Beauty is the Church's Unity: Supernatural Finality, Aesthetics, and Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue

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The subject of church unity can be approached through the nature/grace question. The Catholic and Orthodox communions are joined by their shared recognition of supernatural finality. It underscores their shared ontology (despite a recent assertion that they have become ontologically different). This paper takes up Rowan Williams's implicit claim that their shared stance on the nature/grace question gives the two communions a common understanding of beauty as well. The approach to beauty of Catholic and Orthodox artists reveals ecumenically meaningful shared theological commitments. To reflect on beauty in the context of fraught ecumenical discussions is to resist modernity's fact-value split, in which questions of beauty might well seem secondary to more practical and pressingly specific issues of difference confronting the two communions. Building on Williams's conjunction of ecumenism and beauty, the paper highlights two instantiations of a Christian aesthetic: the emerging consensus that the Church needs a pope who sees himself as the servus servorum Dei; and the historic determination of the positive implications for the arts of the Incarnation. To reflect on beauty in the search for greater visible unity, as Pope Benedict and others have recently stressed, is to turn to a resource of encouragement and hope.

The doctrine of supernatural finality (the nature/grace question) is relevant to ecumenism, and understanding Christian aesthetics is relevant to understanding the relationship between nature and grace. The nature/grace question always alerts us to ontological issues. When Patriarch Bartholomew says, heartbreakingly, that the churches in the East and West have become 'ontologically different', he signals the relevance of reflection on the relationship between nature and grace.[1] In that context, we can talk meaningfully about aesthetics, and need to do so, even though questions of beauty can seem esoteric, while the challenges facing Orthodox-Catholic dialogue are, by contrast, practical and specific. Beauty is central to the Church's self-understanding.

[1] Bartholomew I, '*Phos Hilaron*: Address at Georgetown University (21st October, 1997)', http://www.oocities.org/trvalentine/orthodox/bartholomew_phos.html, qtd in A. Edward Siecienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2017), 411.

Ultimately, in this essay I express hope that the churches in the East and West have *not* become ontologically different, but I will take an indirect route to doing so. I will first elucidate Rowan Williams's work on aesthetics as making the claim that their shared understanding of the relationship between nature and grace draws the Orthodox and Catholics together in terms of their aesthetic commitments. Williams is tacitly (and tactfully) making an ecumenical claim about the two communions in his treatment of aesthetic issues. I will then go on to press the notion that, in beauty, the Orthodox and Catholics can find that they have much in common. The modern acknowledgement of the need for a pope, sheltered by the shared understanding that he must see himself as the *servus servorum Dei*, bears traces of Augustine's revision of the classical understanding of revelatory beauty. The ancient recognition of the implications of the Incarnation for the arts, meanwhile, was and remains a powerful expression of common belief even as forces undermining the Church's unity were gathering. Under the pressure of modernity's fact-value split, questions of beauty can seem to be of secondary importance. Yet meditation on the Church's beauty—which, after all, is bound up with the goal of *visible* unity—and its persistent deep reflection upon and affirmation of beauty, can be a source of great encouragement and hope in the context of mapping the *una sancta*.

In three book-length meditations on art, Rowan Williams tacitly makes an ecumenical suggestion: that ecumenical dialogue may depend on the joint recovery or elevation of the nature/grace question. In *Lost Icons* (2000), *Grace and Necessity* (2005), and *Dostoevsky* (2008), the former Archbishop approaches questions of art alternately from an Orthodox and a Catholic perspective.[2] Throughout, he explains aesthetics in terms of nature and grace. He suggests that we need both Catholic and Orthodox perspectives to understand aesthetics properly and that, in its turn, meditation on beauty (and attentiveness to theological art) helps to deepen our appreciation of the mystery of supernatural finality that we affirm in common. Put another way, their commonality on a sacramental ontology is more fundamental than those questions that divide them.

The nature/grace question is crucial to our understanding our being-in-the-world and our representation of reality, our witness, to the world. In Williams's Dostoevsky book, these issues come to a head in the Russian novelist's attitude towards papal authority. 'Dostoevsky might well have claimed that a good Catholic, by his definition, could not write a good novel', says Williams.[3] This claim has to

[2] To focus on these three works is not to discount the related significance of other books by Williams written in this time period, like his meditations on praying with icons of Christ, *The Dwelling of the Light* (2003), and of the Virgin Mary, *Ponder These Things* (2006). This essay makes no attempt to characterise Williams's tireless work on ecumenical dialogue as a whole. I do note, though, that in his address at a conference to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 2010, Williams focused on the *idea* of unity and, in this way, on ontological considerations. Archbishop's address at 50th anniversary of PCPCU', 17th November 2010, http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/803/archbishops-address-at-50th-anniversary-of-pcpcu.

[3] Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2007), 13.

do with the capacity to represent religious uncertainty 'held or healed within a narrative of the interaction of persons'.[4] Such a narrative can authoritatively point 'to a mended universe'[5] just because of what it makes 'morally and imaginatively possible'.[6] A good novel, the kind of novel a Catholic apparently could not write, is a dialogical, polyphonous novel. It has a quality of invitation about it; it points to a mended universe.

How and why does it do that? That is the nature/grace question. Dialogue depends on the presence of another to whom I can respond, even though my response may be one of contradiction. Dialogue yields freedom, not freedom *from* all others, but freedom arising out of the presence of the other addressing me, challenging me further to define my position, to define myself. At the same time, dialogue requires that we make ourselves recognizable to one another. Recognition is possible 'because we are all at the most basic level of our being made to resonate with the interdependent life of a universe that is addressed and sustained by a Word from God'.[7] That is a fine Trinitarian formulation on Williams's part. I become more myself, more free, as I respond to the other, a process that attests interdependence and, obliquely, resonance. Dialogue yields a more robust picture of freedom than the individualism of modernity that must inevitably see all others as a threat, and it invites reflection on dialogue as analogical or as participation-in a greater reality that enables and enhances the reality of this dialogical realm itself.

In apologetic as well as novelistic terms, importantly, we can deny that any such resonance, any dependency, is operative: 'The fiction is like the world itself — proposed for acceptance and understanding but unable to compel them, since compulsion would make it impossible for the creator to appear as the creator of freedom'.[8]

Freedom, in this apologetic, is paramount. Nonetheless, Dostoevsky's strategy of polyphony, spelled out in the analysis of the novels, yields a picture of the relationship between nature and grace for those willing to accept it.

Williams describes the relationship in Orthodox terms similarly in *Lost Icons*. In this work of cultural criticism, representation as an artistic concern again figures prominently. An icon, Williams tells us, presents a figure or group of figures against a background of gold, which is 'a source of illumination independent of them',[9] yet gives them their definition and distinctness: 'the point of the icon is to give us a window into an alien frame of reference that is at the same time the structure that will make definitive sense of the world we inhabit'.[10] (Williams here offers another fine

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 14.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 12.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 2.
[10] Ibid.

formulation of the paradoxical relationship between nature and grace, and I do not know to whom I ought to be more grateful for drawing me further into this mystery, the Orthodox iconographer or Williams the commentator.) The point applies to the way images work in Dostoevsky's novels. They are not there for stage-setting, but rather offer 'basic theological perspectives on creation and incarnation'.[11]

Dialogism and the imagery of icons alike reinforce the sense of dependency without control. It is in this context that Williams folds in Dostoevsky's view of the Church and why a Catholic cannot be a good novelist. The problem consists in what Dostoevsky, following Orthodox theologians, sees as a secularising move on the part of Catholics:

> Appealing not to the free consensus of persons united in the Body of Christ but to a supreme executive authority, the papacy, … simply by being a supreme executive, becomes a monarchy on the model of other monarchies, and so sets itself up as a rival *political* power.[12]

Doing so destroys the tension, the mystery, of a dialogical reality that resonates with the interdependent life of a universe addressed by God.

Given the chequered history of Catholic interpretation of the nature/grace question, so well told by Henri de Lubac,[13] and the rise of Neo-Scholasticism,[14] Dostoevsky is not necessarily wrong. For Williams, however, certain Catholic artists evince a similar concern to preserve the mystery of supernatural finality.[15] The novelist rescues language and enacts freedom by creating space that 'represents' the way the world's creator 'generates dependence without control'.[16] In his book *Grace and Necessity* (2005), Williams proposes that the Catholic artists Flannery O'Connor and David Jones achieve something very similar. They share an ontology much like Dostoevsky's, though one gleaned from the writings of Jacques Maritain. Rowan describes Maritain's approach to the nature/grace question in the following way:

> Maritain, in terms of the theological politics of the period, stood very much alongside those who argued that if grace were really to be God's free gift, the

[11] Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 13.

