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ART, RELIGION, MARY

Presidential Address Mariological Society of America, 1998

*George F. Kirwin, O.M.I.**

Almost twenty-five years ago, Pope Paul VI addressed the International Mariological-Marian Congress in Rome and made what he called "a pastoral contribution" at the end of his discourse. He said: "We wish to offer an answer to a question that is very important both for pastoral action and for doctrine: In what new and suitable manner is Mary to be brought to the attention of the Christian people so that they will be stirred to renewed zeal in their devotion to her?" After speaking briefly of what he called "the way of truth," he continued, "But there is another way, one that is open to all, even the less learned. We shall call it the way of beauty . . . Mary is entirely beautiful and a spotless mirror. She is also the supreme model of perfection which artists of every age have tried to capture in their work. She is the 'woman clothed with the sun,' in whom all the purest rays of human beauty converge, with those rays of heavenly beauty which are of a higher order but which we can nevertheless perceive. Why is Mary all this? Because she is 'full of grace,' because she is, we may say, filled with the Holy Spirit whose supernatural light shines in her with incomparable splendor. We certainly need to look to Mary and gaze upon her unsullied beauty. Our eyes are only too often offended and, as it were, blinded by the images of illusory beauty which this world offers us." He concluded: "In this age when women are making great strides forward in the life of society, nothing can

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be more useful and attractive than the example of this Virgin-Mother who is radiant with the light of the Holy Spirit and in her beauty gathers up into herself and expresses all the true values of the human spirit."¹ In a letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education (written in 1988) entitled, "The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation," we find a reference to this same topic: "New themes and treatments from new points of view have emerged in post-conciliar Mariology, the value of the *via pulchritudinis* for advancing in knowledge of Mary and the capacity of the Virgin to stimulate the highest expressions of literature and art."

In this forty-ninth annual meeting of our Society we take up the subject of "The Virgin Mary in Art," and we do so by inviting experts in the arts and theologians to open up to us the aesthetic delights of works of art which seek to portray something of the mystery of the Virgin of Nazareth. In addition, the Society is sponsoring a juried art exhibit which displays over seventy examples of Marian art. From among these, some shall receive a special prize for their excellence.

Our meeting is an attempt to respond to the pastoral suggestion made by Pope Paul VI that we bring Mary to our world in the splendor of her beauty—a beauty which over the centuries has been captured by artists of every type, a beauty which ultimately escapes our full attention at any one time and which consequently continues to draw us into that realm which we call mystery. We have as a concomitant purpose to encourage those who are gifted with artistic imagination and skill to seek to embody—whether on canvas or in stone, whether through dance or through music or poetry—something of the beauty with which the Mother of Jesus has been endowed by the overshadowing of the Spirit.

May I begin by sharing with you my perception of the function of this presidential address? I want it to take the form of an exhortation rather than a theological discourse, partly because I understand little or nothing about art theory and I would quickly exhaust my knowledge of Marian art works in less than five minutes. When the topic was proposed to the

¹*The Pope Speaks* 20 (1975): 202-3.

board of the Society a year ago, I was very much in favor of our sponsoring it because I was sure there was a richness that needed to be investigated. At the same time, I began to wonder about what I could possibly contribute to the discussion. And so I went to what is perhaps the best theological library in New York State, that of the Seminary of Christ the King in Buffalo, and found fifty or sixty titles on "Religion and art." Of these I chose perhaps ten books and began to read about theories of art.

One of the last books I consulted was entitled *Visual Art as Theology*² by Barbara Baumgarten, and in its preface I read: "Writing about art is risky business. Art is essentially indeterminate and ambiguous. The power of art lies in its expression of a range of meanings, including ambiguous or contradictory meanings, by visual means. Art cannot be fully described, only experienced. . . . Aesthetics summons language into an articulation of what cannot be articulated."³ I am happy that I did not read this as the first book, because it might have discouraged me from reading others which have opened up for me an awareness of a world which, at least in an explicit way, has been hidden from my eyes. But please do not expect me to be able to articulate that awareness!

In a second chapter, speaking about painting, Ms. Baumgarten says: "When we commit ourselves to a glimpse of reality, it may be mistaken, and it is certainly incomplete. What we discover may not be what we expect but may open up aspects of reality we never imagined. We may bring something new into our midst."⁴ This is written in the context of what the author calls "Committed Indwelling"—the quality required for an artist to produce a meaningful artwork. It can be illustrated by the example of someone who is standing at the entrance to a darkened room and who knows that the light switch is on the other side of that room. The moon shining through the windows casts some light and many shadows in the room. A person entering that room is faced with risk, the risk of stumbling

²Barbara Dee Bennett Baumgarten, *Visual Art as Theology* (NY: Peter Lang, 1994).

