



Between Realism and Idealization. Contemporary Controversies Surrounding the Ways of Fulfilling the Didactic Functions of Images of Saints from a Theological and Moral Perspective

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to provoke discussion on the worship of images depicting saints. However, it is not about defending this worship, since this issue has already been definitively settled by the Church. Instead, the article concerns a new problem – the controversies that arose in connection with some modern depictions of saints, mainly in painting. The mildest of these controversies involve paintings, often made on the basis of surviving photographs, showing saints during their ordinary everyday activities, e.g. while working or resting. A much sharper polarization of opinions occurs when the painting reveals the ethos of the saint with all realism, that is including also their imperfections, and even sin. Can such a saint be an object of veneration which, after all, inherently entails following them as role models? Is such veneration not an acceptance and promotion of flaws that contradict biblical morality? Can such images serve a didactic function? Instead, wouldn't a certain idealization be advisable – the portrayal of a saint as someone perfect, excluding their flaws and weaknesses? The author takes a position on these controversies by formulating criteria for “good” images based on the theological and moral principles of their worship and an analysis of their functions.

Keywords: saints, images, worship, morality

After ancient disputes over iconoclasm, sacred images, including images of saints and blessed, have been assigned a strictly specified place in Christian worship.¹ However, unlike the Christian East, Western tradition has not created a strict canon,

¹ The issue was definitively settled by the Second Council of Nicaea (787) which stated: “we decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honored and life-giving cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or of other suitable material, are to be exposed in the holy churches of God, on sacred instruments and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and by public ways, these are the images of our Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ, and of our Lady without blemish, the holy God-bearer, and of the revered angels and of any of the saintly holy men. [...] Indeed, the honor paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model, and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image” (*Second Council of Nicaea – 787 A.D.*). This position was reiterated by the Fourth Council of Constantinople (869–870) and the Council of Trent in the Decree *On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images* of 3 December 1563. The Church's contemporary

a single system that would carefully repeat once adopted formulas. In icons, the figures of the saints are depicted in a schematic manner. Intentional deformation, hieratic shapes, simple features, luminosity of figures, and symbolic colors depict bodies surrendered to the Spirit, transformed, freed from passions – bodies divinized. In addition, the distinctive robes, inscriptions placed next to the nimbus, and the so-called attributes help to recognize the figure.² Above all, however, they allow one to perceive the invisible in the visible.

On the other hand in the West, from the very beginning, there was great diversity in the depiction of saints; including forms that provoked controversy arising from the tension between the desire to portray the character as realistically as possible and painting them to perfection, sometimes allegorically. The resolution of these controversies was ultimately the responsibility of the Church authorities who made the decision to admit a particular image to worship or reject it as unsuitable for this role. And today divergent opinions, discussions, and disputes arise in connection with images that show saints during their ordinary everyday activities, e.g. while working or resting, and even more so in relation to those that show their imperfections, and even sin.³ The fact is that there are not many such images yet, and therefore the problem is somewhat hypothetical in nature.⁴ However, given contemporary trends to create such cultic and religious images based on surviving photographs, one can expect to see more and more of them.⁵

The question therefore arises: do such images – just like icons in the belief of the Christian East – have the potential to become a gateway to another world, an entrance into the reality of the Kingdom of God, a link between the pilgrim and the glorified Church?⁶ Can they fulfill a didactic and pedagogical function by becoming

teaching on the foundations of the worship of images is contained in *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1159–1162).

² Cf. Bator, “Ikony jako wezwanie,” 223.

³ Here, the author completely leaves out an otherwise important and interesting issue of “new” depictions of Jesus Christ that are also controversial. This issue resounded recently on the occasion of an action organized by the environment of the *Teologia Polityczna* annual to repaint the Image of the Divine Mercy, which is actually part of a larger project planned for 21 years entitled “Paint Catholicism Anew.” The action has raised many questions about the point of such attempts to paint Jesus and Catholicism anew. Ultimately, however, on 9 November 2022 at the Dominican Monastery in Kraków, the exhibition of works has been opened and, what’s more, most of them will grace places of worship in the future.

