

THE IMAGERY OF FAITH

PAUL HAAS, O.P.



T WAS inevitable that Rome should speak on art. The world of Catholic art has long been in turmoil; the tension between the advocates of the most radical tendencies in modern art and those who remain fast to traditional modes of expression was growing ever more strained. As usually happens in such cases, the interested non-partisan was left unpleasantly confused, distrusting irrational innovations on the one hand while remaining dissatisfied with banal and meaningless work on the other. In an attempt to bring conformity out of chaos, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, on June 30, 1952, issued its *Instruction to Ordinaries on Sacred Art*.

The opening statement of the Instruction presents the basic principle which must serve as the rule for the judgment of all religious art. "It is the function and duty of sacred art, by reason of its very definition, to enhance the beauty of the House of God and to foster the faith and piety of those who gather in the church to assist at divine service and to implore heavenly favors." To this definition of sacred art was added a warning to avoid "those images and forms recently introduced by some, which seem to be deformations and debasements of sane art and which are even at times in open contradiction to Christian grace, modesty, and piety and miserably offend true religious sentiments"; and to forbid at the same time "second-rate and stereotyped statues and effigies to be multiplied."

Admittedly these directives are rather general in character, yet they are far from meaningless. The norms of the decree are necessarily broad, but when carefully applied, they can effect a thorough reformation in practical artistic production. Far from interfering with the natural freedom of artists by descending to minute and burdensome details, the Holy Office is content simply to recognize the existence of a real problem and to indicate the extremes to be avoided. It also placed the responsibility for vigilance on the proper ecclesiastical authorities while asking for general interest in a new and wholesome religious art that will be the glory of the Church.

THE PERENNIAL QUESTION OF CATHOLIC ART

Once again, as a result of these papal instructions, renewed attention and emphasis is being given to the frequently repeated question: What is Catholic art? Is there such a thing as a Catholic picture or statue? a Catholic symphony or novel or play? No longer is this to be considered the concern only of professional artists and ecclesiastics, since the Holy Office has clearly indicated that sacred art is intended for all the faithful and therefore demands of all a truly Catholic attitude toward the genuine spiritual value in traditional and contemporary religious art.

These are by no means purely academic questions. As we have seen from the tenor of the recent directive, the Holy See insists that we decorate our churches and beautify our liturgy only with what is truly religious. And the recommendations of the Holy See are meant for the laity as well as for the clergy and professional men who are immediately responsible for church affairs. All of us must adopt an honestly Catholic point of view toward religious art, because it affects us so intimately in our worship of God.

There is very real difficulty in trying to identify the religious and spiritual element in the work of any man, but the issue must be faced if we are to reach a practical solution. The problem becomes pressing when we are confronted with any work of art, be it a stained glass window, a polyphonic Mass, a play or a poem, which departs from the ordinary standards of religious art to which we have become accustomed. It is the extraordinary that makes us wonder; and it seems that nothing is more extraordinary than the modern religious art which has assumed an ever more dominant role in ecclesiastical decoration. The time is at hand for critical examination and balanced judgment.

The international interest which the new chapel at Assy has evoked is a forceful example of how modern religious art attracts attention and stimulates controversy in all quarters. The celebrated chapel in the French Alps was designed and decorated by famous artists of many different religious and irreligious persuasions. The result of their work has been, if nothing else, astonishingly revolutionary. When faced with such an artistic product, we are forced to ask ourselves what it is that makes this little chapel a monument to the best in Catholic architecture or a colossus dedicated to the ambitions of men who sacrifice their talents for the sake of notoriety.

TECHNIQUE A PREREQUISITE

By way of discovering the elements which make for true Christian art, we can immediately eliminate the factor of technique, which is only a material consideration. The technique, or mechanical aspect of any art, though important, is quite secondary. While we expect to find only the best of materials and techniques employed in our sacred edifices and ceremonies, we realize that they must always be subordinated to the more essential formation of spiritual significance and religious character. It is not elaborate carving, imported marble, or expensive fabrics which make a fitting house of worship. Nor is highly skilled workmanship any guarantee of spiritual integrity. At Assy, for example, the artists represented are recognized as master craftsmen. If we find that we can say nothing else good about them, we must admit that they respect the nature of the materials they use, and have produced a well executed and durable structure. Their skill is beyond question; but the content of their work and the value of their style of expression is quite another matter. The same thing is true in other branches of art; complete mastery of their medium is demanded of Catholic writers and musicians before we can begin to evaluate their qualities as religious artists. In no case can we afford to confuse purely technical perfection with spiritual attributes.

REVELATION THE FONT

Apart from its technical perfection, there is something very definite in the work of art itself from which it derives its religious character. The religious nature of a work is not merely subjective, but truly objective. In other words, we would never claim that religious character is simply what we read into the work, as though we arbitrarily suppose for ourselves that a triangle is a symbol of the Trinity. No, there is something about a triangle which is like the Trinity. Similarly, in more elaborate works of art, there is a form impressed by the artist which must be considered on its own merits. "Does this work bear the stamp of Christianity?" we ask. Can we see in it the images and symbols which are unmistakably identified with Divine Revelation, the Incarnation, or the Communion of Saints? These are the things we must look for: the sensible signs of the supernatural order, the footprints of Christ, as it were.

The historical fact of man's elevation to a supernatural life has left and continues to leave very tangible vestiges in our world, even to the extent that we have Christ's institution of

sensible signs as instruments of grace, the sacraments. Moses wrote the Ten Commandments on stone; David sang the Psalms; Jesus was born in a manger and died on a cross; the Holy Ghost appeared in the form of a dove. These are some of the fonts from which all Christian imagery flows, and these images and symbols are as unchangeable as history itself. Of course, they are understood and imagined in innumerable ways; yet they remain essentially the same. The cross is the cross, eternally the sign of our salvation, though it be elongated, twisted, and adorned according to infinitely different styles.

This essential immutability of Christian figures certainly does not mean that there is no room in the Church for growth and development of symbolism. Future persecutions may be the occasion for the evolution of a symbolism far more meaningful and moving than that of the Roman catacombs. However, we must maintain that there is an essential body of unalterable Christian imagery always to be found in true Christian art.

To identify Christian art, then, we must look first to the manner in which the faith is embodied within the limits of the work itself. How it got there and who put it there is another question. First, the artistic product must be judged on the merits of its own content alone.

THE PERSONAL ELEMENT

Since the early days of the Church, there has always been a substantial volume of artistic reproductions in imitation of certain traditional figures. The simple, realistic crucifix is the classical image; as absolute and invariable as it remains, it must always be recognized as truly religious. But since Christianity is a living organism, it seeks a vital expression of its faith. Hence, there are bound to be new insights into the truths of faith and new representations of the whole of Christian revelation. The canonized forms of art remain, doubtlessly drawing a genuine response from those who can appreciate no others; but they are helpless in expressing the intensity of a dynamic faith on the part of the artists who produce them. An artist who works from a very personal and intimate appreciation of the mysteries of his faith cannot but cast his expression in clothing which is as unique as his own thoughts and sentiments.

It is a basic consideration in all forms of Christian art that the product be the outward representation of the artist's inward belief; this is true even of the lately developed form of the religious novel. While the writer's plot is rooted in his understand-

ing of the true effect Christianity has upon his characters, still his development of Christian principles and their application to the problems of his imaginary world all bear the authentic stamp of his own personality.

Although there exists this unchangeable foundation in Catholic art, we could no more expect artists to produce identical work than we could expect preachers to preach identical sermons. The Apostles themselves all received the same faith from Christ Himself, although each preached the Gospel in his own unique way. So do artists bring forth reflections of their own individual conception of reality, even though they all draw from the same font of Catholic truth.

THE RELIGIOUS QUALITY IN ART

What then, besides the recognized symbols of faith, is this "Catholic" or "religious" quality which an artist puts into his work? Is not the personality of the artist a thing quite indifferent to his faith, and perhaps foreign to it? Both of these questions follow logically, and can be answered together. But the answer cannot be grasped unless one has tried himself to express his faith externally in words, color, sound, or simply in his own imagination. We find, after our first attempt, that we are altogether limited in our potentialities; somehow we can express only so much at one time. We are definitely restricted and find it necessary to concentrate on certain particular aspects of what we first saw in one grand vision. For example, in expressing our spiritual appreciation of the birth of our Lord, we might focus our attention on the paradox of the Divine Majesty appearing in the lowest form of human poverty. In expressing this, we say nothing of Mary or of the witness of the angelic choirs or of all the other marvels of that holy night. It is beyond the capability of our nature to say more than one thing at a time. This fundamental limitation of man's external activity explains why it is that all human expression must be intensified and personalized if it is in any way to exhaust the potentialities of its subject; each man's insight and feeling colors all his experiences and determines the mode of their expression.

Artists are no different from the rest of us. They share the same impressions, inspirations, and outlook as everyone else, although they see with greater precision, feel with keener intensity, and are better able to reproduce externally their internal experience. What they do has a certain perfection and grandeur

about it which is not found in the works of other men; yet the fact remains that no artist can add to a religious work anything more than the clarity of his own vision, the strength of his own conviction, and the perfection of his own expression. A very simple and all too common example of this lies in the difference between the truly religious Christmas card and the cheaper, commercial, glamorized type. In the one case the artist emphasizes the supernatural, divine aspects of the mystery of the Nativity, while in the other he is taken up with the cute Infant or Hollywood Madonna, the true nature of the mystery remaining completely untouched.

