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The Church and Its Influence on Representative Art Between the Second and Fourth Century AD

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The nascent Christian Church's attitude towards art, and the opinion that it was the fruit of the pagan tradition, impossible to reconcile with Christianity, was typical for iconoclasm. Such a view was definitely and uncompromisingly against any art production.

As Christianity started to function in the world of ancient culture, it carefully began to take advantage of its heritage. Nevertheless, it had to assimilate at least some of the opinions of ancient aesthetics and art theory.

The attitude of developing Christianity to beauty and art was diverse in its first centuries. We can observe it to some extent by analyzing the writings of early Christian authors, starting with the earliest ones from the second century and ending with those from the period when the new religion became the dominating one, so until the fourth century.

The problem of the influence of the Church and its hierarchy on art in the first centuries of Christianity has been studied by many researchers. In Polish literature it was treated rather cursorily.¹ Foreign literature considering that subject is much richer.²

¹ B. Wronikowska, 'Poglądy Ojców Kościoła na sztukę w ciągu pierwszych dwóch stuleci istnienia Kościoła', *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 26 (1978), pp. 5–12; R. Knapieński, 'Ojcowie Kościoła o znaczeniu obrazów w przekazie wiary', *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 47 (1999), pp. 5–22; B. Przybyszewski, 'Początki starożytności chrześcijańskiej sztuki obrazowej', *Folia Historiae Atrium*, 15 (1979), pp. 5–25; K. Majewski, 'Bezobrazowość oraz burzenie świątyń, posągów bogów i pomników władców w świecie grecko-rzymskim', *Archeologia*, 16 (1965), pp. 292–297; L. Małunowiczówna, 'Stosunek wczesnego chrześcijaństwa do kultury i filozofii pogańskiej', *Ateneum Kapłańskie*, 71 (1979), pp. 3–15; M. Ożóg, 'Tertulian i jego stosunek do sztuki przedstawieniowej', *Vox Patrum*, 27 (2007), pp. 313–318; M. Ożóg, 'Chrześcijaństwo wobec kultury antycznej w IV w. n.e.', *Studia Humanistica Gedanensia*, 1 (2008), pp. 101–113.

² Th. Klauser, 'Sind der christlichen Oberschicht seit Mark Aurel die höheren postern im Heer und in der Verwaltung zugänglich gemacht worden?', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 16 (1973), pp. 60–66; Th. Klauser, 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 1 (1958), pp. 24–27; Th. Klauser, 'Erwägungen zur Entstehung der altchristlichen Kunst', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 76 (1965), pp. 1–11; A. Grabar, *Le premier art chrétien (200–395)*, Paris 1966;

This article presents the opinions of selected Church authorities from that period, who were focusing on the representative art and its role in the early Christian world.

The Church's legal acts rarely considered the problem of images in the Christian world. In the apostolic constitutions, synodal and council documents we can occasionally find some information.

For the first Christians originating from the Judaic tradition, producing any representatives was hard to imagine and accept. They consistently rejected all of them - both statues and pictures.³

It is possible that the Judeo-Christians, who were strict in cultivating their national and religious traditions in the Church, wanted to enforce the Moses' law to the newly converted. In this way new believers could turn away from the pagan culture for good.⁴

The material remains that are the evidence of the artistic activity of early practitioners of the Christ's religion show that after some time they admitted that it is possible to reconcile the properly understood cult of images with directives of faith. However, before it changed, Christianity had to go through the period when the new art was formed by the highest law which was clearly put down in the Decalogue (Ex 20,4 and Ex 20,5).

The Opinion of the first apologist considering partially representative art clearly condemned idolatry and the production of images of gods, as well as their creators. These views had their origin in the fear caused by the tendencies to worshipping idols, which were dangerous for Christians not only because of pagan habits, but also because of the those of neophytes'.⁵

One of the first Greek apologists, Iustinus, noticed that the second commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20,4) is related to the prohibition of the creation of images for the purpose of their worship. He says that the prohibition of creating *any* images does not exist in the Old Testament. If it had existed, God would not have commanded Moses to create the Brazen Serpent, images of the cherubs for the cover of the Ark of The Covenant or the statues of the oxen in the temple (Ex 25,18; 37,7; Num 21,8; 1Kg 7,25). He manifested his strong reluctance

A. Knöpfler, *Der angebliche Kunsthass der ersten Christen, Festschrift Georg Hertling zum 70 Geburtstag*, Kempten – München 1913; H. Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen*, Göttingen 1917; W. Elliger, *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten 4 Jh*, Leipzig 1930; V. Buchheit, 'Tertulian und die Anfänge der christlichen Kunst', *Römische Quartalschrift*, 69 (1974), pp. 133–142; G. B. Ladner, 'The concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 7 (1953), pp. 3–34; J. D. Breckenridge, *The Reception of Art into the Early Church*, Roma 1975; E. Kitzinger, 'The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), pp. 83–149; P. Corby Finney, *The Invisible God. The Earliest Christians on Art*, Oxford New York 1994; T. F. Matthews, *The clash of Gods: a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton 1993.

³ G. W. Dawes, 'The Danger of Idolatry: First Corinthians 8: 7–13', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 58 (1996), pp. 88–89; J. Marcus, 'Idolatry in The New Testament', *Interpretation*, 2006, pp. 152–164.

⁴ Cf. J. Danielou, *Teologia judeochrześcijańska. Historia doktryn chrześcijańskich przed soborem nicejskim*, transl. S. Basista, Kraków 2002.

⁵ A. Nichols, 'Obrazy Izraela (Starotestamentalne prolegomena do chrystologii obrazu)', *Communio*, 10 (1990), pp. 30–47.

not only towards images of gods, but also to those who created them.⁶ He claimed that, first of all, those images were lifeless, and could be the source of evil powers.⁷

Anthenagoras clearly explained why Christians rejected images of gods and any cult worship connected with them. He believed that pagan figures had an enormous power to influence, and that it was caused by demons.⁸ He expressed his reservations about the aesthetic function of the statues in the cities, maintaining that they did not need such decorations. Consequently, Anthenagoras regarded art as something useless.

Irenaeus criticized all abuses connected with the cult of holy images among Christians, which does not mean that he was against using them.⁹ Nevertheless, he reprimanded their use as cult objects.¹⁰ His attitude may provoke doubts. The indignation with which he used to write about carpocratians may be interpreted as the evidence of decisive objection to any worship of images.

Tatianus condemned and ridiculed art and production of statues.¹¹ He said that he did not intend to worship the works created by God for people's good.¹²

Tertullianus then handed over his disdain for art to the people who created it: sculptors and painters. In his opinion those who create such images should be cursed and damned.¹³ The statements and polemics of Tertullianus show him as the typical opponent of any images. It was probably because this was the period of the dynamic development of representative Christian art. On one hand a ban on image production and worship was still valid, on the other hand there was fear of idolatry threatening Christianity from pagans and Gentile Christians.¹⁴

Minucius Felix, who was the first apologist to use Latin, also expressed his disapproval of images. He firmly declared his aversion to the representations of gods, claiming that because of art human awareness was exposed to idolatry.¹⁵ When asked why Christians did not have the altars, temples and cult images, he answered that a man was the image of God.¹⁶

A noticeable disapproval of artists also appeared at the beginning of the third century. That was the time at which the first representations related to Christianity were made. Early

⁶ Iustinus Martyr, *Apologia* I.10.1, CPG 1073.

⁷ Por. T. F. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425*, Oxford 1975, p. 90.

⁸ Athenagoras, *Supplicatio pro Christianis* 23, CPG 1070.

⁹ Por. B. Ladner, 'The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 7 (1953), p. 18.

¹⁰ A. Knöpfler, *Der angebliche Kunstthass der ersten Christen*, in: *Festschrift Georg Hertling zum 70 Geburtstag*, Kempten – München 1913, p. 44. Cf. R. M. Grant, 'Carpocratians and Curriculum: Irenaeus' Reply', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 79 (1986), pp. 127–136.

¹¹ Tatianus, *Oratio ad Graecos* 33.8, CPG 1104.

¹² Tatianus, *Oratio ad Graecos* 4.4.

¹³ Tertullianus, *De idololatria* 4.1, CPL 23.

¹⁴ Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 18, CPL 6; Tertullianus, *Apologeticum* 12.2, CPL 3.

¹⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 22.1, CPL 37.

¹⁶ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 10.2.

Christian authors consistently treated those objects as objects of worship, not as works of art. They tried to oppose the production of images by Christians in order to stop their spread in Christian communities. In statements from that period, the intention to fight against pagan cult is emphasized as well as the opinion about the total prohibition of creating images of God and Jesus.¹⁷

It is forbidden to make an image of God, because the representation of the Creator is in fact a representation of the human artist, so the product of his human hands cannot be an image of God. After some time Church hierarchy allowed the possibility of the artistic creation of Christ and saints. However, their previous regulations could have been in use much longer at the lowest levels, in communities (in the context of churches and tombs). On the other hand, we cannot be sure if those regulations were also effective in relation to individual, private activity.¹⁸ Idol-producers and painters, as well as the owners of the brothels, should be excluded from the Church according to the Apostolic Constitutions.¹⁹

Clemens Alexandrinus believed that it was unnecessary to save or protect pagan shrines. Nevertheless, he ignored Pythagoras's instruction²⁰ and despite his own disapproval towards images, he accepted the use by Christians of secret symbols such as the dove, fish, ship, lyre or anchor on signet rings.²¹ The author has also left some reflections on aesthetics, partially expressing an attitude against art, which he regarded as false and deceptive.²²

Origenes's negative attitude to images concerned not only the images of Christ but also any representative art.²³ According to Christian scholarship it was not permitted to use pictures and statues, but the believer must instead reach beyond these, entrusting the soul to the Creator.²⁴

Didache (first half of the third century) said that Christian communities should not accept gifts from "painters and sculptors of pagan idols, thievish jewelers, dishonest publicans, clairvoyants [...] idolaters".²⁵

Traditio Apostolica paid attention to the occupations of catechumens. If they dealt with painting or sculpture, they should change their job, because it was not possible to reconcile

¹⁷ Cf. N. Gasbarro, 'Il linguaggio dell'idolatria. Per una storia delle religioni culturalmente soggettiva', *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, 62 (1996), pp. 218–219.

¹⁸ M. Simon, *La civilisation de l'antiquité et le christianisme*, Paris 1972, p. 331.

¹⁹ *Constitutiones Apostolorum* IV.6.5., SCL 2, ŻMT 42, ed. by A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2007.

²⁰ Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* V.28.4, CPG 1377.

²¹ Clemens Alexandrinus, *Paidagogós* III. 59.2, CPG 1376.

²² Clemens Alexandrinus, *Protreptikos* II.11.1 and IV.57.5, CPG 1375.

²³ W. Elliger, *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten 4 Jh*, Leipzig 1930, p. 43.

²⁴ Origenes, *Contra Celsum* V.35, CPG 1476.

²⁵ 'Didaskalia, czyli katolicka nauka dwunastu apostołów i świętych uczonych Zbawiciela naszego XVIII', in: M. Michalski, *Antologia literatury patrystycznej*, vol 1, p. 329. Cf. *Constitutiones Apostolorum I-VI*, SCL 2.

activities connected with cults with Christianity.²⁶ An anonymous author of this study encouraged sculptors and painters to give up production of idols.²⁷

It is very likely that the interdictions relating to representations were no longer in force at the end of the third century, particularly under the pressure of rich and influential private persons.

At the beginning of the fourth century, Church hierarchy was still against the production of images. This is shown by the provisions of the Synod of Elvira in AD 306. An interesting question of the function of pictures in Christian shrines was discussed. The participants came to the conclusion that churches were not the right places in which to display pictures. They also prohibited the display of any objects of worship on the walls.²⁸

The bishops attending the synod would have not made such a decision if there had not been any action taken that would regulate that kind of interdiction. It is very likely that the desire to see cult images was so strong that synod had to take it into consideration.

Other opinions related to the subject of representations, being a result of new art, appeared in the writings of authors active in the fourth century. It was the time when the situation of the Church and in the Church was totally different. Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, thus the function and position of art in Christians' life had to change fundamentally. The undeniable fact of the development of artistic creativity was the result of specific deviation from the rules of the Old Testament. The Church Fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries did not condemn the production of images so strictly, but they also did not promote it.

It is hard to say if their opinions had any sense at a time when Christians surrounded themselves with art as never before (their residences and necropoli were decorated with paintings and sculpture). We might say that art entered the Church through the back door, thanks to so called *artes minores*.²⁹ The individual purpose (use) of those works of art could in some ways release them from ecclesiastical control and censure. Christian art was born because of the private initiative of the believers. The Church, in its own natural way, accepted it with delay.³⁰

The aversion of most early Christian writers towards images was responsible for the fact that there were no pictures in Christian shrines in late Antiquity. What is worth noticing is that first positive opinions, approving placing images in the churches, appeared also in fourth century.

Basilios Magnus wrote that painting might have an important educational function, because it had much more opportunity to influence people than words.³¹ He also accepted

²⁶ Hipolit Rzymiski [?], 'Tradycja Apostolska' II.15, transl. H. Paprocki, *Studia Theologica Varsoviensia*, 14 (1976), p. 156.

²⁷ H. Pietras, 'Pośmiertna kariera św. Hipolita', *Vox Patrum*, 17 (1997), pp. 61–75; M. Guarducci, 'La Statua di Sant' Ippolito e la sua provenienza. Nuove ricerche su Ippolito', *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum*, 30 (1989), pp. 61–74.

²⁸ "Placuit picturas in ecclesia esse non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur". Elvira (306), can. 36, *Acta Synodalia* (50–381), SCL 1, ed. by A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2006.

²⁹ J. Elsner, 'Image and Ritual: Reflections the Religious Appreciation on Classical Art', *The Classical Quarterly*, 46 (1996), p. 529.

³⁰ Simon, *La civilisation...*, p. 331.

³¹ Basilios Magnus, *Homilia XII*, PG 31, 489 A.C.

the placing of wall paintings showing martyrs and Christ as judge in the places of worship. He hoped that the view could give people strength, and images in their essence should be related to the preacher's speech.³²

Gregorius Nyssensus expressed a similar opinion. The wall paintings in Christian sacred buildings were very valuable to him. However, he was not sure if the statues could have the same positive function.³³

Paulinus Nolanus, the great church builder, thought the same. He ordered that the churches he built be decorated with paintings, because of their evangelising function.³⁴ Paulinus's individual attitude to art was shown in his opinions relating to the function of images. He proved that pictures were much more effective than books as far as attracting people's attention was concerned. In connection with this he made efforts to place many holy images in his churches.³⁵

Another supporter of representative art was Nilus Ancyranus and, like other writers, he attributed educational function to images. He believed that the scenes from the Old and New Testament should be presented in churches because the illiterate would be able to know God and be closer to Him.³⁶

Even so zealous opponent of images as Athanasius softened eventually, finally having assumed that looking at a picture was adoring the person presented.³⁷

On the other side of the barricade was Asterius. He tried to persuade people not to make any representations. In his homily *Lazarus and Dives* he wrote about the contemporary wealthy people's habit of wearing clothes with painted biblical scenes and he reprimanded them not to paint Christ on himations.³⁸

In one of his homilies Iohannes Chrysostomus encouraged people to decorate their souls instead of their houses. He believed that decorating walls with valuable marbles was absolutely pointless.³⁹ Man disrespected Christ with that kind of behaviour because the material should not be considered precious as it was nothing compared with martyrdom.⁴⁰

Epiphanius wrote that painting pictures of saints is fraud. Every artist made them according to his own imagination. In his spiritual testament Epiphanius strongly encouraged believ-

³² Simon, *La civilisation...*, p. 331.

³³ Gregorius Nyssensus, *De s. Theodoro*, CPG 3183.

³⁴ Paulinus Nolanus, *Carmen XXVII*, CSEL 30; *Epistula XXXII*, PL 61.

³⁵ Paulinus Nolanus, *De pictura*, PL 61, 339.

³⁶ Nilus Ancyranus, *De oratione*, PG 79, 1166–1200.

³⁷ Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Oratio contra gentes*, CPG 2090.

³⁸ Majewski, 'Bezobrazowość'..., p. 75

³⁹ "Let us too, then, adorn not our houses, but our souls in preference to the house. For is it not disgraceful to clothe our walls with marble, vainly and to no end, and to neglect Christ going about naked?, John Chrysostom, Homily on the Statues" II.16.

⁴⁰ "That golden statue! set with gems! I know not how to express it: for I am unable to find any material so precious as to compare it with that body stained with blood!", John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Statues* V.2.

ers not to paint images in churches and cemeteries, because a remembrance of God should be kept only in the heart, not in any material tabernacle devoted to God.⁴¹

When Church Fathers were fighting against representative art, their purpose was not to equate idolatry and the cult of Jesus. Their postulates did not have to be related to symbolic images and historic, biblical scenes.⁴² The early Christian Church did not forbid the use of sculpture, but at the same time did not include it in decorative standards. What is characteristic is the separation of such kinds of art as painting, mosaic and relief, which were unified with architecture, and statues, which were independent works of art.⁴³

Developed iconographic types, spreading in the Christian world in the fourth century might lead to the misuse some of some of them. Slowly, their representative and commemorative function was fading away. It was replaced by the specific and dangerous perception of the image as the object of worship. The Church hierarchy of that time regarded that change as a real danger to Christianity. We can easily notice the concept that pagan idolatry could be regenerated through these types of behavior.

We can assume that the problem of representative art and, consequently, idolatry was a quite serious issue. If it had been the marginal one, without any doubt it would not have been raised by so many writers. It also would not have been a contentious matter. We can observe different opinions in the statements quoted above - both condemning and praising, depending on the time at which those authorities were working.

After some time, when art became more and more common in Christian reality, the Church Fathers - at first faintly - started to defend it. They believed that art could play an important role in evangelism and attract people more efficiently than books as it could be more accessible and understandable.

Considering the negative statements of the first apologists about pictures, we can conclude that their opinions were neither the reason for the decay nor the development of images. Paintings were still being made - the examples can be found in the catacombs in Rome or the house church in Dura Europos, both from the pre-Constantine period.

Visual representations, which were condemned at first because of the danger of idolatry, later started to be regarded as useful, even advisable. Sacred art became synonymous with the Middle Ages and the following centuries. The Counter-Reformation used it to attract people to churches. Nowadays we cannot even imagine how could religion function without art, not realizing how controversial was its presence in the first centuries of Christianity.

⁴¹ Epiphanius Constantiensis, *Tractatus contra eos qui imagines faciunt*, CPG 3749; *Testamentum ad cives*, CPG 3751.

⁴² G. Florovsky, 'Aux origines problème de l'image', *Istina*, 39, (1994), pp. 337–340.

⁴³ L. Uspenskij, *Teologia ikony*, trans. M. Żurowska, Poznań 1993, p. 7.