

THE BUSH WAS ON FIRE AND WAS NOT BURNT

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I beseech Thee, Lord, I am not eloquent from yesterday and the day before: and since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant, I have more impediment and slowness of tongue. —*Exodus* iv, 10

“**B**UT I don't see why he has to twist the body of Christ into such horrible positions. My little boy would do as well, if he could remember his nightmares!”

“It doesn't look like Christ. . . .”

“We were taught that art imitated nature. That's the most unnatural thing I've ever seen!”

These are just a few of the remarks that one might overhear at an exhibit of contemporary sacred art, perhaps at a display of the paintings of Georges Rouault. Despite all the laudable efforts of *Jubilee* and other Catholic publications, contemporary sacred art still poses problems for many among the Catholic laity and clergy, and for the Catholic artist who would remain faithful to his vocation. How shall contemporary sacred art find a path out of the shadows of the esoteric and take its rightful place in the sun? How shall works which are a true reflection of twentieth-century man's supernatural aspirations become a vital part of the Church's artistic heritage? How shall the modern Catholic artist regain the power of communication?

Many of the representative works of art of our own period seem unintelligible to the modern American Catholic; both laymen and clergy fail to understand such works; they may even go so far as to condemn and ridicule them. This all too brief study is intended as an apology for both the artist and his audience; an apology in the original sense of the word, an *explanation*, and this on theological grounds. It does not pretend to cover every aspect of the problem, but it does attempt an exposition of two of the most difficult factors involved: first, the condition of mind and

heart which hinders receptiveness of a work of sacred art, and second, the great problem inherent in the very nature of sacred art. Its point of departure is the work of art itself, for this is that with which the non-artist must contend and that to which the artist directs all his creative powers. And if the reader adverts to an obvious bias in favor of the artist, it is only fair to warn him that this stems from the conviction that appreciation for any true work of art requires a certain docility to the work itself, since true art is the product of one to whom God has given a gift of vision surpassing that of the majority of men.

But we must first settle a possible difficulty as to the use of the term *sacred art* in this essay, and to do this we should like to quote a passage from an address of His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, concerning the masterpieces of Fra Angelico:

It is true that an explicit religious or ethical function is not demanded of art as art. If, as the aesthetic expression of the human spirit, it reflects that spirit in its complete verity or at least does not positively distort it, art is in itself sacred and religious, that is, in so far as it is the interpreter of a work of God. But if its content and aim are such as Fra Angelico gave his painting, then art rises to the dignity almost of a minister of God, reflecting a greater number of perfections (*Accogliendo*, April 20, 1955).

The truth of Pope Pius' statement is evident, even after a brief reflection, and it serves to highlight the immense value of all great art, whether it be the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, the *Aeneid* of Virgil, or a Mozart Symphony. But our purpose in this study demands that we limit the term *sacred art* to those works whose content and aim are specifically supernatural. This, of course, does not mean a limitation to what is liturgical; indeed, what we are about to say can be understood only analogously of certain liturgical arts—those which pertain to vestments, chalices and candlesticks, for instance. These artistic products are necessarily conditioned by the part they play in the whole which is liturgical worship. They are fine arts with a precise functional characteristic. Therefore, sacred art, as we use it, refers to those works whose spirit derives from Catholic doctrine, whose content is some aspect of the supernatural realm, and whose technique reveals a harmony with supernatural truth. Having thus decided upon the sense of the term, which is the subject of this essay, we can now proceed to an examination of the first obstacle to appreciation of sacred art.

Any work of art is a challenge, whether it be a painting, a novel, a statue, a piece of music, a cathedral. It is a challenge to the artist who has the urge within himself to communicate his

unique grasp of some reality; it is a challenge to his audience which strives to grasp the communication. And when it is a question of sacred art, there is a formidable barrier to overcome regarding the communication; it is the barrier of "stock response."

Stock response is fundamentally a matter of attitude, arising from preconceived opinions and emotional predispositions. It can afflict both the sacred artist and the one seeking to appreciate a work of sacred art. All sincere Christians have formed habits of mind and heart which govern their actions in certain phases of daily life, as well as their attitudes towards certain realities of this world and eternity. And since art is an ever present reality in the lives of all men, even though many do not consciously advert to it, these habits of mind and heart generally predispose a person to various degrees of receptivity regarding any work of art. We are not speaking of the attitudes which clearly affect a man's Faith or his moral life; one can still be a good Catholic, even a great saint, without knowing why a particular painting or church has artistic value. We are here concerned with those habitual states of mind and heart which govern, if not completely predetermine, the individual's response to a specific work of art. In stock response, as explained by the eminent critic I. A. Richards, who coined the phrase, "The place of the direct free play of experience is taken by the deliberate organization of attitudes" (*Principles of Literary Criticism*). As Robert M. Browne has pointed out, such attitudes involve "a failure to meet new experience on its own terms; the experience is reduced to familiar patterns" (*Theories of Convention in Contemporary American Criticism*).

How, then, does stock response affect the reception of a work of sacred art? Probably the best explanation of this will proceed by way of exemplification, since all have experienced such a reaction in one form or another during their own lives. One instance can be taken from the current liturgical revival in the Church, which has served to indicate, among other things, just how far the habits formed during life affect reception of the changes recommended by the Holy See. Let us, for a moment, examine the question of Church music. It is probably accurate to say that most American Catholics have grown up with such hymns as "O Mary, We Crown Thee with Blossoms Today." This particular hymn was sung at the Children's Mass on Sunday mornings; it calls to mind innocent associations of childhood, perhaps for many a young lady, the thrill of being May Queen with the honor of crowning the statue of Our Blessed Mother.

With the accent now on participation by all the laity with the priest in liturgical worship, such hymns are looked upon with some disfavor, especially if they are used during the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice. And it is obvious to most Catholics that their pretty tunes and somewhat insipid words do not harmonize with the solemn grandeur of the liturgy. Thus the Church has, with some insistence, called her children back to the Gregorian Chant and to the works of such masters as Palestrina and Victoria for the Mass itself, and to hymns of dignified simplicity for non-liturgical services. But even those who recognize the disproportion between a hymn such as the one mentioned above and the subject it attempts to honor are reluctant to give up the old familiar tune in favor of the ever new, yet more ancient, chant of the Church. This reluctance has its source in the attitude of stock response.

Too many are accustomed to consider Our Blessed Lady in excessively sentimental terms, and often they do not want to lose the *feeling* that comes when such a hymn is sung again years after they have left childhood. Satisfaction with the hymn, even in otherwise mature individuals, arises from a preconceived opinion established in childhood ("That's the kind of music I'm used to.") and from an emotional predisposition of sentimental associations ("I like it because it reminds me of those wonderful days at St. Bridget's."). As the years roll by, Our Lady becomes less and less distinct in the misty haze of remembrance that swirls around the sweet music like the faded perfume of lilacs. Thus, while many people have attained maturity in their family life, their business and social relationships, they yet retain a condition of arrested growth in this particular aspect of divine worship. Perhaps St. Paul's words to the Corinthians may find application here: "As . . . little ones in Christ, I fed you with milk, not with solid food, for you were not ready for it" (I *Cor.* iii, 1-2). But it should be remembered that in the same Epistle, he said: "Now that I have become a man, I have put away the things of a child" (I *Cor.* xiii, 11).

A man may not like some particular statue or piece of music, but at least he should be able to understand why he dislikes it. And this understanding will depend to a great extent on his ability to set aside preconceived opinions and emotional predispositions. It should be evident that as soon as the psychological barrier of stock response is removed, the stage is set for communication between the artist and his audience, or perhaps more

accurately, his congregation, for in an analogous sense true sacred art does possess a sacramental aspect which leads the beholder to realization of the power of grace and urges him to adoration of the Source of all grace. This is the characteristic of Fra Angelico's painting, which prompted Pope Pius XII to call it "almost . . . a minister of God." And this sacramental aspect of great sacred art can only be appreciated by one who is prepared to ignore the blandishments of stock response.

The artist, also, must face the difficulty of stock response, and for him it is a much more complex problem. He must contend with any defects he may have himself in this direction; he must not allow such feelings in the Christian congregation, with whom he must communicate, to warp his own vision; he must attain balance, so that he does not go to the other extreme and produce, in the words of Pope Pius XII, "those works of art . . . which seem to be a distortion and perversion of true art and which at times openly shock Christian taste, modesty and devotion, and shamefully offend the true religious sense" (*Mediator Dei*). Thus, he must avoid the shoals of the pietistic on the one hand and the rocks of the monstrous on the other. In contemporary civilization this is no easy task for the artist, for he can suddenly find himself expressing only the chaos of modern life without even intimating the divine order of Providence, which guides the twentieth century as lovingly as it did the thirteenth. And beyond this, society today is characterized by a highly developed critical sense with proportionately little artistic creativity. There are many who are able to analyze the essential features of great religious art; there are very few who are able to produce it. And when it is produced, the artist must be ready to defend it against the "interpretations" of the analysts.

A discussion of stock response, however, does not solve any problems regarding the work of art itself. Its inclusion is demanded only by reason of an unfortunate circumstance, a condition of mind regarding art which obtains in American Catholicism today. Thus we must turn our attention to what is undoubtedly the greatest single concern of contemporary sacred art: the problem of portraying the action of divine grace within the limited human mediums of word, color, line and sound. The problem is as old as sacred art, but its formulation is relatively modern, for the reason that we have indicated above, namely, that our age has developed to a high degree the various phases of artistic criticism.

The beginnings of a solution may be found in a proper under-

standing of the familiar dictum, "art imitates nature." However, there is no necessity here for prolonged investigation of the statement's meaning with precise philosophical distinctions. The important thing to grasp is the fact that the word *imitation*, when used in connection with the fine arts, does not signify an exact replica; a painting or a statue is not an imitation in the sense that rhinestones are "imitation" diamonds. Rather, a work of art expresses some significant aspect of reality which has captured the imaginative powers of the artist. This aspect of reality cannot be expressed in its total character; there are too many accidental considerations involved, which, if the artist attempted to express them, would obscure the clarity of his vision in a mass of meaningless detail. In *The Windhover*, for example, Gerard Manley Hopkins expresses in words and rhythm the movement of a bird in its majestic struggle against the wind. He is not interested in a detailed analysis of the flying habits of birds, but he sees in this movement or flight a striking similarity to the activity of the Christian soul being perfected through sacrifice. He fastens upon a particular aspect of reality to express his spiritual vision of the "beauty and valor" of Christian sacrifice, and he imitates the natural flight and struggle of the bird in the rhythm and words of the poem, thus communicating through these an imitation of the profound supernatural reality which is the essential burden of *The Windhover*.

There is, moreover, another element in the statement "art imitates nature" which should be examined, and that is the object of the imitation, "nature." Therefore, it will be necessary for us to present a brief explanation of this term, an explanation that has great relevance to sacred art.

In his discussion of Tragedy, Aristotle writes:

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness and misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse (*Poetics*, 1450a 15-19).

When Aristotle uses the word *action* in this context, he does not mean visible deeds or events—running and fighting, for example—for outward happenings in a Tragedy are the concern of the Plot. In the *Poetics*, "action" and Plot are clearly distinguished from one another. Action, therefore, in the Aristotelian sense here expressed, is something much more profound than external comings and go-

ings; it signifies spiritual movement, the inner activity of the soul. It concerns actions of intellect and will, and of human emotions as dominated by, or in some cases dominating, man's rational powers.

