

Pius, X II, Pope, 1876-1958.

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# ***THE FUNCTION OF ART***

**ADDRESS  
OF  
POPE PIUS XII**

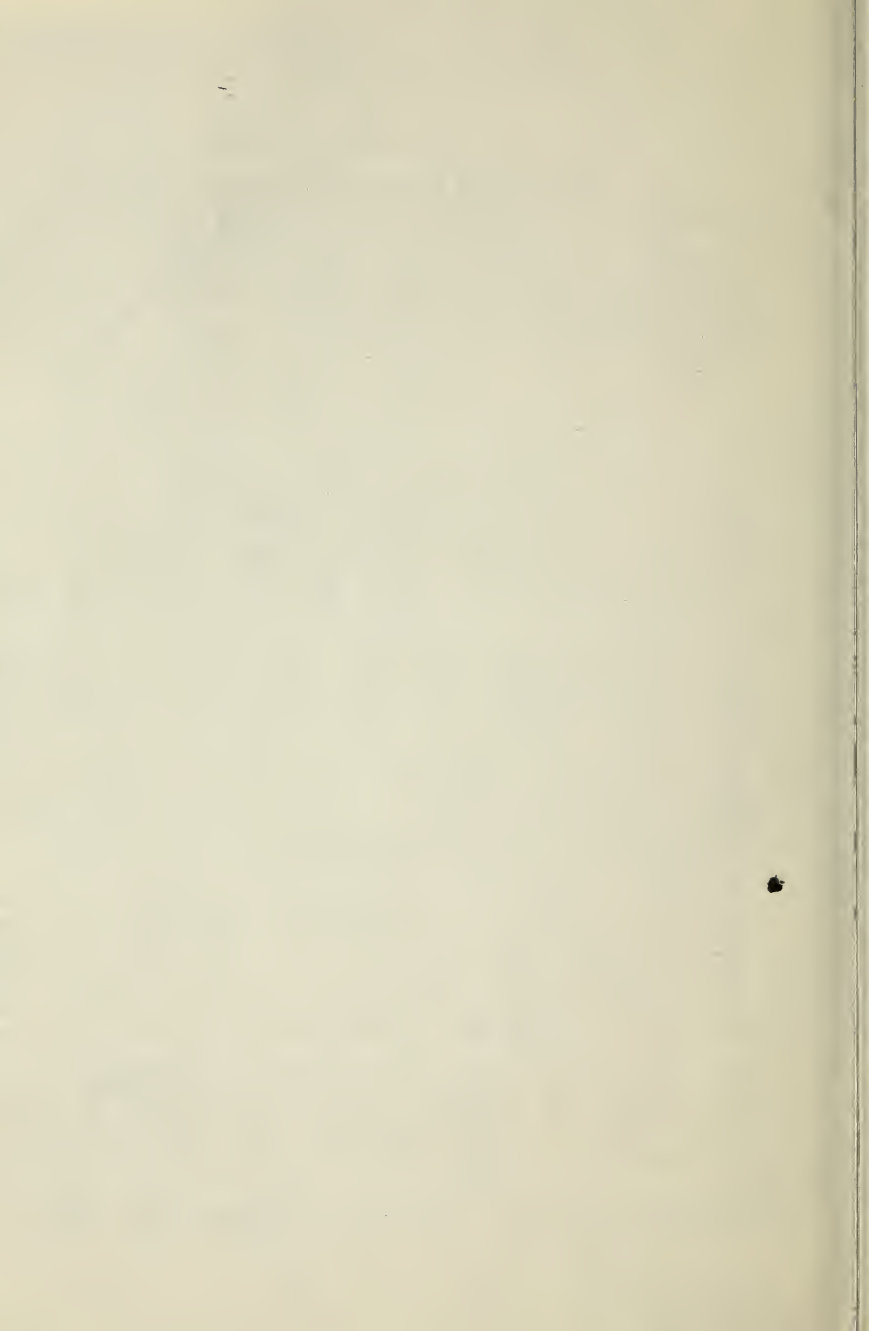
**ON SACRED ART—Instruction of the  
Supreme Sacred Congregation  
of the Holy Office**



**National Catholic Welfare Conference**

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## THE FUNCTION OF ART

*An address by His Holiness Pope Pius XII to a group of Italian artists received in audience on April 8, 1952.*

1. With deep satisfaction, beloved sons and daughters, promoters of the figurative arts, We welcome your devout homage and that of your families, by reason of your coming to Us on the occasion of the sixth Roman quadrennial meeting, and We express to you Our pleasure for the remembrance-gift which you are leaving with Us.

2. How delightful your presence is to Us is shown by the tradition itself of the Roman pontificate. As the heir of universal culture it has never ceased to appreciate art, to surround itself with works of art, to make art, within due limits, the collaborator of its divine mission, preserving and elevating its destiny, which is to guide the soul to God.

3. Upon crossing the threshold of this house of the common Father, you felt as though you were in your own world, perceiving yourselves and your ideals in the masterpieces gathered here throughout the centuries. Nothing is lacking therefore to make this meeting mutually delightful between the Successor, though unworthy, of those Pontiffs who shone as generous patrons of the arts, and you who continue the Italian artistic tradition.

4. It is needless to explain to you—who feel it within yourselves, often as a noble torment—one of the essential characteristics of art, which consists in a certain intrinsic ‘affinity’ of art with religion, which in certain ways renders artists interpreters of the infinite perfections of God, and particularly of the beauty and harmony of God’s creation.

5. The function of all art lies in fact in breaking through the narrow and tortuous enclosure of the finite, in which man is immersed while living here below, and in providing a window to the infinite for his hungry soul.

6. Thus it follows that any effort—and it would be a vain one, indeed—aimed at denying or suppressing any relation between art and religion must impair art itself. Whatever artistic beauty one may wish to grasp in the world, in nature and in man, in order to express it in sound, in color, or in plays for the masses, such beauty cannot prescind from God. Whatever exists is bound to Him by an essential relationship. Hence, there is not, neither in life nor in art—be it intended as an expression of the subject or as an interpretation of the object—the exclusively “human,” the exclusively “natural” or “immanent.”

7. The greater the clarity with which art mirrors the infinite, the divine, the greater will be its possibility for success in striving toward its ideal and true, artistic accomplishment. Thus, the more an artist lives religion, the better prepared he will be to speak the language of art, to understand its harmonies, to communicate its emotions.

8. Naturally, We are far from thinking that in order to be interpreters of God in the sense just mentioned, artists must treat explicitly religious subjects. On the other hand, one cannot question the fact that never, perhaps, has art reached its highest peaks as it has in these subjects.

9. In this manner, the great masters of Christian arts became interpreters, not only of the beauty but also of the goodness of God, the Revealer and Redeemer. Marvelous exchange of services between Christianity and art! From their Faith they drew sublime inspirations. They drew hearts to the Faith when for continuous centuries they communicated and spread the truths contained in the Holy Scriptures, truths inaccessible, at least directly, to the humble people.

10. In truth, artistic masterpieces were known as the “Bible of the people,” to mention such noted examples as the windows of Chartres, the door of Ghiberti (by happy expression known as the Door of Paradise), the Roman and Ravenna mosaics and the facade of the Cathedral of Orvieto. These and other masterpieces not only translate into easy reading and universal language the Christian

truths, they also communicate the intimate sense and emotion of these truths with an effectiveness, lyricism and ardor that, perhaps, is not contained in even the most fervent preaching.

11. Souls ennobled, elevated and prepared by art, are thus better disposed to receive the religious truths and the grace of Jesus Christ. This is one of the reasons why the Sovereign Pontiffs, and the Church in general, honored and continue to honor art and to offer its works as a tribute of human beings to God's Majesty in His churches, which have always been abodes of art and religion at the same time.

12. Beloved children, crown your artistic ideals with those of religion, which revitalize and integrate them. The artist is of himself a privileged person among men, but the Christian artist is, in a certain sense, a chosen one, because it is proper to those chosen to contemplate, to enjoy and to express God's perfections.

13. Seek God here below in nature and in man, but above all within yourselves. Do not vainly try to give the human without the divine, nor nature without its Creator. Harmonize instead the finite with the infinite, the temporal with the eternal, man with God, and thus you will give the truth of art and the true art.

14. Even without making it a specific aim, endeavor to educate men's hearts—so easily inclined toward materialism—toward kindness and a spiritual feeling; you to whom it is given to speak a language which all peoples can understand. Strive to bring men closer to one another. May the artist's vocation, for which you are indebted to God, lead you to this mission: a mission so noble and worthy that it is sufficient in itself to give to your daily life—often harsh and arduous—its fullness and a courageous faith.

15. In order that these Our wishes may be fulfilled and God glorified in your art, We invoke upon you and your families an abundance of heavenly favors and may the Apostolic Blessing which We impart upon you from the fulness of Our heart be a promise of them.

## ON SACRED ART

*An instruction issued to Catholic Bishops of the world by the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office on June 30, 1952.*

1. It is the function and duty of sacred art, by reason of its very definition, to enhance the beauty of the house of God and to foster the faith and piety of those who gather in the church to assist at the divine service and to implore heavenly favors. Wherefore sacred art has always been cultivated by the Church with assiduous care and vigilant interest in order that it might be in complete harmony with its own proper laws which stem from supernatural doctrine and true asceticism and thereby rightly vindicate for itself the title "sacred."

2. Consequently the words which the Supreme Pontiff, Blessed Pius X, uttered when promulgating the wise norms concerning sacred music, are truly appropriate to this subject. "Nothing therefore should have place in the church which disturbs or even merely diminishes the piety and devotion of the faithful, nothing which might reasonably be considered in bad taste or cause of scandal, nothing above all which . . . might be unworthy of the house of prayer and the majesty of God." <sup>1</sup>

3. Wherefore in the early history of the Church the Second Council of Nicea, by condemning the heresy of the Iconoclasts, confirmed the cult of sacred images and threatened with severe penalties those who dared "to wickedly invent anything contrary to ecclesiastical institution." <sup>2</sup>

4. The Council of Trent in its 25th session issued prudent laws concerning Christian iconography and concluded its serious exhortation to Bishops with these words: "Finally let Bishops exercise such diligence and care concerning these matters that nothing distorted may meet the eye,

<sup>1</sup> Motu Proprio *Tra le sollecitudini*, 22 Nov. 1903; *Acta Pii X*, vol 1, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Actio 7<sup>a</sup> et ultima definitio Synodi II<sup>a</sup>, Mansi, *Sacr. Conc.*, XIII, col. 730.

nothing distorted and confused in execution, nothing unbecoming and unbecoming, since sanctity belongs to the house of God.”<sup>3</sup>

5. In order that the decree of the Council of Trent concerning sacred images be faithfully executed, Urban VIII added appropriate norms, affirming, “Let those objects which are exposed to the gaze of the faithful be neither disordered nor unusual in appearance, and let them engender devotion and piety.”<sup>4</sup>

6. Finally the Code of Canon Law gathers all the legislation of the Church on sacred art under summary headings (can. 485, 1161, 1162, 1164, 1178, 1261, 1268, 1269 #1, 1279, 1280, 1385, 1399).

7. Worthy of explicit mention are the prescriptions of canon 1261 which obliges Ordinaries to vigilance, “especially lest anything be admitted into divine worship which is foreign to the faith or not in harmony with ecclesiastical tradition;” and also canon 1399, 12° which “prohibits by the law itself images, no matter how produced, which are foreign to the mind and decrees of the Church.”

8. Recently the Apostolic See reprobated corrupt and errant forms of sacred art. Of no moment are the objections raised by some that sacred art must be adapted to the necessities and conditions of the present times. For sacred art, which originated with Christian society, possesses its own ends, from which it can never diverge, and its proper function, which it can never desert. Wherefore Pius XI of happy memory, inaugurated the new Vatican Gallery of Paintings with a discourse on sacred art. Having recalled the so called “new art,” he added these momentous words: “With masters of art and with Holy Pontiffs we have already many times expressed the thought: that Our hope, Our ardent desire, Our will can only be that the law of the Church be obeyed, so clearly formulated and sanctioned in

<sup>3</sup> Sess. XXV, *De invocatione, vener, et Reliquiis Sanct. et sacris Imaginibus.*

<sup>4</sup> *Sacrosancta Tridentina*, #1, die xv mensis Martii anno MDCXLII, *Bullarium Romanum*, Taurinen. editio, XV, 171.

the Code of Canon Law; that is, that such art be not admitted into our churches, and all the more that it be not called upon to construct, to remodel or to decorate them; rather open wide the portals and tender sincere welcome to every good and progressive development of the approved and venerable traditions, which in so many centuries of Christian life, in such diversity of circumstances and of social and ethnic conditions, have given stupendous proof of their inexhaustible capacity of inspiring new and beautiful forms, as often as they were investigated, or studied and cultivated under the two-fold light of genius and faith.”<sup>5</sup>

9. Recently Pius XII, now happily reigning, in the Encyclical Letter *On the Sacred Liturgy* (November 20, 1947), concisely and clearly formulated the duties of Christian art: “It is eminently fitting that the art of our times have a free opportunity to serve the sacred edifices and sacred rites with due reverence and with due honor; so that it too may add its voice to the magnificent hymn of glory which men of high talent have sung throughout the passing centuries of the Catholic faith. Nevertheless in consciousness of Our office we cannot but deplore and reprove those images and forms recently introduced by some, which seem to be deformations and debasements of sane art, and which at times are even in open contradiction to Christian grace, modesty and piety, and miserably offend true religious sentiment; these indeed are to be totally excluded and expelled from our churches as ‘in general whatever is out of harmony with the holiness of the place’ (can. 1178).”<sup>6</sup>

10. After attentively considering all these points, this Supreme Sacred Congregation, deeply anxious to preserve the faith and piety of the Christian people through sacred art, has decreed that the following rules should be recalled to the attention of the Ordinaries throughout the world, in order that the forms and methods of sacred art may fully correspond to the beauty and holiness of God’s house.

11. Concerning architecture.—Sacred architecture, al-

<sup>5</sup> Sermo diei 27 Oct. 1932, A.A.S., XXIV (1932), p. 356.

<sup>6</sup> A.A.S., XXXIX (1947), p. 590 s.



though it may adopt new styles, cannot in any way be equated with profane building, but must always perform its own office, which regards the house of God and the house of prayer. In addition, in building churches care should be had of the convenience of the faithful, so that they can take part in the divine offices with a better view and better attention; let new churches be resplendent also for the simple beauty of their lines, abhorring all deceitful adornment; but still everything that savours of a neglect of art or of a want of pains should be avoided.

12. In can. 1162, #1, warning is given: "that no Church shall be built without the express consent in writing of the Ordinary of the place, which cannot be given by the Vicar General without a special mandate."

13. In can. 1164, #: "Ordinaries shall see to it, taking counsel of experts if need be, that in the construction and remodeling of Churches traditional Christian styles of architecture and the laws of sacred art be observed."

14. This Supreme Sacred Congregation strictly enjoins that the prescriptions of cc. 1268, #2 and 1269, #1 be religiously observed: "The most Blessed Eucharist should be kept in the most distinguished and honourable place in the church, and hence as a rule at the main altar unless some other be considered more convenient and suitable for the veneration and worship due to so great a Sacrament . . . The most Blessed Eucharist must be kept in an immovable tabernacle set in the middle of the altar."

15. About descriptive art.—(1). According to the prescription of can. 1279: "No one may place or cause to be placed in churches, even though they be exempt, or in other sacred places, any unusual image, unless it has been approved by the Ordinary of the place."

16. (2). "And the Ordinary shall not approve of images to be exposed publicly for the veneration of the faithful, if they are not in conformity with the approved usage of the Church" (#2).

17. (3). "The Ordinary shall never permit to be shown in churches or other sacred places, images which represent a false dogma, or which are not sufficiently decent and moral, or which would be an occasion of dangerous error to the unlearned" (#3).

18. (4). If there are lacking experts on the diocesan Commissions, or doubts or controversies arise, let the local Ordinaries consult the metropolitan Commissions or the Roman Commission on sacred art.

19. (5). According to the norm of canons 485 and 1178, the Ordinaries should see to it that everything is removed from sacred buildings which is in any way contrary to the holiness of the place and the reverence due to the house of God; and let them severely forbid second rate and stereotyped statues and effigies to be multiplied, and improperly and absurdly exposed to the veneration of the faithful on the altars themselves or on the neighboring walls of the chapels.

20. (6). Let Bishops and religious Superiors refuse permission to edit books, papers or periodicals, in which there are printed pictures foreign to the sentiment and decrees of the Church (cf. can. 1385 and 1399, 12°).

21. In order that the local Ordinaries may more safely demand and receive from the Diocesan Commission for Sacred Art advice, which is in perfect harmony with the prescriptions of the Apostolic See and the end of sacred art itself, they should see to it themselves that those appointed to the Commission are not only experts in art but also firmly adhere to the Christian faith, have been brought up to piety, and gladly follow the precise principles defined by ecclesiastical authority.

22. And works of painting, sculpture and architecture should be entrusted for their execution only to men, who are outstanding for their technique, and who are capable of expressing sincere faith and piety, which is the purpose of any sacred art.

23. Finally care should be taken that aspirants to sacred orders in schools of philosophy and theology be educated in sacred art and formed to its appreciation, in a way adapted to the ability and age of each one, by masters who reverence what our ancestors cherished and established and comply with the prescriptions of the Holy See.

24. Given at Rome, from the Sacred Office, on June the 30th, 1952.

JOSEPH CARD. PIZZARDO, Secretary  
Alaphridus Ottaviani, Assessor.

