

## *Art and Mystery*

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The great challenge for an artist is “grasping from the heaven of the spirit its treasures and clothe them anew with words, colors, forms and accessibility”. Thus, on the 7th of May 1964, did Paul VI address the artists he had called together in the Sistine Chapel to recommence a dialogue, rather, to restore, as he insisted, a new alliance between divine inspiration of faith and the creative inspiration of art. As the great Catalan painter Joan Miró confessed, art does not have the task of describing the visible, but of catching in the visible, the Invisible. A poet too, Jules Laforgue, in his *Complaintes*, proclaimed that “Art is the Inconnu, the Unknown, the Mystery”. We must, however, recognize that for some time the alliance between faith and art has fractured.

Art has left the temple. The great biblical narratives, symbols, figures, and sacred parables have been relegated to a dusty shelf. It has followed the secularist ways of contemporary culture. It has abandoned the idea that artistic works embody a transcendent vision of being, indeed “creates a world” to use the words of the philosopher Heidegger, and is substantially dedicated to trying out languages, to complex stylistic searching, to self-referential processing without aim, and even to pure and simple provocation. These routes do not seek for any goal, unlike those attempts tried in the twentieth century, openly abandoning the traditional aesthetic grammar, but with the expectation of a new epiphany of beauty and mystery.

As an example, just think of twelve-tone music and its surprising results, or of the arid cutting of the canvas by Lucio Fontana which transformed into “a gap allowing for a glimpse of the Absolute”. Now, this does not happen anymore because of the always lurking concerns about a functional and slavish devotion of art to a message, a ‘truth’, a ‘beauty’. The painter Georges Braque strikingly reaffirmed this idea in his essay *The Day*

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and the Night, writing that while “art is meant to disturb, science reassures”. Now art still wants to disturb, but it only does so shockingly and provocatively, no longer disturbing consciences, hearts and minds, but forcing them to face the abyss of the Infinite, the Beyond, the Other.

Faced with this split between faith (or more generally transcendence) and art, a split that cannot be resolved by the mere repeating of styles and expressions of a glorious past, Benedict XVI has wanted to propose again – in the current cultural coordinates nearly a half century on from those of 1964 – a new meeting with the artists, allowing for the variety that this term covers, and now goes beyond painters, sculptors, architects, writers, musicians, and includes the new arts such as cinema, design, video-art, and so on. On 21 November next, with the same backdrop in the Sistine Chapel, which silences and enchants with its testimony of beauty and supreme spirituality, the Pope will elaborately recompose a dialogue in the hope that ‘a fruitful union’ will rise again, in the wake of another particular recurrence. In fact, ten years ago, on Easter Sunday 1999, Pope John Paul II sent a Letter to Artists, “to assure of his esteem and to help consolidate a more constructive partnership between art and the Church”.

While waiting to pick up the initiative from Benedict XVI who will suggest by almost throwing the first beat of a dialogue that in the months and years ahead will see multiple answers from the artists, expressed above all through their works, we wish now to cast a symbolic glance, certainly not exhaustive, to the past behind us. In the words of an artist who has witnessed this encounter between aesthetics and faith, Marc Chagall, “painters for centuries have dipped their paintbrush in that colored alphabet, the Bible”. It was, in fact, the supreme iconographic atlas, an ‘immense vocabulary’ of culture, as defined by the French poet Paul Claudel. Meaningful, therefore, is the profession of principle made by the fourteenth century Sieneese artists in their statutes: “We show to men who do not know how to read, the miraculous things made by virtue of faith”.

The bond was so tight, that already six centuries earlier the cantor of the images of the Eastern Church, St. John of Damascus, came to the point of advancing this proposal: “If a heathen comes and says, ‘Show me your faith!’, take him to church and show him the decoration which adorns it and explain it to him with a series of sacred paintings”.

This encounter of art with the liturgy and spirituality has generated that extraordinary patrimony that has graced centuries and centuries of Western history. The famous archaeologist of the Christian Orient, Guillaume de Jerphanion, entitled his trilogy on the stone churches of Cappadocia *Voix des monuments*. Yes, not only the frescoes and the marvelous architecture, but every expression of art, literature, music and even cinema near us (think of Bresson, Dreyer, Bergman, just to evoke a famous triad) become voices that leads us to that eternity from time (*all'eterno dal tempo*), to use an icastic Dantesque citation (*Paradiso, XXXI, 38*).

Certainly, there have been interruptions and censures which have broken that bond and replaced those voices with silence. Our thought turns to the iconoclasm of the eighth century in the East or the “ascetic” reticence of the protestant reformation, which stretched aniconic white waves on the walls of the churches but which, fortunately, would

allow for the extraordinary creative power of music (Bach is a name which reassumes all others, even the greats). You can glimpse this suspicion of art even in some theology fearful of an “idolatrous” drift. Besides, we all know the Biblical admonition in the Decalogue “not to make any likeness” of God (Exodus 20:4), thus avoiding the prostration before the golden calf, the materialization of the divine. This catharsis from materialism and sacred realism is necessary. But things went further. Theology and theologians have not infrequently focused exclusively on systematic speculation, sweeping aside signs and symbols, considered as a haze against the crystal sky of thought and formal logic.

In truth, symbolic language contains in itself truth and its expression. It is significant that a theologian of such acclaim as Marie-Dominique Chenu states, in his *Theology of the Twelfth Century*, the need to give attention to artistic works, whether literary, plastic, or figurative, because they are not “only aesthetic representations, but genuine ‘places’ of theology”. At the root of this is the heart of the Christian message, the Incarnation. This makes visible God who in Christ – as St. Paul affirms – has his *eikon*, his perfect ‘icon-image’ (Colossians 1:15). Indeed, Genesis recognized in humanity itself the “image and divine likeness” (1:26-27). The monk and theologian Theodore the Studite (8th-9th century) did not hesitate, following the logic of the Incarnation, to state the paradox by which “if art were not able to represent Christ, this would mean the Word is not incarnate”.

And Dionysius the Areopagite, the pseudonym of an original theologian of the 5th-6th century, recognizing that in Jesus Christ there is “the visible of the Invisible”, prepared in a certain sense the analogy of art as it would be conceived by Miró in the phrase we cited above. In light of what has been said, we then understand the words of the Letter to Artists by Pope John Paul II: “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. 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”. Also, this was noted by that great lover of icons, as well as theologian and scientist, Pavel Florenskij, when he reminded us of the relationship between icon and cult: “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”.

Let us return then to the starting point of our discourse, namely the belief in the possibility, or rather the necessity, of the encounter between the artist and transcendence, between beauty and faith, structurally linked by a natural harmony, because they aim to express the ultimate meaning of being, to reveal the epiphany of mystery, to conquer the infinite and eternal, to cross the veil of the surface to sense the ultimate secret of reality. ‘Aesthetics’, in fact, derives from the greek *aisthesis*, ‘perception’: thus discerning the spiritual side of each act, deciphering the ‘spiritual sense’ that lurks in every gesture, event, reality by which they are expressed in a perceptible way. This is what the writer Hermann Hesse outlined explicitly in his essay *Klein und Wagner*, using this definition: “Art means revealing God in everything”.