

**HOMILY FOR MASS FOR ARTISTS**  
**ST MICHAEL'S, PARKHEAD**  
**NOVEMBER 22 2009 FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING**

My dear brothers and sisters,

I am delighted to welcome you here today for this second Mass for the artistic community, celebrated in conjunction with the Archdiocese of Glasgow Arts Project.

I greet all of you who are involved in the arts in any way and in a special way I wish to acknowledge the efforts and contribution made by Stephen Callaghan, the Creative Director of our Arts Project, at whose initiative these Masses have been celebrated.

I cannot help but draw inspiration for my homily from that beautiful Letter to Artists written by Pope John Paul II in the Jubilee Year 2000, which is both inspiring and prophetic.

There he wrote: "Humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself. Such an atmosphere has sometimes led to a separation of the world of art and the world of faith, at least in the sense that many artists have a diminished interest in religious themes.

"You know, however, that the Church has not ceased to nurture great appreciation for the value of art as such. Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience."

That concept of art as a bridge to religious experience is one which is central to the programme of the Arts Project of the Archdiocese.

Today's feast of Christ the King was instituted by Pope Pius XI to assert the kingship of Christ whose first coming was to shepherd the people of God and whose second coming will be to judge the living and the dead, to separate the sheep from the goats: "Then the king will say to those on his right hand 'Come you whom my father has blessed. Take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.'" (cf Matt, 25)

What Pope Pius XI already recognized looming as a dark cloud on the horizon, came to pass in the pontificate of his successor, Pius XII, when the Nazi leadership of the Third Reich unleashed the dogs of war across the continent

of Europe to be followed by the bears of communism. We have seen the destruction of both these antichrists, though not without the loss of many lives and the destruction of many cities.

"As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem and came within sight of the city he shed tears over it and said: 'If you had only understood on this day the message of peace! But, alas, it is hidden from your eyes! Yes time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all around you, when they will encircle you and hem you in from every side; they will dash you and the children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing on another – and all because you did not recognize your opportunity when God offered it!'"

This sobering passage from St Luke's gospel, quoting our Blessed Lord not only describes the past but also warns about the future. There are many signs today that despite the peace which has held between those countries which were torn apart in the two great wars of the last century, the very foundations of our Christian civilization are being disturbed, and the laws built upon the values of the gospel are losing their integrity.

Our culture is being paganised, to use a strong word, found in Pope John Paul's great document on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*.

The arts are an expression of culture, they take their form from within it and in turn help to shape it. It is interesting to examine the arts in the period to which I have been referring, particularly those of the Nazi and Communist ascendancies particularly in their public expressions which are commonly ugly and brutal. Perhaps of all the arts, music was the one least containable and can express, and did in some great works, the agony of the human heart - literature out of the gulags likewise.

I find visiting modern galleries can be often disquieting, for many works on show are incoherent and dispiriting, and the plaudits of art critics fuel my disquiets rather than relieving them. If we can legitimately speak of a culture of death, much art reflects it: the body is defaced; the marital act prostituted; gender dissembled. Some of what has been on show recently in the Modern Art gallery of this city and dramatized elsewhere has given rise to objection which I myself have voiced to the appropriate authorities.

The offence given by displaying the bible for marginal comment and portraying Jesus as a Transsexual can be set beside the purported offence given to a Finnish woman married to an Italian atheist who successfully obtained from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg a ruling which would prohibit the display of the crucifix in Italian classrooms, because, she maintained, it violated her parental right to educate their children according to their own beliefs as well as the children's right to religious freedom.

It is extraordinary that her claimed offence should be allowed to trump the enormous offence given to parents throughout Italy and indeed the Italian state itself which had three times dismissed her case, by the attempt to remove what the *Osservatore Romano* on November 3 described as “the most representative symbol of a great tradition that belongs not only to religion but also to the European continent.”

In respect of this case the question needs to be posited, wherein is the offence? Objectively it would seem to be not on the beholder but on the one who is beheld, namely Christ. Should the figure of a tortured man not engage the sympathy of mankind, and indeed did he not say himself, “If I be lifted up I will draw all things to myself”?

However in the case of the objectors this image has become a challenge. It has symbolic value because it stands for a belief in God and our need of his saving help.

But where does this lead us if every symbol of religious belief is to be regarded as offensive to those who are not attracted to that belief or consider themselves repelled by it? What in the crucifix is so offensive and objectionable?

The Italian Council of State answered that question in the following terms: “The presence of the crucifix does not assume a discriminatory value for non-believers, since it represents ‘civilly relevant values and notably those values which underpin and inspire our constitutional order’”.

Natalia Ginzburg, a writer and contributor to the Italian Communist Party newspaper *L'Unità* in March 1988, wrote: “The crucifix represents everyone, because before Christ no-one had ever said that all people are equal, that they are brothers and sisters – rich and poor, believers and non-believers, gentiles and Jews, black and white.”

The printing of these words in the Communist newspaper makes the comment all the more significant.

The *Osservatore* comments: “While aimed at protecting human rights, the Strasbourg Court’s ruling effectively calls into question the foundations on which the same rights are based. It rejects the importance of religion’s role – especially that of Christianity in the construction of the European identity, and in the affirmation of the centrality of man in society. Seen in another light the Strasbourg judges’ decision seems inspired by a concept of state secularity that would marginalize the contribution of religion to public life. From this one could foresee a not-too-distant future in which public places have to be devoid of any kind of religious or cultural reference for fear of offending others’ sensibilities.”

Perhaps equally disturbing is the thought that if human rights are not based upon values then they are likely to depend upon the success of groups within society establishing legal privileges for themselves and those who adhere to their philosophies of life, irrespective of the effect of such laws upon those truths of a transcendental order arising out of religion.

The Italian Bishops' Conference spoke of "the biased and ideological vision" underlining the court's decision which ignores or obscures the multiple meanings of the crucifix, which is not only a religious but also a cultural symbol. All great art has symbolic character making it amenable to the senses through which the intellect and the heart grasp meaning, embrace values, perceive truths and form judgements. It gives vision which is why the Church has always valued the arts and called upon them as servants and witnesses of the truth.

Vision and witness ...

Firstly vision ... we read in the prophecy of Daniel, our first reading (chap 7) "I gazed into the visions of the night and I saw coming on the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man. On Him was conferred sovereignty, glory and kingship and men of all peoples, nations and languages became his servants. His sovereignty shall never pass away."

And witness ...

In the Apocalypse, quoted in today's Mass, we read: "Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the first born of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, he loves us and washed away our sins with his blood and made us a line of kings and priests to serve his God and father." (Rev 1)

And the Gospel describes Jesus before Pilate as the witness to the truth: "So you are a king then?" said Pilate. 'It is you who say it,' answered Jesus. 'Yes, I am a king, I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.'" (John, 18)

Those of you who are Christian artists, and have been gifted by God in many ways, have a great vocation to use your art, your vision, in bearing witness to Christ, and so countering all that obscures his beauty. May he continue to inspire you, and through you, all who love him.