

Extravagance in the Church

By Greg Witherow

Sacred art is a component of many traditional Catholic parishes and cathedrals. Statues, stained glass windows, chalices, vestments, holy water and sometimes even incense are often part of the Catholic experience at Mass. There are many amongst the laity who have their faith enhanced as a result. But not all are so pleased with such arrangements. There are those both inside and (perhaps especially) outside the Church critical of anything that smacks of lavishness. “This money could be used to care for the poor” is a common refrain. Such sentiments are found even in the Gospels, complete with an apostolic condemnation of “wasteful spending”. Do the critics of sacred art speak the voice of Christ? Has the Catholic Church with Her costly sacred art strayed from Her core values? These are fair questions. We will examine them in this essay.

An Apostolic Rebuke

A scene in each of the Gospels gives us insight on our topic¹. The Gospel of John reads,

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him) said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’ This he said, not that he care for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said, ‘Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.’”²

While in this Gospel account it is Judas Iscariot (an apostle) who protests, in the other accounts it was the disciples and the others present. In their case too, **the objection was that the money could have been better spent on the poor.** Unlike Judas, their sentiments were sincere.

A Different Perspective

While popular opinion disapproved of Mary’s act, Christ had a completely different reaction. First he defended Mary; “why do you trouble the woman?”³ Then he was highly complimentary; “for she has done a beautiful thing to me.” And finally Christ honored Mary; “truly I say to you, wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” He made his point. And the wealth expended at Bethany was not an isolated incident. A prostitute likewise honored Christ. It was Wise Men who worshiped Christ with a kingly fortune. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea went to great expense to bury Christ with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. Misguided waste? No. Beautiful worship? Yes.

¹ The anointing of Christ at Bethany was done by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It is recorded in Matthew 26, Mark 14 and John 12. In a separate instance, Christ was anointed by a “sinful woman” in Luke 7.

² John 12:1-8. All scripture references in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version Second Catholic Edition.

³ The following quotes are from Matthew’s account in chapter 26:10ff.

Some Objections

Some may protest that the Gospel examples no longer apply, as Christ is no longer with us. But a Catholic would retort, “in a different way He is still physically present.” This highlights a radical difference between Catholic and Protestant houses of worship. Now listen carefully. A Catholic believes Christ is physically present (body, blood, soul and divinity) in the Holy Sacrament. Consecrated hosts (the Sacrament) reside in what is called a Tabernacle. Every parish has a Tabernacle with the consecrated hosts. This has ramifications for Catholics.

A Catholic parish is a sacred place of worship. It is not merely a meeting house. Every church and altar has been blessed by a bishop. It is required. Why? **It is the home of the King.** Believing this, Catholics often adorn their parishes with kingly adornment reminiscent of the Gospel accounts. **Doing so is an act of respect; it is an act of reverence.** While outsiders may be critical of this, at least they should give the Church credit for being consistent.

Conclusion

Caring for the poor is a core component of the Gospel. It cannot go unnoticed that Christ healed and fed while saving souls. The Catholic Church has always sought to relieve the poor from their misery. She was the first to found universities, hospitals and relief organizations. And the Church today (without the power to tax) is one of the largest private charities in the world.

Yet Catholics are cognizant they worship a King. **And if so, it is proper to act like it.** Of The Errors Of Our Time, excessive reverence is not one of them; but a lack of awe is. In adorning her churches with sacred art, we can say with Christ, “why do you trouble [the Church], for she had done a beautiful thing to me.”⁴ The Church instinctively mimics the scene at Bethany.

One final note. For some people, it is the beauty of sacred art found in the Catholic Church that draws them to Christ, not the prose of scholarship taught in austere churches. Without beauty they remain Lost. With sacred art, Mother Church throws a wide net to capture these lost souls.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

2502 Sacred art is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God – the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,” in whom “the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily.” This spiritual beauty of God is reflected in the most holy Virgin Mother of God, the angels and saints. **Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Savior, the Holy One and Sanctifier.**

2503 For this reason bishops, personally or through delegates, should see to the promotion of sacred art, old and new, in all its forms and with the same religious care, remove from the liturgy and from places of worship everything which is not in conformity with the truth of faith and the authentic beauty of sacred art

⁴ Matthew 26:10. I have substituted “the woman” with “the Church” to make my point. I think Christ would concur.