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A BEAUTY THAT SAVES: DOSTOEVSKY'S THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY *THE IDIOT*

Joseph M. Day

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After publishing *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky began the project of writing a novel meant to take up some of the themes and questions raised in the story of Raskolnikov. The result, after years of struggle and many revisions, was *The Idiot*. In this work, however, Dostoevsky delves into several questions he had not explored deeply in *Crime and Punishment*. One such question concerns the nature of beauty. The question of beauty hangs over the entire plot and meaning of the novel. To begin discussing Dostoevsky's theme of beauty it is useful to note three brief passages from the novel. Perhaps the most widely known and quoted of these statements is Prince Myshkin's claim that "the world will be saved by beauty!"<sup>1</sup> Earlier in the novel, the Prince had commented that "Beauty is a puzzle."<sup>2</sup> Placing these two statements side by side compels the reader to ask with Ippolit: "What beauty is going to save the world?"<sup>3</sup> These three statements introduce the complexity of the theme of beauty. Rather than straightforward and easily reducible to platitudes, Dostoevsky's concept of beauty is theologically deep and multifaceted. To fully understand Dostoevsky's view of beauty it is necessary to examine the story of Russia's first encounter with Christianity. It is also important to note the fact that Dostoevsky finished *The Idiot* while living in Florence. By comparing Dostoevsky and recent Catholic popes, it will become clear that Dostoevsky's concept of beauty is a deeply Christian one. The characters of the prince and Nastasya Filippovna coupled with the art mentioned in the novel provide opportunities for Dostoevsky to express his concept of beauty. What this study reveals is that Dostoevsky's concept of beauty is undeniably Christian, but in a way that is far richer and deeper than often realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Part III, Chapter 5, pg. 402.

<sup>2</sup> Part I, Chapter 7, pg. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Part III, Chapter 5, pg. 402.

In order to more fully understand Dostoevsky's concept of beauty in *The Idiot* it is important to briefly examine both the Russian historical context and the immediate surroundings in which he was writing. Beautiful art has always had an important place in Russian culture, especially in Russian Orthodox religion. The very conversion of Russian to Christianity is attributed to beauty. According to legend, Vladimir the Great sent emissaries in 988 throughout the world to enquire about which religion he and the people of Russia should adopt. Returning from their visit to the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the ambassadors reported to Vladimir about what they had seen:

Then we went on to Greece, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty.<sup>4</sup>

This story is important because it helps the westerner, unacquainted with Russian Orthodoxy, to understand the artistic and religious background in which Dostoevsky wrote about beauty. Beauty, in the Russian conception, is intimately connected with the divine. This legend reveals three connected characteristics of beauty that are crucial for the Dostoevsky's Christian concept of beauty. Firstly, beauty strikes the observer, penetrating him to the heart. Beauty impacts the human person so greatly because it is an encounter with the divine. Lastly, beauty is transformative. The Russian emissaries "cannot forget that beauty"<sup>5</sup> which remains indelibly within them, and which brings about a change, conversion and salvation.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Christianisation of Russia," *Primary Chronicle, Durham University Community*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In addition to understanding the Russian historical view of beauty, it is important to understand the immediate context in which Dostoevsky wrote. The final draft of *The Idiot* was completed while Dostoevsky was living in Florence. Although often ignored by scholars, the effect of traveling in Europe and living in Florence had upon Dostoevsky and *The Idiot* is not insignificant. It was while traveling in Basel that Dostoevsky first encountered Hans Holbein's "Christ in the Tomb," which profoundly disturbed him. But, what is less often noted, is the effect the art of Florence had on him. In Florence Dostoevsky encountered beauty all around him. Although he complained of the rain, Dostoevsky wrote that "when the sun shines, it is almost Paradise. Impossible to imagine anything more beautiful than this sky, this air, this light."<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising that a Russian was struck by the warmth and beauty of Italy's comfortable climate. And, yet, surely as Dostoevsky wrote those words he must have had in the back of his mind the artistic and literary beauty of Dante's *Paradise*.

And it was the artistic beauty of Florence that impacted Dostoevsky most strongly. His wife remembered how much Dostoevsky was struck by the Duomo and especially the Baptistery. It was the doors of the Baptistery, "(especially the one of Paradise) [that] sent him into ecstasies. We never passed by a great work of Ghiberti without stopping a few moments to marvel at it...my husband was entranced by Raphael's 'Madonna of the Chair...before the picture of St. John the Baptist in the Desert, also by Raphael, he stood rapt for a long time.'<sup>7</sup> These great works of Renaissance art clearly captivated Dostoevsky. For him, Florence was a city filled with beauty. "And what treasures," he rapturously exclaimed, "there are in the galleries...How many other divine things there are besides."<sup>8</sup> Dostoevsky's experience of beauty here resembles that

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<sup>6</sup> F.M. Dostoevsky, *Pisma*, ed. A.S. Dolinin, Moscow, 1930, vol. 2, Letter 321, pp. 159-160.

<sup>7</sup> A. G. Dostoevskoi, *Vospiminaniya*, ed. L.P. Grossman, Moscow-Leningrad, 1925, p.127.

of Vladimir's ambassadors. The beauty that Dostoevsky found in Florence struck him greatly, elevated him to the encounter with the divine and imprinted itself within him. As Katharine Strelsky argues, the "art of Italy fed his spirit, consoled his loneliness, gave him images of beauty everlasting, and perhaps it is not too much to say, a subtle coloring to his aesthetic."<sup>9</sup> It would have been impossible for Dostoevsky's theme of beauty in *The Idiot* not to be effected by his time in Florence, surrounded as he was by treasure on treasure, beauty on beauty.

Considering how the beauty of Catholic art struck Dostoevsky, it should not be surprising that his conception of beauty is remarkably similar to that of post-conciliar pontiffs. A comparison of these popes and Dostoevsky will help elucidate the traditional Christian nature of his view of beauty. At the close of the Second Vatican Council Pope Paul VI addressed artists, telling them that the world "needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart."<sup>10</sup> There is a strong theological connection here with Dostoevsky's own view of beauty. In an article he wrote in 1861, Dostoevsky claimed that "Art is just as much a human need as eating and drinking. The need for beauty and creation is inseparable from man."<sup>11</sup> A few years after writing *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky published *Demons*. In this novel, he writes that "Man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live, because there would no longer be anything to do in the world. The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here."<sup>12</sup> Both Dostoevsky and recent popes understood man's existential need for beauty. Without beauty man cannot fully live.

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<sup>8</sup> *Pisma*, Letter 319, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Strelsky, "Dostoevsky in Florence," *Russian Review* 23, no. 2 (Apr. 1964): 161, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed April 1, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Paul VI, "Address of Pope Paul VI to Artists."

<sup>11</sup> Dostoevsky, "Mr. ...bov and the Problem of Art," *Vremya*, 1861.

This Christian conception of man's need for beauty, therefore, locates the salvation of the world in beauty. Pope John Paul II noted that Prince Myshkin's assertion that "the world will be saved by beauty"<sup>13</sup> was said "with profound insight."<sup>14</sup> As John Paul II realized, Dostoevsky's conception of beauty was a deeply Christian and Orthodox one. He draws the connection between Dostoevsky and Eastern spirituality in which Christ is called "the supremely Beautiful, possessed of a beauty above all the children of earth."<sup>15</sup> Here is found the answer to Ippolit's question: "What beauty is going to save the world?"<sup>16</sup> Christ is the Beauty that will save the world. As Pope Benedict XVI points out, "people usually forget that Dostoevsky is referring to the redeeming Beauty of Christ."<sup>17</sup> This salvific beauty is not some abstract aesthetic, but the person of Jesus Christ. In a letter, Dostoevsky wrote that "In the world, there is only one positively beautiful person-Christ."<sup>18</sup> This Beauty who is the salvation of the world was also Dostoevsky's personal Savior. Leaving Siberia, the newly converted Dostoevsky wrote that "There is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more attractive, more reasonable and more manly than Christ."<sup>19</sup> In Christ, Dostoevsky encountered the Beauty from Whom all beauty and all salvation flows.

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<sup>12</sup> Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Part II, Chapter 8.

<sup>13</sup> Part III, Chapter 5, pg. 402.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists."

<sup>15</sup> Enkomia of the Orthós of the Holy and Great Saturday, qtd. in "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists."

<sup>16</sup> Part III, Chapter 5, pg. 402.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "The Beauty and the Truth of Christ," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, (6 November, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky, "Letter to S.A. Ivanova," qtd. in Jeff Gatrall, "Between Iconoclasm and Silence: Representing the Divine in Holbein and Dostoevskii," *Comparative Literature*, 53 no. 3 (Summer, 2001): <http://jstor.org/> (accessed April 8, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky, qtd in Gatrall.

It is necessary to appreciate how profoundly Christian and traditional this few of beauty is. The great Father of the Church and late convert like Dostoevsky himself, St. Augustine came to a similar realization of Christ as Beauty itself. In his discussion of Dostoevsky, John Paul II quotes St. Augustine's exclamation: "Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!"<sup>20</sup> Although it is uncertain whether Dostoevsky was familiar with the words of St. Francis, John Paul II aptly includes them as well in his address. Upon receiving the stigmata, the great saint proclaimed: "You are beauty... You are beauty!"<sup>21</sup> This very Dostoevskian exclamation could easily be imaged coming from Prince Myshkin's lips. Francis' brother Friar, St. Bonaventure explained the founder's words and actions: "In things of beauty, he contemplated the One who is supremely beautiful, and, led by the footprints he found in creatures, he followed the Beloved everywhere."<sup>22</sup> In searching for beauty, man is truly searching for God. The point of quoting all these Catholic theologians and saints is to highlight the traditional Christian character of Dostoevsky's philosophy, or rather, theology of beauty. His beliefs about beauty are grounded in the common heritage and tradition shared by the Churches of the East and the West.

But in order to more fully understand the importance of Christ as pure beauty in Dostoevsky's thought, it is necessary to delve a little more deeply into Christian theology. Dostoevsky's conception of beauty is intimately tied to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. He wrote that "the appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely beautiful person [Christ] is already an infinite miracle. (All of John's Gospel in this sense; he finds the whole miracle in the

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<sup>20</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Chapter XXVII.

<sup>21</sup> Lodi di Dio Altissimo, vv. 7 and 10: Fonti Francescane, No. 261, Padua 1982, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Legenda Maior*, IX, 1: Fonti Francesane, No. 1162, loc. cit., 911.



incarnation, in the appearance of the beautiful.)”<sup>23</sup> The Gospel of John was Dostoevsky’s favorite book of the Bible, and the one from which he frequently drew crucial themes and images for his novels.<sup>24</sup> The drama, richness and beauty of John’s description of the Incarnation have shaped Christian theology in an unmeasurable manner. The words of John’s Prologue reverberate throughout the history of Christian thought, prayer and art. For the Christian there are few words as sweet as these: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”<sup>25</sup>

The Incarnation is crucial for Dostoevsky’s theme of beauty in *The Idiot*. He wrote that “without the ideal of Beauty man will languish, die and go mad. ...And since Christ himself and in his Word carried the ideal of Beauty, I decided: better to instill in the soul the ideal of Beauty.”<sup>26</sup> By taking on human flesh, Christ united divinity and humanity, infusing creation with the beauty of the divine. It is through the Incarnation, therefore, that beauty in art is made possible. St. Paul writes that Christ “is the image of the invisible God.”<sup>27</sup> The word that Paul uses in Colossians is the Greek word, *eikon*, from which the English Icon is derived. It is in and through Christ, the image of the Father, that man has seen and continues to encounter God.<sup>28</sup> This has important implications for art. As an Orthodox Christian, Dostoevsky was very familiar with the use of icons as well as the theological and historical defense of images of Christ. The words of St. John Damascene that because “God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make

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<sup>23</sup> Dostoevsky, “Letter to S.A. Ivanova,” qtd. in Jeff Gatrall.

<sup>24</sup> See Dostoevsky’s use of the Raising of Lazarus (John 11) in *Crime and Punishment* and the grain of wheat (John 12) in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>25</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>26</sup> F.M. Dostoevsky, *Pis'ma* (M.-L., 1928), II, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Colossians 1:15. See also Hebrews 1:3.

<sup>28</sup> John 14:9.

an image of the God whom I see,”<sup>29</sup> would have been familiar to him. Since God dwells among men it is not only permissible, but even, as Dostoevsky and recent popes have claimed, necessary for Christ the beautiful to be depicted in art.

This long discussion raises the obvious question of how Dostoevsky, if he saw the need to depict saving beauty, incorporates this beauty into *The Idiot*. One possible example of an icon of Christ is Prince Myshkin. When Dostoevsky began work on *The Idiot*, he was motivated by a desire to show a character reborn, completing the redemption of Raskolnikov. Faced with the difficulty of this task, however, Dostoevsky shifted direction. “The main idea of the novel,” he wrote, “is to depict the positively good man.”<sup>30</sup> But he also wrote that his hero was to be a “wholly beautiful” and “positively beautiful” man.<sup>31</sup> The hero was to incarnate beauty and goodness. Yet, there is only one man who is truly and completely good and beautiful, Christ. The prince, though Christ-like, is not Christ. He cannot save Nastasya Filippovna, Rogozhin, Aglaya or himself, but instead precipitates the destruction of them all.

Prince Myshkin’s failure is caused by his flawed nature and incomplete beauty. Through the character of the prince, Dostoevsky shows the inability of a good and beautiful man to save. The prince is beautiful because he is Christ-like. His innocence and genuine, unaffected goodwill towards all can be seen throughout the novel. He is very childlike, and loves spending time with children, which is reminiscent of the words of Jesus, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike Rogozhin or Totsky who love Nastasya Filippovna in a lustful manner, out of a desire to possess her, the

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<sup>29</sup> St. John Damascene, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, Trans. David Anderson, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1980), 23.

<sup>30</sup> Qtd. in W.J. Leatherbarrow, introduction to *The Idiot*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xv.

<sup>31</sup> F.M. Dostoevsky, *Pis'ma* (M.-L., 1928), II, 61; 74.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 19:14.

prince loves her with compassion. He makes it clear to Rogozhin that, as “I explained to you before, didn’t I, that I loved her ‘out of compassion, not love.’”<sup>33</sup> It is out of compassion that he offers to marry Nastasya Filippovna and out of compassion that he eventually forsakes Aglaya, turning to her and exclaiming, “How could you! She’s really...so unhappy!”<sup>34</sup> Earlier the prince had implored Aglaya to look with a similar pity upon Nastasya Filippovna. He pleaded with her, saying “don’t hold her up to scorn, don’t cast the stone.”<sup>35</sup> The prince’s words evoke the passage from John’s Gospel where Christ saves the sinful woman.<sup>36</sup> There is in this compassionate Christian love an echo of the beauty of God, the beauty of the God who is, as Dante puts it, “The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”<sup>37</sup>

It is this reflection of God’s love that gives Myshkin his beauty. As a mirror of Christ, reflecting the divine beauty and attempting to shine it forth into the world, the prince fills the role of holy fool. As Leatherbarrow notes, the “*yurodivy*, or God’s fool, was a distinctive phenomenon in Russian Orthodox Christianity, a crazed but saintly figure who sought salvation through meekness and self-abasement...[a] picture of a forgiving, compassionate, Christlike prince.”<sup>38</sup> The holy fool is in sense an icon of Christ. The Catholic theologian, Fr. John Saward, provides a good explanation of this in relation to the priesthood. He writes that “pastors are

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<sup>33</sup> Part II, chapter 3, pg. 218.

<sup>34</sup> Part IV, chapter 8, pg. 605.

<sup>35</sup> Part III, chapter 8, pg. 457.

<sup>36</sup> John 8: 7-11: “But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She replied, ‘No one, sir.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.’”

<sup>37</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 145.

<sup>38</sup> Leatherbarrow, introduction, xiv.

themselves ‘works of art’...God the Father fashions men to be the images of His Son.” But in order to be truly Christlike, the priest or, by extension, the holy fool, “must show forth the beauty of Christ in holiness.”<sup>39</sup> Dostoevsky draws upon the richness of the Pauline tradition which had given rise to these holy fools in Russia and elsewhere. The biblical roots for this idea of the holy fool come from Paul’s First Letter to Corinthians where the Apostle contrasts the wisdom of the world with the folly of the cross, which brings salvation.<sup>40</sup> Dostoevsky also likely drew inspiration from historical manifestations of the holy fool. Although there were many such examples in Russian history, Dostoevsky probably had St. Francis in mind. Writing in Italy, Dostoevsky could hardly have ignored *le Jongleur de Dieu*, who was and still is the most popular saint in Italy.

But the prince’s beauty is only a flawed echo, an incomplete and imperfect image of the beauty of God. Analyzing Prince Myshkin based on the effects of the icon discussed above in regard to the conversion of Russia will help show how Dostoevsky demonstrates the limits of his hero’s beauty. Does the prince truly pierce the other characters to the heart, elevating them to an encounter with the divine that changes them? The end of the novel is a resounding no. The prince is unable to save or change any of the characters in the novel. In fact, “All are destroyed by the passions unleashed by the ‘positively good man.’”<sup>41</sup> Prince Myshkin’s complete failure to

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<sup>39</sup> Seward, John. *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 69.