³Baumgarten, *Visual Art*, xv-xvi.

⁴Baumgarten, *Visual Art*, 27-28.

over furniture, but also with the freedom to imagine where the safe path to that other wall lies. This example helps me to understand that an artist's work begins with some perception of a goal to be attained, though it is often obscured in shadows until it has been reached. And the achievement often surprises the artist, because he or she was not certain where the imagination would lead.

The committed indwelling implies perseverance and, ultimately, love as a driving force—love for the reality to be expressed and love for those in whose behalf it is expressed—even as it is accompanied by uncertainty. I can easily relate to this risk and uncertainty, as I seek to share with you some of my convictions concerning the importance of art in relation to the Virgin Mary. These convictions come from my reading and reflection, from some conversations with “ordinary people” and from some personal experiences.

You need not fear that I shall attempt an exposition of a theory of art. From my reading I am convinced that this is indeed a minefield, one that would require more than a good imagination to cross successfully. Instead, I should like to reflect with you upon a theology of art which could be a stimulus to any artist to engage in an effort of “committed indwelling,” in order to bring a profound sense of hope to our weary world which so constantly seems to have an experience of decline weighing heavily upon it.

Art and religion have seemingly been inextricably linked from primitive times. This is stated quite well by Van der Leeuw in his chapter on “Theological Aesthetics”: “The question is not, How can we make art religious? Nor is it, When or how does art become religious? This would be too external, as though holiness and beauty were two ingredients which can be mixed together according to certain principles. We ask only, When and how is the unity revealed to us which was self-evident to primitive man, but which we can perceive only with effort?”⁵ In a negative sense, there are those in this post-modern age who have declared the end of both art and of

⁵Gerard Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (NY: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1963), 266.

religion simultaneously, since they are thought to be so mutually bound.⁶

Art and religion deal with ultimate realities. Because beauty is ultimately identified with God, artists have often been inspired by the conviction that to make something beautiful is to make something sacred. The linkage between the two is best expressed in terms of meaning. This prompts the question, quite naturally, whether art can be meaningful in a time of meaninglessness. Hans Küng answers the question by saying that an artist can express his basic mistrust in regard to reality in aesthetically harmonious ways, but he need not do so:

Even in the face of all "historical experiences" and with all his appreciation of the abysmal uncertainty of his life, of the world, and even of his art, he can adopt a different basic attitude. Despite all the absurdity, emptiness, meaninglessness thrust upon him, he can hold fast to a fundamental value and meaning of his life.⁷

He describes this as an assent to the ground of meaning to which "thousands of artists have attested through thousands of years in thousands of images, so that the question may well be asked what would art be without the religion from which it emerged from the time of the cave paintings of Altamira, the pyramids in the Egyptian desert, and the great temples in Mesopotamia, in India and, in Greece?"⁸ For his part, Bernard Lonergan refers to art as a carrier of elemental meaning. It often seems to yield insight into religious experience as one of its varied expressions.⁹ Art, he says, is a grasping of what is or seems significant, of moment, concern, import to man. It is truer than experience—leaner, more effective, more to the point.¹⁰ Gerard van de Leeuw puts it quite succinctly: "Without myth, without symbol, without 'costuming' in words, movements, tones, religion cannot exist."¹¹

⁶Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Death of Art*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Haven Publ. Co, 1984).

⁷H. Küng, *Art and the Question of Meaning* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 31-32.

⁸Küng, *Art*, 41.

⁹B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 57ff.

¹⁰Lonergan, *Method*, 61-64.

¹¹Van der Leeuw, *Sacred*, 180.

It is within this context of the intimate relationship between religion and art that we can best understand the role of the artist. In fact, in theological terms we might even refer to it as a mission. There is some ambiguity with regard to the usage of the term "religious" in relation to art. Certainly not every instance of art (and here I am speaking of all the arts) contains what we would normally call a religious theme (e.g., a scene from the Bible or from one of the other holy books emanating from a particular religion). Yet it is commonly agreed that, in some instances at least, what we would call secular art might well convey a religious sense. It is also the case that persons who are not considered to be religious can and do manifest elements of a religious awareness in their work, even though they themselves might not recognize them as such.

First of all I want to speak about how an artist (and again here I am speaking of all the arts) might convey a religious sense (even when not "thinking" in religious terms) by evoking an experience of hope in the face of evil. Then I would like to propose some challenges to the theologian and to the artist in regard to a specifically Marian content for their work.

