

FROM A
LOGICAL
point of view

Celebrating reason as the best of the natural guides we have to truth.

JOHN PAUL II

Letter to Artists
Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999

The special vocation of the artist

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 dictates. 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 Church needs art

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 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?

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?

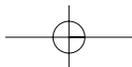
In fact, the religious theme has been among those most frequently treated by artists in every age. The Church has always appealed to their creative powers in interpreting the Gospel message and discerning its precise application in the life of the Christian community. This partnership has been a source 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 inspi-

ration 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!

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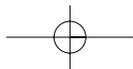
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FROM A **LOGICAL** point of view

ALFRED J. FREDDOSO

The Church and Art

Three things—one distinction and two arguments—stand out in this excerpt from the Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*.

The Holy Father first invokes the common philosophical distinction between *doing* and *making*, which underlies the further distinction, at the level of habit, between a *virtue* (habitual *doing-well*) and a *craft* or *art* (habitual *making-well*). On the one hand, doing-well—that is, acting in accord with our ultimate end—constitutes our goodness as human persons (our *moral* or *spiritual* goodness). On the other hand, making-well—that is, producing fitting objects that conform to “ideas conceived in the mind”—constitutes our goodness as human workers (our *professional* goodness, so to speak). The notion of an object is taken widely here to designate the fruit of any sort of work that involves intelligent design. Even when I clean my office, I have in mind (roughly) an object or end-state that serves to guide my work. But the paradigmatic instances of an art are those that require extensive training and practice.

As the Holy Father points out, making-well does not entail moral goodness, since it is possible to use an art in ways that are morally destructive of ourselves and others. Nonetheless, in the best sort of human lives our ability to make-well both serves and expresses our doing-well. In fact, one theme of Vatican II, emphasized repeatedly by the present Pontiff, is that honorable human work, when properly ordered to our ultimate end and joined to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, can serve to sanctify both ourselves and others. In this way our work, done well and with the right intention, becomes a vehicle of growth in moral and spiritual goodness.

So all honorable work is potentially sanctifying. But certain types of work, because of their inner nature, participate more fully in God's own creative activity. Work in the fine arts, the Holy Father asserts, is especially revelatory of the artist's personality, and beautiful objects of the arts, produced with the right intention, open up "a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for [the artist's] spiritual growth." We discover later that this 'new dimension' consists in the potential of the fine arts to transport us from the mundane to the transcendent, from visible realities to invisible, yet deeper, realities.

It is precisely because of this special nature that work in the fine arts bears a special relationship to the Church. And here we come to the two arguments mentioned above. The first attempts to establish the conclusion that the Church needs the fine arts—in particular, the literary and figurative arts, music, and architecture. The most interesting premise for this conclusion invokes an analogy between objects of art and the Incarnate Word of God, who is himself "the icon of the unseen God." Building on a conclusion established in an earlier section of the letter, the Holy Father reasons that just as the Church needs Jesus Christ to make visible his unseen Father, so too she needs literary and figurative works, music, and architecture to raise our hearts and minds to the Father revealed by Jesus Christ. The Incarnate Word serves as the model of corporeal representations of transcendent realities and thus secures the place of the fine arts within the practice of the Church.

This premise strikes me as both deep and plausible. I will cite just one liturgical example. In a recent Catholic bestseller, *The Lamb's Supper*, Scott Hahn has powerfully reasserted the ancient claim that in the Mass the faithful quite literally participate in the heavenly worship depicted in the book of Revelation. This, of course, is true even when the liturgy is celebrated without music in the most plain setting—for example, in the crypt of Sacred Heart Basilica on the campus of Notre Dame, where I often go to Mass on weekdays. But especially after having read Hahn's book, I am aware that in such aus-

tere circumstances it takes an almost heroic act of imagination to believe that I really am worshipping in the company of the heavenly hosts. By contrast, in the Basilica proper—with its “carpenter Gothic” architecture, its murals and exquisite stained-glass windows depicting hundreds of angels and saints, its Mestrovic Pieta, its hand-painted Stations of the Cross, its magnificent golden main altar, etc.—I have little trouble believing the Mass to be, in Hahn’s words, “heaven on earth.” Recently, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, when a student choir sang to the accompaniment of the three-thousand-pipe organ, the celebration of the Mass was positively sublime. The beauty of the visible signs produced by artists had palpably led the congregation to “see” otherwise unseen realities.

The second argument is a seeming “provocation.” The conclusion is that art needs the Church every bit as much as the Church needs art. In *Fides et Ratio* the Holy Father traces the deleterious effects of the modernist separation of philosophy from faith. So, too, in an earlier section of the *Letter to Artists* he had noted with sorrow a similar modernist separation of art from faith. In each case an important vehicle of the deepest human desires and aspirations has deliberately cut itself off from its possible fulfillment in the Christian understanding of the world. And in light of this now entrenched separation, the very suggestion that art needs the Church sounds strange and outmoded.

The argument itself proceeds in two stages. The Holy Father first notes that in almost every culture there has been a close tie between religion and art. For religion seeks answers to those “most vital personal questions” that art in its own way wishes to address—questions concerning “the hidden meaning of things” and, ultimately, the very meaning of human existence. For art to cut itself off from such questions or from the search for “concrete and definitive” answers to them is for it to lose its very reason for being.

But *a fortiori*—and this is the second stage—art must especially not cut itself off from the full truth about man, which is found in

Christian revelation. For as *Gaudium et Spes* puts it in a passage that the Holy Father has often cited in his writings and once again cites in the very next section of the *Letter to Artists*, Jesus Christ not only reveals his Father to man but also “fully reveals man to himself.” Hence, any authentic attempt to give aesthetic expression to the mystery of man will find both inspiration and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. So art, like philosophy, needs Christ in order to best accomplish its own intrinsic goals. And this is why art needs the Church.

The main premise here—namely, that it is only in Jesus Christ that we can fully understand ourselves—is, to be sure, a revealed premise that must be accepted on faith. But it is also a very powerful premise when taken not as a bare statement to be assented to, but rather as an invitation to meditate on the Gospels prayerfully and with an open heart, guided by one of those great saints whose spiritual writings are capable of revealing hidden depths of meaning. For philosophy, much like art, is in the end a matter of the heart as much as of the intellect.

CATHERINE JACK DEAVEL

Title to Come

I will focus on the final section of John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*, in which the Pope argues that art needs the Church. This section is of particular interest because it draws out the implications of the earlier descriptions of the artist and the artist's role in the Church. Moreover, the Pope's introductory comments suggest that he sees this section as his most controversial argument of the letter. His reasoning runs along the following lines: If the artist is "constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things" and striving to express "the world of the ineffable" (Section 3), then, in order to fulfill this aim, the artist must turn to those human activities and institutions that offer the greatest insight into what is transcendent. Religion is a necessary resource in this task because it directly addresses itself to the nature of transcendence by exploring questions of meaning, both on the level of the whole of reality (*e.g.*, what is the structure of the universe?) and on the level of the individual (*e.g.*, how am I personally called to use my gifts?). Among religions, Christianity—in particular Catholicism—provides an especially fruitful source of inspiration to the artist because Christianity proclaims the Incarnation, that Jesus Christ is God become man for love of human beings. Therefore, art needs the Church because the goal of the artist can best be fulfilled in the context of the life and doctrines of the Church.¹

The most controversial premise of this argument seems to be that the doctrine of the Incarnation is vital to the fulfillment of the artist's vocation. This strong claim serves as the lynchpin of the *Letter* as a whole. Building from the second premise to the third, the argument suggests that art needs religion and, in particular, needs Catholic Christianity because of the doctrine of the incarnation. On what grounds can one assert that art needs the doctrine of the incar-

nation, much less that art needs the Church's particular expression of this doctrine?

Challenges to the importance of the incarnation to art might take one of two basic forms. First, one might argue that John Paul is correct in identifying the task of the artist as the struggle to express what is ineffable and transcendent, as a search for meaning, but disagree that the Incarnation is needed to fulfill this task. In a more encompassing challenge, one might object that the Pope is incorrect in his assessment of the vocation of the artist, in which case, any argument that the Incarnation is necessary for this misconception of art becomes a moot point.

