

**Rejoicing in the Works of the Lord:  
A Joyful Affirmation of Neumann Values**

Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ

Presentation for the Welcome Back Celebration  
Neumann University  
August 26, 2009

When we last met, in this auditorium at approximately this same time of year, I reflected with you upon the centrality of beauty in the Franciscan intellectual tradition, and upon how beauty might re-energize academic discourse and educational planning here at Neumann. Since then, I have had some time to reflect more at length upon the centrality of beauty as an intellectual and spiritual experience, and upon the impact of that experience upon a person. I am sure you too have had some time for discussions and planning about the role of the beautiful for the formation of students as whole persons: intellectually, emotionally and physically.

Today, I would like to continue my reflection with a more prolonged consideration of the experience of beauty, and how it holds within it the key to the experience of joy: the deepest human experience of fulfillment. Joy is not simply delight or pleasure; joy is the fruit of intellectual striving, the culmination of all the values that Neumann holds dear: joy includes reverence and celebration, integrity and honesty, humility and service, excellence in achievement and gratitude and stewardship.

To begin my reflection upon the experience of beauty and its impact on me, I would like to begin with a story from my own undergraduate experience:

When I was in college, I was a French major. Oh, of course, I had begun as a chemistry major, then moved to history, before I realized that what I really loved doing was reading literature and engaging in the study of languages. As part of my course of study, I had the opportunity to spend my junior year abroad in Paris. I will never forget the first time I visited the

beautiful gothic cathedral of Chartres, France. A friend and I decided to travel to Chartres for a Sunday liturgy. As we walked from the train station and approached the cathedral, the bells began to ring. I saw the huge building rise up before my eyes. The incomparable statues on the façade, most notably that of Christ the King, and the early flying buttresses were imposing and stylized. As we entered, temporarily blinded by the darkness, the organ began to play. Ever so slowly, the interior came into focus. The candles, the labyrinth on the stone floor, the rose window, the smiling virgin: all these were elements I had studied in my high school French class, and here I was at last! The experience was far more than I had expected and anticipated. My eyes, my ears, all my senses were filled with colors, sounds, music and art. I was surrounded by salvation history, told with bits of colored glass, stretching up to the ceiling, with light pouring in around me. I looked with joy at the reds and blues of Chartres' stained-glass which have never been duplicated. We don't know how the medieval artisans managed to get those tints of red and blue.

My experience of the beauty of this medieval cathedral on that Sunday in November was, of course, a particular experience of the beauty of a particular building in a particular city, in a particular country, at a particular moment in my life. Nonetheless, the moment had something transcendent and transcending about it. In and through this small experience, surrounded by beauty, I belonged to something much bigger, much grander than my small life. I had come to the end of a journey, a type of pilgrimage, to see and feel what I had read about years before.

Beauty has that power over us, doesn't it? The power to satisfy, to teach, to transform, to take us out of ourselves and to transport us to another dimension, beyond our own lives, our own concerns, our own petty preoccupations. As I have learned over the past twenty years, it is not just beauty, but the experience of beauty and its impact on the individual that explains the key

insight of the Franciscan tradition, in its intellectual, scientific, artistic and spiritual expressions. Beauty and joy are the two central characteristics that undergird the Franciscan experience of the natural world, the person and God. Because of this, the Franciscan intellectual tradition has a distinctly *affective* dimension to it. The human rational journey is not simply about learning how to think correctly, it is a matter of learning to feel correctly, to sense correctly, to notice and, most importantly, to act correctly. We see the model of such correct action clearly in the life of St. Francis of Assisi.

So, with my own experience of Chartres in mind, we can travel to Assisi. Among the Giotto frescos in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi are two images that recall important events from the saint's life. Each fresco captures an aspect of Francis's own transformation into beauty. The first is the well-known image showing him in ecstasy, at the moment he receives the stigmata. The second fresco recalls an event from Francis's early life recorded in the *Legenda Major*. In this scene, a young Francis, still dressed comfortably, encounters a poor knight and, without hesitation, removes his cloak and offers it to him. In a moment of spontaneous generosity, the legend recounts, the young man performs two acts of *pietas*: he gives away what he owns to someone who is impoverished and he affirms the dignity of one who has been humiliated by the events of life.

