

The Art of Theology

BAD CHRISTIAN ART is everywhere. We have all seen in a variety-store window the mass-produced Madonna with mouth askew and blurred eyes. It is doubly offensive: it is not art and it is not Christian. Both of these are required for an object to qualify as Christian art. Good intentions cannot supply for a lack of talent, though it is the temptation of the devout to imagine they do. The nineteenth century has given us many examples of the inadequacy of desire alone. At Lourdes, for example, the art has been referred to as “the devil’s revenge.” Today this devil has abandoned kitsch for plywood panelling and banners. That these were made by devout Catholics is clear; no one else could have imagined such objects. But being a good Catholic does give one the power of a Rumpelstiltskin to change the straw of bad art into the gold of good. Less adverted to is the second quality needed for art to be Christian: a religious commitment on the part of the artist. Great artists may depict religious themes without producing religious art. Not many of Michelangelo’s stupendous creations, for example, invite the viewer to prayer, flawless as they may be artistically.

There is an instance in Saskatoon of devotion and skill coming together to form a great work of Christian art. In the chapel of Saint Thomas More College, one wall is covered by a mural depicting the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The artist, William Kurelek, painted the entire mural in only ten days and, in accord with the Eastern tradition, he fasted and prayed the entire time. The result is a painting that makes a powerful religious impression on the viewer. For many people a similar effect is produced by icons, the religious paintings of the Eastern Church. It is an essential part of the icon that the artist view his work as a religious act. Before he applies his brush to the canvas, he goes to confession and communion, he prays, and he fasts.

The same principles apply to the art of theologizing. The raw materials for this art consist of the Bible and Tradition, the stuff and substance of our faith. Of course, any scholar can work with these materials. But to do theology is to go beyond the abstract, objective interest such scholars pretend to restrict themselves to. Like the Christian work of art, theological constructs are the products of faith and skill and, like the religious artist, the theologian must accompany his work with prayer and fasting. This conjunction produced the powerful writings of the Fathers of the Church and of the great theologians of the Middle Ages. Their insights are so resonant with Scripture and Catholic doctrine as to compel our admiration; they are works that come from and nourish prayer. Consequently there are two sorts of inadequate theologians; one will lack scholarship, the other the virtue of religion. The product will be, variously, a work of devotion or of some

science such as history or sociology. All of these are fine things, but they are not theology. Where both qualities are lacking we find the theological equivalent of the variety-store Madonna.

Catholics have often tended to accept good intentions as a substitute for scholarship, but now that we have come out of our ghettos into universities, I fear we do the opposite. The Christian artist treats the unmarked canvas as if it were the unblemished soul fresh from baptism. Is his work to be of God or of “this world”? The Christian artist kneels in spirit before he makes the first mark. And so, too, theology should be written on one’s knees. I believe we have a lot of scholarship passing itself off as theology, too many books and articles that begin by saying something like, “speaking simply as a scholar I can say that there is nothing in Scripture that requires a ministerial priesthood in the Church.” Scholars may say many strange things: that there is nothing of Christ in the Paschal Lamb or that the psalms are not Christian prayers, but what would a theologian say? To favour abolishing private confession, for example, on psychological or sociological grounds or because the Church has abandoned other ancient traditions, does not much illuminate a *theological* issue. What is there in such arguments that is the fruit of prayer? Nor do arguments based on necessity alone carry much weight. If clergy are in short supply, should we not do penance in sackcloth and ashes, pleading for the blessing of abundant vocations before we allow ourselves to cast aside the restrictions that have characterized the selection of ordinands? Abraham and Sarah decided to accomplish God’s promise on their own, and they brought forth an internecine conflict between Isaac, the progenitor of the Jews, and Esau, of the Arabs, that has been rekindled in our day. Theological discussions will be based on the continuity of the presence of Christ in the Church, on the teachings of the magisterium, and the brilliant work of theologians who are men of learning, prayer, and penance, such as Yves Congar, John Henry Newman, Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Church Fathers.

But the viewer and the artist together make the work of art. In order to profit from theology, therefore, I must regard it in the same spirit that informed its construction. Like the devout soul before an icon, I approach authentic theology with prayer and fasting, that the purified senses may be alive to the religious truths there contained. ❧