STUDIA UBB THEOL. GR.-CATH. VARAD., LXVI-LXVII, 1-2, 2021-2022, pp. 291 - 304
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI: 10.24193/theol.cath.var.2021-2022.19

VIRTUAL INTERACTIVE TOURS AND COMMUNICATION OF THE DIVINE THROUGH CHRISTIAN ART

Maciej JASIŃSKI*

ABSTRACT. ***Virtual Interactive Tours and Communication of the Divine through Christian Art.*** Today, Christian works of art are seen more often in museums and on the Internet than in the places for which they were created, namely churches. For many years, museums have been helping visitors discover the meaning of their works of art through the use of various multimedia tools, and recently their activities are increasingly present in the virtual world as well. An example of this is the exhibition Seeing the Unseen, organized by the National Gallery in London in 2020-21. Its virtual version is highly interactive and multisensorial. However, the museum context does not always allow the viewer of a Christian work of art to discover its religious meaning and references to the divine. The increasing digitalization of museum collections and the emergence of new multimedia tools, such as virtual visits, are opportunities for the Church to communicate the spiritual meaning of Christian works of art in an easily accessible way. The inclusion of Christian images that refer to God in online communication can help modern man, accustomed to experiencing reality even virtually, to discover a new way of spiritual encounter with God through art.

Keywords: Christian art, the divine, online communication, virtual tour, digital media.

Cuvinte-cheie: artă creştină, divinul, comunicaţii online, tur virtual, media digitală.

* Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Facoltà di Comunicazione Sociale Istituzionale, Roma, macko.jasinski@gmail.com.

Introduction

Contemporary people are more likely to encounter Christian art on the Internet or while visiting a museum than in its natural habitat of churches and other sacred places. Since the Enlightenment, religious and sacred art has become part of the then newly emerging national museum collections, and in the age of Web 2.0 it has become *content* of private and institutional social media profiles. The question arises, however, to what extent Christian art has retained its reference to transcendence in these two new environments – museums and the Internet. In other words, reversing the perspective from an artwork to its beholder, the question is whether contemporary man is able to decode the religious meaning of Christian art or whether, on the contrary, he must first "learn how to see again"[1].

What is certain is that by simply beholding it, the viewer will not discover the deeper meaning of a work of Christian art. For Christian art is strongly connected to the dynamics of divine revelation, expressed mainly through biblical, liturgical, and dogmatic texts. It communicates the Good News through its own visual language. Therefore, viewers of Christian artworks must be provided with adequate guidance. This is where the Church enters the scene: at the Second Vatican Council, she recognized the value of art and artists in communicating the ineffable[2]. I believe that widespread access to the virtual world can facilitate the task of today's communicators of the Church (individuals or institutions such as museums and shrines) to introduce contemporary audiences to the Christian iconography of the sacred.

I. Christian Art and the Invisible Divine

Christians have communicated faith in God and his saving plan through visual imagery since at least the 3rd century[3]. However, the notion of "Christian art" is much younger than the very works of art it defines. It began to be used in the middle of the 19th century, when the relationships between artists, society, the state

---

[1] Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, translated by Lothar Krauth, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990, p. 29.

[2] Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 122.

[3] Cf. Robin M. Jensen, "Compiling Narratives: The Visual Strategies of Early Christian Visual Art", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 23:1 (2015), pp. 3-4.15.16.

and the Church were breaking down. Determining which works of visual art can be called "Christian" is an ongoing research problem[4].

Slightly more precise is the concept "religious art" which is used in the history of religion. It emphasizes the mediating function of artworks – they symbolically point to the divine and allow their beholders to experience transcendence through aesthetic experiences. In Christianity, however, art has a much more fundamental place since it is based on the doctrine of the Incarnation. Images therefore express the Church's belief that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (1 Colossians 1:15) and that through him the Ineffable was made intelligible. Hence, for centuries, the Church visually communicated the invisible God through reliefs on sarcophagi, depictions in catacombs, mosaics, icons, sculptures, paintings, as well as through sacred architecture and other forms of the visual imagery.

In defining Christian art, an important concept is "sacred art". As Ralph van Bühren explains, it alludes to the sacred mysteries of God and the liturgical context. Sacred images were created for churches and for the rituals celebrated there, and they are also connected to the doctrine of the Church and to popular piety[5]. In this article the term "Christian art" is used in this sense.

Although Christian art was created as part of the iconographic program of sacred places, modern audiences (no longer just "the faithful") most often encounter it outside of the liturgical assembly in a church.

I.1. Museums – new temples mediating spiritual experiences

In the current context of secularized Western culture museums have become the new temples where visitors, through contemplation of both the exhibits and the architectural space itself, can undergo a profound aesthetic experience. The question of whether their experience can also have a dimension of sacredness and prayerful contact with God is often asked in contemporary research[6].

---

[4] Cf. Ralf van Bühren, "La identidad del arte cristiano. Criterios para su especificación en la historia del arte", in: *Arte y teología*, Actas del 34 Simposio de la Facultad de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra, 14–16 octubre 2015 (ed. Fermín Labarga), EUNSA, Pamplona, 2017, pp. 103-149; John W. Cook, "What is Christian about Christian art?", in: *Interpreting Christian Art: Reflections on Christian Art* (ed. Heidi J. Hornik, Michael C. Parsons), University Press, Macon, 2003, pp. 187-208.

[5] Cf. Bühren, "La identidad del arte cristiano", p. 105.

[6] Cf. Gretchen T. Buggeln, "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred", *Material Religion*, 8:1 (2012), pp. 30-51.

In her article, Helena Wangefelt Ström presents three strategies that museums can apply to the sacred objects that are part of their displays. Wangefelt Ström explains that the first strategy involves "euthanizing" the *cultual* identity of an artwork and giving it new life as a museum object[7]. The second strategy places the beholder's decision at the center – it depends on whether the person considers the work of art as a part of the sacred realm or as one of many museum items from previous epochs. The third strategy is related to the use of an artwork – the author gives the example of treasuries known in Western Europe since the 6th century. The objects contained in a treasury could be used in liturgical, ceremonial, economic or display contexts[8].

Of the strategies mentioned above, the first is the most prevalent among museum institutions. Giving a sacred artwork a new identity as a museum item has important consequences: it affects the way in which it is presented and narrated, and thus also changes the way in which viewers perceive it. In many cases, the lack of religious contextualization is quite striking. For example, the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum in Madrid offers thematic tours on its website to introduce collections to virtual visitors. Although the museum has excellent Christian paintings in its collection (such as Caravaggio's *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*), among the 19 proposed virtual thematic tours there is not a single one with religious connotations. Instead, there are tours named "Fashion", "Gastronomy", "Wine Culture" or "Inclusive Love"[9]. Not only museums, but also sacred places addressing pilgrims and tourists through their museum-like approach can "euthanize" their own cultual identity, or at least disturb visitors' perception of the sacred. A case study conducted by Veneline Dali Saunders showed that more than four out of five of visitors to St. Mark's Basilica and Frari Basilica in Venice did not feel the spirituality of these two sites. Saunders listed factors such as the entrance fee, waiting in line to enter the church, overcrowding, excessive noise, and the labeling of artworks that is associated more with museums than places of worship, as reasons for why the sense of the spiritual has been lost[10].

---

[7] Cf. Helena Wangefelt Ström, "How do Museums Affect Sacredness? Three Suggested Models", *ICOFOM Study Series*, 47:1-2 (2019), pp. 198.202-203.

[8] Cf. Wangefelt Ström, pp. 201-203.

[9] Cf. Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum Madrid, "Thematic Tours", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.museothyssen.org/en/visit/thematic-tours].

[10] Cf. Venelina Dali Saunders, "The Churches of Venice: Sacred Places or Museum Spaces?", *Journal of Interpretation Research*, 19:2 (2014), p. 63.

