

Gianfranco Ravasi

LA BELLEZZA SALVERÀ IL MONDO

Marcianum Press, *Dialogoi Series*

“Beauty will save the world” – a quote from Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* – is the title of a *lectio magistralis* delivered by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi at an interfaith forum in 2009 and later published by Marcianum Press as part of the *Dialogoi Series*.

Cardinal Ravasi is not the first prominent member of the Catholic Church to be inspired by Dostoevsky's famous line. Three popes preceded him. The first was John Paul II who quoted it in his *Apostolic Letter to the Artists*, the second was Pope Benedict XVI in a speech he pronounced during a meeting with artists in the Sistine Chapel and the third was the current Pope Francis in his first encyclical *Lumen Fidei*.

While the three popes touched the subject within a broader perspective on the role of art in elevating the human spirit and nourishing the faith of the believers, Cardinal Ravasi aims at the core of the idea of beauty looking at it from the different angles of theology, literature, philology and philosophy.

His inquiry starts from Pope Paul VI's appeal to the artist at the end of Vatican Council II: «This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. It is beauty, like truth, which brings joy to the heart of man and is that precious fruit which resists the year and tear of time, which unites generations and makes them share things in admiration.»

Hence beauty, not just for its own sake, but for its power of saving human beings from despair and getting them closer to the divine mystery. It is not surprising then, as suggested by Cardinal Ravasi, the loss of hope in today's world that sacrifices beauty on the altar of material gain and gives economy the power of dictating how people should live. Cardinal Ravasi highlights the semantic affinity between what is “beautiful” and what is “good” and, in Hebrew – a language he has dedicated a great deal of his studies – “full of meaning”, thus showing the way to rediscover the original harmony and unity of all things.

«We have at our disposal – writes Cardinal Ravasi – a fundamental instrument that is the language and yet we have let it deteriorate as it is evident in today's communication which has become crude, vulgar, oversimplified, abstract and reduced to a repetition of stereotypes: the typical language used in mobile phone messages, for example».

«By doing so – he continues – we lose a crucial dimension of beauty, not only in man but also in our great western culture. It's a deterioration that looks unstoppable and has slowly changed even the way we call God.»

Despite his apparent pessimism, Cardinal Ravasi believes that it is possible to restore what has been lost if only beauty and faith could re-establish a dialogue. «Faith has undertaken a solitary journey – he argues – and art has locked itself in pursuing self-referential expressions aiming at perplexing people through esoteric, extravagant and incomprehensible forms. In order to bring back an authentic sense of beauty, it is therefore necessary that art and faith, “sisters to one another”, start co-operating again».

Transcendence, according to Cardinal Ravasi, unites within itself truth and beauty, goodness and justice. Thereby the aesthetic category becomes the great category encompassing ethics and the meaning of Pope Benedict XVI 's referring to “beauty” as a “wound” becomes clear. Wound as a slit allowing the penetration into the human soul of a deep sense of beauty. For Cardinal Ravasi, beauty has the power of piercing through the soul of anybody, even the most superficial human being making him/her become, at least for an instant, an authentic being both in joy and suffering.

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