

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM

DAY NINE

SACRED ART AND SACRED FURNISHINGS: WHEN BEAUTY LEADS THE SOUL TO GOD

On Day Eight, we considered sacred music. The Church's song must serve the liturgy, give voice to her faith, and direct hearts toward the glory of God.

Today *Sacrosanctum Concilium* turns from what we hear in worship to what we see and touch.

Chapter VII concerns sacred art and the things set apart for divine worship: churches, altars, tabernacles, baptisteries, images, vestments, and furnishings. The Council begins with a generous claim. The Church has long welcomed the arts because human skill can produce works that help lift the mind toward God.

But sacred art has a purpose beyond pleasing the eye. A beautiful church is a place where the mysteries of the faith are celebrated. An image should help the faithful contemplate Christ and His saints. An altar, vessel, or vestment should serve the sacred action for which it was made.

The Council calls for the Church's artistic inheritance to be carefully preserved. It also welcomes worthy art from the present day and from different peoples. Bishops must exercise judgment, artists need formation, and clergy should learn enough about sacred art to care for what the Church has received and guide what she commissions.

As we read, we can ask: What makes a work of art suitable for sacred use? How can a church welcome new work while protecting its inheritance? And does the space in which we worship help us attend to God?

I. READ

Read Chapter VII, Sections 122-130, "Sacred Art and Sacred Furnishings," in the official text of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

122. Very rightly the fine arts are considered to rank among the noblest activities of man's genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest

achievement, which is sacred art. These arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God's praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men's minds devoutly toward God.

Holy Mother Church has therefore always been the friend of the fine arts and has ever sought their noble help, with the special aim that all things set apart for use in divine worship should be truly worthy, becoming, and beautiful, signs and symbols of the supernatural world, and for this purpose she has trained artists. In fact, the Church has, with good reason, always reserved to herself the right to pass judgment upon the arts, deciding which of the works of artists are in accordance with faith, piety, and cherished traditional laws, and thereby fitted for sacred use.

The Church has been particularly careful to see that sacred furnishings should worthily and beautifully serve the dignity of worship, and has admitted changes in materials, style, or ornamentation prompted by the progress of the technical arts with the passage of time.

Wherefore it has pleased the Fathers to issue the following decrees on these matters.

123. The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites. Thus, in the course of the centuries, she has brought into being a treasury of art which must be very carefully preserved. The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence and honor; thereby it is enabled to contribute its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise in honor of the Catholic faith sung by great men in times gone by.

124. Ordinaries, by the encouragement and favor they show to art which is truly sacred, should strive after noble beauty rather than mere sumptuous display. This principle is to apply also in the matter of sacred vestments and ornaments.

Let bishops carefully remove from the house of God and from other sacred places those works of artists which are repugnant to faith, morals, and Christian piety, and which offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or by lack of artistic worth, mediocrity and pretense.

And when churches are to be built, let great care be taken that they be suitable for the celebration of liturgical services and for the active participation of the faithful.

125. The practice of placing sacred images in churches so that they may be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained. Nevertheless their number should be moderate and their relative positions should reflect right order. For otherwise they may create confusion among the Christian people and foster devotion of doubtful orthodoxy.

126. When passing judgment on works of art, local ordinaries shall give a hearing to the diocesan commission on sacred art and, if needed, also to others who are especially expert, and to the commissions referred to in Art. 44, 45, and 46.

Ordinaries must be very careful to see that sacred furnishings and works of value are not disposed of or dispersed; for they are the ornaments of the house of God.

127. Bishops should have a special concern for artists, so as to imbue them with the spirit of sacred art and of the sacred liturgy. This they may do in person or through suitable priests who are gifted with a knowledge and love of art.

It is also desirable that schools or academies of sacred art should be founded in those parts of the world where they would be useful, so that artists may be trained.

All artists who, prompted by their talents, desire to serve God's glory in holy Church, should ever bear in mind that they are engaged in a kind of sacred imitation of God the Creator, and are concerned with works destined to be used in Catholic worship, to edify the faithful, and to foster their piety and their religious formation.

128. Along with the revision of the liturgical books, as laid down in Art. 25, there is to be an early revision of the canons and ecclesiastical statutes which govern the provision of material things involved in sacred worship. These laws refer especially to the worthy and well planned construction of sacred buildings, the shape and construction of altars, the nobility, placing, and safety of the eucharistic tabernacle, the dignity and suitability of the baptistery, the proper ordering of sacred images, embellishments, and vestments. Laws which seem less suited to the reformed liturgy are to be brought into harmony with it, or else abolished; and any which are helpful are to be retained if already in use, or introduced where they are lacking.

According to the norm of Art. 22 of this Constitution, the territorial bodies of bishops are empowered to adapt such things to the needs and customs of their different regions; this applies especially to the materials and form of sacred furnishings and vestments.

129. During their philosophical and theological studies, clerics are to be taught about the history and development of sacred art, and about the sound principles governing the production of its works. In consequence they will be able to appreciate and preserve the Church's venerable monuments, and be in a position to aid, by good advice, artists who are engaged in producing works of art.

130. It is fitting that the use of pontificals be reserved to those ecclesiastical persons who have episcopal rank or some particular jurisdiction.

Section 122 establishes the chapter's purpose. The fine arts hold a noble place among human activities, and sacred art is directed toward the beauty of God. The Church seeks works that are worthy of worship and capable of turning minds devoutly toward Him. She therefore welcomes artists, trains them, and judges whether their works are suited to sacred use.

This section asks us to consider the purpose of an object before judging it only by taste. A chalice is made for the Eucharist. A Church is built for the liturgy. Their beauty should serve what takes place in and through them.

Section 123 says that the Church has made no single artistic style her exclusive possession. Across centuries and cultures, she has received many styles and formed a treasury that must be carefully preserved. Contemporary artists, too, may contribute works that honor sacred buildings and rites.

There is room here for both gratitude and creation. The art of an earlier age need not be discarded to make space for work made today. New work can join the Church's inheritance when it serves the same faith with reverence.

Section 124 asks bishops to seek noble beauty rather than expensive display for its own sake. It directs them to exclude works that offend faith, morals, Christian piety, or sound artistic judgment. It also requires care that new churches be suited to liturgical celebration and the participation of the faithful.

Cost alone cannot make something worthy. Simplicity can be beautiful when it is thoughtful and well made. An expensive object can still be poorly suited to worship.

Section 125 maintains the practice of placing sacred images in churches for the veneration of the faithful. It calls for moderation in their number and right order in their placement.

The Council does not ask churches to abandon images. It asks that images help the faithful pray without obscuring the central mysteries celebrated there.

Section 126 directs bishops to consult diocesan sacred art commissions and, when needed, other experts. It also charges them to protect valuable sacred works and furnishings from being sold off or scattered.

Such care recognizes that a church often holds gifts of faith from generations who came before us. These works are entrusted to the Church's care.

Section 127 asks bishops to foster artists who understand sacred art and the liturgy. It encourages suitable schools or academies for their formation. Artists serving the

Church are reminded that their work can build up the faithful and help form their devotion.

The Council takes their vocation seriously. It asks for artistic ability joined to knowledge of the Faith and of the worship their work will serve.

Section 128 calls for a review of laws governing the material things used in worship. It names the design of churches and altars, the placement and security of the tabernacle, the dignity of the baptistery, the ordering of images, and the form of furnishings and vestments. It also provides for appropriate regional adaptations by competent authority.

These details matter because worship takes place in a real space, using real things. Their design can either support the rite or make it harder for the faithful to recognize and follow.

Section 129 requires clerics to study the history and principles of sacred art. This formation should help them preserve the Church's venerable works and offer sound guidance to artists.

Section 130 says that the use of pontifical insignia should fittingly be reserved to ecclesiastical persons who have episcopal rank or particular jurisdiction. Even this brief final provision concerns the clarity of signs: what is worn in the liturgy should correspond to the office it signifies.

Taken together, these sections commend worthy beauty, careful preservation, informed judgment, artistic formation, and spaces and objects suited to worship.

II. SCRIPTURE

The Bible does not begin with a building made by human hands. It begins with God creating a world that is good. Light, land, water, living creatures, and human life come forth by His wisdom. All beauty in creation is a gift before it becomes a human work.

The Book of Wisdom teaches that created beauty can lead the mind toward its source: **“For by the greatness of the beauty, and of the creature, the creator of them may be seen, so as to be known thereby” (Wisdom 13:5).** A Christian artist receives materials and skill from that same Creator.

When God commands Moses to prepare the sanctuary, He gives a reason: **“And they shall make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in the midst of them” (Exodus 25:8)**. Its construction is an answer to God’s presence among His people.

God also calls workers by name. Of Beseleel He says: **“And I have filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom and understanding, and knowledge in all manner of work” (Exodus 31:3)**. Skill and craftsmanship have a place in the service of worship.

