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ART AS A *LOCUS THEOLOGICUS* IN THE REFLECTION OF ARTISTS

Christian art is an interesting field that is being more and more eagerly explored by pastoral theology.¹ It is enough to mention the popularity that schools of icon-painting are gaining in Poland and in the world: they are not merely schools of painting, but something much more – schools of prayer and faith. An icon earned the creation of its own theology centuries ago. It should be emphasized that more and more contemporary theologians devote their attention to various aspects of art, visual culture and beauty, treating them – generally speaking – as visual theology (or theology of visibility)². Some scholars consider art as an uninspired theological source. Stanisław C.

¹ Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia kategorii *locus theologicus* na płaszczyźnie teoretycznej i praktycznej na podstawie refleksji i prac artystów biorących udział w wystawie „Miejsca teologiczne” zorganizowanej przez Instytut Wiedzy o Kulturze Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie w dniach 17 maja - 12 czerwca 2012 roku. Autor niniejszego artykułu był obok dr Małgorzaty Wrześniak (Instytut Historii Sztuki UKSW) kuratorem tej wystawy zorganizowanej w podziemiach kościoła pokamedulskiego na warszawskich Bielanach.

² Por. N. Mojżyn, *Między kulturą i teologią wizualną: antropologia obrazu Hansa Beltinga*, w: *Kultura wizualna – teologia wizualna*, red. W. Ka-

Napiórkowski treats sacred art and belles-lettres in terms of monuments of tradition analogous to the history of the Church, which he conceives as a conveyor of tradition and the primary uninspired source of theology³, next to the symbols of faith, liturgy, faith of the People of God (*sensus fidei*), the teaching of the councils, the *ex cathedra* teaching of the Pope, the teaching of the Church scattered around the world (the teaching of bishops and synods), the teaching of the Fathers and writers of the Church, the ordinary teaching of the popes and ecclesiastical law. In this sense, the artistic heritage of the Church, and – more broadly – visual culture, can be viewed as a theological place (*locus theologicus*)⁴. Modern understanding of the concept of *locus theologicus* does not deviate far from the position presented in this matter by a Spanish Dominican, Melchior Cano (c. 1509-1560)⁵ in his posthumously published work *De Locis theologicis* (Salamanca, 1562) five centuries ago. There is no doubt that the experience of the artist and his work can be a place of theological cognition. Perhaps, taking into account the dynamics of the development of theological thought (J. Szymik, J. Królikowski, A. Draguła and others), we are dealing with a “theological turn” analogous to the prior performative and pictorial (iconic) turn in science⁶.

wecki, J. S. Wojciechowski, D. Żukowska-Gardzińska, Warszawa 2011, s. 35-52.

³ S. C. Napiórkowski, *Jak uprawiać teologię*, Wrocław 1996, s. 38.

⁴ N. Mojżyn, *Teologiczne implikacje ochrony dziedzictwa artystycznego Kościoła w dobie globalizacji*, w: N. Mojżyn i in., *Miejsca teologiczne w kulturze wizualnej*, Kraków-Warszawa 2013, s. 321-346.

⁵ W. Kawecki, *Teologia piękna. Poszukiwanie locus theologicus w kulturze współczesnej*, Poznań 2013, s. 113-130.

⁶ J. S. Wojciechowski, *Teologia kultury: chrześcijańskiej, politycznej, wizualnej?*, „*Studia Theologica Varsaviensia*” 2010 nr 1, s. 63-73.

When trying to develop a theology through art, it is essential to take into account hermeneutics, as the interpretation of works of art from a theological perspective is a central issue of this theology⁷. It should be noted that since the early 60s of the twentieth century the key principles of modernism, such as the belief in progress, the power of reason, the confidence in meta-narrative based on the attitudes rooted in the Enlightenment, i.e. rationalism, liberalism and the already mentioned idea of progress, are more and more often called into question when it comes to the modernist affirmation of alienated, meaningless, atomized and divided material of human existence⁸. A complete, Christian understanding of theology involves both the systematic work on the sources of revelation, intellectual reflection on the revealed mystery of God and the doctrines derived from it, as well as other forms of expression of this mystery⁹.

