

Maciej Jan Jasiński

The invisible divine in Christian art
History, theory, communication

EDUSC

© 2026 - Edizioni Santa Croce s.r.l.
Via Sabotino 2/A 00195 Roma
0645493637 - info@edusc.it
www.edizionisantacroce.it

ISBN 979-12-5482-512-9

PREFACE

This book provides a systematic account of how Christian art has sought to make the invisible God perceptible through material and visual means. Spanning seventeen centuries, it examines the development of sacred imagery, its theological foundations, and its changing reception among diverse audiences. The study integrates insights from art history, theology, image theories and communication practices to illuminate how images and architectural forms convey meaning and foster spiritual understanding. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions in the humanities about the nature and function of religious imagery.

The book is based on my doctoral thesis, *The invisible God in Christian art. History, audience reception, theoretical debates and current communications*, defended at the Pontifical University of Santa Croce in Rome in 2024. My interest in the topic arose from several observations. Firstly, the artistic heritage of the Church constitutes a vast evangelizing, educational, and mystagogical resource. Yet the interpretation of Christian art and architecture is not always easy or intuitive, as shown by the frequent requests for guidance among visitors to museums and sacred sites. Nonetheless, relatively few preachers, catechists, or guides make use of Christian art and architecture as interpretive tools. This is surprising, since visuality and its meaning fit perfectly within the communication patterns that shape contemporary society.

Because Christian art attracts scholars from many different disciplines, this study combines transdisciplinary perspectives and theoretical frameworks. In its first chapter, it offers a historical and systematic overview of seventeen centuries of Christian iconography of the divine, explained by over two hundred works of art. For centuries, the Christian iconography of the divine was closely linked to its reception within religious life. The second chapter therefore examines audiences – their motivations and ways of perceiving images of the transcendent God. Two more chapters adopt theoretical frameworks: one examines the theology and magisterial teaching to understand the *intentio auctoris* behind sacred spaces and images; the other applies the visual culture studies on Christian art, drawn from picture theory, image studies, iconography, and religious studies. In its fifth chapter, the book concludes with an analysis of today's communicative practices through which the invisible divine in Christian art is interpreted in pastoral care, academic discourse, and visitor

information in religious tourism. This final part supports one of the study's core objectives: contributing to the professionalization in communicating the meaning of Christian art.

This research came to fruition thanks to the guidance and extraordinary dedication of Professor Ralf van Bühren. From the outset, he inspired me intellectually, helping me refine my ideas, develop my arguments, and strengthen my scholarly approach. I am deeply grateful for his support throughout my academic formation. His enthusiasm and unwavering pursuit of excellence continue to inspire my work and remain a model of scholarly integrity.

I also wish to thank the entire community of the Pontifical University of Santa Croce, and in particular the School of Church Communications, for its generous support in publishing this book. The atmosphere of kindness, encouragement, and professional commitment among the faculty was invaluable throughout my studies and the development of this research. My heartfelt thanks go to Professor Daniel Arasa, Dean of the School of Church Communications, as well as to Professor Jorge Milán and to Professor Juan Rego, Director of the Institute of Liturgy, for their encouragement, enthusiasm, and constructive suggestions. I am also very grateful to Dr. Andrea Zanni, Director of Edizioni Santa Croce, for his excellent collaboration and professional engagement in this project.

My sincere thanks also go to the staff of the institutions where I conducted my research: the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, the Library of the Pontifical University of Santa Croce, and the Ellis Library of the University of Missouri in Columbia, MO.

I am also grateful to Archbishop Wojciech Polak, Primate of Poland, for enabling my academic formation, and to the Pontificio Istituto Ecclesiastico Polacco in Rome, which provided a supportive home throughout my years of study.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their constant support, which have always been a source of strength and encouragement. I dedicate this book to all communicators who, moved by Christian art, strive to let its silent beauty speak.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	11
1. Statement of the problem	11
2. Method	22
3. Definition of core concepts	23
4. Structure of the study	29

Chapter I

HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN ART AND THE VISUAL COMMUNICATION OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

1. The divine as a main subject of Christian art	33
a) The revelatory character of Christian art	33
b) Sources for Christian art: Bible, liturgy, theology, and life of prayer	34
c) Complementarity between images and texts	52
d) Typology: the divine in the “history of salvation”	56
2. Visualizing the divine in late antique and medieval art (ca. 250–1400) ...	64
a) Early images of salvation and the divine Persons	64
b) Church buildings – sacred places of God’s presence	78
c) Apse mosaics – visual epiphanies of Christ as foreshadowing of his coming	84
d) Icons – pictorial links to heaven for devotional use	92
e) Illuminated books – the divine Word seen and meditated upon	100
f) Vitreous arts – luminous typologies of God’s real presence	106
g) Sculpted and painted crucifixes – Eucharistic references to the redemptive sacrifice	118
3. References to transcendence in early modern Christian art (1400–1800)	127
a) Visual rhetoric of the divine	127
b) Pictorial thresholds between viewers and the represented heaven	147
c) Hiding and unveiling as metaphors of revelation	152

CONTENTS

d) References to the divine plan of salvation in monumental picture cycles	159
e) Church interiors as a space for “sacred theaters”	164
4. Searching the spiritual or transcendent in modern art (1800–2024)	170
a) The sacred as an artistic problem in the 19 th -century secularizing cultures	170
b) 20 th -century quests for transcendence in art: ruptures and rapprochements	179

Chapter II

AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF THE DIVINE IN CHRISTIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

1. Visual mediation between viewers and the divine through Christian art	193
2. From the material to the spiritual: transformative engagement with images	201
a) Heterogeneity of audiences and multimodality of their engagement	201
b) Interactions of sensual vision and spiritual gaze	208
c) Anthropological conditions: corporeality and authenticity of pictures	220
3. Multisensorial engagements with sacred art and space	228
a) Sensorial and kinesthetic dynamics of pilgrimages and processions	228
b) Ornamentation vs. destruction of pictures	237
4. Devotional look and emotional responses to pictures	243
a) Visual devotion by means of material and mental images	245
b) Activation of imagination, memory, and emotions	253
5. Preachers, catechists and guides as mediators of meaning	266
a) Preaching with pictures	266
b) Catechesis through pictures	274
c) Tour guiding in religious tourism	276

CONTENTS

Chapter III
THEORETICAL DEBATES ON THE ICONOGRAPHY
OF THE DIVINE BY THE CHURCH

1. Theological discourses on the pictorial reference to God	281
a) The theological rationale for images of God	281
b) Claims for aniconism vs. approval of the practical value of religious images (2 nd –early 4 th centuries)	283
c) Knowledge of God through sensual vision and imagination (4 th –7 th centuries)	291
d) Iconoclastic crises (8 th –16 th centuries): images as mediators of invisible realities?.....	300
e) Promotion of visual devotion and the prevention of potential excesses (16 th –20 th centuries).....	309
f) Christian art as a visual manifestation of divine revelation and a way to experience the transcendent (20 th century–today).....	313
2. Magisterial statements on the need for references to the divine in Christian art	318

Chapter IV
VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES APPLIED
TO IMAGES OF THE DIVINE

1. The rationale for studying Christian visual culture	341
2. Iconology: the search for iconographical meaning (Panofsky)	343
3. Picture theory (Mitchell) and image studies (Bredekamp, Belting): visual agency and iconic presence	350
4. Religious studies: materiality, embodiment, and performativity of sacred images	355

CONTENTS

Chapter V
TODAY'S PRACTICES OF COMMUNICATING
THE DIVINE IN CHRISTIAN ART

1. Reasons for promoting communications of the iconography of the divine.....	363
2. Pastoral attention to transcendence in Christian art	365
3. Academic education, online lectures, and learning platforms interpret Christian art	377
4. Visitor information in religious tourism and museums	384
CONCLUSIONS	393
BIBLIOGRAPHY	
1. Documents of the Church's Magisterium	401
2. Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Sources	406
3. Scientific literature	411
4. Online resources	464
Color Plates	469
Index of names	493
Index of sites	501

INTRODUCTION

1. Statement of the problem

God is transcendent and invisible. This is the central affirmation of Christian theology.¹ But Christianity also teaches that God became visible in the incarnated Jesus Christ.² Within this tension between invisibility and manifestation, the Christian tradition generated an immense visual culture: works of art and architecture that sought to render the invisible divine perceptible, and to shape the believer's encounter with what exceeds human sight.

In Christianity, therefore, images of God are hard to get away from.³ For 1700 years now, they have graced the walls, vaults, windows, manuscripts, and altars of churches. They are carried in processions, kept in homes, and tucked into prayer books. Orthodox communities venerate and kiss them; Catholics employ them for instruction and devotion; many Reformed traditions approach them with caution. All of this proves that images of the sacred are a visual focus of the Christian life of faith. The idea of the active and saving presence of God pervades all Christian visual art, as well as the church architecture, forming its fundamental meaning and establishing its value as mediums for the human encounter with the transcendent. This is why also theology and the Catholic magisterium have dealt with sacred art from Late Antiquity until the 21st century.

In the present, interest in the Christian iconography of God extends well beyond ecclesial contexts. Tourists, museum visitors, and scholars encounter these works in settings shaped by cultural heritage, academic interpretation, and aesthetic appreciation. Christian art and architecture thus remain a durable source of fascination, encouraging travel, education, and intellectual inquiry. Nevertheless, for audiences increasingly situated outside the Christian tradition, the spiritual and doctrinal meanings encoded in this imagery often prove difficult to discern without contextual knowledge.

¹ Cf. Ansgar Paus, Josef Schreiner, Jacques Schlosser, Ferdinand Dexinger, Jürgen Werbick and Franz Wendel Niehl, "Gott," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 4: Franca – Hermenegild, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg / Basel / Rom / Wien: Herder, 1995), esp. cols. 859-871.

² Cf. Peter Hünemann and Udo F. Schmälzle, "Inkarnation," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 5: Hermeneutik – Kirchengemeinschaft, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg / Basel / Rom / Wien: Herder, 1996), cols. 498-501.

³ Cf. Robert Maniura, "Icon/image," *Material Religion* 7, vol. 1 (2011): 55.

These considerations lead to the central objective of this study: to clarify where, when, how, why, by whom, and for whom the Christian iconography of the invisible God has been commissioned, produced, viewed, interpreted, and communicated across past and present.

Within the history of art, Christian images of God and sacred architecture occupied a central position at least until the 18th century. Their long duration, their consistent orientation toward transcendence, their extraordinary range of forms and geographical breadth, and the sheer number of masterpieces they generated, establish Christian iconography as a persistent global socio-cultural phenomenon. Its distinctiveness becomes even more evident when set against the absence of images of God in other major monotheistic traditions.

The principal field of inquiry for this study is therefore the historical development of pictorial and architectural references to the divine in Christianity, especially within Catholicism. The first chapter examines how Christian art and architecture have sought to indicate the invisible presence of God here and now – through symbolic systems, Eucharistic allusions, visual rhetoric, strategies of concealment and revelation, theatricality, spatial choreography, and typological juxtapositions of salvation-historical events. In terms derived from religious and media studies, the question concerns how images and sacred spaces have functioned as *mediums* capable of evoking an *immediate* sense of the transcendent.⁴

Most art-historical scholarship addressing images of the divine restricts its analysis to a single period.⁵ Such focused studies, though rich in detail concerning commissioning, production, and reception, cannot explain why the question of the invisible divine remains of ongoing interest to the Catholic magisterium. Nor can they account for the persistence of the theme beyond specifically Christian contexts – in religious tourism, in museums, and in academic research – despite the fact that artists of the 20th and 21st centuries rarely attempted direct figuration of God. Period-bound

⁴ Cf. Birgit Meyer, “Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium,” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19, no. 1 (2011): 23-39.

⁵ For example, cf. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing. Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Georg Henkel, David Ganz und Thomas Lentz (eds.), *Ästhetik des Unsichtbaren: Bildtheorie und Bildgebrauch in der Vormoderne* (Berlin: Reimer, 2004); Robin M. Jensen, *Face to Face. Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Giselle de Nie, Karl F. Morrison and Marco Mostert (eds.), *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Papers from ‘Verbal and Pictorial Imaging: Representing and Accessing Experience of the Invisible, 400-1000,’ Utrecht, 11-13 December 2003 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

analyses also remain insufficient for explaining the issue's *longue durée* within the history of art or for testing a guiding hypothesis of this study: that Christian iconography of the divine constitutes a universally and enduringly influential mode of communication.

This historical-systematic study addresses that gap by combining source-based and theory-based approaches to Christian representations of the divine. It offers a panoramic survey of the history of Christian art, selecting more than two hundred works of art and architecture from the 3rd to the 21st centuries. Interpreting these works through the lens of divine iconography will clarify how, where, and why Christians have referred visually to God, and how and why these references varied across periods and regions. A cross-sectional analysis of Christian art and architecture will illuminate both the multiplicity of forms and styles in which the divine was pictured, and the diversity of contexts and functions in which such imagery operated.

A second objective of this book is to examine audience reception. Throughout the history of Christian art, the iconography of the divine remained functionally tied to its reception within Christian life – in the liturgy, in evangelization, in catechesis, and in private devotion. For its intended viewers, the faithful, such imagery offered a visual orientation toward the presence of God and his salvation. Because of this spiritual, didactical, or pastoral *intentio auctoris*, audience reception constitutes an essential dimension of the inquiry and will be addressed in Chapter II. The spiritual needs of the faithful – expressed in liturgy and in personal devotion – and the ways in which believers engaged with images shaped the iconography of the divine, influencing both its production and its interpretation. Chapter II will therefore analyze the reception of pictures of God across the centuries. Understanding these modes of reception contributes to a clearer sense of how Christian art and architecture may be communicated effectively today in contexts such as tourism management, museum education, and pastoral care.

Sacred art and architecture are also of considerable interest within religious tourism. In 2011, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimated that approximately 600 million people traveled internationally each year for religious purposes.⁶ These travelers correspond to the category of “religious tourists,” seeking both cultural enrichment and some form of spiritual experience. At Christian sites, many visitors likely desire to understand the iconographic meaning of church buildings and artworks.⁷ Yet in-

⁶ Cf. Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, “Investigating the Intersections between Religion, Spirituality, and Tourism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious and Spiritual Tourism*, ed. Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy (London / New York: Routledge, 2022), 1.

⁷ Cf. Łukasz Wiśniewski, “Religious Tourism in Christian Sanctuaries: The Implications of Mixed Interests for the Communication of the Faith.” *Church, Communication and Cul-*

formation systems at numerous sites remain insufficient. As Chapter V will demonstrate, best practices for communicating the transcendent in sacred art within ecclesial communication are still limited.⁸

Museums are increasingly recognizing that the sacred background of their artifacts must be made intelligible to contemporary visitors.⁹ The statement of the Diocesan Museum in St. Pölten (Austria, founded in 1888), proves the point:

Sakrale Kunst kann heute vielfach nicht mehr ohne Hilfe verstanden werden, weil die mitunter plakative Zeichensprache vergangener Epochen nicht mehr gelesen werden kann – die *codes* können nicht mehr entziffert werden.¹⁰

(Today, sacred art can often no longer be understood without assistance, because the sometimes striking symbolic language of past eras can no longer be read – the codes can no longer be deciphered.)

In light of the continued growth of religious tourism and the increasing acknowledgement by museum professionals that the contexts and provenances of sacred objects require interpretation, the need to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual significance of Christian material culture has become urgent.¹¹ This significance is not always immediately apparent to visitors of sacred sites.

As the first chapter will show, the culture of the 4th to the 17th centuries was deeply saturated with Christian imagery and was highly responsive to the material presence and performativity of images of the divine as *media salutis*. From the 18th to the 21st centuries, however, both the producers and the audiences of images of the divine – as well as the conditions of re-

ture 3, no. 3 (2018): 206–207; cf. also Darius Liutikas, “Travel Motivations of Pilgrims, Religious Tourists, and Spirituality Seekers,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious and Spiritual Tourism*, edited by Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy (London / New York: Routledge, 2022), 225–242.

⁸ Cf. Ralf van Bühren and Maciej J. Jasiński, “The Invisible Divine in the History of Art. Is Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) Still Relevant for Decoding Christian Iconography?” *Church, Communication and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2024): 28. DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2024.2322546.

⁹ Gretchen T. Buggeln, Crispin Paine and S. Brent Plate (eds.), *Religion in Museums. Global and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London et al.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); cf. also Clifton James, “Truly a Worship Experience? Christian Art in Secular Museums,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (2007): 107–115; Gretchen T. Buggeln, “Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred,” *Material Religion* 8, no. 1 (2012): 30–51.

¹⁰ Das Museum am Dom – Diözese Sankt Pölten, “Wo sakrale Kunst und zeitgemäße Glaubensvermittlung aufeinandertreffen,” accessed 5 April 2024, museumamdom.at/institution/30242701/dasmuseum.

¹¹ For example, cf. Michael Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism. Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters* (London / New York: Routledge, 2011); Ángel Galindo García (ed.), *Patrimonio cultural de la Iglesia y evangelización* (Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 2009); Boris Vukonić, *Tourism and Religion* (Bingley: Emerald, 1996).

ception and the cultural contexts in which these images were encountered – underwent substantial change. These shifts were precipitated by religious and socio-political transformations, especially in Europe and America, and by the emergence of modern society.

Before the early 18th century, Christian artifacts were housed primarily in churches or chapels, private galleries, and domestic interiors. Since the late 18th century, they have also been displayed in public museums, where they were assigned didactic functions and subjected to a new mode of viewing – an aesthetic, “disinterested” look.¹² The loosening of ties between the artistic world and ecclesial patronage, increasingly evident from the late 19th century onward, encouraged many avant-garde artists to distance themselves from traditional iconography of the transcendent.¹³ When pictorial references to the numinous did appear, they often expressed the artists’ highly individual religiosity rather than a shared theological vocabulary. Artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose primary concerns lay in the formal languages of art, seldom attempted figurative representations of the divine nature of God. As Chapter III will discuss, the Catholic magisterium identified this artistic development as a problem when the pictorial adornment of ecclesial spaces was at stake.

A parallel problem concerns audience reception. In the 20th and 21th centuries – the era of photography, film, television, and the internet – nearly everyone is familiar with masterpieces of Christian art through digital reproductions or museum visits. Yet secularized culture, though saturated with images, often lacks the capacity to decode the transcendent meaning of sacred art.¹⁴ The iconography and spiritual significance of Christian imagery remain largely absent from the curricula of academic institutions and from the interpretive materials provided by museums. Even within the Catholic Church, pastoral workers often show limited engagement with the iconography of the transcendent God in preaching, evangelization, and catechesis.¹⁵

Since the 1960s, the Catholic Church has shown awareness of both problems. On one hand, it has sought to renew its pastoral dialogue with

¹² Cf. Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961): 131-143; David Morgan, “Toward a Modern Historiography of Art and Religion,” in *Reluctant Partners. Art and Religion in Dialogue*, ed. Ena Giurescu Heller (New York: Gallery at the American Bible Society, 2004), 24-37.

¹³ Cf. Frédéric Debuyss, *Le renouveau de l’Art sacré. De 1920 à 1962* (Paris: Mame, 1991), esp. 8-16.

¹⁴ Cf. Ralf van Bühren and Maciej J. Jasiński, “The Invisible Divine in the History of Art,” 2.

¹⁵ Cf. Ralf van Bühren and Maciej J. Jasiński, “The Invisible Divine in the History of Art,” 24-27.

contemporary artists,¹⁶ emphasizing the need for artworks capable of guiding viewers toward an experience of the transcendent. On the other hand, following Vatican II, the Catholic magisterium has encouraged the use of art and architecture as instruments of evangelization – as pastoral means for communicating the divine message of the Gospel to a broad audience.¹⁷

As Chapter V will demonstrate, despite the sporadic employment of divine iconography in present-day pastoral communication, the potential of art in this domain remains largely unrealized. Cultural and academic communication – whether university courses or digital and on-site museum resources – tends to omit references to the spiritual values embedded in Christian heritage. Some noteworthy exceptions, including the growing number of scholarly studies on Christian art and architecture in U.S.-American and Western European academia since the 1990s,¹⁸ may be taken as promising signs of change.

To clarify the current situation, an important aim of Chapter V is to identify and analyze contemporary communicative practices through which divine iconography is presented and interpreted in offline and online settings – in pastoral care, in academic discourse, and in religious tourism. Chapter V thereby supports one of the core objectives of this study: to contribute to the professionalization of the communication of Christian art. Those engaged in pastoral ministry would benefit from a degree of competence in art-historical interpretation, just as guides would benefit from substantial knowledge of Christian theology and visual devotion.

¹⁶ Cf. Ralf van Bühren, *Kunst und Kirche im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils* (Paderborn / Munich / Vienna / Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008), 302-353, 542-601; Ralf van Bühren, “Contemporary Popes and Artists. Paradigms of Communication after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965),” in *Comunicazione della Chiesa. Volti, persone, storie / Church Communications. Faces, People, Stories*. Proceedings of the 8th Professional Seminar for Church Communications Offices on April 16-18, 2012 at the Pontifical University of Santa Croce in Rome, ed. Alfonso Bailly-Baillière and Jorge Milán Fitera (Rome: ESC, 2014), 228-231.

¹⁷ Cf. Ralf van Bühren, *Kunst und Kirche im 20. Jahrhundert*, 365-367, 417-419, 532-600.

¹⁸ For example, in addition to the authors already cited, such as Belting, Kessler, or Jensen, cf. Wolfgang Kemp, *Christliche Kunst: ihre Anfänge, ihre Strukturen* (Munich / Paris / London: Schirmer-Mosel, 1994); Alexander Linke, *Typologie in der Frühen Neuzeit: Genese und Semantik heilsgeschichtlicher Bildprogramme von der Cappella Sistina (1480) bis San Giovanni in Laterano (1650)* (Berlin: Reimer, 2014); Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (eds.), *Image and Incarnation. The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2015); Zbigniew Treppa, *Obraz jako medium wtajemniczające w misterium. Na przykładzie obrazów nie-ręką-ludzką-wykonanych i pochodzących z wizji mistycznych* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2017); Martin F. Lešák, Sabina Rosenbergová, Veronika Tvrzníková (eds.), *Step by Step Towards the Sacred. Ritual, Movement, and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages* (Roma: Viella; Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2020).

The perspectives of art history and audience reception, though indispensable, are insufficient for grasping the iconography of the divine in its full complexity. As already noted, a central problem in the contemporary reception of Christianity's artistic heritage is that its spiritual meaning and its references to transcendence are evident only to specialists, inquisitive believers, or committed enthusiasts. Most viewers of Christian visual culture require guidance in order to perceive the spiritual values that lie beyond the visible forms. Already in 1952, Josef Pieper diagnosed the "visual noise" surrounding modern humanity, a noise that diminishes our spiritual capacity to discern the deeper meaning of reality. His proposed remedy – "learning how to see again"¹⁹ – appears even more urgent seven decades later. The intensification of visual noise has made the training of the eye, the gradual cultivation of a capacity to perceive visual references to the spiritual world in Christian art, increasingly necessary.

To address the complexity of Christian visual culture, this study adopts two theoretical frameworks. They facilitate a more precise reconstruction of the original rationale – the *intentio auctoris* – behind the images and sacred spaces that sought to render the transcendent God visible. These frameworks also enable deeper reflection on the present communicative potential of sacred images and their function within the material culture of Christianity.

The first framework, treated in Chapter III, concerns the theological debates on images and the magisterium of the Catholic Church. This approach is warranted because Christian iconography participated in the transmission of the faith alongside authoritative texts – the Bible above all, but also liturgical prayers, doctrinal treatises, and spiritual writings. This textual tradition interprets revelation and contemplates the divine nature, frequently employing metaphors and figurative language to articulate the transcendent. Without knowledge of this verbal and textual heritage, it would be difficult to grasp the identity of Christian visual arts, their recurring iconographic motifs, or the consistency of the mental images they evoked in their audiences. In this light, historical, biblical, and dogmatic studies provide essential insight into the *intentio auctoris*, that is, the intentions of commissioners and the purpose of Christian representations of God. Liturgical studies illuminate the original religious setting – the church building – in which viewers encountered images of the divine. Attending to the textual sources of biblical theology, liturgy, dogmatics, and the mystical tradition is therefore indispensable for understanding how Christian art fulfills its devotional, commemorative, didactic, and decorative functions.

¹⁹ Josef Pieper, "Learning How to See Again," in *Only the Lover Sings. Art and Contemplation*, by Josef Pieper, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 31-33.

The theological interpretation of sacred architecture and imagery must be complemented by an examination of magisterial pronouncements. The Catholic magisterium constitutes the Church's authoritative interpretation of the word of God and its official promotion of theological ideas.²⁰ Throughout its long history as the principal commissioner of sacred art, the Church has consistently affirmed the communicative potential of images as visual media for prayer and doctrine – and thus as material and spiritual means of encountering the invisible God. For this reason, an analysis of magisterial texts is crucial for reconstructing the original intentions of Catholic patrons. This is particularly relevant for contemporary communicators – museum curators, tour guides, educators, and creators of online resources – who seek to present the spiritual and theological meaning of Christian artistic heritage to audiences that may be culturally or ideologically distant from the Christian faith. The magisterium clarifies the original contexts in which sacred art and architecture were conceived, commissioned, and interpreted.²¹

The second theoretical framework, addressed in Chapter IV, concerns the picture as understood in visual culture studies. Theology – while fundamental and indispensable – should not confine images of the divine exclusively within its doctrinal discourse on the development and orthodoxy of ideas about God. The visual and material dimensions of Christian artifacts raise practical questions regarding how images generate meaning and what anthropological and cultural conditions render audiences receptive to the influence of religious imagery, whether within Christian practice or outside it (for example, in tourism). However, several decades after the identification of the “pictorial turn” in the humanities,²² there remains no consensus on what an image is, how it configures meaning, or why it exerts such persistent fascination.²³ Methodologically, the second framework

²⁰ Cf. Wolfgang Beinert, “Lehramt, kirchliches. Biblisch-theologisch, historisch-theologisch, systematisch-theologisch,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 6: Kirchengeschichte – Maximianus, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg / Basel / Rom / Wien: Herder, 1997), cols. 751-753.

²¹ Cf. Joseph Tan, “Religious Tourism and the New Evangelization: Theory and Best Practice in the Pastoral Promotion of the Church's Cultural Heritage,” *Church, Communication and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2018): 283-285.

²² Cf. William J. T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn,” *Artforum* 30 (1992): 89-94; Gottfried Boehm, “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder,” in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. Gottfried Boehm, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 11-38; Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium. Elemente einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft* (Cologne: von Halem, 2003).

²³ Cf. William J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28-56; Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, 2nd edition, trans., ed., and adapted by Elizabeth Clegg (Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 1-9; cf. also Audrey Rieber, “Beyond the Debate on Logocentrism. Some Remarks on Image, Language, and the

offers tools to explore the range of responses to these questions. The term “image” has expanded to encompass mental images, pictures with their material supports, and digital reproductions. An image is not simply an image *of* something else; it possesses a mode of being that affects beholders through its very presence.

A further methodological benefit of this framework is that it enables new inquiries into the diverse ways Christian iconography communicates the transcendent divine. It also facilitates reflection on the practical modes by which pictures of God are received. Consider the living tradition of shaking and swaying with sacred images according to a choreographed movement in Kashubia, Poland (fig. 39). Visuality, tactility, motion, ritual practice, emotion, and collective enactment – in short, a sacred performance – become pathways to the experience of the transcendent. The meaning of the Kashubian dance with pictures, like many other past and present practices (cf. II.a), exceeds the boundaries of theology and liturgical ritual alone. Decoding such meaning requires the support of picture theory. Iconology, image studies (*Bildwissenschaften*), and religious studies, examined as the second theoretical framework, assist in clarifying how the “visual regime”²⁴ of Christianity is oriented toward both the human and the divine, and how it may be aligned with contemporary patterns of engaging with pictures and the visual more broadly. These patterns include smartphone applications for prayer, virtual and on-site visits to museums and sanctuaries, and participation in processions with sacred images.

For contemporary ecclesial communicators, offering a contextualized interpretation of Christian iconography to secularized audiences can be a considerable challenge. Effective communication requires an understanding of the socio-cultural contexts of Christianity, the communicative intentions of the Church, and the materiality of Christian artifacts – a materiality that has its own logic²⁵ of producing meaning, analogous to the Christian textual discourses on God and his salvific work. To address these requirements, Chapter IV will examine selected scholarly perspectives on images.

Production of Visual Meaning in Iconology and the Critique of Images,” in *Challenging the Iconic Turn. Positionen – Methoden – Perspektiven*, ed. Dominic E. Delarue and Christoph Wagner (Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 107-122; Emmanuel Alloa, “Iconic Turn: A Plea for Three Turns of the Screw,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 57, no. 2 (2016): 228-250, DOI: 10.1080/14735784.2015.1068127.

²⁴ Birgit Meyer, “Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 27, no. 4/5 (2015): 338.

²⁵ Cf. Gottfried Boehm, “Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder,” in *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen. Die Macht des Zeigens*, by Gottfried Boehm, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2010), 34-53.

Erwin Panofsky's interest in the "intrinsic meaning"²⁶ of artworks invites interpreters to consider the world of ideas that informed their production. Since the mid-20th century, many art historians influenced by Panofsky's iconological method have sought to decode the meaning of Christian art. In their pursuit of intrinsic meaning, they have turned to textual sources.²⁷ Iconology analyzes the Bible, liturgical prayers, theological treatises, and mystical writings as potential sources for Christian iconography. One of the research goals of this book is to assess the extent to which the Panofskian method remains useful for interpreting images of the invisible divine today.

Recent decades, marked by successive cultural turns,²⁸ have produced new approaches to images. Picture theory investigates both how images generate meaning and the agency of images, encapsulated in Mitchell's influential question: "What do pictures want?"²⁹ This study proposes that Christian pictures of the invisible divine belong intrinsically to the interdisciplinary conversations concerning the nature of images. The subsequent passages develop the rationale for adopting selected insights from current picture debates.

It has become something of a paradigm in image studies that the material presence of images is essential for decoding them, no less crucial than their visuality and the interpretive gaze of the viewer. Through their material "presentness," images reinforce their agency – they speak, act, and perform. Their meaning, shaped by materiality, multisensory engagement, emotional reception, ritualized use, and display context, is always emergent and dependent upon context (as exemplified by the Kashubian practice mentioned above).

Performativity, image agency, and iconic presence are likewise central concepts in visual culture studies. Chapter IV will examine these concepts and apply them to images of the invisible divine, revealing the complexity with which images communicate spiritual meaning.

²⁶ Cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 30-31, 38-40; Erwin Panofsky, "On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts," trans. Jaś Elsner and Katharina Lorenz, *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 479. There, Panofsky defines the intrinsic meaning as "the unintentional and subconscious self-revelation of a fundamental attitude toward the world which is characteristic in equal measure of the individual producer, the individual period, the individual people, and the individual cultural community."

²⁷ For a concise summary of Panofsky's impact on the next generations of scholars cf. Craig Harbison, "Iconography and Iconology," in *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception, and Research*, ed. Bernhard Ridderbos, Anne van Buren and Henk van Veen, trans. Andrew McCormick and Anne van Buren (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 391-406.

²⁸ Cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, trans. Adam Blauhut (Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

²⁹ Cf. William J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?*

Religious studies also offer productive categories for understanding the function of images of the divine. David Morgan has described a “cultural economy of the sacred,”³⁰ in which images act as media of exchange between an adored divinity and a supplicant seeking grace. Indeed, the use of pictures of the transcendent in Catholic Christianity has long been embedded in revelatory and intercessory contexts, which this study brings to light in its first three chapters.

Birgit Meyer’s concept of “sensational forms” highlights those rites and prayers authorized by religious authorities that structure the faithful’s encounter with God on sensory, imaginative, and spiritual levels.³¹ Images – such as altarpieces, reliquaries, and crucifixes – function within these forms alongside gestures, sacramental signs, and liturgical paraments. Noting that from the 4th to the 18th centuries Christians engaged with images of the divine predominantly in the public contexts of liturgy, devotion, and instruction is crucial. Because these images inside sacred spaces were closely connected to authoritative texts and rituals,³² their interpretation requires an equilibrium between attention to material presence and iconographic meaning. Neglecting meaning in favor of materiality and performativity risks stripping such images of their theological *raison d’être* and reducing them to objects of idolatrous fascination. Conversely, focusing exclusively on meaning reduces their material and sensory richness, transforming them into two-dimensional “riddles” reproduced in albums or displayed as aesthetic objects in museums. Since the 1990s, humanistic scholarship on images has tended to shift away from the Panofskian emphasis on meaning and context toward material presence and performativity. A return to a balanced methodological equilibrium is therefore warranted.

The perspectives and research questions outlined above demonstrate that the interpretation of Christian images and ecclesial architecture cannot be confined within the boundaries of individual disciplines. Understanding how sacred artworks generate meaning and how they perform requires a genuinely transdisciplinary method – one that respects the theological foundations of Christian visual culture while engaging critically with the analytical tools of

³⁰ David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye. Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 67, also 84-88; cf. also Herbert L. Kessler, *L’esperienza medievale dell’arte. Gli oggetti e i sensi*, trans. and ed. Giacomo Confortin and Fabrizio Lollini (Roma: Officina Libraria, 2023), 33-35.

³¹ Cf. Birgit Meyer, “Mediation and Immediacy,” 23-39; cf. also Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” inaugural lecture, VU University, Amsterdam, 6 October 2006, accessed 10 March 2024, research.vu.nl/en/publications/religious-sensations-why-media-aesthetics-and-power-matter-in-the-2; Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, “Aesthetics,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York / London: Routledge, 2008), 20-30.

³² Cf. Ralf van Bühren, “Revelation in the Visual Arts,” 3.

art history, image theory, reception studies, anthropology, and the study of the senses. This study adopts such an approach in order to do justice to the complexity of its subject.

At the same time, the topic has acquired particular urgency. The historical abundance of images of the invisible God, the growing interest of tourists in Christian cultural heritage, and the communicative challenges faced by pastoral workers and cultural institutions converge to create a pressing need for renewed interpretive frameworks. Chapter V will examine these contemporary perspectives in detail. The broader intention of this study is to strengthen the valorization of Christian cultural heritage by showing how art and architecture have mediated the transcendent divine across centuries, and how this mediation can once again become comprehensible – and therefore meaningful – to the audiences of the present.

2. Method

The visual representations of the divine in Christian art are not only historical phenomena; they persist in the present. This diverse and ever-expanding corpus of images and sacred architectures remains open to interpretation and to new forms of use, engaging multiple spheres of religious, cultural, academic, and communicative life. For this reason, the present study employs several complementary methodological approaches.

To address the first key research question – where, when, how, and why the iconography of the divine has developed since its emergence in the 3rd century – Chapter I examines and interprets more than two hundred exemplary works of art and architecture. This historical overview outlines their pictorial elements, evolution, function, and meaning within their religious and social contexts. All works are analyzed through an art-historical lens using the iconographic–iconological method. This approach considers textual sources indispensable for interpreting pictorial representations, since theological perspectives illuminate the rationale of Christian imagery. The theological framework is drawn from biblical, liturgical, doctrinal, and spiritual texts, as well as from the historic practice of Christian worship and devotion.

Chapter II adopts an anthropological and historical perspective, tracing the development of audience responses to images of God from Late Antiquity to modern forms of engagement in both religious and secular contexts. Works of art and architecture serve as visual evidence for this chapter, alongside textual sources and their scholarly interpretations.

The third chapter analyzes theological and magisterial pronouncements as the first theoretical framework. The interpretation of nearly seventy texts provides insight into the theological identity of images of the divine and of

sacred spaces, and clarifies the religious patterns of engagement with pictures – mediation, veneration, visual devotion – grounded in the Christian faith in the self-revealing God incarnate in Christ. The selection of texts follows bibliographic source lists published by institutions³³ and individual scholars,³⁴ as well as subject indexes in multivolume editions of papal teachings.³⁵

The second theoretical framework, examined in Chapter IV, situates Christian iconography of God within the wider scholarly discourse on images. Drawing on literature from iconology, picture theory (*Bildkritik*, *Bildwissenschaft*), and religious studies, this chapter formulates new questions and develops deeper interpretations that illuminate the complexity of human fascination with – and response to – images of the transcendent divine. The analysis demonstrates the relevance of the topic across art history, theology, picture theory, religious and material culture studies, and tourism and museum studies, and highlights the need for transdisciplinary dialogue among these fields.

Finally, Chapter V analyzes, interprets, and contextualizes contemporary communicative practices related to the Christian iconography of the divine, undertaken by religious institutions (dioceses, parishes, Church associations) and secular organizations (museums, online universities, learning platforms), as well as by individuals (for example, Instagram accounts). The selection of examples is based on bibliographic research documenting institutional activities, keyword searches (such as “the divine in Christian art” or “images of God”) in online search engines, and an analysis of the content and methods employed by official websites and social media platforms of Church institutions, sanctuaries, museums, and private users.

3. Definition of core concepts

This study makes frequent use of terms related to three fields of inquiry. The first area deals with the notion of God, the divine and the transcendence. The second field features concepts of image, picture and representation. The third area encompasses notions of visual communication, vision and visibility. These terms will now be clarified.

God in Christian thought is confessed as a trinity in unity, consisting of one οὐσία (substance or essence) and three ὑποστάσεις (persons).³⁶ He is a

³³ Cf. Italian Bishops' Conference, “Spirito creatore. Proposte e suggerimenti per promuovere la pastorale degli artisti e dell'arte. Subsidy of the Ufficio Nazionale per i Beni Culturali Ecclesias-tici of the Italian Bishops' Conference,” Rome 30.11.1997, *Il Regno. Documenti* 1 (1998): 36–46.

³⁴ Cf. Ralf van Bühren, *Kunst und Kirche im 20. Jahrhundert*, 804–836.

³⁵ For example, *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vols. I–XXVII (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana: 1978–2006).

³⁶ Cf. “God,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 4th edition, ed. Andrew Louth, vol. 1: A – J (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 790–793.

pure essence and pure reality. God is unfathomable (*ineffabilis, incomprehensibilis*), but he has revealed himself in history, most fully through Jesus Christ.³⁷ In classical languages, the word for the Triune God was the same as the common noun used to describe pagan deities; hence θεός-Θεός and *deus-Deus*. Besides, the adjectives used to describe divine attributes – θεῖος and *divinus* – were sometimes used as nouns: τὸ θεῖον and *divinum*. The first meaning of these forms is given by dictionaries as “the divinity”³⁸ or “the divine.”³⁹ Many modern languages have adopted the usus of Greek and Latin, such as Italian (*il divino*), German (*das Göttliche*) and English (the divine).

It seems that *the divine* entered academic nomenclature through the study of religion. Émile Durkheim in the early 20th century introduced the concept of “the sacred.”⁴⁰ He was followed by Rudolf Otto⁴¹ who explored notions of “the holy” and “the numinous.” Mircea Eliade, again, directed attention to “the sacred.”⁴² In the contemporary studies of “the holy” or “the sacred,” notions such as “the numinous,” “the transcendent,” and “the divine” appear alongside.⁴³

³⁷ Cf. Walter R. Dietz, “Divine Essence. Dogmatics,” in *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, vol. IV: Dev – Ezz, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2008), 108-109; Wolf Krötke, “Hiddenness of God,” in *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, vol. VI: Hea – Jog, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2009), 122-124; cf. also Ansgar Paus, Josef Schreiner, Jacques Schlosser, Ferdinand Dexinger, Jürgen Werbick and Franz Wendel Niehl, “Gott,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 4: Franca – Hermenegild, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg / Basel / Rom / Wien: Herder, 1995), cols. 851-871.

³⁸ Cf. “Θεῖος,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, 9th edition with a revised supplement (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 788; “Divinum,” in *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, vol. 5,1: D – Dze, edition with 11 single issues published from 1986 to 1989 (Lipsiae: In aedibus B. G. Teubneri), 1625.

³⁹ Cf. “Diivinus,” in *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press, 1982 [1984]), 564.

⁴⁰ Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁴¹ Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 5-7.

⁴² Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 20-65.

⁴³ Cf. David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, xiv-xvii; Jelena Bogdanović, “Introduction. Encounters with the Holy,” in *Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, ed. Jelena Bogdanović (London / New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-7; Svein Aage Christoffersen, “Transcendence and the Use of Images,” in *Transcendence and Sensoriness. Perceptions, Revelation, and the Arts*, ed. Svein Aage Christoffersen, Geir Hellemo, Leonora Onarheim, Nils Holger Petersen and Margunn Sandal (Leiden: Brill, 2015) 455-473, esp. 456.

The *transcendence* means the supernatural, mediated by divine revelation; it refers to that what is beyond the tangible world and what is separate from it.⁴⁴ Transcendence also denotes God in his quality of incomprehensibility (*Unbegreiflichkeit*) and hiddenness (*Verborgenheit*).⁴⁵ The transcendent God, or “the transcendent,” is then the “wholly Other” (*ganz Andere*).⁴⁶ The meaning of transcendence also includes the dimension of the eternal bliss.⁴⁷ In religious studies, the transcendence can be experienced as a reality that goes beyond the cultic actions, texts, and the existing world.⁴⁸ Thus, “the transcendent” is a term that encompasses both “the divine” and “the heavenly.”

In the history of art, as the first chapter will show, the theological meaning of “divine” and “transcendence” has been metaphorically expressed in a variety of visual forms, mostly taken from biblical, liturgical, doctrinal spiritual texts. These forms include figures, events, symbols, colors, attributes, gestures, as well as composition, style and material.

The second area of core concepts include the notions of image, picture, and representation. The meaning of the word *image* is difficult to transfer from Greek or Latin (εἰκών, εἶδωλον, and *imago*) to modern languages and to translate between the modern languages themselves.⁴⁹ For example, English distinguishes between image and picture, while German (*Bild*), Italian (*immagine*) or Slavic languages (e.g., Polish *obraz*) have no such distinction. Non-European languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, operate on yet different concepts of an image.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Cf. Werner Schüßler, “Transzendenz I. Philosophisch,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 23: Technik – Transzendenz, ed. Gerhard Müller (Berlin / New York: De Gruyter, 2002), 768; Cf. H. G. Senger, “Transzendenz,” in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. VIII (Munich: Lexma Verlag, 1997), 955; Alexius J. Bucher, “Transzendenz,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 10: Thomaschristen – Żyto myr, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg / Basel / Rom / Wien: Herder, 2001), 190-191.

⁴⁵ Cf. Werner Schüßler, “Transzendenz I. Philosophisch,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 23: Technik – Transzendenz, ed. Gerhard Müller (Berlin / New York: De Gruyter, 2002), 770.

⁴⁶ Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 25-30.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hans G. Senger, “Transzendenz,” in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. VIII (Munich: Lexma Verlag, 1997), 955.

⁴⁸ Cf. Johann Figl, “Transcendence and Immanence. Religious Studies,” in *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, vol. XIII: Tol – Zyg, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2013), 63.

⁴⁹ Cf. Dieter Mersch and Oliver Ruf, “Grundlagen. Bildbegriffe und ihre Etymologien,” in *Bild. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Stephan Günzel and Dieter Mersch, with collaboration of Franziska Kümmerling (Stuttgart / Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2014), 3-6.

⁵⁰ Cf. James Elkins and Maja Naef, “What is Outside Image,” in *What is an Image?*, ed. James Elkins and Maja Naef (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 23-29; Dieter Mersch and Oliver Ruf, “Grundlagen. Bildbegriffe und ihre Etymologien,” 6.

The fact that “image” is dealt with by many different disciplines makes its definition even more difficult.⁵¹ In rhetoric, “image” (*Bild*) can mean “painting and the like” (“das Gemälde und ähnliches”), “the inner imagination in the sense of a remembered or conceived perception” (“die innere Vorstellung im Sinne einer erinnerten oder erdachten Wahrnehmung”), “a person or thing that represents another person or thing or something general” (“eine Person oder Sache, die eine andere Person oder Sache oder etwas Allgemeines repräsentiert”), or linguistic and artistic procedures that create or contain an image in the above three senses.⁵² Surprisingly, there is no chapter on “image” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff.⁵³

A material image, opposed to a mental image, can be defined as follows: “An image is a sign or symbol of something by virtue of its sensuous resemblance to what it represents.”⁵⁴ In Charles S. Peirce’s theory of signs “image” corresponds to the “icon,”⁵⁵ that is, “a sign whose intrinsic sensuous qualities resemble those of some other objects.”⁵⁶ An image is thus “sensuous,” and it also “represents.”

The sensuousness of the visual image postulates its material objecthood. Mitchell addressed this issue noting the differences between image and picture. As he says, “The image never appears except in some medium or other, but it is also what transcends media, what can be transferred from one medium to another.” He goes on to say: “The picture, then, is the image as it appears in a material support or a specific place.”⁵⁷ However, most scholars in fields such as visual, media or religious studies do not rigidly adhere to this division. Mitchell himself, elaborating on his definition of image, quoted

⁵¹ Cf. Stephan Günzel and Dieter Mersch (eds.), *Bild. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, with collaboration of Franziska Kümmerling (Stuttgart / Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2014), 41-150; cf. also Krešimir Purgar, “Coming to Terms with Images: Visual Studies and Beyond,” in *Theorizing Images*, ed. Žarko Paić and Krešimir Purgar (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 59-83.

⁵² Bernhard Asmuth, “Bild, Bildlichkeit,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 2, ed. Gert Ueding, co-founded by Walter Jens (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer 1994), col. 10.

⁵³ Cf. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ William J. T. Mitchell, “Image,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. William J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 38-39.

⁵⁵ Charles S. Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 98-119, esp. 104-107.

⁵⁶ William J. T. Mitchell, *Image science. Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, reprint 2015), 17.

⁵⁷ William J. T. Mitchell, *Image science*, 16.

above, speaks of its “inherent qualities such as color, texture, or shape that are the first things to strike our senses.”⁵⁸ Also Gottfried Boehm, through the notion of *ikonische Differenz*⁵⁹ (“iconic difference”), pointed out to the unity of materiality and immateriality in the image.

The terminology of Catholic theology and magisterium uses “image,” “icon,” “sacred image” or “sacred art” in the sense of visual representations of Christ, angels, Mary or other saints. Confirmed in dogmatic tradition, through the veneration of these representations the honour is given to the prototypes.⁶⁰ According to the Second Vatican Council, Christian sacred art consists of “signs and symbols of things supernatural” that turn the mind devoutly toward God.⁶¹

Representation, apart from signifying “a process of representing,” stands for “any kind of making present (Latin *praesens* – present) of a thing or a fact by something else or by a part of itself” (“jede Art der Vergegenwärtigung (lat. *praesens* – anwesend, gegenwärtig) einer Sache oder eines Sachverhaltes durch etwas anderes oder durch einen Teil ihrer selbst”⁶²). This broad definition, grounded in rhetoric, points to the dialectic of presence and absence: the thing to be represented is presupposed as absent and yet at the same time made present.⁶³ Considering the image as a representation underscores its value as a medium. Turning to the *ikonische Wendung* again, “the image is a something that stands ‘for something’” (“Das Bild ist ein Etwas, das ‘für etwas’ steht”⁶⁴), as

⁵⁸ William J. T. Mitchell, “Image,” 39.

⁵⁹ Gottfried Boehm, “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder,” 29-36; cf. also Nico Brömber, “Themen – Begriffe – Elemente. Rahmung – Bildkonstitution – Ikonische Differenz,” in *Bild. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Stephan Günzel and Dieter Mersch, with collaboration of Franziska Kümmerling (Stuttgart / Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2014), 280-282.

⁶⁰ Cf. Second Council of Nicaea, “Doctrine on the sacred images,” 23.10.787, in Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos. Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm. An Annotated Translation of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 787), Containing the Definition of the Council of Constantinople (754) and Its Refutation, and the Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), esp. 179 [377D-E]; Council of Trent, “On invocation, veneration and relics of the saints, and on sacred images,” 3-4.12.1563, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2: Trent to Vatican II (London and Washington: Sheed&Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 774-775.

⁶¹ Second Vatican Council, “Sacrosanctum Concilium. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” 4.12.1963, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2: Trent-Vatican, (London / Washington: Sheed & Ward / Georgetown University Press, 1990), no. 122.

⁶² Daniela Goeller, “Repräsentation,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 7, ed. Gert Ueding, co-founded by Walter Jens (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2005), col. 1177.

⁶³ Cf. Daniela Goeller, “Repräsentation,” col. 1177.

⁶⁴ Beat Wyss, “Grundlagen. Die Wende zum Bild: Diskurs und Kritik,” in *Bild. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Stephan Günzel and Dieter Mersch, with collaboration of Franziska Kümmerling (Stuttgart / Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2014), 11.

Gottfried Boehm wants.⁶⁵ With regard to the divine in Christian art, “representation” is a core concept because Christian iconography metaphorically refers to the invisible God, thought to be present. Christian images of God visualize the One who is believed to be present in an invisible, transcendent way. Representation in the broadest sense can also include non-figurative signs and images, such as the symbolical, geometric or vegetal motifs of church decoration, through which the divine was also imagined.⁶⁶ Thus, this study will use the words image, picture or representation with regard to mosaics, paintings, sculptures, reliefs, vitreous arts, metalwork, etc. that visually communicate persons, stories, objects or ideas.

The third area of key concepts includes terms such as “visual communication,” “vision” and “visuality.” According to the second edition of the *Handbook for Visual Communication*, the definition of “visual communication” does not include the visual and performing arts because these “are not reproducible *en masse* and cannot be distributed via mass media channels.”⁶⁷ At the same time, the editors of the Handbook emphasize two things relevant to the present study. First, the discipline of visual communication grew out of a centuries-old tradition of art criticism, even if it came to prominence in the 20th century with the development of photography and television. Second, while the original visual and performing artworks exist as individual objects or events, their reproductions in print or digital form are now available *en masse*.⁶⁸ Indeed, the original artworks are reproduced and interpreted through the visual communication media (see Chapter V). Furthermore, the integration of visual communication into the mass communication must be accompanied by the acknowledgment that all communications ultimately have also a visual dimension. Material or mental images are involved in conversations, reading a newspaper, listening to a radio program, or engaging in visual arts and performances.⁶⁹ In light of these aforementioned points, the Christian artworks under consideration in this study will be understood as forms of visual communication.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gottfried Boehm, “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder,” 11-38.

⁶⁶ For example, cf. Jelena Trkulja, “Divine Revelation Performed: Symbolic and Spatial Aspects in the Decoration of Byzantine Churches,” in *Spatial Icons: Performativity in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. Alexei Lidov (Moscow: Indrik, 2011), 213-246.

⁶⁷ James D. Kelly, Sheree Josephson and Ken Smith, “Introduction. Visual Communication Dominates the 21st Century,” in *Handbook for Visual Communication. Theory, Methods, and Media*, 2nd edition, ed. Sheree Josephson, James D. Kelly and Ken Smith (New York / London: Routledge, 2020), xviii.

⁶⁸ Cf. James D. Kelly, Sheree Josephson and Ken Smith, “Introduction,” xviii, xxii.

⁶⁹ Kevin G. Barnhurst, Michael Vari, and Ígor Rodríguez, “Mapping Visual Studies in Communication,” *Journal of Communication* 54 (2004): 630.

In the present study, the term *vision* will be used to refer to the involvement of the sense of sight. Vision can be defined as the physiological activity of receiving information through eye contact with light and subsequently processing it cerebrally.⁷⁰ Concurrently, the respective interpretation of the visual data is socioculturally determined (see II.2.b). This aspect of vision is referred to in academic literature as “visuality.”⁷¹ The term *visuality* denotes that different individuals can perform the same physiological action of seeing yet comprehend the visual information they perceive in different ways. It also signifies that an object is visible and therefore intended to be observed, analyzed and interpreted. The concepts of vision and *visuality* provide therefore a conceptual framework for understanding Christian visual art. It is possible to speak of the “visuality of Christian art.” This is obvious because the works of art and architecture created in the environment of Christianity, with its fundamental belief in the self-revealing divine and the Incarnation of the Logos, have a high information potential to be interpreted as metaphors for the heavenly, invisible realm of God.

4. Structure of the study

The present study argues that the transcendent divine constitutes the overarching subject of Christian art. This fundamental characteristic has shaped the emergence, development, medial function, and interpretation of its visual forms. The study therefore begins by outlining the historical iconography of the divine – its primary sources, contexts of use, formal languages, and pictorial strategies for suggesting the presence of the invisible God. Because images of God are created to be seen, engaged, and to mediate an encounter between the human and the divine, Chapter II examines the reception of Christian iconography. The two subsequent chapters provide the theoretical foundations necessary for interpreting such images, and Chapter V evaluates their relevance for contemporary communicative contexts. The analysis of images of the transcendent divine across history thus requires engagement with multiple scholarly approaches concerning religious *objects, practices, and ideas*.⁷² The study therefore proceeds in five steps.

The first task is to identify and categorize the iconography of the divine within the history of Christian art. To determine its various forms and to de-

⁷⁰ On the psychology and physiology of vision, see Richard Gregory, John Harris, Priscilla Heard, David Rose (eds.), *The Artful Eye* (Oxford / New York / Tokyo: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁷¹ Cf. Robert S. Nelson, “Descartes’s Cow and Other Domestications of the Visual,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-20.

⁷² Cf. David Morgan, “Toward a Modern Historiography of Art and Religion,” 22-24.

fine the scope of the material, Chapter I adopts an *object*-centered approach. Through the description, analysis, and interpretation of more than two hundred works of art and architecture, the chapter investigates how these works encode spiritual meaning through iconography, composition, style, patronage, function, and location. The chapter begins with an introductory discussion of the ideas and assumptions that underlie the emergence of Christian art and that account for its central role in communicating the Christian message. These foundational assumptions must be articulated at the outset and consistently applied throughout the interpretation of Christian artworks. The main sections follow a chronological order, dividing the material into three periods – Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, the early modern period, and the modern and contemporary era – and analyzing representative visual and architectural examples within each.

Chapter II is *practice*-oriented and focuses on recipients of sacred images and on their modes of multisensory perception and interaction. Without a beholder, the purpose of an image or a sacred space remains unfulfilled. It is therefore essential to consider the audiences capable of interpreting images of the divine and using them in diverse contexts. The initial subchapter addresses foundational questions concerning the identification of potential audiences and the anthropological perspectives on human fascination with images. Subsequent sections examine historical and contemporary practices of engaging with images of the divine and the architecture of sacred sites. These practices – derived from liturgy, public and private devotion, pastoral activity, and tourism – rely on multisensory perception and on the interplay of cognitive, imaginative, and emotional faculties.

The continued prominence of Christian art within religious, cultural, and academic communication underscores the necessity of emphasizing its original purpose: to transmit the faith and to serve as a visual medium for theological *ideas*. To understand this *intentio auctoris*, the iconography of the divine must be examined within the conceptual framework of theology and the Catholic magisterium. Chapter III therefore addresses, first, the theological debates concerning the legitimacy and justification of visually representing the divine, and second, the relevant magisterial pronouncements that illuminate the original setting and purpose of such imagery. The analysis of conciliar texts and papal teaching is complemented by selected statements of episcopal conferences and individual bishops.

Chapter IV turns to selected problems in iconology, visual studies, and religious and media studies. Historically, theological controversies have often restricted the conceptualization of images of the divine and have not always highlighted their broader cultural significance. Approaching Christian iconography from non-ecclesiastical perspectives allows for fresh questions re-

garding its continued relevance within contemporary visual cultures and its possible modes of interpretation today. The aim of this chapter is to consider the iconography of the divine through perspectives developed outside theology and, beyond iconology, outside classical art history. The established interest in images within the contemporary humanities demonstrates both the historical and current significance of Christian images of the invisible God.

The questions raised in Chapter IV prepare the ground for Chapter V, which examines contemporary practices of interpreting and communicating the iconography of the divine within different domains. The selected examples are grouped into three primary communicative contexts: pastoral care, academic scholarship, and religious tourism. Within each field, various media are analyzed – including guided tours, scholarly and catechetical lectures, books, homiletic publications, online courses, and social media content. The content analysis demonstrates the potential of Christian art within the broader framework of Church communications. Its findings may also contribute to the further professionalization of the ways in which the iconography of the divine is interpreted and communicated today.