

## The Vatican Council and Sacred Art

By Thomas Merton

*Some time after the official promulgation, on December 4, 1963, of the first of the Second Vatican Council's sixteen documents, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), Thomas Merton wrote the following reflections on the document's seventh and final chapter, "Sacred Art and Sacred Furnishings" (nn. 122-130). It is extant in two forms. A seven-page typescript, now in the collection at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, was part of material donated to the Merton Center by Merton's longtime editor Robert Giroux. At some point, Merton revised the material by making handwritten additions and alterations to the typescript and then having it retyped with these changes as an eight-page article with the same title, also in the Merton Center archives. This second version corresponds almost exactly to the original version as revised, except for one instance where the typist of the second version (evidently not Merton himself) misread Merton's handwriting (Merton's insertion "Note the objectivity of the Council's language. Some . . ." was misread and mistyped as "With the objectivity of the Council's language some . . ." – which changes the sense significantly) along with an apparently inadvertent omission (in the first sentence of paragraph 8, the inserted word "Christian" is missing) and a couple instances of missed underlining. This revised version was not subsequently published, nor, apparently, was it mimeographed and distributed to friends, correspondents and fellow religious, as was Merton's common practice with many of his shorter writings. As a source of significant insights with regard to Merton's thoughts on art, on liturgy, and on the Vatican Council, the article is presented here for the first time, printed according to the earlier typescript with its additions and alterations, as checked against the revised typescript. All substantive changes are recorded in the textual notes that follow the article, so that readers can see how Merton revised the original material. Punctuation and capitalization are regularized. Gratitude is due to the trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust for permission to publish the article in the Seasonal and to Dr. Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Bellarmine Merton Center, for locating the two versions of "The Vatican Council and Sacred Art," and for assistance and encouragement in bringing it into print.*

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The seventh chapter of the Council's *Constitution on Liturgy* begins, like all the others, with theological principles. It recognizes the dignity of art as "one of the noblest activities of man's genius." It states very decisively that *all art by its very nature* is in some way a created reflection of the beauty of God. This quality is essential to art as such and it is not confined to sacred or explicitly religious art. The beauty of a landscape by Cézanne or Monet, or of a portrait by Modigliani, is a reflection of "divine beauty" simply because *all* beauty reflects the transcendent and divine art which manifests the Creator in His Creation.

"The arts by their very nature are oriented to the infinite beauty of God, which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands" (n. 122).

This is a strikingly humanistic concept of art, and it shows that there is no fundamental difference between sacred and secular art *as art*.

This has the advantage of setting aside not only an uncatholic spirit of puritanism in Church art, but even more important it is a protection against false religiosity in art. One of the banes of Church art since the French Revolution has been the frightful artificiality and spurious religiosity with which “devotional” subjects have been done and overdone until one gets the impression that the supernatural is a *caricature* of the natural: so intent have Church artists been on keeping Our Lord and His saints out of this world of common, natural and secular forms. But we must remember that what makes art spiritual is not merely the “spiritual” subject.

Since the “beauty of God” is infinitely transcendent and invisible it obviously cannot be transferred directly to canvas in paint, line and form. It is “seen” or “apprehended” through the medium of visible form. A painting purporting to represent Christ Our Lord is not *necessarily* a better “apprehension” of divine and spiritual beauty than a still life of flowers and fruit. Indeed, a good still life may have a far more spiritual and even “religious” quality and therefore better “portray” divine beauty than a bad representation of Christ.

But the still life is not “Church art,” not because it is basely secular or essentially heathenish but simply because it is not appropriate for liturgical worship. It has nothing to do with worship as such. There is, then, a quality which does specify “sacred” art, and this is a more conscious contemplative and liturgical orientation. The arts take on a “sacred” character when they are consciously and explicitly directed to the praise of God “in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men’s minds devoutly towards God” (n. 122).

Note the objectivity of the Council’s language. Some otherwise very intelligent modern approaches to art have concentrated on art as the expression of (subjective) religious feeling or experience. Lortz, for example, *praises* Grünewald for “praying in paint.” Religious expressionism in art is not excluded by the Council. But what is important is not so much the cultivation of religious and aesthetic feeling, as the praise of God. These are not necessarily either coextensive or synonymous.

