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## Modern and Contemporary Religious Medals and Medallic Art

Henrik von Achen

‘Was es zu sehen gilt, ist das Aufgenommensein göttlicher Offenbarung in den Schoß des durch die Gnade der Offenbarung selbst erwirkten menschlichen Glaubens; von diesem Schoß will sie aufgenommen, getragen, zur Welt gebracht werden’.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in *Schau der Gestalt*, 1961.<sup>1</sup>

The present text endeavours to offer a brief survey of the various categories of religious medals and religious medallic art since the 1960s. In this context, the term ‘religious’ is synonymous with ‘Christian’ (with a single exception), and within Christianity mainly, if not exclusively, synonymous with ‘Catholic’. The traditional concept of religious medals is – and must be – widened to include medallic art which is religious in the sense that a relation to faith and religion is articulated by employment of an individual iconography and a title, or by elements from the established Christian iconography. While traditional religious medals, the *numismata sacra*<sup>2</sup>, have a very long history, indeed – almost as long as Christianity itself – the latter group of medallic art or objects is by and large a modern phenomenon. To honour the long tradition of official, commemorative medals, I shall treat two such modern medals by Manfrini in more depth.

The group of traditional medals may be divided into medals commemorating, officially as it were, certain events and ecclesiastic dignitaries (Fig. 1), and devotional medals. Likewise, the group of religious medallic art may be divided into two: On one

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, vol. 1, *Schau der Gestalt* (1961). Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln–Trier 1988, 515.

<sup>2</sup> *Kirchen-Lexikon oder Encyclopädie der katholischen Theologie und ihrer Hülfswissenschaften*. Herder Verlag, Freiburg im Breisgau; *Medaille*, vol. 8, 1893, col.s 1156–1158, here col. 1156: ‘Die dem religiösen Gebrauche dienenden Medaillen, Devotionsmünzen, werden in der Sprache der Kirche *numismata* genannt’.

hand, medals we might define as 'of Christian intent'; on the other hand, medals commenting on human existence using traditional Christian motifs.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, the border lines between these categories are often blurred, and there are medals and medallic objects which seem to defy a clear allocation to any of these groups. Yet, the following overview is structured around the four categories outlined above.



1. Bronze medal by Aurelio Mistruzzi (1893–1983) celebrating the Holy year 1950. The obverse (left) shows the naturalistic portrait of pope Pius XII, surrounded by the inscription in slightly raised letters: *pius xii romanvs pontifex maximvs*, 'Pius XII Roman pope'. The reverse shows the Holy Door, the inscription quoting John 10,9: *ego svm ostivm per me si qvis introierit salvabitvr*, 'I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved'. The diameter is 44 mm.; it weighs 37 gr.

In a certain sense a medal is nothing but a relief, a piece of sculpture, sharing the basic conditions of any such works of art. Hence, it is not surprising that medals attempt to articulate everything conveyed by other sculptures or sculptural works. In the quotation introducing this text, von Balthasar explains the intrinsic relationship between Divine Revelation and human faith, establishing faith as carrier of that revelation. One might, then, make a distinction between traditional religious medals as material expressions of a human faith to which Divine Revelation is integral, and modern, religiously articulated medallic art, the expression of which may be separate from or independent of such Revelation. In this latter instance, contemporary medallic art enjoys the freedom and individuality belonging to the visual arts as such.

While the composition and representation of motifs always were adapted to the format of medallic art, themes never were. The mode had to change, of course, and today its kinship with the mode of poetry has become rather conspicuous. In the medal meaning far exceeds what is actually said, the contemporary medallic object seems to be

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<sup>3</sup> See also: Henrik v. Achen: *The Religious Medal: Perspectives, Problems and Possibilities*, in: *Médailles*, published by FIDEM 2008.

a world of signs, every form element necessary and significant. Yet, precisely the small format is itself an intrinsic part of what constitutes a medal. The very size emerges as a particular medallic charisma. The 'handheld-ness' of a medal or a piece of medallic art creates an intimacy of experience. A medal is already from the outset a concentrated message, enjoying an unparalleled intimacy 'which allows an intensity of expression rarely experienced in large objects', to quote John Cook.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the intimate experience of a medal or a medallic object both demands and fosters concentration.

### **Traditional religious medals: commemorative medals**

When we talk of traditional religious medals, the term 'traditional' does not imply a certain date or time span, but rather a representative function. This function has been served by medals, not least papal medals, since the Renaissance. Today, such medals, commemorating great church historical events like councils, popes, various jubilees and holy years, are still produced, sold or given to people.

In a theological perspective, history is much more than simply the passage of time; it is an ongoing manifestation of the relationship between God and His people, an ongoing Revelation if you wish; a continuous reflection on the experience with God, a deepening of faith and theological thought. In short, all history is history of salvation. The full idea of Christ, then, exists nowhere but in the memory of the Church, and all sacred art is a visual expression of the memory of this image, which, though appearing in various forms, always remains the same.<sup>5</sup> One might say that the consciousness of the Church is the *fons imaginorum*, the source for all images. Therefore, the Church being concrete and visible, the commemoration of events, institutions, dogma, persons and prelates also forms a consciousness of – we might even say reveals – this history of salvation. Church history, then, is the very place where the Triune God appears and is incarnated in a recognizable form. The very vehicle of this incarnation is the faith-filled reflection, the *oculus fidei*, watching, discerning, reflecting and remembering; what we may call remembrance, *memoria*. The history of salvation is acknowledged and recognized in retrospect, based on experiences, events and personalities. Therefore, religious commemorative medals presuppose and are vehicles of this 'incarnation'. Since this perspective on history makes it the *modus operandi* of a continuous Divine Revelation, the distinction between commemorative and devotional medals cannot be absolute. Any medal which in some way remembers and articulates the history of

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<sup>4</sup> John Cook: The Amuletic Medal as a Contemporary Art Form, originally published in *Bulletin, Club Francaise de la Médaille*, Oct. 1983; the text a speech at the XIX FIDEM Congress in Florence, 1983. Cf. the catalogue of the John Cook exhibition in Medialia Gallery in New York, autumn of 2007, 4–7, here 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Romano Guardini: Das religiöse Bild und der unsichtbare Gott. *Arte liturgica in Germania* (exhibition catalogue). Rome 1956, 13–25.

Christianity within a Christian frame of interpretation must necessarily have an epiphanic dimension.

As examples of commemorative medals, two fairly recent, thematically related, papal bronze medals, designed by the North Italian artist Enrico Manfrini (1917–2003), shall be presented: The older of the two medals was issued in Rome in 1964 (or 1965) to commemorate the third session of the second Vatican Council. The more recent medal was issued in Rome in 1989, commemorating the pastoral visit of Pope John Paul II to the Nordic countries.