These frescos are beautiful. They are also set in a beautiful basilica: bathed in light, their colors fill the eye of the visitor. Their story surrounds the pilgrim, drawing his eyes higher to the vaulted ceilings, resplendent with visual beauty. Once again, the cumulative experience is overwhelming. No one who visits the basilica, who walks around to admire the frescos, can leave Assisi unaffected.

Experiences of beauty such as these are both uplifting and edifying. They educate and inspire. In the Giotto frescos we witness the human journey, Francis's own life, from the selfishness of youth to his conversion and transformation into Christ. Together, the images serve as icons: they hold before our eyes the dynamic nature of the Franciscan vision of human perfection as growth into love. Like icons, they invite us to enter into a personal transformation into beauty.

My own experience in Chartres and the Giotto frescos offer examples of a central Franciscan insight: that all life can be best understood according to a *via pulcritudinis*, a journey or way of beauty. Franciscans see all of life: creation, the human person, human action, divine life and love through the prisms of harmony and beauty.

### **What is beauty?**

So now I ask you to sit back, get comfortable, close your eyes and recall a time when you were struck by the experience of beauty. What happened? How did you respond? The experience of beauty is both personal and something we share with others. We can each tell and re-tell stories of a beautiful sunset, a beautiful concert, a profoundly moving work of literature, a moment when a piece of poetry, music, art or theatre touched us deeply.

What do we love when we love beauty? What is it about the beautiful that draws us, that inspires us, that satisfies our desire? Do we somehow understand the beautiful as a good we seek? Something we have lost and suddenly found again? Is the experience of beauty a home we have come back to, at long last? Is there something true or authentic about beauty that attracts our loving admiration? Does the experience of beauty bring together a variety of disparate elements: colors, sights, sounds, feelings?

For the Franciscan tradition, the experience of beauty responds deeply and affirmatively to all of these questions. And, in addition, beauty is something more: it is part of the journey toward the fullness of our humanity. It is a formative journey in which every member of an academic community takes part: administrators, faculty, staff, counselors, coaches, everyone here is a member of the formative team, whose goal is the personal transformation of each student.

The path of beauty is a type of wholistic pedagogy. Beauty is essential to human wisdom and an integral part of the journey toward God. It both uses language and transcends language. It is expressed in nature and in art, in science and in literature. Beauty is, quite simply, the foundational human experience that unites mind and heart, spirit and body, activity and passivity, beyond time, beyond culture, beyond point of view. Creation of beauty in art, literature, poetry and music is a distinguishing characteristic of the human person and all human culture.

In order to understand more fully the nature of our experience of beauty, let us list some of the aspects of the beautiful. First of all, there is **the pattern**, the **ordered relationship of parts**. The beautiful scene, poetry, music, painting or action is internally ordered. The parts fit together to form a whole. The experience of this rational and relational order is pleasing to the mind and to the heart. Things are right where they are supposed to be.

Second, we notice proper **proportion**. Not only is everything in its place, but it is there only as much as is needed. No more, no less. Parts do not overwhelm each other; one element does not stand out inappropriately. This sense of relationship among the parts is pleasing to the eye and ear.

Third, **harmony** is also a characteristic of beauty. In the harmonic chord, we discover ordered proportion, delight and satisfaction. There is no clash of dissonance, no striking conflict

of color. There is a blending of tones and shades. In music, the harmony can be simple (two notes) or complex (polyphony).

All these elements work together to form a **unified whole**. The beautiful object is itself complete and in need of nothing more. Parts are integrated, the whole is itself pleasing and delightful to behold. In a choral work, for example, we hear the ordered notes, the voices blended together in proper proportion, with point and counterpoint, tonal intensity, sharps and flats all combined to create a single experience of pleasure.

In some cases, there can also be a sense of **luminosity**, or light, associated with the experience of beauty. Beauty enters as an epiphany, a splendor that illuminates and transforms. This sense of luminosity can be understood as the link to a divine source of light, order, and harmony.

These aspects all belong to the beautiful object. And yet, there is a final, subjective aspect we must not forget: the **delight and joy** of the observer, listener, participant. Not only does the beautiful object contain and assemble a variety of disparate elements into a single, unified experience, but the person who notices and appreciates beauty is profoundly touched and transformed. Here is a spiritual satisfaction that is unforgettable.

In an educational setting, we might also add that beauty has something to do with wisdom, with understanding and analysis, with seeking and finding, with the haunting sense that we know something we cannot explain or articulate. The experience of beauty unites people across cultures and across generations.

The vision of beauty I have just described is quite different from what many of our contemporaries and most of our students hold. Today, our society identifies beauty almost exclusively with the areas we call the fine arts, sculpture, architecture, music and dance. These

activities often hold a special place for us, but only in a corner of our lives: as decorations, as a gift to a friend, when we take a special afternoon outing to a museum, as our beloved hobby or a luxury. We think that beauty belongs to that category called “matters of personal taste.” We don’t have to agree on what I find beautiful or what you find beautiful. We take for granted that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” We certainly do not see beauty as a foundational frame or lens through which we understand the world, God, ourselves and our moral actions.

But the Franciscan tradition does just that. Franciscan life centers around, is unified by and understands itself in terms of a foundational experience of beauty. In this, the tradition celebrates that deep and central insight of its original medieval culture: that Beauty is a transcendental attribute of being, unifying the true and the good. Beauty is not just one aspect of reality, not just one element among many. Rather beauty is *the deepest* foundation of reality. Beauty can be another name for God.

Beauty is foundational and unifying. In beauty we recognize how all things fit together, how apparently opposing elements contribute to a larger picture composed of dark shades and bright colors, of sharps and flats, of important and unimportant things. In its affirmation that beauty is a central lens through which we understand all life, the Franciscan tradition offers something quite new, one might even call it scandalous, for our consideration today. It is a broader, more expansive and more inclusive vision of reality and human rationality.

### **But what does it mean for a university?**

All this may be very interesting and quite uplifting, but how in the world can this relate to a university education? First, as a Franciscan university, education here at Neumann differs from that of another institution in the way that the Franciscan vision of wholistic pedagogy differs

from career-based education. Education forms a whole, not simply limited to the classroom, but to the residence halls, to the gym, to every moment of every day. And each person here: each staff person, faculty member, administrator, coach, EVS personnel: everyone is involved in the Franciscan vision of education here at Neumann.

We know, however, that many of our students do not see things this way. They see education as a narrow, classroom experience, guided by the syllabus and geared toward the final exam. They talk about finishing college and going out into “the real world”. They measure a successful education in terms of how well and easily they can find and establish their career after they graduate, or with their desire to do well on the LSAT, GMAT, NCLEX or PRAXIS, with their fears about the job market and their own future. If your university is like mine, we can easily be drawn into this narrow vision of education. Accrediting agencies ask for outcomes assessments, learning objectives, measurable and quantifiable results. Let’s face it: the career-based model of education is far easier to measure than the “transformation-based” model. And yet, the Franciscan tradition (or any spiritual/intellectual tradition) embraces a vision of education that focuses on personal transformation: transformation of mind and spirit, transformation of character and life. Everyone at Neumann cares more about the young men and women who leave the institution than about their career successes or placements.

So how can we deepen, strengthen and broaden the case for the Franciscan pedagogical vision, and in particular, how might we make an even stronger case for Neumann’s Franciscan educational vocation, centered on the values of reverence, integrity, service, excellence and stewardship? I have a few thoughts for your reflection and discussion.

The Franciscan tradition gives witness to a profoundly *aesthetic* intellectual and spiritual vision. A prolonged meditation on the experience of beauty and upon its transformative power in



our lives can help to clarify and enhance our own individual ability to take the human journey to God, traced by Augustine, Francis, Clare and all the great saints and scholars of the tradition. Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God* offers us a map from which to consider this journey more carefully. This is a map that all persons are invited to take; it is a pedagogical map toward human fullness. Each member of the academic community at Neumann plays a role in guiding students along this three-fold formative journey. I will list the three stages and then offer more detailed comments, raising some questions for your further consideration.

The spiritual/intellectual journey surrounding beauty is understood by Bonaventure to have three distinct moments. There is a preliminary moment of **awareness** and recognition, the moment when we notice something beautiful in the world that is present to us. We also notice our experience, our feelings, thoughts and reactions, to it. This object of our attention delights us, and we rejoice in its beauty. At this phase I would place the key Neumann and Franciscan values of Reverence, for all persons and for creation, and Integrity of character.

The second moment involves the **reflective unfolding** of the experience. Key to the journey, this moment involves a shift from exterior to interior: a movement toward the *inner person*. We recognize that such external beauty cannot be the cause of its own existence, for, sadly, it is ephemeral and fleeting. There must be a greater beauty, a deeper and richer experience of Beauty that both constitutes and explains our experience of joy and delight. Attention to subjective awareness opens to greater *interiority*: to an awareness of God's presence within. Here we might understand the centrality of the values of Integrity and Excellence, of cooperative learning and teaching styles, of challenge and high standards.

The third and final moment for Bonaventure lies in the dynamic **transformative embrace** of Beauty, the ultimate communion with the source of all that is beautiful. This is not

an end, but a new beginning. Here interiority and exteriority collapse: the God within becomes the God within whose embrace the human person is held. Inner/outer, upper/lower, ascending/descending: now all the categories of the journey collapse into one another: there is only Love. From within this communion, each person is transformed. Here the three values of Reverence, Integrity and Excellence come together to pour outward into Service and Stewardship. In right action and right loving, all the values become incarnate in each person, whether student, staff, faculty, administrator.

We might be tempted to think that such a journey is *linear*; that it is a passage from this world to the next, from *here* to *there* or from *now* to *then*, as from one point on a line to another. We might think of the values as an ascending staircase, with service and stewardship at the summit. We might consider graduation the end point toward which all efforts are directed, with the graduate as a sort of Franciscan “product”. This, too, might make sense with the Franciscan tradition, especially when we look at its emphasis on love and on action. But a deeper consideration reveals that this cannot be the case, because the Franciscan vision of education is *organic* rather than mechanistic. Rather than see the journey of education as one that moves from this experience to the next, Franciscans understood the journey as a *spiritual pedagogy*: as the gradual training and, ultimately, transformation of the person into beauty in this life. The spiritual master or guide needed to help in the journey is the person who has come to that point in her life where she sees beauty everywhere because she sees divine Beauty everywhere. Beauty, like light, illuminates and transforms all that exists. Such an experience of transformation into beauty anticipates the ultimate communion we will experience at the end of our life. But this experience involves an *immanent* spiritual transformation: a transcendence that

is possible in this life. For Franciscans, spiritual transformation into beauty never involves leaving this world, for it requires the continued presence of beauty, both spiritual and corporeal.

Now that we have seen the three stages, let's consider, during the final moments of my presentation, a type of *pedagogical journey through Neumann's values*. We will frame them within Bonaventure's three-fold pattern of awareness (learning to notice beauty), unfolding (learning to reflect upon beauty), and embrace (learning to live out of beauty).

### **I. Learning to notice beauty: Reverence and Integrity**

We begin with the initial stage: learning to pay attention and notice beauty. The beauty of creation is not a fluke; it is not the result of random chaotic movements in the universe. Rather, it is the result of divine rational and intentional behavior: the decision to bring into being and sustain the created order. Created beauty reflects rational beauty. It is based upon the rational canons for beauty (order, proportion, harmony, luminosity) and points to the idea of intrinsic goodness. Those things which possess intrinsic goodness are worthy of love for themselves alone: they are not meant to be used or exploited by another.

God, most certainly, is the being whose intrinsic goodness is eminent. Each person, too, possesses intrinsic dignity, based upon the image of God within. But we can also add other values to this list of intrinsically good things worthy of our love: truth, virtue, integrity and character are all aspects of the highest form of goodness, and therefore belong to the category of rational beauty.

So, we might ask the following question:

How do the students at Neumann currently grow in their ability to notice the beauty of the world around them, to treat it with reverence and to deepen their own integrity? Might these efforts be deepened and expanded?

How do administrators and staff members model an adult awareness of beauty, a reverence for creation and for persons, a life of integrity?

Might the first year have as its goal helping students to **learn to notice beauty**? Students could be encouraged, in every class and at every turn, to **pay attention!** Could the first year of university education be that of **learning to see what is there**? Learning to notice the beautiful? Learning to attend with reverence to the world around them?

Might each department, each major, each residence hall, each athletic program, each service program identify ways that they already promote the growth of students in this area? How could these efforts be intensified?

## **II. Understanding beauty: Integrity and Excellence**

Paying attention to the world around us is the first step; paying attention to our own internal world, to our attitudes, feelings, thoughts, reflections is the far more difficult second step. The path of understanding involves analysis, synthesis, critical reasoning and creative thinking. It is here that the academic disciplines play the central and essential role.

Here I would like to paraphrase the words we heard in the prayer this morning: “Integrity is one of the most difficult character traits we have to mature in because it requires so much introspection. We ask many questions in the business of life: Neumann University’s holistic education provides us with the opportunity to become wealthy but, we must work to expand our definition to include spiritual wealth as well as economic. We must develop our conscience but,

we must decide what satisfaction really is: is it getting what we want, or is it found in what we already have? Our ever-developing knowledge in science is fantastic, but are we providing ethics from the womb to the tomb? Do our choices blur our humanity?”

These sorts of questions can frame further reflection and discussion on the **development of character** as a central part of Franciscan education. Is the goal of Neumann education more than what our secular culture emphasizes: more than getting what we want, more than economic success, more than technological advancement?

Are the standards of excellence part of the everyday awareness of the students? Are they challenged to embrace excellence as a part of a life of integrity and character?

Do courses such as psychology and philosophy work to assist students in the difficult tasks of introspection?

Does the educational experience here, in all its dimensions, offer opportunities for students to develop the skills of authentic self-awareness, self-analysis, self-consciousness that enhance their own sense of who they are and what they are doing, especially with their free time?

Do students find multiple opportunities, and good counselors, to deal with their own failures, whether in the classroom, on the athletic field, in relationships, in life?

### **III. The transformative embrace of beauty: Service and Stewardship**

The examples from the Giotto frescoes make it clear: the journey of Franciscan pedagogy culminates in ongoing *praxis*: an ongoing transformation of mind and heart, in response to the world of beauty and to the beauty of each person, each being. As an actor bursting with enthusiasm, as a dancer bursting with energy, as an athlete bursting with the joy of excellent achievement, so the person at the fullness of the journey is filled to overflowing with a joy that

can only come from a deep and internal experience of beauty, a spiritual encounter that is the fruit of any authentic educational experience.

Whether it involve working with those less fortunate, in tutoring, in volunteering our time with Habitat for Humanity, Assisi house, St. Francis Inn, the House of Joseph, tutoring at Drexel Neumann Academy or in care for the environment at Red Hill Farm, I think the words we heard earlier capture it best: “St. Francis recognized the interdependence of human beings with one another and the rest of creation. Stewardship to him meant that he was responsible to recognize and reverence everything that God brought into his life as gift. Only when we recognize the Earth as a whole, for what it is, an expression of God’s love for us, can we recognize the source of our own lives and become God’s faith-filled stewards on campus and elsewhere.”

So we might ask:

Do our students, at each step in their educational experience, and upon graduation fully incarnate a sense of responsibility and reverence for all that God has done?

Are they men and women who are developing their own ability to “rejoice in the works of the Lord?”

Are they joyful, faith-filled and faithful in their attitude toward life? Toward all persons?

Do they act with compassion, creatively seeking solutions for some of our most urgent problems today?

### **Conclusions:**

This Franciscan vision is so important, so complex, so rich and so beautiful that no one person can achieve it. Like the proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” Franciscan education is a community-based endeavor. This education involves every person in this room: who you are,

what you do, how you do it, and for whom you exist. Neumann University is not simply an academic institution, it is an educational institution, drawing on the great tradition of universities going all the way back to the Middle Ages: to places like Oxford and Paris, where the great Franciscan masters studied, lived and taught.

As they knew then, we know now: there can be no greater vocation than to be involved in the education and the formation of the young - these wonderful men and women who are the hope of tomorrow. As you prepare to begin this academic year, may all your work be informed by the profound joy of knowing the value of what you do, and the values that inspire you.

Thank you.