The language of the Council does not mean that the arts are subservient to an ulterior purpose beyond their own nature, that they are to be used as instruments of Christian propaganda. It means rather that by their very nature all arts, sacred or secular, lead man to contemplation and praise, but when the artist himself is conscious of the higher and more spiritual beauty of the divine, he leads men with him to contemplate the beauty in his work itself. No subject matter is by nature excluded from this contemplation, but the nature of liturgy will lead the artist to prefer certain symbols and forms which are germane to the Church’s worship.

The Church, then, “has always been the friend of the fine arts” and has trained and encouraged artists, first of all in order that the vessels, furnishings and decorations of the sanctuary might be properly made, and should be “worthy, becoming and beautiful signs and symbols of the supernatural world.”

The Council does not confine its attention purely to the formal aspect of art. It also takes account of the materials used by the artist as well as changes in current style. “The Church has admitted changes in material, style or ornamentation prompted by the progress of the technical arts with the passage of time” (n. 122). Though the rest of the chapter is devoted to practical measures and norms, there is a further mention of the dignity of the artist in n. 127, the section which deals with the bishop as patron and promoter of the arts. The artist himself is encouraged to recognize his possible

vocation to devote his talent to God's services, in the Church. Nothing very definite is said about this vocation, but the context contains implications which should be of interest to the bishops.

In the first place the bishop is reminded of his personal responsibility to see that sacred artists are encouraged and trained, that they are "imbued with the spirit of sacred art and of the sacred liturgy." It is explicitly said that the bishop "may do this in person" or else through priests who are competent in such matters. Bishops eager to acquit themselves of this responsibility might possibly consider the formation of regional centers for the study of art and the training of sacred artists. The Council says: "It is also desirable that schools or academies should be founded" (n. 127).

The sacred artist is reminded of the high dignity of his calling. Artists must "ever bear in mind that they are engaged in a kind of sacred imitation of God the Creator and concerned with works destined to be used in Catholic worship, to edify the faithful and to foster their piety and their religious formation." This is no small responsibility, because it puts the artist in some measure on the same footing as the priest who is, by his very office, engaged in the "religious formation" of the Christian people.

The sacred artist is then concerned not only with beauty but with truth. His art is a visual theology and it will fulfill its purpose not by translating dogmatic propositions into line and color, but by expressing in art the reality of the divine mysteries. Art is not just another and less perfect, because silent, form of preaching. It speaks in its own terms, and what it says cannot be said by any other medium. It seeks to make the mystery of Christ in His Church not understandable but "visible" and "imaginable."

Now the recognition of the fact that art has a decisive, though silent, part to play in "religious formation" is an important new emphasis in this Constitution. Here is one of the statements that needs to be well understood and elaborated. We must remember that "religious formation" is not merely a question of conceptual instruction and moral discipline. *Purity of taste and the ability to recognize artistic truth* are not matters foreign to Christian spirituality and holiness. The Christian artist has to recognize his responsibility in shaping or in deforming the spirit of his fellow believers. Artistic taste, far from being an irrelevant and "worldly" affair, is very important to the spirit of worship and of faith.

This raises the whole subject of "religious formation" itself, which can hardly be treated here. But we must face the fact that the great work of renewal and reform in the Church, barely begun by the Second Vatican Council, will depend to a great extent on the quality of this "formation." Seriously limited views of spirituality and of man have exercised a bad influence in the past. Spiritual formation cannot be restricted to a training that is largely mental, ethical and abstract. The true religious formation of the Christian is not the education of his mind or of his conscience alone. It is the religious development of the whole man. And this development is not something to be carried out by a special psychological or ascetic method. It is ultimately the work of God, not of man. It is the work of grace, of the Holy Spirit, acting on man in and through the Church, particularly in her liturgy and her sacraments. The liturgy is the primary source of all the fervor and grace which are required for Christian renewal, since it is "the summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed and the fount from which all her power flows" (*Constitution on Liturgy*, n. 10). Hence Christian renewal must begin with the liturgy itself (n. 21). Renewal of sacred art is inseparable from this renewal of liturgy.

