

CATHOLICISM AS UNCONSCIOUS ART¹

IF it is by inspiration that idea takes bodily form, the word is made flesh, it follows that, given a common material, the greater the inspiration the greater will be the completed reality. Moreover, the greatest imaginable inspiration (that is, God Himself in entire perfection, rather than in isolated attributes) would demand and receive an *infallible* response. We have, therefore, in seeking for a religion that is unconscious art, to seek for a religion that claims direct, certain, and complete infallibility from God. There are many such religions, including the Catholic Church.

But the Catholic Church differs from the rest, not only in the actual authority for its infallibility (a matter beyond the province of metaphysics and aesthetics), but in the fact that it alone claims to be the Body of Christ, the Word made Flesh. Thus Catholicism, since it is a continuation and extension of the Incarnation, becomes not only a work of art, but the abstract type or *pattern of all* works of art. For, just as Christianity claims Christ to be the incarnation, the world of God in the world of flesh, so does Catholicism claim the Church as the incarnation of Christ in the world of history and institutions, though with this difference, that whereas Christ, being God, was perfect as man, there can be no such guarantee for the private lives of the personnel of institutions (however divine). In Christ God associated Himself only with man's imperfections, but in the Church Christ associates Himself with man's sins. Those who reject, 'on spiritual grounds,' the possibility of the incarnation of Christ in a 'corporation,' should be led to reject also the possibility of the incarnation of God in a human body and soul. Both these doctrines comprise the realization and justification of the supreme experience of the aesthetic world—that of the Word being made Flesh. Yet it is necessary to recognize also that the fact of art actu-

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ating and, in a sense, becoming the essence of Catholicism, demands the complementary claim of perfect inspiration, or infallibility. Thus the Church cannot be completely poetical without being completely infallible; and, since infallibility implies complete definiteness and the absence of uncertainty, the Church is dogmatic.

Let us take a parallel from aesthetic perception to show the necessity for the *visible* existence of the Church. The quality of this perfection may be crystallized in the word metaphor; aesthetic activity consists in the transference of thought into form, and of inspiration into thought. Metaphor, although its more usual meaning is restricted to the art of poetry, may in a more general sense be taken, as representing a philosophic attitude which in art is more real than that of fancy, which in its turn is more real than that of reason or literal fact, as the type of all aesthetic activity. Now there are two essential qualifications for a metaphor, which distinguish it from reason on the one hand and madness on the other: first, the unreality of the comparison, according to the standards of common-sense; secondly, the reality of the object to which the comparison is made. Thus the Church must exist visibly *somewhere*, else it does not exist at all, either visibly, spiritually, or in human minds. This vitality, taken as the symbol of humanness, has important consequences. For it leads to the fact that the Catholic Church is an artist whose materials consist ideally of the entire human race, with all its objects; thus it must tolerate the errors and crudities (in both symbol and practice) occasioned by human faults, among which must be placed the sentimentality of the creative power vouchsafed to the average man; thus even the apparently degraded images and pictures often displayed in Catholic churches possess a philosophically *aesthetic* value, inasmuch as they are essential to Catholicism considered as a work of art. Thus ritual recognizes some further standard of *aesthetic* beauty than art does, and this is perhaps the source of their conflict. This conflict is akin to that between the aesthetic and imaginative perceptions, and, just as in that case the easiest

reconciliation is reached through raising the imaginative perception to the purely *aesthetic* value of the aesthetic perception, so with ritual and art the former must be raised to the aesthetic standard of the latter. There can be no religious or artistic justification for admitting bad works of art into the service of religion, where there is a chance of their aesthetic improvement; where the artist in his turn falls into error is to suppose that his own aesthetic standards, though valid for the productions and performances of ritual, are the only standards that are so valid, and to forget that man, with his frailties, is an essential component of a very great work of art—the Church. Where the artist can choose his materials, the Church rarely can.

Closely allied to this apparently supra-aesthetic element in the beauty of ritual is the corresponding necessity of dogma to ritual. When once the principle of the Church being considered as an artist, and all her faith and works as works of art, has been grasped, it is a simple matter to explain the necessity of dogma to ritual. Ritual can no more rightly exist without the dogma which it was born to illustrate, than technique can rightly exist without a subject, or a subject without inspiration. From a still more transcendental point of view, in which Catholicism is regarded as poetry squared, the poetry of poetry, there is aesthetic beauty in dogma itself, and therefore an *aesthetic* rightness in its retention. The separation of ritual from dogma would in fact mean the dissolution of the entire intellectual fabric, not of Catholicism alone, but logically of any art-work.

The dualism of perceptive and imaginative beauty may be paralleled in religious experience with that of mysticism and institutionalism. Protestantism is wrong in maintaining there is any essential conflict between the two. The

² Compare St. Thomas' division of Beauty into *Claritas, Integritas, Proportio*. *Integritas* might here stand for our Imaginative Beauty, while *Constantia* would appear to be the controlling force that reconciles the two other constituents of the definition.

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method of one is direct, of the other indirect. Institutionalism without mysticism, like imagination without primary aesthetic perception, is arid; mysticism without institutionalism, that is, aesthetic perception without imagination, is anarchical. Yet conflicts do arise; and perhaps the best peacemakers are von Hügel's conception of the balancing intellectual element in religion, and—in the sphere of aesthetics—Saint Thomas' quality of *Proportio*, by which he seeks to reconcile *Claritas* and *Integritas*.

Catholicism has always welcomed both Mysticism and Institutionalism, believing them both to be essential to a truly universal creed. In the same way the unconscious aesthetics of Catholicism approves both imaginative and perceptive beauty. And just as the two religious elements mingle to their mutual benefit, so in practice there is less separation than in theory between the two elements in beauty. If imagination be taken to include the intellect, then ritual, which in Catholicism is never based but on dogma, may be said to unite as perfectly as possible the twin elements which have been classified as the participants in beauty.

Thus Catholicism will be found to answer to every constituent of aesthetic fact—the artist, his material, his work, and his end in creating it. Now in Catholicism it is impossible to separate the Church that creates and the Church that receives—the highly isolated artist in the Church is the Eucharistic priest; and thus, since Catholicism, in consistency with its doctrine of the Incarnation and consequent emphasis on the redeemed dignity of man, regards man himself and his perfectibility as the end of works of art, and since the essentiality of the human element in the Church's ritual compels her to consider him also as its means, this union resolves itself into that of the artist, his material, and his end in creating his work. And all these are united to the work itself by the fact of obedience, in that it is the Church herself, whom the material and the end of her art—that is, man and his perfectibility—by faith obey, that controls and indeed creates the work of art.

BLACKFRIARS

Art and Catholicism have been in conflict, but ideally they should form a perfect unity. For the conscious existence of anything ever seeks to blend itself with the unconscious, and the unconscious to lose itself in consciousness: the body and the mind are the conscious and fallible expression of the soul, and, as St. Augustine has said, 'all the life of the body is the soul.' Thus all the life of art is Catholicism: Catholicism may be called the super-ego of art. But equally Catholicism has a duty to recognize art. Two errors must be avoided, that spirit disowns matter, and that spirit automatically includes matter: the errors respectively of Manichaeism and Spinozism. But art is more than the body or even the mind of Catholicism: it has true rights of its own. Just as art must recognize ritual, and ritual obey dogma, so must dogma obey that spirit or principle of art by which the whole of Catholicism is a poem, and which alone compels the obedience of ritual to dogma, and the recognition of ritual by art.

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