Obvious as it is that something personal must enter into the heart of any truly artistic expression of the faith, still it is not an easy thing to recognize such genuine religious feeling in a work of art. The difficulty arises largely from the fact that spiritual qualities admit of very fine shades of difference, something like the finer tones in music which only the trained ear can discern. We might easily conclude, then, that the Church should present to us for our instruction and inspiration only the most certain works of unquestionably spiritual artistry, just as she holds up for our imitation only those men who have been most certainly and most apparently holy: the saints. Surely the Church does not canonize persons whose lives are beclouded by questionable activities and motives. Neither does she wish to encourage art that is tainted with sensuality and valueless as an instrument for spiritual elevation. Unfortunately, however, it is impossible to make the processes of church decoration as strict and thorough as the process of canonization.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CATHOLIC ARTISTS

The need for heightened spiritual emphasis casts a great responsibility upon the shoulders of Catholic artists, for they alone are capable of giving the Church works in content and craftsmanship worthy of the name Catholic. Their first and greatest task is their own spiritual growth. They should not dare to rise as interpreters of divine mysteries and instructors of supernatural truths if they do not understand the things of God and love them. They become like children playing with dangerous chemicals: they are in danger of destroying themselves and others by unknowingly making wrong combinations. Furthermore, in that they dare to speak, they must speak honestly from personal conviction, or else they are hypocrites. They run the risk of grave sin in subordinating the truths of God to their

own personal ambitions and purely natural tastes. How short of blasphemy is it to paint a picture of Christ, the Son of God, solely for the pleasure of enjoying its color and design?

On the other hand, what a priceless treasure lies before the Catholic artist in the deposit of Divine Revelation! All this magnificent beauty within the grasp of man! Who can be content to ignore it, or dare to misuse it?

Then, too, the Catholic artist is a teacher, or better, a guide, who certainly cannot point out the perfections of the faith if he cannot or will not see them himself. It is strange that this thought horrifies so many artists. "Art is not didactic," they cry; "it can do nothing when it is tied down to teaching any set formulae." All we can say is that art *can* teach, and without any sacrifice of its own innate prerogatives; in fact, sometimes it must teach. The Church has always considered the arts as instruments in her apostolate. And in our own day, it is quite evident that the Communists, too, are no less aware of the didactic qualities of truly great art. The restrictions imposed by the artist's remaining within the pale of Revelation might take some of the fun or a bit of the novelty out of artistic creation, but the reward is far greater than the sacrifice. And what happens to the liberty of the artist? This, too, sorry to say, is curtailed, but only for the sake of enjoying a greater good, that of living in the world of divinely revealed truth, which is nothing less than the beginning of divine life. In the long run greater freedom is assured, for the beauty of God is inexhaustible and our expression of it can be infinitely variable; whereas the beauty of this world is quickly depleted for each of us, and there are no new horizons to which we can look. Modern critics of art confirm these views in the close attention they pay to the liturgical art movement. They recognize the fact that here is a mode of artistic expression with a unique content and a limitless theme, worthy of the highest talent.

The final responsibility of the artist who assumes the task of exposing the faith, and one which the Church has always insisted upon, is his obligation to keep in mind those for whom his work is intended. The mysteries of the faith are of eternal interest, transcending the limits of time and place. Hence great liberties are allowed in associating them with all periods in history, all cultures, all groups. We are not surprised to see saints of different ages grouped about the crucifix, nor does a Chinese Holy Family disturb us. All of us readily accept artistic reproductions

of the scenes of the Nativity as taking place anywhere in the world, in any clime, and among any people.

Transgression of the historical realities of time and circumstances is permitted and even encouraged for its ability to convey the universal quality of our faith, and artists should not hesitate to make use of this liberty. But misuse is the danger! Since all artists produce for their contemporaries, and with a very definite audience in mind, they must be careful to use their liberty to good advantage, considering the education, occupations, culture, and spiritual condition of the people. Religious art must arouse love. Yet love is based on likeness: it is easier for us to understand and love that with which we have something in common. Art depends a great deal on first impressions, too; therefore it must strike a familiar note from the beginning, and by what is known, insinuate what is yet unknown.

This is the function of Catholic art and these are the responsibilities of the Catholic artist. When we comprehend the nature and purpose of religious art, we are better able to fulfill our own responsibilities towards it. We come to know what we must look for and encourage, and what we must reject. We learn that we have a right to expect a clear, profound, and convincing insight into the contents of our holy religion. We do not want sensuality, nor sentimentality, nor horror, nor the glorified geometry which too many moderns bring forward for us to accept. What the Church demands are those qualities which are found in the Gospels themselves, which are, after all, the artistic expression of the Holy Ghost: the simplicity, meekness, intelligence, and sincerity of Christ. As Catholics, we demand nothing less in the imagery of our faith.