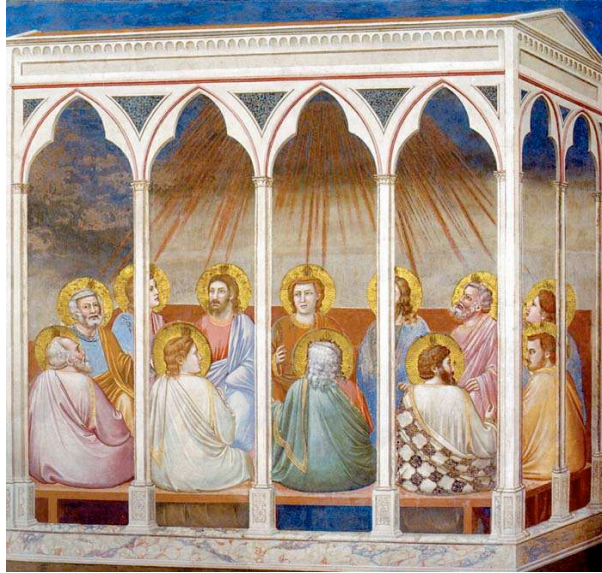


# Appeal to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI *for the return to an authentically Catholic sacred Art*



*Veni, Creator Spiritus  
mentes tuorum visita  
Imple superna gratia  
quae tu creasti pectora*

*Art is an inexhaustible and incredible treasure of catechesis. For us it is also a duty to know and understand well. Not as sometimes art historians do, interpreting it only formally, according to the artistic technique. Rather, we must enter into the content and revive the content that inspired this great art. It seems really a duty - also in the formation of future priests - to become familiar with these treasures and have the ability to transform them into a living catechesis that is present in them and speak to us today.*

(Benedict XVI - Holy Father's meeting with the parish priests and clergy of the Diocese of Rome - February 22nd 2007)

## The Church and Art



- a. Most Holy Father, for many years the Catholic Church has experienced, according to the words of Your Most Holy predecessor John Paul II, “with great loss, confusion and perplexity among the faithful”, in its two thousand year history of engagement with the Muses of art, a new era which is strongly contrasted with the past. This new era is marked by the distortion in much contemporary art of "the living forms or the forms of living beings", as expressed by Ortega y Gasset. One can even infer a sense of contempt for the figurative realism that during the previous centuries characterized the intent of every artistic language to illustrate with care, harmony and splendor all the invisible realities in order to make a worthy place for the Blessed Sacrament.
- b. The way to recover a healthy relationship between art and the Catholic Church was already indicated in 1964 by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, in his famous "Speech to the Artists." The Holy Father then stated the following points for the revival of a "pact" between artists and the Church:
  - i. *"If we want to give authenticity and fullness to the religious artistic momentum, the Mass, it is necessary its preparation, its catechesis, in other words it's needed to be taken or accompanied by religious instruction. It is not permissible to invent a religion, you have to know what happened between God and man, as God has sanctioned certain religious relations that we need to know to avoid becoming ridiculous or stuttering or aberrant. You must be educated. And we think that in the Mass of the artist, those that wants to appear really artists will have no difficulty in gathering this systematic, patient, but so beneficial and nutrient information. "*
  - ii. *"There is need of the laboratory, that is the technique for making things right. And here we leave the word to you. You will say what is necessary, since the artistic expression that should be given to these religious moments will have all its rich expressiveness of ways and means, and if needed also of novelty."*
  - iii. *"And finally add that is not enough the catechism, nor the laboratory. It's needed the essential characteristic of the religious momentum, that is sincerity. It is no longer only art, but spirituality. We must enter the cell's inner self and give to the religious momentum, artistically lived, what is expressed here: personality, a voice just escaped from the depths of the soul, a form that is different from any disguise of the stage, purely representational outward, and the self that is in its synthesis fuller and more difficult, if you want, but also the most joyful. We need that here religion could be truly spiritual, and then will happen to you today what the feast of the Ascension makes us think. When you go into yourself to find all these energies and give the ascent to heaven, that heaven where Christ found his refuge, we feel at first, immensely, I would say, infinitely far away. "*
- a. Most Holy Father: 45 years after those words, the results are modest, if not entirely disappointing. We see today new church buildings constructed without any knowledge of the liturgy, but modeled on functional issues or simply by "star-chitects". We see our churches filled with images which are nominally "religious"

but which do not transmit any messages or, in the worst case, actually distort the supreme truth of the Incarnation. We see our sacred Lectionaries full of childish and trite phrases that do not befit the Holy Liturgy, but rather seem indicative of those celebrations that Your Holiness, as Cardinal, already denounced as «degenerate and showy liturgies», (*Preface to: Klaus Gamber, La réforme liturgique en question*). Such things limit and mock the ability of the Muses of Art to signify and illustrate the things of God. And today we hear even more trite melodies and songs so prosaic that they have nothing to do with the solemn tradition of the Gregorian Chant. In one word sacred art and architecture today do not seem to encourage the sweet and vivifying encounter with the true God, but rather hinder it.

