

ART, SACRED AND OTHERWISE

COMMENTS ON A NEW BOOK

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THIS BOOK WILL BE WELCOMED BY THE ARTIST WHO WORKS, OR EVER HOPES TO WORK, IN THE LITURGICAL FIELD. IT STATES CHURCH LAW CONCISELY AND AUTHORITATIVELY. ITS DOGS AND DONKEYS, RATHER THAN BEING PERSONAL TO THE AUTHOR, SUN UP HISTORICAL TRADITION AND SOUND PRACTICE. IT ALSO TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THE PROBLEMS OF TODAY. THE ILLUSTRATIONS, PICKED, AS I UNDERSTAND, ON THIS SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC, ADD A PLEASING BOLDNESS. USING THIS BOOK AS A GUIDE, AN ARTIST CAN COME TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS EXPECTED OF HIM.

THE AUTHOR, THE REVEREND J. S. O'CONNELL, SAYS: "THE CHURCH PLAN MUST NOT NEGLECT THE CLAIMS OF THE AESTHETIC. THESE, HOWEVER, ARE THE PROVINCE OF THE ARCHITECT, THE ARTIST, AND THE CRAFTSMAN, NOT THE PRIMARY CONCERN OF THE LITURGIST! THERE IS, THEN, A SUBSTANTIAL NO-MAN'S LAND BETWEEN WHAT IS PERMISSIBLE AND WHAT IS FORBIDDEN IN MATTERS OF SACRED ART. TO COMMENT ON THE BOOK FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE PRACTISING ARTIST, AND ONLY INASMUCH AS IT IS CONCERNED WITH THE PROBLEMS OF ART-MAKING, IS THE VERY LIMITED PURPOSE OF THIS REVIEW.

FIRST, LET US LOOK AT THE PITFALLS THAT THREATEN THE UNBARY CRAFTSMAN WHO INTENDS TO WORK FOR THE CHURCH. ON THE RIGHT THERE LURK, AS CARDINAL CELSO COSTANTINI SO FORCEFULLY PUTS IT, "CHEAP REPRODUCTIONS OF PAINTED PLASTER STATUES AND ALL THE INDUSTRIAL RUBBISH THAT HAS INVADED SO MANY CHURCHES!" ON THE LEFT THERE ARE OTHER DANGERS, LABELED BY FATHER O'CONNELL MODERNISTIC ART -- AND ART "OVER SUBJECTIVE, OFTEN BIZARRE AND EXTRAVAGANT, SOMETIMES COARSE AND EVEN BARBARIC, THE PRODUCT OF UNDISCIPLINED SENTIMENTALISM AND MERE EPHEMERAL WHIM." SUCH ART, IF AS BLACK AS PAINTED, SHOULD INDEED ALSO BE AVOIDED.

THIS FEAT OF STEPPING TIP-TOE ON A RAZOR'S EDGE WITHOUT FALLING INTO EITHER CHASM MAKES A MOST DISQUIETING PICTURE BOTH FOR THE CLERIC WHO WOULD BECOME AN ART PATRON AND FOR THE ARTIST WHO LONGS TO PUT HIS CRAFT AT THE SERVICE OF THE CHURCH. IN THEORETICAL FAIRNESS, FATHER O'CONNELL FULMINATES IMPARTIALLY AGAINST THE RIGHT AND AGAINST THE LEFT, SUGGESTING IMMINENT DANGER FROM BOTH DIRECTIONS.

LET US CLOSE THE BOOK NOW, AND CHECK THEORY AGAINST PRACTICE. LET US MAKE A ROUND OF CHURCHES AND INVESTIGATE THEIR WORTH, OR THEIR SHORTCOMINGS, IN THE MATTER OF SACRED ART. THE PICTURE CHANGES DRAMATICALLY. THE CAREFUL BALANCE THAT THE BOOK SUGGESTS, THE IDEAL OF CHURCH ART AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE JURTE MILIEU, WILL RECEIVE A RUDE JOLT IN PRACTICE, AS WE GO FROM CHURCH TO CHURCH IN OUR AESTHETIC PILGRIMAGE. INDEED, VERY FEW OF THE CHURCHES WE VISIT WILL SHOW ANYTHING AS BLATANT AS ORIGINALITY. AND WHERE ART WORKS TO BE FOUND IN A MODERN IDIOM BOLD ENOUGH TO BE SUSPECTED OF FELLOW-TRAVELING WITH THE MODERNISTIC? THIS NIGHTMARE OF CHURCHES RENDERED UNWORTHY BY TORTURED IDEAS AND GAOISTIC DISTORTIONS PROVES TO BE MOSTLY A DREAM. CERTAINLY IN OUR DAY IT IS NOT AN ENEMY STRONG ENOUGH TO UPSET, OR EVEN TO ROCK, SOUND CHRISTIAN TRADITION.

FORMIDABLE, HOWEVER -- ALL-PERVADING, ARRAYED IN ARMOR, AND SO STRONG IN NUMBERS AND ENTRENCHED POSITIONS AS TO SUGGEST THAT THEY HAVE ALREADY FOUGHT AND WON THE BATTLE -- ARE THE SAMPLES OF INDUSTRIAL RUBBISH THAT DEBASE SACRED ART. THERE THEY STAND VICTORIOUS, A GUARD OF DISHONOR AROUND THE ALTAR, A PLASTER FOOT ON TOP OF THEIR SUPINE FOC, IMPERVIOUS TO THE FULMINATIONS OF THE CONGREGATION OF RITES, TO THE ADMONITIONS OF POPE, TO THE OPINION OF ROMAN CARDINALS, AND -- WHO NOT MENTION IT, GIVEN THAT THIS IS AFTER ALL AN AESTHETIC MATTER -- TO THE DESPAIR OF CHRISTIAN ARTISTS. WHAT MORE ACCURATE DESCRIPTION OF THE AVERAGE CHURCH OF TODAY CAN BE FOUND THAN THAT IN THIS INSTRUCTION OF THE HOLY OFFICE: "LET ORDINARIES FORBID SECOND-RATE AND FOR THE MOST PART STEREOTYPED STATUES AND PICTURES TO BE MULTIPLIED AND IMPROPERLY AND ABSURDLY EXPOSED FOR THE VENERATION OF THE FAITHFUL ON THE ALTARS THEMSELVES AND ON THE ADJOINING WALLS OF CHAPELS!"

THUS, IN PRACTICE, IT IS NOT THE REVOLUTION OF THE IDEAS THAT MENACES. THE POSITION AND DIGNITY OF SACRED ART, BUT -- INTENSELY MORE ACUTE -- THIS COMICAL COUNTERREVOLUTION OF BAD ART, BORN OF LUERE, THAT CLUTTERS AND CLOGS THE CHURCHES WITH IMPERTINENCE. SUCH ART IS INCAPABLE OF FULFILLING ANY LITURGICAL FUNCTION: NOW, THEREFORE, CAN IT INSPIRE A DEVOTION THAT DID NOT GO INTO ITS MAKING? SUCH ART TEACHES A FALSE DOCTRINE THAT PRESENTS SANCTITY AS A GENTEEL SOCIAL ACCOMPLISHMENT, AN ACTIVITY SO MILD THAT IT HAS NEVER DISPLACED EVEN A HAIR IN THE COIFFURE OF THE FAIRY PLASTER PRINCESS, OR CALLOUSED THE HAND OF THE MONK WHO CANNOT READ HIS MISSAL BECAUSE A CUPID MASQUERADING AS THE HOLY CHILD IS SITTING ON IT. BUT EVEN SUCH POOR ART CANNOT BE ALL NEUTRAL; INCAPABLE OF GREATNESS, IT WILL SEEP ITS POISON, HEDDLE ITS MEANNESS, INTO THOSE WHO MAKE USE OF IT REGARDLESS OF PIOUS INTENT.

ONE COULD WISH THAT SOMEWHERE IN THE BOOK FATHER O'CONNELL, DESCENDING FROM AESTHETIC THEORY TO THE MENTION OF CLERICAL PRACTICE, HAD ACKNOWLEDGED THE CARDINAL FACT THAT THE ABOMINATION OF THE DESOLATION IS ALREADY ENTRENCHED IN THE TEMPLE. IF MODERNISTIC ART EVER GAINED A TOE HOLD, IT COULD BE SLAPPED DOWN AND BOUNCED OUT BY LOCAL ORDINARIES WITHOUT CAUSING MORE THAN A RIPLE OF PROTEST. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF -- IN ORDER TO ZEALOUSLY PRESERVE THE ARTISTIC MIDDLE-GROUND THAT THE AUTHOR, QUOTING ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITIES, PRESENTS AS THE IDEAL FOR SACRED ART -- ORDINARIES WOULD FORCEFULLY EJECT FROM THE CHURCHES IN THEIR CARE ALL THIRD-RATE STATUES AND PICTURES?

WHAT SHOULD SACRED ART LOOK LIKE, THEN, WHAT SHOULD IT BE? CANON LAW STATES: "ORDINARIES . . . ARE TO TAKE CARE THAT . . . THE FORMS RECEIVED FROM CHRISTIAN TRADITION ARE PRESERVED!" FATHER O'CONNELL LUCIDLY EXPLAINS HOW "FORMS" CAN HARDLY REFER TO ANY ONE STYLE. RATHER THAN PHYSICAL SHAPES, THEY SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS FORMS, RULES OF CONDUCT THAT GO TO MAKE THE PERMANENT CORE AROUND WHICH EVOLVES THE DYNAMIC PAGEANT OF EVER-CHANGING STYLES.

WHEN IT COMES TO A LESS METAPHYSICAL DEFINITION OF WHAT IT IS THAT THE ARTIST-CRAFTSMAN SHOULD FASHION -- PERHAPS BECAUSE OF THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ENCOMPASSING ALL STYLES AND THE MOODS OF ALL LANDS IN A FEW WORDS -- THE INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN ARE VAGUE, AND TO THE LITERALMINDED MAY PROVE A LETDOWN. WE LEARN THAT THE ARTIST SHOULD DO HIS WORK " . . . WITH DUE REGARD TO THE CLAIMS OF THE BEAUTIFUL." HE SHOULD CLOTHE RELIGIOUS IDEAS WITH "LOVELY FORMS." FATHER O'CONNELL BORROWS FROM CARDINAL COSTANTINI WHAT MAY BE THE MOST "HORIZONTAL" DEFINITION EVER VOICED OF ART, "ART IS NOT AN ENIGMA TO BE SOLVED. . . IT OUGHT TO KNOW HOW TO MAKE ITSELF UNDERSTOOD QUICKLY AND GIVE PLEASURE!"

BEAUTY, LOVELINESS, PLEASURE, ARE DANGEROUS TERMS TO APPLY TO SACRED ART. TO THE FEW FAMILIAR WITH THE WORK OF THE GREAT MASTERS (CARDINAL COSTANTINI AND FATHER O'CONNELL MAY WELL BE AMONG THEM) THESE TERMS MAY SUGGEST, HOWEVER NEARLY, THE MEDITATIVE EXALTATION ONE FEELS IN THE PRESENCE OF AESTHETIC GRANDEUR. AS FOR THE MANY WHO ARE FAMILIAR ONLY WITH THE MEDICINE, THERE IS THE RISK THESE VERY TERMS WILL BE CONSTRUED AS AN INDICEMENT OF ALL GREATNESS, AND USED AS A SLY JUSTIFICATION OF THE WORST IN CHURCH ART. PLASTER SAINTS ARE INDEED NO ENIGMA TO BE SOLVED. THEY MAKE THEMSELVES UNDERSTOOD INSTANTANEOUSLY. THOSE WHO KNOW NOTHING ABOUT ART BUT WHO KNOW WHAT THEY LIKE MAY WELL FIND PLEASURE IN THEM.

THERE IS AN IMPLIED INNER STRAIN BETWEEN THE TWO FUNCTIONS OF LITURGICAL ART; THAT OF PRAISING GOD, AND THAT OF CATERING TO THE CONGREGATION. THIS ART SHOULD BE SUBLIME ON THE ONE HAND, AND LUCID ON THE OTHER. ITS QUALITY WILL CHANGE AS THE EMPHASIS OSCILLATES BETWEEN THE USE OF ART FOR THE ALTAR AND FOR THE PEOPLE. THOUGH HE MENTIONS BOTH FUNCTIONS, FATHER O'CONNELL WITH A TOUCH OF THE PRAGMATIC, SEEMS CHURCH ART MOSTLY TOWARDS THE PEOPLE. THIS PROCESS OF LEVELING ART DOWN TO POPULAR FUNCTION HAS ITS ARTISTIC DRAWBACKS. IT IMPLICITLY PUTS A PREMIUM ON THE MORE PEDESTRIAN FORMS OF ART, WHILE LESS SIMPLE STYLES WILL, AT THE LEAST, AROUSE SUSPICION. THUS PRIMED TO EJECT A NUMBER OF ARTISTS FROM HIS IDEAL CHURCH, FATHER O'CONNELL ALREADY FEELS THEIR RESENTMENT; "SOME OF WHAT I WRITE WILL PROBABLY BE UNACCEPTABLE TO CERTAIN MODERN ARTISTS." AS TO WHAT IT IS THAT SUCH FELLOWS GO, CONFINED AS THEY NOW ARE TO THE OUTER DARKNESS, SERVICEABLE CARDINAL COSTANTINI IS CALLED UPON TO FILL IN DETAILS: THEIR ART "LOSES ITSELF IN THE WILD FOREST OF CUBIST AND ABSTRACT ART." FATHER O'CONNELL ADDS A FOOTNOTE, NECESSARY TO BRING THE QUOTE UP-TO-DATE: "CUBIST ART, IT SEEMS HAS FADED OUT OF FASHION." IT HAS FADED; MIND YOU, WITHOUT EVER HAVING BEEN GIVEN A CHANCE TO SPOIL A SINGLE CHURCH WALL!

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, OTHER WAYS OF LOOKING AT CHURCH ART THAN TO CONVEIVE OF IT AS LITTLE MORE THAN AN ILLUSTRATION, A SPUR TO DEVOTION, A BIT OF MACHINERY USEFUL TO LULL THE CHURCH-GOER INTO QUIET THROUGH MASS AND SUNDAY SERMON. OTHERWISE, WHY WAS THIS PROBLEM OF SCANDAL, THAT LOOKS SO PROMINENT TODAY, MINIMIZED OR BY-PASSED AS UNIMPORTANT BY PAST GENERATIONS OF CLERICS WHO WERE ALSO ART PATRONS? FATHER O'CONNELL TELLS A STORY NEARLY TO THE POINT: "UNTIL THE TWELFTH OR THIRTEENTH CENTURY, THE CHRIST REPRESENTED ON THE CROSS WAS THE TRIUMPHANT REDEEMER OF THE WORLD, REIGNING FROM THE CROSS, ALIVE, WITH OPEN EYES, CLOTHED IN THE COLOBIUM AND OFTEN BEARING A JEWELLED CROWN.... FROM THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY HE IS MOSTLY DEPICTED AS DEAD, WITH EYES CLOSED, HEAD DROPPED, AN ANQUISHED FACE, BLEEDING WOUNDS, CROWNED WITH THORNS, AND NAKED. . . . THIS AT FIRST SHOOKED THE FAITHFUL AND EVEN AROUSED INDIGNATION."

THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER FAMOUS SCANDALS CONNECTED WITH THE HISTORY OF CHURCH ART, IN FACT WITH SOME OF ITS GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS. ARETINO DID BERATE MICHELANGELO FOR PAINTING IN THE POPE'S OWN CHAPEL FRESQUES "FIT AT BEST FOR A BROTHEL OR A STEAM-BATH HOUSE." THIS CRITIC, A GREAT ART CONNOISSEUR, HAS GIVEN VENT TO PERSONAL SPIRIT. BUT THE STRENGTH OF THE STATEMENT CAME FROM THE FACT THAT, SO SAYING, HE GAVE VOICE TO THE REVILIZEMENT OF SO MANY GOOD PEOPLE DAUGHT IN THE WILDLY RISING CURRENT OF THE HIGH RENAISSANCE. FROM BYZANTINE TO ROMANESQUE TO GOTHIC; FROM THE ELABORATIONS OF BENINI TO THE CHAETER SIMPLICITY OF THE MATISSE CHAPEL AT VENICE; EACH COMING CHANGE HURT MEN SET IN THEIR WAYS, MEN WHOSE DEVOTIONS WERE SENTIMENTALLY BOUND TO THE STATUES, THE WINDOUS OR FRESQUES THEY LOOKED AT WHEN THEY FIRST LEARNED HOW TO KNEEL AND PRAY.

IN ANCIENT TIMES, CHURCHMEN DISREGARDED SO COMPLETELY THE QU'EN DIRAIT-ON IN FAVOR OF GREATNESS THAT THIS BRAVE ATTITUDE, SPREAD IN SPACE AND TIME, CAN TRULY BE SAID TO BE ONE OF THE FORMAE, ONE OF THE CONSTANTS THAT CAN NOW BE USED AS A GUIDE. THROUGH THE CENTURIES, THE RELATION BETWEEN CHURCHMEN AND ARTISTS HAS BEEN ONE OF INDEBILED BOLDNESS. ABBOTS AND POPES WERE SO QUICK AT ADOPTING THE NEW TRENDS THAT, WITH THE OUT-FOCUSING THAT COMES WITH TIME, IT SEEMS AS IF THE COMMISSIONS THEY GAVE INITIATED, RATHER THAN FURTHERED, THE NEW FORMS. FOR OVER FIFTEEN CENTURIES, THE HISTORY OF ALL WESTERN ART IS AS ONE WITH THE HISTORY OF CHURCH ART. WHY IS FATHER O'CONNELL RELUCTANT TO CONDEED TO THE CHURCH ITS GLORIOUS AND UNMATCHED ROLE AS AN ART PATRON? "THE CHURCH IN HER ART ASSIMILATED -- SLOWLY IT IS TRUE, NEVER IN A HURRY--WHAT IS GOOD FROM THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES...." AND AGAIN, "THE CHURCH, WHILE NO ENEMY TO REAL PROGRESS, IS BY ITS NATURE PRUDENT AND WISELY CONSERVATIVE."

THE SECRET OF THIS ANCIENT BOLDNESS MAY BE FOUND IN A KIND OF EMPHASIS ON THE ROLE OF SACRED ART OTHER THAN THAT WE PLACE TODAY. ART WAS SEEN PRIMARILY AS PRAISE GIVEN TO GOD, RATHER THAN AS A MATTER OF CATERING TO THE FAITHFUL. RELIGION ITSELF IS MORE THAN A SOCIAL GATHERING, OF MORE THAN THE FORMATION OF USEFUL CITIZENS, DOCILE EMPLOYEES, OR TRUSTED NEIGHBORS. FIRST OF ALL, IT IS THE RELATION, THE NAKED RELATION, OF MAN TO GOD. IN THE SAME WAY, THE FACET OF SACRED ART THAT TURNS TOWARDS THE ALTAR IS IN ITSELF A VIRTUE, AN ACT OF FAITH, A VISIBLE PRAYER, REGARDLESS OF THE PRESENCE OR ABSENCE, OF A CONGREGATION. THUS CONCEIVED, THE ROLE OF CHURCH ART STRESSES SACREDNESS MORE THAN MERELY THE MEANS OF REACHING THE PEOPLE.

THIS NEW ANGLE SUGGESTS AS A NEW POSTULATE, THAT THE BEST ART IS NONE TOO GOOD FOR GOD. THIS REQUIREMENT OF QUALITY IS ONE VERY DISTINCT FROM THAT OF READABILITY. WE BELIEVE IN DOGMATIC MYSTERIES THAT EXIST BEYOND OUR CAPACITY OF STATING AND OF UNDERSTANDING. IS IT NOT NATURAL THAT THE GREAT ARTIST, ENDOWED BEYOND THE USUAL MEASURE, THINKING AND PRACTICING HIS ART THROUGH A LIFETIME, MAY, ON ANOTHER PLANE THAN THE DOGMATIC, PROPOSE WHAT TO LESS ENDOWED MEN AND LESS TRAINED EYES WILL APPEAR TO BE AESTHETIC MYSTERIES? CERTAINLY GOD, PRESENT ON THE ALTAR, CAN NEVER BE PUZZLED BY AESTHETIC DEPTH, BUT HE MAY STILL APPRECIATE THE PRAISE IMPLICIT IN AN UNUSUAL ART FORM; WHAT THIS ART CONTAINS OF PURITY, OF SELFLESSNESS, OF DEDICATION ON THE PART OF THE ARTIST, OF ZEAL TO REFINE, COMPOSE, AND ARTICULATE A GENUINE FORM OF MANUAL AND VISUAL PRAYER.

EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE AT LAST EMERGED FROM THE MODERN "DARK AGES", WHEN ONLY THE GOTHIC WAS CONSIDERED A FIT STYLE FOR A CHURCH, A FLAVOR OF ECLECTICISM STILL CLINGS TO CHURCH ART, A FLAVOR OF WHICH THE LAY ART OF OUR TIME IS QUITE FREE.

"THE FIDELITY TO CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN ART. . . . DOES NOT MEAN:

1--MERELY COPYING OF PAST WORKS OF ART. . . .

2--IT DOES NOT MEAN 'ARCHAEOLOGISM'. . . . AN ADOPTION OF THE OLD MERELY BECAUSE IT IS OLD. . . .

3--IT DOES NOT EXCLUDE THE MODERN, PROVIDED IT IS GOOD AND SUITABLE FOR SACRED ART. . . ."

IF WE THINK OF ART AS DECORATION, AS A PLEASING INDUCEMENT FOR THE FAITHFUL, THEN WE MAY PICK, AS THE BOYS FURNITURE, FROM THIS AND THAT CENTURY, INCLUDING OUR OWN, ELEMENTS THAT WILL, ONCE PUT TOGETHER, PROCURE AN ENSEMBLE TO OUR TASTE. IF ART MEANS FOR US INSTEAD A VOICE LIFTED IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD, THAT WILL FOREVER IN THE SANCTUARY REPRESENT US AS DOES THE LIGHTED LAMP, THEN THE BACK DOOR FOR MODERN ART IS NOT ENOUGH. WHY FRISK LIVING ART AT THE DOOR FOR BLACKJACKS OR BRASS KNUCKLES, IF ONE

HAD NO OTHER TO CHOOSE FROM? TO PRAISE GOD, SACRED ART MUST BE A LIVE ART, BORN IN ANGUISH, EMBODYING ENOUGH THAT IS GENUINE OF OUR TIMES AND OURSELVES TO DESERVE EXISTENCE THROUGH COMING CENTURIES. THE ILLUSION OF A CHOICE AMONG STYLES GROWS WITH THE EVER-MULTIPLYING ART FOLIOS AND COLOR FACSIMILES THAT MAKE IT DECEPTIVELY EASY TO TRAVEL BACK AND FORTH THROUGH PAST ERAS WITH ALL THE BLASE NONCHALANCE OF AN ALLEY OOP. THERE COMES AN URGE TO FILL OUR KNAPSACKS WITH SPLENDID LOOT, WITH GEMS PRIED OUT OF CONTEXT FROM ART HISTORY. WE STAND ATOUR THE MOUNTAIN AND SURVEY THESE MANY KINGDOMS, AND GREAT IS THE TEMPTATION TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE OURS FOR THE PICKING.

IF WHAT WE QUERY AFTER IS GENUINE ART, IT WOULD BE WISER TO FORGET SO MUCH BEAUTIFUL AND IDLE KNOWLEDGE. A TOTAL LACK OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE WOULD SERVE US BETTER. VILLART DE HONNECOURT, IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, MADE A GROTESQUE COPY, IN HIS SKETCHBOOK, OF A ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS, AND CAPTIONED IT "THE SEPULCHRE OF AN ARAE." SUCH LACK OF ECLECTICISM, OF TOLERANCE FOR ANCIENT FORMS OF ART, SEEM TO US A PROFESSIONAL SIN, OR AT LEAST AN INTOLERABLE HANDICAP: YET DE HONNECOURT IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS BUILDERS OF CATHEDRALS.

WHAT IS MORE EXPRESSIVE OF THE EXCLUSIVE LOVE OF MODERN ART THAT DEVoured ANCIENT CRAFTSMEN, ARCHITECTS, AND CLERICAL PATRONS, THAN THE ASYMMETRICAL, LOPSIDED CONSTRUCTIONS THEY LEFT US; THEY MAY START UNDERGROUND WITH A ROMANESQUE CRYPT, OR WHICH IS RAISED A CATHOIC HAVE FLANKED BY TOWERS WHOSE TOPS MAY EMERGE INTO THE FULL RESURGENCE. EACH PROGRESS, EVEN EACH CHANGE, WAS SO EAGERLY SEIZED UPON THAT PREVIOUS OVERALL PLANS WERE DISCARDED TO MAKE PLACE FOR EACH SUCCESSIVE STAGE OF "MODERN ART".

BETWEEN US AND SIMILARLY VITAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS THERE INTRUDES A CONTINUOUS REASSURANCE AND REINFORCEMENT OF PREJUDICES THAT WE EXPERIENCE EACH TIME WE CONTACT A PAST PERIOD MORE COMFORTING TO LOOK AT THAN IS OUR PRESENT. WE SIGH FOR A GOLDEN AGE THAT WILL NEVER RETURN; "THE TIME FOR RAPHAELS AND MICHELANGELO IS PAST." WE HOLD UP AS PARAGONS FOR THE LIVING ARTIST OBJECTIVES AND MONUMENTS THAT WOULD BETTER REMAIN FOR BE DEHYDRATED BYONES. STRANGE BEDEFLOWERS SHARE THE SUBCONSCIOUS OF TODAY'S ART PATRON. THE SYZANTINES, ANGELICO, RAPHAEL, BERNINI, AND SO ON TO GILL AND BOSSERON CHAMBERS. THESE DORMANTS AND THEIR REMEMBERED WORKS CONSTITUTE THE UNFAIR TOUCHSTONE FOR WHAT THE LIVING ARTIST BRINGS, HAT IN HAND, BE IT BLUEPRINT, MAQUETTE, OR MURAL CARTOON.

THE PRACTICING ARTIST ALSO SEES AND ADMIRES ANCIENT ART, AND MULLS OVER ART FACSIMILES. AT WORKING TIME, AT THE MOMENT IN WHICH THIS MAN--AMiable OR BOORISH, PROUD OR HUMBLE ON EVERYDAY CONTACT--ACTS AS AN ART MAKER, HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE FALLS AWAY FROM HIM AS OBSOLETE. HE FACES HIS MATERIAL, TOOLS IN HAND, WITH THE SAME BLANKNESS AND BLANDNESS WITH WHICH THE MOST PROVINCIAL CRAFTSMAN OF THE SO-CALLED DARK AGES TACKLED HIS TASK. OTHERWISE, THIS ASSURED SCIENCE, THIS MEMORIZED VISUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA, ONLY GETS IN THE WAY OF WHAT HE IS ABOUT TO DO -- TO SEARCH FOR AND STRIKE CHORDS THAT WILL BE VALID ONLY INASMUCH AS THEY ARE TUNED TO HIS OWN SELF AND TIMES.

POPE JULES, THE ONE WHO COMMISSIONED THE SIXTINE CHAPEL DECORATIONS, QUIPPED ONCE TO A CARDINAL THAT HE HAD BEEN GIVEN POWER TO CREATE CARDINALS AT WILL, BUT WAS POWERLESS TO BRING FORTH A MICHELANGELO. THIS PROUD POPE'S HUMBLE ASSERTION COULD BE AMPLIFIED: NO TRUE ARTIST, AND HE NEED NOT BE ON A LEVEL WITH MICHELANGELO, CAN BE MADE BY HAVING A MAN TOE THE LINE OF ECCLESIASTICAL LAW, OR BY FORCE-FEEDING HIM ON LITURGICAL KNOWLEDGE: NO MAN CAN BECOME AN ARTIST BECAUSE OF PERSONAL PIETY, WILLING OBEDIENCE TO LEARNED SUGGESTIONS, OR AWE AT THE SACREDNESS OF CHURCH ART. IN THAT SENSE FATHER COUQUIER'S OPINION HOLDS GOOD: HE PUT MORE TRUST IN GENIUS THAN IN FAITH.

