

Beauty, Art and Worship: A Catholic Monastic Reflection

Robert Hale, OSB, Cam

It is a real pleasure and honor for me to be here at Fuller, to be able to participate in this wonderful colloquium. Our ecumenical dialogues now extend also to these fascinating areas, causing us Catholics to be aware of how extensively we have come to appreciate and benefit from non-Catholic religious art such as that of Rembrant, and the iconography of the Eastern Church, the splendid religious music and hymns of the Reform tradition and of Orthodoxy.

We are aware also, after decades of dialogue, of our significant agreement regarding key areas of theology and doctrine, areas which undergird our understanding and appreciation of religious art forms utilized in worship and prayer. This is true especially of the central doctrines of creation, the incarnation of the Word, as well as of Christ's redemptive suffering, death and resurrection. As we explore further our accord (and differences) theologically and doctrinally, maybe we can come to greater insight about how we agree (and perhaps do not agree, or at least have different emphases) regarding the relation between beauty, art and worship, also in the variety of art forms and expressions of our different churches.

We Christians believe that the God who redeemed us in Christ is the same God who created us and all things, declaring all to be good (Gen. 1:1f. 1:31). We Catholics believe that God's creative action continues, that our radically contingent universe is sustained in being at every moment by our merciful God, as a magnificent singer will sustain a glorious note over an extended period. God is *the* Creator, the primordial, archetypical first and last Artist; and so the universe is God's great, magnificent masterpiece, available to us through all the senses. God the Artist is the fullness of Love, and Truth--and also Beauty, all of which come to be expressed in God's good creation. And we humans are created in the very image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), so God calls us to be creatures who are also co-creators. We do believe that God created all the human senses, not just hearing, and declared them all to be good.

Michelangelo's creation murals on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, for instance, continue over the centuries to fill us with wonder and awe at Michelangelo's genius, but quite beyond that, at God's awesome, beautiful creativity in creation and throughout salvation history.

We believe, moreover, that as the New Testament insists, God has created all things in and through and for the Word, even the Word incarnate, so that all of creation somehow has a Christic shape, and is filled with the Spirit of Christ. All of creation is potentially reconciled to God in Christ (Col. 1:15.20, etc.), is yearning for the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). Christian art should yearn to at least suggest all that, as does the beautiful Rouault painting, I believe, in this Fuller classroom. The figures suggest Christ

and a group of apostles and disciples , and the very horizon seems mysteriously in harmony and communion with the Gospel theme.

In the incarnation, as my Catholic colleague Prof. Buturain has emphatically noted, the Word chose to become not angelic spirit, not just pure mind, but human flesh, sarx, humanity even in its weakness (Jn. 1: 14). And Christ redeems the whole of us, body, mind and spirit. Thus we humans are now image and likeness of God even in our body—not just in our sublime mind or spirit--, because Christ, fully God is also fully human, also bodily so.

Moreover, Christ is now Risen and glorified; and the Body of Christ in its fuller dimensions now includes all of us baptized into Christ, in our spirits, minds, and also bodies (I Thess. 5:23), redeemed in Christ. We are members of the one Body. This is the great mystery of the *Christus totus*, the whole Christ, as St. Augustine expressed it. And we commune with all of this in the *koinonia* of the faithful, called together in worship, and especially, we Catholics believe, in the *koinonia* communion of Eucharist, Body and Blood of Christ. Christ commands us to take and eat, take and drink, for these elements are his Body and Blood; and we are to do this in memory of him. This culminating moment of Christian worship for us Catholics engages in a transforming way the whole faith community, and the whole of each Christian, spirit mind and body, all the senses, and embraces and legitimizes, by extension, every form of authentic Christian art. For us our faith in full incarnation, and also as eucharistic people, calls us to be open to every dimensions of authentic religious Christian art as also vehicle for communion with God.

We are an incarnate people, but it is also true that our Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father; so our worship is ascensional, transcendent, and calls us beyond *chronos* and temporality Into *Kairos*, into the eternal. And so also should our religious art. Possibly we are all in agreement regarding these implications of our faith for art, and this *koinonia*, this agreement we share, is itself splendid and beautiful!

And all this wants to be seen in its broader, Trinitarian context: For it is from God the Father that all things are created, through the Word, in the Spirit (cf. Gn. 1:1ffl). And now it is through Christ, the Word incarnate, in the Spirit that all things come to return to the Father. This is the fundamental trajectory of salvation history, and of the history of each of us, and so of all worship and prayer. All authentic Christian art should at least implicitly avert to this fuller, Trinitarian context and trajectory.

To give this paper some kind of existential focus, I thought I would speak from my own particular tradition, which is monastic—specifically Benedictine Camaldolese, but certainly in communion with the whole Catholic monastic heritage. And beyond that rooted in the great tradition of Eastern Christian monasticism, also with its glorious tradition of iconographic art. And through our

ecumenical commitment, we feel gratefully open to the Reform, also in its wonderful Taize monasticism and other examples of Anglican and Protestant monasticism and similar faith community experiences.

One of our Camaldolese Benedictine theologians, Fr. Cyprian Vagaggini—whom I was privileged to study under, before he died some years ago—was a member of the Pontifical Theological Commission, and a Peritus at the Second Vatican Council. He had a major role in the drafting of the Constitution on the Liturgy, and even one of our Eucharistic canons. Prof. Buturain quotes Tertullian's famous dictum "Caro est cardo salutis"—the flesh is the very hinge of salvation. Vagaggini wrote a whole article on that, and by that title.¹ And his monumental work, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*,² some 990 pages long, explores among many other topics the relation between liturgy, beauty and art. He notes that liturgy is a complexus of sensible signs, expressing invisible, spiritual realities for the Church's sanctification and worship.³ And he points out that that is precisely what good religious art is and does! So there are no hard and fast boundaries between authentic, beautiful religious art and liturgy. When we monks process into choir and sing and celebrate Eucharist, endeavoring to render the hymns and chant and recitation beautifully, wearing monastic cowls and liturgical vestments that want to be soberly beautiful, using liturgical vessels carefully wrought, and in the presence of fine religious paintings, etc., where does beauty end and liturgy begin? Hopefully liturgy begins, continues, and ends beautifully. Hopefully it is all interwoven. Fr. Vagaggini writes of a "fusion or marriage" between the beauty of fine sacred art and liturgy.

As Prof. Buturain notes, the Catholic tradition is quite vast and ancient. It will include a 4th century fresco in Rome, a 13th century stained glass window in Canterbury, a 15th century ceramic in Florence, a 19th century painting in China, a 21st century carving in Tanzania, etc. etc. But our basic theological and doctrinal beliefs undergird them all.

But "true union differentiates" (Teilhard de Chardin), and the vast range of Christian religious art cannot and should not be constricted, we Catholics believe, into one imposed set of canons and rules from one period and culture, however sublime that period and culture might be. History is dynamic and vast, as is human culture, and the creative Spirit is at play in all God's people in every age. From the very first Christian writings, St. Paul's Epistles, all Christians have been emphatically called beyond closed exclusivism, and perhaps this obtains also when we discuss possible Christian religious art forms for worship.

It is in this Spirit, we Camaldolese Benedictines believe, that when our monks in Italy celebrate, it will be with rather different artistic forms and expression in our singing as well as the vestments, the church painting and decorations, etc. than those utilized by our American monks in the Big Sur. And they will be different from those of our monks in our other houses, whether in India, or in Brazil, or in

Tanzania. So just within our little Camaldolese Benedictine Congregation, we celebrate by means of an amazing variety of artistic forms.

And as we trace changes also back through time we realize that our contemporary monks in Berkeley utilize present art forms that might have been startling to our monks of the fifteenth, or tenth, or sixth century. And yet we believe we can discern an underlying profound continuity and communion of worship—also in the forms of that clothe and express our worship—a communion guaranteed by the Spirit and also by the great theological and doctrinal principles underlying it all.

Believing that authentic artistic gifts are from God, we Camaldolese, like other Benedictines, have endeavored to encourage the sacred arts down through the centuries, through commissions of art but also through affirming the artistic gifts regularly present in our own monks. Just our little Camaldolese family in California includes three artists, one of whom has done commissions for parish churches as well as adorning our own chapel with a large central crucifix and a Madonna and child. And we have in our California family one sacred musician who has composed an abundance of religious music for parishes, published by the Oregon Catholic Press. And he has also crafted, in collaboration with our monastic composers and musicians in Italy, our liturgy book, our Divine Office, which is used also by the Episcopalian monks of Holy Cross here in the U.S.⁴ In Italy we have, just in my lifetime, been gifted by three significant monastic artists, who have been commissioned to provide sacred art for parish churches as well as for our own monasteries.

One of our most famous Camaldolese artists in the past was Lorenzo Monaco (+ c. 1422), who lived during the transition period from Gothic to Renaissance; he was at the center of a whole group of artists, minaturists, and calligraphers in the art studio of our Florence monastery.⁵ Maybe millions of Americans have at least glimpsed one of his paintings recently, a beautiful Madonna and Child, because it was chosen by the U.S. Post Office for their religious Christmas stamp this year! The original is in the National Gallery of Art, Washington. He intended it to be not in an art gallery, or even on a postage stamp, but in a church, as part of liturgical worship!

Lorenzo Monaco is just one example of the many, many monastic artists, composers, sculptors, ceramicists, calligraphers etc. etc. which the Catholic monastic families have produced over the many centuries of our life and worship. For us, worship calls out for beauty, and beauty means art. All this just to suggest how we reverence God's gift of artistic creativity in God's artists.

And we have also commissioned art from non monastic artists down through the centuries. A major masterpiece by Piero della Francesca, his Baptism of Christ, was commissioned by Camaldolese for one of their monastery churches, for instance. And our mother house in the Tuscan mountains, the Sacro Eremo,

commissioned a very important work from the famous fifteenth century Florentine ceramic artist Andrea Della Robbia (+1528). It is a large ceramic Madonna and Child with saints, crafted to be placed specifically right over a chapel altar of the Sacro Eremo, where it has remained since, these five hundred years and more. I thought I would comment on this piece briefly, as just one example of our use of sacred art in the context of our church worship. We have several other significant medieval, renaissance and contemporary pieces of art in our churches, but I am focusing on this, just because we have a fine large poster of it, and I brought it here hoping it will facilitate discussing the work with you now—I hope you can all see it.

Again this piece is of large dimension, and extends the full length of the little chapel altar. It very much imposes itself, but in an enchanting, gentle way, on the priest and the faithful, as they worship in the chapel. Many of us find it to be quite lovely, graceful and graced. In its presence it is hard to be gloomy, or depressed. For us it seems to invite and draw forth Christian joy and reverence, suitable dispositions for Eucharist, (the word means thanksgiving) and for other forms of Christian worship and prayer in that chapel.

It is, as you can see, a Madonna and Child with Saints. Over our other altars we have religious paintings of quite other subjects—a Transfiguration, a Crucifixion, a Deposition from the Cross, etc. We believe that every principle phase of Christ's life and mission provides an appropriate subject of liturgical art, and each explores one facet of the great and salvific Christ mystery. And in each the whole of our salvation history is somehow implicitly contained, but from that particular perspective. So also here. This Della Robbia represents specifically a Madonna and Child with Saints, but it at least implicitly opens to us the whole Christ mystery, which illumines and embraces the celebration of Eucharist and Divine Office and private prayer in that chapel.

First of all, although there are some six distinct figures visible in the poster, it is all very focused on Christ. Mary who reverently holds him is lovingly gazing upon him, as are John the Baptist and Mary Magdalen--and even the two angels above. He is the focus, the decisive unique Person holding it all together. That might be one criterion of good religious Christian art in a worship context—does it at least implicitly, indirectly, call us back to Christ.

And what is Christ doing? Playing with a toy? Gazing at one of the personages in the art piece? No, looking straight at us, engaging us, bringing us into the whole, making us part of the event. We are necessarily involved existentially—as with Eucharist. We are there because Christ has told us: “Do this in memory of me.” Perhaps all good Christian art should somehow be existentially engaging of the beholders, calling them to worship.

And besides gazing at us, what is he doing? He is blessing us. This little child is already somehow the great high priest of the Letter to the Hebrews (Hb.

2:17; 3:1; 4:14, etc.). Our prayer in the chapel is enabled by his blessing us all, rendering us royal priesthood. Another possible criterion of good Christian art: does it somehow express Christ's blessing on us all?

This high priest is a little baby, very bodily present, naked even, also anatomically correct, according to a (for many) startling inclination of Italian renaissance artists. Mary's hands even reverentially indicate, frame his maleness. The point is delicately but emphatically made that the Word was really made flesh--sarx--truly Incarnate. Not even a flutter of docetism here.⁶ Prof. Buturain has emphasized the theme of Incarnation, the Body of Christ—Della Robbia does the same, in this very emphatic artistic piece. Perhaps all authentic Christian religious art should be clearly incarnational.

