



RELIGIOUS AWARENESS IN ART FROM PREHISTORY TO TODAY

A Course in Art Appreciation
Lectures by Dr. Francis J. GREENE, Art Historian

Early Christian and Medieval Art

Simmonds: Good evening, and welcome to our lecture on “Early Christian and Medieval Art,” the second in a series of four lectures by Dr. Francis Greene organized by Crossroads New York Cultural Center. The title of the series is “Religious awareness in art from prehistory to today” and reflects the idea that art is not separate from the larger drama of human history, but it reflects the broader human quest for meaning, and as such is intrinsically linked with religiosity. As it happens, the idea for this series was inspired by a seminal work of Msgr. Luigi Giussani’s, titled *Religious Awareness in Modern Man*, which was first published in English a few years ago in the international theological magazine *Communio*. In this book, Fr. Giussani, whom some of you may know as the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement in the Catholic Church, offered a very lucid discussion on the religious trajectory of Western civilization. We thought it would be interesting to ask a distinguished art historian like Prof. Greene to illustrate how the developments described by Giussani are reflected in the world of artistic creation. Of course, there is a deep link between the human need for beauty and the religious sense, and historically there has been a deep connection between Western art and Christianity. If it is true, as Giussani says, that some of the most important Christian words have become almost incomprehensible to modern culture, this process must be discernible also in the language of the visual arts. To provide some context, I would like to quote a passage from Giussani's Introduction to the book:

The Religious Awareness of Modern Man attempts, first of all, to identify in today's cultural and social situation those aspects that hamper an authentic religious awareness. Furthermore, it tries to outline what Christianity's attitude is in front of this fact. We live in a time in which what is called Christianity appears to be something both known and forgotten. Known because it has left so many traces in the history and education of peoples. Nevertheless forgotten, because the content of its message seems to be hardly relevant to the lives of most people.

In the book, Fr. Giussani identifies the root of the problem in rationalism, the tendency of modern western culture to reduce the scope of reason to its most abstract faculties. Interestingly, this means that also art is pushed radically outside the realm of reason, and

it is no longer recognized for what it is, as an expression of reason's most important questions because in reality art is a form of knowledge consonant with reason, inasmuch it helps one recognize reality as a sign pointing to an overarching Mystery, to which reason tends but can never exhaust. This theme of the "reduction of reason" was brought up last year by Benedict XVI in his monumental Regensburg address, in which he called upon western culture to again "broaden" reason, in order to overcome the current separation between faith and reason, faith and culture, faith and art. It is also a major focus of Crossroads' cultural work.

Now to tell you a little bit about our speaker. Dr. Francis J. Greene has taught at St. Francis College since September 1968, serves as Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages, Fine Arts, and International Cultural Studies where he holds the rank of Professor. Dr. Greene was one of the co-founders of the College Honors Program, served as its first Director and continues to serve on the Honors Council and to teach Honors program seminars. Dr. Greene was chosen as Outstanding Professor in New York State for 1999-2000 by the Carnegie Foundation for Excellence in Teaching. He is a frequent presenter at academic conferences throughout the United States and has published extensively in journals such as *The French Review*, *The Modern Languages Journal*, *Measure*, and *Symploke*. Most recently, Dr. Greene co-edited a book entitled *Perspectives on 9/11*, published by Praeger. He wrote an essay for the editor on the proposed memorial for the site of the former World Trade Center. Let's welcome Dr. Greene.

Greene: Thank you, Rita. I want to say: welcome back to many familiar faces I see who were with us last week, and to many who have joined us this week for the first time as we try to journey through Western Art. We want to see what is this religious sense and religious awareness that seems to be present in every age and in every society.

Last week we started with cave art. We looked at Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece. And when the evening was over, I think we might have felt closer in terms of our modern spiritual sensibility, and certainly Christian sensibility, to the Ancient Egyptians than we did to the Ancient Greeks. We saw, for example, that their sense of the judgment paralleled Judeo-Christian judgment, and particularly the Christian judgment. But it is the Greeks who prepared the way for our lecture this evening as we look at Christian art, at least two periods of it—Early Christian and the Middle Ages. I just to start each week with a connection to the week before.

We saw that, although there were things about Greek culture that we might say are somewhat alien to our thinking, reason was most important to them. And the word *logos*, reason, was also the word for *the Word*. We saw also in their sculpture that they discovered human dignity, the dignity of the individual, the beauty of the human body. And what a wonderful thing it was to be a human being. Extremely important. When we looked at the Parthenon, we saw Platonic illumination, the moving from the shadows of the cave to the reality and out to the light of the sun because, as we examined the temples in the light of day, we weren't frightened; we understood more and more, and we became illumined as we looked more specifically.

Of course we can't forget that Plato is followed by Aristotle who makes this distinction between the exterior of things, the accidents, and that which makes a thing which it is—the substance. A very important distinction that will serve a lot of Western thinking. And then you remember we saw that for them, although they didn't have a clearly evolved theology of the afterlife, there was one thing that was sin to them—not to understand. Reason was primary, and understanding and seeking to understand were at the heart of the human adventure.

Before I begin this evening on Early Christian, I'd like to quote several paragraphs from Pope Benedict in the *Regensburg Address* where he comments on his view of what this culture we looked at last week, the Greeks did in preparing the way for the Christian belief and experience. And these will be a little disjointed because I just want to point where this great scholar, Benedict XVI, speaks about what we said last week. He says:

Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: "In the beginning was the λόγος". In the beginning was the *logos*; in the beginning was the Word; in the beginning was reason.

Then the Holy Father goes on to say:

John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis. In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God, says the Evangelist. The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance... Biblical faith, in the Hellenistic period, encountered the best of Greek thought at a deep level, resulting in a mutual enrichment evident especially in the later wisdom literature... A profound encounter of faith and reason is taking place here, [in this meeting of Christian tradition and Hellenistic culture], an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion. From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith.

Finally he says:

Critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith... This inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history - it is an event which concerns us even today. Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this

convergence, [of Christian belief and Greek Hellenistic thought] with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe [today].

So we see one philosopher's and theologian's thinking about this culture that we looked at last week as we come, this week, to Early Christian art because the Greeks prepared the way so that, when the earliest Christians proclaimed this Word, the *logos*, there is a people with a mindset and thought who can understand it. This language has meaning, although there are new elements, because they have inherited this Greco-Roman culture and tradition, and now they have ears to hear that God has spoken a word, and "the Word has become flesh." And the individual is dignified.

With that as background, we're going to look at some Early Christian art and we're going to look at some later Medieval, and the challenge is as daunting as last week, but we'll do our best.

I want to begin the Early Christian period with some of the earliest images that we have of Christ, and what I want to establish is that, from the beginning, Christians were comfortable with making images of Christ in painting, in mosaic, and in sculpture. There is no question about it. It is a theological act that reflects sacramentality. In Christian belief, God has plunged into human time and taken on flesh and lived a human life. Therefore, one can plunge into the things of creation—stone, cement, paint, plaster, whatever—and in plunging into that, find incarnate in those earthly things, the Divine. So art, in a sense, recreates what one believes has happened in the person of Christ, that Divinity has plunged into flesh and can be seen and touched, therefore through "mere" material, one can approach the Divine.

This is one of the earliest images of Christ, a mosaic, about 250 A.D. We know because of the persecutions of Christians that the amount of art created was fairly limited because one couldn't publicly proclaim belief. Most of this was on the mausoleums and tombs and catacombs, and actually, given the degree of persecution of the early Christians, some of it more rigorous by emperors than others—you had periods of less persecution, it's amazing that as much was created and has survived. But what do we notice? We notice that many of these early images of Christ depict him as if he were a pagan god. This is Apollo in the chariot, the sun god, he is not bearded. The image in mosaic looks very much like the images you would see either in mosaic or in painting or in sculpture of Apollo, and this tells us something. Just as Benedict said, that Christian belief found fertile soil in the intellectual environment of the Ancient Greeks, it actually helped people to be able to assimilate this profound new reality of "the Word made flesh." The early Christians were very comfortable using the art that existed, the pagan art. They didn't say, "Well, we have a new religion; we're starting a new culture." They were part of this Greco-Roman world; they used the existing art form such as mosaic, and they used the styles they had. But this is no longer the sun god, S-U-N; it is the Son of God, S-O-N, the victor in the chariot over death. It also shows, I believe, an incredible confidence about the truth of their belief, and not a fear to use images that might be misunderstood

because we know now this is Christ, the real truth. I think it shows also a sense that, in their belief, Christ has become the final revelation of what earlier civilizations got a glimpse of. The imperfect perception of what God was about was Apollo. It was the best that the Greeks could do. It wasn't bad, and now the truth has come. And we can show Christ as Apollo fulfilled and play on the idea that the sun god, S-U-N, is now the Son of God, S-O-N.

So these earliest works are, in a sense, using all of that iconography that we saw a week ago, but it's very clearly depicting Jesus Christ. And of course we always had nature depicted in the Ancient Greek art, but now they're grape leaves, and we understand what they're about—the Eucharist, the wine. And so the context of this figure is already put in a sacramental and mystical way.

