

Reprinted from the Christian Science Monitor, October 1, 2001.
Republished with permission of the Christian Science Publishing
Society. All rights reserved.

Beauty from the rubble

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

In September, we were on a European "castles" tour. The group visited churches and royal residences representing architectural stages from Roman to Renaissance. Despite the diversity (or maybe because of it), each place had its dash or deluge of beauty. But beauty wasn't found only in preserving the past. Flower boxes overflowed drab walls. Geometric floral arrangements graced intersections. Cement building facades were painted to resemble period architecture. Beauty was in the parks, by the roadside, downtown, and in country villages in France, Luxembourg, Austria, and Germany. Everywhere we went, beauty seemed important.

I discussed the value of beauty with one of our group who owns a bed-and-breakfast in Ohio designed as a castle. She has an eye for the unique and charming. I wondered aloud about the importance of beauty in the United States, where the emphasis is often on functionality, on streamlining for efficiency - unadorned buildings, spaces softened with maybe a little greenery, modular offices with utilitarian off-white or the industrial color of the decade. Even our speech and writing are functional, as we exchange one-line greetings before getting right to the point. Sound-bites and news clips strip the poetry from language, leaving a naked kernel. I wondered aloud about the purpose of beauty when it served no function. My friend immediately responded, "Beauty is necessary!"

Beauty is necessary. What an arresting concept. It's not an extra or an option if we have time or talent. It's the soul of life, and as such, it's necessary to functionality. I instantly glimpsed a new (to me) view of beauty. That beauty isn't adornment but essence. It's the substance of life, of thought expressed.

I began to approach each palace and garden, church and painting, statue and flower box, with the idea that beauty is necessary, vital to the human spirit. With this perspective, I appreciated more the search for beauty expressed by

artist and architect, peasant and king, as more than an outward appearance or excess. It represents an inner search for the divine, for a more spiritual sense and eternal harmony. Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer of Christian Science wrote, "My sense of the beauty of the universe is, that beauty typifies holiness, and is something to be desired" ("Miscellaneous Writings," pg. 86). What an inspiring thought that beauty hints of holiness, of divinity, of godliness on earth - the divine shining through the human.

This became relevant on September 11. A continent away, the visual images are no less numbing. The tour was soon over. Yet we were unable to return home. In Munich, Germany, we wandered into yet another historic palace, the Residenz. It was more opulent, vast, breathtakingly beautiful, than one could imagine. We wandered, amazed, through many of the 147 rooms filled with tapestries and art, painted vaulted ceilings, gilt walls, marbled stucco doorways, fountains, and a seashell-covered grotto. The variety, depth, and extent of beauty was overwhelming. A testament to the Bavarians' value of beauty.

Over 70 percent of Munich was reduced to rubble during World War II. The Residenz was bombed, gutted by fire, and destroyed in a devastating bombing raid April 25, 1944. We saw pictures. Roofs had collapsed into lower floors, leaving a pile of rubble sandwiched between the remaining walls. Almost immediately, restoration began. After the war, rubble was cleared from the remains of the grotto courtyard, and fund-raising concerts were held on site. According to the museum guide, "The beginnings looked inauspicious yet the conviction grew that, despite material shortages and the priority accorded to housing, commitment to rebuilding the royal palace was not as touchingly quixotic as it had seemed." Perhaps this commitment to beauty served as a symbol to inspire and support the populace as they painstakingly rebuilt an entire city. Beauty was necessary.

Beauty, like holiness, like all spiritual qualities, needs to be cherished, nurtured, and cultivated. Spirituality isn't a frill. It's the essence of being. It can inspire and support us, too, as we begin to rebuild structures and human lives.

Now that we're home, my prayer is not only for the functional - for safety, life, health, courage. It's also for beauty - embraced and expressed in the lives of each of us.