As with the first strategy presented by Wangefelt Ström, the third approach relies heavily on the decisions of museum curators. These curators – or heritage managers – make decisions about the shift between identities of a sacred artwork, depending on the given circumstances. For example, a museum may decide to loan an object for use in worship. This is particularly common for museums owned by religious institutions. An agate chalice of St. Adalbert from the 10th–12th century, which is an object of the Archdiocesan Museum in Gniezno, is used during the ingress of a new diocesan bishop bearing the title of the Primate of Poland[11]. Another example of this approach is encouraging (or at least not preventing) visitors to express their reverence for the works of art on view. Gretchen Buggeln gives examples of museum exhibitions in which visitors knelt before representations of Christ. Such manifestations of religious expression, however, is often resisted by museum curators who are concerned about the ideological neutrality of their institutions, about the feelings of members of other faiths, and about how the resulting controversy might affect their institution's funding[12]. Although Buggeln claims that an increasing number of museums are welcoming the expression of religiousness, it is not expected that this strategy will become dominant.

Therefore, it seems that it is the second strategy proposed by Wangefelt Ström is particularly noteworthy for anyone who wants to use Christian art to communicate faith in God. Its starting point is not the decision of a museum curator – as in the case of strategies one and three – but the decision of the beholder. Consequently, this opens up a wide range of possibilities for dialogue between Church communicators and potential viewers of Christian art. For even if the beholder stands before a Christian artwork in a secular museum, he or she may seek (or be confronted with) not only an aesthetic experience but also a spiritual one: an experience of the sacred and the ineffable. The Second Vatican Council and the subsequent teaching of the popes emphasized the roles of artists and art in expressing the divine[13]. The task of today's communicators of the Church is to recognize in

[11] Cf. Photo gallery at Archidiecezja Gnieźnieńska, "Ingres abp. Wojciecha Polaka", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://archidiecezja.pl/ingres-abp-wojciecha-polaka/].

[12] Cf. Buggeln, pp. 41-43.

[13] Among many other statements, cf. Paul VI, "Ci premerebbe. Address at the Meeting with Artists in the Sistine Chapel, 7.5.1964", in: *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, vol. II: 1964, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 1965, p. 313; John Paul II, "Letter to Artists, 4.4.1999", *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 91

which contexts modern man, often unfamiliar with Christian iconography, encounters sacred art. Two of these contexts are undoubtedly museum visits or religious tourism. And one of the effective tools for conveying the religious meaning of Christian art is its virtual presentation through apps or websites.

I.2. Multimediality of museum's exhibitions

Offering visitors additional resources to inform them about exhibition objects (at first these were handheld guides) has been practiced by museums for several decades[14]. Nowadays more exhibitions are based on digital multimedia, interactivity and polysensory experiences. Visitors have at their disposal touch- or motion-controlled screens, augmented reality devices and applications, personalized audio-guides or walls and floors displaying images. The year 2020, associated with the temporary closure of many cultural institutions due to pandemic lockdown, has accelerated an already existing trend where more museums are offering a variety of immersive experiences not only on-site, in person, but also through their websites and mobile apps[15]. Thus, we can distinguish two types of digital tools at museums' disposal: those that enrich guests' experience during their visit and those that substitute an in-person visit to the museum by being available to virtual audiences via the Internet.

According to a survey conducted by Emanuela Edwards, 77% of visitors to the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican Museums sought to learn more about it before

(1999), nos. 12.16; John Paul II, "Sono onorato. Address to Representatives of the International Society of Christian Artists (SIAC) in Rome, 14.10.1986", in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. IX/2: 1986, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 1986, nos. 2-3; Benedict XVI, "Con grande gioia. Address at the Meeting with Artists in the Sistine Chapel, 21.11.2009", *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 101 (2009), p. 1049.

14 Cf. Othman, Mohd K., Helen Petrie, and Christopher Power, "Engaging Visitors in Museums with Technology: Scales for the Measurement of Visitor and Multimedia Guide Experience", in: *Human-Computer Interaction – INTERACT 2011*, 13th IFIP TC 13 International Conference, Lisbon, Portugal, September 5-9, 2011, Proceedings, Part IV (ed. Pedro Campos et al.), Springer, New York, 2011, pp. 92–99.

15 Network of European Museum Organisations, "Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe. Final Report", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf].

actually visiting. Of that number, as many as 49% consulted internet sources, and another 15% also visited the museum's website[16]. However, another case study provides different results: Andrew Duff's survey of visits to religious sites in the United Kingdom shows that only a third of visitors prepared for their visit in advance[17]. The reasons for this discrepancy in percentages may be the great spiritual importance of the Sistine Chapel and its popularity among tourists and art lovers. Thus, the more recognizable and frequented a museum or place of worship is, the more desirable multimedia aids are.

The analysis above shows that a significant proportion of visitors to museums and places of worship of particular artistic significance consult online sources beforehand. One could look at this question from the opposite perspective and ask whether a significant part of interactions with websites, social media profiles and applications of museums (and places of worship) are related to planning a visit there, or whether the range of motivations is much broader. A better understanding of the needs of virtual visitors would improve existing and future multimedia online resources. It seems that still most traffic on museum websites is generated by those who want to prepare for their visit. However, there are also those who simply look for good quality content about art or want to have a look at their favorite masterpieces. The current pandemic situation has also resulted in increased traffic on museum social media. Official museum profiles on *Instagram*, *Facebook* or *Twitter* are gaining more and more interactions, showing that a new relationship of quality is being established between museums and their audiences[18]. These results show that Internet users recognize museums as trustworthy institutions, interact with their content, and applaud all initiatives related to virtual exploration of museum collections, including short posts with iconographic descriptions of artworks through virtual tours of museum galleries as well as advanced experiences based on the concept of augmented reality. If this trend continues, perhaps in the

[16] Cf. Emanuela Edwards, "Survey of Audience Reception in the Sistine Chapel: Decoding the Message of Sacred Art", *Church, Communication and Culture*, 3:3 (2018), pp. 266.276.

[17] Cf. Andrew Duff, "Unlocking the Potential of Church Tourism", accessed 2 April 2022, [http://cvta.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/insights_church_tourism.pdf].

[18] For many examples of museums' digital proposals and social media campaigns during the pandemic and for an extensive bibliography cf. Myrsini Samaroudi, Karina Rodriguez Echavarri, et. al., "Heritage in Lockdown: Digital Provision of Memory Institutions in the UK and US of America During the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35:4 (2020), pp. 337-361.

future the main need of a typical virtual viewer will not be one of preparation for a physical museum visit, but to experience a work of art through the Internet. In other words, the use of digital multimedia tools will increasingly shift from *knowledge* and *understanding* to *experience* and *feeling*. Nowadays, the online-offline opposition seems to be no longer valid because virtuality is becoming a *continuation* of – and not an opposition to – reality. The next expected step is the transition from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, where the very concept of "experience" can be defined differently, given that the virtual world will be perceived as equally real. In the debate about the limits of virtual experience, images have a central place[19].

I.3. Seeing the Unseen in the National Gallery, London

In my talk, I would like to refer to one example: a proposal by the National Gallery in London, which opened the interactive exhibition *Seeing the Unseen* on December 20, 2020, displaying Jan Gossaert's painting *The Adoration of Kings* (1510–15)[20]. The exhibition (though that word is not fully adequate) was described by the organizers as part of their "new innovation program which explores new kinds of Gallery experiences using digital technologies and which places our visitors at the heart of the design process"[21]. Although it ended on June 13, 2021, potential visitors can still access it through "an experimental, interactive experience designed for mobiles"[22]. The gallery encourages virtual users to put on their headphones and immerse themselves in the world of Gossaert's *Adoration of Kings* from the comfort of their own home.

