

Reconcilable differences: The church reaches out to modern arts

VATICAN CITY – Once made in heaven, the marriage between art and the church has long been on the skids.

“We are a bit like estranged relatives; there has been a divorce,” said Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Much of contemporary art walked away from art’s traditional vocation of representing the intangible and the mysterious, as well as pointing the way toward the greater meaning of life and what is good and beautiful, he said during a Vatican press conference Nov. 5.

And the church has spent the past century “very often contenting itself with imitating models from the past,” rarely asking itself whether there were religious “styles that could be an expression of modern times,” he added.

In an effort to “renew friendship and dialogue between the church and artists and to spark new opportunities for collaboration,” he said, Pope Benedict XVI will be meeting more than 250 artists from around the world Nov. 21 inside one of the world’s most stunning artistic treasures: the Sistine Chapel.

The church’s attempts to heal this rift with the world of modern arts span back to Pope Paul VI, who said the troubled relationship between the church and artists was based on misunderstandings and past restrictions on expression that had been removed.

Pope Paul loved art and saw an urgent need to encourage contemporary artists to reclaim their spiritual mission.

He held a landmark meeting with artists in the Sistine Chapel in 1964 and told them they were precious to the church for their “preaching and rendering accessible and comprehensible – or better still, moving – the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of the ineffable, of God.”

The pope set up a collection of paintings, sculptures and graphic art to show how modern culture could still convey religious concepts. He inaugurated the Vatican's Collection of Modern Religious Art in 1973, which contains works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky and Edvard Munch.

Pope John Paul II, an accomplished actor, poet and playwright long before becoming a priest, eagerly continued Pope Paul's rapprochement.

He issued a papal letter to artists in 1999 in an effort to "consolidate a more constructive partnership between art and the church."

He sought to exalt artistic endeavors and urged artists and entertainers to steer clear of "empty glory or the craving for cheap popularity" or easy profit.

Artistic gatherings and events have been a common occurrence at the Vatican.

In the decades of Pope John Paul's pontificate, it was not unusual to see all sorts of popular art forms employed. In 2004, for example, Polish break dancers spun on their heads on the marble floors of the Vatican's sumptuous Clementine Hall to the pope's apparent delight while music blared from a boombox.

Pope John Paul met with countless stars from the entertainment industry, and reminded them of their responsibility to be positive role models, "capable of inspiring trust, optimism and hope."

While Pope Benedict XVI is an avid pianist and has spoken numerous times about the importance of beauty and art, he tends to shy away from raucous encounters.

In fact, the pope, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, wrote in 1998 that he had been skeptical of the idea of Pope John Paul sharing the stage in 1997 with a group of rock and pop stars that included Bob Dylan.

"They had a message that was completely different from the one the pope was committed to," then-Cardinal Ratzinger wrote. He said he wondered whether "it was really right to let these types of 'prophets' intervene."

While it is not clear who made the decision, the Vatican discontinued its annual

Christmas concert under Pope Benedict's watch after a 13-year run.

The concert series, which featured well-known international stars each year, had been marred by a controversy in 2003 when the U.S. pop singer Lauryn Hill stunned the audience in 2003 by asking church leaders to "repent" and speaking of the pain of those abused by priests. It was feared other artists might use their opportunity on a Vatican stage to promote their own personal agendas.

Instead Pope Benedict eagerly attends many of the classical concerts held in his honor.

He will even be featured on a new CD singing and reciting Marian hymns and prayers. The CD, called "Alma Mater," will be released worldwide Nov. 30 by Geffen Records. A similar CD of Pope John Paul reciting the rosary in Latin became an instant hit in 1994.

Pope Benedict has said the church's ancient treasure of liturgical music should not be frozen in time, but should evolve with appropriate modern-day adaptations.

What is important is that it represents "holiness, true art and universality" and stirs the hearts of its listeners, letting them experience "the same intimacy of the life of God," he told staff and students of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in 2007.

Pope Benedict has said art needs to help people see that authentic truth, beauty and goodness are always intertwined and needs to allow "the beauty of the love of God" to shine through.

The human spirit longs for authentic - not superficial and fleeting - beauty that is "in full harmony with the truth and goodness," he has said.

Archbishop Ravasi expanded on that notion at the Nov. 5 press conference when he said art has always had an ethical and transformative role.

He said the world needs artistic expression that lifts people above and beyond "the dust of our own existence and helps us live better."