

A RIGHT TO BEAUTY: A FAIR SHARE OF MILK AND HONEY FOR THE POOR

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The author argues that humans have a right to beauty, and that the poor, often immersed in ugliness, have a particular and urgent need for and claim upon this right. Beauty provides a contemplative and self-transcending rest essential to human flourishing, while the encounter with beauty enables human persons to realize their vocation as cocreators. Deprived of their fair share of creation's bounty and mired in filth and squalor, the poor have a right to savor and create beauty.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ ARGUES that “the weakest of humanity” must not become “the rubbish tip of the industrialized nations,” for “the right to beauty is an expression (more pressing than some suppose) of the right to life.”¹ So too the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture demands that the Catholic Church engage “in the promotion of justice and building up the great common house where every creature is called to live, especially the poor,” for “they too have a right to beauty.”²

This right to beauty affirmed by Gutierrez and the Vatican does not appear in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Pope John XXIII’s social encyclical *Pacem in terris*, or any other major

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¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (New York: Cambridge University, 1999) 19–38, at 36.

² Pontifical Council for Culture, *The Via Pulchritudinis*, Privileged Pathway for Evangelization and Dialogue, III.3 (Plenary Session, March 28, 2006). This and all Vatican documents cited in this article are available on the Vatican Web site and easily found by title search.

document listing basic human rights.³ Nor does Gutiérrez or the Vatican explain the groundings or scope of this right.

But if there is a universal and fundamental right to beauty, a right that the poor especially are in danger of being denied, then this right flows first from the fact that the startling and sometimes overwhelming encounter with beauty opens up something essential in the human heart, drawing us out of ourselves and inviting us to an engagement with the transcendent.⁴ For beauty, wherever we encounter it, is that surprising brilliance or clarity that arrests and liberates our attention, evoking awe and wonder and opening us to the eternal. Beauty does not merely please and attract us, it also derails and releases us from obsessive and deadly attention to the self or the routines of survival, and summons us to reach, like Michelangelo's Adam, for the other and the divine.⁵ The right to beauty is the right to a joyful, contemplative and self-transcending rest that is inaccessible to the machine or beast of burden, but essential to our flourishing as human persons.

At the same time such a right to beauty must flow from the fact that all humans are summoned to be artists, or cocreators of a world of beauty. In the encounter with beauty, we discover a universal call to imitate, replicate, or add to the beauty before us; and in the creation of beauty, in the fashioning of something well-crafted, harmonious, startling, or pleasing, we achieve and fulfill our human identity and vocation as artists or cocreators and nurturers of beauty. Art is not merely the occupation of professional painters, sculptors, or architects. It is the universal human vocation to create and re-create beauty. And the right to beauty is the right to actualize and complete our own creation by developing our talents and making our mark as cocreators.

Finally, the right to beauty flows from the fact that injustice itself is ugly and inflicts ugliness upon its victims. For if beauty is characterized by harmony, symmetry, and elegant proportions, then the disproportion, chaos, and violence of injustice scars and deforms the planet and human communities with all sorts of ugliness; and the deprivations, injuries, and

³ There is no reference to beauty in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of the French Revolution. Still, articles 24 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights do defend the right of all to leisure, to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, and to enjoy the arts. As I will show below, these rights may suggest a right to beauty.

⁴ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2001) 23, 111–14; Mortimer J. Adler, *Six Great Ideas* (New York: McMillan, 1981) 129–30.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas speaks of the “brilliance” and “clarity” of beauty in *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1m; *ST* 1, q. 39, ad 8; *ST* 2–2, q. 145, ad 2; Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* 111–14.

insults that injustice inflicts on the poor stain and smudge them with ugliness.⁶ An unjust community is a Frankenstein of ill-fitting parts, crushing and distorting its weakest and lowest members and grinding them and their habitat into filth and squalor. A right to beauty is a right to live in a just community and a right to a fair share of creation's bounty.

To establish a fundamental and universal human right to beauty and to show that the poor have a special claim to a fair share of creation's beauty, I turn first to Catholic social teachings on human rights. Next I lay out the three central arguments in support of such a universal and fundamental right, namely: (1) that the contemplative and self-transcending rest associated with beauty is essential to achieving full humanity; (2) that humans must be able to create beauty to fulfill our vocation as persons; and (3) that persons and communities deprived of beauty are invariably stripped of justice. Finally, I suggest that the poor have a particular right to beauty both because they have been cheated of their "fair" share of creation's bounty and because their labor and creativity have produced so much of the world's beauty.

A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Except for the 2006 statement by the Pontifical Council for Culture, Catholic social teaching never mentions a right to beauty. But we may discover some grounds for such a right within Catholic social thought, or at least grounds for an argument that humans should not be forced to live and work in conditions stripped of all beauty.

First, Catholic social documents repeatedly affirm that all persons have the right to "the means which are suitable to the proper development of life,"⁷ and argue that the poor and working class have a right to "decent" and "reasonably comfortable" accommodations, and to living and working conditions that provide for their "dignity."⁸ The Church has also expressed its opposition to "subhuman living conditions . . . [and] disgraceful working conditions," as they are an "insult to human dignity."⁹ Indeed, church documents affirm the rights of all persons to living and working conditions that are safe, clean, and reasonably comfortable, and Pope John Paul II has asserted the right of all persons to a clean environment.¹⁰ For humans,

⁶ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, "The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 31 (1972) 165–68.

⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* no. 11.

⁸ Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, nos. 44–47.

⁹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* no. 27.

¹⁰ See John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* nos. 11, 21, and esp. 19; John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, no. 9 (World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990).

unlike mere beasts of burden, are entitled to certain intangibles commensurate with their dignity as persons. And if such dignity does not require the presence of beauty in one's environment, it must at least reject an unrelenting ugliness.

Second, Catholic social teaching affirms the twin rights of development and participation,¹¹ arguing that all persons and communities have the right to fully develop their talents and resources and to participate in and contribute to the larger political, economic, and cultural structures of society.¹² In particular, church documents assert a right to cultural, artistic, and educational development, and John Paul II argues that persons have a right to develop our "openness to the transcendent."¹³ As creatures fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator of a world of beauty, our right to development and participation implies a right to become cocreators of beauty, for that is our vocation as persons and communities.

Third, Catholic social thought affirms that every human being and community is entitled to a fair share of the goods of creation, and that the poor and underprivileged need and deserve special assistance in securing their fair share. Both the principles of the universal purpose of created goods and distributive justice demand that all persons and communities receive a fair share of the earth's goods—securing at least enough to sustain and support them in reasonable comfort.¹⁴ And if God's creation is a world of beauty, all persons have a right not merely to the food and shelter provided from nature's warehouse, but also to a share of the beauty of God's bounty. At the same time Catholic social thought has long called upon the state to protect the endangered rights of the poor and upon all persons to make a preferential option for the poor. Given the systematic alienation of the world's poor from the enjoyment and creation of beauty, any real protection of or preference for the poor must include a liberation from the filth and squalor in which they are immersed.

And so, while Catholic social teaching does not assert a specific right to beauty, there are elements in the tradition suggesting that all persons have a right to some fair share of the beauty of creation and to participate in the ongoing work of creating a world of beauty.

THE RIGHT TO A CONTEMPLATIVE AND SELF-TRANSCENDING REST

Mortimer Adler contends that the enjoyment of beauty provides us with the contemplative and self-transcending rest humans need. "The goodness of enjoyable beauty that makes it an indispensable ingredient in the happiness

¹¹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 32.

¹² John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* nos. 12–13.

¹³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 32.

¹⁴ See Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* no. 22.

of a well-lived life consists in its providing us with the rest that all of us need.”¹⁵ Sleep and relaxation help us recuperate from work and stress, but the enjoyment of beauty takes us out of our daily routines and may even “be said to lift us out of ourselves, resulting in a kind of ecstasy.” As Adler sees it, humans have a fundamental need for a rest that previews “the heavenly rest of the souls who enjoy in heaven the beatific vision of God,” and that the enjoyment of beauty provides just such a rest.¹⁶

Elaine Scarry also believes beauty takes us out of ourselves.¹⁷ Our encounter with a beauty that is sacred and unprecedented awakens awe in us and sets us off on an endless quest for beauty’s source. This “deliberation” differs somewhat from Adler’s contemplation, but also draws us to the divine and transcendent, transforming us into beauty’s heralds and disciples, inspiring us to create more and more beauty. Beethoven hears Mozart and is driven to compose symphonies. Michelangelo sees the Pantheon and must build St. Peter’s Basilica. Beauty overflows and shines out, stunning us and sending us reeling in search of its source and in imitation of its grandeur.¹⁸

But Scarry goes further than Adler, claiming that beauty not only opens us to a contemplative and deliberative rest, but can—in the language of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch—“decenter” and “unself” us, dislodging us from the center of our own universe and opening us up to concern for the other.¹⁹ Caught in the sudden grip of beauty, we are momentarily unconcerned with ourselves or with defending our ego. Beauty dethrones us and renders us one of the crowd. “We cease to stand even at the center of our own world . . . [and] willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.”²⁰ As Ivone Gebara has written, “beauty can wake us up to care, to enlarge our world, to go beyond our skin, to feel the pleasure of being alive.”²¹

There is no guarantee that beauty will “unself” or “decenter” us in ways that render us just or compassionate. Plenty of narcissists and villains savor the splendor of a sunset or create and collect works of beauty and art; and most of those who covet and hoard the world’s wealth have a great love for beautiful things—if only to possess them. But Adler, Scarry, Murdoch,

¹⁵ Mortimer J. Adler, *Six Great Ideas: Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Liberty, Equality, Justice: Ideas We Judge By, Ideas We Act On* (New York: Touchstone, 1997) 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 131.

¹⁷ Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* 28–30.

¹⁸ See *ibid.* 4–7; Angela K. Nickerson, *A Journey into Michelangelo’s Rome* (Berkeley, Calif.: Roaring Forties, 2008) 117; and Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: Norton, 1997) 381, 390, 450.

¹⁹ Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* 111–13.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 112.

²¹ Ivone Gebara, “Yearning for Beauty,” *Other Side* 30.4 (2003) 25.

Weil, and Gebara would all agree that humans need the contemplative and self-transcending rest that the enjoyment of beauty can provide, and that a life without any opening to the transcendent or the neighbor is a deeply impoverished existence in which no one should be long enslaved.

The Right to a Sabbath

If Adler and others see the enjoyment of beauty as essential to our humanity because it provides us with a contemplative and self-transcending rest and helps to “unself” and “decenter” us, Scripture says something similar about the Sabbath. For though we may normally think of the Sabbath rest as a religious duty or command, the Bible also presents the Sabbath as a liberating gift that helps us achieve our humanity by enjoying a contemplative and self-transcending rest and by turning our attention and concerns outward to the unrecognized neighbor. Indeed, the command to observe a Sabbath rest is also (even primarily?) a command to respect the right of everyone, especially the poor, to enjoy this liberating rest. Like the enjoyment of beauty, the Sabbath rest frees us from drudgery by opening us to the transcendent, and draws us outside ourselves by turning to the neighbor.

Richard Lowery notes that the first creation narrative in Genesis 1–2:4 culminates in the Sabbath rest of the seventh day.²² The Sabbath is not an appendix or sequel to the work of creation, but its completion; and neither the world nor humanity is fully created until they have entered into this Sabbath rest with their Creator.

The world is not fully created until a Sabbath rest has been incorporated into its ongoing story, until a resting and peaceful breath has been placed in the heart of the universe, a rest that ensures *shalom* and harmony throughout creation. And humans, fashioned in the image and likeness of their Creator, have not been fully created or become fully human, until they have been introduced to the Sabbath rest shared with them by their Creator.

For the ongoing Sabbath rest transforms humans from drones or slaves destined to toil “all the days of their lives” into cocreators fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator with whom they rest.²³ The contemplative and self-transcending rest of the Sabbath, the blessed and holy day that opens us to the transcendent, has made us fully human.

²² Richard Lowery, “Sabbath and Survival: Abundance and Self Restraint in a Culture of Excess,” *Encounter* 54 (1993) 143–67.

²³ Lowery, *ibid.* 150–51, notes that, unlike the first six days of creation, the description of seventh day does not conclude with the phrase “there was evening and there was morning,” suggesting that God’s Sabbath rest, intended to be shared by humans, is ongoing.

At the same time this Sabbath rest reflects a bountiful creation, providing all creatures with more than enough to be fruitful and multiply. In a world where six days of labor produce enough food for the entire week, no one need hoard, covet, or steal. There is enough for all to share. In a world punctuated by a regular Sabbath rest people are liberated from selfishness and greed, and invited to share with the neighbor and stranger. The Sabbath rest invites us to recognize and respond to our neighbor.

The liberation of the Hebrews begins with a demand for a Sabbath rest. Sending Moses and Aaron to the Pharaoh (Exod 5), God commands that the Hebrews be released to celebrate a feast for Yahweh. But the Pharaoh abhors the very thought of a religious holiday for these teeming slaves, and imposes crippling and deadly increases in their workload. "What do you mean," he demands of Moses and Aaron, to give these people ". . . rest from their labor?" (Exod 5:4-5, NAB).

The Pharaoh reacts so violently to this demand because this rest is not the rest of chattel or slaves, but of free people. Oxen and ass do not worship. Humans worship. And Moses and the Hebrews are demanding that the Pharaoh recognize their right to a uniquely human rest, which the slave master cannot abide. For under the Pharaoh the Hebrews live and work as slaves, toiling endlessly under their merciless overseers. And so Yahweh sends Moses to liberate Israel from this horrible bondage. But that liberation begins with the demand for a rest dedicated to God, and each time Moses and Aaron return to the Pharaoh, they repeat their demand to "let the people go, so they may worship the Lord their God."

Once the Hebrews are set free from the Pharaoh, God commands these former slaves to institute a regular Sabbath rest and extend this liberating rest to all the aliens and slaves in their households. And later in Canaan this practice of a liberating Sabbath rest will give birth to a Sabbatical year in which slaves are released and debts cancelled, and to a Jubilee year when homelands are redeemed.

Patrick Miller argues that the Sabbath rest commanded by God in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is a divine gift that liberates slaves by directing them to a rest "that is open to God," and demands the ongoing liberation of all peoples by directing the Hebrews to extend this Sabbath to slave and stranger alike.²⁴ And it may be why the very first Catholic social encyclical, written "to save unfortunate working people from the cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments for money-making" lists the right to Sabbath rest as the first of workers' rights. As Leo XIII argued in *Rerum novarum*, on the physical level workers have a right to a rest that will prevent their being worn down and exhausted by

²⁴ Patrick D. Miller, "The Human Sabbath: A Study in Deuteronomic Theology," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6 (1985) 81-97, at 86-93.

their labors. But as spiritual beings they are first entitled to another sort of rest—"a rest from labor, hallowed by religion."²⁵

Human beings need some opportunity for a contemplative rest that opens them to the transcendent if they are to achieve their full potential and liberation. They must have some regular release from the oppression of the mundane and practical, or from forced and endless toil; and any real struggle for liberation and justice must have this rest or release as a cornerstone.

At the same time, any genuine rest opening humans to the transcendent must also lead us to recognize and care for the other. Scarry, Murdoch, Weil, and Gebara believe or hope that beauty can provide this "unselfing" or "decentering" rest, while Miller and Leo XIII have staked their hopes on a Sabbath rest. Either way, the rest that makes us human must also help us see and respond to the humanity of our neighbor.

If the enjoyment of beauty can provide us with a contemplative and self-transcending rest, and if this same beauty can help to "unself" and "decenter" us in ways that help us become more just and compassionate—and thus more humane, then perhaps we have a right to beauty. The God we find in Exodus and Deuteronomy certainly believes no human should be enslaved in a life without any sacred and holy rest, and that we should extend this liberating and humanizing rest to all our neighbors. Perhaps that is not so different from saying that the God who fashioned a world of beauty and who created humans in her own image and likeness would not want to see any of her children trapped in a life stripped of beauty and devoid of Sabbath.

THE RIGHT TO COCREATE BEAUTY

Adler believes that the enjoyment of beauty is indispensable for a well-lived life. But humans fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator of a world of beauty are called to be more than observers and consumers of beauty. In *Art in Action*, Nicholas Wolterstorff contends that the human need and talent to create beauty is universal. In every age, in every place, no matter how difficult or brutal the conditions, no matter how much energy and resources were required to meet the need to survive, humans have fashioned works of art. The impulse to create art, to exercise the human calling as cocreators of a world of beauty, is not a luxury, but a pervasive and fundamental human need, which may explain why article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defends not only a right "to enjoy the arts," but also a right "freely to participate in the cultural life of the community."²⁶

²⁵ Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum* no. 41.

²⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980) 4.

In the 19th century William Morris decried the way industrial workers were reduced to slaves by a division of labor that prevented them from exercising any creativity, and were constantly pressured to produce worthless and ugly objects by a relentlessly competitive capitalism. The central claim to which Morris returned again and again was that every worker had a right to work that was fitting, pleasant, and useful—meaning that no one should be forced to produce objects without value, use, and beauty.²⁷ Work is the central occupation of every person, and that work should, according to Morris, allow persons to make things that are both useful and works of art.

“Time was when everybody that made anything made a work of art besides a useful piece of goods, and it gave them pleasure to make it.” And, Morris believes, this should once again be the case. The creativity of art must either be “shared by all people” or abandoned as a sham. It must be “part of the daily life of every man . . . and with us wherever we go,” or recognized as a meaningless luxury. Providing all people with fitting and honorable work in which they can take pleasure will extend art to all and make an end of degrading toil.²⁸

Both creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 teach that all persons are called to be creators and tenders of beauty. In Genesis 1:26–27 humans are fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator of a world of beauty, a Creator who has transformed the violent and chaotic wilderness of *tohu wabohu* (1:2) into a free and well-ordered cosmos. And in Genesis 2:15 humans are placed in Eden to “cultivate and care” for the beauty of this lush garden. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) captures some of this biblical vocation to be cocreators of beauty when it notes that “Created ‘in the image of God,’ man also expresses the truth of his relationship with God the Creator by the beauty of his artistic works.”²⁹

If Genesis 1–2 makes the case that humans have a vocation to be cocreators of beauty, Exodus calls for liberating work in which we exercise our full talents and fashion works of art. In “Slaves or Sabbath Keepers?” Ellen Davis argues that the key to the Hebrews’ liberation from Egypt was their release from the “bad work” of slavery and their taking up of a system of “good work” grounded in the Sabbath and providing former slaves with an opportunity to develop and exercise their human freedom and creativity as cocreators.³⁰

²⁷ William Morris, “Art, Socialism, and Environment,” in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Lawrence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000) 32–36.

²⁸ William Morris, *Art and the Beauty of the Earth* (London: Longmans, 1898) 13–16.

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 2501.

³⁰ Ellen Davis, “Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers? A Biblical Perspective on Human Work,” *Anglican Theological Review* 83 (2001) 25–40.

For Davis the “good” or Sabbath-based work taken up by liberated Hebrews includes the freedom to participate in the creation and design of works of beauty, and the ability to labor in ways that tap into and develop their full range of talents as cocreators of beauty. Free people do have a right not merely to a Sabbath rest, but also to bring their minds and creativity, along with the sweat of their brow, to the labors they take up.

In Egypt a teeming sea of Hebrew slaves toiled in the construction of Egypt’s public works, raising up store cities and monuments for generations of Pharaohs. But this work was not the labor of free people, and the Hebrews had no say in the design of these palaces, temples, and fortifications. The plaintive cries Yahweh hears and responds to in Exodus 3 make it clear that the work of these slaves is not—by any stretch of the imagination—honorable, fitting, or pleasant.

That would all change with the construction of the tabernacle, a labor of love and beauty the Hebrews would take up, design, pay for, and carry out as a free people. Once safely out of Egypt, the Hebrews receive instructions from Yahweh for the construction of the sacred ark, a tabernacle that will carry the twin tablets of the Decalogue, and an artifact of unparalleled beauty that will also be their first public work.³¹ In the construction of the tabernacle, funded by the free will offerings of liberated slaves, carried out under the wisdom and direction of a Hebrew master builder (Betzalel), and executed with the craft, skill, and wisdom of legions of Hebrew weavers, carpenters, and artisans, a society of slaves is being transformed into a liberated people.³²

Catholic social teaching argues that “work is a good thing” for humans, and for our humanity, because through work a person “achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’”³³ As John Paul II sees it, work is a primary means by which we “fulfill the calling to be a person,” the way we live out our role of cocreators fashioned in the image and likeness of God.³⁴

In our labor we work not just on our workbenches but on ourselves, developing our talents and skills, educating and enriching our hearts and hands and heads, fulfilling our vocation to become fully human persons. So we need work that allows us to grow and to exercise our full range of human skills and abilities, work that enables us to become artisans and craftsmen.

³¹ Exodus 25–31.

³² Davis, “Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers?” 31–34; Exodus 35–40.

³³ John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* no. 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.* nos. 1, 6.

And because work provides us with the means to join with others in building up the common good of the human community, we need to be able to participate fully and freely in the economic and political systems and structures that create and sustain our world. We need work that not only provides us with a fair wage, adequate rest, and safe conditions, but that also offers us a way to participate in and create a better world.

Since human work is meant “for the development of one’s powers,” the Church has recommended “partnership contracts” that allow “workers and other employees [to] become sharers in ownership or management” of companies.³⁵ And because human work is to be carried out by “free and independent human beings created in the image of God,” Catholic social teaching has called for the active participation of all workers in the various economic enterprises in which they labor.³⁶ Indeed, over the years Catholic social teaching has repeatedly called for “new forms of partnership between workers and managers” that “expand economic participation, broaden the sharing of economic power, and make economic decision more accountable to the common good,”³⁷ and John Paul II has argued that every laborer has the right “to take part in the very work process as a sharer in responsibility and creativity.”³⁸ For Catholic social thought work is a distinctively human activity that enables persons to achieve and fulfill their vocation as cocreators fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator of a world of beauty.

THE RIGHT TO A “FAIR” SHARE OF CREATION’S BOUNTY

Beauty is not always a sign of justice. But injustice—when seen in full—is always ugly. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos railed against the exquisite summer and winter homes of the wealthy, condemned their lavish estates decorated with terraces and gardens, and reviled their spacious apartments, inlaid with ivory, paneled with cedar, and painted with vermilion—not because these prophets despised their architectural splendor, but because these beautiful homes were, in a sense, stolen from the poor and financed with fraud, unjust levies, and unpaid labor.³⁹ Isaiah 3:14 laments: “The loot wrested from the poor is in your houses.”

The iniquity, corruption, and violence that built these mansions and estates have rendered them hideous and grotesque, which is why Pires da Silveira says that hunger, poverty, disease, wars, drugs, and violence are

³⁵ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno* no. 65; see also no. 52.

³⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* no. 68.

³⁷ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 297.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* no. 15.

³⁹ Amos 3:15; 5:11; Jeremiah 22:13–15; Isaiah 3:14–15; 5:8–9.

ugly and dirty and make our world ugly and dirty,⁴⁰ and why John de Gruchy reports that apartheid “was not only unjust but also ugly.”⁴¹

Social critics and reformers have long pointed to the ugliness of injustice. Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* and Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* rubbed our faces in the filth and squalor of industrial workers, while photojournalists Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* and Dorothea Lange in *An American Exodus* scalded a nation’s conscience with pictures of squalid tenements and starving sharecroppers.⁴² And today Sebastiao Salgado, the Brazilian economist turned photojournalist, serves up the scarred and disfigured faces and bodies of injustice, avarice, and oppression in books like *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age* and *Terra: Struggles of the Landless*.⁴³ In such works injustice is not an abstract principle, but a filthy crowded tenement under a leaden sky of poisoned smoke, or the exhausted blackened face of a nine-year-old miner who should have been in school.

The ugliness of injustice has two faces. First we see the grotesque and dreadful conditions in which the world’s poor and oppressed live and work, as well as the awful disfigurement and scarring suffered by the countless victims of greed, hatred, and violence. Injustice has marred and stained the overcrowded, polluted, and exhausted places where these forgotten and invisible neighbors try to scratch out their daily crust or crumbs, marking habitations with a gruesome ugliness. And injustice has tattooed the hungry, tired, desperate, filthy bodies of these same neighbors with a similar ugliness, marking their eyes with fear and their flesh with every manner of sore, blemish, and scar.

Second, we see the ugliness of a world thrown off balance by a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots. If beauty is a matter of symmetry, balance, and harmony, the ugliness of injustice is to be found in the picture of two very separate and radically unequal worlds, in the grotesque greed with which so many of us in the First World hoard and consume far more than our fair share of the bounty of creation while billions of our neighbors scrape by on less than a few dollars a day. The ugliness of injustice is that it is two-faced, and that in an unjust world billions have

⁴⁰ Abival Pires da Silveira, “Justice, Bread, and Beauty,” *Reformed World* 47.3–4 (1997) 101–7, at 103.

⁴¹ John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (New York, Cambridge University, 2001) 1.

⁴² Dorothea Lange, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2000).

⁴³ Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age* (New York: Aperture, 2005); and Salgado, *Terra: Struggles of the Landless* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

been robbed of their “fair” (beautiful and just) share of the bounty of creation.

