

# Imaging the Word: *Art and Theology*

## Weighing the Cost of Discipleship

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, Belgium has a history of supporting the arts—it is home to Peter Paul Rubens’s famous *Elevation of the Cross* and *Descent from the Cross*. Yet the last time the cathedral acquired a new piece of art was in 1924. That changed in 2015, when the Cathedral purchased a bronze sculpture by contemporary artist Jan Fabre, called *The Man Who Bears the Cross*. It is a self-portrait of the artist surveying a large cross that he balances in the palm of his hand.

*The Man Who Bears the Cross* was originally shown in wax in the 2014 exhibition “The Spiritual Skeptic” at Antwerp’s At The Gallery. There it was spotted by parish priest Bart Paepen, who had been “looking for a way of making a connection between the world of the church and that of contemporary art” for some time, and thought this piece would be a perfect fit for Our Lady.



Jan Fabre (Belgian, 1958–), *The Man Who Bears the Cross*, 2015. The Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp, Belgium, on November 18, 2015.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, the meaning of the piece is open ended rather than declaratory. Fabre has said that the cross is a symbol of the question, “Do we believe in God, or don’t we?”

The priest Paepen elaborates on this interpretation:

A man bears an enormous wooden cross on his right-hand palm. He is not a prophet, nor an apostle, a martyr, or a saint. He is someone who does what we invite every visitor of the cathedral to do, regardless of his background or his convictions. Take the cross in your hands, a token of the God that is celebrated here, a token of his love for the whole of humankind, a token of the engagement that he asks from all his followers. Take up the cross and balance it. Perhaps you will not succeed in holding it upright. Perhaps it is too heavy or too difficult. Perhaps you should try again later. Perhaps you don't like it. Just let it down then. Who knows—you may succeed and feel right. Then it could be that you have found a goal and a meaning in your life. ([Source](#))

He continues, “The work is noncommittal but at the same time challenging and inviting. Just feel what we stand for.”

When one thinks of “bearing the cross,” what likely comes to mind is a heavy burden, images of the beaten Christ on the road to Calvary, where the cross is borne on his shoulders. In Christian parlance, those who “bear the cross” are those who willingly take on the personal suffering associated with living out the gospel.



But in *The Man Who Bears the Cross*, “bearing the cross” has a different connotation. It is borne not on one's back, but on the palm—held out and lifted up before view, an object of consideration. It's still weighty, but that weight is negotiated through a balancing act. The sculpture visualizes an internal process that everyone must undergo: deciding whether to accept Christ and him crucified, or to reject him. Some people spend most of their lives

weighing the two options, not ready to commit to either a Yes or No. Some don't even see the options as worth handling. Some perhaps jump on the Christian bandwagon too quickly without first counting the cost.

As Paepen said, Fabre's sculpture doesn't demand a "right" response to the cross, but it does ask that we at least take the time to ponder its claims, to choose—to bear, to accept, to endure the cross and its commitments, or not. Will visitors to the church bear the challenge?

This six-minute film by Wannes Peremans shows the sculpture being installed and includes interviews with Paepen and local art historian Joanna De Vos.

*The Man Who Bears the Cross* in the Cathedral of Our Lady is the first of eight casts. Another was on display in 2016 at the Forte di Belvedere in Florence, Italy, as part of an exhibition called "Spiritual Guards."



Temporary installation of Jan Fabre's *The Man Who Bears the Cross*, Forte di Belvedere, Florence, Italy.