

**THE INSTITUTE FOR CHRISTIAN WORSHIP:  
LECTURE NOTES**

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Thursday, March 22, 2007

- I. Introduction: Lecture Titles and Topics
  - A. Lecture 1
    - 1. Title: “Pestilence, Death, and Worship in the Throes of Despair”
    - 2. Focus: Matthis Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion*
  - B. Lecture 2
    - 1. Title: “Light, Line, and Worship Through Transformation of the Everyday”
    - 2. Focus: Henri Matisse’s *The Chapel of the Rosary*
  
- II. Christianity and the Visual Arts
  - A. Brief Overview
    - 1. The visual arts have played an important role throughout the history of the Christian Church
    - 2. During the Middle Ages: the visual arts served as an effective means of presenting, promoting, and preserving theological truths and ideas
    - 3. During the Protestant Reformation: the reformer Martin Luther argued that the visual arts are useful for encouraging personal worship and teaching biblical truths
    - 4. Note: there has never been a time when the visual arts have not been a source of controversy within the Church (this is no less true of the Church today)
  - B. The Visual Arts and the Modern Church
    - 1. Over the past twenty years, the evangelical community has witnessed a steady increase in interest in the visual arts
    - 2. This resurgence can be seen, for instance, in the general increase in books and journals devoted to the arts; in art-related conferences and lecture series; in seminary course offerings in the area of the arts; and in local Church sponsored art galleries, art events, art workshops, etc.

3. Given the relative “newness” of the subject, we are still in the process of seeking answers to basic questions such as:
  - a. What is the nature and role of the visual arts in the life and worship of the Church? Do the visual arts have a place in corporate worship? If so, what?
  - b. What is the relationship between Word and image? Does a high view of the word necessarily result in a low view of images?
  - c. Does the second commandment prohibit representations of Jesus in art?
  - d. Is there such a thing as “Christian Art”? If so, what does it look like?
  - e. What does it mean to be a “Christian artist”?
  - f. How does one critique a visual work of art? Is it acceptable, for example, to enjoy a work of art aesthetically, even if its subject matter reflects and/or promotes a non-Christian worldview?
  - g. What about the role of nudity? Is all use of nudity in art wrong or are there occasions when the use of nudity is appropriate and acceptable? If so, what are those occasions?
  - h. Why are there no great twentieth-century Protestant artists? What happened?
  - i. Does a Protestant view of visual art differ from a Catholic view of art? If so, how?
  - j. And the list goes on and on and on.
4. Part of what makes these questions especially challenging for many believers is the current status of the contemporary art scene
5. Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*<sup>1</sup>
  - a. Thesis: Art, as it has been traditionally defined, is over because it has lost its aesthetic import (in other words, because there has been a conscious break or separation between art and beauty)
  - b. “Art” has been replaced by “Postart” (what we are witnessing today is art in its final stage)
  - c. Leading characteristics of Postart: a choosing of banality and cleverness over mystery and creativity

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

- d. Thus, to invest emotionally and intellectually in postart one has to be morally and intellectually confused
6. Ted Orland, *The View from the Studio Door*: “Today most art-making is not part of something larger than itself. It certainly isn’t within the art world, where the embattled but still dominant postmodernist view holds that artists are not even authors of their own work . . . How deeply *can* art matter if the only fitting description of its meaning and purpose is ‘art for art’s sake’? Perhaps all of us - artists and otherwise - would benefit from Bach’s self-imposed discipline that each of us should work to glorify God, educate our neighbors, and continue to expand out technical abilities. Maybe *that’s* how you open the door to art that matters in a culture that otherwise displays little interest in issues of substance.”<sup>2</sup>
7. Result: when we come to the subject of Christianity, the visual arts, and worship, it is a subject that:
  - a. has few easy answers and
  - b. is in great need of serious and prayerful theological thought and reflection
8. Reasons why I chose Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion* and Matisse’s *The Chapel of the Rosary*:
  - a. First: they are generally regarded as two of the most important works in the Western Christian tradition of art (Because of this, I believe they are two works that every believer should know something about)
  - b. Second: they are both frequently cited in modern discussions concerning Christianity, the visual arts, and worship.
  - c. Third: the events surrounding the making of these two works are, I believe, two of the great stories of the Western Christian art tradition
  - d. Fourth: Discussions about them inadvertently raise central questions regarding Christianity and the visual arts including: What is the role of the visual arts in worship? What is the role of beauty in worship?

