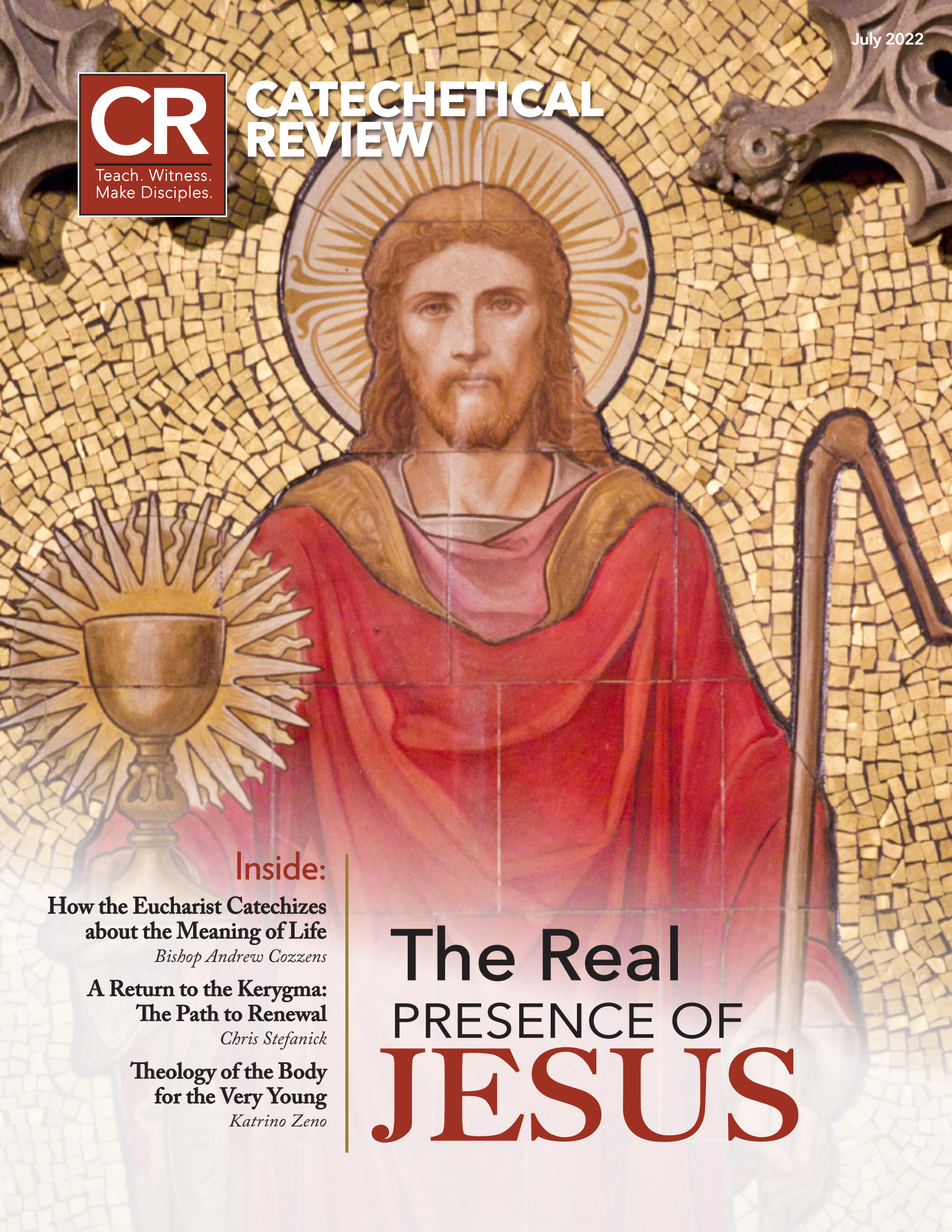




CATECHETICAL REVIEW



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Why Beauty Matters for Catechesis and Catholic Schools

By Roland Millare

In modern culture, relativism reigns supreme. Consequently, the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty no longer seem to transcend beyond the subjective whims of every autonomous individual self. Truth is a matter of one's opinion. Goodness is relative to each person. Beauty is a matter of personal preference.

Catechists and Catholic educators have been given a great opportunity to lead the young people entrusted to their care to encounter objective truth, consistent moral laws that lead to the flourishing of goodness, and to appreciate authentic beauty. Although the three transcendentals are inseparable, I would like to focus on the role of beauty in teaching, evangelization, and formation.

Bishop Robert Barron frequently exhorts the faithful to “lead with beauty.” Images are powerful means of conveying both the truth and distortions of the truth. Images have been used well to market products and lead people astray into ideology. The Church has employed the use of sacred art to convey the truth in a powerful and formative way. In the introduction to the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explains the rationale for using sacred images within the *Compendium*:

Images are also a preaching of the Gospel. Artists in every age have offered the principal facts of the mystery of salvation to the contemplation and wonder of believers by presenting them in the splendor of color and in the perfection of beauty. It is an indication of how today more than ever, in a culture of images, a sacred image can express much more than what can be said in words, and be an extremely effective and dynamic way of communicating the Gospel message.¹

The beauty within art, architecture, music, and film is a visible manifestation of a truth being communicated by the artist. Beauty, when used well, can lead the faithful to encounter the face of Christ the Incarnate Word.

In order to renew catechesis and Catholic schools with beauty, first we must discuss the definition and nature of beauty. Second, we need to examine what role beauty plays in our lectures, presentations, and classrooms. Finally, we must work toward greater manifestations of beauty within the liturgy.

Beyond Subjective Aesthetics

Most people do not think critically about beauty. When I taught a high school senior theology class on the relationship between faith and culture, we spent part of the second semester focused on the transcendental of beauty. Students have all kinds of opinions about beauty, but few seem to be able to engage in an intelligent conversation about why they hold the opinions they do. Consequently, I would begin the unit on beauty by thinking about aesthetics.

St. Thomas Aquinas offers us a concrete definition and criteria for beauty that remains an essential foundation for a fruitful conversation on the topic. In order for something to be beautiful, Aquinas argues that it must be characterized by wholeness, proportion, and radiance (or clarity). To the extent that something is marked by these characteristics is the degree to which a particular thing is pleasing to the eye. Beauty elicits this experience of pleasure based upon these objective criteria.

High school students need vocabulary and basic concepts to engage in a fruitful discussion about the objective characteristics of beauty, lest they only understand beauty subjectively. It was helpful for my seniors to read some excerpts from the writings of Aquinas, St. John Paul II's Letter to Artists, Benedict XVI, and contemporary author Denis McNamara. I would also introduce my students to aesthetics via Roger Scruton's BBC documentary on beauty, *Why Beauty Matters*. The use of this documentary was important to offer insight into beauty in light of modern art, architecture, and music.



This foundation in aesthetics led to a robust and often-times spirited seminar on the nature of beauty as we discussed whether beauty was objective or subjective (or both), the significance of beauty in relation to the other transcendentals (the good and the true), and the role of beauty in evangelization and catechesis. While the students did not always agree, it was fruitful for them to articulate informed ideas about beauty as we would continue to think and to discuss the role of beauty in the sacred liturgy and the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Intentional and Incarnational Encounter with Beauty

In light of the Incarnation, “matter matters,” as Peter Kreeft would say. Are we intentional with how students encounter beauty from the moment they set foot on the campus of a Catholic school, parish, or building? In his discussion of the essential marks of a Catholic school, Archbishop Michael Miller emphasizes the impact of the Incarnation upon the campus of a Catholic school:

The very fact of the Incarnation tells us that the created world is the means chosen by God through which he communicates his life to us. What is human and visible can bear the divine. If Catholic schools are to be true to their identity, they should try to suffuse their environment with this delight in the sacramental. Therefore they should express physically and visibly the external signs of Catholic culture through images, signs, symbols, icons and other objects of traditional devotion. A chapel, classroom crucifixes and statues, signage, celebrations and other sacramental reminders of Catholic ecclesial life, including good art which is not explicitly religious in its subject matter, should be evident.²

Catholic schools should be intentional in creating an environment in which students encounter the mysteries of the faith via beautiful sacred art, statues, and sacramentals. Schools should also display beautiful secular art. Following our initial study of beauty, I took my students on a walk around campus to evaluate where we could find beautiful images that they may have overlooked as a result of adolescent sleepwalking from class to class.

Every teacher should make a conscientious effort to put beauty on display within their classroom, but this practice should move beyond wall space into the content of lecture material. Following the lead of the *Compendium*, an effort should be made to incorporate beautiful sacred art as a form of catechesis and evangelization. An excellent model of this effort is the book *Echoing the Mystery: Unlocking the Deposit of Faith in Catechesis* by Barbara Morgan and Sr. Athanasius Munroe, OP. Each chapter, which covers a particular doctrinal teaching, has examples drawn from sacred art, architecture, and music. There is a brief commentary that accompanies the particular example of beauty.

Whether a teacher is giving a catechetical presentation for sacramental preparation, a series of lectures for a theology unit, or a presentation on some aspect of the mystery of the faith, he or she should incorporate beautiful artwork intentionally in presenting the faith. Images are powerful in helping us to capture

the imagination and assisting our audience to understand and to appreciate the truth, which we are trying to convey. Above all, catechesis should follow the example of the Incarnation by allowing our words to become flesh via beauty.

The Splendor of Beauty within the Sacred Liturgy

Beyond the confines of the classroom, we should be conscientious of the role of beauty within the sacred liturgy. Pope Francis argues, “Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy.”³

High school liturgies are a constant challenge because of the limits of the large, multi-purpose spaces in which most such liturgies are celebrated. In light of the nature of the sacred liturgy as a representation of Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary and a foretaste of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, every effort should be made to ensure that the liturgy is celebrated with reverence and beauty. Despite the limitations that a school may face, it can surely invest in sacred vessels and vestments that befit the dignity of the liturgy. Efforts should also be made to have some sacred images to assist the faithful with their worship. The other essential part of the liturgy in which every school could invest is a good choir (or schola) to assist the faithful in the singing of the sacred liturgy.

The overall purpose of beauty within the liturgy is greater participation and clearer understanding of the mystery being celebrated, regardless of the accidental limitations of the setting. An intentional focus on the role of beauty in how the Mass is celebrated can assist in helping the faithful to see beyond what is immanent and mundane.

Beauty alone cannot save the world, but beauty coupled with truth and goodness can help reorient every student and member of the faculty and staff within a Catholic school to more frequent contemplation of Christ, the beautiful Incarnate Word. Beauty within the classroom, on display on campus, and used in the celebration of the sacred liturgy can help young people to understand that truth is not simply an abstraction but the encounter with a living Person—Jesus Christ, who remains “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8).

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Notes

- 1 Liberia Editrice Vaticana, *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 5.
- 2 J. Michael Miller, CSB, “The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools,” Catholic Education Resource Center, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/education/catholic-contributions/the-holy-sees-teaching-on-catholic-schools.html>.
- 3 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

Photo:

Michaelangelo’s “Creation of Man”, Pierre Metivier, Flickr.com cc