The starting point for the artist is love. Van der Leeuw is clear on this: "Every artist, even one who knows nothing of the Christian faith, can confirm that in the act of creation love is the element in which one's own life and the work of art are united."¹² Since the reality of love is complex, we can simplify by proposing a theory which goes quickly to the heart of the matter. The major lines of this theory appear in Tad Dunne's *Lonergan and Spirituality*.¹³

It is John who enunciates the principle for all authentic living and loving when he says: "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another" (1 Jn. 4:10-11). It is God who gives us our power to love. Dunne says: "With transcendent love [and that is what we call the love of God for us and our love for him], we can

¹²Van der Leeuw, *Sacred*, 280.

¹³T. Dunne, *Lonergan and Spirituality: Towards a Spiritual Integration* (Chicago: Loyola U. Press, 1985).

imagine ourselves caught up in a great circle of love, beginning from the One who loves us, pouring this thirst and desire into our souls, and pouring from our souls towards absolutely all goodness, truth, beauty, and order—which is what this One is. Our love is Alpha and Omega, both the source and the object of our loving.”¹⁴ Our love is God’s Self-gift to us and it sets in motion our questioning, our wondering, our longing. Not everyone recognizes that this longing is transcendent love; the secularist does not. On the other hand, some who profess to believe in God suppress their wonder, their curiosity and their awe, so that their convictions are narrow and their motivating drive is often self-centered love. There are also people who are in love with God but do not know it; they have not yet named God as the Source or the End of their longing.

Another metaphor to describe this transcendent love of God is that of a light which is refracted into three primary “colors” which we are accustomed to call the virtues of faith, hope and charity. These three give us a special kind of “knowledge” which is not the result of what we could call the upward surge of our attention, intelligence, our reason and our responsibility; rather they emerge downward from transcendent love. It is through these three gifts that God’s transcendent love penetrates human consciousness and redeems human wreckage. It is precisely here that I believe that artists make their contribution to the world’s redemption, and this, even if there is nothing explicitly religious or Christian in their intentional awareness. Van der Leeuw seems to capture the sense of this, though he is not speaking directly of love, when he says: “It is hardly conceivable that such a typically human form of expression as art, or more comprehensively formulated, such an essentially human awareness as that of beauty, should find no entrance to that deepest depth into which religion leads us. It cannot be assumed that holiness and beauty are hermetically sealed off from one another. . . . Again and again religion searches for art, because it cannot live without form and figure.”¹⁵ Recently, an artist friend told me: “I don’t know much

¹⁴Dunne, *Lonergan*, 111.

¹⁵Van der Leeuw, *Sacred*, 189.

about art theory but I do know we need symbols." These symbols are not simply external signs; they somehow bear the reality with them.

Lonergan calls faith "the eye of love" which discerns the transcendent value of everyday activities. It habituates us to weigh the value of everything against our experienced love for God. Faith gives believers convictions about human nature which not only run counter to the fundamental convictions of ideologies but which can serve as foundation for other wiser theories.

The second refraction of transcendent love is charity, our love for a person or community whom we know. Charity is an overflow of transcendent love and then, by a return route, a direct link with divine Mystery. Sometimes the sense of the presence of divine Mystery is sharp, but often it is dulled by the tedium of love, the struggle to continue to love in the face of great obstacles. The love of appreciation, or complacency as it is sometimes called, rests in the beloved. It draws on transcendent Mystery to see a divine beauty where the world sees only human ugliness. Because of the value which faith gives reality, charity continues to be surprised at its ability to sustain its self-sacrificing love toward others.

In this capacity—or vocation—as a carrier of hope, the artist makes his/her specific contribution to human redemption, to the alleviation of human misery and suffering, to the ultimate defeat of human selfishness. Even in pre-Christian writings the supreme importance of hope was acknowledged. We hear in the story of Pandora's box that when the box had been opened and its contents scattered far and wide: "Hope alone remained at the bottom of the box to assuage the lot of man."¹⁶

Following Lonergan, Dunne calls hope "a confident desire born of religious love." It "longs for the fullest good and the unadulterated truth," and "it pines for a glorious outcome to human history. It yearns to see the face of the Mystery which incessantly draws it."¹⁷ Hope flows from the responsible and

¹⁶*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, comp. and ed. Paul Harvey (4th ed. rev.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, c1967), 612.