⁴ A typical example of such an image is a depiction of the Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati based on a photograph where he has a pipe in his mouth. Eventually, this “attribute” was retouched out of the picture unveiled at the beatification. However, for many, he is a symbol of holiness that is close at hand, accessible to everyone, not shying away from life. Photographs of saint popes (Pius X and John XXIII) or Blessed Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko with a cigarette are sometimes perceived similarly.

⁵ A separate issue concerns the extremely realistic images of contemporary martyrs. Today, for example, it is not difficult to access photographs of the battered body of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko which, albeit (fortunately?) have not yet become a model for cult images, do have their place in private worship.

⁶ The functions of the icon are widely described by J. Ratzinger in the book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Cf. Ratzinger, *Teologia liturgii*, 97–112. Cf. also: Kawecki, “O istocie sztuki,” 279–280.

an illustration of biblical morality and its “fascinating commentary”?⁷ Or on the contrary, are they a form of acceptance and promotion of flaws and a cause of righteous indignation? Thus, controversies surrounding such images arise not only on the level of art history and theory, theory of beauty, cultural studies, philosophy, sociology of image, sociology of culture, theology of image, and visual theology, but also on the level of moral theology – and it is from this perspective that the author intends to evaluate them, posing a question not so much about their beauty, but about the “good” that they are supposed to serve.

Defenders of these “new” forms of depicting saints justify their position by stating that the contemporary man lives in a culture of image, and at the same time has increasingly reduced ability to contemplate elaborate iconographic scenes and rich symbolism. It is more difficult for them to enter the realm of the *sacrum* with full concentration. They are insensitive to the deeper dimensions that may be present in the image. They regard a holy image the same as the images that overcrowd the streets, movie theaters, television, the Internet.⁸ In contrast, it is much easier for them to absorb brief, even terse insights captured in visual form. Besides, such images allow for the inclusion of a more optimistic vision of mortal life. Therefore, the figures of the saints in the paintings are to be – in their opinion – as realistic as possible, and so they should not ignore moral imperfections either. For only then it is possible to achieve the hodegetical purposes of the worship of saints. Opponents of such forms deplore the desacralization that has affected contemporary ecclesiastical art, the mixing of religious and secular content, which had already emerged after World War I as a consequence of secularization, and today seems to be only increasing.⁹

The Church is thus dealing with new disputes over iconoclasm. Today, however, they have taken a different form. Now it is not so much about legitimizing the worship of images in general, or even the well-known – especially in the Renaissance – issue of nudity in holy images, or – already found in Romanesque art – almost erotic themes. Instead, it is about setting certain boundaries for the ways of depicting contemporary saints because of their formative influence – the power to inspire positive moral attitudes. What should be the basic assumptions of these works for them to provide an actual illustration of biblical morality and draw people to it? Are all the existing images of saints and blessed suits suitable for worship – whose essential

⁷ According to the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Bible and Morality. Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* “biblical morality” is the ethical content of Scripture (cf. no. 95). The saints were described as providing “a fascinating commentary on the Gospel” by pope Francis in his Address to participants in the Symposium promoted by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints “Holiness Today” on October 6, 2022.

⁸ Gilbert Durand calls such a state “iconoclasm-by-excess.”

⁹ Cf. Oficjalska, “Obrazy święte,” 70.

element, after all, is to follow their example? Are they all equally revealing God's initiative, which underlies this morality, and Man's response to His gift?¹⁰

1. Functions of the Image and the Ways of Fulfilling Them

In order to dispel the controversy surrounding the already existing and hypothetical forms of representation of saints, one must refer to the function of the image or, more broadly, the function of sacral and religious art. Holy images, including images of saints, are created to receive the reverence of the faithful (cf. *CCL* 1188); so that the faithful can venerate them.¹¹ Therefore, they primarily have a worship function. Such a purpose of image veneration was already indicated by the Council of Trent which, indeed, confirmed the Church's earlier teaching on the subject: "Moreover, that the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honor and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them, on account of which they are to be worshipped; or that anything is to be asked of them; or, that trust is to be reposed in images, as was of old done by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols; but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent; in such wise that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints, whose similitude they bear."¹²

