The relationship between Christian faith and art is a deep and abiding one. Scripture, which begins with its focus on an imagistic, evocative, dramatic word of God, sets the stage by conveying the word through the narrative of story, the images of creation, the architecture of the temple, the dance of the prophets, the music of the Psalms, and the drama of the story of faith.

If the relationship is there in the beginning, however, it has also had turbulent moments in its history, as the story of iconoclastic movements attests. From the Council of Elvira in 315 A.D. down to the present, theologians and Christian communities—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—have challenged the presence of the arts and, particularly, the visual arts in the life of the church. But such iconoclastic movements did not alter the reality of the relationship, for the church’s own need for the arts as mediatory structures for conveying, teaching, and deepening the Christian faith remained determinative. The relationship was too profound to be eliminated. At best, it could only be modified by emphasizing certain art forms over others or controlling the way they functioned in the church’s life.

In commenting on how we might understand this relationship, I want to identify core ways the arts interact with the life of faith. Five such points of intersection are fundamental. My comments are highly abbreviated, but I hope helpful in exploring the importance of the arts for the church.

The arts are an integral part of worship. Nowhere is the importance of the arts greater for the life of faith than in worship. We need only think for a moment about how dependent we are on them. We enter a building, a work of architecture, and move into a defined liturgical space. We walk down the aisle and into our pew, fold our hands, rise, sit, bow our heads, kneel, all in choreographed movements that are the rudiments of dance. We listen to music and sing hymns, using the poetry of the Psalms and the stories of the gospels. We see stained glass windows and the art of paraments and vestments and communion ware. In so doing, we participate in a

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Arts in the Church: 
Beautiful, but Also Faithful

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After a poetry reading in which I read poems by women who treated Christian themes rather directly and often as believers, a well-spoken colleague marveled that I had found all these good poets who happened to treat Christian themes, if not from the inside, at least from an admiring distance. Such women as Stevie Smith, Anne Sexton, Mona Van Duyn, Vassar Miller, Patricia Beer—the list is respectable and not short. Her point was that the assumption of the whole contemporary literary establishment was that Christianity was done for and that the literature of the day never treated the Christian story.

These poets, however, are outside the ken of most Christian publishing houses, which seem to prefer greeting-card verse (flush-left prose) if they consider verse at all, apparently assuming that good poetry doesn't sell.

On the other hand, there is the conversation I had with the member of a Lutheran college art department about an exhibition of a very good Christian artist. The immediate reaction was fear: saying an artist was Christian, I could hear, put him down several notches on whatever scale it is we use to rate artworks.

This is the general attitude of the secular culture toward Christian art, added to an almost visceral rejection of the content. Looking through any Writer's Market book, one is struck by the many magazines that stipulate: no religious verse.

The serious artist with Christian convictions will be caught in the rip tide between these prejudices: Christians don't like good art, and secularists don't like Christian art, so the good Christian art is left somewhere in the middle without a publisher, although the audience is there and waiting.

Meanwhile, the church consumes the arts in its day-to-day worship life. Churches need talented and gifted musicians. They need writers who can write words that faithfully praise the Lord. They need artists who can create works of art worth looking at over time. Such artists, including even dramatists, function more

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drama of the Christian story. All of the major art forms are present and all become means through which we are called into the presence of God. The acts of ritual within the liturgical life are woven in a fabric of the arts, and they play upon our minds and touch our souls.

The arts as sources of religious questions. The arts confront us with the religious and moral questions of human existence—questions about the meaning and purpose of human life, about birth and death, alienation and redemption, love and justice, order and chaos, about our relationship to God. The artist gives us sounds, images, voice, and movement that pull us into these questions and press us to experience their power and explore their meaning. The arts are prolegomena to theological reflection. They are windows into the spiritual situation of both our souls and our world.

The arts provide us insights into religious traditions. Art invites us to encounter and appropriate the religious traditions from which we come. A painting of Giotto, a black spiritual, the stained glass windows of Chartres, the architecture of a prairie church, the poetry of the Book of Common Prayer, a Mozart mass, a Rouault Christ figure—all become symbolically rich sources through which we can enter into diverse expressions of Christian life and know something of the larger history of which they (and we) are a part. In all religious traditions—from the Orthodox to the Quaker, from high church to low church—there are artistic forms that create, sustain, and transmit the tradition itself. Art is an entrance into tradition and history.

The arts can be prophetic. Art can speak to us prophetically and enliven our own prophetic consciousness. It can pronounce the divine no against human idolatries and injustice; it can offer the divine yes of new possibility. It can be form-negating and form-creating in the power of its expression: for art can negate those distorted forms that embody the evil of the world and can point to the need to create new forms for the common good. Nowhere is this more powerfully seen in the modern world than in the treatment of war and violence by such artists as Kaethe Kollwitz, Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, and Georges Rouault. Through their work we see judgment against the idolatry of war and the call for new visions of peace.

The arts can be sacramental. Art may become the means through which we know grace. Even though it is a human construct, art may become that through which we experience the holy. Art may become the burning bush that turns profane ground into sacred ground. We do not control the power of art; we do not determine its sacramental structure. Sacramentality is a gift. But when a work of music or dance or visual art is sacramental, we know ourselves on holy ground and we know God's presence in the world.

In these five ways art is not only useful but essential to the life of faith, for it is a means, a mediating reality, that brings to us the word of God, the judgment of God, the grace of God.
like the artisans of the medieval period—producing art that praises or points to God in clear and functional ways that ordinary Christians can appreciate. Beautiful, yes, but also faithful.

The last contemporary worship conference I attended—with its workshops on music, drama, banners, new liturgies, etc.—was really a creative arts workshop for worship. People were producing artistic materials and teaching others to do the same. Art for a purpose, to glorify the name of Jesus and invite other people in to do likewise. Whatever the medium, the work aimed to speak Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, to people.

Here is where the church is actively engaged with the arts. It needs to encourage the crafts so they flourish among us even today. We have an astonishing number of fine artistic works—operas, plays, poems, paintings, sculptures, dance, etc.—that are both modern and profoundly Christian. Some of them are readily accessible to the conventional middle-class Christian. The church and its institutions of higher learning should not only perform them but cause more to be created. As one who works at that edge of the church and the arts, I am amazed at how much there is to do and how much more could be done if the church understood its power to commission new works even as it tends to the rich and marvelous tradition that it already has. ☝