

Captivating Beauty

by Katie Prejean McGrady



Her little eyes lit up, darting left and right as she turned into a living bobblehead doll, taking in all the details of the beautifully decorated church. We walked down the aisle quickly, slipped into the pew where my parents were saving seats for us, and settled in for what I was already certain would be a stressful hour of worship. Easter Sunday Mass with an eight-month-old is akin to a full body workout and I was convinced before we even set foot in the church that my daughter would be squirmy and loud the entire time.

But she wasn't. Rose wasn't perfectly still, but not too noisy or wiggly either. She seemed captivated by the sights, sounds, smells, and bells of Easter Sunday Mass with the bishop.

The organ seemed louder than normal and every time a note played, Rose's head would pop up and she'd look in the direction of the sound. Floral banners and bouquets of flowers adorned every open space, while a gigantic image of the resurrected Christ hung by the baptismal font. As Rose was passed from person to person, her head would turn back and forth as she looked at everything filling the space.

Never before had I seen my daughter so captivated by the church. Perhaps it was her age—newly mobile, having just mastered crawling, and much more vocal, having discovered there’s range to her voice. But I think it was also the church itself, so beautifully decorated for the Easter season, the Paschal candle lit, the finest art hung on the walls, and the most gorgeous flowers on display.

The beauty of the space captured my eight-month-old’s attention, as well as my own.

This is what beauty does: it captures our attention, draws us in, and invites us to pause and sit in wonder and awe at the majesty before us. And no one does beauty quite like the Roman Catholic Church.

From the basilicas we know by name—St. Peter’s in Rome, Notre-Dame in Paris, and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.—to the smaller churches we know because they mean something personal to us, the places we worship hold great meaning precisely because they are often so beautiful and invite us into an experience of the divine. The art that’s been created by and for the Church over the centuries—the works of ancient artists such as Michelangelo, Bernini, and Caravaggio, and modern artists such as Jennifer Norton, Carl Fougousse, and Daniel Mitsui—have given us beautiful things to look at, prompting a contemplation of the great mysteries of our faith.

The Church is no museum, at least in the traditional sense that a museum is a place where you go to look at pretty things and then leave, having had an experience of something nice to cross off your bucket list. The Church is more a curator of beauty, inviting us in to gaze upon, rest, and wrestle with that which is good, beautiful, and true.

It’s no coincidence that *Ave Explores: Art and Architecture* kicks off on the one-year anniversary of the devastating fire at the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. This new series examines art and architecture in the Church and how the beautiful things within our tradition—from the buildings in which we worship to the paintings that hang on our walls—help us to engage with our faith. Throughout this series, you will learn from art historians and Church history scholars, architects and artists, filmmakers and professors, and illustrators and iconographers who will invite you to ponder the depths of your faith and look into the face of God.

Just like a little girl can be swept up in the beauty of a church on Easter morning, so too can we be swept up in the beauty of the art and architecture that helps capture the mysteries of our faith.



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