

May 31-June 1, 2001

The Art of a Presence Seen
Reflections on the Encounter with *Anno Domini*
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Key Note Lecture
Christians in the Visual Arts Biennial Conference
“A Presence Seen: The Artist in the Church and the World”
University of Dallas

The Art of a Presence Seen

The opening chapters of the Bible make an astonishing declaration. Creation, the text sings, is the work of a loving hand, fashioned in divine delight for the purpose of enjoyment and loving communion. This declaration was as astonishing in the ancient Semitic world as it is in our own world. Creation is not the battle-ground of competing forces, good and evil. Nor is creation, as many in the ancient world and our own would have it, a field for struggle in order to win some spiritual victory on the other side of life, a paradise offered only to those few souls who have the purity of character necessary to enter the kingdom of God. Creation is not to be overcome in order to enter a reserved sacred world of which this our earthly one is only a shadow, a preparation. What the Biblical story proclaimed as the purpose and meaning of the gift of life artists laid hold of and articulated. Life, like art, is fashioned by a loving Creator. When we dwell at the centre of life, we dwell in the presence of the Kingdom of God, the place of communion, creativity, delight and wonder, or, as this conference suggests, "A Presence Seen".

The only real sin is "to miss the mark of life"; and the only choice human beings face -- their freedom -- is to dwell in life or abandon what is real for that which steps outside of the creation, outside the world of loving communion.

While the Biblical hymns beautifully declare the glory and wonder of creation, most, if not all, human beings often experience the world as a place of struggle if not battle, and, all too often, as a place of agony and alienation. Yet, deep within the human spirit and often in the story and song of human cultures we hear the distant echoes of another way of knowing the world.

"For me the initial delight
is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew.
There is a glad recognition of the long lost...."

What your great poet Robert Frost is "remembering" what brings him to "a glad recognition of the long lost" is the work of the Church, and, I suggest to you, the work of artists. Art, Christian art, glimpses "a presence seen." It is the art of God incarnate.

The "art of arts" is the "remembering" at the heart of human experience. Liturgy tutors the faithful in this art. The early Greek Fathers and Mothers of the Church were very deliberate in their choice of the word "liturgy" for the work of the community of pilgrims who lived present to the kingdom of God, at the heart of creation. *Leitourgia*, its Greek form, signified a public duty, a public work. Just as those who teach the young or those farmers who provide food for communities far and wide are engaged in work for the whole of society, so the Church in its prayer is working for the restoration of creation. Liturgy, prayer, is the art of coming anew into the presence of the Creator. In prayer we are restored to creation and creation is restored to herself. The liturgical practice, the prayer, of the ancient church cosseted creation, all of human experience, healing and refreshing the eyes of the faithful to see again the grace-filled world so easily forgotten, the playground of God's delight. Liturgy calls the faithful out of alienation to a life of loving communion. Liturgy is the art of remembering and the art of Christians is a *leitourgia*, a public work, in service to restoring sight in the age of show.

An ancient prayer of the Church says, "O Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, Who art everywhere **present** and fillest all things, O Treasury of every good and Bestower of life: come and dwell in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O Good One."¹ Art in which presence is seen, whether the work of professing Christians or the work of those claiming for whatever reason to be devout atheists, is free of nostalgia, free of utopian vision. Here the Holy Spirit is at work. This work is never propaganda but its opposite, Presence, a Presence Seen. Whatever the play of the past, the hope or vision of the future, they come to have meaning in Presence, in our brief moment of incarnation. This life and our fragile world are what the Bible calls the place of the Presence of the Kingdom. "Heaven on Earth" is in no sense a nostalgic dream or a utopian vision. On the contrary, the living tradition of Christianity understands the Kingdom of God, the life of loving communion, as the fullness of creation because this world was made in joy and for joy.

One of our spiritual Fathers, Saint John Chrysostom (c.347-407), ascetic, preacher and finally Bishop of Constantinople, Doctor of the Church and ultimately martyred at the hand of his own bishops (something many an artist, some among us, are familiar with) said: "God created the arts in order that life might be held together by them, so that we should not separate ourselves from spiritual things" (Homily to the Philippians, 10.5). Art is liturgy, the holding of the world together, a glimpse of the presence seen. Art and prayer open again "all the works of the Lord" for our contemplation and lead us into the precincts of praise. To teach us to pray, that is the work of art. To teach us to see, that is the work of prayer.

But we work, intellectuals and artists alike, in a world that seems strange at times, a world that has an appetite for forgetfulness. In my country Canada and in the United States we live in a culture of amnesia. This was driven home with new force for me a decade ago when I asked a class in the history of religions at the University of Alberta, in a province in Canada that many still identify with the "Bible belt," if they knew Moses. Did they know the religious tradition in which he stood, where he lived, or the text in which we read of his struggle? Had they met this stuttering prophet, murderer and liberator, who never experienced the joy of homecoming? In a class of 100, five hands went up. My Jewish colleague Francis Landy told me later in the day that in his classes the name of Jesus is often known only as a swear word. I realized on that day that I was now teaching my generation's children, that my generation's flight from our parent's faith (it is true for Christians, Jews and others alike), the latest chapter in secularization, had completed its work.

The bareness of our public landscape of meaning, the naked public square as Richard John Neuhaus calls it, has rendered the discussion of meaning and the sources of meaning in Christian culture mute. It seems to me that the political discourse of the right and left in both our countries has conspired to blind us to the heart of our culture, the Christian tradition. Its values and meaning may be seen only through the spotlight shone by the hermeneutics of suspicion. Consequently, there has been little place in the public square for

¹ We find this prayer in various places in the liturgical prayer of the Eastern Churches and in the Wesley's devotional books. It begins Morning Prayer for Orthodox faithful throughout the world. See, *A Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians*, translated from the Greek by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1987.

the discussion of the complex issues which the political right and the left always manage to reduce to single issues. But I have also noticed recently that this anorexia of memory has run its course. Our children long for a world of value and meaning larger than self-interest, a world of ideas and commitment large enough to include humility and wonder. Perhaps we now stand at the threshold of a new era in our culture.

I did the *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries* exhibition out of my love for the Christian tradition, a regard for the illuminating power of art, and my confidence that a forthright consideration of meaning, the meaning at the heart of Western civilization, continues to speak even in our age of amnesia. I had read Jaroslav Pelikan's wonderful book, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* when it was published by Yale University Press in 1985, and some years later discussed the exhibition idea with him, inviting him, eventually, to be the Honorary Curator of the exhibition. Since no consideration of Jesus can be faithful without being grounded in incarnation I spent time in the extraordinary houses of religious women in Quebec, and in Orthodox monasteries in Serbia (in Kosovo just before all hell broke loose), and Greece, including Mount Athos and Meteora. I walking the pathways of my pietist ancestors in Scandinavia, walked the road to Nicea and sat on the Synthronon in the church at Nike (Nicea, Isnik) where Arius was taken on by Athanasius, incarnation was affirmed as the heart of our faith, and the creed was drafted. I chanted a portion of the Great Litany quietly in the shadows of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and contemplated the "abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the Prophet." I walked from the Women's Cistercian Monastery in the lovely town of Dijon to the public square, the same walk taken by 42 women, young and old, arrested on a Tuesday at the height of the Terror during the French Revolution and taken the following Sunday at three o'clock, introduced to Madam Guillotine, given a last word ("Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do"), and ushered into the Eternal. I talked with curators and historians about doing an exhibition on Jesus through the centuries, spent time with artists, and negotiated with the guardians of various nations' cultural patrimony.

The first challenge, of course, was the theme of the exhibition itself: "How can you possibly contemplate doing an exhibition on Jesus?" The second was: "What right do you have doing an exhibition that uses artistic works to speak of cultural meaning? We are concerned with aesthetics and history. That is what museums proper do. " "We have just purged ourselves of this heinous story and all the harm it has visited on human culture" one French intellectual and cultural guardian said to me. Our discussion was on my mind the next day in Dijon as I listened to the echo of the forty-two sisters and their last words to the executioner.

I did the *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries* exhibition as a little way of anointing, of pouring oil (the "oil of gladness," I hope) on our civil discourse. I hoped it would make our considerations of the complex questions we face in this historical moment a bit more supple by opening up the sources of our culture. It was been humbling to watch 114,000 people (the largest attendance in the history of our museum) move slowly back and forth, again and again thinking and pondering and talking together as they found themselves along that walk with Jesus through the centuries. Many wept and although I am not always sure why, it did strike me that the invitation to ponder and to let their own conversation, the movement of their heart and mind, rise to the surface and join the choir of that great cloud of witnesses from Jesus the Jew to Jesus the Man for the World, was a welcome relief. So

many have not known that such a choir has been calling them for years to sing their own song, their new song, and to have the great cloud of witnesses over twenty centuries provide the melody line for their particular counter-point.

The Art of a Presence Seen. Since we begin our reflections together on this extraordinary theme at the centre of the Christian tradition, which I think speaks profoundly as your work does to our blindness to life in the age of show², let me give you a suite of stories from the *Anno Domini* exhibition, stories on a Presence Seen.

The exhibition used Pelikan's 18 "images," epochs, from "Jesus the Rabbi" through "Jesus, the Man for the World" showing his place in the history of culture with the gifts and challenges that have formed us over 2000 years. In each of these themes I endeavoured to hold present and past together; in each of them let the incarnation speak and not dull or divert its presence. Day in and day out, from October 2000 to January 2001, I encountered elderly women and men, received notes, letters, and phone calls from friends of my too-soon departed parents. Connie Bergstrom from the Swedish and Norwegian hamlet of Meeting Creek in Alberta, where my parents courted, said she walked a little way, looked, read and pondered, and sat down, moved. "I heard your Father and Mother, David. They were everywhere. I would walk a little more but was so moved by the art and what it all said about me that I had to sit and cry a little more." A Presence Seen over two thousand years of Christian tradition illuminated eighty years in the life of my parent's friends because the life-giving roots remain and *Anno Domini* dusted off some of the leaves, revealing that green liveliness of human experience we are so easily tempted to forget.

Dominique Dendrael, a curator working in France at the museum which now occupies the house of the Cistercian women in Dijon, brought many of the French works to the exhibition. On the second day of the exhibition she spoke of how taken aback she was to see the works she had brought, works she diligently sought out from many regional museums in France because the guardians of the French national collections would not let the works they controlled go into an exhibition about Jesus and meaning: "Despite all our discussions David I am astonished to see these works I have come to love shown in the context of the world of meaning which gave them birth." A self-described exile from the Christian tradition, she had glimpsed the Presence Seen by artists of reputation and unnamed nuns, work she had come to treasure not quite knowing why. The last works we hung in the gallery were brought by Roberto Fontanari from the Galleria dell'Accademia associated with Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice. An art historian of some note and friend of Umberto Eco he came to me after twenty minutes in the *Anno Domini* and said, "David, what have you done here? For twenty years at Saint Marko I have thought about how it is we always reduce our wonderful works simply to history and aesthetics. We swim in such art works but we never speak of their meaning. I see here that it can be done. It is a third way and I see how deeply it engages us." The Keeper of a portion of the treasures of Scotland at the National

² The monastic traditions, East and West, have spoken about the guardianship of the eyes as a central spiritual discipline. For a provocative discussion of the this issue in modern society see *The Scopie Past and the Ethics of the Gaze, A Plea for the Historical Study of Ocular Perception*, Barbara Duden, Ivan Ilich and Mother Jerome, working paper no.6 published by Science, Technology, and Society Studies, Pennsylvania State University, November 1995.

Museum of Scotland, Godfrey Evans, brought the Phoebe Anna Traquair (1852-1936) works, Thomas Kirkwood's (1621-1663) magnificent Trinity College Communion Plate, the Giuseppe Mazzuoli (1644-1725) gilded terracotta bozzetti of the Virgin Mary and Christ Holding the Cross and a 13th century Limoges reliquary. He spoke about how his museum would not think of doing an exhibition that so explicitly addressed the meaning of the Christian tradition for human culture. "We simply could not do such an exhibition. But now that I see it, perhaps there are ways." With all my colleagues who came from the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and Greece our discussion over the few days we were together turned on our culture of amnesia, the traces of a presence seen in the heart of Western culture. We spoke about how our museums and galleries that preserve and value the gifts of human culture have come to colonize their meaning and feed the disease of amnesia we so often bemoan.

I began with the words of your poet Robert Frost: "For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. There is a glad recognition of the long lost..." There were thousands of conversations in *Anno Domini* on this "glad recognition of the long lost." Those who claimed a portion of the tradition, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, Roman Catholics and Orthodox, and those for whom Christianity had been colonized by the glare of our age of show and hermeneutic of suspicion glimpsed the One "who is ever ancient, ever new." Their own story, its struggle and joy, was drawn to the surface by a presence seen by artists. They saw because you and generations before you see. Presence is the gift of the Christian revelation, the Christian unveiling of the mystery of being. Seeing is your gift to all of us who "would not learn to look." And CIVA's gift to me and to the exhibition made it possible to ring the changes on 2000 years of Christian seeing. Karen Mulder's regard for your work led me to include the works of Sandra Bowden, Donald Forsythe, Edward Knippers and Bruce Herman so that the Presence Seen in contemporary work might join the great cloud of witnesses from de Ferrari to Simon Solomon, Fra Angelico, Altdorfer, Dürer, Rembrandt, Bosch and the Cranachs to Rodin, Blake, Eric Gill, Spencer, Ford Madox Brown, Copley, Kokoschka, Eichenberg, Jacob Lawrence, Molly Lamb Bobak and so many others.

To teach us to pray, that is the work of art. To teach us to see, that is the work of prayer. In a Presence Seen they meet. In your work, for which our world longs, we are again opened to Beauty, the language of that "sure light" which unveils the mystery of Being³ that Christ's incarnation affirms and your vocation fulfills.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume I: Seeing the Form. Translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1982). In his Introduction von Balthasar discusses how modern society has banished Beauty and how her two sisters, the True and the Good, will not tolerate this and that the human condition cannot bear it.