### Lecture 1: “Pestilence, Death, and Worship in the Throes of Despair”

- I. Background Information:
  - A. Artist: Matthis Grünewald
  - B. Title: *The Crucifixion*

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<sup>2</sup>Ted Orland, *The View from the Studio Door* (The Image Continuum Press, 2006), 34.

- C. Date: c. 1508-1516
- D. Medium: Oil on panel (size: 16.5' x 26')
- E. Location: Musée d'Unterlinden (Colmar, France)

II. Modern Significance:

A. General:

- 1. The greatest crucifixion painting ever painted
  - a. "No other crucified Christ in all Western art exceeds this one as an expression of the full ghastly horror of Christ's terrible death."<sup>3</sup>
  - b. Contemporary Art History Textbooks
    - 1) Janson's *History of Art*: "the most impressive ever painted"<sup>4</sup>
    - 2) *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*: "perhaps the most memorable interpretation of the theme in the history of art"<sup>5</sup>
- 2. One of the greatest religious paintings ever painted<sup>6</sup>
- 3. One of the most influential paintings of the twentieth-century

B. Specific: Artists and Theologians

- 1. Artists
  - a. Pablo Picasso (Spanish artist, 1881-1973): it is said that it was the first painting to "trigger" the Spanish painter's creative impulses<sup>7</sup>
  - b. Graham Sutherland (English artist, 1903-1980): *The Crucifixion*, 1946, based on Grünewald's painting and images of victims of the Holocaust

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Murray and Linda Murray, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 220.

<sup>4</sup>H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition revised (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 527.

<sup>5</sup>Richard G. Tansey and Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 793.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 222.

<sup>7</sup>Roy A. Harrisville, "Encounter with Grunewald," *Currents in Theology and Missions* (February 2004) [on-line]; available from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0MDO/is\\_1\\_31/ai\\_114050791/print](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MDO/is_1_31/ai_114050791/print); Internet; accessed 6 January 2007.

2. Theologians

a. Karl Barth (Swiss theologian, 1886-1968)

- 1) A reproduction of the painting hung near his desk for many years
- 2) He made numerous references to the painting throughout his various writings, especially his *Dogmatics*
- 3) Christ crucified: a reminder of death “with all its horrors and mysteries”
- 4) Group of figures on the left: “humanity in face of its fate”
- 5) Mary Magdalene: a reminder of “the weakness of our goodwill”
- 6) The hand of John the Baptist: “judgment and grace”<sup>8</sup>

b. Paul Tillich (German-American theologian, 1886-1965)

- 1) “I believe it is the greatest German picture ever painted, and it shows you that expressionism is by no means a modern invention.”<sup>9</sup>
- 2) “one of the rare pictures which is both Protestant in spirit *and* at the same time great art.”<sup>10</sup>

C. General Observations

1. The body of Christ: Why does it look the way it does?
2. The presence of John the Baptist and the Sacrificial Lamb
3. Conclusion: If it is *not* a historical representation of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, then what is it and why is it significant?

III. Matthais Grünewald (or Matthias Gothart Nietart, c. 1475-1528): Artist Background

A. Early years

1. Little is known of his early years

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Tillich, 99.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 161.

2. E. H. Gombrich: "Grünewald is as great a mystery to us as Shakespeare"<sup>11</sup>
3. Later, he served as the official court painter of the Archbishop of Mainz, but was later released because of his Protestant sympathies
4. Evidence suggests that he participated in the peasant uprising of 1525<sup>12</sup>
5. Later in his life, he kept himself alive by selling a skin-balm<sup>13</sup>
6. He died of the plague in 1528
7. He left behind a few meager belongings including: a rosary scented with musk, a copy of Luther's 1522 Testament and Luther's Wittenberg sermons delivered on March 9-16, 1522
8. Three years after his death, Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) ranked him second to only Albrecht Dürer among German masters

#### IV. The Plague or "Black Death" and St. Anthony's Fire

##### A. Origin and Outbreak of the Plague

1. Erupted in the Gobi Desert in the late 1320s, no one really knows why, and then spread outward in every direction
2. By 1347 it reached:
  - a. Constantinople
  - b. Alexandria
3. By 1348 it reached:
  - a. Cyprus
  - b. Paris
  - c. England
  - d. Germany
4. By 1349 it reached Norway

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<sup>11</sup>E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: Lowe & B. Hould, 1989), 269.

<sup>12</sup>Linda Nochlin, *Mathis at Colmar: A Visual Confrontation* (New York: Red Dust, Inc., 1963), 5.

<sup>13</sup>Pierre Schmitt, *The Isenheim Altar* (Switzerland: Hallwag Berne, 1969), 4.

5. By 1350 it the Eastern European countries
6. By 1351 it reached Russia
7. The disease moved along trade routes and the tolls were enormous:
  - a. Florence: between 45% and 75% died in a single year
  - b. Venice: 60% died over the course of 18 months
  - c. Doctors and clergy were the hardest hit (those who directly cared for the sick)
  - d. On average, it took several generations to recover, from 1347-1350: approximately one of every three people died (although some scholars say higher)
8. The plague hit everyone: rich, poor, male, female, young, old, healthy, sick
9. Result: brought about a sense of absolute despair, vulnerability, and sheer terror

B. Process of Infection

1. Fleas drinks rat blood that carries the bacteria
2. Bacteria multiplies in flea's gut
3. Gut clogged with bacteria
4. Flea bites human, regulates blood in open wound

C. Symptoms

1. First: high fever, aching limbs, and vomiting of blood
2. Next, the swelling of the lymph nodes (glands found in the neck, armpits, and groin) that swell to the size of an egg or an apple until they eventually burst, with death following soon after
3. The whole process from initial fever to death took about 3-4 days
4. It was swift, caused terrible pain, and was grotesque in appearance

D. St. Anthony's Fire

1. Cause: A poisoning from a fungus that grows on rye grass.
2. The fungus contaminates the rye flour used in making bread (an excessive intake causes the disease)
3. Symptoms: hallucinations, vomiting, terrible burning sensation in the limbs (the

sensation of being burned alive at the stake), and dry gangrene of the hands and feet (fingers, toes, hands, and feet simply fell off)

4. Because gangrene frequently affected the limbs of the patients, amputation was a common treatment

## V. The Antonites

- A. A hospital order that originally grew out of an organization of laymen devoted to the care for the sick<sup>14</sup>
- B. The Antonites were organized by Pope Urban II in 1095; granted a constitution by Pope Boniface VIII in 1298<sup>15</sup>
- C. In response to the plague and other deadly diseases, the Antonites built their houses at all the great road junctions in the Western world, including a convent and hospice near the village of Isenheim<sup>16</sup>
- D. The goal of the convent and hospice was to care for those infected with the plague, St. Anthony's Fire, venereal diseases, leprosy, and other skin diseases (most had no hope of recovery)<sup>17</sup>
- E. The convent at Isenheim grew rapidly
- F. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Grünewald was invited to the monastery and commissioned to make an altarpiece for the high altar of the Abbey Church<sup>18</sup>

## VI. The Isenheim Altarpiece

- A. The whole work is comprised of nine paintings and various woodcarvings and is divided into three main parts
  1. Part One (or the Outer set): consists of three painted panels depicting the Crucifixion and Entombment (center), St. Anthony (right), St. Sebastian (left)
  2. Part Two (or the Inner set): consists of three painted panels depicting the Annunciation (left), Concert of Angels and the Nativity (center), and the Resurrection (right)

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<sup>14</sup>Schmitt, 3.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Nochlin, 7.

