

Reference material for the St. Charles Borromeo Sanctuary Design Contest
By Denis R. McNamara, Ph.D.
Assistant Director
Faculty Member
The Liturgical Institute

“Signs and symbols of heavenly realities” is how the text of the Second Vatican Council describes the nature of the “noble ministry” of sacred art. This high calling means that liturgical art is destined to reveal to human eyes something that they otherwise could not see: the glorious realities of heaven itself. For this reason, proper liturgical art may rightly be compared by analogy to the sacraments themselves: it uses the very matter of the earth in stone, glass and pigments to give a foretaste of the heavenly glory promised to us by Christ.

While this “high” theology of art may sound surprising, it grows directly from the life of Christ himself. Two important biblical movements come to mind in developing a theology of sacred art: the Incarnation and the Transfiguration. Christ, the invisible Word of the Father, became visible by taking on human flesh composed of the very matter of the earth. The Incarnation, then, teaches us that matter can become a bearer of divinity. At the Transfiguration, Christ’s earthly body became dazzling radiant with divine life, so much so that the apostles had to hide their faces. Christ did not lose his body, rather it was transfigured in radiant divinity. The Transfiguration, then, teaches us that matter can even be elevated to reveal God’s glory.

The challenge for liturgical artists and parishes is as daunting as it is exciting. Just how do we represent heaven in our churches and how do we make images which bear the dignity of angels, saints and even the Trinity itself? The Church’s great tradition teaches us two important points. First, scripture –especially the Book of Revelation – gives us a mystical view of heaven which guides liturgical imagery. Second, a highly developed tradition of representing heavenly beings exists in our own tradition, one which shows them transfigured with divine life and freed from the effects of the Fall.

Chapters 4 and 20-21 in the Book of Revelation describe in symbolic terms a vision of heaven shown to St. John. He writes that a door to heaven stood open and he saw one seated on a throne with a gem-like radiance, surrounded by angels, white-robed elders, the four evangelists and many multitudes coming from every race and nation, all praising God. So heaven is ordered, perfected, radiant, centered on God, and populated with angels and saints singing God’s praises. As an image of heaven, a church building shares these qualities, and art in particular provides the method to “see” these heavenly beings in sacramental form. The sanctuary of a church is the privileged place for a great mural of this heavenly liturgy, allowing the worshipper’s eyes to participate in the radiance of the liturgical Christ, the Lord of heaven and history whose love welcome us to his glory.

Since the beings shown in liturgical art exist in heaven, they appear in their heavenly condition. The Trinity, of course, is represented to indicate its glory and divine nature. The angels show a similar glory since they were never subject to the Fall. Saints, however, require a special kind of representation since they were redeemed and conformed to the likeness of God. They are shown freed from anger, concupiscence, sickness, mourning and death. Their poses are calm and graceful, their attire perfected and idealized. Their eyes and ears are shown slightly enlarged to reveal that they see the face of God and listen to his revelations. Their mouths are often quite small, indicating that though they praise God, they are in a fundamentally receptive posture, delighting in God's divine life. The Book of Revelation tells us that heaven has no sun or moon, for the light of Christ is their light. For this reason, saints' faces appear luminous and never show shadows caused by an outside light source. Instead, Christ's light radiates from within.

Heaven is also described in scripture as a garden, the "new earth" of the Garden of Eden restored and glorified. Since all of creation was redeemed and glorified in Christ, full liturgical art frequently includes stars, plants and animals, which, like the saints, are shown in a restored condition. Stars burst with flower-like brilliance, animals exist in peace with each other, and plants bloom in abundance. Rivers water the garden, making it fertile and life-giving, just as the Holy Spirit, called the "rive of the water of life," supports Christ's Mystical Body with grace.

As St. John Damascene has written, liturgical art reveals to the eye what the gospels provide for the ear: a revelation of God himself. Liturgical art, then, does more than set a mood or merely showcase the talents of a famous artist. It is a revelation made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit through the hand of the artist who has mastered the manual skill, knowledge of God and life of disciplined prayer required to rise to the lofty call of liturgical art. When all the conditions are in place, art becomes a window into heaven for the earthly congregation, and remind us that we "share in the heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem" and "sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army" (SC, 8).

Denis R. McNamara, Ph.D.
Assistant Director
Faculty Member
The Liturgical Institute

Author of Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy