



# RELIGIOUS AWARENESS IN ART FROM PREHISTORY TO TODAY

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

*The Museum of Biblical Art, New York City, November 28, 2007*

## **The Renaissance**

**Simmonds:** Good evening, and welcome to our lecture on “Renaissance, Baroque, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” the third in a series of four lectures by Dr. Francis Greene. 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.

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:** Good evening everyone. It’s wonderful to see some new visitors to our series, and many of you who have been with us several of the weeks that we have been doing this series. We’re in

the third week and tonight we're going to devote ourselves entirely to the Renaissance, and next week I hope you can join us because we're going to look at the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century which are really where issues become more problematic and challenging. This whole idea of man's self awareness as evidenced in art. The real challenge comes after the late 1700s. It's going to get very interesting next week, not that this week won't be as well. So we hope you can join us. We will have the opportunity to meet and talk and pursue our questions more in depth at the end of the series next week.

Each week we like to look back for a moment to the week before. If you remember last week, we dealt with art in the Early Christian period, and what we saw is that, from the beginning, Christians used images as a very important part of worship. A decision was made, an instinctive decision, to use images -- from the outset. Why? Because the image is sacramental. God, in Christian belief, took flesh in Jesus Christ; therefore, Christian belief looks into the "stuff" of this world in order to ascend to God. Creation is good. God created good things, and indeed was willing to come and live among His creation; therefore, within the Church, we use oil and candles and light and water. The things of this earth are sacramental. They are signs of something beyond themselves. These simple materials of the Creator lead us to a greater spiritual reality, and so too, in art, with the things of this earth—clay and wood and canvass and stone—we plunge into them because through these images we ascend to God. Our approach is both incarnational and sacramental.

We saw, however, that early on in the East there was a retreat from this approach for a while. Beginning in Turkey, in Constantinople, the iconoclast period in which some thought that no images should be used. Part of it was theological, but, as we said, it is very complicated because there were also some purely political motivations behind it. But it was a testing after which the Christian communities decided definitively to use images because "the image" is at the heart of the Christian experience. And once the iconoclast period was over, Christianity (Catholicism) plunges itself, in its art and in its worship, into the materials of this world.

We saw that St. Francis of Assisi, in the 1200s, because of his own life and spirituality, accelerated this even more. He found God in all of creation—the plants and the animals, the most marginalized and the most abandoned—and his plunging ever deeper into the world further advanced Christian dedication to the use of the "matter" of this world in art and in worship.

What I'm going to do very briefly is to read from several Scripture quotations and from several of the authors I recommended to you last week on this issue. They are commenting on what we saw already. But we're not just looking back because the Renaissance is a continuation of this approach. Tonight we're not going to see a break with what we've seen, but rather a continuation with different approaches, perhaps, and different stylistic attitudes, but not a break at all. In religious art the viewer encounters a reflection of the incarnation, but the images also reenact the incarnation on their own artistic level. The invisible God and 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 1 John 1: 1-2: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, 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 it 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.”

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.” 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 you 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 you will paint and make visible to everyone Him who desired to become visible.”

For Ouspensky, whom I recommended in the readings, the 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, whom I also recommended to you, 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 of 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)

Well this is some of the material. And I have with me that suggested bibliography again, if anybody didn't get it. Some good reading, Ouspensky, Sendler and others on this issue.

But we saw something else last week. We saw that in the Middle Ages, there was a clear belief that truth was one. That truth, God, reality, creation, knowledge and science as they knew it were one. There was no division. And I want to repeat that. The medieval belief that truth is absolutely one, God, truth, reality, creation, knowledge and science as they knew it were one. They are not in any way in conflict. And thus, as we ended, we spoke of St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Medieval theologian, who in his theology created what we call “the medieval synthesis”; he attempted to pull all of this into a unity.

Today, some modern philosophers feel that St. Thomas was a little over-systematic; he wasn't open to loose ends; he had to have everything in the system. Well, maybe he overdid and maybe he didn't, but he did believe that everything was one and could be brought together. His attempt

was to resolve apparent contradictions. The belief was there and the attempt was made. This basic belief, and we see this in his *Summa Theologica*, his basic belief in the unity of all creation and truth in God and with God is reflected in the Medieval Gothic cathedral where we saw that the plan, the elevations, the stained glass, the rose window, the labyrinth -- every element came together to create a total unity. There were many tensions: the horizontal and the vertical, the circular and the rectangular, shadows and light, and the spires. Even the flying buttresses reflected this tensions or disparities, because one buttress would push up against the wall, and one buttress would receive the wall's thrust in a downward direction and into the ground. Excellent studies have been, particularly by Professor Marks of Princeton University, on directional forces in Medieval flying buttresses. But the point is, with all of those tensions, the cathedral was a total unity, as with Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.

Well, this week we come to the Renaissance. Generally begun around 1400 in Italy, it spreads across all of Europe to the North and then in every direction. It really begins in Italy, and some would say that the Renaissance was prefigured as early as the late 1200's and early 1300s by Giotto. We looked at Giotto in the Bardi Chapel at Santa Croce in Florence, and the seeds of the coming Renaissance are already there.

The first thing we're going to observe in the Renaissance is technical perfection in painting. Space, lighting, anatomy, drapery is, by this time, perfect in execution. There is a new presupposition about art, that the frame of the painting is a window on a real world and one should see absolutely real anatomy, drapery, perspective, light, and so forth. I would suggest that that claim to perfection begins with Saint Francis who plunges himself in his spirituality ever deeper into the material world, and when the St. Francis Master painted those scenes we looked at in the upper church of Assisi, the Renaissance approach was already prefigured and being prepared. What the Renaissance brings is the full force of science and mathematics to bear upon painting. For example, mathematical works of the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, who constructed the dome of the Florence Cathedral, were drawn upon in refining techniques of perspective. So from this point on the expectation in painting will be technical perfection. But this is not a course on the history of technique, and I am not going to put an emphasis on that tonight, although for some technical perfection is the marvel of the Renaissance, that most Renaissance paintings look as though they are windows onto a real world and that we, the viewers, could open the window and walk into that world.

Secondly, this Re-naisance, the rebirth, is a rebirth of what? Of Greece and Rome. The view of the scholar, poet, painter, architect of this period is that they are part of the second Greece and Rome. First there was Greece and Rome, the great classical civilizations, after which came the Medieval period, and now they were the inheritors and revivers of those two great Classical civilizations. Greek and Roman philosophy is reborn, Plato and Aristotle take precedence once again. Platonic literature and poetry abounds. In architecture the Gothic is rejected in favor of a return to classical style. We're going to see the nude reappear—the rebirth of Greece and Rome. But know that represents no return to paganism, but is, rather, a fascinating mixture of earlier pagan elements, melded with Christianity in a way that works. It's a fine line that these artists walked, but, for the most part, it worked.

We will see the return of the nude figure and many elements borrowed from Greek and Roman pagan mythology. Yet we are not going to look at art that is against God, or Christianity, or against the Church. These artists, although they imbued themselves in the pagan Greek and Roman culture and sources, were Christian believers who created art which is as devout, as inspiring, as moving and as theologically complex as anything in the Middle Ages. And that is very important to establish. If there is a break, it does not take place in what we're going to look at tonight. We are going to see art by believing, devout, Christian, Catholic artists who had enormous devotion, and, in many cases, profound insights into theology. When we come to this art, we will find for ourselves devotion, belief and much theology to contemplate.

I begin with Raphael's painting just a little after 1500 of *The Betrothal of the Virgin Mary*, a scene and story based on the Golden Legend. I begin with an excellent example of the technical perfection in painting of which we already spoke. We observe the extraordinarily beautiful faces of the women, the garments as glorious as anything done in classical antiquity, the extraordinary Renaissance (not Gothic) architecture, but most of all we marvel at the space where, now, every line converges to the central point which is the doorway; we observe absolute technical perfection. Symbolically the doorway is open, as was Mary to marriage to Joseph and eventually to the message of the angel, finally offering her "Yes" to God's plan. Thus the door is open, not closed.

We talk about the great Medieval synthesis by Thomas Aquinas, but there is a great Renaissance synthesis as well, and no painting reflects it better than Raphael's fresco in the papal apartments of the *Disputa* which really does not depict a dispute over the Eucharist, but rather a theological discussion conducted in an atmosphere of wonder and awe. At the very center of the painting is the Eucharist in the monstrance on an altar. In the same way that Thomas Aquinas, in the Middle Ages, attempted to bring all knowledge together, we have here all of Christian belief about the Eucharist in this fresco painted just around the time when Michelangelo is painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, about 1508. God the Father holds the globe of the world attended by the angels, His Son, Jesus Christ, with angels around Him, His Mother, Mary, and John the Baptist, His cousin, John, is doing exactly what he did in life—pointing the way to Jesus. And then the Holy Spirit, all centered directly over Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Below are the apostles and the heavenly court. Still further down are the writers and thinkers on the Eucharist from over the centuries. It brings together all belief as they offer their theories on the depth of the reality of the Eucharist. There is no painting in art history more devout, more theologically sound, taking the deepest belief of Christianity, Christ's presence in the Eucharist, the Real Presence, as its subject.

I'm going to show you some of the details. We see the glorious figure of God the Father, the glorified Jesus Christ in heaven, His mother, John on our right pointing to Him, but the Holy Spirit surrounded by the four books of the Gospel, angels holding each of them—our way of knowing about the Eucharist and more about Jesus. A little contemporary detail: it is 1508, the beginning of the building of the new St. Peter's Basilica. Julius had had the old one torn down, and we see this on the right side going up. We also see a range of popes, theologians, and scholars, Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, all of whom wrote, thought and spoke about the Eucharist. Dante is even there, Dante who wrote so beautifully about faith and about Our Lady and whose devotion really summarizes in a poetic way much of the Medieval outlook. We see

Saint Jerome working on his commentary of the Bible, while Saint Thomas Aquinas dictates his scholarly thoughts on the Eucharist to the scribe who's taking it all down. This is an incredible attempt to bring together deep belief and affirm it—the *Disputa*.

In the same papal apartments, maybe less famous, is a fresco called *The Mass at Bolsena*, also painted by Raphael. We see Pope Julius II attending Mass in the town of Bolsena. The story is told that at Bolsena there was a priest who had lost his belief in the real presence of Jesus, continued to offer the Mass, but no longer believed that anything really happened to the bread and wine. One day he placed the host down on the altar cloth, and when he picked it up there was a blood-red cross on the altar cloth -- a Eucharistic miracle to indicate a theological point—the true presence of Christ. Pope Julius, who had not been there at the time of the miracle, wanted himself painted in the scene in homage to the Eucharist. Clearly these frescoes were not created merely to decorate the walls, but to establish some of the most important elements of Christian belief which are, today, still examined and sometimes struggled with.

We now go backward, chronologically, to 1438, to this beautiful altarpiece by Gentile da Fabriano which shows the *Adoration of the Magi*. In this magnificent twisting procession we see the kings and their retinue coming from afar, and nowhere in art will you see more devotion than these three Kings, one of whom falls at the feet of Jesus, while the second is removing his crown, as the third one waits his turn. Again and again in these extraordinarily beautiful paintings we see intense devotion and reverence for Christ. This altarpiece was in the sacristy. The incredible brocade and detail in the garments of the three kings are quite appropriate for a sacristy, the room where the priests would put on the vestments for mass. So thematically it is very carefully painted to link it to the site.

If we wish to talk about Medieval devotion continuing into the Renaissance what artist could we choose more exemplary than Fra Angelico, the artist who received his name “Angelico” because there was something, even to his contemporaries, so ethereal, so spiritual, that while we had a theologian called “the angelic doctor,” he was considered “the angelic painter.” Today he is Blessed Brother Angelico. He did a series of Annunciations of which I will show you only one. It is in the monastery of San Marco in Florence at the top of the staircase, and every day, as the monks past it, they would follow the instructions in Latin painted beneath the fresco: “When you see this image, say a ‘Hail Mary’.” The viewer is impressed by the absolute innocence of Mary who sits, not on a throne, but on a lowly wooden stool, and just openly listens to what the angel says. Note the technical perfection of the architecture—by the way, columns that Brunelleschi would have created, where every line leads the eye to a small interior window which is open, but barred -- a beautiful image of Mary’s virginal conception of the Christ, the window that is barred, but open to life. So the painting is beautiful, moving, and theologically complex. You see how soft the colors are, almost pastel – colors almost ethereal.

We come to one of my favorite paintings, *The Madonna of the Rocks*, by Leonardo da Vinci, 1483, a wooden panel, created as an altarpiece. We saw some altarpieces last time. It would be positioned above the priest as he said Mass with his back facing the congregation. First of all, this painting was intended to capture in some way the Immaculate Conception and was to be

dedicated on December 8, 1483, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and lore says it was delivered the evening before, December 7, 1483, so it could be unveiled. Now there's a tradition, the story's probably completely false, but absolutely true in its essential point. The story says that when the good Fathers of the parish received the painting from Leonardo, who was by now famous, they were horrified. They had to pay him, but they felt that they couldn't put it in the church. Who would believe this was Mary? Where was the throne? Where was the gold background? Where were the angels? Where were the halos? There's a beautiful woman in a rock garden with two little babies and another woman. Everything that had been expected in art to speak of Mary was gone. What Leonardo did is to take up all the artistic threads before him, and I would say that he takes the last step suggested by the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi and Leonardo plunges totally into visible, tangible world. What we see is what anyone would have seen who met Mary—a beautiful woman, no wings around her, no halos, but a person. And if we see goodness or gentility, we see it in the face. We experience, for the first time, the way we experience people, good and evil, by just what we see. In a sense Leonardo was among the first painters to say (by how they painted), "I only know one thing: flesh and blood. And when I deal with the Divine, you will have to see it the way they saw it in Christ's time-- in flesh and blood." So this wonderful little story that the parish priests didn't know what to do with the painting, may or may not be true, but the point of the story is that Leonardo had gone beyond all expectations. And this is really the Renaissance now. I would say that this painting represents a final "yes" to the spirituality of Saint Francis who plunged himself into the things of this world and there saw the Divine. So Mary is situated in a garden. The organization of the painting leads us from the figure of Mary to the Christ Child. Leonardo presumes that we will start by looking at Mary's face and then follow the tilt of her head to our left. Then our eyes would follow her arm down to her hand which embraces one of the two children in the painting. But this is John the Baptist, not Christ. John's gesture of adoration toward the other baby leads us to the Christ Child whose hand is raised in blessing and teaching just as in a Byzantine icon such as we saw at the very beginning of our series.

Now if it's possible that we don't follow the visual "leads" Leonardo wanted to us to follow, and we look the other way, to the right, then Mary's other hand hovers over her baby like a halo. There's no symbolic halo, but rather an "enfleshed" halo – Mary's hand. You have to see the painting in the Louvre. That hand seems to jump forward off the altar panel. Its three-dimensional quality is amazing. . And so the hand leads us to the baby anyway. But perhaps the viewer doesn't look at any of these figures, but looks, instead, at this beautiful woman at the far right whom Leonardo says in his notebook is an angel. One might think the figure is Elizabeth, but it can't be Elizabeth; this woman is too young. Elizabeth was older. Indeed this is an angel, in the Jewish tradition, in the role of a messenger who says to the viewer: "Look over here where I am pointing". And when the viewer looks there, he/she ends up looking at the Baby Jesus, no matter how one entered the painting visually speaking, one ends with Jesus. Just in these principles of organization alone, it is brilliant, a turning point in the history of Western Art.

And then, of course, it's not just a tour de force in terms of the physical detail of the bodies, but the rocks can speak to us of Calvary, of the tomb. The waterfall speaks of John the Baptist, and there's also a small pond in the foreground. All of this iconography speaks of Calvary, the tomb, the Resurrection, Baptism and new life. There is as much symbolism as in Medieval

painting, but the iconography is completely natural. So the Renaissance reveals to us the same devotion and the same theology as in the Middle Ages, but in a different way.

Another aspect of Renaissance painting is an explicit return to Ancient Greece and Rome. So Raphael also painted, in the papal apartments, *The School of Athens* where, in a wonderful Roman setting, not a Greek setting, he depicts Plato and Aristotle, Socrates, Pythagoras and all of the Greek philosophers together. At the center we see Plato pointing upward (to the world of ideas and ideal forms), and Aristotle pointing down to the more concrete and specific, reflecting his teaching about substance and accidents. Of course this fresco is a wonderful study in perspective, technical perfection, but it also reflects this return, not only in poetry and in literature, to Greek ideas of Plato and Aristotle, but used to further Christian belief, this interesting amalgam of the two.

We also see the return of the female nude. In his *Birth of Venus*, Botticelli paints the first major female nude since antiquity, then expressed most often in marble sculpture, such as the Venus of Milo. And in antiquity it was the *Venus de Milo*. Botticelli draws upon the myth of her being born from the foam of the sea and attended by the nymphs. We observe the stylistic linearity which Botticelli loved. In Venice Titian will take us fully into the theme of the female nude, as in the famous *Venus of Urbino*, perhaps the most perfect female nude of the Italian Renaissance. As depicted she is Venus, the goddess of love, but she is also obviously a very well-to-do Venetian woman attended by her servants. We observe not only in the nudity, but in the drapery the attention to the folds that the Greeks and Romans also practiced and loved. The dog on her couch is a symbol of fidelity, Fido, the faithful one.

Now I think it's very important that these are themes that are not intended to be in conflict with Christian belief, but are discoveries of other realms to be celebrated, and part of the Renaissance is coming back to that discovery that we saw in the *Discobolus* and the *Apollo Belvedere*: what a glorious thing it is to be a human being! Remember we saw particularly the way Apollo stood there. All of this is a part of what we call "Humanism," and none of it is intended to be against God or Christianity, but it is an approach or a direction different from the Medieval approach. There's something else that needs to be said. Any of the approaches or the spiritualities that we've seen since the beginning of our survey, if taken too far one way or the other, could be destructive, as in all of life. Even Medieval asceticism could be taken too far; one could destroy one's health and therefore be of use to no one in the Church or anywhere else. Many of these ideas that are emerging or re-emerging in the Renaissance are sound, *if kept in balance*. So what a grand and glorious thing it is to be a human being, yes, if one understands where the source of one's life comes from. This Renaissance culture, which based itself on ancient Greece, needed very much to remember the Greek motto, "All things in moderation, the middle course." All ideologies and spiritualities can be taken too far in certain directions. It's very important to say that these paintings were not created to subvert Christian belief, but rather they reveal a rediscovery of a culture which had been forgotten and which is glorious to them and not at odds with their Christian belief. Such a synthesis is not impossible, but it had to be carried out cautiously and judiciously.



Among the most famous sculptures of the Renaissance and certainly one of the greatest by Michelangelo is David (of the Old Testament). The subject was chosen, in part, so he could treat the nude figure. It is obviously in the tradition of the *Discobolos* or *Apollo Belvedere*. We've seen this—the idealized young man with a deep concentration in the face, contrapposto position, perfected and idealized. Yet it is religious -- David who slew Goliath, and so we have this interesting mixture of what was pagan and is now Judeo-Christian, and it works. Remember that all the athletic events in ancient Greece were performed in the nude, so the athletes were depicted in the nude. Well, this was sort of an athletic event; David slew the giant, so the subject permits the figure to be nude. Observe David's stance and the expression on his face. Once again, what a glorious thing it is to be a human being! This is not intended to be anti-Christian. If one doesn't have a sense of oneself, and of the glory of the creation from God, then one cannot have a sense of the gift that one has received as a human being.

But there is another element that enters in here. It really isn't a religious sculpture at all because it was commissioned by the city of Florence and what we're supposed to see is Florence. The city fathers had asked Michelangelo to create a sculpture that embodied Florence. He could have chosen any image, but his decision was to sculpt David as representing the city. The reason is that Florence, which was certainly a Republic and somewhat democratic, was menaced by enemies on every side, primarily Milan, and felt that it had nothing going for it in terms of military strength, and yet it had "the right" going for it; "the right" was on its side. David, winning over the giant against all odds, became a perfect image of the often beleaguered city. Thus for centuries it stood in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, representing the city of Florence, and was only moved into the *Accademia* a little over a century ago. .

In this iconic sculpture there exists an interesting mixture of the pagan, of the celebration of the beauty of the human body, a little bit of the religious, and an enormous amount of the political, all coming together in a strange mixture that holds together. When the Renaissance Florentines looked at the David, they didn't think of God, nor of the Old Testament; they thought of their political situation and how they had survived. Remember the first week, how, in the Parthenon frieze, the Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs revealed how the Athenians saw themselves, as a civilizing and fully human presence in a largely "animal" world.

In Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, his God the Father is an idealized Greek older man. Look at the power of the body! And when we look at Adam, what do we see? We behold a Greek god, a perfected, an idealized body lacking only one thing—life. All of this is based on Greek prototypes, and yet it is profoundly religious. I would say it is one of the most brilliant paintings in the history of art, and I'll tell you why. How does an artist show this concept and belief, common to Judeo-Christian faith that a Supreme Being who was complete in Himself chose freely to share His existence and create a world and people to share His life and love, creating them from nothing. How can that be expressed as an image? It's impossible, and yet Michelangelo succeeded. The artist cannot show creation taking place, so he depicts the life force, which is God, powerful, as revealed by those Greek, athletic arms, and a lifeless form, Adam, propped up like a puppet. If one pulled Adam's knee out, the whole figure would fall over like a lifeless doll or a puppet. The eyes are not focused; the figure is lifeless. So it's uncreated, but it is about to be created, and the moment that spark goes over, Adam will stand up and be like unto God. When he stands up, once he receives life from the Creator with that body, he will

be like his Creator. And that is totally Biblical. It's brilliant! Show Adam uncreated, but about to be created. However, all of it is ancient Greek in its visual inspiration, so he was able to take these pagan Greek forms and make the most profound depiction of creation that has ever been shown, in my opinion.

By the way, a little detail -- in an era that wasn't known for having feminist sensibilities, Michelangelo refused to depict an all-male creation. He put Eve in God's arms as if she were a concept in His mind. So Eve was there from the beginning. He didn't want it to be all male. It wasn't the creation of Adam, but rather the creation of Adam and Eve. Right now Eve is in God's arms, but Eve's eyes are not focused on the Father. They are riveted on Adam, her intended partner and spouse. My point here is that the visual sources of this fresco are technically and in some ways ideologically pagan, directly out of ancient Greece, and yet the painting could not be more devout or more moving in Judeo-Christian religious terms.

We know that Michelangelo actually based Adam's body on a Greek sculpture because, while he was painting the ceiling, they found, in Rome, an ancient Greek torso which is now called *The Belvedere Torso*. Michelangelo left his work and went to look at it. He painted this "current" archeological discovery right into the ceiling in the twisting figure of Adam. So we see this Christian art has these quite specific underpinnings from ancient Greece.

In the final analysis it all comes down to the meeting of the hands, the life-force, the energy going forth from the finger of God the Father. Between the Father's finger, filled with life-energy, and Adam's lifeless finger there is a spatial gap, because there is always a gap to be spanned between the human and the Divine.

Called back years after the completion of the ceiling in 1512, Michelangelo was asked to depict the Last Judgment over the papal altar. The artist creates this very complex painting of Christ judging the world at the end of time. At the center is a beardless Christ modeled on pagan images of the god Apollo, executed with idealized, athletic body. The Pope was comfortable with this because he was rooted in this classicism. Again, there is nothing in this intended to be anti-Christian. Rather, the artist is drawing upon a rich cultural heritage from Antiquity. We know also that many of the figures were nude, right over the papal altar, and it was only after the Reformation that somebody was sent up to paint over them to make them more "modest."

Obviously, that the hell at the bottom of the fresco is the Greek Hades where one crossed the River Styx in a boat. Once again Michelangelo has borrowed ancient Greek mythology for this Christian scene.

In terms of architecture we are going to look at a most inconspicuous exterior, that of the Church of San Lorenzo in Florence, a Medici church commissioned by and for the Medici. It was never finished on the outside. In Italy architects would add the facades after the church had been completed, and often these facades had absolutely no relationship to the interior. By contrast, in France the exterior of a church or cathedral, such as that at Chartres, was intimately related to the design of the interior. In the case of San Lorenzo they never got around to completing the façade. But inside we have a perfect example of Renaissance architecture, a total return to Greek and Roman architecture. The Gothic has been rejected with its pointed arches, stained glass, flying buttresses, gargoyles, and the sculptural program on the exterior, and we return to the Roman

basilica with a flat ceiling and the rounded (Roman) arches. *Pietra Serena*, the grey stone, stands out against the white walls. Each arch plays off the other from a visual point of view, and there is an almost dizzying interplay of arcuated and trabeated forms, all of them in careful mathematical relations to the other decorative and structural elements. Every unit of space is measured mathematically to perfection. For example, the distance of the side aisle is one-fourth the distance of the middle aisle, and such mathematical proportions go on and on. As mentioned, all the interior elements are executed in contrasting colors of white and grey to create a cold, logical, and precisely rational impact—quite different from the mysticism of the Gothic interior. In the Medieval Gothic cathedral, when there were mathematical proportions the numbers were, typically, 3, 12 or 40—numbers spoke symbolically of God and the Bible. Here the math is used for the sheer enjoyment of what my mind can do. The numbers do not have mystical association. It's a different approach to God. It is meant to be devout also. There was a deep belief among the Renaissance Platonic philosophers and poets that the intricacies of mathematics could lead one to God as surely as any mystical experience. So there's a great confidence in that rationality and its ability to do something. It's simply a different approach.

Another aspect of Renaissance thought is the importance of the individual. In this wonderful Botticelli painting of the Adoration of the Magi, we have the entire Medici family, Cosimo, Piero, Giovanni, Giuliano, and Lorenzo the Magnificent, standing there with such a self-assured stance. When we look at this painting, do we end up looking at Christ or remembering the Medici?

One of my favorite paintings by Piero della Francesca is of the Virgin and the Christ Child, positioned, oddly in the apse of a church. The perfection of the perspective is such that by measurements we can tell what kind of an egg is suspended from the ceiling of the apse—an ostrich egg.

Depicted among the supplicants is one of the outstanding figures of the Renaissance, Federico da Montefeltro, one of the great knights and swordsmen. He kneels in front of his patron, Saint John the Evangelist, but on the opposite side the space in front of Saint John the Baptist is vacant to signify that Federico's wife, Battista Sforza, had recently died at the age of twenty-three after giving birth to her ninth child. . So once again, is it a painting about the Virgin and the Christ Child? Do we remember the Virgin or do we remember the empty space and Battista Sforza and her husband, Federico?

I am going to end with this portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and his wife, Battista Sforza, who was commemorated in the earlier painting. Federico was very proud of the fact that he lost a fair amount of his nose in a sword fight. In this portrait you can see how much of the bridge of the nose is missing. It is depicted as if it were a badge of honor. We see him in his uniform; behind him are all the lands he owns. Opposite his image is that of Battista. On the back of this double panel painting/portrait is a scene of Federico da Montefeltro being crowned by the goddess Fortune. Today we might say that he is being favored by Success.

I want to end this evening with a quote by Fr. Luigi Giussani from *Religious Awareness in Modern Man*:

Humanism substituted the ideal of human success for the medieval ideal of sanctity: all things no longer flow harmoniously together in God, [as in the medieval synthesis]...but in the successful man [By whom is Federico being crowned? By Success or Fortune]...the successful man who relies on his own forces. Man is to place his hope in his own strength; he is to bank on his own energy. What matters [in life] is to make [your] life a "success.".... And what if a man has not enjoyed favorable circumstances? Where will he find his worth? If the value of his life is no longer founded upon this objective relationship with God, but is instead consigned to the mercy of fortune, what then? And is a small and weak man worth nothing?

With that question in mind, we end tonight and we look forward, next week, to addressing issues raised by art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.