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From Strangers to Friends of God: The Vocation of the Artist in Jacques Maritain's Life and Work

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Abstract

The thesis of this article is that the understanding of the vocation of an artist in the writings of Jacques Maritain emerges as to develop *habitus* (practical virtues of the intellect) in order to direct their inspirations in order to make beautiful things that convey the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization and inspire others to contemplate God. This vocation to be an associate of God in creating beautiful works is a powerful reminder of the close relationship between all personal vocations and the common good. First I explore Maritain's conversion to Catholicism, including through the arts. I next clarify Maritain's Thomistic understanding of art as one expression of the illuminating intellect. I then review Maritain's writings about the arts in education. I conclude with theological and pastoral reflections on the vocation of an artist.

Keywords: beauty; contemplation; creativity; fine arts; sacred art

1. Introduction

What is the vocation of a Christian artist? In the American context, at least and perhaps also in Europe, the greatest challenge for Catholics and Protestants alike in understanding the vocation of an artist is Romanticism, which Anglican scholar and musician Jeremy Begbie maintains clearly represents a theological break from a cosmological view of art which existed prior to the Reformation. Understanding the philosophical and theological concepts undergirding the vocation of an artist in Jacques Maritain's writings is crucial to encourage Christian artists to contribute to evangelization in liturgy and the formation of a beautiful culture.

Maritain's conversion, as recounted in a biography of Jacques and Raissa entitled *Beggars for Heaven*, embraced both his senses and his intellect. His later intellectual explorations about art took place in the context of a spiritual accompaniment of many artists rediscovering or deepening their Catholic faith. In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain lays out clear Thomistic principles about art that should be understood as the philosophical grounding from which to interpret his later writings about the fine arts,

including his deeper explorations into the subjectivity of the artist in *Creative Intuition in Art & Poetry*.

To develop a thesis about the vocation of the artist, I also draw from Maritain's writings on *Education at the Crossroads* about the place of music (and the fine arts more generally) in a liberal arts education. Because Maritain was a public intellectual – one of his aims was to make philosophy relevant to discussions of the common good – I combine ideas from his writings on education to expand the vocation of the artist into a broad, integral vision of authentic human formation.

The thesis, the integrative summary, leads me to propose that the vocation of an artist is to develop the *habitus* (practical virtues of the intellect) to direct their inspirations in order to make beautiful things that convey the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization and inspire others to contemplate God.

To understand the significance of this understanding of the vocation of an artist, I will explore several things which Maritain asserts do *not* fit with the vocation of an artist: the artist is neither a performer, nor a demi-god, nor a mystic. Although he emphasizes the importance of an artist's creative intuition, he is clear that the special gifts of artists do not make them special envoys from God, at least not apart from tradition, spiritual discipline and a connection to the church. Maritain's sharp critiques of surrealism in the fine arts make it abundantly clear that his emphasis on creativity and intuition should not be interpreted from a Romantic, anthropocentric humanism but within the Thomistic framework of *Art and Scholasticism*. In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain makes forceful statements about the ultimate aim of education as the search for personal sanctity and the preservation of the spiritual heritage of a civilization. In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain clearly critiques a rules-based method of training artists in favor of developing a *habitus* that forms the creative intuition. For Maritain, apprenticing with a master is the best way to learn to make art.

I conclude with reflections from Pope John Paul II's 1999 letter to artists, who, like Maritain, emphasized the vocation of artists as encompassing the general call to holiness, the particular call to develop their creative intuition and the overflowing dynamism between the artist, church and society.

2. Maritain the convert

Jacques Maritain came from a liberal Protestant background, but prior to his conversion to Catholicism, he was largely agnostic. As his friendship with Léon Bloy, a French Catholic writer, had been central to his conversion, Maritain always sought to share his experiences with a wide circle of artists, intellectuals, scientists, and public leaders. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has said, Catholic intellectuals should be prepared to answer the question: Catholic instead of what?¹ MacIntyre insists that for Catholics, it is not sufficient to state what they believe. Catholics should be clear what they are *not* permitted to believe.

What was it, then, that Maritain rejected when he converted to Catholicism? In his studies at the University of the Sorbonne in Paris, Maritain found friends and he found love with Raissa, but he did not find inner peace. His life was marked by a feeling of

¹Alasdair MacIntyre. 'Catholic Instead of What?' Paper presented at the DeNicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, (2019). <https://youtu.be/XjYLM1lw47Q?si=U7ov91Jw6XuVVvj>.

strangeness in this world. His longing for an ultimate meaning to things, for a reason to believe that it is possible to know and assent to the truth, led him through various philosophies and culminated in his embrace of Catholicism.

His conversion was a turning around, a coming home and a going out. This dynamism of the search for God – the interior and the exterior – permeates all of his writings. For Jacques and Raïssa (who was a mostly secular Jew before becoming Catholic with Jacques), entering the Catholic Church was like walking a bridge to the known and unknown. The closer they got to God through prayer, intellectual reflection and the arts, the more they perceived the strangeness of this world, that their longings for the ultimate truth would be only partially revealed in this life, yet they grew in certainty that their inner lives participated already in that eternal being which is the source of all human creativity.

For the Maritains, perhaps they would have answered the question of Catholic instead of what in the following way: Catholic instead of going insane. What can overcome the strangeness of being, the fear of violence and the inevitable sufferings of human existence? Pure materialism simply offered the Maritains no satisfactory answers for the longings and fears of the human heart.

They passed through a stage with Nietzsche, but they couldn't embrace any metaphysical system that exalts pride and violence. To tear away the masks of the tragic in life and simply proclaim the will to power essentially says that the search for meaning is absurd. They fell into despair. As Jean-Luc Barré writes in his biography of the Maritains entitled, *Beggars for Heaven*, Raïssa remarked that,

Our perfect understanding of one another, our very happiness itself, all the sweetness of the world, all the art of men could not make us accept rationally – in whatever sense we might understand that expression – the misery, the unhappiness, the wickedness of men. So either the justification of the world was possible but could not be established with the true form of knowledge, or life did not merit an instant more of our attention.²

The Maritains could not accept a pure materialism that left a bitter taste in their souls. If they could not find the absolute, the thing to unify their existence and give it a reason, the Maritains made a pact to commit suicide. They could accept that life was painful, but they sought redemption from pain, lest they be forced to conclude that human existence is nothing other than absurd – that pain is meaningless and enduring happiness elusive.

Their intuitions, their need for probing the mystery of consciousness led them through Plato's understanding of the soul, to the classroom of Henri Bergson and to friendships with artists, poets and musicians. After being opened by Plato to some form of transcendence and by Bergson to ideas of human consciousness and experience – subjectivity as really signifying something – they went further, coming to see the divine acting in history – starting in their own lives.

After a time of retreat after deep experiences of prayer at La Salette, a site of Marian apparitions in France, they emerged with zeal to share their newfound inner

²Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: Beggars for Heaven*. 1st ed (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 48.

life with their wide circle of friends, such as poet Charles Peguy, who was re-exploring his Catholic faith (and later returned). Now that their souls were filled with grace, they came back to the philosophical problem of certitude. They felt an urgent need to seek out truths of a universal philosophical order in the doctrines of the faith. These very philosophical truths became very apparent to them in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Raïssa began to read St. Thomas even before Jacques. Together, they found that Thomas Aquinas helped them unite their head and their heart.

Thomas Aquinas's assurance that God enters us through our senses reassured the Maritains that their love for poetry, music, painting, and photography could nourish their soul, bring them closer to God, and yet also preserve the mystery of beauty. Their appreciation for St. Benedict and their experiences of monastic ways of living nourished their connection to nature; the imitation of nature (a central Thomistic principle) became central to Jacques's writing on art.

In their Thomistic circles in Paris and in personal friendships with painters such as George Rouault, the playwright, Jean Cocteau, and the writer, George Bernanos (whose play became the inspiration for the opera *Dialogue of Carmelites*), Maritain seems to have sought an understanding of the vocation of the artist that would be spiritually universal and Catholic but would not form merely a confessional program (a statement of beliefs) or rigid aesthetic (doing exactly what came before). Perhaps the Maritains embraced the eccentricity of some of their artist friends as an expression of people grappling with the strangeness of our existence and striving to bridge the gap between us and God.

The Maritains were nonetheless concerned about egocentricity, crises of passion, and ambiguous narcissism. Their artist friends were concerned about being lectured at or moralized by the Maritains – imposing doctrine on them, or telling them how to do their art. Instead, encounters such as that of Bernanos show that the Maritains sought to make artists embrace the responsibility of their calling, encouraging them to go deeper into their journey towards holiness. In his biography of the Maritains, Barré describes how Bernanos expected Maritain to comment on themes of a novel he was writing, but Maritain emphasized 'the intimate responsibility of the creator with regard to his work'.³

With regards to that encounter, Bernanos remarked:

I understood nothing about Jacques Maritain's theology, but from our very first encounter he made an unforgettable impression. This was probably the most important encounter of my life, certainly on the level of the faith and friendship. He understood me without any moralizing.⁴

As converts to Catholicism, the Maritains were Thomists instead of Nietzschean. They affirmed universal truths and personal creativity. They feared that the rejection of all established conventions in arts would result in absurdity and intellectual confusion.

³Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: Beggars for Heaven*. 1st ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 234.

⁴Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: Beggars for Heaven*. 1st ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 236.

Following their conversion, personal holiness and the call to build Christian civilization were the ultimate ends around which all aspects of the Maritains' lives revolved, including their spiritual and intellectual friendships with artists.

3. Maritain the Thomist

Maritain's work in *Degrees of Knowledge* remains the most detailed and lengthy account of the questions that preoccupied him through his life: how to unify practical, speculative, and mystical knowledge. In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain turns to artistic practice not as the somehow pure expression of our true inner self as in Romanticism, nor a 'mere' representation/shadow of an ideal form (as in Plato) but as incarnational and therefore an extension of God's redemptive action in history.

In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain describes how the artist uses his God-given intelligence to take matter and shape something that did not exist before. This art-as-craft is a participation in God's intelligence, furthering God's redemptive work in the world.⁵ Maritain distinguishes art from conceptual knowledge or mystical knowledge, stating that 'art is a *habitus* of the practical intellect'.⁶ Without denigrating nor denying the artist's creativity, nor denying the symbolic value of objects, Maritain is careful to keep the focus of art on the making of an object.

Maritain refers to Thomas Aquinas's brief definition of beauty, *id quod visum placet*, (which can be translated as 'that which seen, pleases') remarking that 'these four words say all that is necessary' to maintain the transcendent and incarnational elements of beauty in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. For Maritain, writing in *Art and Scholasticism*, the artist is 'an associate of God in the making of beautiful works'.

Keeping the dynamism of the interior and exterior in focus, Maritain states that our seeing of the object gives delight, which he calls 'intuitive knowledge'. 'Beauty shines form on matter', Maritain writes in *Art and Scholasticism*, echoing the theme of light and its illuminating effects on our inner being when our senses encounter an object which communicates in such a way that we rejoice in knowing something we previously did not know.

The Thomistic description of art as a participation in God's intelligence, of beauty as radiating the transcendent into the imminent, undergirds Maritain's calls to artists in his Thomistic circles and his personal friendships to embrace the responsibility of their gifts by developing a *habitus* of prayer and discipline. In Maritain's Thomistic thought, human intelligence has the capacity to penetrate to the essence of things. To know the essence of things and then to co-create with God is, indeed, a great responsibility

⁵For Maritain, as for Aquinas, only God creates out of nothing, yet humans are nonetheless called to co-create with God, a tremendous responsibility to further God's salvific work through practical action, making objects. See Fr. Brad Elliott's article in this journal for an elaboration of this point.

⁶All of the quotations from *Art and Scholasticism* come from this translation, which lacks page numbers. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*. Originally published in 1920. Translated by Joseph W. Evans in 1962. Available online through the Jacques Maritain Center at the University of Notre Dame. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://maritain.nd.edu/assets/545270/jacques_maritain_art_and_scholasticism_and_the_frontiers_of_poetry.pdf](https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://maritain.nd.edu/assets/545270/jacques_maritain_art_and_scholasticism_and_the_frontiers_of_poetry.pdf).

for an artist, and, when done well, the artist creates an object that gives delight to the senses of others.

'The Middle Ages knew this order. The Renaissance shattered it', Maritain asserts in *Art and Scholasticism*. For Maritain, that understanding of human freedom as cooperating with God's grace, extending God's presence in the world, avoids the error of dispersion of one's vision that ends in absurdity, on the one extreme, or on rigid rules, on the other extreme.

Maritain critiques artists who have elevated human creativity and tried to capture beauty for themselves at the expense of seeking to co-create with God. Others have lowered the vocation of the artist to nothing more than financial gain or what he calls 'the finality of the useful' apart from, or perhaps directly contrary to, the delight of our inner vision. Neither approach could have quelled the lack of inner peace that Maritain experienced when he was a stranger in the world with no bridge to the infinite.

Contra rules-based teaching of art, in *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain advocates for a master-apprentice style of teaching art. 'By the very fact that art is a virtue of the practical intellect', he states, 'the mode of teaching that by nature belongs to it is apprenticeship-education, the working-novitiate under a master and in the presence of the real, not lessons distributed by professors'.

4. Maritain the educator

To better understand how Maritain sees the vocation of an artist, I now turn to his writings on education. Already present in *Art and Scholasticism*, published in 1920, is a principle that 'in every discipline and in all teaching the master only assists from the outside the principle of immanent activity which is *within* [emphasis mine] the pupil', a principle Maritain elaborates on in *Education at the Crossroads*, published in 1943. Although the virtue of art is in the object made, a narrowly pragmatist view of art as self-expression or use-value would have a similar result: the deadening of the inner dynamism of the person, the place of true freedom where we encounter God and respond joyfully in virtuous action.

Education at the Crossroads emerged from a series of lectures Maritain gave at Yale University in which he hoped to steer educators away from pragmatist tendencies that downplay the contemplative faculties of the person. Maritain's understanding of the proper end of education – the spiritual growth of the student – led him to advocate for a liberal arts curriculum, with the *quadrivium* and *trivium* followed by specialized forms of knowledge (which would include theology and philosophy). Maritain notes that music is traditionally a part of the liberal arts curriculum, understood neither as entertainment nor self-expression. Rather, hearing music is part of the discipline of the senses. The making of music is a practical virtue, and reflecting on our experience of music leads us to rejoice in the glimmer of the infinite that is mysteriously present in sound.

In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain writes that 'it is necessary to make clear for the understanding of the pupil the inner logic of a Mozart Sonata, read and discussed from the score. But', he adds, following his Thomistic principles that point to the senses, 'it is first necessary for the pupil to *hear* [emphasis mine] the Sonata and be delighted in it and *love it* [emphasis mine] with his ears and with his heart'. Referring

to theological errors about our senses, Maritain states that ‘man’s senses are not that impure element which Puritanism abhorred. They are not unworthy of reason. They naturally serve reason and convey its food to it’.⁷

A liberal arts education should lead a student’s intelligence to follow in the footsteps of the intellectual virtues. Learning about music, for example, is not simply meant to teach how to imitate the technique of a composer but to learn to see the intellectual virtues that allowed the composer to create that music and make it beautiful and endow it with meaning and beauty and delight.

To fail to recognize all of reality, which includes seeing the inner being of things, would turn students into merely practical actors, following an instrumentalist philosophy but with no adherence to truth as such. To deny mystery, to deny that practical knowledge emanates from and leads to contemplative knowledge, is to be stranded in the material world. Rigid individualism, the pursuit of technique over reason, material gain over the preservation and extension of the spiritual heritage of civilization is the threat Maritain sees in moving away from the liberal arts, including music.

Maritain’s writings on education are thus practical, but not pragmatic. To neglect the arts in educational curricula would be to fundamentally mis-apprehend the nature of the human intellect which delights in the dynamism between contemplation and action.

Maritain’s defines the proper end of education as more than skills, character, or knowledge acquisition. The end of education is:

to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person – armed with knowledge, strength of judgment, and moral virtues – while at the same time conveying to him the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization in which he is involved, and preserving in this way the century-old achievements of generations.⁸

Although in his philosophical writings on art, Maritain emphasizes the free cooperation of the artist with God, a full understanding of his view of the vocation of the artist should include his vision of a broader understanding of education (not just schooling), which preserves and extends the spiritual heritage of the nation and civilization.

5. Maritain the art critic and patron of artists

Alice Ramos’s article in this journal reviews Maritain’s writing on the subjectivity of the artist as explored in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* and other works. Ramos aptly interprets Maritain’s writings as a philosophical Thomist. Thus, Maritain should not be interpreted as presenting a Romantic view of the vocation of the artist to simply express his subjective inner life. Rather, it is important to see Maritain’s *Creative Intuition* as a Thomistic exploration into the spiritual preconscious from which stems poetic knowledge that helps unite beauty, truth, and goodness. Maritain’s writings are clear that in each human person there is an irreducible mystery where the encounter with God happens. As humans are a unity of body and soul, the inner element of each

⁷Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 53.

⁸Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 10.

of us is profoundly shaped by the virtues of the practical intellect. Works of art and poetry are the extrinsic product of the practical intellect. The inner element of art is never sufficient for Maritain apart from its external expression.

The very idea that humans have a spiritual preconscious – a central aspect of Maritain's philosophy – is a key premise that distinguishes his philosophy of humanity from ancient Greek philosophers, Freudian psychology, Romanticism, and surrealism. Maritain carefully distinguishes the spiritual preconscious from the Freudian subconscious, which he describes as 'blood and flesh, instincts, tendencies complexes, repressed images and desires, traumatic memories'. He goes so far to call the Freudian subconscious the 'deaf unconscious – deaf to the intellect and structured into a world of its own apart from the intellect'.⁹

Maritain does not deny that the Freudian subconscious exists or is powerful; what Maritain questions is whether the Freudian subconscious acts autonomously or whether that subconscious can be directed by another power, namely, the spiritual preconscious. Not recognizing that humans have a spiritual preconscious, or not educating that spiritual preconscious, leads to dissonance, dispersion, and the fragmentation caused by a lack of direction for our drives, passions, and instincts (i.e., the Freudian subconscious.)

Because art and poetry bring new objects into the world, Maritain argues that they form part of the practical rather than the speculative intellect: knowing for the sake of action, of bringing something into existence. Participating in art and poetry forms our identity and subjectivity into beings who have inner qualities of a stability in how to use our many human gifts for the common good.

The subjectivity of the poet or artist matters because it is through the exhilarating, dynamic process of creativity that we come to see ourselves as subjects with an interior grasping towards infinity, not only through thoughts or feelings but by creating objects in the world. To be fully human, art and poetry must, therefore, be profoundly disinterested, even self-sacrificial. Poetry and art emanate from the deepest recesses of our soul, Maritain writes, but are 'in no way for the sake of the ego'.¹⁰ Rather, we engage in art in order to engage our creativity as a sign of transcendent beauty.

