Bohemians of the Holy Ghost

Each particular Church should encourage the use of the arts in evangelization, building on the treasures of the past but also drawing upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new “language of parables”. We must be bold enough to discover new signs and symbols, new flash to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty which may mean little to the evangelizers, yet prove particularly attractive for others.

— Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, §167

There is the Heart of Jesus—let us fly through that adorable door. The baker, the butcher, the coal dealer, the landlord will not follow us. Everything will come out all right, the phantoms will vanish. For ten years my wife and I have been living after this fashion. Are we not the Bohemians of the Holy Ghost, the tramps of the Consolator?

— Léon Bloy, Pilgrim of the Absolates, p. 49

Our age of restless amnesia is an opportune time for beauty, which still has the power to suspend apathy—creating an opening for truth and goodness to take root. Beauty dilates our hearts, opening them up to the transcendent, as well as offering a unique mode to enrich the faith and deepen the mystery of God’s redemptive reality. Rather than focusing exclusively on changing the broader culture, however, art must also evangelize parishioners in their own continual conversion—calling us to ever greater catholicity. Artists themselves cannot express the beauty and holiness of the trinité God without being internally transformed. There are many Catholic artists working today, in a variety of both traditional and unconventional media, who seek to share their work. When parishes are exposed to these emergent visual practices, vocabularies, and ideas, we can encounter beauty where it defies our expectations and challenges our comfortable assumptions.

The arts are a vital part of every parish, from the music used in worship and the iconography found in paintings to the design of the architecture. Outreach to practicing artists within the community of believers is often overlooked, however. Many artists have a desire to contribute to the life of the Church, but it is also necessary for the Church herself to promote, commission, and encourage their participation at the parish level. To facilitate a vibrant and challenging cultural community that strengthens our shared Catholic faith, it is also important for artists to participate in the parish, producing not just works of art or events, but contributing to the unique vocation to an ongoing dialogue with parishioners, priests, and religious. By mutually supporting one another with fellowship, prayer, the sacraments, and studio visits, we can elevate our craft and perfect the true, the good, and the beautiful in our work.

The Church can also be a place of display, freeing the hermetic art-object by opening it to alternative interpretations and modes of reception—outside the scope of the original author’s intentions. The venue of the church, as opposed to the typical white, ‘neutral’ contemporary art gallery, suggests connections and alternative routes to enter the meaning of an artwork, instead of succumbing to the secular obsession with the signature or branding of the artist.

The Catholic Church is where I first encountered the true theological dimension of beauty. Praying before the Blessed Sacrament, it became clear that it is not only humans who seek salvation in the Resurrection. The fallibility of matter itself, as it groans in its own decay, also finds fulfillment in Christ with the Eucharist as a prophetic sign of this eschatological materiality. Even the monstrance is a kind of visual exegesis on the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic host.

This understanding led me to reflect on the artistic practice of collage as an unusual, but uniquely appropriate method to aesthetically confront the implications of the Resurrection on matter, transforming the visual debris of our throwaway culture into a medium for prayer. Collage can preserve and even celebrate the discarded fragments prevalent today by identifying the source of their dignity in Christ’s incarnation.

“Though all this is marked by the tragedy of sin, which weighs down matter and obscures its clarity, the latter is redeemed in the Incarnation and becomes fully ‘theophoric’, that is, capable of putting us in touch with the Father.”

Catholic Artists working in the New Evangelization are searching for the means to convey the robust tradition of faith through authentically contemporary forms. As faithful sons and daughters of the Church, we wish to serve Christ for the revitalization of the faith. We believe that beauty revealed in the arts is uniquely situated to glorify God in our culture of skepticism and indifference. We humbly and joyfully continue to meditate upon the mysteries of our faith through paper, stone, canvas, harmony, and prose and will continue, even in obscurity, if that is God’s grace. However, we yearn to be embraced by the Church and nourished by Her patient wisdom and guidance.

References
1. Orientale Lumen, §11.