The sanctuary includes things made with care: an ark, a lampstand, woven fabrics, precious materials, and figures of cherubim. These objects serve the worship God has commanded. Their beauty is joined to purpose.

Israel’s later Temple also bears sacred images. The presence of cherubim in its design shows why the commandment against idols cannot be read as a ban on every image. Scripture condemns the worship of created things as gods. It also records images made for a sanctuary dedicated to the true God.

Yet no earthly building can contain Him. Solomon acknowledges this when he dedicates the Temple (3 Kings 8:27). Its beauty must lead beyond itself to the Lord who hears His people’s prayer.

The psalmist expresses the love that such a place can awaken: **“I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house; and the place where thy glory dwelleth” (Psalm 25:8)**. He loves the house because it is associated with God’s presence.

The prophets show that neglecting justice and fidelity cannot be remedied by splendid worship. A beautiful sanctuary calls the people who enter it to live truthfully before God.

In the fullness of time, **“the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14)**. The Son of God took a visible human life. His disciples saw His face, heard His voice, watched His works, and beheld His Passion. The Incarnation gives Christian sacred images their deepest foundation.

St. Paul calls Christ **“the image of the Invisible God” (Colossians 1:15)**. A painting or icon of Christ cannot contain His divinity. It can direct our attention to the One who truly became man.

The Apostles also speak of the Church herself as a building made of people. St. Peter tells the baptized: **“Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house” (I Peter 2:5)**. St. Paul says that in Christ they are built together as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22).

The people who worship in a church are therefore never less important than its walls. The walls, altar, and images should help those living stones offer praise.

Finally, St. John sees the heavenly Jerusalem and finds no temple building there: **“For the Lord God Almighty is the temple thereof, and the Lamb” (Apocalypse 21:22)**. Our churches are places for pilgrims. Their beauty can point us toward the communion with God for which we were made.

III. REMEMBER – WHAT CAME BEFORE?

The Church’s concern for sacred art did not begin at Vatican II. She inherited from Israel a reverence for the place and objects of worship. From the earliest centuries, Christians also had to ask how visible things could speak of the God who had become visible in Christ.

As Christian communities grew, they developed places for gathering, baptizing, hearing the Scriptures, and celebrating the Eucharist. Sacred images helped tell the story of salvation and keep the memory of Christ and His saints before the faithful.

The question of images became especially urgent during the icon controversies. The Church defended the place of sacred images in Christian life. Her reasoning was bound to the Incarnation: the Son of God truly took flesh. The honor given to a sacred image is directed toward the person represented; the material object is not adored as God.

This distinction remains essential. The image of Christ directs us to Christ. Images of His Mother and the saints recall people transformed by His grace and joined to His Body. The Church places them within a life centered on the worship of God.

Over the centuries, Christian art took many forms. Mosaics, icons, carvings, stained glass, paintings, textiles, metalwork, and architecture expressed the Faith through different materials and styles. A small chapel and a great cathedral could both be made with devotion and care.

The Church's inheritance also brought responsibilities. Buildings need repair. Sacred objects need protection. Patrons and pastors need judgment. Artists need to understand what a work is for. The desire to make something new must be joined to care for what earlier generations entrusted to the Church.

Chapter VII speaks directly to these responsibilities. It says that the artistic treasury must be preserved. It gives worthy contemporary art room to grow. It calls bishops to seek counsel and asks that clergy and artists be formed.

We may also look honestly at the years after the Council. Many communities faced difficult decisions about older churches and furnishings. In some places, valuable works were lost or removed without sufficient care. The Council's own instructions give us a way to judge such decisions: Were worthy works protected? Were knowledgeable people consulted? Did the resulting space serve worship and help the faithful pray?

The same questions apply when a parish commissions something new. Does the work express the Faith? Does it suit its place and purpose? Has it been made with skill? Will it help those who worship there for years to come?

IV. BENEDICT XVI

Benedict XVI often wrote about beauty as a path that can open the human heart to God. He also warned that beauty can be shallow or misleading when it is separated from truth.

In *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he connects the beauty of the liturgy to Christ's Paschal Mystery. He asks the Church to attend to the art used in celebration: the architecture of the church, the arrangement of the sanctuary, images, vestments, vessels, and furnishings. These should work together to foster reverence for the mystery being celebrated.

A church, in this view, is shaped from within by the liturgy. The altar, ambo, crucifix, tabernacle, and celebrant's chair each have a role. Their placement and relationship can help the faithful understand what is taking place.

Benedict also urges those responsible for commissioning art to know the history of sacred art. Priests and seminarians need this formation as well. They are often called to

care for a parish's inheritance and to make choices that will shape worship long after their own service there ends.

At his 2009 meeting with artists in the Sistine Chapel, Benedict renewed the Church's friendship with art. He spoke of authentic beauty as something that can awaken the desire to seek what lies beyond ourselves. He also reminded artists of the responsibility carried by their gifts.

His dedication of the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona gave a concrete example of his welcome for artistic work of a later age. He recognized a building in which engineering, art, and faith had been brought together for the praise of God.

Benedict's reflections help us read Chapter VII with care. A sacred space should be beautiful because of the mystery it serves. Artists may bring fresh gifts to that task. The Church, in turn, must know what she is asking them to make.

V. PILLARS COMMENTARY

The Church's sacred art and furnishings are part of how she teaches us to worship. An altar, a crucifix, a tabernacle, an image of Our Lady, or a place to kneel is never decoration. These things help direct our attention toward God and give visible expression to what the Church believes. That is why *Sacrosanctum Concilium* speaks of sacred art as a service to divine worship and says that things set apart for worship should be worthy and beautiful, signs of the supernatural world.

The Council did not declare one period of art the only Catholic style. It recognized that the Church has welcomed artistic work from different ages and peoples. A newly built church, therefore, need not imitate an older one in every detail. But freedom of style is not freedom to forget what a church is for. Sacred art should draw the faithful toward God, express the faith truthfully, and serve the liturgy. The Council also called the art handed down through the centuries a treasury to be carefully preserved.

Chapter VII asks bishops to exercise judgment about what belongs in a church. It maintains the practice of placing sacred images where the faithful may venerate them, while asking that their number and arrangement show good order. It calls for the careful formation of artists and for attention to the dignity of churches, altars, tabernacles, baptisteries, vestments, and other furnishings. It expressly warns that valuable sacred

furnishings and works of art must not be disposed of or dispersed. Renewal, in the Council's own text, carries a duty of stewardship.

We cannot read those words honestly without also looking at what happened afterward. In many parishes, the changes were earthshaking. Historic altars were removed, dismantled, or left behind a newly installed altar. Communion rails came out. Side altars, statues, and other furnishings that had shaped generations of prayer were removed or moved out of sight. Some churches were made to look starkly modern. Where the Communion rail disappeared, parishioners often lost the place where they had always knelt together to receive Our Lord. For them, this was not an abstract debate about architecture. It was a change to the church in which they had been baptized, married, and taught to pray.

These losses should not be brushed aside as though the Council had simply ordered them. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for review and permitted change; it did not command the wholesale removal of historic altars, Communion rails, or sacred images. Indeed, its instructions to preserve the Church's artistic treasury and safeguard valuable furnishings give us reason to question whether many of the renovations honored the Council's own principles. That judgment concerns particular decisions made after the Council; it should not be attributed automatically to the Council's text.

The Communion rail makes this especially concrete. A rail marked a sacred place and offered a shared place to kneel for Communion. Its removal did not abolish the Church's reverence for kneeling: later liturgical instructions explicitly recognize that the faithful may receive Holy Communion kneeling. Yet taking away the rail made that long familiar act of reverence much harder to practice in a parish.

We must acknowledge that some renovations needlessly impoverished churches and wounded the people who worshiped in them. The question Chapter VII leaves with us is whether the things we build, preserve, move, or remove help the faithful recognize the holiness of the place and the mystery celebrated there. The Church has received a rich inheritance. Faithful stewardship calls us to understand it before we set any part of it aside.

VI. REFLECT

As we finish today's reading, ask yourself:

- When I enter a church, do its altar, images, and sacred space draw me into prayer?
- Can I recognize the faith and generosity of those who cared for this place before me?

VII. DEEPER THOUGHTS TO CONCLUDE THIS DAY

A church can speak before anyone says a word.

The doorway marks a passage out of ordinary activity. The font recalls the grace by which we entered Christ's Body. The ambo awaits the proclamation of His Word. The altar stands ready for the Eucharistic sacrifice. Sacred images place before us the Lord, His Mother, and the saints who have followed Him.

The greatest beauty present at Mass comes from Christ Himself. He gathers His people, speaks His Word, and gives Himself to them. Sacred art serves this encounter. At its best, it helps us see more clearly where we are and whose presence we have come to seek.

And when we leave, the beauty we have received should bear fruit in our lives. The living stones of the Church are called to show, through faith and charity, something of the glory toward which every sacred image points.

THAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SACRED ART.