

# CHURCH AND ART: FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL TO TODAY

**Mauro Mantovani**

Facoltà di Scienze della Comunicazione sociale  
Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma, Italy

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## Introduction

As a continuation of our previous paper (2013), dealing with subjects of a philosophical and theological nature about the themes of beauty and conservation – seen particularly from an ontological and anthropological-pedagogical perspective – this paper offers some reflections on the relationship between Church (Catholic) and art from the Second Vatican Council to today (2014).<sup>1</sup>

As Pope John Paul II writes in his *Letter to artists*, «even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience» [1]. In fact it is undeniable that in all religious experiences art has always played a very important part, and that all major spiritual movements, not only Christian ones, have had a great influence on art throughout history. Even Michelangelo considered art as something “sacred” in itself, precisely because there is an extremely profound relationship between art and spirituality.

## 1. Church and art: from the Second Vatican Council to Pope John Paul II

The Catholic Church expressed itself on the subject of sacred art during the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution *De sacra liturgia, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, published 4th December 1963; Chapter VII is entitled *De arte sacra deque sacra suppellectile* (i.e. *Sacred art and sacred furnishings*). This document has become a key reference point for many other texts.<sup>2</sup>

The *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms that the Church is “a friend of the arts” and throughout history has always sought their “noble help”. The Document pronounces itself on the dignity of sacred art: «Very rightly the fine arts are considered to rank

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• Corresponding author: mantovani@unisal.it

among the noblest activities of man's genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest achievement, which is sacred art. These arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God's praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men's minds devoutly toward God.

Holy Mother Church has therefore always been the friend of the fine arts and has ever sought their noble help, with the special aim that all things set apart for use in divine worship should be truly worthy, becoming, and beautiful, signs and symbols of the supernatural world, and for this purpose she has trained artists. In fact, the Church has, with good reason, always reserved to herself the right to pass judgment upon the arts, deciding which of the works of artists are in accordance with faith, piety, and cherished traditional laws, and thereby fitted for sacred use. The Church has been particularly careful to see that sacred furnishings should worthily and beautifully serve the dignity of worship, and has admitted changes in materials, style, or ornamentation prompted by the progress of the technical arts with the passage of time». [2]

On 4th December 1963, another conciliar document was promulgated, the Decree on the Media of Social Communication *Inter Mirifica*. Point number 6 clearly affirms the fundamental connection between artistic action and moral action: «The second question deals with the relationship between the rights, as they are called, of art and the norms of morality. Since the mounting controversies in this area frequently take their rise from false teachings about ethics and aesthetics, the Council proclaims that all must hold to the absolute primacy of the objective moral order, that is, this order by itself surpasses and fittingly coordinates all other spheres of human affairs - the arts not excepted - even though they be endowed with notable dignity. For man who is endowed by God with the gift of reason and summoned to pursue a lofty destiny, is alone affected by the moral order in his entire being. And likewise, if man resolutely and faithfully upholds this order, he will be brought to the attainment of complete perfection and happiness» [3]. **As R. Papa comments, this part of the Decree is particularly interesting and original because «the fact [...] that the same moral horizon includes questions regarding aesthetic issues is, in some ways, an aspect that has not yet been fully understood, and is what makes the Decree *Inter Mirifica*, an extraordinary text, which even today is able to say new things. Indeed, the real focal point of the sixth paragraph is in placing the problem of aesthetics in the context of modern social media and analyzing the rights of art in moral matters. [...] The virtues practiced and cultivated are effective instruments to edify man, and art is a human activity that, in practicing the same virtues, has the task of revealing the splendor of truth through beauty. Very often the perspective of the rights of art is confused with the freedom of escaping from the perspective of moral principles; instead it is precisely because beauty is the duty and concern of art, that consequently it cannot but be interested in the connections with truth and goodness [...]. It is the order of goodness that unifies all human activity, and art cannot be an exception; in a certain way, it is its higher exemplification» [4].**

If we consider the whole of the Second Vatican Council documents, the discourse on art is connected with some reflections included in the second chapter of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the theme of promoting and developing culture<sup>3</sup>, where art is presented as a "cultural act", and as a "cultural good"<sup>4</sup>. It is interesting how from the first point of this chapter, which reflects on the existence of cultural pluralism, *Gaudium et Spes* states that «different styles of life and multiple scales of values arise from the diverse manner of using things, of laboring, of expressing oneself, of practicing religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridic institutions, of

cultivating the sciences, the arts and beauty. Thus the customs handed down to it form the patrimony proper to each human community» [5].

If we consider artistic production, the Council uses the denomination of “liberal arts” even though it does not give a precise definition of them: if it is true that “liberal arts” can be considered, as already implied by Thomas Aquinas, as those that «are directed in the service of gratifying the soul» [6] in a selfless way and for this reason are not ordered to address servile needs (the so-called “mechanic arts”)<sup>5</sup>, however, especially today – like C. Chenis rightly notes – «the artistic value of a *res* [thing] is proportionate to the degree of beauty grasped by aesthetic judgment. Unlike what happens from an educational perspective, man’s many other productive activities needing a material instrumentation (architecture, sculpture, painting, etc.) can also be included among the liberal arts on condition that they respect the criterion of the definition that is focused on the qualification of beauty. Beauty expresses itself as *splendor formae*. [...] The difficulty of drawing a line between the beautiful and the ordinary, between the artistic and the functional, has however the value of redeeming so-called minor arts and of replacing artistic productions in the broader context of cultural heritage: a kind of heritage that, as well as a value of beauty, also has a value of civilization, and constitutes a historical record of great value» [7].

Among the Messages of the Second Vatican Council (8th December 1965), that addressed to the Artists stands out: «We now address you, artists, who are taken up with beauty and work for it: poets and literary men, painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, men devoted to the theater and the cinema. To all of you, the Church of the council declares to you through our voice: if you are friends of genuine art, you are our friends.

The Church has long since joined in alliance with you. You have built and adorned her temples, celebrated her dogmas, enriched her liturgy You have aided her in translating her divine message in the language of forms and figures, making the invisible world palpable. Today, as yesterday, the Church needs you and turns to you. She tells you through our voice: Do not allow an alliance as fruitful as this to be broken. Do not refuse to put your talents at the service of divine truth. Do not close your mind to the breath of the Holy Spirit.

This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. It is beauty, like truth, which brings joy to the heart of man and is that precious fruit which resists the wear and tear of time, which unites generations and makes them share things in admiration. And all of this is through your hands» [8].

Forty-five years later, as Pope Benedict XVI (2009), recalled, on 7th May 1964 in the Sistine Chapel «an historic event took place, at the express wish of Pope Paul VI, to confirm the friendship between the Church and the arts. [...] On that occasion Paul VI made a commitment to ‘re-establish the friendship between the Church and artists’, and he invited artists to make a similar, shared commitment, analyzing seriously and objectively the factors that disturbed this relationship, and assuming individual responsibility, courageously and passionately, for a newer and deeper journey in mutual acquaintance and dialogue in order to arrive at an authentic ‘renaissance’ of art in the context of a new humanism» [9].

Among later affirmations on art made by Pope Montini one to be remembered is his Discourse on 23rd June 1973, when he met with the artists who had offered their works for the new Collection of Modern Religious Art in the Vatican Museums, defined on that occasion as an «earthly garden of religious art»;<sup>[10]</sup> another is a Discourse

pronounced on 21st July 1976 [11]. C. Chenis underlines the fact that «the incisiveness of Giovanni Battista Montini on the relationship between Church and art comes from a very favorable situation, where interior sensibility, educational paths and personal knowledge on the one hand, combine with historical circumstances, aesthetical debates and ecclesial events on the other»<sup>6</sup> [12]; he also cultivated a very special interest towards contemporary art.

In an article written in 1978, the year of Pope Paul VI's death, E. Beretta reports the viewpoint of the Church, that recognizes Giovanni Battista Montini as "the Pope of the artists", owing to his cultural eminence and his closeness and sensitivity for the art of his time.<sup>7</sup> He often repeated his view of the Church's esteem for the arts: in addition to the previously mentioned speeches, of note are those of the 20th February 1965 (*La Scuola d'Arte Cristiana "Beato Angelico"*), 17th December 1969 (*Ristabilire amicizia e alleanza*) and 8th October 1977 (*Il Papa inaugura una mostra su S. Paolo*).

During the pontificate of John Paul II other documents about this subject were issued, such as the *Codex Iuris Canonici* [Code of Canon Law] (15th January 1983) and the Apostolic Constitution on the reform of the Roman Curia *Pastor Bonus* (28th June 1988). Of particular significance is the afore-mentioned *Letter to artists* of the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1999: as Pope Benedict XVI remembers ten years later, «for the first time, on the eve of the Great Jubilee of 2000, the Pope [John Paul II], who was an artist himself, wrote a *Letter to artists*, combining the solemnity of a pontifical document with the friendly tone of a conversation among all who, as we read in the initial salutation, 'are passionately dedicated to the search for new "epiphanies" of beauty'. [...] The same Pope proclaimed Blessed Fra Angelico the patron of artists, presenting him as a model of perfect harmony between faith and art» [13]. In 1997 Pope John Paul II published the *editio typica* of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which comments on the eighth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor", discussing the merits of the strong tie between established truth and beauty, and therefore between truth and goodness, and between art and truth: «The practice of goodness is accompanied by spontaneous spiritual joy and moral beauty. Likewise, truth carries with it the joy and splendor of spiritual beauty. Truth is beautiful in itself. Truth in words, the rational expression of the knowledge of created and uncreated reality, is necessary to man, who is endowed with intellect. But truth can also find other complementary forms of human expression, above all when it is a matter of evoking what is beyond words: the depths of the human heart, the exaltations of the soul, the mystery of God. [...] Created 'in the image of God', man also expresses the truth of his relationship with God the Creator by the beauty of his artistic works. [...] Like any other human activity, art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to and ennobled by the ultimate end of man» [14].

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church there is also a specification about *sacred art*, which «is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God - the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature' (Heb. 1:3, in whom 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col. 2:9). This spiritual beauty of God is reflected in the most holy Virgin Mother of God, the angels, and saints. Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Savior, the Holy One and Sanctifier» [15].

For this very reason the document affirms that «bishops, personally or through delegates, should see to the promotion of sacred art, old and new, in all its forms

and, with the same religious care, remove from the liturgy and from places of worship everything which is not in conformity with the truth of faith and the authentic beauty of sacred art» [16].

Pope John Paul II in his *Letter to artists* – as Pope Benedict XVI recalls once more – adds: «'In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, the artist gives voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption' (no. 10). And in conclusion, he states: 'Beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence' (no. 16)» [17].

Benedict XVI notes, moreover, that John Paul II «restated the Church's desire to renew dialogue and cooperation with artists: 'In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, *the Church needs art*' (no. 12); but he immediately goes on to ask: 'Does art need the Church?' - thereby inviting artists to rediscover a source of fresh and well-founded inspiration in religious experience, in Christian revelation and in the 'great codex' that is the Bible» [18].

On the relationship between art and religious worship, Pope John Paul II remembered also that «the Church has called the arts to serve the liturgy, entrusting it with the task of assisting in men's dialogue with God [...] in worship which prepares people to love each other and to serve the Almighty» [19].

Christian sacred art for this reason should be considered a «sacrament that unites the human and the divine: *sapit Deum sapit hominem*» [20]. Christian sacred art, as C. Chenis underlines, following K. Wojtila's teaching, «is at the apex of religious art because it explicitly addresses God, his praise and his glory, and for this reason it was originally intended for ecclesiastic community worship. Sacred art has consequently an undeniable social and spiritual value: it is memory, advent, prophecy and eschatology, and 'it is necessary for the Church because it is necessary for man'. It is therefore a historical and cultural patrimony and heritage that needs to be protected and safeguarded» [21]. It is not surprising then that the Pontiff in another Discourse in 1981 said: «We live in an era in which heirlooms and traditions are valued in order to recover the original spirit of each people. Why shouldn't the same be true for religion, to draw from works of art of different eras precise information about the *sensus fidei* of the Christian people» [22].

## 2. Church and art: Pope Benedict XVI

The teaching of Pope Benedict XVI has also been particularly attentive to the relationship between faith and art.<sup>8</sup> During the already cited Discourse in the meeting with artists of 21st November 2009, he solemnly stated: «I wish to express and renew the Church's friendship with the world of art, a friendship that has been strengthened over time; indeed Christianity from its earliest days has recognized the value of the arts and has made wise use of their varied language to express her unvarying message of salvation. This friendship must be continually promoted and supported so that it may be authentic and fruitful, adapted to different historical periods and attentive to social and cultural variations» [23]. On this occasion, Pope Benedict XVI recalled, as we have already mentioned, the historical meeting that took place between the artists and Pope Paul VI in the «sanctuary of faith and human creativity» which is the Sistine Chapel; he commented on the scene of the *Universal Judgment* by Michelangelo and

also spoke about today's difficulties.«What is capable of restoring enthusiasm and confidence, what can encourage the human spirit to rediscover its path, to raise its eyes to the horizon, to dream of a life worthy of its vocation – if not beauty? [...] Indeed, an essential function of genuine beauty, as emphasized by Plato, is that it gives man a healthy 'shock', it draws him out of himself, wrenches him away from resignation and from being content with the humdrum – it even makes him suffer, piercing him like a dart, but in so doing it 'reawakens' him, opening afresh the eyes of his heart and mind, giving him wings, carrying him aloft. [...] Authentic beauty, however, unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond. If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence, the Mystery of which we are part; from this Mystery we can draw fullness, happiness, the passion to engage with it every day. [...] Beauty, whether that of the natural universe or that expressed in art, precisely because it opens up and broadens the horizons of human awareness, pointing us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the abyss of Infinity, can become a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God. Art, in all its forms, at the point where it encounters the great questions of our existence, the fundamental themes that give life its meaning, can take on a religious quality, thereby turning into a path of profound inner reflection and spirituality. Dear artists [...] you are the custodians of beauty [...]. Faith takes nothing away from your genius or your art: on the contrary, it exalts them and nourishes them, it encourages them to cross the threshold and to contemplate with fascination and emotion the ultimate and definitive goal, the sun that does not set, the sun that illumines this present moment and makes it beautiful»<sup>9</sup> [24].

Some days before the meeting with the artists, Pope Benedict XVI had called to mind the relationship between theology and art established during the Middle Ages, a period in which the historical and cultural circumstances were an occasion for a re-flourishing of theology, which was able to gain greater awareness of its proper nature. Two of Pope Benedict XVI's Wednesday catechesis have been specifically dedicated to the *theological background of Romanesque and Gothic Cathedral architecture*, as aspects of medieval theology: «The Christian faith, however, deeply rooted in the men and women of those centuries, did not only give rise to masterpieces of theological literature, thought and faith. It also inspired one of the loftiest expressions of universal civilization: the cathedral»<sup>10</sup> [25].

Pope Benedict XVI remembers, among other things, the introduction of *sculptures*, the representations in the *portals*, the vertical *rush* and the *brightness* of the Gothic cathedrals, their *architectural lines*, the *stained glass windows* and the *decorations*, and he adds: «I would now like to emphasize two elements of Romanesque and Gothic art that are also helpful to us. The first: the masterpieces of art created in Europe in past centuries are incomprehensible unless one takes into account the religious spirit that inspired them. Marc Chagall, an artist who has always testified to the encounter between aesthetics and faith, wrote that 'For centuries painters dipped their brushes into that colorful alphabet which was the Bible'. When faith, celebrated in the Liturgy in a special way, encounters art, it creates a profound harmony because each can and wishes to speak of God, making the Invisible visible. [...] The second element: the strength of the Romanesque style and the splendor of the Gothic cathedrals remind us that the *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, is a privileged and fascinating path on

which to approach the Mystery of God. What is the beauty that writers, poets, musicians, and artists contemplate and express in their own language other than the reflection of the splendor of the eternal Word made flesh? [...] Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord help us to rediscover the way of beauty as one of the itineraries, perhaps the most attractive and fascinating, on which to succeed in encountering and loving God» [26].

Of significant interest on this issue are also the Discourses made by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Barcelona in November 2010 for the Dedication of the Church of the *Sagrada Familia*.<sup>11</sup>

During the Audience of the 31st August 2011, moreover, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the “way of artistic expressions”, as a manifestation of that *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, «whose deepest meaning must be recovered by men and women today. It may have happened on some occasion that you paused before a sculpture, a picture, a few verses of a poem or a piece of music that you found deeply moving, that gave you a sense of joy, a clear perception, that is, that what you beheld was not only matter, a piece of marble or bronze, a painted canvas, a collection of letters or an accumulation of sounds, but something greater, something that ‘speaks’, that can touch the heart, communicate a message, uplift the mind. A work of art is a product of the creative capacity of the human being who in questioning visible reality, seeks to discover its deep meaning and to communicate it through the language of forms, color and sound. Art is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible, it expresses the thirst and the quest for the infinite. Indeed it resembles a door open on to the infinite, on to a beauty and a truth that go beyond the daily routine. And a work of art can open the eyes of the mind and of the heart, impelling us upward»[27]. Some of these affirmations also constitute the closing lines of one of the articles published in this Journal, in the volume of the year 2012 [28].

In the same Discourse, Pope Benedict XVI added some specific reflections about artistic works considered fruit of the faith: «However some artistic expressions are real highways to God, the supreme Beauty; indeed, they help us to grow in our relationship with him, in prayer. These are works that were born from faith and express faith. We can see an example of this when we visit a Gothic cathedral: we are enraptured by the vertical lines that soar skywards and uplift our gaze and our spirit, while at the same time we feel small yet long for fullness....Or when we enter a Romanesque church we are spontaneously prompted to meditate and to pray. We perceive that these splendid buildings contain, as it were, the faith of generations. Or when we listen to a piece of sacred music that plucks at our heartstrings, our mind, as it were, expands and turns naturally to God. [...] Dear friends, I ask you to rediscover the importance of this path also for prayer, for our living relationship with God. Towns and villages throughout the world contain treasures of art that express faith and beckon to us to return to our relationship with God. May the visits to places filled with art, then, not only be opportunities for cultural enrichment – that too – but may they become above all moments of grace, incentives to strengthen our bond and our dialogue with the Lord so that – in switching from simple external reality to the more profound reality it expresses – we may pause to contemplate the ray of beauty that strikes us to the quick, that almost ‘wounds’ us, and that invites us to rise toward God» [29].

### 3. Church and art: today

Today, the “landscape” of activities of the Catholic Church, includes the so-called *Court of the Gentiles* (*Atrium Gentium*), promoted by the Pontifical Council for Culture. The “court” is generally a place of meeting and dialogue. The *atrium gentium* was originally a place of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem, not reserved exclusively for the Israelites, which anyone could enter freely, regardless of their religion, language or culture. First pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ravasi and Pope Francis have taken up this expression again and enhanced it because it is able to represent metaphorically all those places of encounter and dialogue, «in which people might in some way latch on to God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands. Today, in addition to interreligious dialogue, there should be a dialogue with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown» [30]. We can add that from the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis has further enlarged this category by paying particular attention to the “existential peripheries”.<sup>12</sup>

This is how Cardinal Ravasi described this *Court*, in an interview: «Believers and non-believers inhabit the same earth and frequent the same university lecture rooms. But the risk is that they isolate themselves inside their own sacred or secular enclosure, at times ignoring each other, if all goes well or most of the time mocking each other. For this reason we need to find a common space, to demolish the walls that divide cultures and reciprocal attitudes. We want to try. [...] Ultimately, the important thing is to stimulate the quest surrounding the question of God, which may even remain unknown for many; nevertheless, no one, is authorized to stop us from asking questions about Him»<sup>13</sup> [31]. One of the fundamental themes of the *Court of the Gentiles* is consequently that of beauty.