ONCE FOUND, THE LIVE ARTIST SHOULD SOMEHOW BE PUT TO WORK IN THE HOUSE OF GOD. WHAT HE DOES THERE SHOULD, IN THE WORDS OF POPE PIUS XII IN MEDIATOR DEI, "...TAKE INTO ACCOUNT MORE THE NEEDS OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY THAN THE PERSONAL TASTE AND JUDGMENT OF THE ARTIST." ONE SENSES HERE A CONCERN PECULIAR TO THE CONDITIONS OF OUR TIME. THE INFERENCE IS THAT TODAY THERE EXISTS AT LEAST A LATENT CONFLICT BETWEEN THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE CHURCH AND THE PATH OF ARTISTIC FULFILLMENT. THIS IDEA WOULD SURPRISE PAST GENERATIONS OF ARTISTS. BATTALIONS OF CRAFTSMEN FOR WHOM THE CHURCH WAS THE IDEAL AND ALL-UNDERSTANDING PATRON: MEN WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN AT A TOTAL LOSS IF ASKED TO DISENTANGLE THE ONE FROM THE OTHER OF THEIR TWO GOALS, LITURGICAL AND AESTHETIC. CONDITIONS HAVE CHANGED. ARTISTS, AT LEAST LIVE ARTISTS, ARE NOW OPEN TO SUSPICION AS EGOCENTRIC, EGOLATRIC, SMITTEN WITH RELATED HANDICAPS. IN TURN, THE ARTIST MAY BE A FAITHFUL PARISHIONER, BUT THE ART HE SEES IN HIS PARISH CHURCH WILL PROVE MOSTLY AN EYESORE, AND HE WILL LEARN TO PRAY WITH HIS EYES CLOSED. PERHAPS HE WILL PRAY FOR A RENEWAL OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN CLERIC AND ARTIST, A RETURN TO WHAT EXISTED ONCE BEFORE.

WHEN SUCH A PRAYER IS ANSWERED, THIS GETTING TOGETHER AGAIN OF CLERICS AND ARTISTS NEED NOT STIR UNdue TREPIDATION. ARTISTS WILL PROVE, ON ACQUAINTANCE, A SURPRISINGLY TRANQUIL BUNCH OF FELLOWS. THEIR PROBLEMS ARE MAINLY THOSE OF CRAFTSMEN. THEY KNOW BETTER THAN THE CRITIC OR PATRON THAT ART, WHATEVER ITS ENDS AND ITS FORM, IS FOR THEM, IF IT IS TO BE AT ALL, ARDUOUS MANUAL LABOR. THEY MAY ALSO REMAIN TACTFULLY SILENT WHEN TOLD OF THE CHASM BETWEEN MODERN AND MODERNISTIC ART, AND WILL MEELY PROMISE TO BE ON THEIR BEST BEHAVIOR. ACTUALLY, THE NEW FOUND USEFULNESS, THE MONUMENTAL SCALE OF THE WORK AT HAND AND ITS BOSSERON TIE-UP WITH ARCHITECTURE, UNDERPUSH THE SACREDNESS OF THEIR MISSION, WILL PROVE MORE INSTRUCTIVE AND MORE IMPERATIVE THAN HAIKY A PAPER-PRONOUNCEMENT. BIG TO DO HIS BEST, THE ARTIST WILL DO SO, IN ALL FREEDOM AND ALL HUMILITY.

IF I MAY MENTION MY MOST RECENT EXPERIENCE IN THE LITURGICAL MURAL FIELD, IT DID PROVE A GRATIFYING ONE. THERE ARE SOOTHING AFFINITIES BETWEEN CLERICS AND ARTISTS. THE CLERIC, HOWEVER MUCH TIME HE MAY SPEND IN STRENGTHENING THE FINANCES OF THE PARISH, IS FORBIDDEN PERSONAL WEALTH BY CANON LAW. THE ARTIST MAY NOT AFFORD LURE ANYHOW, DEALING AS HE DOES IN A COMMODITY THAT IS NOT EVEN SEASONAL. THE CLERIC REALIZES THE PRIMACY OF THE SPIRITUAL ORDER. HE KNOWS HOW PHYSICAL MATTER -- OIL, WATER, BEESWAX OR FIRE -- MAY THROUGH RITES BECOME A CARRIER AND DISTRIBUTOR OF GRACE. THE ARTIST ALSO IS A MAKER OF OBJECTS THAT REMAIN SENSELESS AND USELESS AS SUCH, ACQUIRING MEANING AND FUNCTION SOLELY ON THE MYSTERIOUS PLANE OF THE SPIRIT, ON THE BORDERLING OF THE SPIRITUAL. AFFINITIES WILL WORK BOTH WAYS: ONCE UNDERSTOOD OUR LORD'S SAYING THAT THE LILY OF THE FIELD IS CLOTHED IN MORE SPLENDOR THAN SOLOMON IN ALL HIS GLORY, THE SEED OF AESTHETIC WONDER WILL BE SOWN, AND THE CLERIC SHOULD SEE EYE TO EYE WITH THE ARTIST.