The Mirror Column
11-19
Bishop William Joensen

Beauty and the Best

Beyond Thanksgiving, November in the Des Moines diocese affords us several moments to take a step back, ponder, and focus on what really matters in life. The Nov. 2nd Women's Conference hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Parish, with its theme, "The Soul of the Matter," with presentations on spiritual purification, Eucharistic faith, and living a soul-sourced life, was one. And the Nov. 24th 2 p.m. Sunday Mass at St. Ambrose Cathedral, where all liturgical musicians are blessed and commissioned in their distinctive vocations to help lift our hearts and offer God a sacrifice of praise, is another. The recognition of vocal and instrumental performers follows closely on the heels of the Nov. 22nd Feast of St. Cecilia, patroness of musicians (and in my young bishop's reckoning, still a top five patron saint among our young people being confirmed!).

Not everyone who travels to Rome ventures across the Tiber River to visit the Church of St. Cecilia. Those who do are inevitably enchanted by the confessional crypt of the martyred young wife, who, despite torture and threats of death, is said to have "kept a song alive in her heart" to God. After centuries of being entombed in the catacombs, Cardinal Sfrondrato in 1599 re-opened her grave and found her still incorrupt. The cardinal had enlisted the artist Stefano Moderno to be present at the unearthing of her body, and to give witness in words and in marble to what he experienced: a lithe, modest, and graceful form with extended fingers pointing to the Holy Trinity, and her exposed neck bearing the fault line of her decapitation. Yet violence yields to virtue; beastliness is superseded by beauty; hostility toward her tenacious faith cannot quench holiness. Cecilia the martyress and Moderno the sculptor are artists in their own right of what is

most true, good, and worthy of our beholding. They realized their vocations to point beyond themselves to the God who is eminently attractive, fascinating, soul-stilling. Our beautiful God impresses and inspires us all in varied ways, though we rely heavily on artists of all stripes to awaken, enkindle, and expand our awareness of what our souls most desire: the God who alone satisfies the yearnings of our voracious hearts.

In his 1999 "Letter to Artists," St. John Paul II acknowledges that not all are called to be artists. Yet artists, when conscious of their gift, are led to see "the whole of creation with eyes able to contemplate and give thanks, and to raise to God a hymn of praise" (nn. 1-2). Artists (including poets, writes, sculptors, architects, musicians, and actors) commune with beauty as a vocation bestowed by God as a sort of divine spark. The Holy Father continues: "Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people. . . teachers, fathers and mothers" (nn. 3-4). Genuine artists evoke the ultimate sentiment acclaimed by St. Francis in his ecstatic experience with Christ: "You are beauty!" And the early Christian humanist Paulinus of Nola captures the same sentiment: "Our only art is faith and our music Christ" (nn. 6-7). When done well, in the key of Christ, our faith feeds our music, and our music feeds our faith. We might ponder that wisdom the next time we access Spotify.

Thank God for our liturgical musicians in parishes across our diocese! They are not technicians plunking out notes, vocalists giving lip service to the score set before them. They are realizing a sacred vocation given by God, giving expression to an energy kindled in their hearts, and expanding our awareness of just how beautiful and marvelous God is. Each Sunday and beyond, we are given a chance to "let our praise loose" in response to the beauty we have encountered--in the face of which the ugliness of life pales. Whether historians will credit St. Cecilia with actually being a musician in her own right, we know with her that there is a song

always lurking in our hearts, an underlying hum we can barely constrain: our God is beautiful--

the best life on offer!