<sup>18</sup>Georg Scheja, *The Isenheim Altarpiece* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1969), 8.

3. Part Three (or the Innermost set): consists of two painted panels depicting St. Anthony and St. Paul in the wilderness (left), the temptation of St. Anthony (right), and a carved wooden shrine to St. Anthony (center)
- B. When closed, the work stands nearly 9' high x 16' wide
- C. The procedure for opening and closing the various panels was based on the church's liturgical calendar
- D. Function: the altarpiece became an integral part of the healing program at the monastery hospital
- E. The structure of the patient's day was designed by the church and organized around bells, prayers, and devotions
- F. Entering the Church as a routine activity was officially enacted in 1478
- G. Patients were brought into the church to look upon the altarpiece, pray for recovery, and find spiritual hope and comfort amid their physical suffering (those who could not walk were carried by those cared for them)
- H. It was only after the patient was brought before the altar that they would then provide him or her with medical treatment<sup>19</sup>
- I. It was a place filled with tears, laments, and cries of sheer desparation

## VII. The Crucifixion

- A. Composition (general observations)
  1. The largest crucifixion ever painted in Germany, and indeed Europe<sup>20</sup>
  2. The painting consists of five traditional figures: (1) Mary the Mother of Jesus, (2) John the disciple, (3) The Lamb of God, (4) John the Baptist, and (5) the crucified Christ
  3. Light source: unknown; a symbol of divine presence
  4. The painting reads in counterclock-wise motion: (1) the upper left, (2) the lower center, (3) the upper right, and (4) Christ crucified
- B. Mary the Mother of Jesus and John
  1. Clothing: she is dressed in a Cistercian nun's habit of pure white (contemporary dress)

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<sup>19</sup>Nochlin, 7.

<sup>20</sup>Horst Ziermann, *Matthis Grunewald* (New York: Prestel, 2001), 82.

2. She is represented in the act of fainting or collapsing
    - a. John holds her loosely with his right hand and tightly with his left (as though catching her in the act of fainting)
    - b. This is a “live action” scene (although this is a static image, it is a representing a living drama)
  3. Source of imagery: The writings of St. Bridget of Sweden, “When she heard the voice of her son moaning in His last moments, ‘My God, why hast thou deserted me?’ and saw the stiffening of His limbs, the sagging of His head as He gave up the ghost, the violence of her grief so constricted the Virgin’s heart that her saintly body became incapable of even the slightest movement.”<sup>21</sup>
  4. Feelings of lifelessness and emotional exhaustion are reinforced through:
    - a. the position of her hands
    - b. the dominant use of straight lines in her clothing
- C. Mary Magdalene
1. Identified by:
    - a. Her long flowing hair
    - b. The jar of ointment by her knees (anointed the feet of Jesus)
  2. The visual opposite of Mary the Mother of Jesus: agonized despair and sorrow
  3. Feelings of despair and sorrow are reinforced through:
    - a. The position of her hands
    - b. The dominant use of wavy lines in her clothing
- D. The Lamb
1. Shedding blood for the salvation of mankind (blood pouring out into chalice/holding cross) of Holy Communion
  2. Symbol of Christ the redeemer (alludes to both the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the triumph over death through the resurrection)
- E. John the Baptist
1. Represented as a distinctly germanic type, i.e., blue-eyed, broad, and bearded (contemporary appearance)

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<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Schmitt, 12.

