THE RENEWAL OF SACRED ART

Timeless Principles and Contemporary Challenges[1]

by Aidan Hart

INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to be asked to come all this way from England to talk with you tonight and to run the icon course. I pray that our evening will make your own trip here to the campus of St Mary's University College worthwhile.

The human face and body is a wonder. So much depth. By it we can see and are seen, hear and be heard. By it we smell the fragrance of creation and partake of Christ's body and blood. Through their bodies the disciples touched God.

Sacred art is the natural extension of this mystery, the union of matter and spirit, creator and creation. Without liturgical art Christianity can too easily descend to a system, a concept, an ideology. Beholding daily the face of Christ in His icons we are reminded that God has become flesh, that He loves us, that life is a relationship with Christ, His angels, His saints. In His face we see the union of joy and sorrow, we see that the meaning of life's struggles is to become beautiful in spirit. As one of the Russian words for saint suggests, *prepodobni*, we are called to become "much like" Christ. We are called to become living icons of Christ.

True beauty is the handmaid of the Lord. It is a fragrance wafting over the walls of paradise to remind us that paradise exists, that to walk with God in His creation is our destiny. Although apparently not linked etymologically, the Greek the word for beauty, *kalon*, is similar liturgically to the word *kalein*, to call. Beautiful liturgical art calls us, beckons us to go deeper.

And so sacred art is not an optional extra. Matter is with us forever. Even in the age to come we will be material beings, have bodies, albeit transfigured and immortal bodies.

It is in man's nature always to fashion matter. We are image making creatures. And so it is not a question of whether or not we should have icons, have church music, have church architecture: it is rather a matter of what images, what music, what buildings we will have.

Social justice or beauty? "Is not the energy, time and money that one can expend on liturgical art a distraction from the Church's labours to promote social justice, to improve people's human rights?" some argue. But is not an environment that lifts the soul a right? Is not ugliness a form of oppression? The ugliness and poor design of the concrete high-rises created in 1960's Britain for the poor created so many social problems that the government found it more economical to demolish them and replace them with more expensive but more humane buildings. The ugly soon becomes expensive and wasteful.

If the Church in the freedom of its worship omits to create beauty in its liturgical art, then it will not be able to do so in the wider world. Indeed, if our neighbour is starving and we have no means left of helping him than melting

[1] A lecture given at St Mary's University College, Calgary, Canada, 30 May, 2013

down the church silver then the church should do this as a last resort - sainted bishops have done this very thing. But it is a last resort. That great saint, Basil the Great of Caesarea (c. 329-379), saw no conflict between effort expended on beautifying church and on helping the poor. St Gregory of Nazianzus said of St Basil in his funeral oration to the saint:

> *[Basil] looked after the support of the poor, the entertainment of strangers, the care of maidens, legislation written and unwritten for the monastic life, arrangements of prayers* (i.e. the liturgy), *adornment of the sanctuary.* (Orations xliii)

For St Basil the Great, adornment of the church went hand in hand with the support of the poor.

We can survive living in a white box or a dark cave, and we can of course pray there. Many Christians in prison for the faith have been compelled to do just this, to live in a cell for years. But this is precisely an unnatural situation. When we have the freedom and means, why not use all that is available in the service of the Lord? St Paul writes of the Father's plan for the fullness of time, "to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). Earth, the material world, is an integral part of God's plan. To suggest that material beauty is a distraction suggests that the material world is a distraction, which borders on the heresy of Manichaeism. Matter is not the result of the fall, as the Manicheans claimed, but is created by God and is good.

The term sacred art can be understood rather broadly - from any art with some spiritual content to art used by any religion in its worship. So in our discussion tonight I shall confine myself to its more specific meaning of liturgical art, that is, art made for use in the worship of the Christian Church and for private prayer.

Although I work as an icon painter and carver, I hope that what we discuss tonight will be applicable to all the other liturgical arts as well. The principles and challenges of all the liturgical arts are, I think, broadly the same.

And although I am a member of the Orthodox church and work within its icon tradition, I will attempt to address sacred arts issues that face non-Orthodox Christians as well as Orthodox. In any event, the distinction is becoming less and less, especially as Catholic and Episcopalian churches are increasingly drawing on the icon tradition.

I will begin by outlining the key theological principles which nourish liturgical art, and then discuss how these are applied in the icon tradition. I will then finish with a discussion of the challenges facing the current renewal of liturgical art.

THE THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES CENTRAL TO LITURGICAL ART

1. **The Incarnation of God**: God has become flesh, has united Himself to our human nature. And so we can depict the second person of the Holy Trinity in the person of Christ. Images of the God-man Christ, the Theanthropos, affirms the reality of the incarnation. This was the main defence of icons put forward by the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 AD) against the iconoclasts: "Icons are a tradition useful in many respects, but

especially in this, that the Incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely fantastic."

2. **The transfiguration of man:** St Athanasius the Great wrote that:

   For He was made man that we might be made God. (from "On the Incarnation")

St Peter wrote that we have been granted many promises that by these we might "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Icons depict people who are in this state of union, hence the haloes and other stylistic techniques. The fullness of man is not to be merely man - no matter how developed physically or mentally or culturally - but divinised man, man in union with God through Christ. By participating in Christ we participate in His divinity, since His humanity and His divinity are forever united in His Person as the Logos of the Father. Liturgical art should not therefore depict an ideal world of fantasy, but the real of real people who are transfigured.

3. **Matter can be grace bearing**. A consequence of man's deification in Christ is that his body is transfigured along with his soul. As St Simeon the New Theologian (949–1022 AD) explains:

   Having become all fire in his soul, man transmits the inner radiance gained by him also to the body, just as physical fire transmits its effect to the iron.

   And since we are joined materially to all creation, matter also is transfigured through us. It becomes a grace bearer. And so liturgical art does not just depict this reality, but it is itself part of this reality. Its very existence affirms that the material world is good and an integral part of the spiritual life. It helps us use all our senses to love God and to receive his love, for thanks to icons we can not only hear about God but we can behold God's face and express our love through kissing and bowing before His image. That great defender of icons, St John of Damascus, wrote:

   Since we are fashioned of both soul and body, and our souls are not naked spirits, but are covered, as it were, with a fleshly veil, it is impossible for us to think without using physical images. Just as we physically listen to perceptible words in order to understand spiritual things, so also by using bodily sight we reach spiritual contemplation.("On Divine Images", 3.12)

4. **Communal man**. We are made in God's image which means we are made in the image of the Holy Trinity. This means that we are persons fulfilled in relationship. God is love not only because He loves His creation, but because before all eternity the Persons of the Trinity have loved one another. So, to be a full and alive person is not to be individualistic, but is to love. The very word person means face, which presupposes relationship. In this we find our uniqueness, not in seeking to find ourselves as if we were self-contained entities.

Christ has overcome the division of the dead and the living. Heaven and earth are part of the one Church, hence that wonderful phrase in the Athanasian Creed: "I believe in the communion of the saints". Liturgical art helps to bring these two worlds together. A church with icons and frescoes continually revitalises this sense of the communion of the saints. Church chant can evoke the otherworldly. The movements and vestments of the liturgy should themselves be icons, reflections, of heavenly worship.

5. **The eye of the heart.** We have various faculties: the five bodily senses, the rational faculty, our aesthetic sense, free will, and finally, the noetic faculty. In our secular age this last faculty (called *nous* in Patristic Greek) has been largely forgotten. It is the eye of the heart by which God, people and things are known directly. Through it, when purified, we can know God rather than merely know about Him. Liturgical art should touch all these faculties, but most critically it can help to open our spiritual eyes.

   What do we see when this eye sees? Christ not only created each thing, from stone to angel, but He also sustains each thing by the power of His word. It is this hidden and unique word within each thing, *logoi* spoken by the Logos, that the purified eye of the heart can perceive. As St Paul wrote:

   > *All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* (Colossians 1:16b,17)

And in Hebrews we read:

> *He upholds all things by the word of His power*. (Hebrews1:3*)*

The bush which Moses saw burning had always been burning, only he hadn't the eyes to see this. It was ultimately Peter, James and John who were transfigured on Mount Tabor, so they could "behold Christ as He always was" (from the Orthodox service of Transfiguration).

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL LITURGICAL ART

Having outlined the theological basis of liturgical art, we can now identify some of the characteristics that it should possess. How these can be achieved is a much larger topic than we have time for tonight, but we can here at least identify some of the things we should be aiming for.

The icon as door

Liturgical art should aim to bring us into communion with its subject - Christ, the saint, the sacred event depicted. In this sense liturgical art is not art in its modern sense. Its aim is to lead us beyond itself, and not to be admired as a stand-alone work of art. This requires a deliberate imperfection in the work to remind us that it is the subject matter that is the ultimate reality and not the image. This in large part explains the flatness of the Orthodox icon tradition and the rejection of naturalism. This abstraction common to all sacred art also enables the works to suggest invisible but very real spiritual realities. One can say that such works are more realistic than naturalistic works which limit themselves to physical realities.

Repentance the aim

The formal elements of liturgical art - its style if you like - should lead us into a deeper state of prayer, compunction, wakefulness. Be it music, architecture or visual art, its aim is not to stimulate a temporary feeling of euphoria, but to help us enter a permanent and sustained state of love, or peace, of prayer.

For this reason traditional liturgical art usually unites joy and sadness, hope and compunction. It is centred on inviting us to turn our will towards the will of God, rather than to stimulate feelings. Certainly good sacred art does arouse feelings of peace and inspire uplifting thoughts, but it does this in a sober way. Someone once said to me that the Christian life is not ecstasy - literally, the going out of oneself - but instasy, the meeting of Christ in the depths of the heart. Saint Ephraim the Syrian wrote:

> *The ladder of the Kingdom is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin, and there you will find steps by which you will be able to ascend.*[2]

The making an ecological act

If liturgical art affirms the goodness of matter then the actual making of sacred art can itself be an ecological and transformative act. It is not just the result that is important, but the process. An icon painter takes representatives of the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms and transforms them into something even more articulate in the praise of God. He neither misuses the raw materials nor leaves them in the ground, but he lovingly fashions them, brings out their potential. So I think we should as much as possible use natural materials, and discover the special qualities of each medium and material that we use. It is like raising children, helping each one to find their unique role in life.

The making is a priestly act

The great liturgical artists unite gift, skill and spirituality. This is because making liturgical art is a priestly and prophetical act. Creation can praise God of its own accord, but it gives thanks through us, its mouthpiece. We are ourselves a union of matter and spirit, and so we are the meeting place of the material and spiritual worlds. In the words of the seventh century St Leontius of Cyprus:

> *The creation does not venerate God directly by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify Him, through me the waters and showers of rain, the dew and all creation venerate God and give Him glory.*[3]

The liturgical symphony

Each work of sacred art is an instrument within a larger liturgical orchestra, and so its design needs to harmonize with the whole. Egotism and the desire to make a statement has no room. Panel icons hang within a church and are

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[2] ” The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian" Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston,1984, p. 11

[3] St Leontius of Cyprus, PG, xciii, 1604AB; transl. Kallistos Ware

venerated as part of liturgical ritual; murals are painted on the surfaces created by the architect; chanters sing music composed by composers and words written by hymnographers; clergy and laity have processions in a sacred choreography wearing woven and embroidered vestments. Each sacred artwork is part of the whole.

Cultural incarnation

While liturgical art expresses timeless and heavenly realities, it should also be incarnational, be an expression of all that is good in the culture making it. Romanesque iconography and architecture, for example, is a Western European expression of the same principles informing Byzantine sacred art. Even though St Paul's spirit "was provoked within him" when he saw all the idols in Athens, he began by identifying and affirming what was good in their culture.

> *Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.* (Acts 17:22,23)

The Apostle then went on to quote approvingly from one their philosophers and one their poets. I think liturgical artists should do the same thing, drawing what is good from the culture for whom one is making work. For iconographers in Britain this might for example mean drawing inspiration from the Romanesque, Anglo Saxon or Celtic heritage. Those of you living in North America will need to find your own voice. This process can take time, generations even, but it is a natural outcome of unique cultures expressing their love for God.

This enculturalisation is a subtle task. Two excesses need to be avoided:

A. The concern to be local and contemporary should not eclipse the timeless and eternal quality of liturgical art. It is perhaps best not to make enculturalisation an aim as such, but let it happen naturally as one seeks to express eternal and divine realities.

B. The opposite extreme to be avoided is to limit the tradition to copying great works of the past. Whilst copying masterpieces with understanding is an excellent way to unearth their secrets, copying is not of itself the essence of sacred tradition. The fact that one can date and determine the provenance of icons by their style alone testifies to the variety within the icon tradition.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

We come now to a discussion of some of the challenges that face the renewal of liturgical art today. It is wonderful that St Mary's University College has plans to develop their programme of sacred art, for liturgical art is a specialist field that requires a union of theology and liturgical experience with artistic skill. The Church cannot afford to hand over this vital aspect of her life to the whims of the ever shifting contemporary art world.

Our histories

To understand the different challenges facing the liturgical art of Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches we need to understand something of the histories each have inherited.

For the **Protestant Churches** the watershed in liturgical art of course occurred with the iconoclasm of Calvin on the Continent and of Oliver Cromwell in Britain. Behind this destruction was the belief that images got in the way of one's relationship with God. This belief, which I hope I have shown in this talk to be erroneous and not Christian, still dogs many Protestant denominations and makes them shy away from the adornment of their churches.

Before much progress can be made towards a Protestant sacred art, image and ritual must be put on a firm theological basis and not be considered as an optional extra, to be adopted only if it is according to one's personal tastes. There are encouraging signs that this is beginning to happen. Taize community for example, founded by the Protestant Brother Roger Schutz, was an early promoter of icons in particular and of beauty in worship in general. About a third of my commissions for icons now come from Anglican churches, and even many evangelical congregations and book publications are using icons.

Concerning the **Roman Catholic Church**, there seem to be two historical elements that influence its contemporary liturgical art. The more recent shift regards the aftermath of Vatican II. Many Roman Catholic faithful believe that Vatican II was misinterpreted by many to mean that churches should be stripped and simplified down to white walls. They feel that such church interiors have become quite Protestant in this respect.

Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI tried to redress this trend by encouraging artists in the service of worship, for example John Paul II's "Letter to Artists" (1999). However, I understand that there is still resistance in many quarters to any return to a more traditional understanding of liturgical art.

Another promising sign is the establishment in Rome of a Masters programme in Architecture, Sacred art and Liturgy at the European University, and most recently the Sacred Art School in Florence, founded by Dony MacManus.

The second issue facing the renewal of liturgical art within the Roman Catholic Church lies further back. From early times western Christendom has tended to value images primarily for their didactic value and discouraged veneration of them. In 600 AD Pope Gregory the Great wrote to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles to permit images as useful

> *for the edification of unlearned people, though ignorant of letters....but by all means forbid the adoration of images.*[4]

The letters written by Charlemagne's court - the Caroline Letters - in response to the Seventh Ecumenical in defence of icons followed the same tack as St Gregory, limiting the value of icons to their usefulness as books for the illiterate. The Caroline letters sadly relied on very bad Latin translations of the original Greek texts, which most notably failed to follow the distinction in the Greek between worship due to God alone and veneration due to holy things.

[4] Epistles of Gregory the Great, Book XI, Letter 13.

In part due to this emphasis on icons as books for the illiterate, at least from around the fourteenth century the Roman Catholic Church has tended to give much more freedom to individual artists than the Orthodox Church to decide how they were going to depict sacred subjects, and has tended also to favour more naturalistic renditions. Those who favour this freer approach argue that it encourages more creativity. Those against it say that it presents worshippers in the church with the artist's particular and individual interpretation of subject matter rather than a true and spiritual interpretation.

The Orthodox Church by contrast, while affirming this didactic role of the sacred image, has much more closely related the style of its iconography with its theology and clearly described distinction between worship due to God alone and veneration due to all people and things through which God comes to us. Contrary to popular opinion this does not in fact stifle creativity - Byzantine and Russian iconography was always reinventing itself. But this correlation of style and content has meant that Orthodox sacred art has arguably sustained more consistently a spiritual profundity in its work - hence the enormous interest in iconography within the Catholic Church. Orthodoxy has applied theology not only to the what but to the how of its sacred art.

Pope John Paul II in his "Letter to Artists" himself acknowledged this difference of approach when he wrote:

> *.....In the East, the art of the icon continued to flourish, obeying theological and aesthetic norms charged with meaning and sustained by the conviction that, in a sense, the icon is a sacrament. By analogy with what occurs in the sacraments, the icon makes present the mystery of the Incarnation in one or other of its aspects.*
> *In the West, artists start from the most varied viewpoints, depending also on the underlying convictions of the cultural world of their time.*

Personally, I feel that for Catholic visual liturgical arts to make enduring changes for the better it needs to make a closer link between the formal means of its art and its theological content. This link is clearly acknowledged in music, so why not in the visual arts. If it is more appropriate to sing the sacred words of the Mass using Gregorian modes than heavy rock music, why should it not be also be more appropriate to use art forms especially designed to convey spiritual realities? The medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan famously wrote.

The **Orthodox Church** faces a different set of challenges. It was only around the beginning of the twentieth century that both Russia and Greece began to revive traditional iconography. This has in many quarters produced a copyist spirit, arising probably from a fear of debasing the tradition only just revived.

From the time of Peter the Great Russian liturgical art in Russia had become somewhat sentimental, and in Greece the four hundred year long Turkish occupation led to its iconography becoming somewhat folksy and primitive. The revival began in Russia with the removal of darkened varnish to reveal the brilliance of the medieval masterpieces, such as the famous Trinity icon by St Andrey Rubliof. The renewal in Greece came mainly through the iconographer and writer, Photius Kontoglou.

Despite the copyist mentality in many quarters, there are leading lights such as Fr Zenon (Teodor) in Russia, whose icons embody the same profound spirituality of medieval works and yet are fresh and new in style, and who are inspiring a new generation.

Individualism verses personalism

Secular art has been somewhat hijacked by individualism - be it the desire for fame, to shock, make money, or to express one's private world view or angst. All this is one thing in the freedom of the art world, but it means that liturgical artists need to ensure that they keep their eye on the plot. The artist of the sacred needs constantly to tread the middle path, avoiding egotism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other.

It is a wonderful thing to work within a community, to integrate ones own individual works with the larger choreography of the Church's worship.

Creativity

It is a mistake to think that setting theological parameters on sacred art will stifle artistic creativity. Since sacred art aims to suggest lofty realities the artist's creativity is stretched to the uttermost. A sacred tradition has its focus on creativity in depth rather than in the endless novelties of innovation. What is lost in horizontal freedom is amply made up for in freedom in depth. There are many ways of suggesting the bush of creation "burning without being consumed" by the glory of God. God is infinite and man finite, and so each culture and each individual will add their particular emphasis and nuance to their liturgical art. The fourteenth century saint, Kallistos Xanthopoulos, attributes the success of an icon of the Archangel Michael to “the ardent love” of the painter for his work:

> *How is it that matter can drag the spirit down and encompass the immaterial by means of colours? This is the work of ardent love, as shown by the facts, and it kindles the heart.*

An important outcome of this more dynamic and challenging view of sacred art is that it will attract gifted people who would otherwise be put off by a copyist’s approach.

Training centres for liturgical artists

There are few or no centres in the West where liturgical art is taught in a serious, in depth and long term way. It needs to be treated as a specialist field, involving both technical training - which is usually lacking in secular art schools - and theological and liturgical learning.

Although we can learn a lot by ourselves - by trial and error, by reading, by observation - this can be a slow way to progress. And without more experienced eyes critiquing our work we can get a false impression of its worth. By far the best way to progress quickly is to learn from those more experienced. Such schooling may take the form of apprenticeships with an individual master, or full-time or part-time courses run by an institution.

Providing such centres of learning is surely the most urgent challenge before us if the renewal of sacred art is to bear fruit. This could either take the form of funding to help experienced masters take on apprentices, or of

institutions offering in-depth courses which teach the necessary skills in the context of theology.

Such schools could also offer to seminaries short courses to introduce future priests to the important role liturgical art can play not just in worship, but also in mission. It is no good training artists to enrich worship if the bishops and priests are not commissioning them.

Father Vasileios, the abbot of Iviron monastery on Mount Athos, once said to me that there are epochs where it is difficult to get things right artistically and there are epochs where it is difficult to get things wrong. We are in the former type of epoch. The mechanisation of our age and the desire to build quickly has meant we are not surrounded by the beauty that comes from using natural materials. Our intuition of what looks right and what doesn't is not so developed if we grow up amidst the cheap and synthetic and the ugly. Mass production means we can make more easily but not always more beautifully. This makes schools of sacred art, with good teachers and a sound theological basis, even more important. What a citizen of a "difficult to get it wrong age" might do naturally as a first liturgical art language, we must learn as best we can as a second liturgical art language.

CONCLUSION

Worship on earth is participation in heavenly worship. Its forms therefore need to reflect and be an icon of that heavenly worship. The lineaments of Old Testament worship were not invented by man's creativity but were revealed by God to Moses. The dimensions of the tent of meeting, its colours and furnishings, the rituals to perform were all images of heavenly realities. Although executed using human creativity, imagination and craft, the design of the tent and its furnishings were sourced not in human imagination but in divine revelation. It couldn't be otherwise of they were to accord with heavenly realities.

It is remarkable how the heavenly worship that the Apostle John describes in the last book of the Bible - The Book of Revelation - corresponds with traditional liturgy and church architecture. Surely it is pertinent that St John has this vision when he is "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10), that is on Sunday, the day of the Holy Liturgy. He describes things that we see still today in church architecture and furnishings and liturgy:

- The seven golden lamp stands (Rev.1:12). A seven branched candlestick usually stands on the altar.
- "...Lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders..." (Rev. 4:2-4) . Christ enthroned surrounded by twenty four elders corresponds to the bishop's throne in the centre of the apse surrounded by benches for the priests.
- "Round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind" (Rev. 4:6). One often sees depictions of this in the apse.
- "Day and night the four living creatures never cease to sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'" (Rev.

4:8). This thrice holy hymn is sung at every Liturgy and is simply us on earth joining in with heaven's creatures in their ceaseless worship.

- "The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne" (Rev. 4:10). In the Orthodox tradition we venerate the icon of the Saviour by crossing ourselves and bowing three times, or in Great Lent prostrating right to the ground.
- "Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'" (5:11,12). In a church filled with frescoes or mosaics one not only hears but also sees this heavenly host of angels and saints. In this way we quickly gain a lively sense that when we begin a service on earth we are in fact simply joining in with the ceaseless worship conducted in heaven.

I would like to finish with the words of that great saint and poet of the fourth century, Saint Gregory of Nyssa. He reminds us that true beauty leads us beyond itself to its source, to God who is the Father of all good things:

> *The person who gazes on divine beauty marvels at what is continually being revealed to him and never ceases desiring more; what he awaits is even more magnificent and more divine than what he sees.*