[12] Ibid., emphasis his.

[13] Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études Historiques* ([1946], [Paris: Lethielleux, 1991]); see also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[14] For a brief introduction to Neo-Scholasticism, its tendencies, and its effects, see Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), esp. 107–12, 157–64.

[15] In *Dostoevsky*, Williams allows that 'how the holy is represented' may be '*more readily* intelligible in an Eastern Christian than in a Western (Catholic or Protestant) framework'. Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 13 (emphasis mine). However, that is not to say it is not intelligible in a Western framework *at all*. Williams suggests as much when he admits that Dostoevsky's 'opposition to Roman Catholicism is often as intemperate as it is ill-informed'. Ibid., 14.

[16] Ibid., 12.

> distinction between the natural order of creation and the added dimension of grace had to be absolutely clear. But…it would be wrong to think of him as defending a static idea of human activities with goals that are intrinsically unrelated to God. His concern is to suggest how apparently unrelated goals can be understood coherently, so as to avoid that trivializing of human agency that occurs when theological judgements are invoked at the wrong level.[17]

Here one sees again the centrality of supernatural finality and, in that context, the union of creaturely freedom and dependency. Humans have genuine agency; and their goals are not intrinsically unrelated to God.

Coming down where he does on the nature/grace question, Maritain helps Catholic artists to see that they have the capacity to reveal hidden dimensions of reality that ordinary forms of analysis and description fail to represent. The inner life of an object resonates with one's own sense of it as an artist. The language of metaphor is inescapable. Mimesis consists not in holding up a mirror to nature but in creative redescription such that previously unknown patterns emerge. Both Jones and O'Connor fold Maritain's aesthetic into their art.[18] Williams especially draws out the emphasis on the freedom of characters within a story. The treatment of characterisation in O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' closely resembles Dostoevsky's achievement in his novels.[19] The rhythm of the characters' interactions with one another uncovers 'a consonance that is well beyond any felt harmony or system of explanation but is simply a coherence and connectedness always more than can be seen or expressed'.[20] That dialogical resonance, even between two characters one of whom is about to shoot the other, preserves the mystery of creaturely freedom within a context of an even more fundamental dependency. For Williams, a particular way of construing the nature/grace question unites Orthodox and Catholic aesthetic projects.

A form of the nature/grace question unites Eastern and Western thought elsewhere in Williams too. He has been working in an ecumenical vein ever since his doctoral thesis. In that early work, he promotes Augustine's reading of the *imago trinitatis* to shield the Church Father from interpretations that characterise him as a rationalistic theologian.[21] He is rather a foundational source for a theology of *ek-stasis*.[22] Augustine's trinitarian theology tends towards the mystical and relational.

[17] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 10.

[18] In this work, Williams takes care to correct an overly hierarchical view of Maritain's politics. He may already have a view to Dostoevsky's concerns on this point. Ibid., 7.

[19] Ibid., 102–8.

[20] Ibid., 100.

[21] Rowan Williams, 'The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique'. D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 1975, http://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:15b86a5d-21f4-44a3-95bb-b8543d326658, esp. 122–28.

[22] Ibid., 81–89.

Williams distinguishes sharply, though not unkindly, between that and the rationalism that Lossky would ascribe to the Western Father.[23]

On the one hand, one can only be grateful for the emphasis on mystical theology in Orthodox Christianity. It represents a plea for wholeness. Mysticism must accompany and augment considerations which are otherwise arid and rationalistic. Western thought is susceptible to such one-sidedness. Not only does mysticism complement reason, it is a dimension of what reason is, properly understood. On the other hand, Augustine is a person in the West who well represents the respect for wholeness and the mystical vision, as Williams shows. Augustine's trinitarian theology illustrates the centrality of supernatural finality. For Williams, the point is that Augustine is more a source of likeness than unlikeness between the two communions. The Church, as a whole—East and West—has wrestled with the problem of rationalism. In connection with the emphasis on likeness, one thinks also of the burden of de Lubac's argument in *Surnaturel* and the magnificent closing chapter in praise of Augustine in *Corpus Mysticum*. I note with keenness Siecienski's mention of the latter book in the surge of *rapprochement* in mid-twentieth-century East-West discussions.[24] For de Lubac, as for Nicholas Afanasiev, Eucharist and Church are linked. In Siecienski's telling, this common emphasis fosters dialogue in the context of a fresh, shared return to the sources.

The Orthodox and Catholic communions have in common, I read in Siecienski, apostolic succession, priesthood, and the eucharist.[25] Appreciation of supernatural finality constitutes another point of commonality. Despite 'theological politics' and diverging views among Catholics, and presumably among the Orthodox, there is an identifiable tradition shared by both of these groups, and by others too. It has been recovered in Catholicism by *nouvelle théologie* and further described by Williams, John Milbank, and others.[26] Donald Allchin, Williams's doctoral supervisor, draws extensively on Orthodox theologians to remind Anglicans of its relevance in their tradition as well.[27] A (recovered) shared sensitivity to our intrinsic need of grace, to participation in God, to supernatural finality has made ours a fresh moment for ecumenical dialogue. Furthermore, ironically, the best picture that we have of the relationship between nature and grace is the Church, even when, like in the O'Connor story, it looks like someone is about to shoot someone else.

Our goal, then, is visible unity, though not a unity achieved in a 'secularising' way. In 2005 and in 2006 Benedict stated and reaffirmed his commitment to 'rebuild-

[23] For a more modern example of this tendency, see John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 100.

[24] Siecienski, *Papacy*, 381–82.

[25] *Unitatis Redintegratio*; Eng. trans: Tanner, ed., Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils 2, 916, qtd in Siecienski, 389.

[26] John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

[27] A.M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Theology*, (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988).

ing the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers'.[28] He echoes statements in John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* that likewise stress *visible* unity.[29] The question is whether the presence of a pope necessarily represents a secularising move. In Dostoevsky's novels, 'the free consensus of persons united in the body of Christ' is inherently attractive. The dialogical body suggests a resonance with a transcendent source from which it seems to emerge, distinct and free though dependent. It does so in Catholic writers like O'Connor as well. In claiming that Catholic artists are capable of enacting the nature/grace synthesis, Williams seems to be suggesting that the mere presence of a pope is not determinative. The Church still has the ability to be beautiful and to body forth the mysterious relationship between nature and grace. In fact, one can go further and say that our *present* reality is unity on some level: 'I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church'.

'Visible unity' involves a double gesture towards beauty. (1) visibility—*id quod placet visum*—is Aquinas's famous definition of beauty. The unity of the Church is pleasing to behold. (2) To apprehend unity—to perceive the coherence, the wholeness, the form of a thing—is to have an aesthetic encounter. Visibility and unity combine in Balthasar's phrase 'seeing the form'. The form is Christ. We are the body of Christ, we make Christ visible.

The notion of being beautiful, of being that which pleases when seen, ought to give the Church incentive and energy to work towards this goal. Examples of the power of beauty can help. Here are two. The first is an excerpt from *The Bell* by Iris Murdoch, impenitent Platonist though she is. In it the protagonist Dora has escaped to the National Gallery to reflect on a complicated situation in a lay Anglican community in which she finds herself. The visit turns into a meditation on the power of beauty:

> Dora had been in the National Gallery a thousand times and the pictures were almost as familiar to her as her own face….She wandered a little, watching with compassion the poor visitors armed with guide books who were peering anxiously at the masterpieces. Dora did not need to peer. She could look, as one can at last when one knows a great thing very well, confronting it with a dignity which it has itself conferred….It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect….Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy

[28] Pope Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity', Friday 17th November, 2006. https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061117_pc-chrstuni.html. Benedict opens this address by quoting this statement from the previous year. 'Initial Message of Pope Benedict XVI', 20th April 2005, *L'Osservatoro Romano* English edition, 27th April 2005, 4.

[29] Siecienski, *Papacy*, 410. Williams likewise emphasises visible unity in his address at the 50th anniversary of PCPCU: '…the life of the Church called to be *visibly one* in the one Lord, *visibly one* with his one prayer to the Father, *visibly one* in the common search for holiness'. Williams, 'Archbishop's Address', np (emphasis his).

> make it worthless….The pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood.[30]

Mapping the *una sancta* involves recognising that we are the masterpiece. The beauty of our unity confers a dignity upon onlookers, as well as the promise of a reality beyond their dreary solipsism, beyond that which their consciousness can wretchedly devour. In the midst of our activity, we do well to recognise that our goal is, in part, the passivity of a beautiful object. We have tremendous incentive to be beautiful, and ought to take much solace in knowing that we already are. We will qualify this Platonic apprehension in a moment, but it has a place in our ambitions.

