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Ecclesiastical cultural heritage: preservation and promotion

In this volume's effort at dialogue with the United States on questions of cultural heritage and of the legal framework created by the Italian Republic to safeguard heritage, I write as Director of the Office of Sacred Art of the Archdiocese of Florence and Director of the city's cathedral museum (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo) on the theme of *Public and Private in the Promotion ('Valorizzazione') of Cultural Heritage*. My specific subject is *religious* cultural heritage, extraordinarily rich in Italy and all of Europe, and I write both as a former 'Consultor' of the Vatican Commission on Church Cultural Heritage and as president for twenty years of *Ars et Fides*, an international association of volunteer guides in historic churches with its legal home in Belgium. The point I want to make is one I advocated in a Council of Europe conference in Oslo, in 2000, on the role of the private sector in this area, and as a keynote speaker at the United Nations World Tourism Organization conference in Utrecht in 2016 on *Religious Heritage Tourism in a Changing Society*: namely, that to 'preserve' one must first 'promote' understanding of what the UNWTO accurately defines as a «fragile heritage». People preserve that which they have been helped to see as important to their lives – or, in the terminology used by UNESCO and recalled in these pages by Sarah Harding, people preserve *tangible* cultural heritage in response to their understanding of its *intangible* roots.

In the Church itself this has not always been the case: preservation, that is, has not always been accompanied by attention to religious meaning. 15th century Pope Sixtus IV's gift of important examples of classical statuary to the city of Rome, like early 16th century Pope Leo X's appointment of Raphael as 'superintendent' of archeological findings in the Eternal City, were legal actions meant above all to guarantee the physical preservation of antique works held to be of significant historical importance.

It was really only in the early 19th century that things began to change, with Pope Pius VII, famous for having negotiated the Concordat of 1801 with Napoleon and then, in 1809, for having refused to cede the Papal States to France, telling the emperor's representative: «*Non possumus*…» – «We cannot, We should not, We will not». In 1802, a year after his election and at the suggestion of the then Inspector General of Fine Arts of the Papal States, the sculptor Antonio Canova, Pius VII created an administrative structure designed to protect Rome's treasures, later expanded and reiterated in an edict of 1820[1]. The edict recalled how church leaders of the past had forbidden the alienation of masterpieces from the Papal States, but lamented the fact that their «very wise laws» had proven ineffective. Pius VII forbade even bishops and cardinals from removing works from their original place and authorized the Vatican arts authorities to buy works still in private hands to prevent their being sold abroad. Among the artworks to be saved, in addition to ancient statues and reliefs, his edict included medieval and Renaissance paintings on wood panel and on canvas.

These provisions for the preservation of the Church's artistic heritage still said nothing of the meaning that that heritage had for the institution, apparently taking for granted that this was obvious. As the 19th century unfolded, however, the Church awakened to the epochal change that modernity had wrought, and in its theology, spirituality, and art sought to reactivate the fervor of earlier ages. So, too, in Catholic literature and art, and from Francois René de Chateaubriand's 1802 *Genie du Christianisme* ('The Animating Spirit of Christianity') to medieval and Renaissance revivalism in architecture, painting and sculpture was but a short step; in philosophical thought a similar process produced the Neo-Scholastic movement in opposition to Modernist ideas.

These reactions – defensive and nostalgic in character – shaped the aesthetics of an influential churchman, Cardinal Celso Costantini, who in 1913 published an essay in Father Giuseppe Polvara's influential magazine *Arte Cristiana* ('Christian Art') in which he cited the conviction of the German Nazarene painter Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869), that: «only uninterrupted interior prayer can maintain the artist's enthusiasm: only a life lived according to the rules, a pure life, can give the artist that peace of the spirit and of the heart that is absolutely necessary to produce truly pure works»[2]. The same nostalgia gave form to the Fra Angelico School of Art founded by Polvara at Milan in 1934, with the permission of that city's archbishop, Achille Ratti, later Pope Pius XI, and still echoed in a famous discourse by Pius XI's successor, Pius XII, in 1952, which insisted that the great masters of Christian art of

1. Verdon T., *La Basilica di San Pietro. I papi e gli artisti*, Milan: Mondadori, 2005, pp. 159-161.
2. *Ivi*, p. 173.

Fig. 1 – Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. Room with Donatello's Mary Magdalene, 1453-1455 ca., painted wood (courtesy Museo dell'Opera del Duomo).

Fig. 2 – Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. View of the Galleria del Campanile (courtesy Museo dell'Opera del Duomo).

the past had been interpreters not only of beauty but «of the goodness of the God who reveals and redeems. [Such artists] translate Christian truths in easily legible, universal terms […] and communicate their intimate meaning and emotion with an efficacy, a lyrism, an ardor such as perhaps even the most fervent sermon lacks»[3].

This new awareness of art's role in communicating religious faith, born alongside the similar 19th- and early 20th century sensitivity to art's importance in creating national identity[4], gave questions of preservation and conservation new urgency. In the 1960s, then, Pope Paul VI invested not only the art of the past but contemporary art as well, with a role in the spiritual formation of believers that he compared to his own priestly mission[5] – a view enthusiastically shared in the United States, where an official Roman Catholic text of 1978, *Environment and Art*, prepared by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy and published by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, insisted that «contemporary art forms belong to the liturgical expressions of the [worshipping] assembly as surely as the art forms of the past»[6]. The same document defined the necessary balance between contemporary and historical art in places of worship, stating that «because it is symbolic communication, the liturgy is more dependent on past tradition than many human activities are» but noting also that «because it is the action of a contemporary assembly, […liturgy] has to clothe its basically traditional structures with the living flesh and blood of our time and our arts»[7]. In the same spirit, Pope John Paul II's 1999 *Letter to Artists* gave great attention both to church art of the past and to contemporary art in the service of the worshipping community, insisting on the vocation of Christian artists in all periods to communicate holiness[8].

3. *Ivi*, pp. 173-174.
4. Verdon T., *L'arte sacra in Italia. L'immaginazione religiosa dal paleocristiano al postmoderno*, Milan: Mondadori, 2001, pp. 307ff.
5. *Ivi*, p. 337.
6. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Environment and Art*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference Publications Office, 1978, no. 33, p. 20.
7. *Ivi*, p. 21.
8. *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists,* Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999, nos. 4; 7-10.

