



THE HOLY SEE AT THE BIENNALE ARCHITETTURA 2018

Communication by Cardinal Ravasi at the Press Conference



The Holy See, which represents the Catholic Church in its entirety, makes its first entrance to the arena of the *Biennale di Architettura di Venezia*. It does so landing in the lagoon on the splendid island of San Giorgio, penetrating a woodland oasis not with graphic representations or models but with a veritable sequence of chapels. These are true and proper temples in Christian worship, even if in a minor form compared with cathedrals, basilicas and churches. Each chapel contains two fundamental liturgical elements: the ambo (pulpit or lectern) and the altar. These are the expression of the Holy Word that is proclaimed and the Eucharistic Supper that is celebrated by the assembly of believers.

The number of chapels is also symbolic as it expresses a sort of decalogue of presences fitted within the space: they are similar to voices that have been transformed into architecture and resound with their spiritual harmony in the drama of daily life. A visit to the ten Vatican Chapels, then, is a sort of pilgrimage that is not only religious but also secular. It is a path for all who wish to rediscover beauty, silence, the interior and transcendent voice, the human fraternity of being together in the assembly of people, and the loneliness of the woodland where one can experience the rustle of nature which is like a cosmic temple. Preceding this procession is an emblem: the “Woodland Chapel” by Swedish architect Gunnar Asplund who, nearly a century ago (1920) and from a different region, evoked with his project the constant quest of humanity for the sacred within the spatial horizon of nature in which we live.

Architects from different backgrounds and diverse experiences have come to the island of San Giorgio to represent this “incarnation” of the temple in history, the dialogue with the plurality of cultures and of society, and to confirm the “catholicity” which is the universality of the Church. They come from nearby Europe with its complex historical configuration and from distant Japan with its unique religious roots, from the vivacious spirituality of Latin America and the seemingly secularized USA, as well as remote Australia that actually reflects contemporary concerns.

There was a precedent for this entrance of the Holy See into the *Biennale Architettura*. In 2013 and then in 2015, the Holy See entered two editions of the *Biennale Arte* with its own pavilions, offering a primordial message on the theme “In the Beginning” from the Judeo-Christian Holy Scriptures. In the first edition, the artists took into their hands, as had been done for centuries, the biblical book of Genesis with its opening line, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This is also the start of being and of existing. Contemporary art saw the return of this thematic subject of the creation of the universe and of humanity, the de-creation (the Flood and Babel), and the re-creation with the beginning of the history of redemption in Abraham. During its second presence at the *Biennale Arte*, there was instead the ideal *incipit* of the New Testament. This proposes

another completely new beginning that descended from divine eternity and became bound up with human historical and contingent fleshliness: "In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh," as we read in the famous hymn that is used as the prologue to John's Gospel.

The choice was clear and explicit and meant a change of direction compared to the recent past. For the last century, in fact, a lacerating divorce had opened up between art and faith. They have actually always been sisters, to the point that Marc Chagall had no hesitation in saying that "for centuries the painters have dipped their brushes in the colored alphabet that was the Bible," the "Great Code" of western culture, as defined by the artist William Blake. Then, however, the roads divided.

On one side, art had left the temple; the artist had placed the bible on a dusty shelf to pursue instead the secular road of modernity, often fleeing the use of figures, symbols, narrations and sacred words. Indeed, artists often considered the message as an ideological gallows and instead dedicated themselves to stylistic exercises that were more and more elaborate and self-referential or even sometimes desecrating provocations. Art was entrusted to an esoteric criticism that was incomprehensible to most people and became enslaved by the ways and means of a market that was often artificial and even excessive.

On the other side, theology looked almost exclusively to systematic speculation that believes it has no need of signs or metaphors; it too had put into storage the great repertoire of Christian symbols. In the ecclesial sphere, there was a return to copying the modules, styles and genres of the past, or alternatively the use of a simpler amateurism, or worse, we adapted to the ugliness that pervades the new urban suburbs and the aggressive building schemes, raising modest sacred buildings that are devoid of spirituality, beauty or an encounter with the new artistic and architectural languages that were meanwhile being elaborated.

From this situation, a desire emerged for a new encounter between art and faith, two worlds that in earlier times intertwined but that had then become mutual strangers. It is a path of encounter that is certainly hard and complex and that feeds on reciprocal suspicion and hesitation and even fear of making things worse. It is a dialogue that in architecture has already registered significant steps and that began halfway through the last century, not just through the work of theologians and pastors who were sensitive to the issue, but also in the official magisterium beginning with Paul VI and his 1964 meeting in the Sistine Chapel with the artists. John Paul II's 1999 *Letter to Artists* followed and then the new encounter of Benedict XVI in the same Sistine Chapel in 2009.

This first entrance of the Catholic Church to the *Biennale Architettura* occurs during the pontificate of Pope Francis. In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* – a sort of programmatic manifesto he authored at the beginning of his Petrine ministry (November 24, 2013) – he wanted to renew a classic trajectory of Christianity, the so-called *via pulchritudinis*, that is, beauty as a religious path, aware of St. Augustine's assertion that "we do not love, except what is beautiful" (*De Musica* VI, 13, 38). Concretely, the pope exalted "the use of the arts in evangelization, building on the treasures of the past but also drawing upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new language of parables."

It is striking that the following declaration appears in the *Statutes of Art* from the 14th century artists of Siena: "We are those who show the illiterate people the marvelous works carried out by virtue of the faith." And St. John Damascene, the great defender of art in the 8th century against the iconoclasm that was being pushed by the emperor and large sections of the Church at that time, suggested: "If a pagan comes to you and says: 'Show me your faith!' You must take him to a church and show him the decorations and explain the series of sacred paintings."

Pope Francis concludes as follows: “We must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty which may mean little to the evangelizers, yet prove particularly attractive for others.”

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi