

Beauty opens hearts to the love of God

“*Da amantem, et sentit quod dico*,” says St. Augustine: “Give me a lover and he understands what I am saying.”

How can anyone understand the supreme value of beauty, if they are unable to feel love?

For example, I have grown up with Helene Grimaud. I love how she plays the piano. Although I do not know her personally, I have been listening to her albums ever since she first recorded one at the age of sixteen. That was in 1985, with the Rachmaninoff Piano Sonata No. 2.

But now she is about to



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release a new album at the end of this month, a double disc of Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op.15, and Piano Concerto No. 2 in B Flat, Op.83. I am very excited, and I can feel my love surging again. I joyfully anticipate the many hours of beauty when I will be listening to her interpret Brahms.

“Brahms’ music expresses life stripped to its emotional essence,” writes Grimaud in her album liner

notes. “The 2nd Concerto offers a journey of intimate introspection.”

“*Si autem frigido loquor, nescit quid loquor*,” says St. Augustine: “If I speak to one who is cold, he does not know what I am saying.”

The great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand quotes these Latin lines, from St. Augustine’s tractates on John’s Gospel, at the outset of his study of beauty, his masterpiece, the *Aesthetics*.

Von Hildebrand’s *Aesthetics* is nearly one thousand pages long and comes in two volumes. It was written in German near the end of his life, in less than a year,



Dietrich von Hildebrand

when he was more than 80 years old. Previously available in German, this work of genius has now been translated into English, by Fr. Brian McNeil. It will soon

be published by the Dietrich von Hildebrand Legacy Project and made widely available.

This exciting philosophical event is a terrific chance for lovers of beauty to reflect on their unique experience of beauty. What is it that burns with delight in our souls, and gives wings to our minds, whenever we contemplate the noblest beauties of aesthetic form?

Von Hildebrand gives a very interesting answer to this question: real love. His answer enables his *Aesthetics* to launch into some of the most profound meditations published in the twentieth century. Very soon, in the twenty-first century, these meditations will impact the English-speaking world. But decades ago Pope Pius XII already knew how important von Hildebrand’s thought was: “Von Hildebrand is the 20th-century doctor of the Church,” he said.

Moreover, “I am personally convinced that, when, at some time in the future, the intellectual history of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century is written, the name of Dietrich von Hildebrand will be most prominent among the figures of our time,” said Joseph Ratzinger (our beloved Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI).

Von Hildebrand gives serious attention to how beauty inspires love. He thus builds on a classic theme from the philosophical tradition. The fire of love, when it is fed by beauty, empowers the soul so that it can reach higher understanding. Plato famously said in the *Phaedrus*, his dialogue on beauty: “At the sight of beauty, the soul grows wings.”

At the outset of his study, after he quotes St. Augustine, von Hildebrand takes a stand: “Some things can be approached only with great reverence, for it is only then that they disclose themselves to us as they truly are. One of these is beauty,” he writes. “Beauty kindles love, and only the one who remains captivated by it, only the one who is intoxicated by it, only the one who remains a lover while he is investigating its essence, can hope to penetrate its essence.”

But von Hildebrand is careful to distinguish aesthetic experience from moral and religious experience. It is not equivalent. Yet it too demands our utmost attention and reverence. “We need not approach beauty on our knees, but we must be reverent and receptive, listening in all humility,” he writes.

And this is why: “Genuine beauty liberates us in many ways from the force of gravity, drawing us out of the dull captivity of daily life. At the sight of the truly beautiful we are freed from the tension that urges us on towards some immediate practical goal. We become contemplative, and this is immensely valuable,” insists von Hildebrand. “We expand, and even our soul itself becomes more beautiful when beauty comes to meet us, takes hold of us, and fires us with enthusiasm. It lifts us up above all that is base and common. It opens our eyes to the baseness, impurity, and wickedness of many things.”

Beauty thus provides a healing for our culture’s widespread moral corruption: “Contact with an environment permeated by beauty not only offers real protection against impurity, baseness, every kind of letting oneself go, brutality, and untruthfulness; it has also the positive effect of raising us up in a moral sense. It does not draw us into a self-centered pleasure where our only wish is to indulge ourselves. On the contrary, it opens our hearts, inviting us to transcendence and leading us in *conspicuum Dei*, before the face of God.”

But if you are unable to love when Helene makes music, I doubt you can ever understand Dietrich and me — and what we are raving about.

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