

GRETE REFSUM

**The French  
Dominican Fathers  
as Precursors to the  
Directives on Art  
of the Second  
Vatican Council**

*Dissertation Lecture*

*Oslo 8. December 2000*

**Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo**

**Statens håndverks-og  
kunstindustriskole/  
National College of Art  
and Design**



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*Grete Refsum*

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# SUPPLEMENT

Dissertation Lecture, held 8.12.00  
at Oslo School of Architecture

## The French Dominican Fathers as Precursors to the Directives on Art of the Second Vatican Council

### Introduction

This lecture will be a travel in France, mind the places: *Audincourt, Assy, Ronchamp, Vence*.

### The Order of Saint Dominic

St. Dominic (1170-1221)<sup>1</sup> founded his order in France in 1215<sup>2</sup>. The order is dedicated to the salvation of souls through preaching and teaching; it therefore is called the *Order of Preachers (Ordo Praedicatorum, abbreviated O.P.)*. The Dominicans are also known as *Black Friars* because of their black mantle worn over a white robe. The Order of St. Dominic is one of poverty and its spirit and religious life is one of contemplation<sup>3</sup>. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)<sup>4</sup> entered the order in 1242<sup>5</sup> and since he frequently studied and worked in Paris,

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1 Blessed Jordan 1231-33, electronic doc.:4 and 41.

2 In April 1215 Dominic and his companions were given a house in Toulouse in which they established their new community. Bishop Foulques of Toulouse gave his approval in July, and together with Dominic they went to Rome to attend the Fourth Lateran Council that was held this same year. In accordance with a decree of this Council, Pope Innocent III promised to confirm the order on condition that Dominic choose one of the approved religious rules and obtained a church where Mass and the Divine Office could be celebrated. In spring 1216, Dominic and his brethren, meeting in Toulouse, chose the rule of St. Augustine and drew up the constitutions. Bishop Foulques gave them the Church of St. Romanus in Toulouse, and they began to build a priory next to it. In December 1216, Pope Honorius III confirmed the order, and in January 1217, gave it its preaching mission and the name the Order of Friars Preachers. The order took definite shape at the first General Chapter at Bologna in 1220 (Jordan 1231-33:22-24; *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997:497).

3 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997:497-98.

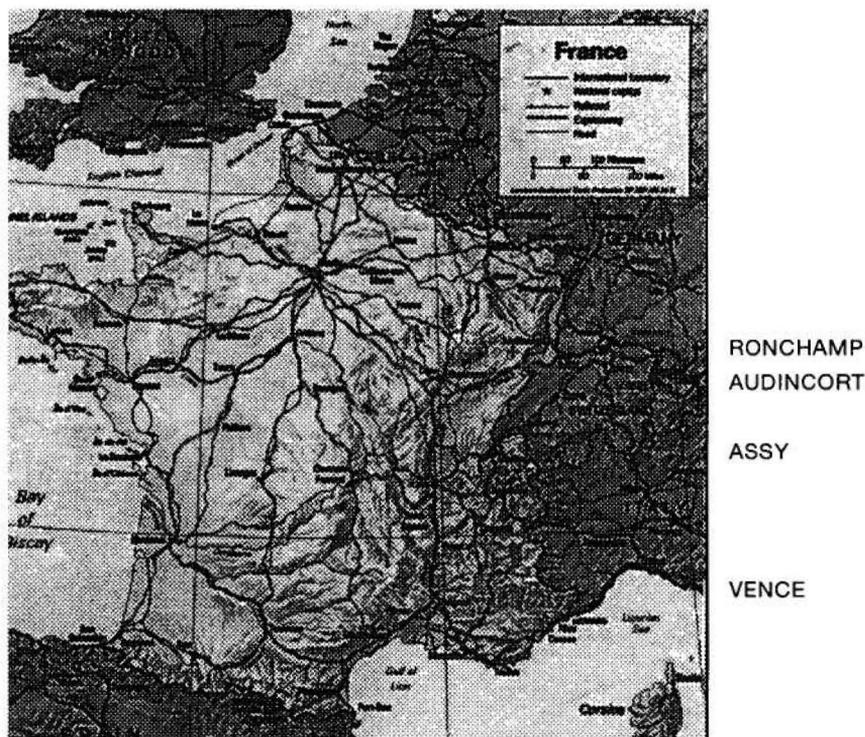


Figure 1 France

he may well be counted as a French Dominican. In 1265 St. Thomas was sent to Rome to direct a Dominican study at Santa Sabina, and at this place he started the writing of *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas created a synthesis between the theological thinking of the time and Aristotelian philosophy. He combined a *theology of revelation* based on *Holy Scripture*, and *natural theology* based on perceptual experience<sup>6</sup>. Aquinas did not formulate a specific aesthetic theory in an explicit body of writings, but it is possible to extract his theory on art through his works<sup>7</sup>. Concerning beauty in manmade objects Aquinas writes: “Three things are necessary for beauty: first, *integrity* or perfection, for things that are lacking in something are for this reason ugly; also due *proportion* or consonance; and again, *clarity*, for we call things beautiful when they are brightly coloured”<sup>8</sup>.

4 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997:1614

5 His family opposed this decision and held him imprisoned for two years, but finally released him to the Dominicans (*The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, 1965, v.10:660).

6 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997:1614-17.

7 Eco 1988:19.

8 Eco 1988:65.

### The decadence of ecclesiastical art

The Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation in the 16th century<sup>9</sup> intended to secure a visually correct teaching through the art objects taken into church buildings, and initiated formulations of rules concerning the arts of the Church<sup>10</sup>. After the Baroque period, there was no genuine style of ecclesiastical art to take its place, and the arts in the Roman Catholic Church were caught in an accelerating decadence<sup>11</sup>. The clergy in order to provide appropriate art for their churches favoured artworks that strictly followed academic ideals. Especially in France, this attitude led in the 19th century to what is often called *Academicism*, images with a lifeless and institutionalized character, and the development of cheap copies of popular images for devotional purposes<sup>12</sup>. Such an art was controllable, and in times of the growing movement of *Modernism* that denounced old authorities and religious dogmas, the Church took an even more consistent stand against everything new including innovations in the arts<sup>13</sup>. Since the arts developed fast by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the distance between the arts and artifacts of the Church and contemporary art became unbridgeable.

### The beginning of modern ecclesiastical art

Some intellectuals and artists recognized the problem of the arts in the Church. The French poet Paul Claudel criticized the Church and called the church buildings of the early 20th century "heavily laden confessions" the ugliness of which, was a demonstration to all the world of the Church's sins and shortcomings, timidity of faith, interest in worldly luxury, and Pharisaic character<sup>14</sup>. Frequently individual artists worked on religious themes in a contemporary visual language, but the French painter Maurice Denis is regarded as initiator of the continuous tradition of modern ecclesiastical art that appeared around the turn of the centuries in Paris. Denis founded a school for modern Christian art in his own studio that until his death in 1943 highly influenced the common understanding of new art in the Church. His modernist definition of a painting as a two-dimensional surface covered with colours arranged in a particular order was revolutionary<sup>15</sup>.

9 Formulated by the Council of Trent held in the period 1545-1563. For a simple survey, see *The Dictionary of Art*, 1996, v.7:26.

10 See Evelyn Carole Voelker's dissertation *Charles Borromeo's "Instructiones Fabricae et Suppellectilium Ecclesiasticae." 1577. A Translation with Commentary and Analysis* from 1977; Susanne Mayer-Himmelheber's dissertation *Bischöfliche Kunstpolitik nach dem tridentinum. Der Secunda-Roma-Anspruch Carlo Borromeos und die mailändischen Verordnungen zu Bau und Ausstattung von Kirchen* from 1984; Pamela M. Jones' study *Federico Borromeo and the Ambrosiana. Art Patronage and the Reform in the Seventeenth-Century Milan* from 1993;

11 Seasoltz 1962:35.

12 See William Rubin's dissertation *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy*, from 1961, chapter 1.

13 See the article on *Modernism* in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* from 1913/1996.

14 Rubin 1961:7.

15 Rubin 1961:24.

### Georges Rouault and Jacques Maritain

Another artist of the time that worked on religious themes was Georges Henri Rouault. Rouault was born in Paris in 1871. At the age of 14, he was apprenticed to a maker of stained glass, but after six years of training, he started to study art. Rouault had a social conscience and believed in the purifying effects of humility. Gradually his vocation became to tell the truth, regardless of social consequences. Through suffering Rouault found his personal style, and his religious motifs<sup>16</sup>.



Figure 2 Christ Mocked, Rouault 1913<sup>17</sup>

In 1911 Rouault met Maritain and they became friends for life<sup>18</sup>. Jacques Maritain was born in Paris in 1882. He was raised Lutheran, but as a student he realized the need of something *Absolute*, and in 1906 he converted to the Roman Catholic Church. Maritain studied St. Thomas Aquinas, and tried to relate the Thomistic philosophy to modern culture. From 1914-33 Maritain taught modern philosophy in Paris<sup>19</sup>. Inspired by his pious artist friend Rouault, Maritain, in 1923, wrote the influential book *Art et Scolastique*, in which he advocates for *true* and thereby, *modern art*<sup>20</sup>.

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16 Finne 1954:51-52. Ferdinand Finne's article on Rouault in *Kunsten idag* from 1954, is translated in its entirety and given on the pages 48-57.

17 Courthion 1977:94, colourplate 18.

18 Finne 1954:25.

19 *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1978 mic. v.VI:630.

20 Finne 1954:19.

21 During the French Revolution the Dominican priories had been closed and the friars scattered, but from 1850 on the order gradually recovered and seats of learning were established in Germany and Rome (*The*

### The Dominicans in Oslo

After the First World War the French Dominicans expanded their activities<sup>21</sup>, and in 1920 two friars were sent to establish a house in Oslo<sup>22</sup>. Despite hardships, the project was backed, and in 1926 a new church was to be erected. At this time, the accepted artistic styles in the Church, in addition to Academicism and its kitschy popular counterpart, were the historical: neo-Byzantine, neo-Gothic, and neo-Romanesque. While opposed to historical styles in general, Dominicans preferred the spirit of the Romanesque to that of the Byzantine, considering it more in keeping with the nature of modern experience, and in Oslo, the Norwegian architect Harald Sund in accordance with the ideas of his patrons, designed a Neo-Romanesque church. The church was dedicated 2 October 1927<sup>23</sup>. The church was characterized by a Norwegian contemporary writer as "an exceedingly light and friendly house of God"<sup>24</sup>.

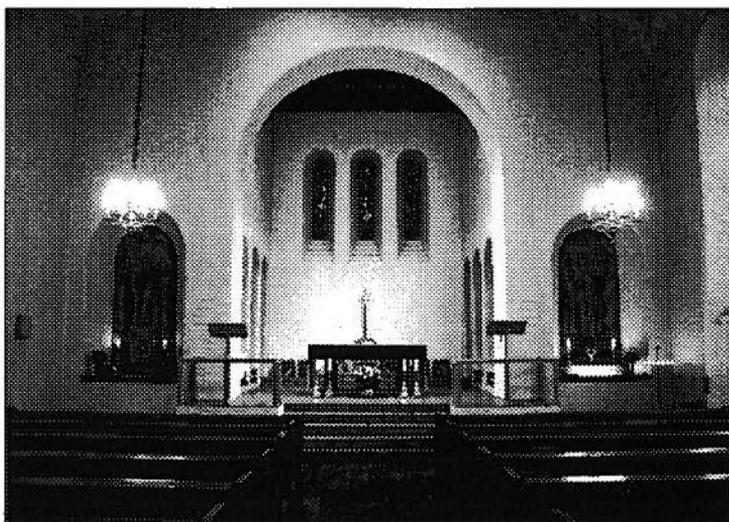


Figure 3  
St. Dominikus Church in Oslo, nave (photo: Alexander Refsum Jensenius, 2000)

### Father Marie-Alain Couturier O.P.

The following year a young Dominican friar, Marie-Alain Couturier, painted the frescoes in the church<sup>25</sup>.

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*Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, 1965, v.8:40-42).

<sup>22</sup> The Norwegian prohibition against Roman Catholic orders given in 1537, had been abolished in 1897 (Wreden 1989:29).

<sup>23</sup> Rubin 1961:18.

<sup>24</sup> Kjelstrup 1942:195.

<sup>25</sup> *L'Art Sacré* v. 9-10, 1954:14.

<sup>26</sup> See *L'Art Sacré* volume 9-10, Mai-Juin, 1954, "Le Père Couturier".

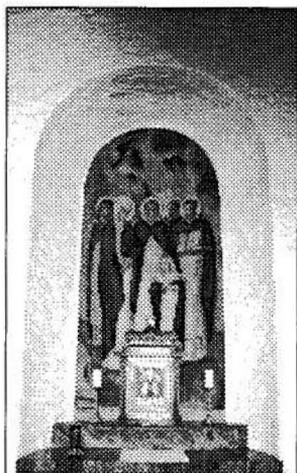


Figure 4  
Fresco of St. Dominic, Father  
Couturier 1928 (photo:  
Alexander Refsum Jensenius,  
2000)

Couturier was born in France in 1897. He started to study philosophy, but in 1916 he was mobilized for the First World War, and soon was severely wounded. During the period of recovery Couturier experienced different kinds of pain, not least bronchitis and asthma, from which he had suffered since childhood. Through these hardships his vocation to become an artist awakened, and in January 1919, Couturier started his artistic education in Paris. In the fall the same year he came in contact with *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* centered on Maurice Denis. For the next five years Couturier lived and worked in this milieu: decorated churches in the media fresco and stained glass; read Claudel; became acquainted with Matisse, Picasso, and Le Corbusier; frequented the house of the Maritains; and toured Italy<sup>26</sup>.

In the early 1920'ies the general interest in modern religious art was growing. Before this time, it was doubted that religious art could be *modern*, now, the question was whether modern religious art was *good*<sup>27</sup>. Many new groups of artists were formed, and Couturier was active in a workshop that produced modern stained glass. Maritain became the spokesman of these religious artists of the time. According to him, *tradition* was an ongoing reality, and only artists who were faithful to their own inner truths<sup>28</sup>; were *true artists* or *genuine artists*<sup>29</sup>.

Couturier's religious life matured, and in 1925 he entered the Dominican order, ready to renounce his career as artist, and started three years of philosophical and theological studies. But his Dominican superiors esteemed his original profession, and ordered him to decorate churches<sup>30</sup>.

27 Rubin 1961:26.

28 White1990:154-55.

29 See Maritain's book *Art and Scholasticism* (Maritain 1949).

30 *L'Art Sacré* v. 9-10, 1954:

31 Rubin 1961:29-30.

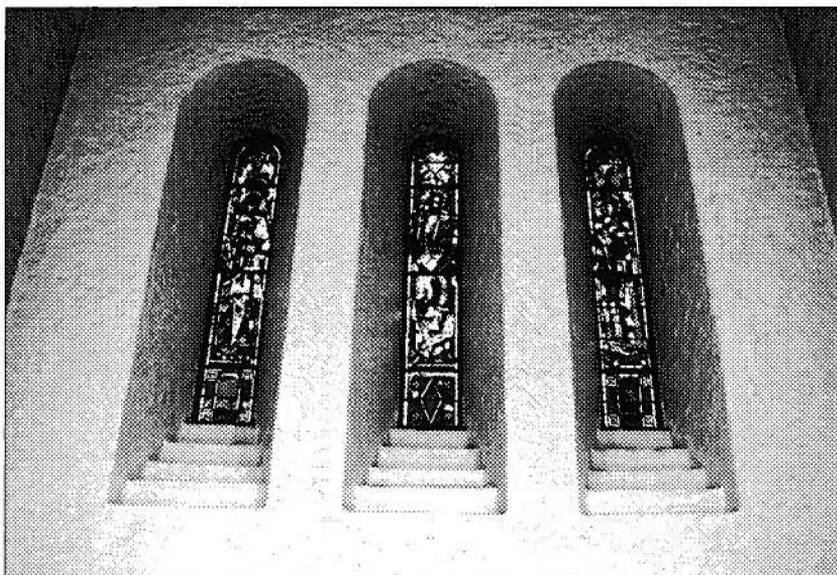


Figure 5 Stained glass windows, St. Dominikus, Oslo, by Father Couturier (photo: Alexander Refsum Jensenius, 2000)

### The Sacred Art Movement

During the 1930'ies the more scattered individual efforts to revitalize the art of the Church in France grew into what is called the *Sacred Art Movement*. Although intellectuals and a few *Jesuits*\* played their part, the French Dominicans constituted its major force. The traditionalists in the Church were in this period extremely active in raising money and constructing new churches in old styles. Moderate groups struggled to assimilate old and new styles so that classical works by, for instance, Picasso, might be considered acceptable, while rough images of Rouault were refused. Father Couturier's ambition was to revive Christian art by appealing to the independent masters of the time, and in 1932, he started to discuss his ideas with his Dominican brother, Jean Dévény (1896-1981), who was a chaplain in a sanatorium at Assy, opposite Mont Blanc<sup>31</sup>.

In October the same year the new Vatican picture Gallery was opened. Pope Pius XI in his address at the opening sordidly and with reference to the Code of Canon Law, said that since much of the art of the day reverts to crude forms of the darkest ages, it is unfitting for the service of the Church. This statement was taken to be an utter condemnation of modern art in the Church. However, the document contained also more positive statements, saying that the Church welcomes every good and progressive development of the approved Christian traditions, and beautiful forms that are cultivated by the twofold light of *genius* and of *faith*<sup>32</sup>.

32 *Acta Apostolica Sedis* 24 (1932), 335. Pius XI, Address, (October 27, 1932); English translation in: White 1990:160-61.

### The periodical *L'Art Sacré*

In 1935, the periodical *L'Art Sacré* was founded by Joseph Pichard in Paris with the intention of enlightening moderate groups who were preoccupied with style instead of contents and artistic value in art, by advocating for a minimal taste and contemporary modernist religious art. After one year its economy was disastrous. The Dominican Fathers, Couturier and the art historian Pie Regamey, rescued the magazine by lay financial support, and went in as co-editors. Together, Regamey and Couturier started their project of educating professional and lay about modern church art and architecture. Regamey was the patient pedagogue in words, while Couturier communicated directly through pictures, letting the objects speak by themselves. In the subsequent issues new neo-Romanesque and minimalist church buildings were presented, among them works by the architect Maurice Novarina. Couturier underscored their functional style and *beauty of simplicity*. He showed how local traditions of form and materials could be assimilated in new churches, so they became *modern* religious buildings, in *authentic* modern style<sup>33</sup>. Couturier announced Rouault as a painter whose work were examples of *modern, authentic and profound Christian art*<sup>34</sup>.



Figure 6  
*Crucifixion*, Rouault 1939<sup>35</sup>

Also examples of new chalices and vestments were presented in *L'Art Sacré*<sup>36</sup>.

In 1937 some of the best modernist religious artists had gathered enough support among the clergy and lay community to make a frontal attack against the traditionalists. The occasion was the filling in a number of the blank windows

33 Couturier Mai 1938:117-121.

34 Couturier September 1938:244-47.

35 Courthion 1977:120, colourplate 31.

36 Regamey 1938:44-48.

37 Regamey 1939:49-53.

in *Notre-Dame-de-Paris* with modern stained glass. Father Couturier was among the participants. The new windows were considered a success by members of the clergy and artists, but more conservative groups were alarmed. The traditionalists objected primarily to the principle of using modern art in the Church as such, and secondarily to its use in a Gothic cathedral. Father Regamey treated the quarrel in *L'Art Sacré* in February 1939<sup>37</sup>. He defended the new pieces in his scholarly way, and concluded that the result would be good. Still, after long discussions the windows were removed.

By the end of the 1930's the Catholic modernist art movement had to admit that despite good intentions, no outstanding results were achieved. Father Couturier realized that lesser artistic talents would never suffice to bring about the desired resurrection of the arts in the Church. Little by little a more daring position began to be explored, first theoretically through the articles in *L'Art Sacré*, and then events of life led them into practice<sup>38</sup>.

#### **Father Jean Dévény O.P. and Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce at Assy**

In the winter of 1939, Couturier decorated the church of Santa Sabina in Rome. On his return to France, he decided to pay a visit to his friend Jean Dévény (1896-1981), who now was appointed Canon at Assy. Assy had become a centre for treating tuberculosis, and the large number of Catholic patients necessitated the creation of a new parish. Father Dévény was given the task of planning and administering the building of a church, which subsequently was to be placed in the hands of the Dominicans<sup>39</sup>. Architect Novarina (1907) had designed the new *Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce*<sup>40</sup>, and when Couturier arrived, the walls were under construction.

Canon Dévény had himself been a patient at this place and was much in sympathy with the taste and sentiments of Assy's transient population. The absence of an indigenous congregation with local traditions made this task of church building unique. Father Dévény's first notion of a church for this community was to make something traditional in *good taste*, a church of *good quality*. He later argued that the choices of artists for his new church, resulted simply from this desire to seek *quality* in the arts. When Couturier arrived, Dévény who had been uncertain about the decorations of his church happily sought his advice<sup>41</sup>.

Couturier started by taking his friend to an exhibition of religious art in Paris<sup>42</sup>. Dévény liked a stained glass window based on a cartoon by Rouault,

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38 Rubin 1961:29-30.

39 Rubin 1961:30-31.

40 Electronic document available at <<http://www.eglise-assy.com/PAGES/HISTOIRE.html>>

41 Rubin 1961:30-32.

42 At Petit palais (Rubin 1961:33).

and requested it for his church. He later said that he had no plan for a modern church, but felt that a single Rouault window would be a positive addition to the total living of the art in the church. Rouault nearly 70, graciously accepted the request, it was his first work commissioned for a Catholic Church<sup>43</sup>.

### **Wartime 1940-45**

In December 1939, Couturier was charged to preach Lenten sermons to the French colony in New York, and when the war broke out his stay was lengthened with five years<sup>44</sup>. Meanwhile, Dévény continued the decorations of his church. He decided that the Rouault window should set the standard. First, he tried to commission the Catholic artist Raoul Dufy, but because of the war he was unable to get in contact. Then, he turned to Bonnard, who after overcoming an initial skepticism, agreed to collaborate. Thereafter, André Derain was asked to produce the image of St. Dominic, but he withdrew. Since St. Dominic was from Spain, Canon Dévény thought a Spanish artist would be a good choice. He knew Picasso from his pink and blue period, and visited him in his Paris studio. But Picasso's expressionist wartime work was too much for Canon Dévény, who considered this painter unsuited for the task, and then made a halt in the further decorations<sup>45</sup>.

Couturier's stay in America and Canada during the war became fruitful. First, the meetings with famous exiled European artists, especially the painters Fernand Léger, Salvador Dali, and Marc Chagall became influential for his thinking. With a distance to Europe, unaffected of concrete trouble with congregations and Church authorities, Couturier could reconsider his ideas about art in the Church. So far he had thought of Christian art as representational, now, his friendship with Léger made him understand that abstract art have religious potentialities<sup>46</sup>.

### **Maurice Lavanoux, Liturgical Art Society and Liturgical Arts**

Secondly, Couturier met members of the American modernist group *Liturgical Art Society*, that had been established in 1928, as a national effort to devise ways and means for improving the standards of taste, craftsmanship, and liturgical correctness in the practice of Catholic art in the United States<sup>47</sup>. And he kept contact with Maritain, who since 1933, had been professor in Toronto<sup>48</sup>.

43 Rubin 1961:33.

44 O'Meara O.P. 1986, electronic doc.:2.

45 Rubin 1961:33-34.

46 Rubin 1961:30.

47 White 1990:viii.

48 *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*. 1978 mic., v.VI:630.

49 White 1990:34-35.

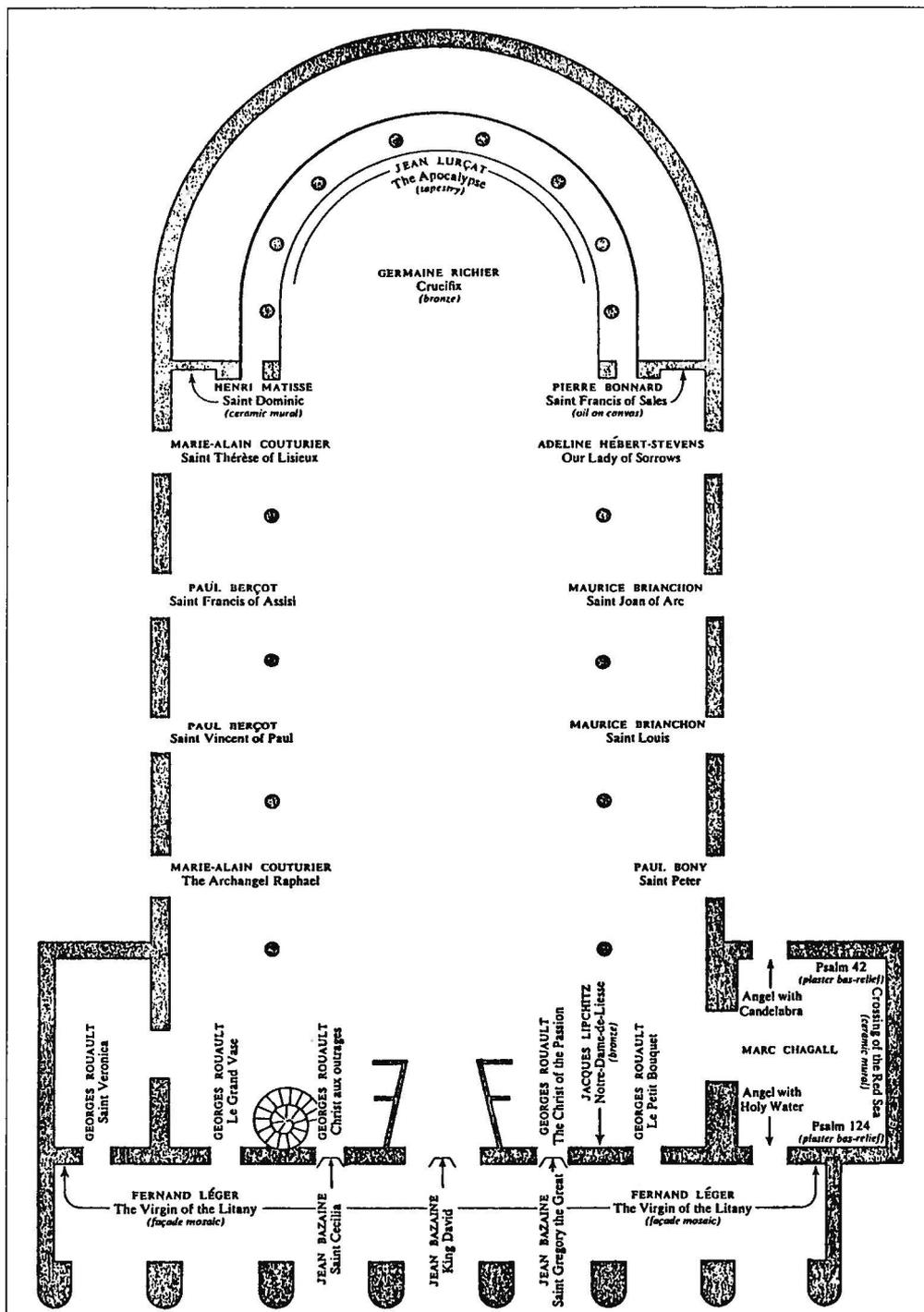


Figure 7  
Church of Assy, plan of decoration

Liturgical Art Society began publishing its magazine *Liturgical Arts* in 1931, and from 1932 Maurice Lavanoux took over the editorial responsibilities. Lavanoux had studied in Paris and trained to be an architect<sup>49</sup>, and was strongly influenced by Maritain's philosophy<sup>50</sup>. For the next four decades, with Lavanoux as editor, *Liturgical Arts* exerted one of the strongest influences in the period on American artists and architects concerned with the design and furnishing of Roman Catholic church buildings.

Couturier met Lavanoux and they became friends. Father Couturier taught Lavanoux a lot. Once, Lavanoux went with Couturier who should buy material for his vestments. Instead of seeking a store for religious goods, Couturier found a fine white material in a ladies' shop. This episode taught Lavanoux that goods from the whole world were available for the Church's use, regardless of how they were categorized. Couturier's simple lesson became important for the Society's later commitment to the *indigenization* of religious art and architecture<sup>51</sup>.

### Post-war France

In 1945 Couturier returned to France, and the iconographic program for Assy was finally set up<sup>52</sup>.

This church now became a practical laboratory for experimenting with art in a church. Eight saints that all were linked by their involvement with sickness or cure, were chosen as motifs to the windows in the nave. Father Couturier executed two of them himself, and the rest were produced by Catholic artists who had been active in the modernist circles. Then came the radical aspects of the plan; the Communists Léger and Jean Lurcat were engaged for decorations respectively on the facade and in the sanctuary. Canon Déverny desired a Virgin in Majesty as the focal point in the chancel, but realized that a modern artist could not supply such an image, and the decoration instead came to represent the cosmic struggle from the Apocalypse. The eight windows in the western wall got stained glass, three designed by Jean Bazaine and the rest based on Rouault's paintings<sup>53</sup>.



Figure 8  
Veronica, Rouault 1945<sup>54</sup>

50 White 1990:106-108.

51 White 1990:143.

52 Rubin 1961:34.

53 Rubin 1961:37.

54 Courthion 1977:136, colourplate 39.

55 Rubin 1961:37-38.

In 1947 followed a baptismal font by Jacques Lipchitz, and Chagall decorated the baptistery outside the church, with scenes from the Old Testament that he as Jew could consent to<sup>55</sup>.

The church at Assy demonstrated that art in a church could be modern, and in his encyclical letter *Mediator Dei* from November 1947 Pope Pius XII writes: "Modern art should be given free scope in the due and reverend service of the Church and the sacred rites, provided that they preserve a correct balance between styles tending neither to the extreme realism nor to excessive "symbolism", and that the needs of the Christian community are taken into consideration rather than the particular taste or talent of the individual artist". It adds: "We cannot help deploring and condemning those works of art, recently introduced by some which seem to be a distortion and perversion of true art and which at times openly shock Christian taste"<sup>56</sup>. The last phrase was a remark to the Dominicans<sup>57</sup>.

However, in Vence, near Nice, a Dominican convent needed a new chapel. In 1941 Matisse during his convalescence from illness had been treated by a handsome and devoted nurse who was interested in painting. Later she entered the Dominican convent in Vence nearby Matisse's house. Then arrived the young Dominican novice Brother Rayssiguier who was interested in architecture, and in 1947 when the new chapel was to be built, Sister Jacques and Rayssiguier turned to Matisse for help. The end of the story was that Matisse took command of the whole process<sup>58</sup>.

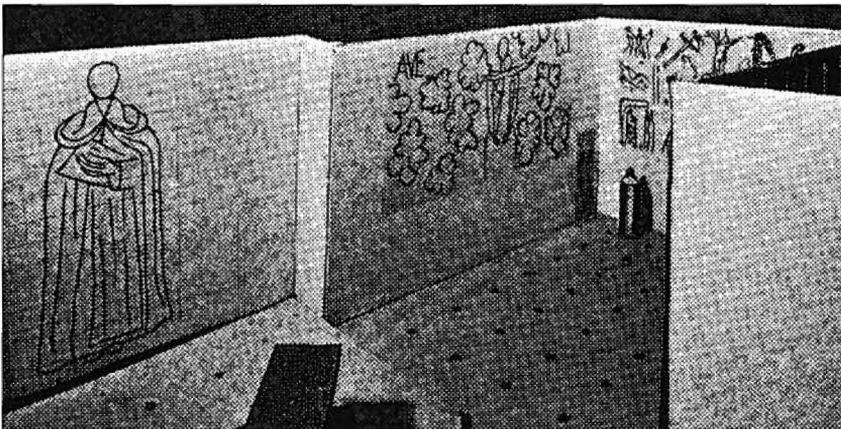


Figure 9  
Model of Chapelle de Vence, Matisse 1948<sup>59</sup>.

56 *Mediator Dei*, article 195.

57 Rubin 1961:48.

58 Barr 1952:279.

59 Barr 1952:515.

60 Barr 1952:280.

At Assy the planned work went on, and in 1948, Matisse, who worked on St. Dominic in Vence with father Couturier as model, agreed to produce another image of the saint for Assy<sup>60</sup>.

Finally Georges Braque offered a small relief for the tabernacle door, and Germaine Richier was commissioned to do a crucifix<sup>62</sup>.



Figure 10  
St. Dominic, Vence, Matisse  
1948-50<sup>61</sup>.

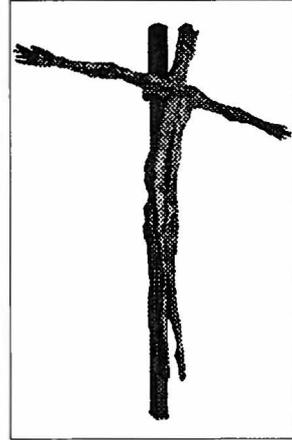


Figure 11  
Crucifix at Assy, Germaine  
Richier 1949<sup>63</sup>.

The discontinuous iconographic program at Assy was a complete break with usual practice in church decorations. The non-Catholic artists had been allowed to work in exactly that sector which appeared spiritually open to them, and the iconography became a compromise between the aims and the desires of the Dominican Fathers and the limited liturgical possibilities that modern artists could sincerely render. This resulted in images of the heroes of the Church, while Christ, Mary and traditional narratives played a minor role. However, Canon Dévény thought the artistically and theologically isolated parts of the decorations might harmonize well with the individualistic convalescents that would be the users of the church<sup>64</sup>.

In 1948 Father Couturier again took an active role in the direction of *L'Art Sacré*. Now, the difference in approach between Couturier and his co-editor Régamey deepened. Couturier insisted on a less compressed, more visual lay-out; he would give the image primacy, "poetry over pedagogy" as he expressed it. Peoples' taste should be restored through poetry, that is, pictures. The two editors decided to edit separate issues of the periodical<sup>65</sup>. Between 1950-54

61 Holm 1951:43.

62 Rubin 1961:38.

63 Patfoort 1961:8.

64 Rubin 1961:39.

65 Couturier 1989:10.

66 Dominique de Menil and Pie Duployé selected articles by Couturier in *L'Art Sacré* from 1950 to 53 and published them in English in the book *Sacred Art* from 1989.

Couturier produced 12 issues in which the image holds first place<sup>66</sup>. Through his choice of images he created a language that should teach the reader to *look*. The sensitivity of the eye should be restored through *purification* and *liberation*<sup>67</sup>. People should learn to see the purity of modest, simple and honest forms, the beauty of forms as form independent of subjects or intentions. According to Couturier, *beauty* is the sole legitimate criterion in art. Liberation was necessary since the visual habits were locked up in academic imperialism, imprisoned in conformism. Couturier's slogan became "Great men for great works". Still, he underscored that the clergy had to express precise programs and exact ideas that the masters could give form<sup>68</sup>.

### La querelle de l'art sacré

1950 was a Jubilee Year and the central event was the proclamation of the dogma of the bodily Assumption of the Virgin. In August the church at Assy was consecrated, followed by a major exhibition of modern sacred art in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. The occasion attracted enormous attention. In the United States *Life* magazine featured it, and conservative Catholics attacked what they read and saw<sup>69</sup>. In Rome the First International Congress of Catholic Artists took place in September, accompanied with a large exhibition of sacred art of a character markedly in contrast to the one in Paris. Traditionalist groups wanted rules concerning sacred art, and an Index of forbidden art. It was the chairman of the United States' delegation Maurice Lavanoux who calmed the situation and formulated the liberal view that denied the necessity of such rules<sup>70</sup>. On the final day of the Congress, Pope Pius XII tried to balance between the groups. He warned against art that had to be explained in verbal terms, a statement that by the traditionalists was taken as support<sup>71</sup>. Father Régamey, however, was quick to explain in *L'Art Sacré* that abstract works by painters like Manessier or Bazaine needed no explanation in words<sup>72</sup>.

However, by the end of 1950 the criticism against the chapel at Assy and Richier's crucifix in particular, increased. According to *Mediator Dei* deformations in the arts of the Church were unacceptable. Father Régamey pedagogically argued that deformations *of* art were different from deformations *in* art, which simply meant bad art, and of course were unacceptable<sup>73</sup>. But in January 1951,

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67 Couturier 1989:14-17.

68 Couturier 1989:35-36.

69 Rubin 1961:45-46.

70 Lavanoux 1950:4-6.

71 PiusXII

72 "Rome 1950", *L'Art Sacré*, January-February, 1951, No. 5-6, pp. 22-26.

73 Ibid.

as Canon Déverny was giving a lecture titled: *Does the Church of Assy Contribute to the Renewal of Christian Art?* and Richier's crucifix was shown, a riot broke out, and a furious group of people shouted: "Insult- sacrilege!"<sup>74</sup>.

A time of accusations followed, and the crucifix was removed, officially on the request of hurt parishioners. But this was untrue; the parishioners had after their first surprise, liked it, and some of them wrote letters to the bishop asking to get their own man of sorrows back<sup>75</sup>. In *L'Art Sacré* Couturier admitted that Assy was no masterpiece, but added, I quote: "if we were to start all over again, we would go still further. We would be still tougher, still more absolute. But it would be in the same direction. With no regrets. Without shadow of hesitation". And Couturier ended by saying, I quote: "Father Déverny did exactly what he ought to have done. Let the dead bury the dead"<sup>76</sup>.

