



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
TO ARTISTS FOR THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INAUGURATION  
OF THE VATICAN MUSEUMS' COLLECTION OF MODERN ART**

*Sistine Chapel  
Friday, 23 giugno 2023*

**[Multimedia]**

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Good morning and welcome. Here [in the Sistine Chapel], we are surrounded by art... and by artists: yourselves. Welcome!

Thank you for accepting my invitation; I am happy to be with you, because the Church has always had a relationship with artists that can be described as both *natural* and *special*. A natural friendship, because artists take seriously the richness of human existence, of our lives and the life of the world, including its contradictions and its tragic aspects. This richness risks disappearing from the view of the many specialized disciplines that respond to immediate needs, but find it difficult to view life as a polyhedron, a complex and multifaceted reality. Artists remind us that the dimension in which we move, even unconsciously, is always that of the Spirit. Your art is like a sail swelling with the wind of the Spirit and propelling us forward. The Church's friendship with the arts is thus something quite natural. Yet, at the same time, it is also a special friendship, especially if we think of the many periods of history that we have traveled together and which are part of the patrimony of everyone, whether believers or non-believers. Mindful of this, let us look forward to a new season of rich fruits in our own time, born of a climate of listening, freedom and respect. People need those fruits, those special fruits.

Romano Guardini once wrote that: "The situation of the artist is not unlike that of a child and even that of a visionary" (*L'opera d'arte*, Brescia, 1998, 25). I find these two comparisons intriguing. For Guardini, "a work of art opens a space into which we can step, in which we can breathe, move about and encounter objects and persons as they open up before us" (*ibid.*, 35). It is true that in

the encounter with art, boundaries become more fluid and the limits of our experience and understanding broaden. Everything seems more open and accessible. We experience the spontaneity of the child filled with imagination and the intuition of the visionary who grasps reality.

For the artist *is* a child – by this I mean no offence – who gives free rein to originality, novelty and creativity, and thus brings into the world something new and unprecedented. In doing so, artists unmask the lie that man is a “being towards death”. We must certainly come to grips with our mortality, yet we are beings not towards death, but towards life. A great thinker like Hannah Arendt affirms that the hallmark of humanity is the ability to bring newness into the world. This is part of our richness as human beings: to bring newness. Even in nature, procreation brings newness with every child who comes into the world. Openness and newness. That is what you bring, as artists, by cultivating your own originality. In your creations, you always put something of yourself, as unique beings like the rest of us, but for the sake of creating something even greater. With your talents, you bring to light something exceptional; you enrich the world with something new. I think of those words found in the Prophet Isaiah, where God says: “Behold, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (*Is* 43:19). In the Book of Revelation, God says the same thing: “See, I am making all things new” (21:15). The creativity of the artist can thus be said to share in God’s own passion for creation, the passion with which he created. You are sharers in God’s dream! Yours are eyes that see, eyes that dream. It is not enough simply to see; we also need to be able to dream. As a Latin American writer has said, we human beings have two eyes: an eye to see what is before us, and another to see our hopes and dreams. When someone lacks these two eyes, or sees things only with one or the other, something is lost. The ability to see our hopes and dreams... artistic creativity... It is not enough simply to see; we also need to dream. As human beings, we yearn for a new world that we will not see fully with our own eyes, yet we desire it, we seek it, we dream of it.

As artists, then, you have the ability to dream new versions of the world, to introduce novelty into history. New versions of the world. That is why Guardini also says that you are like visionaries. You are a bit like prophets. You can see things both in depth and from afar, like sentinels who strain their eyes, peering into the horizon and discerning deeper realities. In doing so, you are called to reject the allure of that artificial, skin-deep beauty so popular today and often complicit with economic mechanisms that generate inequality. It is not a beauty that attracts, but one that is born dead, lifeless. A fake, cosmetic beauty, a greasepaint that conceals rather than reveals. In Italian, the word for “makeup” is also the word for “trick”, since a touch of deception is always present. You want to distance yourselves from that kind of beauty; instead, your art strives to act as a conscience critical of society, unmasking truisms. You want to make people think, to be alert; you want to reveal reality also in its contradictions and in those things that it is more comfortable and convenient to keep hidden. Like the biblical prophets, you confront things that at times are uncomfortable; you criticize today’s false myths and new idols, its empty talk, the ploys of consumerism, the schemes of power. This is an intriguing aspect of the psychology of artists: the ability to press forward and beyond, in a tension between reality and dream.