2. His presence symbolizes the message of mankind's redemption
3. Written Latin text: John 3:30, "illum oportet crescere me autem minui" [in red Roman majuscules] or "He must increase but I must diminish"
4. Traditional Passage: John 1:29, "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"
5. Significance (use of John 3:30 instead of John 1:29): places a greater emphasis on salvation and Jesus as the Savior of mankind
6. Open book: a symbol of biblical authority and fulfilment of prophecy
7. Stance: solid and firm; symbol of the confidence of his message and the strength of his conviction
8. He stands in front of a body of water visible in the middle distance (possible interpretations)
  - a. The baptism of Jesus
  - b. The healing waters of the Jordan: 2 Kings 5:1-14, Naaman is cured of leprosy by dipping seven times in the Jordan
9. Pointing finger: elongated and upturned too far
  - a. Emphasis on Christ as the object of his message
  - b. Comparable, I believe, only to the two fingers in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*

F. Christ Crucified

1. The centrality of the figure of Christ: the size of his body (he is the largest figure in the painting; size as an indicator of importance)
2. Viewed from below: the view of the patients
3. Christ has already died, i.e., this is a "dead" Christ
  - a. His hands appear to be in the first stage of rigor mortis
  - b. His head is hung low and his mouth is ajar
  - c. His body is encrusted with blood and pus
  - d. His toenails are blue
  - e. The dark background (cf. Matthew 27:45)
4. Inspiration for imagery: a passage from the *Revelations of St. Bridget*: "Then the

color of death came on wherever He could be seen for the blood; His cheeks clung to His jaws, His attenuated ribs could be numbered; His belly, exhausted of all its humors, collapsed on His back, and His nostrils were pinched up, as His heart was almost broken. Then His whole body quivered, and His beard sank on His breast. Then I fell lifeless to the ground. His mouth being open as he expired, His tongue, teeth, and the blood in His mouth could be seen by those looking on, and his half-closed eyes were turned up; and his body, now dead, hung heavily, the knees inclining to one side, the feet to the other, on the nails as on hinges.”<sup>22</sup>

5. The body of Christ

- a. Arms are pulled out of their sockets from the weight of the sin of the world (cf. Isaiah 53:5, “But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening of our well being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.”)
- b. Skin pierced with splinters, lacerated, and swollen: the horror and reality of his death and sufferings
- c. It has been argued, rather convincingly, that the discoloration and other wounds correspond to the various symptoms of the diseases represented in the convent (in other words, it is an image of Christ with the plague, with St. Anthony’s fire, etc.)

6. The position of Christ’s body:

- a. *Crucifixion* painting: Off-center; open the left panel only - the amputated Christ (at the shoulder)
- b. *Entombment* painting (predella panel below): open the left panel only - the amputated Christ (at the knees)

VIII. Summary Observations

A. Purpose: to strengthen faith and renew hope:

1. by reaffirming the *divinity* of Christ
  - a. He is able to save them spiritually
  - b. He is able to give them hope beyond their pain and suffering
2. by reaffirming the *humanity* of Christ
  - a. He understands their suffering

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<sup>22</sup>*Revelations of St. Bridget* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1984), 51.

- b. He knows their pain
- B. The painting provides an affirmation of the presence of God in the midst of human suffering
- C. The painting was designed to speak directly to the needs of its audience without compromising its theological integrity

**Lecture 2: “Light, Line, and Worship Through Transformation of the Everyday”**

- I. Transition (from Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion* to Matisse’s Chapel of the Rosary)
  - A. A transition from darkness to light (physically and literally)
  - B. A transition from a place of lamentation and woe to a place of quiet and meditation
  - C. A transition from a sacred object to a sacred space
  - D. Direct connection
    - 1. Like many other artists of his day, Matisse was also deeply influenced by Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion*
    - 2. In his preparation for the chapel, Matisse made a drawing of the hands inspired by the hands of Grünewald’s Mary the mother of Jesus<sup>23</sup>
- II. Significance of the Chapel of the Rosary
  - A. One of the earliest and finest examples of the integration of modern art and the Church (it has been called “revolutionary”)
  - B. The chapel was completely designed and decorated by one of most influential artists of the modern period (the complete vision of a single artist)
  - C. Henri Matisse himself considered the work to be his “masterpiece”
    - 1. “This work has taken me four years of exclusive and assiduous work and it represents the result of my entire active life. I consider it - in spite of its imperfections - to be my masterpiece.”<sup>24</sup>
    - 2. “The chapel is for me the culmination of a life work, and the coming into flower