¹⁷Dunne, *Lonergan*, 123.

loving levels of our consciousness to resolve the ambiguities of our experiences, sometimes biased, as well as our misunderstandings and our prejudices. It entails moral and religious conversions and thus gives direction to our desires. Faith consists in value judgments about what is good and what ought to be done. Hope is carried by imagination and affectivity. Hope is supported by affective contemplation of the coming of the Kingdom, by liturgical rites, by song, incense and art. Hope uses symbols to represent the mysterious working of our mysterious God. It is through these symbols that hope resists the vast pressures of social decline. It is in these symbols that one has access to the beauty which is ultimately identified with transcendent good, with unity and peace.

Hope is about felt expectations, and it is concerned with the rather negative aspects of something still to be attained. Those negative aspects are rooted in a twofold reality, the reality of sin and the reality of mystery. We can never grasp mystery, even when we are grasped by it. We can never comprehend sin because it has no intelligibility; it is irrational. Without eliminating fear, hope helps us to differentiate our fears by distinguishing the fearful darkness of sin and the fearful darkness of Divine Mystery. It enables us to see a day in the future when we shall see God face-to-face and the evil of sin will have been vanquished through love's triumph.

Whether through music or dance or image, the artist shares with us his/her experience of beauty and thus gives us courage and a sense of ultimate well-being. This is not achieved by illusion; it flows from a grasp of truth through faith, truth which is resolved into an awareness of the presence of God's redeeming love in creation, truth which faces the inevitable pain without flinching because it is sustained by an affective "sense" which is not primarily grounded in words but rather in symbols—symbols which may be ambiguous or obscure, but powerful nonetheless. "The liturgies that really work are always those whose tone or feeling bring hope—not, as many liturgy planners seem to think, those whose theme or thoughts are most clearly articulated."¹⁸ It is that sense or tone which is

¹⁸Dunne, *Lonergan*, 125.

provided for society by the artist, a tone with which the artist resonates, coming as it does from within the depths of the spirit. And that spirit is constantly open to a further "spiritualization" by "mystery." "The richer the eschatological symbols we have available in our tradition, the more we will be able to desire with confidence that the Kingdom will come, the Heavenly Banquet will begin, Jesus will come again upon the clouds to judge the living and the dead."¹⁹

And now for the challenges to be issued to artists and theologians alike. We could say that both are dealing with mystery; both experience mystery and its allure in their conscious lives. The theologian seeks to articulate that experience through intellectual reflection—to tell us what it is, what value it has, what demands it is making upon us. He/she seeks clarity, vision, a project for action. In short, he/she is looking for truth by which to live. The artist is caught by the beauty of the experience; that beauty is identified with truth but it is not expressed in rational terms; what dominates is the sense of the ineffable which always remains somewhat hidden from reasoned discourse. It is the "simply different" aspect of the analogy upon which the artist fixes his/her gaze. The theologian may help the artist to understand how that experience of faith is the fulfillment of all the artist's hopes and dreams. One area of theological development since the Second Vatican Council which would both benefit by artistic expression and would help to convey a deeper sense of hope is that of the interrelationship between Mary and the Church. Their typological relationship contains a richness which has hardly been mined and which would bring our hopes and expectations for ultimate meaning to a deeper level. In that intercommunion between the individual and the collectivity, as exemplified in the Mary-Church analogy, we should find a more profound expression of the resolution of multiplicity into unity without removing either. It is within that context that the theology of the communion of saints would expand our horizons for hope that all reality will be ultimately perfected by its return to God in a communion of love, without losing its identity but achieving

¹⁹Dunne, *Lonergan*, 126.

its destiny to be an integral part of the Kingdom. The artist can help the theologian convey to a world in need of imagery something of that pull of the transcendent which underlies the experience of all who are called to intimacy with God.

It is natural for those who speak and write about Christian art to desire that it be centered around Christ, the perfect image of the Father, the One who was actively present at the creation of the world, He who is called the exemplar of creativity. Still there is a need for artistic expression of the beauty of God's plan insofar as it focused on the woman Mary, the Virgin Daughter of Sion, who bears within herself the hopes and dreams of those who are called "God's people." We have listened to the music, we have witnessed the dance, we have heard the poetry, we have pondered the painting and sculpture, and we have been renewed so many times! Yet we need more. We need to be reminded over and over again that God's promises to His people are trustworthy; we need to be encouraged by symbols to do whatever her Son tells us to do, symbols which bear within them somehow her "yes" to God, her unflagging faith, her trust that the Spirit is present and active, so as to continue to bring fruitfulness out of barrenness, life out of death. That sense of hope is the artist's gift to us, howsoever it is portrayed. Ultimately, it is God's gift to the artist to be used for the building up of God's people in holiness and peace. May the sculptor, the painter, the choreographer, the poet, and the musician expend themselves willingly in our behalf in gratitude for the gift they have received!