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Celebrating the Beauty of Faith: The Eucharist and Sacred Art

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Arrested only a few months after his appointment as bishop of Saigon, Archbishop Van Thuan was imprisoned for fifteen years. Nine of those years were spent in solitary confinement. After his release from prison, the archbishop was expelled from his home country, and he went on to share his story of faith and hope in the face of isolation and abandonment.

The archbishop recounted that, on his arrest, he was forced to leave his residence empty handed. Permitted to ask for only a few personal items, his flock understood immediately his request for some wine as “medicine.” They promptly sent him a small bottle of wine and some hosts hidden in a flashlight. Each day, for as long as he could, with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of his hand, and the smallest host fragment, he would celebrate Mass. Years later he would write, “This was my altar, and this was my cathedral . . . those were the most beautiful Masses of my life” (Archbishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimony of Hope* [Boston:Pauline Books and Media, 2000], 131).

What makes the Mass “beautiful?”
What is the place of beauty in the

liturgy? Is sacred art, that is, art created solely for the Eucharist, an integral part of every liturgical celebration? Finally, how might pastors, catechists, teachers, and parents draw on the catechetical and evangelizing power of sacred art? These are some of the questions this article invites reflection on.

Sacred Art in the Liturgy: Do We Really Need It?

Beauty in the Eucharist flows first from the Incarnation, the central mystery of Christian faith. Christ is, as St. Paul writes, “the image [eikon] of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Once the invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ, God’s relationship to humanity and humanity’s relationship to creation was radically changed. Now, matter really matters.

Sacred art makes visible to our senses the invisible beauty of God’s love for the world. Elements from the material world—precious metals, stone, clay, pigment, textile, and wood—are shaped into works of sacred art that extend the mystery of the Incarnation into our human experience of sight, sound, smell, and touch. Inspired by the Incarnation, sacred art becomes an

essential part of the Eucharist, so we can say “that the complete absence of images is incompatible with faith in the Incarnation of God” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000]).

Beauty in the Eucharist flows also from the nature of the liturgy itself. So whether in a majestic basilica, a familiar parish church, or a stark prison cell, the beauty of the liturgy radiates from the sacred action itself. For “the Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal mystery by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1067).

Sacred Art in the Liturgy: Encountering the Beauty of Christ

“The word ‘liturgy’ . . . means the participation of the People of God in ‘the work of God.’” But what is the “work of God” that the faithful are invited to participate in every Eucharist? It is nothing less than the saving work of “Christ . . . (who) continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church” (CCC, no. 1069). Sacred art in the liturgy leads us from seeing or hearing to contemplation to worship, as we give thanks for Christ’s saving work made sacramentally present in our lives.

To encounter a work of sacred art then is to encounter the beauty of Christ’s love. For “in the liturgy, Christ himself becomes the gesture of the Church . . . the beauty of the liturgy is therefore first and foremost the beauty

of Christ’s own movements in all its simplicity and love, but it is also the beauty of our movements and the beauty proper to the signs and elements of creation which the liturgy puts in harmonious order in time and space. The beauty of the liturgy is the order it creates within us and in our relationship with God” (Archbishop Piero Marini, www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2004/documents/ns_lit_doc_20040202_liturgia-bellezza_en.html).

Sacred Art: A Particular Vocation in the Liturgy

God meets us where we are. And we are created as a unity of mind, body, and spirit. We express and perceive spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. This is why the sacraments are “woven from signs and symbols . . . [whose] meaning is rooted in the work of creation and human culture, specified by the events of the Old Covenant and fully revealed in the person and work of Christ” (CCC, no. 1145). Signs from human social interaction also become, in the liturgy, the privileged means by which God encounters us: “Washing and anointing, breaking bread and sharing the cup can express the sanctifying presence of God and man’s gratitude toward his Creator” (CCC, no. 1148).

Sacred painting, mosaic, stained glass, sculpture, and sacred music continue this “divine pedagogy,” rooted in concrete signs and symbols that engage the whole human person—mind, heart, will, senses, and religious imagination. Sacred art, therefore, has a particular vocation in the liturgy: “evoking and glorifying, in faith and

adoration, the transcendent mystery of God—the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ. . . . Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration and prayer, and to the love of God” (CCC, no. 2502).

Sacred Art: A “Pre-Sacrament” for Our Times

We live in the midst of an image-saturated culture in which we now speak of “sensory overload” and even of “sensory addictions.” Children in sacramental preparation are immersed in television and video games. Young adults in youth ministry spend hours on the Internet in social networking. And computer and entertainment technologies shape the daily work of adults in parish RCIA and adult faith formation. The surrounding visual culture is an everyday reality for those we form through evangelization, catechesis, and preaching.

How ironic then that even as the everyday world of those we form in faith is filled with sensory experiences of every kind through multiple images, words, and sounds, their daily or weekly experience of liturgy or catechesis is plain, perhaps appealing only to the intellect or to emotions and often starkly bereft of beauty. While the surrounding culture appeals more and more to visual and sensory experiences, less and less value is placed on beauty in the liturgy. A diminishing value is given to sacred art in liturgy, catechesis, and evangelization at precisely the moment when popular culture, in content and medium, has become increasingly visual.

In this cultural context, can pastors, catechists, teachers, and parents afford

to overlook sacred art? Does the surrounding visual culture not challenge catechists and evangelists to take seriously the role of sacred art as a “pre-sacrament?” (Art as a “pre-sacrament” is a term used by Pope John Paul II in his poem “Roman Triptych” to describe the art and architecture of the Sistine Chapel.) Might sacred art as a “pre-sacrament” serve to open our minds and hearts and predispose us to full, conscious, and active participation in the Eucharist?

Sacred Art: A “Concrete Mode of Catechesis” and “A Visual Gospel”

For centuries, the Church’s faith has taken artistic forms. Much of the Church’s heritage of sacred art was first intended not for museum displays, art critics, or aesthetic delight alone. Rather, sacred art was created for the ordinary person in the pew and often served as a “catechism in stone and stained glass,” as a “homily on canvas and in mosaic,” and as a “Bible of the poor.”

Sacred art has always been a “concrete mode of catechesis” (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_23041999_artists_en.html). And you do not have to be an art expert to begin. Your parish church or diocesan cathedral is an immediate and local source for sacred art. There you will find examples that artistically express the life of Christ and his mother, biblical figures and narratives, and the lives of saints.

Draw your students’ attention to the vast treasury of the Church’s “visual

Gospel” in painting, sculpture, stained glass, and sacred music during catechetical sessions. A parish booklet that describes the stained-glass windows, baptismal font, liturgical vessels and vestments, mosaics, and sculpture can serve as one way to introduce children and RCIA candidates to the life and history of the parish community, as well as offer an element for mystagogical catechesis.

Catechesis that includes sacred art shows forth the beauty of the Christian faith through color, light, line, form, and sound. For “the only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments: namely the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb...If the Church

is to continue to transform and humanize the world, how can she dispense with beauty in her liturgies, that beauty which is so closely linked with love and with the radiance of the Resurrection? No. Christians must not be too easily satisfied. They must make their Church into a place where beauty – and hence truth – is at home” (Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985] 129-30).

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