The world God fashions in the first Creation account of Genesis 1–2:4 is beautiful—seven times we read how God saw it was good or very good. And this same creation is also “fat,” which is what makes it beautiful. Richard Lowery notes that the verb used here when God “makes” the world also means to fatten, suggesting a creation that is ample, abundant, and plentiful, a bounteous and overflowing creation with enough food and habitat for all God’s creatures to be fruitful and multiply.⁴⁴

In this fat and beautiful world God intends all creatures to enjoy the rich bounty of creation and delight in its overflowing abundance. Here there is no need or justification for hoarding or coveting or stealing or cheating, no reason to take someone else’s fair share or to hunger for more than we need.⁴⁵ As Lowery notes, the command to share creation’s bounty “grows out of the assurance that God provides sustenance and beauty sufficient for a good life.”⁴⁶ Anything else—any coveting, hoarding, cheating, or stealing—would be an affront to the beauty of this creation and its Creator.

And if God’s creation is beautifully fat, so is the land Yahweh promises to the Hebrews. Again and again God promises to deliver the Hebrews to “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” This Promised Land, Ezekiel 20:6 tells us, is “the most beautiful of all lands,” and its beauty flows from its fatness, from God’s gracious will to provide for all who dwell there. For in this fat Promised Land, we read in Deuteronomy 15:4–6, God will bless the Hebrews abundantly, and there will be no poor in their midst. No one will be in need. No one will be driven into borrowing, debt, or servitude, and no foreign kings will conquer or rule over them.

But keeping the promise of this fat land means keeping God’s laws—and at the heart of these laws is a commitment to provide everyone with a fair share or portion (*nahalah*) of this land’s bounty.⁴⁷ And so God directs the Hebrews to provide every tribe and family with a fair parcel of land, forbids the coveting or stealing of anyone else’s lands, and ensures that those who lose their homes or liberty through poverty and debt will have their lands and freedom restored in the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. In a similar fashion God commands that the poor be protected from predatory loans, that the hungry be allowed to glean from the crops and vines of their neighbors, and that a tithe be collected for widows, orphans, and poor strangers.

Behind all these practices is a commitment to provide everyone with a fair share of the bounty of this “most beautiful of all lands” and to ensure

⁴⁴ Lowery, “Sabbath and Survival” 147.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 147–48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 162.

⁴⁷ Timothy Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment* (New York: Cambridge University, 2002) 55–57.

that the weak and powerless, the most likely to be robbed of their fair portion and allotment, are protected. In the fat land promised the Hebrews milk and honey will flow for all.

And yet a craving in the hearts of the rich and powerful threatens to destroy the beauty of the Promised Land—for those who have so much keep wanting more, keep scheming to rob or cheat their neighbors of their fair share.⁴⁸ Like the ugly, gaunt cows in the Pharaoh's dream, these avaricious creatures are a famine devouring the fat beauty of the land.⁴⁹

Micah 2:1–2 castigates the rich “who plan iniquity, and work out evil on their couches. . . . They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and they take them; they cheat an owner of his house, a man of his inheritance.” Isaiah 5:8 reviles the wealthy for their insatiable appetite for more and more estates, adding house to house and field to field until they have driven everyone else off the land. Amos 8:4–6 complains that the rich cannot wait to defraud and exploit the poor in the marketplace, or sell their neighbors into bondage for the price of a pair of sandals. By fixing their scales, imposing cruel levies, withholding just wages, and defrauding their neighbors in court, the rich have become thieves and robbers.

And this mindless coveting, the prophets warn, will destroy the beauty of the land. The houses and fields of the poor will be gobbled up, and the palaces and estates of the wealthy will be vacant and barren monuments to their owners' avarice and injustice. The lowly will be driven off their lands and forced into debt and bondage, while the rich will be stripped of all their beautiful possessions and decorations, and famine and pestilence, drought and death, will disfigure and scar the land and its people.⁵⁰ Greed will make a wilderness of the Promised Land.

The God who creates a fat world of beauty in Genesis 1–2:4 and liberates the Hebrews from bondage by bringing them to a fat land flowing with milk and honey intends that everyone enjoy a fair share of the bounty of creation and the Promised Land, and commands us to tend and care for the fat beauty of creation and the Promised Land by providing that fair portion to all. To do otherwise is to create ugliness.

THE POOR'S SPECIAL CLAIM TO BEAUTY

The two creation accounts of Genesis 1–2 present beauty as a universal vocation and right. In these stories every human has a calling and a right to

⁴⁸ Patrick D. Miller, “Property and Possession in Light of the Ten Commandments,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Matthewes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004) 17–50, at 42–46.

⁴⁹ Genesis 41:3–4.

⁵⁰ Amos 5:11–12; Isaiah 3:1–26.

share in the beauty of creation's bounty. But in Exodus God sends Moses to bring the beauty of the Sabbath and the Promised Land to the poor, landless, and enslaved Hebrews. In Scripture the poor have a special claim on beauty because they have been robbed of their "fair" share of creation's fat bounty.

The poor have a special claim on beauty for two reasons: because they are mired in so much unjust ugliness and because they have created so much of the world's beauty. Their first claim to beauty comes from the fact that they have been robbed of their fair share of creation's beauty and forced to live and work in the ugliness created and deepened by this theft. Their second claim arises from the fact that their sweat and sacrifice have created so much of the very beauty from which they are excluded.

