

The Dominicans and the Journal *L'Art sacré*

Aidan Nichols OP

The project

Just before the Second World War, some Dominicans in the Province of France became concerned about the poor state of religious art in that country, if not only there.¹ They were especially worried about the nature and quality of artworks placed in churches as a context for the sacred Liturgy, and (often) about the style and disposition of those churches themselves. In 1937 they inherited a new-born review with the name *L'Art sacré* in which they began to work out a policy or programme for the future. The coming of the War in 1939 and the German occupation of northern France where they were working led to the suspense both of the publication and of their activities. But after the War they were able to resume, and the journal continued its life until a couple of years after the closure of the Second Vatican Council.

Without a doubt its most ground-breaking and influential period was in the early 1950s. At that time it became embroiled in a quarrel over the nature of sacred art which reached the highest levels in terms of Church authority, eliciting in 1952 interventions both by the French episcopate and by Rome. The Dominicans of *L'Art sacré* were not exclusively concerned with theoretical criteria for the art of the Church. Had they been, it is rather doubtful whether they would have stirred up public opinion among the Catholic population in France, and in the French episcopate, in the way they did. High on the list of *gravamina* against them were the controversial commissions they arranged for new churches and decorative schemes, often from artists who were themselves unbelievers. Like all Dominicans, one trusts, they were, however, primarily theologians, even if the two principal figures had also had a professional training in the visual arts and of these one was a practicing artist. Much of their theological combination remains valid, even if, as we shall see, there were also deficiencies.

¹ See S. de Lavergne, *Art sacré et modernité. Les grandes années de la Revue 'L'Art sacré'* (Namur, 1992).

Historically, Dominicans are canons regular who, for the sake of the Church's mission, turned themselves into preaching friars. So the solemn celebration of the Liturgy, the proper work of canons regular, and the preaching of the Word, the specific task of an 'order of preachers', have always been constants in Dominican life. It was out of concern for the role of the visual arts in liturgical worship, and their value as a medium in which to communicate the truths of Catholic Christianity, that these men (re-)founded and ran *L'Art sacré* and endured the trials it brought them, even if some of these were to a degree self-inflicted. As one of them wrote, what was at stake was 'the face the Church presents to the world'.² Their efforts are instructive in that they were trying to negotiate a passage between Tradition and modernity, which is what all of us are trying to do in different ways.

The protagonists

So who were the principal Dominicans involved? They were two in number.³ The elder was Pierre Couturier, born in 1897, died in 1954, in religion Père Marie-Alain Couturier. After secondary school at Lyons, he decided to train as an artist, and was accepted as a pupil by the Parisian *Ateliers d'art sacré*, on which more anon. In 1925, when in his late 20s, Couturier entered the Dominican Province of France – sometimes known as the Province of Paris since at this time there were three French Dominican Provinces of which the Province of France was the senior. The French Revolution had wiped out the Dominicans, but a brilliant young diocesan priest, the Abbé Lacordaire, who will come into this story again, had re-established them in the early 1840s. Couturier, despite his Dominican vows and priestly ordination, never gave up practice as an artist. Indeed, following such mediaeval Dominican models as Fra Angelico and Blessed James of Ulm, he was encouraged to see his vocation in these terms. Like Angelico, he specialised in the painting of frescoes – scenes and compositions of figures painted directly onto the plaster of church walls. There are, for instance, a number of these, from the years 1928 to 1929, in the Dominican priory church at Oslo, where the present writer spent some time at the turn of the 1970s and 80s. In 1932, he was commissioned to paint frescoes for the chapel of the Master of the Order at the priory of Santa Sabina in Rome. Like James of Ulm, Couturier also worked in stained glass, another form of Dominican *muta praedicationis*, 'silent preaching'. On this basis, he

² P.-R. Régamey, *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?* (Paris 1952), p. 8.

³ See F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*. La revue *Art sacré* des Pères Couturier et Régamey, *Mémoire dominicaine* 14 (1999), pp. 169–197, is my chief source of information.

made it his business to get to know the professional art world in France, and was especially friendly with the Fauvist Henri Matisse. Matisse was usually regarded as the leader of *Les Fauves*, an art movement which treated painting as an 'alchemy of colour' aiming to explore the possibilities of pure colour and create harmonies parallel to musical composition. It lies behind the later development of abstract art. In the key years 1949 to 1953, Couturier's writing dominated the journal. It is not easy to get copies of *L'Art sacré* most of whose subscribers were clergy, Religious or interested laity rather than public libraries. But in 1983 Couturier's articles from that period were collected and published, under the anodyne title *Marie-Alain Couturier. Art sacré*. The following year, The French Dominican publishing house Les Editions du Cerf brought out an anthology of essays he had placed in various publications from 1939 onwards. The anthology was released under a title more eloquent of his later difficulties with the Church public, *La Vérité blessée*, 'The Wounded Truth', and this was sufficiently successful to be re-printed in 1991. Couturier's death in 1954 is one of the two events that marks the end of the great period of *L'Art sacré*.⁴

The other major figure was Raymond Régamey, in religion Pie-Raymond Régamey, born in 1900 and living on until as late as 1996. Régamey was the child of a French Protestant family already distinguished in the arts and the world of letters. He himself studied literature and the history of art at the Sorbonne, and early showed signs of literary productivity, publishing his first articles, chiefly on nineteenth century French art, before he was twenty years old. Following his University studies, he trained in art conservation and the year after he became a Catholic, 1927, was named as assistant conservator of paintings at the Louvre. In 1928, however, he abandoned this promising career and joined the French Dominicans at Amiens, on the territory of the Province of Paris. Régamey was friendly with many of the leading French art critics of the period and also with such practising artists as Georges Rouault who, like Matisse, began as a Fauvist though his later work is often described as 'mystical Expressionism'. In 1952 Régamey published a book under the title *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, 'Sacred Art in the Twentieth Century?'. This book sums up in chastened form – 1952 was the date of a sharp Roman rap over the knuckles for the editors – the aims and experience of the Dominicans of *L'Art sacré*, and was regarded by their admirers as the 'Bible' of the movement they represented. Also well worth reading (where accessible!) is Régamey's lengthy essay on the nature of Tradition from the viewpoint of Catholicism and the arts, entitled 'A la recherche de la Tradition', 'In search of

⁴ See also the issue of *L'Art sacré* devoted to him: 1954, 9–10 (the post-war journal numbered issues by fascicules only, sometimes overlapping the end of the calendar year).

Tradition'. Published in *L'Art sacré* for 1948, it is one of the journal's high points.⁵ In 1954, straight after the death of Couturier, Régamey began collecting and eventually publishing some writings and notes by the Dominican whose friend he had been since the noviciate.⁶ He had the more time to do this in that he had just been relieved of the editorship of *L'Art sacré*: delayed fall out from the Church controversy of two years earlier. Couturier and Régamey, while - naturally enough - not agreeing on absolutely everything, worked from the same first principles in terms of their programme of a modern sacred art. Their removal, whether by death or superior's decision, brought to a close the most creative period of the journal's history, even if the legacy they left was not happy in all respects.

The context

Before getting into the meat of the contribution it will be helpful, I think, to say something about the context. *L'Art sacré* began in 1935. It needs to be understood, therefore, against the backcloth of the 1920s and early 30s. In the years immediately following the Great War in France various voices were raised against the sugary and sentimental tone of much mass-produced Church art, often referred to by the location of its main Parisian retail outlets as the 'art of Saint-Sulpice'. Over-sweet, anaesthetising any sense of the hard ascetic and moral demands of Christianity, offering pseudo-religious compensation: these were the typical terms in which critics poured scorn on this art and its equivalent in the Germanic countries where a useful one-word term of opprobrium was available, *kitsch* – etymology unknown. The French had a similar term, *bondieuserie*, but the writers of *L'Art sacré* made the German term popular, notably after the monastic press of Ettal in Bavaria published in 1950 a study called 'Kitsch and Christian Living', *Kitsch und Christenleben*, a work enthusiastically reviewed in the French journal.⁷ The word got into the other main European languages as well. In English, it was helped along by a translation of Richard Egenter's book, adapted for the situation in England by Nicolette Gray, interpreter of the art of the Dominican tertiary David Jones.⁸ The phenomenon of sugary, sentimental sacred art was not confined just to the two sides of the river

⁵ P.-R. Régamey, O. P., 'A la recherche de la Tradition', *L'Art sacré* 1948, 5–6, pp. 81–107.

⁶ *Dieu et l'art dans une vie, le P. Couturier* (Paris 1965).

⁷ It inspired several succeeding issues devoted to 'Les marchands et le temple', or 'Pourquoi le succès de la bondieuserie?', see *L'Art sacré* 1951, 9–10.

⁸ R. Egenter, *The Desecration of Christ* (London 1967), based on idem., *Kitsch und Christenleben* (Ettal 1958, 2nd edition).

Rhine. It is an interesting if perplexing question why what came to be called *kitsch* arose as it did in the later nineteenth century. Writing as a moral theologian with a good knowledge of art history, Egenter traced its origins to the arbitrary subjection of religious themes to artistic fancy, aided by Rococo emotionalism and, subsequently, Romanticism. Techniques of mass production, made possible by the machine, added the factor of multiplication to the simplification and distortion already present in the studio. Inspid, and frivolous (it was compared with Pop Art in this respect), *kitsch* turned divine things into commodities for the purpose of spiritual pleasuring. Such 'artistic miscarriage', commented Egenter, gave 'the Father of lies' a 'wonderfully flexible and effective means of turning the masses away from salvation'.⁹ In his own analysis, Régamey added for good measure: deviations of piety, aggressive commercial organisation and publicity, the desire to avoid the higher cost of employing good craftsmen, official connivance, the laziness of the clergy and the lack of interest in the Church of the recognised 'living masters' of the arts. The last three factors, at least, *L'Art sacré* might expect to help circumvent.

The writers of the early twentieth century French Catholic revival – Léon Bloy, novelist and pamphleteer, Paul Claudel, dramatist and poet, Loris-Karl Huysmans, novelist – had long since agreed on the lamentable condition of ecclesiastical architecture, painting and liturgical craftsmanship. In due course they won the support of two active – and pro-active – Catholic artists, Maurice Denis and Georges Desvallières. Maurice Denis, though he had trained with the Pont-Aven group gathered around him by the Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin, was far from being self-consciously modern. An ultramontane royalist who deplored the secularisation of society and looked to the recreation of a 'Catholic social order' in France, he strongly opposed a number of the *avant-garde* developments: not simply Fauvism but also Cubism whose best-known figure was Pablo Picasso. Cubist artists began by breaking down objects into angular forms, though later on they abandoned the claim to be interpreting nature. Denis was also hostile to Futurism, originally an Italian movement which sought inspiration in the machine, and tried to convey a sense of high-speed motion by whipping forms out of shape. For Denis the upshot of these movements could only be the total separation of art from nature. His own painting – its style described by the *Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth Century Art* as 'tender and mild, with pale colours and relaxed lines'¹⁰ – aimed to reclaim in some way the spirit of the Italian renaissance understood as a Christian rather than neo-pagan development, though a recent study has also claimed him

⁹ Idem., *The Desecration of Christ*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁰ 'Denis, Maurice', in I. Childers, *A Dictionary of Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford 1988), p. 167.

for the enthusiasts of 'Byzantium re-discovered'.¹¹ But he was not simply anti-modern. He wanted to simplify form so as to stress symbolic content, a concern that links him to the widespread European style of *Art nouveau*, which flourished in Germany, England and Russia as well as France. He emphasised flatness of surface pattern, like some later members of the School of Paris. His stress on the spiritual nature of art cannot have been simply ecclesiastical because it was taken originally from the group of secular artists called *Les Nabis*, 'The Prophets'.¹² When he was demobbed after the War, Denis took up an idea from the other would-be practical reformer of Church art in the 1920s, Georges Desvallières.¹³

Desvallières, whose dates are 1861 to 1950, had been a pupil of the late nineteenth century Symbolist painter and illustrator Gustave Moreau. He was probably attracted to Moreau by the latter's fusion of mystical and romantic imagery, as was Rouault. Before the First World War Desvallières was working on ideas for a Catholic art school, something that came to fruition in 1919 more through the efforts of Denis than anyone else under the title *Ateliers d'Art sacré*, 'The Workshops of Sacred Art'. As Desvallières envisaged them, these 'workshops' were to be places where practising artists could apprentice the young. He had it in mind that they would be lineal descendants of the artists' fraternity founded in Rome by the reviver of the French Dominicans, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, in 1839.¹⁴ Rome was the Mecca of most nineteenth century artists, a situation codified later by the French State when it made submission of an entry for the *Prix de Rome* a condition of official recognition for artists. In 1872 the members of Lacordaire's *Confrérie de Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste* set up a daughter organisation in France itself. That was when the *Société de Saint-Jean* came into existence, as an instrument for organising conferences, exhibitions and publications all designed to renew the visual arts in the service of the Church. The *Ateliers* were to be in this succession.

The Denis-Desvallières *Ateliers* were consciously modelled on the mediaeval guild system, in which in England at the same time the 'Guild Socialists' were interested. One moved from apprentice to co-laborator as one went on. The future Père Couturier was precisely one of these young men, who, typically, were sent out in teams to redecorate village churches and convent chapels or to give talks to 'edify' the faithful and clergy by presentations on sacred art. Although the

¹¹ J. E. Bullen, *Byzantium Rediscovered* (London 2003).

¹² For more on this figure, see J. P. Bouillon, *Maurice Denis* (Geneva 1983).

¹³ A. Garreau, *Georges Desvallières* (Paris 1942).

¹⁴ E. Cartier, *Un Religieux dominican. Le Révérend Père Hyacinthe Besson, sa vie et ses lettres* I. (Paris 1865), pp. 73–76. Besson was a member of the brotherhood who went on to enter the Order of Preachers in the Province of France.

Ateliers were not the only associations of artists with religious concerns, they were the most important ones. Denis formulated their manifesto. The artist was to realise in his work a symbiosis between his life as a believer, his life as an artist and his life as an ordinary human being.¹⁵ *Ateliers* artists were invited to explore the main sources of Christian inspiration, which, describing their set-up, Régamey defined as the Bible and the Liturgy, 'sciences religieuses' (meaning, I suppose, a knowledge of doctrine) and lastly the 'works of art of the great Christian epochs': Romanesque, Byzantine, Gothic and so forth.¹⁶

Apart from the *Ateliers* of Denis and Desvallières, the other main influence on the origins of *L'Art sacré* was the Neo-Thomist philosopher and lay theologian Jacques Maritain. Maritain's *Art et scolastique*, which so stimulated the sculptor, letterer, engraver Eric Gill and the artist (in various media) and poet David Jones at Ditchling,¹⁷ was held in great esteem in circles dedicated to the renewal of Church art in France. This was true not least among the Dominicans who were Maritain's closest clerical contacts. *Art et scolastique* appeared in 1920. It forms part of Maritain's plea for a new Christendom. In this book, he expressly refused to look for a style or a manner of working or a set of techniques specific to Christian art. This refusal deeply influenced the Dominicans of *L'Art sacré*. Like Denis, Maritain did not think that the 'Christian' of 'Christian art' had anything to do with painterly means at all.¹⁸ Rather, the Christian character of art had to spring spontaneously from a 'common renewal of art and holiness'.¹⁹ A truly religious art could not, he thought, exist outside a holy society – that is, a society capable of engendering holiness and recognising it when it saw it.

To turn away from Wisdom and contemplation, and aim lower than at God, that, for a Christian civilisation, is the first cause of all disorder. In, it is the cause of this impious divorce between Art and Prudence which one finds in epochs where Christians no longer have the strength to bear the integrity of their riches.²⁰

¹⁵ For the influence of the *Ateliers* philosophy on (especially) the early *L'Art sacré*, see P.-R. Régamey, 'Bilan de l'époque 1920–1940', *L'Art sacré* 1948, 3–4, pp. 50–57 and here at p. 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ F. MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London 1989), p. 161; R. Hague (ed.), *Dai Greatcoat. A self-portrait of David Jones in his letters* (London 1980), p. 31.

¹⁸ J. Maritain, *Art et Scolastique* (Paris 1927, 2nd edition), pp. 113–116. There is an analogy here with Maritain's view of Christian philosophy, which is '[simply] philosophy itself [but] in its Christian state, in the conditions of exercise and the lights which are the privilege of the Christian soul'. Thus his speech inaugurating the Louvain memorial to Cardinal Mercier as cited in P. Chenu, *Entre Maurras et Maritain. Une génération intellectuelle, 1920–1930* (Paris 1999), pp. 195–196.

¹⁹ J. Maritain, *Art et scolastique*, op. cit., p. 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Like Denis and Desvallières, Maritain insisted on the traditional requirement that in sacred art the artist must himself be a believer. Christian art is 'the art of redeemed humanity'.²¹ The effective abandonment by the Dominicans of *L'Art sacré* of this fundamental thesis was going to be in the future the most serious criticism lodged against them. What by contrast was new in Maritain's attitude was the notion that the sacred artist, in order to be fully an artist, must be fully of his own time. Without that commitment to the contemporary, Maritain held, his or her artworks would not be an authentic artistic testimony to the faith.²² This was the other important 'doctrine' the Dominicans took from him.

The background to the beginnings of *L'Art sacré* was also organisational. In 1934 an umbrella organisation - 'OGAR', the 'Office général d'art religieux' - was established for the various associations of Catholic artists and craftsmen. It had the very practical aim of helping artists to get commissions and at the same time informing the clergy about what was called the 'new artistic production'.²³

The establishment of 'L'Art sacré'

With financial assistance from two benefactors, OGAR established the journal *L'Art sacré* in 1935. Its first editor, Joseph Pichard, was a layman married to an artist who worked in mosaic. Under his editorship, *L'Art sacré* did not do overmuch to correspond to Maritain's requirement that sacred art be of its time. The great majority of its articles concerned the history of Christian art, while the others were chiefly chronicles of exhibitions visited. Though Pichard had been criticised for being too commercially minded in the way he ran *L'Art sacré*, the journal went into financial crisis in the summer of 1936. To be fair to Pichard, this was partly owing to the wave of strikes that accompanied the transition from the administration of Pierre Laval, which had failed to cope with the continuing inter-War economic crisis, and the coming to power of the Leftist Popular Front government of Léon Blum. *L'Art sacré* was only saved by the intervention of two wealthy aristocratic ladies who bought it and presented it to the fledgling Dominican publishing house Les Editions du Cerf in 1937.

This was the beginning of the connexion between *L'Art sacré* and the Order of Preachers. The French Dominicans were surely the first grouping in Europe to establish a Religious community with as its defining apostolate the running of a publishing house. Originally

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²² For Maritain's relations with contemporary artists, see M. Cagin, 'Jacques Maritain et les artistes', *Cahiers Jacques Maritain* 27 (1993), pp. 5-30.

²³ F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*', art. cit., p. 173.

founded at Juvisy in 1938, it soon moved into the centre of Paris where it still exists today in the same building, the Couvent Saint-Dominique at 29, boulevard de Latour-Maubourg. Les Editions du Cerf has been phenomenally successful and remains the largest religious publishing house in France. A few months after they acquired *L'Art sacré*, du Cerf – of course this must have been with the consent of the French Provincial – made Père Couturier and Père Régamey joint editors. Given their artistic backgrounds, they were, after all, the obvious choice. After the interruption of the War, Régamey would become sole editor, since Couturier had developed an apostolate of lecture-tours on the areas represented by the review while he was in North America for the duration of hostilities.

Policy or policies of the Dominicans of 'L'Art sacré'

Hostilities, as things turned out, were not to be confined to the global struggle between the Axis powers and the Allies. The very first post-War issue announced that the journal intended to be 'severe' in its aesthetic judgments. It declared that its criteria would be no different from those operative in the world of profane art: namely, the quality of art as art. It set out to blame and shame, irritating the parish clergy and, even more no doubt, the proprietors of Catholic repositories and art-shops by publishing photographs of what it considered the worst examples of bad Church art, though the editors were sufficiently charitable only to give the names of individual artists when they felt they could praise not damn. The post-War *L'Art sacré* expressed its intention to initiate its readership into an understanding of specifically modern art, and to sensibilise it to the work of even those artists they knew many people would find disconcerting. Although the post-War *L'Art sacré* continued to do various things its pre-War incarnation had done – chronicling exhibitions, reviewing books, sponsoring articles on Christian art history and suggesting practical applications of the arts for the Liturgy, the majority of its pages were devoted to contemporary art: a clear reversal of the Pichard policy.

But the new incarnation was also a reversal of the early policy of Couturier and Régamey themselves. Before the War they had shown themselves, after the manner of Denis, rather acerbic critics of much modern art. Their guns were even trained on the work of Rouault, despite the fact that he saw his vocation as to render in art the crusading, anti-bourgeois Catholicism of Bloy. In 1937, for example, Couturier, writing on Picasso and the present-day conditions of Christian art, had roundly declared that some forms of twentieth century art were simply incapable of meeting the essential conditions of any Christian art worth the name. Naturalist art, abstract art, Cubist art were, Couturier opined, anti-religious in their very fundamentals. Not

mincing words, he described Picasso's work as 'malignant': it was *tout chargé de maléfices*.²⁴ In 1938, while recognising Rouault's Christian inspiration, Couturier deemed his work, which of course had a Fauvist background, full of 'extremes and brutality' (certainly Bloy himself disowned it, probably for its violent, ugly colours). To place his artworks in a Church setting could only serve, wrote Couturier, in words which must have been extremely painful to Rouault if he read them, to discourage the 'love of priests and the faithful'.²⁵ The only moderns the pre-War Dominican *L'Art sacré* liked turned out to be some rather obscure Swiss artists in *la Suisse romande* and some slightly better known church architects in the German-speaking cantons.²⁶

True, what we can call the 'first Dominican *L'Art sacré*' was far from bovinely content with the existing state of things. In measured but unmistakable terms it lamented the missed opportunities of *Les Chantiers du Cardinal*, the huge programme of church-building in the working-class and suburban districts of Paris which occupied most of the 1930s. It welcomed a joint exhibition of Church artists and other artists - including Marc Chagall, an somewhat unplaceable figure who mixed Surrealist dream images with Judaism and Russian folk art - as arranged by Pichard at the end of 1938. But its policies were essentially the following:

1 First, while establishing links with the contemporary art-world outside the Church, to avoid where possible the *avant-garde*, and privilege instead connections with those modern artists who were closest in technique and aim to the pictorial traditions of past centuries. This reflected the position of Denis and Desvallières, the two D's, but not necessarily that of Maritain.

2 Secondly, to insist on the principle that a sacred art could only be created by artists who were themselves religious, which in the case of a Christian sacred art must mean believing and practising Christians. This was taken for granted by the two D's and forcefully re-stated, with justificatory explanations, by Maritain.

3 Thirdly, to accept that in a society which had undergone considerable secularisation, it was not to be expected that an art sympathetic to the spiritual vision of the Church, congruent with its Liturgy and useful in its preaching, would ever be generally available. There could only be isolated islands where a successful combination of Church Tradition and modernity was achieved. This was also Maritain's

²⁴ A.-M. Couturier, O. P., 'Sur Picasso et les conditions actuelles de l'art chrétien', *L'Art sacré* 18 (1937), pp. 99 ff., cited in F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*', art. cit., pp. 176-177.

²⁵ A.-M. Couturier, O. P., 'Rouault at le public ecclésiastique', *ibid.*, 33 (1938), pp. 245 ff., cited in F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*', art. cit., p. 177.

²⁶ On the architects, Fritz Metzger and Hermann Baur, see F. Debuyst, *Le renouveau de L'Art sacré de 1920 à 1962* (Paris 1991), pp. 33-35.

conviction and no doubt helps to explain why across the English Channel the artists and craftsmen of the Ditchling Guild and community found his book so satisfying. Such an island is exactly what they were themselves.

