

*Letter of His Holiness
Pope John Paul II
to Artists*

1999
VATICAN CITY

lenges which stand before us. Thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity, every time it loses its way, will be able to lift itself up and set out again on the right path. In this sense it has been said with profound insight that "beauty will save the world".²⁵

Beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence. It is an invitation to savour life and to dream of the future. That is why the beauty of created things can never fully satisfy. It stirs that hidden nostalgia for God which a lover of beauty like Saint Augustine could express in incomparable terms: "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you!".²⁶

Artists of the world, may your many different paths all lead to that infinite Ocean of beauty where wonder becomes awe, exhilaration, unspeakable joy.

May you be guided and inspired by the mystery of the Risen Christ, whom the Church in these days contemplates with joy.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary be with you always: she is the "tota pulchra" portrayed by countless artists, whom Dante contemplates among the splendours of Paradise as "beauty that was joy in the eyes of all the other saints".²⁷

"From chaos there rises the world of the spirit". These words of Adam Mickiewicz, written at a time of great hardship for his Polish homeland,²⁸ prompt my hope for you: may your art help to affirm that true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal.

With my heartfelt good wishes!

From the Vatican, 4 April 1999, Easter Sunday.

JOANNES PAULUS PP II

*To all who are passionately dedicated
to the search for new "epiphanies" of beauty
so that through their creative work as artists
they may offer these as gifts to the world.*

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31)

The artist, image of God the Creator

1. None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate.

That is why it seems to me that there are no better words than the text of Genesis with which to begin my Letter to you, to whom I feel closely linked by experiences reaching far back in time and which have indelibly marked my life. In writing this Letter, I intend to follow the path of the fruitful dialogue between the Church and artists which has gone on unbroken through two thousand years of history, and which still, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, offers rich promise for the future.

In fact, this dialogue is not dictated merely by historical accident or practical need, but is rooted in the very essence of both religious experience and artistic creativity. The opening page of the Bible presents God as a kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator. This relationship is particularly clear in the Polish language because of the lexical link between the words *stwórca* (creator) and *twórca* (craftsman).

What is the difference between "creator" and "craftsman"? The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing—*ex nihilo sui et subiecti*, as the Latin puts it—and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the Almighty alone. The craftsman, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning. This is the mode of operation peculiar to man as made

25 F. DOSTOEVSKY, The Idiot, Part III, chap. 5.

26 Sero te amavi! Pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi!: Confessions, 10, 27: CCL 27, 251.

27 Paradiso XXXI, 134-135.

28 Oda do młodosci, v. 69: Wybór poezji, Wrocław 1986, vol. 1, p. 63.

in the image of God. In fact, after saying that God created man and woman “in his image” (cf. Gn 1:27), the Bible adds that he entrusted to them the task of dominating the earth (cf. Gn 1:28). This was the last day of creation (cf. Gn 1:28-31). On the previous days, marking as it were the rhythm of the birth of the cosmos, Yahweh had created the universe. Finally he created the human being, the noblest fruit of his design, to whom he subjected the visible world as a vast field in which human inventiveness might assert itself.

God therefore called man into existence, committing to him the craftsman’s task. Through his “artistic creativity” man appears more than ever “in the image of God”, and he accomplishes this task above all in shaping the wondrous “material” of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion over the universe which surrounds him. With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power. Obviously, this is a sharing which leaves intact the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature, as Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa made clear: “Creative art, which it is the soul’s good fortune to entertain, is not to be identified with that essential art which is God himself, but is only a communication of it and a share in it”.¹

That is why artists, the more conscious they are of their “gift”, are led all the more to see themselves and the whole of creation with eyes able to contemplate and give thanks, and to raise to God a hymn of praise. This is the only way for them to come to a full understanding of themselves, their vocation and their mission.

The special vocation of the artist

2. Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.

It is important to recognize the distinction, but also the connection, between these two aspects of human activity. The distinction is clear. It is one thing for human beings to be the authors of their own acts, with responsibility for their moral value; it is another to be an artist, able, that is, to respond to the demands of art and faithfully to accept art’s specific

The Creator Spirit and artistic inspiration

15. Often in the Church there resounds the invocation to the Holy Spirit: *Veni, Creator Spiritus...* – “Come, O Creator Spirit, visit our minds, fill with your grace the hearts you have created”.²⁴

The Holy Spirit, “the Breath” (*ruah*), is the One referred to already in the Book of Genesis: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (1:2). What affinity between the words “breath - breathing” and “inspiration”! The Spirit is the mysterious Artist of the universe. Looking to the Third Millennium, I would hope that all artists might receive in abundance the gift of that creative inspiration which is the starting-point of every true work of art.

Dear artists, you well know that there are many impulses which, either from within or from without, can inspire your talent. Every genuine inspiration, however, contains some tremor of that “breath” with which the Creator Spirit suffused the work of creation from the very beginning. Overseeing the mysterious laws governing the universe, the divine breath of the Creator Spirit reaches out to human genius and stirs its creative power. He touches it with a kind of inner illumination which brings together the sense of the good and the beautiful, and he awakens energies of mind and heart which enable it to conceive an idea and give it form in a work of art. It is right then to speak, even if only analogically, of “moments of grace”, because the human being is able to experience in some way the Absolute who is utterly beyond.

The “Beauty” that saves

16. On the threshold of the Third Millennium, my hope for all of you who are artists is that you will have an especially intense experience of creative inspiration. May the beauty which you pass on to generations still to come be such that it will stir them to wonder! Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude.

From this wonder there can come that enthusiasm of which Norwid spoke in the poem to which I referred earlier. People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial chal-

1 Dialogus de Ludo Globi, lib. II: Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften, Vienna 1967, III, p. 332.

precise application in the life of the Christian community. This partnership has been a source of mutual spiritual enrichment. Ultimately, it has been a great boon for an understanding of man, of the authentic image and truth of the person. The special bond between art and Christian revelation has also become evident. This does not mean that human genius has not found inspiration in other religious contexts. It is enough to recall the art of the ancient world, especially Greek and Roman art, or the art which still flourishes in the very ancient civilizations of the East. It remains true, however, that because of its central doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word of God, Christianity offers artists a horizon especially rich in inspiration. What an impoverishment it would be for art to abandon the inexhaustible mine of the Gospel!

An appeal to artists

14. With this Letter, I turn to you, the artists of the world, to assure you of my esteem and to help consolidate a more constructive partnership between art and the Church. Mine is an invitation to rediscover the depth of the spiritual and religious dimension which has been typical of art in its noblest forms in every age. It is with this in mind that I appeal to you, artists of the written and spoken word, of the theatre and music, of the plastic arts and the most recent technologies in the field of communication. I appeal especially to you, Christian artists: I wish to remind each of you that, beyond functional considerations, the close alliance that has always existed between the Gospel and art means that you are invited to use your creative intuition to enter into the heart of the mystery of the Incarnate God and at the same time into the mystery of man.

Human beings, in a certain sense, are unknown to themselves. Jesus Christ not only reveals God, but "fully reveals man to man".²³ In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself. All believers are called to bear witness to this; but it is up to you, men and women who have given your lives to art, to declare with all the wealth of your ingenuity that in Christ the world is redeemed: the human person is redeemed, the human body is redeemed, and the whole creation which, according to Saint Paul, "awaits impatiently the revelation of the children of God" (Rom 8:19), is redeemed. The creation awaits the revelation of the children of God also through art and in art. This is your task. Humanity in every age, and even today, looks to works of art to shed light upon its path and its destiny.

²³ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

dictates.² This is what makes the artist capable of producing objects, but it says nothing as yet of his moral character. We are speaking not of moulding oneself, of forming one's own personality, but simply of actualizing one's productive capacities, giving aesthetic form to ideas conceived in the mind.

The distinction between the moral and artistic aspects is fundamental, but no less important is the connection between them. Each conditions the other in a profound way. In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are. And there are endless examples of this in human history. In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. For him art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them. The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture.

The artistic vocation in the service of beauty

3. A noted Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, wrote that "beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up".³

The theme of beauty is decisive for a discourse on art. It was already present when I stressed God's delighted gaze upon creation. In perceiving that all he had created was good, God saw that it was beautiful as well.⁴ The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two concepts, coined a term which embraces both: *kalokagathía*, or beauty-goodness. On this point Plato writes: "The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful".⁵

It is in living and acting that man establishes his relationship with

² The moral virtues, and among them prudence in particular, allow the subject to act in harmony with the criterion of moral good and evil: according to *recta ratio agibilium* (the right criterion of action). Art, however, is defined by philosophy as *recta ratio factibilium* (the right criterion of production).

³ Promethidion, Bogumil, vv. 185-186: *Pisma wybrane*, Warsaw 1968, vol. 2, p. 216.

⁴ The Greek translation of the Septuagint expresses this well in rendering the Hebrew term *t(o-)b* (good) as *kalón* (beautiful).

being, with the truth and with the good. The artist has a special relationship to beauty. In a very true sense it can be said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of "artistic talent". And, certainly, this too is a talent which ought to be made to bear fruit, in keeping with the sense of the Gospel parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14-30).

Here we touch on an essential point. Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole.

The artist and the common good

4. Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people, witnesses of the faith, teachers, fathers and mothers, who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community by means of that supreme art form which is "the art of education". Within the vast cultural panorama of each nation, artists have their unique place. Obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favour of the common good.

The particular vocation of individual artists decides the arena in which they serve and points as well to the tasks they must assume, the hard work they must endure and the responsibility they must accept. Artists who are conscious of all this know too that they must labour without allowing themselves to be driven by the search for empty glory or the craving for cheap popularity, and still less by the calculation of some possible profit for themselves. There is therefore an ethic, even a "spirituality" of artistic service, which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people. It is precisely this to which Cyprian Norwid seems to allude in declaring that "beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up".

translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable. Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colours, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery.

The Church has need especially of those who can do this on the literary and figurative level, using the endless possibilities of images and their symbolic force. Christ himself made extensive use of images in his preaching, fully in keeping with his willingness to become, in the Incarnation, the icon of the unseen God.

The Church also needs musicians. How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God.

The Church needs architects, because she needs spaces to bring the Christian people together and celebrate the mysteries of salvation. After the terrible destruction of the last World War and the growth of great cities, a new generation of architects showed themselves adept at responding to the exigencies of Christian worship, confirming that the religious theme can still inspire architectural design in our own day. Not infrequently these architects have constructed churches which are both places of prayer and true works of art.

Does art need the Church?

13. The Church therefore needs art. But can it also be said that art needs the Church? The question may seem like a provocation. Yet, rightly understood, it is both legitimate and profound. Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable. How then can we fail to see what a great source of inspiration is offered by that kind of homeland of the soul that is religion? Is it not perhaps within the realm of religion that the most vital personal questions are posed, and answers both concrete and definitive are sought?

In fact, the religious theme has been among those most frequently treated by artists in every age. The Church has always appealed to their creative powers in interpreting the Gospel message and discerning its

5 Philebus, 65 A.

11. The Second Vatican Council laid the foundation for a renewed relationship between the Church and culture, with immediate implications for the world of art. This is a relationship offered in friendship, openness and dialogue. In the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Fathers of the Council stressed “the great importance” of literature and the arts in human life: “They seek to probe the true nature of man, his problems and experiences, as he strives to know and perfect himself and the world, to discover his place in history and the universe, to portray his miseries and joys, his needs and strengths, with a view to a better future”.¹⁸

On this basis, at the end of the Council the Fathers addressed a greeting and an appeal to artists: “This world—they said—in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart and is that precious fruit which resists the erosion of time, which unites generations and enables them to be one in admiration!”.¹⁹ In this spirit of profound respect for beauty, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* recalled the historic friendliness of the Church towards art and, referring more specifically to sacred art, the “summit” of religious art, did not hesitate to consider artists as having “a noble ministry” when their works reflect in some way the infinite beauty of God and raise people’s minds to him.²⁰ Thanks also to the help of artists “the knowledge of God can be better revealed and the preaching of the Gospel can become clearer to the human mind”.²¹ In this light, it comes as no surprise when Father Marie Dominique Chenu claims that the work of the historian of theology would be incomplete if he failed to give due attention to works of art, both literary and figurative, which are in their own way “not only aesthetic representations, but genuine ‘sources’ of theology”.²²

The Church needs art

12. In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore

18 No. 62.

19 Message to Artists, 8 December 1965: AAS 58 (1966), 13.

20 Cf. No. 122.

21 SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 62.

22 La teologia nel XII secolo, Milan 1992, p. 9.

5. The Law of the Old Testament explicitly forbids representation of the invisible and ineffable God by means of “graven or molten image” (Dt 27:15), because God transcends every material representation: “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14). Yet in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God becomes visible in person: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son born of woman” (Gal 4:4). God became man in Jesus Christ, who thus becomes “the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself”.⁶

This prime epiphany of “God who is Mystery” is both an encouragement and a challenge to Christians, also at the level of artistic creativity. From it has come a flowering of beauty which has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation. In becoming man, the Son of God has introduced into human history all the evangelical wealth of the true and the good, and with this he has also unveiled a new dimension of beauty, of which the Gospel message is filled to the brim.

Sacred Scripture has thus become a sort of “immense vocabulary” (Paul Claudel) and “iconographic atlas” (Marc Chagall), from which both Christian culture and art have drawn. The Old Testament, read in the light of the New, has provided endless streams of inspiration. From the stories of the Creation and sin, the Flood, the cycle of the Patriarchs, the events of the Exodus to so many other episodes and characters in the history of salvation, the biblical text has fired the imagination of painters, poets, musicians, playwrights and film-makers. A figure like Job, to take but one example, with his searing and ever relevant question of suffering, still arouses an interest which is not just philosophical but literary and artistic as well. And what should we say of the New Testament? From the Nativity to Golgotha, from the Transfiguration to the Resurrection, from the miracles to the teachings of Christ, and on to the events recounted in the Acts of the Apostles or foreseen by the Apocalypse in an eschatological key, on countless occasions the biblical word has become image, music and poetry, evoking the mystery of “the Word made flesh” in the language of art.

In the history of human culture, all of this is a rich chapter of faith and beauty. Believers above all have gained from it in their experience of prayer and Christian living. Indeed for many of them, in times when few

6 JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), 80: AAS 91 (1999), 67.

could read or write, representations of the Bible were a concrete mode of catechesis.⁷ But for everyone, believers or not, the works of art inspired by Scripture remain a reflection of the unfathomable mystery which engulfs and inhabits the world.

A fruitful alliance between the Gospel and art

6. Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality's surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. The intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one's own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things. All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit.

Believers find nothing strange in this: they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God. Is it in any way surprising that this leaves the spirit overwhelmed as it were, so that it can only stammer in reply? True artists above all are ready to acknowledge their limits and to make their own the words of the Apostle Paul, according to whom "God does not dwell in shrines made by human hands" so that "we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold or silver or stone, a representation by human art and imagination" (Acts 17:24, 29). If the intimate reality of things is always "beyond" the powers of human perception, how much more so is God in the depths of his unfathomable mystery!

The knowledge conferred by faith is of a different kind: it presupposes a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Yet this knowledge too can be enriched by artistic intuition. An eloquent example of aesthetic contemplation sublimated in faith are, for example, the works of Fra Angelico. No less notable in this regard is the ecstatic lauda, which Saint Francis of Assisi twice repeats in the chartula which he composed after receiving the stigmata of Christ on the mountain of La Verna: "You

Even in the changed climate of more recent centuries, when a part of society seems to have become indifferent to faith, religious art has continued on its way. This can be more widely appreciated if we look beyond the figurative arts to the great development of sacred music through this same period, either composed for the liturgy or simply treating religious themes. Apart from the many artists who made sacred music their chief concern—how can we forget Pier Luigi da Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Tomás Luis de Victoria?—it is also true that many of the great composers—from Handel to Bach, from Mozart to Schubert, from Beethoven to Berlioz, from Liszt to Verdi—have given us works of the highest inspiration in this field.

Towards a renewed dialogue

10. It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself. Such an atmosphere has sometimes led to a separation of the world of art and the world of faith, at least in the sense that many artists have a diminished interest in religious themes.

You know, however, that the Church has not ceased to nurture great appreciation for the value of art as such. Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.

It is clear, therefore, why the Church is especially concerned for the dialogue with art and is keen that in our own time there be a new alliance with artists, as called for by my revered predecessor Paul VI in his vibrant speech to artists during a special meeting he had with them in the Sistine Chapel on 7 May 1964.¹⁷ From such cooperation the Church hopes for a renewed "epiphany" of beauty in our time and apt responses to the particular needs of the Christian community.

7 This pedagogical principle was given authoritative formulation by Saint Gregory the Great in a letter of 599 to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles: "Painting is employed in churches so that those who cannot read or write may at least read on the walls what they cannot decipher on the page", *Epistulae*, IX, 209: CCL 140A, 1714.

9. The favourable cultural climate that produced the extraordinary artistic flowering of Humanism and the Renaissance also had a significant impact on the way in which the artists of the period approached the religious theme. Naturally, their inspiration, like their style, varied greatly, at least among the best of them. But I do not intend to repeat things which you, as artists, know well. Writing from this Apostolic Palace, which is a mine of masterpieces perhaps unique in the world, I would rather give voice to the supreme artists who in this place lavished the wealth of their genius, often charged with great spiritual depth. From here can be heard the voice of Michelangelo who in the Sistine Chapel has presented the drama and mystery of the world from the Creation to the Last Judgment, giving a face to God the Father, to Christ the Judge, and to man on his arduous journey from the dawn to the consummation of history. Here speaks the delicate and profound genius of Raphael, highlighting in the array of his paintings, and especially in the "Dispute" in the Room of the Signatura, the mystery of the revelation of the Triune God, who in the Eucharist befriends man and sheds light on the questions and expectations of human intelligence. From this place, from the majestic Basilica dedicated to the Prince of the Apostles, from the Colonnade which spreads out from it like two arms open to welcome the whole human family, we still hear Bramante, Bernini, Borromini, Maderno, to name only the more important artists, all rendering visible the perception of the mystery which makes of the Church a universally hospitable community, mother and travelling companion to all men and women in their search for God.

This extraordinary complex is a remarkably powerful expression of sacred art, rising to heights of imperishable aesthetic and religious excellence. What has characterized sacred art more and more, under the impulse of Humanism and the Renaissance, and then of successive cultural and scientific trends, is a growing interest in everything human, in the world, and in the reality of history. In itself, such a concern is not at all a danger for Christian faith, centred on the mystery of the Incarnation and therefore on God's valuing of the human being. The great artists mentioned above are a demonstration of this. Suffice it to think of the way in which Michelangelo represents the beauty of the human body in his painting and sculpture.¹⁶

16 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Homily at the Mass for the Conclusion of the Restoration of Michelangelo's Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, 8 April 1994: *Insegnamenti*, XVII, 1 (1994), 899-904.

are beauty... You are beauty!"⁸ Saint Bonaventure comments: "In things of beauty, he contemplated the One who is supremely beautiful, and, led by the footprints he found in creatures, he followed the Beloved everywhere".⁹

A corresponding approach is found in Eastern spirituality where Christ is described as "the supremely Beautiful, possessed of a beauty above all the children of earth".¹⁰ Macarius the Great speaks of the transfiguring and liberating beauty of the Risen Lord in these terms: "The soul which has been fully illumined by the unspeakable beauty of the glory shining on the countenance of Christ overflows with the Holy Spirit... it is all eye, all light, all countenance".¹¹

Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness of truth was bound from the beginning to stir the interest of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every "epiphany" of the inner beauty of things.

The origins

7. The art which Christianity encountered in its early days was the ripe fruit of the classical world, articulating its aesthetic canons and embodying its values. Not only in their way of living and thinking, but also in the field of art, faith obliged Christians to a discernment which did not allow an uncritical acceptance of this heritage. Art of Christian inspiration began therefore in a minor key, strictly tied to the need for believers to contrive Scripture-based signs to express both the mysteries of faith and a "symbolic code" by which they could distinguish and identify themselves, especially in the difficult times of persecution. Who does not recall the symbols which marked the first appearance of an art both pictorial and plastic? The fish, the loaves, the shepherd: in evoking the mystery, they became almost imperceptibly the first traces of a new art.

When the Edict of Constantine allowed Christians to declare themselves in full freedom, art became a privileged means for the expression of faith. Majestic basilicas began to appear, and in them the architectural canons of the pagan world were reproduced and at the same time modi-

8 Lodi di Dio Altissimo, vv. 7 and 10: *Fonti Francescane*, No. 261, Padua 1982, p. 177.

9 *Legenda Maior*, IX, 1: *Fonti Francescane*, No. 1162, loc. cit., p. 911.

10 *Enkomia of the Orthós of the Holy and Great Saturday*.

11 *Homily I*, 2: PG 34, 451.

fied to meet the demands of the new form of worship. How can we fail to recall at least the old Saint Peter's Basilica and the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, both funded by Constantine himself? Or Constantinople's Hagia Sophia built by Justinian, with its splendours of Byzantine art?

While architecture designed the space for worship, gradually the need to contemplate the mystery and to present it explicitly to the simple people led to the early forms of painting and sculpture. There appeared as well the first elements of art in word and sound. Among the many themes treated by Augustine we find *De Musica*; and Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Prudentius, Ephrem the Syrian, Gregory of Nazianzus and Paulinus of Nola, to mention but a few, promoted a Christian poetry which was often of high quality not just as theology but also as literature. Their poetic work valued forms inherited from the classical authors, but was nourished by the pure sap of the Gospel, as Paulinus of Nola put it succinctly: "Our only art is faith and our music Christ".¹² A little later, Gregory the Great compiled the *Antiphonarium* and thus laid the ground for the organic development of that most original sacred music which takes its name from him. Gregorian chant, with its inspired modulations, was to become down the centuries the music of the Church's faith in the liturgical celebration of the sacred mysteries. The "beautiful" was thus wedded to the "true", so that through art too souls might be lifted up from the world of the senses to the eternal.

Along this path there were troubled moments. Precisely on the issue of depicting the Christian mystery, there arose in the early centuries a bitter controversy known to history as "the iconoclast crisis". Sacred images, which were already widely used in Christian devotion, became the object of violent contention. The Council held at Nicaea in 787, which decreed the legitimacy of images and their veneration, was a historic event not just for the faith but for culture itself. The decisive argument to which the Bishops appealed in order to settle the controversy was the mystery of the Incarnation: if the Son of God had come into the world of visible realities—his humanity building a bridge between the visible and the invisible—then, by analogy, a representation of the mystery could be used, within the logic of signs, as a sensory evocation of the mystery. The icon is venerated not for its own sake, but points beyond to the subject which it represents.¹³

12 "At nobis ars una fides et musica Christus": Carmen 20, 31: CCL 203, 144.

13 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Duodecimum Saeculum* (4 December 1987), 8-9: AAS 80 (1988), pp. 247-249.

8. The succeeding centuries saw a great development of Christian art. In the East, the art of the icon continued to flourish, obeying theological and aesthetic norms charged with meaning and sustained by the conviction that, in a sense, the icon is a sacrament. By analogy with what occurs in the sacraments, the icon makes present the mystery of the Incarnation in one or other of its aspects. That is why the beauty of the icon can be best appreciated in a church where in the shadows burning lamps stir infinite flickerings of light. As Pavel Florensky has written: "By the flat light of day, gold is crude, heavy, useless, but by the tremulous light of a lamp or candle it springs to life and glitters in sparks beyond counting—now here, now there, evoking the sense of other lights, not of this earth, which fill the space of heaven".¹⁴

In the West, artists start from the most varied viewpoints, depending also on the underlying convictions of the cultural world of their time. The artistic heritage built up over the centuries includes a vast array of sacred works of great inspiration, which still today leave the observer full of admiration. In the first place, there are the great buildings for worship, in which the functional is always wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an intuition of the mystery. From here came the various styles well known in the history of art. The strength and simplicity of the Romanesque, expressed in cathedrals and abbeys, slowly evolved into the soaring splendours of the Gothic. These forms portray not only the genius of an artist but the soul of a people. In the play of light and shadow, in forms at times massive, at times delicate, structural considerations certainly come into play, but so too do the tensions peculiar to the experience of God, the mystery both "awesome" and "alluring". How is one to summarize with a few brief references to each of the many different art forms, the creative power of the centuries of the Christian Middle Ages? An entire culture, albeit with the inescapable limits of all that is human, had become imbued with the Gospel; and where theology produced the *Summa* of Saint Thomas, church art moulded matter in a way which led to adoration of the mystery, and a wonderful poet like Dante Alighieri could compose "the sacred poem, to which both heaven and earth have turned their hand",¹⁵ as he himself described the *Divine Comedy*.

14 La prospettiva rovesciata ed altri scritti, Rome 1984, p. 63.

15 Paradiso XXV, 1-2.