

THE SILENT SPEAKER THE SACRAMENTAL QUALITIES OF VISUAL ARTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of Visual Arts in turning the heart, mind and senses towards prayer. Visual vocabulary is simple and direct. Just as the vocabulary of prayer is without a mask, artworks elicit our silent voice to respond directly to God. I will be looking at three specific artworks which take us beyond ourselves, however unwillingly, into the life of prayer. I will be discussing the imagery and symbolism which drags us into the artworks, as we discover the depth of theological truth at our own level, and become more at one with God, growing ever so slowly at our own pace and on our individual journey. The artworks are: Rublev's *Trinity*, Grunewald's *Crucifixion*, and *The San Damiano Crucifix*.

Introduction

Fr. Frank Wallace SJ, wrote in his book *Encounter Not Performance* of a banner he had seen in a Uniting Church in Balwyn, Victoria.¹ For Frank, the banner encapsulated what he understood prayer to be. It bore this message:

L is Listening

L is Learning

L is Loving

L is Living

Being a visual artist for whom visual stimuli is most important, I would preface the banner with a further L — L is Looking. It is

through looking that we can find ourselves drawn into the triune mystery.

My intention is to examine three artworks by artists about whom little or nothing is really known. The works themselves have had a marked influence upon the spiritual life of many as they elicit our silent voice, and open us to the voice of God. I have chosen Rublev's *Trinity*, Grunewald's *Crucifixion*, and *The San Damiano Crucifix* because of my own experience. *The San Damiano Crucifix* is part of the Franciscan story and culture. The Rublev *Trinity* became the prototype for all later Trinity Icons, becoming popular in the West as a devotional item in the 20th Century. The Isenheim *Crucifixion* by Grunewald was seen by many victims of plague or leprosy and must have evoked some response. I undoubtedly could have chosen many other artworks, as any truly aesthetic experience brings believers closer to the beauty and truth that is God. This beauty "is the glory of the radiant power of God revealing himself to humanity".² Through the arts, this beauty is to be contemplated in its reflected manifestation, as it is a beauty which cannot be described or seen directly. "This same glory is the beauty which believers today see reflected on the face of the crucified Christ."³

When we look at an artwork, we may have a multitude of responses. Because just as each artwork is different, so are we, and only some may sound an echo in our heart. Each time I see these three artworks, even as reproductions, I am drawn to a greater understanding of the Mystery that is the Godhead. Sometimes I am aware of the truth that is there and can sense that truth if not understand it. These artworks, amongst thousands of others, have a sacramental quality, as "they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to co-operate with it ... and because there is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot be directed towards the sanctification of men and the praise of God".⁴

The San Damiano Crucifix

For a period of my life I was in a Franciscan community, and daily stood or sat below a copy of *The San Damiano Crucifix*. At first I was impressed because it was the only real artwork in the Friary. Its scale and colour appealed to my tastes. This copy of the 11-12th Century work was large and dominated the refectory — its colour and form radiated throughout the room. More and more I was

drawn to it. The original crucifix was created during a time when plague and violence were common, when death and suffering were everyday events. This crucifix, probably made locally in Italy, is Byzantine in form, but also contains the direct approach of Catalan paintings of the Romanesque period. Yet this artwork, which predated St. Francis of Assisi, was already full of the poetry and spirit of St. Francis. It is little wonder that, before this crucifix, Francis should hear the voice of God giving direction to his calling.

The Christus stands on the cross humble, yet triumphant over sin, evil, suffering and death. His arms do not support the weight of his body. Rather they are open in invitation, welcoming us, telling us that it is through him we shall find salvation. He is the open door. Nearly four hundred years after St. Francis, Angelus Silesius summed up the search for understanding that brought Francis to kneel before this crucifix: "see where you do not see, hear where no sound comes through, go where you cannot go and God will speak to you".⁵

This cross bears symbols of great joy and tells not of a single event, but of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The dark areas behind the outstretched arms of the Christ represent the tomb. Angels are seen in lively discussion on both sides of the arms and are the angels who announced the resurrection to those who believed. The figures of Mary, the mother of God and of John, are found on the left hand side of the figure, whilst on the right side of the Christus stands Mary of Magdala and Mary, the mother of James. These four figures are expressing love. The other large figure on the right is a Roman Centurion who bears no halo. Behind his shoulder, the small head peeping through is that of the unknown artist. Lower down, diminutive figures on both sides are representative of the soldiery and the mocking populace. At the very foot of the cross, though badly damaged in the original, are found disciples looking heavenwards. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there gazing up to heaven. This Jesus whom you have seen ascending will come again" (Acts 1:11). At the top of the crucifix, the risen Christ ascends into heaven greeted by his father and surrounded by a chorus of angels.

This artwork by an unknown artist sums up great truths without any gloss. Above all it is a statement of the faith and understanding of the artist.

The Rublev Trinity

In the West, the spirituality of St. Benedict calls upon us to listen. In the East, the core of spirituality handed down by the Byzantine fathers calls upon us to focus on gazing. In the West, the emphasis has been on the written and spoken word of God. In the East, the senses of sight, sound, and smell alluded to a glimpse of the heavenly kingdom to be found in the liturgy, wherein the icon played an important role. The Russian religious artist was not seen as a craftsman, as was the situation in the West. Rather, the icon painters were so absorbed in their work and faith that they preferred to work anonymously. "The anonymity of the artist belongs to a type of culture dominated by the longing to be liberated from oneself ... 'I am not the doer, but the instrument; human individuality is not an end but a means."⁶ The artist prepared for work through prayer and fasting, and the resulting works were often considered to be NERUKTVORNII, that is, not made by human hand.

Little is known of the artist Andrei Rublev, except that he was a monk in the Monastery of the Trinity and St. Sergius in the village of Zagorsk, north east of Moscow, at the turn of the 15th century. He was probably a pupil of Theophanes the Greek, but developed his own linear design with flowing curves. Because of his holy life and spiritual perspicacity Andrei Rublev was canonised by the Orthodox Church. Rublev undoubtedly was influenced by St. Sergius, in whose honour he painted *The Trinity*. Sergius himself so loved the Trinity that he so named his monastery.

In his painting *The Trinity* Rublev has presented us with the Old Testament Trinity. The story told in Genesis 18 recounts how Abraham saw three Men or Angels and addressed them as one. Because Abraham and Sarah welcome Yahweh into their home and their lives, giving their best to him, the scene is also called PHILOXENIE or hospitality. The icon of the Trinity represents the scene at Abraham's table. The three "angels" are seated around the table which contains a bowl, their shared love feast. Each is a reflection of the other, yet complete in itself. Each holds a staff of authority. The spatial and physical relationship of the three figures presents us with the essential equality of the three divine persons who are one. The Christ figure in the centre has the oak of Mamre behind him. This tree symbolises the site of the visit

of Yahweh to Abraham, the symbol of Jesus' occupation, and his passion and triumph. The incarnate Son blesses the meal and gazes at the Father, whilst the Spirit is inclined towards them both. The colours and the golden wings create a whirlpool from the circular design. We are drawn into a maelstrom of love, participants in the agape.

The painterly style, though based upon Byzantine art, has broken free and become a personal statement for Rublev. Where the Byzantine style has been modified, the icon has become truly Russian. The eyes are not the exaggerated eyes of Greek religious art. Form is not created by shadow, as the "light of God allows no shadow to stand out".⁷ Each movement appears to flow back with gentleness to the unity of the One. Though the movement is gentle, we are drawn through our gazing to become participants, which is only right that we should. The theologian and mystic Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "let us become like Christ, since Christ also became like us. Let us become gods for him, since he became man for us".⁸ To become like Christ, however, means letting go of self and allowing the Spirit to work within and upon you. This means being true to self without artifice and simply attending to God.

Grunewald's Crucifixion

Marlene Halpin wrote that "occasionally, something or someone nudges us to awareness".⁹ This happened for me with the third artwork. Grunewald's *Crucifixion* from the Isenheim Polyptych was painted about 1510. My first reaction to the painting was one of amazement at the scale and horror of the Christus. I was only aware of the suffering Christ. I knew nothing about the artist, his time or the placement of the work. Years later, I came across a reproduction of the painting in a book and felt strangely drawn to it. This time however, I was drawn to it by the Lamb of God. Why was it present? Why was John the Baptist present? I was confused and determined to find out. The painting nagged at me like grit in a shoe.

The painting was commissioned for the Lazar at Isenheim in Alsace by the Antonine community, hence the figures of St. Sebastian and St. Anthony the Hermit. The arrows that pierce St. Sebastian left wounds like the plague buboes. The arrows were fired by an angry God bringing pestilence to the sinful. St. Anthony is depicted as a calm figure, lost in thought, oblivious to the

plague-bearing demon who shattered the bottle glass window to breathe its plague-ridden breath on him. At first I took these side panels to be mere decoration or additions. But in fact they give sense to the centre piece.

Christ who was sinless, suffered, and his body bears the marks of his scourging. The similarity of his wounds to those of the plague victims is not accidental. The body of Christ is nearly twice the size of any other figure in the scene, which symbolises the immensity of the pain and suffering borne by the Son of God. Pain and suffering was also borne by the patients at the Lazaret. The Father shows through his Son, not a vengeful, but a loving God. This is not a painting of an actual event but a statement of faith. This larger than life body with its anguished hands and twisted feet contains two natures, human and divine. On the left are Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John the Evangelist, aghast at the suffering imposed upon and borne by Jesus, the man. At the foot of the cross, Mary Magdalen raises her hands in supplication, begging forgiveness. On the right we have John the Baptist, calm and pointing to Christ, the Saviour. John holds in his hand the word of God, whilst at his feet is seen the sacrificial lamb bearing the cross of suffering and redemption, the blood of sacrifice pouring into the chalice.

The more I gazed at this painting, it became not a work depicting the horror of pain, nor Gothic grotesque, but a painting depicting God's undying love. The crucifixion is not just the culmination of Christ's suffering, but a depiction of the love of the Trinity. This Grunewald knew, and this painting for the Lazar was not merely a eschatological reminder, but truly a comfort for those who could see the love of God. St. Anselm wrote: "whoever does not believe, will not experience, and who does not experience will not know. For just as experiencing a thing far exceeds mere hearing of it, so the knowledge of him who experiences is beyond the knowledge of him who hears".¹⁰

Grunewald was inspired by the mystical writings of St. Bridget, who herself led an austere life and looked after the sick and poor. She wrote of the suffering Christ and the suffering in the body of Christ. But a contemporary of Bridget, Julian of Norwich, wrote in her ninth revelation about the joy and happiness of the passion. "The whole Trinity was involved in the passion of Christ, imparting abundant virtues to us and overflowing grace, by him; but

only the Virgin's Son suffered, and thus made all the blessed Trinity rejoice forever."¹¹

Conclusion

It is not possible to state the exact source of inspiration for the San Damiano artist, but the inspiration of these artists aside, it was their faith that allowed them to present their images of sublime love. "Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen" (Heb 11:1). God has made us in his own image and likeness and given us a share in his creativity. Surely it was by turning to God, and submerging themselves in him, that these artists produced artworks inspired by and inspiring us to prayer. Just as the iconographer abandoned the 'I' of self, so in prayer we have to forget self and in humble emptiness be open and receptive to the voice of God.

There is yet one more aspect to these artworks that draws us into them. None of them is simply what it appears to be at first glance. They are all symbolic of something greater. Avery Dulles wrote "symbols transform the horizons of man's life, integrate his perception of reality, alter his scale of values, re-orient his loyalties, attachments, and aspirations in a manner far exceeding the power of abstract conceptual thought".¹² Symbols are a part of human existence and an expression of one's humanity. In the Scriptures, the Liturgy, and the Arts, symbols are used to communicate truths to us. In the three artworks discussed, it is apparent that symbols can take us beyond what is merely present to the eye.

Normally contemplation succeeds meditation, but I find the reverse through my gazing contemplation. I am placed in the picture, like the painter of *The San Damiano Crucifix*. *The Trinity* of Rublev has a circular design, but then so do the two scenes of the Crucifixion as crosses bisect a circle. Each in its own way is a mandala, a circular design which expands from its centre. Mandala are visual expressions of communion expressed by the arts in many forms and languages. These three mandala are expressions of the communion Tillard writes of: God himself in a Trinitarian communion; the communion between God and humanity through the incarnation; the redemptive and fraternal communion of the baptised; communion with Christ which is guaranteed through the

apostolic witness; and the sacrament of communion celebrated in the Eucharist.¹³

As mandala expand consciousness, so my gazing becomes like a stone, dropped into the centre of a pool, and as the ripples expand, so does my consciousness of God's love. The more he allows me to enter the picture, the more receptive I become and the clearer becomes his voice. This visual mantra, the mandala, takes up and echoes the mantra I was taught to pray by Frank Wallace: "Father, Son, Spirit, John". Just as God spoke to St. Francis through *The San Damiano Crucifix*: "Francis, go and repair my Church which, as you see, is falling into ruins", visual artists can express God's truths through their artworks, building on faith and tradition, rebuilding the Church. The silent speaker reaches me through the sacramental quality of the visual arts, "evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God".¹⁴

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