Artistic Expression and Christian Life

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ALL modern discussion of Christianity and art might begin with a reminder about the Great Mistake. The Great Mistake, of course, is the idea that there is a choice between having art and not having it, or a decision to be made concerning the extent to which art is to be allowed or encouraged in Christian life and worship. There is no such choice, no such decision. We have art whether we like it or not. The question is whether it is to be good or bad. You can no more be confronted with a decision whether to have a lot of art or a little in the Church than you can be confronted with a decision whether to have a lot of expression on your face or a little. If you have a little rather than a lot of facial expression, it will be proper to describe your face as "dead-pan"; if you have, by dint of a Herculean effort, extremely little expression on your face, your appearance will be suitably described as very "dead-pan." If you take care to have as little personality as you can contrive, you will be designated a person with a colourless personality, even a person with a remarkably colourless personality. Perhaps you may account this an achievement; but not all achievements are commendable.

So it is with the face of the Church. If you work hard enough at the task of barring art from the Church you will have a "dead-pan" Church—at any rate as long as the Holy Spirit permits it. When worship consists, in its external expression, of a series of rows of people squatting on pew cushions with their ears cocked at a black-robed figure on an elevation opposite them, who reads at them, punctuating his reading by calling upon them for the singing of a hymn, so that the liturgical architecture is like a string of sausages culminating in a larger and fatter sausage tipped with an apostolic blessing, then the Church is as "dead-pan" as sinful human nature has so far contrived to make her.

It is not, however, to be supposed that this is the only way to damage the face of the Church. It is, indeed, a way that has for some time been going out of fashion. The modern tendency is rather to paint a smirk on the face of the Church. So much noise has been made about the advantages of "aids to devotion" and the like, and so much have the learned talked of symbolism, that there is no lack of inclination to decorate churches and church services with various bits and pieces from the past and a whole panoply of artistry that is thought in some way or other to be very up to date —in many cases because there has never before been such an opportunity for displaying bad taste. There is no need to make an inventory of the

Sacristy of Horrors. An elementary example will do for a start: the septuple amen. It does not need much general education to enable one to see that while it may be good liturgical artistry to pour forth alleluias in glorious profusion, it is less than this to utter repetitious amens, and much less still to sing them chorally or make a whole anthem or fugue out of one of them. The alleluia is a shout of praise to God. It is the expression, in a convenient and much-hallowed form, of the heart's unbridled joy in acknowledging the glory of its Creator and Saviour. There is no more reason to limit its utterance than there is for a lover to limit the number of times he will declare his love to the beloved whom he woos. A very different rôle must be assigned to the amen in our Christian liturgy. It signifies assent: "so be it." Indeed, in the liturgies of the French Reformed Church it is actually rendered: "ainsi soit-il." If you have any doubt of the absurdity of three-fold or seven-fold amens, try a French one. The amen punctuates a prayer. It is the people's assent to what the minister says to God on their behalf or in their name. It marks the people's wakefulness. In a secular situation the audience might express themselves by applause; but in prayer there is nobody to applaud but God, who certainly does not need it. There is of course no exact counterpart, outside worship, of the function of the amen, for worship itself is, as an activity, *sui generis*. The nearest approach to it, however, is perhaps when we shout "Right" or "Okay" as a work is proceeding. This is something we say in a business-like way; only a person in need of psychiatric care would attempt to make a grand opera out of it. Of course the cult of the septuple amen does not arise from psychiatric disturbance; it springs, rather, from ignorance of the riches and complexity and splendour of Christian worship, which is no more to be improved upon by whimsical fancies than is the Mona Lisa to be enhanced by a caste-mark on her forehead.

It is true that liturgy is a living activity, the expression of the Church's supreme action. So it is not changeless, but rather, like the Church herself, ever new yet ever the same. It changes; it develops; it unfolds, as does, in its own way, a symphony. This is not to say, however, that in order to improve a symphony you have only to think of something you have never thought of before and add it as pepper to canned soup. When a church building, planned or engineered to be different from any ever designed before, turns out to look a little like a fish (albeit a fish unknown to ichthyologists), it is too much to hope that by recalling the *ichthus* symbol one will somehow squeeze meaning into chaos or invest our Christian heritage with an adornment. It may seem a welcome novelty in church design to have, in a building furnished for the Reformed Church tradition, a pulpit shaped like a "v" to represent the Open Book and to put by the side of it an empty chalice set upon the holy table. The fact remains, however, that what is actually communicated by the expression is rather the notion of a hollow voice in an empty cup, and not all the stained glass of Chartres or all the mosaics of Ravenna would do more than accentuate the aching sadness of the void. The idea seems good; the idea sounds good; the idea might *be* good, were it

being applied in a lesser context than that of our infinitely rich Christian faith and infinitely holy Christian heritage.

The Christian artist, like all artists, paints what he sees reflected in the stream of life. It is a truism that no artist should be didactic, for the artist's *métier* is expression, not pedagogy. Nevertheless, since teaching is of the essence of the Church's life, it is impossible that any genuinely artistic expression of the Church's life should fail to be capable of teaching. Indeed, art has always been the principal medium of the life of the Church as *ecclesia docens*. Disparagement of the visual arts in the Church is not only unrealistic; it is also the outcome of ignorance and arrogance—of ignorance because it ignores the truth that the Church's riches are so great that all media must be enlisted in service of the hope of expressing them, and of arrogance because it ineffectively conceals adherence to the peculiarly anthropocentric view that knowledge of an alphabet brings a man nearer the Kingdom of Heaven. It is notorious that biblical literalists (than whom there are no more fundamentally irreligious people) are largely drawn from those who, being able to read a little, are fascinated by the fact that they can read at all. A more generous frame of mind and heart is needed in him who would keep company with God. Above all, this hope demands great humility; it is said that the heavenly gates are built low, because those who enter them are used to stooping. No truly humble man has ever denigrated art that has humbled itself in the service of God.

The relation of art to Christianity is both unremarkable and peculiar. For art, as expression, can be the vehicle either of man's most arrogantly self-centred pride or of his most profoundly Christian humility. The artist, as such, rightly glories in his autonomy; but in fact his independence, real though it be, is the independence of a child. Unwittingly, the artist—at any rate in his working hours—is serving self or God. He is either narcissistically nourishing the most self-destructive forces of egoism in his own soul on pretext of catharsis, or else he is humbly feeding upon the green pastures of Christ's flock, that are watered by the stream of eternal life. Good art leads to heaven or to hell, for it is always in fact enlisted in the service of one master or another. Bad art leads nowhere except in the sense that it leaves a man helplessly shut out from God in a wilderness of his own making. If he makes the wilderness in the very garden of the Church itself his case can hardly be accounted hopeful.

Art, being expression, is always one; yet for this very reason it must be said that Christian art is different from all other art, since Christianity is unique. The artist, as such, whether he is expressing his own sultry and egoistical passions or the glory of the infinitely generous love of God, is expressing what, for good or ill, he has found. Nevertheless, whenever an artist succeeds in expressing, in even the most seemingly trivial way, so much as a single aspect of the Christian faith and life, his work glistens with the whole shimmering splendour of the Church, thereby delighting some and blinding many. Art is a handmaiden so lowly yet so intimately close to the heavenly throne that they who seek to please him who sits upon it will not

despise the instrument he so favours and exalts. In the Middle Ages Mary became the personification of this mystery at the heart of the Church's life. Only by the triumph of a crude literalism was the Marian function so extended that men lost sight of the delicate interior meaning of the personification. If "gray with dust is Dante's crest", it is because of the gross denigration of art as the instrument of God. By the denigration of art there are lost all too easily both the delicate subtlety and the earthy robustness of the sound of God in the interior castle of man's soul.

True, there is an ever-present danger in art. It is the danger that lies in language itself, which is of course, from at least one point of view, a form of art. Art, like history, is concerned with the individual. In itself it is finite and fragmentary. When, in Satanic rebellion, it puffs up its own pretensions, it succeeds only in making its fragmentariness and finitude more ostentatiously brash. It is precisely because through Christ is redeemed not only man but man's culture and man's art that the latter is capable of a transformation that is the very mirror of the redemptive process itself. Art, yoked to Christ, expresses more than the individual artist can know. It becomes sacramental in character, and the artist, like the medieval cathedral builders who are said to have built better than they knew, expresses more than there is in any human artist to express.

Nor should it shock those jealous for the autonomy of art to be told that Christ's yoke enhances it. Every artist knows that no art is genuine that has not submitted itself to one burden or another. The imaginative genius of the artist is not undisciplined fancy; it is indeed the very avoidance of this that is the life of art. The sculptor must wrestle with an intractable medium; the poet, whatever literary licence he may claim, must submit himself to the discipline of language. If, in Joycian fashion, he invents neologisms and portmanteau words, triple-punning in Telugu, Finnish, and French, it is certainly not through indiscipline that he succeeds. It is not insignificant that the Sistine Chapel ceiling was painted by an artist handicapped by a very uncomfortable position and that translators constrained by rather arbitrary rules not of their own making produced, in the King James Version, the greatest masterpiece in English prose. The principle is most striking when the artist is able to submit himself to the easy yoke and the light burden that are Christ's. As conscience is the fruit of a disciplined life, so taste is the offspring of disciplined expression. Freedom of fancy is the way to tasteless eclecticism—that kind of eclecticism that springs from lack of commitment as much as from lack of historical perspective.

Much was written, for much needed to be written, in the earlier decades of the present century, on artistic freedom and the peculiarity of the artist's calling. Puzzles, however, remained for the aesthetician—puzzles that raise problems which I do not believe it is possible to solve in any satisfactory theory of art, because I do not believe that any satisfactory theory of art can say what it must say about aesthetic experience without leaving a mystery that the aesthetician as such must acknowledge to be beyond his province. One important aspect of this mystery emerges in the problem of

artistic novelty and creation. To this problem, as well as to the problem of particularity in art, aestheticians have increasingly addressed themselves. That every man is in his way an artist, as Croce contended, is really a truism in aesthetics. Yet it is extremely obvious to me as well as to others that I am no Michelangelo. There are no doubt Dickensians who appreciate aspects of Dickens that Dickens himself did not recognize; but not one of them is a Dickens. Whence comes the creative spark, the artistic genius, that makes the artist, as creator, a great man? Reputation and fame have nothing to do with it, of course; there are many besides Kierkegaard whose genius has gone for long unnoticed or ignored, and perhaps in some cases works of genius lie for ever buried, unacknowledged and unappreciated. It is not *only* that the artistic genius has expressed himself more successfully than do most of us. Many people express themselves perfectly yet in the very perfection of their artistic expression they but draw attention to the humiliating fact that they really have very little to express. It seems almost as though that is why they do it so well. A public speaker may be a brilliantly entertaining raconteur; but if he is nothing more than this we soon tire of him. We admire his gift, such as it is, and eventually we complain that he has nothing to say. We may for a whole hour watch a conjuror with more delight than we should ever feel in listening to a Kant; but if we understand Kant at all we shall listen to him much longer than we should ever conceivably be willing to watch a conjuror.

The fact is that art is fed from outside itself. As Croce put it in his own philosophical idiom, it is always the expression of an impression. But when we ask whence comes the impression, or why some impressions are so much richer than others, there is no conceivable answer that the aesthetician can legitimately give, for there is nothing in art that provides an answer. The impression lies beyond art; it lies elsewhere in human experience, being for instance nourished upon the rich pastures of our moral activity when it is not starved by the latter's barren desert. The isolated artistic activity is indeed amoral; but that of which it is the expression is the outcome of the morality and immorality that runs through the stream of the artist's life. It is in this sense, and this sense only, that art can be said to be not merely chaste or obscene but the instrument of God or Satan. Mauriac was right, therefore, in saying that society, in its attitude towards the artist, ought to begin by purifying the water so that they who drink of it shall not get sick. The artist *qua* artist is morally irresponsible; but the artist is much else besides. While it is true that *qua* artist he cannot help what the world does to the impressions he must express, it is no less true that as a man he may have weighty responsibilities. The Christian will also say, of course, that the fact that the artist's *métier* is expression does not prevent him, if he participates in the instrumentality of the Church, from engaging in an *expressio divinorum*.

Croce, in the epoch-making treatise, *Estetica*, published in 1901, really did for the philosophy of art what Wittgenstein and others did for the philosophy of thought. In estimating their services to philosophy we may set

aside the fact that he happens to be associated with an anti-metaphysical neo-idealism while the Vienna Circle are associated with an anti-metaphysical positivism. In both cases the service has been of the greatest importance, the dogmatic presuppositions of the respective parties notwithstanding. Nevertheless, there has already been abundant evidence of the need to recognize more fully that the isolation of elements is not the last word in the chemistry of the spirit. Far from dispelling mystery it really augments it.

Yet art, though it is not God's last word, is his peculiar tool. So far as the categories of human understanding go, we are justified in calling the Incarnation his artistic masterpiece in his dealings with us. We need not raise the finer points of Christology in order to say this, though the finer points of Christology may help us to appreciate its meaning. As members of the Church we are called upon above all to appreciate the splendour of this divine artistry and to give glory to God for it; yet as we are called upon to be participants in the life of the Church we are called upon to be artists in the expression of that life. It is true that we are expected to be artists of a special kind; nevertheless artists can never be so peculiar that they fail to *do* art. If we have caught even the faintest glimpse of the *visio Dei* that sustains the life of the pilgrim on his way to the heavenly Jerusalem, we must express it. That it is beyond the limits of human language to express is surely incontestable in all Christian experience. Then why should we limit our media? Does not such limitation ill conceal a pernicious neo-docetism that would destroy the life of the Church? Of course we may set ourselves, for one reason or another, certain disciplinary rules. We may ban, as in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, all three-dimensional art forms, and we may even spurn polyphonous music, as does the West in plainsong; but all this is not to repudiate or exclude from the Church, as did some of the English Puritans, whole realms of expression that acknowledgment of the mystery of the Incarnation really demands. It is, however, to remind us that Christian art is a difficult and most serious enterprise. *Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist die Kunst*, is true only where art, being divorced from life, becomes mere play. Even then it means that, besides the good art that is mere play, there is perforce much bad art that is not play, yet that cannot help being bad because it is not allowed to be good.

Let us therefore not be surprised to find that the wickednesses that disfigure the Church (and which we think we can by mere discretion conceal from the vulgar gaze) are really being seen as clearly as if they were written in neon lighting across our spires. For our bad art tells the whole story all too well. We see this easily enough when we criticize a tradition other than our own—when we deplore, for instance, dime-in-the-slot electric votive candles that may black out without even the warning of a spurt or a flicker before your prayer is ended. Yet in its context this is hardly worse than "dial-a-prayer" (although admittedly to be able to dial to hear a prayer may be useful for those who cannot read, or whose sense of prayer has not yet developed beyond incantation). What would surely strike a Martian

theist (if there are any) most vividly in much contemporary Christian art is that it expresses the sin of our schism more than the Christian mysteries we acclaim. Too often our art fails because our life fails. Art cannot flow where life ebbs. We should listen more humbly to the voice of the simple souls who tell us how they react to the artistic expression of our life. A Hungarian refugee, taken for the first time in her twenty years of life to an American Protestant service, was asked how it struck her. Limited, no doubt, by the inadequacy of her English vocabulary, yet eloquent in her way, she replied: "Talk-talk-talk-talk, talk-talk-talk-talk". This is far from being a sufficient appreciation of the ministry of the Word, even at its worst; nevertheless, it draws attention to the poverty of our liturgical signs, symbols, and symbolification. The promise is that if Christ be lifted up he will draw all men unto him. There is no such assurance about the beholding of his rent garments.

The Christian artist must get behind the sinful fragmentation of the Church to the perfect integrity of the life that flows in it. The expression of this demands a maximum of artistic skill that will include, for example, among the basic techniques it presupposes, a profound understanding of history. Above all it demands a life of constant interior prayer, whose practitioners have always been humble enough to know that God uses not only the humblest of men as his instruments but also the humblest of means. Art, which Croce exalted in his philosophy by giving it the lowliest place in his quaternity of modes of human experience, is the means in which he delights. Words are for theologians, and even theologians would be unable to use them if the life of the Church were not expressed in art, for then they should have nothing to say. For the most telling language of God is the language of his love, and here, no less certainly than in human love, words are, though needful, inadequate: "The waters woo for me; the night replies". But if contemporary churchmen are to express, as we must, the mystery of God's love, we must not only learn to be more unfastidious about artistic media than many of us have been; we must learn that in Christian art there are subtleties not always so much as dreamt of in our impoverished philosophy.