Beauty’s civil and economic virtues are vital for us. Beauty is necessary to renew the economy and labor market, to establish new schools and universities, and to guarantee care for those who didn’t choose to be poor.

The old and new kinds of poverty afflicting the poor can only be overcome through the beautiful poverty of St. Francis. Although the Italian economy and civil life “produced” (artistic, musical, urban...) beauty, it was beauty that first brought about the economy and civil life.

Anything made in Italy has been precious for centuries. Artisans and workers of all periods have made this true. They grew up surrounded by cathedrals, piazzas, valleys, seas, and mountains, and were thereby nourished by beauty. So we must realize that it is not only raw material, capital, and labor that are inputs for our economy; Dante, Pinocchio, Fellini, stories, landscapes, frescos, churches, are the basis for national production. Beauty becomes translated into designs, cars, shoes, outfits, foods.

Food and wine tourism attract people to, for example, Umbria and Sicily. In such places one will not only “consume” accommodations, food, and wine, but will “eat and drink” the beauty accumulated over thousands of years of culture and in the landscape (one should bear in mind that although the entrepreneur sells this product, part of its price isn't his; this is also true considering taxes). Economic value was created when people started adding value to products through beauty; when producers learned how to express beauty they translated it into products, goods, the economy, and welfare. Today we continuously consume beauty but are no longer capable of producing it, other than in very small quantities. We should start creating beauty once more so that goods and labor may flourish again. Beauty cannot be planned for in business schools or political forums; it is the fruit of graciousness. Grace (Charis in Greek) is the root of beauty (also gracefulness) itself, and it inspires love for places, cities, and regions.

It may not be as obvious today as in the past, but beauty is essential in maintaining good schools and universities. Currently they lack not only of economic and financial resources, but also beauty. Our children and youth should receive their education and develop their personalities in the most beautiful places. However, these places are in the hands of banks and speculators while students are crowded together in forgotten, decaying buildings. I just don’t know how one can teach, let alone how students can encounter and get to know Socrates, Pythagoras, and Leopardi, in such an ugly environment.

Clear-sighted people working in schools know that classrooms, walls and yards speak and teach as well. They are “colleagues” who communicate in a non verbal language just as vivid as ours. Children are aware of this and have learned it from fairy tales and cartoons where grasshoppers, animals, and plants also speak, and where houses can open their eyes and smile. Evidentially children aren't simply incomplete grown-ups; they have something more than the adults, though this is eventually lost in time. Such an approach to beauty is necessary if true child-adult reciprocity is to be fostered. However, in schools today this is what happens: A child reads a poem of Ungaretti and a few minutes later runs outside, wishing to experience the mystery of poetry in real life (either one lives poetry in one’s own flesh, or it’s useless, it can even be harmful). The scruffy and decayed recreation space they play in doesn’t allow the student to learn the desired exercise in freedom and truth. Thus, the next day the teacher has to start again from scratch, a task worthy of Sisypus. In short, a school is good if it’s beautiful.
Demand for beauty is even more urgent among the poor. In times gone by the population of a town, including the poor, would frequent the most beautiful places, namely the cathedrals and churches. It’s stunning to think that Giotto’s and Caravaggio’s frescos decorated the rooms that offered shelter to poor, simple, humble and illiterate people. The harsh burden of a short life filled with struggle was eased by the gift of art. Artists and patrons handed the poor part of the richness that was once taken from them.

Of course back then there was also a lot of opulence and private wealth that was not shared with the poor. Today however, despite the French Revolution and democracy, even less beauty (wealth) is shared than before. Wealth is now produced by the financial market and then concentrated in fiscal paradises, in invisible and extremely private real-estate, or other assets. Towns are not at all made more beautiful by mansions of millionaires. People don’t see them, let alone live in them. They represent an uncivilized kind of wealth; they are neither in nor for the city. Thus, the luxury and pomp confined within their walls aren’t true to beauty. The inhabitants themselves won’t enjoy its beauty as long as it remains hidden to others, mainly to the poor. “You chose to be condemned for life to enjoy only what brings joy to all!”, the concept in this lovely verse by David Maria Turoldo is actually true for everyone. “In my cooperative” a civil entrepreneur once told me “there will be very competent hairdressers, because” he continued “if an old lady breaks her thighbone, as long as she doesn’t feel beautiful she will not be cured, she might even let herself die”.

True beauty is therapeutic. Hideous surroundings may avoid cure or even cause death. When poor people are helped and offered shelter in an agreeable environment they will be capable of giving the first step out of their unfortunate condition. Beauty brings out the best in us. Beauty therefore is not a luxury good but is a necessary good that should go hand in hand with dignity and poverty. Let’s fill our cities, companies, and schools with beauty so we will not run out of the spiritual and symbolic strength to start again.

Translated by Cristian Sebok