At this time Father Couturier and Régamey realized the profound divorce between modern art and a large part of the public<sup>77</sup>. They thought that education of the clergy might be the right strategy, and one issue of *L'Art Sacré* was exclusively devoted to the topic<sup>78</sup>. They planned an educational program led by the Dominicans, but the resistance was now massive and they had to realize that there could be no more progress at the present time. Still, Father Couturier believed in miracles<sup>79</sup>.

In June 1951 Cardinal Constantini wrote an article in *Osservatore Romano* that attacked Assy, the Sacred Art Movement, and Couturier and Régamey in person. This was the first official Vatican attack on their activities, and from now on the two lived in constant fear of an official condemnation<sup>80</sup>.

Only days later, Matisse's chapel in Vence was consecrated,



Figure 12  
Consecration of Chapelle  
de Vence, June 25, 1951<sup>81</sup>.

74 Rubin 1961:41.

75 Rubin 1961:52.

76 Couturier 1989:56.

77 Rubin 1961:53.

78 *L'Art Sacré*, November 1946, v. 9, titled "L'Éducation artistique du clerge".

79 Rubin 1961:53.

80 Rubin 1961:54-55.

Matisse tried to identify with his objects and then express it in one outpouring, rapid and uncontrolled. To his critics, Matisse said, I quote: "All that I have done, I have done out of passion", and "all my life, my only strength has been my sincerity". Concerning his Stations of the Cross,

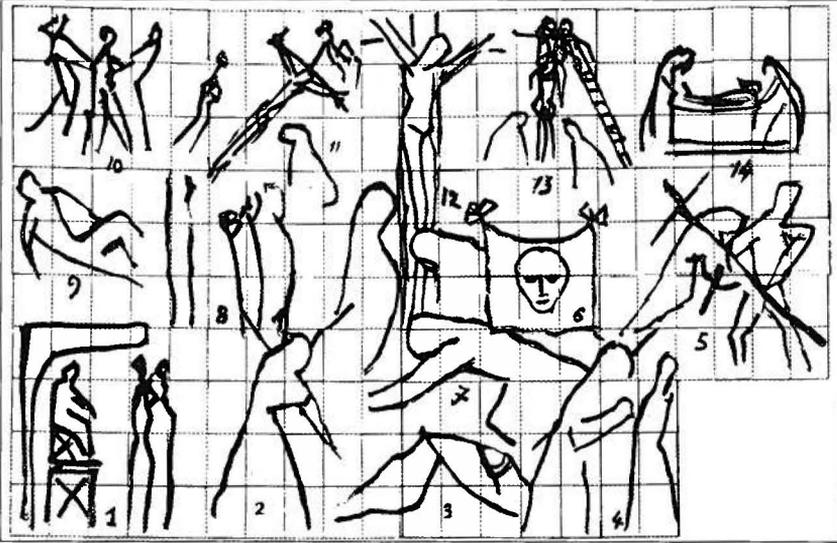


Figure 13  
Stations of the Cross, Chapelle de Vence (Barr 1952:520).

Matisse said: "Things like that, you have to know them by heart so well that you could draw them blindfolded". And Couturier added: "these working principles are precisely the ones that should govern religious art"<sup>82</sup>. According to Couturier, Matisse had found a language of images, written in a hurry to communicate intense emotion of the greatest importance, which was brutally thrown on the wall, and speaks the terrible *truth*<sup>83</sup>.

In September 1951, a new church for the workers at the Peugeot factory at



Figure 14  
Bazaine's mosaic, Audincourt<sup>84</sup>.

Audincourt was consecrated. The building was designed by architect Novarina, Bazaine had decorated the front in mosaic, and Léger had designed the windows and the altar image.

Couturier announced this event in *L'Art Sacré*. The plans for Audincourt had been agreed to by the Diocesan Committee for Sacred Art and the Archbishop together with the plans for a new pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp. Couturier commented, I quote: "The future will make this date, the 20th of January 1951, as a red-letter day in history of

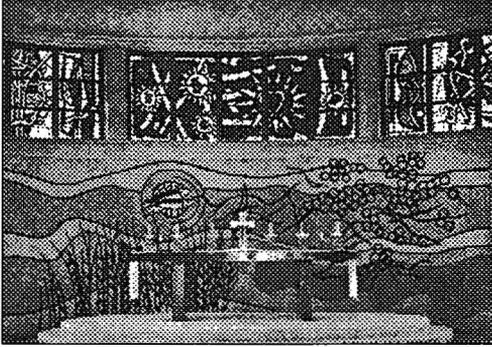


Figure 15  
Léger's altar decoration, tapestry and stained glass,  
Audincourt<sup>85</sup>.

the renewal of Christian art". For Father Couturier the dedication of Audincourt was a lesson of *hope*<sup>86</sup>.

Meanwhile, the attacks on the Dominican renewal project continued. In the fall the Catholic writer Francois Mauriac asked: can art be heretic?<sup>87</sup> At this stage *La querelle de l'art sacré* was so fierce that new directives were necessary. In spring 1952,

appeared a statement from the Episcopal Commission for Pastoral and Liturgical matters of France<sup>88</sup>. But this directive was essentially a compromise to pacify the parties, and generally liberal and favourable of the Dominican cause<sup>89</sup>. It recognized that sacred art should be a *living art*. Still, the arts of the Church should be understandable without intellectual explanations. Pope Pius XII in his speech to Italian artists in April, opened by welcoming the "promoters of figurative arts". However, the function of art according to the Pope, lies in its ability of breaking through the finite, and providing a window for the infinite<sup>90</sup>. Then in June, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office issued the instruction on sacred art<sup>91</sup> that without naming anyone, was an official critique of the Dominican program. This document warns against distortions and unusual images, which are not in conformity with the approved usage of the Church, and therefore, may represent false dogma and spread dangerous error to the unlearned.

81 Barr 1952:516.

82 Couturier 1989:92.

83 Couturier 1989:97.

84 David 1957:48, Tafel 10, photo Moosbrugger.

85 Patfoort 1961:17.

86 Couturier 1989:102.

87 Rubin 1961:56.

88 "De quelques principes directeurs en matière d'art sacré".

89 Rubin 1961:57.

90 Pius XII "The Function of Art" from 1952.

91 "De Arte Sacra", English: "On Sacred Art".

