



New York Cultural Center

The Event of Christmas at the Crossroads of Western Painting: A Lecture through Images and Music **Dr. Francis Greene, PhD** Featuring the **Communion and Liberation Choir** Tuesday, December 19, 2006 at 7:00pm **Museum of Biblical Art** 1865 Broadway at 61st Street, New York, NY

Simmonds: Before introducing tonight's event, I would like to thank Dr. Ena Heller and all of the MOBIA staff for their wonderful hospitality and support. The Museum of Biblical Art is without a doubt the perfect venue for an evening dedicated to the relationship between Christmas and artistic beauty.

In fact, the very idea of this museum points to the fact that the Christian revelation is an esthetic event—the revelation of the beauty of God, which was invisible and untouchable, and became visible and touchable in the Incarnation of the Word. Christmas, in particular, is the celebration of the "visibility" of God, who chose to become present in the world as a baby in order to enter into relationship with us. This new "visibility of the invisible" has since then been reflected in countless works of art. Indeed, one could argue that the incarnation of the divine beauty generated a whole new "gaze" for those who contemplated it, and sparked a radically new artistic tradition which set the foundation for all of Western art. This novelty is particularly obvious in the great Christian painters of the Middle Ages, who were able to see in every aspect of reality a sacramental reflection of the divine beauty. We live in an age where this ability to see the sacramental depth of the world has been greatly weakened, so much so that some of these ancient masterpieces may appear distant and hard to understand. The purpose of this event is to help re-educate our vision, so that we may again become able to experience wonder in front of the event of Christmas.

To help us, we have with us tonight an exceptional educator: Dr. Francis Greene. He began teaching at St. Francis College in September, 1968 in the department of Fine Arts and Foreign Languages. Over the past 30 years he has taught courses in French language and literature, fine Arts, and International studies. Since 1980 he has served as Chair of the department which now includes a major in International Cultural Studies, which he established almost a decade ago. In the Fall of 1999, Dr. Greene was named "Outstanding Professor in New York State" by the Carnegie Foundation. He is a frequent speaker at academic conferences throughout the US and has published extensively in the areas of history, architecture, and French literature.

To accompany his presentation of a selection of works of art related to Christmas, we also have the choir of Communion and Liberation, directed by maestro Christopher Vath. The Choir is composed of high school and university students as well as housewives and working adults, all who have come together to give voice to their faith through the beauty of the texts and music they perform. Their acappella repertoire extends from Gregorian chant to the 20th century, and spans many countries and languages. Formed in 1994 under the direction of Mr. Vath, the choir has performed both its Christmas Lessons and Carols and its Lenten choral meditation around the New York metropolitan area. They perform every year at the Way of the Cross over the Brooklyn Bridge on Good Friday.

Christopher Vath was born in New Orleans. He attended North Texas State University, where he received a Bachelor of Music Degree in Piano Performance with Joseph Banowetz. After doing graduate studies at the Julliard School with Martin Canin, he started teaching piano and working as a liturgical music director and is currently at Regina Pacis Church in Brooklyn. He has worked as composer, arranger, and pianist in the field of commercial music. Two of his choral arrangements are published by World Library Publications. Since 1996, he has been “Talking Music”, a lecture concert series, which attempts to lead the listener to the ultimate questions of humanity through great works of music. In 2005, in addition to his Weill Hall debut, he gave a private performance for Pope Benedict XVI at the papal summer residence.

And now, I am delighted to hand the microphone over to Dr. Greene.

Greene: This evening we address the event of Christmas as expressed in music and painting. In many ways music is the most direct and accessible of all the arts. It is immediately experiential for the listener. One hears a piece of music and the listener either likes it or does not. One is either affected or not. Admittedly the serious listener can be assisted in his/her listening by learning how better to listen, what to listen for, the various genres and movements of music. All of this is the work of a sound education. But this does not deny the immediacy of musical experience. This is why the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky in his 1913 essay *On the Spiritual in Art* suggested ways in which the plastic art of painting might take on some of the directness and immediacy of music. One of his goals was that painting might be more directly accessible and immediately experienced by a wider public. To put it simply, he wanted painting to become more like music.

I begin with these observations on music because this evening, before we look at images of the event of Christmas, and before we listen to music which celebrates this event, we need to lay a theoretical basis for approaching the painted images since, for many, they do not always have the immediacy or accessibility of music. In no way does this imply that painting is a more profound or a more valued art than music. Nothing could be further from the truth. But it will become evident that laying a historical and theoretical basis for image-making in religious painting will better equip us to gaze this evening upon images which, perhaps, have become all too familiar to us and which need to be seen with fresh eyes. This will be our goal tonight – to take a new and fresh look at the event of Christmas as celebrated in music and as visualized in Western painting. In the process we will see that the very act of creating a Christian image—be it a painting, sculpture or mosaic --- is fundamentally incarnational at its very roots.

There abound within Christian art images of Christ and the saints which operate as visual texts which need to be “read” carefully, as they often communicate on and at several levels. In this regard they are not unlike many of the images and symbols in literary texts. Until recent centuries most Christian images were almost always meant to be seen and experienced within a specific architectural setting, functioning in intimate relationship with the architecture itself. In point of fact the buildings themselves, most often churches, functioned as unified texts which were meant to be read in their totality. The plastic arts within the building were also texts to be read, often serving as chapters in the larger architectural “book,” sometimes serving as sentences or words, and almost always as metaphors or similes.

Paul Finney has written: “God’s essential being was thought to be invisible. But indirect disclosures mediated through things and beings that divinity caused to exist...are another matter entirely—mediated visions were judged to be well within the grasp of philosophical mortals desiring to see God. At issue here is an epistemology of signs, a cognitive exercise that exploits and explains signs pointing to divinity. And, as in all such metaphorical exercises, what really counts is the ability to read the signs...including those propounded in the artist’s workshop.”(Finney 279)

Our analysis will focus on several images in Early Christian Art which function as texts, specifically palimpsests which can be read on several levels. The first is a Roman sculpture of the Good Shepherd, dated to the late third century A.D., now in the Museo Pio-Christiano, part of the Vatican Museum. It is one of the earliest existing sculptures of Christ. According to the most commonly accepted reading of this sculpture, we behold an image of Christ, the Good Shepherd, bearing a lamb upon His shoulders. He is beardless and quite young, wearing the *exomis*, a short, belted outer garment. He stands with weight shifted slightly to one leg in a modified form of ancient Greek *contrapposto*, used in ancient sculptures of athletes and pagan gods. A close examination of the back of the figure reveals that it was once part of an architectural setting, attached to a wall or structural support.

A comparable figure of the *Good Shepherd* in the Louvre, Paris, also dates to the late third century A.D. and is, once again, among the earliest sculpted images of Christ, borrowed from ancient Roman and Greek pagan mythology. Saint John of Damascus, in his *Treatise in the Defense of the Images*, sees the Early Christian impulse to fashion images of Christ as the inevitable consequence of the Incarnation: “In former times God, who is without body, could never be depicted. But now, when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter, who worked out my salvation in matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation.” (Kuryluk, 54-55)

Jaroslav Pelikan comments upon the fundamental role of image-making at the heart of Christian belief: “Quite apart from human history, therefore, there was, in the very life of the Godhead, an image-making and an image-manifesting, which expressed the mystery of the eternal revelation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this sense, the Son of God before the Incarnation was not only “the image of the invisible God,” but “the invisible image of the invisible God.” (Pelikan 89) The complimentary relationship of written text, such as Scripture, and the textual and multi-layered early Christian image is, perhaps, best expressed in this poignant verse of the New Testament, John 14:8: Philip said to Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.” Jesus replied: “Philip, after I have been with you all this time, you still do not know Me? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.”

In the Roman Mausoleum of the Julii, below Saint Peter’s Basilica, and dated to about 250 A.D. is found the first known Christian mosaic, depicting Christ as Apollo, the Sun God, the *Sol Invictus*. Like Apollo Christ rides His chariot, and the nimbus, equally pagan in origin, radiates from His head. But here the former *Sol Invictus* can be read as the Son of Righteousness who triumphs now and forever over all that is darkness and death. The relationship of this visual text to the text of Scripture is evident: Hebrews 1, 2-3: “In this the final age God spoke to us through His Son...This Son is the reflection of the Father’s glory, the exact representation of the Father’s being.” The palimpsest which is this mosaic provides a superb example of visual and textual syncretism, the attempt to reconcile or to combine differing beliefs or belief systems, in this case by suggesting new readings of previously pagan images.

Pelikan writes: “The earliest Christians did not set about to uproot the noble trunk of the Greco-Roman artistic past; instead they grafted their own nascent weeds onto this venerable trunk.” (Pelikan 227) In his study of the theology of the image Leonid Ouspensky has perceptively written: “Christianity selects and adopts from the pagan world all that was of its own, that is, all that was Christian before Christ—all that was scattered through it as separate, splintered particles of truth—and links them together,

joining them to the fullness of revelation....it is not a penetration of pagan customs into the Church, but their 'churchification,' not a paganization of Christian art, as it is often thought, but the Christianization of pagan art." (Ouspensky, Meaning, 27-28)

One of the earliest paintings of Christ, the *Good Shepherd*, a fresco and dated to the late third century A.D., is found in the catacombs of Priscilla, in Rome, in the Chamber of the Velatii. Once again Christ is depicted with the *exomis* tunic with light purple striping and leg bands. This early painted image is adapted, as were the comparable sculptures, from pagan imagery. Paul Finney writes: "Adaptation is a key in evolutionary theory, and the earliest Christians showed a remarkable capacity for adapting to a highly evolved and complex environment, namely that of Greco-Roman society." (Finney 109)

All these images are fundamentally sacramental. The viewer encounters a reflection of the Incarnation, but the images also re-enact the Incarnation on their own artistic level. The invisible God the Father spoke His eternal Word, the Son, Jesus Christ, who plunged into human time and took flesh, becoming the visible image of the invisible God, the *Imago Dei*. These textual and visual images mirror the written text of Colossians 1:15: "He is the image of the Invisible God, the first-born of all creatures." In and through matter God became visible and accessible. In and through the materiality of these and other plastic images the once invisible God can be seen and better grasped, as expressed in the text of I John 1: 1-2: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched, we speak of the Word of life. This life became visible; we have seen it and bear witness to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life that was present to the Father and became visible to us." Thus Saint John of Damascus writes, in the eighth century: "You may draw His image and show to anyone willing to gaze upon it...Use every kind of drawing, word or color...things which have already taken place are remembered by means of images." (Kuryluk 53) Following the teaching of Plato, Saint John of Damascus considered sight the most noble of the senses and remarked that images stimulate the eye and the mind, declaring that "what the book is to the lettered, the image is to the illiterate." (Kuryluk 52) Then again, he writes: "But when you see Him who has no body become man for you, then you will make representations of His human aspect. When the Invisible, having clothed Himself in the flesh, becomes visible, then represent the likeness of Him who has appeared. When He who, having been the consubstantial Image of the Father, emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant...having taken on the carnal image, then paint and make visible to everyone Him who desired to become visible." (Ouspensky, Theology, 51) A distinctive trait of the New Testament is the direct connection between the Word and the image. (Ouspensky, Theology, 55) The multiple readings of these early images are affirmed by the analysis of Egon Sendler who sees them as works of art, but also as signs which go well beyond the domain of art, images which, he says, are living proclamations of the value of matter. Just by their existence they make reference to the Incarnation. As signs he sees in them both the signifier and the signified, and it is the signifier, the image itself, which participates in an opening toward the Infinite. They are concrete, but transcendent images reflecting by their very finitude another dimension, both infinite and unspeakable. (Sendler 78) Thus the observation by Ouspensky that "the preaching of Christianity to the world was from the beginning carried out by the Church through word and image," by the dual texts of Scripture and the visual image. (Ouspensky, Meaning, 26)

However, Ouspensky rightly reflects upon the inherent limitations of such efforts, no matter how extensive or superbly executed: "The ways of iconography, as a means of expressing what regards the Deity, are the same as the ways of theology. The task of both alike is to express that which cannot be expressed by human means, since such expressions will always be imperfect and insufficient. There are no words, nor colors, nor lines which could represent the Kingdom of God as we represent and describe our world. Both theology and iconography are faced with a problem which is absolutely insoluble -- to express by means belonging to the created world that which is infinitely above the created." (Ouspensky, Meaning, 48-49)

Of all the works of art discussed this evening, the name of not one artist has survived to us. Yet, in contemplating these images, one must think of those who fashioned them. Christoph Schonborn says of these now anonymous sculptors and painters: “If Christ appeared on earth in order to redeem man in his total being, to form man after His own image, then we must also say that the artist’s energy, his sensitivity, and his creative powers are included in the re-creation as well. The work of the artist, too, was drawn into the spell of this mystery.” (Schoenbrun 238)

The challenge offered by any palimpsest, whether of paper or stone, is to recognize it for what it is and to make the sometimes arduous effort to peel back its outer layers. That challenge can be as daunting in the visual arts as in literature, but few efforts are more rewarding, and in this regard one thinks of a stanza from the poem, Aurora Leigh, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries
And daub their natural faces unaware,
More and more from the first similitude.

At the conclusion of these prefatory remarks Dr. Greene discussed six paintings related to the Nativity of Christ and developed the Incarnational aspects of each, not only in terms of content or story, but in reference to technique including iconography. The choir, under the direction of Maestro Christopher Vath, performed selections of sacred music between each group of paintings. The images discussed included:

The Nativity, fresco, Giotto, Arena Chapel, Padua, early 1300’s.

The Annunciation, Fra Angelico, 3 versions: one altar panel and two frescoes, Florence, 1430 and 1438.

The Adoration of the Magi, altar panel, Gentile da Fabriano, the Strozzi altarpiece, Florence, 1423

The Nativity, predella panel of the Strozzi altarpiece, Gentile da Fabriano, Florence, 1423

The Adoration of the Magi, Botticelli, 3 altarpieces, 1475, 1481, 1500

The Immaculate Conception, The Birth of the Virgin Mary, Madonna and Child, triple scene in a tondo, Fra Filippo Lippi, 1452

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