ART, SACRED AND OTHERWISE

COMMENTS ON A NEW BOOK

JEAN CHARLOT

This book will be welcomed by the artist who works, or ever hopes to work, in the liturgical field. It states church laws obliquely and authoritatively. Its goals and don'ts, rather than being personal to the author, draw upon 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, and 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. B. 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 50/50'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 practicing artist, and only that, seems to me to be a limitation, but it is connected to the problem of art-making, and is the very limited purpose of this review."

First, let us look at the pitfalls that threaten the unruly craftsmen who indulge in work for the church. On one hand there are, as Cardinal Celsus Constantini 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, newer subjective, often bizarre and extravagant, sometimes crude and even barbarous, the product of an uncivilized sentimentalism and mere terminal whim. Such art, if as black as painted should indeed also be avoided.

The next step of stepping tip-toe on a razor's edge without falling into either chasm makes a most distasteful picture both for the artist who could become an art patron and for the artist who longs to put his craft at the service of the church. In theoretical freedom, Father O'Connell pulinuates partially 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 the photographic, often in picture books, in the matter of sacred art. The picture changes, the careful balance that the book suggests, the ideal of church art as an example of the style, milieu, will receive a rude jolt in practice, as we go from church to church in our aesthetic pilgrimages. Indeed, very few of the churches we visit will show anything as blatant as originality, and where are works to be found in a modern idiom bold enough to be suspected of follow-traveling with the modernistic? This nightmare of churches rendered unmeaning by tortured ideas and sacral 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-pervasive, arrayed in armor, and so strong in manner and enthroned positions as to that they have already fought and won the battle — are the samples of industrial junk, that defile sacred art. They stand victorious, a guard of honor around the altar, a plastic feet on top of their pulpits, impervious to the fulminations of the Congregation of Rites, to the admonitions of Pius XII, to the opinions of Roman cardinals, and — with 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 1800s that menacing, the position and dignity of sacred art, but — intensely more acute — this empirical counter-revolution of bad art, born of lukewarm, a plastic feet on top of their pulpits, impervious to the fulminations of the Congregation of Rites, that defile sacred art. Such a work makes a false claim to present sanctity as a gentle social accomplishment, or any little can be cleared up, that has been displaced even a hand in the disguise of the fairy plaster princess, or following the hand of the hook and cannot read his misdeeds as a cupid macerating as the Holy Child is sitting on it, but even such poor art cannot be all neutral: incapable of greatness, it will feed its poison, mold its meanings, into those who use it regardless of pius intent.

One could wish that someone in the book Father O'Connell, descending from aesthetic theory to the mention of clerical practice, had acknowledged the cardinal fact that the assumption of the desoration is already expressed in the temple. If modernistic art ever carried a toe hold, it could be discussed and rounded out by local ordinaries without causing more than a ripple of protest. What could happen if — in order to zealously preserve the artistic middle-ground 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, in the forms received from Christian tradition are preserved. Father O'Connell, lucidly explaining 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 artistcraftsman should fashion — perhaps because of the impossibility of encompassing all styles and the modes of all lands — in a few words: the instruction in the text is vague, and to the liturgical-minded may prove a lesson. He should clothe religious ideas with "lovely forms". Father O'Connell borrows from Cardinal Constantin what may be the most "horizontal" definition ever voiced of art, "art is not an enigma to be solved... [I ought to know how to make itself understood quickly and give pleasure]."
BEAUTY, LOVELINESS, PLEASURE, ARE DANGEROUS TEMPTS TO APPLY TO SACRED ART. TO THE FEW FAMILIAR WITH THE WORK OF THE GREAT MASTERS (CARDINAL COSTANTI AND FATHER O'CONNELL MAY WELL BE THE HIGHEST OF THEM) THIS TEMPTATION MIGHT BUDGE; HOWEVER NEARLY THE HEDATIC EXALTATION ONE FEELS IN THE PRESENCE OF AESTHETIC GRANDURE, AS FOR THE MANY WHO ARE FAMILIAR ONLY WITH THE MEDICINE, THERE IS THE RISK THESE VERY TERMS WILL BE CONSTRUED AS AN INDUCEMENT OF ALL GREATNESS; AND USED AS A BLY JUICIFICATION OF THOSE FATIONS OF CONTAMINATED ART. PLANTED Survival Is Indeed No Enigma To Be Solved. THEY MAKE THEMSELVES UNDERSTAND INSTANTANEOUSLY. THOSE WHO KNOW NOTHING ABOUT ART BUT WHO KNOW WHAT THEY LIKE MAY WELL FIND PLEASURE IN THEM.