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<sup>23</sup>Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God’s Medicine and the Painter’s Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>24</sup>Barbara F. Freed, *A Model for Matisse* (First Run Features, 2003), DVD.

of an enormous, sincere and difficult effort.”<sup>25</sup>

III. Henri Matisse (1869-1954): Artist Background

- A. French painter, sculptor, graphic artist, and designer
- B. From the c.1920s, he was regarded as one of the foremost painters of his time<sup>26</sup>
- C. He was famous, in large measure, for his sensitive use of line and bold use of color
  - 1. Example of sensitive use of line: *Untitled*, 1938, lino-cut, 31 x 24 cm
  - 2. Example of bold use of color: *Large Red Interior*, 1948, oil on canvas, 146 x 97 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
- D. Central subject: the human figure
- E. Following two operations for cancer in 1941, he was confined to a bed or wheelchair for the rest of his life
- F. However, it was during this time, from 1949-51, that he created, in his own words, his “masterpiece”
- G. He died a few years later on November 3, 1954

IV. The Chapel of the Rosary: Background

- A. Two principle characters:
  - 1. The artist, Henri Matisse
  - 2. A nurse, and later Dominican nun, Sister Jacques-Marie
- B. The Story
  - 1. In the early 1940s, Matisse was in need of a nurse, and so he placed an ad at a local nursing school
  - 2. The ad was answered by Jacques-Marie who, at the time, was unaware of the artist's fame and notariety (in fact she had never heard of him before)
  - 3. Because he was very sick, she bathed him, changed his dressing, and prepared his food, among other things

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<sup>25</sup>Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 128.

<sup>26</sup>Ivan Chilvers and Harold Osborne, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Arts*, New edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 358.

4. When she stopped working for him, he later contacted her and asked her if she would pose for him and she agreed
5. Upon viewing her first portrait by Matisse called *Monique*: “When he’d finished, I looked at it and was very disappointed. It didn’t look much like me and I didn’t think it was very good. And I told him what I thought. He said, ‘If I wanted something that captures reality, I’d take a photograph. That would be better than my painting.’”<sup>27</sup>
6. In 1946, Jacque-Marie decided to become a nun and enter the order of the Dominicans
7. The news of Marie’s decision terribly upset Matisse (in fact, it is reported that after hearing the news he could not work for several months)
8. Over time, however, Matisse’s disappointment subsided and he reluctantly accepted her new found vocation
9. In a letter written by Matisse to Sister Marie, Matisse wrote: “Thank you for your prayers. Ask God to give me my last years the spiritual life to keep me in touch with him and permit me to end my long and laborious career in the way I’ve always sought so that the earthly nourishment of my art may reveal his manifest glory to those who are blind to it. This for you, J.M., is my profession of faith that comes in response to your letter. I am grateful to you for having stilled this in me. The need to answer your letter forced me to find deep within myself things I have never before expressed in words, because until now I’ve never felt a need to say them to anyone.”<sup>28</sup>
10. In 1947, Sister-Maries showed Matisse as drawing she had made of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (Matisse responded, “You must turn this into a window. You’ll put it in your chapel.” “Monsieur,” replied Sister-Marie, “we have no plans for a chapel.” Matisse replied, “It doesn’t matter, we’ll design a chapel around your stained-glass window.”<sup>29</sup>)
11. In December 1949, the cornerstone of the chapel was laid and, three years later, on June 25, 1951, the chapel was inaugurated and consecrated
12. Upon the completion of the chapel, Matisse wrote, “this work required me four years of an exclusive and entiring effort and it is the fruit of my whole working life.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Freed