The medal of 1964 was struck by the firm E. Senesi in Pognano, Lombardia. It weighs 37 gr., and its diameter is 44 mm. (Fig. 2) The obverse carries the signature of the artist, while the signature of the Senesi firm appears on the reverse.



2. Bronze medal by Enrico Manfrini (1917–2003) commemorating the third session of Vatican II 1964. Obverse (left) and reverse.

The obverse of the medal shows Christ enthroned in front of a number of church buildings. St. Peter's can be identified, otherwise they are simply buildings symbolizing various denominations; Russian and English features can be distinguished. The inscription on the reverse quotes John 17, 21: *vt vnum sint*, 'that they may be one', and continues: *tertia sessio concilii oecumenici vaticani secvndi*, 'the third session of the second ecumenical Vatican council'. The reverse shows St. Peter being rescued from the waves by Christ; the inscription quotes Matt 14,31a: *extendens manvm apprehendit evm. pavlus vi. pont. max.* 'Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him. Paul VI, Pontiff'.

The motif of the medal is conventionally figurative, as in most of the traditional religious medals. The task of conveying a specific message with an official character seems to have governed the choice of form. There was no room for formal ambiguity, since such ambiguity is often regarded as producer of an equally ambiguous message. We shall return to this important point when discussing the contemporary 'unofficial' religious medals. However, as early as in 1900, a deviation from the purely naturalistic

form was found in one of the medals of Leo XIII, made to mark the Holy year, and a degree of freedom in the treatment may also be discerned in a medal made in 1954 to commemorate the 100 years' jubilee of the dogma of Immaculate Conception. Still, the medal by which John XXIII marked the opening of Vatican II in 1962 was perhaps one of the first medals in a clearly modernizing style. Basically, however, the traditional religious medals remained figurative if slightly stylized or abstract, even when a new and more independent medallic art and a new formal vocabulary emerged during the 1960s. The vast majority of modern religious objects belong to this slightly modernizing style, which lives on in its own special habitat further and further from contemporary art, medallic or otherwise. Compared to contemporary visual art (and with what else should one compare?), this majority appears anachronistic and hence unauthentic. This is one of the aesthetic problems of contemporary religious medals, which they share with all medals commemorating specific persons or events by imitative representations (mimesis).

The representations on the two sides of the medal refer to the two important documents produced by the third session which ended in November 1964. On the obverse, text and picture refer to the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. Jesus' wish for unity among the apostles is repeated in the quotation from 'The High Priestly Prayer' in John 17. Even if the Catholic Church certainly cannot be accused of promoting indifferentism, the ecumenical road to unity is Christ Himself; he alone is the point of departure and the goal. Thus, the figure of Christ dominates, in the composition and in terms of size, providing a point of gravity, while the various church buildings, even St. Peter's, seem clearly subordinate to Him and His wish. The dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, is visualized on the reverse. The Church ship and Peter are saved by Jesus, the hand of the Lord leading His flock through the ages. Even in stormy weather and rough sea, Christ remains by His Church, rescuing it and eventually calming the waters. Immediately after the passage quoted, Jesus continues: 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' So, the medal communicates that there should be no fear, the Church is held, guided and safeguarded always by the Lord Himself.

In the promotion of a Christian unity which is configured to Christ and His will, one might detect a reflection of Teilhard de Chardin's great vision of the entire history of the universe as one coherent movement, originating from Alpha, and converging – just as ecumenism must necessarily do – towards the one point Omega; cf. Revelation 21,6: 'I [am] the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end'. Pulled by the gravity of Omega, Christ, all becomes one.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, as late as in 1962 the Roman Holy Office

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<sup>6</sup> See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ (1881–1955): *Le Phénomène Humain*, written in 1938–1940, but not published until posthumously in 1955. In his speech at the ecumenical service in Uppsala, Sweden, 9th June 1989, John Paul II quoted from *Lumen Gentium* when articulating the convergence into one people, 'a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness', one people, one Church. See §2 section 1:

condemned some of Teilhard de Chardin's writings, yet as Vatican II unfolded he seemed if not *de iure*, then *de facto* rehabilitated.<sup>7</sup> The two documents were the most important result of the third session, and they were approved on the last meeting, on 21st November 1964. The medal was struck to commemorate this achievement.<sup>8</sup>

25 years later, Manfrini designed another bronze medal to commemorate the visit of John Paul II in June 1989 to the Nordic countries. (Fig. 3) This time, however, the bronze medal was gilt. It was struck at the Stefano Johnson factory in Milano. It weighs 50 gr., its diameter is 50 mm. The obverse has the signatures 's. johnson' and 'e. manfrini', the reverse carries only the signature of the artist.



3. Bronze medal by Enrico Manfrini (1917–2003) commemorating the pastoral trip of pope John Paul II to the Nordic countries in 1989. Obverse (left) and reverse.

The obverse of this medal shows a half figure portrait of the pope, vested in a chasuble, the pallium visible too, wearing his zucchetto, skullcap, and clutching his pastoral cross in his well known way.<sup>9</sup> The likeness of the portrait is not particularly impressive, but it does not matter much, since the contour alone with the familiar staff and gesture would suffice to denote the figure as John Paul II – the first true media star of the Catholic hierarchy. The inscription on the obverse reads: *ioannes paulus ii pont. max.* 'John Paul the second, pontiff'. When discussing medals on the theme of ecumenism, this very title has a particular meaning. Pontifex Maximus, the 'supreme bridge-builder', was an important old Roman religious title. In an ecumenical perspective, of course, the task of

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[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1989/june/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19890609\\_uppsala\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1989/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19890609_uppsala_en.html).

<sup>7</sup> The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, was one of its most important documents and seemed quite influenced by the thoughts of Teilhard de Chardin.

<sup>8</sup> In 1963, Lello Scorzelli (1921- ) had designed a relatively modern bronze medal commemorating the 2nd session of the council, also with E. Senesi as minter, and likewise with a diameter of 44 mm.

<sup>9</sup> In 1972, a medal with the theme of the conversion of St. Paul actually had on its obverse a rather similar representation of Paul VI holding a pastoral cross.

building bridges – to other Christian denominations – would be particularly meaningful. On the reverse Christ is depicted as the Good Shepherd, standing in the middle of his flock, which is arranged so as to form a cross. All the sheep are turned attentively towards Christ, alluding to John 10,4b: 'the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice'. The legend mentions the five countries visited and the period of the visits, norge island finland danmark sverige 1–10. VI 1989. Then follows the same passage from the gospel of John as on the 1964 medal: 'ut omnes unum sint jo. 17.21'.