THERE IS AN IMPLIES INNER STRAIN BETWEEN THE TWO FUNCTIONS OF LITURGICAL ART. THE PRAISING GOD, AND THAT OF CATERING TO THE CONGREGATION. THIS ART SHOULD BE SUPLINIS THE ONE HAND, AND LUCID ON THE OTHER. TO QUALITY WILL CHANGE AS THE OVERCAST OSCILLATES BETWEEN THE USE OF ART FOR THE ALTAR AND FOR THE ALTAR FOR NATIVE GROWING, FATHER O'CONNELL'S EXPLANATION WITH FUNCTION OF CHURCH ART TOWARDS THE PEOPLE. THIS PROCESSIONS OF LEVELING ART DOWN TO POPULAR FUNCTION HAS ARTISTIC DRAWBACKS. IT INHIBITIVELY PUTS A PREMIUM ON THE MORE PEDESTRIAN FORMS OF ART, WHILE LESS SIMPLE STYLES WILL, AT THE LEAST, AROUSE SUSPICION. THIS PRIME TO EXECUTE A NUMBER OF ARTISTS FROM HIS IDEAL ORDER TO DO CONSCIENCE, TIE ALREADY FEELS THEIR DETERMINATION. SOME OF WHAT I WRITE PROBABLY BE UNACCEPTABLE TO CERTAIN MODERN ARTISTS. AS TO WHAT IT IS THAT SUCH FELLONS DO, CONFINE AS THEY NOW ARE TO THE DARKER SIDE, SERVICEABLE CARDINAL COSTANTI IS CALLED UPON TO FALL IN DETAILS: THEIR ART "BLOWS ITSELF IN THE WILD FOREST OF CURBST AND ABSTAIN ART." FATHER O'CONNELL ADDS A POSTSCRIPT, NECESSARY TO REJOIN THE QUOTE UP-TO-DATE: "CURBST ART, IT SEEMS HAS FAILED OUT OF FASHION." IT HAS FAILED: HUMAN, WITHOUT EVER HAVING BEEN GIVEN A CHANCE TO SPOIL A SINGLE CHURCH MILL.

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, OTHER WAYS OF LOOKING AT CHURCH ART THAN TO CONCEIVE OF IT AS LITTLE MORE THAN AN ILLUSTRATION, A SPUR TO DEVOTION, A BIT OF MACHINE USEFUL TO LULL THE CHURCH-GoER INTO QUIET THROUGH MASS AND SUNDAY SERMON. OTHERWISE, WHY WAS THE PROBLEM OF SCANDAL, THAT LOOM SO PROMINENT TODAY, MINIMIZED OR BY-PASSED AS UNIMPORTANT BY PAST GENERATIONS? FATHER O'CONNELL'S TRIBUTE TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE CHURCH REPRESENTED ON THE CROSS WAS THE TRIUMPHANT REDEEMER OF THE WORLD, REIGNING FROM THE CROSS, ALIVE, WITH OPEN EYES, CLOTHED IN THE GLORIOUS AND OFTEN HAVING A JEWELLED CROWN, FROM THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY CYMBAE IN THE CHURCH, WHICH IS DEAD, C)f THE STEREO TYPE, BLOODED, BLOOD-MARKED FACE, BLOODED HEADS, BLOOD-MARKED HANDS, BLOODED HANDS AND THORNS, AND NAKED. THIS AT FIRST SHOOK THE FAITHFUL AND EVEN ARROGANT INDIGNATION.

THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER FAMOUS SCANDALS CONNECTED WITH THE HISTORY OF CHURCH ART, IN FACT WITH SOME OF ITS GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS. ARENDT DIED BECAUSE MICHAELANGELO FOR PAINTING IN THE PAPAL PALACE, PREVIOUS "BUT AT BEST FOR A BROTHEL OR A STEAM SHED." THIS CRITIC, A GREAT ART CONNOISSEUR, HAS GIVEN THE THEORETICAL SPIKE BUT THE STRENGTH OF THE STATEMENT COMES FROM THE FACT THAT, AS HE SAID, HE GAVE VICTORY TO THE IDEOLOGY OF SO MANY GOOD PEOPLE CAUGHT IN THE UGLY RISING CURRENTS OF THE HIGH RENAISSANCE, FROM BYZANTINE TO ROMANESQUE TO GOTHIC; FROM THE ELABORATIONS OF BERNINI TO THE NATURALISM OF MATISSE CHAPEL AT VENICE; EACH COMING CHANGE HURT MANY MEN IN THEIR WAYS, MEN WHO ONCE SENTIMENTALIZED TO THE STATUES, THE HINCOS OR PRECIOUS THEY LOOKED AT WHEN THEY FIRST LEARNED HOW TO KNEE AND PRAY.


THERE IS A NEW ATTEMPT AS A NEW POSTULATE, THAT THE BEST ART IS MORE GOOD FOR GOD. THIS REQUIREMENT OF QUALITY IS ONE VERY DISTINCT FROM THAT OF REALIZABILITY. WE BELIEVE IN DOGMATIC MYSTERIES THAT EXIST BEYOND OUR CAPACITY OF STATING AND OF UNDERSTANDING. IS IT NOT NATURAL THAT THE GREAT ARTISTS, EXCEEDING THE USUAL MEASURE, THINKING AND PRACTICING HIS ART THROUGH A LIFETIME, MAY, ON ANOTHER HAND, DISREGARD THE DOGMATIC PROPOSES THAT TO LESS ENDORSED MEN AND LESS TRAINED EYES WILL APPEAR TO BE OF SUCH TALENT AS TO BE LACK OF BEAUTY TO BE THE PRIMARY, CAN THE BEAUTY OF ART BE DEPTH, BUT BE MAY STILL APPRECIATE THE PRAISE IMPLICIT IN AN UNUSUAL ART FORM; WHAT THIS ART CONTAINS OF PURITY, SELFLESSNESS, OR DEEDication ON THE PART OF THE ARTIST, OF ZEAL TO REFINE, COMPOSE, AND ARTICULATE A GENUINE FORM OF MANAL AND VISUAL PRAYER.

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

THE PRAISING TO CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN ART... DOES NOT MEAN: 1—HERE COPYING OF PAST WORKS OF ART... 2—IT DOES NOT MEAN: "THANDHEERHELDRHE... 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 PLEASENG INDUCEMENT FOR THE FAITHFUL, THEN WE MAY PICK, AS ONE DOES FROM FURNITURE, FROM THIS AND THAT CENTURY, INCLUDING OUR OWN, ELEMENTS THAT WILL, ONCE PUT TOGETHER, PRODUCE AN ENSEMBLE TO OUR TASTE. IF ART MEANS FOR US INSTEAD A VOICE LIFTED IN THE PRESIDENCE OF GOD, THAT WILL FOREVER IN THE SANCTUARY REPRESENT US AS DOES THE LIGHTED LAMPS, THEN THE BACK DOOR FOR MODERN ART IS NOT ENOUGH. WHY PRIEST LIVING ART AT THE DOOR FOR BLACKJACKS OR BRASS KNOCKERS, IF ONE
HAS 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 GROUP WITH THE EVER-MULTIPLYING ART FELLS A STATURE COLOR-LAY THAT MAKE IT DECEPTIVELY EASY TO FORGET THROUGH PART GROWS ON THE BLASE NOOCHANCE OF AN ALLEY GOD. THESE COME AT AN URGENT TO FILL OUR KNAPSACKS WITH SPLENDOUR LOST, WITH SEMS FRIED OUT OF CONTEXT FROM ART HISTORY. WE STAND ATOP THE MOUNTAIN AND SURVEY THESE MARY RENOWING, AND GREAT IS THE TEMPTATION TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE ONS FOR THE PICKING.

IF WHAT WE QUEST AFTER IS GENUINE ART, IT WOULD BE SANE TO FORGET SO MUCH BEAUTIFUL AND IDEE KNOWLEDGE. A TOTALLY LACK OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE WOULD SERVE US BETTER. VILLARI DE HOMEOCOURT, IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, MADE A QUOTATION OF THE SIGILS IN THE HISTORICAL HISTORICAL EVIDENCE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION THEY LEFT US; THEY MAY START UNEROSING WITH A ROMANESQUE CRYPT, ON WHICH IS RAISED A OUTDOOR HAVE FLANGED BY TOWERS WHICH TOPS MAY EXTEND INTO THE FULL REPUBLIC. EACH PROGRESS, EVEN EACH CHANGE, WAS SO EASILY SEIZED UPON THAT PREVIOUS OVERALL PLANES WERE DISCARDED TO MAKE PLACE FOR EACH SUCCESSIVE STAGE OF "MODERN ART".

BETWEEN US AND SIMILARLY VITAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS THERE ENTERS A UNSTOPPABLE REASSURANCE AND REINVESTMENT OF INDIGESTIONS THAT WE EXPERIENCE EACH TIME WE CONTACT A WORK PART OFMIST HARMONIOUS, A STATE WHERE THE HARMONY OF CONSTRUCTIVE THINGS LEFT US; THEY MAY START UNEROSING WITH A ROMANESQUE CRYPT, ON WHICH IS RAISED A OUTDOOR HAVE FLANGED BY TOWERS WHICH TOPS MAY EXTEND INTO THE FULL REPUBLIC. EACH PROGRESS, EVEN EACH CHANGE, WAS SO EASILY SEIZED UPON THAT PREVIOUS OVERALL PLANES WERE DISCARDED TO MAKE PLACE FOR EACH SUCCESSIVE STAGE OF "MODERN ART".

