A Survey of Marian Art

by Fr. Johann Roten, S.M.

Some consider religion as otherworldly, abstract, and removed from the "real thing." Yet, religion has been for centuries one powerful carrier of civilization and culture. The pyramids are religion hewn in stone, as are the cathedrals of Notre Dame and Chartres (noted for its magnificent windows). Who could deny the religious roots of Dante's *Divina Comedia* and Goethe's *Faust*? Religion arouses passion and triggers wars, but it also inspires architects and artists. Contrary to some naive misconceptions, religion has always tended to become visible, to enter life with its many shapes and shades. With the Incarnation of Christ, religion became united with material creation.

Religious art in particular serves to bring the reality of God to earth and to lend voice and image to some of our most profound feelings and convictions. Religious art attempts to make visible what is invisible; it sets the human stage for the divine script of salvation and, sometimes, even sets free the divine spark we all carry in the depth of our being. Ever imperfectly, religious art attempts to be the synthesis of two worlds: the world of God and that of humanity. It serves to bridge that which we perceive as a dichotomy. The beauty of the image makes truth and goodness attractive and reminds us of their ultimately gratuitous character.

The many ways in which religion can be seen in and through art become apparent when one compares Eastern and Western Christian art. The icons of Christ and of his mother in Eastern art have been the same since holy images were first painted in Constantinople and elsewhere. The icon painter asks, "How could God and his message possibly change?" Ever faithful, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In the icons we contemplate the continuity and stability of God's love. In the West, however, no such directives were given to the artist, and here religious art has become a kaleidoscope of stout, earthbound Romanesque figures, Gothic structures of lofty elegance, as well as the sensuous celebration of the allegory of life, time, and eternity in Renaissance, Baroque, and contemporary art. Religious art in the Western world sometimes reminds us of a happy merry-go-round, a moveable feast.

How does one best represent the dramatic event of the Annunciation? This question has been asked time and again by many artists. The surrealist Belgian artist René Magritte (1908-1967) created a work with the title "Annunciation" which had in sight neither an angel Gabriel nor a Mary absorbed in God's word. Magritte's work simply suggests a secret link between

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natural and artificial elements. Could this be a suggestion to explore more thoroughly the ultimate and definite link between the obviously disparate worlds of God and humankind? Notwithstanding the differences in media and quality, religious artists help us discover new interpretations of a religious event or truth. They document not only how rich and multifaceted the language of revelation can be, but also how utterly dependent God wants to be, who allows us to give the deity a visible presence in the quicksands of history.

However, the intersection of perception and projection—the perception of God’s self-revelation and the projection of our own reality (pain, frustration, doubt, ambition) into his message—also constitutes the watershed between true religious art and artistic expression as such. Must Marian art always attempt to portray the figure of Mary, or should it in some way convey the mystery of God’s love for Mary and of Mary’s response to that love? If the overly-sweet and shallow rendering of some traditional images makes void the holy reality of their content and meaning, an extremely abstract representation can fail to connect personal experience with the original spiritual intent of the religious message.

People tend to identify themselves with holy images, and they do it for various reasons. Some may choose an image for a purely aesthetic reason, others prefer an image associated with an experience. Religious images can be reminders of important events in one’s life. They often reflect strong tendencies of identification or rejection and may so express need, fashion or ambition. And, of course, art can be the bridge to a better understanding and deeper experience of spiritual realities.

“The Marian Art Survey,” a recent study conducted by the International Marian Research Institute (IMRI), reveals much about what we believe is Marian art. One hundred and eighty individuals—young people (high school and college age) and adults—were asked to describe their preferences in Marian images. When twelve images of Mary—from her birth to her assumption and coronation—were presented to them, the favorite image by far for all respondents was the Nativity scene. It is the most classic example of Christian imagery, and bears, after all, no exclusively Marian character.

The second most popular image chosen was that of the Assumption. Here there was significant agreement between high school and college students. Similar agreement can be noted for the image that ranked third—the finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple—again, not a specifically Marian scene.

There is a slight difference in the second and third choices of adults. After the Nativity, they directed their choices more specifically toward Mary; they gave second place to the Annunciation, followed by Mary’s visit with Elizabeth.