<sup>40</sup> I Corinthians 1:18-25: “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside.’ Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

<sup>41</sup> Leatherbarrow, introduction, xviii.

save Nastasya Filippovna and his complicity in her demise is the most glaring example of the prince's inadequacy. Yet, Myshkin also breaks Aglaya's heart and propels her into a disastrous marriage with a Polish "count." The whole affair leads to Rogozhin's punishment in Siberia and Ippolit's unredeemed death. For all his attempts to save those around him and society through the beauty of his Christian love, the holy fool ends as a total idiot without reason or much hope of salvation.<sup>42</sup>

If in the prince there is found an incomplete and unsatisfactory reflection of the redemptive beauty, the art mentioned in the novel is also a mixed package. An examination of two of these works of art will help clarify Dostoevsky's use of beauty in *The Idiot*. The first of these is the Madonna. As was noted above, Dostoevsky was particularly struck by Raphael's "Madonna of the Chair."<sup>43</sup> The representation of the Madonna in Orthodox art is even more prominent than in Catholic iconography. Yet, there is here another link between the shared theological traditions of Dostoevsky's East and the Catholic West. John Paul II describes the Blessed Virgin as the "tota pulchra."<sup>44</sup> He points to Dante, the most famous Florentine, who in Paradise beheld "the face that is most like the face of Christ," she who is the "beauty that was joy in the eyes of all the other saints."<sup>45</sup> As the Mother of God, the Madonna represents for both Dante's Western Church and Dostoevsky's Eastern Church the most beautiful woman.

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<sup>42</sup> Part IV, chapter 12, pg. 650: "...but Schneider frowns more and more and shakes his head: he hints at complete destruction of the reasoning faculties; he does not speak of incurability, but he allows himself the gloomiest insinuations."

<sup>43</sup> In *Pisma*, Letter 319, p. 155 Dostoevsky exclaimed: "My God, in '62 I did not notice the 'Madonna of the Chair,' I passed by it for a week without seeing it, and only now have I discovered it."

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists."

<sup>45</sup> *Paradiso* XXXII, 85 and XXXI, 134-135.

The Madonna mentioned in *The Idiot*, however, is not by Raphael, but by Hans Holbein. Prince Myshkin says of Alexandra Ivanovna, she is “beautiful and very sweet, but perhaps you have a secret sadness; you have the kindest of hearts, no doubt of that, but you are not high-spirited. You have a certain something in your face reminiscent of the Holbein Madonna in Dresden.”<sup>46</sup> Yet, as Glenn Arbery, points out Prince Myshkin does not seem interested in Alexandra’s Madonna-like beauty.<sup>47</sup> Instead of this pure and moral beauty, the prince is torn between Aglaya and Nastasya Filippovna. According to Arbery, Aglaya is meant to represent “Greek beauty” while Nastasya Filippovna represents “the beauty of Sodom” between which the prince is caught.<sup>48</sup> According to this argument, Prince Myshkin fails because he rejects the Christian beauty of Alexandra and Vera Lebedev in favor of his “static view of beauty,” which causes the destruction of himself and the other characters.<sup>49</sup>

But Arbery’s argument fails to fully comprehend the prince’s love. He does not choose “the sort of beauty that characterizes those who are united in using each other and being used.”<sup>50</sup> His love is a Christian love, not one in which he wants to use Nastasya Filippovna. He wants to save her. Arbery suggest that Myshkin’s choice of Nastasya Filippovna is the “choice of physical beauty” in a picture separated from the actual person of Nastasya. This misses, however, the fact that Myshkin sees a beauty in Nastasya’s suffering that is at its core Christian.

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<sup>46</sup> Part I, chapter 6, pg. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Glen Arbery, “The Violated Ikon: Dostoevsky and the Riddle of Beauty,” *Renascence* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 189, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed 10 April, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

Arbery calls Nastasya Filippovna “Myshkin’s unconverted Magdalene,”<sup>51</sup> as if this excluded her from any Christian conception of beauty. Jesus saw the beauty of the sinful woman before she ever confessed her sins, reaching out to offer her salvation in her suffering.<sup>52</sup> When first gazing upon Nastasya Filippovna’s portrait, the prince thinks to himself that this is “a strange beauty indeed!”<sup>53</sup> Madame Yepanchina asks Myshkin if this kind of beauty is really appealing to him. When asked why, the prince responds that “In that face... there’s a great deal of suffering.”<sup>54</sup> In the character of Nastasya Filippovna, therefore, the reader is introduced to a variation of Dostoevsky’s idea of the beautiful: the beauty of suffering.

Rather than representing a non-Christian type of beauty, Nastasya Filippovna actually incarnates the beauty of the divine in a different, but complimentary way than that of the Madonna or the holy fool. While the Christlike holy fool reflected the compassionate love of Jesus and the Madonna the moral purity of Christ, Nastasya Filippovna shows forth the beauty of Christ in all mankind. Through the Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ applied to man through Baptism, the dignity and beauty of man has been raised to an even more exalted level.<sup>55</sup> Now mankind can share in the sonship and heritage of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup> As brothers and sisters of Christ, those who suffer share in a special way in the suffering of Christ. The beauty of sufferers and the importance of recognizing and reaching out to this beauty is

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>52</sup> See also Romans 5:8: “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

<sup>53</sup> Part I, chapter 7, pg. 85.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>55</sup> For Old Testament passages on the dignity and beauty of man see Genesis 1:26-27 and Psalm 8:5.

<sup>56</sup> 1 John 3:1: “See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.” And also Romans 8:16-17: “The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

clearly demonstrated by Christ's discourse on the end times. To the righteous God will say, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."<sup>57</sup> Nastasya Filippovna, in her suffering, exhibits this kind of beauty, which is found even in the least.

Nastasya Filippovna's account of how she would paint Christ brings up the question of the connection between the beauty of her suffering and that of Christ's. She would paint Christ alone, without his friends, only a child beside him. Gazing out at the world, "his face is sad... The sun is setting..."<sup>58</sup> The scene is one of a sad, weary Jesus, deserted by his friends. Nastasya Filippovna's face is also one of sadness and suffering. At first sight this concept of beauty in suffering may seem alien to the sort of beauty discussed thus far. Indeed, the works that Dostoevsky praised in Florence and the beauty that converted Russia were all beautiful with the splendor and glory of God. Yet, as Pope Benedict points out, "in [Christ's] Face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes 'to the very end.'"<sup>59</sup> The very beauty of Christ is made manifest in his suffering. It is this that unites the two paradoxical verses: "You are the fairest of the children of men" and "He had no beauty, no majesty to draw our eyes, no grace to make us delight in him."<sup>60</sup> Man is accustomed to think of the God who is Truth enthroned in glory, as he is often depicted in Orthodox icons. But, as Benedict shows, "in the suffering of Christ he also learns that the beauty of truth also embraces offence, pain, and even the dark mystery of death, and that this can only be found in accepting

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<sup>57</sup> Matthew 25:40.

<sup>58</sup> Part III, chapter 10, pg. 480.

<sup>59</sup> Ratzinger, "The Beauty and the Truth of Christ."

<sup>60</sup> Psalm 45:3 and Isaiah 53:2.



suffering, not in ignoring it.”<sup>61</sup> In Christ the union of beauty and suffering that strikes the human heart is found. It is this fusion that Prince Myshkin recognizes in Nastasya Filippovna, which impels him to reach out with love and compassion.<sup>62</sup>

If there is beauty in suffering, then why is Hans Holbein’s painting of “Christ in the Tomb” so dangerous? It would seem that this painting surely captures the horrors of Christ’s suffering. And yet, there is something about his painting that makes the prince exclaim, “That picture! A man could lose his faith looking at that picture!”<sup>63</sup> This is the same reaction Dostoevsky himself had when he first beheld the work.<sup>64</sup> The painting is dealt with most extensively, however, by Ippolit. Instead of the traditional way of depicting Christ “as still retaining a trace of extraordinary beauty in the face,” in this painting “there was no hint of beauty.”<sup>65</sup> This depiction of Christ is so shocking that, according to Ippolit, it would cause the disciples to reject belief in the resurrection and even cause Christ himself to hesitate before the horrors of his impending execution. Holbein’s painting has had the opposite effect from that which Christian art should. Instead of raising the viewer up to an encounter with the divine, the painting becomes a “medium through which this notion of some dark, insolent, senselessly infinite force to which everything is subordinated is unwittingly conveyed.”<sup>66</sup> The painting is

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<sup>61</sup> Ratzinger, “The Beauty and the Truth of Christ.”

