Greetings once again in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let me invite you to join me in prayer as we come together to study again today. Let us pray. Eternal God, open our eyes that we might see that which You have us to see. Open our ears that we might hear Your Word, and open our hearts that we might have compassion toward those around us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I want us to think together today about the role of art in the worship of God. What place does the aesthetic have in our practice of the Christian faith? I’d like to begin by asking you to close your eyes, if you would, and picture your church, your home congregation. What kind of a building is it? What kind of architecture does it represent? Does it have great spaces that lead you upward? Is it rather small? Is it large? What kind of a building? Then look around, in your mind, at the pictures. What kinds of pictures are there? Are there pictures of Christ, of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus? Of the apostles, of other figures from the Scriptures? What kind of windows does it have? Do we find stained glass windows in the sides of the sanctuary or in the back? What’s on the stained glass window, if they’re there? Are there Bible stories? Are there figures from the Scripture? What kinds of decorations do you find or symbols in the church itself? Are there carvings at the end of each of the pews? Are there special carvings on the pulpit area or where communion is held? Is there a cross in the church? Are there the symbols of the dove? Are there candles? Is there an open Bible? Do you have statues or sculpture? Whatever picture you have in your mind, ask yourself the question: What role do these play in my understanding of the faith and in my worship within the church?

I’d like for you to keep that basic set of questions in the back of your mind as we look at one of the most fascinating and important events in the Middle Ages. It focused around the Seventh Ecumenical Council and the issue was the use of icons for Christian worship. Now an icon is a flat picture, usually painted in oil on wood. But we can also find it in mosaics or ivories or other
materials. It is meant to represent Christ, Mary, one of the saints, some other Christian object. And it is to be used for public and private worship. Some believe these are even channels of grace.

Some years ago, it was my privilege to be a member of the board of trustees of the Boston Theological Institute. And when I left that position, they joined together to give me several gifts, including a wonderful big coffee table volume, titled *The Icon*. It was actually chosen by Dean Alke Kalevus from the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary. And in that, in beautiful fashion, are pictures and texts relating to icons across the centuries. I often thumb through that and am reminded of the importance that icons play within the whole eastern Christian tradition.

They had come to be a matter of some issue and concern, however, at the time of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. And there were those iconoclasts who wanted to get rid of all icons, of all representations of this type, feeling that they were idolatrous. And there were others in the church who were deeply committed to the use of icons and found them helpful in worship. And these two came at loggerheads with one another in this great eighth century conflict.

I want to come back to that in just a bit. But let me lay the foundation for our story in the development of art within the early church as a whole. Where did Christian art actually originate? Well we have some excellent resources to help us in studying this subject. Let me just mention a couple of them today. Michael Gough’s *The Origins of Christian Art*, published in London by Thames and Hudson, is a wonderful graphic presentation of early Christian art. Graden Schneider’s *Ante Pacem*, is a study of the archeological uncoverings of art in the first few centuries, put out by Mercer Press. It’s a beautiful, helpful volume for our study as well.

Early Christian art included, of course, poetry and music. These have been taken over from Jewish practice and were carried on in the Christian churches without much question. Sculpture and painting, however, were different matters. These had been strictly prohibited among the Jews and in the early years among Christians. The concern, of course, was primarily the concern of idolatry. How do you preserve the Christian community from worshiping such objects? Christians also were concerned in those early centuries to avoid all show and vanity. Many of them felt that the end was soon coming. So they didn’t need to spend their time working in these areas of art and aesthetic expression.
David Millikan, in a wonderful little article which he published in *Theology News and Notes*, out of Fuller Seminary in October of 1974, put it this way:

In the early church, the output of art was meager. Many of the subjects we associate with Christian art are missing. There are no bearded Christs. Generally, artistic activity was low. The Jewish heritage did little to encourage the cause of arts in the early church. The Jews had interpreted the second command, “You shall not make a carved image for yourself,” as a prohibition against all images of living creatures, not just a prohibition against images made to be objects of religious worship. For example, Josephus noted that the thing to be avoided in the design of the tabernacle was the representation of any animal form. The coinage of Jewish kings has olive wreaths, flowers, grapes, stars, but never men or animals. The early church shared in this heritage and evidenced a certain shyness in representing things that they considered to be holy. Yet the impression ought not to be left that the intellectual climate was totally prohibitive. What archeological evidence we have indicates that though the output was small, there was a conscious art tradition. A closer look shows that the fathers’ attitude was one of disdain rather than prohibition. The fathers generally looked upon art as singularly pointless and even perhaps a dangerous activity for the Christians.

What we have emerging then by the middle of the second century is a kind of rude art tradition among the Christian communities. A number of symbols began to emerge as the earliest art forms. We find these on the walls of the catacombs and in other houses and properties that have been dug up by the archeologists. These include, of course, the great symbol of the cross (one of the most revered early symbols of the church). It’s depicted sometimes with the Alpha and the Omega of Revelation 1:8; sometimes with the Anchor of Hope; sometimes with the Palm of Peace. Archeologists tend to distinguish seven basic forms of the cross which they find in these early centuries: (1) the Saint Andrew Cross, (2) the Egyptian Cross, (3) the upright Latin Cross, (4) the inverted Latin Cross of Saint Peter, (5) the Greek Cross, (6) the Double Cross, [and] (7) the Triple Cross. And one finds also a series of monograms, using the first two Greek letters of Christ’s name, Chi-Rho. And these are put in artistic fashion in various forms and put on tombs or ornaments to mark out their identification with the faith.
As early as the second century, the custom of making the sign of the cross with the hand upon rising, bathing, going out and eating was a very popular practice. Such reverence did the early Christians have for the cross that Tertullian even had to defend them against contemporary charges that they worshiped the cross. We see this in his Apology. Cyprian mentions the sign of the cross as a part of the baptismal rite. Prudentius recommended it as a preventative against temptations and bad dreams. Constantine, of course, as you’ll remember, had the sign of the cross put on helmets and scepters and coins and seals and elsewhere as a sign of that great event which he had when he saw the vision. And it was in the sign of the cross that he was to conquer.

The sculptured or carved representations of Christ attached to the cross is a very much later development. We don’t find that until the mid-sixth century. The oldest crucifix, in fact, is not found until AD 586 and that on a richly illuminated Syrian copy of the Gospels, which is located in Florence. The first practice of the use of the cross was for the cross to appear alone. We see that in the second century. Then the cross and the lamb, in the third century, becomes popular, with the cross often leaning against the lamb's shoulder and the hoof over the part of the cross. In the fourth century, Christ and the cross are pictured together with Christ holding it in His right hand. Then Christ nailed to the cross, the sixth century, when we first begin to see any kind of crucifix form.

Early Scriptural symbols were used to depict virtues and duties in Christian life, and you have these emerging quite early in the church too: (1) the dove, from Matthew 3:16, representing simplicity and innocence; (2) the ship, sailing through a sea of corruption [with] Noah's ark and others as precedents; (3) the palm branch, the sign of victory or peace, from Revelation 7:9; (4) the anchor, the sign of hope, Hebrews 6:19; (5) the lyre, symbol of festal joy and sweet harmony, Ephesians 5:19; (6) the rooster, an admonition to watchfulness (remember Peter in Matthew 26:34); (7) the heart, Psalm 42:1, the quest for refreshment; (8) the vine, the union of Christians with Christ and the fruitfulness of the Christian life as in John 15 (that great chapter of the vine and branches); (9) One of the favorite images of the early Christians was Christ as the good shepherd. We see this on rings and cups and lamps. We have some 150 of these from the first two centuries alone, which have been found by the archeologists. Christ is usually depicted there as a handsome, beardless, gentle youth with sandals and staff, flowing robes and the lamb on the shoulders which He's carrying back after having found it, bringing it back to
the fold; (10) You also have the image of *the phoenix*, even though that’s not a biblical image. We find it in our collection of early Christian writings, the little Richardson selection that we’ve been using. Clement refers to this. And you can find it on page 55 of that interesting collection, if you want to dig that out. [There it is] representing rejuvenation, resurrection, [and] richness of the Christian life; (11) *the fish* also was a favorite, found very early in the second century. We see it in the Roman catacombs among other places.

It is perhaps the favorite symbol of the early church other than the cross itself. The fish, you see, represented both the Redeemer (the fisherman) and the redeemed (the fish). And often with that went the anagram “Ichthus.” Now if you take the first letters, those Greek letters, you find the words which are intended to mean “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” In some pictures, in fact, the fish is swimming in the water with a plate of bread and a cup of wine on the back, indicating the mix of that double symbol of Redeemer and redeemed as well as the sacramental elements of Baptism in the water and the Eucharist in the wine and the bread. There you have everything kind of gathered together in one place.

It’s an interesting reality to see Christians in our day putting the fish, sometimes with the Ichthus words in the middle of it, on the back of their cars or on bumper stickers or on their windows or hanging from their homes. I remember when I was doing research in upstate New York several years ago, I needed to find a motel, and as I was driving along I saw one by the side of the road and there was a fish hanging from it and I knew immediately that there were Christians in there. I turned in and indeed found wonderful fellowship with folk of common mind and faith. It’s a nice symbol to draw people in. And it served the very same function among the early Christian communities—to identify themselves in this kind of symbolic way toward one another.

Why did early art begin at all in the Christian communities, considering the great fear which they had and which they had inherited from their Jewish background of idolatry—the fear of falling into worship of things which were less than God Himself Who is spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-23). I think a number of reasons help us to understand the power and importance of the development of the Christian art tradition. Let me suggest four of them that I think may be especially instructive.
The Iconoclastic Controversy

Lesson 09 of 24

The first of those is the informational value which we find in art. Our family had the privilege of spending time on two occasions living in England, in Oxford first, and then Cambridge later. While we were there, our whole family came to love and appreciate the great cathedrals of England. We would spend many hours in various cathedrals throughout the country. We visited, I suppose, every one of them there and many in Europe as well. We would go back many times to cathedrals like Eile, Canterbury, and York. And I can remember visiting those with my children and standing by the wood carvings or in front of the stained glass windows and having them explain to me the messages of the Christian faith which were pictorially represented throughout the cathedrals. Some, in coming into the cathedrals, are struck by how much stuff there is in there. But when you come to look at those things that make up all that stuff, separately you come to see that most of them are geared to symbolize, to pictorially represent, Christian faith stories from the Scripture which were very useful to people who couldn’t read. And in many of the periods of the Middle Ages, very few people in the general population could actually read or had access to very expensive books which had to be hand copied. So they learned the faith in the cathedrals or in the churches on the stained glass windows and through the carvings and the like. And it was remarkable to me how adept our son and daughter became, much better able to do it than I was, to tell the story of those biblical tales through the beautiful artwork which was presented to us there. Artwork can have this kind of informational value. And it was particularly useful, I think, for people in ages when they didn’t have access, as we do today, to as many books as we have.

Secondly, I think that art can serve a religious value, as reminders of the faith. My father is a minister of the gospel, and some years ago he was invited to travel through a number of countries in South America. As he was preparing to leave and packing his suitcase, my younger brother came into his room and handed him a little stone that he had found out in the yard, a little smooth pebble. He said, “Dad, I want you to put this into your pocket, and every time you reach for your change or your keys and you bump your finger into that little pebble, I want you to remember that I love you and that I’m praying for you.” And Dad has often told, with a kind of twinkle in his eye, the delight of being tired or discouraged and inadvertently reaching his hand in his pocket and bumping that little stone and remembering.
Artwork can have that kind of recollection producing quality for the Christian community as well, as it has for many of us. Who among us has not gone into our church and, looking around, spotted certain elements or figures or images or pictures that bring back to mind those special moments in our own past in which God has met with us there. And they have particular meaning to us as a result of that. Artwork then can have not only informational value to help teach the faith in pictorial form—in effect, places like cathedrals were great flannelgraphs [copy machines] for the faith—but also religious value as kind of reminders.

But they also, in the third place, serve a kind of missionary value. What a wonderful ability that artwork has in communicating the faith in other cultures across language barriers, where one can picture once again what is going on in the Christian faith and is drawn into it because it is so much more accessible through the form of artwork than it is often times through our lectures or through our preaching.

Finally, and fourth, let me suggest that the Bible itself points us in the direction of the development of artistic ability and craft ability. I refer here to texts like Exodus 31, this marvelous passage. Let me read a bit of that chapter from the first verse on:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also, I have given the skill to all the craftsman to make everything I have commanded you: The Tent of Meeting, the Ark of Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent—the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand—and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you.”
Isn’t that a fascinating text when one thinks about the prohibition against idolatry on the one hand and the command of God and the gifting of the Holy Spirit, for people with artistic ability, to put that to the service of God’s work in the church. I think that that is true of the church today, for we have people with artistic ability, with craft ability, those who can express themselves in those aesthetic ways. And all too often our churches make no use of them at all. We do not value them. In fact, sometimes they are told they must do their work elsewhere and not in the church. The Exodus passage points to the reality that God not only calls people to do that kind of work but gifts them to do it. And it then becomes a part of that ministry which they have within the larger community.

Artwork then can have informational value. It can serve as a kind of reminder of the faith. It can be a help in missionary outreach and, in fact, is undergirded by God’s own promise of giftedness and calling in that area. One can see then, through these and perhaps other means that you can develop in your own thinking, of why artistic expression would begin to emerge in the church and why it would come to be increasingly valued in the life of the church.

From very simple signs and symbols at first. Signs being those things that pointed to the greater realities beyond them without being real parts of that reality. And symbols, which not only pointed to those greater eternal realities, but themselves became a part of that reality. Those simple expressions of art led, eventually, to full-blown artistic expression in representations which came to be called icons. The Bible furnished rich material, of course, for these pictures: historical, typological, allegorical pictures. Some of the favorites: Adam and Eve, the rivers of paradise, the ark of Noah, the sacrifice of Isaac, the Red Sea passage, the giving of the law, the deliverance of Jonah, and many others from the Old Testament. From the New Testament came the adoration of the Magi, feeding of the five thousand, Jesus entering Jerusalem, the healing of the paralytic, the changing of water to wine, and others.

The passion and crucifixion were never represented in the early manuscripts and artistic work, except by the symbol of the cross. And then you begin to see that process of change, which I described for you before. And eventually, Christ comes to be actually represented as Christ. In those early representations, they were not meant to capture Christ as an artistic expression, but to point to Christ as the Savior. The focus was upon the work of Christ and the purpose of Christ and the function that Christ
had come to perform, but not on Christ Himself as a person, as a figure. Gradually, however, these actual pictures of Christ come into use. The earliest, as I mentioned before, was to picture Christ as a Shepherd. Then as one who had a lamb on His shoulders bearing our sins. As a fisherman on occasions. These were intended for primarily allegorical purposes, however. The primary core of them was on Christ’s function rather than on Christ’s person.

The same was true, in part, for pictures of Mary. These date back to the second and third century, usually as part of the birth scene with Jesus. There’s no trace of worship or unusual veneration prior to the Council of Ephesus. But then in the Theotokos Controversy, there is great interest spurred in Mary, and you have the development of some of the theories and views of Mary which emerge in the Middle Ages.

I think it’s safe to summarize then that the earliest Christian art was a very guarded affair, restrained by Jewish precedent (the fear of idolatry), and that what art there was is largely symbolic or allegorical in those early years, expressing the function or ideas about, rather than representations of. As V. V. Weddle phrased it in his *Baptism of Art*:

*The good shepherd of the catacombs is not only not an image or an icon, he’s not even a symbol of Christ. He is the visual signification of the idea that the Savior saves; that He has come to save us; that we are saved by Him. This art cannot be called art in the real sense of the word. It neither represents nor expresses but simply signifies.*

What we see happening, however, is this move from sign to symbol, ultimately to full representation. “No one has ever seen God,” they read, but “the man Christ Jesus reveals him in full” (John 1:18). The image of Christ is, therefore, the very image of God, for Christ is God. “Cannot,” they ask, “some of God’s very presence and power be captured in an image or an icon? And can’t that image become also itself a spiritual reality?” By the seventh century, therefore, great numbers of Christians had not only made images of Christ, but held them in great veneration. Leontius of Neapolis wrote in the seventh century:

*I sketch and paint Christ and the sufferings of Christ in churches, in homes, in public squares and on icons, on linen cloths, on clothes so that men may see them plainly and remember them. And as thou, when thou makest thy reverence to the Book of the law, bow us down not to the*
substance of skin and ink, but to the sayings of God that are found therein. So, I do reverence to the image of Christ, not to the substance of wood and paint, that shall never happen, but by doing reverence to an inanimate object. I think to embrace Christ Himself and to do Him reverence. We Christians, by bodily kissing an icon of Christ or of an apostle or martyr, are in spirit kissing Christ Himself for His martyr.

Such an interpretation was given legal standing at the Synod of Trullan in AD 692 in its 82 Canon. It reads:

In venerating the ancient icons and the saints who were devoted to the church as symbols, as prototypes of the truth, we especially venerate grace and truth as the fulfillment of the law. We decree that, henceforth, there are to be imprinted upon the icons of Christ our God, who took on the guise of humanity, that in this semblance seen might discover the depth of God’s humility, His words...To bring to mind His life in the flesh, His passion, His saving death, and the redemption of the whole world.

Here we have images, then, filled with power by the gospel. But such veneration of icons is only a very short distance from what might be called real idol worship. And soon the veneration became perverted. In many places, it took improper forms. Among the masses, superstition was attached to many of these images. “Many think that they sufficiently revere their baptism,” wrote one worried monk in the seventh century, “who entering the church kisses all the icons without paying any attention to the liturgy or the divine service.” Abuses came to abound. Some took icons as godparents for their children. Others scraped paint from icons to be mixed in the Eucharistic wine. Others laid their communion upon an icon so that they could be said to have received the cup and bread from a saint’s hand, and so on.

We see those emerging even in our own day—there was an article in January of 1987 in the *Wall Street Journal* which indicated a special miraculous event in Chicago related to an icon:

When a painting of the Virgin Mary began to weep in a church here in December, parishioners were thrilled, they called it a miracle. But to their dismay, they have since had as many as five thousand visitors a day in their little three hundred seat church, which is across the street from a Kmart store in a working class neighborhood. Parishioners have
had to call the police to restrain unruly gawkers. “We’re exhausted. I’m almost praying that she stops crying,” says the Reverend Philip Khufu, who is pastor of Saint Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church.

Miracles often seem to turn into hysteria, “People go ape.” It’s interesting the kind of interest in and magnetism of these kinds of miraculous events, sometimes focused inappropriately around icons. There’s always a subtle tendency to drift back into paganism, love and respect can turn quickly to idolatry. And so it has been across the years of the church, that there have been those who, fearing that sort of idolatry, have wanted to get rid of icons and, in fact, all of the other artistic expressions (statues, paintings of other sorts, wood carvings, and the like). These iconoclasts have gone to battle again and again to try to rid the church from those kinds of activities and representations.

Many others have taken the sword, have stood in the gap, for the preservation of those very art forms, feeling that they are an important part of worship and that they can be used of God to help strengthen the faith of men and women. It is this conflict, in fact, that comes face to face with the Seventh Ecumenical Council and which then spawns, what emerges, two meetings. One of them represented as Orthodox, as part of that flow of ecumenical councils seen as authoritative in the life of both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. The other, dominated by the iconoclasts, which strongly criticizes the use of icons and the use of artwork in the church.

Let me read first from the iconoclastic council which was held in Constantinople in AD 754. Both of these, both accounts and commentaries, are included in this marvelous volume, number 14 of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. This is the Nicene, Post-Nicene Fathers, second series. Let me read to you from the iconoclastic group. I am reading from page 543 and following:

Satan misguided men so that they worshiped the creature instead of the Creator. The Mosaic Law and the prophets cooperated to undo this ruin. But in order to save mankind, thoroughly, God sent His own Son, Who turned us away from error and the worshiping of idols and taught us the worshiping of God in spirit and in truth.

Then it goes on to lay out specific statements, number 19. Let me read a few of them to give you some of the flavor:
If anyone ventures to represent the divine image, the character of the word after the incarnation, with material colors, let him be anathema....If anyone ventures to represent in human figures by means of material colors, by reason of the incarnation, the substance or person of the word which can’t be depicted and does not rather confess that even after the incarnation the word cannot be depicted, let him be anathema....If anyone ventures to represent the hypostatic union of the two natures in a picture and calls it Christ and thus falsely represents a union of the two natures, let him be anathema....If anyone separates the flesh united with the person of the word from it and endeavors to represent it separately in a picture, let him be anathema.

And it goes right down the list, casting anathemas against all of those who both create art and use art and preserve art in the life of the church. Now there can be no question as to where that particular council lined up. But that was replaced several years later, in AD 787, with what came to be seen as orthodox theology. And this grows out of the desire to find useful presence and meaning for icons and other artwork in the church.

Let me read a bit from that particular council, II Council of Nicea, pages 550 and following in our collection:

To make our confessions short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us. One of which is the making of pictorial representations agreeable to the history of the preaching of the gospel, a tradition useful in many respects but especially in this: So that the incarnation of the word of God is shone forth as real and not merely fantastic. For these have mutual indications and without doubt have also mutual significations. [What they’re trying to do in promoting artwork is to accentuate the reality of the incarnation]. Just as the figures of the precious and life giving cross, so also the venerable and holy images as well in painting and mosaic, as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God. And on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on the hangings and in pictures, both in houses and by the way. To wit the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our spotless lady, the Mother of God, of the honorable angels, of all saints, of all pious people, for by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation,
by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes and to a longing after them. And to these should be given due salutation, an honorable reverence [Not worship, of course, and they’re clear to say that worship should be preserved alone for God. Only God is worthy of our worship]. Not indeed that true worship of faith, which pertains alone to the divine nature, but to these as to the figure of the precious and lifegiving cross and to the book of the gospels and to other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented. Those, therefore, who dare to think or teach otherwise, or as wicked heretics to spurn the traditions of the church and to invent some novelty, or else to reject some of the things which the church has received, or evilly and sharply to devise anything subversive of the law of traditions in the Catholic church, or to turn to common use the sacred vessels or the venerable monasteries, if they be bishops or clerics, we command that they be deposed. If religious or lay, that they be cut off from communion. The Holy Synod then cried out, “So we all believe, so we are all minded, so we give ourselves and our consent and we have signed our names.”

You don’t have to think very long to discover exactly what they are pointing to in this important work in the Nicene Council in 787. But it highlights the debate which didn’t end then, because the iconoclastic forces, many of whom went again and again into the streets and into the churches to tear down statues and to destroy the artwork, the conflict between that iconoclastic force and the pro-icon force continues right down to our present day. We see it in various forms within our own churches. There are those among us who would argue a pretty strong case for the elimination of all such artwork in our churches. Others will come from traditions where it’s deeply revered and valued and will want to argue that these are useful. And in fact, they serve very fine and Christian ends for the faithful, for worship and for service, for inspiration, and for teaching in the church.

That basic issue, which is highlighted now by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and the battle which took place then, also raises for us, I think, this important question with which we all need to wrestle again and again. And it’s a question with which
I started our class today: What is the proper role of art for the Christian in the church? Remember I asked that you close your eyes and think back to your own congregational setting, to your own church. And I asked you to picture on the wall what was hanging there. What representations are there? Are there crosses? Are there open Bibles? Do we have represented on the communion table the carved words, “Do this in remembrance of me?” Do we find stained glass windows with representations of the saints of the church or biblical characters or biblical scenes?

Whatever we find there, whatever kind of tradition that has nourished you and out of which you have come, I would encourage each one to think through once again what role those pieces of art play in your own life and development as Christians. And to begin to wrestle with the whole question of how one avoids idolatry while promoting genuine, appropriate, aesthetic, and creative expression in the life of the Christian community. It’s a question which I think is pressed upon all of us and is perhaps a more important question than some of us imagine. We in the West particularly have become so linear, so didactic, in our teaching that we fail to see that many come to understand the faith and embrace the truth of the Christian gospel by means other than our argumentation orally or by the reading of a book.

The beauty of artwork, the power of music, the magnificence of God’s creation, all of those things which nourish that larger whole which we are as people, should be put to use for the promotion of the gospel and for the training of people in the faith.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council seems like a strange and distant and perhaps even dusty event. But if you look at it carefully, it raises a very contemporary and enormously important question: What role for us does art play in the church? What nourishing do we encourage of that aesthetic, creative, artistic heart of us and part of our body? These are things, I think, worth thinking about and praying about, asking God to guide us by His Spirit—that we would do honor to Him, avoiding any idolatry, but celebrating that giftedness which the Spirit provides for His church.