## I. *The reason of the present situation*



- a. Holy Father, although four centuries have passed since its publication, we believe that Gabriele Cardinal Paleotti's "On Sacred and Profane Images" (1582) sets out clearly the main cause of the current situation: *"It is our opinion that the abuses are not so much attributable to errors made by the artists in shaping the images, but rather to errors of commission and to the gentlemen who neglect to commission the works as they should be: they are the real causes of abuse, because the artists are simply following their instructions."*

## II. Theological References



- a. Most Holy Father, the three well known and indispensable fundamentals of Catholic Aesthetics: *Integritas*, *Proportio*, *Splendor Formae*, are integral to the pursuit of the “Beauty of Truth”. Unity, truth, goodness and beauty are essential to our understanding of the Holy Trinity and the liturgy. They constitute the fundamental character and nature of the *Res sacra* and at the same time express the dependent relationship of the faithful to Christ and the Church. Sacred art must therefore be essentially *True*.
- b. The divine accord between Father and Son (see *Job*. 14,9) which in the Trinity is perfect, substantial and complete, permeates all creation, and permeates creation precisely because God desires, in the mystery of His transcendence, creatures made in His own image who are able to perform intelligently and freely the same Holy Liturgy, that operates in the Holy Trinity. The principle of divine accord, the eternal offering of the Son to the Father for the salvation of the world and the sending of the Holy Spirit to move the hearts and minds of humanity to God is both the model for and the reality of the Church's Holy Liturgy. We as the Body of Christ participate sacramentally in the eternal realities of Heaven in union with the Second Person of the Trinity and all the angels and saints. Jesus is the perfect incarnate model for us, expressed by St. Thomas and St. Bonaventura as *Verbum et Imago*. This is why the care for the sacred texts and sacred music (*Verbum*) as well as sacred architecture and the sacred arts (*Imago*) that support and serve the liturgy are of such profound importance. The Incarnation of the Lord is the beginning and source of sacred art. Art that mocks or fails to express the doctrine of the Incarnation faithfully, by denying it through abstractionism and renunciation of meaningful form, is incompatible with the definition of "Catholic sacred art".
- c. The liturgy is not something artificially constructed-- something intellectually contrived to create some religious experience or feeling -- it is instead the Canticle of Sacrifice for the glory of God with the choirs of the angels and saints, and the sacramental participation in the life of the Trinity itself. The liturgy invites us to turn to the Lord, looking away from ourselves or other creatures, to look upon Him through the ministerial priest acting *in persona Christi*, to the glory of the Father. So the liturgy is sacred because it is from above, from the Holy Trinity in heaven. It is “heaven on earth”, and it sanctifies all things through the sacrifice of Christ to the Father in Heaven. For this reason art can only be validly understood as a "servant of the Liturgy" and ought to be in all ways consistent with the definition of Dionysius the Areopagite as a "visible representation of mystical and supernatural events", although truly real.
- d. The parallel path and the intimate connection between liturgy and art also does not conclude its meaning. The work of art and architecture, unlike the liturgy, continues even after the liturgy. It therefore has the additional task of being an echo of the liturgy, after the Mass is finished. In this way the decoration of the

church and its architecture can rightly claim the pedagogical and exhortative functions regarding the message of the Gospel, as well as to aesthetically enrich the liturgy, and ultimately to the communication with the Lord in His Temple.

- e. Loyalty to the Incarnation and fidelity to the liturgy are therefore the cornerstones of sacred Catholic art.

