

## Bellezza

Associated with the Benedictine monastery at Subiaco, situated forty miles east of Rome, there is a cave called *il Sacro Speco* in which St. Benedict at the start of his retreat from a falling Roman Empire (around 500 AD) resided until he was called to start his famous Order to salvage civilization for posterity. Understandably the later monks of the Order decorated that cave over time. There are arches and slender columns, a marble altar covered with gold, blue and crimson mosaics.

Not content simply to hear the Gospel, they needed to see it by way of frescos dating from as early as 700 AD, covering every square foot of ceilings and walls. The upper cave, now a large chapel, depicted the whole climax of Christ's life: his entry into Jerusalem, the kiss of Judas, the flight of the disciples, his crucifixion, meeting with Mary Magdalen, confrontation of doubting Thomas, ascension into heaven.

There it is in reds, blues, purples, silver and gold along with iconic images of Mary and saints. And in the lower chapel there is even an image of St. Francis, painted from life when he visited the place in 1223. It's tucked behind a corner at shoulder level and when you stumble upon it in all your vulnerability, his wide open, gracious eyes look right into your soul.

As if that weren't enough, when Jane and I visited this treasure twenty years ago a wedding was taking place in the upper chapel. In other words, we were to experience the place not as a mere museum but alive with faith and love – with all the figures of the frescos beaming down upon the event like strangely alive participants. Of course there were the beautiful bride and groom, family, friends fashionably attired – as Italians are wont to be at such occasions.

Bellezza! Beauty! That's what summed up the whole experience for me. And isn't that what religion is ultimately about: becoming beautiful, perceiving and creating beauty everywhere, behaving beautifully (and not just puritanically) – a banquet of beauty - visual, musical, moral - to which God invites us?

But then it dawned on me. Here I was, a casual American tourist, khaki trousers, sports shirt, scuffed shoes. And I began to worry whether some guest, like the king in today's parable, might approach me and ask, "My friend, how is it you came in here not properly dressed?"

And I thought, "By golly, I've got to acquire a change of wardrobe. Not only literally but spiritually. I've got to divest myself of all the sourness and whining and grinding of teeth, the resentments, anxiety, excuses - the things that perpetually mute my beauty if I am ever to become eligible to enjoy God's world so beautifully reflected here within this *Sacro Speco* of Subiaco."

**Geoff Wood**