Let me take up the second objection first. The answer to this challenge goes back to the initial explanation of the artist's vocation. In describing the task of the artist, John Paul claims,

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. . . . 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. (Section 1)

Notice that this description focuses on the self-expression of the artist. Interestingly, this approach does not seem to be an overtly controversial account of art. Presumably, artists without religious commitments can and do understand their art as self-expression. John Paul goes on to emphasize that art can also aim at ends beyond the work itself. Art can be a means of spiritual growth for the artist and a medium through which to communicate with other people. These ends are noteworthy in part because they are directly linked to the artist's inner life, that is, to the self that is expressed in art. In the case of spiritual growth, the artist is changed in the act of crafting a work of art. The self that is expressed is molded in the act of molding a medium—word, music, paint, stone. In the case of com-

municating with others, at least part of what is being communicated is the personality of the artist. “Works speak of their authors” (Section 1). Whatever else the task of the artist may be, it seems fair to say that this task involves self-expression.

The question that then must be asked is, who is the self that is expressed in art? John Paul is well aware that this question must be the starting point of any serious attempt to understand the self-expression at the heart of the artistic enterprise. Thus, he begins his letter by placing the particular vocation of the artist within the larger context of the vocation of the human. The artist is a human being, whose primary task as a human is to fashion a good life. In Genesis, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. We act in this image and likeness by directing our creative abilities upon ourselves: “men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life” (Section 1). As authors of our free acts, we fashion a moral life. The artist has the additional call to direct his or her creative powers toward the created world in order to produce a work of imagination and beauty. God, the great Craftsman, is mirrored in His creation, particularly, the human.² Likewise, the human artist is mirrored in his or her work of art. The artist reflects the divine image twice over: the artist reflects the image of the Creator, and the art reflects the artist. Thus, human art also reflects God.³

Thus, the objection is countered by the claim that all art involves self-expression of the artist in some way. In this respect, John Paul’s assessment of the task of the artist seems to be correct. Art expresses the transcendent insofar as art will always convey some meaning or trace of a personality.⁴ Even so, we are still left with the first objection: why should the artistic task of expressing the transcendent require the Incarnation?

The incarnation is of central importance to the artist because the person of Christ makes clear that the aim of the artist is not in vain. If Christ is truly God become man, then the source of all transcendence and the final end in the search for transcendence took human

form. The Incarnation promises that it is possible for the artist, however imperfectly, to express what is transcendent by means of earthly media. It is no accident that John Paul presents his *Letter to Artists* on Easter Sunday. In the passion and resurrection, Christ experiences and redeems human suffering and joy. The Catholic Christian understanding of the incarnation is particularly important because of the role of the sacraments: “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”⁵ In some sense, sacraments are a model for art. Earthly objects, words, and actions confer what is transcendent, namely, God’s grace. If Christ is present in the Eucharist, then the incarnation is continually with us. The transcendent is continually made manifest in the earthly.

Notes

1. This conclusion may appear to overstep John Paul’s conclusion by claiming an indispensable role for Catholic Christianity. In response, I take it that when the Pope argues that there is a “special bond between art and Christian revelation” (Section 3), he is arguing that Christianity offers unique inspiration to the artist; however, the stronger conclusion that art needs the Church seems a fair reading. Besides being the initial question of the section, John Paul points to the historical partnership of the Church and artists, noting that this partnership “has been a great boon for an understanding of man, of the authentic image and truth of the person” (Section 3). The heart of this understanding of the human person must be rooted in the person of Christ and, given the nature of the partnership, presumably in the Catholic Christian tradition’s understanding and worship of Christ.
2. The order and beauty of the created world serves as a model for the human artist. God’s creation reveals God to human beings, communicating what is ineffable and inspiring human art. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) para. 2500.
3. This anthropology nicely diffuses a tension in art. Why is it that the depiction of a particular personality is thought to express a universal truth about humans? For example, in theater and literature, the more generic a character is, the less one is moved by his or her struggles and adventures. By contrast, a well-developed character is one with distinct moral traits and

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particular motivations. Despite the fact that these particularities may define the character as someone “not like me,” the well-developed character captures the imagination of the reader or audience member. If John Paul is correct that each human self reflects God, then the more complete the depiction of a human self, the more completely transcendence is revealed. The human self is universal in its reflection of the divine. Whether shown in its flourishing or in its deformity, the particular self is formed by the choices of a creature made in the image and likeness of God.

