

## Contemplation and Sacred Art\*

*Irene Rothweiler*

*Irene Rothweiler was born 1958 in Aachen, Germany. After having earned a degree in Music and Dance Education in Cologne 1980, she turned to modern glass-painting. Complementary to the training and practice of this field of sacred art, she studied art history at the universities of Cologne and Aachen. After receiving her first awards, many lead glass windows according to her designs were realised, above all in churches and chapels in Germany, Belgium and Israel. She also paints murals and designs modern paraments. Irene Rothweiler is married, has four children and lives with her family in Bonn.*

I would like to thank Marieta Quesada for her beautiful contribution and especially for broaching the subject of sacred art. For twenty years I have been working in the field of sacred art. I am German. I was born in Aachen and I live with my family in Bonn. I create church-windows for historical or modern churches and chapels. In addition to that, I do mural painting and design modern paraments.

Sacred art focuses on holy, mystical events. As an artist I have to bear in mind that I work in consecrated places. Any work of art in a liturgical context has to visualize the transcendent world. This holds true for lead glass windows, chasubles and pulpits, as well as altarpieces and tabernacles. Sacred art is art that fulfills an obligation. In my view this is the fundamental requirement in sacred space. This also applies to contemporary artists, whether they are working in a more figurative or abstract fashion. Everything should be considered from this perspective.

Today's artists continue to live with the great treasures of former times. And we continue to make use of them. But it is not our concern to reproduce the

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treasures of the past. Our matter for discussion is not perfection in craftsmanship — which is necessary without doubt — but artistic creativity. It means that we are asked to explore new directions. We artists have to do this, also in sacred space. No patron can release us from that.

Modern art does not mean *per se* abstract or non-figurative art. It is true that today's inflationary torrent of pictures suggest a critical distance from "realistic" painting. But that is not a verdict, but rather a warning of the trivial. What is evident often requires only a hint. This way the viewer gets involved and he or she completes and joins in on the shaping of the work of art. Figurativeness must not necessarily be understood as mimesis of nature. Marc Chagall called the Scriptures an "iconographic atlas". John Paul II speaks of this in his 1999 *Letter to Artists* (n. 5). Chagall did not paint in a "realistic" style, but literally in a "fantastic" style.

Symbols are also figures. They are figures that hint at something. They point to what is invisible. (*Table 12*). Traditional Christian art is very rich in symbols. Symbols have always included the viewer. They invite you to perceive the invisible. They ask for contemplation. In my experience, the richness of Christian symbols is a spring as well as a guide. However, when one is no longer conversant with the language of symbols, one's eyes do not easily perceive the message. Symbols are also very plausible junctures to catechesis. But this has to really be practiced.

Sacred art is certainly commissioned art. The patron defines the purpose. Blessed Josemaría, who had a special talent for architecture and art, did not tell artists "how" to do their work as artists; it was up to the artist. Heliodoro Dols, architect of the modern shrine of Torreciudad quotes him as follows: «The statements within the pictured scenery have to be evident to everybody; they should have a didactic effect. The altarpiece ought to be a lesson in catechism. It should be a contemporary sculpture, artistically well done and finished down to the last detail, featuring the special aim of intensifying the prayer of the people, both those with great knowledge of art as well as those with less technical knowledge, and even for children» (Patronato de Torreciudad (ed), *Torreciudad*, Madrid 1988, p.167). These are certainly legitimate instructions for a patron to give. After that, it is up to the artist.

This does not always go that smoothly. One of my window designs was greatly appreciated by the pastor in charge, but was not explicitly accepted by the art committee of the episcopate. I, consequently, hesitated to have the designs realized. The pastor then sent me a note which included a photocopied paragraph from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican Council II, quoting as follows: «The art of our own time from every race and country shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it bring to the task the reverence

and honor due to the sacred buildings and rites. Thus it is enabled to join its voice to that wonderful chorus of praise in honor of the Catholic faith sung by great men in past ages» (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 122). I keep this note with a sense of honor. And now my windows are decorating the church mentioned above.

It is more pleasant to communicate the message of art to believers than to discuss the often very theoretical objections by the art committees (*Table 13*). «Through his works», says John Paul II «the artist *speaks to others and communicates with them*» (*Letter to Artists*, 2). That is the opportunity and Blessed Josemaría says how to use it: «There is an urgent need for spreading the doctrine of Christ. Store up your training, fill yourself with clear ideas, with the fullness of the Christian message, so that afterwards you can pass it on to others». (*The Forge*, 841)

Each commission I take has different conditions. Not only do I have to adjust each time to new space and light conditions, but also in each case to the parish, the congregation, the hospital, the religious communities, the Order of Knighthood — always to people with their own special “taste” and distinct or vague ideas. These are people whom I have to convince through my work. Occasionally I also work in chapels of some apostolic initiatives of Opus Dei. Through my work, I can help to dispel prejudices that are sometimes held against the dignity of contemporary religious art.

In 1980, when I got my first large assignment to provide a modern church with windows, I was not familiar at all with the challenges an artist has to face when working for a church. How did it happen that I felt at home in the world of sacred art, of signs and symbols? When I think about it now, two fortunate circumstances seem to have been crucial for me.

The first was that I was born into a family involved in art and architecture. My father was an architect and responsible for maintaining the Cathedral in Aachen, as well as other historical buildings of the city. Furthermore, he had set up a modern architectural office in our home. Consequently, I was in contact with experts and artists in my immediate environment as early as my childhood. These events formed me and encouraged my hereditary talents.

The second circumstance was my encounter with Opus Dei. My first acquaintance with Blessed Josemaría Escrivá occurred in my college years. Subsequently I was drawn by his message deeper and deeper into the richness of both the world of faith and the teachings of the Church. Escrivá urges us to do the following: «You must always have, in everything, the same ‘instinct’ as the Church. For this, you must acquire the spiritual and doctrinal training that you need, which will make you a person of sound judgment in temporal matters, humble, and quick to correct yourself when you realize you have made a mistake» (*The Forge*, 840).

My work in sacred art then also became part of my inner life. I truly consider my profession to be a matter of personally lived faith and its expression.

Blessed Josemaría saw the heart of the secular mentality of Christians living in the world in combining the human and the supernatural into a unity of life. He was very passionate about that. Pope John Paul II explicitly mentions the unity in the life of an artist, who not only creates a work of art but also tries to some extent to make his life into a work of art, into a masterpiece (cfr. *Letter to Artists*, 2). The Pope refers to the difference between artistic and moral dispositions and their correlation: «Each conditions the other in a profound way. In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of *what* they are and of *how* they are what they are» (*Letter to Artists*, 2).

Therefore artists run the risk — and by no means only the poorer ones — of falling into a kind of double life or schizophrenia: to serve the holy place of worship without being internally affected by it. I unfortunately came across this phenomenon when I witnessed the temptations artists face to regard the church only as a support or stage for their art. Blessed Josemaría makes himself very clear about this matter. He writes: «The objects used in divine worship should have artistic merit, but bearing in mind that worship is not for the sake of art: art is for the sake of worship» (*The Forge*, 836).

Blessed Josemaría's message about the sanctification of work has had a great influence on my personal life. I am married and the mother of four children. Reading Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*, wherein he speaks of how the artist's work reflects God's image in the human being and how God calls the artist to participate in His creative power, I asked myself whether I had a share in God's creative power more as an artist or as a mother. As an artist, I think more in terms of intuition and inspiration and less in terms of daily life and organization. Blessed Josemaría clearly answered my question. He wrote: «Let me stress this point: it is in the simplicity of your ordinary work, in the monotonous details of each day, that you have to find the secret, which is hidden from so many, of something great and new: Love» (*Furrow*, 489).

This applies to my profession no less than to my family management. Without the constant encouragement of my faith and spiritual guidance, which I have been receiving from Opus Dei for twenty years, I could hardly master the demands of working with sacred art. At the beginning of every project, there is always just a commission and a white piece of paper, then sketches pile up... There are a lot of steps until the project is finished, including long and often obstinate discussions with art committees and boards of trustees. It requires a lot of inner strength to carry on to the end and to stay true to my choices of subject and idea, and to myself.

I get this inner strength from contemplative prayer, which was recommended as a daily practice by the Founder of Opus Dei. These periods of prayer are breaks during my professional activity, reserved for dialogue with God or silent reflection on His life. Blessed Josemaría speaks even more emphatically about dialogue with Christ during the Mass, which is the center of every day. It may be inappropriate to talk about illumination in this context, but some important ideas occur to me during Mass: subjects, ideas and specific ways of handling confusing situations. There are certainly times of doubt, depression and resignation. But beyond that remains the feeling of gratitude and certainty that the spiritual framework will always keep me going and guide my steps. Soon optimism will prevail again.

Over time, I have become increasingly friendly with the faithful donkey, Blessed Josemaría's symbol for the one who lives a life of sacrifice. I realized with delight that my new friend has also found acceptance in the field of sacred art: the pews of the oratory of Pentecost in the central offices of Opus Dei in Rome show the donkey at the waterwheel. Blessed Josemaría, then, had not only biblical scenery represented, but also scenes from secular life in order to transpose them into the supernatural world.