<sup>62</sup> It should be noted that this Christian dimension to Nastasya Filippovna’s beauty does not exclude inappropriate reactions to her beauty. The cases of Totsky and Rogozhin clearly demonstrate that men can ignore this deeper beauty, which goes beyond the physical. To these the Father will say, “Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). And, again, “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45).

<sup>63</sup> Part II, chapter 4, pg. 229.

<sup>64</sup> Leatherbarrow, introduction, xi.

<sup>65</sup> Part III, chapter 6, pgs. 429-430.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 431.

not an encounter with the Beauty Who is Love, Truth and Life. It is an encounter with disbelief, with the senseless, empty abyss that gapes wide open before modern man.

The heart of the problem with Holbein's "Christ in the Tomb" is that it only shows half of the reality. As Tatiana Goerner notes, "The Holbein caricatures the image of Christ, for it depicts the mere surface truth of his death."<sup>67</sup> Holbein's painting is a divorce of the divine and the physical. The painting has destroyed the image of the incarnation. There is no hint of beauty or resurrection in this broken body. Olga Meerson, however, argues that the painting highlights "God's voluntary partaking of human suffering and limitations as God's emptying Himself of divinity, the divine *kenosis*."<sup>68</sup> But Meerson places too much emphasis on the *kenosis*. God's emptying of himself does not, after all, mean that Christ's body should have no traces of beauty.<sup>69</sup> Representing the body of Christ so destroyed, beyond the possibility of resurrection is a dangerous idea. Of course, "with God all things are possible,"<sup>70</sup> but Holbein's painting makes even that seem impossible and leads to the erosion of faith in the resurrection. Holbein's Christ is so devoid of beauty or the possibility of resurrection that his body is hardly recognizable as that of Christ. The viewer is inclined to agree with Ippolit's assessment of the painting's effect on people. For those who are struggling with their faith, fighting for their faith, the painting can lead them to disbelief in Christianity. The prince thought Rogozhin was a "warrior; he wanted to bring back his lost faith by force." Yet, haunting these thoughts is the painting. As Myshkin

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<sup>67</sup> Tatiana Goerner, "The Theme of Art and Aesthetics in Dostoevsky's 'The Idiot,'" *Ulbanus Review* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 90, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed 10 April, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Olga Meerson, "Ivolgin and Holbein: Non-Christ Risen vs. Christ Non-Risen," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 39, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 208, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed 8 April, 2014).

<sup>69</sup> Philippians 2:5-8: "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 19:26.

exclaims to himself, “How strange that Holbein picture was though.”<sup>71</sup> Without any glimmer of the resurrection, the painting undermines any faith in the Christian message.<sup>72</sup>

The novel ends, like Holbein’s “Christ in the Tomb,” without an encounter with the beauty that saves. This tends to leave readers profoundly unnerved. The hopes that redemption would sweep away the suffering and confusion of the characters are frustrated as the reader beholds the shattered wreck of Dostoevsky’s perfect man. Where is the salvation that beauty was supposed to bring? It would be easy to conclude that *The Idiot* is a pessimistic novel, one in which it is proved that there is no saving beauty. But the evidence of Dostoevsky’s time in Florence shows the effect beauty had on him personally. His letters and other works testify to the human need for beauty. And theologians, including pontiffs as learned as Benedict XVI, have understood Dostoevsky’s deep insight into human nature. Most importantly, Dostoevsky’s writings point continually to Christ as the exemplar of beauty. *The Idiot*, therefore, manifests the inability of mankind to save itself. Without that Beauty who is both Victim and Priest, Servant and King, it is impossible to achieve conversion and redemption. Even the best of men, the most good and most beautiful, cannot save the world or even individuals. There is only one Beauty that can save, only one Savior who can forgive the guilty, heal the suffering and convert the sinner.

## Art Appendix

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<sup>71</sup> Part II, chapter 5, pg. 242.

<sup>72</sup> I Corinthians 15:14-19: “And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. Then we are also false witnesses to God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.”