A different sort of example comes from a painting done by van Gogh done in 1889 near Arles in the south of France. It was included in an unusual show called 'Mystical Landscapes' at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Curated with the help of theologians (hence its unusualness), it attracted unexpectedly large audiences, as it did in the Musée d'Orsay to which it travelled. The intensely moving picture of the olive trees was at the centre of a disagreement Van Gogh had with his friend Paul Gaughin. Responding to Gaughin's picture of Christ weeping in Gethsemane, Van Gogh said, 'When I want to think about Gethsemane, I look for an olive orchard. You don't need to put Christ in the picture'.[31] There is an old slippery slope here that has incarnational thinkers like John of Damascus at the top end and Matthew Arnold at the bottom, but Van Gogh is arguably articulating the mystery of the relationship between nature and grace. The presence of the *Logos* cannot be manipulated as a conceptualisation. Our unity cannot be achieved as a manipulation. Our beauty must be a participation in the divine life that necessarily is bound up with mystery. Whatever *could* be read as secularising, the depiction of mere olive trees, the presence of an executive structure, can also be seen as caught up in cruciform energies and dependent upon supernatural finality. The art of both can only extend an invitation.

Perfection of form means something different to Christians, East and West, than it does to the ancient Greeks. Von Balthasar spells out the development in a memorable paragraph on Augustine from his essay on revelation and the beautiful. Augustine is regarded as the founder of Christian aesthetics 'through the measure and current…of a pastoral office with its humiliations'.[32] 'The most christian objects

[30] Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* ([1958], [London: Penguin, 2001]), 174–75.

[31] 03_MysticalLandscapes_VanGoghTheOliveTrees_Final.mp3. This soundfile from the exhibit has since been removed from the internet. Lead curator Katharine Lochnan discusses the disagreement in a piece by CBC News. Jessica Wong, 'Mystical Landscapes brings Monet, van Gogh masterpieces to Toronto', CBC News, 21st October, 2016 https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/mystical-landscapes-brings-monet-van-gogh-masterpieces-to-toronto-1.3814343.

[32] Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Revelation and the Beautiful', *Word and Revelation: Essays in Theology I* (Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1964), 121–63; at 130.

art depicts are precisely the least esthetic ones:' he goes on to write: 'the ignominy of the passion, the repugnant facts of martyrdom'.[33] For Balthasar, Christian ideas of beauty are rooted in suffering and abnegation, which constitute cruciform going-out-from-oneself. David Bentley Hart likewise reads Augustine in a deeply positive way. For him, the Augustinian aesthetic issues in the infinite revisability of a self grounded in the divine being:

> The interiority that opens up in the *Confessions* possesses no center in itself, nor does it depend upon an idea in relation to which it is a shadow tormented by its simulacral drift; instead, it is an infinitely revisable, multiplicit, self-contradictory text, whose creaturely contingency is restless in its longing, founded in nothing, and open to what it cannot own by nature.[34]

Hart here expresses the mystery of self-transcendence. It produces an aesthetic that he places in direct contrast with that of Nietzsche. Nietzsche exalts the classical virtues of nobility. He has no place for a gospel narrative that can include 'the tears of a rustic' like Peter.[35] They 'could appear only grotesque from the vantage of a classical, noble aesthetic'.[36]

We can be energised by the call to Christian unity in the knowledge that that unity entails a bearing of witness. At the same time, Christian beauty always involves the way of the cross. If we are unified, it is in our self-sacrificial service. One of the most encouraging themes of Siecienski's book is the papacy's desire again to embrace the slogan *servus servorom Dei*.[37] One sees this in the *Communio* emphasis on the papacy as '"a power which is pastoral and oriented toward service" and in particular the service of unity'[38] and John Paul II's description of the pope as the '"first servant of unity"'.[39]

In a great irony, the time of the iconoclasm controversy coincides with the growing separation of East and West. The approval of images represents a significant milestone in the Church's understanding of the gospel. As Aidan Nichols says, 'A faith based on divine Incarnation will eventually find expression in the realm of the *visible*'.[40] The Second Council of Nicaea emphasises this point. Ambrosios Giakalis writes that 'The iconophiles…sought through the icon to enable the holy to permeate the material world….On the deepest theological level the iconoclast con-

[33] Ibid., 131.
[34] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 114.
[35] Ibid., 125.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Siecienski, *Papacy*, 369.
[38] Ibid., 395.
[39] Ibid., 410.
[40] Aidan Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 21 (emphasis mine).

troversy was about deification'.[41] That Council contributes decisively to Christianity's understanding of its relationship to culture and to the puzzle that is the nature/grace question. (I've always found it striking that John Milbank uses as an epigraph to *The Suspended Middle* the filmmaker Robert Bresson's quip, 'Le Surnaturel, c'est du réel précis'.[42]) The Incarnation induces the Church to arrive at a point in its history that unifies it in terms of visibility.[43]

It is astonishing that, at the same time, the Church should be moving towards schism. The issue is ontological. Tantalisingly, the Church is working out its theology of beauty in ways that unite East and West; at the same time, in Siecienski's narrative, it is inscribing fixed reference points that look and feel like instantiations of *natura pura*.[44] The question of the papacy is about visible politics, geographical boundaries, offices. These matters would seem to be about earthly realities, but is that necessarily to secularise? One wonders if the categories are accorded a status according to the logic of *natura pura*, accorded a level of reality they do not possess. Daniel Sahas suggests something along these lines when he says that Leo III took actions that 'made the jurisdictional borders of the Church coincide with the borders of the State. The Church was now defined in terms of the *imperium*. From "catholic" in the theological sense, meaning whole, encompassing, and all-inclusive, the Church

[41] Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 3. Catholic theologian Michael Patella agrees with this emphasis on deification or divinization. Michael Patella, *Word and Image*: *The Hermeneutics of the St John's Bible* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), xii, 10.

[42] Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, ix.

[43] In the introduction to his English translation of the Definition (*horos*) and other texts related to the controversy, Daniel Sahas writes, 'The theology of the icon, and its reaffirmation, was another manifestation of the "catholicity", that is of the wholeness of truth, that the Church embodies. That is why the victory of the Church over the issue of the icons was hailed in 843 as a triumph of "Orthodoxy" for the entire Christian Church'. Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto: U of T Press, 1986), 30. Andrew Louth likewise emphasises the overwhelming importance of the episode: 'Christian worship throughout Christendom articulated a sense that the worshippers on earth were joining in their worship of God with all the saints who had lived on earth before them….The Triumph of Orthodoxy in the Byzantine Empire meant that there was an officially enunciated theory about the significance of icons—they were no mere illustrations, but windows on to heaven, mediating between the earthly worshippers and the saints in glory¼'. Andrew Louth, *Greek East and Latin West: The Church AD 681–1071* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 198. Elsewhere, though, he describes the situation in such a way as to accentuate the distinctness of the Eastern Church: 'The emergence from the period of iconoclasm of an Eastern theology of the nature, and indeed necessity, of Christian art meant that the development of Christian art in the East was guided by a much more clearly articulated theology than the development of Christian art in the West from the Carolingian period onwards'. Ibid., 8. Louth, however, is quick to make the following qualification: 'This, added to the way in which iconoclasm had led to estrangement between the papacy and the Byzantine emperor just when the papacy needed military support against the Lombards, forcing the papacy into the arms of the emerging Carolingians, means that the iconoclast controversy marks a crucial point in the deepening estrangement between Greek East and Latin West that would eventually lead to the Great Schism'. Ibid., 8–9. One wonders whether the latter point is not the more determinative one. That the default position in the West seems to have been iconodule does not in itself argue for a distinction between East and West on the theology involved. The East may nonetheless have come to a more considered appreciation of the implications for art and culture of the Incarnation for having gone through this searching process.

[44] Siecienski, *Papacy*, 207–19.

becomes "catholic" in the political sense, that is "universal"'.[45] One wonders whether the debate at this time, in Dostoevsky's, or in our own represents a failure to apply the insights of the iconoclasm controversy regarding the relationship between nature and grace to the issues dividing the Church.[46]

That is, the affirmation of images implies the strangeness of the implications of the Incarnation. Yet the oddness seems not to have been put into the sort of comprehensive frame of reference that theologians of supernatural finality encourage. When one reads Siecienski's pages on this time period, the two controversies lie side by side, but do not appear to affect one another. The iconoclasm controversy is one thing, the growing unease about papal jurisdiction another. The terms of reference, however, suggest cross-over. The very idea of representation, understood incarnationally, is destabilised and, with it, whatever is meant by 'geography', 'politics', or even 'Rome'.[47] This effect of the iconoclasm controversy itself does not seem to cross over to contemporary (in both senses) anxieties about the papacy.