4. One could, of course, object to John Paul’s anthropology, but this is a further consideration. The Pope is correct that some anthropology must be provided in order to explain the nature of the self that is expressed in art. This anthropology must make sense of artists’ own understanding of their work as artists and, therefore, must deal with expression of transcendence in some manner.
5. *Catechism*, para. 1084.

Some Comments on John Paul II's Letter to Artists

The strand of argument that interests me most in this passage has three phases.

[1] *There is a connection between art and morality.* This premise flows from the claim that moral commitment and artistic endeavour are each concerned with a person's "being" or "personality." Morality is a matter of "forming one's own personality," while art offers "a unique disclosure of [the artist's] own being" and "in some way reveals his own personality."

[2] *Therefore the Church needs art.* This premise follows from the aforementioned understanding of the character of art. For the Church is said to speak of "the world of the spirit," and by revealing a person's being, art makes that realm accessible by making it "perceptible." Specifically, the encyclical letter implies that art can play a part in communicating the affective dimension of personal being.

[3] *Therefore art needs the Church.* In support of this connection it is enough to recall the shared concern of the Church and artists with "the world of the spirit", and to add that the Gospel presents us with "the authentic image and truth of the person." In so far as artists are concerned to reveal a person's being, then to that extent the Gospel offers a standard against which their work can be measured.

There are various ways in which this strand of argument might be amplified. I shall suggest one, drawing on Mikel Dufrenne's text *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*.¹ Dufrenne's work offers support for the starting point of the argument, by supporting the idea that an artwork can disclose a person's being. On Dufrenne's account, an artwork can evoke (in the sense of calling to mind, but also in the

sense of engendering in us) an affectively toned way of being in the world. For example, the encyclical makes reference to architecture, and Dufrenne proposes that buildings, as much as paintings and music, can play this sort of role. He gives this example:

Versailles speaks to us through the rigor of its lay-out, the elegant equilibrium of its proportions, the discreet pomp of its embellishment.... Its pure and measured voice expresses order and clarity and sovereign urbanity in the very countenance of stone. (179)

Expressions such as “measured voice” and “sovereign urbanity” are reminiscent of our descriptions of human personalities. Accordingly, Dufrenne speaks of an artwork as projecting a *Weltanschauung*, where this outlook or worldview is to be understood not as some theory of the nature of things, but as a way of being in the world:

This *Weltanschauung* is not a doctrine but rather . . . the way of being in the world which reveals itself in a personality. We are not surprised that [this *Weltanschauung*] can turn itself into a world, the world of an aesthetic object, since each man already radiates a world. There is a nimbus of joy around the joyous man. We say of another that he exudes boredom. (177)

Dufrenne suggests that artworks and human beings have a common capacity to project a “world,” in other words, to evoke an affectively toned demeanour of the kind that can suffuse, and give structure to, our experience in general. If that is so, then we may agree with the encyclical that artworks can reveal a person’s being. In Dufrenne’s terms, they can do this in so far as they project the sort of “world” that can be incarnated in the life of a human being (such as a world of “measure” and “urbanity”).

Allowing that this is so, what should we make of [2], the idea that the Church needs art? Dufrenne’s formulation of the idea that art

can reveal a person's being provides one way of developing this connection. But the encyclical also suggests that the Church needs art to "translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable." Here the text seems to suggest that art may communicate not simply the character of a human person's being, but something of *God's* being, not as it is "in itself," of course, but in terms of the response it properly elicits in human experience. Here again, Dufrenne's work offers a way of developing the sense of the text. For instance, referring to Debussy's *La Mer* he writes: "Something like the essence of the sea is revealed to me, with respect to which every image is gross and vain. We are concerned with what I experience when I am before the sea, of what there is of the truly 'marine' in it—with its affective essence" (520). Here Dufrenne suggests that *La Mer* succeeds in disclosing the character of the sea not by revealing its "real essence" (its nature from a scientific point of view), but by recalling and perhaps instilling in its listeners that complex of affective responses that the sea typically engenders in us. And by analogy, we might suppose that an artwork may speak of God's reality by evoking, on certain points, the kind of affective demeanour that is fitting in our relationship to God. This is not of course to commend an idolatrous attitude towards art, but to echo once more the encyclical's suggestion that in music (and other art forms) faith can be experienced as "vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation," where these affective states have God as their ultimate object.

Of course religiously powerful experience does not always involve such uplifting emotions, and sometimes it is a sense of God's inaccessibility that is forcefully felt. Artworks may be revelatory in this respect too, we may suppose, by conveying a way of being in the world that befits a sense of divine absence. Simone Weil envisages something of this kind in this memorable passage:

I entered the little Portuguese village. . . . It was evening and there was a full moon. It was by the sea. The wives of the fishermen were going in procession to make a tour of all the

ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. . . . There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.²

This passage raises again the issue posed in [3], namely the question of whether art needs the Church. For whether or not the hymns in this example communicate a spiritual demeanour (one of “slavery”) that is true to the nature of things depends of course upon what sort of world we inhabit. If it is a fallen world, then to that extent the hymns, and the sadness they evoke, do indeed disclose something deep about the human situation. We may infer that in so far as artists seek to reveal what ways of being in the world are ultimately appropriate for human beings, and also what ways are typical, then they can draw inspiration from the Church, and specifically from the teachings of Christian anthropology, which are addressed to precisely these questions.

Notes

1. Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, tr. Edward S. Casey et al. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973) [first published in French, 1953].
1. Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, tr. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 19–20.

JOHN HALDANE

Art and Vocation

The Holy Father's 1999 'Letter to Artists' is a characteristic blend of philosophical, aesthetic and theological reminders of the condition and orientation of incarnate human persons. We are made for God but we have to find our way to him, and that involves aiming ourselves towards a goal. The notion of an end occurs twice here: first, as a *destination* or terminus, but second, as a *state* or condition to which we have, with God's grace, to bring ourselves. This latter is the business of self-realisation: the process of becoming fully and actually what, in part and in potentiality, we already are.

Herein enter both ethics and art. The Pope is right to distinguish but not to sever them. Kant believed that thought and experience divide into three categories: the *speculative*, the *practical* and the *aesthetic* (hence the three great *Critiques* (of 'Pure' and of 'Practical' reason, and of 'judgement'). In the Thomistic tradition, however, the category of the practical subsumes both the moral and aesthetic since it views the latter as primarily a matter of activity—as Thomas Aquinas observes: "In art, the mind is directed to some specific aim, while in morality it is directed to an aim shared by all human life" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, q. 21 a.2 ad 2). To be sure, there is the aesthetic as experienced beauty - disinterested contemplation of form for its own sake. But this most commonly arises from making, and from reviewing what one or others have made. For this reason the aesthetic of nature properly suggests the idea of a maker of nature.

That is not yet a proof, for it could be that the appearance of aesthetic order in the natural world is an illusion. For example, the apparent composition in the forms of living things; and the dramatic opposition between the heights reaching towards the burning light, and the deeps plunging into the chilling dark, could just be

projections onto an aesthetically blank world. The possibility of a persuasive design argument remains, however, if, as I have claimed, the idea of beauty is internally related to that of aesthetic design, and if, as I would also maintain, the appearances of natural beauty, recorded by people of different cultures, places and times, are as they indeed appear, namely aspects of the world. One might add, ‘of the world *as experienced*’, for as St Thomas also observes “beauty complements good by subordinating it to the cognitive powers . . . beauty is that, the very perception of which is pleasing” (*Summa*, Ia, IIae, q. 27, a1, ad 3).

In distinguishing ethics and art the Pope may also have had in mind two opposing errors into which one may fall, having correctly recognized the truth that there are important connections between the moral and the aesthetic, namely those of aestheticizing the moral, and of moralising the aesthetic. We make speak rhetorically of the beauty of good character, and of the artistry of a well-designed policy; but it is as easy to speak of the drama of degeneracy and of the thrilling anticipation of moral tragedy. Certainly much aestheticizing has been directed upon these latter. The ‘decadents’ sought to make a point about how art could be severed from morality by showing that it could serve the interests of decline as of improvement. Wilde’s *Portrait of Dorian Gray* is a rather contrived effort in this direction, as are Aubrey Beardsley’s flat and lifeless illustrations for Wilde’s *Salome*. The fact that, it seems, both men turned to the Church as they approached death says something about their souls but does nothing to enhance the status of these works. It does, though, encourage the thought that had things been otherwise in their lives, and in the surrounding culture, then they might have developed their talents in artistically and aesthetically more profound ways.