THE PRACTICING ARTIST ALSO SEES AND APPRECIATES ANCIENT ART, AND NULLS OVER ART FACSIMILES. AT WORKING TIME, AT THE MOMENT IN WHICH THIS MAN-AMADE OR составлен, PROUD OR HUMBLE ON EVERYDAY CONTACT—ACTS AS AN ART MAKER, HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE FALLS AWAY FROM HIM AS OBSCOUR. HE FACES HIS MATERIAL TOOLS IN HAND, WITH THE SAME BLANKNESS AND BLINDNESS WITH WHICH THE PROVINCIAL CRAFTSMAN OF THE SO-CALLED DARK AGES TACKLED HIS TASK. OTHERWISE, THIS ASSUMED SCIENCE, THIS UNDECORATED VISUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA, ONLY GETS IN THE WAY OF WHAT HE IS ABOUT TO DO—TO REACH FOR AND STRIKE CHORDS THAT WILL BE VALID ONLY TO THOSE AS THEY ARE TUNED TO HIS OWN SELF AND TIMES.

POPE JULES, THE ONE WHO COMMISSIONED TITIAN'S CHAPEL DECORATIONS, QUOTED ONCE TO A CARDINAL THAT HE HAD BEEN GIVEN POWER TO CREATE CARDINALS AT WILL, BUT WAS POWERLESS TO BRING FORTH A MICHAELANGELO. THIS PROUD POPE'S HUMBLE ABBREVIATION COULD BE APPRECIATED; NO TRUE ARTIST, AND HE NEED NOT BE ON A LEVEL WITH MICHAELANGELO, CAN BE MADE BY HAVING A MAN TO THE LINE OF ECCLESIASTICAL LAW, OR FORCE-FEEDING HIM ON LINGUISTICAL KNOWLEDGE: NO MAN CAN BECOME AN ARTIST BECAUSE OF PERSONAL PIETY, WISHING SEDUCTION TO LEARNED SUGGESTIONS, OR AVE AT THE SACREDNESS OF CHURCH ART. IN THAT SENSE FAther CONTUPTAL 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 DOES HE THERE SHOULD, IN THE WORDS OF POPE Pius XII IN HEDATOR DEX, "...TAKE INTO ACCOUNT MORE THE NEEDS OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY THAN THE PERSONAL TASTE AND JUDGMENT OF THE ARTIST." ONE SENSES HERE A CONSCIOUS PERSPECTIVE TO THE CONDITIONS OF OUR TIME. THE INTENTION IS THAT TODAY THERE EXISTS AT LEAST A LATENT SUPPLEMENT BETWEEN THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE CHURCH AND THE PATH OF ARTISTIC FULFILLMENT. THIS IDEA WOULD SURPRISE PART GENERATIONS OF ARTISTS, BATTALTIONS OF CRAFTSMEN FOR WHOM THE CHURCH WAS THE IDEAL AND THE ALL-UNDERSTANDING PATRON; MEN WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN AT A TOTAL LOSS IF ASKED TO DISRENODE, FROM THE OTHERS OF THEIR TWINS GOTHIC, LITURGICAL, AND ARTISTIC CONDITION, HAVE CHANGED. ARTISTS, AT LEAST LINE ARTISTS, ARE NOW OPEN TO SUSPICION AS EOCENTRIC, EOCALITRIC, SMITTEN WITH RELATED HABIT, IN TIVE, THE ARTIST MAY BE A FRAUDULENT PRIEST, BUT THE ARTIST HE SEES IN HIS PARISH CHURCH WILL PROVE MIGHTY AN EYESORE, AND HE CAN LEARN TO PRAY WITH HIS EYES CLOSED. PERHAPS HE WILL WAIT FOR A RENAISSANCE OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN CLERIC AND ARTIST, A RETURN TO WHAT EXISTED LONG BEFORE,

WHEN SUCH A PRAYER IS ANNOINTED, THE SETTING TOGETHER AGAIN OF CLERICS AND ARTISTS NEED NOT STIR UNNECESSARY COMPLAINTION. 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 FORMS AND ITS FORMS, IS FOR THEM; IF IT IS TO BE AT ALL, ARDENT AND MANUAL LABOR. THEY MAY NOT EVEN TRULY OR FULLY RELIST WHEN TOLD OF THE CHASM BETWEEN MODERN AND MODERNIST ART, AND WILL EASILY PROPOSE TO BE ON THEIR BEST BEHAVIOR ACTUALLY, THE NEW FOUND USEFULNESS, THE MONUMENTAL SCALE OF THE WORK AT HAND AND ITS SOBERING TIE-UP WITH ARCHITECTURE, UPON MOST THE SACREDNESS OF THEIR MISSION, WILL PROVE MORE INSTRUCTIVE AND MORE IMPERATIVE THAN ANY PAPER-PROMPTING. BIG TO DO IS BEST, THE ARTIST WILL DO SO, IN ALL FREEDOM AND ALL HUMANITY.