

# IMAGES OF THE UNSEEN

The Mysteries of Life Revealed in Sacred Art

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To the Blessed Virgin Mary.  
*I am all yours, My Queen, My Mother,  
and all that I have is yours.*

To Mary Lou—  
she who *incarnates* beauty.

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## Chapter One:

### THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE<sup>1</sup>

To those of the secular world, the introduction of Christian doctrine into a discussion of art may seem odd and even unsettling. Yet looking at the Western art of the past two millennia, one could rightly wonder how Christian doctrine has come to be omitted from the discussion. It seems rather remarkable in retrospect, yet while as an art student I sat through hundreds of lectures, viewing countless slides of religious art—annunciations, nativities, sermons on the mount, healings, last suppers, flagellations, crucifixions, resurrections, ascensions, pentecosts, martyrdoms, assumptions, coronations, and last judgments—, I can scarcely recall a time when the lecturer bothered to address the religious content of any of it in a substantial way. Rather, and somewhat surreally if not sacrilegiously, we sat before these magnificent expressions of Christian piety limiting our talk to things like technique, composition, perspective, and color.

The secular thinker prefers to look past the religious aspect of the works from the Renaissance and Baroque period, regarding that aspect as something of a blight, an unfortunate holdover from the “Dark Ages,” which should not keep one from appreciating the accomplishments of the artists.<sup>2</sup> The presumption, moreover, is that the artists of the past bore the same disdain for religion as the secularists today and that they worked in religious themes only out of necessity, the Church being the chief patroness of the arts at the time. If

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<sup>1</sup> I am truly indebted on this subject to Dr. Regis Martin, whose lectures on the Sacraments at the Franciscan University of Steubenville were a tremendous inspiration to me.

<sup>2</sup> The label “Dark Ages,” originating among the founders of Protestantism in the sixteenth century and later adopted by the rationalists of the seventeenth, was a pejorative term with anti-Catholic overtures. Thankfully, it has fallen somewhat by the wayside in recent times as scholars have come to acknowledge the age which brought us the cathedral and the university could hardly be characterized as dark.

they had had the good fortune to live today, freed from religious tyranny, so the thinking goes, they would certainly have chosen more “enlightened” subject matter. This idea is terribly misinformed. Many of the Renaissance and Baroque artists happened to be genuinely religious people. Giorgio Vasari, the student of Michelangelo famous for his biographies of artists, described Giotto, the father of the Italian Renaissance, for example, as “having lived no less the life of a good Christian than he had that of a great painter” (*Lives of the Artists*, p. 32). He further recounted how it was said of Fra Angelico that he “never set his hand to a brush without first saying a prayer;” and how his own teacher Michelangelo, being “the admirable Christian he was,” “took great pleasure from the Holy Scriptures” (*ibid.*, pp. 177, 474). It would do the secular soul considerable good, furthermore, to contemplate how far less grand our artistic heritage would have been had these artists forsaken religious subject matter—no Arena Chapel, no Sistine ceiling, no *Last Supper*, no *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*.

This is not to say the long relationship between the Church and the arts has been without discord. Vasari, for instance, also decried Christianity’s destruction of ancient Greco-Roman art and architecture, which he considered to be “infinitely harmful and damaging” to artistic progress (*ibid.*, p. 5). The misguided zeal that led to these acts would turn inward later in history, moving some believers to also destroy Christian art, which they likewise came to see as idolatrous. At the same time, though, another more reasoned attitude has always existed among the faithful, one that inspired them not to eradicate pagan art as much as to transform it, to separate the good in it from the bad and adopt it as their own. It was a way of claiming all things for Christ, of using the accomplishments of the pre-Christian past as a foundation upon which to build, fashioning works that gave unrivaled honor to the one true

God. This was what Vasari and his contemporaries did. It was the very spirit of the Renaissance.

Just as the authentic religious devotion of the artists of the past is lost on the contemporary viewer, the real reason why the Church supported the arts so fervently likewise eludes him. Why did she deem it necessary to build elaborate cathedrals decorated with exquisite altarpieces, frescoes, and statuary? It cannot have been simply a matter of opulence since the Church in earlier times, possessed of modest means, exhibited the same penchant for richly adorning her sacred spaces, as is proved by the art and decoration of the catacombs (Fig. 1). So why the excessive materialism?<sup>3</sup>

The Catholic Church expresses her faith in material ways because of her belief in the Incarnation: that God took on human flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary—“And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (*John* 1:14). Sacred Scripture calls the Lord Jesus Christ “the image of the invisible God” (*Col.* 1:15). In Him, God, an unseen spiritual being, became fully seeable, hearable, touchable, became one of us. Spirit became flesh. The intangible became tangible. The unknowable became knowable. God who is beyond space and time entered into them in a real way. Divinity and humanity met and were reconciled.

The Church’s belief in the Incarnation is manifest in her sacramental system. In the Sacraments, divine grace, which cannot be perceived with the human senses, is imparted

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<sup>3</sup> There are those in religious circles who would criticize the Church on these grounds, insisting that her treasures ought to be sold for charity. The Gospels show us this false piety was prevalent in the time of Christ as well. Seeing a woman anoint the Lord with a costly jar of rare ointment, the disciples (and primarily Judas) protested, insisting the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor (cf. *John* 12:4-5; *Matt.* 26:8-9). The Lord rebuked them, however, saying, “She has done a beautiful thing to me” (*Matt.* 26:10). This

through sensible things—water, oil, bread, wine, hand, voice, and so on. These rites, which give material form to the immaterial, are extensions of the Incarnation.

This is particularly true of the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament. At the moment of the priest's consecration at Mass, what was ordinary bread and wine is mystically transformed before us into the living Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Outwardly, it still appears and tastes like bread and wine; yet its very substance has been changed. The outer serves, then, as a symbol of the inner reality. Bread symbolizes nourishment and sustenance, and wine joy. In Holy Communion our souls are fortified with divine life and our hearts inebriated by the presence of the Beloved. Above all, the Eucharist and all the Sacraments affirm that Christ really did come in the flesh; and His coming has bestowed upon our human nature a dignity that is beyond reason.

There is a still deeper truth to the Mass. The Eucharist is the very sacrifice of Calvary made present before us. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus dies again; He died once for the sin of the world and no further offering shall be required (cf. *Rom.* 6:10). His sacrifice, though, is not an event confined to the distant past. It has an *eternal* dimension to it which supersedes space and time. In the Eucharistic celebration, God, who exists outside of space and time, makes the one death of Jesus present to the assembly of His people, *representing* it to us in an unbloody manner. He does this in order to provide the Church in every age a means of participating in and offering the sacrifice of His Son to Him in praise and thanksgiving. This is why the Apostle Paul declared, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a

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spirit to do something beautiful for Jesus has inspired the Church, even in impoverished times and places, to give all that she had for His glory and the adornment of His House.

*participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16, emphasis added). This is the ineffable joy and mystery of the Mass, in which those invisible realities of God’s love and mercy become visible to us.*

Uplifting as the Church’s Eucharistic teachings are, they can certainly be difficult to grasp. Often we struggle with such things because we are trying to comprehend them by human reason alone, unassisted by grace. Often we have not yet matured spiritually enough to understand, being yet “babes in Christ,” needing to be fed “with milk, not solid food” (*1 Cor. 3:1, 2*). Sacred art, having the power to say much without words, can be especially beneficial at times like these. We find the full Eucharistic doctrine silently expressed, for instance, in Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ *Madonna of the Host* (Fig. 2). The beauty of the image in itself inspires in our heart reverence for the Mass. The levitation of the Host over the Cup tells us this is not ordinary bread and wine. The *IHS* imprinted on the Host—the ancient Greek monogram for Christ—implies His Eucharistic Presence. It also suggests the historical continuity of the doctrine: that our ancestors in the era of the catacombs held these truths sacred, as did the Apostles before them. Our Lady, her gaze set intently upon the Host and Cup, her prayerful gesture being reminiscent of the Annunciation, points to the fact that the Son whom she bore is here now before us.

The sacramental principle of *the invisible made visible* exists by way of analogy in all physical Creation, in man himself, and in his art.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Christians have always found metaphors of the spiritual world in the natural. Defending the faith to the Emperor Antoninus Pius around A.D. 150, for instance, Saint Justin the Martyr noted how the form of

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<sup>4</sup> It should go without saying that the use of the term “man” throughout the text to refer to the human race as a whole, male and female, is not meant in any way to give offense. Likewise, the masculine pronoun will be



the Cross is repeated in physical objects and especially in the human figure. The Cross, he wrote,

is the greatest symbol of [Christ's] power and authority, as [can be] shown from things you can see. Reflect on all things in the universe [and consider] whether they could be governed or held together in fellowship without this figure. For the sea cannot be traversed unless the sign of victory, which is called a sail, remain fast in the ship; the land is not plowed without it; similarly diggers and mechanics do not do their work except with tools of this form. The human figure differs from the irrational animals precisely in this, that man stands erect and can stretch out his hands, and has on his face, stretched down from the forehead, what is called the nose, through which goes breath for the living creature—and this exhibits precisely the figure of the cross (*First Apology* 55).<sup>5</sup>

Notice his assertion that the power of the Cross can be “shown from things you can see” and in “all the things of the universe.” Primarily, he references things made by man—sails, ploughs, and other tools—suggesting there is something innate to the human person that compels him to pay homage to His Savior in the things that he makes. And he goes on to include the human body itself, which “exhibits precisely the figure of the cross.” From Justin’s point of view, this preeminent sign of Our Incarnate Lord is built into the very fabric, the very stuff of who we are.

Similarly, C.S. Lewis praised Saint Athanasius for seeing “an essential likeness between the miracles of Our Lord and the general order of Nature.”<sup>6</sup> In contemplating the signs of the supernatural found in nature, Lewis went on to write,

[These signs] are focal points at which more reality becomes visible than we ordinarily see at once. I have spoken of how [Christ] made miraculous bread and wine and of how, when the Virgin conceived, He had shown Himself the true Genius

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used in order to avoid the repetition of the phrase “he or she.” This is also merely in keeping with the rule of grammar.

<sup>5</sup> Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Church Fathers* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 278-279.

<sup>6</sup> *God In the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 36-37.

whom men had ignorantly worshipped long before. It goes deeper than that. Bread and wine were to have an even more sacred significance for Christians and the act of generations was to be the chosen symbol among all mystics for the union of the soul with God. These things are no accidents. With Him there are no accidents. When He created the vegetable world He knew already what dreams the annual death and resurrection of the corn would cause to stir in pious Pagan minds, He knew already that He Himself must so die and live again and in what sense, including and far transcending the old religion of the Corn King. He would say “This is my Body.” *Common* bread, miraculous bread, sacramental bread—these three are distinct, but not to be separated.<sup>7</sup>

Holding fast to the sacramental principle, *the invisible made visible*, the Church incorporates material symbols into her life of praise and worship. Even the smallest detail of the Sacred Liturgy is invested with rich Christological symbolism, designed to usher believers ever more deeply into a relationship with the God-man. The lighting of a candle points to Christ, “the light of the world” (*John* 9:5): the wax representing His virginal flesh received from Mary, the wick in the center His sinless soul, and the flame atop His divinity. The use of incense enhances our communion with Christ as well: the sweet aroma recalling to our hearts and minds the Lord’s sweetness, the smoke ascending from the censer reminding us that our prayers are ascending to heaven (cf. *Ps.* 141:2; *Apoc.* 5:8). Candles, incense, vestments, the sign of the Cross, genuflection—we use bodily things and our bodies themselves to pray and worship because we are not disembodied spirits but spirits enfleshed. Through grace such ordinary things are transformed to take on new meaning. They become in a sense little gospels repeating anew: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The sacramental principle lies at the heart of all visible Creation, so much so that to divorce the material world from it—to view Creation in a non-sacramental way—is nothing less than to remove from life its meaning. What does it mean to say the sacramental principle

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 36-37.

lies at the heart of all visible Creation? It means, simply put, there is more to life than what one sees with his eyes—far more (cf. *1 Cor.* 2:9; 13:12)!

The idea of the sacramental principle will sound blasphemous to that puritanical breed of Christian who accepts the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity: that man and nature, being fallen, are devoid of all redeeming qualities. According to this way of thinking, the notion that God would use corrupt physical objects, and man himself, to convey grace is inconceivable. Thus, are many Protestant assembly houses sparsely decorated—paintings, statues, and even crucifixes being omitted.<sup>8</sup> This austere approach to worship on a certain level denies the reality of the Incarnation: that God really did take on our human nature (though certainly without the stain of our sin); that He used earthly things, such as water, oil, and clay, to transmit grace; and that He deigned to use fallen human beings to carry on His ministry after He had gone. The dignity of the human person is infinitely increased by the fact that the Lord not only became what we are and died for us, but calls us to participate with Him in His work. This belief that men and women do indeed become “God’s fellow workers” is a belief not in our own merit but in the efficacy of His grace (*1 Cor.* 3:9).

As Scripture attests, at the completion of Creation God beheld all He had done and saw that “it was very good” (*Gen.* 1:31). The physical world, though injured by its fall from grace, nevertheless retains some of that original goodness. For these things, fallen though they are, remain the work of the Father’s hands and were redeemed by the Son’s death. “Behold,” says the Lord, “I make all things new” (*Apoc.* 21:5).

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<sup>8</sup> Protestantism’s rejection of the crucifix is especially perplexing. Is it not just as important after all to remember Christ’s suffering and death as it is His resurrection? To, as Saint Paul put it, “preach Christ crucified” (*1 Cor.* 1:23)?

The *Gospel According to Saint John* says of Christ, “All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be” (1:3). Because the created world has been patterned after the Word Incarnate, flesh and spirit having been reconciled are inseparably connected. Christ experienced not merely a resurrection in spirit, but in body. This is why the Empty Tomb is so important (cf. *John* 20:1 ff.). This is why He retained the wounds in His hands, feet, and side; and invited Saint Thomas to touch them (cf. *John* 20:27). In light of the Incarnation, material things have taken on an emblematic character, bearing a significance beyond their outward form. The things which we see in this world point to the things which we cannot see in the next.

A woman may be beautiful, but she is not in fact beauty itself. Rather, she communicates beauty to the world. What is beauty after all? In attempting to define it one tends to resort to describing merely beautiful things. But beauty is not a material thing, it is an ethereal concept. Still, the man beholding his wife could rightly claim to behold beauty. She, while not beauty itself, has the power to make beauty, the unreal concept, real to him. In a sense, she *incarnates* beauty, *sacramentalizes* it. Otherwise, how would her husband, a being dependent upon the senses, ever come to comprehend it?

Consider a bird in flight. What ideals does it conjure? Freedom perhaps and the virtue of hope. The bird is emblematic of and actually inspires these things in one’s heart and mind. In contemplating this subject, the modernist sculptor Constantin Brancusi chose to focus on the movement of the bird more so than the bird itself (cf. Fig. 3). In so doing, he rather effectively conveyed to the viewer the very essence of the bird’s flight as it were, if not the bird itself. To interpret a flying bird in a purely intellectual way, on the other hand, simply as a winged animal doing what winged animals do, is in a sense to take its life away—not its

natural life certainly, but its *supernatural life*, if you will, the power of the bird, as designed by God, to serve as a symbol of something greater than itself. Is not a bird, a descending dove, in fact, used in Scripture to represent the Holy Spirit, God Himself (cf. *Matt.* 3:16)?

We see this principle of the invisible made visible chiefly in man who, unique among physical creatures, is made in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen.* 1:26). A composite of spirit and flesh, the condition of his soul is often manifest outwardly through the body. Hence, joy is manifest through laughter, embarrassment through blushing, wonder through the raising of eyebrows, anger through the clenching of fists, and so on. It is in man's nature to sacramentalize, to express the immaterial materially through the things that he makes (as Justin the Martyr indicated). That he makes things in and of itself indicates his being made in the Creator's image. Man's making of things is simply the child imitating the work of his father. It is primarily in the Liturgy and in art that man expresses himself in this distinctive, sacramental way.

The rather miraculous ability of art to convey the invisible was movingly demonstrated in a story which my grandfather used to tell involving a replica he once saw as a young man of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (Italian, "pity"), the image of Mary holding her dead Son's body upon her lap (cf. Fig. 4). It was a tabletop replica displayed across the room from where he had been standing, which he felt compelled to approach. As he drew closer, he realized that what was drawing him near was the Virgin's outstretched hand. And as he stood transfixed before the statue, the gesture of the hand communicated to him something profound. "Mary seemed to say to me," he recalled, "'Look what I gave the world; and look what they gave me back.'" All the many lectures, books, and commentaries on art and religion I have attended and read over the years have failed to touch me as deeply as this

simple, yet sublime revelation of my grandfather. One knows instantly upon hearing it that it came from God. And how did God communicate it? Through a bit of compressed dust, a physical substance, which He inspired one of His creatures to carve into the shape of a human hand.

The non-religious artist, of course, would not think to define art in terms of religious doctrine. Nevertheless, the sacramental principle is inherent in all art. In the process of making art, what is it that comes first, even before the painter lifts his brush, the violinist picks up his bow, the potter sits at his wheel, the playwright grasps his pen, the dancer steps onto the floor? All these things are preceded by an idea. Whether it be love or death or patriotism or anarchy or mercy or justice, an intangible concept inspires the artist to create. And in the act of creating the intangible concept is made real. The idea takes on flesh, immaterial and material are merged into one.

While all art—religious as well as secular—retains this basic characteristic of making the invisible visible, the characteristic itself in a certain sense testifies to religious truth. Man's creation of art suggests that the greater material universe around us is likewise the result of a creative process—that it, too, has a Creator. One would not think to say the *David* came into existence of its own volition (cf. Fig. 5). Yet many think nothing of saying that man himself, the *David's* living template, an inconceivably more complex and wondrous thing, came into existence without a maker. The one who would think to deny man is more complex and wondrous than the statue needs to ask himself which statue thinks and manifests its thoughts through sensible speech; calculates; reasons; loves; has blood pumping continuously through a network of arteries and veins; feels through a network of nerves;

stands by way of a skeletal structure that grows; walks by way of a self-strengthening, flexible muscular system; dreams, plans, builds, . . . oh yes, and sculpts?

To what does the act of creating art, of making something physical from an ethereal idea, point if not *creatio ex nihilo*, God's creation of matter from nothingness?<sup>9</sup> That the material world did not merely happen, but was created, moreover, points to the truth of the Incarnation. For is it not merely reasonable to expect that God, having made the material world, would desire to enter into it in a material way? All the more astounding is the realization that He did so not out of necessity, but out of love (cf. *John* 3:16). God did not need to create the world, or us, but wanted to. He did not have to come into the world as one of us, to die for our sins, but wanted to. His acts of creation and redemption were entirely gratuitous.

Art, too, is gratuitous. Despite the tendency to over romanticize what he does, the artist does not need to make art. If he never picks up his brush again he will live, though admittedly in a far less fulfilled way. He makes art because he wants to. The point will be taken up in another chapter, but the gratuitous nature of man's art is what separates it from the things that mere animals make, which are always made from necessity.

If art is not made from necessity, why then does man make it? The chief purpose of art, from the very beginning, has been to communicate ideas and, more concretely, to tell a story. In plumbing the depths of the hidden mysteries of the world, man has used his art to

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<sup>9</sup> Meditating upon this point led Pope John Paul II to conclude, "None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you" (*Letter to Artists* 1).

record what he has discovered. It is the universal trait of man, in fact, to investigate and express what John Paul the Great called “the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?*” (*Fides et Ratio* 1; p. 9). Man has pondered these questions, says John Paul II, over and over again in religious and philosophical thought throughout the ages. “They are questions,” he writes,

which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives (ibid., pp. 9-10).

The people of the Middle Ages, the men and women of Christendom, derided though they may be by today’s cultural sophisticates, intuitively knew through faith this universal human story of *who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going*. Simple as their worldview may seem to modern man, it was a worldview that worked. In protest, the critic will cite a litany of social injustices, wars, and diseases that plagued medieval man, for which he will invariably find a way to blame religion. Yet social injustices, wars, and diseases continue to plague modern man in the post-Christendom era. Secular humanism and the so-called Enlightenment have not eradicated them. In fact, the greatest social injustices and wars of the modern era, and of all time, were caused by atheistic, totalitarian regimes. As for diseases, modern man has had to deal with epidemic levels of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and sexually transmitted diseases brought on by immoderate and immoral Western living, as well as pollution on a global scale and the serious health problems it has caused.

In his superb book, *Chance or the Dance?*, Thomas Howard contrasts the medieval and modern worldviews, dubbing them the “Old” and the “New Myth” respectively. He argues that medieval man, maintaining a view of the world built upon symbolism, tended to



see earthly things as being emblematic of spiritual things, whereas his modern counterpart, being a product of the Enlightenment, tends to see things as having no meaning beyond their physical reality. For those of the Old Myth, says Howard, “everything means everything;” for those of the New, “nothing means anything” (p. 12).

Medieval man interpreted the universal story both through things seen and unseen, allowing the visible to serve as metaphor for the invisible. “One thing was a case in point of another,” Howard explains.

A goshawk tearing a field mouse seemed a case in point of what is also visible in the fierce duke who plunders the neighboring duchy. A lamb was an instance of timidity, mildness, harmlessness. The earth receiving life from the sun and bringing forth grass and trees and nourishing everything from itself was like all the other mothers. The inclination to trace correspondences among things transfigured those things—goshawks, lambs, the earth, kings—into images of one another, so that on all levels it felt that *this* suggested *that*. It is a way of looking at things that goes farther than saying that this is *like* that: it says that *both this and that* are instances of the way things are. The sun pours energy into the earth and the man pours energy into the woman because that is how fruit begins—by the union of the one thing and the other; by the union of what appears under stellar categories as sun and earth, and under human categories as man and woman. That is in both instances, there is enacted under the appropriate species what lies at the root of things (ibid., pp. 14-15).

The result was a system of belief that affirmed the basic truths of life: that men and women, though flawed, are good because they were made by a good God; and that life, in spite of its challenges, was worth living. Consequently, suicide and abortion, intrinsically destructive elements to society, were not nearly as prevalent in the medieval world. Despite all their troubles the people of the Middle Ages clung to life, knowing from the influence of the Church that life is good! How many in today’s secularist age would without falter say the same?

By contrast, modern man has limited his understanding of existence to that which he can see. Because the meaning of life cannot be empirically demonstrated, therefore, he has

concluded that life has no meaning. Existence seems ultimately to be, as Jean Paul Sartre declared, an absurdity. Modern man has lost touch with the universal story of who we are (our identity), where we have come from (our origin), and where we are going (our destiny); and his ambiguous view of life is reflected in his art.

The Church, on the other hand, retains the universal story—not because she is old and the story is antiquated—, but because she is eternal and the story is timeless. If indeed she is the divine keeper of the story of man, one should expect to find the story plainly revealed in her art. And one does. In examining this narrative trait in art, we shall next consider art's sacramental quality through the ages, from the caves at Lascaux to today.