

COLUMNISTS

Pope praises artists for making divine visible

Nothing is more distinctively Catholic than the perception of the whole created order as sacramental. Catholicism sees the entire cosmos as a sign of God's presence and as an instrument of God's saving activity on our behalf.

Within that overarching sacramental universe there are many individual sacraments: Jesus Christ is the definitive sacrament of God's presence and redemptive activity; the church is the sacrament of Christ; and the seven sacraments are the classic means by which the church expresses and actualizes its own sacramental nature. Because sacramentality is so deeply embedded in its soul, Catholicism has always valued, sponsored and inspired the work of painters, musicians, sculptors, writers, poets, choreographers, actors, architects.

Martin Marty has pointed out that, by contrast, Protestantism is more a religion of the word. Hence, it has been "uneasy about objectification of the divine drama in images which might themselves draw the devotion of the supplicant from the invisible God beyond the gods" (*Protestantism*, p. 228).

The Catholic affirmation of the artistic and the aesthetic has been powerfully reiterated by Pope John Paul II in a "Letter to Artists," released on April 23



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

(*Origins*, 5/6/99). He refers to the work of artists as a search for new "epiphanies" (manifestations) of beauty, and to their work as a participation in the creative activity of God.

"In a certain sense," the pope writes, "beauty is the visible form of the good." It is "a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence." However, "the beauty of created things can never fully satisfy. It stirs that hidden nostalgia for God...."

The letter's opening paragraph encapsulates Catholicism's all-encompassing sacramental perspective and the relation of artists to it: "None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feel-

ing has shone so often in your eyes when like the artists of every age-captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colors and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with whom God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you."

Through their creative activity, artists "appear more than ever in the image of God" and their works are "a reflection of the unfathomable mystery which engulfs and inhabits the world." Indeed, art makes "perceptible ... the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God."

The artist's intuition "strives to interpret its hidden mystery" and to give meaning to "the mysterious unity of all things." The artist's act of creating, on the other hand, "is no more than a glimmer of the splendor which flared for a moment before the eyes of the spirit." Works of art, however, not only express the invisible reality of God; they also disclose the inner reality of the artist.

"The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced, but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer

to the history of culture."

While the pope makes clear that his letter is directed to nonbelievers as well as to believers, Christian artists have a deeper inspiration for their work in the person of Jesus Christ, who has "unveiled a new dimension of beauty" — an "unspeakable beauty of the glory of God shining on the countenance of Christ."

The pope reminds us that there were some "troubled moments" in the church's embrace of the artistic. He cites the iconoclast crisis in the eighth century in which one side, with imperial support, opposed the use of images and icons because, according to them, God is beyond visible representation.

The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 rejected iconoclasm: "If the Son of God had come into the world of visible realities — his humanity building a bridge between the visible and the invisible — then, by analogy, a representation of the mystery could be used ... as a sensory evocation of the mystery." The pope points out that this was an "historic event not just for the faith but for culture itself." Sacramentality was reaffirmed — and Catholicity with it.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Love is shown in deeds

30th Sunday of the Year (Oct. 24): (R3) Matthew 22:34-40. (R1) Exodus 22:20-26. (R2) 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10.

A lawyer came to Jesus and asked him, "Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?"

Jesus answered, "To love the Lord your God; and the second is like it: to love your neighbor as yourself."

But what is love? When we say, "I love you," often we mean, "I need you," and when I no longer need you, I will be through with you. We hear people say, "I love my new car." Is that love?

First of all, love is something you learn. We are not born loving. Babies are lovable, to be sure. But they are not necessarily loving. We come into this world grasping. Our chief concern is our own needs. We cry and someone meets our needs, and we are contented. Unfortunately, some people never get beyond that kind of approach to life. But along the road of life some of us learn to quit grasping and to start living. We learn to return love as well as to receive it.

One day a mother sat in a rocking chair with her 4-year-old son. Suddenly, the little boy lifted his small head, stared straight at his mother, and became very still. The he cupped her face in his ten-



By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

der little hands and said almost in a whisper, "Mommy, I'm in your eyes." He had seen his own reflection in his mother's eyes, and this strangely affected him. Mother and son stayed in that same position for several long moments as the rocking stopped and the room grew quiet. "And I'm in yours," his mother said. Then he leaned his head against her, and she resumed rocking and singing.

This little boy learned to love from his mom. Each of us learned to love the same way. From Mom. From Dad, from grandparents, a favorite aunt. Each of us has our own story to tell. We saw ourselves in someone else's eyes.

But where does such love originate? From God. We love because God first loved us.

Secondly, love is something you do. We can talk about love until we are blue in the face. But if our actions aren't loving, our love is meaningless.

Once in a parish, a group of men resolved to demonstrate that they loved their wives sacrificially. These men planned the most incredible evening a woman could imagine. They made handwritten invitations and sent limousines to pick up their wives. The banquet hall was lavishly decorated. The men served their wives the meal. At the end of the meal every other man read his wife a love letter. This sacred evening was a celebration that their wives were gifts from God.

The hope for the world is that we all love one another. But that demands that we know Jesus Christ, for he is love personified. Jesus showed us real love in action. Each Holy Communion gives us Jesus, fills us with love. A love that is a concrete act — showing concern, compassion and forgiveness.

During the days of Nazi occupation in Holland, Peter van Woerden transported Jewish children under the cover of darkness from their homes to safety. He was eventually caught and spent several months in prison. After the war, he and

his musical family traveled throughout Israel, singing and witnessing for the Lord. When Peter had a massive heart attack, they rushed him to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. The doctor on call that day skillfully saved his life.

After he recuperated, Peter expressed his gratitude to the medical staff. When they compared notes, the doctor told Peter he was one of those children Peter had rescued. One that Peter had saved, saved Peter. Love rewards the lover.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, October 25

Romans 8:12-17; Luke 13:10-17

Tuesday, October 26

Romans 8:18-25; Luke 13:18-21

Wednesday, October 27

Romans 8:26-30; Luke 13:22-30

Thursday, October 28

Ephesians 2:19-22; Luke 6:12-16

Friday, October 29

Romans 9:1-5; Luke 14:1-6

Saturday, October 30

Romans 11:1-2, 11-12, 25-29; Luke 14:1, 7-11

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