We see an early painting, approximately 300 A.D., a fresco from one of the catacombs. It depicts Christ the Good Shepherd. And here we see Christ carrying an animal on his shoulders, but basically what we have is a sort of combination between a Greek god and certainly a pagan bucolic image of a shepherd. These images were often used for tombs and these figures were sometimes shown bringing an animal for sacrifice to the gods. But now, with the clear understanding from the Scripture that Jesus is a shepherd and a good shepherd, they appropriate totally this pagan imagery of a figure like we bring an animal for blood sacrifice to the gods, indicating that it has been fulfilled, that this animal becomes all of us, the believers, on the shoulders of the Redeemer. And we see a certain comfort in doing that. The art is not sophisticated. The conditions under which it was created did not permit the kind of time that we might take, for example, in decorating a church, and yet you can really see the origins of it. I would say the same thing is true of this image, as is true of the other. It appropriates pagan vocabulary, but it is clear to the viewer that this is Christ the Good Shepherd. And there was probably enormous satisfaction that in a sense a previous imperfect way of approaching the gods, animal sacrifice, has now been fulfilled in their belief in the person of Jesus Christ. I see great confidence in it.

The third image I want to show you, in the Vatican Museum, is a sculpture of the Good Shepherd from about 325 A.D. And there are a number of these that are quite similar. Christ is not yet depicted with a beard; the hair style and the face are Greek, and have been totally appropriated from the Greeks. What we clearly see here is a shepherd or a delegate bringing in an animal for sacrifice to the pagan gods. But when we look at it, we do not see that. And when they looked at it in 325 A.D. when this was sculpted, they did not see that anymore. The form is from the past; it is Greek. But this is Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, the Son of God, carrying the flock, the believers on his shoulder. Some scholars have suggested that the lamb is not destined for sacrifice but that, rather, the sculpture is simply a pagan, bucolic celebration of the rural life. But, in either case, the image has taken on a new Christian meaning.

So we see in this Early Christian art not only images which we would understand, but an enormous amount of confidence that they can use the culture that they live in, that it is

not an alien thing. I think this is very important: The culture which is hostile to them, actually, and which is pagan, and which involved idol worship and statuary, is not to be feared but to be met and used with a certain optimism in order to advance in a new direction.

In the 700's we have the iconoclastic struggle which begins in the East. Basically the use of images begins to be questioned, particularly in the East, in Constantinople. Perhaps there should be no images. And we see this to this day in Islam, as you know. In Islamic art you may have patterns, you may have calligraphy, no depictions of individuals. And so, after an initial optimism about the use of images, some Christians begin, for many complex reasons, to question: Should we have images? We might end up worshipping the images. Look what happened in the story of the golden calf. But we also know with the iconoclastic struggle that there were political reasons that had to do with political control; a lot of it didn't have to do with religion at all. And there were struggles back and forth, but we don't see that in the very early Christian period. And what happens, as we know, and you could say, how could you summarize a struggle that horrific in five minutes? But the decision is finally made in the Christian West that we will make images as they did at the beginning, and we will use them for instruction, for belief and for edification. As those first Christians, we do not fear matter or material, and we do not fear to draw upon the culture in which we live, but rather to meet it and to use it in a positive way. But there was that dalliance, very complex dalliance in the 750s and following. Next week I'll begin by reading some of the quotes of St. John of Damascus and others who insisted that, if we are a people of the incarnation, we must be a people of the image.

I want also to look at architecture because in some ways it's more important for us. The great need, once the persecution was lifted and after Constantine in 313, was that the liturgy could now take place in public, and there was a need for a new structure, no longer a temple, but a church, where the Mass could be celebrated. And just as in the art we saw, the early Christians did not say, "We're a new people with a new religion; we have to have a new architecture." They took what they had from the contemporary pagan-Roman culture which, in this case, is the basilica. When we hear the word "basilica" we think immediately of a church. It's a church term. For certain churches it's actually a very technical term. Certain church buildings can become a basilica if they meet certain requirements. But that's not what it was. Basilica was a pagan-Roman building which was used for the administration of justice, for the law courts. Much of our legal system is based on Roman to this day, and the Romans had a very well developed system of law.

We're looking at an early Christian church, but this structure could have been built 250 years before Christ in the heart of Rome as a court room. The judges would be set off by the back wall which was semi-circular, called the apse. Thus the architecture indicated their importance. Then there is the main hall where, as in any court room, people would be seated, witnesses, people who had business to do, others who might just come in to watch, and that section was the nave. There was only one large public hall, so if I had to

confer with my client, I had nowhere to go. Thus there were side aisles behind the columns where I could go and talk to my client about what was going on and confer, and then come back into the hall. Everything was based on the administration of justice. When we have a nave and an apse in any structure, we have a basilica structure no matter what its use. The columns created side aisles. Here we have side aisles too; they're a little private area, and because of that, in general, the windows went up higher; the ceiling would be a couple stories high, creating a spacious hall. The Romans liked space. Remember the Pantheon? Round, remember the open temple, the first one you could come in and walk around in? They liked space. So let's have the ceiling a few stories above the floor; windows could be up above. It was usually a flat ceiling, like this, a beamed flat ceiling. The basilica could also be used as a throne room when the emperor would visit and hold an audience. He would be seated in the apse and people would stand or sit in the nave.

When, after 313 A.D., Christians needed a public space for the Mass, it occurred to them to adapt the basilica! They put the altar in the apse where the judges had been, and the congregation in the nave. almost every Christian church you went in, not all, but almost every, is a basilica. And so you see that, just as they took Apollo and his chariot, and they took the shepherd going off to sacrifice the lamb and confidently Christianized them, so too they took a pagan governmental and political structure and made it into what is to this day the hallmark of Christian worship, most certainly of Catholic Christian worship, and most others. If you've been in a Christian church that wasn't that way, it was probably totally modern and circular, and that was, therefore, also Roman in inspiration being based on the ancient pagan Roman Pantheon. We don't get very far from Rome when we enter a Christian church.

This is one of the earliest Christian churches we have, not the earliest—Santa Sabina in Rome. The Church of Santa Sabina opened in 422 AD. And it's one of the most consecutively used Christian churches, used to this very day with relatively little transformation. I could show you Saint Paul Outside the Walls, but it burned in the 1800s, and so when you go to St. Paul Outside the Walls it's a complete reconstruction, but this isn't. It is in Rome on one of the seven hills, but not often visited by tourists because it's a little out of the way. So when your travels take you to Rome, go to Santa Sabina up on the hill. It's conducted by the Dominicans, and on each Ash Wednesday, Pope Benedict comes here to celebrate the Ash Wednesday Liturgy. Of course we all know that in Europe, unlike America, they don't rivet the pews; it would ruin the interior space. So the seats are put down as we need them.

Here we see the basilican structure with very little decoration. The early Christians were moderate in the amount of decoration. The beautiful fresco you see in the apse is a much later addition, but everything about it is Roman—the Roman space, the Roman rounded arches, the pure Roman unfluted Corinthian columns; this is the early Christian basilica.

I'll show you the outside of Santa Sabina—the most utterly simple structure. It was the interior that counted most-- for the Mass. Those are the clerestory windows from the outside—simplicity itself. By the way, they called the central hall the nave for the Latin *navis* because it reminded them of a ship. It was like the body of a long ship to them.

For centuries these churches were about the size of an average church in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan—they might hold a congregation of 400 or 500, maybe 700, but we don't have the great, large cathedrals till around the year 1000. One of my favorites is Pisa Cathedral which really was at the height of its construction just after the year 1000. All of these large churches are a problem in terms of dating because, as you know, they took hundreds of years to build. They would start with the apse to get it going so they could have Mass, and then they would construct the nave, and then they would do one transept, and 50 years later they would start the other transept. It was spread out over several hundred years so that, if you attended the final dedication of the cathedral's completion, it would probably be your great-grandfather who was there the day they broke ground. Today you could go away for half a year and come back and a high rise building has risen next to your home! They didn't do it that way. And that is also how they could afford the expense, by spreading it over a very extensive period of time.

And so we have a real problem when trying to provide dates for these buildings. Well, the beginning of the construction was about the year 1000. We see is a long nave with an apse at the back, clerestory windows, but we begin to see additions such as a transept, so the building becomes cruciform. In some cases they might place a dome at the crossing which, of course, is Roman in inspiration. If the community had money, as Pisa did they might build a separate bell tower, and at Pisa there is also a separate Baptistery.

Why, around the year 1000 do they start to build on this scale? Because, without being explicit, permeating those first centuries was a belief that Christ would not only come again, which the Scripture says, but soon. But in the following centuries Christ's final coming did not take place. When the year 1000 was approaching there emerged a strong sense among many that, now finally in the year 1000, Christ would return. When, once again this did not happen, many went back to the Scriptures where Christ says that the time is not for us to know or consider and that we are to be about the Father's work. For many the thought began to sink in: Christ will indeed return, but who know when? Then they really began to think about building churches on a scale to last at least a thousand years.

Of course the cathedrals were also built on a grander scale to accommodate large congregations for the Bishop's liturgies and also for churches of pilgrimage. But another factor entered in – civic pride. In a sense, Pisa wanted to have the best cathedral, one to rival near-by Florence. One could say that such motivation is vain and competitive and not very spiritual. and so human. But we must remember that these cathedrals were also built out of such a deep love of God, with great sacrifice and in the belief that God deserved the very best setting for the Mass to take place. One must never underestimate

that these buildings are testimony to belief. In many of the communities, particularly in France, if an individual didn't have money to contribute, he/she would carry one stone from the quarry for miles and deposit it at the building site to say, "I helped build this cathedral" There are stories of those in France who were said to have pulled carts with the stones on their shoulders instead of the oxen, so that they could in some way contribute and reduce the cost of the building.

When we enter this interior of 1000 A.D., we're back to the same structure of Santa Sabina in 422 A.D. because we have a great nave with an apse, clerestory windows, columns creating side aisles, and a flat ceiling. Little has really changed in 600 years, except the scale. It's still a basilica, but it's higher and it's grander and it has a transept with a small dome at the crossing. And something else is very interesting—these beautiful stripes. Not very Western at all, certainly not very Italian, nor very French. Where would this architect see stripes? In the he crusades. He'd probably gone into the Middle East and he'd probably done something almost no one in Italy or France ever got to do—set foot in a mosque. And he saw the striped patterns of decoration. He survived the crusade, came home and became an architect, and, ultimately, he worked the stripes he had seen in the Middle East into his cathedral. There is something else too that derives from Islamic architecture—the pointed arch which, in the West, is the hallmark of Gothic architecture., and there are many theories, but it probably came from Islam. This is the most likely. In the same way, cathedral builders who had served in the crusades saw the pointed arch in mosques and began to include them in the cathedrals they built upon their return to the West. It's the intersection of East and West.

This evening we have looked at Early Christian images and architecture as well as the Romanesque. The second theme that I want to develop this evening comes back to that struggle the early Christians had about the image. I want to address the influence of St. Francis of Assisi also on the whole direction of Western art, understandably in a brief and limited way. Given our time constraints.

This is the earliest painted image that we have of St. Francis of Assisi, created nine years after he died, in 1235, by Bonaventura Berlinghieri. It's an altar piece, a large panel that would be as large as the front of this room that would be placed above the altar where the priest says Mass because, by now, the priest is saying Mass with his back to the people. The congregation did not have a lot to look at, so the altar panel provided something that was visually interesting and inspiring to look at.. With its gold background it would be resplendent in the church under the reflection of the sun streaming through the windows or in the reflection of candlelight. This particular image a wonderful example in the West of what we would say is the Byzantine or Eastern approach to painting. We use the term "Italo-Byzantine" because it's been done in Italy, but very much under the influence of the East. There is an abstract austerity about the face. This is not an attempt to show real space or real flesh; it is a text to be read—Francis and scenes from his life.

In the Eastern tradition, the frame of a work of art, be it an icon or an altar panel, takes one immediately out of this world, and one begins, in a spiritual sense, to rise to the

world above. So, for example, the gold, which is practical to reflect light; also suggests the heavenly domain. Garments are not meant to look like garments; the lines are meant to be decorative. In many cases the gold striations of the garment folds serve to reflect light. The aloofness and impassivity of Francis' face suggests eternity. Here there's a grandeur. Now this is the beloved Francis, but the icon endeavors to whisk us out of this world to a more heavenly encounter.

So it isn't that Bonaventura didn't know how to make drapery or how to create a background. Nor that he lacked the technique to make flesh look "real." These ideals or goals of painting "real space, flesh, and drapery," are artistic objectives that develop in Italy in the 1400s, and they are a uniquely Western idea. None of this was the intention of Bonaventura and his contemporaries. For all of these artists, the painting is a beautiful thing; it's not reality in this world. Rather, it points to and leads to a higher and deeper reality. A painting is, first and foremost, a beautiful thing, and what could be more beautiful than the resplendent gold and the linearity of this garment? It is also a spiritual experience. But it is not an experience of the space we occupy, nor of the day to day world we live in -- that's a later concept. So in this image we are whisked up into eternity quite beautifully. Francis was a man of poverty who often fasted. . This image communicates his austerity—the man who gave up everything, who ate little, who gave away everything he had.

If we look at several of the side scenes very briefly, for example, we have the famous receiving of the stigmata. Here the mountains are stylized, as is the tree. What I mean by that is that there's no attempt to suggest a real mountain. And for those of you who know icons, all of these forms are taken right out of Eastern icons; they are almost stock images used here to fill in the space. It's really not an attempt to create a building because all of it is a frame for Francis receiving the stigmata. In later art one would approach it differently-- with a building that looks real, with a tree that has foliage, and so forth. But here the mountain, the tree, and the corners filled with buildings are of no importance other than leading our eye to Francis so that we will see that Francis received, the first that we know, this privilege of bearing the wounds of Christ.

There's also the famous scene of Francis preaching to the birds with a very stylized mountain with one bird bigger than the other because that's the one communicating with Francis. Again the building simply functions to frame the friars. But the point was made that Francis is in intimate union with nature, and it is said that when he preached to the animals, they would listen, that they communicated. The central point of Francis's union with God's creation is very effectively communicated, but it's not a real world that is depicted in visual and spatial terms. . It's not supposed to be; there's a larger reality.

Francis is canonized within two years of his death, and quite soon they built a church at Assisi, for his body. By 1300, they wanted to decorate the upper church with frescos of the life of St. Francis. Until 20 years ago we could call these the Giotto frescos. Giotto is really the father of painting in the Western world; he revolutionized painting. But scholars today question whether it was Giotto or an unknown artist or artists now called

the Saint Francis Master. In his magisterial study on Italian Renaissance art, Frederick Hartt suggests that the endless debate over whether Giotto painted these frescoes or not is a distraction because, in any event, these paintings helped change the direction of Western art after 1300 and onwards.

What I want to show briefly, without getting lost in detail, is how Franciscan thinking began to change Western religious art. We already saw that Francis sought God first in nature. If nature is created by God, it reflects Him. So the birds reflect Him, “Brother Sun and Sister Moon,” all of the animals, also the most marginalized in society, the poorest of the poor. Francis began to embrace the specific, the human, because they were all from the hand of God. And it is a spirituality different from the Byzantine spirituality where I want to leave this world very quickly to ascend to God; these things will distract me. Francis embraces them. We saw that.

By 1300, Franciscan ideas have so spread that the artist of the upper church at Assisi paints in a Franciscan way. Art begins to plunge into the specific. Some very brief examples—in the scene of Francis walking through the city before he has his conversion, someone sees him and senses that there is something special about him. Thus he lays his cloak on the road for Francis to walk on. Here we have the first urban street scene in Western painting. We have a street scene with a crowd, and these two onlookers seem to be saying of the man who laid down his cloak that he is insane. We have never had this kind of specificity of onlookers before in painting. Although the buildings in the background may seem fanciful, we find them both in all their specificity to this day in Assisi’s central square. We all know that Francis had to give up quite a fortune, the family business, cloth. His father was a cloth merchant who traded in the East. And what is it the man puts down in front of Francis? A beautiful cloth cloak. So too in the scene of Francis’ charity to a beggar, he is giving him his beautiful cloth coat. In fact it is the cloth which visually links Francis and beggar in a bond of union well beyond the visual level.

This is the wonderful scene of Francis when he renounces his worldly possessions makes the decision not to pursue the family cloth business, but rather to give everything up. Francis has taken off all his clothing which his father is now holding. Here what separates Francis from his father is cloth. His father is so angry that he has to be held back; he is going to punch his son. There is emotional and physical tension—the father in a rage has to be held back,. There there is the amazement of the onlookers; we’ve never had anything like this in Western art. Crowds, people who want to hit one another, and of course the artist, in his brilliance, creates a small that divides those two worlds that cannot understand each other. It’s sad, father and son do not see eye to eye, but there’s this gap between the father’s vision and this other vision of the world. Now, the scene is a bit dramatic. Francis has taken off his clothes, and what does the bishop do? He throws a piece of cloth around him to cover his nakedness, and what’s wonderful, look at the bishop’s face; he is so embarrassed by the entire event that he looks out in to our space and seems to be saying “What am I doing here?”

These paintings include not only typical human reactions, but also humor. The St. Francis master, painting just 70 years after St. Francis died, is changing the direction that Western art will take, and this is clearly under the influence of Franciscan ideas.

We all know the beautiful scene of St. Francis praying before the San Damiano cross; he goes into this derelict church which the artist shows with the roof is caving in. There Francis hears from the cross, “Rebuild my church.” It’s a very important moment, and that’s the San Damiano Cross which the artist has depicted. Now the top is derelict because the building is falling apart, but the artist has opened a side view into the church. Francis is still wearing his fine clothing, but he’s discovering his vocation. . . And you know the story, of course. He thinks “Rebuild my church” refers that church, and he and his friends work on it for about two years, and then Francis realized that the call was to rebuild the larger Church, the People of God. Rebuild the people of God. “Rebuild My Church.” Church historians say that before Francis came on the scene, the priesthood and the Church was in some trouble; there was great laxity. And that after Francis lived and died there was a new springtime, a new vigor in the Church. Something had changed, that somehow within the priesthood, the religious orders, and the larger Church there was a new life after he had lived his. And we see the beginning of that process in this scene.

Now, here is the San Damiano Cross itself which you can visit in Assisi in the Church of Santa Chiara. This cross was probably painted in the late 1100s, before Francis was born, by an anonymous artist and it embodies Byzantine spirituality and artistic technique. Everything is symbolic. There is even a painted frame, and everything about it leads one out of this world. It’s a very aloof Christ, really a *Christus triumphans*. He’s on the cross but triumphant already. We see him conquering death, and around Him are all kinds of images that we can read—Mary and the other Mary and Mary Magdalene; we see the Centurion and the rooster(of Peter’s denial). There are angels engaged in a *sacra conversazione*, marveling at what is happening. Near the top Christ is ascending to the Father, Whose hand we see extended down to Him. But are the images “real” to the eye? No. This is the Eastern spirituality where it is a beautiful image and a text to be read. What’s interesting is that Francis’s conversion is before this image, and it’s a conversion which led to a change in art, so that we in the West would not paint in this manner much longer. There were all kinds of spirituality. The reason why there are many spiritualities is God made many different personalities and we need different spiritual ways to approach Him. ways. The Assisi frescoes represent one spirituality, and the San Damiano another.

And, of course, the scene that everyone knows—Francis preaching to the birds, and how different it is from the Italo- Byzantine treatment that we saw by Berlinghieri— here a simple Francis in his habit and now the birds in scale and proportion.

Tradition says that Francis created the first Christmas crib, that he was the very first to make images of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and set them up at Christmas. We have this

wonderful depiction of a church sanctuary behind an altar screen. We see Francis setting up the crib. It is a wonderful “behind-the-scenes” view. We are given this insiders’ view. But what it shows is the whole approach of Franciscan spirituality and what art was becoming. To help people better understand Christmas, Francis takes some things of the earth like clay that’s baked, or stone, or wood that’s carved and make images so that the viewer can plunge down into those specific things and do what? Ascend spiritually to God through the encounter with those created materials. That’s the essence of Franciscan spirituality. And that is exactly what is happening to the viewer in these frescoes at Assisi.

The last one—Francis’s body being brought through Assisi after his death Here is the Church of Santa Chiara, and St. Clare and the Poor Clares coming out in great emotion to view the body of Francis. The artist has made visible, with great tenderness, an unrestrained grief such as we have never seen before in Western art. Meanwhile a man from the crowd climbs a tree to get a better view. Now art embraces **everything**, including somebody who says, “I can’t see; I have to get a better view.” Of course, the artist is recalling a verse in Scripture, “Christ went once to a city and there was a short man who couldn’t see anything; his name was Zacchaeus, and he climbed the tree to see Christ.

We are now in the church of Santa Croce in Florence where we will see frescoes, definitively by Giotto. You will note that this church is unusually wide and open in the nave area because the Franciscans emphasized preaching. Thus the nave becomes a preaching hall. People have to be able to sit and hear the homilies. So we see Franciscan influence even on architecture. But we are going to the Bardi Chapel where we see this extraordinary scene of the death of St. Francis, painted by Giotto. In all of Western art to this point in time, never did we see such an explosion of unadulterated emotion as the friars and even some of the nobles of the town who surround the body. Look at those specified faces, the prayers being chanted, and the enormous grief of one of the brothers for his dead brother, and this other one, painted in a somewhat sketchy manner, who sees something beyond the body; he sees Francis ascending to the Father, not in brown, not in gray, but in lavender, a color that was rarely used at this time— suggesting freshness, spring, and new life.

So my second point this evening is that as the West moves in a direction to embracing life, Franciscan thought has a profound influence. When you go to Assisi, look with new eyes at those frescoes. A terrible tragedy happened in that upper church about a decade ago, but the frescoes were almost untouched. It was a miracle because they are a cradle for the ongoing development of Western art, religious and secular.

Now what will happen because of Francis and Franciscan thought, paintings like this of the crucifixion, as beautiful as they are, will lead to these three dimensional, emotional renditions, rooted in the pain and the suffering of the moment. Western art now begins to embrace reality because Francis did. Now this may in a sense be pre-Renaissance,

although we are still in the Middle Ages, and you can see that, as the Greeks sowed the ground for the Early Christians, so did the Middle Ages for the Renaissance.

As we conclude this evening I wish to explain what is called “the Medieval synthesis,” using Chartres Cathedral in France as an example. I am using Chartres because it is said that, of all the Medieval cathedrals, Chartres is creation’s book where everything in belief came together in one building, much in the way Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* created what we sometimes call the Medieval synthesis of everything, of all possible contradictions being brought together. Seen at a distance we always can tell Chartres because the towers don’t match. One caught fire and when they rebuilt it they did it in a different style. We will see many Trinitarian references: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. First there are the rose windows—three of them, one on the front, two on the transepts, but the rose is Mary, the Mystical Rose. Chartres was a place of pilgrimage because they had the veil of the Virgin, and so pilgrims came from all over Europe to this small town to visit Chartres. The portals of the Medieval cathedral were Biblical texts at a time when there was no printing and when 90% of the population was illiterate. Every Sunday believers would hear about Jesus and about God the Father and about Mary, but there were no books, there were no art museums, and there was no place to see anything of an artistic nature. But in the cathedral, in living color, in stained glass and in stone, everything you ever believed was there. It was open to you. You could come as long as the church was open, be you a land owner or a cabbage farmer, and as you proceeded from the sculptures on the outside to the stained glass on the inside, everything you were staking your life on was there depicted for you. It’s very hard for us to understand what a book the Medieval cathedral was. In our lifetime, by the time we were all five years old we’d seen every image of the Christmas story that could possibly be seen. We are so visually saturated that it is truly difficult for us to appreciate what an advance the Medieval cathedral was in terms of making images available to the believing public. The images in the tympanum over the central portal were devoted to Jesus Christ, and the portal to the right was Mary’s. In the central tympanum at Chartres we see Christ, of the apocalypse. Worked into creation’s book were the saints, prophets, martyrs, the workers, all carved, as well as the seasons of the year, and the Zodiac—nothing was alien to the Medieval cathedral because all creation was one and truth was one, so they could put in the Zodiac and the workers, along the builders. They depict them all in stone and in stained glass. . The cathedral in stone is what Thomas Aquinas accomplished in the *Summa Theologica*, and it was an equilibrium eventually lost.

I’m going to interrupt these remarks to say that I hope that, after the Thanksgiving break, you can come for the last two weeks. We’re going to look at the Renaissance and then we’re going to see how, in a sense, it all begins to unravel with the Enlightenment. And it’s at that point that we’ll refer to Fr. Giussani’s text. No one would disagree with Fr. Giussani up to now, but when the Enlightenment comes, this unity that we see in this building, that everything belongs together because it’s part of one truth, begins to disintegrate. And I hope you’ll particularly join us the last week when we look at the 20th Century and we let the art speak to us and see what it says about man’s religious sense in our own age.

To return to Chartres, in the portal devoted to Mary we see Mary with Jesus seated upon her lap because she becomes the altar. There is also a depiction of the death of Virgin, not recorded in Scriptures, but a topic which intrigued the Medieval mind. In this sculpted scene Mary's coffin becomes an altar as well. .

I want to show very briefly too just in one portal how we can read these sculpted Biblical texts. This is the Cathedral of Notre Dame, the cathedral of Mary, but we have the old Latin saying, . . . "To Jesus through Mary." All correct Mariology leads ultimately to Christ. So let's look at this portal. This old Jewish priest with a censor, Melchizedek, the ultimate priest of the Old Testament. This man with the knife and a boy—Abraham being told that he does not have to sacrifice his son. This figure with the stone tablets—Moses, and this figure with the sheep—Aaron, and this one with the crown—David. They're all prototypes of Christ. Christ the great high priest of the New Testament, Melchizedek, the great high priest of the Old Testament. Abraham is God the Father, Christ is Isaac, but God the Father did not hold His Son back from death; there was no reprieve. The ultimate image of Christ: Moses who stood in the gap between God and man, as Christ does. Aaron, priest and figure of the Old Testament, David, king, the one from whom Christ is descended. So this was a text to be read visually, intellectually, and spiritually.

Chartres is said to have the finest stained glass ever created in any Medieval cathedral. We enter the cathedral through the central portal and turn to examine the lancet windows in the façade, but now seen from the interior. On the right we see the tree of Jesse. These three lancet windows in the facade are the most important and are considered by some the most extraordinary stained glass, but you have to have binoculars. The tree of Jesse is on the right; in the center under the great Rose window we see the life of Christ, and on our left, the third lancet window depicts His Passion. The book in stone begun on the exterior now becomes the book in stained glass.

In terms of architectural structure, it is still a basilica with nave and an apse, columns, side aisles and clerestory windows, but the ceiling(vault) is now 12 stories above us, and the arches have become pointed, the hallmark of the Gothic style (1200-1500). The pointed arches raise our eyes upward. In terms of the increased height, the pointed arches, the increased light through the use of stained glass—all of this raises not only the eye but the spirit. Everything about the interior raises the eye and the heart to God. The very structure facilitates the praise of God. It is not an experience of fear; it is glory and praise, and the understanding that comes through the spiritual texts in glass and stone both inside and out.

It would be possible to take someone to a Medieval cathedral who knew no Christianity and teach them the entire faith from the stained glass and the statues. It's all there. It is truly the Bible in stone. In his novel, *Notre Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo wrote, in 1830, that before there was the printed Bible, there was the Bible in stone (the Medieval Cathedral). Victor Hugo said that in 1830, "Before the book, it was the book in stone."

Chartres is the only of the Medieval cathedrals that still has its labyrinth in stone on the floor of the nave. Pilgrims would come in and, on their knees, they would follow the labyrinth 's 11 circles to the center reenacting the journey to Jerusalem and to Christ. It must have been very painful on those uneven stones. They have been removed from every gothic cathedral except Chartres. And at the center, a 6-petaled rose—the garden lost and the garden re-found. We come back to the center.

We are going to conclude this evening with brief comments on the two other Rosw windows, those in the North and South transepts. The rose window on the left side, is devoted to Mary, and on the right side, to Christ. The left is the north side, where it gets cold in the winter and needs a mother's warmth Thus it is devoted to Mary.. The right side gets the sun, so it is consecrated to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. There's the left side, Mary, the cold side, needing a mother's warmth, and the right side which gets the sun—the Son of God, Jesus Christ. A woman donated Mary's window, Blanche of Castile, mother of king of France, and a man donated the Christ side, Pierre de Montreuil. Male-female, left-right, sun and shadows, Mary and Christ—it all holds together in a great synthesis.

We are going to see, after our Thanksgiving break, that the Renaissance takes all this just a step further, but some other elements and ideas begin to intervene, some old and going back to the ancient Greeks, others new. So we urge you, if you can, to join us in two weeks. We'll take a week for Thanksgiving, and we're going to start our next session with the beautiful Renaissance.