

Homily by Adam Cardinal Maida
GOOD FRIDAY
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL
APRIL 6, 2007

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My brother Bishops and Priests, Deacons and Religious, Seminarians and my Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

On this Good Friday, as we commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus for our salvation, I would like to reflect on this mystery in terms of beauty. We often speak of the glory of the cross or consider the pain and suffering Christ endured. While it is not common in our tradition to speak about the beauty of the crucified Lord, there are indeed good reasons to do so, for even in the disfigurement and humiliation of the way He died, divine beauty and glory radiated from Him. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux once proclaimed, *“How beautiful you are to me, my Lord, even in the very discarding of your beauty!”*

As we heard from today’s first reading, Isaiah 53, the fourth Suffering Servant canticle, the servant was *“marred beyond human semblance... there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by people, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, one of those from whom people hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem...”*

The beauty of Christ on the cross is something completely different than the model or ideal of beauty as defined by our contemporary culture. To understand this mystery of hidden beauty, we must set aside our preconceived ideas of beauty and try to see things with a whole new perspective. The beauty of Jesus Christ—specifically in His act of dying—is to be found not in the physical form of His Body, but rather, in the love radiating through His human disfigurement. On the cross, we begin to glimpse the mystery of eternal, uncreated glory, that is, the perfect love of the Son for the Father, and the Father for the Son, a love that radiates in and through their Holy Spirit.

The divine beauty Jesus embodied on the cross is a beauty that is truly relational; He shows us that the very nature of all love and goodness can be known and understood only by hearts that are pure and minds that are willing to accept a mystery that startles us and leaves us speechless, even confused. In the way that Jesus died, He brought together in a mysterious harmony infinite majesty and humility, divine power and human weakness, transcendent meekness and lowest humility.

As the late theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar once put it, *“The beauty of Jesus Christ appears precisely in the crucified, but the crucified, precisely as such, is the one risen: in this self-disclosure, God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, that which we would call ugly, as well as that which we would call beautiful”* (*The Glory of the Lord*, volume 7, page 22). In other words, the crucified Lord teaches us by His silent suffering in loving obedience that every aspect and moment of human life has a dignity and goodness; even that which seems ugly or unpleasant can still be holy and revelatory of God.

Contemplating the beauty of Christ’s love, we begin to understand ourselves and all creation in a new way. The witness of Christ, the Son of God, accepting the most painful and humiliating type of death challenges us to a new definition of what is beautiful. Here we clearly see the necessary link of beauty with the other “transcendentals”—goodness and truth.

Contemplating the beauty of Christ on the cross, our hearts are inspired by a new kind of goodness, the completely selfless love of God for us. His agape challenges us to be more pure of heart in all our thinking, judging, and acting. We are to consider whether we act out of selfish motives or simply and totally as a grateful response to such underserved goodness: we seek to be good for “goodness sake.”

The vision of Christ, the Son of God, accepting a painful and humiliating death which completely disfigured Him forces us to confront our instinctive human fear of suffering and the way we typically run away from anything that is not physically attractive. Once the full force of Calvary hits us, we cannot help but come to a new appreciation of the dignity of all life, especially those who would be most readily rejected as undeserving of our love or affection.

The full truth of our human dignity comes to light as we gaze upon the cross. We even come forward to kiss the cross, for in this mystery, we see Christ’s special identification with our human weakness and sinfulness. We understand His loving embrace of the poor, the very young and the very elderly, all those having challenges of body or spirit.

As we enter into a new spirit of beauty, goodness, and truth, we experience a fundamental conversion, a turning away from the surface values and attractions of this world and begin to choose the way of poverty, simplicity, humility, and obedience. Finding our joy and peace in the beauty of the Lord Jesus on the cross, we understand in a new way His solidarity with us and for us.

The radiance of His love casts a new glow upon all humankind and we see all people and all things bathed in the light of His love. The darkness of our fallen world begins to fade away and our cold hearts are touched and changed in such a way that we actually begin to want to choose all that which is “last and least.”

In his recently published Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI speaks about Christ’s Death on the Cross—a gift we experience and receive anew in every Eucharistic celebration—as an “epiphany of beauty,” a manifestation and communication of the love of our triune God. He writes:

“Christ is the full manifestation of the glory of God. In the glorification of the Son, the Father’s glory shines forth and is communicated (cf. Jn 1:14; 8:54; 12:28; 17:1). Yet this beauty is not simply a harmony of proportion and form; “the fairest of the sons of men” (Ps 45[44]:3) is also, mysteriously, the one ‘who had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him’ (Is 53:2). Jesus Christ shows us how the truth of love can transform even the dark mystery of death into the radiant light of the resurrection. Here the splendor of God’s glory surpasses all worldly beauty. The truest beauty is the love of God, who definitively revealed Himself to us in the Paschal Mystery.”

Part of the beauty of Christ dying on the cross also includes the way He calls us out of ourselves to a deeper relationship with the Heavenly Father and with one another. Christ’s beauty actually includes and transforms our own dignity and beauty; as we contemplate His sacred face wounded for our sins, our hearts are stirred to contrition and sorrow for our sins and we weep in humble gratitude at the thought of God’s desire to save all humankind. The mystery of Christ on the cross contradicts worldly wisdom, earthly powers, and earthly beauty.

Simply put, gazing upon the crucified Christ and following His example, we not only contemplate a new beauty and glory but we actually begin to share it: we become God’s beautiful new creation, members of the Body of the Risen Christ, more fully and deeply united with all our wounded, yet hopeful brothers and sisters throughout the world.

A century-and-a-half ago, a Russian novelist Fryodor Dostoevsky once said the world would be saved by beauty. Divine beauty alone—that is, the beauty of the crucified and risen Lord—can satisfy the deepest hungers of our hearts. Today, as we come forward to embrace the cross of Christ and allow Him to embrace us in the ugliness of our sin, we will indeed be saved by beauty, the beauty of the self-sacrificing and obedient love of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father. To Him be all glory now and in every age. Amen.