In the French context, we can say that, in effect, the Dominicans of the first or Pre-War *L'Art sacré* considered the work of the Denis-Desvallières *Ateliers* to be the way ahead. They merely deplored its small success in convincing those in ecclesiastical authority, as well as donors and patrons, that this and not the 'art of Saint-Sulpice' was what they ought to be supporting.²⁷

The change that overcame the review when it started up again in 1945 was not total, but it was marked. It forms part of a general transformation of the French Catholic élites in the later 1940s and early 1950s. Often ascribed to the shared struggle against Fascism in which Communists and secular humanists as well as many Catholics were involved, this change took the form of an abandonment of the hope of a restored 'Catholic social [and we can add, cultural] order'. Not only was such a hope unrealistic, based on nostalgia for a lost Christendom that could never, in fact, be restored. Worse still, it was also dangerous, because it minimalised or denied outright the common ground of basic humanity on which Christians and other walked. That common ground might express the values or spirit of the Gospel better than a dogmatic manual or a liturgical text or an icon or a classical treatise from the history of Christian spirituality. This mind-set, which was most obviously present in the upper echelons of Catholic Action, where the majority of engaged Catholics were to be found, also held good for a number of the intellectually more sophisticated clergy of which the French Catholicism of this period could boast not a few. The issues it raised were the issues which, after the Second Vatican Council, led to quite divergent views of what the Council's call for *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* – making contemporary by going back to the sources – was actually intended to achieve. Today, it underlies for instance the differences between the two main international theological journals, *Concilium* and *Communio*, and even the divergent attitudes of English Roman Catholics towards the London *Tablet* (whose agenda is remarkably coincident with that of the principal *Concilium* theologian, Hans Küng). Fortunately, we are not concerned with those wider issues globally but only as reflected in one small lens, which the Dominicans of the Province of France re-cut and polished in the years 1945 to 1948.

The Second World War and the German occupation had caused great material hardships in France, and the paper-shortage led to a

²⁷ P. –R. Régamey, 'Bilan de l'époque 1920–1940', art. cit., p. 50.

marked reduction in the physical quality of the review. But it was the change in its moral quality that aroused attention. After the War Couturier and Régamey began to extend their contacts with profane artists beyond those who were relatively conservative in matters of the medium if not the message to reach out to the real *avant-garde*. These included, for example, such Modernist or Functionalist architects as Le Corbusier – the name adopted professionally by Edouard Jeanneret for whom deliberate rupture with the cityscapes and building designs of the past was a necessity if men were to embrace cultural modernity – defined, as with the Futurists by technology – in a thorough-going way. In 1920 Le Corbusier had launched the so-called Purist movement, its magazine entitled significantly *L'Esprit nouveau*. In Le Corbusier's view, artist and architect have not only the right but the duty to induce historical amnesia. It was a mentality reflected not only in Futurism but also in Dadaism which explicitly sought to relegate the art of the past to a mental dustbin. (One of the best known Dadaist paintings is the version of the Mona Lisa by Marcel Duchamp which shows the inscrutable lady wearing moustache and beard.) Couturier and Régamey also cultivated the painter and stained glass artist Jean Bazaine, a member of the Post-War School of Paris who had rejected the entire tradition of representational art as exhausted and moribund and expected the future to lie only with non-figural art. Régamey set up a touring exhibition which went round the country demonstrating what sacred art should be like, in painting, sculpture, metalwork, textiles. For the market-towns and villages of *La France profonde* Régamey was careful to include less difficult work, including for instance pieces by the two D's. But when he took his exhibition to Rome, and put it on in enhanced form, with a subsidy from the French State, for the Holy Year of 1950, he dropped most of the non-avant garde works thus producing a collection dominated by Rouault, Alfred Manessier (an abstract artist of the Paris School), and the Cubist Georges Braque. This was something of a diplomatic gaffe. The exhibition was noticed, as how could it not be, by Cardinal Celso Constantini, Pius XII's president of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art. The baleful eye with which the cardinal toured Régamey's exhibition was relevant to the 'querelle de l'art sacré' which exploded two years later.

A caveat

Before describing that quarrel, which centred on the commissions given to largely agnostic architects and artists to create and furnish three churches to be lightships for the future, Notre-Dame-de-toute-grâce at Assy, La chapelle du Rosaire at Vence and Le-Sacré-Coeur at Audincourt, let me enter a caveat. There is no worse fate for a French intellectual than to be considered not *au courant*. Régamey's

cultivation of 'the great and the good' in the world of the arts, irrespective of religious affiliation or outlook, was in part an expression of this perhaps forgivable vanity. That he was less radical than some feared is shown by two sorts of evidence.

The first of these is indirect, and it consists in the difficulties he had in relations with the Parisian *Centre de Pastorale Liturgique*. In the forefront as it was of the plans for liturgical revision which issued in the new Roman Missal of 1969 and the introduction of the vernacular, the *Centre* emphasised the need to bring the Liturgy closer to the people rather than the people closer to the Liturgy. Though well-intentioned, it was, unfortunately, a harbinger of what by the 1970's would be called, in a useful Americanism, the 'dumbing-down' of Western Catholic worship. In time to come, such evidences as the manner of the post-Conciliar reordering of churches, the kind of music encouraged by pastoral liturgists, and the style of translation sometimes brought to bear on the new Latin books would speak volumes for the developing spirit of the age. What the stormy petrels of the 1950s envisaged as the Liturgy of the future had little place for high art. Régamey found he could not work with the *Centre* of which at a certain point, embarrassingly, *L'Art sacré* had become an organ. Not only was it deaf to his appeals for more concern with the quality of liturgical celebration. Its *responsables* did not understand the very purpose of such a concern, which was to facilitate the *contemplative* appropriation of the Liturgy.

To the extent that the sacred arts assure the material conditions for the most worthy realisation of the [liturgical] Mystery, to that degree do they dispose souls to the Mystery, to that degree do they express its different virtualities for souls.²⁸

Only by contemplation, argued Régamey, could the realities hidden in the liturgical action be lovingly held in the mind.²⁹ The church building, he wrote, as setting of the Liturgy, should be heaven on earth.³⁰ By the late 1960s, with their emphasis on active participation, liturgical creativity, and the continuity of the Liturgy with secularity, this point of view would be considered hopelessly reactionary and *vieux jeu*.