What conclusions can be drawn from these findings? The popularity of Christmas and the familiarity of the Nativity scene may indicate why the respondents gave first place to this representation—although the Nativity of Christ is a scene more representative of Christ than of Mary. There is less familiarity with scenes of Mary’s life as portrayed in the Gospel. This lack of awareness of other representations of Mary corresponds with other findings that Catholic youth are not well acquainted with a variety of Gospel themes present in art. On the other hand, of all the scenes presented, the Assumption (which ranked second) corresponds most to the familiar setting of holy cards, where Mary, standing free, looks up to heaven. (Representations of Mother and Child were not included in the survey, because they do not reflect a typical scene of Mary’s life.)

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Evangelization, The Church, and Mary

The word "evangelization" is relatively new to Catholics. Before Vatican II, we spoke much of the "missions" and "making converts," but "evangelization" was not part of the Catholic vocabulary. Vatican II (1962-65) spoke frequently of the Gospel (evangelium) and the need to make the Gospel known ("to evangelize"). Evangelization was the topic for the 1974 Synod of Bishops, and, in his letter to the Church after the Synod (On Evangelization in the Modern World), Pope Paul VI spoke of evangelization as "the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity."

In 1979, Pope John Paul II repeated Paul VI’s words during his first visit to Santo Domingo. In his homily at the outdoor Mass before 250,000 people, he said, "Evangelization constitutes the way and the vocation of the Church, her most profound identity. The Church exists to evangelize."

Both Paul VI and John Paul II developed the meaning of evangelization. What matters, said Paul VI, is the evangelization of culture and cultures (not in a decorative, superficial way, but in a vital way which touches the culture’s foundation). In the encyclical The Mission of Redemption, Pope John Paul II noted that there are seeds of the Word in every culture which bear fruit in harmony with the Gospel. Evangelization is related to authentic human development. By exposing the roots of unjust political and economic systems, evangelization goes to the very heart of social imbalances.

Fr. Avery Dulles believes that, "The popes of our time have correctly identified God’s call to the Church in our day and have hit upon an effective remedy for the church’s present ills." The Church, Fr. Dulles maintains, has become too introverted. Once we grasp the universal validity of the Christ’s message and its significance for the whole of human life, we gain a new appreciation of the privilege of being its bearers and a new eagerness to share it. As John Paul II asserts: ‘Faith is strengthened when it is given to others.‘

At every moment of its history, when the Church seeks a deeper identity, it finds the Virgin Mary as model. Is the Virgin Mary related to this new movement of evangelization within the Church? In 1975, Paul VI spoke of Mary as the Star of Evangelization, as the one who "on the morning of Pentecost...watched over with her prayer the beginning of evangelization ever renewed which the Church, docile to her Lord’s command, must promote and accomplish, especially in these times which are difficult but full of hope."

At the Third International Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla in 1979, Mary was related to the new consciousness of evangelization, especially the evangelization of culture. Our Lady of Guadalupe was recognized as the great evangelizer of the Latin American peoples. "From the very beginning—with her appearance in Guadalupe and the dedication of a shrine to her there—Mary has been the great sign of the nearness of the Father and Christ, inviting us to enter into communion with them; and she has served as a sign endowed with a maternal, compassionate aspect. Mary has also been the voice urging us on to union as human beings and as peoples."

In 1990, Pope John Paul II used the language of Puebla as he spoke of Our Lady of Guadalupe as "the first evangelizer of Latin America, the real star of evangelization, the evangelizer of people."

This year will be the final stage of the nine-year novena which Pope John Paul II began in 1984 to prepare for the 500th anniversary of the discovery and evangelization of the Americas. On October 12, 1992, he will participate in the special celebration in Santo Domingo to commemorate this occasion. He will also attend the Fourth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Santo Domingo. The themes of the conferences are "The New Evangelization, Human Advancement, and Christian Culture."

The American Bishops have invited us during this quincentennial celebration to renew "our commitment to give birth with new fervor to the life of the Gospel in our hemisphere." As the Bishops entrusted the activities of this year to Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, they noted, "She truly was the first Christbearer."
Marian Library Books in Quincentennial Exhibit

To mark the quincentenary of 1492 and the contact of Europe and the New World, The Bridwell Library (Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University) is hosting an exhibit, "Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe: Mother of God, Mother of the Americas," illustrating the history and character of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. Through sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts, printed texts, and religious images, the exhibition will show how two important traditions, one Mes-American, the other Spanish, converged to create a matrix out of which devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac (Mexico City) began in sixteenth-century New Spain and continued to develop as the focus of Mexico’s sense of national identity and as a primary element of popular piety in Mexico and elsewhere in the Americas.

The Marian Library has contributed 30 works on Guadalupe to this exhibit. Among the books loaned is a work by Anastagio Nicoselli, issued in 1681, the first book published in Europe on Guadalupe. Another is a collection of sermons on Guadalupe, preached in the Cathedral of Zacatecas (Mexico), and published in 1759. The exhibit will be on display from June 16 to September 19, 1992, at The Elizabeth Perkins Prothro Galleries, The Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

Symposium on Marianist Spirituality

From May 5 to 13, 1992, Marianist religious and laity, representing more than a dozen countries, will gather at the University of Dayton for the International Symposium on Marianist Spirituality. Sponsoring the International Marian Research Institute (IMRI) and the North American Center for Marianist Studies (NACMS), the symposium will focus on how Marianist spirituality finds expression in the cultures of the world today. Participants will come from Europe, South America, Asia, Australia, Africa, and North America. The lectures will be open to the public.

Mariological/Marian Congresses

The XI International Mariological Congress and the XVIII Marian Congress will be held at Huelva, Spain, from September 18 to 27, 1992. The theme of the Mariological Congress will be “Marian Devotion from Vatican II to the Present,” and the theme of the Marian Congress will be “Mary, Star of Evangelization.”

Located on the southern tip of Spain on the Atlantic, Huelva is the site from which Columbus set sail for the new world. The city has been designated by the Church of Spain as its “spiritual capital” for 1992. The area around Huelva contains several Marian shrines known to Columbus: Santuario de Nuestra Señora de la Cinta and Santuario de Nuestra Señora del Rocio. A session of the Mariological Congress will be held at the Franciscan monastery of La Rábida, which was Columbus’ residence while in Spain.

The last Mariological Congress occurred in Kevelaer, Germany, in 1987. At that Congress, The Marian Library Medal was conferred on Fr. Heinrich Koester, S.A.C. The Marian Library Medal will again be conferred during the international Mariological Congress. About six hundred people are expected to attend the meetings at Huelva.

Annual MSA Meeting—Houston

The 43rd Annual Meeting of the Mariological Society of America will take place at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, May 28-29, 1992. The theme will be “Mary in the Liturgical Year—Ordinary Time.” Speakers include Frs. Peter D. Fehlner, O.F.M.Conv., James C. Turro, J. Michael Joncas, Walter T. Brennan, O.S.M., and Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm. This will be the last of three annual meetings on “Mary in the Liturgical Year.” A study of the Mariology and scholarly achievements of Fr. Juniper Carol, O.F.M. (1904-1990), the MSA’s founder, and the annual survey of recent Mariological publications complete the program. More information about this meeting is available from the MSA Secretariat at The Marian Library.

Annunciation Program

March 25 at Bergamo Center

On March 25, 1992, in the chapel at Bergamo Center, The Marian Library and IMRI sponsored a program of readings from the works of a medieval English mystic, Dame Eleanor Hull (c.1390-c.1460). To the accompaniment of music and dance, Sheila Conard, editor of the texts, read selections from Dame Eleanor’s meditations. These were divided into three sections: the first presented the Annunciation, Nativity, and Magnificat; the second dealt with the Passion; while the third presented Christ’s Resurrection, along with Mary’s Assumption and Coronation.
In the last few years, several books have appeared which present the Rosary not as a type of devotion, but rather as a method of praying. There is a great interest in prayer and spirituality. Two Cistercians, Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, have made significant contributions to this movement by their writings on the Centering Prayer and other forms of contemplative prayer. Now, Basil Pennington writes a deeply personal book, describing from experience what the Rosary means in his life.

Included is a short history of how beads, stones, and shells have been used by peoples of all religions—Christians, Muslims, Buddhists—as a reminder of the call to daily prayer, a help to focus one's attention to prayer, a way to indicate the time spent in prayer, and a bond of solidarity with all who have prayed in this way.

The Rosary is not a fixed prayer to be recited, but rather a “method, an instrument, of prayer.” There are many ways of praying the Rosary, “no one is a priori better than others.” Three ways of praying the Rosary—the literal, the meditative, and the contemplative—are suggested, opening into limitless number of variations. Two sets of meditations on the mysteries are offered—the one from the Scriptures, the other written during the author’s visit to the Holy Land written from the site of the mystery—Nazareth, En Karem, Bethlehem, Jerusalem. Also included are listings of scriptural scenes which could become mysteries of the Rosary at different periods of life—sickness, mourning, pregnancy.

In 1974, Pope Paul VI described the Rosary as a contemplative prayer in which, together with Mary, we center on the great mysteries of our redemption. Fr. Pennington’s book is a fine introduction to this approach to the Rosary. (Also recommended is a book previously noted here, Robert Llewelyn’s A Doorway to Silence: The Contemplative Use of the Rosary.)


This English translation of a classic of Marian studies—René Laurentin’s Court Traité sur La Vierge Marie has been long awaited. The first edition of this work appeared in 1953; it was revised and updated in succeeding editions. This is a translation of the fifth edition (1967), which includes references to the Marian doctrine of Vatican II.

The work treats with precision many of the historical and theologi-cal questions in Marian studies. It is divided into two sections: the first, “Doctrinal Development,” outlines the history of Marian doctrines in six historical periods, beginning with the Scriptures. Particularly interesting is the section on the post-Tridentine Marian Movement which culminated in the 1950s with the pontificate of Pius XII. Comparisons are made between the Marian Movement and other preconciliar movements—liturgical, ecumenical, scriptural—all of which converged in Vatican II, with some reaching the goal for which they had been created.

The second section is a study of the principal Marian doctrines, again considered historically, from their “preparations in the Old Testament up to the parousia where the Church will rejoin the Theotokos in her integral glorification.” The scriptural and historical view of Marian doctrines was in sharp contrast to the more speculative approach prevalent in the preconciliar period in the search for the fundamental principle of Mariology. Vatican II saw the
development of Marian doctrine within the framework of salvation history: “Mary has entered deeply into the history of salvation” (Lumen gentium 65).

It is a tribute to Fr. Laurentin that, although written twenty-five years ago, the work still offers much to the English-speaking world. While a new introduction on the currents in Marian studies since Vatican II and an updated bibliography would have been desirable, these additions could have even further delayed the work or made its appearance impossible. Fr. Charles Neumann’s translation is always clear, precise, and “reader-friendly.” Fr. Fred Miller and the World Apostolate of Fatima are to be commended for making this work available. An indispensable reference guide for Marian studies.

**International Marian Research Institute**

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June 15-26
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June 29-July 10
Fr. Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm.

Mary and Woman in Saint Thomas
June 29-July 10
Fr. Frederick M. Jelly, O.P.

(Marian Art... continued from page 2)

Another survey was taken to find out preferences for Marian images from different periods of art history. Of all the images, each representing a period (Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, nineteenth- and twentieth-century), the ones least favored were the representations of the Byzantine period (icons), of Romanesque style, and of twentieth-century art. Among adults, the nineteenth-century pre-Raphaelite “Madonna and Child” ranked highest. College seniors gave preference to the Renaissance Madonna, whereas high school freshmen opted for the Baroque Mary, regal and imposing. Icons, Romanesque art and twentieth-century Expressionism tend to be stylized—sober in expression, form, and line—and somewhat impersonal, whereas, the Renaissance and nineteenth-century Madonnas convey poetic beauty and easy gentleness. Nineteenth-century art appears as a humane art, the way we like to imagine the supernatural. Attractive in a sometimes superficial way, it suggests a seamless unity between this world and the other. On the other hand, icons, Romanesque art and twentieth-century expressions of religion in art may appear too harsh and uncomfortably absolute. The icon is wholly concentrated on the divine, and Romanesque statuary can be so earthbound that it appeals to the supernatural by the sheer opposition to it. The emphasis on essence or matter present in twentieth-century art is an attempt to create the supernatural, in a readily accessible way, in and through personal experience. (Part I: continued in the next issue)
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