Estrangement and Engagement: The Passionate Dance of Art and Religion

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"All the arts penetrate into the depth of things
which are beyond the reach of cognition."
Paul Tillich

The nexus between art and theology is religion or, more specifically, religious practice. A fruitful beginning then for a dialogue between art and theology is to ask how much present-day artists are exposed to religion and how much theologians are exposed to the world of art. As a term "art" encompasses many activities and disciplines. Art can be art practice, that is, the creative production of art works or artifacts, it can also mean reflection on art as theory and history. Proper parallels, therefore, should be between art theory and systematics, art history and Church history, etc.

The history of the relation between art and religion, especially the Christian tradition has been rocky and uneven. Because of its Judaic roots, Christianity has always had a suspicion about the arts. Fear of idolatry has, in particular, cast aspersions on the visual and performance art. In contrast, there seems to be less fear with the verbal and literary, although an idolatry of the verbal pervades the Christian tradition, and a manifestation of that are the varieties of Christian fundamentalism and literalism.

Art is metaphorical and is a way of understanding and dealing with reality. It is suggested that the tripartite Vitruvian veritas, utilitas, *and* venustas *can be the basis of fruitful dialogue between art and theology, if these three are read not merely as a program of aesthetics but as concretizations of the* metaphysical transcendentals, *the true, the good, and the beautiful.*

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I prepared the key note address for this conference long before the fire storm that erupted in the art and religion scene in August, with the exhibition *Kulii* in which Mideo Cruz's *Poleteismo* was exhibited. That exhibit gathered enough media mileage, calls for reparation, prayer, processions, and even a Senate hearing and the resignation from CCP of some of my personal friends. And now criminal cases against Mideo Cruz, Karen Flores of CCP, and a host of others.

The event only showcased how art can be such a potent force in a society that tends to sideline it and not give it much support. The event was so full of irony that as a critic and practitioner of art I could not but notice.

I knew of the brewing firestorm before it erupted into a media frenzy through some cc-ed email between the artists and others. And my first reaction was also the reaction of other artists, "*Sa wakas napansin si Mideo*."

Mideo is a performance and installation artist. When he received the Ateneo Art Awards in 2006, it was for a performance piece called *Banquet*, where he set a table before him full of whitened bones, rotting meat, and other garbage. Then, he entered the scene dressed in a white suit with a pig's mask. He began acting as if he were consuming the pile of garbage. His message was clear: we are becoming pigs in this consumerist society. The image had many historic and literary resonances, the hungry sailors of Odysseus turning into pigs as they drink of the magic potion of Circe, the pigs into which the demons of the Gerasene demoniac enter only to fall headlong into the sea, the common expression "You pig!" "*Matakaw ka pa sa baboy*." "*Hayop, baboy mo*!"

He is also an installation artist. When he did *Poleteismo 3* in June 2007, he recreated inside the phone booth of Loyola House, what looked like an over the top dashboard of a *jeepney* where a rosary, blinking lights, sacred images, and pictures of politicians, movie stars and women clad in bikinis were placed side by side. To see in a new space what is commonplace elsewhere was refreshing, it moved the familiar to the unfamiliar and raised questions.

In the frenzy of media soundbites, the Ateneo and UST were dragged into the fray. Quoting what apparently came from Mideo,

that *Poleteismo* had been exhibited in the Ateneo and UST, media (especially the broadcast media of the Internet, where every Tomas, Juan, and Pedro or Maria, Rosario, and Isabel, can give a two devalued *sentimo* of opinion), the Ateneo and the Jesuits were pilloried. As one blogger queried, "Were the Jesuits, who run Ateneo, the 'bad-ass' people in the Church?" Like in many media frenzy, where like sharks feasting on a carcass, there were lots of thrashing and sound, more sound than light. Lots of blood and gore, and then what?

Because of the frenzy, media wanted to interview Fr. José Mario Francisco, and Fr. Jason Dy, who was mistaken as the curator of the 2007 show at LST. Messages were being sent by alumni to the Ateneo. In the midst of all these, there was another stream of conversation, congratulatory notes to Mideo Cruz saying that at last he has had not just national but international media attention. "*Nakakainggit ka*!" said a blogger, "*nasa* New York Times *ka na*."[1]

I was not too sure if Mideo was distressed by the very adverse and public reaction to his work.

When Fr. Mario Francisco asked me if LST should issue a statement about *Poleteismo*, as did Dr. Marlu Vilches, dean of ADMU School of Humanities, my instinct was to advise delaying in making statements because the media fire storm was raging fiercely and I had a feeling that any statement of from LST and the ADMU would have only fallen into the trap of Mideo's installation. I said apply the standard media formula—After two weeks news is no longer news. LST and ADMU sent out a clarification after the Senate hearings. By then the firestorm was dying.

My instinct to delay was based on an understanding of installation and performance as art form. Installation and performance are interrelated. These are forms rooted in the avant-garde, especially in New York. Its ancestry is Dadaism, which started in Zurich before World War II and had, before the war, spread across Europe and

1. By way of clarification: *Poleteismo* is an on-going art work, begun by Mideo in 2003. While it works with the basic idea that Filipinos have a fetish for images and icons, which is for him an expression of a polytheistic mindset, *Poleteismo* is constantly evolving and changing. It changes depending on a current issue Mideo is addressing. *Poleteismo* in LHS/ LST was called by the curator of the group show *Tutok Karapatan: Nexus*, Boggie Ruiz, as *Poleteismo 3*. For Mideo to have allegedly claimed that *Poleteismo* was already shown in LST and UST [implying an Imprimatur]

was journeying to the United States when war broke out. When these art forms were popularized in New York, they appeared in the bohemian districts of Greenwich and SoHo. These art forms found a home in privately run, off the main track, galleries rather than more established galleries along 5th Avenue or Park, and certainly not in the temples of culture like the MOMA or the Met.

Installation and performance were like graffiti, outsider art!

Installation involves creating an environment into which the viewer is invited to respond and interact. Performance is a short dramatic gesture, not quite a full blown play and which, unlike traditional drama, may not have a clear beginning, middle or end and which destroys the fourth wall of drama by inviting participation from the audience.

Both art forms are deliberately provocative and come to completion when it can evoke a reaction from the viewer.

This was the trap I was cautious about. To respond precipitously to the installation and performance is to complete them.

Kulii was exhibited in the CCP gallery, not a very accessible gallery if you want a broader public to see a work. When it achieved media frenzy, more people came to see the work.

And until Mideo's *Poleteismo* hit the news, installation and performance art were hardly known by the general public. It was groupee art, attended by artists, their friends, supporters, gallery owners, art critics, the *culturati* and anyone with artistic and cultural pretensions. In fact, many installation and performance artists lament that it is the same group that watches them.

When I mentioned "irony" at the beginning of this address, this is the first instance of irony provoked by *Poleteismo*. By responding to *Poleteismo*, the viewer has allowed provocation and therefore, completes the art work. And the more people are provoked and answer the provocation, the more the art work lives and is completed. The best way then to avoid the trap of *Poleteismo* is to ignore it.

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and the continued propagation of this by media is misleading. *Poleteismo 3* (2007) was not exactly the same as *Poleteismo* 2011. The offending icons were not there. Like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, there are many books. Potter Book 1 is certainly a different work from Book 7, although the same characters appear.

The second note of irony is the display of *Poleteismo* in CCP, which by doing so has legitimized the installation. The art form of installation in its inception (at least) was protest against the art establishment, yet installation and performance artists have not been unhappy having their works in establishment venues. There is a tension in practitioners of these art forms: to stay outside the establishment and have their opus despised as non-art, or to penetrate the establishment and thereby emasculate their art.

Legitimization is a tempting option because it offers patronage. Installation and performance art do not sell; individual pieces in an installation might but not the whole. Such art forms are often financed by the artist or sometimes by friends and patrons. So when the art establishment opens its doors, the installation artist can see the opportunities.

The third note of irony is underestimating the context of the provocation. Naughty children may find it amusing to taunt a sleeping huge dog but if the dog awakes and snarls back, children run away in fright. Mideo Cruz and his patron, CCP, underestimated the context or better still did not consider more deeply or were unable to predict the context, when they were still planning *Kulü.* The religious scene was hot! It was raging since debates on the RH Bill came to public consciousness. It got embarrassing with the Senate hearings on the PCSO and the alleged *Pajero* bishops. The Senate hearing placed the Church establishment in a bad light and its apologists needed a situation to get back at the government establishment. CCP's involvement with *Kulü* was a fuse that ignited the next round of Church vs. government debates. Because of *Poleteismo*, defenders of the Church establishment could now show the Church as the aggrieved party, the victim of government abuse, or, to use government legalese, "grave abuse of discretion."

The *Poleteismo* fire storm alerts us to a number of issues:

- First, it demonstrates the power of art. We may take art for granted, even ignore it by hardly patronizing it or supporting it. But when it provokes and tramples on our cherished value and enters our space, we react.
- Second, it demonstrates that art has been working quite independently of Church. It moves by its own rules and rhythms and now stands as critic of entrenched institutions and powers, including Church.

- Third, it demonstrates how very little Church people understand the dynamics of new or emerging art forms. How it can be easily bamboozled into contributing to an art work's impact and longevity.

Art and Religion. The *Poleteismo* fire storm illustrates clearly that nexus between art and theology is religion or, more specifically, religious practice or religion as *praxis*. And it is in the realm of praxis that theology and art intersect.

A fruitful beginning then for a dialogue between art and theology is to examine *praxis* and ask how much present-day artists are exposed to religion and how much theologians are exposed to the world of art. To make dialogue meaningful, each must know what the other is doing.

Art terminology. As a term "art" encompasses many activities and disciplines. Art can be art practice, that is, the creative production of art works or artifacts.[2] Toward such production, art schools and academies are dedicated. "Arts" in the plural refer to the different forms or genres of artistic expression, each corresponding to a bodily sense: the visual, the tactile, the kinetic and the auditory and the gustatory. Hence, the visual, sculptural, architectural, performance, musical and culinary arts.

To further calibrate in this broad spectrum of meanings, distinctions have been made between art and craft, or the fine arts and the practical arts, specifically, in the West. The fine arts refer to painting, sculpture, classical music and dance and the practical arts or crafts to design, folk music and dance, popular music and dance, and the culinary arts. But such a spectrum is not fixed because boundaries are defined by practice and by cultural norms, which vary from place to place and across time.

"Art" can also mean art theory and criticism; art history, or even the business of art.

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2. The two terms "art work" and "artifact" mean the same thing. Artifact comes from the Latin "*ars, artis*," art and "*factum*," made. If made then it is a work. However, in common parlance, "art work" refers to fine art or high art and artifact to folk, popular or practical art. This distinction, however, is highly charged culturally and historically. It is primarily a Western distinction that is clearly not held in the East, like China or Japan, where the fine arts are practical objects, like tea cups, wind screens and textile. In China, the gentleman's treasure is the calligraphy set consisting of paper, ink, brush and ink grinding and mixing stone.

The proper parallels, then, would be art theory and theology; art history and theological history, etc., rather than art and theology. Theology, I understand as a reflection on faith and religion, just as theory, criticism and history are to art.

Art as locus theologicus. But can theology make art a *locus theologicus*? Can theology do a theological critique of art? Can it appropriate the methods of art, for instance, literary criticism?

It can and historically it has. Likewise, can art make theology or its contents, like the doctrines and moral it teaches, the practices and cult of religion, a *locus artium*, a source or inspiration for the arts? It can and has.

To cite examples. When the Church Fathers read the "four senses" of Scripture, they did not invent this type of literary criticism but rather adapted it from the literary criticism prevalent in the Hellenistic World. By doing so, they had asserted that the prevailing criticism was theologically acceptable or at least neutral and could be properly used for a deeper insight into Sacred Scriptures. They were freeing Judaic literature from its cultural bonds and reading it through the optic of Hellenistic culture. More examples. Hans Urs von Balthasar in his theological reflection on aesthetics starts with the fine arts, so does Paul Tillich when he asserts that the resurrection as depicted by Mattias Grünewald in the Isenheim altarpiece is for him the best depiction of this mystery, and when he calls the altar's crucifixion "the greatest German picture ever painted."[3] Karl Barth (1886-1968) kept a reproduction of the work next to his desk for years and made a number of references to the altarpiece in his theological writings.

Balthasar's theological aesthetics is the foundation of Michelle Gonzales, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas*. This is a theological reading through the optic of liberation theology of the poetic and dramatic works of Sor Juana, the poet laureate of colonial Mexico. Resonating with works of Latino theologians like Roberto Goizueta and Luis Rivera-Pagán, and Ernesto Sábato, she cites

3. Paul Tillich, "Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art," Chapter 7 of *Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. Carl Michalson (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1956), 128-146.

Goizueta who situates theology's "great loss" of beauty as the gateway to "an experience of the Divine" with theology's response to "the scientific and rationalist worldview produced by the Enlightenment." "This loss," says Goizueta, is "a consequence of Western rationalism, which leads to the divorce of form from content and the marginalization of the aesthetic form as unacademic."[4]

Art has also been known to draw inspiration, critique, question or even subvert doctrines and morals, matters theology deals with. Filipino artist, Pablo Baens Santos, took the motif of the suffering Christ and transformed it into *Christa*, a symbol of the silenced Philippines during the martial law years. When Anna Fer recollects the brutal murder of Fr. Tulio Favali in the hands of the blood-thirsty Manero brothers, she draws upon the tradition of iconography but subverts it literally by turning the image on its head. Bertolt Brecht's *Waiting for Godot* is an extended performance piece on the silence and absence of God and Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are journeys into the afterlife, shaped by the theology of his era. Pieter Brueghel's *Fall of Icarus* is a visual meditation on the apparent apathy of the world and of humans to whatever befalls the neighbor, quite the opposite of the good Samaritan. W.H. Auden in *Musçe des Beaux Arts* gives words to this apathy:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters; how well, they understood
> Its human position; how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
> How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
> For the miraculous birth, there always must be
> Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
> On a pond at the edge of the wood:
> They never forgot
> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
> Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
> Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
> Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

4. Michelle González, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 13.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
> Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
> But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
> Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

And there is Mideo Cruz!

Overview. In this keynote address, I will not do a theological reading of art works; I leave that to the theologians; instead, I will speak from the point of view of the artist, who is entering into a dialogue with the theologian.

I would like to go back to an earlier moment—in the relationship between art and religion. Prior to the building of a theological aesthetic, there is the relationship between art and religion.

I will take as a practical and existential starting point, which in the context of monotheistic religion has been stormy. Let it be clear that by monotheistic religion I am referring to the Christian faith, although others with different persuasions may find some relevance in what I say. Pardon, the limitation.

From that picture of relationship, I shall move on to Vitruvius' tripartite *firmitas, utilitas,* and *venustas*, cited in the concept paper of this conference as "discourse-organizing structures (or if you may, 'logics' or 'dispositions') for both artistic and theological fields." I will suggest deepening our understanding of these "dispositions" so that they become points of confluence for the artistic and theological tasks and discourse. I will suggest moving these structures from procedural strategies to ideals that might illumine that path that art and theology can travel hand in hand.

Tango of Love and Hate: The centuries of relation between art and religion may be compared to a tango, where partners in tight, even passionate embrace, part from each other, only to return to that embrace and then that parting. This cycle of embrace and parting seems to characterize the Christian tradition's relationship with the art and the arts.

Where are we today? I suggest we are midway between embrace and parting, we are at the moment in a tango, where the partners are still holding hands and the man who leads the dance flings his partner and she pirouettes away. Whether she, by centrifugal force is thrown away, or by the centripetal bond of hands holding tight returns to the center and the embrace, hangs in a balance.

To illustrate this point let us do an environmental scan and see how art has been used in our modern churches, the most common place where art may be found. Looking at random pictures of churches will make you agree that much art is uninspired, too busy, tawdry and aesthetically depressing, because side by side with better art pieces are mass produced resin and fiber glass images, bought from church supply store. Many made in China. Cheap prints even tarps churned by machines. And the seemingly mindless repetition of the same image, oblivious of sound liturgical and aesthetic considerations.

Bracketing the question whether UP's *Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice* is an appropriate space for the present form of the Roman liturgy, this is the only modern church in the Philippines where four National Artists have their art works. Leandro Locsin, National Artist for architecture designed the chapel; Napoleon "Billy" Abueva did the crucifix and all the carvings; Vicente Manansala the *Via Crucis* (provocative in the 1950s because it had a 15th Station, the Resurrection); and Arturo Luz designed the floor terrazzo *River of Life* — all three National Artists for the visual arts. No other modern church, constructed during the chapel's almost six decades' existence, can boast that it has so much art from nationally acclaimed and internationally awarded artists. In fact, when churches are constructed today, artists are hardly called for their input and expertise. The architect usually does most of the design and relegates execution to third parties of religious suppliers.

Lucky, if the church even has an architect. Some priests think that they can do all the designing and end up with a church with bits and pieces from here and there, like the dome of St. Peter's basilica, or an altar with horns like the altar of holocaust of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Or the trend today to build Baroque *retablos* even in modern spaces. Call this the "recolonialization of Philippine church art."

The Story. How did we get here; to this estrangement of art and religion? To this spinning away of art and the Christian religion?

The story begins at the very root of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Judaism gave the world the gift of monotheism, the concept and belief that there is one absolute God, transcendent above all; powerful and answerable to no power, whether "in the heaven, on earth and under the earth" (Phil 2:10). That monotheism becomes a fixed feature of Biblical faith, did not happen immediately as research in scriptural history tells. Abraham, called by the one God and having forged a covenant with God, is still burdened by old received beliefs. Moses, after receiving the commandment not to forge a graven and after destroying the Golden Calf, makes a bronze effigy of the fiery serpent and sets it on a pole so that "if anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he will recover." The command to forge the effigy, says Numbers, comes directly from God (21:4-9).

The experience of the destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the subsequent experience of exile was crucial in solidifying monotheistic belief, etching it in stone as it were. It was while in exile, that the Chosen people gave the *Tanakh* or the Jewish Scripture its final edited form by which we know it. While in exile, the people of Israel faced the polytheism of the peoples with whom they were mixed and the constant temptation to turn away from the God of their fathers to that of their neighbors, who in the prevailing belief of those times was more powerful because victorious. Forced, then, to live far from the temple, now destroyed and a sure sign that God had abandoned them, the exiled people asked why this happened to them. They, the favored nation of a God so great, that led Moses and their forefathers with a mighty hand out of slavery, they were now the most abject of peoples, downtrodden, and depressed that they could not even sing the songs of Zion as they hung their harps to the trees and wept: "By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps" (Ps 137: 1-2).

The reason that they came up with for the people's common misfortune was that they had abandoned the covenant they and their fathers had made and ran after the Baals and the Astartes; and they were suffering the consequences of this apostasy. In exile, the people forged a more absolute image of the God of their fathers, a jealous

God who would brook no competitor. A powerful God, who cannot be cajoled, threatened, or bribed by humans as their neighbors were doing with their gods and the effigies of these gods. From the crucible of exile, grew the identity of the Jew so that the post-exilic people who returned to the land of their ancestors, were far more cohesive, motivated spiritually, and decidedly anti-polytheistic than their fathers. The prophet, known as Second Isaiah, because his work was added to the prophecies of Isaiah, "declared that Yahweh was the only God.… He was the only God who counted." Second Isaiah

> wasted no time denouncing the gods of the goyim, who since the catastrophe [of the exile], could have been seen as victorious. He calmly assumed that Yahweh—not Marduk or Baal—had performed the great mythical deeds that brought the world into being…. If Yahweh had defeated the monsters of chaos in primordial time, it would be a simple matter for him to redeem the exiled Israelites.… Yahweh had finally absorbed his rival in the religious imagination of Israel; in exile, the lure of paganism had lost its attraction and the religion of Judaism had been born (Armstrong 1993, 60-61).

Because one of the most common use of art works in polytheism is the depiction of spirits and deities, an iconoclastic streak marked Jewry. Isaiah expressed it best when he mocked the maker of idols who took wood and clay and with his own hands fashions an idol and then bends his knees to worship. Isaiah writes:

> The carpenter stretches a line and marks with a stylus the outline of an idol. He shapes it with a plane and measures it off with a compass, making it like a man in appearance and dignity, to occupy a shrine. He cuts down cedars, takes a holm or an oak, and lays hold of other trees in the forest, which the Lord had planted and the rain made grow to serve man for fuel. With a part of their wood he warms himself, or makes a fire for baking bread; but with another part he makes a god which he adores, an idol which he worships. Half of it he burns in the fire, and on its embers he roasts his meat; he eats what he has roasted until he is full, and then warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I feel the fire." Of what remains he makes a god, his idol, and prostrates before it in worship he implores it, "Rescue me, for you are my god"' (44: 13-17).

This satirical indictment of idol making and worship demonstrates the wariness of the Judaic tradition about images, and hence, about art's ability to make anything greater than its maker. Thus, iconoclasm has marked the history of the three great monotheistic religions, which share common roots with Judaism. Christianity has had its share of this in the 8th and 9th centuries' iconoclastic controversies and the iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, and in the fundamentalist and "born again" Christians' question on the use of images. "Sola Scriptura" has been interpreted and exercised as an aversion to imagery, the downplaying of the visual and the enthronement of the verbal. When Mohammed preached monotheism to his people, he ordered the destruction of the more than 300 idols in the Arab Kabah at Mecca, to the chagrin of his tribe mates, whose annual pilgrimage to Mecca was the source of much wealth in this trading hub in the Arabian desert. The destruction of idols is a recurring theme in the history of monotheism. When Spanish missionaries had their Tagalog and Visayan converts turn over their *likha* and *anting-anting* to destroy or burn them, they were working within a long tradition of monotheism going back to the prophets of the Jewish covenant and their battles with the priests of Baal, through the experience of exile and the iconoclasms of the Christian tradition.

Because images, idols, and *likha* were artifacts or work of art, Biblical faith and Islam, which were influenced by it, have had an indifferent even hostile attitude to art. Islam has completely proscribed the depiction of human and animal form so its art is geometric and non-representational. Calligraphy was the favored art form.

