



Humanities has traditionally been considered as the study of man: his culture, ideals, history and interaction with the world. And sure, that definition makes sense. Yet in these few reflections, I would like to propose that, though nearly universally accepted, this approach to humanities is incomplete.

The traditional view of humanities focuses on the questions: Who is man? How does he relate with the world? What are his passions, desires and fears? In other words, we look at man and see the different aspects that make him up, the parts of the whole. But we can go deeper. We can ask: *What is man's purpose?* The center of our study shifts from "what?" to "for what?" This second question implies the first, but widens its horizon. Man's center is his heart: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23)." In it lie our deepest desires and most secret thoughts. But what is our heart made for? Why is it always searching, always longing? Through the arts, humanities should help teach our heart to discover the answer we've been searching for: beauty.

One could object that beauty cannot be the main purpose of creation, the answer to our heart's longing. Von Balthasar answers:

... God does not come primarily as a teacher for us ("true"), as a useful "redeemer" for us ("good"), but to display and to radiate himself, the splendor of his eternal triune love in that disinterestedness that true love has in common with true beauty (H.U. Von Balthasar, *My Work: in Retrospect*, p.80).

Thus, beauty is strictly related with love. When we learn to see creation as a gift of love, we come to recognize its beauty. Creation is a work of love, a work of beauty.

But appreciation of beauty isn't something that always comes spontaneously to us—our hearts must be formed to appreciate it and long for it (cf. Deuteronomy 30:6). A humanism elevated by Christianity should recognize that God is man's ultimate end. Heaven is all about being with God who is Goodness, Truth and Beauty.

We use our intellects to seek the truth and our will to possess the good. Our final goal as humans (rational animals, subsistens in rationali natura, or however you prefer) is the contemplation of God through the Beatic Vision. We were made for contemplation. Now, will we ever understand God? Will we ever possess him? Yes ... and no. God is infinite and we are finite—no way we could t him in our puny minds or keep him in our pockets!

Beauty implies both possession of the good and understanding of the truth, with the unique contribution of relating them both with the Infinite. Don't panic— here's an image that could help: filling up a balloon with water. When it's full (completely satisfied), it starts to expand, and the more it holds, the bigger it becomes and the more capable of receiving even more. Contemplation, then, is a rest in desire and continual deepening in it. It's what our hearts seek, the adventure of God himself—we will never tire of contemplation! So what does this have to do with the real world, with what we study in humanities? We should first look at our experience of nature, since that's the easiest place to start. Watching a sunset is a moment of great beauty. But what do we experience in that sunset? We watch it, trying to get our minds around it while knowing at the same time that we will never be able to fully understand it. But contemplation is not merely intellectual activity—something in us longs to possess it as well, to stretch out that moment as long as possible, to grasp it and become one with it in some way. This longing, this desire, for understanding and possession permeates beauty. Confronted with beauty, our mind bows down before the mystery and our fingertips reach out desperately towards the infinite prize just out of grasp. C.S. Lewis writes:

In one way, of course, God has given us the Mornin Star already: you can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and god-desses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image (C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, pp.42-43).

God is an artist, and an artist pours himself into his artwork. If you study an artist in depth, you begin to recognize his work. Those familiar with Caravaggio know that he uses a cutting interplay of light and dark—in both color and morality. God's mark as an artist is beauty itself and for those with eyes to see, everything he creates has this mark on it. Hence the strict relationship between beauty and creation.

Moving from nature to the arts, we see the same effect of longing as in nature. If creation is God's artwork, man's art, as Tolkien would say, is an act of "sub-creation" (see Tolkien's work *Tree and Leaf*, especially his essay entitled "On Fairy Stories"). This beauty is fashioned by man and experiencing it brings us into man's soul, teaching us to order our desires towards the highest things. Beauty in the arts satisfies a thirst man has to express and delve into the mystery of who he is and what he was made for, yet it whets our appetite for more, provoking greater thirst and greater wonder. We are never satisfied. As John Paul II wrote:

Beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence. It is an invitation to savour life and to dream of the future. That is why the beauty of created things can never fully satisfy. It stirs that hidden nostalgia for God which a lover of beauty like Saint Augustine could express in incomparable terms: "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you!" (John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (1999), num.16).

Unlike nature, the arts bring out a variety of preferences. Why is this? Art's value lies not just in the physical appearance, but in the spiritual message transmitted through the medium of paint, chisel or pen. You can't limit art to the sum of its parts.

We each have our natural preferences and strengths as far as appreciating beauty goes, and appreciation in one field whets our appetite for finding more. Experiencing beauty and growing in that experience makes us more aware of beauty in other areas we aren't as inclined towards, opens our eyes to the pattern. Someone who has less formation in beauty perceives less.

An impediment to beauty appreciation is jadedness and impurity. Those stuck in sensuality have a harder time freeing their spirits for contemplation. The pure in heart shall see... beauty (Cf. Matthew 5:8). Through virtue we learn how to discover the pattern beauty walks and to recognize it with ever greater ease.

Why is this? Well, beauty constantly pushes us towards the transcendent and the spiritual. Sensuality, on the other hand, makes us less human by fixing our attention on the lower aspects of our nature as divorced from the supernatural.

Perhaps the most radical condition for perfecting our eye is a growing freedom from egoism, a being stripped clean of self-centeredness. Why does one microbiologist thrill in the study of a living cell, while another seems unmoved? The

first has no screens before his appreciative vision, no avarice, no vanity, no lust, no envy, no egoism. Just as the removal of cataracts restores clear vision, so does repentance restore the joy of youth and a capacity for the beautiful (T. Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, p.77).

Now the highest beauty on earth corresponds to what has the highest level of being: man. His spirituality lifts him beyond all other material creatures. So training our hearts to recognize beauty helps us to see each person with reverence, trains us to look for beauty in people we aren't necessarily attracted to, teaches us to respect the mystery of the other. Here beauty as studied in humanities connects with the spiritual and affective formation of the heart.

Yet among men, what is the moment of greatest beauty? A saint. A saint has reached the highest level of human fulfillment, is the most, well, human. And even more specifically, Christ is Beauty itself, and it is on the cross where his beauty is most manifest, for there God gives himself completely to us— there we are given the clearest possible experience of God's love. In the cross we find the answer to the mysterious connection between beauty and sorrow.

In the end, man's contemplation of beauty in this life opens him to discover more beauty, to enjoy a foretaste of the Beatific Vision. His thirst for beauty, properly ordered, leads him to God himself: Beauty, whether that of the natural universe or

that expressed in art, precisely because it opens up and broadens the horizons of human awareness, pointing us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the abyss of Infinity, can become a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God The way of beauty leads us, then, to grasp the Whole in the fragment, the Infinite in the finite, God in the history of humanity (Benedict XVI, 21 November 2009).

Regarding the New Evangelization, the Church has recently highlighted the importance of the Way of Beauty in leading people to God and in order to enter into dialogue with modern culture. This is because, as I have tried to show above, beauty is the presence of the infinite or the divine in the creature. Beauty points both to the thing itself and at the same time beyond itself to God. It is the best response to man's longing for God, taking our desires and refining them, directing us to what we were made for. Apologetic arguments divorced from beauty almost do more harm than good.

Humanities students must have the experience of beauty, which is much more than simply learning or receiving what is taught in the lecture hall. If they experience beauty and go deep into that experience in literature, for example, they will grow in their capacity to appreciate beauty and in their desire for it. This will make them much more likely to continue their studies on their own initiative, even after they finish their degree, and to be more open to other fields they hadn't appreciated much before. It becomes a personal quest. So the *unum necessarium*

is an experience of beauty—an inciting incident. Humanities is more than a checklist of content to learn. It should be centered on the heart's quest for beauty. Let the journey begin!

And it is said by the Eldar that in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any substance else that is in this Earth; and many of the Children of Ilúvatar hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen. (J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, *Ainulindalë*, p.32)