Often you do this with irony, which is a marvelous virtue. Humour and irony are two virtues we need to cultivate more. The Bible is rich in touches of irony, poking fun at presumptions of self-sufficiency, dishonesty, injustice and cruelty lurking under the guise of power and even at times the sacred. You can also serve to discern genuine religiosity, which is all too often presented in trite or demeaning ways. As visionaries, men and women of discernment, critical consciences, I consider you allies in so many things that are dear to me, like the defence of human life, social justice, concern for the poor, care for our common home, universal human fraternity. The *humanness* of humanity is dear to me, the human dimension of humanity. Because that is also the great passion of God. One of the things that draws art closer to faith is the fact that both tend to be troubling. Neither art nor faith can leave things simply as they are: they change, transform, move and convert them. Art can never serve as an anesthetic; it brings peace, yet far from deadening consciences, it keeps them alert. Often, as artists, you attempt to plumb the depths of the human condition, its dark abysses. We are not all light, and you remind us of this. At the same time, there is a need to let the light of hope shine in that darkness, in the midst of our selfishness and indifference. Help us to glimpse the light, the beauty that saves.

Art has always been bound to the experience of beauty. As Simone Weil wrote: “Beauty seduces the flesh in order to gain entrance to the soul (*L’ombra e la grazia*, Bologna, 193). Art touches the senses in order to enliven the spirit, and it does so through beauty, which reflects things that are good, just and true. Beauty is a sign of fullness; it makes us spontaneously say of something: “How beautiful!” Beauty makes us sense that life is directed towards fullness, fulfilment. In true beauty, we begin to experience the desire for God. Many today hope that art can return more and more to the cultivation of beauty. Certainly, as I have said, there is also a kind of beauty that is futile, artificial, superficial, even dishonest. Cosmetic beauty.

I believe that there is an important criterion for discerning the difference, and that is harmony. True beauty is in fact a reflection of harmony. Theologians speak of God’s fatherhood and Christ’s sonship, but when they speak of the Holy Spirit they speak of harmony: *Ipse harmonia est*. The Spirit creates harmony. The human dimension of the spiritual... True beauty is always the reflection of harmony. If I may say so, harmony is the *operative virtue* of beauty, its deepest spirit, where the Spirit of God, the great harmonizer of the world, is at work. Harmony exists when elements different from each other nonetheless form a unity, different from each of the parts and different from the sum of the parts. This is not easy; only the Spirit can make this possible: differences that do not become conflicts, but mutually integrating diversities, and unity that is not uniformity but open to multiplicity. As at Pentecost, harmony works these miracles. I like to think of the Holy Spirit as the one who takes the greatest disarray – we can think of the morning of Pentecost – and then creates harmony. A harmony that is not balance, because harmony is born out of imbalance; harmony is something more than balance. How much we need to hear this message! We live in an age of media-driven forms of ideological colonization and devastating conflicts; a globalization that standardizes everything coexists with any number of particular interests that are closed and self-absorbed. This is the great danger of our time. The Church too

feels the effects of this. Conflict can act under a false pretense of unity, from which arise divisions, factions and forms of narcissism. All the more do we need to make the principle of harmony dwell in our world and eliminate uniformity. As artists, you can help us to make room for the Spirit. When we see the work of the Spirit, which creates harmony from differences without destroying or standardizing them but bringing them into harmony, we come to understand what beauty really is. Beauty is that work of the Spirit which creates harmony. Brothers and sisters, let your artistic genius pursue this course!

Dear friends, I am pleased that we have been able to meet. Before taking leave of you, I have one more thing to say to you, something close to my heart. I would like to ask you not to forget the poor, those especially close to the heart of Christ, those affected by all of today's many forms of poverty. The poor too have need of art and beauty. Some are living lives of great hardship, and so have even greater need of this. Usually, they have no voice to make themselves heard. You can choose to become the interpreters of their silent plea.

I thank you and once more I affirm my esteem for you. I hope and pray that your works will prove worthy of the women and men of this earth, and render glory to God who is the Father of all and whom all seek, also through the testimony of works of art. And finally I ask you, please, in harmony, to pray for me. Thank you.