Surrealism is a threat to the vocation of the artist because it collapses the distinction between the sign and the thing signified. Maritain fears that then the vocation of the artist in surrealism becomes what he calls magical knowledge or black mysticism. The idea of a magical gnosis, the artist taking on a kind of altered state of consciousness results from the 'quest for the human subject's omnipotence'. But that omnipotence is not true freedom, as 'the soul believes it is transferred above everything and enjoys infinite liberty'.¹¹

In the modern world, the artist is often seen as a hero who expresses his subjectivity with supreme freedom. But this view of the vocation of the artist isolates the artist's vocation as entirely inside himself, while somehow expecting the artist's expression

⁹Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry. With an Introduction by Raymond Hain* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2018), p. 84.

¹⁰Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry. With an Introduction by Raymond Hain* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2018), p. 131.

¹¹Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry. With an Introduction by Raymond Hain* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2018), p. 173.

to become the basis of a collective conscience for society. For Maritain, an artist cannot claim to create his own conscience, much less the conscience of a collectivity. An artist may be inspired to create objects and those objects may, in fact, direct the inspirations of a collective group, but the artist is never to be misunderstood as the *origin* of the conscience. God is the author of the human conscience. Maritain compares the responsibility of an artist to that of a doctor: a doctor cannot claim to create nature itself; likewise, an artist cannot create meaning. An artist and a doctor both apply techniques to what God has created, furthering God's redemptive, beautiful work in the world.

In order to build a civilization of love, not one of endless absurdities, the vocation of the artist for Maritain must encompass not only communicating their own creative intuitions but also forming the receptive intuition in the hearer or the seer. Although he does not write extensively about the subjectivity or virtues formed in those who look upon art or hear music and poetry, Maritain concludes *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* by calling on artists to embrace their creative intuition and make objects that assist others in properly ordering their loves.

6. Theological and pastoral reflections on the vocation of the artist

In his essay 'Music in the Western Theological Tradition', Jeremy Begbie, an Anglican theologian at Duke University and pianist and conductor, traces developments in Protestant theology since the Reformation.¹² Begbie argues that the growing gap in post-Reformation theology between the transcendent and the imminent set the stage for the emergence of the Romantic view of the imagination in which the beauty of the art form is understood as coming from the creativity of the human creator. Although most post-Reformation theologians Begbie cites would not totally deny that artists co-create with God; nonetheless, by moving away from the cosmological view of art in the early church and the medieval church, the chasm between God and human beings in modern Protestant theology has become so great that it becomes nearly inconceivable to speak of music as somehow uniting man and God or unveiling the mysterious inner workings of God. Perhaps unexpectedly, Begbie argues, shifting from seeing music as expressing an ordered cosmos to seeing music as expressing the inner life of the artist opened up a pathway for music itself to be a form of spirituality apart from any theological understanding of art or of the person.

If creativity is unleashed by freeing the subconscious from tradition or anything said to stifle its expression, what is to keep the artist from descending into the deaf Freudian subconscious Maritain was so concerned about in the surrealists? What if inside the subjectivity of the artist is a place of endless conflict and chaos? Would the artist somehow emerge not with an object that does not express order, harmony, or love but rather with an object that expresses ugliness, division, and destruction? As Begbie points out, when the Romantics separate the subconscious from virtue,

¹²Jeremy S. Begbie, *Music in the Western Theological Tradition*. Jeremy Begbie, 'Music in the Western Theological Tradition', in *St Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. (University of St Andrews). Article published, <<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MusicintheWesternTheologicalTradition>> [accessed 15 February 2024].

intelligence, and knowledge, the imminent spirit, that is, a merely human spirit not mysteriously connected to God, the risk is that the human spirit, the purely imminent spirit not connected intimately to the transcendent, descends into darkness and absurdity of the surrealists.

Aidan Nichols OP advocates for *ressourcement* theology, going back to the Scriptures and also to the debates about art in the early church as capable of expressing deep theological meaning. In *The Art of God Incarnate*, Nichols describes iconoclast Christology of the early church as fearing that the deification of Christ's humanity somehow pits our humanity as in competition with divinity rather than transfigured by it. Nichols argues that the early church fought iconoclasm, insisting that we are meant to use our senses to find God through images. He even states that we *need* to encounter Christ through our senses, not just our minds. If the disciples saw Christ in the flesh and perceived his divinity via his human attributes, Nichols writes, so must we. The view that the arts can disclose supernatural realities to us through our senses, transforming our senses, Nichols argues, is essential to the very meaning of holiness. The path of holiness is a growing in that transformed vision of the divinity of Christ and growing in the likeness of that image, aided by Scripture and by the arts.

Pope John Paul II lived through the cataclysmic darkness and absurdity of communism in Poland. He first pursued his vocation to holiness in the world as an actor and playwright, later becoming a Catholic priest. In his 1999 letter to artists, Pope John Paul II connects the crucial subjectivity of the artist to a calling to further the common good.

Pope John Paul II addresses the chasm that artists perceive between worldly beauty and infinite mystery, calling on them to transform the feeling of strangeness in the world into a joyful search for God. He states that:

all artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit.¹³

His emphasis on the joy of co-creating with God could not be stronger. He writes:

None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when – like the artists of every age – captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.

¹³ All quotations from Pope John Paul II are from this letter, which lacks page numbers. Pope John Paul II. *Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Artists*. Vatican, 1999. <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html>.

Referring to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Vatican II document on the liturgy, Pope John Paul II points out that the council did not hesitate to consider artists as having 'a noble ministry', as their works reflect in some way the infinite beauty of God and raise people's minds to God. Art can be a kind of evangelization, or at least a complement to it, as through the arts, 'the knowledge of God can be better revealed and the preaching of the Gospel can become clearer to the human mind'.

As an actor and playwright, Pope John Paul II wrote and performed plays both for their beauty and to aid the Polish nation struggling under communist to retain its memory and unique identity as a people of God. The vocation of the artist to recover, preserve, and extend the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization to which he belongs is thus part of Pope John Paul II's journey and that of the Maritains. It is through our particular identities that we approach the infinite. Our collective identities, that of the nation and civilization to which we belong, are not idols to be worshipped. But our collective identity as a nation and a civilization are like a ship built by humans, in collaboration with God, on which we journey towards the infinite.

Pope John Paul II is clear that the church needs literary figures, artists, musicians, and architects to express the ineffable. Likewise, artists need the church to support them in their vocation to holiness, as the contemplative life of an artist – the personal encounter with God – partially shapes the art created.

7. Conclusion

As a young couple studying philosophy and building friendships with artists, the Maritains sought a total explanation of reality. They were initially drawn to but then rejected Romantic anthropocentrism because Romanticism elevates the imminent spirit but provides no bulwark against a world full of violence and darkness. The Maritains' personal encounter with inner darkness and violence in the world became a primordial encounter with the strangeness and fallenness of the world and led them to the brink of meaninglessness. Their friendships with artists and poets saved them, in part by leading them to the mysticism of Catholic prayer. Their Catholic faith was ultimately solidified through studying of the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

If the societal threats the Maritains faced, Nazism and communism, no longer threaten civilization as they once did, new forms of Gnosticism that deny the full meaning of the Incarnation – the fusion of the divine and the human – reappear in philosophical, artistic, and political movements and even in theology. As Jacques Maritain well knew and warned, the vocation of the artist understood as egocentric self-expression threatens to become a dark mysticism which misdirects our collective spirit away from a unity of truth, beauty, and goodness and towards nothing but power and domination of others.

Artists create objects that we delight in when we bring those objects into the rooms of our interior castle for contemplation, a contemplation that guides our quest for personal holiness and directs our efforts for the common good of the nation and civilization. The arts are a powerful manner in which God's presence among us is experienced as a strangeness, like a wound that pierces our hearts and opens us to an intimate friendship with our creator and sustainer.

The understanding of the vocation of an artist in the writings of Jacques Maritain emerges as to develop *habitus* (practical virtues of the intellect) to direct their inspirations in order to make beautiful things that convey the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization and inspire others to contemplate God. This vocation to be an associate of God in creating beautiful works is a powerful reminder of the close relationship between all personal vocations and the common good.