Now a parallel exists between the two statements "art imitates nature" and "Tragedy is an imitation of action." *Nature* in its philosophical signification ordinarily does not refer to what is commonly called "Mother Nature." It can, and often does, mean the essence of a thing, that which makes the thing to be what it is. But in a more fundamental sense nature is defined as "an intrinsic principle or cause of motion and rest" (II *Physics*, chap. 1). In man, the principle of motion, of action, is most properly the soul, and the soul is known through its activities—we know that man has a rational soul because he thinks and wills. Although further elaborations are necessary for a complete understanding of the elements involved in the dictum "art imitates nature," we are justified in the generalization that preeminently, *art imitates spiritual activity*. Such activity, of course, must be externalized in art, made sensible through words, rhythm, color and sound. Nonetheless, the fact remains that true works of art are not merely a question of the external, of that which is perceived by the senses. It is true that only through the external mediums do we apprehend the spiritual movement, but both factors are necessarily present, and this is the ultimate reason for the unique satisfaction great art gives. It appeals to man by engaging all the human faculties simultaneously; man approaches a work of art with his mind, his heart and his senses.

Having reached the conclusion that art is essentially an imitation of the soul's inner activity, we are now in a position to investigate a most important feature of sacred art, that distinctive aspect which separates sacred works from all other artistic products. And here we find St. Thomas to be a most competent guide in our investigation.

Without doubt, one of the most sublime considerations in the theology of the Angelic Doctor is the doctrine that grace perfects nature without destroying nature. Since all that comes from God is good, there can be no real conflict between the natural and supernatural gifts He has given to man. If any conflicts do arise, they are of our own making. Adam, misusing the divine gifts given to him, thus opened the door to sin and death in the world. From Adam's disobedience there resulted a devastating confusion in human powers; man's natural understanding and affections

became disorientated, so that he was no longer the friend of God. The human faculties remained intact, but they had declared war—a pathetic war against God, an impossible war against the universe, an all too effective war against man himself. Then in His mercy, God set up a new Adam on the face of the earth, His Own Divine Son. And Christ, through His total sacrifice on the Cross, restored to mankind the possibility of return to friendship. Christ triumphed in the battle and all His co-heirs were henceforth armed with His grace, which brings a share in His victory. And this weapon of victory, the grace-full activity of Christ, is the unique factor, the distinguishing characteristic, portrayed in sacred art. For if art is an imitation of the vital activity of the soul, sacred art is the imitation of the soul's action supernaturally vitalized by the saving grace of Christ.

It is, of course, the portrayal of grace in action that elevates sacred art far beyond the loftiest reaches of Parnassus, but it is also the element which makes the production of such works the supreme artistic challenge. In a true sense, the experience of the sacred artist is very close to that of Moses, as recounted in the opening chapters of the *Book of Exodus*.

And the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he saw that the bush was on fire and was not burnt. And Moses said: I will go and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt (*Exodus* iii, 2-3).

The burning bush is one of the most powerful symbols that can be used to illustrate the character of sacred art, and it gives an indication of the effect such a "great sight" must have on the imagination of an artist. The bush is a natural object transformed, but not destroyed, by the presence of the supernatural. And that supernatural presence is externalized, made visible "in a flame of fire." The aspect of divine reality which captures the artistic powers is indeed very much like the burning bush, and no true artist can escape the impelling desire to share his captivity with his fellowmen. Perhaps a theologian would analyze the phenomenon and test its validity; a preacher might use it as an example of God's direct intervention in the affairs of men; but the artist must recreate it, must fashion an external representation of it, so that all men may join in his contemplative experience.

Thus, the supreme challenge of recreating, of imitating, the supernatural reality of grace imposes a great burden on the artist and implies a great perfection in all sacred art. Moreover, there is a close relationship between the burden and the perfection.

Remember the words that Moses spoke to God, as he stood bare-foot before the burning bush.