At the beginning the beholder (perhaps it would be more appropriate to say: participant) sees the whole *Adoration* in very high resolution. This gives him the opportunity to orient himself in the composition of the painting and to recognize the

[19] Cf. Juan Rego, "Immagini e liturgia: Ripensare la storia per una prassi secondo il Concilio Vaticano II", *Annales Theologici*, 34 (2020), pp. 238-240.

[20] Cf. The National Gallery, "Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart), «The Adoration of the Kings»", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/research/research-resources/national-gallery-catalogues/the-sixteenth-century-netherlandish-paintings/jan-gossaert-the-adoration-of-the-kings-introduction].

[21] The National Gallery (@nationalgallery), *Instagram* video and post, 19.05.2021, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CPDkZq2h3I7/].

[22] The National Gallery, "Seeing the Unseen: At home", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/visiting/virtual-tours/sensing-the-unseen-at-home].

main figures – Mary, the Baby Jesus, the Kings with their retinues; and then Joseph, the shepherds and the angels in the background. He can enlarge the image and learn more about its origins by clicking on the description. However, the description is rather poor and omits many iconographic elements that are of great importance for understanding the Christian message of the painting. For example, it is not explained what the gold, frankincense and myrrh brought to the Baby Jesus symbolize. Instead, the viewer's attention is directed to the scenery of the depicted event – Gossaert places the Nativity in ruins, on a dilapidated floor with almost withered plants growing out of it. This symbolizes the moment of breaking with the old world and transition to the new one. Overall, the description lacks an explanation of the religious meaning of the painting – a viewer unfamiliar with the depository of the Christian faith will not receive any clues regarding the relation of the Infant Jesus to this rupture and transformation of the world.

The viewer then looks at the painting from the perspective of one of its characters, King Balthasar. The canvas is divided into six segments focusing on six themes: "Rupture", "Transformation", "Balthasar", "Anticipation", "Celestial" and "The Star". Poems were written especially for this exhibition (by Therese Lola), intended to be statements by King Balthasar. They are read by the author herself at the beginning of each segment.

The participant can then zoom in on the painting on his smartphone, discovering even the smallest details. This is a very satisfying and revelatory experience, given that Gossaert's painting – as is usual with the Flemish masterpieces – is highly detailed. The viewer can see much more on his screen than he would be able to see in a museum room, standing a few feet from the original.

Zooming in on specific parts of the painting with the magnifying glass tool produces corresponding sound effects. The viewer examining the two dogs hears them gurgling or biting a bone; touching with a finger the shepherds or the crowd in the background triggers the sound of whispers, while zooming in on the horses is combined with the clatter of their hooves. The sounds assigned to the broken floor (stones breaking off) or dried vegetation (rustling of dry branches) remind the viewer that the theme of the painting is the transition from the old, "shriveled" world to a new world full of life. The close-ups on the Madonna's robe, the gifts of the Kings or the angels' wings produce harmonious sounds, reminiscent of heavenly choirs, and may invite the viewer to reflect on the invisible, spiritual dimension of the Nativity scene.

While the virtual experience of *Adoration of the Kings* cannot replace the physical presence in the museum and direct contemplation of the painting, it can be a very rewarding experience. The high resolution of the digital version of the painting allows one to see the details, full of deeper meaning. The intimacy of viewing *Adoration* in a private location, away from bustle and fatigue that accompanies visiting the museum, can foster a deeper aesthetic experience. The polysensory nature of the experience certainly helps – the participant engages not only his sight, but also his hearing and touch. Moreover, the viewer seeking the sacred can make the contemplation of this work his own adoration of the Baby Jesus. Besides, many people may find this type of experience to be good preparation, before seeing the painting in person, for a planned visit to the museum. In fact, the *Seeing the Unseen* experience was met with delight by visitors[23].

