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*Catechetical Series:*

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*What Catholics believe & why*

## Our Lady In Sacred Art

Louis Bosco  
BEHOLD THE TRUTH  
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# Our Heritage of Sacred Art

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One of the many blessings we enjoy as Catholics is the Church's unique heritage of sacred art: *paintings, sculpture, and architecture* that help us to learn and grow in our faith.

Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Maestà* (detail),  
1311

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# Our Lady *in Sacred Art*

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The Virgin Mary has been a central figure in sacred art through the centuries because she is central to our faith lives as Christians. Our Lady is so important to us as followers of Jesus because it was through her faithfulness to God that Our Savior came into the world.

Alessandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat* (detail), 1485

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## *Art and the Incarnation*

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Of Christ's coming into the world, the Bible states: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (*John 1:14*). It is because of the *Incarnation*, the invisible God becoming visible in Christ, that the Catholic Church expresses her faith in material ways (in the Sacraments and through sacred art).

Gerard van Honthorst, *Adoration of the Shepherds* (details), 1622

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## ***Mary in the Catacombs***

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The earliest surviving image of Mary in Christian art dates to about 150 A.D., and is found in the catacombs, massive underground cemeteries outside of Rome. Its presence in the catacombs proves the importance of Mary to the early Christians.

*Madonna and Child* (detail), catacomb of Saint Priscilla, ca. 150

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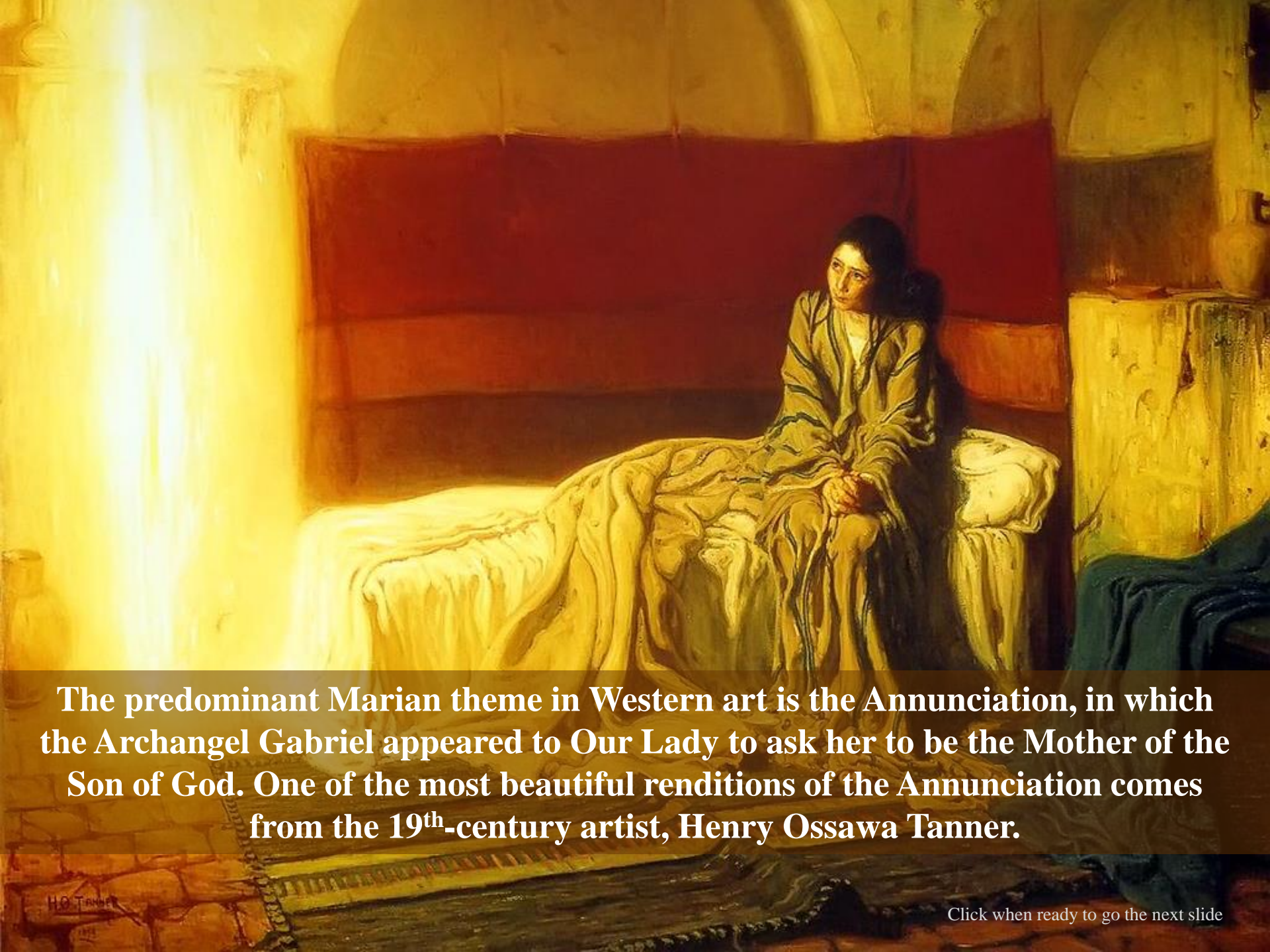
## Mary in the Catacombs

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Mary was important to the early believers because she verified for them the truth of the Incarnation—that God had really become man. It is a great mystery of our faith that God, the Creator of all that is, had a Mother—a *Mother whom He created for himself, but a Mother nonetheless.*

*Madonna and Child* (detail), catacomb of Saint Priscilla, ca. 150

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**The predominant Marian theme in Western art is the Annunciation, in which the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Our Lady to ask her to be the Mother of the Son of God. One of the most beautiful renditions of the Annunciation comes from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century artist, Henry Ossawa Tanner.**



**Tanner follows Rembrandt's tradition of portraying biblical persons as everyday people. It is the contrast of the supernatural and the everyday that gives Tanner's work such extraordinary force.**





**Seated at the edge of her bed, her hands neatly folded in her lap, the Virgin seems to have been interrupted in the midst of prayer. With the absence of halo and queenly vestments, she appears almost as an ordinary girl from Nazareth. Yet her engaged expression, her collectedness in the presence of the Archangel, who appears before her as a pillar of fire, assures us of the contrary.**



**Here is Our Lady on the verge of uttering the words that would bring Our Savior to us: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (*Luke 1:38*).**

# Divine Grace Made Visible

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One of the greatest artists of all time was Leonardo da Vinci. The consummate Renaissance man, Leonardo was proficient in many diverse fields, including science, engineering, and astronomy. As an artist, he was set apart by his mastery of painted light.

Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*,  
1486

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# Divine Grace Made Visible

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Delicate and subtle, often blended with the tips of his fingers, the light in Leonardo's paintings gives silent exultation to the diffused light of nature. This natural light becomes emblematic of God's supernatural light. It is almost as though he has discovered how to paint divine grace.

Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*,  
1486

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## *Art that Tells a Story*

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The artist Giotto, who lived about two centuries before Leonardo, is considered the father of the Renaissance. Giotto was first and foremost a storyteller and his work bears an unmistakable quality of sincerity.

Giotto di Bondone, *The Lamentation of Christ* (detail), 1306

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## Art *that* Tells *a* Story

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In his fresco painting, *The Lamentation of Christ*, Giotto holds back nothing in conveying the grief of the angels, whose anguish over the death of Christ appears not just on their faces, but in their tormented bodies and limbs.

Giotto di Bondone, *The Lamentation of Christ* (detail), 1306

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## *Art that Tells a Story*

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The body of the Lord rests at the base of the composition in the arms of His followers. Giotto draws our attention to the tender moment of Mary's last embrace of Her Son by using the two mourners in the foreground, whose backs are turned to us, to frame the scene.

Giotto di Bondone, *The Lamentation of Christ* (detail), 1306

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## A Mother's Last Embrace

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No doubt the most famous image of Mary's last embrace of Jesus is the *Pietà*, carved in marble by the incomparable Michelangelo, when he was just 23 years old.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1499

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## A Mother's Last Embrace

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My grandfather used to tell a moving story involving a replica of this statue he once saw as a young man. It was a tabletop replica displayed across the room from where he had been standing, which he felt compelled to approach.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1499



## A Mother's Last Embrace

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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.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1499



## A Mother's Last Embrace

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“Mary seemed to say to me,” he recalled, “Look what I gave the world; and look what they gave me back.””

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1499

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# Christ *in the* Holy Eucharist

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Because sacred art has the power to say much without words, it can be especially beneficial in helping us grasp the deepest mysteries of our faith.



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres,  
*Madonna of the Host*, 1854

# Christ *in the* Holy Eucharist

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The beauty of Ingres' *Madonna of the Host* inspires in our heart reverence for the Mass. In the painting, the levitation of the Host over the Chalice tells us this is not ordinary bread and wine.



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres,  
*Madonna of the Host*, 1854

# Christ *in the* Holy Eucharist

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Our Lady's gaze, set intently upon the Host and Chalice, her prayerful gesture being reminiscent of the Annunciation, reveals to us that the Son whom she bore is here now before us under the disguise of Bread and Wine.

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres,  
*Madonna of the Host*, 1854





# Elevating *the* Human Heart

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Sacred art has the miraculous ability to lift the human heart and mind above the things of this world to focus on those of the next. We see this in the cathedrals of the Gothic era, such as the Cathedral of Notre-Dame (or, the Cathedral of Our Lady) in France.

Cathedral of Notre-Dame,  
Reims, France, 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries

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# Elevating *the* Human Heart

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These magnificent structures manifest the splendor of God through their dynamic form, stained glass, and multiple decorative elements. True sacred spaces, they were designed to enhance the experience of entering into the wonder of God's presence.

Cathedral of Notre-Dame,  
Reims, France, 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries

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## Our Heritage of Sacred Art

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The Bible tells us “when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away” (*1 Cor. 13:10*). Sacred art helps us to contemplate the truth, beauty and goodness of God during our time here on earth, and to look forward to the happiness of eternal life with Him one day in heaven.

Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Maestà* (detail),  
1311