The renewal of sacred art must be carried out with the clear understanding that the purity and truth of Church art are essential to liturgy itself. The actions and chants are normally supplemented by visible signs and symbols. Liturgical celebration requires vessels, vestments and ornaments which themselves should speak eloquently of the inner and spiritual truth of the mysteries that are being celebrated. The continued presence of fake art, pretentiousness, formalism or empty display in the sanctuary cannot help but affect the validity of the liturgical revival itself.

We may note in passing that the Constitution is characterized by a refreshing spirit of moderation and simplicity. It is not inclined to favor the sumptuous display and pomp that belonged to the days when bishops were feudal princes and the Church was a temporal power. There is a definite reproof of useless splendor and inordinate or vulgar pageantry. Certain discreet limitations in the use of *Pontificalia* are urged in the last paragraph of the chapter on art (n. 130).

The new directions to be taken in “religious formation,” in this liturgical ambient, must be guided by a realistic concept of man’s nature. It will not do to treat man as though he were a soul imprisoned in a body which is regarded as an unspiritual encumbrance and an obstacle to the Christian life. On the contrary, our Christian life cannot be lived in a mature and intelligent fashion unless we accept the conditions of our earthly existence. A mature and creative spirituality must take into account such vitally important human activities as sense perception, imagination, and the full psycho-physical response of the whole man to created and visible beauty. To attempt the “religious formation” of the Christian while neglecting such vital and spiritual functions will degrade humanity and not ennoble it. That is why the purity and creativity of artistic experience are so important in the Christian life of prayer and worship. A genuine Church art will therefore play a most important part in the renewal of Christian worship and liturgical spirituality.

Meanwhile, the Council’s insistence that the bishop and his clergy should concern themselves with the artist *in person* opens another very important avenue along which our thought must travel in the future. It suggests further and deeper consideration of *the importance of communication between the artist and the Church*. The Council does not merely envisage the bishop acting as patron toward the artist as artist, whether he be a Christian or not. (This situation has of course arisen and the fact that men like Matisse have been called upon to decorate Church edifices has been very significant.)

The Church is also concerned for *the artist as a member of the Christian community* and therefore she seeks to establish, once again, the fact that he has a place of his own in the community. She wants the bishops to take cognizance of this and to act in such a way that the artist will be encouraged once again to function as a member of the Christian community who actively participates in the Church’s work of salvation and sanctification by means of the “visual theology” which is his contribution to her life of worship and her proclamation of the Gospel message. The artist thus has an important part to play as a “lay-apostle.” *A fortiori*, if he is a priest or religious, his art will form an important part of his apostolate.

This dialogue between the bishop and the artist must of course be carried on at the deepest level of religious seriousness. This is going to require a certain amount of adjustment on the part of many bishops and many artists, for it must be regretfully acknowledged that clergy and artists do not at present speak a common language.

If, according to the text of the Constitution, the bishop is called upon to “imbue the artist with

the spirit of sacred art and the spirit of liturgy,” it may also happen that the artist is called upon to imbue the bishop with the spirit of art and help him to become familiar with the intuitive standards of judgement which are learned only by experience of what is and is not “good art.” We dare to hope that both bishops and artists will benefit by this exchange. It will not be enough for them to recognize one another’s existence in a spirit of tolerant amusement: a real communication is called for, and this may not be easy.

For one thing, and this too is suggested in the Constitution, many bishops and pastors have perhaps tended to consider sacred art as a “status symbol,” or as a manifestation of conspicuous waste. Art can be regarded as a sign that one’s parish or diocese has “arrived.” What matters, in that case, is to be in contact with current fashion. This puts the pastor or bishop in the same position as any other buyer: if he is not familiar with the product, he will tend to follow the advice, or rather yield to the pressures, of a “good salesman.” The result need not be described. But the Council warns against it: “Ordinaries, by the encouragement and favor which they show to art which *is truly sacred*, should strive after *noble beauty rather than mere sumptuous display*” (n. 124).

As long as there is no adequate training in these matters, the clergy and their lay benefactors will naturally be guided by lavish advertisements for high-priced Church art, instead of learning to find artists who will do original work for them with higher spiritual quality and at less expense.

