

THE VISUAL ARTS AND THE TEACHING CHURCH

Two events in recent years have given new impetus to the somewhat long-standing controversy on liturgical art. One was the construction, under the guiding spirit of the late Père Couturier, O.P., of the three "modern" churches at Assy, Vence, and Audincourt.¹ The other was the Instruction of the Holy Office, *De arte sacra*, of June 30, 1952.² The complexity of the controversy has been made more manifest by the variety of allied questions subsequently discussed—at times rather warmly—in theological and artistic publications. To mention but a few: To what extent should the Christian artist hold to "traditional" Christian styles and iconography? Can he legitimately borrow from "modern" techniques and symbolism, even to the extent of employing the "grotesque" idioms of secular abstractionists and distortionists? Is there a specifically Christian aesthetic? Have official ecclesiastical directives tended so to curb the self-expression of the artist that creative initiative is jeopardized? Should liturgical art be "popular" or esoteric?

Numerous questions of this kind demand attention if a proper balance is to be found, so that art may regain its true place in the life of the Church today. But none of these individual problems will find a solid solution unless a more important aspect of the issue be kept clearly in mind, namely, the purpose of liturgical art. It is more important not only because it is more fundamental, but because it serves best to make clear that what is involved here is no mere side-issue about elusive aesthetic values or "fitting decoration," but something directly connected with defined matters of faith and with the practical efficacy of the teaching Church. Unfortunately, however, this very aspect of the question, the basic purpose of liturgical art, has suffered from relative neglect and even misrepresentation.

Since the problem is theological, the present remarks will be based pri-

¹ *L'art sacré*, Nov.–Dec., 1951, and *Liturgical Arts*, Feb., 1951, Feb., 1952, and May, 1952, offer worthwhile descriptions and evaluations of this significant project.

² *AAS*, XLIV (1952), 542. It is clear that this Instruction was issued to check certain extreme tendencies in the liturgical arts. It has been understood by some, however, as a blanket proscription of whatever can be loosely grouped under the vague term "modern," even though the Instruction cites from the Encyclical, *Mediator Dei* (*AAS*, XXXIX [1947], 521): "It is eminently fitting that the art of our times have a free opportunity to serve the sacred edifices and sacred rites with due reverence and with due honor" (p. 590).—"Anyone who thinks that the *Instruction on Sacred Art* decrees the death of the new art—of living art—is in error. The *Instruction* does not intend to be a lesson in art; it seeks only to make firm certain values imposed by the nature of a church, by what the *Instruction* calls 'ecclesiastical tradition'" (Emmanuel Card. Gonçalves Cerejeira, "Church Architecture and the Modern Spirit," *Four Quarters*, April 15, 1954, p. 17).

marily on Scripture and tradition. Since the problem is practical, the order will be the concrete framework of history, following the evolution of God's providence and the practice of the Church in the use of visual, sensible forms and symbols.

THE DIVINE PEDAGOGY

In his first epistle to Timothy, St. Paul says of Almighty God: "... it is His will that all men should be saved, and be led to recognize truth."⁸ Theologians point out that there is question here not of a mere velleity but of a will that is efficacious in the sense that it affords the means necessary for men to come to a knowledge of God. God is, then, a teacher, leading men to knowledge—or better, to wisdom.

Now since the ways of God are infinitely wise, it can be fruitful to consider His means of informing the minds of men. For with a penetration infinitely surpassing our own, He "knows the hearts of all men,"⁴ those hearts which are the primary concern of the teaching Church. It is only reasonable, then, to ask ourselves what the techniques of the divine pedagogy are.

God's methods are manifold. He has taught us, to use St. Paul's expression, "in many ways and by many means."⁵ But one device has stood out conspicuously from the very beginning. "From the foundations of the world men have caught sight of His invisible nature, His eternal power and His divineness, as they are known through His creatures."⁶ In other words, God uses the visible things of sense to lead men to the invisible truths of the spirit, *per visibilia ad invisibilia*. "See how the skies proclaim God's glory, how the vault of heaven betrays his craftsmanship."⁷

However, not content with the powerful didactic of the works of creation, God made use of the more direct method of supernatural revelation, retaining throughout the device *per visibilia ad invisibilia*. It is seen on almost every page of Scripture, at least in the constant use of striking sense-imagery. But there are more conspicuous examples. I shall choose but one.

When Almighty God committed His covenant to Moses on the cloud-covered peak of Sinai, He summed up all the essentials of the Law in the few brief verses of the decalogue.⁸ The account in Deuteronomy repeats the commandments, and then continues: "These words the Lord spoke . . . with a loud voice, adding nothing more."⁹ Nothing more, that is, to what was the essential revelation. Actually, however, He did add more, a great deal more. Chapter after chapter is required for the detailed stipulations of the liturgy: precise instructions for the construction of the ark and for the manner of sacrifice, meticulous directions concerning the materials, colors,

⁸ I Tim. 2:4. The translations of Msgr. Knox are used throughout.

⁴ Acts 1:24.

⁵ Heb. 1:1.

⁶ Rom. 1:20.

⁷ Ps. 18:2.

⁸ Exod. 20:2-17.

⁹ Deut. 5:22.

and adornment in jewels and embroidery of the sacred vestments, and so on, page after page.¹⁰

For the accomplishment of this enormous task Moses is given a helper: "Here is the name of the man I have appointed to help thee, Beseleel. . . . I have filled him with my divine spirit, making him wise, adroit and skilful in every kind of craftsmanship; so that he can design whatever is to be designed in gold, silver, bronze, marble, precious stones and woods of all sorts."¹¹

But to what purpose all this splendor of liturgical symbolism? "Because it is a token . . . reminding you that I am the Lord, and you are set apart for me,"¹² ". . . that they shall know that I am the Lord their God."¹³ Yet why this elaborate means of merely repeating what had already been clearly stated in the first commandment? Because for God the written word, even when gravated with His own finger on the tablets of the Law, and the spoken word, even when preached by the inspired Moses, are not enough. Moses the teacher needs Beseleel the artist. As in natural revelation, so here, God uses the visible, the sensible, to lead men to knowledge of the invisible, and employs the ministry of beauty for the teaching of truth.

But even this was not enough. When men still refused to hear God's lesson aright, He sent His own Word, Eternal Truth Itself. That Truth, spurned by men immersed in sense, became Itself a thing of sense: "The Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us."¹⁴ St. Athanasius lays clear stress on this didactic aspect of the Incarnation.

He deals with them as a good teacher with his pupils, coming down to their level and using simple means. . . . Men had turned from the contemplation of God above and were looking for Him in the opposite direction, down among created things and things of sense. The Saviour of us all, the Word of God, in His great love, took to Himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, halfway. He became Himself an object for their senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might come to a knowledge of the Father through the works which He, the Word, did in the body.¹⁵

¹⁰ Exod. 25-30. ¹¹ *Ibid.* 21:2-5. ¹² *Ibid.* 31:13. ¹³ *Ibid.* 29:46. ¹⁴ Jn. 1:14.

¹⁵ *Oratio de Incarnatione Verbi*, 15 (PG, XXV, 121 C-D); transl., *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, by a Religious of C.S.M.V. S.Th. (N.Y., 1946). This notion of the Incarnate Word as a visual didactic recurs frequently in the Fathers. He became Man "so that by reason of His body He might come within the ken of bodily creatures—a thing otherwise impossible because of the incomprehensibility of His nature" (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.*, XXX [PG, XXXVI, 132 A]). "The bodily activity of our Lord is a manifestation of His divinity; and His invisible attributes are made known to us by those that are visible" (St. Ambrose, *Lib. IV in cap. 4 Lucae* [PL, XV, 1626 A]). "Invisible by reason of His own nature, He became visible by reason of ours; the Incomprehensible desired to be comprehended" (St. Leo, *Sermo II de nativitate* [PL, LIV, 195 A]).

It is again the same principle, *per visibilia ad invisibilia*, expressed by our Lord Himself when he told Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."¹⁶ In the Preface for Christmas, the liturgy sings once more of this reason for the Incarnation: ". . . that while we recognize God visibly, we may be drawn by Him to love of things unseen."

The same technique is seen throughout our Lord's entire pedagogy. In parables rich in sense imagery He spoke of the sower of seed, lilies of the field, sparrows, and fish of the sea.¹⁷ He confirmed His teaching by miracles, sensible signs of God's sanction.¹⁸ He established a visible Church and endowed her with sacraments, using such commonplace material things as water, bread, and wine to signify and even confer an invisible reality, grace.¹⁹

THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church, being divine, evolved in her turn ever new manifestations of this divine didactic. The sacramental system flowered into the various forms of the liturgy,²⁰ bringing in its train those masterpieces of liturgical art which, besides being one of the greatest glories of the Christian past, formed an integral part of the cycle of salvation: life-giving grace and truth emanating from the One God, vesting itself in beauty, educating to goodness, and leading back to the One.

¹⁶ Jn. 14:9.

¹⁷ Any sane pedagogy proceeds from the known to the unknown. But the aim of Christ's pedagogy is not merely knowledge but love. "The kingdom of heaven is compared to earthly things so that the mind may ascend from knowledge already acquired to an understanding of things as yet unknown, raising itself up to the invisible by similitudes based on the visible . . . ; so that, since it is accustomed to loving what is known, it may learn to love also what is unknown" (St. Gregory the Great, *Hom. XI in evang.* [PL, LXXVI, 1114 D]).

¹⁸ Christ performed His miracles ". . . that we might wonder at the invisible God by reason of His visible works . . . and yearn for the vision of the Invisible Himself, whom we know as invisible from visible reality" (St. Augustine, *Tract. XXIV in Ioannem*, 1 [PL, XXXV, 1592-93]).

¹⁹ "For the rehabilitation of sinners, it was necessary that man should proceed from sensible things to knowledge of the spiritual, should refer to God his attachment to them, and use them ordinately in accordance with God's intention. Hence the institution of the sacraments was necessary, by which man is taught spiritual truths by means of sensible things" (St. Thomas, *In IV Sent.*, t. 4, d. 1, a. 2, ad 1m).

²⁰ The *Mystagogic Catecheses* of Cyril of Jerusalem (PG, XXXIII, 1059 ff.; *Monumenta eucharistica et liturgica vetustissima*, ed. J. Quasten [Bonn, 1935], pp. 70-110) are forceful evidence of the didactic efficacy of liturgical symbolism in the early Church, the kind of efficacy the liturgical movement is striving to regain. Cf. also R. W. Felix, O.S.B., *Some Principles of Psychology as Illustrated in the Sacramental System of the Church* (Washington, D.C., 1924).

There is no need here to illustrate once again the truism that the history of art is the reflection of the history of ideas. What calls for emphasis is that great Christian art is a singularly striking exemplification of that truism precisely because it was, of set purpose, didactic. Much of the art of today, for example, for all its confusion and obscurity, is none the less an accurate index of the confusion and obscurity of contemporary ideologies. Bound by some subtle psychological necessity, it reflects its intellectual climate, but often in spite of itself. For an artist may aim at an expression of confusion,²¹ but he hardly aims at confusion of expression.

But when C. R. Morey says that "Byzantine art, at its best, remains the finest expression of Christian dogma that Christianity has produced,"²² that religious expression should not be thought of as something which occurred unconsciously, as a sort of *operatio sequitur esse* of the age. It was the direct outcome of an explicit policy, jointly fostered by emperor and hierarchy, "to propagate an ideology," as André Grabar expresses it.²³ For that fusion of Judaic and Graeco-Roman traditions, sought vainly by Philo, foretold by St. Paul as one of the works of Christ,²⁴ preached fearlessly by Justin Martyr, was seen now as a *fait accompli* wrought by Christian truth. Pope and emperor had joined forces to fashion a world-embracing supernatural society based on a "new truth" surpassing all previous philosophies because it found in the Trinity and Incarnation the meaning of all being and all history. The artists commissioned to give visual expression to this inspiring conception responded magnificently. Those idioms of pagan iconography and architecture long used to express the might of the Roman Empire were now supernaturalized by delicate nuances and the admixture of Christian symbolism to depict the triumph of the Kingdom of Christ on earth. Their monuments remain today in Constantinople, Salonika, Rome, and Ravenna,²⁵ repeating still, through the telling imagery of architectural form and glowing mosaics, the profound dogmas of the early Councils and Fathers, with the exultant overtones of Athanasius' *Against the Pagans* and Augustine's *City of God*.

²¹ For example, in a panel representing the pains of the damned, or in Brueghel's "Temptations of St. Anthony."

²² C. R. Morey, *Christian Art* (N.Y., 1935), p. 33.

²³ André Grabar, *Byzantine Painting* (N.Y., 1953), p. 23.

²⁴ Eph. 2:11-21.

²⁵ The explicit didactic of the famous Ravenna mosaics is described by Otto G. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 1-22. When, in the middle of the sixth century, Theodoric's Arian forces were besieging Ravenna, Justinian, neglecting his army, expended his funds on the erection and adornment of churches, exposing in brilliant artistic form and symbol the theologico-political system he defended. Strange stratagem for a successor of Caesar, but it prevailed. Cf. also A. Grabar, *op. cit.*, 53-72.

The rise of the bitter iconoclast controversy in the eighth century served to make officially explicit this didactic purpose of liturgical art, as is seen by the condemnation of the heresy by the Fourth Council of Constantinople:

The sacred image of Our Lord Jesus Christ should receive honor and veneration equal to that given to the book of the Holy Gospels. For as all attain to salvation by means of the words of Scripture, so all, whether learned or illiterate, draw profit from the direct message expressed by means of color in works of art. For the language of the colored picture preaches and fosters the same truths as the written word.²⁶

While no one can question the value of the contributions speculative theology has made to the efficacy of the teaching Church, yet none of the great theological systems has received such a formal and striking encomium as that in the above definition. Countless Christians suffered torture and death in the defense of holy images, and some of them were canonized as martyrs of the faith. There may be some who are willing to die for the doctrine of the real distinction between essence and existence or for the Suarezian modes, but this would seem a rather insecure path to the honors of the altar.

Once reaffirmed, the technique *per visibilia ad invisibilia* went on in time to evolve new forms. The somber restraint of early Romanesque reiterated the severe mystical theology of contemporaneous monasticism. But as monasticism spread, its spirit evolved and sought fuller expression in the use of motifs borrowed from treasured illuminated manuscripts and from the decorative techniques brought to the continent by followers of Alcuin. The mighty Bernard fulminated against the new tendency, but to no avail.²⁷ His own immediate followers became the vanguard in the movement that would bring Romanesque to a more vitally expressive maturity throughout the whole of western Christendom.²⁸ That movement led to the flowering

²⁶ Can. 3 (Mansi, XVI, 399; Denz., 377). That the canon has reference not only to the sacred image of our Lord but to sacred images in general is clear from the other acts of the Council, as well as from the earlier condemnation in the Second Council of Nicaea (Act. VII; Mansi, XIII, 378; Denz., 302).

²⁷ "I need hardly mention the boundless height of the churches, the immoderate length, the meaningless width, the elaborate adornments and curious kinds of imagery. For such things impede devotion by attracting the attention of those who pray" (St. Bernard, *Apol. ad Guillelmum*, XII [PL, CLXXXII, 914 C]).

²⁸ In the early twelfth century Cistercian monks were active in developing that form of Romanesque known as Burgundian; cf. C. R. Morey, *Mediaeval Art* (N.Y., 1942), pp. 236-40. During the same period, monks of Cluny exerted widespread influence by their use of art as a handmaid of truth. "Sculpture was reborn in France in the eleventh century. It was soon adopted as the most powerful auxiliary of thought by the abbots of Cluny, Saint Hugh and Peter the Venerable. . . . They believed in the power and virtue of art!" (Emile Mâle, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* [N.Y., 1949], p. 17).

of Gothic, which in its turn translated into fresh idioms of stone and colored glass the powerful new conceptions of the great Scholastic theologians.

To the Middle Ages, art was didactic. All that it was necessary that men should know . . . was taught them by the windows of the church or by the statues in the porch. . . . The countless statues, disposed in scholarly design, were a symbol of the marvellous order that through the genius of St. Thomas Aquinas reigned in the world of thought. Through the medium of art the highest conceptions of theologian and scholar penetrated to some extent the minds of even the humblest of the people.²⁹

The idea is clear in St. Thomas' own teaching:

There were three reasons for the introduction of the use of the visual arts (*images*) in the Church: first, for the instruction of the uneducated, who are taught by them as by books; second, that the mystery of the Incarnation and the examples of the saints be more firmly impressed on our memory by being daily represented before our eyes; third, to enkindle affective devotion, which is more efficaciously evoked by what is seen than by what is heard.³⁰

In other words, religious instruction, in the full sense of the term, for all classes of men. For the visual didactic has a profound efficacy peculiarly its own. Book, pulpit, and classroom are not enough.³¹

But time was preparing a new attack. With the sixteenth century came the new iconoclasm of the Reformers. The Council of Trent countered by condemning the heresy anew, with particular stress on the didactic value of the visual arts.³² Renaissance artists, for all their enthusiasm for ancient

²⁹ Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century* (N.Y., 1913), p. vii.—“The Cathedral is the mirror of science, and in fact, all kinds of knowledge, even the humblest, such as fitted men for manual labor and for the making of calendars, and also the highest, such as the liberal arts, philosophy, and theology, were given in plastic form. Thus the cathedral could readily serve as a visible catechism, where the man of the thirteenth century could find in simple outline all that he needed to believe and to know” (M. de Wulf, *Philosophy and Civilization in the Middle Ages* [Princeton Univ. Press, 1922], pp 104–5).

³⁰ *In IV Sent.*, t. 3, d. 9, q. 1, a. 2, ad 3m.

³¹ “[Masterpieces of Christian art] . . . not only translate into easy reading and universal language the Christian truths; they also communicate the intimate sense and emotion of these truths with an effectiveness, lyricism and ardor that, perhaps, is not contained in even the most fervent preaching” (Pius XII, in an address to a group of Italian artists, April 8, 1952 [*Catholic Mind*, Nov. 1952, p. 698]).

³² “Let the bishops diligently teach that by means of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption portrayed in paintings and other representations the people are instructed and confirmed in the articles of faith . . . ; also that great profit is derived from all holy images, not only because the people are thereby reminded of the benefits and gifts bestowed on them by Christ, but also because through the saints the miracles of God and

forms of beauty, were alive to the current conflict of ideas, and met the attack with a new polemic emphasis in their works—for example, the frequent representations of those parts of the theology of the sacraments which the Reformers rejected.³³

SOME CONCLUSIONS

What follows from what has been said is that Christian art, particularly liturgical art, is more than a pleasing ornament fittingly, but unnecessarily, hung on the fabric of Christian thought.³⁴ The didactic use of the visual arts according to the timeless technique *per visibilia ad invisibilia* has been formally defined as pertaining to the deposit of faith. Our art has a job to do, and that is to teach. There is its primary *raison d'être*. Moreover, in the past whenever Christian art has been truly great, that principle has been most clearly realized and most splendidly exemplified. Conversely, when in recent centuries that principle tended to be obscured, Christian art lost the force of its message (and that is the real damage), but at the same time it became poor art even from the aesthetic point of view. It aimed at being not pertinent but pretty. There was much sweetness but little light; much ugliness but without even the power of expression of the grotesque.

Now, whatever be the judgment on contemporary, or "modern," liturgical art, it is, in many of its manifestations, an honest reaction against the weak misrepresentations of recent centuries, with a view to making Christian art once more a true apostle of the Christian dynamic. Granted that the movement has had its extremes. To reject it out of hand, however, would be no less rash than to condemn all modern literature because much of it is unprincipled and vapid. An issue so intimately affecting the efficacious teaching of Christian truth cannot be dismissed with snap judgments.

It is clear that Christian art, if it is to be faithful to its didactic mission, must be traditional in content; that is, it must be based on and inspired by

salutary examples are set before the eyes of the faithful, so that they may give God thanks for those things, may fashion their own life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God and cultivate piety" (Sess. XXV, decr. 2 [Mansi, XXXIII, 171 D; Denz., 985]; transl. H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* [St. Louis, 1941], p. 484).

