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Ecclesiastical Art and the Layman

The Editors of **FOUR QUARTERS** believe that the past few years have seen the beginning of a movement among artists, clergy, and laymen that may well re-establish for the Church its once-proud, though unofficial, title of "patron of contemporary artists and contemporary art." We have, therefore, asked Joseph Mintzer, a founder and first president of the Ecclesiastical Art Guild of Detroit, to supply the specific instance—that of the founding of the Detroit Guild—upon which Michael Sikorski of La Salle College develops some aspects of the general problem involved in the employment of art in Catholic communities today.

I

• Joseph W. Mintzer

TWO YEARS AGO, while attending the opening of an annual statewide art exhibition in Michigan, several Catholic artists met and exchanged opinions on the subject matter being shown. A young Catholic matron deplored the fact that while a wide range of subjects was represented there was not even one work of art of religious inspiration. Works of social significance, political belief, decorative motivation, representational naturalism, and pure abstraction were there—but not one work inspired directly by belief in God.

These Catholic artists realized that because of the purely secular state facilities available to exhibiting artists it was somewhat understandable that no work of religious significance had been accepted by the exhibition jury, and perhaps that none had even been submitted by any of the exhibiting artists. So they planned to meet at a later date and discuss the problems at length. My study, as centrally located, was offered and accepted as a meeting place. There we faced the problem of action.

We decided to organize an Ecclesiastical Art Guild that would be open to all artists who were willing to express or demonstrate their understanding of the teachings of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. There was to be no exclusion of anyone who did not profess our own faith; so many gifted artists have found Christ a great artistic inspiration.

A spiritual moderator was needed to advise us on theological matters as they arose, so we invited a priest who had an extremely broad art background and a wonderful grasp of the religious and artistic problems involved.

Our invitation to fellow artists met with considerable response. Each meeting saw our group swell with artists and craftsmen from almost every level. Eminent architects, sculptors, painters, poets, musicians—members

from practically every field of endeavor required for ecclesiastical functions were included.

The charter we drew up was too technical to include here, but these were our aims:

- a) to have no argument with the great traditional arts, but rather to help spread understanding of them whenever and wherever possible, especially to seminarians, who would be the pastors of the future, and in whose hands choice of art for the churches would someday rest;
- b) to show what living American artists had to contribute to the beliefs of Catholic Americans, using any and all artistic techniques;
- c) to discourage the blind purchase of plaster statues and artistically poor paintings from art supply catalogues;
- d) to hold an annual exhibition in order to present our works to the clergy, religious, and laymen.

Despite the fact that we had no financial support (we paid dues for our slight Guild expenses) and no encouragement from diocesan authorities (we evoked only an attitude of "let's wait and see"), we managed to have an exhibition. In spite of disagreements among the artists themselves, especially between the traditionalists and the modernists, we exhibited works juried and accepted by three professional artists and approved by our moderator.

The opening of our first show was attended by almost a thousand people in spite of the winter's worst weather, and the exhibit was well attended for its duration. Many purchases were made directly from the show, and several commissions resulted. The Chancellor of the diocese was most gratified and extended monthly use of diocesan facilities. It was a humble beginning but it established conclusively that an interest exists in a religious art by native craftsmen using existing techniques.

II ● Michael L. Sikorski

BUT with what religious art and habits of viewing religious art instilled by it, must the contemporary native artist compete—in his effort to wed the best of the traditional with the best of the modern, to restore vitality and primacy to the Church as Patron of Arts?

The Rev. David Ross King, in an article entitled "Art and Matter" written for *Commonweal*, makes the following observation: "Have not men made pictures and statues these many centuries (and faster and cheaper than ever in this mechanized age), and are not the churches and our homes filled with them? Yes. But are these always representations that are sanctified and that sanctify? Have they the 'sacramental character'?" In much religious art have we not found the "immensities of religion, of

humanity's need and humanity's destiny, set aside, and in their place," to quote Father Gerald Vann, "only thoughts that soothe and lull the individual—a lace-edged, flower-strewn covering over the mouth of hell?" I believe that Julian Green did the art of Catholics in America a service when he faced honestly "the awful spell cast over religious sensibility by the great man whom our fathers called Sanzio." Raphael did indeed "saturate and infect the minds of millions with dull commonplaces about the gospel . . . crowding the invisible with chromos." How right is Mr. Green:

Raphael is probably one of the most dangerous heretics since the Church began; his heresy is a subtle one which begins with a yawn and ends with nausea. His good intentions are as plentiful as they are demoralizing. He kills devotion with an almost infallible aim.

What exactly have been the effects of this corruptive "classic" influence upon the art of our churches and homes? Upon the people? Has not art without the truly Christian character tended to form people without Christian character? The nadir of the tragedy, I am persuaded, is in the negation of reverence. Before the images the beholder feels either comfortably patronizing or cozily chummy; he may experience something akin to calf love, but he doesn't fall irresistibly to his knees. Who could feel before the *Madonna della Sedia* his own littleness and his own dignity, the majesty of the divine, the splendor of God's holy works—as he might before a *Head of Christ* by Roualt? The art which has been spawned on false classicism has sought escape from reality, rather than the awesome penetration into reality—just as have those allegedly devotional books that drool gluttonously over a sugar-candy heaven and shudder daintily before the spectacle of God's material creation, belittling the body, for example, as the prison-house of the spirit from which on death's blessed day the soul will at length escape, like a bird from its hated cage (in all this, what of the resurrection of the Son of Man, wherein is contained mystically the ennoblement of all our visible universe?).

Yet for reverence, sacred and essential to a true Christian spirit, reverence for God and all the works of God, has been substituted sentiment and for love has been substituted sensuality. Look at our *Christs at the Helm*, our *St. Bernadettes* (heavy with lip rouge and dreamy-eyed with false lashes)—here is love as believed in, hoped for, and parodied by the world of which Satan is prince and sly master. In such works of art, common and commercial, big-selling and properly approved, I find no trace of divine love or of its elevation of all things into itself. Faith is weak in many hearts, we hear. One cause, surely, is discovered in the representations of sacred persons and themes in the art of our churches and homes. Well might a man grow weak in purpose and careless in practice who has been reared among swivel-hipped Madonnas, saccharin Sacred Hearts, spineless St. Josephs, and gaudily garbed Infants of Prague. ("Genuine crystal

eyes, very lifelike, twelve dollars extra.") The yawn begins in childhood and the nausea comes in due time.

The present feeling toward objects being manufactured for devotional purposes is characterized by dissatisfaction. The feeling is well-founded and no one expresses better than Father King just what is the cause of complaint. The dissatisfaction has become general among clergy and laity alike. It is to be found wherever there are men and women of any intelligence and sensibility who need the ministrations of true religious art. The devotional objects available today simply do not satisfy this need. The reaction has gone beyond the talking stage. Ecclesiastical Art Guilds (as Mr. Mintzer has suggested) are foremost among such movements in the United States. The most successful work undertaken to improve the condition of sacred art has been done in France. I refer to the appearance, in such religious structures as the church of Assy, the Dominican Chapel at Vence, and the church at Audincourt, of religious art executed in the modern manner by such contemporary masters as Matisse, Roualt, Braque, Miro, Léger, Chagall, and Bazaine. Because the work accomplished in France has drawn attention throughout the world and because the approach to the problem of securing good sacred art as manifested in these projects has met with considerable favor and will undoubtedly be repeated elsewhere, it is proper to consider just what that approach is.

The artistic adviser for the church of Assy and the church at Audincourt was Father M. A. Couturier, O.P. In a recent issue of the *Magazine of Art* there appeared an article by Father Couturier entitled "Religious Art and the Modern Artist." It seems to me that the problem as Father Couturier sees it is primarily an artistic one. He writes: "We were tired of always seeing in our churches the most mediocre examples of painting and sculpture." He does not fail to note the religious lack in church art: "In the long run, we thought, this mediocrity could only result in seriously altering the religious psychology of clergy and worshippers alike." Father Couturier seems to feel, however, that the religious aspect of the problem will take care of itself if the artistic aspect is improved.

It was not theoretical reasons of doctrine but, on the contrary, considerations of a primarily practical nature that impelled us to summon these artists. We called on them purely and simply because they were the best painters and sculptors of our day. We believed that it was our duty to procure for God and our Faith the best art of the present. That was our first reason. . . . In the second place we thought that by turning to these masters we might be able to bring about a renaissance of Christian art in general.

It was Father Couturier's belief that in procuring the best art of the day he would obtain works that were also genuinely religious. He was well aware, though, that of the artists he had engaged "the majority . . . were not religious men, or only very superficially so." Some people accused him of "preferring to seek unbelievers rather than believers." This he denies. He does admit that it "posed a real problem." It was this: "One could certainly look for strong vital works from men of this sort; but

could one expect truly *religious* works? Could we expect from these modern masters art which would also have authenticity as *religious art*?" Father Couturier believed that he could. He feels now that his expectations "have been fully justified."

Most of us, myself included, must base our opinions of their work only on photographs which have appeared in magazines. In my judgment Father Couturier has good reason to be aesthetically satisfied. The art which has come forth is original, imaginative, and exciting. It represents certainly some of the best art of today. As religious art, however, it is perhaps not all that one would have it be. True, the artists have not allowed the irreverent elements of previous church art to enter into their compositions. But the artists have not as a whole or even as a majority managed to substitute anything positive for what they have eliminated. Their success is a negative one. Their works are like souls which have been cleansed, but into which Sanctifying Grace has not yet entered. The reason may very well be the difficulty to which Father Couturier himself referred, namely, the fact that the majority of the artists "were not religious men, or only superficially so." I must admit, though, that in the absence of geniuses who are at the same time saints it is safer, as Father Couturier states it, "to turn to geniuses without faith than to believers without talent." (I would like to note here that the majority of the members of the Ecclesiastical Art Guilds are believers. As in the Detroit group of which Mr. Mintzer was president, far from taking their talent for granted, they encourage further self-development in the craft of their respective arts.)

In another part of his article, Father Couturier writes:

In spite of the fact that during the past century extraordinary changes have been taking place in every aspect of life—spiritual, social and material—we still see Christian art constantly repeating the old styles of past centuries, slavishly rebuilding romanesque, gothic or Renaissance churches, never utilizing modern forms until they are already outmoded—or else employing them artificially, in a senile fashion, in repetitions, copies or borrowings that lack any spontaneous spark of life.

Father Couturier favors changing from the romanesque and gothic, and his reasons are cogent enough. Yet perhaps one should remark that while Christian art *has* been repeating the old styles, repetition is not an evil in itself. The general use of romanesque and gothic styles in different countries and throughout diverse social periods has made these styles traditional. They have come to symbolize for many the oneness, universality, and continuous prevailment of the Church itself. To hold that Christian art has employed the old forms "slavishly" may seem too thoroughly demeaning. Jacques Maritain has observed: "There is no style peculiar to religious art, there is no religious technique." He notes further

that sacred art . . . cannot isolate itself, that it must, at all times, following the example of God Himself who speaks the language of men, assume, the while exalting from within, every means and every form of technical vitality, so to speak, placed at its disposal by the contemporary generation.

The language of the old forms is one that is rich in connotation. I would give it up with reluctance, doing so only when certain that men would be able to communicate in the new language as exactly and, more importantly, as meaningfully as they did in the old. Father Couturier writes: "Latin is a dead language, because it is no longer either evolving nor renewing its structure; . . . it is language incapable of assimilating any new form. In the same way one is forced to admit that Christian art is dead." Latin to be adequate for the Church's use of it need not be capable of assimilating any new forms. The language of Christian art, while it is capable of assimilating new forms, may not need to do so. Change for the sake of mode is not desirable here. The mean which I would follow is that to be found in the original charter of the Ecclesiastical Art Guild of Detroit (outlined by Mr. Mintzer in *Part I* of this essay), for while its members were advised therein to explore any and all modern artistic techniques they were cautioned to have no argument with the traditional forms.

M. Maritain writes that religious art "must be intelligible. For it is there above all for the instruction of the people, it is a theology in graphic representation." The art in a church is there for the men in the street and must be as intelligible to them as it is to those of the faithful who are more fully informed artistically. Unfortunately, not all of the art to be found in the church at Assy or Audincourt is without a trace of obscurity. Father King writes:

If they (the masterpieces of Renaissance and post-Renaissance techniques) go to the heart in the wrong way (for as Father Jungmann, the distinguished Jesuit philosopher, so aptly says, citing the Raphael Madonnas, "the purely natural relations predominate while those of an ecclesiastical-religious nature have faded") at least they do go there, and they do deeply impress the mind and affect the soul if not beyond the natural level. They do not leave beholders of good will perplexed and frightened and unhappy. *Claritas* still counts.

On the other hand, the faithful are not prevented from improving their artistic taste and understanding by studying. One of the aims of the Ecclesiastical Art Guilds is to spread understanding wherever possible.

Father Couturier, looking over the work that has been done in France, remarks that "an era so lacking in hope has required adventurous experiment. . . . As long as the ecclesiastical authorities continue to repose their confidence in us, we shall continue to follow the same path. We believe this path to be the best and most direct and, in the long run, the most certain."

Father Couturier and his associates in France, and the Ecclesiastical Art Guilds in America, have done more than merely follow a path—they have blazed it. Further exploration is still needed, but they are working in the right direction. The path they have opened may not be the *most* direct or certain way but it is the most promising that is open to Christian art today. It deserves to be well travelled.