Christianity, however, introduced a new angle to monotheism, shared neither by Judaism or Islam, which St. John Damascene, the most vocal and often quoted defender of icons, perceived as the basis for Christianity's engagement of the arts. This is the Incarnation, believed not just as an article of faith but as a principle of engagement with the art. Damascene argued that although the godhead remained invisible and ineffable, and hence in the Jewish covenant could not be portrayed, that godhead sought to be visible in the incarnated person of Jesus. Because Jesus is "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 Jn 1:1), it is proper to depict Jesus and the saints, who

reflect his glory, in wood, paint, and gold gilt. It is proper to write an image of Jesus as the iconographer does.

This *ikon* or image is not like the idols believed to be the residence of a god. The image made by human hands has all the marks of imperfection of its human maker. It cannot strive to be a true icon, because there is only one such, Jesus the icon of the Father. The image that an iconographer makes is an image of The image, as such it is a symbol. As symbol it is a mirror that reflects the world of its creator, hence, an icon has all the trappings of Byzantine art and its complex world of color, gesture, vesture, and artistic conventions, like the text completes the icon. As a symbol it is a window through which the praying believer can enter the realm of the divine. Hence, in many traditional icons the image is always framed; the frame might just be painted but it is always there as an important component of iconography. The frame is like a door or window jamb through which the sacred person depicted in imagery enters the human world and the human the world of the sacred. But this does not happen automatically, rather it happens in the context of faith-filled and faithful prayer.

This insight did not come easily. It came after more than half a millennium of image making beginning with the use of symbols like the fish, the cross, the monograms ICXC and IHS, IXCOUS. Later, came the adoption of Hellenistic images to depict the Christ—Christ as the sun-god Apollo, seen in ancient catacombs, or Christ the good shepherd. Other symbols from late Hellenistic art and architecture were used like the laurel crown, the palm leaf, and the column wreathed with grapes as symbols of victory, martyrdom, and the Eucharist.

From symbols of the Christ, to poetic allusions to Classical figures, Christian art erupts in the splendor of the Byzantine, known for its mosaics and painted icons resplendent against a gold background, symbolic of heaven and the deity. It is in the East that icon painting flourished, amidst the splendor of the Eastern Roman Empire. And despite the iconoclasm, even supported by the Byzantine emperors, like Leo III and Constantine V, and waged against the proliferation of images, which were not only splendid but costly, art-making continued in the Christian tradition.

The Byzantine was paralleled by the development in the West of the Romanesque, more modest and less extravagant as an expression of societies that had emerged from tribal Europe than the Byzantine. While the Byzantine tradition continues well into our century (its height between the fourth and the fourteenth BCE) the West moved from the Romanesque to the Gothic and to that culturally pivotal Quattrocento—the Renaissance, impelled in part by the greater participation of different cultures in Christian art-making; Gothic is French, Renaissance Italian, and the Neoclassical Revival, British, at least initially.

The Renaissance is generally pictured to have begun in Italy and its impetus is the fall of Jerusalem to the Ottomans. This event forced scholars from the Middle East to transfer to Italy via Venice, the entrepôt for the Middle East. These scholars brought with them texts of Classical writers, especially, the philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and the mathematicians like Euclid, known for geometry. This is the usual historical narrative. But more recent scholarship points to a more proximate source of Classical learning in the more than seven centuries' rule of the Moors of southern Spain. These Moors, more tolerant than the conquering Spanish monarchs of the 15th century, Ferdinand and Isabella, lived side by side with Jews and Christians. Their scholars translated into Arabic the works of antiquity, adding their own commentaries as did Avincenna (c. 980-1037 CE), and engaged Jews and Christians in scholarly dispute. The dispersal of the Moors, who refused to be baptized, through the many centuries of battles with the Christians who came from northern Spain, had already resulted in the dissemination of Classical learning but in the 15th century, this came to a "tipping point" and the ferment, which was already brewing in Europe, came to full boil in Italy.

Classical learning awakened or reawakened Europe to a source of learning and wisdom dominated by reason and not tied to Judaeo-Christian scriptures. Here was knowledge whole and entire that did not depend on the magisterium and received doctrine, but depended on logic and reasoning. Here was learning that was "humanistic" rather than "theistic."

It was not, however, atheistic as previous perception and interpretation of the Renaissance had it and where a common trope was that the Middle Ages was the age of faith or of God and the

Renaissance of reason or of the human. In fact, as studies, done by Leo Steinberg, John O'Malley, and others show, the Renaissance was an age of faith but the big difference was spiritually it emphasized divine immanence rather than transcendence. The favorite Renaissance image of Jesus was the Babe in Bethlehem and the Madonna with Child rather than the Pantocrator, the risen Lord, ruler of the *pantos*.

Because God has so deemed it fit to be human, there was something profoundly good and spiritual about the human, therefore, a turning to toward the human was good. One of the revered classical authors, Aristotle, from whom the natural science was learned, pushed for observation and an empirical method in the pursuit of truth. Aristotle pointed the way for seeking knowledge by tuning to the world, quite different from the otherworldly aspirations of Medieval times. Although the 13th-century Franciscan, Roger Bacon (1214/1220 - 1292) espoused a model of scientific method based on his study of Aristotle's *Optics*, it was not until two centuries later that his method would gain widespread popularity. In line with this empiricism were the compendiums and encyclopedias or the Renaissance, the printed collection of maps and the establishment of botanical and zoological collections, in which local and exotic flora and fauna, from the Americas, Asia, and Africa were put together.

Art took an empirical turn as artists studied human anatomy, clandestinely performing dissections to learn better how the human body was constructed. The anatomical studies of Da Vinci, the drawings of the human form by Michaelangelo, and Albrecht Dürer's drawings and engravings of plants and animals show the fruit of acute and careful observation, bordering on the scientific. The central panel of Hubert and Jan Van Eyck's (before c. 1395-1441) *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432), the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, shows familiarity with flora, so painstakingly and accurately depicted in paint, "that they may be botanically identified."[5]

The empirical turn is evidenced in the proliferation of architectural handbooks in the 16th century. Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554) and

5. Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (London: Laurence King Publishing, Ltd., 1984), 435.

Giacommo de la Porta's handbooks were examples of this empirical turn. Their work, De la Porta's far more popular and useful work, was based on the examination of the architectural works of antiquity, and countless sketches and studies of Roman ruins.

This intellectual ferment coincided with changes that redefined power, which was to revolutionize life in Europe. While the kingdoms still existed and continued to rival each other for wealth, allegiance, territory and power, in 1492, the same year that Ferdinand and Isabella completed the *reconquista* of Spain, and brought about the surrender of the caliph of Alhambra of the Moorish territory Al Andalus, Christopher Columbus had landed in the Caribbean opening up the age of exploration, first pioneered by the Portuguese monarch, Henry the Navigator, but later to be hotly contested by the Spanish sovereigns. This was the beginning of world empire; it was also the redrawing of the world map, as exploration brought many lands under European hegemony and at the same time expanded the European concept of "the world."

It would take a long time for the dissolution of kingdoms, beginning with the French Revolution that brought down Louis XVI and the much hated, Austrian queen Marie Antoinette, and culminating with the wars of independence against colonial rule of the 19th and 20th century.

Furthermore, the Renaissance shifted the source of wealth from hereditary lands and fiefdoms to the hands of merchants and bankers. These once hated professions, deemed in the Middle Ages just a step above prostitution were now the real powers as monarch borrowed money from the likes of the Medici of Florence and Fruggers of Augsburg to pay for their wars, their political maneuverings, explorations, and lavish building activities and festivities, that characterized this era. The beginnings of capitalism that we know today was laid during this era.

Still another shift had to do with the dissemination of knowledge. No longer was knowledge in the hands of monks and ecclesiastical hierarchs and those who monopolized the scriptorium and the pulpit, which in the hands of some like the mesmerizing Girolamo Savanarola (1452 - 1498), a bully pulpit to criticize, intimidate and cajole their enemies — real or imagined. With the perfection of the movable type printing press, attributed to the German Johannes

Gutenberg (1398 - 1468), ideas could be disseminated independently of Church or State. Private individuals, though needing a license from Church and State to make printed copies of their writing (this was the original meaning of copyright), found a new latitude and speed to get their ideas across. Add to this the mastery of metal engraving and a new genre that appealed to many senses was produced. And there were brave individuals who published anonymously at great risks to their lives and properties but publish, they did. These clandestine publications challenged the monopoly of knowledge power entrenched in the hands of traditional institutions.

The Catholic Church was spiritually not at the highest point of her life as the Renaissance popes competed with other monarchs, securing the Papal States with armies, which they led in battle and building the fortunes of their families, as the notorious Spanish upstart Rodrigo Borja, better known as Alexander VI did. His successor and rival Giuliano della Rovere, Julius II, was no better although he had better taste and judgment in the arts and was a far better administrator. This great patron of Michaelangelo died of syphilis.

Where was the artist amidst these revolutionary changes? In the previous millennia and a half of Christian history, the artist was more often than not anonymous. Although some names like the 12th-century Gislebertus, who signed his name on one of the capitals of the Cathedral of Autun ("Gislebertus hoc fecit" he chiseled on the limestone) were preserved, the vast majority of Christian art was anonymous.

Art was subservient to religion. It had two basic functions: to teach and to offer. To teach, through pictures, the vast majority who could neither read nor write was the purpose of the many images in stained glass windows, called "the Bible of the poor." To teach was the purpose of the illustrations in the illuminated manuscripts and the Book of Hours, although these written texts on parchment or vellum, had limited circulation. To teach was the purpose of statuary and sacred imagery in the form of mosaics and paintings — far more popular and public media of art. To offer meant to become a votive offering to God, and to God through the many saints that peopled the Christian imagination.

Because it was a teaching tool and a votive offering, anonymity was treasured. What was taught was more important than the person who made the teaching visible, and votive offerings as they were intended for worship were done in the spirit of utmost humility and gratitude. Self-effacement was in order.

During the Renaissance, that changed. In the time of the High Renaissance the great master artists — Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), Michaelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564) and Raffaelo Sancho (1483-1520) — were no longer anonymous and the practice of signing an art work became more and more widespread. By then, it was a matter of course for an Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) to sign his works with the characteristic colophon AD, or Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) to have his name prominently displayed on a painted piece of paper. Now art works had authors, not anonymous artisans laboring away in workshops with many others doing their work. It was at this point, that what later critics would differentiate as fine arts and crafts, would emerge. Fine arts were one of a kind original works, while crafts were multiples. The distinction between artists and artisans also emerged.

Pivotal in solidifying this distinction, was the emergence of writing about artists. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), himself an artist although of middling talent but more successful as an architect, produced a work on the life of great artists, first published 1550 and dedicated to the grand duke, Cosmo de Medici. Vasari, who is said to have invented this genre, speaks of Michaelangelo as "divo." Criticism and history became the handmaid of the creative artist and assisted in promoting their careers, or contrary wise, in damning them to oblivion. Vasari is also the first to use the term "Renaissance" or "rinascita" in Italian.

Vasari's biographies served to consolidate the artist as celebrity. The better known artists were traded by their patrons to gain favor or power. Although he did not like Rome and was ill at ease with the Papal court, Michaelangelo was the unwilling pawn in the Medici's bid to get on the good side of Pope Julius. Michaelangelo was forced to go to Rome because his patrons, the wealthy bankers of Florence, made him do so.

The celebrity artists would continue to play an important role into the Baroque of the 17th century. The gifted Italian Jesuit brother

painter, Andrea Pozzo (1642-1709), known for painting the illusionistic ceiling of the San Ignazio and the Stanza de San Ignazio in the *casa professa* adjoining the Gesu, was sent by his superiors to the courts of Austria to win support from their royal patrons, who financed the many works of the Jesuits — their schools among the most important of them.

Vasari it was who emphasized the idea that artists were original thinkers who through their art expressed the profoundest truths about human life. The artist-philosopher, a misogyny Plato would have spurned, was firmly established as a mythos in the Renaissance.

This would be but a step toward the 19th-century idea of the artist as a lonely misunderstood genius, "speaking words of wisdom," "alone on a hill." This was staple of the Romantic movement.

But the dilution and dissolution of this image of artist as lonely genius is the 20th century's creation — artist as media figure and celebrity. The infant terrible, the agent provocateur, thumbing a nose on the unwary and mooning revered institutions of power. Artist as media celebrity was best articulated by Andy Warhol's dictum of "15 minutes of fame."

Cult of the Individual. Although the individual has always been around, the social importance of the individual's ideas and creative initiative was not given much emphasis until the Renaissance and the humanism it fostered. In Florence, the household of Lorenzo il Magnifico held a nightly open house, where philosophers, artists, diplomats, writers or any individual of consequence would partake of this banker's table, while discussing, with no set agenda, themes or issues that interested the discussants. This freewheeling exchange of ideas and insights was in contrast to the medieval approach where the most common method was the magisterial lecture and the disputation, a ritualized debate where a topic under dispute was proposed and exponents for the topic faced opponents against the topic, ending in a summation of the most reasoned position. While these forms of learning and knowledge transmittal persisted beyond the Middle Ages, the Renaissance did certainly open up new areas of debate, ranging from such topics of "how the planets go," in the celebrated Galileo case, to whether the "Indians" had the same rights as the Europeans that "discovered" them, or whether there was *terra incognita* south of the earth to balance the continents north.

It was not just the artist who was perceived as original thinker but others too like writers, playwrights, legal savants, and the emerging empirical scientists and, yes, theologians. The Protestant Reformation can be understood as the Christian theologian no longer bound to the power structures of the Catholic Church. When Martin Luther proposed his 95 theses, he, in a way, set the prototype for the present-day theologian. Although there are theologians identified with the Catholic Church (the present Roman hierarchy has its official theologians) by and large theologians who study in seminaries and theological schools today choose their specialization or the topic of their thesis or dissertation not because the Catholic Church or any other Christian confession has dictated what they should study. More often than not the agenda is a matter of personal choice, perhaps, a serious confrontation of personal questions, issues or interests, or it is a matter of the learning institution, where schools and noted professors indirectly or directly influence what their students study.

The rise of the individual against traditional institutions can explain in part the present situation of the relation between art and religion, specifically art and the Church.

The Church and the Arts. Since the Renaissance there has been a slow but palpable drifting away of the Church institution from the arts. The hierarchical and institutional Church found challengers in patronage in the figures of cardinal princes, nobles, and wealthy businessmen and bankers. Wealthy patrons like the Scrovegni family-built private churches as votive offerings or as monuments of atonement or mortuary chapels as the de Astalli family did in Rome.

Private chapels were not a Renaissance invention. The royal funerary chapels, like San Denis for the French monarch, the Isabeline Gothic chapel for the Spanish kings and queens, the independent monastic chapel of the Benedictines and the Carthusians, these are the ancestors of the privately funded and built chapel. But during the Renaissance, patronage took on a dramatic turn. The scale was unprecedented when imperial states, financed by wealth siphoned from the colonies flowed into European coffers. The imperial Spanish monarch, Philip II, built the monumental *El Escorial*, designed

6. The official name of the Escorial is Real Monasterio del Escorial de San Lorenzo.

by the royal architect Juan de Herrera as a government center for a vast empire "where the sun never set," a palace and a monastery for the Heronimytes.[6] In many places, in particular in Iberia, the Church was greatly dependent on royal largesse so that the monarch, through a system of patronage, exercised more influence in the production of art than the Pope or any ecclesiastical hierarch. In fact, under the *patronato real*, it was quite difficult to say if the Church enjoyed true independence from the monarchs. Popes and cardinals also vied for patronage as Rome was being transformed after decades of neglect.

