

# Making Sense of the Claim that Beauty is Knowledge

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**ABSTRACT:** Pope Benedict XVI claims that beauty is knowledge. This article seeks to understand this claim through Leonardo Polo's theory of knowledge. Polo distinguishes between objective knowledge and symbolic knowledge. Beauty as knowledge would fall under symbolic knowledge. Polo lists five intellectual symbols, among which is *deity*. This is relevant as Benedict XVI claims specifically that artistic beauty may communicate knowledge of God. Finally, Polo identifies sentiments of the soul by which the person has inklings of both innate habits of the soul and extramental realities. It would seem possible to express these sentiments in musical rhythms, transforming a musical composition into a communication about God.

**KEYWORDS:** Art, Beauty, Symbolic Knowledge, Knowledge by Connaturality



In his message to the *Comunione e Liberazione* in Rimini in 2002, Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) cites Nicholas Cabasilas, the fourteenth century Greek theologian who claimed that beauty is knowledge. It is a claim Cabasilas makes of the beauty of Christ. Ratzinger appropriates Cabasilas's definition and applies it to art, narrating a personal experience apposite to his point:

For me an unforgettable experience was the Bach concert that Leonard Bernstein conducted in Munich after the sudden death of Karl Richter. I was sitting next to the Lutheran Bishop Hanselmann. When the last note of one of the great Thomaskantor Cantatas triumphantly faded away, we looked at each other spontaneously and right then we said: "Anyone who has heard this knows that the faith is true." In that music there was a power perceptible that was so extraordinary of present reality, although coming from the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothing, but could only have come from the power of the truth present in the composer's inspiration. (Ratzinger 2002)

In this particular experience of Ratzinger's, beauty is knowledge of the truth of the faith. This is a broad claim. The cantata Ratzinger listened to was "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" (BWV 140), also known as "Sleepers Awake," whose lyrics speak of the Bride and Bridegroom, their desire for one another, and their eventual wedding. The Bride and Bridegroom are traditional figures for the Church and Christ, the soul and Christ, Israel and the Messiah, but when Ratzinger says that anyone who has heard the cantata knows that the faith is true, he does not restrict himself to what the lyrics express. He refers to nothing less than Christian faith in its entirety.

This knowledge, Ratzinger says, came with the impact of the music on his heart. The impact itself came from "the power of the truth present in the composer's inspiration." Almost ten years later, Benedict XVI related the same anecdote in a general audience:

I remember a concert performance of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach—in Munich in Bavaria—conducted by Leonard Bernstein. At the conclusion of the final selection, one of the Cantate, I felt—not through reasoning, but in the depths of my heart—that what I had just heard had spoken truth to me, truth about the supreme composer, and it moved me to give thanks to God. Seated next to me was the Lutheran bishop of Munich. I spontaneously said to him: "Whoever has listened to this

understands that it is true”; the faith that is as strong as that is true, and so is the beauty that irresistibly expresses the presence of God's truth. (Benedict XVI, 2011)

In this re-telling, Benedict specifies that the cantata spoke the truth about God. Benedict cites Andrei Rublëv's icon of the blessed Trinity as another artwork with which one could have a similar experience. (Benedict XVI, 2011) We are ready to accept the equivalence of truth and beauty at a metaphysical level, but at the level of the real, at the level of a concert performance? Did Ratzinger allow his own faith to dictate the impression he received? Was he guilty of bias? In the general audience just cited, Benedict cites the experience of Paul Claudel who entered the Notre Dame de Paris an atheist and left a believer, entranced by the beauty of the Magnificat sung by the choir at a Christmas Mass, Benedict's point being, I suppose, that one's personal beliefs do not dictate our reaction to beauty. Did Ratzinger think the cantata to be true because it was beautiful? Or was the cantata beautiful because it was true? When Benedict speaks of “the beauty that irresistibly expresses the presence of God's truth,” what he seems to be driving at with regard to his experience is that there was no need to argue from beauty to truth or from truth to beauty; rather, one sensed the presence of the truth of the Christian faith in the very beauty of the cantata. (Benedict XVI, 2011) Both truth and beauty were grasped in a single experience, not in his head, Ratzinger/Benedict clarifies, but in the depths of his heart. *How* is that possible, we may ask?