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

13. During this time, Matisse was confronted by his friend and rival, the artist Pablo Picasso, who challenged his decision to do the chapel: “Picasso asked, ‘Do I believe in God?’ Yes, when I work. I feel like I am assisted by someone who leads me to do things that are greater than myself, greater than what I’ve done before. Picasso was furious that I was doing a church. ‘Why don’t you do a market?’ he asked, ‘You could paint fruit, vegetables. I could accept it if you were a believer. But if you are not, I do not think you have the moral right to do a chapel.’ I replied that for me, doing this is essentially a work of art. I don’t know whether or not I am a believer, the essential is to work in a state of mind that is close to prayer.”<sup>31</sup>
14. The function of the Chapel: “I want those who will come into my chapel to feel purified and relieved of their burdens.”<sup>32</sup>

## V. The Chapel

### A. Two Key Features:

1. Stained-glass windows
2. Three Monumental Ceramic Line Drawings
3. Henri Matisse: “In the chapel, my overarching goal is to balance a surface of light and color with a white wall covered with drawings in black.”<sup>33</sup>

### B. Three Monumental Ceramic Line Drawings

1. Importance, Henri Matisse: “In sum, the ceramic tiles are the spiritual essential and explain the meaning of the monument.”<sup>34</sup>
2. Subjects
  - a. Saint Dominic (left)
  - b. The Virgin and the Christ child (middle)
  - c. The Stations of the Cross (right)
3. Reasons for the Subjects
  - a. Saint Dominic: because they sisters were Dominicans

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>M.-A. Couturier, *Sacred Art* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Flam, 129.

- b. Mary and the Christ child: because the sisters were of the order of “Our Mother of the Rosary”
  - c. The Stations of the Cross: because they are “always in a chapel”
4. Material: ceramic panels composed of large squares of glazed white tile with black line drawings<sup>35</sup>
  5. To create the drawings, Matisse used a nine foot pole with a rag attached to the end dipped in glaze
  6. For Matisse to truly draw something, he had to be able to do so with his eyes closed or “blindfolded” until he possessed his subject (thus he drew St. Dominic with his eyes closed until he finally “got it”)<sup>36</sup>
  7. The drawings are defined by their simplicity of form and purity of expression
  8. The drawings were seen by Matisse as the visual equivalent to a large open book with the white tiles as the pages and the black lines as text<sup>37</sup>
    - a. Grünewald’s *Crucifixion*: the inclusion of literal text
    - b. Matisse’s Chapel: the inclusion of symbolic text
- C. The Stations of the Cross
1. The most controversial feature of the Chapel
    - a. Saint Dominic and the Virgin and Child: drawn with the same sense of clarity and simplicity
    - b. The Stations of the Cross, in contrast, are much more rough and “child-like” (more akin to the nature of the events<sup>38</sup>)
  2. Sister Marie, on seeing the stations for the first time: “I felt liked I’d been kicked in the stomach. I starred at what I was tempted to call ‘scribble.’ I looked at these drawings and thought, ‘How am I going to get my sisters to accept this? That was my real concern. . . . The chapel itself was a problem. *The Stations* were going to be really hard to swallow. What bothered me was the total simplicity of the drawings. His early sketches were more developed, more

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<sup>35</sup>Flam, 129.

<sup>36</sup>Freed

<sup>37</sup>Flam, 130.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 129.

realistic. Here there were just lines.”<sup>39</sup>

3. Marie-Alain Couturier: “I want to try to say, as simply as I can, what I think of this work: I think it is the most important and most beautiful thing in the chapel. I also think that it is what will most deeply disturb the public of our time. I say ‘of our time’ because I already see the youngest among us, the twenty-year olds, accepting and living it readily. It belongs to their world. It speaks a language they understand.”<sup>40</sup>
4. Judgment and Value:
  - a. If we judge the drawings on the basis of natural representation, then they would surely receive a failing grade
  - b. However, if we judge the drawings as symbols, then we not only view them as Matisse intended them to be viewed, but we are also reminded of the rich use of visual symbols in the history of the Church

## VI. Christianity and Visual Symbolism

- A. Definition (visual symbol): a material object used to represent something, often immaterial
- B. Primary function: to instruct and encourage believers
- C. The power of symbolism: it takes everyday objects and transforms them into opportunities for theological reflection (through symbolism the ordinary becomes extraordinary)
- D. Earliest Christian symbols include:
  1. Peacock: heaven (beautiful array of colors)
  2. Anchor (one of the earliest symbols): hope
  3. Fish: Christian baptism, evangelism, i.e., “fishers of men”, theological acrostic: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior
  4. Cross: redemption and salvation, the total expression of the Christian faith
- E. The great age of Christian symbolism in the West was during the Middle Ages, with its peak somewhere between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries
- F. Example: Fran Angelico’s *The Annunciation* (c.1434, tempera on panel; 63 x 71 inches [160 x 180 cm], Museo Curico, Cortona)

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<sup>39</sup>Freed

<sup>40</sup>Couturier, 96.

1. The painting is a representation of the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary as recorded in Luke 1:26-38
2. Composition and Subject Matter
  - a. The painting depicts two separate, though related, biblical events
    - 1) Foreground Event one: the annunciation (New Testament)
    - 2) Background Event: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Old Testament)
  - b. Important observation: the events occur simultaneously
3. Symbolism<sup>41</sup>
  - a. Foreground Event: The Annunciation
  - b. Angel Gabriel
    - 1) Text (Gabriel speaks): Luke 1:35 (“The Holy Spirit has come upon Thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee”)
    - 2) Left hand: issues the pronouncement
    - 3) Right hand: points to Mary as the recipient of the divine message
    - 4) Colorful wings: multicolored; indicates the angel’s close proximity to God
    - 5) Pattern design on the hem: taken from Ming porcelain
  - c. Mary
    - 1) Crossed hands: faithful submission to the will of God
    - 2) Text (she responds): Luke 1:38 (“Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word ”)
    - 3) Note: the viewer must “read ” the image
    - 4) Blue mantle: the color of the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven
    - 5) Drawn curtain in doorway: Mary’s virginity
  - d. The Dove: the Holy Spirit

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<sup>41</sup>Robert Cumming, *Annotated Art* (London: DK Publishing, 1995), 12-13.

- e. Architectural detail above the Corinthian column: Isaiah the Prophet (a reference to the birth of Christ as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy)
- 4. Like Grünewald's depiction of the Mary fainting, the painting is a living drama
- 5. Background Event: The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden
  - a. Scene: the act of being expelled from the Garden
  - b. Adam and Eve's hands: gesture of grief and despair
  - c. Landscape: barren wasteland (in contrast to Mary's fertile garden; the two "worlds" are separated by a fence)
- 6. The painting represents both the fall of humanity and the promise of salvation (a reflection on the larger subject of salvation)
- E. Challenge of symbolism: requires a great deal of knowledge on the part of the viewer (where there is biblical and theological illiteracy, symbolism ultimately fails)
- F. John Baldock, *The Elements of Christian Symbolism*: the more Western society has moved towards materialism, the more it has eroded the symbolism of the Christian church<sup>42</sup>
- G. Today, the use of traditional symbols in worship is lacking

## VI. Summary Observations

- A. Grünewald's *The Crucifixion* and Henri Matisse's Chapel of the Rosary serve as excellent reference point for introducing and discussing issues related to Christianity, the visual arts, and worship
- B. Martin Luther: "Yes, would to God that I could persuade the rich and the mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the inside and outside, so that all can see it. That would be a Christian work."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>John Baldock, *The Elements of Christian Symbolism* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1997), 6.

<sup>43</sup>*Luther's Works*, American ed., vol. XL (Philadelphia, 1958), 99.