The Ugliness of Poverty

The dignity, humanity, and inner beauty of the poor are captured in paintings like Millet's *The Gleaners* and photographs like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*; but these images cannot mask the awful truth that poverty itself is ugly, and that the poor are forced to live and work in a horrible ugliness. As Gutiérrez noted, the world's poor have been exiled to its rubbish heaps.

If beauty is what pleases upon being seen, then the poor see little beauty, for their view is crowded with the unpleasant face of want. In place of a fat bounty that will satisfy their needs, the poor see only a collection of desperate hungers that will not go away and cannot be met. There is not enough food, water, clothing, shelter, work, or medicine—and not enough money to pay for any of these. And these hungers and shortages scar and disfigure their surroundings and environments. Streets and alleys in their barrios, ghettos, and slums are dark, filthy, and dangerous, littered with uncollected trash, wrecked cars, and potholes. Houses and storefronts are boarded up, and windows and street lamps are shattered. Schools and grocery stores are fortified like prisons.

The view of the poor is also crowded with the unpleasant humiliation of being unable to provide for themselves and their families, and with the ugly scorn of those who see them as miserable or pitiable freeloaders and failures. The "normal" people we watch on television are all able to get jobs, pay the rent, feed their families, and even send their children to college. But billions of the poor find themselves in a world where these simple tasks are Herculean or impossible, and where their inability to meet these challenges is a constant source of shame, pity, and disgust.

And when they do find employment, the poor are assigned work that is dirty and ugly. They collect our trash, pull our weeds, pluck our chickens, slaughter our livestock, butcher our meat, pick our strawberries, wash our

dirty laundry, mop our floors, scrub our toilets, and clean the diapers of our children and grandparents. If there is a dirty, messy, filthy job to be done, there is certainly a poor person—preferably an immigrant woman of color—ready to do it.⁵¹ For decades our middle class has moved away from jobs that brought us into contact with dirt, waste, filth, or ugliness; we now send someone else's children into our kitchens, dining rooms, bathrooms, basements, and backyards. We are a society that creates more waste and trash than any the world has ever seen, and we outsource the cleaning of our growing rubbish heap to the poor.

But we do not simply ask the poor to clean our trash. We also dump our garbage and waste and toxins in the neighborhoods and communities of the poor. Around the nation and the planet, middle and upper-class communities export and dump their refuse and filth in places where the poor and minorities live, places twice as likely to have abandoned toxic waste sites, hazardous landfills, garbage dumps, and incinerators.⁵² And these same poor and minority communities have few safeguards protecting them from the effects of all this pollution and degradation.

We ship our toxins and pollution overseas to poor nations, increasing the ugliness of their poverty. As industrial and postindustrial nations in North America and Europe tighten environmental controls on manufacturing, mining, and agriculture, we ship pesticides, toxic waste, and “dirty industries” overseas to less developed countries desperate for cash, but without adequate resources to protect their citizens from these hazardous materials.

To add insult to injury, all this ugliness and poverty simply fuels more poverty and ugliness. For poverty itself is a major source of the environmental degradation threatening to unmake the beauty of creation's bounty, because the desperation of the poor makes them imprudent stewards of creation. In a world with a burgeoning gap between rich and poor, the world's wealthy consume an ever more disproportionate share of creation's bounty while billions of poor people are forced to live and work in increasingly overcrowded, polluted, and exhausted places. As a result,

⁵¹ Christine Firer Hinze, “Dirt and Economic Inequality: A Christian-Ethical Peek under the Rug,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001) 45–62.

⁵² Vernice D. Miller, “Building on Our Past, Planning for Our Future,” in *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. Richard Hofrichter (Philadelphia: New Society, 1993) 128; Robert D. Bullard, “Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement,” in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston: South End, 1993) 19; Aaron Sachs, *Eco-Justice: Linking Human Rights and the Environment*, Worldwatch Paper 127 (Washington: Worldwatch Institute, 1995) 10; Benjamin Goldman and Laura Fitton, *Toxic Wastes and Race Revisited: An Update of the 1987 Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (Washington: Center for Policy Alternatives, 1994) executive summary.

those trapped in poverty put greater and greater stress on their overtaxed environments, burning down forests, exhausting topsoil, emptying aquifers, and polluting air in a desperate struggle to meet their day-to-day needs.⁵³

And it is, of course, the poor who bear the brunt of all this environmental degradation. As the U.S. Catholic bishops argue in their 1991 statement on environmental justice, “The whole human race suffers as a result of environmental blight, and generations yet unborn will bear the cost for our failure to act today. But in most countries today, including our own, it is the poor and the powerless who most directly bear the burden of current environmental carelessness.”⁵⁴

In Exodus 3 the terrible cries of the poor drive Yahweh to liberate the Hebrews with the beauty of the Sabbath and the Promised Land. Today billions of the world’s poor cry out as well for some share of creation’s beauty, and both the ugliness of their poverty and the ugliness dumped on them because they are poor and powerless should press us to ensure that they receive some “fair” share of creation’s bounty.

So Much Beauty Made by the Poor

Genesis reports that the beauty of creation was fashioned by God and intended for all humanity. But history records that the great public works of ancient civilizations were built by the poor and enjoyed by their royal or aristocratic masters; indeed, that the enforced labor and alienated wealth of legions of lowly artisans, peasants, and slaves produced the monumental ramparts, palaces, temples, and gardens enjoyed by a tiny ruling class that governed ancient cities and empires.⁵⁵ In his classic treatment of *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford describes the alienated and enforced labor of peasants and slaves that produced the wonders of ancient cities, enjoyed primarily by kings and their cohorts.⁵⁶ Explaining the workings of advanced agrarian societies and aristocratic empires like Egypt, Greece, and Rome, William Herzog argues that the glory and grandeur of ancient palaces and temples that housed the royal and priestly classes were created by the “legal theft” of peasant wealth, land, and labor.⁵⁷ And in *The Theology of the Built Environment*, Timothy Gorringer notes that the

⁵³ James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 50.

⁵⁴ U.S. Catholic Bishops, “Renewing the Earth” no. 426.

⁵⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 2008) 22; Indra Kagis McEwen, *Socrates’ Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1997) 72–73.

⁵⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1961) 37, 108–10, 147.

⁵⁷ William R. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 90–102.

leisured contemplation of all this civilized and civilizing beauty, a contemplation Aristotle saw as the very purpose of human existence, was largely reserved to a handful of aristocratic families and made possible by the “extremely cruel treatment of slaves,” while Mumford reports that the splendor of the Parthenon itself, Pericles’ magnificent sacrament of Athenian democracy, was paid for with booty stolen from conquered and impoverished peoples.⁵⁸ Even in the idealized account of Solomon’s construction and furnishing of the Temple and palace in 1 Kings 5–7 it is clear that these building projects were paid for with tribute from peasant farmers and that the nearly 200,000 conscripts assigned to this labor did all the heavy lifting. No wonder Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos repeatedly decried the splendor of these palaces and estates as theft committed against the poor.⁵⁹

In the modern era as well much of the splendor of civilization owes its existence to the labor and sweat of the poor. Leo XIII argues in *Rerum novarum* that, while those who govern and administer the state “should be held in highest estimation,” the legions of agricultural and industrial laborers who make up the working class create the bulk of society’s wealth and bounty. “It is only by the labor of working men,” the pope argues, “that States grow rich.”⁶⁰ And so the ranks of the working class, “who contribute so largely to the advantage of the community,” and who are being impoverished and enslaved by a small group of “avaricious and grasping” industrialists, have a right to “share in the benefits which they create.”⁶¹

John Paul II makes a similar point in *Laborem exercens*, explaining the priority of human labor over capital, pointing out that the accumulated wealth and means of production to be found in modern society “is the result of the heritage of human labor.”⁶² The capital of industrial and postindustrial society has been built up over centuries through the hard and creative work of laborers of every sort. And so, John Paul argues, this accumulated wealth must in some way be placed at the service of workers who seek to participate in and make their own contribution to the modern workbench.

In differing ways each pope argues that justice demands that the poor and working class be compensated for their contribution to the wealth and splendor of modern civilization. Leo XIII demands not only that these

⁵⁸ Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment* 147–48; Mumford, *City in History* 147.

⁵⁹ Amos 3:15, 5:11; Jeremiah 22:13–15; Isaiah 3:14–15, 5:8–9.

⁶⁰ Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum* no. 34 ⁶¹ *Ibid.* nos. 3, 34

⁶² John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* no. 12.

workers receive basic food, clothing, and shelter, but also be delivered from their misery and receive what conduces to their well-being.⁶³ In other words, they are to receive some share of the bounty and enjoyment of the beauty they have produced. John Paul II argues that the contributions of generations of laborers means that contemporary workers have a right to share in the ongoing creation of society's splendor and wealth.⁶⁴ They have a right to be cocreators of the world's beauty.

CONCLUSION

Gutiérrez argues that “the right to beauty is an expression (more pressing than some suppose) of the right to life,” implying that the right to life means more than the right to survive, or the right to those goods and services required to stay alive.⁶⁵ The right to beauty points to a fundamental right to flourish, to a basic human right to live in a manner commensurate with our dignity as persons and vocation as cocreators of a world of beauty.

At a minimum, the right to beauty demands that all persons live and work in settings commensurate with their human dignity, places that are safe, healthy, clean, well lit, and spacious, and places in fundamental and sustainable harmony and balance with the larger environment. The right to beauty means that everyone is entitled to a “fair” share of creation's bounty, to live and work in places that are not mean, barren, exhausted, filthy, or squalid. This right to beauty also requires that all persons be allowed to train for and find labor that expresses and enhances their human dignity and fulfills their vocation as artists and cocreators. The right to beauty entitles all people to appropriately challenging and creative work, allowing them to participate in and make their unique contribution to the ongoing construction and improvement of the common good. Finally, the right to beauty demands that all persons be able to contribute to and enjoy the riches of their cultural and artistic heritage, be given access to the bounty of this inheritance, and be provided with the resources to contribute to its growth.

⁶³ The solicitude Leo encourages toward impoverished workers is reminiscent of the liberality shown released slaves in Exodus 12:35–36 and Deuteronomy 15:12–15. It is not enough simply to meet the survival needs of these liberated slaves. They are to share in the bounty and riches of their former masters.

⁶⁴ John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* no. 12.

⁶⁵ Gutiérrez, “Task and Content of Liberation Theology” 36.