s potential impact, we must first understand the nature of the church. Engaging Louis-Marie Chauvet’s image of the church as being set apart

⁹ Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 167.

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from the world by a dotted line, not a solid wall, allows the church to embrace the tension of its existence between the spheres of the sacred and secular. According to Chauvet, this “paradox of *the Church* is precisely that it is never more faithful to its particular marks than when it in some sense forgets them to open itself to this reign, larger than itself, which grows in the World”.¹⁰ This, Chauvet says, is when the church is most properly described as being the sacrament of God.¹¹ If the church is insulated from the world in which it was created to be a sacrament, the church fails to be an effective instrument of God’s grace because it disregards the very grace that God offers back to the church through the world. This task—to be both a distinct community of grace in the world, yet not fall into an “us vs. them” mentality of division—is not only that of “the church” at large and abstractly, but the task of every Christian.

Karl Rahner’s conception of the anonymous Christian is one way to combat an “othering” mindset that eschews those outside an ecclesial community, enabling the church to seek not only the natural virtues embodied outside itself, but those bestowed by grace. Rahner’s “anonymous Christian” refers to someone who is not necessarily baptized or a part of a church community, but whose life reflects the Gospel values and sacrificial love of Christ. Thus, by their witness and sacrifice, these “anonymous Christians” associate themselves with Christ not through their explicit profession of faith, but through their witness and implicit faith in Christ. Because of humanity’s inherently transcendent nature, God’s bestowal of grace at the moment of humanity’s creation, and Christ’s Incarnation, humanity’s experience of the transcendent can be

¹⁰ Louis-Marie Chauvet, “Introduction: A Fundamental Theology of the Sacramental,” in *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. P. Madigan and M. Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 181 (his italics).

¹¹ Chauvet, “Introduction: A Fundamental Theology of the Sacramental,” 181.

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conceived of as an inherently supernatural grace.¹² In other words, Rahner believes that humans are, by nature, transcendent beings, and encounter God's Mystery in the act of knowing and loving, for divine Mystery is the foundation and *telos* of human transcendence.¹³ As Joseph Wong summarizes Rahner's thought, "For this reason, in accepting one's own human existence through silent fidelity and constant dedication to the duties of everyday life, a person is responding to God's offer of grace and accepting the mystery of Christ, perhaps even without recognizing it explicitly".¹⁴ The possibility that those beyond the dotted line of the Church's boundaries are able to respond to God's grace through loving and knowing, thereby accepting (at least to a degree) the mystery of Christ, creates a fertile foundation for Gregory's hermeneutic of unity between virtue and beauty.

Gregory's conception of beauty as a mark of virtue provides a concrete manner for non-anonymous Christian to enact their understanding of the church as a "dotted-line" community by seeking out anonymous Christians who embody the beauty of virtue in the world. Instead of fueling a combative "us vs. them" mindset, seeking beauty incarnated in virtue outside the ecclesial community presents the church with opportunities to reach beyond itself to recognize the good, holy work of the larger community. Often, only work done by individual faithful or explicitly Catholic groups is recognized by the Church, both in regards to charitable work done on a larger scale and small acts of love done in the community. Yet, what might be transformed in each of us, and in our church, if we watch for the Spirit at work in each of our brothers and sisters in the world, even if they are not Catholic? How might explicitly naming acts

¹² Joseph H. Wong, O.S.B. CAM, "Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-West Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 55, no. 4 (1994): 613.

¹³ Wong, "Anonymous Christians," 613.

¹⁴ Wong, "Anonymous Christians," 614.

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of love that carry echoes of Christ's own love and virtue inspire in us the awe that one feels when standing before something beautiful—in this case, both a beautiful human bearing the *imago Dei*, and an action making present God's grace to a world deeply in need? By attuning ourselves to the beauty of virtue which surrounds us in often-overlooked places, we can become more attuned to the grace of the Spirit being communicated to the world. A renewed attention to the Spirit's presence will enrich not only our spiritual lives, but also help bridge the division which exists between the world and the church.

By being willing to name the beauty of virtue in those who are outside the ecclesial community's particular boundaries, members of the church can begin to bridge the dividing chasm which seems to exist between the secular world and the church. Oftentimes the church focuses solely on its role as a sacrament of God's reign in the world, forgetting that grace not only flows from the church to the world, but from the world to it. When we as individuals seek out beauty's virtue both outside and within the ecclesial community, we free ourselves to better recognize where the Holy Spirit is present. Seeking the Spirit's presence and grace as individuals and as a community creates the possibility of bridging the church community to the secular world through a posture of humility, openness, and willingness to seek God's beauty in all places. As we attend to the Spirit's grace outside the church, we become more open to the Spirit itself and can bear the Spirit's grace from outside the church inside the dotted line, to enrich the ecclesial community. Perhaps our recognition of the Spirit in a brother or sister outside the church could even provide the opportunity for an explicit invitation to come and see what the grace of the church is like, although this must be done in a spirit of humility, and not with an attitude of superiority which assumes him or her to be deficient because he or she is not a part of

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the church. Regardless of what fruit is born from our invitation or a relationship with others beyond the Church, great spiritual fruit stands to be gained from employing the virtue of humility to open oneself to grace's presence outside the church, for abundant grace can be communicated from beyond to within the ecclesial community.

While it can be tempting to bemoan the chasm which exists between the sacred and the secular realms, Dr. Richard Lennan often reminds his students that the only "golden age" of the church is in the future—that of the eschatological age. Because the church is comprised not only of bishops and priests, but each of us and our pew-neighbors, the church's conversion is tied up in our personal conversion. Thus, our spiritual disposition and formation is of the utmost importance. May we allow Gregory of Nazianzus' hermeneutic of the beauty of virtue to be one which we not only contemplate with our intellect, but with our spirit, and may we enact this hermeneutic in our daily encounters with others. We must allow grace to flow into our heart not only from the sacraments, but from the anonymous Christians who surround us. We are called to carry this grace with us back into the church, and to invite our pew-neighbor to do the same. In this way we as the church can seek to be mediators of grace to the world through our own enacting of beauty's virtue and naming of its presence in others. In so doing, we can help build the eschatological, golden age of church in which the chasm between sacred and secular will be bridged by the grace of the Spirit, in part through the beauty of virtue.

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