Even Papal patronage was not clearly an official act of the papacy. To finance his wars and his art patronage, Julius II hastily created cardinals because with such titles came contributions from wealthy nobles. Whether this was properly sanctioned is unclear; clearly though, the Pope moved like an autocrat and went about aggrandizing himself and his family. He commissioned Michaelangelo to paint to honor his uncle Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere) who had built the eponymous Sistine Chapel. It appears then that Papal patronage was more personal rather than institutional. Thus, Popes commissioned tombs more sumptuous than their predecessors, heraldic charges in the personal coat of arms of Popes appearing in art works of this and the succeeding eras, like the bees of the Barberini in the baldachinno of St. Peter's or the names of ecclesiastical patrons from families like the Farnese, Borghese and Medici, chiseled unto the façades or walls of chapels and churches.

Promoted by reforming religious orders, the Catholic Church in the 17th century gravitated toward the highly animated, dramatic, affective, and emotional Baroque as a style that preached while it uplifted through an experience of the aesthetic, but this confluence of Church and art was short-lived. Again, the Church institution did not mandate the adoption of Baroque exuberance; this was more the initiative of religious orders, congregations, and noble or wealthy patrons. As Vatican II document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, puts it, the Church has never adopted an art style as its own but respects the styles across time and cultures that Christian communities had encountered and owned.

> 123. The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according

> to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites. Thus, in the course of the centuries, she has brought into being a treasury of art which must be very carefully preserved (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*).

Artists were no longer the monk calligrapher or illuminator, the monk iconographer; instead, lay artists, including women, working in bottegas or atelier were the preferred artist. Some of these artists, while working on Biblical and religious themes, lived private lives that were by no means edifying, their artistic talent being the most important criteria for patrons to choose them as artists.

By the 19th century the rift between art and Church had become wider and deeper. If we speak about the tango between art and Church, "Church" here must be specified as the community of believers, which is also the community of patronage. The rift, therefore, is not just with the institution but with the Church community. Less and less works were commissioned and artists were left on their own.

The emergence of Revivalist architecture produced church art and architecture that was unimaginative and repetitive. The Gothic, once shunned as barbaric by Neoclassical critics, was seen in many Church circles as the epitome of a transcendent style that harmonized with the Church's spiritual aspirations. The lofty spires that soared heavenwards, the bell towers and the tall rib vaults of the central nave, all were rhapsodized as lifting the soul to the spiritual realm. Toward the later part of the 19th century and the early 20th, Gothic Revival style was favored as "the church style." So from San Francisco to Shanghai, Manchester to Manila, Gothic spires pierced the skies and lancet windows let light flood the naves with colors, refracted through stained glass marked by insipid Romantic designs.

Gothic revival cut across denominations and the biggest patrons of Gothic were mainline Protestant churches, which brought the style even to the American prairies and missions in Africa and Asia.

In the 20th century, art patronage is no longer the domain of powerful institutions, but to whoever can afford it in an art market characterized by advertising, product placement, and the handling of artistic careers by a growing number of professional managers. Art is a large and growing international industry, though highly

unregulated, defined by galleries, competitions, shows, management firms, advertising, and by the growing reach of the social networks. Art is displayed and performed virtually everywhere. In short, art's continuance depends in great part on the capitalist system that encircles the globe, characterized by free and open markets.

Where we are: Today, art ubiquitous and unregulated, enjoys an unprecedented autonomy creating its own spaces that rival the sacred spaces of religion. John Pungente, Canadian Jesuit movie historian and critic's Finding God in the Dark: *Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies* (2004)[7] is both a compendium of movie reviews that explore the theme of the sacred and a guide to integrating these movies in retreats, recollections, and pastoral work. The title alludes to the hidden God, whom people seek in the dark, and to the darkened movie house, which is the temple for the projected images of cinema.

The movie house is not the only "temple to the arts." Museums, art galleries, and art spaces are also such spaces. In fact, in many museums, one finds a quiet space akin to a church or chapel, a refuge were a visitor might sit transfixed at a painting, as Henri Nouwen recounts in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*: *A Story of Homecoming* (1992), how he sat quiet for hours before Rembrandt's painting of the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668. Oil on canvas 262 x 206 cm.) in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Although he has seen the painting in posters and had acquired one in Paris, when the opportunity to see the original in the Hermitage came, Nouwen approached the painting with trepidation "there were moments in which I had wondered whether the real painting might disappoint me." But it did not:

7. John Pungente and Monty Williams, *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies* (Montréal: Pauline Books and Media and Novalis, 2004). This book has a preface by well-known retreat master, John English, SJ. This book is well-reviewed and a has a complementary website, Finding God in the Dark (web.mac.com/ltwiebe FindingGodInTheDark) that brings up-to-date reviews of movies that push the agenda of the book to use movies for those doing Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises.

> While many tourist groups with their guides came and left in rapid succession, I sat on one of the red velvet chairs in front of the painting and just looked. Now I was seeing the real thing! Not only the father embracing the child-come-home, but also the elder son and three other figures. It was a huge work in oil on canvas, eight feet high by six feet wide. It took me a while to simply *be* there, simply absorbing that I was truly in the presence of what I had longed hope to see, simply enjoying the fact that I was all by myself in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg looking at the Prodigal Son.

Nouwen sat in front of the painting long enough to notice that natural light flowed "through a large window at an eighty-degree angle" and that "the light became fuller and more intense as the afternoon progressed. At four o'clock the sun covered the painting with a new brightness, and the background figures—which had remained quite vague in the early hours—seemed to step out of their dark corners. As evening drew near, the sunlight grew more crisp and tingling."[8]

Nouwen had what art critics, like Joshua Taylor, call an "aesthetic experience," a transcendent experience of beauty, that literally knocks one's socks off. In religious circles, this might even be called "ecstasy," after a period of contemplation or attentive seeing, as Nouwen had done. That this experience is possible in a museum, shows that the space has similar potentials to the churches and temples of religion. This poses a challenge to the Churches because it is in encountering powerful and power-filled art where those who are alienated from religion may find their spiritual experience. Art has become a competitor of religion.

So art in our times can become the substitute for religion. And many of the artistic-minded and inclined have found in art a much more satisfying experience than the cliché laden, repetitive scolding, and negative approaches in some Church circles. The art world has created its own culture and reality defined by artists and their careers, art managers, auction houses, galleries, and museums. Art openings,

8. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image Book, Doubleday, 1992), 8.

festivals, and competitions are art events that define art's year; just as feasts and solemnities and liturgical seasons define the Catholic year. Some better off people move from festival to festival as film makers and artists do to display their work, gain recognition, even the fame they seek and subsequently reap financial rewards in a business defined by market demands and stimulated by marketing hype. Art has become a system all unto itself, the logical consequence of the Renaissance and its enthronement of individual enterprise. Art has its own take on religion, and the organized type. In some circles religion is seen as irrelevant or at best ignored and sidelined. Faced with this situation, to establish lines of dialogue and engagement will take effort and the willingness of the artists and religionist to dialogue.

If left alone, art can spin off and will fly from the tenuous grasp of religion; just as a tango dancer and partner can let go of the hand that holds and twirl away not to return. Yet there are those both in the religious sphere and in the artistic sphere who still believe that a strong partnership is desired. There are artists whose works touch the spiritual, even Christian themes. In the Philippines, I can think of the work of the master Ang Kiukok and Vicente Manansala, who painted crucifixions and Billy Abueva, who does religious imagery and has built his own ecumenical church building, which dialogues not just with organized mainstream religion but with native animistic traditions. There are the social realists of the 1970s and 80s who drew upon the riches of Christian iconography as a vehicle for social protest. I can name Emmanuel Garibay and Villaverde, who work with explicitly religious imagery. Garibay critiques and satirizes organized religion, and Villaverde celebrates the simplicity of the Gospel.

In the dialogue between art and religion, I have already mentioned Pungente's work on movies. Here is a Churchman seeing what movies can contribute toward a deeper insight into Ignatian spirituality. There is also the initiative among the Indian Jesuits to integrate art with retreats.[9] And on the side of the artists are groups like Asian Christian Art Association (ACAA), founded by the late Masao Takenaka, professor of Christian ethics and sociology of religion.

9. See Ignis

It had its first headquarters in Kyoto, Japan, then Indonesia, and the Philippines. Unfortunately, because of lack of funds, the association has announced that it is disbanding. For a while the Jesuit Institute of the Arts in the United States was quite active and it came as a response to an address by the Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe, who had gathered Jesuit artists in Villa Cavalete. And there is the annual meeting of JAW, Jesuits in the Arts Workshop, held in India. There have been at least seven workshops.

Not to be forgotten was the active engagement of John Paul II with artists. His address to artists and his address at the inauguration of the restored fresco of the Last Judgment at the Sistine Chapel recognized the importance of embodiment as expressed in the works of artists. Also on the official side, the Vatican has established an office for Church Patrimony. This is ecclesiastical speak for an office in charge of the cultural and artistic heritage of the Church. The establishment of the office, under John Paul II, and the organizing of similar offices on the level of Bishops' Conferences indicate that the official Church has taken note of culture and the arts.

These are but a few hopeful signs that art and religion can work together and fruitfully at that.

***Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas*, Dialogue Points or Dispositions:** We are at a crucial time in the relation of art and religion. It can be a time of intense interaction or of parting — a parting perhaps more complete than before. In many ways, art does not need religion as it exists with its own rationality. In fact, as some religionists fear, art is a serious competitor of religion. Reactions that media is corrupting the youth, that TV is the big baby sitter and that art is getting more violent, sexual, immoral or amoral are often heard. Media which is a form of art are perceived as great competitors in forming values. Thus, public pressure to close exhibits have been resorted to by believers using tools of pressure politics like boycotts, demonstrations, etc., as the well-publicized and long-drawn protest against Serrano Andres, *Pis Crucifix* (1987) and Mideo's *Poleteismo* (2011).

These reactions are pointers that there is something amiss and anyone concerned about religion and its continuing role in society and culture must address this.

Now, how is theology to address this? As reflection on faith, it is a second moment, the first moment being experience of the lived faith. Theology can give pause to see deeply and widely. Gabriel Marcel in *The Mystery of Being* suggests further that reflection has two moments: primary reflection is analytic and secondary reflection is synthetic. This synthesis leads us to a deeper grasp of experience. Because theology is reflection especially about the faith, religion, the spiritual, and the numinous, it can address art, which through the powers of creativity and imagination stretch into the realm of the numinous. Great art like great theology touches mystery and like theology cannot fully grasp it.

May I suggest that in this meeting of theological minds, we look deeply into theology and art as ways of understanding reality and that to begin the dialogue we look into controlling dispositions of this conference: Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's tripartite *venustas, firmitas, utilitas*. This tripartite division can point to methodological paths art and theology may follow as they dialogue with one another. As points of dialogue let me put forward some clear assertions.

Thesis 1: Art, its making and creating, critiquing and evaluating, historicizing, promoting is a form of thought (or more actively) thinking.

In this sense, art is, like theology, a form of thought. Art, however, places more accent on imagination and creation, whereas, theology may place the accent elsewhere depending on its tradition. Some theologies insist on orthodoxy, which means faithful transmission of the past and may preclude or at least circumscribe creativity. Some theologies are more proactive and projective, going beyond the boundaries of tradition, even risking censure from Church authorities. To recognize the varieties and differences in thinking is to begin the dialogue. Theology tends to prioritize the verbal while art uses many more modes of thinking — visual, kinesthetic, tactile, auditory and gustatory. (See Thesis 3 for further elucidation).

Thesis 2: Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's tripartite qualities of good architecture are analogues or specifications of the transcendentals of metaphyics: the true, the good, and the

beautiful.

Okay, these transcendentals have been bastardized, especially by Imelda Marcos in her long reign as culture czarina of the Philippines during the two decades of martial law. But the transcendentals are far from being fruitless concepts. Properly understood, they are pregnant with meaning and a gateway to insight. A Stargate, if you will.

Far from just being a frame for a *floregilium* of related topics, under which aesthetic and theological themes and concerns can be organized or anchored, the tripartite categories of Vitruvius understood in the light of the transcendentals are guides to sane and worthwhile art as well as theology, and point toward a synthesis point.

Thesis 3: *Firmitas* relates to *veritas*, Truth.

Metaphors for truth based on architectural and artistic concepts are many. In popular parlance, we talk of being on solid ground, to have strong foundations for an argument or thesis. We speak of truth as straight, alluding to the straight-edge or ruler used by architects to draw lines. The liar has a forked tongue, an imagery adapted from native Americans. One who speaks truth speaks straight. We talk about plumbing the truth, a reference to the plumb line used to make sure that walls are straight. In Pilipino, reason is "*katuwiran*," the root being *tuwid* or straight. This is a pregnant concept: the just or honest person is "*matuwid*," the reasonable person is "*may katuwiran*," reform of life is "*pagtutuwid ng landas*."

Our true colors are revealed by what we do and say. We talk of people presenting façades that hide their true selves, or masks — metaphors derived from architecture and theater. "To hit the right note" is to have laser-sharp insight that gets to the point.

Conversely, truth-related words are used in art. False or faux finishes refer to a type of decorative painting that simulate the texture of stone, wood etc., although the material is of inferior quality, like wood trying to look like marble or alabaster. Faux jewelry is made of paste or glass. Making sure that measurements are true means that they are exact. Terms like objective, real and abstract are used in art writing and criticism. These are truth-related terms used in art.

But going further, *veritas* in art implies that art has an intelligible content. Art has *subject matter*, it can be talked about because it is *a what*. Subject matter, therefore, answers the question "what?" What is it? What it is all is reflected (but not always) in the titles given to painting and sculpture. However, subject matter in art varies according to art form or genre. Dramatic works' content can be summarized by tracing the plot line, but plot does not exhaust content because characters are also part of the content, so is the atmosphere and tone of a dramatic work.

What about non-representational art, of the type that appeared in New York in the 1960s non-figurative, abstract expressionism? The subject matter of these art works is not what they represent but what they are. The adage "painting is paint" is relevant here. Such work does not represent or stand for something else. The work is about the sensuous qualities of paint, its texture, its play on light and darkness, the optical mixing of colors and the ability of color and line to evoke mood and feeling.

What about performance and installation art that provokes? The art is not the work but the provocation and the response. The art is found in the movement between artist and audience, the art work and its consumers. This is kinesthesia.

Or what about instrumental music, which vanishes the moment it is played and heard? Music is about sound and its qualities of pitch, speed, rhythm, harmony or disharmony and so forth. And dance is about movement, the force, speed, and line of movement coming together in a choreographed composition.