In his address to artists of 2009, Benedict says the experience of beauty occasioned by an artwork may bring a person in contact with the Other, with what is Beyond oneself, the Mystery, the abyss of Infinity. (Benedict 2009) In other writings Benedict uses “Other” and “Infinity” to refer to God, but in the address to artists that I am citing, Benedict distinguishes between the encounter with the Other, the Beyond oneself, the Mystery, Infinity and the encounter with the Transcendent, the ultimate Mystery, God. In other words, in his address to artists, Benedict does not limit himself to artworks on religious themes. He quotes Simone Weil: “In all that awakens within us the pure and authentic sentiment of beauty, there, truly, is the presence of God. There is a kind of incarnation of God in the world, of which beauty is the sign. Beauty is the experimental proof that incarnation is possible. For this reason all first-rate art is, by its nature, religious.” Benedict quotes Hermann Hesse as well: “Art means: re-

vealing God in everything that exists.” (Benedict 2009) Benedict wishes to make it clear that he refers to all art, not just religious art. Maybe we should follow Simone Weil’s example and add, “All first-rate art.”

The encounter with the Other, with what is Beyond oneself, the Mystery, Infinity is not unknown to teachers of literature, art, and music. There certainly is such knowledge at the end of Homer, in the contemplation of a Leonardo da Vinci, by the close of a composition by Bach—knowledge that is of a piece with the experience of the work’s beauty. It is difficult to put that knowledge into words, and the knowledge is experienced very differently from knowledge from books of philosophy, theology, or the social sciences. But what *is* this knowledge that seems to be knowledge of abstract realities and yet is not, which is comparable to direct knowledge of material reality and yet is not?

I have turned to Leonardo Polo for answers to these questions, and a key answer is what Polo calls “symbolic knowledge.” What does Polo mean by *symbol*? “The symbol is the temporalization of the truth, the road to approach it, which can appear in its entirety.” (Polo 2005, 208) It is the truth existing in time and space, that is, as concrete reality, *leading* to the truth outside of time and space, but it is able to do that only because it *is* the truth temporalized. “For Nietzsche,” Polo says, “‘to symbolize’ is the same as ‘to connote.’ ‘To connote’ means at one and the same time ‘to gather and to send.’” (Polo 2005, 207) This is what the artwork does: It gathers mental associations and sends us to a particular meaning. Benedict in his general audience of 2011 calls the artwork a communication on the part of the artist. Do we have here divergent views? The two views are of the same thing from two different vantage points. Nietzsche takes the point of view of the viewer/listener/reader of art looking at the finished object; Benedict takes the point of view of the artist looking at the object in the process of becoming. The artist’s means of communication is the artwork, and the artwork is a vehicle for symbolic knowledge. In his general audience, Benedict says that what the artist seeks to communicate is the deep meaning of visible reality that he has grasped.

For Polo there are two kinds of symbols: those of the imagination, those of the intellect. (Polo 2005, 209) Of these two Polo explores only the latter, but the former—and this is the first point I wish to

make in this article—can send the viewer/listener/reader of art to the latter. What are intellectual symbols?

Intellectual symbols are ideas that arise from “pursued” or “continued” knowledge, in contrast to objective knowledge which Polo describes as “stopped” or “detained.” (Polo 2005, 212) Intellectual symbols are the fruit of insisting on understanding deeply and yet more deeply. They are called symbols because they point to realities that can be elucidated only “above reason,” and what that means we will now see.

In Polo’s theory of thought there are three innate habits of the soul by which the human being can know “beyond reason”: *synderesis*, *intellectus*, and wisdom. (Polo 2005, 217) These names are familiar to Thomists. We know *synderesis* to be the habit of the first practical principle: Do well and avoid evil. *Intellectus* is known by a longer name: the habit of the first principles. Both *intellectus* and wisdom appear in the list of five intellectual virtues. *Synderesis* is ordinarily understood to initiate practical action, but in Polo’s anthropology, aside from initiating practical action it also initiates intellection. Polo equates it with the I in contemporary philosophy. (Polo 2005, 219)

Polo takes Thomas’s real distinction seriously and places *synderesis* in the essence of the human being, *intellectus* and wisdom in the person’s being. (Polo 2005, 216-217) What this means is that the knowledge we acquire through *intellectus* and wisdom is experienced as coming from deep within us. That is what I understand by Pascal’s heart. (I would like to see here an echo of Benedict’s “depths of the heart.”) I would not have to explain this if this lecture were in my native language Tagalog; there Pascal’s *heart* would be translated as “kalooban” which literally means “intimate depths.” The knowledge that beauty is comes from the intimate depths of the person. *Intellectus*, Polo says, is the habit by which we know the acts of being outside the person; wisdom, the habit by which we know the person we each are intimately. (Polo 2005, 225)

Polo lists intellectual symbols in his book on Nietzsche: *consciousness*, *physis* or *nature*, *ens* or *the being*, the logical *axioms*, and *deity*. (Polo 2005, 217-225) The knowledge of various things pursued more and more deeply converges on these five basic ideas. Polo says

intellectual symbols are not abstractions. They are not generalizations. They are not “elicited.” (Polo 2005, 213)<sup>1</sup> They appear with the illumination of cognitive acts. (Polo 2005, 213) Polo describes them as “verbs at the point of take-off.” (Polo 2003, 232) Like Thomas’s *esse*, they are dynamic realities that should not be frozen into forms. Most of us are used to refer to the real distinction as a noun; Polo asks us to refer to it as a verb. Why describe them as “at the point of take-off”? Because they are symbols and therefore exhibit something of the symbol’s enigmatic character. “Take-off” refers to decipherment. I would call them “intuitions” while they are enigmatic, “insights” once deciphered. How are they deciphered? Certain ideas related to essence are deciphered by *synderesis*: *consciousness*, *physis* or *nature*, *ens* or *the being*. Beyond *synderesis*, Polo identifies intellectual experience in which the decipherment of symbols related to *esse* occurs, carried out by *intellectus*. (Polo 2005, 209)

Among these symbols is *deity*, and that should catch our attention because when Benedict speaks of artistic beauty as knowledge, he frequently means knowledge of God. A relation between the artwork as symbol on the one hand and intellectual symbols on the other suggests itself: the artwork experienced as symbol—as *imaginative* symbol—sends us to an intellectual symbol. This is exactly what Polo says in his *Course on Theory of Knowledge*, although he does not expand on it. (Polo 2006, 22)<sup>2</sup>

Aside from the references to God, there is the repeated reference to force or power, presence and truth in Benedict’s two relations of the Bach anecdote. Power is felt to be emanating from the very presence of truth. I believe Benedict to be trying to capture the experience of the decipherment of *deity* carried out by the *intellectus*, and the decipherment is experienced as the presence of truth, so strong as to seem a sensible force. The knowledge coming from *intellectus* is intuitive, not discursive. It usually comes as a grace, as a gift; it is not

<sup>1</sup> “Para lograr el conocimiento de símbolos no basta con los actos de la inteligencia que tradicionalmente se llaman *operaciones inmanentes*.”

<sup>2</sup> “Con la construcción imaginativa surge el símbolo, asunto que pertenece a la teoría del arte. La imaginación constructiva se llama también imaginación simbólica; los símbolos son imágenes con una sobrecarga intencional por la que aluden a algo que no presentan, que está más allá de la imagen: a ese algo conducen, dejándolo, sin embargo, latente.”

a peak that is conquered laboriously. But this is precisely the way that beauty as knowledge reveals itself: as a sudden manifestation characterized by depth.

But there is more.

Benedict is emphatic that the experience of beauty he had with the Bach cantata came not from the cantata's lyrics or dramatic situations but from its music. It is easy to see how the lyrics or dramatic situations of "Sleepers Awake" might suggest God to the listener, but the music? Here Polo may once again be of help.

In the "depths of the heart" may be found not only intellectual experience, but also what Polo calls "moral experience," which he informs us is no different from knowledge from connaturality, that "light that moral virtue provides," in the words of Aquinas. (Polo 2005, 227) A person *knows* certain things because of the virtue he possesses. Polo identifies three virtues in particular that provide inklings (or notices) of the innate habits of the spirit: the virtues of friendship, justice, and prudence. Friendship, says Polo, is the inkling of the innate habit of wisdom; justice, of *intellectus*; prudence, of synderesis. (Polo 2005, 228)

How does this relate to music?

Polo claims that each of the three innate habits is congruent with a characteristic "sentiment of the spirit." (Polo 2003, 225) Polo calls these sentiments that inkling itself of the innate habits they are congruent with. (Polo 2005, 227) The habit of wisdom is congruent with elation, "an exultant and controlled rapture"; (Polo 2003, 227) *intellectus*, with serenity; (Polo 2005, 230) synderesis, with gentleness. (Polo 2005, 230) The sentiments of the spirit, Polo observes, send us to extramental realities: the sentiment of synderesis (gentleness) to the good, the sentiment of *intellectus* (serenity) to the being of things, and the sentiment of wisdom (elation) to God. (Polo 2005, 231) In particular, Polo notes that the virtue of friendship is the inkling of the habit of wisdom because it incites us to pursue "lo más alto," the highest, nothing less than friendship with "lo superior, la sabiduría, Dios," the superior, wisdom, God. (Polo 2005, 228, note 30)

Polo calls the particular sentiment congruent with a particular innate habit the "tone" of the sentiment. (Polo 2003, 26-27; 2005, 228, 230) For Polo one cannot discuss sentiments of the spirit without alluding to the particular tone of the sentiment, and the tones are the

reason why knowledge by connaturality is difficult to describe. The metaphor is auditory; is it too much to call it musical? Each of these tones is, of course, translatable *as tones* into particular rhythms, and there lies one explanation of how music could be a source of knowledge, even of God: through the actual use of particular rhythms that refer us to both extramental realities and innate habits of the soul. Why keep Polo's metaphor "verbal"? Why not attack it as music?

The master of rhythms that bear the listener to the divine is, of course, Bach, and I would like to invite the reader to listen to parts 1 (Chorale) and 4 (Aria) of "Sleepers Awake." There you will find rhythms of serenity combined with rhythms of elation, of the variety Polo describes as "an exultant and controlled rapture." (Polo 2003, 227) In part 1, serenity dominates, but in part 4, controlled rapture does. Then compare parts 3 and 6, the duets of the soul and Christ. Part 3 presents us with a gentle rhythm: it is the soul and Christ longing for one another; part 6, on the other hand, is pure unadulterated "exultant and controlled rapture," when the soul is united to Christ and Christ to the soul. In one sense, these rhythms are determined by the texts of the cantata, but in another, if one separates the music from the text, what we have is a gradual elevation of the mind—from the gentleness of *synderesis* to the serenity of *intellectus* to the controlled rapture of the habit of wisdom. We often hear of music ennobling the soul; Polo explains how; Bach shows how.

Let me now examine three quotations from T. S. Eliot which I think are relevant to Polo's point about thinking beyond reason. The first comes in Eliot's long essay on Dante, commenting on modern man's prejudice against allegory: "We take it for granted that our dreams spring from below: possibly the quality of our dreams suffers in consequence." (Eliot, 1960a, 204) To Freud's unconscious, we should contrapose Polo's; what we imagine Freud's unconscious to do to conjure what Eliot calls the low dream, we must imagine the innate habits do to conjure what Eliot calls the high dream. The second quotation comes from Eliot's long essay on the metaphysical poets: "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility." (Eliot 1960b, 247) Of course, it isn't possible to *feel* one's thought unless one acquires some distance from it, unless one is able to view it. This is crucial to Polo's theory on symbolic knowledge, and we are

not here talking of self-consciousness or reflection, but precisely of the innate habits of the soul which “observe” one’s thought taking place at a lower level. It is from that sustained illumination on the part of the habits that the intellectual symbols emerge. Eliot’s remark that thought modified Donne’s sensibility, which I take to mean the way Donne perceived concrete things, proposes the continuity between thought and sensibility. This is a point Polo makes about symbolic knowledge: the dogged pursuit of understanding that eventually yields intellectual symbols does not mean a greater and greater distancing from reality. (Polo 2005, 216)<sup>3</sup> Here is the third quotation:

...the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (Eliot 1960b)

If I substituted Polo’s name for Eliot’s poet, would Polo turn in his grave? Eliot’s “new wholes” are not generalizations; they are not abstractions; they are, I would say, the transmutation of experiences into symbols, symbols of the imagination and intellectual symbols, which are the subject matter of his *Four Quartets*.

Why these three quotations from Eliot? I wish to make the point that what Polo says about symbolic knowledge is not unknown to great artists—among them Dante, the metaphysical poets, and Eliot.

Let me make a summary of what we have gone through. I began with the exposition of the claim made by Benedict XVI in various discourses that beauty is knowledge. The knowledge that beauty reportedly is comes not from reason, but from the depths of the heart, and is a knowledge that is not secondhand as from books or classes, but rather more like knowledge from the direct experience of the object known. I have proposed that Polo’s theory of knowledge, and specifically his theory of symbolic knowledge, intellectual experience, and knowledge by connaturality, may explain the sort of knowledge which Benedict says beauty is. Certainly, the decipherment of the artwork as symbol may be compared to the illumination of phan-

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<sup>3</sup> “El símbolo ideal va más allá de las determinaciones sensibles, sin que eso signifique, como entiende Kant, una pérdida de contenido, puesto que el contenido de los símbolos no es empírico, sino inteligible.”

tasms, but after the illumination of phantasms must follow the illumination of the intellectual operations and acquired habits that have accompanied the reading of the poem or contemplation of the work of art. Polo's theory of knowledge is not limited to memory, imagination, and reason, but includes *synderesis*, *intellectus*, and wisdom. The artwork operates on all these levels of cognition simultaneously, and in the hands of Shakespeare or Dante, Michelangelo or Leonardo, Bach or Mozart one level may be deliberately contrasted with, reinforced, or developed by another. The development of knowledge in the enjoyment of a work of art takes place not along a line, but in the middle of a matrix.

The ultimate purpose of this exercise has been to introduce the reader to aspects of Polo's thought. I have not quoted Polo on beauty. Polo has not written a book on art or aesthetics or beauty, although I have seen the manuscript of a lecture on art in electronic format and Polo does have remarks on these topics strewn through his oeuvre. If we compare Polo's thought to the globe, then his theory of knowledge is the Pacific Ocean. We have looked at a little corner of it, the part of greater interest to artists and art critics.

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