

THINGS DIVINE IN ACCENTS HUMAN

An Editorial

IN THE LAST CANTO of the *Paradiso*, when Dante was faced with the overwhelming difficulty of portraying in human words his artistic vision of the Most Blessed Trinity, he prayed thus:

O Light Supreme, that art so far exalted
Above our mortal ken! Lend to my mind
A little part of what Thou didst appear,
And grant sufficient power unto my tongue
That it may leave for races yet unborn,
A single spark of Thy almighty flame!
And if Thou wilt come back to my remembrance,
That I may sing Thy glory in these lines,
The more Thy victory will be explained.

We do not hesitate to adopt the language of Western Christianity's greatest poet as the most profound expression of the motivating principle of all Dominican art. Throughout the ages the Order of Preachers has ranked among its members not only great theologians and philosophers, but also great artists, and this by reason of the totality of its mission. For art speaks in some way to all men, and sacred art utters the impelling language which leads to the adoration of God Who has given such power to men. Dominican artists are those who have known the Truth and the Truth has made them free: free as children of grace, and free to express in sensible form the wonder of their vision of Truth. They speak things divine in accents human.

This Spring Issue of *Dominicana* is devoted to sacred art, and more especially to the contributions made by Dominicans to the great artistic treasury of the Church. We cannot hope to exhaust this subject in so limited a space, but we do hope to give an indication of the richness of the artistic tradition within the Order. We have received help from many sources, but we must take the opportunity to thank Sister Mary of the Compassion, O.P., of the Dominican Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary in Union City, New Jersey, for the original sketches she has done for the issue. The frontispiece of *Christ the Divine Artisan with Some of His Journey-men* and the study of *Fra Angelico with His Assistants* are an indication of the fact that she is one who is continuing the tradition in our own day. Our gratitude is extended also to Sheed and Ward for their kindness in allowing us to use the portrait of Sigrid Undset, one of the Order's truly great tertiaries.

THE BUSH WAS ON FIRE AND WAS NOT BURNT

Marcellus M. Coskren, O.P.

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