The second reason for not exaggerating Régamey's radicalism lies in the tenor of the major articles he published in *L'Art sacré*. There are five major ones. Aside from the most theologically heavy-weight, the 1948 essay on Tradition already mentioned, the others

²⁸ P.-R. Régamey, O. P., *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, op. cit., pp. 24–25.

²⁹ F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*', art. cit., p. 182. For his view of contemplation, see *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, op. cit., pp. 51–52; of the Liturgy, *ibid.*, pp. 103–118.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 114–116.

are 'Present-day Tendencies in Christian Art' (1946), 'Modern-day Lessons of the Ancient Arts' (1948) and 'The Artistic Education of the Clergy' (1946), as well as a *bilan* or survey of the arts in the years 1920 to 1940, co-authored with Couturier in 1948.³¹ These essays make it plain that Régamey's artistic credo was a modest one. His opposition was certainly not to figural art as such or even, *under certain conditions*, to an art in conscious continuity with the Christian centuries. What he chiefly opposed was the ecclesiastical version of academic art, a term used by art historians to describe the art favoured in the official salons, and notably by the Parisian *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, at the time of the emergence of the Impressionists whose canvases, notoriously, the Academy rejected, thus leading to the first of the *Salons des refusés*. For Régamey, academicism is what happens when a creative artistic epoch has passed its zenith and enters a sterile period when formulas replace inspiration. He claimed to discern a law whereby such academic art always tends to become eclectic, and seeks to secure its effects by what he called 'amalgamating' the highest number of qualities possible. 'Only the level of pretention', he wrote, 'distinguishes academicism from *bondieuserie*'.³² Hence the need for what Couturier, writing in *L'Art sacré* for 1950, termed 'fine images that are very pure' so as to purify and discipline an art that had become, like many pre-Conciliar Catholic churches, too cluttered and all over the place.³³

It was in this *therapeutic* context, Régamey felt, that the Church in France needed to go to the profane 'masters', *les maîtres*. To ignore what was happening in the contemporary arts outside the Church was to proclaim, in his strong words, that the Church was *attachée à la mort*, 'attached to death'.³⁴ A detached observer might have thought that those words could with greater justice be applied to some of the more nihilistic movements in the contemporary art world then and later: Futurism, for example, in whose original manifesto, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, we are told that art should praise war, the strong, and the healthy injustices of life, or, in England, the art of Francis Bacon which treats human flesh as meat and as one historian

³¹ P.-R. Régamey, O. P., *Tendances actuelles de l'art chrétien*, = *Cahiers de L'Art sacré* 7; idem., *L'éducation artistique du clergé*, = *ibid.*, 9; idem., 'Leçons actuelles des arts anciens', *L'Art sacré* 1948, 1–2, pp. 3–32; 'Bilan de l'époque 1920–1940', *art cit.*

³² Idem., *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

³³ A.-M. Couturier, O. P., 'Pour les yeux', *L'Art sacré* 1950, 5–6, pp. 3–4, and here at p. 4. In *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, Régamey would go to some lengths to specify positive criteria for suitably Christian versions of these: doing justice to divine transcendence and divine immanence alike, to both the Cross and the Resurrection aspects of the mystery of Christ, expressive of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Beatitudes (closely linked in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas), instructed by the Liturgy, and 'Marian' in having their centre of gravity outside themselves.

³⁴ Words cited in F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*', *art. cit.*, p. 185.

of modern art has commented, portrays human beings 'decomposing in transparent cages'.³⁵

Be that as it may, Régamey's condition for permitting a sacred art in explicit continuity with those of the past to persist in the Church was that any form or technique which had no place at all in the present-day secular arts be sedulously avoided. If a particular kind of artistic form is no longer in the creative sensibility of artists, then artists in the Church should never be tempted to make use of it. What all this actually meant in practice with Régamey – and here he *was* radical in the sense the Roman authorities feared – was a rupture with the centuries-old assumption – or conviction – that Church art must necessarily be the work of believing artists. This 'assumption' was certainly a 'conviction' in the Eastern churches whose hagiology contains a special category for artist saints, the holy iconographers.

'La querelle de l'art sacré'

As already mentioned, it was the giving of commissions in the liturgical arts to artists who were agnostics or even atheists which alienated a significant proportion of the Church public in France, quite as much as shock – though there was some – about the actual appearance of some of the art produced.³⁶ Couturier was most responsible for this. By 1945 he had abandoned his largely negative view of the contemporary art world. Twentieth century art, he declared, so far from being, as many allege, materialistic, is one of the most spiritual chapters in the entire history of art. He connected modern art's deliberate poverty of means with the self-stripping of such Christian mystics as St John of the Cross.³⁷ What might we be talking about here? Well, we could be talking about Russian Suprematism, as in Kazimir Malevitch for whom putting a black square on a white ground is painting. Or we could be talking about American Abstract Expressionism, emerging in the 1940's, and best known from Jackson Pollock who worked by dancing on the canvas while dribbling paint on it which he then scuffed with his hands to get the end product, hence his nickname 'Jack the Dripper'. In fact, we are probably talking about somewhat more accessible *avant-garde* artists, but mention of these names could indicate a certain tendency on the Dominicans' part to look at the art-world through rose-tinted glasses.

If Couturier thought that the decorative work and liturgical objects produced by a variety of contemporary artists for the three new

³⁵ N. Weston, *Kaleidoscope of Modern Art* (London 1968), p. 178.

³⁶ For the crisis, see S. de Lavergne, *Art sacré et modernité*, op. cit., pp. 150–160.

³⁷ Writing in *L'Art sacré* 1950, 11–12, p. 25, cited in F. Caussé, 'Les rapports des Dominicains avec *L'Art sacré*', art. cit., p. 186.

churches *L'Art sacré* sponsored – the two parish churches at Assy and Audincourt and the chapel for the Dominican sisters at Vence – were going to be received in his own Sanjuanist spirit, he was soon to be disabused. The completion and opening of these projects in 1951 unleashed a storm of criticism of the Dominicans of *L'Art sacré* which in the event they did not survive. The adverse reaction was not just from the so-called ‘simple faithful’, among whom at any given time the majority of the hierarchy should no doubt be included. A number of Catholic artists with an *Ateliers* training already felt betrayed by the change of tone in the journal, as did those who took their principles in these matters from Maritain. In April 1952, a Commission set up by the French bishops to look into the matter came down nonetheless on the side of *L'Art sacré*, with some reservations. But unbeknownst to them the Holy Office had also been working on the problem. In June 1952 it issued an Instruction on Sacred Art, accompanied by an authoritative article in *L'Osservatore romano* by the cardinal president who had so little enjoyed his tour of Régamey's exhibition two years earlier. The article interpreted the Instruction as a rejection of the French experiments, and its author would have known if anyone did.

The 1952 Instruction is a somewhat threadbare document which chiefly consists of citations from the 1917 Code of Canon Law and passages from the allocutions of the previous Pope, Pius XI. But at least it has the literary virtue of brevity. It opens abruptly enough by rejecting the proposition that sacred art should be governed by a sense of what it calls ‘the needs and conditions of modern times’, *novorum temporum necessitates atque condiciones*.³⁸ Christian art, it goes on in more positive vein, was brought to birth with Christian society, and it has its own ends, its own intrinsic purposes from which it may not deviate and which, by implication, cannot be learnt from elsewhere. However, what may well be feasible is what the Instruction calls, citing a sermon of Pius XI, ‘a just and progressive development, *sviluppo*, of the good and venerable traditions [of the art of the Church]’. ‘Development’, it goes on, is hardly the word for

those representations introduced recently by certain people, representations which seem to be a deforming and depraving of sane art and are even at times openly repugnant to Christian dignity, modesty and piety, and deeply wound the religious sense. They must be removed from our sanctuaries.

This was probably a reference to the hanging crucifix at Assy, by the bronze-worker Germaine Richier, an atheist: at any rate, it was the only object actually purged in the three buildings concerned (by the bishop of Annécly).

³⁸ For the text, see *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* XXXIV (1952), pp. 542–546.

On church architecture the Instruction warned against trying to assimilate sacred architecture to that of profane buildings. Though regretting the addition of tasteless ornamentation to exteriors, it deplored what it called 'a certain negligence in conception and execution' – possibly an allusion (if so a very mild-mannered one) to the stark and often brutal simplicities of the Modernist school. As to art in the interior of churches, the Instruction reminded bishops of their duty in canon law not to allow the installation of images lacking in intrinsic value, or stereotyped images (meaning, presumably mass-produced objects), or the siting of images in a way that, as it put it, lacked 'order or taste'. On that point, the canon law in vigour, specifically canon 1178, sufficiently agreed, as the Dominicans knew perfectly well, with the editorial approach of *L'Art sacré*. But the editors' post-War plan for meeting the demands of this canon by looking to the secular masters to raise the level of art in Church was categorically rejected when the Instruction declared:

Let there be commissioned works of painting, sculpture and architecture only from those who are remarkable for their competence and who are capable of expressing a sincere faith and piety, the goal of all sacred art.

One might have thought that there would be a few people at least who could meet this twofold criterion given that, in post-War Paris it has been reckoned that the total number of professional artists living in the French capital was around sixty-five thousand.

Naturally, Couturier and Régamey responded. It is not entirely easy to say whether the response should be called defiant or despairing. Apparently, they now publicly doubted the very possibility of what they had for some years defended. In effect, they reverted to Maritain's pre-War thesis: a new sacred art has to await a new society that can recognise the holy. In the introduction to his 1952 *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, which was published sufficiently late that year to include a translation of the Roman Instruction, Régamey wrote:

A true renaissance of the sacred arts will not be possible for long centuries, because it will take long centuries – some of them doubtless catastrophic centuries – to re-establish an accord that is *sufficiently habitual, strong and stable* between three sorts of existence which have to be pursued simultaneously: that of living faith, that proper to the arts, and that of the faithful whom those arts are to serve.³⁹

But even now, he added, they can come together occasionally, and the result is wonderful.

Interviewed by the national daily *Le Figaro*, at the heart of the uproar in France itself, Couturier had put it more vigorously. In a

³⁹ P.-R. Régamey, *Art sacré au vingtième siècle?*, op. cit., p. 13.

conversation re-published in *L'Art sacré*, he told the interviewer:

I do not believe in the existence or the possibility of a modern sacred art. To expect a truly sacred art (*un art proprement sacré*) from a society of a materialist type, and specifically a Christian art from nations that have become once again for practical purposes pagan, seems to me a chimaera.

But, like Régamey later, he went on to put a twist in the tail, by adding:

In default of a renaissance of a truly sacred art, I do believe, however, in the appearance among us and especially in France, of works of very high 'religious' inspiration, but rigorously individual and generally fortuitous. ... That is to say, I believe in miracles.⁴⁰

When Couturier died in February 1954, he did so two days before the draconian measures taken by the Province of France, under Roman pressure, against the Dominican priest-workers, and those like Père Marie-Dominique Chenu who had provided them and their diocesan counterparts with theological legitimation. The opportunity was taken to pronounce also against the directors of *L'Art sacré*. The Master of the Order, Emmanuel Suarez, who had come to France a few weeks previously to demand the removal from Paris of the theologians of the worker-priest movement, had in fact added for good measure that Couturier and Régamey should go as well. Death had defeated him for the one, though not for the other.⁴¹

In fact, as with many such interventions in the Catholic Church, things – with the exception of the Richier crucifix – seem to have gone on very much as before. The new Dominican editors of *L'Art sacré*, Augustin Cocagnac and Marie-Robert Capellades went on much as before. They arranged for yet another controversial church-building, the pilgrimage church of Notre-Dame-du-haut at Ronchamps, by Le Corbusier. They continued to champion 'demanding' artists like Rouault. The authenticity of their 'apostolic succession' to Régamey is equally shown, however, in their less than fulsome welcome for the post-Conciliar liturgical reform, at least as received in France. While not opposing the official liturgical revision, their motto became: *La réforme doit éviter l'informe*, 'the reform must avoid the formless'.⁴² They warned against over-hasty measures of liturgical adaptation, deploring the 'chaos' into which the offices of the Church had fallen in not a few parishes. Misplaced zeal was leading the clergy foolishly to dispense with forms and objects which,

⁴⁰ See *L'Art sacré* 1952, 9–10, pp. 24–25.

⁴¹ F. Leprieur, *Quand Rome condamne. Dominicains et prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris 1989), p. 103. The official letter from the Master only mentions the younger man, Couturier having just been buried.

⁴² Editorial of this title in *L'Art sacré* 1965, 7–8, pp. 3–5.

experience showed, had the power to move people towards faith. This was a period when not only *kitsch* and *bondieuserie* but things of beauty and true liturgical propriety were transferred from church to market-place, while other things that really were 'articles de bazar' made their journey in the opposite direction.⁴³ In its last years *L'Art sacré* registered the crisis into which the very notion of rite and ritual gesture was falling. Régamey returned as a guest contributor to analyse the 'ravages'. His verdict could be summed up in the English phrase 'deeply shallow'. The chickens of deficient liturgical, aesthetic, theological, spiritual discernment, some hatched in an earlier generation, were coming home to roost.⁴⁴

Conclusion

I suppose I have already made plain my preference for one crucial policy of the first *L'Art sacré*. If by 'sacred' art we mean, as the Dominicans of *L'Art sacré* did, an art that exists so as to serve and interpret the Church's faith and worship, it seems inappropriate to seek out practitioners among unbelievers. How can they be expected to have an interior understanding of the Bible and the Liturgy which Régamey himself called the principal pertinent sources of a Christian sacred art? If on the other hand by 'sacred' art we mean an art expressive of the human search for God, or transcendence, then matters look different. One could well install outside a church or even in the atrium (if it has one) works which express a question mark to which the holy images in the liturgical space furnish an answer. To the sibyl and the pagan philosophers in the entrance porches of a number of mediaeval cathedrals there correspond within the cathedral the frescoes and sculptures that illustrate the mysteries of Incarnation and Atonement, and their fruits in the lives of the saints.

But, to my mind, the main *lacuna* in the thinking of the Dominicans of *L'Art sacré* holds good of both periods of the journal's existence and lies elsewhere. It is, I think, extraordinary that, so far as I can tell, they never seem to have realised the importance for the church interior of an overall iconographic scheme. To devise decoration for a church interior without having any sense of an overall scheme that presents the content of Christian revelation through painterly images in a way suited to the celebration of the liturgical mysteries can only be to condemn church buildings to incoherence. In his study *Modern*

⁴³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴⁴ P.-R. Régamey, 'Les racines du mal et les remèdes', *ibid.*, 1965, 9–10, pp. 21–25.

Sacred Art and the Church of Assy (New York and London 1961), William S. Rubin describes that flagship of *L'Art sacré* very negatively as the fruit of a temporary alliance between liberal priests, artists and the French Left. He is on firmer ground in saying it lacks liturgical integrity. As the American Episcopalian John Dillenberger pointed out by way of commentary on Rubin's book, the bringing together of individual works by undeniably great artists – Marc Chagall for a ceramic mural and stained glass, Georges Rouault for more stained glass, the Surrealist Jean Lurçat for tapestry, Georges Braque for the metalwork of the tabernacle door and so on, but *without ever devising a consistent iconographic scheme* conveys quite as incoherent an impression as any of the fussy church interiors the Dominicans deplored in the pages of their journal. Worse still, it generates the feeling that the church is a gallery or museum. Even a ' cursory glance', writes Dillenberger, at the themes in glass, paint and other media in the church of Assy:

will confirm that there is no iconographic scheme related to the liturgy and the theological scope of the Church's affirmations.⁴⁵

That would be unthinkable in, for example, an English parish church on the eve of the Reformation⁴⁶, or a Greek Orthodox church today⁴⁷ or, where post-Conciliar iconoclasm has not triumphed, one of the German churches entrusted to the Benedictines of the nineteenth century Beuron school.⁴⁸ We suffer from this lack; if you wish to see how things could be better, without travelling to the Peloponnese or Baden-Wuerttemberg, and happen to be passing through London, I recommend a visit to the Marylebone masterpiece of Sir Ninian Comper⁴⁹, St Cyprian's, Clarence Gate.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the issues

⁴⁵ J. Dillenberger, 'Artists and Church Commissions: Rubin's *The Church at Assy Revisited*', *Art Criticism* 1. 1 (Spring 1979), pp. 72–82, reprinted in D. Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.), *Art, Creativity and the Sacred. An Anthology in Religion and Art* (New York, 1992, 2nd edition), pp. 193–204, and here at p. 198.

⁴⁶ W. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge 1955), pp. 239–241.

⁴⁷ For an illuminating description of the developed iconographical scheme recreated in Neo-Byzantine churches, see R. Taft, S. J., 'Byzantine Liturgy', in K. Parry et al., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford 1999), pp. 103–105.

⁴⁸ H. Krins, *Die Kunst der Beuroner Schule* (Beuron 1998). Perhaps the best example of a comprehensively worked out iconography is the *Gnadenkapelle* at Beuron itself: *ibid.*, pp. 83–89.

⁴⁹ A. Symondson, *The Life and Work of Sir Ninian Comper* (1864–1960). *The Last Gothic Revivalist* (London 1988); *idem.*, 'Unity by Inclusion: Sir Ninian Comper and the Planning of a Modern Church', *Twentieth Century Architecture* 3 (1998), pp. 19–42. I am grateful to Philip McCosker of the University of Cambridge Divinity Faculty for procuring these materials, as well as locating some of the last issues of *L'Art sacré*.

⁵⁰ *Idem.*, 'Mediaevalism in the Twentieth Century. St Cyprian's, Clarence Gate, London', *The Victorian* 14 (2003), pp. 12–15.

Couturier and Régamey raised, the problem of pious artists producing banal art, and the difficult issue of the relation between spiritual quality and artistic quality, will not go away.

*Aidan Nichols OP
Blackfriars
Buckingham Road
Cambridge
CB3 0DD
Email: aidan.nichols@eidosnet.co.uk*