### III. The Commission



- a. Holy Father, both priests and the liturgists have within in their Christian and Catholic identity the clear responsibility for sacred art. It is they who must assist the artist who starts from his technical vocation to reach a Christian and liturgical vocation: the only vocation that can enable him to create a sacred art. This secures sacred art from any cultural relativism and also serves to enhance local cultures and local devotional identities.
- b. The need to develop local devotions finds justification in the cultural diversity, which is an authentic richness of Catholicism. The suppression of local devotional practices by the iconographic program of many contemporary churches is a cultural violence. The wise use of local devotional images of can help to integrate the Church within the local geographical and human environment, as well as refresh the memories of the local community rooted in the history of the Church. The artwork can become a useful and holy instrument in the revitalization of local devotions, but always drawing on the traditional iconography of the subject, without which it would, paradoxically, deny its historical continuity with the objectives of representation.
- c. The desacralization of the last decades made both clergy and faithful unable to wonder and rejoice: wonder and joy that depends on the presence of the Sacred. The sense of Christian sacredness is a Christological consequence, because Jesus Christ is the Word and the Face of the Father, made flesh. If the Incarnation is the key figure, this must be expressed not as the man who becomes God, but as God who became man. For this reason in Christian art we must insist on the role of the image. "The *ars celebrandi* must foster the sense of the sacred and the use of those external forms which educate in this way, as, for example, that of the harmony of the rite, of the liturgical vestments, of the furnishings and of the sacred place." (*Sacramentum Caritatis* n.42).
- d. The lack of seminary training in the sacred arts and architecture is now perceived as a serious shortcoming. We therefore strongly urge the establishment of a program of artistic and architectural training up to university level sponsored by the Church of Rome. This path, of course, should always be integrated with norms and canons that clearly show the Catholic Church to be autonomous and the mother of a coherent art and sacred architecture.

#### IV. The Artists



- a. Your Holiness, today we see the widespread religious illiteracy among artists. We encourage the development of a specifically theological and liturgical catechesis in order to fulfill what has been expressed by the Servant of God Pope Paul VI in his memorable meeting with the artists.
- b. Artist must be above all possess the objective skill in order to accomplish what is commissioned of him and at the same time he must understand or at least appreciate the Creed of the Church and its liturgy. While in the past sometimes the first requirement has been neglected, it now likely that the second requirement is lacking.
- c. The construction of a sacred Christian building or of a musical composition for the liturgy are permanent announcement of Jesus Christ to man. The creative activity of the artist cannot be detached from either the Christian faith or Christian morals. St. Paul urged Christians to know Christ by the Spirit “and not conform to worldly mentality”. This implies that the inner knowledge of Jesus leads to conversion and to abandon all worldly cares. An artist who is a nonbeliever can produce a sacred work if while working identifies with the mystery of faith or opens himself to grace: his art then becomes testimony of the Truth sought and found in his work. However, this is possible only with one's sincere openness to appreciating the truths of faith which, through the Church, introduces a more perfect way of knowing and living the Divine Reality.
- d. Concern about the working with "name brand firms" does not mean that the projects of a non believing architects or non-Christian or non-practicing Catholics are useless and always misdirected. These can become opportunities for catechetical instruction in preparation for the church projects themselves. The faith is therefore not a secondary requirement to build a sacred building or to make art.
- e. The Christian artist is humble, he almost disappears: he like everyone is called to conversion. Your Holiness, when you were Cardinal you taught that to be brought to a new way of seeing, first you must change the heart from the inner core which is the cross and resurrection (see *Introduction to the Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 117). So Eastern Christians are required to first fast before writing an icon. With a mind at least open to the faith it is not possible to produce sacred art for liturgy.
- f. Consequently the artist must acquire knowledge of liturgy and Scripture, and be willing to work within the continuity with tradition and with the Magisterium of two millennia of the Church. The Christian artist does not work alone but in communion with the Church community of all times. A contemporary church cannot be isolated from the forms established by tradition, but rather must always innovate and develop them within.
- g. Divine beauty, together with truth, is the ontological foundation of sacred art. The character of the liturgy is the intimate connection of the ritual celebration with its



symbolic gestures, both linguistic and artistic, therefore with the architectural arrangement and the iconographic structure that best expresses the mystagogy and liturgical interpretation. In the liturgy God is revealed to man; so it follows that the artist is a minister of beauty, because the Church is the house of God and the people who belong to him.

- h. If the artist is humble, there is nothing more beautiful than to be transformed in Christ. Only the beauty that originates in Christ can save the world by order, the order of love. For in the end "only love is credible." How can an artist build a church, an image of Christ's body, without the theological love of Christ?
- i. So sacred and religious Christian art - an art that is ordered to the liturgy - is based on a look that is profoundly open, that rests on the ecclesial dimension of the faith, that is objective, realistic and shared, which asks that the artist should be formed within the Church (cf. *ibid*, p 127-131). The freedom of art does not mean license, but free adherence to the obliging needs of the faith. Without faith there is no art suitable for the liturgy, but merely a knowledge of Christ "according to the flesh".

## V. The Sacred space



- a. Most Holy Father, as you wrote when you were Cardinal, “in the Eucharistic liturgy the priest leads the people in the prayer turning toward the Lord”. So in every church the ideal center is the One who dwells in it and who makes it what it should be. (see Jn. 2,21). Would then it not be proper to reintroduce liturgical orientation to Christ, and to restore the Tabernacle and the Real Presence of the Lord as the veritable heart of the sacred space?
- b. In order to reintroduce the definition of "sacred space" in the concept of "Templum" we must reaffirm its basic constituents. The sacredness of church building is a fact because of its consecration, an act that cuts a portion of space from the profane use and dedicates it -- consecrates it -- to the worship of God. Because of this act the church is aptly called a “temple”, from the Greek word *Τέμνω*, "to cut", and from which also is derived *Τέμενος*, "sacred precinct". To express this characteristic, this being an area from which the common uses are cut off, are needed some design tricks that we find expressed in different ways throughout the history of Western ecclesiastical building. One of the basic requirements therefore to express the sacredness of a space is precisely the expression of "otherness" in relation to the surroundings. Architectural tradition has given us the use of the monumental entrance, which emphasizes the importance of crossing the threshold and the character of the area of transit between two different sizes, so also the church's interior was marked by numerous buffers to protect areas of strict sacerdotal use from the lay use, and consequently those dedicated to the Sacraments from the rest of the church.
- c. We must still recall the primary source of the sacredness of the area of Christian worship to realize that the old ritual of consecration of the building was in fact a form of the ritual of baptism, saying schematically, gestures and meanings of the rite of baptism of men on the stone body of the building. The Church, Body of Christ, was taking shape in the church building and like a man dedicate himself to Christ starting from his baptism the same was done also for the space. In its comparison with the baptized body, it was inevitable that the consecrated building did allude to the human body, the highest divine creation. Besides the obvious cruciform plan, often used for the same reasons, the typical symmetry of church plans allude both to the human body as well as many forms of creation. As within the human body, and because it is a sacred body, the interior of the church is well ordered with a measure of symmetry.
- d. A third useful criterion in the definition of Christian sacred space is the hierarchy of spaces. It is therefore intended to be a hierarchy in the spatial arrangement of different parts of the place of worship, as much as a hierarchy of decorating them. Regarding the first one is needed that the spaces where should be performed the liturgical actions are placed on a higher plane than the others, something that

expresses the importance of the liturgical action, elevation which becomes a symbol of the journey of elevation of man to God, who approaches heaven, a symbol of divine presence, and ultimately an help for visibility. Regarding the second one, the decoration should also reflect a hierarchy starting from the less sacred spaces to the most sacred ones, perhaps through a gradation of materials, colors and subjects. Such gradations assist the understanding of the same hierarchy of spaces that are also architecturally expressed in the building's elevation.

- e. A fourth way of underlining the sacred character of the area of worship is the skillful use of light, also calibrated from place to place, before any other element because the light has been the subject of symbolic similarities with divine wisdom.
- f. Architecture and sacred art has spread through the followers of the famous masters, but has in the modern age been virtually prohibited among modern architects and in architectural education. The Church has a great patrimony of architectural forms and historical styles-- Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, and Classical-- that are all unified in their common goal of expressing the sacramental realities expressed in Scripture that the Church is the Body of Christ, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Mountain of the Lord, and so forth. Various ages have sought to express these sacramental ideas, and have produced an extraordinary body of sacred architecture, valued for their artistic architectural and religious merit due to a positive "imitative" process. The recourse to historical styles, classical and "sacramental" architecture does not pose any obstacle to the creative architectural process, but rather it directs the process to communicate the shared objectivity that is the core symbol structure by which we understand the message of truth that the Church must spread. The message of Jesus Christ and the Gospels cannot be interpreted by subjectivity: they are established as truths of faith. Abstractions, reminiscences, interpretations that aim to bypass the sensorial representation of reality, symbolical evocations, understood as the cornerstones of modern art in general cannot belong to the Church as an institution, and much less to the church as building that should accommodate and embody the certainty, truth and beauty of the real and objective presence of God.

## VI. Sacred Music and Liturgical Chant



- a. Holy Father, the Church has today the opportunity to regain his "highly" role in the Magisterium of music, mainly in the field of sacred music and liturgical chant, which must necessarily respond to the categories of "good" and "right" for their intimate connection, not just correspondence, with the liturgy itself (Paul VI, *Address to the singers of the papal chapel*, March 12th, 1964).
- b. In the ancient history of Christianity the dialectical relationship between sacred music and secular music has produced many times the intervention of the Church to «clean up the building of the Roman liturgy» (a term explicitly used by many Popes) from the secularist intrusions that the music itself lead in the Temple and that, over the centuries and the gradual technical and musical development, have become increasingly severe and spill-over from the proper liturgical use, ending often in the assumption of roles of self-referencing or profane nature. From the time of the *Const. Ap. Docta Sanctorum* issued by Pope John XXII (1324), the Magisterium has always indicated the righteous ways of understanding music in the service of worship, gradually adopting new techniques compatible with the liturgy, but always and consistently pointing up to the present day (including the Magisterium of Vatican II and the entire post Vatican II period) in the Gregorian chant, the primal root, the source of constant inspiration, the highest - because it's simply the most noble - form of music that can perfectly embody the Catholic liturgical ideal also by virtue of its anonymity and its meta-historical true aesthetical, verbal and sensitive universality.
- c. We cannot now definitely establish musical forms and styles a priori, but the recovery of Gregorian chant, good polyphonic and organ music (even inspired by the Gregorian), -ancient, modern and contemporary - would certainly, after decades of absolute shock and "probability" in music, recall the liturgical "words" that the Catholic tradition in art and music has given us for centuries: they have worked - using a representative expression of Pope Paul VI in the Enc. *Mysterium Fidei* - as real «tiles of the Catholic Faith», which was always founded on sensible data, endowed with Truth and Beauty; and always devoid of sterile and mannered or archaeological intellectualism, to be avoided with care (as indicated by Pope Pius XII in Enc. *Mediator Dei* that introduced the liturgical reform of the late twentieth century).
- d. Maybe in the arts devoted to the service of worship, music is the strongest, for that constant "catechetical" meaning which the Magisterium has constantly recognized, and also the more delicate because, by its nature and unlike the other arts, requires a *tertium medium* between the author and the viewer, or the interpreter. For this reason the Catholic Church should take better care of the music than of other arts and should, as happened in the past, urge the education of both authors and interpreters: for sure today the effort is much more difficult than in Middle Age, Baroque period or in the XIX century, since the actual society is completely

secularized. However today is needed a clear knowledge of the fundamentals so that the musicians – once endowed with the needed expertise – can recover the *sensus Ecclesiae* together with the *sensus Fidei*.

## VII. Liturgical Adaptation and Naodomia



- a. Most Holy Father, following the publication of the *Motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* in 2007 it would be appropriate to stop the so-called renovation of older churches to the new Rite. Given the option for every Catholic community to celebrate according to the Extraordinary Form of the Rite we request a stop to the destruction of the precious heritage of the Church as witnessed during the last several decades with the iconoclastic removal of high altars, communion rails and tabernacles, incorrectly implemented in the name of "liturgical adaptations."
- b. It would be appropriate, in consideration of the legal dimension of the liturgy, to consider the possibility that the Church begins a journey that could lead to the definition of artistic and architectural "canons". In particular the latter, according to a tradition that is highly preserved in the Eastern Church, as "naodomia", or science for the construction of the Temple.

## Appeal

*For all the reasons set out above, we are eager to receive from Your Holiness a fatherly listening and the merciful attention of the Vicar of Christ. We beseech you, Holy Father, to read in our heartfelt appeal our most pressing concern for the appalling conditions of contemporary sacred art and sacred architecture, as well as a modest and most humble request for your help so that sacred art and architecture can once again be truly Catholic. This so that the faithful can again enjoy the sense of wonder and rejoice once again at the presence of the beauty in God's House. This so that the Church can be once more regain her rightful place, in this era of irrational, mundane and malforming barbarism, as a true and attentive promoter and custodian of an art that is both new and truly "original": an art that today as always flowers in every age of progress, which reflowers from its ancient roots and eternal origin, faithful to the most intimate sense of Beauty that shines in the Truth of Christ.*