The image is meant to facilitate an encounter with the one it depicts. By resembling the person it represents and perpetuating the memory of them, it is also intended to facilitate prayer. From the beginning, the Church justified this function by using the achievements of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought to express that "whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it."¹³ This applies to both God and the saints. "For faith teaches us, that although the venerable Sacrifice may be lawfully offered to God alone, yet it may be celebrated in honor of the saints reigning in heaven with God Who has crowned them, in order that we may gain for ourselves

¹⁰ In this way, contemporary documents of the Church define Christian morality based on the Bible, as opposed to the earlier approaches which emphasized obedience to the commandments, practice of specific virtues, alignment with the imperatives of natural law, in short – human effort. Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality*, no. 4.

¹¹ Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 318.

¹² Council of Trent, *On the Invocation*.

¹³ This thought was already known in the ancient Church. St. Basil taught that "the honor rendered to the icon reaches the prototype." Cf. John Paul II, *Duodecimum Saeculum*, no. 8. Since the fifth century, this idea has been repeated throughout the centuries, providing the basic justification for the admissibility of image worship in Christianity.

their patronage.”¹⁴ Thus, if the worship function of the image is emphasized, one considers mainly the glorification of the Triune God and the celebration of the people who, through their lives, have perfectly united with Him, which the Church has confirmed by a special act of canonization or beatification. Therefore, the various forms of image worship first and foremost express respect to the people whose likenesses they depict. From a purpose thus determined, a basic demand was derived in the past in relation to the images themselves: they are to be created in such a way as to stimulate the will to piety.

The images also serve a reminding function. In a way, they are a visualization of the content of faith.¹⁵ They help to “enter” the situation presented and thus get closer to God and the truths of Christian life, including the moral life. They stimulate one’s imagination. Through the pictorial representation of religious truths, the message of the Gospel is conveyed, as in the case of verbal teaching. In the worship of images, therefore, the Church proclaims the same thing it teaches in the specific language of theology and celebrates in the liturgy.¹⁶ This is why the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, justifying the practice of placing sacred images in churches, states that they are iconographical transcriptions of the Gospel message, in which image and revealed word are mutually clarified; memorials of our brethren who are Saints, and who continue to participate in the salvation of the world, and to whom we are united, above all in sacramental celebrations (cf. *DPP* 240). Thus, just like liturgical texts, images remind the truth about the communion of saints, about the fellowship of the pilgrim Church with the glorified Church. Their worship is thus meant to remind one of the duties to sanctify oneself on the path of life in accordance with God’s law and authentically imitate the virtues of the saints and blessed (cf. *DPP* 212).

Both the worship function and the reminding function are focused on the didactic objectives of the images. The Church in its teaching has always emphasized the important role of the example of saints in bearing witness to Christ. Today she also – as taught by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy – proposes them to the faithful as examples drawing all to the Father through Christ (cf. *SC* 104). Similarly in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the same Council reminds us that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole Church, we seek from the saints example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession (cf. *LG* 51). Performing the reminding function, the images simultaneously call for prayer so that the Lord would repeat what He has accomplished in the history of salvation, including in specific individuals associated with this history.

¹⁴ Leo XIII, *Mirae caritatis*, no. 12.

¹⁵ Cf. Adamczyk, “Praktyka umieszczania,” 162.

¹⁶ Cf. Feliga, “Obrona kultu obrazów,” 25.

Strenuous encouragement of true and authentic worship of saints is motivated precisely by the fact that one can follow their example and build oneself with it (cf. *CCL* 1186). This element of the worship of saints has also always been considered the essential purpose of the worship of their images. The Church – according to *Obrzędy błogosławieństw* [Rites of Blessings] – urges the faithful to venerate holy images so that they can explore the mystery of God's glory, which lit the face of the Son of God, and which in turn is reflected in His saints, so that in this way they themselves become more like the Lord (cf. Eph 5:8).¹⁷ The images are a form of catechesis, carriers of religious and moral content (cf. *DPP* 240). Importantly, they are to facilitate their popularization among believers. The image functions as a signpost guiding people's lives and admonishing them on how to live.¹⁸ The holy figures in the paintings are meant to point to Christ and His moral message and prove that man is able to live according to the principles of the Gospel. Looking is to give rise to faith (*fides ex visu*) which is not just a collection of theses requiring adoption and approval by reason, but involves the whole existence, works through love (cf. Gal 5:6), creates certain moral obligations and demands its own "enactment." However, for this to happen, the saints must be presented in an appropriate manner.

Not without significance is also the decorative function of an image. Indeed, its task is also to provide an aesthetic impression, to evoke a specific experience in the viewer. The paintings are meant to inspire religious feelings, trigger experiences and, in a way, facilitate the pursuit of perfection. If they are simply beautiful, they also refer back to the values. If they are made with the utmost artistry and are characterized by religious refinement, they are – as stated in *Obrzędy błogosławieństw* – as if a reflection of the beauty that comes from God and brings one closer to Him.¹⁹ The attraction of beauty lies in the fact that it leads to ethics, that is to a "beautiful" life.²⁰ Therefore, the decorative function is also ultimately focused on educational goals. What is more, by affecting emotions, images work more effectively than mere preaching about good and evil. However, only that which is a reflection of eternal beauty deserves the name of beauty. The beautiful is that which is good and which leads to goodness. Beyond this boundary marked by goodness, there is only apparent beauty, and even ugliness, which is sometimes called beauty although it is not.²¹ Therefore, not everything that man creates and considers beautiful is beautiful. Images of saints can also be simply ugly and as such will certainly not fulfill the educational function.

17 Cf. Komisja ds. Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów Episkopatu Polski, *Obrzędy błogosławieństw*, 83.

18 Cf. Oficjalna, "Obrazy święte," 59; Czesna, "Rola obrazów religijnych," 52.

19 Cf. Komisja ds. Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów Episkopatu Polski, *Obrzędy błogosławieństw*, 83.

20 Cf. John Paul II, "Message to the Pontifical Council," no. 2.

21 Cf. Zadykiewicz, "Moral Boundaries of Beauty," 125.

2. Realism and Idealization in the Service of Moral Formation

In the past, painters tried to achieve the didactic goal by means of two extremes – through realistically painted scenes and particular naturalism or through idealization.²² Realism advocated an extremely objective, as accurate as possible rendering of ordinary life scenes – in addition, from the lives of regular people. The depiction of everyday scenes, characteristic of this trend, was carried over to sacred art, including images of saints. A realistic painting believed that the saint, despite their distinctive special qualities of spirit and character, is an ordinary person. Therefore, they must be shown as an ordinary man, without selectivity or embellishment. Such an image must also reflect the spirit of the times. Therefore, the saint should be portrayed as a figure from their own era. These assumptions were accomplished through subdued colors, mundane subject matter, and avoiding unnecessary accents. All this was meant to emphasize the “ordinariness” of the saint.

Idealization – on the contrary. It tried to express the invisible in a visible way; present people not as they are, but as they should be; bring out individual aspects of personality elevated to superhuman standards.²³ A saint is someone who managed to get close to the evangelical moral ideal, achieve heroism. Hence the features characteristic of this type of painting: static compositions, symmetry, harmony derived from mathematical principles, and triangle or circle compositions.²⁴ Idealization is also evident in the emphasis on expression, in painting faces to show a specific emotion: terror, hope, confusion. In addition, idealization utilizes deliberate distortion of proportions and perspective, carefully selected colors and their juxtaposition. All this is used to convey the truth that what we want to express is actually beyond our expression and even perception capabilities. Idealization in images resembles allegory in literature. It allows to bring out individual personality aspects, thus images with idealistic overtones sometimes carry a moralistic and simplistic message.

