

Article

Spirituality of Artistic Service

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Abstract: In the document *Letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*, John Paul II pointed out that artists, with their creation, perform a professional social service for the benefit of the common good through the “spirituality of artistic service”, which, through the perspective of “educational art,” contributes to the life and revival of the individual and society. Since that document does not specify what a model of such spirituality would consist of, the goal of this paper is to offer a proposal for the theoretical elaboration of its potential framework. The topic is discussed from the perspective of Christian theological aesthetics. The starting point for the development of the spirituality of the artistic service model is Christian artistic creation. The indicated theoretical framework of the spirituality of artistic service is based on three dimensions of Christian artistic creation. The first represents Christian artistic creation that points to the depths of the mystery of the sacred through Christian symbols. The second dimension of Christian artistic creation relies on the contemporary form of religious imagery in changed cultural circumstances in order to adequately present a transcendent perspective of the meaning of existence. The third dimension of Christian artistic creation awakens admiration in the recipients through artistic contemplation, thus enabling a spiritual transformation and serving as the bearer of eschatological hope. In the end, it is shown that this model of spirituality in artistic service can serve as a good theoretical framework for the implementation of three new dimensions of Christian art suitable for the contemporary cultural environment: mystagogic, existential, and contemplative.

Keywords: John Paul II; educational art; spirituality of artistic service; Christian art (religious and sacred); the sacred; symbol; religious imaginary; artistic contemplation

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1. Introduction

The connection between religion and art is manifested through their joint effort to use the language of symbols to express the ineffable, not only from the mystery of what is divine but also from the mystery of the human (John Paul II 1999, no. 13). Throughout history, the mysteries of the Christian religion have served as an abundant source of inspiration for artists. Christian sacred art sought to show the beauty of God and thus make it tangible for man. A fruitful dialogue between the Christian religion and art has accordingly enabled believers to gain a deeper understanding of the mystery and meaning of existence (Pontifical Council for Culture 2006, chpt. 3). In the document *Letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*, John Paul II (1999, no. 4) points out that this kind of creation is a sublime form of art, which he dubbed “educational art”. There, he refers to the art that opens the way for mankind to experience faith through artistic creation, which at the same time enables a deeper dimension of encountering God. Such an art is educational because it is capable of empowering people in spiritual terms and thus helping them to grow and develop as human beings in the light of the mystery of the sacred. In this sense, John Paul II (1999, no. 4) emphasized that artists, thanks to their creation, perform professional social service for the benefit of the common good and that there is a “spirituality of artistic service” that contributes to the life and rebirth of the individual and society. Since the document *Letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists* does not specify what a model of such spirituality would consist of, the goal of this paper is to propose a theoretical elaboration of its potential

framework from the perspective of Christian theological aesthetics. The starting point for the development of the spirituality of the artistic service model is Christian artistic creation. The indicated theoretical framework of the spirituality of artistic service will be based on three dimensions of Christian artistic creation.

The first dimension of Christian artistic creation points towards the depths of the mystery of the sacred through Christian artistic symbols. Here, the traditional inner link between art and the mystery of the sacred will be especially thematized from the perspective of symbols. At the same time, it will be shown that only the preservation of this link enables authentic Christian artistic creation, resulting in ever deeper penetration into the mystery of the sacred. On the other hand, it will also be pointed out that breaking the authentic connection between Christian art and the mystery of the sacred results in mere kitsch, as such creation remains only on the level of pleasing superficiality.

The second dimension of Christian artistic creation should be able to offer a contemporary form of Christian religious imaginary. The altered forms of individual and social existence arising from the philosophical, scientific, technical, political, communication, and general cultural currents of the modern and contemporary eras require new dimensions of the Christian religious imaginary. Therefore, we will try to answer the following question: Is Christian artistic creation today able to offer forms of religious imagery that would still adequately present a transcendent perspective of the meaning of existence in altered cultural circumstances?

The third dimension of Christian artistic creation is open to creative inspiration for shaping Christian artwork, which will arouse admiration in the recipients through artistic contemplation, leading in turn to the inner spiritual transformation of man. Here we will delve into the conditions that need to be met so that a Christian work of art has the opportunity to serve as a bearer of eschatological hope.

At the end of the paper, it will be shown that this model of spirituality in artistic service can serve as a good theoretical framework for the implementation of three new dimensions of Christian art suitable for the contemporary cultural environment: mystagogic, existential, and contemplative.

2. Artistic Creative Service That Points to the Depths of the Sacred Mystery through Christian Symbols

The inner connection between art and the sacred is already witnessed by the art of prehistoric times (Palaeolithic and Neolithic art). One of the more complex and convincing contemporary interpretations of cave painting and prehistoric sculpture and architecture are the religious or ritual ones. The cave art found in Altamira (Spain), as well as in Chauvet, Pech-Merle, and Lascaux (France), along with the carved figures found in the caves of Hohlstein-Stadel and Vogelherd (Germany), Le Tuc d'Audoubert and Brassempouy (France), and also the huge megalithic blocks (the most widely known being Stonehenge in England), all had a ritual, religious, or magical purpose, among other things (Davies et al. [2007] 2008, pp. 6–8, 17–18). In other words, the oldest known works of art “speak”, among other things, about the fact that people from prehistoric times used art in an effort to express the intuitive feeling that they were overwhelmed by some unfathomable mystery in which they recognized the sacred (Gombrich [1995] 1999, pp. 39–53; Scruton 2009, pp. 51–53). Mircea Eliade (Eliade [1957] 2002, p. 10) defines the sacred as that which opposes the profane. As such, it manifests itself as something “completely different”. Nevertheless, the hierophany of the sacred, as a reality that is not of this world, occurs through objects that form an integral part of the natural, profane world. It is precisely through these objects that the sacred manifests itself as a force saturated with battle, which means reality, eternity, and effectiveness. A religious person wants to participate in this reality and be saturated with the power of the sacred (Eliade [1957] 2002, p. 11). Contact with the sacred, indeed, enables people to transcend the limitations of time and space and consequently return to their transcendent sources in order to simultaneously steer themselves towards their own fulfillment (Evdokimov 1989, p. 110). Since prehistoric

times, people have used the language of symbols in their attempts to come into contact with the sacred through art (Otto [1971] 1983, pp. 96, 169). Art and religion strive to show the indescribable and express the unspeakable precisely through symbols (Halík [2021] 2022, p. 31). To be more exact, by way of symbols, art and religion become a code of transcendence—a code of the truth of the unconditional (Jaspers [1978] 1998, pp. 134–139). In that context, symbols—more than concepts—are more suitable for the articulation and interpretation of the existential experience of transcendence (Malović 2016, pp. 65–66).

Precisely because of this, Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer [1944] 1978, p. 43) offers an alternative to the definition of a human being as an *animal rationale* by positing the thesis that the specificity of a human being lies in the fact that he or she is primarily a symbolic being, an *animal symbolicum*. Indeed, this author believes that the concept of reason, derived from the traditional definition of a human being as an *animal rationale*, covers only the intellectual or logical part of his or her being. This, however, unjustifiably neglects people's emotional, affective, poetic, imaginative, and religious dimensions. An appropriate and wholesome expression of the abundance and diversity of people's spiritual and cultural lives can therefore be realized exclusively in the dimension of symbolic forms, among which myth, religion, and art play a crucial role, along with language, science, and history (Kasirer [1946] 1972, p. 65). All these forms of specifically human spiritual expression and formation are realized in the medium of symbols, as they namely unite the *mundus sensibilis* and the *mundus intelligibilis*, which have been continuously opposed throughout history (Kasirer [1964] 1985, pp. 29–33). This means the following: due to the natural sensory and spiritual structures of human beings, the content of the spirit is revealed only in their sensory expression, i.e., a symbol that, as a word, is a work of art or a religious act, simultaneously points to a spiritual content beyond the sensory and is used as a vehicle of expression (Kasirer [1964] 1985, pp. 34–35).

Rudolph Arnheim (Arnheim 1969, pp. 135–150) also pointed this fact out in his analysis of the image, in which he distinguishes layers of signs, representations, and symbols. The image speaks a specific language of depth since it points towards the symbolic depth of ideas as expressions of spiritual content and meaning beyond the surface of the signs and depictions with which it portrays characters, objects, and actions. Arnheim (1969, p. 145) illustrates his thesis with the following example: "Pictorial analogues, as I said earlier, fulfill a mediating position between the world of sensory experience and the disembodied forces underlying the objects and events of that experience. A portrait by Rembrandt is a picture interpreting a particular inhabitant of Amsterdam as a kind of person, characterized by a particular pattern of physical and psychological forces—a man, let us say, battered but upright, vigilant but thoughtful. At the same time, the unknown man from a past century is of lasting interest as a symbol because his image gives an animated appearance to those more abstract qualities of oppression and resistance, outward directedness, and inner containment. The same is true for a good 'abstract', i.e., non-mimetic work of art. Since it does not portray the external shape of physical objects, it is closer to the pure forces it presents symbolically; but it portrays at the same time the inherent nature of the things and events of the world and thereby maintains its relevance for human life on earth."

The peculiarity of Christian symbols is that they strive to serve as hints of transcendence, in which it would be possible for our minds to glimpse at the sacred and experience the absolute (John Paul II 1999, nos. 15, 16). Correspondingly, wherever a human being discovers a call to the absolute and the transcendent, the opportunity for a metaphysical interpretation of reality opens up. It is the interpretation that, from the very beginning, points towards the absolute foundation of everything that exists (John Paul II 1998, no. 83). Of course, due to its transcendent nature, the sacred and absolute exceed the capacities of human direct, complete, and perfect cognition, so the human mind is permanently under the veil of mystery when it comes to this matter. This is precisely why Christian symbols are the most appropriate expression of the paradoxical dimension of the mystery of the sacred, which is in permanent dialectical tension between the possibility of its partial disclosure and its inscrutability. To be more exact, symbols partially expose the mystery to which they

refer. Yet, this disclosure does not cancel it, since symbols also hide the mystery, therefore preserving its inexhaustibility (Halík [2021] 2022, p. 31). In this way, a symbol helps the human mind in cognition to explore with its own strength (mind and senses) within the mystery and at the same time encourages it to go beyond the reachable and tangible and thus to penetrate more and more into its depth and richness (Kovač 2020, pp. 86–90).

In the context of this paper, the first dimension of spirituality in artistic service should be manifested through the efforts of contemporary artists to express the transcendent dimension of human life. This, in turn, would be possible if contemporary artists, through Christian symbols, directed the gaze of today's people towards the ever-greater depths of the mystery of the sacred, at the same time encouraging them to think about the mystery of the world and humanity (Pontifical Council for Culture 1999, no. 1). It seems, however, that sacred works of mass production often remain only on the attractive surface, and thus on superficiality, which inevitably falls into the abyss of religious and artistic kitsch (Halík [2021] 2022, p. 32).

Depending on the field of philosophy (metaphysics, anthropology, ethics), art, aesthetics, society, language, literature, media, technology, psychology, politics, ideology, economy, education, etc. within which they analyse it, different authors (Dorfles [1990] 1997; Gic [1971] 1979; Broch [1977] 2007; McBride 2005; Horvat 2013; Lewis and Lewis 2018; Radojčić 2018) define kitsch as: stereotypical, conservative, mimetic, cheap, consumerist and bad art, forgery, bad and cheap taste, shallow, passive, predictable and pre-programmed affectation and sentimentality, evil, sin, false life, insincerity, the phenomenon of forgetting death, the principle of overemphasis, banality, lack of style, triviality, sweetness, likeability, hoarding, mediocrity, comfort, repetition, imitation, pseudoculture, etc.

Roger Scruton (Scruton 2009), Rajmund Kupareo (Kupareo 2007), and Ivan Golub (Golub 1976) question the phenomenon of kitsch in religion in a fairly interesting way, which is significant in the context of this paper's topic. Scruton (2009, pp. 189–91) maintains that a concrete sacred work of art achieves its meaning insofar as it tends to be a tangible expression of the deepest truths about divine transcendence. Sacred works of mass production, with which the contemporary market of devotional objects abounds, completely deviate from this ideal and contribute only to the kitschification of religion. These artifacts, which often have a liturgical purpose, become solely a superficial projection of personal feelings without a deeper connection with the mystery of the sacred.

Using a similar vocabulary, namely the notion of aesthetic pietism, Kupareo (2007, p. 247) marks such sacral works of mass production as those that distort a truly religious attitude since they correspond to the personal needs of believers who find only correlates of personal desires in them, which in turn represents an expression of their religious immaturity. That way, continues Kupareo (2007, p. 247), sacral works as "formal signs" (semantic relations) are transformed into "magical signs" ("effective" causality relations) and considered a kind of amulet.

Golub (1976, p. 381) goes further, providing an interesting interpretation of religious kitsch. For him, kitsch is an exaggeration and one-sided accentuation of one part of reality at the expense of the truth of the whole. Heresies therefore primarily represent religious kitsch because they unilaterally highlight only one aspect of some religious truth and thereby lead to delusions and lies, e.g., when they emphasize only Christ's divinity or only his humanity. Applying this criterion to Christian religious and sacred art, Golub (1976, p. 381) highlights the following: "Kitsch—art, music, and speech—can be heretical, too. Should we recall certain sweet visual, musical, or oratorical representations of Christ as well as brutal, violent visions of God? Surely there is no such art, such words, colors, or sounds that could express the totality of the Mystery, but art acknowledges the Mystery; it differs from kitsch precisely because of that. Kitsch does not know the Mystery, while art always confesses it; a work of art is immersed in the Mystery, while kitsch represents an escape from the Mystery, tearing the Mystery apart."

The first dimension of the spirituality of artistic service that is proposed here should enable today's human beings to permanently evade the kitsch of banality, routine, stereo-

types, and mediocrity of superficiality and to further penetrate the depths of the mystery of the sacred, so that infinite horizons of the transcendent would open up for them, primarily through religious and sacred works of art (*Pontifical Council for Culture* 2006, chpt. 3). The second dimension of the spirituality of artistic service should facilitate such an opening and approach to the mystery, as that dimension could offer forms of Christian religious imaginary that would adequately present a transcendent perspective of the meaning of existence in contemporary culture.

3. Artistic Creative Service That Offers a Contemporary Form of Christian Religious Imaginary as a Transcendent Perspective of the Meaning of Existence

The cultural imaginary is a system and a stock of preconceptions that people of a certain era rely on in their attempts to interpret the basic structure of reality and thus the meaning of existence and people's place in it. Religious imaginary can greatly contribute to the construction of general cultural imaginary; however, according to the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz (*Miłosz [1995] 1999*, pp. 27–30), it has been gradually losing its power of the last grounding of reality that it had prior to the Copernican impact of the scientific and technical civilization, from the dawn of the new age to the present time. Today, it seems that the expressions of despair, absurdity, and general nihilism of modern culture, as well as the intensification of the feeling of futility and rapacious consumerism of contemporary culture, require a revival of the religious imaginary, which in new forms would once again be able to offer a transcendent dimension of meaning (*Miłosz [1995] 1999*, pp. 31–32). The question in the context of this topic is therefore the following: What key elements construct the contemporary cultural imaginary, with regard to which new forms of the Christian religious imaginary could and should be sought?

According to Zagorka Golubović (*Golubović 2010*, p. 111), the dominant imaginary of contemporary culture is based on pragmatic economic and utilitarian principles, which represent the basic criteria of personal and social development, primarily in the forms of a growing material-living standard, constant consumption, and permanent technological innovation. She sees such an approach as a reductionism of the concept of culture, whose primary goal should be the humanization of the individual and society through the values of the “communal ethos” that could enable the implementation of the potentials of humanization (*Golubović 2010*, pp. 110, 113). The aforementioned author further maintains that the contemporary concept of culture has lost its reflective and critical dimension, and is therefore strongly marked by moral relativism that erases the distinction between good and evil, better and worse choices, so its reductionism manifests itself as: value disorientation due to a life that has been reduced to the acquisition and consumption of goods, the lost sense of solidarity due to possessive individualism, the impoverished forms of human communication due to the dominance of technocracy, the absolutization of economic rationality at the expense of social rationality, imitation and reproduction that have replaced creation and originality, the loss of critical thinking in favour of populism, the escape from the real world into the virtual one, etc. (*Golubović 2010*, pp. 112–14, 117).

Considering this reductionism, guided by economic values as the most important criterion of human development and technocratically oriented concepts as the most important criterion of social development, *Golubović (2010, pp. 115, 121)* believes that it is necessary to revitalize the substantial elements of culture as the most important criteria of human existence and development. These are primarily freedoms of thought and action, which are based on creative imagination as a cultural agent of humanization (*Golubović 2010*, p. 117). It is precisely creative imagination that makes it possible to see culture not only as a transmission of civilizational achievements (produced goods and social systems that are necessary for survival and the satisfaction of human needs), but also as meaningful constructions of human reality in which the life of an individual and society can be fashioned through reflective interpretation (*Golubović 2010*, pp. 110–11).

The second dimension of the spirituality of artistic service would have to be realized precisely in the artistic creative imagination, which within the general cultural imaginary

would once again be able to revive the potentials of the Christian religious imaginary as a specific association to the transcendent dimension of meaning (Rus 2004, pp. 1169–76). Contemporary culture has been strongly influenced by the crisis of meaning. It was partly caused by the spiritual climate of various forms of nihilism, which confines people to the limits of their own immanence without any relationship with the transcendent. Precisely this type of crisis of meaning then leads to the reduction of reason to a mere instrumental function (John Paul II 1998, no. 81), which in turn results in all those dynamics of absolutization of economic and technocratic rationality analyzed by Golubović (2010). The answer to the crisis of meaning should therefore be sought in the kind of rationality that will be able to open space for today's people to reflect on the unconditional foundation and ultimate purpose of their entire existence and actions. This type of rationality is a reflection of faith, which for Christians has its source in Revelation, undoubtedly, but also in the natural religious constitution of every human being, which manifests itself as openness to transcendence (John Paul II 1998, no. 81).

A sociologist of religion, Željko Mardešić (Mardešić 2007, p. 252), accurately pointed out that the true function of religion is to “satisfy” the meaning of human existence. Reflection on faith in this context would help a person in the quest for answers to the so-called orienting life questions such as: how should we live, how to master dying, does our being have a why and to what end, and what end would that be (Ratzinger [2013] 2015, p. 128)? Reflection on faith within contemporary forms of the religious imaginary can therefore open the horizon of meaning, especially with regard to life experiences of injustice, suffering, guilt, meaninglessness, and ultimately death itself (Küng [1990] 2003, p. 81).

Christian religious and sacred art can contribute to this kind of reflection of faith in its own specific way, as it is able to symbolically embody the aforementioned orientation questions of people through various aesthetic forms that illuminate human miseries and joys and consequently help them to gradually reveal their position in history (Anić and Sever Globan 2018, p. 306). Thanks to the contribution of artists, knowledge of the transcendent can be manifested better (Second Vatican Council 1965, no. 62). If, on the other hand, it serves as an incentive for deep speculation—when it reflects in aesthetic and symbolic terms on the unfathomable and ineffable mystery of the sacred—the work of art becomes, in its own special manner, a way to approach the deepest reality and meaning of mankind and the world (John Paul II 1999, no. 6).

So in this spirit, the document *Via pulchritudinis* (Pontifical Council for Culture 2006, chpt. 3) underscores the following: “All Christian artwork has such a meaning: it is, by nature, a ‘symbol’, a reality that refers beyond itself and leads along the path that reveals the meaning, origin, and end of our terrestrial journey. Its beauty is characterized by a capacity to move from the interior ‘for self’ to that of the ‘more than self’.”

On the same note, Romano Guardini (Guardini [1995] 2005, p. 98) emphasized that through a work of art in which a new abundance of meaning emerges, a person reaches a deeper level of awareness of the totality of the being there (*dasein*) and therefore can experience personal spiritual transformation. It is a special kind of transformation that, for example, in a Christian religious and sacred work of art, is manifested as a transition from the immediate reality in which people have been torn apart by numerous blows and demands of everyday life to the “unreal” domain of the religious imaginary in which they can contemplate ideas of different life possibilities that have the power of revealing a transcendent meaning (Guardini [1995] 2005, pp. 99, 110).

In that sense, the third dimension of the spirituality of artistic service also becomes unavoidable. It is the dimension that was denoted in the introductory part of this paper as artistic creation that is open to creative inspiration for shaping Christian artwork, which will arouse admiration in the recipients through artistic contemplation, leading in turn to the spiritual transformation of a human being. Works of art in this context would also be carriers of eschatological hope.

4. Artistic Creative Service That Awakens Admiration through Artistic Contemplation That Leads to the Spiritual Transformation of a Human Being

According to Joseph Ratzinger (Ratzinger 2007, p. 48), Christianity permanently bases its poetic proclamation of the sacred through art on the link between truth and beauty. For him, beauty represents first and foremost the clarity of knowledge, though knowledge of a higher form, since it should elevate mankind towards the fullness of truth. Ratzinger (2007, p. 49) actually follows the thought of the medieval Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas, distinguishing between two types of knowledge: rational and deductive knowledge, which is by all means indispensable for both scientific and theological thinking, and contemplative knowledge, which is especially important for seeing beauty and truth in a work of art, among other things. This type of cognition results from contemplative observation, which, according to Evdokimov (1989, p. 140), when it comes to observing an icon, thanks to the power of the external senses, opens in the observer those internal senses of cognition with which the observer transgresses over the surface of the merely empirical and perceives the presence of transcendence as *mysterium tremendum*. Sacred art rests precisely on this kind of observation, which reaches further and deeper than the senses, though not hindered by them but directed towards their original determination. That is the observation that perceives the transparency of the spirit within the senses. Christian religious and sacred art would, according to Ratzinger ([2013] 2015, pp. 121, 129, 131–32), lead to this new view of contemplative faith, which enables the invisible to be perceived in the visible.

Despite the fact that the focus of contemporary culture is primarily on practice, as evidenced by the depletion of human strength mainly in doing and producing, it seems that the intrinsic need for a contemplative spirit has not yet died in people (Kongregacija za ustanove posvećenog života i družbe apostolskog života [2015] 2016, no. 3). According to this actually contemplative tendency, modern people can gradually become pilgrims to the depths where they can sense the traces of transcendence (Kongregacija za ustanove posvećenog života i družbe apostolskog života [2015] 2016, nos. 11, 45). In this context, The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life defines contemplation in the document *Contemplate: To Consecrated Men and Women on the Path of Beauty* in the following manner: “The expression ‘to contemplate’ in everyday speech means to watch for a long time, to carefully observe something that arouses wonder or admiration, for example, natural scenes, starry skies, paintings, monuments, or landscapes. Such perspective, by grasping beauty and enjoying it, can go beyond what is contemplated and encourage the search for the creator of beauty (cf. *Wisdom* 13, 1–9, *Romans* 1, 20). It is a perspective that contains something beyond seeing [...]. If it is true that the term contemplation comes from Greek (*theorein/theoria*), signifying the intuition of the mind that reaches unity from the multiplicity of what is seen, the whole through a fragment, and the deep nature of things in a phenomenon, it is even more true that a biblical human being has an essentially contemplative *animus* (Kongregacija za ustanove posvećenog života i družbe apostolskog života [2015] 2016, no. 4).”

This kind of contemplative spirit is able to find, mainly in works of art, help for the consideration of phenomena through which consciousness can rise to its transcendent origin. According to Ken Wilber’s (Wilber 1997, pp. 71–92) integral theory, consciousness is not manifested in a closed and unchanging form, as highlighted by certain theories of consciousness that emphasize only one of its dimensions. The integral theory of consciousness presupposes the connection of several of its aspects: the intentional aspect (internal subjective), the behavioral aspect (external objective), as well as the cultural and social aspect (intersubjective). As Wilber (1997, p. 83) put it, “In short, consciousness is not located merely in the physical brain, nor in the physical organism, nor in the ecological system, nor in the cultural context, nor does it emerge from any of those domains. Rather, it is anchored in and distributed across all of those domains with all of their available levels.” The integral theory of consciousness is able to help people open their minds and hearts towards an integral practice of transformation that seeks to train all the core dimensions of the human being, i.e., the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions (Wilber

[2000] 2004, pp. 141–47). In this context, we can conclude that all the indicated aspects of consciousness (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) are integrated in a special way in the recipient's encounter with a work of art. To be more exact, observing a work of art presupposes the integration of sensory experience (the first eye of the body), mental and emotional experience (the second eye of the mind), and spiritual experience (the third eye of contemplation), leading to an integral transformation. The integration of all dimensions of consciousness that results from observations made with the eye of the body, the eye of the mind, and the eye of contemplation, Richard Rohr (Rohr [2009] 2016, pp. 39–40) describes simply as presence. He finds presence to be the experience of a moment of deep connection with the secret of the sacred, before which the consciousness remains amazed. Consciousness that sees the beauty of the phenomenon of a work of art (sensory experience or the first eye of the body) and recognizes its transcendent origin in it (mental experience or the second eye of the mind), through the power of aesthetic contemplation, is thus consumed by deep admiration (spiritual experience or the third eye of contemplation) (Pontifical Council for Culture 2006, chpts. 2, 3). Cynthia Bourgeault (Bourgeault [2004] 2019, pp. 161–74) believes that this dimension of presence in amazement is realized not only as a contemplative attention of the mind (mindfulness) but also as a contemplative attention of the heart (heartfulness), characterized by humility and pure love that leads to complete surrender to oneself. On the other hand, this kind of deep admiration, affecting both the mind and the heart, then leads further towards the inner spiritual transformation of the observers, simultaneously encouraging them to come out of themselves and open up to others (Pontifical Council for Culture 2006, chpt. 2). This approach, of course, can greatly help today's mankind in restoring interpersonal relations as well as in healing social divisions, which in a torn and divided world constitutes an urgent moral obligation (Kongregacija za ustanove posvećenog života i družbe apostolskog života [2015] 2016, no. 51).

According to Ratzinger (2007, p. 51), many contemporary works of art miss this point of contemplative wonder by placing greater emphasis on the shocking, violent, vulgar, and ultimately ugly. He characterizes such works of art as misleading, dizzying, and false since they hinder a person from coming out of and rising up to higher levels of truth. They do not allow for a person to undergo an inner spiritual transformation, as they lead him or her to narcissistic self-contemplation, closing themselves to others (Ratzinger 2007, p. 52).

Differing completely from Ratzinger's approach, the authors Hans Maier (Maier 2015, pp. 50–58) and Gustav Schörghofer (Schörghofer 2015, pp. 97–103) emphasize that Christianity actually gave birth to a new aesthetic of reckless beauty, based on the undisguised truth of the abyss, ugliness, misery, disease, and death, called the aesthetics of kenosis. Progressively transcending the ancient canon of moderate beauty, where the depiction of a successful, complete, and higher person prevails, Christianity has increasingly emphasized the imperfect, fragmentary, and painful in its artistic expressions, thereby laying the foundations for a new aesthetic of kenosis (Maier 2015, pp. 51–54).

Christianity built itself on God's kenosis, which Paul talks about in his Epistle to the Philippians (2, 6–8). In line with that, art that is under Christian influence should have made the Son of God visible, who became a man and humbled himself by dying on the cross. For this reason, Christian art has been focused on God's kenosis manifested in the suffering of God's Son. That suffering, of course, encompassed the suffering of all people and was manifested in the depiction of the world of the poor, crippled, sick, and disenfranchised, who were regularly invisible in the ancient art canons (Maier 2015, p. 52). Schörghofer (2015, pp. 97–101) sees a contemporary echo of the kenosis aesthetics in the art of the 20th and 21st centuries. According to him, the aesthetics of kenosis can be seen in three significant phenomena that characterize modern and contemporary art, namely: the cry and screaming of modern and contemporary art; the emptiness and silence of modern and contemporary works of art; and low and small art in which useful objects, waste, and consumer goods take the place of the great themes of art (myths, biblical narratives, and legends).

These three phenomena shall not be further elaborated on in this article. We only wanted to emphasize that beauty, understood as the brilliance of truth and the clarity of knowledge, can also be seen in the contemplation of works of art that bear the truth of the abyss, ugliness, misery, shock, illness, and death. It is a transforming truth in which one can also glimpse a trace of transcendence that manifests itself as kenotic dispossession.

The beauty of a work of art in this sense is not only related to truth but should also be related to goodness. Admiration of works of art, especially religious and sacred ones, should lead a person to the inner path of self-transcendence, notes [Ratzinger \(2007, p. 50\)](#). A work of art in that context, according to Pierre Hadot ([Hadot \[2002\] 2013, pp. 16–17](#)), is supposed to serve as an incentive to change the moral and practical way of life, which in turn should make the person in question better. How? A work of art, e.g., a theater performance, is able to pull the viewer into the artistic vision of the human, putting before him or her the decision to follow or avoid certain behaviors, decisions, choices, solutions to life situations, and questions posed by the protagonists in his or her personal and social life. In this context, the following insight by [Kupareo \(1993, p. 38\)](#) proves to be rather significant: “Art clothes all values in the garb of perfection, not only because art must be perfect in itself but also because it elevates these concrete aspects to the level of ‘ideas’ and ‘ideals’. The work of art will no longer be about Caesar, Columbus, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and others, which is to say only about the lives of some historical figures, their plans, struggles, despairs, hatreds, loves, etc.; they become symbols of ‘role models’ (good or bad) for feelings and human activities, worthy of respect and imitation or repulsion.”

The third dimension of the spirituality of artistic service should therefore be realized in the creation of such religious and sacred works of art that will open contemporaries to the aesthetic contemplation of truth and goodness in such a way as to arouse in them the admiration for the wise messages of life’s truths about the world, humanity, and God, thus helping them “find their way spiritually” in life, in the realm of searching for the meaning of life and in the domain of concrete moral and practical action in everyday life ([Guardini \[1995\] 2005, pp. 88, 100](#)). Art, according to [Kupareo \(1993, p. 36\)](#), strives to show people that they can realize themselves more fully. This would actually mean that it aims to show that people can be in greater agreement with themselves, with others, with nature, and ultimately with God as the transcendent source of their existence ([Kupareo 1987, p. 103](#)).

A Christian religious and sacred work of art that brings out in people a longing for the unspeakable and a willingness to sacrifice and abandon oneself is also of eschatological character, as it manifests a kind of anticipation of life and training for life. As the inner transformation of a person in awe, it is actually a kind of prelude to future, eternal life. To be more exact, a work of art—similar to, for example, dance and liturgy—is not constrained by the confinement and weight of everyday life but hints at various possibilities for a better, more meaningful, and thereby more fulfilling life. That way it becomes a concrete, tangible form of hope that has already been sown here and now, so that during this life people will bear the fruits of truth, goodness, and beauty, which will somehow accustom them to a fully designed life in the fullness of transcendence and to freedom as well as openness to the Other and for others ([Guardini \[1995\] 2005, pp. 112–13](#); [Ratzinger \[2013\] 2015, pp. 10, 115](#)).

5. Discussion: “Educational Art” in the Service of Training a Person for Symbolic Understanding and a Contemplative Way of Life

Paul Evdokimov ([Evdokimov 1989, p. 51](#)) expressed concern regarding the fact that a technically and consumerist-oriented civilization considers poets and prophets useless. While making sure that everything is done to satisfy the physical hunger in the world, it is necessary to do at least as much to satisfy the spiritual hunger. Therefore, contemporary culture must confirm the primacy of the “refined spirit,” and, in that sense, it is obliged to protect and promote the importance of poets and prophets. According to [Evdokimov \(1989, p. 52\)](#), Christian believers are called, by their very nature, to reveal the invisible presence of transcendence to the world that closes itself in its immanence.

The search for such manifestations of transcendence in contemporary culture can also be encouraged by Christian artists who will awaken human dormant spiritual abilities, such as wonder, admiration, and the search for truth through a contemplative way of life, as well as personal spiritual transformation and growth through selfless dedication to others (Dubay 1999, pp. 17–20). In this sense, an artist can be an eminent spokesman of the modern human being seeking the invisible presence of transcendence, thanks to the ability, in the concreteness of the artwork, to express general aspirations, questions, pains, protests, joys, disappointments, hopes—and everything that people feel but they themselves do not have a suitable way to express—with aesthetic forms (Collingwood 2011, pp. 11–14). Artists have the gift of reshaping the natural world of purposes into an artistic world of meaning in which visible symbols of the invisible presence of transcendence remain preserved and which, in a concrete work of art, the observers can permanently contemplate, admire, and accordingly develop in spiritual terms (Guardini [1995] 2005, pp. 83, 99). That way, the artist, with the power of his or her artwork, helps a person in the search for answers to questions that are of fundamental importance for his or her survival (Kupareo 2007, p. 339).

It seems that it would represent a sublime form of art that John Paul II (1999, no. 4) calls “educational art”, since it should contribute to the personal growth of a person, the development of society, and the deeper connection of Christian religious communities. This, of course, is not about assigning only a functional value to art, according to which it would be reduced to a means of achieving various non-artistic goals, such as the didactic and pedagogical or moral and practical functions of a work of art. Guardini ([1995] 2005, pp. 97, 100–1) made an excellent observation that art does not primarily have an extra-artistic purpose (technical, economic, didactic, ethical, religious, etc.), but that it certainly has a meaning. That meaning, on the other hand, manifests itself in the revealing form of artistic symbols that can train the observers for contemplative silence, composure, and listening for transcendence, by which the possibilities of their spiritual transformation are realized. In this context, the question posed by Pope Francis becomes utterly important (Francis 2015, no. 222; Francis 2022, no. 45): How can modern human beings once again become capable of symbolic understanding and living a contemplative way of life?

Deborah J. Haynes (Haynes 2006, pp. 72, 80) maintains that such training can be contributed by those artists who, among other things, are open to the religious tradition based on metaphysical ideas about the sacred and who are also open to contemplative practices in their work. In addition to personal motivation and their own views, such artists do not neglect the perspective of the sacred, which thus becomes their transcendent motivation for creating works of art. Therefore, they also include their own religious beliefs in their creation, and they do it decisively but always in the humility of open communication with others (Haynes 1997, p. 237). In this context, Haynes (1997, p. 237) points out: “In my view, artists should be self-determining but not overly individualistic, guided by a moral purpose and a sense of living tradition, and they should believe in and act on the communicative power of art. The education of artists should foster these values.” Artists who are guided by metaphysical ideas about the sacred and, thus, the transcendent motivation of creation are able to provide an answer of hope to the existential insecurity and despair that mark our age. On the one hand, this is the retrospective dimension of hope, i.e., the one that contemplates the transcendent dimension of meaning in the preserved memory of sacred symbols. On the other hand, it is a perspective dimension of hope, i.e., one that, considering the current problems and demands of contemporary culture, corresponds to new forms of religious imaginary. This imaginary is enriched with the positive content of meaning, value, feeling, beauty, and evocation of good, opening today’s humanity to that eschatological point, the *already yes but not yet* promise of the future in the present (Haynes 1997, pp. 241–45).

In this context, the language of Christian religious and sacred artwork does not only communicate the message of the artist but also the truth about the mystery of the sacred that is contemplated by the artist, who provides us with his or her own interpretation of that mystery through the power of symbols and religious imagery. Artists do this not to

glorify themselves but to glorify their transcendent source (*Pontifical Council for Culture* 2006, chpt. 3). On a further point, it is important to highlight the creative artistic experience of icon painter Michael Courey, a priest of the Greek Orthodox Church, and American Christian artist Makoto Fujimura.

Courey (2017, p. 152) points out that his thirty years of artistic experience had taught him that an icon painter can and should draw inspiration for his sacred artistic creation from six sources, namely: the Holy Scripture, tradition, publications in the fields of theology, history, and artistic practice, concrete creative experience in painting icons, prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. All these sources have a common purpose, which is to spiritually prepare the icon painter so that, through creative skill, the mystery of the sacred in Christian religious symbols and imagery would be at least partially revealed, with the power of which observers of the icon could touch the primal source of the meaning of existence through contemplative immersion, so that they would be spiritually transformed in the light of Christian hope through their admiration of the sacred (Courey 2017, pp. 152–61).

Makoto Fujimura (Fujimura 2020, p. 3) sees his own work as a theological work as much as an artistic one. This is why he believes that artistic creation should be the theology of making. It is a theology based on the so-called slow art, which is actually the sacred act of creating an artwork slowly, allowing for time in which one can become aware of God's creative presence (Fujimura 2020, p. 53). In this context, Fujimura (2020, pp. 3–4) writes the following: "Art making, to me, is a discipline of awareness, prayer, and praise. Imagination gives us wings to create, but it is through Christ's tears and the invitation to the feast of God that we can be partakers of the New Creation. [...] And through this act, I begin to feel deeply the compassion of God for my own existence and, by extension, for the existence of others. My works, therefore, have a life of their own, and I am listening to the voice of the Creator through my creation. I am drawn into prayer as I work." Similar to creation, the slow viewing/ beholding of an artwork by its recipients can be a co-creative act of awareness, prayer, and celebration of God's presence. The recipients who find time to dwell on a work of art are able to gradually penetrate into the deeper layers of their being and sense the traces of transcendence in it. Such art is indeed educational. It teaches a special kind of knowledge that is not only rational (conceptual, logical, and discursive) but is primarily intuitive. It is the integral knowledge of the mind and heart, reason and feelings, that first realizes and senses the mystery of transcendence. This is the knowledge about which Fujimura (2020, pp. 82–83) wrote: "If beauty, truth, and goodness are qualities of our movement back to God, then the end of the rainbow of such pursuit is not rational recognition but an encounter. Artists do not seek proof of God's existence; artists explore the unknown in search of deeper meaning."

6. Conclusions

In the early Middle Ages, and with regard to the cultural circumstances and spiritual needs of that time, Christian art in the West—painting above all—had primarily a catechetical educational role for illiterate believers (*Biblia pauperum*) and for knowledgeable believers who wanted to understand the biblical message more deeply, and a heralding role for non-believers (Pehar 2016, p. 58; Kovač 2020, p. 31). The late Middle Ages, again with regard to the cultural circumstances and spiritual needs of that time, witnessed the development of a threefold dimension of Christian art: didactic (teaching the ignorant who are taught through images), mnemonic (stronger imprinting of the mystery of the Incarnation and examples of the virtues of the saints in the memory), and affective (encouraging pious sensibility and devotion) (Pehar 2016, pp. 58–59). Considering the cultural circumstances of today's time (or lack thereof), it seems that we can speak of a spiritual need for three new dimensions of Christian art. These are the mystagogic, existential, and contemplative dimensions.

The mystagogic dimension of art is utterly important for overcoming the prevailing kitschification of religion, which does not even spare Christian believers today. Analogous to the mystagogical dimension of worship (Crnčević 2003, pp. 45–59), the mystagogic

dimension of art is supposed to guide the observer through artistic symbols towards the depths of the mystery of the sacred in order to experience it as much as possible and to live with it in a concrete work of art. The paper tried to show that the first point of the spirituality of artistic service, which, through the religious and sacred artwork of today's people, tries to open to the infinite horizons of the transcendent, is suitable precisely for the achievement of the mystagogic dimension of Christian art.

The existential dimension of art is important primarily in relation to the dominant cultural imaginary of contemporary culture, which is characterized by a crisis of meaning that manifests itself in the spiritual dynamism of absurdity and universal nihilism, as well as in the feeling of futility and frantic consumerism. The existential dimension of art should lead to a transcendent option of meaning, which could be the answer to the crisis of meaning of today's people, who close themselves in a narrow-minded manner within the limits of their own immanence. The paper strived to show that the second point of the spirituality of artistic service, which is able to encourage a person to reflect on the unconditional foundation and ultimate purpose of his or her entire being and action through new forms of the religious imaginary of a work of art, is suitable for the achievement of the existential dimension of art.

The contemplative dimension of art is noteworthy, especially with regard to the prevailing cultural content that predominantly focuses on a desperate depiction of the human condition, expressed through the accentuation of what is shocking, violent, vulgar, and ultimately ugly. Through the aesthetic contemplation of truth and good, the contemplative dimension of art should awaken in its recipients a kind of admiration that is capable of changing a person from the inside, serving as a bearer of eschatological hope. This paper also aimed to show that the third point of the spirituality of artistic service, which can train a modern person for contemplative silence, composure, and listening for transcendence, through which the possibilities of his or her spiritual transformation are realized, is suitable for the realization of the contemplative dimension of art.

This paper provides a theoretical framework for all three points of spirituality in artistic service from the perspective of Christian theological aesthetics and from the starting point of Christian artistic creation. The possibility of realizing the theoretical model offered here in the practice of artistic creation should be checked next. That part of the work is, of course, left to the creative practice of interested Christian artists.

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