

Teaching the Faith through Art

by Miguel de Angel

Having been a professional artist in my previous career, I have always looked for ways to use art more directly in ministry. I have done greeting cards and t-shirts as fundraisers, painted murals, used my own art in talks, and encouraged students to draw after a talk as an alternative to journaling among other things. I also use art to reach the students that are visual learners. Not everyone internalizes things through reading or listening so art can be a great alternative medium. This article will focus on how to use art as part of your talks, presentations and discussions even if you are not an artist. If you are looking for ways to encourage your teens to use their artistic talents as a way to praise God - the article titled “**the aRts**” – also in this manual – has more relevant information on that topic.

Why art?

The Church has a great art tradition. In fact, for hundreds of years the Church was the number one patron of arts and artists in the world. Hundreds of years ago art was the principal way the stories of our faith were transmitted to the masses. They really understood the old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words.” People needed to “read” details to a story in a single painting or drawing. Many of the great artists did that and much more.

Art communicates at many different levels, conscious and unconscious, connecting with the viewer mentally, instinctually and viscerally in ways other mediums can't. Students will often be able to read a scene in a picture with great insight and add to a conversation when comparing two pieces of art even if they are not greatly familiar with the subject. For these reasons, art is immensely valuable as a tool to use with teens.

Using Art in Youth Ministry

Start by figuring out what you may want to cover. Is there a particular Bible passage that comes to mind? Once you have decided on a theme, you can turn to the Internet. Internet searches are an invaluable tool when looking for religious art to use in talks. At this point, you should search for images by title. Parables and biblical scenes are an easy place to start. Names of biblical figures and saints are also useful.

I found the below example¹ of two images of the *Prodigal Son* very useful. They depict the return of the prodigal son. Both are by Rembrandt in different mediums and at different times in his life. You can also compare different artists' work; they do not have to be by the same artist.

You can read the Bible passage before a general discussion of the images or have the discussion and *then* read the passage to see how your student's perception of the image may have changed after reading the text.

The particular blog where the two images of the *Prodigal Son* came from suggests great questions to help foster discussions when comparing the two images. The link does not have the complete Bible passage but does include a link to it on the Bible Gateway (biblegateway.com)²

Here are a few I would suggest for this particular example:

- How is the depiction of the father and the son similar/different in each picture?
- How do the figures gathered around the father and son affect the scene? Who are they?
- Does the color and lighting of the images suggest any additional insights into the scene that might not otherwise be there? If so what does it say?

Art Analysis

When looking at art, there are certain things that we should look at in order to “read” it and interpret the artist’s message. The color and lighting of the scene, the posture and expression of figures and the placement of the elements in the picture, including figures and background, should be considered.



I personally like Rembrandt’s line drawing of the Prodigal Son (the image to the left) more in this example. While the clothes of the son in the second image (the image to the right) are torn and one shoe is missing, the son in the first image hardly has enough clothes to cover himself, suggesting the harsh time he’s had away from the father. The father is leaning forward. You can almost feel the father’s mercy and compassion in his pose and expression as he runs to help his son to his feet. It is clearer to me that the people in the background are servants in the first drawing. They seem to have a sense of urgency as they bring the son new and clean clothes.

The one thing I particularly like in the second image is the lighting, especially the contrast between light and dark. It is almost as if the son has been in darkness and has come back to the light. Remember that people in Rembrandt’s time really did “read” paintings. Even though the light source is coming from behind the son, if you read the painting from top left to bottom right we go from darkness to light. People back then would have gotten this, and I bet your students will too.

In addition to these suggestions, I encourage you to take advantage of the many Smithsonian museums. We are lucky to live close to so many free museums in D.C. Take advantage of them and plan a field trip to the National Gallery or other art venues.



Online Resources:

www.artbible.info has a selection of art inspired by Bible stories, with every painting linked to a related bible passage.

www.christusrex.org/www2/art has links to a small collection of religious art/paintings listed by themes and artists.

christusrex.org/www2/art/rembrandt.htm

I'm including this link to the Rembrandt section of this site because he's a highly regarded *master painter* with a plethora of religious paintings to his name.

Glossary:

Religious art - Art depicting religious images and scenes.

Iconography - A specific tradition of Christian art with specific materials, processes and style where prayer is an integral part of each step in the process. Religious icons generally represent God, Christ, Mary, saints or angels in a flat background. Symbols often help identify the figures: St. Peter might hold the keys to heaven, St. Paul a sword, etc.

Sacred art - Art used in liturgy and Sacrament

After an art career spanning from multimedia design to cartoon animation and children's books, Miguel De Angel strongly felt the call to youth ministry. It did not take long before he leaned into it and took a Youth Ministry position at Good Shepherd Catholic Church in Alexandria, VA. Miguel now looks for ways to use his artistic talents in ministry.

¹ Images by Rembrandt from the blog entry *A Mending Shift* by Jeromy Johnson.
<http://www.mendingshift.com/2007/12/14/rembrandts-the-return-of-the-prodigal-son-4/>

² The Bible Gateway has Catholic and non-Catholic versions of the Bible so it is recommended to double-check which version you are looking at.