



"ARTISTS' MASS" IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL

HOMILY OF PAUL VI

Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord

Thursday, 7th May 1964

Dear Sirs and even dearer Sons!

May we be permitted, before this brief discourse, to free your spirit from a certain apprehension, from some turmoil, which can take by surprise one who finds himself, in such an occasion as this, in the Sistine Chapel. There is perhaps no other place which makes one think more and feel more anxious, that instils more timidity and at the same time provokes to a greater measure the sentiments of the soul. And so it is precisely you, artists, who have to be the first to remove the instinctive hesitation from the soul, which arises when entering this cenacle of history, of art, of religion, of human destiny, of memories, of portents. Why? Because it is precisely, if any other exists, a cenacle for artists, of artists. And so you should, in this moment, allow the great breath of emotions, of memories, of exultation - which a temple such as this can provoke in the soul - freely to invade your spirits.

There could be some other turmoil, almost another paralysing shyness; and it is that which not so much Our own humble person may bring but rather Our official presence, Our pontifical ministry: "The Pope is here!" you surely think. Have artists ever come to the Pope? It is the first time that such has happened, perhaps. Or rather, they have come for centuries; they were always in rapport with the Head of the Catholic Church, but with different relationships. It could be said, even, that the point of this relationship, of this rapport, was lost. And now you are here, all together, in a religious moment, all for you, not as people behind the wings, but as those who truly come onto the stage of a spiritual conversion, a sacred celebration. And it is natural, if you are sensitive and comprehending, that there be a certain veneration, a certain respect, a certain desire to understand and to be silent. And so, even this sensibility, if in this moment should tie down your interior expression of free feeling, We would like to untie because if the Pope must welcome everyone - because he is Father to all and has a ministry to all, and has a word for all - for you he reserves this word; and desires and is happy to express it today because the Pope is your friend.

And he is this not only because a tradition of sumptuousness, of patronage [of the arts], of grandeur, of pomp encircles his ministry, his authority, his relationship with people, and because he needs this decorative and expressive picture to say to those who wouldn't know who he is and how Christ would have wanted him in the midst of men. He is this for more intrinsic reasons, which, then, are those which keep us occupied today and which interest our spirit and so thus: they are Our ministry's motives which make Us come to seek you. Need We say that great word that after all you already know? We need you. Our ministry needs your collaboration. It is because, as you know, Our ministry is to preach and to make accessible and understandable, even moving, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of the ineffable, of God. And in this operation, which transmits the invisible world in accessible, intelligible formulas, you are masters. It is your craft, your mission; your art is precisely that of understanding the treasures of the heaven of the spirit and to enrobe them with word, with colours, with form, with accessibility. And not only an accessibility which could be like that of the teacher of logic or mathematics, but one that makes, yes, the treasures of the inaccessible world comprehensible to the cognitive faculties of the senses and to our immediate perception of things. You have also this prerogative in that same act by which you make accessible and comprehensible the world of the spirit: to conserve such a world's ineffability, the sense of its transcendence, its aura of mystery, this necessity to reach it with ease and with exertion at the same time.

This – those who understand these things call it “Einführung”, sensitivity, that is, the ability to inform, by way of feeling that which by way of thought we would not be able to understand and express – you do this! Now in this way of yours, in this ability of yours to translate within the circle of our consciousness – *et quidem* of those easy and happy things, that is of those perceptible things, which is to say of those things that only by intuitive vision can be gathered and gleaned – we repeat, you are masters. And if We would lack your assistance our ministry would become faltering and uncertain and would need to make a special effort, let us say, for itself to become artistic, even to become prophetic. To rise to the strength of intuitive beauty's lyrical expression we would need to make the priesthood coincide with art.

Now, if this is so, the discussion should be grave and solemn. The place, maybe also the moment, would present themselves; not so much the time which is conceded Us, and not so much the programme which we have prearranged for this first friendly meeting. Who knows if another occasion may come when we can say more? But the topic is this: it is necessary to re-establish the friendship between the Church and artists. In truth, it is not that the friendship was ever broken; and this same event proves it, that it is already proof of such a friendship in action. And then there are many other manifestations that may show forth proof of a continuity, of a faithfulness in relations, which testify that the friendship between the Church and artists was never broken, also because, as We were saying, the Church needs this, and We could say even more in addition, reading it in your hearts. You yourselves go searching for this world of the ineffable and you find that its homeland, its domicile, its best store is even now the Religion.

So we have always been friends. However, as occurs between relations, as occurs between friends, it has become a little spoiled. We have not broken but we have upset our friendship. Will you allow Us a frank word? You have abandoned Us a little, you have gone far away to drink from other fountains in the still legitimate search to express other things; but no longer ours.

We would have other observations to make but We do not want to upset you this morning and to be discourteous. You know that we bear a certain wound in our heart, when we see you intent on certain artistic expressions which offend us, custodians of the whole of humanity, of the complete definition of man, of his holiness, of his stability. You separate art from life, and so... But there's even more. Sometimes you forget the fundamental canon of your consecration to expression; what you say is not understood, often you don't even know yourselves: you follow a language of Babel, of confusion. And so where is the art? Art should be intuition, it should be talent, it should be happiness. But you do not always give this talent, this happiness and so we remain taken aback and daunted and indifferent.

But to be sincere and daring – We have merely touched upon it, as you see – we recognise that we, also, have made you suffer a little. We have made you suffer because we have imposed imitation as the first rule upon you, on you who are creators, always full of life, gushing with a thousand ideas and a thousand new things. We – it was said – have this manner, we must adapt to it; we have this tradition and we must be faithful to it; we have these masters and we must follow them; we have these canons and there is no way out. Sometimes we put a cloak of lead on you, we can say. Forgive us! And then we also had abandoned you. We did not explain our things to you. We did not bring you into the secret cell where God's mysteries make man's heart jump for joy, out of hope, of gladness, of exhilaration. We did not keep you as pupils, friends, in dialogue. For this reason you did not recognise us.

And therefore your language for our world was docile, yes, but almost bound, faltering, unable to find its free voice. And we have felt, then, the dissatisfaction of this artistic expression. And – we will perform a complete *Confiteor* this morning, at least here – we treated you even worse. We turned to surrogates, to "oleography", to works of art of little worth and little value, even though, in our defence, we did not have the means to accomplish great things, beautiful things, new things, things worthy to be admired; and so even we were side-tracked down paths where art and beauty and – which is the worst for us – the worship of God were poorly served.

Shall we make peace again? Today? Here? Do we want to be friends again? Shall the Pope become once again the friend of artists? Do you want some suggestions, some practical ideas? But these things don't enter the equation now. Let feelings remain now. We have to return to be allies. We must ask of you all the possibilities that the Lord has given you, and, so,

in the scope of functionality and purpose, which makes art the brother of the worship of God, we must allow your voices free and powerful song, of which you are capable. And you must be so very good at interpreting that which you must express, to come to us to draw from the subject, the theme and sometimes more than the theme, that fluid secret which is called inspiration, which is called grace, which is called the charism of art. And, please God, we will give it to you. But we were saying that this moment is not made for long discourses and to give definitive proclamations.

However we have already, on our part, We the Pope, we the Church, signed a great deed of the new alliance with artists. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first that the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council issued and promulgated, has a page – I hope that you are familiar with it – which is indeed the pact of reconciliation and the rebirth of religious art in the bosom of the Catholic Church. I repeat, Our pact is signed. We await from you the countersignature.

So for now We limit Ourselves to some very simple remarks but they will not displease you.

The first is this: We are happy for this Artists' Mass and wish to thank Monsignor Francia; He and all those followed who him and have harvested the idea. We have seen this initiative be born, We have seen it first welcomed by Our esteemed Predecessor Pope Pius XII, Who began to open the paths and to give them citizenship in ecclesiastical life, in the prayer of the Church; and so We congratulate you on what has been done on this front, which is not the only one, but is good and is well to follow: We bless it and encourage it. We would like that you bring abroad, those who have colleagues, imitators, followers, Our blessing for this experiment for artistic religious life that has again made seen that between priest and artist there is a profound harmony and a marvellous capacity for understanding.

The second is this, very well known but must, We think, be remembered in this moment: and it is that if the artistic moment that is produced in a sacred, religious act – like a Mass – would be full, be authentic, be generous, truly fill and make the souls that participate in it palpitate and the other things that crown it, it has so much need of two things: a catechesis and a workshop.

We will not stretch Ourselves now to discuss whether art should come spontaneously and suddenly, like a celestial flash of inspiration, or rather – and you tell us – it needs a tremendous apprenticeship, hard, ascetic, slow, gradual. Well, if we want to give, We repeat, authenticity and fullness to the religious artistic moment, to the Mass, then it needs its own preparation, its own catechesis; it is necessary to make it be apprehended in other terms or accompanied with religious instruction. It is not licit to invent a religion, it is necessary to know what has happened between God and man, how God has sanctioned certain religious relationships that are necessary to know so that we do not become ridiculous or stammering or aberrant. It is necessary to be instructed. And We think that in this setting of the Artists' Mass, those that want truly to manifest themselves artists, will not have difficulty in accepting

this systematic, patient but so beneficial and nourishing information. And then a workshop is needed, that is a technique to do things well. And here we leave the word to you to say what is needed, so that artistic expression may have all its richness of expression of ways and means to give to these religious moments, and, if it occurs, even new things.

And finally we will add that neither catechesis nor workshop is enough. The religious moment's indispensable characteristic, that is sincerity, is required. We are no longer talking only about art but of spirituality. It is necessary to enter into the interior cell of ourselves and to give to the religious moment, lived artistically, that which we express here: a personality, a voice obtained right from the depths of the soul, a form that is distinguished from every costume of the stage, of purely external representation; it is the "I" that is found in the fullest and most arduous synthesis, if you want, but also the most joyous. It is necessary that here religion be truly spiritual; and so that which today's feast, the Ascension, makes us think about will happen for you. When we enter ourselves to find all these energies and make the climb to heaven, in that heaven where Christ has taken refuge, we feel ourselves in a first moment, immensely, I would say, infinitely far away.

The transcendence which modern man fears so much is really something that infinitely surpasses him, and he who does not feel this distance does not feel true religion. They that do not perceive this superiority of God, his ineffability, his mystery, do not perceive the authenticity of the religious fact. But they who feel it experience, almost immediately, that that faraway God is already there: "You would not look for him if you hadn't already found him." Pascal's words, true; and it is that which is verified continuously in the authentic spiritual life of the Christian. If we truly search for Christ where he is, in heaven, we see him reflected, we find him pulsating in our soul: the transcendent God is become, in a certain way, immanent, is become the interior friend, the spiritual guide. And communion with Him, which seemed impossible, as if it would surpass infinite abysses, is already consumed. The Lord comes into communion with us in the ways, as you well know, that are those of the word, that are those of grace, that are those of sacrament, which are those of the treasures that the Church dispenses to faithful souls. And let this be enough for now.

Dearest artists, we now say one word only: arrivederci!