The Bible and Art

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Exploring the Covenant of God's Love in Word and Image

By

Robert Ignatius Letellier
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Cover image: The Prophets and Evangelists, the 13th-century south transept lancet windows, Chartres Cathedral. The New Testament Evangelists are seated on the shoulders of the Old Testament Prophets. From left to right: Luke is supported by Jeremiah, Matthew by Isaiah, John by Ezekiel, and Mark by Daniel. In the centre is the Madonna and Child, Mary, the Daughter of Zion, presenting Jesus the Word of God incarnate. The whole presents an icon of salvation history as distilled in the mystery of covenant.

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The Covenant Cross, pavement mosaic at Antibes Cathedral, Provence (early 13th century). The design depicts in concentric circles the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the Prophets, all subsumed and held in embrace by the Cross of Calvary.

Quoting Marc Chagall, the great Jewish artist of the twentieth century, the Pope recalled how artists through the ages have 'dipped their paintbrush in that coloured alphabet which is the Bible'. Indeed, most Western art for centuries was literally inspired by the biblical vision, both Old and New Testament, which is still at the centre of Catholic liturgy and life.

—Ronald D. Witherup, on Pope Benedict XVI

CONTENTS

Part 2: The New Testament

LIST OF BIBLICAL ABBREVIATIONS

The Old Testament

Am	Amos	Josh	Joshua
1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Judg	Judges
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	1 Kgs	1 Kings
Dan	Daniel	2 Kgs	2 Kings
Deut	Deuteronomy	Lam	Lamentations
Eccles	Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)	Lev	Leviticus
		Mal	Malachi
Est	Esther	Mic	Micah
Ex	Exodus	Nah	Nahum
Ezk	Ezekiel	Neh	Nehemiah
Ezr	Ezra	Num	Numbers
Gen	Genesis	Obad	Obadiah
Hab	Habakkuk	Prov	Proverbs
Hag	Haggai	Ps (pl. Pss)	Psalms
Hos	Hosea	Ruth	Ruth
Is	Isaiah	1 Sam	1 Samuel
Jer	Jeremiah	2 Sam	2 Samuel
Job	Job	Song	Song of Songs
Joel	Joel	Zech	Zechariah
Jon	Jonah	Zeph	Zephaniah

The Deutero-Canonical Books

Bar	Baruch
Ecclus	Ecclesiasticus (=Sirach)
Jud	Judith
1 Macc	1 Maccabees
2 Macc	2 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach (=Ecclesiasticus)
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom (=Wisdom of Solomon)

Apocrypha

1 Esd	1 Esdras
2 Esd	2 Esdras

The New Testament

Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Apoc	Apocalypse (=Revelation)
Col	Colossians
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Eph	Ephesians
Gal	Galatians
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
Jn	John (Gospel)
1 Jn	1 John (Epistle)
2 Jn	2 John (Epistle)
3 Jn	3 John (Epistle)
Jude	Jude
Lk	Luke
Mk	Mark
Mt	Matthew
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
Philm	Philemon
Phil	Philippians
Rev	Revelation (=Apocalypse)
Rom	Romans
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Tit	Titus

All citations from Scripture, unless otherwise stated, are from the Revised Standard Version (1881).

LIST OF FIGURES

Old Testament Images

New Testament Images

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to provide an opportunity for studying some specially chosen areas of Scripture, building on the fundamental revelation of the Word of God. These introductions are aimed at illustrating the foundations of biblical studies, covering the content of both Old and New Testaments, some of the critical issues implicit to the study of both, and some of the approaches used in biblical scholarship. The specific focus is the revelation of the Covenant between God and his chosen people in the Old Testament, and its fulfilment or completion in the coming of Jesus Christ in the New Testament (cf. Rom 9—11).

The book is designed to enable readers to consider special themes and selected passages of the Bible in a way that sharpens reactions, and makes application of the Bible to contemporary issues in the world possible. The process, alert to both diachronic (or historical) and synchronic (or literary) challenges in the sacred texts, puts major emphasis on exegetical and hermeneutical issues, and the theological application of interpretive findings, whether in study or in preaching, pastoral or teaching situations. It continues the study of the Bible at a higher level, and hopes to allow the reader to build on and expand knowledge gained from earlier reading or experience. It also aims to develop the use of imagery and art as creative tools in the better understanding of salvation history.

This is not meant to be a textbook, nor another introduction to the Bible, but a working manual, or sourcebook. The ideas presented are meant to inspire a desire to study the sacred texts in detail, particularly how they track the revelation of God's love in his covenantal relationship with the Chosen People and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This includes examining how some artists have sought in their work to reflect the interpretations of the Bible by scholars of the Christian tradition. Careful study of the iconography is in turn meant to enable a sharper appreciation of the scriptural texts and to develop an awareness of how they can be used for reflection, for instruction and in catechesis.

A Catholic Worldview and Understanding of Art

The Catholic worldview and understanding of art expresses in its various forms all the different elements of faith. It consists of any works of art, like sculpture, painting, mosaics, metal- or needlework and architecture, which reflect the belief that Jesus is the Saviour of the world.

Such works convey the Church's teaching in this respect through recognizable symbols and images.[1] Spirituality is generated in accessing a dimension of being and meaning that transcends the purely physical and material, and in perceiving a sacredness when it enshrines values that are universally considered to be sacrosanct and sublime.

St Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215) reminded the Church of its "Master's delight in the beauty of the world", emphasizing the relevance of Greek philosophy to Christian thought. If our eyes are opened by divine grace, we can see that everything in creation, other than sin, has been purified by the Incarnation—Jesus' birth as man.[2] This idea encouraged and even enabled artists to understand the value of cultivating beauty for the enrichment of the mind and the nourishment of the soul.[3]

Art, even when pursuing worldly aims and objectives, may also be used to evoke religious fervour when it is perceived as serving the Kingdom of God. There are many stories in the Scriptures that have been illustrated in Christian art and tell of sacrifice and heroism. In the Old Testament there are the instances of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac for God (Gen 22); the young David and the slaying of Goliath (1 Sam 17:48-49); and the intrepid Daniel in the Lions' Den (Dan 6). The New Testament provides examples in the stoning of Stephen the Deacon, the proto-martyr (Acts7:54-60); and of course, centrally, in the Crucifixion of Jesus, which illustrates the ultimate sacrifice for humankind (Mt 28, Mk 15, Lk 23, Jn 19). Christian art, used in these ways, fulfills its spiritual purpose by stimulating people into action as it seeks to portray the invisible and divine through material means.

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[1] See Edward Hulme, *Symbolism in Christian Art* (Blandford Press, 1976).
[2] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* (Exhortation), c. AD 195.
[3] St Clement is revered as a saint and Church Father in Eastern Catholicism, and until 1586 was also venerated by the Church of Rome when he was removed from Roman Martyrology by Pope Sixtus V.

This didactic role of art in Christianity, and the focus that it has on prayer and contemplation, has, over time, played an important role in contributing to the spiritual development and growth of the Christian faith. But there have also been misgivings concerning the relationship between expensive and overtly flamboyant works of art and the teachings of Christ, who was more concerned with relieving the misery of the sick and the poor.

Indeed, Puritanism, and more modern types of evangelical Christianity, have verged on philistinism in perceiving works of art as a distraction or even temptation, aimed more at the glorification of the individual patron than at the worship of God.[4] But from the Catholic perspective, the elaborate nature of some works of art should not be a distraction from the purpose of art, nor be confused with the simplicity and clarity of Jesus' message, but rather be understood as an articulation of the creative gifts bestowed on man, an expression of glory given to God. In this, man recognizes the creative power of the Spirit, and the redeeming beauty of the Son Jesus, rather than just the skills of the artist.

What emerges therefore out of the early beginnings of Christian art, and subsequent Catholic interpretation of it, is an ecclesial culture based on a way of life that is seen as 'universal' or 'worldwide'.[5] The Catechism teaches that the word 'catholic' has several related meanings: it refers to wholeness, integrity and oneness (CCC 830–831).[6] This wholeness is vested in Jesus, because Christ is present in his Church, and in Christ there is fullness of life (Col 1:15), Christ's body united with its head—the *Totus Christus*. The Church therefore seeks to affirm the nature and essence of faith, this sense of universality and wholeness, through the belief that Jesus Christ the Son of God died on the Cross for the redemption of mankind, and through his Resurrection brought salvation to all people. Art carries an innate message, and Christian art should attempt to penetrate the faith in Jesus and his Resurrection in portraying the invisible and the divine by material means.

Most Christian art is therefore based on Scripture, since the Bible reveals the Word of God—his Utterance (CCC 102-104). For Catholics, Scripture

[4] See the discussion in Francis A. Schaeffer. *Art and the Bible* (1973) (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2007).
[5] St. Ignatius of Antioch was the first person to use the word 'catholic' when he wrote to his local Church in Smyrna. See *Early Christian Writings. The Apostolic Fathers.* Trans. Maxwell Staniforth (Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 117-24.
[6] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Burns & Oates,1994).

is *sacred* because it is the divine Word which gives support and vigour to the life of the Church. It provides food for the soul and is the font of the spiritual life. It follows that the Church perceives Catholic art also as *sacred* since it is there to represent and express through Scripture the divine teachings of salvation, and the truths expounded in its theology and pastoral teaching (CCC 131-133; 141).

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) promulgated at the Second Vatican Council (4 December 1963)[7] teaches that sacred art and furnishings, especially religious art, are by their very nature an expression of the creative power and infinite beauty of God. Such work made by human hands is of one of the highest achievements, since sacred art, when dedicated to God, extends his glory on earth and serves the sole purpose of turning people's spiritual aspiration devoutly towards God (SC 7:122). Expressing devotion to God should not thus be confused with idolatry since the two actions have different outcomes. Catholic art does not encourage idolatry. Devotion fosters the virtues of religion, disposing us to acknowledge God as Creator and Saviour. This leads to appropriate worship of God as Lord and Master through whom everything exists (CCC 2095-2097).

Idolatry leads to the veneration of objects in themselves, idols and other false divinities, which is contrary to the teaching of the Judeo-Christian traditions. It is contrary to the teaching contained in the Decalogue (Ex 20:2-17), the Ten Commandments given to Moses: *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (cf. also Deut 5:6-21). Idolatry leads to superstition and irreligion, emptying worshippers, leaving them devoid of feeling because the idols they worship are vacuous since they have *"mouths but do not speak and eyes that do not see"* (Ps 115:4-5). Idolatry is a temptation from faith, but Catholic art encourages and even nurtures faith. Jesus said that *"no man can serve two masters"* (Mt: 6.24), and man commits idolatry when he reveres anything other than God (CCC 2113).

Despite the ban on graven images in the Decalogue, the basis of all Puritanical rejection of art, the Old Testament has several examples of the association of art with sacred things, even with revelation itself. The construction of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness is given in great detail (Ex 23—30), with minute instructions about the fabrication of the priestly

[7] *Vatican Council II. Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*. Ed. Austin Flannery, (1975; New revised edition. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), pp. 1-40.

garments (Ex 25:9) and of the Ark of the Covenant with its crafted cherubim (Ex 37:7). The same procedure is followed later for the construction of Solomon's great Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron 2—7), with specific patterns for various parts of the whole (1 Chron 28:11-12), all to be filled with artifacts and covered in precious stones, with bas reliefs and carved cherubim on the walls (2 Chron 3:6-7). Secular art is also discussed. Solomon's throne, known as the Mercy Seat, is lovingly described in all its aesthetic beauty (1 Kgs 10:18-20). Poetry features prominently, especially in the life and achievements of great King David, creator of the Psalms (2 Sam 23:1-2). Music is mentioned, as in the celebration of Miriam's Canticle that follows on the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 15:20-21). Music was part of the Temple liturgy (1 Chron 2:3-5; 2 Chron 29:25-26). King David greeted the return of the Ark to Jerusalem by dancing before it (2 Sam 6:14-15), and the Psalms combine music-making and dancing in praise of the Lord (Ps 150). Many of these images are pulled together in Ezekiel's extended and glorious vision of the restored Temple (Ezk 40—47).

Another striking use of art in the Old Testament is the creation of the Bronze Serpent in the Wilderness, raised on high as an icon of healing (Num 21:6). This is of particular pertinence because of its links with the Gospel: here Jesus himself refers to it in relation to his own anticipated elevation on the Cross, where he in turn becomes the ultimate icon of salvation (Jn 3:14-15). The use of art in the New Testament is more restricted than in the Old, and probably the best examples come from The Revelation to John (The Apocalypse). Here the depiction of the end times, the celebration of the Liturgy in Heaven with its song of the redeemed (Rev 15), and then the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth, and of the Holy City of Jerusalem (Rev 20), are all envisaged in terms of movement and song, in terms of massive archaeological/material concepts and exquisite decoration.

The Rise of Christian Art

Christian art emerges from the early history of Christianity, which according to the Acts of the Apostles, was initiated when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples after Christ's ascension into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). They were gathered together in Jerusalem and were transformed, principally through the gifts of wisdom and fortitude, into an enduring Church (Acts 2:1-4, 41-43). The Apostle Paul explains that despite their lack of power they nevertheless became an extraordinary force *"having*

nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor 6:10). They had known Jesus, or those close to him, and their hope in him was stronger than their fear of death. Many died as martyrs (or witnesses). The first Roman Christians were buried along the Appian Way at catacombs in the city where a vast network of passages were excavated. The historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c.55-c.120), an eyewitness of the early persecutions, left a vivid account of such events in his writings.[8] These persecutions forced Christians to hide and meet secretly in private houses, and ironically, in the catacombs dug for their burial. These were dark and maze-like and this allowed them to preach the Gospel and celebrate the Eucharist without detection. Under the Emperor Diocletian (AD 245-313), who initiated the last great persecution of Christians in 303, many thousands were killed and buried in these catacombs spread around the city.

It was in these Roman catacombs that the earliest surviving Christian art works have been found. These give evidence of the emerging faith, with scenes from Scripture, or of rituals such as preaching and celebrating the Eucharist. There are still priceless artifacts that bear witness to early Christian religious practice and ceremony, such as sculptures on Roman sarcophagi used for burial and honouring the dead;[9] and also paintings which depict typical religious scenes and actions.[10] Many of the illustrations have a Roman influence, like the image derived from the Old Testament of Noah and the Dove (Gen 8:8-12) where Noah wears Roman dress and has a laurel wreath on his head.

The Jesuit priest and cultural historian Pierre de Bourguet explains how early Christian art constitutes an "impressive body of work" of Roman influence, even in the context of a disintegrating Empire, and not generally associated with the ravaged and decaying contemporary image of the

[8] Tacitus, Roman senator and historian, is known for his two major works *Annals* and *Histories*.

[9] The carvings on these stone sarcophagi would often include an image of the deceased as well as images of biblical figures. There are two rams at each end of the stone coffin which represent strength, and are Old Testament figures (God supplied Abraham with a ram in place of the sacrifice of his son Isaac Gen: 22:13). In the centre is the figure of a shepherd carrying a sheep which, picking up on the pastoral ideas, represents Jesus as the Good Shepherd watching over and rescuing mankind.

[10] This depicts the deceased Christian man at prayer with widow and child from the Chamber of Velati, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome.

Eternal City.[11] The importance of this early art was, however, specifically for inspiration and instruction, imparting a symbolism underpinning Christian doctrine and belief.

During the first three centuries this Christian art was largely confined to secret signs and symbols, as in a painting found in the Catacomb at Saint Callistus in Rome. Christ is symbolized by the drawing of a fish, since the letters that make up the word fish in Greek are **ICHTHUS**.[12] This was taken to represent **I**(esus) **Ch**(ristos) **U**(ios) **S**(oter), interpreted as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". The painting depicts two fishes, one bearing on its back loaves of bread, and the other carrying beakers of wine, so defining the two elements of the Eucharist. A further example is the famous cypher 'chi-rho' (**XP**), which stood for the first two letters of Jesus Christ in Greek.

The Catacombs of Priscilla and of Peter and Marcellinus contain wall paintings, understood to date from the 3rd century, portraying the Eucharist in a more realistic manner. These show women and men seated around a table with various signs indicating that this is a meal of love and peace (*agape*) (cf. 1 Cor 10). This picture is also interesting as it seems that women are portrayed as ministers.

At much the same time in Cappadocia, in the eastern part of the Empire, there are examples of the homes of 'hermit' troglodytes who settled in caves naturally sculpted out of a volcanic plain from around the 4th century AD. Later generations, fearing persecution, made underground cave dwellings sculpted by their own hands and with primitive tools. By around the 11th century the caves were adorned with frescoes. Each small community seems to have had a chapel built into their cave complexes, complete with a recognizable apse and a stone altar from around 5th to 6th cc. AD, making this one of the oldest 'sacred' Christian places.

The 4th century brought a radical change for Christianity; the catalyst being the conversion of Emperor Constantine I (c.272-337) to Christianity. As a result of his conversion, Christianity moved from being the religion of the persecuted minority to the official religion of the vast Roman

[11] Pierre du Bourguet, S.J., *Early Christian Painting* (London, 1965).

[12] André Grabar, *Christian Iconography. A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton, 1968), p. 87: "Early Christian iconography often limited itself to highly schematic figurations, which evoked scenes and persons described in the Bible but did not represent them. ...it more often produced image-signs than narrative scenes and portraits of the protagonists of religious history".

Empire. The *Pax Constantiniana* (the Peace of Constantine) saw great many changes to the way Christians practiced their religion, and this new found freedom provided a fresh impetus to art as an expression of faith.[13] In 330 Constantine transferred his capital from Rome to the ancient Greek city Byzantium which he renamed Constantinople, and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This became a new and important centre for Christian art, developing a distinctive style of art known as Byzantine. The style of this art, and its theological influence, assumed huge importance for the history of religion, as did the prolonged and passionate debate about the role of art in religion and theology, issues which remain enduringly divisive into the present age.

During the period 726–843, the restoration of orthodoxy in the Eastern Church under Emperor Leo III (717-740) resulted in a strict use and interpretation of religious imagery. The imperial attack on image worship in fact initiated the Iconoclast Movement:[14] Eastern Art became more conservative as a result of concessions to sentiment disposed against the use of icons for religious purposes, and the debate generated controversy, even persecution, throughout the Byzantine Empire. Adherents of the movement sought to abolish the veneration of icons. While this did not affect the attitudes of people in Western Europe, it required the Third Council of Nicaea (787) to rule on this matter, and reinstate the full use of icons in the Church. But the violent controversy ended only in 843 when the limited veneration (*dulia*) of icons was officially authorized and distinguished from the full worship (*latria*) offered to God.[15]

Theology and Art

The Fathers of the Church distinguished between theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*), the latter illuminating "all the works by which God reveals himself and communicates his life" (CCC 236). One such way is through the skills and talents of the artist. Through their work they are able to reveal some of the beauty of God, his creation, and the mystery that surrounds belief in Him.

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[13] See Book 10 "Peace and Recovery of the Church: Victory of Constantine" in Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Trans. G. A. Williamson (Penguin Books, 1964, 1983), pp. 380-414.

[14] Iconoclast: A breaker or destroyer of images especially those set up for religious veneration.

[15] See IX "The Iconoclastic Teaching and the Orthodox Response" in Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (New York: St Vladimir, 1978), pp. 145-78.

When art and theology combine 'core' values, the ensuing 'culture' can be expressed and illuminated, an important aspect in teaching the faith and upholding the Christian ethos. Art has a power to speak deeply to mankind in a visual way that carries greater impact and resonance than the word. Long before man could read and write, from earliest prehistory, he could paint, and use this as a way of expressing human experience and ideas. When the ice cap that covered northern Europe at the beginning of the Quaternary compelled man to live in caves, he decorated them with engravings and paintings representing the fauna of the period—mammoths, bears, chamois, wild horses—with amazing realism and movement.[16] The earliest forms of writing, found in the Sumerian civilization around 4000 BC, were pictures or pictograms which were developed into a cuneiform script. Much later, the catacomb paintings of Ancient Rome are a good example of this pictorial instinct, since as discussed above, they illustrated and teach us about the beginnings of Christian 'catholic' culture and its practices.

The word 'culture' derives from the Latin verb *colere*, the past participle of which is *cultus*, carrying two connotations. The first can be taken to mean a farmer or gardener who cultivates and cares for the soil. The second relates to *cultus* or 'cult' as a form of religious belief or devotion. From this secondary meaning comes the idea of reverence and worship.[17] In addition, theology understands that the whole of creation begins and ends in God, the *exitus reditus* (coming from God and returning to Him). For the Christian, caring/nurturing and worship stand at the heart of the idea of culture. However, the exercise of these acts requires an object.

The philosophy and theology of Catholicism are associated with the 'unity of being' that comes from the belief in an archetypal 'oneness' that is God (cf. Deut 6:4: *"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one LORD"*). The source of reality is one, human nature is one, and there is one divine image. This understanding of 'oneness' forms a cohesiveness so that human life, nature and culture are intimately linked together (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1:53).[18] This union means that whenever art is portrayed or viewed

[16] P. M. Grand, *Art Préhistoique* (Paris: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1967).

[17] Culture is essentially the training and development of the mind, the social and religious structures and intellectual and artistic manifestations that characterize a society.

[18] The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965) in *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents,* pp. 903-101.

from the perspective of faith, it should reflect the belief that this sense of 'oneness' generates the strength and power in the faith that represent the essential principles of Christian culture. These principles include: a triune God, creation, grace, deliverance and redemption, the sacraments (especially Baptism and Eucharist), and the united body of believers, the Church.

In Christian art all these principles are foundational in every subject. In theology the mystery of three divine persons in one God permeates all of the Church's doctrines, liturgy, prayers and its sacramental life. Catholic understanding is that God is Trinity and Love, and whilst distinct, these elements are in total communion with each other. Belief in God brings 'total communion' with the oneness of God. And since the Judeo-Christian traditions are 'ecclesial cultures', their gathering together as religious assemblies (*qahal* and *ecclesia*) brings about and images forth this oneness and unity. This is apparent in Synagogue worship, and preeminently in the ecclesial celebration of the Eucharist and the reception of the sacraments.

God reveals himself to his faithful through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus; at the Mass He becomes present. The Church, being faithful from the beginning to the Lord's command, teaches how the celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life and stands at the centre of its devotion (CCC 1324; 1342). Therefore the celebration of the Eucharist serves to reflect all of the 'core' principles that are a part of Catholic culture, and at the same time lifts the faithful beyond the present to a transcendental level, projecting the innate unity, truth, goodness and beauty of God.

As much as Catholic culture seeks this unity, truth, goodness and beauty in faith, and especially in the Eucharist, it has also sought the same transcendent principles in art. It expects to perceive an intrinsic truth and beauty expressed in a religious painting or sculpture, even though extrinsically this might not be obvious. The work of some artists can appear very brutal, harsh or even weak, not seemingly reflecting the goodness, beauty and strength of a God of love. The historian Diarmaid MacCulloch refers to the perception of changing art in his book on Christianity. He refers to "culture wars" in various parts of the world during the 20th century where movements looked to the sacrifice of the Cross for strength, but instead, paradoxically, found in the powerlessness

of the Crucifixion the basis for resurrection freedom and transformation.[19]

It cannot always be assumed that art will necessarily be beautiful in the obvious sense of the word. Indeed, the Greek word for art, *agios*, means 'awe', and awe is not necessarily associated with beauty. What is often more important in art, and especially in religious art, is the intention and extrapolated meaning that tries to understand the source and inspiration behind it.[20] In Christian theology, the essential values concern deliverance and redemption. This involves the concept of sin and its implications, emphasizing that through human intelligence and freedom, mankind is able to choose to do good or evil. Sin has the effect of separating man from the goodness we associate with God. The consequence of unrepented sin is isolation from this goodness by an eternal separation that is traditionally understood as 'damnation' or hell (CCC 1033-1057): *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire"* (Mt 25:41). Artists over the years have illustrated hell as the consequence of sin, some in disturbing graphicness; others, by contrast, have shown the reward of heaven for those who have followed God's ways. In this way art has underpinned the Church's teaching on moral behaviour.

Pope Benedict XVI, speaking in August 2011, observed that artistic expressions are true paths to God, the supreme source of beauty. Art is capable of envisioning our need to go beyond what we see, and reveals a thirst for God. Such works, he said, are born of faith, and express faith.[21]

Pope Francis, at a meeting in Rome with the Patrons of the Arts in 2013, observed "that in every age the Church has called upon the arts to give expression to the beauty of her faith and to proclaim the Gospel message of the grandeur of God's creation, the dignity of human beings made in his image and likeness, and the power of Christ's Death and Resurrection to

[19] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (Penguin Books, 2009), p. 979. "Christian art created in the twentieth century has interesting shifted away from old priorities, even in Catholic art, and there is a greater stress on Christ on the Cross with themes of crucified weakness where the tiny seed of mustard becomes a great tree".

[20] H. R. Rookmaker in *Modern Art & Death of Culture* (Crossways, 1994) uses famous and lesser-known paintings to propose that modern art reflects a dying culture, and that Christian attitudes can create hope in current society.

[21] From a General Audience at Castel Gandolfo on 31 August 2011, reported by the CAN (Catholic News Agency).

bring redemption and rebirth to a world touched by the tragedy of sin and death."[22]

These two statements serve to illustrate how valued and important art is for the Church, the role that it has in expressing doctrine and theology, and in teaching the faith. In particular, art can evoke in people a deep sense of mystery and desire—in recognizing the beauty in creation, in reflecting on the history of salvation, and in drawing closer to the Creator beyond them.

Covenant

God wishes to draw all men into communion with himself. This idea is emphasized in the doctrine of salvation and expressed most cogently in the theme of covenant. The free gift of divine love is the essence of covenant.

'Covenant' is a word that occurs frequently in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, both in the Scripture readings chosen in the lectionary, and in the forms of worship which have evolved for the sacraments, including the Mass, most notably Eucharistic Prayer IV. The statement *"Time and again you offered them covenants and through the Prophets taught them to hope for salvation"* from this prayer (The Order of Mass, para.117) is foundational to any study of the covenant, because it identifies the medium of divine love from the first, and stresses the frequency of the action of God. The very inception of revelation is this self-communication of the creative and saving power of the Lord. The Hebrew term ***berit*** has an emphasis on the inequality of the two parties, and on the protection offered by the more powerful to the weaker. The repeated action of God shows his faithfulness and loving–kindness (***chesed***) in caring for the world he created. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek under Ptolemy II (250 BC), the translators chose ***diatheke*** for ***berit*** rather than the more contractual concept represented in the word ***suntheke***. ***Diatheke*** describes a universal gift, such as in a will. So the Lord gives covenant to Israel unilaterally, and Israel responds.

Eucharistic Prayer IV continues to assert how the coming of the Messiah was prophesied from the first, and how the plan for salvation was accomplished through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ (or Anointed One), and the special sending of the Holy Spirit. The Divine Office includes prayers such as that in Morning Prayer for

[22] From a meeting with Pope Francis and the "Patrons of Art" held in the Vatican Museums on 19 October 2013, reported by the CNA.

Wednesday of Week 4, where the faithful ask that God remembers his *"solemn covenant, renewed and consecrated by the blood of the Lamb"* (i.e. Jesus) *"so that* [the faithful] *may obtain forgiveness of their sins and a continued growth in grace"*. The covenant is then seen to be the major focus in the spiritual life of the Church. It is therefore a key reason why study of covenantal revelation, unfolding from Old Testament times to the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, is enriching for all who hold or teach the Christian faith.

What do the covenants actually mean in the context of salvation history?

The covenants all reveal a pattern of election, commission and promise, and each one has something unique to say. Covenant is about salvation: it is the advent of sin that created the need for covenants. In the Garden of Eden everything was perfect, so it would have been unnecessary for God to have made a covenant with Adam. Only after the Fall (Gen 3:22-24) is there necessity for some saving plan. This is proleptically referred to in the primordial prediction of the Gospel, or the **Protoevangelium**, of Gen 3:15.

Once the Fall had taken place, the dynamic of God's call and saving power is demonstrated in his loving care for his People. It is also clear that human irresponsibility and disobedience to God can return creation to chaos (Jer 4:23-26). Nevertheless, God's readiness to pardon his rebellious People's many transgressions indicates the loving and forgiving nature of this relationship. By his covenants, God communicated his love and thus his saving plan. Therefore, understanding the concept of covenant is crucial to understanding the nature of God's relationship with his People, and indeed with all humankind.

Each covenant represents a key Biblical moment, when a chosen personality is called to be God's agent, and a defining symbol or concept is provided, governing the proclamation of the covenant and indicating its specific recipients:

1) **Noah** and the **Rainbow**, with all creation **(Gen 9)**
2) **Abraham** and **Circumcision**, with his family **(Gen 15—17)**
3) **Moses** and the **Law**, with all the People of Israel **(Ex 19—24)**
4) **David** and the **Messiah**, with the House of Judah **(2 Samuel 7)**
5) **Jeremiah** (the Prophets) and the **New Heart**, with all God's people **(Jer 31:31-34)**

Each represents a key moment in the unfolding of God's saving plan of love. An exploration of the rich content of each of the covenants draws one more deeply into the mystery of divine grace. The theme of covenant, the principal theological key to the whole Bible, is a history of God's passionate, merciful and steadfast love. Indeed, the Old Testament shows God's redemptive work as an ever-growing communication of his love. Eventually this love takes perfect embodiment in the Incarnation: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

The significance of this is exposed by the Apostle Paul when he speaks of the faith of Abraham, God's choice of the Jews, the question of circumcision, and why the Gentiles are not bound by the Law, and affirms that those who believe in Christ are descended from Abraham. The old covenant is not annulled, but brought to completion in the new covenant in Christ (cf. Rom. 4:1-25; Rom. 9—11; Gal.3:6-9).[23]

[23] See The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Éditions Paulines, 2001), which warns against "supersessionism", the error of regarding Christianity as "replacing Judaism in God's plan of salvation" (no. 85, cited in Appendix 1); cf. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions), no 4. *Dominus Iesus* is a response to misunderstandings arising from the latter. Cardinal Ratzinger's article "The Heritage of Abraham" (*L'Osservatore romano*, 29 December 2000) affirms that "Judaism is the faithful response of Jews to God's irrevocable covenant" which is "salvific for them" because God is faithful to his promise. See also Walter Kasper, "The Good Olive Tree", *America*, 185:7 (2001): 12-14 (delivered at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York, 1 May 2001): "One of these questions is how to relate the covenant with the Jewish people, which according to St. Paul is unbroken and not revoked but still in vigour, with what we Christians call the New Covenant. As you know, the old theory of substitution is gone since II Vatican Council. For us Christians today the covenant with the Jewish people is a living heritage, a living reality. There cannot be a mere coexistence between the two covenants. Jews and Christians, by their respective specific identities, are intimately related to each other. It is impossible now to enter the complex problem of how this intimate relatedness should or could be defined. Such question touches the mystery of Jewish and Christian existence as well, and should be discussed in our further dialogue."

PART 1:

THE OLD TESTAMENT

CHAPTER ONE

THE TORAH, OR PENTATEUCH

The Torah, or Pentateuch (Five Scrolls), traditionally the most revered part of the Hebrew canon, comprises a series of narratives, interspersed with codes of law, providing an account of events from the beginning of the world to the death of Moses. Modern critical scholarship tends to hold that there were originally four books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers) resulting from the division into manageable scrolls, to which was added a fifth scroll or book, Deuteronomy. The five books that have come down in various texts and versions have been seen as a unit in the various religious communities that preserved them. Their basic content may be divided into six sections, as:

1) the beginnings of the world and man (the primeval history)
2) the Patriarchal narratives (from Abraham to Joseph)
3) Egyptian slavery and liberation (the Exodus)
4) the divine revelation and Covenant at Sinai (the Ten Commandments)
5) wanderings and guidance in the Wilderness (divisible into two separate blocks, before and after Sinai)
6) various legal materials (the Decalogue, Covenant Code, passages of cultic and Deuteronomistic laws) interspersed in the narrative, which take up the greater portion of the Pentateuch.

1A. Genesis

Genesis is called ***Bereshit*** in Hebrew, after the first word of the Bible, meaning 'in the beginning'. It tells of the beginnings of the world and of man and of those acclaimed as ancestors of the Hebrew people, all under the shaping action and purpose of God.

This section investigates this fundamental book of the Bible which falls into two main parts, Gen 1—11, dealing with the Primordial History, and Gen 12—50, dealing with the Patriarchal Narratives. Gen 1—11 contains the archetypal themes of Creation, sin, death, the formation of human