Notice, by the way, that the decadents sought both to give aesthetic celebration to evil, and to elevate art to a moral calling. In this latter regard ‘art’ has to be understood as artistry, that is as a set of

skills for literary or graphic composition, delineation and expression. While there is much to be said for the cultivation of these skills, as of any that have the potential to realise fundamental human goods, the decadents erred twice in seeing themselves as noble spirits: first, because the values in whose service their artistry was deployed were negatives, i.e. disvalues; but second, and less obviously, because they encouraged the assumption which others of good intent have also made, that artistry is not as such neutral. That it is, like moral virtue, intrinsically directed towards non-aesthetic goods. But this is what Plato exposed in the *Republic*: a skill (*technē*) is precisely neutral as between opposing ends. He who in virtue of knowing medicine can alleviate suffering and effect a cure, can, by the same knowledge, bring pain and death. Likewise, artistry may be technically competent or incompetent, but when competent—even excellent—it can still be used badly. Not all art is good in either the technical or in the external evaluative senses.

Yet there is at least an analogy of excellence between artistry and moral character, and one might hope that as an artist develops his skills, so he might want to conjoin them with an equal depth of informed feeling about the human condition. As and when that occurs, one might expect the artist to look around for a *logos*—an account of the deepest meaning of this condition. And since we may assume that the deepest and truest account of it is that afforded by Catholic anthropology, so we may hope that the sincere artist will be drawn to this and be inspired by it.

So we come to religious art. The Holy Father's phenomenological orientation shows itself in his observation that "In song, faith is *experienced* as vibrant joy, love and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God" (my emphasis). This is true for those of faith (and of fair ear and voice); but what of those who hear the glories of a sung mass, say, but lack faith? can art be a route to God? Of course, psychologically it may indeed be an *occasion* of conversion; and we saw earlier that there might be an argument from the expe-

rience of beauty to the idea of an author of it. But the first is a matter of empirical contingency (strictly, anything may be an occasion of anything else); and the second concerned the aesthetics of nature. What I have in mind now is the different possibility that the experience of religious art might provide rational grounds for coming to a religious conclusion.

How might this be? After all, is not the implication of my earlier comments that artistry can serve *any* end, and so we must distinguish what is said from how well it is expressed? If so, then however beautifully the Creed is scored and rendered, its setting and performance offer no testament to its truth. But here a new distinction has emerged. The first was that between *skill* and *end*; now we have shifted to one between *form* and *content*. Indeed, bad things may be beautifully said, and true words ill-delivered. But in these cases we have a sense that the same things might be said differently, and aesthetically better or worse. In other words we are assuming that the form and the content are separable. But supposing that in some cases they are not.

Consider a facial expression which communicates a certain attitude of its bearer. One may be able to say what that attitude is independently of the expression, but equally one may not. One may only be able to say to someone else “she looked at me in that special kindly way of hers—you know *the way* I mean.” Here ‘look’ and ‘attitude’ are not separable: the facial expression *is* the moment of kindness. See it and you register the state. Put another way, it is the ground of one’s conviction that kindness is there and of one’s being comforted by it.

Now suppose that one hears an inspired rendering of Palestrina’s *Missa Papae Marcelli* and it seems transcendent; a movement away from here into another place; not a spatial location but a place whose dimensions are religious; one shaped by creation, grace, judgement and loving sacrifice. Might one not say to another “I felt transported and made present before this—you know *the way* I mean.” Of course

a hearer may not; but that no more shows that one's experience was not veridical than does the fact that in the case of kindness someone else may not recognise that experience either. Here we see what a severe criticism it is of religious art (and ipso facto of such artists) to say that it is (and hence that they are) 'merely illustrative'. Great religious art does not *illustrate* the religious, it is animated by and expresses it; just as a facial gesture may be animated by and express kindness. That is the religious challenge to artists: to be forms of the Word (*Logos*).