In this same section, the Constitution rightly reminds bishops of their obligation to “remove from the house of God and other sacred places those works of artists which are repugnant to faith, morals and Christian piety, AND WHICH OFFEND TRUE RELIGIOUS SENSE EITHER BY DEPRAVED FORMS OR BY LACK OF ARTISTIC WORTH, BY MEDIOCRITY AND PRETENSE” (n. 124).

Actually, this text of the Constitution modifies and clarifies the judgements pronounced in those earlier documents. In the Instruction of the Holy Office (June 30, 1952), a term like “deviation” might have suggested that there was an official (and rather strict) standard, and seemed to imply that the introduction of new forms would *ipso facto* constitute a “deviation” from this single approved standard. On the other hand the wording of the Constitution on Liturgy implies not an approved or official style, from which the artist might deviate, but common norms of art and good taste, violated by pretentiousness and mediocrity. Emphasis is on “artistic worth” not on official norms. The Constitution bans all degradations of art in any style whatever, whether conventional, romantic, pseudo-classical, pseudo-byzantine, orphan-asylum gothic or what you will. It can apply just as well to bad and pretentious pseudo-modern, fake expressionist or semi-surrealist art. It is clear enough from the context of the Constitution (see n. 123) that *no style whether modern or traditional* is regarded as by its very nature “depraved” or as a “deviation.” Hence the condemnation implied here can only be directed at bad works of art, to be judged as such in each individual case, according to their own merits. There is no single approved style which can be called purely Catholic and which is the norm by which other styles are judged to be deviations.

The Council warns against indiscriminate and irrational scattering of “works of art” in every part and corner of church buildings, an abuse that has so far been all too familiar. The church should not become a forest of pious statues or a dark, musty warren of nondescript shrines where large and small images vie together for the homage of votive lights amid the shadows. The Council says: “The number of sacred images should be moderate and their relative positions should reflect

right order. For otherwise they may create confusion among the Christian people and foster a devotion of doubtful orthodoxy” (n. 125).

The rest of the chapter on sacred art in the Constitution on Liturgy is devoted to diocesan and other commissions on sacred art (n. 126) and to the training of seminarians in these matters (n. 129). Meanwhile, the canonical legislation governing the construction of sacred buildings, altars, etc. is to be completely revised (n. 128).

- 3 The seventh chapter] *The interlined above cancelled* This preceded by We can conclude this study with a brief survey of the chapter on Sacred Art in the Council’s *Constitution on Liturgy*. Council’s] *interlined and marked for insertion* on Liturgy] *interlined with a caret* transcendent and] *and interlined above cancelled* beauty of the
- 4 This has the advantage . . . subject.] *added on verso of previous page* basely secular or] *interlined with a caret* There is then,] *then, interlined with a caret* contemplative and liturgical] liturgical *interlined above cancelled* religious Note . . . synonymous.] *added on verso of previous page* The language] *The added on line before cancelled* This of the Council] *interlined with a caret* Christian propaganda.] *Christian interlined with a caret* all arts, sacred or secular,] *interlined with a caret above cancelled* they and praise,] *interlined with a caret* and forms] *interlined with a caret* art.] *altered from* art, It also takes] *It interlined above cancelled* But very definite] *very interlined with a caret*
- 5 The sacred artist is reminded] *sacred interlined with a caret* The sacred artist is then . . . “imaginable.”] *added on verso of previous page* Here is one] *Here interlined with a caret above cancelled* this has to recognize] *followed by cancelled* then Artistic taste . . . of faith.] *added on line* to be carried out] *to be interlined with a caret*
- 6 There is a definite . . . pageantry.] *interlined with a caret* The artist thus has] *thus interlined with a caret* A fortiori, . . . apostolate.] *added on line*
- 7 and this may not be easy.] *this may interlined with a caret above cancelled* will Actually, this text] *preceded by cancelled* The language of this statement must be carefully compared with the terms used in the official documents we have quoted above; “nothing that would give just motive for offense and scandal . . . extravagant forms of sacred art . . . deviations . . .” wording of the Constitution on Liturgy] *on Liturgy interlined with a caret* not on official norms] *on interlined with a caret* There is no single . . . deviations.] *added on line* warns] *preceded by cancelled* also