Realism and idealization – although different in their assumptions – nevertheless have the same goal: to direct the viewer toward goodness and eternal beauty. In the former case, however, this goal is achieved (e.g. in Caravaggio’s painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*). with realistically painted feelings (astonishment, confusion, curiosity) – the viewer can almost see Christ’s physical pain from the touch of Thomas’ finger. In contrast, idealization aims to show almost unearthly beauty. Ultimately, however, both beautiful gentle-faced Madonnas and dirty feet (Caravaggio’s

²² Cf. Bator, “Ikony jako wezwanie,” 222.

²³ Bator, “Ikony jako wezwanie,” 223.

²⁴ The postulate of idealization appeared already in ancient art thanks to Aristotle, who formulated the principle of *mimesis* as expression, in contrast to depictions of *mimesis* as passive copying, imitation, repetition. The features derived from this principle are particularly visible in the religious painting of the Renaissance and Baroque, but also in later art.

favorite motif) had essentially the same purpose: except that in the first case, it was expressed in attempts to capture this beauty, and in the other – in highlighting that which still separates one from that beauty. Today there is a certain polemic between proponents of realism and idealization, but realism seems to be gaining more recognition. Hence, there is also a fairly high acceptance of forms that, every now and then, here and there, cause consternation and scandal.

Already in antiquity – and in Christian culture and art from the fifth century – people depicted in paintings were equipped with certain objects or symbols that made the person more easily recognizable; allowed to identify them. Such an attribute, relating to the person's life, martyrdom, or sometimes legend, was also – especially since the Middle Ages – a carrier of didactic content. To this day, we recognize that a palm symbolizes a martyr; a lily – a virgin, and a tiara – a pope. These are known as shared attributes. Some saints had individual attributes. A saint with a lamb is Agnes; with a musical instrument – Saint Cecilia; with a lion – Saint Jerome; with a club – James the Less; with a scallop shell – James the Great, with breasts on a plate – Saint Agatha; with a beehive – Saint Ambrose. In modern images, saints and blessed are usually depicted without such symbolic attributes, although it happens that, in the spirit of idealization, they are “equipped” with such items as a cross, rosary, breviary, diary, rule of life, etc. On the other hand, if – guided by realism – the image is created based on a photograph, it may feature an item that somewhat rises to the level of an attribute and – just like the idealizing element – begins to play a reminding or didactic role.

However, where one wants to emphasize the reminding function, one would rather highlight realistic facial features, emotions, as well as the aforementioned “attributes.” Realistic representation of a person makes them more familiar, and the story of their life becomes more fascinating. In contrast, for the sake of the didactic function, one would rather introduce certain idealizations aimed at the approximation of the invisible by the visible. If the image is to express man's participation in God's holiness, it is unlikely that such a role will be fulfilled by an extremely realistic depiction of imperfections or flaws, yet if we want to use the image to express the truth that also a person affected by imperfections can partake in God's holiness, then moderate realism may even be an additional advantage.

The choice between realistic and idealized depictions is also motivated by the place for which the image is intended. If it is to serve worship – it usually makes greater use of idealization, if it is to be a didactic means – greater realism is allowed. In this respect, it is useful to make a distinction between sacred art and religious art.²⁵ Religious art has a decorative function. Images included as part of the decoration of

²⁵ Probably already during the cult of the Roman emperors, a distinction was made between the two types of portrayals: ordinary images, placed in public places, and cult statues, placed in temples. This division was approved by Christians in the process of forming a defense of their own worship of images. Cf. Feliga, “Obrona kultu obrazów,” 29.

walls, the altar, or e.g. in stained glass windows, do not draw attention to themselves but are only accompanying pieces whose presence is a reminder of the holy communion. They, too, must meet the highest artistic standards. Only images made with the utmost artistry and characterized by religious refinement can be a reflection of the beauty that comes from God and brings one closer to Him.²⁶

Sacred art has a different task. Worship images are works that become objects of public worship, as signs and symbols of the supernatural reality (cf. SC 126). They are meant to focus the prayerful attention of the faithful at a given time and place. They are not meant – like religious art – to present a story for meditation, but the person one is talking to – the person who is currently in the kingdom of God.²⁷ Perhaps this explains the moral ambivalence of certain images, including the (in)admissibility of the “immoral” attributes in the depictions of saints. Admittedly, no one can prohibit an artist from creating images in accordance with their imagination. Even more so, no one can forbid having such images in one’s home. However, this does not mean that they are all suitable for worship and placement in the liturgical space of the church.

St. Cyril of Alexandria wrote: “If we make images of pious people, it is not, after all, in order to glorify them as gods, but rather – by looking at them – to stimulate ourselves to compete with them. However, we make images of Christ in order to stimulate our souls to love Him.”²⁸ Perhaps this purpose of images of saints, i.e. that “they are to stimulate competition with them” and not be an excuse for stagnation in moral development or even backtracking on the road to perfection, in a way also justifies the greater realism of religious art, especially that intended for private worship, and these – let us say – “immoral” attributes.

3. Criteria for “Good” Images

Today, the Church does not regard any style as privileged and universally valid. She does, however, formulate some general indications concerning the images of saints. In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Second Vatican Council included the following statement: “The practice of placing sacred images in churches so that they may be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained. Nevertheless their number should be moderate and their relative positions should reflect right order. For otherwise they may create confusion among the Christian people and foster devotion of doubtful orthodoxy” (SC 125). An almost identical framework of artistic depictions

²⁶ Cf. Adamczyk, “Praktyka umieszczania,” 175.

²⁷ Cf. Grabska, “Sztuka sakralna,” 108–109.

²⁸ Quoted after: Salij, “Miejsce świętych.”

of saints is defined by the current *Code of Canon Law*.²⁹ The Second Vatican Council also obliges the bishops to “carefully remove from the house of God and from other sacred places those works of artists which are repugnant to faith, morals, and Christian piety, and which offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or by lack of artistic worth, mediocrity and pretense” (SC 124).³⁰

Based on these few statements, it is possible to formulate fundamental postulates regarding the depiction of contemporary saints and potential criteria for choosing between realism and idealization. First, however, it is important to note the Church’s explicit precept: “The practice of placing sacred images in churches so that they may be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained.” Therefore, the custom must not be abandoned just because occasionally there are inappropriate images. This is what Joseph Ratzinger writes on the subject: “The complete absence of images cannot be reconciled with belief in the Incarnation of God. [...] Iconoclasm is not a Christian option.”³¹ But what should these appropriate images be – more realistic or more idealized?

Only such depictions can be considered good and valuable, for which the source of inspiration is faith which – as highlighted by contemporary Church documents – has a moral dimension.³² Moreover, the images should be created in such a way as to enable a believer to find in them the whole, unobscured, mystery of faith. Thus, anything that is not inspired by faith, does not serve to awaken and strengthen faith, much less anything that is incompatible with the faith or may be misleading, cannot be the content of images of the saints, because otherwise it would undermine the very essence and purpose of the worship of images (cf. CCC 1159–1162),³³ or even, in the words of the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* – could lead to certain abuses (cf. DPP 239).

²⁹ “The practice of displaying sacred images in churches for the reverence of the faithful is to remain in effect. Nevertheless, they are to be exhibited in moderate number and in suitable order so that the Christian people are not confused nor occasion given for inappropriate devotion” (CCL 1188). Cf. also: Misztal, “Kult świętych,” 108–109.

³⁰ Cf. DPP 244: “It is for the local ordinary to ensure that inappropriate images or those leading to error or superstition, are not exposed for the veneration of the faithful.”

³¹ Ratzinger, *Teologia liturgii*, 109.