92 Rubin 1961: 58-63.

The crisis in the Roman Catholic Church was now obvious. In 1953 restrictions were laid on the Dominicans and *L'Art Sacré* was silenced<sup>92</sup>. Father Couturier had fallen ill<sup>93</sup>.



Figure 16 Father Couturier<sup>94</sup>.

He had hoped to let Miró decorate a chapel, and he also had plans for engaging Picasso. But his last energy was spent on the project of Ronchamp<sup>95</sup>. To those who criticized him for commissioning Le Corbusier or other artists from outside the Church, Couturier said that the spiritual gifts may be purer in masters from outside than in the faithful, even the clergy, and, I quote: "This fact may be irritating, but at the present time it is undeniable. The Spirit breatheth where the Spirit will"<sup>96</sup>. The 9th of February 1954 Couturier died, fifty-seven years old.

Only days later, the Dominican Yves Congar boldly published an article in which he says that, I quote: "it is essentially by the celebration of the mystery of the body of Christ that a place becomes a church".

He then called attention to the Latin and Greek word for church: *Ecclesia*, which stands for both the mystery of the people of God, and for the building or place where the Christians meet for worship - and such a place can be made by anything and be anywhere, it is the altar and the pulpit that are its essentials, nothing else. Congar explicitly mentioned the work of Couturier and Régamey as examples of churches produced by *simplicity*, which have a transparency that asserts the Glory of God in the poverty of man<sup>97</sup>.

*Notre-Dame-du-Haut* at Ronchamp was completed in 1955.

It became a success with great consequences for the subsequent church building in Europe -Protestant and Roman Catholic alike.

93 *L'Art Sacré*, Mai-June 1954:31.

94 Patfoort 1961:4.

95 Couturier 1989:158.

96 Couturier 1989:154.

97 Congar 1967:229-237.



Figure 17  
Notre-Dame-du-Haut,  
Ronchamp, facade<sup>98</sup>.

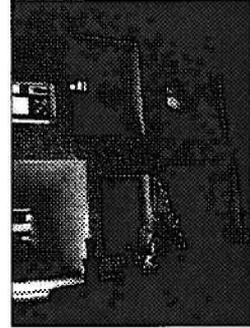


Figure 18  
Notre-Dame-du-Haut,  
Ronchamp, inside  
to the south<sup>99</sup>.

### The post-war development in America

In the United States Maritain had been appointed French Ambassador to the Vatican authorities after the war (1945-48), and Lavanoux was regarded one of the foremost experts on ecclesiastical art and architecture both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church<sup>100</sup>. Through his *Liturgical Arts* Lavanoux repeatedly called for a living, contemporary art in the church and freedom for the artists who wished to work for the Church.

### The pre-conciliar process

On January 25, 1959, Pope XXIII called an ecumenical council to be convened in Rome<sup>101</sup>. Father Congar was appointed theological consultant to the preparatory commission of the Council and helped to write the *Message to the World*<sup>102</sup> given at its opening, besides, he influenced a number of its most important documents<sup>103</sup>. Lavanoux was convinced that the Liturgical Arts Society could play a role in the forging of a positive statement concerning the arts of the Church, that might be eventually included in the proceedings of the Council. A longtime friend of the Liturgical Arts Society Monsignor Joachim Nabuco from Brazil was appointed moderator of the subcommittee on sacred art for the liturgy commission of the Council. In May 1961, Nabuco sent Lavanoux a draft of the document that the art subcommittee had prepared for submission to the commission. In response, Lavanoux compiled a set of relevant materials to be included in the subcommittee dossier, and he was appointed "technical adviser" to the com-

98 Art Guide 1972, frontpage.

99 Art Guide 1972, endpage.

100 White 1990:59.

101 Pope John XXIII 1962:209.

102 Pope John XXIII 1962.

103 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997:397.

104 White 1990:70.

mittee. At the same time Lavanoux was allowed to send copies of *Liturgical Arts* to the members of the subcommittee and certain other key persons in Rome<sup>104</sup>. Thus, through Lavanoux the ideas of the French Dominican Father Couturier could flow freely and influence the writings of the documents that were to become the directives on art given by the Second Vatican Council in 1963<sup>105</sup>.

### Epilogue

Before you leave for lunch, I would like to add some information about St. Dominikus church in Oslo. In the entrance, there is a little stained glass window in a geometric pattern that has a slight resemblance to the windows in the chancel.

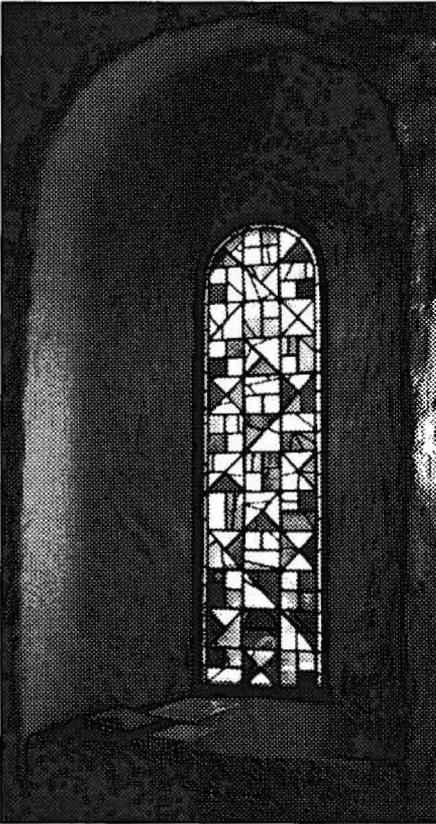


Figure 19  
Narthex window, St. Dominikus, Oslo  
(photo: Alexander Refsum Jensenius, 2000)

But the entrance window is not a late piece of Couturier, and since it was installed in 1986, it actually falls outside this lecture. However, this window happens to be my Diploma at the National College of Art and Design from 1985. Thanks to your choice of lecture, I two weeks ago realized that the Dominican painter towards whom I always felt sympathy, and struggled so hard to artistically cooperate with, was Father Couturier.

Personally, and on behalf of the field of visual arts, I would like to use this occasion, to express my deepest respect and gratitude towards the unique theologian and artist that together with his Dominican brethren, was a brave and uncompromising precursor to the directives of art of the Second Vatican Council that opened the Church for *modern* art and artists.

*Thank you.*

105 *Sacrosanctum Concilium, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, chapter VII, 4 December 1963; in: Vatican II, 1981.

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