

OPENING THE WORD | CARL OLSON

Currents of reflection

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River inspired theological insights among the Church Fathers



If baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus insist on being baptized by his cousin, John? And if baptism, as St. Peter wrote, “now saves you ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 3:21), why would the Messiah deem it appropriate, even necessary, to be baptized? What was the point of the Lord’s baptism in the Jordan River?

These and related questions fascinated and perplexed many of the early Church Fathers and theologians. The baptism of Christ, writes Benedictine Father Kilian McDonnell in his study of the topic, “The Bap-

tism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation” (Liturgical Press, \$24.95), was widely discussed in all the currents of theological reflection in the early Church, “without doubt partly because of the problems it posed.” From this discussion emerged many helpful theological insights.

St. Justin Martyr (d. 165) addressed the baptism in his “Dialogue with Trypho.” He emphasized that the son had no need to be baptized, but did so in order to reveal himself to mankind; the baptism, in other words, was the messianic manifestation, a sign for the Church first, and then the world.

When Jesus came to the waters, St. Justin wrote, “He was deemed a carpenter,” but the proclamation of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove showed him to be far more than a woodworker.

In “Against Heresies,” St. Irenaeus (d. c. 202) focused on the participation of those who believe in Christ in the anointing of the Savior. The connection between the baptism and anointing is evident in the New Testament, as heard in today’s

reading from the Acts of the Apostles: “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38). This same anointing, St. Irenaeus wrote, is given to those who are baptized into Christ. The Holy Spirit has become “accustomed in fellowship with him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ.”

Others delved into the mystery and meaning of the Jordan River. St. Hippolytus (d. c. 236)

referred to “the Grand Jordan”; Origen (d. 254) wrote that just as “no one is good, except the one and only God, the Father,” likewise “no river is good except the Jordan.” St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. c. 394), in

his treatise, “On the Baptism of Jesus,” wrote: “For Jordan alone of rivers, receiving in itself the first-fruits of sanctification and benediction, conveyed in its channel to the whole world, as it were from some fount in the type afforded by itself, the grace of baptism.” Just as Joshua entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan, Jesus opened the way to heaven by entering the same waters.

St. Ephrem (d. 373) wrote a hymn connecting the baptism of Jesus with the womb of Mary and the Sacrament of the Eucharist: “See, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore you! See, Fire and Spirit in the river where you were baptized! Fire and Spirit in our Baptism; in the Bread and the Cup, Fire and Holy Spirit!”

Christ dwelt first in the womb of the Virgin and then in the womb of the Jordan; he emerged from both as the Incarnate Word. Those who are baptized thus become the children of Mary and partakers of the body, blood, soul and divinity of her son.

Carl E. Olson is the editor of IgnatiusInsight.com.

SACRED ARTS

Truth through beauty

Foundation helps Catholics reconnect with sacred art, music and architecture

By Emily Stimpson

“The alliance between the Christian faith and the arts has been broken.”

So spoke Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, on Sept. 10, 2009, announcing a meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and artists from around the world.

The meeting, which took place Nov. 21, gathered together painters, poets, composers, dancers, actors, filmmakers and architects under the famed ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The reason for the meeting was the problem outlined by Archbishop Ravasi and Pope Benedict’s desire to both heal that rift and renew the sacred arts.

Many in the world of art and the Church welcomed news of the gathering. But perhaps no group in America welcomed it more than the Foundation for Sacred Arts, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit founded to help bring about the very renewal Pope Benedict seeks.

Through exhibitions, seminars, concerts and other ventures, the foundation works to school postmodern Catholics in the Church’s rich tradition of sacred painting, music and architecture. It also cultivates and promotes artists dedicated to teaching truth through beauty.

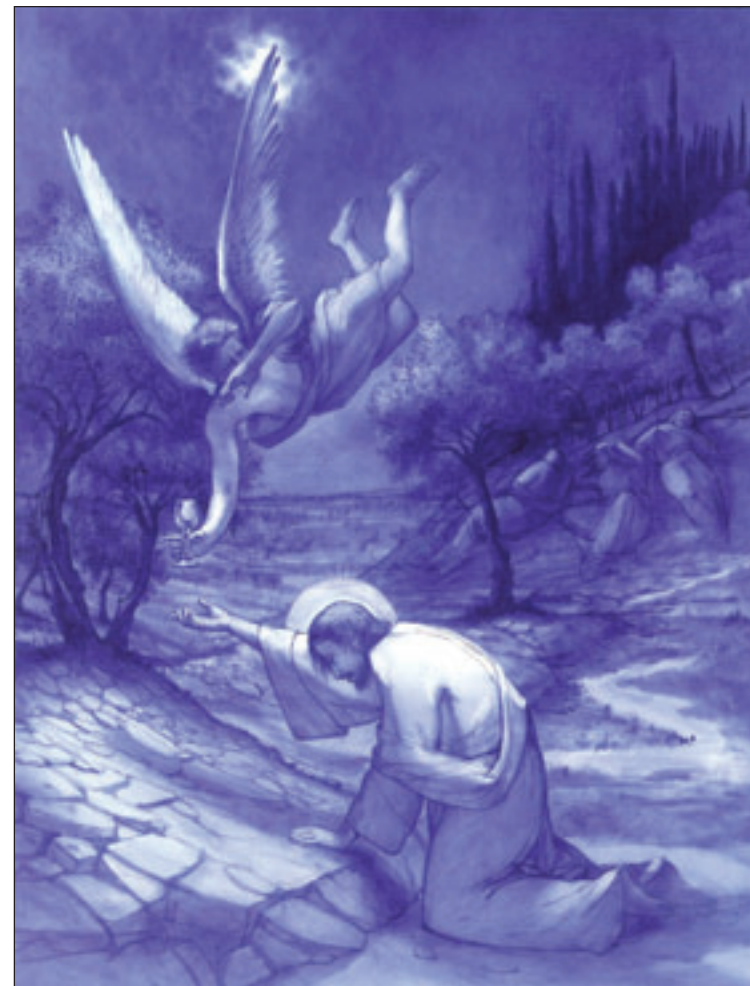
Bound together

Once upon a time, the need for such an organization would have been unthinkable.

As Dominican Father Giles Dimock, prior of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., explained, from the earliest days of Christianity, art was considered essential to expressing and teaching the faith.

“Even when the Christians were a beleaguered minority in the catacombs,” he said, “they used images of the Lord as the good shepherd, scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and pictures of loaves and fishes.”

Once Christianity went



“The Agony in the Garden,” by Anthony Visco, was featured in a Foundation for Sacred Arts exhibition. Courtesy of Anthony Visco

BEAUTY IN ART

“Beauty, whether that of the natural universe or that expressed in art, precisely because it opens up and broadens the horizons of human awareness, pointing us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the abyss of Infinity, can become a path toward the transcendent, toward the ultimate Mystery, toward God. Art, in all its forms, at the point where it encounters the great questions of our existence, the fundamental themes that give life its meaning, can take on a religious quality, thereby turning into a path of profound inner reflection and spirituality. This close proximity, this harmony between the journey of faith and the artist’s path is attested by countless artworks that are based upon the personalities, the stories, the symbols of that immense deposit of ‘figures’ — in the broad sense — namely the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. The great biblical narratives, themes, images and parables have inspired innumerable masterpieces in every sector of the arts, just as they have spoken to the hearts of believers in every generation through the works of craftsmanship and folk art, that are no less eloquent and evocative.”

— Pope Benedict XVI during his Nov. 21 address to artists

above ground, early believers gave form to their faith in the great basilicas and mosaics of the fourth century. They also set their worship to song in the form of Gregorian chant. As the centuries passed, the Church went on to commission the great Gothic cathedrals and stained-glass win-

dows of the medieval period, then the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, Palestrina’s polyphonic chant and Mozart’s orchestral Masses.

The first reason for that close relationship, said sculptor H. Reed Armstrong, is that

art and faith are bound together by beauty.

"We are brought by the perceptible beauty of the material world to the imperceptible beauty of the spiritual world," he said.

Sacred art also forms the imagination.

"In our culture, the imagination gets a bad rap," said Armstrong. "People think if you imagine something it's not real. But the imagination is the faculty by which we envision reality. Through promoting the sacred arts, the Church fomented proper imagination — steering us away from improper images and filling the mind with good ones."

Ultimately, however, art and faith are connected by the reality of the Incarnation.

Presenting the truth about a God who took on flesh demands representing that truth in paint, plaster, marble and stone, not to mention poetry and song.

"We're bodily creatures, and all knowledge comes to us through our senses," said Father Dimock. "We were not saved by a distant God, but by the Second Person of the Trinity, who became one of us and saved us through that. God saves us through our body, with our senses. Sacred art touches our senses and elevates them."

Lost in abstraction

Well over a century ago, however, that understanding began to wane. The Enlightenment and the modernism it spawned led some to believe that a mature faith didn't require mere pictures. The advent of plaster statuary and mass-produced sentimental artwork (along with mawkish music) made matters worse.

"As the images lost their power, people began to think they weren't important," said Armstrong.

At the same time, the world of art abandoned realism and embraced abstraction. Works of art became less understandable and therefore less capable of teaching the faith.

"Modern art is self-referential. The artist understands it, but it's rarely readable to the viewer," said Ann Marra, the foundation's executive director. "And if it's not readable, it's



H. Reed Armstrong's bronze bust of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Courtesy of H. Reed Armstrong

not catechetical."

Complicating matters further was the Second Vatican Council's call for the Church to embrace contemporary art. The call was well-intentioned. The Church recognized the fissure between faith and art and wanted to find new ways to communicate truth to people of the 20th century.

"The problem," said Catholic artist Anthony Visco, "was that too many people mistook 'contemporary' to mean 'modernist,' which it never did."

The result were churches "built not to serve the liturgy but to serve the novelty of design," and art and music that were "more about the artist than turning minds to God."

