

# FEDERAZIONE MONDIALE DEI CLUB E CENTRI UNESCO (WFUCA)

Consiglio Esecutivo e Convegno Internazionale

*“Il Linguaggio Universale della Musica e dell’Arte per un’Etica Globale”*

Lucca e Firenze, 8-13 marzo 2013

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*Sacred Art and Global Ethics*

Florence, 11 March 2013

Most Florentine art is sacred in character, treating Christian themes from the *Madonna and Child* to Christ crucified, deposed from the cross and mourned by his mother and friends, or then resurrected and glorious. But Florence itself is no longer a city whose inhabitants are all believing Christians, and, like other world-level art centres, today welcomes millions of visitors from non-Western cultures, whose knowledge of Christianity may be limited.

What moral impact do our images actually have, then? Merely aesthetic? Or also ethical? Have they maintained something of their original existential communicative force, or are they now to be considered fascinating but indecipherable relics of a past world? And, if they do still speak to the human heart, can their message be grasped even by those who come from afar? Or only by believers in Christ?

For a city like Florence, a country like Italy, and a continent like Europe these are fundamental, life-and-death questions. If we answer them positively, then our heritage truly has the universal value that we like to ascribe to it; if on the other hand we answer negatively, then the paintings, the statues, the grand buildings are nothing more than costly antique objects—beautiful things unable to say anything of real importance to our contemporaries.

The Church itself has asked what purpose, function, human sense its images have. The proposed answers are interesting: John Paul II underlined the need for renewed attention to the role of images in the life of the Church, stating specifically that “the rediscovery of the Christian icon will help raise awareness of the urgent need to react against the depersonalizing and often degrading effect of the multiple images that, in publicity and in the media, condition our life” (*Duodecimum saeculum*, n. 11). In a situation of increasing secularization of society – which thus becomes estranged from the values of the spirit, from the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ and from the hope of a world to come – the art of the Church “gives access to the reality of the spiritual and eschatological world”, the Pope asserted.

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Another pope – Paul VI, in his message to artists in the closing discourse of the Second Vatican Council, December 8, 1965 – suggested both the origin and the ultimate goal of this aperture to spiritual realities that art affords. Speaking for the Council Fathers, and with strong emotion, Paul VI implored artists not to refuse to put their talent at the service of divine truth, and not to close themselves to the breath of the Holy Spirit. “This world in which we live”, he said, “needs beauty if it would not fall into despair. Beauty, like truth, puts joy in men’s hearts and is a precious fruit able to resist the wear of time, able to unite one generation with another, helping them communicate in shared admiration” (*Message to Humanity*, pronounced at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council).

These then are some of the immediate ‘benefits’ we can expect in rediscovering sacred images: an antidote to the depersonalization and debasement of visual experience that seem unavoidable in modern culture; a reaffirmation of spiritual values inherent in the mystery of Christian faith; the eloquent vision of a world to come; lasting inner joy; the sense of a continuity in time – or, rather, the continuity of sense from one time to another; and a link between old and young: a love of beauty shared by different generations which lets them ‘communicate in shared admiration’.

Speaking from Italy – from the perspective, that is, of a civilization that has been Christian for two millennia – we must seriously consider the image, overwhelming and salvific, consoling and edifying, of the ‘humanity of God’ (cf. Titus 3,4 in the Vulgate version) revealed in Christ: the central theme of Christian art, treated with unparalleled eloquence by Tuscan artists. In countless works, including masterpieces by Nicola and Giovanni Pisano, Duccio di Buoninsegna and Giotto, Donatello, Jacopo della Quercia, Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, Verrocchio, Leonardo and Michelangelo, believers and non-believers can grasp the inherent humanism of the Christian faith, which holds that, becoming man in the Blessed Virgin’s womb, “the Son of God” was in some sense united to every man and woman. He worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he really became one of us, like us in everything except sin” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22).

This art close to men’s ordinary experience, which however conveys the mystery of “the Holy One in our midst” (Hosea 11:9), has a special relationship with people’s lives. Leon Battista Alberti, the fifteenth-century architect and theoretician, speaking of the new ‘realist’ painting of his

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age, said: “narrative images will touch people’s feelings when the personages depicted therein clearly display their own emotions. Nature takes over, which is ever in search of things like herself...and so we weep with the weeping, laugh with those who laugh and mourn with those who mourn” (*Della pittura*, Book 2).

The relationship Alberti alludes to is one of *exemplarity*, operative in Tuscan art from the time of Saint Francis on - the monumental wood Deposition group in Volterra Cathedral, dating from the 1220s, comes to mind - : a relationship that will shape the development of Tuscan art right up to the modern era. Nor may we consider ‘insignificant’ the impact of exemplary images on believers’ lives, decisions, even freedom, if the first Letter of Saint Peter declares that “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an *example* so that you might follow in his footsteps” (1 Peter 2:21), and Saint Paul several times invites the faithful to become his imitators, convinced that it is no longer he who lives, but “Christ living in me” (Galatians 2:20). Elsewhere, in fact, the Apostle assures us that, in the Last Judgement, Christ will be recognized as “glorious in his saints, and...be seen as marvelous in those who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

Through the immediacy of ‘natural’ images, the Church can thus propose the example of Our Lord’s life, the life of the Blessed Virgin and of the saints. In this way, images become one of the means that Christians use to communicate the truth they have received; the new universal *Catechism* in fact dedicates part of its chapter on the eighth commandment to the theme: “Truth, Beauty and Sacred Art” – a paragraph that immediately follows others on “Living in the Truth”, “Bearing Witness to the Truth”, and “Use of the Means of Social Communication”. In practice, in every period of its history, Christian art has been conceived as a ‘means of communication’ able to ‘bear witness’ to the heritage given those who ‘live in the truth’.

In the simplicity of a Romanesque country church, in the gentle beauty of a Christ by Fra Angelico or the inner drama of statues by Donatello and Michelangelo, every believer – and, in truth, every person, whether a believer or not – can grasp meaningful aspects of his or her own spiritual search. Across time, and beyond the cultural and historical divisions that separate us, this so human art discloses an underlying communion rooted in our nature, which is the first gift the Creator makes to us. By inviting those who are near and those who are far off to contemplate New and Old Testament stories and the lives of the saints in mosaics and frescos, stained glass,

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altarpieces and statues, we are doing what the Fathers present at the Second Vatican Council had in mind when, in *Gaudium et spes*, they wrote that the Church invites even atheists to reflect on Christ’s Gospel with an open mind, and invites them “courteously” – “*humaniter*” in the Latin text – as one man might talk to another on the basis of their common experience as human beings.

The Church can allow herself such ‘courtesy’ with Christians of other confessions, as well as with non-Christians, because – as paragraph 21 of *Gaudium et spes* states – she “knows perfectly well that her message is in harmony with the most secret aspirations of the human heart, whenever she defends the dignity of the human calling and thus restores hope to many who despair of finding a higher destiny”.

Through the art of our churches, we are thus called to satisfy not only the “legitimate requirements” our visitors have as tourists, giving them an adequate art historical introduction, but also “the most secret aspirations of the human heart” - so secret that visitors often do not feel them, even though they are real -: the aspiration to find sense in life, meaning in history, communion with neighbors and with those who are distant in space and time, communion with those who have gone before us, communion with the past.

In representations of Christ, Mary and the saints – but also in the abstract order of architecture, and in the mystical order of symbolic images – we want to purify our gaze, lift our mind and prepare our heart for the task before us.

Looking together at *images*, we want to grow together in the *substance* of that joy of which painted and carved works, works built in stone or set to music, works in rhythm or rhyme are but the fair outer garment – much as dance expresses, in the body’s limbs, an abundance of the heart.

And we want, finally, to measure ourselves with those visions of faith which history and art offer, in order to grasp the beauty of our calling and to open ourselves to inner conversion. In the courage, love, sacrifice and compassion seen in painted and carved faces – in the human gestures depicted by artists, and in the rationality of architectural spaces designed for praise – we want to discern the faithfulness of the Artist-God who defined as “very good” the creation his hands had made.

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