Salvador Dali's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*: A Theological Re-Assessment

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[A copy of the painting can always be found by doing an "Image" search of the title at the Google search engine.]

Introduction

Completed in 1955 after nine months of work, Salvador Dali's painting *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* has remained one of his most popular compositions. From its popularity at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where almost upon its arrival in 1955 it replaced Renoir's *Girl with a Watering Can* as the most popular piece in the museum (pushing her "into the mud" as *Time* magazine quipped[1]), to the painting's perennial presence in college dorm poster sales every fall semester, the piece has continued to draw interest. The combination of what seems a classic Christian theme with the jarring techniques of Surrealism captures the eye, as Dali was able to do repeatedly with such works as *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, *Crucifixion* or *Corpus Hypercubus*, *The Madonna of Port Lligat*, *Nuclear Cross*, and *The Ecumenical Council*, among others.

Despite the popularity of *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*, however, dealing with significant paintings—even those with Christian content—is not common work among theologians. Nor, perhaps, is dealing with theological content an easy task for art historians, more of whom are displaying an increasing ignorance regarding Christian themes in art.[2] I have encountered only two theologians—Francis Schaeffer and Paul Tillich—who have written on this painting of Dali's. Despite being writers with very different theological commitments, the

[1] "People" *Time*, November 19, 1956, p. 46.
[2] My most recent encounter being with _____ on the Pre-Raphaelites, where in Dante's painting *The Annunciation*, she identified the haloed dove of the Holy Spirit as a representative pet from the artist's home and a statement of his commitment to animal rights!

two were united by one fact in their assessment of this painting: they both misunderstood it. Here we will explore the nature of each theologian's misunderstanding of the work, and then, after a brief glance at the nature of Dali's Christianity, we will then re-assess the theology that is being expressed in Dali's painting and come to an accurate understanding of his intention.

Francis Schaeffer

Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) was, with his wife Edith, the founder of the L'Abri Fellowship—an interesting turn in the post-war movement of Christian missionaries heading back into Europe from the United States in the years following World War II. L'Abri—and Schaeffer's work in general—became concerned to specifically meet the world of Western *culture* with a Christian voice. Schaeffer was coming out of a classic Presbyterian fundamentalist background, formed in the early theological battles of the 20th century between modernism and fundamentalism at Princeton, and which resulted in the break of the faculty and the fundamentalists' founding of Westminster Theological Seminary as an alternative to what they saw as the disastrous capitulation of authentic Christianity to the disintegrating forces of modern theology and philosophy.[3]

In his writing and documentary film-making, Schaeffer took on the thankless task of trying to come up with an over-arching description of Christianity's relation to philosophy and culture over the entire course of Western civilization. I call it "thankless" because while the task of a generalist—to pull together vast amounts of data and to draw conclusions from it—always needs to be done, today perhaps more than ever, there is no room for such writers in the contemporary academic guild, which is so given over to specialization that all specialists will immediately take issue with a generalist for daring to *make* generalizations. I, too, must criticize

[3] These fascinating struggles are related in Bradley J. Longfield's *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates*. Oxford University Press, 1991.

Schaeffer's project, but before doing so, I do want to make a note of approval for his attempt. In particular, Schaeffer was doing something very unusual in that the audience he was writing for—one of Protestant biblical fundamentalism—had no place at this time for a serious engagement with Western arts and culture. It is to Schaeffer's credit that he opened up an acceptable route into the arts for American "Bible-believing Christians." It was also Schaeffer's contribution in his engagement with culture, along with the aid of his friend and collaborator Dr. C. Everett Koop, that he drew American Protestantism into the anti-abortion movement with their book and documentary *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Without his involvement, the Christian resistance to abortion-on-demand after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision was looking to shape up as a solely Catholic concern.