During the first year of the Pontificate of Pope Francis, which started on 13th March 2013, the Holy See participated for the first time in the *Biennale* in Venice (from 1st June to 24th November) with a Pavilion entitled “In the Beginning”, inspired by the biblical narration of the Genesis, in a perspective of dialogue with contemporary culture: «Contemporary art [...] is one of the most significant expressions of culture in recent years. The book of Genesis [...] is a fundamental theme for culture and Church tradition, and has been a source of inspiration for many works that have left their mark on the history of art. The first eleven chapters, dedicated to the mystery of our origins, to the introduction of evil into the history of mankind, to the hope and projects of humanity after the devastation symbolically represented by the Deluge» [32].

During the presentation of this event, on 14th May 2013, at the Holy See Press Office, the President of the Biennale, Professor Paolo Baratta, in speaking of this International Art Exhibition as an “exhibition- research”, affirmed that «contemporary art, in its alternating development, has seen artists proclaiming ideas and expressing concepts that look for forms, and conversely, has seen artists creating forms that urge reflection, but it has always considered man with his questions the main object of interest, seeking not the passivity of the consumer but the active participation of the observer» [33]. What is certainly interesting and significant, and by no means accidental is the use of the category of “active participation” (*actuosa participatio*) which represents – not without misunderstandings or reductive interpretations – one of the main aspects of the Catholic doctrine about liturgy.<sup>14</sup>

As regards the relationship between art and ecumenism, it is interesting to consider that if in the history of the second millennium, Christianity is indeed divided into many confessions, it is nevertheless in many respects closely united in art. Cardinal T. Bertone, at the time the Vatican Secretary of State, at the end of the Concert in two choirs held in the Sistine Chapel on Friday 28th June 2013, by the *Cappella Musicale Pontificia* “Sistina - the SistineChapel Choir - and *Thomanerchorof Leipzig* (Germany), said: «What in Christianity has been divided by historical-political events and different interpretations of the Revelation, has maintained a deep unity in art, and even today can continually find fruitful meeting points in the intelligent consideration and study of common sources» [34]. **Inserting this event within the liturgical Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul** (29th June), the cardinal added, within a specifically ecumenical context: «the spectacular setting of the Sistine Chapel can help us to transfigure diversities through beauty, a way to meet God and to meet in truth [...] Tomorrow’s celebration in St. Peter’s Basilica [...] will be a tangible sign of the will to anticipate in history that desired unity that we all seek and that as a gift from God we may one day achieve»[35]. The Anglican choir of Westminster Abbey had already sung in the Vatican for the Solemnity of the Saints Peter and Paul in 2012, while as part of this significant “ecumenical project” on the 25th-27th May 2014, the Sistine Chapel Choir made an ecumenical trip to Moscow performing several musical pieces together with the Synodal Choir of the Moscow Patriarchate. The two choirs performed together again in the Vatican, at St. Peter’s Basilica, during the Eucharistic Liturgy of the 29th June 2014 (Feast of Saints Peter and Paul) presided by Pope Francis. Indeed art, especially art that unites talent and creativity with competence and culture, seems able to anticipate existentially what theological dialogue on the one side, and diplomacy on the other, find it very difficult to achieve.

It is also worthy of note that, along the same lines, the country chosen as special guest for the XXVII edition of the Turin International Book Fair (8th-12th May 2014) was the Vatican. Except for the participation in an Exhibition in Santo Domingo, it was the first official participation of the Holy See to in a global publishing event, in a “book temple”.

As for the teaching of Pope Francis, we can find in his first Encyclical letter *Lumen fidei*, though not directly dedicated to art, that – as different commentaries have noticed – sacred art is in many ways considered, for instance in speaking about how the connection between faith and light, and between believing, seeing and hearing, runs all the way through the encyclical, and is of particular significance at numbers 29-31.<sup>15</sup> Faith is presented as the acquisition of a new vision, like a “change of eyes”: «Faith’s understanding is born when we receive the immense love of God which transforms us inwardly and enables us to see reality with new eyes» [36]. This is why the aim of Christian sacred art is to “become the mirror of Christ’s face”, and why this very dynamic of “becoming a mirror”,<sup>16</sup> of the intrinsic seeing of faith in Jesus Christ, becomes the foundation of Christian figurative art; for this reason sacred art, “mirror of the divine splendour”, – like R. Papa affirms – «can be included in the dynamic of the testimony; just as from listening, announcement is born; so from seeing, sacred art is born, the communication of things that have been seen»<sup>17</sup> [37].

Number 35 of the *Lumen fidei* states that «the religious man strives to see signs of God in the daily experiences of life, in the cycle of the seasons, in the fruitfulness of the earth and in the movement of the cosmos. God is light and he can be found also by those who seek him with a sincere heart» [38]. Indeed, if the light of Revelation

illuminates all creation, strengthening the need of an art able to represent the world, then, as once more R. Papa affirms, «the art that becomes a reflection of the world is an art that is willing to search for God, and bears witness to his presence. All religious art should show signs of God's presence in the natural reality that surrounds us»[39].

The Encyclical letter by Pope Francis shows once again the undeniable link between the truth of faith and the reality of history, so that «the history of Christian art is a witness and a narrator of the history of God with men and, at the same time, and for this very reason, the history of Christian art should be read as the history of a witness to faith: faith illuminates and gives meaning to the history of art too» [40].

Concentrating on the issue of faith, the *Lumen fidei* recalls the Second Vatican Council, affirming – fifty years later – that the Council «enabled the light of faith to illumine our human experience from within, accompanying the men and women of our time on their journey. It clearly showed how faith enriches life in all its dimensions» [41].

This expression of proximity to contemporary man and his search for truth, meaning and beauty, is therefore essential; Pope Francis also adopted this approach in his perspective of working to promote in any context and at any level the authentic “culture of encounter”.<sup>18</sup> What the Pontiff said during a meeting with a group of diplomats was extremely interesting: «Through your service, you are in a position to promote the *culture of encounter*. You are diplomatic officials, and all of your work aims at ensuring that representatives from nations, international organizations and institutions come together in the most profitable way. How important this service is! The more visible, ceremonial aspect of your work is ordered to the unseen, to the growth of positive relations based on mutual understanding, respect and the common search for paths of development and peace» [42]. Since he was speaking with Italian diplomats, he added: «Here in particular you have a further card to play: that of the Italian cultural heritage. Throughout the world, Italy has always been synonymous with culture, art, civilization. And you contribute to ensuring that this be esteemed within a culture of encounter, that this heritage contributes to the common good, to what Paul VI called the civilization of love» [43].

## Conclusion

We have talked about art in this contribution, at a time that can be considered a time of crisis in art, at least in relation to liturgy. L.M. Epicoco speaks of “crisis of communicability”: «today, when we speak of crisis, we are speaking of this very crisis of communicability. Art, instead of introducing us to the Mystery, attracts attention only to itself, leaving man, and the believer alone, isolated from the Mystery. A kind of art that celebrates itself, that narrates only of its reversions, that no longer shows itself as a slit through which the Eternal filters out in space and time. The keyword is functionality, not communicability. Thus, an art is born that is convenient but sterile. Or even worse, art is only an excuse to celebrate the artist, and so it becomes a monument to its creator. In practice, a dead end» [44].

According to ecclesiastical teaching «art should not fail to understand the complexity of reality, and beauty needs to have features of objectivity to be able to understand and enjoy comprehensibly, acknowledging the cultural area in which the artifacts are located. Art consequently needs to have an existential goal and to adapt itself to achieve it. The lack of interest in aesthetic fruition does not exclude the spiritual or material usefulness of the *res artistica*: a useless work of art is a contradiction in relation

to art considered to be *bonum*» [45]. Here we are obviously assuming an elevated and integral concept of “useful”, not merely utilitarian.

In the case of sacred arts, according to what we have previously affirmed, «art that seeks to serve the liturgy, and consequently truth, goodness and beauty, must act as a handmaid (humble servant) and not as a mistress; it must not lay claim to the kind of rights that suffocate the ‘communication’ of the truths of faith or the beauty and deepness of the Mystery» [46].

In the Encyclical letter *Lumen fidei*, Pope Francis points out that the question of “total truth”, which is also a question about God, risks falling into «oblivion in our contemporary world. The question of truth is really a question of memory, deep memory, for it deals with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness. It is a question about the origin of all that is, in whose light we can glimpse the goal and thus the meaning of our common path» [47].

In this sense, R. Papa comments that, «art too, has found itself overwhelmed by many utilitarian, technologist and relativistic visions, considered either only from a perspective that sees the aesthetical dimension, or only from a functional-publicity perspective. Instead art is intimately the expression of true beauty, the expression of that ‘seeing’ that the *Lumen Fidei* describes as a ‘body of knowledge of the faith’, and also ‘faith that appears as a process of gazing, in which our eyes grow accustomed to peering into the depths’ (*Lumen Fidei*, n. 30)» [48].

There is need, as C. Chenis wrote, quoting once again Doctor Angelicus, not of an art that is falsely pure and disincarnate, but an art *able to sublimate in the divine the daily scene*: «if ‘*per ardorem caritatis datur cognitio veritatis*’ (Thomas Aquinas), *per pulchritudinem artis datur contemplatio gloriae Dei*. Therefore art can really promote friendship among peoples and their encounter with God, establishing peace in the depths of the human soul»[49]. From this we have a true “vocational” vision of the identity and mission of the artist who<sup>19</sup> wants to serve the Church: so he «has not to put himself at the centre of the artistic action, but become a humble instrument, able to serve truth and beauty»[50].

In this sense, it is interesting to note that in the text of the first Encyclical letter by Pope Francis, *Lumen fidei*, we can find the word “art” when speaking of the “*art of building*”. Here, the Pontiff explains how the perspective of *faith* illuminates the same *architecture* as that of the relationships between individuals, peoples and the different social actors: «Faith makes us appreciate the architecture of human relationships because it grasps their ultimate foundation and definitive destiny in God, in his love, and thus sheds light on the art of building; as such it becomes a service to the common good. Faith is truly a good for everyone; it is a common good. Its light does not simply brighten the interior of the Church, nor does it serve solely to build an eternal city in the hereafter; it helps us build our societies in such a way that they can journey towards a future of hope» [51].

People in fact, are not only matter, they have a spiritual nature, which is why the liberal arts – as recalled by the Second Vatican Council in number 122 of the previously quoted *Sacrosanctum Concilium* – have been considered by the Church among the activities that most qualify this aspect of human existence, and consequently – if we speak about liturgy – «every expression of Christian worship would have to be artistically featured in order to emerge in dignity and efficacy. This with the aim to better stimulate human creativity and to suggest the beauty of supernatural reality» [52].

It is not by chance that the last document by Pope Francis, the apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, has a specific paragraph on the theme of the “way of beauty” connected with the work of evangelization and catechesis of the Church: «Every form of catechesis would do well to attend to the “way of beauty” (*via pulchritudinis*). Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties. Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus. This has nothing to do with fostering an aesthetic relativism which would downplay the inseparable bond between truth, goodness and beauty, but rather a renewed esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it. If, as Saint Augustine says, we love only that which is beautiful, the incarnate Son, as the revelation of infinite beauty, is supremely lovable and draws us to himself with bonds of love. So a formation in the *via pulchritudinis* ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith. Each particular Church should encourage the use of the arts in evangelization, building on the treasures of the past but also drawing upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new ‘language of parables’. We must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty which may mean little to the evangelizers, yet prove particularly attractive for others»<sup>20</sup> [53].

For this reason, all kinds of work in education and professional qualification directed towards the maintenance and conservation of cultural, environmental and monumental heritage is highly deserving, not only because they do not deteriorate and maintain their functionality, but also because they can be experienced for the beauty they embody and are bearers of, thereby extending over time their accessibility and fruition.

That is why in education it is always extremely important to work on the formation of the young generation to engage them in artistic and cultural creation and conservation, by prioritizing programs of lifelong qualification and deepening professionalism and competence for all those wishing to work in the promotion and organization of artistic and cultural events. And in this perspective the Catholic Church, in different levels and dimensions, can be – in its own particular way – among the protagonists<sup>21</sup>. In our opinion, a consistent historical, philosophical and theological training for the operators in this sector - to complement the necessary technical training - is indispensable, especially when the events relate to religious patrimony and culture, starting from architecture and the sacred arts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a bibliography on this issue, consider also: Burckhardt T. 1990, *L'arte sacra in Oriente e in Occidente*, Bompiani, Milano; Chenis C. 1991, *Fondamenti teorici dell'arte sacra. Magistero postconciliare*, Las, Roma; Papa R. 1999, *Riflessioni sui fondamenti dell'arte sacra*, Euntes Docete 52, 3, pp. 327-341; Plazaola J. 2001, *Arte cristiana nel tempo*, San Paolo, Milano; Salviucci Insolera L. 2002, *Arte e sacro*, in Lever F. - Rivoltella P.C. - Zancchi A. (ed.) 2002, *La Comunicazione: il Dizionario di scienze e tecniche*, ElleDi Ci - Rai-Eri, Leumann - Roma, pp. 54-58; Papa R. 2005, *I colori dello spirito. Capolavori dell'arte cristiana tra XIV e XVII secolo*, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello

- Balsamo; Verdon T. 2009, *L'arte nella vita della Chiesa*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano; Ravasi G. - Guerriero E. - Iacobone P. 2009, *La nobile forma. Chiesa e artisti sulla via della bellezza*, San Paolo, Milano; Sendler E. 2010, *L'icona, immagine dell'invisibile. Elementi di teologia, estetica e tecnica*, San Paolo, Roma; Grabar A. 2011, *Le vie dell'iconografia cristiana. Antichità e medioevo*, Jaca Book, Milano; Papa R. 2012, *Discorsi sull'arte sacra*, Cantagalli, Siena. The publication by C. Chenis provides a very important source for deepening many themes considered in this contribution, such as: art as a cultural act; sacred art as a cultural Christian act; Church and cultural goods; the Bible and sacred art; liturgy and sacred art; autonomy and functionality of works of art; styles and visual types; conservation and adaptation (pp. 158-164); artistic styles; the need for education.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Chenis C. 1991, *Fondamenti teorici dell'arte sacra*, cit., pp. 30-31. Instead, for a presentation of the relationship between Pope John XXIII and art, see Papa R. 2014, *San Giovanni XXIII e l'arte*, Seminari di belle immagini (10 May 2014), [www.retesicomoro.it/Objects/Pagina.asp?ID=5794](http://www.retesicomoro.it/Objects/Pagina.asp?ID=5794)
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Second Ecumenical Vatican Council (7 December 1965), Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 53-62.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Chenis C. 1991, *Fondamenti teorici dell'arte sacra*, cit., pp. 10-16.
- <sup>5</sup> Regarding the positive evaluation of the "mechanic arts" there are however some interesting examples also in medieval thought, such as the theologians of the School of Saint-Victor, in Paris. See for instance Poirel D. 1997, *Ugo di San Vittore. Storia, scienza, contemplazione*, Jaca Book, Milano.
- <sup>6</sup> The whole text by C. Chenis (pp. 193-252) shows clearly the important contribution given by Pope Paul VI to art; in the same volume, specifically on the theme of music, see Palombella M., *Giovanni Battista Montini e la musica*, pp. 253-261.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Beretta E. 1978, *Omaggio al "Papa degli artisti"*, *Arte Cristiana*, n. 647, pp. 81-88.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Werner Benjumea C.J. 2012, *Reflexões sobre a relação entre arte e fé segundo Joseph Ratzinger*, *Lumen Veritatis* 5, n. 21, pp. 32-43.
- <sup>9</sup> On this issue, see the interesting contribution by Lever F. 2013, *Christian Art as a locus theologicus and the digital media*, *Salesianum* 75 (2), pp. 349-357.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. also Chenis C. 2010, *L'architettura delle cattedrali segno del corpo mistico*, in Andreani L. - Cannistrà A. (ed.), *Le cattedrali segni delle radici cristiane in Europa. Atti del I e del II Convegno di Orvieto (11-13 novembre 2005 and 16-17 novembre 2007)*, Opera del Duomo di Orvieto, Orvieto, pp. 3 - 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/travels/2010/index\\_spagna\\_it.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/travels/2010/index_spagna_it.htm).
- <sup>12</sup> Cf., for instance, Leuzzi L. 2013, *Amare e Servire. Il realismo storico di Papa Francesco*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano; Fares D. 2014, *L'antropologia politica di Papa Francesco*, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 165 (15thFebruary 2014), q. 3928, 345-360; Savagnone G. 2014, *Il Vangelo nelle periferie. Comunicare la fede nella società liquida*, Dehoniane, Bologna; Toso M., *Nuova Evangelizzazione del Sociale. Benedetto XVI e Francesco*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf., on this topic: [www.atriumgentium.org](http://www.atriumgentium.org); [www.cortiledeigentili.com](http://www.cortiledeigentili.com); Fontana S. 2010, *Nel Cortile dei Gentili Benedetto XVI invita atei e credenti a parlare di Dio*, *L'Occidente* (7thJanuary 2010); Leuzzi L. 2010, *La questione di Dio oggi. Il nuovo cortile dei gentili*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano; Introvigne M. 2010, *Il cortile dei gentili. La Chiesa e la sfida della nuova religiosità: "sette", nuove credenze, magie*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo; Mantovani M. 2011, *Dalla cattedra al Cortile*, *Unità e Carismi* 21 (2), pp. 46-48. On the exact day that we completed this

- text, Saturday 31st May 2014, the Meeting of the “*Cortile dei Bambini*” with Pope Francis had just taken place.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Palombella M. 2002, *Actuosa participatio. Indagine circa la sua comprensione ecclesiale*, Las, Roma.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Papa R. 2013, *Benedetto XVI, Francesco e l'arte di vedere il volto di Cristo*, Zenit.org (29th April 2013), pp.1-2; Papa R. 2013, *Papa Francesco, la “Lumen Fidei” e l'arte Sacra* [Prima parte], Zenit.org (22nd July 2013), pp. 1-3; Papa R. 2013, *Papa Francesco, la “Lumen Fidei” e l'arte Sacra* [Seconda parte], Zenit.org (5th August 2013), pp. 1-4; Papa R. 2013, *Papa Francesco, la “Lumen Fidei” e l'arte Sacra* [Terza parte], Zenit.org (19th August 2013), pp. 1-3.
- <sup>16</sup> «This respect on God's part for our human eyes shows us that when we draw near to God, our human lights are not dissolved in the immensity of his light, as a star is engulfed by the dawn, but shine all the more brightly the closer they approach the primordial fire, like a mirror which reflects light». Francis 2013, Encyclical Letter *Lumen fidei*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, n. 35.
- <sup>17</sup> We can read at number 22 of *Lumen fidei*: «**Faith is not a private matter, a completely individualistic notion or a personal opinion: it comes from hearing, and it is meant to find expression in words and to be proclaimed. For 'how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?' (Rom 10:14). Faith becomes operative in the Christian on the basis of the gift received, the love which attracts our hearts to Christ**».
- <sup>18</sup> Cf., on this theme, Fares D. 2014, *Papa Francesco e la cultura dell'incontro*, La Civiltà Cattolica 165 (1st March 2014), q. 3929, pp. 449-460.
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- <sup>21</sup> We would like to point out the web site of the Holy See ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) where it may be interesting to consider, in particular, the pages about the Pontifical Council for Culture, the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, the “Fundamental Texts”, the Apostolic Vatican Library and the Vatican Museum. Concerning the aspects connected with the promotion of ecclesiastical cultural goods, cf. for instance [www.futurantiqua.com](http://www.futurantiqua.com) and particularly the *Rete Sicomoro*, where it is possible to find a rich number of documents, and also video-courses and a series of useful instruments and reflections. See also Olcuire G.C. 2014, *Dobbiamo delle spiegazioni*, in [www.vinonuevo.it](http://www.vinonuevo.it) (3 May 2014).

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### **Biographical notes**

**Mauro Mantovani**, a Salesian priest, is currently Vice-Rector and Dean of the Faculty of Social Communication Sciences at the Salesian Pontifical University of Rome, where he is full professor in theoretical philosophy. He is Doctor of Philosophy at the Pontifical University of Salamanca in Spain and in theology at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas “Angelicum” in Rome. He teaches philosophical theology, philosophy of history and introductory philosophy. His most recent research interests relate to the history of Spanish Thomism and issues relating to the fine line between philosophy, theology and science. He is an ordinary member of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas.