in the very next section of the *Letter to Artists*, Jesus Christ not only reveals his Father to man but also “fully reveals man to himself.” Hence, any authentic attempt to give aesthetic expression to the mystery of man will find both inspiration and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. So art, like philosophy, needs Christ in order to best accomplish its own intrinsic goals. And this is why art needs the Church.

The main premise here—namely, that it is only in Jesus Christ that we can fully understand ourselves—is, to be sure, a revealed premise that must be accepted on faith. But it is also a very powerful premise when taken not as a bare statement to be assented to, but rather as an invitation to meditate on the Gospels prayerfully and with an open heart, guided by one of those great saints whose spiritual writings are capable of revealing hidden depths of meaning. For philosophy, much like art, is in the end a matter of the heart as much as of the intellect.

**RESPONSE**

Catherine Jack Deavel

Why the Church Needs Art

I will focus on the final section of John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists*, in which the Pope argues that art needs the Church. This section is of particular interest because it draws out the implications of the earlier descriptions of the artist and the artist’s role in the Church. Moreover, the Pope’s introductory comments suggest that he sees this section as his most controversial argument of the passage. His reasoning runs along the following lines: If the artist is “constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things” and striving to express “the world of the ineffable” (Section 3), then, in order to fulfill this aim, the artist must turn to those human activities and institutions that offer the greatest insight into what is transcendent. Religion is
a necessary resource in this task because it directly addresses itself to
the nature of transcendence by exploring questions of meaning,
both on the level of the whole of reality (e.g., what is the structure
of the universe?) and on the level of the individual (e.g., how am I
personally called to use my gifts?). Among religions, Christianity—
in particular Catholicism—provides an especially fruitful source of
inspiration to the artist because Christianity proclaims the Incarna-
tion, that Jesus Christ is God become man for love of human beings.
Therefore, art needs the Church because the goal of the artist can
best be fulfilled in the context of the life and doctrines of the
Church.¹

The most controversial premise of this argument seems to be
that the doctrine of the Incarnation is vital to the fulfillment of the
artist’s vocation. This strong claim serves as the lynchpin of the pas-
sage as a whole. Building from the second premise to the third, the
argument suggests that art needs religion and, in particular, needs
Catholic Christianity because of the doctrine of the incarnation. On
what grounds can one assert that art needs the doctrine of the incar-
nation, much less that art needs the Church’s particular expression
of this doctrine?

Challenges to the importance of the incarnation to art might take
one of two basic forms. First, one might argue that John Paul is cor-
rect in identifying the task of the artist as the struggle to express
what is ineffable and transcendent, as a search for meaning, but dis-
agree that the incarnation is needed to fulfill this task. In a more
encompassing challenge, one might object that the Pope is incorrect
in his assessment of the vocation of the artist, in which case, any
argument that the incarnation is necessary for this misconception of
art becomes a moot point.

Let me take up the second objection first. The answer to this
challenge goes back to the initial explanation of the artist’s vocation.
In describing the task of the artist, John Paul claims,
In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are. . . . In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. (Section 1)

Notice that this description focuses on the self-expression of the artist. Interestingly, this approach does not seem to be an overtly controversial account of art. Presumably, artists without religious commitments can and do understand their art as self-expression. John Paul goes on to emphasize that art can also aim at ends beyond the work itself. Art can be a means of spiritual growth for the artist and a medium through which to communicate with other people. These ends are noteworthy in part because they are directly linked to the artist’s inner life, that is, to the self that is expressed in art. In the case of spiritual growth, the artist is changed in the act of crafting a work of art. The self that is expressed is molded in the act of molding a medium—word, music, paint, stone. In the case of communicating with others, at least part of what is being communicated is the personality of the artist. “Works speak of their authors” (Section 1). Whatever else the task of the artist may be, it seems fair to say that this task involves self-expression.

The question that then must be asked is, who is the self that is expressed in art? John Paul is well aware that this question must be the starting point of any serious attempt to understand the self-expression at the heart of the artistic enterprise. Thus, he begins his letter by placing the particular vocation of the artist within the larger context of the vocation of the human. The artist is a human being, whose primary task as a human is to fashion a good life. In Genesis, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. We act in this image and likeness by directing our creative abilities upon ourselves: “men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life” (Section 1). As authors of our free
acts, we fashion a moral life. The artist has the additional call to
direct his or her creative powers toward the created world in order
to produce a work of imagination and beauty. God, the great Crafts-
man, is mirrored in His creation, particularly, the human. Likewise, the human artist is mirrored in his or her work of art. The artist reflects the divine image twice over: the artist reflects the image of the Creator, and the art reflects the artist. Therefore, human art also reflects God.

Thus, the objection is countered by the claim that all art involves self-expression of the artist in some way. In this respect, John Paul’s assessment of the task of the artist seems to be correct. Art expresses the transcendent insofar as art will always convey some meaning or trace of a personality. Even so, we are still left with the first objection: why should the artistic task of expressing the transcendent require the incarnation?

The incarnation is of central importance to the artist because the person of Christ makes clear that the aim of the artist is not in vain. If Christ is truly God become man, then the source of all transcendence and the final end in the search for transcendence took human form. The incarnation promises that it is possible for the artist, however imperfectly, to express what is transcendent by means of earthly media. It is no accident that John Paul presents his Letter to Artists on Easter Sunday. In the passion and resurrection, Christ experiences and redeems human suffering and joy. The Catholic Christian understanding of the incarnation is particularly important because of the role of the sacraments: “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.” In some sense, sacraments are a model for art. Earthly objects, words, and actions confer what is transcendent, namely, God’s grace. If Christ is present in the Eucharist, then the incarnation is continually with us. The transcendent is continually made manifest in the earthly.
Notes

1. This conclusion may appear to overstep John Paul’s conclusion by claiming an indispensable role for Catholic Christianity. In response, I take it that when the Pope argues that there is a “special bond between art and Christian revelation” (Section 3), he is arguing that Christianity offers unique inspiration to the artist. The stronger conclusion that art needs the Church seems a fair reading as it is the initial question of the section. John Paul points to the historical partnership of the Church and artists, noting that this partnership “has been a great boon for an understanding of man, of the authentic image and truth of the person” (Section 3). The heart of this understanding of the human person must be rooted in the person of Christ and, given the nature of the partnership, presumably in the Catholic Christian tradition’s understanding and worship of Christ.


3. This anthropology nicely diffuses a tension in art. Why is it that the depiction of a particular personality is thought to express a universal truth about humans? For example, in theater and literature, the more generic a character is, the less one is moved by his or her struggles and adventures. By contrast, a well-developed character is one with particular moral traits and motivations. Despite the fact that these particularities may define the character as someone “not like me,” the well-developed character captures the imagination of the reader or audience member. If John Paul is correct that each human self reflects God, then the more completely a human self is depicted, the more completely transcendence is revealed. The human self is universal in its reflection of the divine. Whether shown in its flourishing or in its deformity, the particular self is formed by the choices of a creature made in the image and likeness of God.

4. One could, of course, object to John Paul’s anthropology, but this is a further consideration. The Pope is correct that some anthropology must be provided in order to explain the nature of the self that is expressed in art. This anthropology must make sense of artists’ own understanding of their work as artists and, therefore, must deal with expression of transcendence in some manner.