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The first Communion class at St. Mary of the Woods in Chicago, 2019 (Provided photo)

by Patrick T. Reardon

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The other day, I was at the first Communion of my great-niece Maeve, and was again struck, as I often am, by the holiness of beauty.

Maeve is a beautiful 8-year-old (of course, aren't all 8-year-olds beautiful? And holy?) She was one of nearly 60 kids who were receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist in her parish church, St. Mary of the Woods, in Chicago.

It's a low-slung worship space, built in the 1950s when Catholic church-building in the newly settled suburbs and on the edges of the city eschewed traditional architecture. In an effort to keep costs down and experiment with new ways of raising the human spirit to God and toward community, the designers of St. Mary of the Woods put the altar along one very long western wall, facing some two dozen rows of pews under a ceiling that was only 20-25 feet above the floor. It is a space that would have flirted with the sterility of a conference center meeting room, except for one thing.

Along the western and northern walls are 18 floor-to-ceiling stained-glass windows filled with abstract colors in and around myriad leaf shapes — the "woods" of the church name — and highlighted by eight images of Mary in various legendary visions, such as her appearance to St. Juan Diego at Guadalupe and to St. Dominic, giving him the rosary.

Throughout the touchingly innocent first Communion Mass, those two walls were ablaze with bright colors that subtly shifted with each slight change in the sunlight outdoors. It was beautiful. It was holy. It was a glimpse into the heart of God.

Every now and then, I'll hear someone complain that the church should sell off all its art in the Vatican and in its churches — and get rid of those church buildings while they're at it — and give the money to the poor.

I understand the sentiment, but it seems to me that to get rid of all that beautiful art and architecture would be to lessen our experience of God and to lose the unifying force of great art.

Please understand that I fully recognize the need for the church — and for humanity in general — to work for a more equitable world, and to work to reduce the poverty that weighs down hundreds of millions. That is a foundation stone of our faith.

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Another is beauty. All religious faiths, as far as I know, find God in the delight, wonder and pleasure of beauty, which, of course, isn't just what we see, but also what we smell and touch and hear. Think of all the great music of all the many faiths.

Beauty is far from simple. Indeed, it's a complex reality that exists on many levels. Something that might seem ugly can be beautiful. Remember when Jesus used his spit and the dust on the ground to form a mud to put on the eyes of the blind man to give him sight. It might sound yucky, but, for the blind man, it was a most beautiful thing.

During the church year, there is a lot to delight the senses: the exotic smell of incense, the darkened church suddenly alight on Holy Saturday, the touch of chrism on the forehead of the newly confirmed, the flow of water over the head of a baby being baptized. One Holy Thursday, I was among those to have our feet washed. What a touching human act! The hands of one person, holding, bathing, caressing another's foot, a communication of love, of God.

I fell in love with the church (the building) when I was brought by my parents as a baby into this vaulting, great open space over my head, so unlike the second-floor flat where the three of us lived. This was at St. Thomas Aquinas (now St. Martin de Porres), a church filled with stained-glass windows and, behind the altar, a huge 40-foot-tall painting, patterned on a similar work by Spanish master Francisco de Zurbarán.

For the past 30-plus years, my wife, Cathy, and I have worshiped with the St. Gertrude community in another space that seems to be as wide and high and embracing as the universe, as God.

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All four walls at St. Gertrude feature stained-glass windows, designed by German artists during the early 1930s when the church was being built. At times when sunlight hits them at a certain angle, they splash the floor and the marble walls with exquisitely shifting patterns of color that bring small children — and many adults — delight.

I went to St. Gertrude for decades before I realized that the stained-glass windows contained a subtle, artistic grace note that has given me great joy ever since. In the windows on the south wall, over the doors of the church, Jesus, Mary and the saints have blue and turquoise halos, while those in the windows along the very long east and west walls are generally orange and yellow, often in the same circle of light.

But behind the altar on the north wall, the six saints who flank Jesus are adorned with halos of kelly green.

The Baltimore Catechism, a half century ago, defined a sacrament as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." All of this beauty, whether the mud of Jesus' spit or the clouds of incense or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, all of these are outward signs, instituted by God, to give grace. We can be one of those outward signs. We can be bright lights of beauty in the world, no matter what we look like.

A smile is always beautiful. A listening ear is always beautiful. Each of us, if we strive to do right and follow Jesus, can be a stained-glass window spreading our patterns of light all around us. And our halo can be blue or orange or even kelly green.

[Chicago-based Patrick T. Reardon is the author of eight books, including *Requiem for David*, a poetry collection about his brother's suicide. All Soul Seeing columns can be found at NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

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