Recapturing imagination

In the decades that followed, the gulf between the Church and the arts widened. Then, in 1999, Pope John Paul II penned his famous "Letter to Artists," issuing the same call for renewal that Pope Benedict issued in his Nov. 21 meeting. Around the same time, younger Catholics began experiencing what Father Dimock called a "hunger for roots," seeking out beautiful churches and more traditional art and music.

That seeking has continued, as has a growing interest in young artists to return to more traditional forms of art, Visco said, adding he hears weekly from such aspirants, all looking for training and work.

And that's where the Foun-

ation for Sacred Arts comes in. Although founded in 2002, its early efforts were confined to traveling exhibitions. Last year, the foundation expanded exponentially — increasing its staff, hosting conferences in Virginia, as well as Chicago, and putting on an exhibition focused on the mysteries of the Rosary at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. It also launched an online directory to help bishops and pastors looking to commission paintings and sculptures, and helping churches find qualified artists.

It hopes to expand programs further, launching a series of sacred music concerts and another exhibition, as well as conduct workshops in seminaries around the country.

"Through all our programs, we aim to be a catalyst for a new movement in the sacred arts — one aligned to an objective standard of beauty, rooted in the traditions of the Church, that also resonates with a 21st century audience," Marra said.

Artists such as Visco and Armstrong say the foundation's work can't be underestimated.

"A renewal of the sacred arts won't come out of secular art schools," said Visco. "We need something like the Foundation for Sacred Art to reach the next generation. That's the missing link."

Not surprisingly, the biggest obstacle the foundation has faced is financial. Convincing donors that supporting art is as important as soup kitchens is tricky.

"We're pragmatists," said Father Dimock. "When it comes to building churches, we tend to think that building a shelter is the mission. But we forget that if there's not beauty in that shelter, there's nothing to draw people in. To carry out the Church's mission we have to appeal to the whole person."

Failing to do that carries a significant risk, Armstrong said. "We cannot leave the imagination out of the picture," he added. "We're losing souls by leaving it out."

Emily Stimpson is an OSV contributing editor.

ANSWERS | MSGR. M. FRANCIS MANNION

Eulogizing the dead

If friends and family want to speak of deceased, the most appropriate time is toward end of funeral vigil



Question: At some funerals I have attended in recent years, one or more members of the family have given eulogies after Communion at the funeral Mass. Is this practice officially allowed by the Church, or is it up to the pastor?

—Name withheld
Seaside, Fla.

Answer: First of all, the practice of eulogies at Catholic funerals is officially discouraged. In the General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals we are told that a homily is to be given, "but there is never to be a eulogy" (No. 27).

What is meant by a eulogy is an elongated narration of the human achievements and qualities of the deceased. Certainly homilies have to have a personal quality, and the homilist has to connect the readings to the life and death of the deceased. The primary emphasis is always, however, on the readings and the symbols of the funeral rite.

There is certainly a place for the whole genre of presentations that fall under the heading of a eulogy, and this is outside the funeral Mass. The Church prescribes that before the end of the funeral vigil "a member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased" (No. 80). Also, when the vigil is completed, there is, in my opinion, a place for additional talks. Another obvious place is at the luncheon that follows the funeral.

When I meet with families to prepare the funeral and the question of talks by family members or friends come up, I always try to steer them toward the vigil. This usually works. If they persist in saying something at the Mass, then I ask that only one person speak, that the talk be kept to five minutes or less, and that the content be reverent and appropriate. This is sometimes tricky; the last thing a pastor wants to do is up-

set the family on the occasion of a funeral. Hard feelings can be long lasting.

No U.S. diocese that I know of has banned eulogies at the end of funeral Masses, but I am aware that some in Ireland and Australia have.

Liturgical dance

Question: Is liturgical dancing permitted during Mass? Why is liturgical dance still allowed in some places?

—Name and address withheld

Answer: In 1975, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a statement recognizing that while various kinds of dance have had their place in biblical and Oriental Christian worship, "the dance has never been made an integral part of the official worship of the Latin Church."

The statement recognized the validity of "religious dance" outside the liturgy, but held that as far as the liturgy itself goes, dance "cannot be introduced into liturgical celebrations of any kind whatever." The Holy See has said remarkably little about the matter since then.

My hunch is that it does not want to close off completely the possibility of dance in non-Western areas of the Church. Liturgical dance was used at various papal Masses outside Europe during the papacy of Pope John Paul II. And during Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Australia for World Youth Day an elaborate danced form of the Gospel procession was used.

I think that what appears to be a wait-and-see attitude on the part of the Holy See is wise. However, I concur with the perception of the 1975 Vatican statement that dance in Western cultures generally lacks a religious quality, and so is unsuitable for the liturgy.

Msgr. M. Francis Mannion is a priest and theologian of the Diocese of Salt Lake City. Send your questions to Pastoral Answers, Our Sunday Visitor, 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750 or to mfmannion@osv.com. Letters must be signed, but anonymity may be requested.