While pastoral trips of the popes would usually have the visit to Catholics as their main purpose, the visit to the Nordic countries, with their very small Catholic minorities (less than 1 %) in basically Lutheran populations, naturally attained an ecumenical character. While visiting the Catholic diaspora remained the main focus, the pope was clear about the ecumenical dimension of his trip. In his very first speech, on June 1st, he followed the consequences back to the ecumenical document of Vatican II, and indirectly quoted John 17, 21: My visit to the Nordic countries is a confirmation of the Catholic Church's commitment to the ecumenical task of fostering unity among all Christians. Twenty-five years ago the Second Vatican Council clearly impressed the urgency of this challenge on the Church. My predecessors have pursued this goal with persevering attention through the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine source and guarantor of the ecumenical movement. From the beginning of my Pontificate I have made ecumenism a priority of my pastoral concern and action. God grant that my visit will bring us ever closer to that full fellowship in faith and love which Christ himself wished for his followers.

When meeting the Finnish president Mauno Koivisto on 4th June, John Paul II repeated this ecumenical hope: 'I would hope that the fellowship that has grown between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran and Orthodox Churches here may be further strengthened by this pastoral visit'.<sup>10</sup> Actually, in each country visited, ecumenical encounters formed an integral part of the pastoral trip, and the quotation from John 17, 21, found on the medal, was repeated several times. Undoubtedly, the pope definitely envisaged his trip to the Lutheran countries in the north as an ecumenical endeavour. Precisely this dimension was articulated by these two medals, the medal of 1964 paving the way, as it were, for the medal of 1989; both commemorating the ecumenical aspect which was truly a new perspective articulated by Vatican II and practised by a papal visit to the Lutheran countries in the north.

In the presentation above, little is said about the actual form language, and the message conveyed seems strangely independent of the form by which it is articulated. A

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<sup>10</sup> In Norway: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1989/june/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19890601\\_arrivo-norvegia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1989/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19890601_arrivo-norvegia_en.html), §4, section 2. In Finland: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1989/june/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19890604\\_pres-finlandia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1989/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19890604_pres-finlandia_en.html), §3 section 2.

latent problem in all iconographic analyses is the tendency to disregard or overlook the question of form or art. Concentration on meaning appears to happen at the expense of interest in form. Since any work of art, indeed, any visual representation, is a combination of subject and form, this poses a problem, inherent in most iconographic studies. The task, then, would be to analyze form as a constitutive element in the production of meaning. We shall return to that particular problem, when discussing some of the modern art medals.

### **Traditional religious medals: devotional medals**

Representative and commemorative religious medals, like those presented above, have a long history, at least going back to the Renaissance, but devotional medals have an even longer history, going back to the first centuries of Christianity. The possibilities of mass production provided by the industrial age of the 19th century, resulted in an enormous multitude of medals produced to make the Church visibly present, but first and foremost to create, articulate and sustain the devotional life of the faithful. This would remain the case in the 20th century, particularly in the later part, where the culturally extremely important phenomenon of mass tourism, often even 'religious tourism', would create an immense demand for devotional medals. Again, a blurred line exists between souvenirs, devotional objects and, indeed, jewellery – offered tourists and pilgrims at various more or less holy sites all over the world. The bronze pendant on a key ring, bought on the Greek island of Syros in 2006, measures 39 x 28 mm., may serve as an example of this: With its obverse showing a relief of the 'Virgin of the Passion' (Panagia tou Pathous), it would definitely have qualified as a medal, had it not been for the fact that its reverse shows nothing but raised letters with the Greek text 'Greetings from Syros'. (Fig. 4)



4. Bronze medal and souvenir on a key ring from Syros, Greece; produced c. 2005. Obverse (left) and reverse.



In itself, mass production does not necessarily result in bad forms, or less attention to aesthetic aspects of the products. However, concerning medals as devotional objects, the devotion invested in and served by the medal appears to have been deemed far more important than mere aesthetic considerations. A devotional medal is an instrument of devotion, and precisely this instrumentality transfers the interest from the object itself to the devotion. Much to the chagrin of art historians, aestheticians and numismatists, it remains a grim fact of life that aesthetic quality, the question of 'art' as such, hardly matters at all compared to the piety invested in and, indeed, articulated by devotional medals. Hence, many such medals display all the features of 'Kitsch', and most contemporary devotional medals are therefore unable to attract the interest of art collectors, museums or art historians, and one might suspect: of numismatists.

Within the present survey, there is no room for a lengthy discourse on the relation between artistic quality and Christian art. Undoubtedly, this relationship is often experienced as at least tensional. Due to the context, which is existential, namely the practice of faith – and ultimately that too is a question of God – the 'kitschy-ness' of devotional objects has not only been an artistic problem, but a theological and even moral one, since it attacks the very fabric of 'the good, the true and the beautiful'.<sup>11</sup> If a medal is an expression of bad taste, how can it be good and true? And another equally fundamental problem: if there is an intrinsic link between religious and artistic quality as it has been assumed, then lack of artistic quality amounts to far more than just an aesthetic problem, it concerns the religious statement and its kerygmatic efficiency.<sup>12</sup>

Some medals exist as more or less fixed forms, which are reproduced time and time again. One such obvious example is the 'Miraculous Medal' of 1830. Another example is the medal of St. Benedict. Its power to prevent evil is the reason for its popularity, having been used almost as a Christian amulet<sup>13</sup> since it appeared around the middle of the 17th century. The medal is found inserted into a lot of more or less devotional objects, like crucifixes or key rings, providing protection for their owner against all evil.<sup>14</sup> By far the most popular version was produced in (and after) 1880, under supervision of the monks at Monte Cassino in Italy, to celebrate the 1400th birthday of St. Benedict. This is the version still offered and purchased, and its popularity

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<sup>11</sup> This basically medieval trinity was repeated by Joseph Hoster in *Arte liturgica in Germania*, 1956, op. cit., pp. 26–30, and ten years later in *De Nieuwe Katechismus* of the Dutch bishops. On the question of Kitsch, cf. R. Egenter: *Kitsch und Christenleben*, Buch- und Kunstverlag der Abtei Ettal 1950, where Kitsch is rejected on a moral and religious basis, e.g. 105. Cf. further Hugo Schnell: *Zur Situation der Christlichen Kunst*. München-Zürich 1961, 85, where he stated that the rejection of 19th century Kitsch was not only aesthetic, but spiritual and religious.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Urban Rapp OSB: *Konzil, Kunst und Künstler*, Joseph Knecht-verlag, Frankf.a.M. 1965, 56–64 and 68–75.

<sup>13</sup> Concerning the continued use of religious medals as amulets in the early part of the 20th century, see W. L. Hildburgh: Notes on some Flemish Amulets and Beliefs. *Folklore*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1908), 200–213.

<sup>14</sup> See A. J. Corbierre: *Numismatique Benedictine: histoire scientifique et liturgique des croix et des medailles de Saint Benoit, patriarche des moines d'occident d'apres des documents inedits*, I–II, Roma 1901. Cf. also <http://www.osb.org/gen/medal.html>, downloaded 22.04.2008.

has effectively effaced all other types. Thus, the apotropaic power of the St. Benedict medal – directly imbedded in the inscription - seems almost intrinsically linked to the Cassino type, even if other types have the same inscription. Modern means of communication and production, together with the 'amuletic' aspect of the medal, seem to have promoted this formal fixation of power in the 1880-version. The medal showed here was bought in a Catholic bookshop in London in 2005; it is made of gilt brass with decorated parts in enamel, and has a diameter of 46 mm. (Fig. 5)



5. St. Benedict medal of the Cassino type, produced c. 2000. Obverse (left) and reverse.

Apart from the actual meaning of the various inscriptions on the medal, which you can find easily on the internet (in itself a testimony of the popularity of the medal), two aspects of this devotional medal are interesting: its form and its status as a sacramental. Many of the features on the medal existed in some way, but when the medal was redesigned in 1880, the form employed for the redesign was the natural Benedictine choice at the time, namely the style of the German 'School of Beuron'.<sup>15</sup> It was a stylized, decorative style, which broke with the Nazarene naturalism and/or medievalism of contemporary religious art. At least two of the main artists, who established and developed the Beuron style, had since 1876 lived in the monastery of Monte Cassino. Presumably, the German monks were responsible for the simplicity of the design, its symmetry and stylized, archaic frontality all features belonging to the school of Beuron. While the choice was particularly Benedictine in 1880, it has until this day remained the authorized form of the medal.

<sup>15</sup> For a short introduction to that style, see Hubert Krins: *Die Kunst der beuronner Schule*. Beuroner Kunstverlag, Beuron 1998.

When blessed, medals of St. Benedict become sacramentals, which is important because their protective power is increased through the blessing by a Catholic cleric.<sup>16</sup> This kind of strengthening of the effect of devotional medals is well known, and many such medals are still blessed, either immediately when purchased, for instance at some monastery or holy site, or by the local priest when the owner has returned home. Thereby, they receive increased power to fulfil their functions as instruments of devotion and of support of a holy life until the end. Sacramentals are thus regarded by the faithful as especially efficient in exciting piety and intensifying devotion, protecting from evil, as well as supporting and deepening the religious life of their owners, making it easier for them to obtain Grace. In Greece, a small silver medal may be given as a gift at baptism. The medal – to be worn around wrist or neck – carries on the obverse a flat relief of the Pantocrator, on the reverse the traditional initials around a cross, ic/xc/ni/ka. The medal would surely be blessed by the priest, but for good measure a blue glass eye is attached to it, to avert the evil eye from the baby. The one illustrated was bought on the island of Samos in July 2007 for 9 Euros. It weighs only 6 gr. including the chain, and measures only 20 x 15 mm. (Fig. 6) If not in theory, at least in practice, there is no clear distinction between amulet and blessed religious medal – or, indeed, between medals and jewellery.



6. Greek baptismal medal in silver with apotropaic eye of blue glass, probably produced c. 2005. Obverse (left) and reverse.

Since the 16th century, another way of increasing the effect of the medal and thereby the benefit enjoyed has been the attachment of indulgences to it. Or rather, the indulgence is not so much attached to the object as it is a result of the object's

<sup>16</sup> Instruction from the Sacred Congregation of Rites in Rome, dated 26th September 1964.

devotional use. So, while the indulgence is linked to the object, its 'realization' depends on the devotion of the believer. In both cases, be it blessings or indulgences, the medallic object is supplied from the outside with an extra power which is not inherent in the object, but which must be added through some rite.

To the believer who wears it around the neck or carries it in the pocket, the devotional medal constitutes an objective reference to things holy and Divine, independently of the subjective state of mind. In this way, the medal functions as a constant reminder. On most devotional medals, the inscriptions contain prayers; they are not lengthy as in the St. Benedict medal, perhaps only the formula 'opn' (ora pro nobis, pray for us), but in this way the medal itself seems to pray almost on behalf of its owner. The legend always prays, even if the owner does not.

In all this, we realize that devotional medals exist with a special closeness to people, a special importance. They may lack artistic quality, but they have something else, which should not be too easily dismissed: they matter. And they matter more when being sacramentals and providing indulgences. They matter because they are instrumental in procuring divine protection, at the same time embodying a spiritual presence of existential importance. They are deeply embedded in people's lives. While art medals and medallic objects of great beauty and power may be put on display at exhibitions, and sometimes taken out by collectors for a few moments of enjoyment, devotional medals – carried, worn, clutched and kissed – accompany the faithful from baptism to death bed. In 1983, the American medallist John Cook stated that if the medal was to survive, it had to become something that mattered.<sup>17</sup> What he looked for was a medallic art which sought deeper levels of meaning, penetrating into the psyche of contemporary man, with the capability of being of service to mankind, articulating a profundity which satisfied universal needs – in short: all qualities which to some extent characterize devotional medals. So, while he did not look for religion, he nevertheless wanted a certain related quality in what he called 'the amuletic medal'.

Yet, if devotional medals have many of these 'amuletic' qualities, but not the aesthetic quality which John Cook undoubtedly took for granted in this new medallic art, the problem of form and art still remains unsolved. It shall be revisited in connection with the contemporary religious medals. Presently, however, we shall take a closer look at two contemporary devotional medals with specific though varied functions: a medal for your pet animal, and a gift on the occasion of confirmation. As is the case with so many devotional medals, no designer's signature appears anywhere.

The pet medal does have a certain tradition. Earlier in the 20th century, in Italy, St. Antony medals were attached to the collars of life stock for protection – and as far back as in 1612, in the Visitation scene on an altarpiece in Antwerp, Rubens painted

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<sup>17</sup> John Cook 1983, op. cit., 4.

Elizabeth's lap dog with a Marian medal around its neck in a pink ribbon!<sup>18</sup> The medal for pets presented here, the Saint Francis Pet Medaillon, can be purchased at St. John's church of the Capuchin friars in New York. (Fig. 7)



7. Saint Francis Pet Medaillon (Cat-size), purchased in 2007. Obverse (left) and reverse.

It is made of metal with an 'antique Silver finish' with a diameter of 28 mm ('cat-size'). On the obverse, St. Francis is shown surrounded by animals, the legend reading: 'st. francis of assisi protector of all animals'. The reverse is meant for engraving the name of the pet and the telephone number of its owner. Raised letters say: my name is ..... if lost please call .....<sup>19</sup> By attaching the medal to the collar of a beloved pet, the protection from 'inadvertent loss or fatal injury' by the patron saint of animals is evoked, the protective power heightened as the pet medal is delivered in 'blessed condition'.

The medal in memory of the reception of the sacrament of confirmation (German: Firmung) is offered in the spring/summer 2007 catalogue of the German Beuroner Kunstverlag. (Fig. 8) It is made of bronze with a diameter of 40 mm.<sup>20</sup>



8. German Confirmation medal, produced c. 2005. Obverse and reverse.

<sup>18</sup> On the use of St. Antony medals, see Hildburgh 1908, op. cit., 211. The Rubens painting is the north wing of the triptych 'Descent from the Cross', in the south transept of the cathedral in Antwerp.

<sup>19</sup> According to a sheet on the medal distributed in the church, the price of USD 20 includes engraving. What is shown here is 'cat-size', for dogs or other large pets a larger medal can be provided. According to the sheet, 'The St. Francis Pet Medaillon is a ministry of caring for all God's creatures'.

<sup>20</sup> See the catalogue on p. 17: 'no. 795, Geistsendung, Durchmesser 4 cm, inkl. Lederband, 4,95 Euro'. A discount is offered when more than 25 copies are bought (for instance by a parish for its youth). It may have been offered for the first time a few years earlier, 2007 was not the first time.

The obverse shows a large dove coming from above diving towards three rings with seven small balls. Evidently, the dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit, through the sacrament coming from God to those who receive the sacrament (the *confirmandi*). During the confirmation mass, the bishop, extending his hands over the *confirmandi*, prays:

'All powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen'.

These seven gifts of the Spirit are signified by the small balls on the rings. On the reverse, raised letters pronounce a prayer: 'Give us your Spirit and let us be your witnesses'. The prayer articulates the ecclesial importance of the sacrament, by which youth is called and equipped to serve the Gospel of Christ through their lives. Compared to the confirmation medals of the 19th century which displayed a representation of the rite, the bishop standing before the *confirmandus/a* in front of an altar etc., the designer of the present medals has tried to achieve a simple design, reduced to a single major symbol, hence also concentrating on the essence of the sacrament, namely the reception of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The modernized and stylized, yet still figurative representation of the dove, and the structuring of the background, is similar to so many of the religious bronze objects produced in Germany since the 1960s. A huge product culture has been developed, still very much in demand. It is characterized by a specific religious, figurative style which seeks simplification in a slightly abstract way, fond of established symbols, immediately recognizable as modernizing as stylization substitutes naturalism, yet at the same time safe, conservative. Details about designers, artists and modes of production and distribution are seldom revealed and almost unobtainable. The features recognized in this German devotional style of the later part of the 20th century are also found in a number of art medals, particularly when such medals perform a specific commemorative task.

Two more objects should be mentioned here, since they seem to have an 'amuletic' function, and display figures which belong to Christian tradition. Today, they enjoy an immense popularity far beyond Christian spirituality. They show angels. We might very well call them 'medallic objects'. They are small objects with no texts, but simply a relief of an angel, in both cases executed in a modernizing style, and, obviously, with no presumptions of art. The first is a bronze object offered in the same Beuron

catalogue as the confirmation medal, presented as a 'Handschmeichler' depicting a Guardian angel.<sup>21</sup> It translates something like 'an object which is pleasant to hold in your hand'. (Fig. 9)



9. Handschmeichler (left), German, and small Guardian angel medal, American, both produced c. 2005

Obviously, the object is meant to be kept in the pocket and held in the hand from time to time. The forms are smooth since these forms are supposed to be particularly attractive to the sense of touch. The category is known in German, where those selling such objects talk of 'tactile aesthetics' and of the overlapping of the haptic and the visual in the experience of the object. This particular perspective is also well known in the contemporary concept of 'hand-held art', which quite often is regarded as an important aspect of the charisma of medallic art – much to the despair of museum professionals! Related to the smooth Guardian Angel hand-held object is another angel, probably a Guardian Angel as well, namely the one found on a small uniface medallion bought in 2007 in the store of St. Patrick's cathedral in New York. It is cheap, made of metal, perhaps polished pewter, and it measures 25 x 22 mm. On the obverse an angel, in flight as it were, on the reverse nothing except a stamp 'v+k'. Obviously, like the German Handschmeichler, this small object is also meant to be carried in a pocket.

While the German object presupposes actual touching, the American object seems to have an even more clearly pronounced amuletic function. Both angels are simply supposed to be carried along as guardian angels. The pictures on the objects represent them, and through these objects they accompany the carrier or owner, obviously as a sort of protection. The design itself may have played a less important role, the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 16, 'Handschmeichler, 302VR, Schutzengel, Höhe ca. 5 cm, 6,90 Euro. Neu'. It measures 48 x 23 mm. Several other German firms offer such Handschmeichlers as Guardian Angels to carry with you.

Handsmeichler should be touched rather than looked at, and the small angel from New York was to remain hidden in the bag, the wallet or a pocket. Obviously, the objects are designed, but the quality of the design as such was probably never perceived as integral to this protective function.

### **Contemporary religious medals: articulating faith**

In defining some medals as 'traditional', the term indicates that these medals continue to serve the traditional purposes of representation, commemoration, propaganda and devotion. Compared to such medals, contemporary medallic objects are basically regarded as art, a considerable emphasis, therefore, placed on the question of form. As with modern art in general, a clear distinction between 'form' and 'content' is neither recognized nor regarded possible, or, rather, the two dimensions merge into one. Yet even if the art medal is acknowledged as a unity of form and content, there is a tendency to move form into the centre of attention, challenging the iconography or theme as the constitutive element of greater importance. Anything can validly be regarded as an art medal, as long as it has artistic quality; to the general interest in medallic art, the content, or message, or statement conveyed, necessarily becomes secondary. It does not mean that medallic art has no function beyond displaying form or art, but the conditions have changed in a way which poses some problems concerning religious medals.