Figure 1. Hagia Sophia<sup>73</sup>

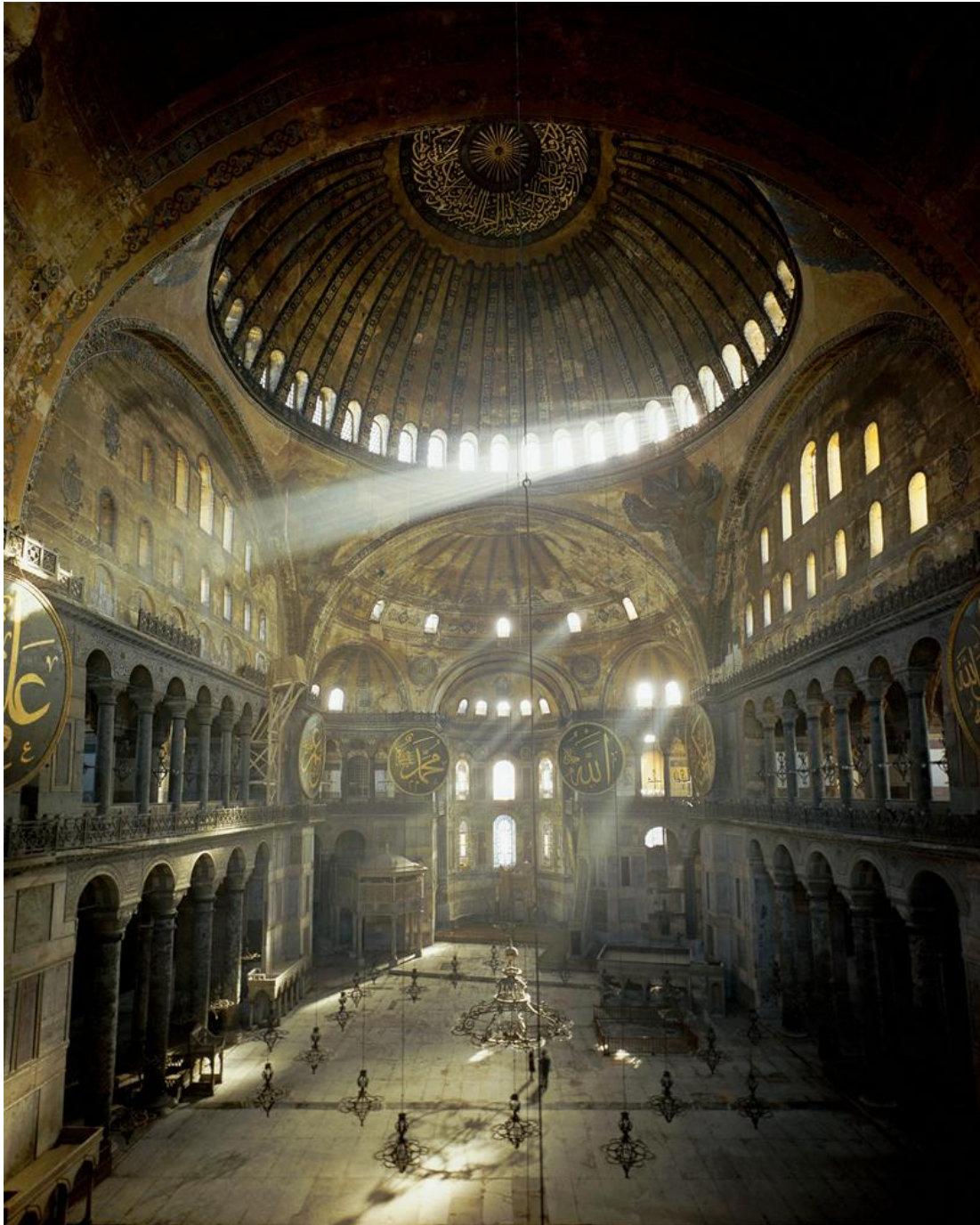


Figure 2. Gates of Paradise<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Hagai Sophia*, Reproduced from *ArtStor* (accessed 14 April, 2014).

<sup>74</sup> Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Doors of Paradise*, 1425-1452, Reproduced from *ArtStor* (accessed 14 April, 2014).





Figure 3. The Madonna of the Chair<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Raphael, *Madonna della Sedia*, 1514, Reproduced from *ArtStor* (accessed 14 April, 2014).



Figure 4. Holbein's Madonna<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hans Holbein, *Madonna od Burgomeister Mayer*, 1526-1528, Reproduced from *ArtStor* (accessed 14 April, 2014).





Figure 5. Christ in the Tomb<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Hans Holbein, *Dead Christ*, 1521-1522, Reproduced from *ArtStor* (accessed 14 April, 2014).