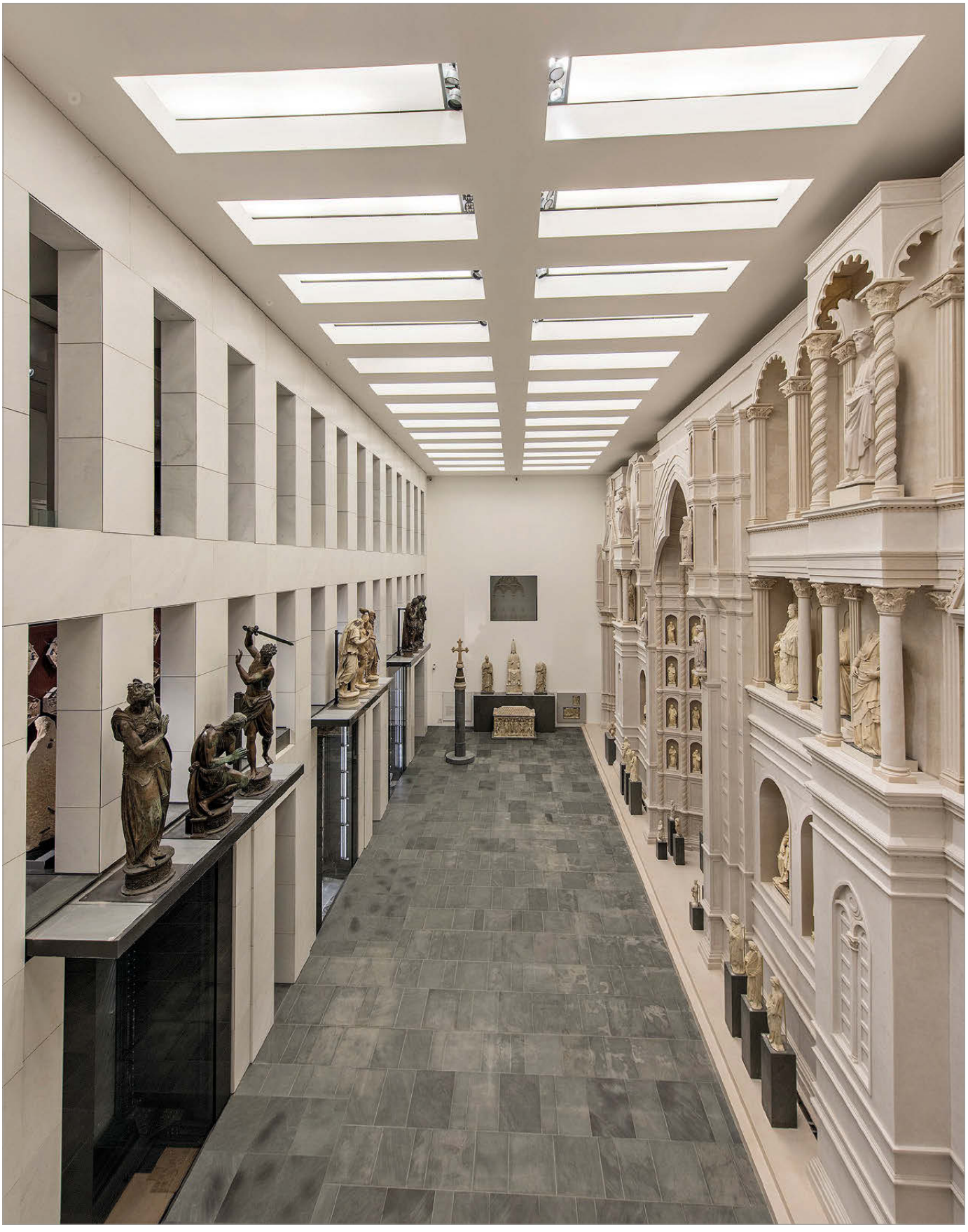

Fig. 3 – Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. View of the Sala del Paradiso (courtesy Museo dell'Opera del Duomo).

Fig. 4 – Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. View of the Sala delle Cantorie (courtesy Museo dell'Opera del Duomo).

One of the most significant texts in this process was a Pastoral Note of the Tuscan Bishops' Conference published two years before John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*. Entitled *Life Has Become Visible. Art and the Communication of the Faith*[9], it was written in preparation for the Holy Year of 2000 – a Jubilee year that would see millions of pilgrims not only in Rome but also in other Italian cities – and sketched the theological reasons for considering ecclesiastical art a component of the faith-experience of all Christians, urging those who would be involved in welcoming pilgrims to explain to them the history and meaning of the sacred buildings, sculptures, paintings and other works which pilgrims would see. In its twelfth chapter, the *Pastoral Note* extolls the capacity of artistic masterpieces to touch viewers deeply, saying:

> «In the simplicity of a Romanesque country church, in the gentle beauty of a Christ by Fra Angelico or the inner drama of statues by Donatello and Michelangelo, every believer – and, in truth, every person, whether a believer or not – can grasp meaningful aspects of his or her own spiritual search. Across time, and beyond the cultural and historical divisions that separate us, this so human art discloses an underlying communion rooted in our nature, which is the first gift the Creator makes to us. By inviting those who are near and those who are far off to contemplate New and Old Testament stories and the lives of the saints in mosaics and frescos, stained glass, altarpieces and statues, we are doing what the Fathers present at the Second Vatican Council had in mind when, in *Gaudium et spes*, they wrote that the Church invites even atheists to reflect on Christ's Gospel with an open mind, and invites them 'courteously' – *'humaniter'* in the Latin text – as one man might talk to another on the basis of their common experience as human beings.

The Church can allow herself such 'courtesy' with Christians of other confessions, as well as with non-Christians, because – as paragraph 21 of *Gaudium et spes* states – she knows perfectly well that her message is in harmony with the most secret aspirations of the human heart, whenever she defends the dignity of the human calling and thus restores hope to many who despair of finding a higher destiny.

Through the art of our churches, we are thus called to satisfy not only the «legitimate requirements» our visitors have as tourists, giving them an adequate art historical introduction, but also «the most secret aspirations of the human heart» – so secret that visitors often do not feel them, even though they are real –: the aspiration to find sense in life, meaning in history, communion with neighbors and with those who are distant in space and time, communion with those who have gone before us, communion with the past». This is 'promotion' – what in Italian is called '*valorizzazione*', 'giving of value' – at the highest level. And it becomes the evident and sufficient reason for preserving all expressions of the Church's cultural heritage, destined to enrich and transform human beings of future generations.

9. Conferenza Episcopale Toscana, *Nota Pastorale: La Vita si è fatta visibile. L'arte e la comunicazione della fede*, Florence, 1997.