While contemporary art by all means tries to hide its religious origin¹⁰, every time it speaks about man and his place in the universe, it is not able to escape from its ultimate relationship to God. In addition to contemporary art projects explicitly addressing the issues of God and man, as well as touching

⁷ D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, London, 1981, s. 67-68; M. P. Gallagher, *Post-Modernity: Friend or Foe?*, w: *Faith and Culture in the Irish Context*, red. E. G. Cassidy, Dublin, 1996, s. 74-75.

⁸ M. P. Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith-and-Culture*, London 1997, s. 88-90.

⁹ T. Węclawski, *Metodologia teologii*, „Nauka” (2004) nr 3, s. 102. Sam Kościół to uwzględnić w swojej oficjalnej doktrynie, gdy do grona doktorów Kościoła, a więc osobistości, które ze świętością życia połączyły mądrość intelektualną, zalicza na przykład św. Teresę z Lisieux, czy nawet św. Katarzynę ze Sieny, które nigdy profesjonalnie nie zajmowały się teologią.

¹⁰ Por. H. Belting, *Obraz i kult. Historia obrazu przed historią sztuki*, przeł. T. Zatorski, Gdańsk 2010.

upon the transcendental and metaphysical matters, we can often find issues exposing the deepest meaning of life and death in apparent isolation from God; this type of works can be described as crypto-theological because they require the viewer to use a specific mode of theological reflection. Thanks to the experience and sensitivity of both artists and the audience of works of art, this type of projects can also become a source of theological cognition.

Naturally, there are fundamental differences between theology and art in a number of dimensions, and we must be aware that the relationship between them is not clear and simple. Frank Burch Brown, dealing with art and theological aesthetics, rightly noted that while theology “in its most typical, classic version strives for logical consistency, coherence, generality, conceptual accuracy and the accuracy of judgments”, art “explores fictively, metaphorically and experientially what *formal theology cannot* itself present or contain”¹¹.

The theology of icons developed for centuries in the Christian East, and the theory of religious and artistic image (the Christian West) are convenient tools in discussing a *locus theologicus* in visual culture. It is significant to note how the concept of an icon is used in today’s everyday language and how its meaning has been trivialized. The widespread use of all kinds of “icons” in contemporary popular culture, which is visual in nature, only apparently brings us closer to understanding their meaning. Numerous “icons of sport” or “icons of music”, who are in fact pop culture idols, do not reflect by any means the complexity of what is essentially icon painting. On the other hand, they make us consider the roots of the worship

¹¹ F. B. Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, Princeton, 1989, s. 166-167.

of all kinds of mass culture “icons” as well as search for methods and tools potentially useful in theological research. It is no coincidence that centuries ago the theology of icons sought to equal the importance of the icon with the importance of the cross and the Gospel, which have been worshipped since the beginning of the Christian era. Moreover, the worship of icons was attributed to the development of hagiography and iconographic tradition. The Eastern and Western theology split when *Libri Carolini*, trying to rationalize the worship of icons, were published¹². The point of disagreement was the issue whether icons can be recognized as places of theophany, i.e. visible signs of the presence and grace of God. In the West, there is no difficulty in acknowledging such a role of icons when we accept the core assumption of the theology of icons that material image can lead us closer to the truth because of its symbolic content, providing it is the faithful that take on the responsibility for the proper contact and interpretation of sacred images¹³. An extensive explanation of the theology of icons can be found in the works of P. Evdokimov, W. Łoski and L. Uspieński¹⁴, among others. The philosophy of these theologians, binding faith and art in an existential diptych, has come full circle starting with the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, who first developed the theory of image and symbol and gave the image the status of an intermediary in the contemplation of the invisible and uncreated¹⁵. God creates and acts with the help of his uncreated energies that permeate everything that

¹² M. Pokorska, “*Cibus oculorum*”. *Uwagi o teorii dzieła sztuki w Libri Carolini*, „Folia Historiae Artium”, XXVII (1991), s. 13-32.

¹³ B. Dąb-Kalinowska, *Ikony i obrazy*, Warszawa 2000, s. 13.

¹⁴ L. Uspieński, *Teologia ikony*, przeł. M. Żurowska, Poznań 1993.

¹⁵ *Patrologia Graeca (Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca)* J. P. Migne, 585 B.

exists and keep everything in existence¹⁶. The foundations of the theology of icons laid by Dionysius include the key category of beauty: every human being bears the reflection of God's beauty but this beauty is not like the beauty of God (apophatic theology). Still, this beauty can be a sufficient tool for man to get to know God¹⁷. The beauty of God, which is invisible, becomes visible due to the psycho-emotional character of the human nature. Teodor Studyta argued that although the material image of God (a picture) is not identical with its transcendental primary image, it is identical with its hypostasis and name¹⁸. According to the theology of icons, iconic images are epistemological; they do not merely reflect, but present the truth with the help of appropriate images, signs and symbols¹⁹.

Although the Eastern doctrine of icons has never been fully accepted in the Catholic tradition, it has never been denied in pastoral practice as well. The picture may lead to an encounter between man and God incarnate, who penetrates a believer and fills him with grace. The holy picture is neither a simple illustration nor decoration: it is a symbol and representation of the mystery of Incarnation that reveals to the human eye the spiritual message emerging from the Word addressed to the ears and heart of man. The picture as a medium of a certain form and meaning belongs to the symbolic culture and has specific properties and functions. In addition to its aesthetic

¹⁶ W. Łoski, *Teologia mistyczna Kościoła Wschodniego*, przeł. M. Szczaniecka, Warszawa 1989, s. 64-65.

¹⁷ Por. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków, 1962, t. 2, 39, 43.

¹⁸ P. Evdokimov, *Sztuka ikony. Teologia piękna*, przeł. M. Żurowska, Warszawa 1999, s. 178.

¹⁹ W. W. Byczkow, *Iz istorii wizantijskoj estietiki*, „Wizantijskij Wriemiennik” 1976, t. 37, s. 173.

function, it can perform educational, cognitive, utilitarian or worship roles²⁰. The picture, not only religious one, may have a cathartic character, the power to purify through individual experience sublimated to the level of higher values, to the transcendentals: beauty, goodness and truth. In religious terminology, it means moving the values of the *profane* to the domain of the *sacred*²¹.

The key to the relationship between theology and art was given by one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner. He wrote that if theology “is understood as the ultimate human self-expression in the extent to which it stems from the self-communication of God, religious phenomena present in the art become themselves significant as part of the practised theology”²². In all efforts to ensure that a piece of art is treated and appreciated as a *locus theologicus*, the key thing is to be aware of the tension existing between the image and word. This tension stems from the fact that, as Rahner noted, visual art cannot be directly rendered by other means of expression. This tension is inspiring and provides the basis to perform the theology of art and theology through art. As long as we can distinguish between the word and the visual work, they both express our reality and the ultimate reality; close relationships between them should be a subject of thorough research and they should broaden our horizons. In this perspective, art,

²⁰ Por. D. Jankowski, *Podmiotowe uczestnictwo w sztuce a kreowanie tożsamości osobowej jednostki*, w: *Sztuka i wychowanie. Współczesne problemy edukacji estetycznej*, Warszawa 2010, s. 149.

²¹ T. Boruta, *Figur Racje*, Kielce 2009, s. 52.

²² K. Rahner, *Theology and the Arts Thought*, “A Review of Culture and Idea”, 224 (1982), s. 25.

including contemporary art, can be an interesting challenge for a theologian and creatively expand the scope of his work²³.

In discussing the relationship between theology and art, we should also refer to the aesthetic thought of another twentieth-century Western theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. This thinker assumes that the Word of God – the Logos – is revealed as a grace, an unmerited gift of God. God appears in this gift as an enduring beauty, still present today. The question of beauty in Revelation is closely connected with the biblical concept of glory. The glory is expressed in the *kenosis* of Christ, so there are no feelings of pleasure associated with it. When perceiving beauty (in an aesthetic experience), man is free to choose; theology helps him make the right choice as theology is not merely an abstract reflection, but should always lead to a subsequent encounter with God²⁴.

A part of the research project “*Locus theologicus* in visual culture” was the exhibition entitled “Theological Places”. The exhibition presented the works of the Polish artists of young generation, dealing with the issues of life and death, love and exclusion, passing, oblivion, the feeling of the existence of “something more”; the works talked about discovering higher values constituting the core of human existence and the feeling of longing for them, about feelings, the search for love and the joy of finding it. In other words, the artists attempted to deal with important topics related to man and his life as well as his metaphysical needs and aspirations, often marginalized by the

²³ Por. Alex Stock, *Ist die bildende Kunst ein locus theologicus?*, w: *Wozu Bilder in Christentum? Beiträge zur theologischen Kunsttheorie*, red. A. Stock (St. Ottilien 1990), s. 175-181.

