

THE KINGDOM AS PRESENT: TRUTH, ART AND POLITICS

To connect the relationship of God to the world with the question of art and in turn confront those two inquiries with a theory of politics is not to combine three questions external to one another, but to look for the hidden links that lead from one to the other. The links are not obvious or if they seem to be obvious then they are as stultifying as the clichés of civil religion which infuse political rhetoric with a dead morality. To tie a glimpse of the holy with sensible beauty, discussion of the well-being of the city and truth is perhaps a liturgical act in the sense that it is the creation of a discourse that is performative: it is what it denotes or symbolizes, a work of art that speaks the truth and desires the good. There is a thought that does what it says, i.e., links truth, the good and beauty in anticipating the presence of God. That thought is theology, the speaking of God that calls upon his presence or put another way, the contemplation of the anticipation of His presence in the sensible and human world. Of course, that is what liturgy does and point to the reality that all our actions and words are a “rational sacrifice,” to quote Romans.

That introductory reflection leads us to Prosper of Aquitaine’s *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*¹ which is more commonly shortened to *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of prayer is the law of faith. In fact it is the liturgy that provides some guidance in teasing out the hidden links between politics, art and the truth of God and the human world. The icon presents itself as one such nexus through its incorporation in the iconostasis of the Eastern liturgy. The icon has its place in the place where the liturgy is

¹ Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 32, n. 1.

enacted as a nexus of the action of gathering that takes place in the Eucharist: “The icon is a witness, or, better still, a consequence of the unification of the divine and the human, of heaven and earth, that has been accomplished in Jesus Christ. All icons are in essence icons of the incarnation. Thus, the iconostasis originated from the experience of the temple as “heaven on earth,” as testimony to the fact that “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.” Like all the rest of the iconography in the church building, it is an incarnation of the vision of the Church as *sobor*, as the union of the visible and invisible worlds, as the manifestation and presence of the new and transfigured creation.”² To catch a glimpse of the imminent kingdom and the same time as one is transfixed with the gaze of a rupture in the continuity of time creates within the relationship of the icon and its viewer a gathering together of what through sin is held apart, a solidarity of flesh uniting bodies that are constantly tempted and do go their own way. The icon creates a vibrating sensibility not so much through its content, but through its function. The icon creates a vision that sees it; it is not seen by a vision already in possession of itself. It is a work of art: a sensible thing that creates in a momentary gaze the sensibility that responds to its touch. A world is coming forth; a kingdom is drawing near.

As a gaze that gathers to itself the sensibility that reaches out and touches what touches it the work of art is an act, an action in the process of creating links and bonds that course through the affectivity that responds to it. While it does not pose the question of the good of the city-the common good-it shows it, manifests an offer of sense in the moment of the gaze, touch or hearing. In that moment because it is, so to speak, preformed, the presence of God can show itself. It discloses an epistemology in which

² Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p. 20-21. *Sobor* in Russian can be translated as *gathering* or *temple*.

the boundaries and thresholds of politics, art and critical reflection can, by exposing their hidden links, transgress the reified conceptions that render them ideological instruments and not stepping stones for thought. The act of knowing is embedded in a bodily action with affective and perceptual dimension. To know is not only to see, but to be seen; to touch, but to be touched; to desire, but to be desired. The icon as clue to the hidden links between art, politics and truth only makes sense within that kind of epistemology where the gaze of the art work transfixes by a sensible communication of the inbreaking of salvation, the contestation of suffering, meaninglessness, and despair and the sustenance of joy, thanksgiving, and celebration.

A piety that concentrates on the content of the art work misses the force of the rupture of consoling feelings in the drawing near of the kingdom. The drawing near of the kingdom does not reconcile consciousness and the world, nor deaden the pain of suffering or the intense physical infusion of joy by producing a narcotic peace that passes over the lack of well-being or shalom in the world. The art work only communicates the truth of joy and suffering if it sensibly exposes the viewer or hearer to what stirs within the dim awareness that the body has of what could be yearned and hoped for beyond the surface pleasures of the flesh. To be seen and to be heard in seeing and hearing is to be drawn into the mass of emotions that form the interpersonal space in which sensible thing confronts bodies and bodies confront bodies. At that point the work of art occupies the space of politics where the existence of the city is at stake, Zion, the strong city of joy in opposition to the city of chaos, Babel.