Given the above insights, I argue that the digital, interactive, and polysensory experience of Christian art can be a powerful tool for communicating the sacred realm of the invisible God. The National Gallery project analyzed here had its limitations due to the secular nature of the institution. *Seeing the Unseen* presented *Adoration of the Kings* from the standpoint of aesthetics and art history, not from a religious perspective. Nonetheless, one can bear in mind what Wangefelt Ström's study mentioned above – it is up to the museum visitor to decide whether a work of Christian art is an invitation to experience the transcendent.

It should be added that the initiative need not lie with secular cultural institutions. Similar "interactive experiences" can be designed by Church museums or most frequented sacred places of Christianity.

I.4. Toward enhancing the virtual tour of the Sistine Chapel

Once again, the Sistine Chapel may serve as an example. The Vatican Museums website offers a virtual panoramic visit to the Chapel[24]. The Internet user

[23] Cf. Nancy Durrant, "Seeing the Unseen at National Gallery review: a quiet revelation", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/sensing-unseen-gossaert-national-gallery-review-b216866.html]. See also comments on The National Gallery (@nationalgallery), *Instagram* photo and post, 27.04.2021, [https://www.instagram.com/p/COKq_TTAFlx/].

[24] Cf. Musei Vaticani, "Sistine Chapel. Virtual Tour", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-sistina/tour-virtuale.html].

has a 360-degree view of its interior. The person can move his or her virtual position in several places and zoom in on the walls and the vault. The Vatican Museums website offers several similar tours, such as in the Raphael's Rooms and in the New Wing. None of them are accompanied by a description, let alone a more detailed explanation of where the virtual beholder is and what he or she is looking at.

While this virtual tour is a valuable tool, it seems that simply showing the viewer the inside of the Chapel will not bring them any closer to understanding the religious meaning of Michelangelo's and other painters' frescoes. Incorporating polysensory stimuli into the tour would help introduce the viewer into the world of Christian iconography.

The Sistine Chapel, like Gossaert's *Adoration*, abounds in detail. Its visitors are unable to clearly see much of it, and it is difficult for them to connect the various biblical stories and allegorical figures together. With an interactive experience like the one at the National Gallery, the viewer could spend more time learning about the Chapel's iconographic program. The *Seeing the Unseen* exhibition offered poems read by their author. In the case of the Sistine Chapel, the participant, after zooming in on the *Creation of Adam*, for example, could hear the corresponding passage from *Genesis*. And by clicking on Perugino's *Handing of the Keys*, he would hear a passage from the Gospel (Matthew 16:18-19).

The engagement of the sense of hearing would not have to be limited to listening to passages from the Bible. It should be remembered that the Sistine Chapel still serves a liturgical function. This is reminded by the custodians' requests for silence and short prayers recited by a priest several times a day[25]. Therefore, a viewer visiting the chapel virtually, at the touch of a finger on their screen, could, for example, listen to Gregorian chant, or hear the sounds made by the sanctus bells.

Such an interactive experience for some would be preparation for a visit to the Vatican; for others, it would be a visit in itself. Paradoxically, contemplating the Sistine Chapel through a smartphone or tablet may (but not necessarily) introduce the viewer to its sacredness more efficiently than an actual visit. While nothing can replace the eyewitness experience of the Chapel, several factors can be taken into account. Pilgrims and tourists visiting the Vatican Museums are usually tired and sometimes stressed by simply getting to the Chapel through the narrow corridors.

[25] Cf. Edwards, pp. 272-274.

The Chapel itself is quite bustling, crowded and lacks fresh air. Visitors often spend only a few minutes looking at the frescoes before giving way to other people coming in. The results of the survey conducted by Saunders, cited above, showed that similar circumstances of a visit to a sacred place can hinder visitors from perceiving its sacredness and thus from having a spiritual experience.