I beseech Thee, Lord, I am not eloquent from yesterday and the day before: and since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant, I have more impediment and slowness of tongue (*Exodus iv, 10*).

Something analogous to this "impediment and slowness of tongue" is always present in every work of sacred art, although it assumes a great variety of forms depending on the artist and the age which his art reflects. It is that unique human perfection, at once lowly and exalted, which accompanies all human greatness; in sacred art, it is a kind of sensible recognition of the inability of man to express adequately the divine vision; it is humility standing barefoot on the holy ground of eternity. Hence, its twofold aspect of burden and perfection.

Strange as it may seem to some, this unique perfecting element in sacred art is the most important determining force in artistic technique. It is that characteristic in the works of Georges Rouault and, to a lesser degree, in those of El Greco which is unfortunately called "distortion." In Angelico it reveals itself in brilliance of color and, to quote Pope Pius XII, "celestial light." Gregorian Chant manifests this peculiar quality in its severe beauty of melodic line, stripped to the utter essentials of song, but rich with implicit harmonies never actually heard, as if harmonic texture would drown the disciplined spirituality which is the chant's sublime content, in an ocean of too human sound. It affects even literature in a myriad of ways, for we discover in the novels of Sigrid Undset a kind of "cosmic description," embracing the heavens, the earth and the sea, which reflects the inner state of soul, thus giving one of the most powerful representations in all art of redeemed man's worth and nobility, and implicitly showing the all-inclusive government of divine Providence.

Examples could be multiplied, but the important thing to note is the fact that this analogous "impediment and slowness of tongue" characterizes all sacred art, wherein the loftiest consideration of man in the supernatural order is wedded to the lowliest and most fundamental materials in nature: rhythm, sound and color. If we find the paintings of a Georges Rouault disturbing and unintelligible, it may help to remember the difficulties such an artist must contend with. Although his works do reflect the horror of our own civilization with its wars and threats of war, that aspect which is called "distortion" in his paintings is not

a new thing in the long history of sacred art. One has only to examine his painting of *Christ Mocked by the Soldiers* along with Fra Angelico's work on the same subject in the cloisters of San Marco. Angelico, the most serene of artists, has gone to incredible lengths of "distortion" in this painting. For while Christ sits blindfolded in the white robe of the fool, the robe itself gleams with the glory of the Transfiguration. And if His figure reveals the fullness of majesty, and thus satisfies the "laws" of physical beauty, the figures of those mocking Him are another question altogether. A *trunkless* head with twisted lips spits upon His Sacred Face; a *dismembered* hand slaps Him! We can say that if Angelico portrays, in a vivid sense, what mortal sin does to us by so "distorting" the bodily integrity of the mockers, Rouault expresses what mortal sin has done to Christ, by picturing the total agony of His human body. But both artists communicate with moving sincerity and supreme artistic ability different aspects of supernatural drama.

Thus, we must have patience in our seeking to understand a work of sacred art; we must not expect that something so inherently difficult in production will reveal all its secret treasure in an instant. And, above all, we should be most reluctant to condemn or ridicule, after only brief reflection, what has been fashioned by human genius as an imitation of supernatural joy and sorrow, exaltation and agony. For we must keep in mind that the masters who produce great works of sacred art are the true descendents of Moses, going back to Egypt to lead the children of God to greater awareness of His Providence, His Majesty, His Goodness, despite the "impediment and slowness of tongue" which afflicts any man who would speak (or write, or compose, or build, or paint) convincingly of supernatural reality.



". . . the artist who is firm in his faith and leads a life worthy of a Christian, who is motivated by the love of God and reverently uses the powers the Creator has given him, expresses and manifests the truths he holds and the piety he possesses so skillfully, beautifully and pleasingly in colors and lines or sounds and harmonies that this sacred labor of art is an act of worship and religion for him."

Pope Pius XII: *Musicae sacrae disciplina*, "Encyclical Letter on Sacred Music,"
December 25, 1955.