

Art in the Light of the Divine
Faith and Art
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Address to the St. Thomas More Forum
21 March 2012

The history of humanity has been a long lonely road trodden by millions of individuals struggling to make sense of the world they were born into.

Faith is directly inspired by God into the soul, but its penetration is greatly facilitated by the environment we live in. We benefit from the transmission of the faith of ancestors, passed down from the turbulent lives they carried, their small daily difficulties which much resemble ours, the choices they made resulting in the transmission of this great treasure of the faith, a torch which has been relayed since centuries.

God's presence is everywhere in the world. From the seasons, rhythms of day and night, the species, the beauty and the intricacies of the human brain and its potential. Yet God, the master of all things is invisible to us.

Man has tried to materialize God, since we share in his humanity. Yet how can one make the principle of the divine, which is invisible, translated into the visible so that our frail natures may accede to its mysteries?

Man's imperfect hands have attempted to create the perfection of his image. The Divine Mysteries are so utterly awesome that one wonders if this is not entirely presumptuous. And Christ says "My Kingdom is not of this world," leaving teeming generations of Christians in a permanent state of impermanence. The attachment to this world should be tenuous since it is in the next that we will be fulfilled. It is however in this fragile earth-bound world that we are fated to be born. We have created a permanence as far as we can fathom that stretches until the end of time. This permanence is made up of constructions, agriculture, trade routes, machines, arrogant bridges and 1 kilometre towers built on sand. It is also made up of centuries of human thought, actions and art. This is the light of the divine.

Art uses the world of senses to penetrate into the world of the soul.

Art and spirituality have always had a symbiotic relationship.

Art is the ultimate search for God through the creative act. Piercing its complexities and mysteries is brief and short-lived. The act of creation will lead inevitably to the next because the thirst for greater understanding and refinement is always present. It is a ladder leading to Heaven. The core of the artistic drive is to take matters further, to keep reaching out, to create greater harmony, balance and beauty no matter how challenging the subject. Some artists will tell you that they don't seek beauty, yet the search for beauty will always manifest itself even in discordance. Beauty will manifest itself in balance, in an equilibrium of composition. The eye as the mirror of the soul is seeking God, truth and the sublime.

Art is the silent witness throughout the history of the human race that testifies to the faith of Christians since 2000 years. Would atheists have us believe that since the 2nd century catacombs till today, Christians have been portraying the same mythological characters in a never-ending search for meaning?

If we are to extend our assumption to prehistory, there again we are faced with the same evidence that humanity has always believed and that art has been the visual evidence of it.

But how can we describe the Divine? Through which human construct can we depict God?

The only direct evidence of the beauty of Christ's face is the Shroud of Turin, during his Passion, when he was torn and bloody and beaten. To me, the most powerful and extraordinary of all images and a miracle for our time.

The Christians of the Catacombs knew Jesus as the Good Shepherd, also through symbols and pictograms such as the anchor, the peacock and the fish (ichthus) during their times of persecution.

In Byzantium, Christ was depicted as the supreme Pantocrator, Judge of all humanity, the all-powerful Messiah.

Romanesque church architecture used the cube at the column's capital to carve lessons into stone to teach the faithful about good and evil.

Gothic art and architecture carried the message of Christianity heavenwards with soaring heights and elongated carvings.

The Renaissance saw a greater introduction of the human into the fabric of sacred art. Even the Virgin Mary and Christ Jesus were portrayed in a more fleshly manner, as if to draw them closer to our condition as humans. And where we see one of the best examples of the communion of God, the Holy Family, the angels, men and the soul combine into one extraordinary painting and here I talk of El Greco's The Burial of the Duke of Orgaz.

Throughout the history of art, there have been limited themes for artists to explore: God and the seeking of Him, love, war, sex and the self.

The vocabularies have varied but the questions remain.

Shifts in the nature of sacred art necessarily reflect the changes and developments in society as well as mirroring the artistic trends of the time.

But what of the 20th and 21st centuries?

The 20th century represented a fundamental rupture in the history of art and the faith. No longer was beauty the sole criteria for making art. Other considerations such as the truth behind appearances, a certain element of provocation and the role of the subconscious came into play.

The refusal of any so-called authoritarian systems such as the Church and a belief in the emancipation from all systems of thought set the dialogue back between art and faith.

Representational idioms were often replaced by abstraction. The form was discarded. During this time, Christian artists such as Malevitch and Manessier in Europe turned to mystical abstraction to express God's spiritual presence.

Since the start of the 21st century, abstraction has receded to the benefit of body art. This art puts the body in the spotlight as a vector of rebellion or oppression in order to question social, family and religious rituals.

Parallel to this movement is one where sacred images are defiled in the most provocative manner in a bid to shock Christians.

Since the 20th century, has art stopped informing, illuminating and teaching the faithful?

The didactic role of sacred art during our time has almost been evacuated, although the need to evangelize with the help of the image is presently greater than ever before in the history of Christianity. Such is the level of religious illiteracy currently, that at some European universities, students are asked to read the Bible as a prerequisite to beginning courses, so that they may understand the art history they are planning to study.

An understanding of religion through the Old and New Testaments is essential to comprehending the subtleties of Western art.

References to the Bible in art or literature that our forefathers would have immediately grasped are mostly lost on generations of young and youngish people. It is a visual code with few decrypters. A rare language. A mysterious treasure trail.

Is it because moral teachings defining good and evil so graphically, so terrifyingly, irk the viewer who has perhaps evacuated the idea of sin itself? The medieval stone carver was not afraid to depict Heaven and Hell, the seven deadly sins, a peasant beating his dog and a devil swallowing himself whole. The power and earthiness of these depictions contrast so strongly with our smooth lives. They are so raw and unequivocal.

Is it because the substance of the gospels fails to touch the modern consumer so used to the representation of glitzy manmade idols on TV?

Do artists need to be religious to create a sacred artwork?

This is an interesting question, which often confronts me.

Since World War II, in Northern and Eastern France, our great medieval cathedrals, which were almost flattened by Nazi and Allied bombs along with their magnificent stained glass windows, have had a new controversial life infused into them. Famous contemporary artists such as Claude Viallat have created giant rivers of coloured glass in Nevers Cathedral which completely transforms the inner atmosphere of the cathedral, bombarding it with synthetic light that was never intended for it. It is interesting to note that Claude Viallat does not profess any faith.

The Church is not just a meeting place for all, a marketplace of sorts. It is a place where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated, where the combination of art, architecture and light must be conducive to silence, contemplation, prayer and conversations with God. Where the baby is baptized, where the prodigal son is converted, the young couple married and the elderly laid to rest.

Not a place for putting forward of the Self.

I believe that only artists who believe can share or transmit their understanding of the Christian message. The role of the Christian artist is certainly not to arrogantly inflict himself on the faithful in an embodiment of his own image.

The status of the artist has also greatly impacted on his/her role in the Church since the time of the master of Cabestany, the famous yet anonymous 12th century artist who ingeniously carved his way through the Romanesque churches of Southern France, Catalonia and Tuscany and was responsible for 121 major works in stone. No longer are pious and anonymous artisans quietly working for the glory of the Church.

We are ageing and comfortable nations ensconced in our materialism and paralyzing cautiousness with our Christian beacons glowing only very timidly.

Vertical spires are crowded out by encroaching supermarkets and shopping malls. Cathedrals and churches today are clean, lusted places of worship that have been restored into oblivion.

Where are the stained glass craftsmen, stonemasons, goldsmiths, carvers, mosaicists who were collaboratively employed by the guilds to create great monuments to the glory of God?

Great cathedral-building demands great artisans and artists and sadly today there are few examples of new churches being built in the Western world.

I will say now something about my work

Transmitting the experience of the Catholic living in the suburbs through the visual arts equates to an insight into the creatures of Graham Greene, Shusako Endo or Chesterton novels. It is an attempt at the visual description of the ordinary life of most Christians in Western countries.

The struggles with work, motherhood, sickness and the support from the Church, its sacraments and its universality. *To be in the world but not of the world.*

In the accompanying exhibition of my works, you will find references to “Living the Honest Life” as I call the Christian life. The unprepossessing life of most of us in the community.

I suppose the message I hope I will not fail to deliver is that despite the ambient subliminal messages of vacuity produced by our modern town planners, the spirit of faith in God subsists in the everyday life of homo suburbia.

And that there will always be a place for art in the scheme of the Divine.