³² In the Apostolic Letter *Duodecimum Saeculum* (no. 11) John Paul II writes: “I can only invite my brothers in the episcopate to maintain firmly the practice of proposing to the faithful the veneration of sacred images in the churches and to do everything so that more works of truly ecclesial quality may be produced. The believer of today, like the one yesterday, must be helped in his prayer and spiritual life by seeing works that attempt to express the mystery and never hide it. That is why today, as in the past, faith is the necessary inspiration of Church art.” John Paul II commented on the moral dimension of faith, *inter alia*, in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (no. 89): “Faith also possesses a moral content. It gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment; it entails and brings to perfection the acceptance and observance of God’s commandments.”

³³ Cf. Klejnowski-Różycki, “Sakralna sztuka liturgiczna,” 78.

Any fragmentation, i.e. detachment from the whole of worship and the whole of Christian ethics, can be considered such “abuse.” Hence the admonition contained in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: “their number should be moderate and their relative positions should reflect right order. For otherwise they may create confusion among the Christian people and foster devotion of doubtful orthodoxy” (SC 125). Fragmentation would be focusing on elements that call into question the heroism of the saint’s life, and not on the whole of their life, especially its culmination. Anthropocentric humanism can also be called “abuse.”³⁴ An image is meant to inspire Christian hope, and thus act as a bridge between man and the reality of God; between life here and now and future salvation. If it focuses attention solely on itself or directs it only toward the creator, it does not fulfill such a role.

In the worship of saints in general, and in the worship of their images in particular, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the saint’s Christian identity, the essence of their holiness, the effectiveness of their life testimony, and personal charisma (cf. DPP 231). However, one should not – as indicated by the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* – focus on legendary elements, elements related to the saint’s life, or on demonstrating their thaumaturgic powers (cf. DPP 231).³⁵ Even more so, one should not focus on imperfections or flaws, especially if there is some relativization of the requirements of the Gospel behind it. In creating and using images, all superstitions should be eliminated, let alone material gain and profit-driven depictions of saints in a playful, shameless manner, full of temporal allure and splendor. This fact alone indicates that the evaluation should take into account not only the content but also the intentions behind its creation and use.³⁶ The images are

³⁴ Cf. Syczewski, “Kult świętych,” 151. This problem seems to be addressed by John Paul II (“Homélie”) in his words addressed to artists: „Arguably, art is always an attempt. But not all attempts are equally inspired and equally fortunate. Some seem to distance themselves from the vocation of art, which is supposed to express beauty, truth, love, all that is deepest in the nature which is God’s creation [...]. And when art interprets a strictly religious reality or when it wishes to have a sacred character, it can rightly be demanded of it to avoid any falsity, any desacralization.”

³⁵ It is worth noting that in the past images of saints often recreated some legendary element or the thaumaturgic power of a particular saint (e.g. a painting depicting the temptation of St. Anthony, a tame lion at the feet of St. Jerome, or the trumpet of last judgment appearing over his head). Moreover, these elements were included for didactic reasons. In the images of contemporary saints, there is *de facto* less of these elements, which, by the way – according to the *Directory on Popular Piety* – is more in line with the spirit of the times, and therefore what should be emphasized instead is the importance of the saint’s Christian identity, the depth of their holiness and the effectiveness of their evangelical testimony, as well as the personal charisma with which they enriched the life of the Church.

³⁶ Already St. John of Damascus stressed that if the image is created in honor of God, then its worship is by all means correct, whereas if it is to commemorate evil or lesser gods, then it is a condemnable idol: “As regards the issue of images, we must look for the truth and the intentions of those who create them. If it is truly and genuinely for the glory of God and the saints, for the promotion of virtue, the avoidance of evil, and the salvation of souls, then we accept the honor given to them. [...] If anyone would make images to worship the devil and his demons, we resent them and throw them into the fire.” Quoted after: Feliga, “Obrona kultu obrazów,” 42.

intended to provide aid on the path of spiritual and moral development, on the path of prayer; they are to arouse piety toward the invisible saint. If they focus the attention on themselves, they prove to be an obstacle to achieving these goals. No less important is the attitude of the one who uses the image (who worships it; who faces it). They too should see the image as a source to seek inspiration for moral growth, not signs of the immoral lives of saints and arguments to justify their shortcomings.

