



## Understanding Reverence

### Cultivating a pilgrim's eye for beauty (Part III)

*Sister Dominic Mary Heath*

Many of us, unfortunately, won't find good role models of reverence close by. But another way to learn reverence, which is open to all of us, is to grow in understanding.

I once met a man in his sixties who complained to me about the simplistic way his third-grade teacher had explained heaven to him. She told the class that they should imagine having good things in heaven just like they have good things now. For example, if they lived in a blue house, they would have a blue house in heaven. This analogy, similar to the one C. S. Lewis uses in *The Last Battle*, didn't sit well with him as a child: his family lived in an apartment!

"Now, isn't that a silly way to explain heaven?" he asked me.

"Yes," I agreed. "But you're not a child anymore. ***To learn reverence, we have to become as receptive as little children.***

What have you done since third grade to understand heaven better?"

His is a common mentality. Many people grow up enough to criticize their first, childish ideas about faith, but don't follow through to more mature ideas about God, creation, and the human person. Left in a state of arrested development, reverence can't ripen.

Understanding allows us to experience reverence in its mature mode. It is the necessary completion of childlike imitation, no matter how young or old we are when we begin to comprehend divine truths. Understanding is something we can cultivate ourselves, firstly by studying the truths of nature and revelation, and secondly by removing misconceptions that are obstacles to reverence in our lives. If I imagine that God is a crotchety old man in the sky, for example, and don't know that he is spirit infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, who has created me to share in his goodness, I won't be able to assume an authentic posture of subjection to him, one of gratitude and supplication.

The point is that when I walk into a place of sacred beauty, the ideas I bring with me really matter. Irreverence grows out of ugly ideas I have about creation, the human person, and God's saving providence. These misconceptions make it difficult for me to recognize beauty no matter how much of it I see around me. Becoming aware of my own misconceptions can open me to the experience of beauty in its three traditional properties – proportion, integrity, and clarity – and serve as a remedy for irreverence itself.

#### **Reverence and Bodies**

Disregard for the body is a second common idea, one that keeps us from experiencing the beauty of the human person. Most of us are very comfortable with an easygoing attitude that says, "No worries, what I do with my body is spiritually irrelevant." The idea that bodies have responsibilities is unfamiliar, and the fact that reverence makes demands on our bodies seems rude. Reverence, religion, God: these are matters of the mind and soul.

Meanwhile, however, we're clearly missing something. And that's not a bad definition of ugly. Beauty is characterized by *integrity*. Integrity as an aesthetic value refers to the pleasure our minds take in seeing completeness and wholeness in things. It is the beauty of a thing that has all its parts, neither too many nor too few. It pleases me because through it I glimpse something of God – the fullness of being – himself. If I want to see the beauty of the world and my place in it (proportion), I can't overlook the fact that I am a soul *and* a body (integrity). It's precisely the integrity of the human person that explains why we owe God acts of embodied reverence.

We need our bodies in order to receive knowledge of the world around us. We derive knowledge from our five senses, all day long, every day of our lives. What's fascinating, however, is that we re-

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ceive knowledge of God in the same way. God has chosen to reveal himself to us according to the embodied mode of the human nature he has given us – incrementally, over time, using sensible words and deeds that are often mediated through other people.

The bodily mediation of Christian revelation is a basic premise of the Incarnation: the Word became *flesh* to reveal the face of the Father whom no one has seen (John 1:18). What's more, this mediation gives us a new perspective on the reverence we owe Christ in his humanity; it explains how what we pay him in justice returns to us in sweetness. Aquinas puts it this way:

Matters concerning the Godhead are, in themselves, the strongest incentive to love and consequently to devotion, because God is supremely lovable. Yet such is the weakness of the human mind that it needs a guiding hand, not only to the knowledge, but also to the love of Divine things by means of certain sensible objects known to us. Chief among these is the humanity of Christ.

Christ's humanity is a divinely foreseen aid, a "guiding hand," as Aquinas says; our hearts and minds are weak and cannot pierce the heavenly realms on their own. This is why reverence for Christ's humanity – the kind of devotion motivating centuries of pilgrims to the Holy Sepulchre – is not an awkward compromise with superstition or an unfortunate falling away from pure, reasonable religion. Instead, it is an aid intrinsic to God's *ordinatio*, or saving order: "God," writes Saint Teresa of Avila, "desires that if we are going to please Him and receive His great favors, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ, in whom He takes His delight."

That God continues to work within this bodily mode is a basic premise of Christian anthropology for which we should be grateful. It not only means we can hear God in Christ. It also means we can speak back.

Our bodies speak reverence to God in the same way they have been spoken to: incrementally, over time, using sensible words and deeds often mediated through other people. For example, when we humble our bodies in God's presence by bowing, kneeling, or even just folding our hands, we are using our bodies to speak reverence. When we deny our bodies by fasting, almsgiving, and other forms of Christian sacrifice, we are using them to speak reverence. When we gather our bodies at the times and places consecrated for God with the people of God, we are using them to speak reverence. And when we put our bodies at the service of others out of love for God and neighbor, we are using them to speak reverence.

At the same time, we are also shaping our lives into an integral whole that is nothing less than beautiful. But in a world where bodies have no responsibilities, we miss it.



#### THOUGHTS OF HENRI NOUWEN

"Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, "Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody." ... [My dark side says,] I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."

"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

#### In Memoriam

9.30am: Stephen Magner (Anniversary)  
11am: Marian Mc Evilly (1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary)  
5pm: Frank D'Arcy (Anniversary)

Weekend of 16 June

6pm Vigil: David Thompson

#### Masses and Confession

**Sundays:** Vigil, 6pm (Saturday), 9.30am, 11am, 5pm  
Croatian Community Mass 6.30pm

Daily masses 10am and 12.40pm, Saturday 10am only  
-**Rosary** daily after 10am mass

**Adoration Blessed Sacrament**, Weds 10.30-12.40

#### Last Week's Collections

1<sup>st</sup> Collection: €835  
Share Collection: €605  
Weekday collections: €646

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