Perhaps Sergei Bulgakov's analysis of the iconoclasm controversy accounts for the lack of interaction. Bulgakov tells us that the iconophiles did the Church no favours. In Aidan Nichols's summary, Bulgakov found Nicaea's key doctrinal statement 'insufficiently connected with the main corpus of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine issuing from the earlier ecumenical Councils'.[48] For the Russian theologian, the iconophile arguments depend on assumptions that tend in iconoclast directions. He addresses the lack by supplying a sophiological metaphysic: 'Bulgakov selects a concept at once biblical and philosophical — namely, wisdom, in order to lay out a theology of beauty in nature and grace'.[49] Bulgakov (and, through him, Nichols) is supplying a hint of how questions of beauty and representation were and are bound up with the Church's unfolding understanding of its core doctrines.

Nichols, meanwhile, in making 'soundings in sacral aesthetics' in both Eastern and Western sources, like Williams tacitly wants to draw the two communions together. Sacral aesthetics remind us that our discourse is always in need of purification in a manner that reminds us of the constant temptation to look at and think about reality in reductive ways. We misstep in our participation in the divine dance;

[45] Sahas, *Icon and Logos*, 29–30.

[46] Jaroslav Pelikan draws attention to this problem, in a way, in his Mellon lectures when he puts heavy emphasis on the relationship between religion and politics in describing 'the context'. Jaroslav Pelikan, 'The Context: Religion and "Realpolitik" Byzantine Style', in *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 7–39.

[47] For an account of the nomenclature surrounding 'Rome', see Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, 29–30. '"The fathers rightly granted privileges to the throne of Old Rome, because it was the royal city". Therefore, the ecclesiastical position of Old Rome was derived from its political position as the capital of the Roman Empire. From that it would necessarily follow that Constantinople, as the new "royal city", was now entitled to "equal privileges"'. Ibid., 30. Admittedly, such considerations do not necessarily rise, in Pelikan's suggestion, to the level of poetry or ontology.

[48] Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 72.

[49] Ibid., 74.

our mental energies flag. Beauty reminds us of this, of the goal as well as the already present reality of our being-in-the-world.

Questions of art open onto the mystery of nature/grace. They matter wherever questions of politics, geography, and our being-in-the-world are at issue. They matter precisely where Patriarch Bartholomew can say East and West have grown 'ontologically different'. That statement, as shocking as it may have been on the day it was uttered and as heartbreaking as it is to read, may represent a breakthrough. To identify ontology as a descriptor of the two communions potentially puts issues of schism where they can be got at otherwise. One of those ways is through the arts.

To countenance 'the arts' is not a question merely of decoration, but it does have practical dimensions. Williams and Nichols suggest one of these in writing on nature and grace with reference to artists. Artists can be theologians. Saying so convincingly without falling into Matthew Arnold's error of making Culture a surrogate spirituality[50] has been one of the great accomplishments of recent Christian cultural apologetics.[51] Our ecumenical challenges require all our theological resources.

Another practical application is to renew and extend the place of art in the Church. At the end of *Redeeming Beauty*, Aidan Nichols observes that the Church (he tells us parenthetically that he means in the first instance the Catholic Church, but he includes the Orthodox Church and 'much of Protestantism' in this assessment)[52] uses art for two purposes. It uses the arts to throw light on Christ; and it baptises them, letting them be transfigured by the light of Christ. But neither is happening very much today, because dogmatic Christianity has failed 'to commend itself as a unifying framework for all the legitimate activities and aspirations of contemporary culture'.[53] He sees bringing art back to 'the sacred foyer of the Church' as part of a 'multi-pronged' mission to make the Church's vision 'plausible' once more.[54]

Perhaps, in the first instance, bringing the arts back would help parishioners to experience a vision for wholeness and to realise how important it is that it be embodied by the Church. Sacral art can help to instil that yearning. While all art tacitly assumes and promotes coherence, two (ekphrastic) themes suggest them-

[50] On Arnold's error, see C.S. Lewis, 'Learning in War-Time', in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 20–32; at 26.

