

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
"The Noblest Activities of Man's Genius: Art and the Life of Faith"

I have had a number of conversations recently with Catholics who scruple about the proper enjoyment of created things. Basically, they wrestle with this: "Can I love God *and* my hobby, my passion, my job, or what-have-you?"

I think this is not an uncommon question. For centuries, religious sects have contrasted matter and spirit as opposing principles, as if the goods of the world were somehow intrinsically opposed to heavenly goods. The ancient Manicheans were well-known for this error. But theirs was not a reasonable view, nor is it the Catholic way. St. Augustine (354-420), once captive to the Manichean, answered them:

For we Catholic Christians worship God, from whom are all good things whether great or small; from whom is all measure great or small; from whom is all form great or small; from whom is all order great or small. (*On the Nature of the Good*, 3)

St. Augustine's answer could also have been proposed as a slogan for the Second Vatican Council. Bl. Pope John XXIII, when he addressed the opening of the Council (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*), explained that he wanted to engage the world with the Gospel more by way of affirmation than by negation. In nearly every area of human endeavor - science, government, work, industry, medicine, religion, the arts - the Council found something to celebrate. The Council fathers explained that these goods are in no way opposed to our heavenly end. On the contrary:

Thus, far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 3.34)

Nowhere did the Fathers of the council express their belief in the goodness of created things more clearly than when they addressed the fine arts. They wrote:

Very rightly the fine arts are considered to rank among the noblest activities of man's genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest achievement, which is sacred art. These arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands. . . All artists who, prompted by their talents, desire to serve God's glory in holy Church, should ever bear in mind that they are engaged in a kind of sacred imitation of God the Creator. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 122, 127)

*Art is a kind of sacred imitation of God the creator.*

This is as sublime a reason to make, to produce, and to create as you could ever hope to find. But Catholic faith offers something even more awesome. According to St. Thomas, *any* act directed

to its proper end and in accord with reason is good. If we perform this act in the love of God that we call sanctifying grace, it can even be an occasion of merit. (S.T. 1st/2nd, 18.9; 1st/2nd, 114.4) St. Paul says essentially the same thing:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. (Colossians 3:23-24)

As Catholics, we can celebrate the good that is in all created things. Furthermore, we can *create* good things by our skill and art and, in doing so, we can imitate the Creator. And if we do these things in the love of God, we can even attain eternal life through them. St. Paul, again: " We are to follow the truth, in a spirit of charity, and so grow up, in everything, into a due proportion with Christ, who is our head." (Ephesians 4:15)

In his *Confessions* (Book 7), St. Augustine explains that he was led away from the Manicheans, in part, by a contemplation of created beauty. This led him, ultimately, to contemplate the beauty that was in God. This is why he could advise people to celebrate goodness wherever it is found - provided it be found in love and truth. In this love, there is great freedom. "Love," said St. Augustine, "and do what you will."