In contrast, a virtual, interactive visit to the Sistine Chapel can be a very intimate experience. Although naturally there is nothing that can replace direct perception of a work of art, it is precisely this intimacy of a virtual visit (an intimacy that is often lacking in museums and popular sacred places) that contributes to the great value and versatility of multimedia tools. A virtual viewer touring the Sistine Chapel can choose a quiet, private place, and with earbuds on, immerse himself in the world of Christian iconography. One would be provided with all the information needed regarding the history of the place and the theological significance of the images. Due to the nature of digital media, a viewer would be able to individually determine the type and amount of information wanted. Through the various clickable (or touchable) elements, a viewer could use drop-down menus and select pieces of information seen as being useful and receive only those stimuli craved. A person can spend as much time exploring the Chapel as one wishes. Again: if one wishes to do so, the experience can be transformed into a prayer as well.

I.5. The Church as an online guide to the iconography of God

A project like the one proposed above is quite complex. In order to fulfill its role, it requires involvement of many resources, especially human and economic. At the same time, the widespread availability of the Internet and users' growing expertise in digital design make it possible for anyone who would like to use Christian art to communicate in the digital world. The use of virtual tours and other digital media tools do not have to be based on original, advanced concepts but can creatively process and comment on those already available. According to the second strategy of Wangefelt Ström, it is the beholder who decides whether he will treat the work of sacred art he views as a real sacred object. In this perspective, the role of the Church's communicators – priests, catechists, publicists, guides to the holy places, the artists themselves, and all those who are committed to communicating the Good News of God – is based on providing contemporary audiences with the opportunity

to learn about Christian iconography and to experience through it an encounter with God. This includes any activity on social media (e.g. *Instagram* photos with descriptions of iconography of works of art), blogging about sacred art, or posting content about museums or holy places of special artistic value on video-sharing platforms.

Although the online presence of Church communicators basing their message on Christian art is still rather modest and superficial, there are notable exceptions. A case in point is Bishop Robert Barron (currently Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles), who preaches, catechizes, and evangelizes, inter alia, by explaining Christian iconography. His *YouTube* channel[26], in which he frequently references the treasury of Christian culture, including the visual arts, has over half a million subscribers (as of April 2, 2022). His work is supported by the *Word on Fire* initiative[27], which offers articles, videos, study programs, webinars and courses on its website. The online success of this project has led to the publication of *The Word on Fire Bible: The Gospels*, where besides the biblical text the reader will also find four types of commentary: one by Bishop Barron, one by a selected Father of the Church, one by a contemporary writer of the Church, and lastly, a commentary of the *via pulchritudinis*, that is, a work of Christian art accompanied by an essay that explains its meaning[28]. It is to be expected that over the coming years more users will emerge who will incorporate iconography of the sacred and of the divine into their online communications.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I wrote about museums that have become new temples, enabling viewers to have a deep aesthetic and even spiritual experience, mediated by visual art. It seems that another "place" where modern man can satisfy his

[26] Cf. Bishop Robert Barron, *YouTube* channel, accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/user/wordonfirevideo].

[27] Cf. Word on Fire, "About Word on Fire", accessed 2 April 2022, [https://www.wordonfire.org/about/].

[28] Cf. *The Word on Fire Bible (Volume I): The Gospels*, Word on Fire, Park Ridge, 2020; cf. also *The Word on Fire Bible (Volume II): Acts, Letters and Revelation,* Word on Fire, Park Ridge, 2021.

need for spirituality, and uplift his thoughts to God, is the Internet. And the role of the Church is to recognize this new place as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel and to contextualize her strategies for the symbolic expression of the divine through art.

This task is especially realistic in the case of religious museums or sanctuaries that already have a well-developed, so to speak, 'digital infrastructure'. That is, they have a good website, well-run social media, and many users interacting with them and visiting their website for additional information or to prepare their visit. But and this is one of the great advantages of digital communication, the budget for creating such a project does not have to be large. A good team can do it so that not only the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, but also the medieval bronze doors of the cathedral of my diocese in Gniezno or the gilded iconostases of the churches in Oradea can delight virtual beholders with their sacredness and introduce them to the world of Christian faith.