When evaluating the value of a particular image, it is also important to take into account cultural considerations. The idea is that when conveying a message through an image, one should bear in mind the appropriate ways of expressing content for a given cultural area. This is because the images represent a specific culture. They depict real figures, people of their time (cf. *DPP* 243).³⁷ Determinants of contemporary culture explain why today's images of saints are closer to the Renaissance emphasis on the value and dignity of earthly life than to the ideals of medieval asceticism. Unfortunately, sometimes they only reflect the prevailing trends, the condition of man and modern culture, rather than setting more ambitious goals – leading toward objective good.

It seems that contemporary controversies surrounding the ways of fulfilling the didactic function of images cannot be resolved by choosing between realism and idealization. This is because each of these forms can become a tool for preaching moral truth, but it can also carry the danger of its falsification or distortion. Due to the modern relativization of beauty or even the apotheosis of ugliness, the resolution of these controversies cannot be left solely to subjective perception either. After all, the viewer of the image may also enjoy that which is wrong. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt objective criteria of Christian faith and morality, which set the limits of the didactic impact of painterly depictions of saints.

Conclusion

Some contemporary images of saints arouse controversies and cause objections, especially in the context of their influence on the moral attitudes of the viewers and on the formation of a holistic vision of moral life, consistent or not with biblical morality. The ambivalent nature of such “art” stems from the opportunities it presents in this regard, but also the possible risks. The opportunities are related above all to the condition of modern man as *homo videns*. Modern culture has been dominated by visual media. Thus, in addition to oral or textual messages, images should also be used for didactic purposes. The problem, however, is that not every image can fulfill

³⁷ Cf. Syczewski, “Kult świętych,” 151.

this role. Some may even falsify the very essence of Christian morality or some specific aspects of it.

The main criterion for evaluating the images concerns the very essence of their worship and role in moral life. Images of saints are meant to have a persuasive function – they are to draw one toward authentic goodness, encourage the practice of positive moral attitudes, and even create a kind of bond between the recipient and the ethical model depicted. Therefore, in their creation and veneration, one should avoid anything that could carry the risk of distorting true worship and losing genuine piety. It is also necessary to avoid anything that could falsify the moral message of the Bible, erase its authenticity, and provide an excuse for attitudes that are in clear contradiction with it. Images of saints should help participate in the mystery of the people they portray. They should also create a connection between those who create these images and those who contemplate them. An image is not a photograph in the strict sense. Its task is only to assure that the moral ideal indicated in the Bible is achievable despite various obstacles. In this way, it becomes an aid to moral growth.

It should also be remembered that the final verification of the value of a cult image is left to the Church, specifically the bishop. It is the bishop who ultimately decides whether or not to place a certain image in places designated for public worship. No one is allowed to do this on their own. Slightly more freedom is possible in the selection of images of saints for private worship, for one's own home, or for the workplace. However, it is also worth remembering that the Church – including the domestic one – is a place of the saints' communion, and therefore also communion with the saints, and therefore it is worth applying the above criteria also when making individual choices.

In the culture of image and in the face of constant demands for unlimited freedom in the field of art, it is necessary to not only talk about the didactic functions of the image but also to form the ability to perceive and evaluate them. Showing the path of holiness should be accompanied by forming a critical view of the ways of expressing this holiness. Since contemporary art often only aims to shock, and its moral boundaries are increasingly crossed in favor of absolute freedom, one can also expect lively discussions around specific forms of depictions of saints, which will find their staunch supporters, but also opponents.

A Catholic must be aware that not all art is in the service of morality. Not all art equally serves to convey moral values. Not all art shows the beauty and goodness of man, even if it depicts a holy man. There are forms of it that are misleading and sometimes outright demoralizing. However, the boundary is not between realism and idealization, but rather between an integral vision of a man and a partial view; between the truth of a man called to holiness and the so-called modernity, utility and pleasure.

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