[51] The Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts in St Andrews, the Theology Through the Arts programme in Cambridge, and the Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts are among the initiatives that have done much to draw attention to this fact. So too have individual studies like Alison Milbank's *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians* (2007), Malcolm Guite's on Coleridge (2017), and Vittorio Montemaggi's work on Dante's *Commedia* (2016). This vein of inquiry deeply influenced my own study of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales, The Fellowship of the Beatific Vision* (2016).

[52] Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 148.

[53] Ibid., 149.

[54] Ibid.

selves.[55] There is a pleasing, somewhat uncanny[56] artistic resonance of *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus with the Second Council of Nicaea over questions that develop and liberate Christian aesthetics.[57] For many artists, Mary has profound associations with showing, with revelatory fulness. The iconography of the *Panaghia* gives expression to the way the Marian body (including the Church) mirrors the activity of Christ within. Marianism encourages reflection on beauty, especially the beauty of visible unity.

Another potent theme is martyrdom. As with Augustine's pastoral duties, there is nothing aesthetic about it, and it is part of what Christian aesthetics most fundamentally is. Contemporary interpretations of martyrdom in the church foyer would certainly align with Nichols's vision. One wonders whether unity in the suffering and persecution of the body of Christ will cause ancient quarrels simply to burn away, to be replaced by clearer cruciform logic. Or perhaps sudden Christian unity, as powerful as it is difficult to imagine, will just as suddenly incite martyrdom. If it does, it may happen at the hands of some ancient religious foe. More likely it will occur at the hands of some gang that holds to the even more primordial impoverished creed of *natura pura*.

Theological aesthetics can enable us to see that we are and are called to be a work of art in our visible unity and can encourage us in the task of mapping the

[55] Pelikan seems not to have a full grasp of the paradox involved, in artistic terms at least, of Maritain's discussion of art. If, in terms of nature/grace, one wants to take care not to invoke theological judgements 'at the wrong level', in artistic terms that translates into the fact that art 'does not in itself *tell* you anything' (Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 12). Yet in his short Introduction, Pelikan wants to marry images (the icon) and ideas (things that tell one something). He quotes Nabokov at length, who says that 'literature is not a pattern of *ideas* but a pattern of *images*…. Let us keep an eye on the imagery and leave the ideas to pile up as they please. The word, the expression, the image is the true function of literature. *Not* ideas'. Qtd in Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, 3, emphasis Nabokov's. Pelikan disagrees with this asseveration: 'Whatever may be the validity of that judgment as applied to literature, and specifically to Tolstoy, it does not do justice to the intricate relation between image and idea in philosophy and theology, above all in Byzantine (or, for that matter, Russian) philosophy and theology…'. Ibid. An icon or the interior of a church can indeed carry an idea. Pelikan is surely right to emphasise this point and to rescue art (not least as a Mellon lecturer) from some privileged and hermetically sealed environment. Yet for Maritain (a fellow Mellon lecturer!), as for Williams, 'idea' may not be the appropriate word, for the work of art replicates the relationship between creator and created reality, in which the creator generates dependence without control. It does not tell you anything. In preserving the sense of the work of art as its own integrated world of images, Nabokov retains something of the sense of freedom that attaches itself to art.

For the purposes of the discussion in this paper, as a bearer of the nature/grace question, art consistently challenges the 'ideas' (political, theological) into whose service one can try to press it. This is so not because it truly stands apart in some precious, self-contained sphere, but because of the depth of mystery involved in participation and supernatural finality. The ekphrastic quality of art is not truly reflexive but an invitation to discover even greater depths in the mystery of the Incarnation and the meaning of Trinitarian relationality.

[56] In the full, Freudian twofold sense of being both obvious and hidden at the same time.

[57] Niki Tsironis helpfully observes that 'Although her cult began in the early Christian era, it took centre stage when it became identified with the cult of icons during the period which conventionally we term as iconoclasm'. Niki Tsironis, 'From Poetry to Liturgy: The Cult of the Virgin in the Middle Byzantine Era', in I*mages of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, edited by Maria Vassilaki (London: Ashgate, 2005), 91–102; at 91.

una sancta. The laity have a role to play in that achievement. But ecumenism is no task for populism, nor is engagement of art. Beauty is a transcendental, at once accessible and forbidding. As such, it requires deep thought and deep commitment. Equally, though, it cannot be ignored; it demands our attention wherever technical and seemingly narrowly definable theological challenges confront us. In disrupting our categories, in reminding us of suffering and service, in urging us to see the cruciform whole, Beauty will indeed save the world.