²⁴ N. Mojżyn, *Locus theologicus w sztukach wizualnych – nowe perspektywy badawcze*, w: *Wierzyć i widzieć*, red. N. Mojżyn i in., Sandomierz 2013, s. 99.

consumer society. In the unique atmosphere of the old Camaldolese basements, sanctified by time and place, we could see the works of Agnieszka Bartak-Lisikiewicz, Dorota Berger, Bartek Jarmoliński, Jacek Łydźba, Aleksandra Marchocka, Łukasz Murzyn, Małgorzata Wielek-Mandreli. Each of the artists touched the transcendent in their works, addressing a variety of topics, approaching existential problems; after long contemplation, a deeper meaning concealed beneath the surface of ordinary events could be seen slowly emerging from these works. The nature of the works, their form and content as well as the place of their exhibition aroused the feeling of celebration of the sacred, a dialogue with God and contact with higher ideals and values. Exploring these ideals naturally required active participation of a recipient, who had to penetrate a material object, mature and bring out its immaterial depth²⁵.

The works of art presented in the exhibition and commentaries given by the artists served as interesting research material allowing to discuss these works as a potential *locus theologicus*. The artists' reflections involved answering the following general questions: Can contemporary visual representations form the basis for theological analysis? Can we talk about a *locus theologicus* in contemporary visual art? These general questions were then reformulated into several more detailed questions and asked in the form of a questionnaire²⁶.

²⁵ M. Wrześniak, *Wstęp*, w: M. Wrześniak, N. Mojżyn, *Miejsca teologiczne. Katalog wystawy zorganizowanej w dn. 17.05.2012-12.06.2012 w podziemiach kamedulskich*, Warszawa 2012, s. 1.

²⁶ W ankiecie postawiono m.in. takie pytania: czy sztuka współczesna, zamknięta w terażniejszości, efemeryczności i analizie własnych środków i przeżyć, może odpowiadać na najgłębsze pytania człowieka, czy może jest tylko tragicznym odzwierciedleniem pustki i bezsensu egzystencji? Czy

To some artists that answered the questionnaire, art is undoubtedly an expression of the experience of God; it emerges from the experience of faith, the desire to bear witness, the delight over the economy of salvation in which they participate. In their opinion, if art is to reflect something more than itself, it must be rooted in faith. But this is only one position. There were also reflections of the artists who appeal to more universal cultural codes; their art emerges from non-religious sources such as unrequited love, loneliness, suffering, pain or despair²⁷.

It cannot be said that there is no art referring to transcendence, to metaphysical experiences, one that does not look for answers to the basic questions about the human condition, man's fate now and after death; but if such art exists, it has the right to search for new means and forms of expression beyond the traditional repertoire of resources. The homogenization and standardization of contemporary culture has reduced the issues of the supernatural to – generally speaking – anthropocentric matters. Jacek Łydźba writes that “in contemporary art God is treated equally to color, texture, expression, war, death, desire, advertising, silence, noise, sound, material, matter, femininity, masculinity”²⁸. The works of this artist are filled with sincerity and simplicity of expression, a truly childlike innocence and trust. Something of a fervent pop art mysticism of

sztuka dziś może jeszcze mówić o wartościach, odwoływać się do piękna, transcendować? Czy sztuka powinna odwoływać się do Boga i do treści religijnych? Gdzie artysta może szukać inspiracji duchowej w swojej twórczości? Czy sztuka sakralna może powstawać na zamówienie? Jakie cechy powinno mieć dzieło, by można było nazwać je sakralnym?

²⁷ Wywiad z artystami został przeprowadzony przy okazji wernisażu wystawy “Miejsca teologiczne” 17 maja 2012 roku w podziemiach kameleondulskich w Warszawie, ul. Dewajtis 5 (dalej: Wywiad).

²⁸ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

Andy Warhol certainly characterizes these works²⁹. Maybe today's culture carries in itself the unconscious feeling of *Deus absconditus*³⁰ – God hidden, as described by Saint Thomas – and this feeling is revealed in the new language of signs which most Christians have not yet got accustomed to? It is interesting in this context to mention one artist taking part in the questionnaire, who presented a mature and full of openness voice, declaring himself as a non-believer, though rooting his art in the Christian culture: “I think that for a believer art can be a place of God's revelation. We most frequently seek God in beauty. In the case of pop culture, which likes to make use of kitsch and ugliness, it is probably harder to see God. Pop culture continuously mixes forms of the *sacred* and the *profane*, but maybe thanks to it, religion in art seems less unreal, closer to the contemporary audience?”³¹.

Małgorzata Wielek-Mandrela often deals in her work with issues analogous to religion: human existence and its limitations, passing, love, truth, justice, beauty and transcendence. Both art and religion – as Mandrela notes – “are characterized by a yearning for a different reality, for something that is out there, beyond the horizon. Art represents a transcendental approach to life. The artist serves here as a deliverer and performer. The work cannot therefore arise from the mind only, some-

²⁹ N. Mojżyn, *Aksjomat*, w: *Miejsca...*, dz. cyt., bns.

³⁰ Na potrzeby doktryny chrześcijańskiej św. Tomasz z Akwinu stworzył, używane później m.in. przez Lutra pojęcie *Deus absconditus* („Bóg ukryty”) dla opisanego tajemnicy i oddalenia Boga; odpowiednik pojęcia *Deus otiosus* („Bóg oddalony”). Zob. Max Weber, *Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, Cambridge 1978, s. 220.

³¹ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

thing from the outside has to work as well. Feelings, emotions, the subconscious led by some unfathomable power ...³².

Paul Evdokimov referred the question of art and the experience of faith to the “theology of presence”. He wrote that every purely aesthetic piece of art is opened by emotions and feelings, like a medieval triptych, whose wings are the artist and the recipient. According to the Russian thinker, the whole experience is contained in a triangle of aesthetic immanentism. However, as he noted, there are works filled with transcendental elements that break this closed triangle, that trigger not only an aesthetic sense and emotions, but also a mystical sense – *mysterium tremendum* – and thus they become unique theological places³³. A contemporary Western theologian, Johann Baptist Metz, a student of Karl Rahner, stresses that the most important achievements in theology and the history of the Church derive from such a theology in which the biography, fantasy, accumulated experience, conversions, visions and prayers are inseparably linked with the theological system³⁴. The theology of presence in a way stands in agreement with the metaphysics of presence, which was proposed by Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind, and which became the leitmotif of the deconstruction philosophy in the theory of architecture. Its main thesis is the view that architecture can be a language able to convey meaning and able to be a sub-

³² Wywiad, dz. cyt.

³³ P. Evdokimov, *Sztuka ikony. Teologia piękna*, przeł. M. Żurowska, Warszawa 2003, s. 157.

³⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, wyd. 4 red. (Mainz 1984), s. 196-197.

ject of analysis in linguistic philosophy³⁵. Both Derrida and Eisenman argue that a *locus*, a place of presence, is contained in architecture; the same dialectic of presence and absence is found in construction and deconstruction.

Jacek Łydźba, a believing artist, openly admits that religious experience is present in his works (he even expresses his faith in his art); using the means of *licentia poetica*, he speaks very frankly about experiencing the presence of God, the *sacred*, which is to him like “a meadow in the mountains surrounded by a forest and a blue sky. The *sacrum* is this moment during the Mass when I get to understand, I find out, I realize the truth that I have sinned. The *sacrum* is a delight”³⁶. A prophetic and visionary piece of art “speaks”, in his view, about life in all its aspects. Dorota Berger’s answers sound also very sincere; she became fascinated by C.S. Lewis’s autobiographical novel “Surprised by Joy”, in particular by his experience of a sudden joy caused by aesthetic experiences; to Dorota Berger such experiences are as if the first signs of the existence of true “God’s Joy”. God communicates himself through stories, on which this communication depends. Berger tries to include these rays or flashes of “God’s Joy” almost explicitly in her works, which go beyond purely religious painting, though they are inspired by the little masters of the Italian Renaissance. She talks about the presence and absence simultaneously, about the feeling of being here and there – after going to the other side, about the silent presence of God, whom we cannot see, who escapes the human perception, but one that manifests

³⁵ J. S. Curl, *A Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, Oxford 2006, s. 880.

³⁶ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

himself even in a gentle and quiet breeze ruffling the waves and the crowns of trees.

In the exhibition, Łukasz Murzyn showed several works of art depicting ultrasound images of his pregnant wife's womb, which presented themselves as a kind of a microcosm; he also showed a very suggestive video installation *Corpus Christi*, which presented the Host-Passion, the Body of Christ suffering during the Passion. Murzyn claims that by experiencing the divine beauty the artist becomes an extremely sensitized and talented person, even a prophet – icon writer. He states: “there is a tendency to think that the language of contemporary art and new media of art are reserved for materialists. Artists whose worldview would allow them to create good religious or sacred art wrongly assume that those media are ‚bad’ and the ‚sacred’ art can only be done with a brush or a chisel, necessarily in the anachronistic kitsch style. It is not about the means of expression only, of course, but about the contemporary thinking about the form and definition of a work of art in general”³⁷.

Practising theology through art is based on and, at the same time, confirms the fact that man was created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1, 26); he gets to know the world and himself through senses, mind and life experience. Simultaneously, he meets God; as the theologian Sallie McFague states, the whole world and the universe somehow constitute “the body of God”, whose parts are above all people. In this sense, religious experience is not the exclusive domain of holy places, because “the body of God” is everywhere; apart from churches, there are many other potential sacred places, for example, it could be the Piłsudski square with the cross, a ceme-

³⁷ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

tery, the Way of the Cross ... These are special cases of religious art, characterized by signs and symbols; but all places where truth, love and good exist may be considered even more sacred ... Making a visual image a source of theological commitment entails saying a radical “yes” to creation, creativity and imagination. It is the affirmation of life-giving senses, of what is sensual, aesthetic, of the fact that even the Spirit of God can be perceived in material things. An example might be Bartek Jarmoliński’s art, drawing from the rich repertoire of pop art; in his works, he methodically mixes various conventions and axiologies. Generally speaking, Jarmoliński gives the icons of pop culture a transcendental quality. Such artistic activity based on visual art is an instance of embraced, embodied theology. In the centre of this theology stands only a seemingly paradoxical claim that the ultimate reality, and more specifically the invisible face of God who is Love, Truth and Peace, can be perceived and studied through the little pieces of the earthly reality. Jarmoliński goes exactly in this direction in his works, whose protagonists – the holy icons/the icons of pop culture – make us realize that the sharpest conflicts of modern civilization reveal the deepest human desire to experience Love, Truth and Peace, as well as their defense as fundamental values, though for some people not always evidently associated with God. Jarmoliński, therefore, deals with the condition of today’s man , “his needs, both as an individual and in the wider dimension, a society in which a loyal, honest and empathic man will be a value in himself – this is most important”³⁸.

The exhibited works, touching more or less explicitly on transcendence and manifesting God’s presence and action,

³⁸ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

show that a piece of art is not understood and used merely as a means to illustrate simple biblical and dogmatic truths. Art today is not like *ancilla theologiae*, as philosophy was once described. Art is becoming a partner of philosophy and theology in attempts to answer the most important questions. Each artist wants to express it in their own way. Jacek Łydźba speaks confidently about his works: “Art exists when it deals with values, when it refers to beauty, when it tries to transcend”³⁹. And Małgorzata Wielek-Mandrela talks about the elements of transcendence as something “concealed but very real. Something that is underneath, the essence. Something that is not subject to debate, something undeniable. It can be sensed, it is a kind of goodness and holiness. It is not available to everyone. It can show up in different aspects of life”⁴⁰. She believes that we are again in the situation of mystery and somewhat ancient aniconism, a desert, where God can speak again and find new ways to the heart of modern man⁴¹. If it is indeed so, then art has the right to be a legitimate source from which we can read the signs of God manifesting himself in the world. In this way, the theological perspective of looking at art allows man to open, experience and interpret the manifestations of transcendence of God that is hidden and constantly revealing himself: *Deus absconditus* – *Deus revelatus*. In this vein, we can read the sarcastic voice of Łukasz Murzyn, who said that “the art closed to metaphysics is the art of the second category, trivial, popular in the negative sense. Most often it becomes a bo-

³⁹ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

⁴⁰ Wywiad, dz. cyt.

⁴¹ Por. J. Plazaola, *Historia y sentido del arte Cristiano*, Madrid 1996; cytuję według wydania włoskiego: *Arte cristiana nel tempo storia e significato*, red. M. A. Crippa, przeł. B. Pistocchi, t. II, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 2002.

ring, ideological agitation. The postmodern artists have lost faith in everything, including their own originality, and they frequently join one of the prominent 'choirs', referred to as discourses in the jargon of art curators. What we believe in – the artist notes – determines our concept of art⁴².

Looking for a *locus theologicus* in visual arts is the hallmark of a new approach to methods and tasks of theology. Today, theology includes many heterogeneous activities and reflections; contemporary theology opens its doors for researchers from different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. According to some authoritative Catholic theologians, virtually every believer who reflects on his faith is already a "theologian"⁴³. From this point of view, some literary works dealing directly or indirectly with faith are considered, at least partially, theological today, for example Dante's "Divine Comedy" or Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment"⁴⁴. We must look in the same way at the works of visual art taking up existential topics, works which are universal in content, deal with transcendence and higher ideals, such as the works of artists who took part in the "Theological Places" exhibition in the old Camaldolese basements in Bielany, Warsaw.

Searching for meaning and truth in visual culture with the help of theology referring to spiritual culture and symbolic meanings does not seem fruitless, even in a broad perspective of contemporary culture, as long as this culture takes the experience of faith, or existential human experience, as its center. Religious pictures are somehow authenticated by folk religio-

⁴² Wywiad, dz. cyt.

⁴³ L. Balter, *Teologia polska między Zachodem a Wschodem*, w: *Teologia polska na XXI wiek*, K. Gózdź, K. Klauza (red.), Lublin 2005, s. 19.

⁴⁴ Por. W. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, Dublin, 1988, s. xiii.

sity based on an active faith, especially the religiosity that so often makes use of the sacred images. In contemporary theology and the official teaching of the Catholic Church there are more and more references to experiencing faith consciously and genuinely, as a kind of existential experience. A German theologian, professor of fundamental theology, Johann Baptist Metz, notices the lack of reflection on this kind of experience in contemporary theology; he states that Catholic theology to a large extent is characterized by “the division between the theological system and religious experience”⁴⁵. This is a common problem of theology which often escapes from the basic experience of faith in religious life when building more or less complex syntheses. On the eve of the new Millennium blessed John Paul II wrote that a true Christian religion is the religion of “dwelling in the inmost life of God” because “the Holy Spirit, who searches the depths of God leads us, all mankind, into these depths by virtue of the sacrifice of Christ”⁴⁶. The Christian life is not something abstract, detached from the world and its problems; on the contrary, it is something very real and experienced. In the introduction to the last, fourth part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (after the discussion of the doctrinal content of the Christian Creed and then the principles of the Church’s liturgy and the basis of morality), we can read that the mystery of the Christian faith “requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God”⁴⁷. The experience of faith involves worship and spiritual

⁴⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube...*, dz. cyt., s. 196-197.

⁴⁶ Jan Paweł II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, nr 8.

⁴⁷ *Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego*, Poznań (*Pallotinum*) 1994, nr 2558.

expressions on an individual or community level. These expressions can take various forms of piety, but their common feature is a “thirst for God” and “an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence”⁴⁸. In this perspective, it is worth noting that the Second Council of Nicaea, which was crucial to the theology of icons, was the first council to have raised pastoral problems on such a scale, while dealing with other dogmatic issues to a lesser extent, which did not happen before or after the council. The experience of faith, which is similar to an aesthetic experience, is an important component of true faith, but also an equally important element of the methodology of Catholic theology, and therefore should be considered as a proper form of theological cognition – *locus theologicus*.

⁴⁸ Por. Congregazione per il Culto Divino e la Disciplina dei Sacramenti (Kongregacja ds. Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów), *Direttorio su pietà popolare e liturgia: Principi e orientamenti*, Vaticano 2002, nr 9. Tekst Kongregacji przytacza słowa Pawła VI z *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 48.