Subject matter or content is a *locus* for art and theology to meet. Theology can read the content of art while art can look to theology to get greater clarity on the big issues that art has faced and which theology also does. Issues like the struggle between good and evil, death and suffering, love and loss and so forth — staples all of the classics of art. Theology's analytic and rational dimension can counterbalance art's propensity toward the imaginative and creative; while art can address theology that may have become too rational and may have lost the affective.

Ever since the sacred texts, whether the Jewish Tanakh or the Christian Scriptures, were put into writing, these texts lost much of its orality and the power of performance. With the growing commentaries on the text and the subsequent building of the discipline

of theology, less and less of the performative, hence dramatic, is visible. In theology, the verbal as medium of thought and communication has taken over to the exclusion of other media. Art's multisensory and multimedia approach to truth can be a foil to theology's enthronement of the verbal while theology's mastery of the verbal points art toward the deeper exploration of the media of thought and communication it uses and must master. The present danger in today's art world is the easy sliding of artists from one medium to another, to the easy blurring of boundaries between the visual and the performative, between the tactile and the auditory, without mastering one or the other. This is the curse of ho-hum, lackluster, and insipid performance arts; and installations that are half way between a junk pile and sophomoric displays of sophistication. Also of poorly crafted visual arts. If artists are as careful as theologians when they scrutinize their scriptures, art as truth is better served.

Thesis 4: *Utilitas* relates to *bonus*, Good.

Contemporary art has placed a high premium on the artist. In some circles, artists are regarded like oracles and their works assiduously collected like relics from some guru. The temptation for the artist is to define or identify "good" with what is good for me. Because of this, the 19th-century adage "*ars gratia artis*," which was battle cry against undue censorship especially by government, has degenerated into "anything goes." Shock and awe have replaced well-thought through works; works titillate rather than relate and ameliorate.

Art's utility can be pedestrian and quotidian. To differentiate from this type of utility, the distinction between craft and fine arts operate, or between design and art. Design is for artifacts that have practical use. So that a computer keyboard and case are well-designed. Although aesthetically pleasing, such designs are not given the nomenclature of "fine arts." But utility is more than about what can be used or what is practical. Even the most useless or non-utilitarian of artifact, say a non-representational abstract work, is useful. It can be useful aesthetically because it modifies space, a fact that interior designers know well. But its usefulness can also be social. Art works

are collected and displayed as status and role markers. Although photography is already an accepted art medium, among royals, the oil portrait is still a must. Oil painting has prestige value. The painted oil portrait's use is cultural and social, not utilitarian.

Because art has a social function, *utilitas* as *bonus* challenges the artist to create art that is socially relevant and responsible. Because *utilitas* is *bonus*, art cannot escape the question: is it good art? Morally good that is. Here is a point of meeting with theology, especially moral theology. Some artists refuse to ask ethical questions, deeming themselves above ethics or completely unconcerned about ethics, except the ethics of personal freedom; theology can raise ethical issues about art, and rightly so. Moral questions can be framed either as specific questions like, does nudity demean women? Or is there a nudity that is demeaning and a nudity that is uplifting? The nude in the West has always been the subject of art and will continue to be, so such questions are relevant. Or the question can be framed in a more general way: what is ethical art? How can art be moral or immoral? Should art be censored? And by whom?

Is *Poleteismo* immoral? What is immoral in it?

The second disposition says rightly: art as *utilitas* is "art for life's sake," or "engaged aesth-ethics," accent on ethics. That same disposition says that art can be a "prophet of possible worlds" or a "diagnostician of society's malaise," as the art of social realism has advocated and done. And art is able to be prophetic because it is imaginative. It works in the realm of possibilities and is not confined to realities: to what can be rather than to what already is. It can dream visions of Utopia against the harsh reality of oppression, degradation, destruction, and wanton violence. It can ask not just the question why, but also "Why not?" Why not a better world? A more compassionate world? Why not life more human and humane? More touched with divinity?

Thesis 5: *Venustas* relates to *pulchritudo*, Beauty.

Venustas is properly the realm of art.

Philosophical aesthetics is a long drawn reflection on the issue of beauty, what it is and what its function is. Unfortunately, aesthetics

is not a very popular field and some artists loathe to reflect on aesthetics and simply move from gut feel.

Beauty has to do with pleasing form or form appropriate to the subject matter. Form and subject matter taken together, according to Joshua Taylor, constitutes art's "expressive content." (Taylor, 1981)

Venustas as beauty, as the first disposition says, is about the delightful, beautiful, contemplative, formal, purist, sublime, "art for art's sake." Beauty was what entranced Nouwen as he gazed upon Rembrandt's work. Beauty calls forth the contemplative gaze.

But beauty can be seductive and misleading if detached from the good and the true. The challenge for the arts is not to separate the transcendentals into three distinct spheres but to see them interpenetrate for it is in the interpenetration that great art arises. The traditional suspicion of religion about the beautiful, the wariness about the forbidden fruit that is "good for food, pleasing to the eyes" and awakens the desire "for gaining wisdom" (Gen 3: 6), is warranted. This suspicion is exaggerated in some circles as an avoidance or abhorrence to whatever seduces the senses. The struggles the Christian goes through to live a life of avoidance, is so ably portrayed in the Danish film *Babette's Feast* (1987).

Despite the struggle, some would even say the aberration of neurotic avoidance, nonetheless it cannot be denied that the beautiful can be idolized and, therefore, dangerous. Certainly, there is the seduction of beauty in the arts and media today. How much effort, time and resources are being spent on the body beautiful and projecting this, along with youthfulness, as primal values. Values that underwrite much of the advertising arts.

Theology as *venustas* can alert the artist to the seduction of beauty, while the artists can awaken the theologian to the beauty of religious truth and to the challenge not to over rationalize religious truth that it becomes insipid as much chewed quid.

Thesis 6: The power and fruitfulness of the tripartite *firmitas, utilitas,* and *venustas* lie in the interpenetration of the three and their synthesis.

The fourth disposition, "Art and Theology as *Beyond Tripartitas,*" says "A great description for both art and theology is it does not

rule out what it leaves out (Burch-Brown)." I suggest that "what it leaves out" is not necessarily another element. What it leaves out is synthesis. When the transcendentals, expressed in Vitruvian terms, are put together, one has a better definition of art. *Venustas* is about beautiful art, but that beauty expressed in the solipsistic interpretation of "art for art's sake" rather than its historical interpretation, must be challenged, modified, and hedged in by "art for life's sake," the dimension of *utilitas*. And true utility, especially social utility cannot be detached from solid foundations or the firmness of truth.

Theology can also be guided by this tripartite division leading to synthesis. While most theology concerns itself with truth, shown in the study of doctrine or systematics, and morality or ethics, beauty does not seem to play a large role. Yet, beauty and elegance are qualities of good thinking. Science in theorizing seeks for the simple and elegant theories. Technology and engineering, practical offsprings of science, seek those same qualities.

Is beauty a desideratum of theological thinking? Certainly, in the history of theology, elegant theological synthesis has its allure. The continuing appeal of scholasticism is based in part because the system is clear and elegant, therefore beautiful.

But, because beautiful, it can be seductive. Beauty has seduced art and it can only be tamed and hemmed in by truth and goodness. This can also happen to theology, when theological systems calcify and atrophy, leading theological debates to fruitless excesses in words, words, words.

It is with these tripartite dispositions, brought together in synthesis, that art and theology can approach its *locus theologicus et artium*, which is reality itself, or more specifically the human life lived against the horizon of transcendence and mystery. Life that will continue to provoke art-making and theologizing. Life, as both subject and horizon, in which and against which the artistic and theological enterprises are played.

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