³³ ". . . the art of the Counter Reformation defends all the dogmas attacked by the Protestants" (E. Mâle, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century*, p. 168). In the pages following, Mâle describes the fulness of that apogetic.

³⁴ "It is an error . . . to think of the sacred liturgy as merely the outward or visible part of divine worship or as an ornamental ceremonial" (*Mediator Dei*, n. 25). It is clear from the Encyclical itself, e.g., n. 195, that this refers also to liturgical art.

revealed truth.⁸⁵ But should it be traditional as regards form? Is it in some sense required to perpetuate the great styles hallowed by long use?

Certainly the artist can learn from the past; he must. But one of the things he will learn quickly is that the great artists of the past did not hesitate to abandon any form, style symbol, technique, or system of structure which they judged an unsuitable medium for what they wanted to say.⁸⁶ Hence those now demanding only "traditional" styles are, in fact, very untraditional. "Traditional" is, rightly, an impressive word. As such, however, it can be a tempting lable for bolstering one's own position. But sometimes all it means is "what I am used to." It is, at any rate, certainly not synonymous with "repetitive."

Speaking generally, Christian art, if it is to be truly traditional, must be modern; for all the great traditional styles were, each in its own period, modern. They spoke in vitally fresh forms to the men of their times. Put more pointedly, however, the difficulty is: Are not the forms, symbols, and theories of modern art too secularist in inspiration to lend themselves to the expression of the supernatural truths of the faith?

Only time and the craftsmanship of our artists will supply the ultimate answer. But history again has precedents which can throw light on this problem of adaptation. The early Christians, for example, did not hesitate to use the forms and techniques of the art of pagan Rome in the construction of their splendid basilicas. In the East, existing luxurious, even sensuous, idioms employed in the ateliers of the Levant were adapted by the architects of the Byzantine churches.⁸⁷ Surprisingly, symbols were even borrowed from ancient cults and mythologies. The lion as symbol of revivifying power and the frog as symbolizing eternal life were taken over by Christian artists from Egyptian hieroglyphics. The *putti* of classical mythology, later so common in Renaissance painting, are depicted in the catacombs of Cagliari

⁸⁵ "The ordinary shall never permit to be shown in churches or other sacred places, images which represent a false dogma, or which are not sufficiently decent and moral, or which would be an occasion of dangerous error to the unlearned" (*CIC*, can. 1279, § 3).

⁸⁶ This is true of even the most representative Christian styles. Romanesque, for example, is sometimes described as having developed gradually, smoothly, "organically," from the earlier basilica style. Yet ". . . forsaking the laborious quest for rare materials and shaking off the servitude of consecrated forms, [the Romanesque architects] built with a logic and freedom which, though awkward and clumsy at the outset, have nevertheless the powerful charm of sincerity. This independence bore fruit in marvelous achievements. They built with the materials of their own locality, for the climate of their own locality, and in accord with the needs and discernment of their contemporaries" (E. Enlart, "L'architecture romane," *Histoire de l'art*, ed. A. Michel [Paris, 1905 ff.], I, 2, 444).

⁸⁷ Cf. A. Grabar, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23.

fishing from a small boat, symbolizing fishers of souls.³⁸ Better known is the fable of the phoenix, which enjoyed widespread use as a type of immortality.³⁹ Later on, the asymmetrical, restlessly coiling designs and grotesque fauna motifs of the ancient pagan Celts found themselves perfectly at home in the illuminations of the Book of Kells and in numerous Romanesque churches as far away as southalpine Italy.⁴⁰

Traditional usage seen in the light of such precedents does not immediately prove that "modern" forms and theories *should* be used. It certainly does not show *how* they should be used. But it does throw considerable doubt on the "traditionalist" opinion that they should *not* be used. St. Bernard decried the use of sculpture and other "innovations," but Romanesque developed just the same. A short time later, southern Europeans would laughingly call the new art of the North "Gothic," because the word meant for them "barbarous," "crude." And had the artists listened to their critics, we would have neither Romanesque nor Gothic. Their genius lay in their ability to transform traditional doctrine into fresh symbols, meaningful to the men of their times. If the artist of today is to be traditional in this sense, if he is truly to teach, he can hardly be limited to the use of established forms in his attempt to depict the bearing of revealed truth on the welter of problems oppressing the modern world.

It is true that, as soon as Christian art, particularly liturgical art, becomes esoteric, its didactic loses the element of universality and to that extent is less Christian. At the same time, however, once it aims at simply becoming "popular," once it is content to give the people "what they like," it is betraying its mission. The people of Capharnaum did not like the doctrine of the Real Presence, but our Lord let the people go, not the doctrine.⁴¹ There is such a thing as heretical art; and the artist, if he too is to teach, must be governed by objective truth, not by popular demand. He must come down to the people, but only to raise them above themselves. If the popular norm

³⁸ These and other instances of Christian use of pagan symbolism are treated by H. Lützel, *Die christliche Kunst des Abendlandes* (Bonn, 1932), pp. 15-16. "As in the catacombs, so here in the realm of mosaics, we find the earliest Christian art making free use of the materials of the Roman antique tradition" (J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* [Princeton Univ. Press, 1947], p. 427).

³⁹ Pope St. Clement uses this figure in his Letter to the Corinthians, *I Clem. ad Corinthios*, 25 (ed. Funk, I, 132).

⁴⁰ E.g., the chimeric figures on the bronze doors of the church of St. Zeno in Verona. This widespread use of fantastic iconography, as also the gargoyles of the Gothic period, are ample testimony that even the grotesque is nothing new to the tradition of Christian art.

⁴¹ Jn. 6:26-27.

of "good art" is that which most closely approaches the verisimilitude of the color photograph, he will try to educate them to something better. No matter how great the demand for dewy-eyed statues of the saints, the craftsman of integrity will refuse to turn out these dismal, foppish parodies of Christian sanctity, and the conscientious pastor will refuse them a place in his church.

Let us take another brief look at the past, if only to dispel the notion that abstraction and distortion are a sort of two-headed monster spawned in our own decadent age by "arty" charlatans too effete for honest productivity. To choose but one conspicuous example, the major Christian architectural systems are, in the last analysis, highly subtle abstract forms for the expression of a religious idea. Romanesque structural design, for example, gave way to Gothic not simply because a "new aesthetic" or advanced building techniques had developed, but because the simpler lines and restrained proportions of the earlier style were inadequate for the more complex theological conceptions of the later architects. Romanesque simplicity breathes the mysticism of early western monasticism. Gothic unity in multiplicity represents the meaningful concord of all things in the eternal plan of God's providence. Romanesque, like a strong surge of devotional prayer, leads to God immediately. Gothic, the visual counterpart of the moderate realism of thirteenth-century theologians, points to God mediately, through the wondrous variety of God's creation and redemptive providence.⁴²

But how many of the faithful of those past ages could analyze the delicate didactic of those abstract structural forms? Yet the message was no less telling, even if only unconsciously perceived. Christian art can often be bluntly clear;⁴³ but if it is to be faithful to its calling, it must often be subtle—as subtle as the inspiring cadences of liturgical chant. For Christian truth is essentially mysterious, seen now as a "confused reflection in a mirror."⁴⁴ It is preeminently here, in the realm of Christian mysteries, that the artist—

⁴² The simpler, unfigured Romanesque façade did not deter the viewer, but allowed him to pass directly within, where the horizontal axis, emphasized by the unvaried series of columns flanking the nave, drew the eye immediately to the altar, the visible symbol of God's presence. But the Gothic façade and porches, with their sculptured world in miniature, hold the viewer's attention. Then the interior, with its soaring vertical axis, draws the eye upwards and along past a profusion of images in stone and colored glass, and only then, finally, to the altar. Both conceptions are thoroughly Christian. Philosophically, both find justification in the doctrine of the analogy of being. Cf. Morey, *Christian Art*, pp. 42-49.

⁴³ As, for example, the frequent representations of scenes from the Old and New Testaments, or the vitally sculptured "moral" medallions, in which the virtues are graphically represented in juxtaposition to the opposed vice.

⁴⁴ I Cor. 13:12.

painter, sculptor, poet, or musician—can say something beyond the competency of the more precise, articulate propositions of the theologian.⁴⁵ But what is it that he says? As well ask: What does the sung *Exultet* say that the recited *Exultet* does not? What does St. Thomas say with his poems on the Eucharist that he does not say in his scholarly treatises on that mystery? What do Giotto's frescoes say about the Franciscan ideal that is not found in the words of the Poverello himself? Analysis can only go so far here. Complete clarity in Christian art would belie the essential mysteriousness of Christian truth.

Much the same is true as regards "distortion." It is safe to say that worthwhile Christian art of the past affords far more examples of distortion in perspective, anatomy, and landscape than of "realistic" representational style. To regard these merely as crude examples of careless technique or unskilled draftsmanship is impossible in the light of historical research.⁴⁶ Types of distortion are so common that even representative examples can hardly be given here. This should not be surprising if we are to look for meaning in a Christian work of art; for, after all, the spiritual world of reality seen by the eye of faith can hardly be truly represented by the material world as seen by the naked eye. To follow such a materialistic norm, to rule out all abstraction and distortion because "things don't look like that," is itself a most pernicious kind of distortion; for it is a crass debasement of the spiritual element essential to Christian teaching. It is, at the same time, a rejection of most of what is good in the Christian art of the past.

For many modern artists, self-expression has become the be-all and end-all of artistic activity, a god both absolute and vacillating. Purely personal intuitions, transient emotional flashes, these are the stuff from which inspiration springs. And if the resultant artefact is utterly unintelligible to anyone else, that is unimportant.

This should not be surprising. It is but the visual parallel of current idealistic philosophies. But it is disturbing that this fickle idol should gain even a tiny niche in the temple of the Eternal God. The incongruity should be obvious. Art simply for art's sake, or for the artist's, can have no real place here.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "Thanks to its subtlety and refinement, art—whether heard or seen—reaches depths in the mind and heart . . . which words, either spoken or written, with their insufficiently shaded analytical precision, cannot attain" (Pius XII, in an address to the First International Congress of Catholic Artists, Sept. 5, 1950; cf. *Liturgical Arts*, Nov., 1950, p. 3).

⁴⁶ Cf. Lützel, *op. cit.*, p. 27. This is not to deny, of course, that the past affords numerous examples of inexpert workmanship.

⁴⁷ One of the conditions for the use of "modern art" in the churches is: ". . . the needs

The artist, with his sensitive perceptivity and expressive techniques, is, of course, extremely important. It is he alone who is equipped to effect that marvelous transformation of spiritual truth into material symbol, to keep fresh and vital the God-given didactic of the visual. Moses still needs Beseleel. Yet the artist, if he is to teach, is important as a means, not as an end. His work must point to God, not to himself. But if he is genuinely inspired by Christian truth, there will be no problem. Once he has grasped the sublimity of the Creed, once he has realized that it is now "not I," but "Christ that lives in me,"⁴⁸ he will spurn mere self-expression as a puny thing.

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of the Christian community are taken into consideration rather than the particular taste or talent of the individual artist" (*Mediator Dei*, n. 195). This no more implies a suppression of the personal, subjective aspect of the activity of the artist than the demands of the Christian life have meant the extirpation of the personalities of the saints. In the fullest sense, Christian artistic activity is a profound, even mystical, subjective response to two objective realities: Christian truth, and those to whom that truth is to be communicated. The great antagonist of Iconoclasm, St. John Damascene, commenting on our Lord's words, "Blessed are your eyes, for they have sight; blessed are your ears, for they have hearing" (Mt. 13:16), clearly indicates this twofold objectivity: "[The Apostles] saw Christ face to face, since He was bodily present. But since He is not present to us in the body, we hear His words from books, and are sanctified. . . . In like manner, through the language of images, we see a representation of His bodily form and of His miracles and sufferings, and thereby advance in holiness. . . . For since . . . our soul does not stand alone, but is hidden, as it were, by a veil, we cannot arrive at spiritual truths except by means of corporeal things. Consequently, as we hear physical words with material ears and come to understand the spiritual, so by contemplating material things we attain to contemplation of the spiritual" (*De imaginibus oratio III* [PG, XCIV, 1333 D]).

⁴⁸ Gal. 2:20.