

## Reinstating Icons Into the Western-Latin Tradition

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“Images reveal by means of color what theology expresses by means of ideas.” This famous quotation, from the eighth century, writings of John Damascene, allows us to understand the difference between the status images enjoyed in the ancient world, compared with the present. Images have been moved into an increasingly marginal role in Western liturgical worship and this has happened through many different and discrete stages.<sup>1</sup>

Given this state of affairs, in this chapter I wish to follow a strictly historical journey that will attempt to highlight the important junctures that have led to the status that images have today.<sup>2</sup> On this path, we shall consider how images are interweaved throughout the evolution of the liturgy and the design of the churches.

### 1. The Period of the Basilicas

After the Edict of Constantine in A.D. 321, some fundamental rules for the form and installation of iconography became fixed within the Roman basilicas. While there are many variations, these are not sufficiently great to negate the evidence of a general plan. Indeed, this general iconographic plan will become a standard that will be followed well past the year 1000 in church architecture. To understand this plan, let us look at two basilicas built in the sixth century in Ravenna, Italy: Sant’Apollinare in Classe and Sant’Apollinare Nuovo.

We still see parts of the original mosaic cycles in these two basilicas today. At Sant’Apollinare Nuovo the apse mosaic was lost in a fire and was replaced by a late Baroque work, while at Classe, the original mosaics in the nave have been lost.<sup>3</sup> However, by virtually combining the two buildings we can see the complete original formula that decorated the basilicas in this period with its full cycle of images.

This virtual church building, reveals the basilica to be a kind of signpost indicating the path that the faithful embark on once they have entered the space. This can be seen as a symbol of the Biblical concept of the “People who journey toward the Promised Land.” The purpose, and end of this journey, is the encounter with the Living God celebrated in the Liturgy. Along with the architectural elements, the basilican plan also contains mosaic images that indicate this route. This is done by three interconnected elements.

The nave mosaics in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo use the concept of the procession of Martyrs and Virgins to show how the Celestial Church assists and shares in the life of the faithful. They show that the remembrance of the History of Salvation is actualized in present.

The triumphal arch of Sant’Apollinare in Classe stands as a sign of the end of the journey: the final approach of the faithful from the entrance of the basilica to the altar. The apse, which is the true and real place of dialog between heaven and earth, indicates the space where two irreducible realities (heaven and earth) encounter one another in the Eucharistic Sacrifice celebrated in the Liturgy.

If we stretch the point, we can see among these elements of the building the three temporal coordinates of the past (the nave), the present (the apse) and the future (the triumphal arch). All of these details of the complete cycle, however, revolve around the Mystery of Christ understood as a memorial.



Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo

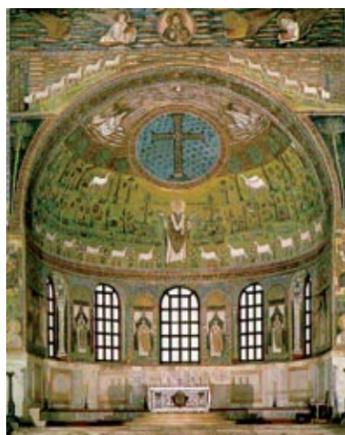
### The Nave

The nave mosaics are divided into two series of images on separate levels. The upper cycle presents passages from the Sacred Scripture.<sup>4</sup> These passages summarize the most important events of Salvation History. Below them, two processions (men/Holy Martyrs on the right and women/Holy Virgins on the left) imitate the processions of the faithful below them in their progress toward the apse. This iconographic cycle, then, underlines the continuity between the aims of the Pilgrim Church on Earth with those of the Heavenly Church and points out both the goal and the perfection of the Christian life.

### The Triumphal Arch

At the point of intersection between the nave and the area reserved for the clergy, the gaze of the faithful focuses along the projecting walls and is drawn toward the arch by a series of ascending images. The sequence begins with a quarter length bust of an evangelist. This recalls to the viewer the apostolic preaching, which is the precondition for the understanding of the Mystery.

The portrait of the evangelist is surmounted by the image of an angel who indicates the separation that exists between the divine world and the world of mankind; a separation, however, that has been abolished by the incarnation of Christ. The next image is a palm. This is a symbol of the faithful who are justified by faith. They are like the luxuriant tree that grows until it reaches the gates of the Heavenly City. This city is the connecting point between the wall and the arch itself.



Sant’ Apollinare in Classe.  
The Apse and Triumphal Arch.

<sup>1</sup> Damasceno, Giovanni, *Difesa delle Immagini Sacre*, Città Nuova, Roma 1983

The common English Translation is: Allie, Mary H. *St. John Damascene on holy images: followed by three sermons on the Assumption*, T. Baker, London 1898.

<sup>2</sup> I am beginning my investigation beginning with the period of the basilicas after the Edict of 325.

<sup>3</sup> At present the nave is decorated with a cycle of frescoes representing prelates, which argues for the presence of a coeval iconographic cycle similar to the one in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo with its procession of saints and Biblical scenes.

<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, these are scenes from the Old and New Testaments selected and presented under the rubric of the prefiguration of Christ in the Old Testament and the completion of prophecy in the New Testament.

On the arch the faithful see a procession of sheep that symbolize themselves now in heaven. As part of the flock, they can hear the voice of the Shepherd, are fed in the “pastures of eternal life,” and come to meet the Lord, who is portrayed in the center of the arch and flanked by the symbols of the four Evangelists.

### The Apse

The representation in the center of the apse conceals an episode from the Gospels: the Transfiguration. Christ is in the center of a bejeweled cross (Crux Gemmata) with Moses and Elijah at his sides. Below them, three sheep symbolize Peter, James and John. This mosaic, then, gives us a comprehensive interpretation to the function of the entire edifice. The basilica is conceived as the place of encounter between heaven and earth in which the Mystery of Transfiguration and Divinization is made present.

Below this scene of the Crux Gemmata is Bishop Apollinare, the early patron of Ravenna, who still presides over his flock (the sheep) from heaven. He, then, symbolizes the Celestial Church that has preceded assembled faithful in the sign of the faith.

The descending movement of this reading of the images ends suggestively with the figure of the (really present) bishop celebrating the liturgy with the assembly gathered around him. Thus, the liturgical celebration by the assembly of the Church of Ravenna gathered around its bishop is united with the Church that celebrates in heaven, and with Christ, the author and perfecter of the faith.

One can add yet another theme that serves to enrich this meditation: the stars that surround the Cross number ninety-nine. This reminds us of the parable of the shepherd and the one lost sheep (Lk 15). Perhaps, the faithful can see in themselves that lost sheep for whom the Shepherd searches, in order to return it safely to the flock, adding a hint of devotion to the theological message.

By looking at the iconographic structure of the basilica as a whole, we are able to see the strict connection tying together the liturgical building, the liturgical action and their figurative interpretation. In this context, the images seem quite far from the later conception of images that relegates them to the function of “decoration.” Therefore, it is important to underscore how much the iconographic cycle, within the basilica, becomes an integral and indispensable part of a unified project.

### The Iconostasis and Portable Images

The basilicas of this period were furnished with an element that is no longer visible: the iconostasis. The photograph shows an exceptionally well-conserved example in the iconostasis of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Grado, Italy.

This architectural element served many functions. It divides the nave from the sanctuary and, most importantly, the balustrade appears to have been a place to display portable images-icons.

The liturgical function of these portable images must be traced

back to the variations occurring during the liturgical year.<sup>5</sup> Because the monumental cycles in the basilicas present a fixed and invariable layout, it is conjectured that icons connected with the various liturgical seasons come to be set up in order to enrich the Mystery being celebrated during that season. An eighth century reference speaks of a procession with an icon that was then placed on the iconostasis as an introduction to the liturgical celebration.<sup>6</sup>

The photo of this sixth century church of local construction is a rare example of the preservation of a house of worship from antiquity. Conserved thanks to its secluded location, it can give us an ideal reconstruction of a church from the basilican period. From the iconographic point of view, then, in addition to the fixed monumental cycles of the nave and apse, we must also consider the iconostasis and its set of various images tied to the liturgical year. The portable images (icons) and their use further enrich the assertion of the organic unity of the liturgical buildings of this period.



The Iconostasis of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Grado, Italy (6th century).

### 2. A Thorny Issue: the Reception of the Second Council of Nicaea in the West.

In the context of the Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries, the Church elaborated its distinct concept of the image. In the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, the expression of these theological concepts was attached to the idea of the “prototype-image (icon).” Tied to the categories of Neo-Platonist philosophy, this expresses a hierarchy of participation between the prototype and the image, which represents it.<sup>7</sup>

In the West, Nicaea II and its distinct concept of the image was erroneously received at the Synod of Frankfurt in 794. If one goes beyond the obvious semantic subtleties, it seems that the lack of communication between the two Churches was provoked by different liturgical practices.<sup>8</sup> The cause of the misunderstanding can be found in the translation of the Acts of the Council from Greek into Latin. The two different greek terms for “Adoration” (the acts of adoration owed to God alone) and “Veneration” (offered to images), were translated with the same Latin word “adoratio.” The Eastern Church, then, was accused of offering to images the same kind of cult reserved to God.

The position of the French Church expressed at Frankfurt did not receive recognition by Pope Hadrian I, who maintained a moderate position and was inclined to keep a critical distance from

<sup>5</sup> Belting, Hans, *Il culto delle immagini*, Carocci, Roma 2001.