But it is not just Christ that the piece evidences. There is his mother, Mary, his prophetic predecessor, John the Baptist, and his loving disciple, even apostle, Mary Magdalen. They are all smiling as they gaze on him: he is a cause of joy for them all, a blessing; he is Good News.

Christ is also our brother, and so Mary, for us Catholics, is mother of us all (see for instance Jn. 19:26f). With Christ, from his conception and birth to his passion and death and resurrection, she witnesses to Christian discipleship; and here she teaches us maternally, by lovingly adoring her Son. She is also regal, being crowned by angels—she is queen mother because Christ is King. And this because she is “full of grace” (the text in Latin at the base), that grace ultimately being “uncreated Grace,” Christ himself.

The two other saints represent the two decisive phases of salvation history: both the old covenant preparing for the new—in John the Baptist—and love as the fulfillment of the new covenant—Mary Magdalen. All salvation history leads up to, or flows from the incarnate Christ. Perhaps all good Christian art should be rooted in Scripture, in salvation history as Christ centered.

Two other saints flank them (not visible, alas, in the poster—but in cards I am distributing), St. Anthony of the Desert, father of monks, and St. Romuald, our own Camaldolese founder. Both of them seem more inner directed than outer, contemplating the Christ mystery in their hearts. But these two archetypal monks indicate how emphatically “contextualized” this art is, intended precisely for this Tuscan monastic chapel. Not just a piece of art that might be equally suitable in any museum or in the living room of any art collector. No, this piece is intended to be part and parcel of the worship of monastics and their guests.

The five saints of the piece are representative of the immense “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) that always surrounds us in our Eucharistic and Divine Office worship. A salvation history that extends even into our own specific histories, whether monastic (as in this case) or lay, or whatever. Perhaps all

authentic Christian art should witness to the fuller communion of saints, express ecclesial reality, not just be about me with my Jesus.

The piece certainly has a Christmas spirit to it, with its central theme of Madonna and Child. But much more is suggested. Even the Paschal theme, the transcendent and eternal are indicated. This because Mary and John the Baptist and Mary Magdalen and St. Anthony and St. Romuald are all presented as contemporaries in a mysterious kairos present, and in full koinonia even with the angels. And this is enabled because they are focused on the regal, living Christ who pulls us also into the event, through our faith and reverence and worship, by his gaze and by his blessing. Should not all Christian art aspire somehow to express the full Paschal mystery, the Kingdom we are being drawn into even now?

And all this above the chapel altar, as one particular but striking way to exemplify what Eucharist and Divine Office and Christian prayer of whatever form are all about: Koinonia, communion with incarnate and risen Christ (and so with the Father in the Spirit), koinonia thus "in the beauty of holiness" with all of the faithful, all of creation.⁷

We Catholics are aware of how we have been enriched by the Protestant and Orthodox heritages, also regarding sacred art and music. We hope we also have something to offer, as we all explore together, in the one Spirit of Christ, our one call to worship the Lord, exploring together the vast mystery of God's Beauty and Truth.

ENDNOTES

¹Cyprian Vagaggini, OSB Cam, “Caro salutis est cardo: corporeita` eucharistica e liturgia” in *Miscellaneae liturgica in onore di S.E. il Cardinale G. Lercaro*, Vol. I, Desclee, 1965).

²Cyprian Vagaggini, OSB Cam, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy: A General treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976). See especially the sections on sacred art and the liturgy.

³ Ibid., pp. 19ff.

⁴Cf. Cyprian Consiglio, OSB Cam, “An Image of the Praying Church: Camaldolese Liturgical Spirituality” in *The Privilege of Love: Camaldolese Benedictine Spirituality*, Ed. Peter-Damian Belisle, OSB Cam (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990).

⁵Cf. for example Lino Vigilucci, OSB Cam, *Camaldoli: A Journey into Its History and Spirituality* (California: Source Books, 1995), pp. 87 ff.

⁶Cf. for instance the provocative study by Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1996. Steinberg discusses Andrea Della Robbia and illustrates one of his works as exemplifying the very incarnational emphasis of Renaissance religious artists.

⁷Cf. Robert Hale, OSB Cam, “Koinonia: The Privilege of Love” in *The Privilege of Love*, op. cit.

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