Schaeffer's treatment of Dali's canvas flows directly from his primary thesis: he described modern thought as having fallen into a fatal dichotomy between a "lower level" of the rational and the logical which can give no meaning, and an "upper level" of "a blind optimistic hope of meaning, based on a nonrational leap of faith."[4] This was his way of expressing what he saw as the fatal impasse of existentialism. The alternative he wanted to offer was a rational belief in the content of an inerrant Scripture that gave meaning by opening up a personal relationship with God. Dali's painting, Schaeffer judges, fits right into the flawed reasoning of modern thought. Speaking of Dali's entry into religious painting, Schaeffer writes:

> Eventually, Salvador Dali abandoned Surrealism—with its acceptance of absurdity—and began his mystical paintings in which Gala, his wife, became the focal point in his leap into the area of nonreason in a hope for meaning. The final breakthrough in this period was his painting *A Basket of Bread*. He had painted in 1926 and 1945 other works with this same title; these depicted baskets of rough Spanish bread. But in 1945, he used this title for a painting of Gala with one breast exposed. He wrote her name on the picture; there is no mistaking who she is. He made her his mystical center. In some of his paintings he would portray

[4] Schaeffer, Francis. *The God Who Is There*, ch. 2 in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985. p. 57.

> her three or four times, often where Mary would have appeared in Roman Catholic paintings. There are a number of such paintings in the New York Cultural Center in New York City. From this time on, many of his paintings show his mystical leap into the area of nonreason.[5]

Schaeffer is clearly critical of Dali's work from the beginning and finds Dali's own attempts to interpret his own work as seriously deficient in Christian content. This is of particular interest to us in our examination of *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* because Dali's Eucharistic consciousness is revealed as Schaeffer challenges its depth.

> Salvador Dali has written about this painting in a little folder on sale in the museum: "In artistic texture and technique I painted the *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* in the manner in which I had already painted my *Basket of Bread*, which even then, more or less unconsciously, represented the Eucharist to me."
>
> What does he mean? He means that when he looks at his wife one day, really loving her, and paints her with one breast exposed, this is equated by him to the Eucharist; not in the sense that anything really happens, either in the Roman Catholic Mass, or that anything really happened back there in Palestine, 2,000 years ago, but his love jarred him into a modern type of mysticism.[6]

As far as Schaeffer can determine, Dali has used Christian imagery but has deleted the Christian content or meaning of the traditional imagery. Schaeffer's presupposition is that for Dali, like other post-Christian artists, there is an assumption throughout the culture that Christianity has been "proven wrong," or "outgrown." As a result, Christian symbolism is free for the taking, but must have new content given *to* the symbols. Since Western culture has given up on a rational religion with the dismissal of Christianity, all that is left, Schaeffer insists, is a vague, irrational, and modern wishful sort of mysticism: the kind of contentlessness we typically find today by people who identify themselves with the catchphrase, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." But is this an accurate representation of Dali and his beliefs? Let us read on to see how Schaeffer deals with the painting we are examining.

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[5] Schaeffer, Francis. *How Should We Then Live?*, ch. 9 in *A Christian View the West*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985. pp. 187-188.
[6] *The God Who Is There*, p. 71.

> This was the period of *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951), now in the Glasgow Art Gallery, and *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. These were not paintings of the Christ of history. Rather, in them Christ is an upper-story, mystical figure. There were the leap of Kierkegaardianism expressed in painting. The Christ in the *Last Supper* [sic] is a shadowy figure through whom we may look at the landscape behind. The little ships are visible through his body. This is not a body of flesh and blood in space and time. This intangible Christ which Dali painted is in sharp contrast to the bodies of the apostles who are physically solid in the picture.
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> Dali explained in his interviews that he had found a mystical meaning for life in the fact that things are made up of energy rather than solid mass. Because of this, for him there was a reason for a vault into an area of nonreason to give him the hope of meaning. Whether in his interviews or in these paintings, that which causes him to escape the absurdity which Surrealism presented is not reason, and it is not Christianity either; it is a blind leap into the area of nonreason.[7]

So what Dali expresses here is, in Schaeffer's assessment, not a real and traditional Christian vision. It is not even a Christian vision in modern form. It is a non-rational attempt to grab at meaning—the type of meaning that Christianity used to give—using the *forms* of Christian belief, but without actual Christian *faith* behind it.

This painting, however, like many other works of art, are forced by Schaeffer into fitting his thesis where in fact, I will argue, such a concept is not really in Dali's mind at all. We have to assume four things if we are to agree with Schaeffer's interpretation:

1. We cannot accept the sincerity of Dali's Christian belief after his public re-commitment to Catholicism in 1949.
2. We must assume that Dali was searching for meaning in his work and not trying to convey a meaning that *he* assumes is part of the content of his art.
3. We have to assume that the point of this transparent Christ is one of contentlessness, and that Dali has no other, sensible reason for portraying Jesus in this way.
4. We have to assume with Schaeffer that this is a painting of the Last Supper.

[7] *How Should We Then Live?*, p. 188.

Each of these, we will find, are assumptions we cannot make, but before demonstrating why we cannot make them, we must turn to another theologian, one Schaeffer himself saw as a theological champion of the intellectual and spiritual self-destruction he was combating: the prominent liberal German-American Protestant, Paul Tillich.

Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) had very little in common theologically with Francis Schaeffer. But one point that they *did* have in common was a profound interest in the arts, and they shared a belief in the power of the arts as having a theological and philosophical significance of their own. Tillich's writing on the arts and theology remains engaging and useful. His essay "Art and Ultimate Reality,"[8] for example, outlines a set of five elements in art that correlate with five ways or aspects of religious life and provide a key for fruitful understanding of art. These five elements—the sacramental, the mystical, realism, idealism, and expressionism—are employed with skill by Tillich, but also provide the basis by which Tillich gives an inadequate response to *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*.

Tillich disliked few things more in art than what he termed *kitsch*. In his schema, kitsch is a corruption of the positive element in art that he called "idealism." The beautifying naturalism of kitsch—the tendency to, in his words, confuse "idealism with a superficially and sentimentally beautifying realism"—was the chief danger in religious art and was,

> the reason for the disrepute into which idealism, both word and concept, has fallen. Genuine idealism shows the potentialities in the depths of a being or event, and brings them into existence as artistic images. Beautifying realism shows the actual existence of its object, but with dishonest, idealizing additions.[9]

[8] Tillich, Paul. "Art and Ultimate Reality (1960)" in *Paul Tillich: Writings in the Philosophy of Culture*, ed. Michael Palmer, *Paul Tillich: Main Works/Hauptwerke*, Vol. 2. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter–Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1990. pp. 317-332.
[9] Ibid. p. 325.

This is precisely the trap into which he thought Dali had fallen with *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*. His reaction to the painting was one of extreme, even exaggerated distaste. While Tillich's religious interpretations of paintings are usually sensitive and thought-provoking, his impression of *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* is shallow and misleading. His viewing of it took place just before he was to deliver a lecture on "Religion and Art." His secretary Grace Calí recorded his reaction in these words:

> Tillich was horrified by it (using his own word) … Tillich strongly feels that in portraying the divine, the forms must be distorted from reality as we see it in order to convey the 'other worldliness' of what is being expressed.

He immediately conveyed his distaste in the lecture that he gave afterwards and his comments were picked up by *Time* magazine.

> Tillich deplored Dali's work as a sample of the very worst in "what is called the religious revival of today." The depiction of Jesus did not fool Tillich: "A sentimental but very good athlete on an American baseball team...The technique is a beautifying naturalism of the worst kind. I am horrified by it!' Theologian Tillich added it all up: "Simply junk!"[10]

"Junk" was Tillich's unfortunate English choice of a word to translate his German term *kitsch* and to round out the growing absurdity of the episode, when *Time* then made a transatlantic call to Spain for a response from Dali at having his work called "junk," the tenuous nature of such a long-distance call in 1956 resulted in Dali's roaring in reply, "I was not drunk!"

Despite the fact that these are not Tillich's most profound words of criticism of a piece of art, what can we perceive of his understanding? First we see that Tillich is true to his system: if he is dismissing this painting as *kitsch*, he is clearly seeing it as a failed attempt at an idealistic painting, a "superficially and sentimentally beautifying realism." He would continue to defend that interpretation of the painting years later.[11] But it is certainly an odd sort of realism that is

[10] "People" *Time*, November 19, 1956, p. 46.
[11] "I used the untranslatable German word *Kitsch* for a special kind of a beautifying, sentimental naturalism, as it

dominated by transparent figures. His distaste for the figure of Jesus is also telling. Granted we have a slightly different Jesus than is standard in art of the time, in that he is clean-shaven as well as transparent. But to call him a "sentimental but very good athlete on an American baseball team" is certainly exaggerated. In fact, one wonders how many baseball games Tillich went to in 1956 if he imagined an American ballplayer to be sporting shoulder-length hair at the time. This is a robust-looking Jesus, certainly, but the mystery of his semi-visibility is unaddressed in Tillich's haste, much less the semi-visibility of the transcendent figure above and the stylized geometric space that we also glimpse in this mysterious vision Dali has given us. Why call it "sentimental?" Perhaps because of the solemnity of its worship? The reverent quiet of the picture certainly conveys a depth of feeling. The picture was noted in an article from 1955, the year of its completion and donation to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. by its owner, Chester Dale, as "the most popular picture in the National Gallery,"[12] and this in an article by an author who also dismissed it as "vulgar" and "shallow."[13] Does its popularity indicate a sentimentality in the work? Or could the viewers view it in a sentimental way that does not do justice to what is being expressed in the work? If that is the case, however, would such a sentimentality truly detract from the painting itself if that reaction is really a misunderstanding? In both cases—whether there is a sentimentality in the work, as Tillich claims, or a sentimentality in the audience, as I am allowing as a possibility—neither of these are acceptable

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appears in disastrous quantities in ecclesiastical magazines and inside church buildings. The word *Kitsch* points not to poor art, based on the incompetence of the painter, but on a particular form of deteriorized idealism (which I like to call "beautifying naturalism"). The necessary fight against the predominance of such art in the churches during the last hundred years leads me to the frequent use of the word *Kitsch* (which I even applied to describe the face of Jesus in Dali's famous *Last Supper [The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (plate *58)]* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington)." From a conversation between Tillich and John Herman Randall, professor of philosophy at Columbia University during Tillich's days at Union Theological Seminary, published in *Philosophical Interrogations*, ed. Sydney and Beatrice Rome (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1964*),* pp. 407-8. Cited in Paul Tillich, "Contemporary Visual Arts and the Revelatory Character of Style" in *On Art and Architecture.* Ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger. Crossroad: New York, 1987, pp. 132-133. Note also Tillich's casual misidentification of the painting as a *Last Supper*.

[12] William Walton, "Parnassus on Potomac" *ARTNews*, March 1956, p. 39.

[13] Ibid., p. 37.

readings of the painting. Tillich's reading must be held in suspicion, if not outright rejected, for four reasons:

1. Tillich's rejection of the painting has all the appearances of an immediate, unreflected reaction.
2. Tillich's dismissal of the painting as *kitsch* lacks explicit support: it is an accusation, not a conclusion.
3. There is no examination of the distinctive and unusual features of the painting, which must be a part of a thorough judgment of the canvas.
4. He gives no explicit indication of recognizing the actual theme of the painting: like Schaeffer, in his reaction to Jesus, he gives every indication of thinking that this is a painting of the Last Supper.[14]

While I would argue that in general, Tillich is a much more useful theological interpreter of the arts than Schaeffer, with his tendency to interpret everything through the lens of a single argument, here Tillich's system and his insight failed him. The two theologians who have taken time to write about this work have both failed to understand it in the slightest. In hopes of correcting these skewed visions, we will undertake here a new theological assessment which does justice to the complexity of Dali's vision.

Salvador Dali, Catholic

It is neither my place, nor my intention to offer an assessment of Dali's faith. I intend here to only lay out a few facts regarding Dali's Christianity as a matter of "orientation" before we proceed directly on to an examination of the canvas. It is a simple matter of record or common knowledge among those studying Dali that around the year 1949 or 1950 he returned to the Catholic faith of the Spanish people. His return started perhaps as early as 1920 when

[14] See note 11.

someone gave him the poetry of Saint John of the Cross and he found himself quite excited about it. Certainly in 1946 we see the first of his explicitly religiously-themed paintings in the still very Surreal *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. By the time of his public embrace of Catholicism, he had broken with the Surrealists (while at the same time remaining the most well-known Surrealist painter) and had announced his intention to "become classical" in a thoughtful combination of Surrealist visual liberties combined with a High Renaissance classical treatment of the body. He became excited by the possibilities of expressing mystical ideas in light of the new visions given of the world by nuclear physics, not falling for the "science versus religion" propaganda of Enlightenment modernity, noting "Not a single philosophic, moral, aesthetic or biological discovery allows the denial of God."[15] This new thrust to his work did not go unrecognized, as one critic noted how "...the iconography of nuclear physics is used to invest his madonnnas and religious heroes with the unseen powers of the universe."[16] Dali certainly continued to play the role of the mad artist, selling himself to the public with a Ringling Brothers exaggeration and determination, but his art now had a creativity, content and depth that it had not enjoyed in his earlier, purely Surreal period, dominated by strict Freudian illustrations. His religious paintings now entered into the 2,000 year dialogue of Christianity and explored a mystical edge of Christianity that had seemed particularly challenged by a sterile view of modern science. Here, too, Dali still marketed himself with a nationalistic pride, claiming that "...(an Iberian cannot reveal himself as anything but a mystic!).…" Self-promotion aside, however, we have enough warning to be open to Dali as being willing to approach classic themes of Christian faith from strikingly new perspectives.

[15] Salvador Dali, quoted in *Dali...Dali...Dali....* Max Gérard, Henry N. Abrams, Inc., New York 1974.
[16] J. G. Ballard in the introduction to *Dali,* Ballantine Books, New York 1974.

The Painting

Our eye is first drawn to the center. By the simple device of placing Christ's face at the very center of the painting, intersecting with both the line of the horizon in the distance and placing the source of the sunlight at that very point on the horizon, the figure of Christ is made to dominate the painting. It is only after taking him in, and perhaps his setting as well, that our eye is then drawn upward, at Jesus' direction, to the figure above him who otherwise dominates the work. This figure, a giant torso whose arms take in the whole of the presented space, is perhaps the final resting place of our eye as it has been directed through the canvas. Otherwise, if our eye has immediately moved from Christ to the torso above, only then do we come to take in the what appears to be a less-important setting, but what in fact will be the center of meaning for the piece. If we examine the various elements in turn, the meaning of the painting which has escaped Schaeffer and Tillich will soon become apparent to us.

Jesus' Gestures and the Figure Above Him. The gestures Jesus makes are very specific and beg explanation. We can see that Jesus is in fact making a pair of gestures: with his left hand he gestures back toward himself. With his right hand he points to the great and mysterious figure above him. What does this massive torso mean? Is it symbolic of someone in particular or is it more general? Perhaps its generalities might lead us to a specific interpretation. We can see that the figure is male. We can also see that the figure is presented to us without a face. Like Jesus, the figure at the top of the painting is also transparent: the only other person like that in the image. Could they be the same person: a Jesus at table and a transcendent Jesus of some sort? The only similar characteristics that they have other than being male and transparent are that they both have the same colour of skin and both are without crucifixion wounds. Three differences we might note are that the giant figure *is* a giant, unlike Jesus, is without clothing, and does not

have Jesus' hair resting on his shoulders. At that superficial level, we might deny that the two are the same. So who might Jesus be gesturing toward who is above him, equally-invisible and in some way greater than he, represented here as an unrealistic difference in size? Why not the Father? In fact, what it looks as though we have here is a visual representation of Jesus' reply to his disciple Philip, from the very night of the Last Supper. In the Gospel of John, we read:

> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"
> Jesus answered, "I am the way and truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."
> Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."
> Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."[17]

This reply seems a perfect translation of Jesus' gestures: "Anyone who has seen me," he indicates with his left hand, "has seen the Father" he points out with his right hand, indicating the figure that shows so much in common with Jesus. We might also note the appropriate placement of allowing the Father's face to be off the visible area of the canvas: it was a central warning in the Old Testament to Moses and to others that "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."[18] At the risk of perhaps reading too much into the gestures, we might also note that the classic meaning of "right hand" and "left hand" in the Scriptures are to indicate that which is greater by the right hand, and that which is lesser by the left. The figure above Jesus is the Father, and we will see that this interpretation adds even more consistent meaning to the painting as we go on.

The Twelve-Sided Space. The setting of the painting is distinctive if not bizarre: the space that Dali has taken great pains to represent is a dodecahedron—a twelve-sided space which we are able to perceive in the pentagon-shaped panes of the vast window space behind the table.

[17] John 14:5-9. (New International Version)
[18] Exodus 33:20.

Dali makes this space transparent like the figures in the center of the painting, although whether this is for the same reason or whether it is simply to let us *see* that space more clearly will take a bit of study to understand. What we can begin with is *why* he might set this scene in a twelve-sided space. It helps, of course, that he has told us something about his reasons.

> Contrary to the anecdotal and obscure conceptions in paintings on this same subject, I wanted to materialize the maximum of luminous and Pythagorian instantaneousness, based on the celestial communion of the number 12: 12 hours of the day—12 months of the year—the 12 pentagons of the dodecahedron—12 signs of the Zodiac around the sun—the 12 apostles around Christ.[19]

What exactly this means is a bit more difficult. The dodecahedron space around the subjects is not real, at least, not "real" in the sense of being part of the physical architecture containing the altar. If you examine a dodecahedron, you will find that the floor would not be flat. In fact, there would *be* no discernable floor, for in the arrangement of the windows that we see, there would be no plane of the figure that would be horizontal as we see here. The twelve-sided space, then, that we see here is a "spiritual" space that is present—like the figures of Christ and the Father above—but is not visible or "present" in a physical way. This space is in the same realm as the Father, for the Father is able to cast a shadow on this architecture, even if for the rest of the room it is transparent or invisible. The twelve-sided space, as Dali contends, is a symbol taken from antiquity of heaven: it is heaven that is present, heaven is the space in which the event we see in the painting is taking place. It is the figure of the Father, then, who fills both heaven and earth as they are presented in this painting, with His outstretched arms taking in the whole of the space.

The Twelve Around the Table. The twelve figures kneeling in reverence around the table must command our attention. Taking traditional symbolism for granted, we easily identify these as the Twelve Apostles, Jesus' friends and disciples who were present at the Last Supper. A

[19] "Salvador Dali. His most recent major work," Author unknown. *Apollo*, 63, May 1956, p. 143.

second look at them, however, makes us question our first, easy assumption. We see that the twelve are mirror images of one another: six sets of twins perfectly arrayed on either side of the table to duplicate one another. Hair, posture, the way their clothing drapes across their forms, even the way they catch the light: all are duplicated. The only real differences are a few switched colours: gold and blue, reversed in the clothing of one pair and in the hair of another. These are idealized figures. We may count them as the Twelve Apostles, certainly, but they are not the historic Twelve: here they have been universalized and made anonymous.[20] Unlike in Leonardo's *Last Supper*, they are not important here for their specific personalities. Instead, what we are invited to notice is their action, not their identity. They kneel in reverence, in prayer, and in worship. But their attention, we might be surprised to notice, is *not* given to Christ. Indeed, they do not seem to be aware of the figure seated amongst them. None of them visibly react to Jesus sitting at the table for the very simple reason that Jesus is not *visibly* seated at the table. We see Jesus in a mysterious, transparent or spiritual way, but Jesus is not *physically* present and none of the Twelve respond physically for that reason. Their heads are bowed, yes, but toward the altar, not toward the figure of Jesus that we see. What *does* inspire their worship and prayer is what is there on the table, solid and casting shadows, unlike Jesus: the bread and the wine, the Eucharist, *the Sacrament of the Last Supper*.

Here at last we come to the core of the meaning of the painting. What we are presented with here is *not* the Last Supper. At least, not an historical *Last Supper* as Leonardo painted. Instead, we have exactly what the title of the work said we had, and what both Schaeffer and

[20] Dali's own comment, while referring to the figures as "apostles," proved not to be particularly helpful: "Approaching the secret organization. Each apostle must be a luminous instantaneous ecstasy, the same as the signs of the Zodiac encircling the sun." (Dali's note on a detail of *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*, on the first four disciples to Jesus' right.) Michel Tapié, "Salvador Dali: An Appreciation," in *Dali: A Study of His Life and Work*, New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, CT, 1958, p. 81.

Tillich ignored: we have the *sacrament* of the Last Supper. We have a painting whose true subject is the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Real Presence is a cornerstone of Catholic mysticism, and it is especially the mystical end of Catholicism that grabbed Dali's attention. The Real Presence of Christ is the recognition that in some special and particular way Christ is truly "in" the Eucharist and thereby "in" the believer who engages in receiving that sacrament. The classic definition of a sacrament—a visible sign of an invisible reality—conveys quite well the idea of what the Catholic is experiencing in receiving the Eucharist: that in the visible sign of bread and wine—which is here on the table, solid and present and visible to the twelve around it—the invisible reality—Christ himself, the sacrament of God on Earth, our Father here present in this mystical twelve-sided heaven—is truly and Really Present. It was not Dali's intention to paint a mere *Last Supper*, although the twelve anonymous figures around the table invoke and remind us of that historical occasion. Dali's true intention, which he has masterfully accomplished on this canvas, is to remind us of what is occurring in every celebration of this mystery of bread and wine: that the worship here on Earth makes present the realities of the worship in Heaven. The Real Presence of Christ means the Real Presence of the Father. The community drawn together in recognition of this miracle—the Church—shows the Real Presence of the Holy Spirit, and where the Trinity is, is Heaven: unseen with our eyes, but sensed and recognized in our prayer.

Conclusion

Our two theologians, Schaeffer and Tillich, both seem to have gone astray by making the most natural of mistakes regarding Salvador Dali's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*, and that is to take it at first glance as being a *Last Supper*. Our eye, trained by the fame of the da Vinci

masterpiece, makes that immediate leap when we are confronted with Christ at table and twelve figures gathered around him.

But the signs that this is not the historical Last Supper, even if these twelve anonymous figures still may stand for the Twelve Apostles, are plentiful: the mysterious spiritual nature of the Jesus who sits, without interaction with his fellows, at the table, along with the similar spiritual nature of the transcendent figure above him and that of the space in which they are gathered, should alert the viewer immediately that they are being given a vision of something special and distinct from the Last Supper the night before Jesus' execution. Instead, we have seen how the interaction between the spiritual Real Presence of Jesus, in relation to His Father and the space of heaven, turn our focus—along with the attention of the twelve—to the elements of bread and wine which are visibly at the center of reverence upon the table. The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, illustrated in all the personal and divine dynamism that Dali could muster, is the true subject of the painting, and remains with us as an image of iconic depth and power, reminding us of the true nature of this most frequent moment of Catholic mysticism: one which always threatens to be lost in the limits of our own vision.