The English text is: Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. UCP, Chicago 1994. See in particular chapter 12: “The Iconostasis and the Role of the Icon in the Liturgy and in Private Devotion.”

<sup>6</sup> Andaloro, Maria; Romano, Serena, *Arte e iconografia a Roma*, Jaca Book, Milano 2002

<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, the same concepts – not without interpretive misunderstandings – was taken up by the iconoclasts to define the relationship that exists between the Eucharistic bread and the person of Christ present in the sacrament. The idea of the relationship similar to that of images had entered their minds and the position had been challenged in 754 during the iconoclast council of Heria. The council fathers in fact believed that the iconoclasts affirmed an ontological hierarchy between model and image: Heria denied such a relationship for images while admitting it for the Eucharist, the bread-true body of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> In the West, the scarcity of images and the impoverishment of the celebration, joined to the increasing sacralization of the Eucharist, can be linked to a preoccupation concerning the potential antagonism between sacred image and the presence of Christ in the sign of the bread and wine as understood by the Eastern Church. The distrust of Charlemagne for the Eastern conception of the image was such that he ordered work on apologetics on the matter: the *Libri Carolini*.

the controversy.<sup>9</sup> The papacy, therefore, assumed the function of balancing the extreme positions, particularly that of the French Church and considered the position of the Second Council of Nicaea to be legitimate.

While the diverse theological positions and misunderstandings between the East and the West must be taken into account, it was liturgical practice joined to regional traditions that assigned a different function to the image. In the West, this helped in the diffusion of narrative images (Historia) that told the story of the various Sacred Mysteries and they became ever more numerous and important. Side by side with these images, however, other images that maintained the “prototype-icon” theory elaborated by Nicaea were conserved and created (many of these of Byzantine manufacture) as “Sacred Images” although they assumed a marginal role liturgical celebrations.<sup>10</sup>

The liturgy and the narrative image became closely linked, with the images being considered an aid for the faithful to understand the Mysteries of the Faith. At the same time, the Eucharist was being increasingly understood as the sacrament that showed the real-permanent Presence. Through their reflection on the idea of Transubstantiation, medieval thinkers put the Eucharist and other sacramental signs (the Word, sacred image, etc.) into a systematic hierarchy.

This achievement had the effect of progressively disengaging sacred art from the intrinsic sanctity that should be granted to the image. Indeed, in the Latin Church, the Eucharist was the Sacred Presence par excellence and images were considered not just as supplemental accessories but, rather, served to explicate the Eucharistic Mystery and its celebration. The thorny issue of the reception of Nicaea II in the West will lay the foundations for the increasingly difficult dialog between the two conceptions of the image. Its legacy comes down to us today through the centuries, presenting issues that are not yet remedied.

### 3. The Gothic

The decision of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis to reconstruct his abbey church in the new style in 1145 conventionally marks the beginning of the Gothic.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon, at first concentrated in France, spread throughout the rest of Europe with important but not essential variations.

If one can speak of a typical conceptual framework for the Gothic church, it can be formulated by verticality and by space flooded with light. Theological reflection during this period was being reshaped by the emergence of Aristotelian philosophy. The structure of theology, which up to this time had been united and inspired by

the concept of participation, mediated by Neo-Platonism, became progressively more speculative, accenting dualism: light-dark, high-low.<sup>12</sup>

While the basilica has a horizontal structure that indicates a pathway leading the faithful to an encounter with the apse and the altar, the Gothic church seeks to transport the faithful towards the transcendent by way of a fundamentally vertical structure.

In the Gothic, the monumental iconographic cycles tend to disappear and are substituted with stained glass cycles.

The stained glass itself was born of speculative reflection. These windows are designed to filter the light and then to introduce it into a place of worship, and this operation was designed conceptually: the “neutral” light coming from the sun is reshaped by the stained glass and, to stretch the idea, might be said to be “evangelized” by means of this filtering.<sup>13</sup> This is inspired by the concept of dualism: while the light itself is being introduced into the church, it passes through stained glass depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and thus becomes imbued with a new substance.

These places of worship are offered as indications of otherness: as the faithful enter through the portals, they are welcomed by the Heavenly Church and are placed within a space that is sacred because it is “other” from that which ordinarily surrounds them. The light passing through the stained glass becomes “sacred” because it loses its connotations of natural, ordinary light.

The installation of the stained glass gradually results in the loss of the classical pattern of the basilica. The development always tends toward the kind of symbolism just discussed. While the History of Salvation is presented in its completeness, as had been the case previously, it now loses its power for imaginative re-creation and memorial in relation to the celebration of the Liturgy.



Sainte Chapelle, Paris, showing the fundamental concept of the Gothic Church: natural light passes through the stained glass to become “sacred” light.

### 4. The Italian Gothic

The Gothic in Italy presents some important features. It is not as “extreme” as the French Gothic, lying within a more linear transition with what went before it. A significant example of the Italian Gothic

<sup>9</sup> The Holy See did not remain indifferent concerning the events in Byzantium. Already in 731 a council was held, whose proceedings have been lost, presided over by Pope Gregory III in the Vatican basilica, where he condemned the iconoclastic ferment of the East. In 769 another synod presided over by Pope Stephan III in the Lateran palace was held against the iconoclasts and the decisions made at Heria. The Italian bishops together with some representatives from the French world proclaimed: “If we want to draw comfort that the Saints offer us (...), we ought to honor with the greatest honor the relics not only of bodies but also their clothing, and even churches consecrated to their names and their images and portraits in whatever place they have been painted. (...) If someone does not want to venerate the holy images of our Lord Jesus Christ and his holy Mother, and all the saints in accordance with the pronouncements of the holy Fathers let him be anathema “

A. Bianchi. *La teoria dell'immagine nei Libri Carolini*. Aevum, Milano 2001.

<sup>10</sup> “By image is meant primarily personal portrait (imago-eikon). It usually depicts a person and therefore is treated as such. It is in this sense that it becomes the privileged object of religious practice. In this context, it was venerated as a cult image, distinct from the narrative imaging (historia), which placed the sacred history in front of the viewer. “ BELTING Hans, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes von dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Beck'sche Verlagbuchhandlung, Munchen 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Menozzi, Daniele, *La Chiesa e le immagini*, San Paolo, Milano 1995. “The abbot called the new undertaking opus novum or modernum in contradistinction to the opus antiquum and built it over the Carolingian basilica, which he modified: thus was born the Gothic.” P 127-132.

<sup>12</sup> Ruskin, John. *La natura del gotico*, Jaca Book, Milano 1997.

In English: Ruskin, John. *The Nature of the Gothic*. Portland, Or. : C. Lehman, 1975.

<sup>13</sup> Barral I Altet, Xavier, *Vetrare medievali*, Jaca Book, Milano 2003

is the double basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.<sup>14</sup> The upper church in particular displays an iconographic installation that is close to the early-Christian cycles. The stories of the Old and New Testaments are placed in the nave, while the sanctuary area has scenes of the Life of Christ.<sup>15</sup> But an important variation has been inserted into the nave: scenes from the life of St. Francis. This variation opens up a new concept in the iconic representation, because it brings the events of the Bible to new life through the representation of a particular person and of the new “historia salutis” that his life offers.



The Upper Church of the Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi. The iconographic installation recalls the Early Christian cycles

In these churches the earliest representations of the basilica period are changed: the image of Christ Pantocrator depicted in the apse and the image of the Mother of God depicted as the “Deesis” (Supplication) either at the side of Christ or below him to indicate her role as intercessor. The change occurs in two specific ways.

The figure of Christ Pantocrator is gradually changed into the figure of the Crucified. This image is hung over the altar signifying a theology that finds its completion in the spirituality of the Mendicant Orders: a new image of God thought of as closer to us, as is the Christ who takes upon himself the sins of the world. Some representations go so far as the place St. Francis himself under the image of the bleeding Christ: St. Francis who shared God’s passion for humanity to the point of experiencing the very blood of Christ by the stigmata on his own hands.<sup>16</sup>

The figure of the Mother of God assumes a different symbolic role under the thrust of a new spirituality that loved to feel God as close and passionate. She becomes the Mother of God of the “Sacra Conversazione” (the Holy Conversations) of the Thirteenth Century in Tuscany and Umbria. The name of the image itself changes: it is now called the “Madonna” (Our Lady). The faithful wish to feel like a child in the arms of their mother who intercedes for them. Progressively these “Madonnas” are located in the apse as altarpieces. The Maestà by Duccio located in the cathedral of Siena is an exemplary representative of this type of painting.



Here then are the main elements that characterize the iconographic systems of the Gothic church as found in Italy: Stained Glass, the Crucifix and the Marian Altarpiece. There are other elements present in various contexts: external decorations and the arch over the main portals; symbolic or iconographic treatment of the flooring (Siena, Pisa); cycles of wall frescoes (Assisi); pulpits (Pisa, Siena).

If we compare these buildings with the Romanesque basilicas, the beginning of a rift between the celebration of the liturgy and theological reflection becomes evident and the liturgical spaces will inevitably reflect the results of this fracture. Looking in particular at the iconographic cycles, one notes a loss of overall consistency and above all a lessening of the evocative and memorial function of the images that they had in the previous period.

The new cycles were intended to be “Bibles for the Poor” (Bibliae Pauperum) and so, were erected as teaching devices. The suggestive power of the image and its capacity to integrate itself into the liturgical worship gives way to catechesis and instruction by means of images.

### 5. The Path of the Image in the Eastern Tradition

The Eastern tradition, particularly after the fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the gradual shift of its vital centers to the capitals of the Balkans and the Russian principalities, rejected the speculative method that was accepted in the Latin tradition when contemplating the Mysteries of the Faith.<sup>17</sup> Instead, it re-focused its attention upon the early Christian tradition.

This is mainly due to the work of the Byzantine mystic and theologian, Nicholas Cabasilas (1319 -1391), who proposed a system of Liturgical Theology. The liturgical spaces of the Orthodox move closer, although with important variations, to the system found in the basilicas. Then, in the Russia of the fourteenth century we will find the construction of the iconostasis wall.<sup>18</sup>



Kurbinovo, Macedonia, The Apse: frescoes, 1236 year

Duccio di Buoninsegna, Maestà', Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena

<sup>14</sup> Toubert, Helene. *Un'arte riformata. Riforma gregoriana e iconografia*. Jaca Book, Milano 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Frescoes preceding the cycles of Giotto and Cavallini. Painted by Cimabue and partially corrupted.

<sup>16</sup> Belting, *Likeness and Presence*. See in particular Chapter 13 “Living Painting”: Poetry and Rhetoric in a New Style of Icons in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries.

<sup>17</sup> Velman, Tanya. *Bisanzio: L'arte monumentale*. Jaca Book, Milano 1997

<sup>18</sup> Lazarev, Viktor. *L'arte dell'antica Russia. Mosaici ed affreschi*. Jaca Book, Milano 2000.

## 6. The Renaissance

The wonderful construction of the Dome of Santa Maria del Fiore (The Duomo of Florence) by Brunelleschi, traditionally signals the beginning of the Renaissance.<sup>19</sup> The iconography within these renewed buildings did not follow a linear development as it had in the preceding periods.

The insertion of side altars for the Eucharistic celebration seems to interrupt the cohesion of the iconographic cycles within the church.<sup>20</sup> The general liturgical space, however, still maintains its cohesive legibility in the Renaissance, which the thought of the architects of the time understood to be a harmonious space that incorporates the classical conception of a “temple made to the measure of Man.”<sup>21</sup> From the point of view of the celebration of the liturgy, however, the buildings appear to be “a church of churches” because every altar refers only to its own celebration, with simultaneous celebrations often occurring at different altars.

The altarpiece, which was already a part of the Gothic ensemble, becomes in this period the dominant focus of the side chapels. The composition of the Sacra Conversazione gradually became fixed. It was made up of the Madonna with Child in the center, surrounded by Saints (generally patron saints and at time with the one who commissioned the painting) and painted with a particular perspective to signal its connection with the community gathered around their priest and altar. These paintings have an evocative capacity because they seek to lead the faithful to recognize their relationship with the heavenly Church Triumphant.

The central or privileged altar does not follow a single pattern: sometimes it maintains the Cross suspended over the altar, while at other times a large altarpiece with its own iconographic cycle (generally related to the life of the Madonna) replaces it. Just as was said above, these altarpieces attempt to enter into a dialog with the faithful through their imagery and seek to generate feelings of devotion.

But everything cannot be so easily classified in this period. The Sistine Chapel, that classic emblem of the Renaissance, for example, lies outside of the typical pattern. Constructed with just a single altar, it maintains the structure of the early Christian basilica in its iconographic design.

The sidewalls contain scenes from the Old Testament (the Life of Moses) on one side, which are complemented by the New Testament Life of Jesus on the other. Michelangelo frescoed the ceiling with scenes from the Hexameron (the cycle of the six days of Creation,

in this specific case enlarged with scenes from the Life of Noah). The apse contains his fresco of the Last Judgment, a direct revival of the image of Christ the Judge of the early apses.<sup>22</sup> Thus, a cycle that recalls the basilical cycles has been created in the late Renaissance. There is, of course, the evident change of using images that continually seek to represent observable reality, while the early Christian images were two-dimensional and maintained a symbolic approach to their interpretation. The final effect, therefore, will not be the same. Here the iconographic cycle, although it relates to the most genuine canons of the early Christian cycles, suggests an increase of the devotional and a loss of the early unity of the liturgical space, the liturgical action and the iconography



The Sistine Chapel, panoramic view

## 7. The Baroque

A necessary requirement for the Baroque was the birth of the anti-classicism phenomenon of Mannerism.<sup>23</sup> This movement, rebelling against calm, graceful images, elaborated a style that broke with the past and introduced images that were, on various occasions, judged to be unfit for the liturgy. Beginning in 1521 the Inquisition and the Holy Office began to intervene against these paintings that had been set up as church altarpieces, judging them to be inappropriate because some of the more eccentric images did not favor devotion and could become a distraction for the faithful.

The reaction of the Reformers, particularly the originally moderate position of Martin Luther, to these kinds of images became a motivating force in the movement to reform the houses of worship. The second generation of reformers tended to forbid images in the churches, sometimes allowing only a cross (with the image of Christ removed). Paradoxically, their judgment of images moved along the same lines as that of the Inquisition discussed above, judging images to be incompatible with worship because they would be a distraction.<sup>24</sup>

The Counter-Reformation that ensued after the involved processes of the Council of Trent was an attempt to move beyond the Mannerist works and it produced a precise theory on the place of images, which was especially elaborated by Cardinal Paleotti in 1594.<sup>25</sup> Images in churches must inspire the devotion of the faithful and must distance themselves from themes or content that are excluded from the liturgical space,



Birnau. Unsere Liebe Frau.



Piero della Francesca, The Montefeltro Altarpiece, (The Virgin and Child with Saints), 1472, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera

<sup>19</sup> Toman, Rolf. *Arte italiana del Rinascimento*. Könemann, Köln 1998. In English: Toman, Rolf. *The Art of the Italian Renaissance*. Cologne 1995

<sup>20</sup> Neunheuser, Burkhard. *Storia della liturgia attraverso le epoche culturali*. Edizione liturgiche, Roma 1999. See in particular pp. 119-120.

<sup>21</sup> Burckhart, Jacob. *La civiltà del Rinascimento in Italia*. Newton Compton editori, Roma 2000. In English: Burckhart, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: an Essay*. New York, Modern Library 1954.

<sup>22</sup> The Scriptural reference can be found in Mt 25 within the Synoptic apocalypse.

<sup>23</sup> Pinelli, Antonio. *La Bella Maniera. Artisti del '500 fra regola e licenza*. Einaudi, Torino 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Menozzi, Daniele. *La Chiesa e le Immagini*. San Paolo, Milano 1995. P 175-195.

<sup>25</sup> Prodi, Paolo. *Ricerca sulla teoria delle arti figurative nella riforma cattolica*. Nuova Alfa Editoriale, Bologna 1984.

such as explicit depictions of the nude, images inspired by the pagan cults, and the like.

The typical iconographic pattern of the Baroque crystallizes in the images of the Church of the Gesù in Rome. The fresco cycles that envelop the church lead the faithful toward the characteristic theme that the church is a space in which heaven and earth meet, and that the element that connects the two is the Eucharistic Sacrifice or, more precisely, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The painting of this time so blends with the architecture that it visually extends the real space until it seems to dematerialize into the ceiling painting. The most exemplary and extreme examples of this are found in the Baroque Benedictine churches such as *Unsere Liebe Frau* in Birnau, Germany.

The Baroque, then, adds a new feature into the iconographic cycle by proposing that images have an illusionistic function. This way of viewing images in the churches, however, will produce a further splitting of the union between the place dedicated for worship and its celebration.

## 8. Neoclassicism

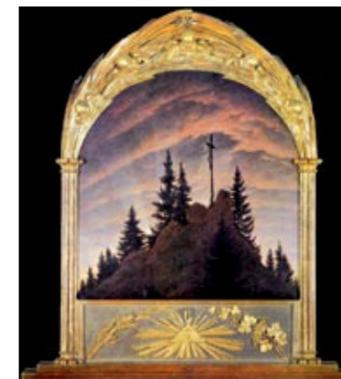
Reacting against the last phase of the Baroque (the Rococo), calls began to be made around 1760 to end the architectural visions of the former period because they were judged scarcely to be able to be integrated into a profound sense of the meaning of the liturgy. The movement known as Neo-Classicism returned to the stylistic elements of the past, but demonstrated a distinct weakness in its reproduction of the antique, failing to develop it so as to address contemporary needs.

A good example is the construction of the Church of the Madeleine in Paris, which reproduces with some fidelity the structure of the Parthenon in Athens. The external decorations that appear throughout the edifice are of Biblical subjects, but are in reality pedantic copies that are virtually identical to Greek high reliefs.

Neo-Classicism shows a variety of styles because the movement harkens back to styles extending from the early Christian to the Gothic, to the Renaissance and up to the Baroque while attempting to bring them all into a more or less successful synthesis. These churches reference the ideals of the earlier buildings and reformulate them, but this combination of iconographic styles renders the buildings into illegible hybrids. For example a Neo-Basilican style church may contain pictorial cycles that relate to the Renaissance or to the Baroque with the obvious result that they are illegible because one



Paris. The Neo-Classical Church of the Madeleine.



Friedrich. The Tetschen Altarpiece. A landscape from the Romantic Movement in Germany. Dresden, 1808.

cannot read the images as an interpretation of the liturgical context of the building.

In its confrontation with the Modernist Movement, the ecclesial response of the Syllabus of Errors in 1864 marked the Church's decisive position and also produced a break with contemporary art and architecture. One might compare such structures as the Eiffel Tower with the Church of the Madeleine discussed above, or the emergence of Impressionist art with the iconography of Saint-Sulpice in order to understand how very distant the ecclesial buildings and their images are from the artistic expressions of their times.

This permits a further observation: whereas previously church architecture was an integral member of the artistic panorama of each period, the late Neo-Classical period marks a break with contemporary culture. The faithful who enter these buildings lost the cultural references that marked their epoch and the tended to understand their religious practices within a spirituality that was divorced from its cultural context.

## 9. Attempts to Dialog with Modernity

There are some trends during the Neo-Classical period that give evidence of a desire to re-contextualize the places of worship within a dialog with Modernity. First and foremost were the experiments to incorporate the new building materials of concrete and steel, from which followed the complete rethinking of the shape of the church building.

Le Corbusier's church of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp can serve as the embodiment of epoch's struggle to reformulate sacred spaces outside of historical stylistic themes.

Regarding pictorial cycles, we can note at Ronchamp and in practically all of the churches inspired by this vision their total absence.

The element of light seems to supply for the absence of images. For example, in a chapel for private celebration Le Corbusier uses a lantern above the altar to gather an extraordinarily intense light into the small zone of the celebration, thereby indicating the transcendental nature of the Mystery. In the interior of the nave,



Monet. Madame Monet and her Son 1875 (Also known as The Walk, Woman with a Parasol).



Fladrin. Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, 1842. An example of the "Style of Saint-Sulpice."



Le Corbusier, Ronchamp. Notre Dame du Haut. The interior.

on the other hand, small glass louvers impart a barely visible light, indicating how quietly and discreetly the Mystery makes itself present. Ronchamp's external liturgical space uses nature itself as the setting, suggesting a celebration of the Eucharist in the full light of outdoors.

These "imageless" iconographic programs prevalent in the new church buildings are, however indirectly, indebted to the internal artistic debate concerning figurative and non-figurative art.

Within the limited scope of this investigation, our most important concern is to underline how the traditional integrity of the church building is here decidedly untraceable.

### 10. Recent Post-Conciliar Trends

By Post-Conciliar we mean the churches built after the 1960s. From the perspective of iconography, we can conveniently isolate three basic strands.

The first strand is a certain nostalgia for the Neo-Classical period that essentially reproduced more or less well-concealed architectural achievements from the past. The iconography of their interiors are hybrids, most frequently using stained glass in the apse and/or along the nave. The use of figurative subjects continues from the Neo-Classical period, while in its dialog with contemporaneity, it inherits the debate between figurative and non-figurative art. These works can be integrated into the liturgical celebration only with difficulty, but perhaps may be admitted as a sort of scenographic appendix to the liturgical space.

The second strand is the complete absence of iconographic cycles, which are basically recollections of the celebrated examples formulated by the great architects (Aalto, Michelucci, Le Corbusier). In these churches space and light are substituted for the presence of images; at times we see the introduction of the Crucifix placed either above the altar or somewhere in the apse, which brings to mind the Gothic period. If we continue this thought, we can compare these buildings to the Gothic metaphysical conception of sacred space and could view them with the same formal assessment.

The third strand is the re-introduction of large iconographic cycles in contemporary churches, particularly in monastic churches and



Alvar Aalto, Riola di Vergato, Bologna. Parish Church.



The Church of Saint Vincent de Paul, Bologna.



Kiko Arguello. The Twelve Great Feasts. Cathedral of Our Lady of Almudena, Madrid.



Marko Ivan Rupnik. Redemptoris Mater Chapel, the Vatican.

the churches associated with the ecclesial communities born after the Council. Among these we should recall the synthesis achieved through the maintenance of a traditional framework joined with a new dialog with contemporary art, for instance in the work of Kiko Arguello and Marko Ivan Rupnik.

We do not as yet have a complete analysis that can account for the return of figurative images in the worship spaces of the Latin tradition. Figurative images (icons) are present in the Orthodox churches within the framework of its theological-liturgical conceptions, while the West, in the long journey that images have taken through the centuries, has changed this primordial state. It is precisely this change that generates a question that is difficult to answer, which perhaps can be expressed like this: "How is it possible that people of the Latin Rite Church would feel the need to rehabilitate images and sometimes whole cycles-dating from the remote past and seemly divorced from modern concerns?"<sup>26</sup>



Iconographic cycle. Master Alexander Stalnov and co-workers. Seminary Chapel, Albano Laziale, Rome.

### 11. Return to the Sources in order to Reclaim the Icon

In the face of this history of liturgical images within sacred spaces that we have just sketched, we can see immediately how

limited a single answer to that question would be, as if there were a "recipe" that could be safely proposed for every circumstance.

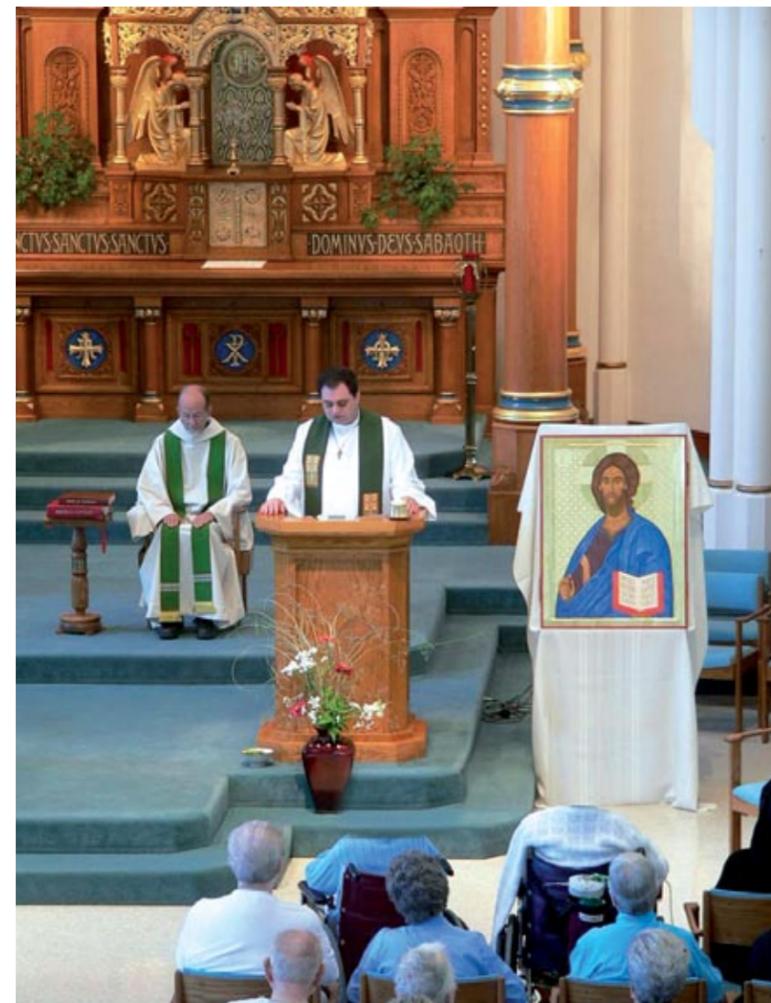
The purpose of this chapter was meant primarily to help generate the right questions while seeking to avoid stock or unconvincing answers.

I also sought to connect the typical stylistic features proper to each period because by extrapolating the particular characteristics of each period and by bringing this into a synthesis we can consider each style's strengths and shadow areas.

However, I do think that it is possible to hold on to one particular reference point and that is the relationship of the liturgical celebration, the place of worship and the iconographic cycle. The early Christian Church successfully maintained this synthesis for centuries and the Eastern Churches, which were not subjected to the cultural conflicts of the West, maintain this synthesis up to the present.

Without useless nostalgia, I think that reference to this criterion (agreement of the celebration, the building and the iconographic cycle) is an obligation for the designer of churches and for those who are called to liturgical activity today, particularly when assessing the suitability of a place of worship for the celebration of the liturgy.

In conclusion, it is not possible to favor a unique solution, nor to make a final judgment concerning the use and dissemination of icons, if we are asking what service they can offer to the announcement of the Gospel. But if I may be allowed to make some recommendations, I would suggest that one always look for examples of the best possible workmanship and avoid reproductions that are glued to boards or articles of little value so that, always and as much as possible, the icon will remain enveloped in that formal purity that characterizes it. When introducing icons into a space, one might follow a policy of progressive substitution. For example, one could replace images or statues of Jesus and Mary with their corresponding icon. The same could be done for the altar cross and the images of the patron saint. It is more difficult to make a judgment about larger undertakings such as a Deesis or a complete cycle of images, especially if the church into which they are to be introduced already has narrative images (as is the case with most Baroque and Neo-Classical churches). It would be best to consult with the local Ordinary and the diocesan commission for sacred art. We will have to wait for a more in-depth reflection by the Magisterium with its consequent guidance. For the time being, the presence of icons in the churches is linked to a question that comes more from pragmatic needs and is tolerated.



A modern icon of Andrej Rublev's Christ the Savior by Master Gianluca Busi. It is displayed on the left side of the apse. The Monastery of St. Gertrude, Cottonwood, ID, USA



Iconographic Cycle. Master Gianluca Busi. The chapel of the Generalate of the Ancelle Parrocchiali dello Spirito Santo, Rome.

<sup>26</sup> Busi, Gianluca. "Diffusione delle icone e comunicazione del Vangelo" in Rivista di Teologia dell'Evangelizzazione 15 (2004) 149-156.