In the history of the religious medal, the message conveyed should be clear and unambiguous, easily understood by its intended audience which was capable of recognizing conventional motifs, particularly when aided by inscriptions. In addition, precisely by being traditional, the religious medal articulated official Christendom, thereby simultaneously acquiring an official and collective quality.<sup>22</sup> The modern art medal departed from all that: due to the hegemony of form it was – as all modern art – basically ambiguous, in the sense that it may be interpreted in various ways. It is quite often without inscriptions, relying on form alone. It is by definition untraditional, and fundamentally individual. Even when conveying messages in line with official Christendom, they cannot in any way be regarded as 'official', and while they may articulate positions or expressions of current interest to many, they are not 'collective' in the traditional religious sense. So, when looking at contemporary religious medals, we cannot expect them to perform the same services as the traditional medals. Nevertheless, within a religiously articulated frame of reference, a number of medallists

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<sup>22</sup> In the instructio *De arte sacra*, published by the Holy See in 1952, Pope Pius XII referred to Codex Iuris Canonici (1917), can. 1261, which stated that no deviation from the tradition of the Church was allowed, cf New Catholic Encyclopedia. McGraw-Hill, New York 1967, Liturgical art, vol. 8, 188 seq.



do voice personal experiences or human concerns, conveyed by what they regard as appropriate and adequate forms and symbols.

If what we might call 'dogmatic clarity' is reduced in favour of formal requirements, modern art does, indeed, provide new possibilities as well. The form with its poetic quality breaks with the discursive language. While this may be a problem in a more narrow catechetical perspective, a new language is gained - a poetic voice which may voice deeper concerns and combine features, reflections and elements of tradition in new ways. It is a language which is one with the message; where everything is expression.



10. Baptismal medal in bronze by Barbro Raen Thomassen, made in 2007 on commission from the Collection of medals at the University Museum in Bergen. Obverse (left) and reverse.

An example of form adding a significant meaning to an already Christian message, is found in a baptismal medal from 2007, bronze with a turquoise blue-green finish, by the Norwegian artist Barbro Raen Thomassen (b. 1955). It is heavy, weighs 702 gr., and measures 98 x 98 mm. (fig. 10) The octagonal form refers to the traditional form of baptisteries, while the convex surface makes the dove and the text move towards the beholder. Based on this convexity, everything is in motion as a significant aspect of the Holy Spirit, the Mover. On the reverse, a quotation from Psalm 42, 2 answers the coming of the Spirit with an outburst of longing: 'As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God'.

A series of cast bronze medals made by the English artist Elisabeth Koster (b. 1926) in 2003 has the Revelation as its theme, the message to each of the seven churches of Asia articulated by a medal. The medal shown here concerns the church of Laodicea which was lukewarm, neither warm nor cold, and with no idea of her own wretchedness. (Fig. 11) It measures 65 x 85 mm and weighs 214 gr.



11. Bronze medal, The angel of Laodicea, made by Elisabeth Koster in 2003. Obverse and reverse.

The obverse shows a relief of the angel and the name of the church in raised letters. On the reverse, Christ, 'the Amen', exhorts the church to buy clothes, an angel giving to people 'white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed' (Rev 3,18). The word 'overcome' (through repentance etc., cf. v. 19) appears at the bottom as an exhortation; for he who overcomes, i.e. conquers, will be granted a seat next to Christ. The medal shows the reduction in terms of motif and composition which quite often is necessary to satisfy the demands connected with a small size. The artist has to edit the message of the angel, and such an edition must always be guided by the judgement of the individual artist.<sup>23</sup> The freedom of modern art pertains not only to forms, but also to the new and individual editing of traditional motifs.

In analyzing contemporary religious medals, form cannot be overlooked; it is, so it seems, more integral to the message, and cannot be forgotten in the iconographical analysis. Evidently, any medal is also form – never message alone. But it has been the modern position that since this form is an intrinsic part of the message or content, it must be of high quality, must be art. The aesthetic or formal quality is, therefore, indispensable for the conveyance of a message of quality. The equation 'artistic quality equals quality of message' means that form matters. While this is a rather commonplace notion concerning modern art in general, this too became the position of those propagating a new religious art after World War II. The bond between quality of form and of message, caused Kitsch to be rejected as a reduction of the quality and authenticity of the Christian message, and hence, a spiritual as much as an aesthetic problem (Egenter). The first religious medals in a modern form language, more free and less naturalistic, yet still figurative, were produced in the 1960s. The discussions on sacred art and modernity went on through the 60s and the 70s, where some – based on the old argument for the

<sup>23</sup> In a letter to me, dated 24th April 2004, (j.no. 194/04) Koster wrote that '*The Book of Revelations remains for me a source of inexhaustible inspiration*'. In 2000, Koster had already made a series of four circular bronze medals with the general themes of the Revelation to John.

legitimacy of the visual arts – argued that the duality of sacred and profane had been dissolved by the Incarnation. Hence, Christian anthropology had to be based on Christology – an echo of the cosmology of Teilhard de Chardin.

But if the distinction between sacred and profane disappeared, what would constitute Christian art? The answer was: the context. In 1977 a number of Catholic and Protestant academics maintained that there existed no particularly Christian art; a work of art was neutral, it would be reinterpreted or redefined by being placed in a Christian context, for instance inside a church.<sup>24</sup> Today, the current definition of art is basically contextual as well, or institutional if you wish: art is what is displayed as such, just as sacred art becomes sacred when appearing in a religious or ecclesial context. However, this does not mean that a work of art cannot be religious outside a specific religious context, if this were argued our experience would simply disclaim such an argument. The idea of the contextuality of meaning depends, obviously, on the inherent ambiguity in modern art. Undeniably, however, the question of motif cannot be disregarded or considered irrelevant if for instance a medallion object should qualify as 'Christian' or 'religious'. So, if formal considerations challenge the traditions and concepts of Christianity, a balance must be found, a fruitful tension kept living, yet held at bay.

This question is not purely academic or aesthetic. Since it concerns the basic criterion for acquisition, it is of operational importance and thus fundamental for any collector or museum. The motif, the theme, the iconography, therefore, must play a constitutive role. It need not happen at the expense of form. While a religious medal like the St. Francis Pet Medaillon may be only religious, a religious art medal must display both religion and art. Christian art, and thus the religious art medal, is subject to the same laws and criteria which govern all other art forms. Any pious content or message does not dispense from formal considerations and concerns by virtue of its exaltedness, because the task of form is to express the exalted content adequately. It is equally true, as stated by Vatican II in 1963, that there is no especially Christian style.<sup>25</sup> One may well ask: is the phenomenon 'religious medal' qualified by its intend to articulate some aspect of faith, to be a religious statement? If the intentional element is that important, then perhaps all other medals, regardless of their iconography, should be labelled as something else than 'religious'? Yet, the intention of the artist (often inaccessible to

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. the editorial in *Das Münster*, no. 4, 1977, 316, who voiced what one may regard as a 'semi-official' opposition to this view.

<sup>25</sup> Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, 1963, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art. 123: '*Ecclesia nullum artis stilum veluti habuit, sed ... modos cuiusvis aetatis admisit. (...) Nostrorum etiam temporum ... ars liberum in Ecclesia exercitium habeat*'. Cf. the prominent Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, who viewed expressionism as the condition for a truly Christian art: *Zur Theologie der bildenden Kunst und der Architektur*, in: *Kirchenbau und Ökumene*, (ed. G. Langmaack). Friedrich Wittig Verlag, Hamburg 1962, 20–25. The statement of the constitution, however, is only correct if we disregard the dominant medievalism of Christian art between Romanticism and World War I.

others) is a most difficult criterion, motif and inscription providing more stable ground, indeed.

If the motif, however, remains a constitutive component of a contemporary religious art medal, we may ask which features define the object as 'religious'. Apart from the obvious, the iconography, it may be the title. Sometimes an unspecified form is 'Christianized' by its title, sometimes a neutral title is given Christian significance through iconography.<sup>26</sup> Three examples may illustrate this: one is a medal titled 'Waver', by the Hungarian medallist János Kalmár, the second is a silver medal, 'Judas Kiss', by the Dutch artist Linda Verkaaik, and the third is a sequence of three medals, 'The Road', by the Bulgarian medallist Nadia Rozeva Green.



12. Bronze medal, 'Waver', made by János Kalmár in 1983.

János Kalmár (b. 1952) made 'Waver' in 1983. (Fig. 12) It is a uniface, bronze medal, measuring 83 x 65 mm and weighing 377 gr. On the reverse his initials are found. When I saw the object for the first time on his web site, I misread the title. I read 'Wafer'. Instead of someone who waves, I perceived it as a wafer in the sense of the host used for the Eucharist. And it made perfect sense. The form of the heavy object seems like a bread, and on that bread a small figure appears like a man hanging with extended arms, his head hanging down, in short: like a crucifix. Traditionally, hosts carry a flat relief of a crucifix, so the title 'wafer' simply explained the motif. But the intention of the artist was different. So – to continue the reflections on the intentional perspective - is it a religious medal? Not if the criterion is artistic intention; but perhaps, if it is how it is interpreted by the spectator. So, the 'religiousness' of that particular object is created in the interpretation, but the form – provided by the artist – allows this to be a reasonable

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Henrik v. Achen: Das Problem des Titels in der modernen christlichen Kunst. *Das Münster* (München) 1991, Heft 2, 103–106.

interpretation. Even if the title throws us off, from the artist's hand the form possesses what we might call 'religious potential'. To realize this potential demands a viewer; the artist, however, can do no more than offer the possibility of such an interpretation. What is conveyed by and modern work of art is the result of collaboration between the artist, who through form provides a direction, a possibility, something to perceive and interpret, and the audience who perceives and interprets. In this sense meaning is always created, first by the artist, then by the spectator.

The motif of a medal might trick memories or create associations – in the case with 'Waver' by Kalmár it obviously lead to a misreading of the title. Sometimes, though, the title steers the perception of the motif in a specific direction. This was the case with a silver medal from 2006 by the Dutch artist Linda Verkaaik (b. 1956) entitled 'Judaskus', Judas Kiss. (Fig. 13) It has a diameter of 55 mm, and weighs 142 gr. If the medal had not been given this particular title, but instead 'Love' or 'Closeness', or something else, one would not have placed it in the category of religious medals. Moreover, without the title the motif on the reverse, the two letters J opposite each other could hardly have been identified as letters, let alone interpreted as the Js of Judas and Jesus in confrontation; they would have remained enigmatic.



13. Silver medal, 'Judas kiss' made by Linda Verkaaik in 2006. Obverse (left) and reverse.

The motif is open to a number of interpretations, the title, however, narrows them down to one, determining the interpretation, and thus, 'creating' the specific motif.

The opposite happens before a sequence of three cast brass medals called 'The Road', made by Nadia Green (b. 1974) in 2003. (Fig. 14) This time, the neutral title is given a specific dimension by the fact that a cross is clearly visible, and, moreover, a crucifixion appears in a circle as if in a vision. The three medallic objects are somewhat uneven rectangles, cast in brass, 92/89/89 mm high and 96/96/93 mm wide, weighing 385/468/354/gr. The obverse of the first medal shows a person kneeling alone in front of a cross, the Crucified appearing in the sky. In the second, an angel-like figure (Guardian angel?) is seen right behind the kneeling person, and in the last medal the Crucified is

replaced by a sun whose rays beam towards the kneeling person, with the Guardian angel still right behind. The reverses carry only barely readable inscriptions: The first two are difficult to decipher, the last reads: 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matthew 3,2).



14. Brass medals, 'The Road', I-III, made by Nadia Green in 2003.

The use of specific Christian elements lends meaning to the neutral title. The road means a life, an experience, where the Cross is present, only bearable because someone has already carried it. It is the role of the Guardian angel to accompany the soul through life and direct it towards Heaven. Therefore, the Crucifixion is the source of light, like a sun; it does not remove the Cross, but it shrouds it in light, in hope.

Now, this interpretation, pious as it may be, is the meaning produced when I process what the form offers. The message or content emerges through the cooperation between artist and spectator; remaining, nevertheless, fundamentally individual and thus uncontrollable.<sup>27</sup> The exact intention of the artist cannot be perceived clearly from the forms alone, but depends on his or her written statement. To a certain extent, there will always be this gap between intention and form, since form seldom is able to cover entirely every aspect of the intention and construction of thought behind the work of art. Hence, our interpretation must work on its own, using the presented form merely as a point of departure. The approach through form alone – without conventional motifs and written recipes of meaning – entails a basic uncertainty, or rather, a potentiality to be realized in the meeting between the medal and the person holding it in his hand. There are several possible interpretations, nothing seems irrevocably fixed. In this the contemporary art medal participates in a freedom which is characteristic of modern art as such. While one can easily understand why this might not always be seen as an unquestionable advantage from a traditional, ecclesial point of view, it offers religious art

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<sup>27</sup> In an e-mail to me on 26th September 2006, Nadia Green wrote that the work was very personal, created during a time of looking into herself to find answers. The work '*explores the division of Earth and heaven and it's a humble admiration of the sacrifice made for us humans. The last piece in the series shows how Heaven descends on Earth, and the constant transition from dark to light*'. The road, she wrote, is the personal road each of us travels, discovering for ourselves the truth and values that matter.

medals new possibilities. But then again, the task of Christian art, as Romano Guardini stated in 1956, is not to teach faith in the catechetical sense, but to prepare for an epiphany.

### **Contemporary religious medals: commenting on human existence**

The freedom of modern art seems absolute, and the modern religious art must – if it wants to be regarded as art – have the same freedom. So should the beholder, who cannot be limited to whatever the artist might have or have not intended. Once out there, the message of the medal is no longer solely decided by the artist. There are today a number of works which comment on human existence. This need not be a religious or Christian comment, but there are quite many works which are open to a Christian interpretation. Perhaps this is so because so many fundamentally human experiences lend themselves open to the interpretive (and expressive) apparatus of Christian theology or spirituality, even if the medallist never intended to create a 'religious', or 'Christian' medal. History weighs in, experience and tradition, and in such cases the act of interpretation may effectively separate intention from perception.

There is at least one category where the Christian component is what we might call objective, not unlike what we have just discussed, namely medals using elements from Christian tradition and iconography to make a statement or to comment on human experience and life. While such elements carry a meaning provided by Christian tradition, they are components of a statement which does not in itself have to be Christian at all. The old symbol, e.g. the Cross, may appear, but its context is new and provides a new meaning of it. Sharing a common history, a common heritage, such old-new elements are part of an existing repertoire, yet they may be vehicles of any message. Angels have long ceased being particularly Christian, let alone Catholic, and today a crucified person might simply denote human suffering.

While a contemporary Christian art may employ signs which do not belong to Christian tradition,<sup>28</sup> a modern art seeking pure signs and symbols, open to all times and interpretations, 'uninhibited metaphors' (Roland Barthes), will often need signs belonging to Christian history: 'our children, these strangers playing around us, will one day come to our door with the thrown away signs'.<sup>29</sup> Quite often, precisely these elements make the statement existentially relevant and intense. It should be kept in mind, however, that the acquired general character of elements from traditional Christian iconography does

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Herbert Muck: *Werkzeuge und Zeichen*. Das Münster (München) 1976, no. 3, 221–228, here 228. Cf. further Schnell op. cit. 1961, 11: any art showing man in his true existence is a Christian art in the sense that man is created in the image of God. On 86–89, Schnell registers that signs and symbols are given a greater role in Christian art at the expense of naturalism.

<sup>29</sup> Quote from the danish poet and author Ole Sarvig (1921-81): *Krisens billedbog*, 2. ed., København: Gyldendal 1968, p. 152, poem dedicated to Otto Bruder, first published in *Vindrosen* 1962, no. 4.

not make them useless to a Christian interpretation – even if such features are employed without intending to offer a religious statement.

One such example is the bronze medal 'Tears for Souvenirs', made in 2006 by the Irish artist, Eamon Gray (b. 1978), in cast bronze, weighing 172 gr.; it has a diameter of 77 mm. (Fig. 15)



15. Bronze medal 'Tears for Souvenirs', made by Eamon Gray in 2006. Obverse (left) and reverse.

On the obverse, Gray uses the old Christian burial motif from the first Christian centuries, the opened and empty bird cage as a symbol of the changing relationship between body and soul in death. The reverse shows a solitary feather lying in the bottom of the space. His explanation, and indeed inspiration, did not come from the early Church, but from a French game, and his statement was not intended as anything religious at all. The issue is lost youth. 'The bird, as a symbol of youth, has escaped, leaving only a feather in its place, a fleeting memory (...) The cage door hangs open; youth has fled, as it will eventually escape us all. All that remain for us are the memories, the souvenirs of what was, what is lost to us'.<sup>30</sup>

In a few instances, the text functions as an image, drawing the event into the religious frame of reference. This is the case with a number of Israeli medals; the one shown here is a struck silver medal, issued by the Israeli state to commemorate the liberation of the hijacked plane in the airport of Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976. (Fig. 16) The medal has a diameter of 59 mm and weighs 115 gr.<sup>31</sup>

The obverse is simply a quotation from Psalm 18,17, 'He reached down from on high and seized me'. The entire text celebrates the rescue of David from his enemies and thus makes good sense considering the event to be remembered. The motif on the reverse is a combination of an Israeli plane, a sword and an olive branch. Sword and olive branch is the insignia of the Israeli Defence Forces. In a speech in Knesset,

<sup>30</sup> The artist's own text in *The Medal*, Autumn 2006, 93.

<sup>31</sup> On the edge an inscription reads: 'Silver 935 The state of Israel'. All inscriptions on the medal are in both Hebrew and English.



celebrating the event 30 years later, the passage was applied to the Israeli military in what appeared to be a more secular approach: 'The Jews were no longer helpless in the face of their enemies' murderous designs. They had a saviour in the form of the State of Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces'.<sup>32</sup> The event commemorated was no religious event, and the image on the reverse is not religious, but the text on the obverse interprets the event, and hence the image, religiously – even if a quite secularized version of it appeared 30 years later.



16. Silver medal, made in 1976 to commemorate 'Operation Jonathan'. Obverse (left) and reverse.

## Conclusion

In this short text I have endeavoured to provide a brief survey of the various categories of modern and contemporary religious medals, illustrated by objects in the medal collection of the University Museum in Bergen. Attached to the presentation I have offered some reflections on the phenomenon of the religious medal, and on its conditions of existence as part of contemporary medallic art. Certainly, it has been made clear that this field by no means can be perceived as homogeneous, neither qualitatively nor functionally. The present text has not tried to suggest uniformity where it does not exist. The only common denominator in this variety of objects – offering a broad definition of 'religious medals' - may be said to be a visualization of human conditions of existence interpreted from a Christian perspective or visually open to Christian interpretation. Religious medals manifest and articulate the cultural history of human faith and devotion in which they have always been embedded.

Precisely the variety of religious medals becomes the very point of attraction, lending itself to a large number of historical, ethnological and theological disciplines, but also to reflections on functionality, on form versus context, on the almost emblematic

<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.netanyahu.org/thiryeartoop.html>, downloaded 28.04.2008. The speech was delivered by Benjamin Netanyahu, the brother of the only Israeli casualty at Entebbe, Jonathan N. (hence the name 'Operation Jonathan'). It must be kept in mind that, in a Jewish context, the title 'saviour' is not as serious as in Christianity.

coexistence of pictures and texts, on the conditions of modern and contemporary art. Religious medals articulate all that man is, fears and hopes for. Indeed, the intrinsic charisma of numismatic studies in medallic art is the intimacy of great themes; the eternal wonder 'that so much can be concentrated within something so small'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Philip Attwood, in his editorial for the spring issue 2008 of *The Medal*, (London), no. 52/2008.