

## EDIFICES THAT EDIFY

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**D**OMINICANS and architecture! A legitimate topic, to be sure, when we consider all the magnificent edifices, all the talented architects, which the Order has produced down through the seven centuries of her history. Yet what timeliness is there in such a discussion? What, for that matter, is particularly *Dominican* about it! For apart from the peculiar forms imposed by our monastic and liturgical needs, it must surely be conceded that "Dominican" architecture over the centuries has always been very much of a piece with contemporary modes of architectural expression.

But the way a Dominican *thinks* of architecture, and the zest with which he thinks of it, if summoned to do so in the fulfillment of his vocation—here the Dominican and the Thomist will surely shine through! At least this is certainly true of the Friars Preachers involved in one of the Order's greatest contributions to the contemporary world of art and architecture: the little French magazine, *L'Art Sacré*.<sup>1</sup>

It may seem odd that one review, *Dominicana*, should devote a special article to a sister review which any interested party can obtain and read for himself. Yet *L'Art Sacré* is less known in this country than it deserves to be. And to tell of it is to tell in part at least of a fruitful Dominican apostolate in the field of the arts. The story of *L'Art Sacré* is in great part the story of Father Marie-Alain Couturier, and the success of his mission can be gauged by the fact that some of the greatest achievements in modern religious art have been intimately connected with his name—Assy, Vence, Audincourt.<sup>2</sup> An adequate summary of Father Courturier's contributions in this field would fill a book. Yet we here attempt a dim reflection of his genius through a brief examination of the *idea* behind the magazine he founded, *L'Art Sacré*.

We all know the story about the Benedictine, the Dominican, the Franciscan, the Jesuit, and the lightbulb. Well, a Dominican approach to architecture will very likely follow this same line: it will be an intellectual, a *theoretical* approach. Such, in all truth, is the spirit of the French Dominicans behind *L'Art Sacré*. Let us say first of all that they see (or saw, for the situation is changing) the present state of the arts *vis-a-vis* the Church as a problem, a challenge, a tragic picture of estrangement on the one hand and effete sterility on the other. The light bulb of Church art, which had shone so brightly from the Catacombs to the High Baroque, had burned out. The great art of the twentieth century, by and large, was not being inspired by the Christian faith; and the Church herself seemed unable somehow to find the contemporary artistic setting for her worship and her message. This aesthetic problem gave rise to an apostolic one—surely a legitimate concern for Dominicans—that a Church speaking only with the art of the past seemd to have lost the tongue which would speak to the man of today. At least, she no longer seemed to enjoy the powerful assistance of artistic expression in her apostolate to twentieth-century man. This state of affairs, admittedly, seems to have been much more serious in Continental Europe; it is only beginning to create a stir here in America.

Thus there existed a two-fold problem—the apostolic and the purely aesthetic. There was another aspect demanding attention, too, especially in the realm of architecture. The very progress of technology, and specifically the perfecting of new structural materials, such as steel and reinforced concrete, had given an altogether new orientation to architectural procedure.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious benefit was the tremendous liberty now afforded the architect: the skyscraper, the suspension bridge, vast concrete hangars and spans—what was not open to his new-found powers? Yet what relation did these vastly-expanded capacities bear to the traditional, canonized norms of the Church?

The heart of the problem, then: how can the art of our age be won for the Church? How can it be restored, “re-capitulated” in Christ? (Eph. 1:10) An apostolic problem, a theological problem of ideas—and how will Dominicans approach it? Others will go right ahead and build, still others will start from the viewpoint of beauty, others yet will take their stand almost exclusively on canonical regulation. But a Dominican will search for *meaning*. Good Thomist that he is, he will first ferret out the *status quaestionis*, then, having seen the lay of the land, he will conclude to

the particular procedures indicated in a given case. This, precisely, has been the approach of our Dominican brethren in *L'Art Sacré*.

Take for example the particular question to which they have been giving their attention for much of the past year: the matter of small, inexpensive churches so urgently needed amid the rapidly-expanding suburbs of France (and America). A common response to this problem might be to build as needed, without much provision for the beauty or real suitability of the structures erected, even though the persons involved might be nursing a pang of remorse that something more "worthy" was not to be had. This is leaping into the midst of the fray, and is better than not leaping at all; but the function of *L'Art Sacré*, and its excellent counterparts here in America, is to provide that helpful look before the leap.

The thesis expounded in this magazine is that such small, light churches are not a mere stop-gap measure, an architectural *obiter dictum*; but rather that they represent a distinct challenge for today's architect—commensurate indeed to the primary construction problem of the hour. The corollary—an important one—is that these slight little buildings deserve, just as much as the "big jobs," to be placed in the hands of top-flight architects. From the hands of these masters, if we call on them, will come churches that are impressive works of art. Indeed, even allowing for a sizeable fee for the architect, we may expect greater satisfaction, both aesthetic and utilitarian, often with distinct savings on the economic level.

Such is the thesis, and its practical corollary. But how establish the thesis? Where to begin? What is to be said for the tradition of the Church?

The tradition of the Church! At first sight it seems to shrink with horror from the materialistic makeshifts of our day? Is not hers the tradition of Chartres and Rheims, Melk and the Vatican? Is it not her tradition to lavish her best in the service of God? Yet there is another tradition, just as much hers, the tradition of Ars and Assisi, of mountain shrine and village church and remote monastic chapel.<sup>4</sup> A tradition of poverty and humility and simplicity, it too speaks of the Gospel—the words of the first beatitude.

Nor should we regard the smaller, humbler churches of Catholic Europe (and America) as second-best, built in diffident imitation of the cathedral which was the ideal. On the contrary,

there is an explicit ideology within the Church, a traditional bias in favor of the humble and against the extravagantly splendid. Among the "loci theologici" cited by *L'Art Sacré* surely the best known is St. Bernard's warning to William of St. Thierry.

O vanity of vanities, vanity even more senseless than it is vain! The walls of the church glitter with a display of riches, and the poor lack everything; its stones are covered with gilt, and the children go unclothed; the goods of the poor pay for embellishments to charm the eyes of the rich; the dilettante can satisfy his curiosity in church, but the poor find nothing there to sustain them in their wretchedness. . . . Moreover, there are so many of these representations, and the diversity of them is so charming and so various that we would rather look at the sculpture than read our manuscripts, and spend the day marvelling at them instead of meditating the law of God. Great God, if we are not ashamed of such trivialities, at least we ought to regret the amount they cost!<sup>5</sup>

Nor can Dominicans forget their own Holy Father, who constrained the Prior of Bologna to leave off work on the "palace" he had begun in Dominic's absence;<sup>6</sup> nor the seraphic Francis, too, in whose consummate poverty Dominic seemed to recognize the image of the Son of Man. From the early centuries—Chrysostom, the Desert Fathers; with increased underscoring in our times—John Vianney, Thérèse de Lisieux, Bernadette: the Church has recognized that "blessed are the poor in spirit." There has been an innate sense of restraint, austerity, chasteness, above all of sincere truth, in art inspired by the Gospel.

Yet probably at no previous time in history have exterior circumstances so conspired to bring this truth home to the faithful. Historically, we stand looking back at the Church of the Ancient Regime—a Church, it may be said, of false impressions. To men of those times, the Church seemed tied to the *status quo*, allied with the wealthy ruling classes; her solicitude for temporal power men regarded as a gauge of rivalry with secular powers on their own terms. Came the Revolution. The old order was swept away, and her enemies expected to see the Church go with it. The Church did suffer, suffered evils and injustices; was sorely chastened in her human element. But Divine thing that she is, all this did her good, and it served to clear the air. Now she shines forth in all her supernatural beauty, which is from within, even as historical changes have forced or persuaded her to put aside the accidental trappings and panoplies which were valid for an earlier age.

Sociological factors, too, as well as historical, help to shape

our present outlook and will shape the churches we build. And these currents which affected the Church also affected her faithful, and to all appearances less happily. Sociologically the currents of Revolution, Industrialism, and Godlessness which dominated the nineteenth century could not but affect the common people adversely. To use an expressive French word, they became *deracinés*—"uprooted." Irresistably drawn from their native countrysides to the great shapeless centers of industry, they left behind not only the physical setting of their life, but its cultural and spiritual setting as well. The scandal of our times, as Pius XI called it, was that the Church had lost the masses, had lost the proletariat—for proletariat it was, that great mass of uprooted people which now stood challenging her missionary zeal. Indeed, where modern civilization has run its course unmitigated (which has been less the case in America perhaps than in certain parts of Europe) the workers stand forth not only as distinct but as the dominant class.

And (even if it be legitimate to believe, as this author does, that the process of disintegration has pretty well reached its term) still the sociological setting of the Church's mission in many, many parts of the world today is this de-Christianized proletarian milieu. The apostle—and the Dominican—should be sorely conscious of such a plight and it is duly emphasized in *L'Art Sacré's* elaboration of its thesis. This proletarian setting of the Church's modern apostolate is bound to exert no little effect on its architecture.

There is for one thing the obvious economic effect: these people, being poor, will not be able to afford sumptuous, overbearingly impressive churches. More important, however, and much stressed in the pages of the magazine, is the psychological factor: modern man will not feel quite at home in a thirteenth or sixteenth century edifice; more to the point, he would sense a sort of untruth were he to express himself in the canons of the past. The truth is that the man of our times, cut off almost entirely from the thought-patterns and symbols of his forefathers, has of necessity evolved new thought-patterns, new images. There is a twentieth century image of Christ, a twentieth century image of His Church, and this is as it should be. And these are the images which will be expressed in all true sacred art created in our times.

These are facts perceived by every perspicacious examiner of the present situation. There is broad agreement, too, on the

precise forms which are taking shape, and the special emphases of these new forms; and it is certain that these new directions masterfully express a sublime aspect of the Christian message. The typical church form of our day, as described by many authorities, is the "tent of God," a light, non-permanent structure evoking the tabernacle of the Wilderness, where God's glory dwelt among the Jews.<sup>7</sup> For "we have here no abiding city" (*Hebr.* 13:14), as men of the atomic age well realize. We are the "people of God on the march"; DP's, refugees know this well. Even our secular architecture is light, unencumbered; its beauty all in clean lines and graceful sweep of movement. How appropriate then for Christ, who, in the etymological rendering of John 1:14 so well appreciated today, has "pitched his tent among us." He has come among us, humble and despised, our Brother and Redeemer, one of ourselves.

This is the spirit behind today's churches, this and a growing liturgical sense which gives the sacrificial altar special prominence, while yet bringing it into intimate relationship with the participants of the congregation. Hence experimentation with new layouts—circular, centralized, diagonal—to bring the altar closer to the people. Nor should the accessories of private devotion intrude to distract from its prominence. Only the instruments of the full Catholic sacramental life—the baptistry and the confessional especially, and also the pulpit for "breaking the bread" of God's Word—these come forward in an ordered and meaningful relation to the main role of the church, which is the setting for the Eucharistic sacrifice-banquet.

The general tendency, then, is to make today's church a home—the House of God and of God's people. The people are to be at home there, as in their supernatural home, as in anticipation of heaven, for the church edifice has always been regarded as pre-figuring heaven. Thus the home-feeling will not be something on the natural level, as it seems to be at times with our Protestant brethren, where the church's home-like function takes on the humanitarian connotations of "Old Home Week," and finds its expression in the facilities and comforts more proper to a social club. This is not to deprecate entirely the Protestant insight, for something of the same kind belongs in our churches, too, but from a different point of view. For us, it is not the church's function to satisfy the material longings of the community; but rather, starting from the viewpoint of the supernatural community, the *ek-klesia*, we will want in our churches all

that truly contributes to this purpose in the building up of the "spiritual edifice" which is the faithful community itself. We mean by this adequate provision for pamphlet racks, parish libraries and all such features essential to the modern pastoral apostolate.

Fortunately there are many such churches being built today, both in America and in Europe. Admittedly, not so many as there should be; many areas, many architects, too many patrons still seem constrained to compromise with the past. Often, too, one gets the impression of economy for economy's sake (really the worst vice of architecture in this country today) instead of that studied, reflective approach to the *function* of a proposed structure—a purely intellectual task, and a hard one—which will infallibly generate beauty from within, from the very nature of the structure planned. And this approach will also, frequently enough, beget truer and more long-range economies than any penny-wise, pound-foolish sort of architecture.

An intellectual task, and a hard one, I called it, this task of thinking through to the *end* (I intend the double-entendre) before we build. This, I think, is the task to which the Dominicans of *L'Art Sacré* have addressed themselves, and one cannot but be impressed with the results they achieve. Not that they are alone in the work; far from it, and one need only recall *Liturgical Arts* and others of a similar character published in our own country. But it does seem that the Dominicans, with their particular training and heritage, should be in a better position than others perhaps, to catch the true pulse of the hour. Following their great mentor, St. Thomas, they will be able, if true to their principles, to steer a middle course between stand-pat conservatism and rash novelty; for like him they will conserve the best of tradition, while preserving an open, docile mind for whatever of good appears among the new, and for truth and beauty, no matter from whose hands they receive it. If Thomas was above all the Common Doctor, we too should be "common," as working toward the common ground of a new synthesis, rather than as building up walls and hedges to keep men and truths apart, disjointed. This is an apostolate, a true Dominican apostolate, and one which the associates of *L'Art Sacré* have been admirably fulfilling.

Yet, if in terms of *function* and apostolic purpose they have thought and reflected and meditated, still they realize, as we must, that what they have given is but an ideology, a *theology*, if you will, of church architecture. Having formulated this theology, there

remains the necessity of bringing it down to the practical level of design and construction. Here belongs the practical corollary we mentioned above, and which is the final plea and war-cry of *L'Art Sacré*: if we want great architecture, meaningful architecture, memorable architecture, *beautiful* architecture, we must turn to the great architects, to the masters. To the best of their abilities, the French Dominicans have promoted and practiced this "appeal to the masters," and with many fine results. And this, more than anything else, I should say, is the lesson we should learn from *L'Art Sacré*: a respect and sympathy for the truly great, as they pursue their art, and a resolve to call on them, if opportunity arises, sparing no expense at this level to get the very best.

But if the Church thus receives the "best" which her sacred liturgy demands, there are other benefits to such a policy, benefits to the artists themselves. Certainly we can readily envision the spiritual fruit an artist might receive who seeks his inspiration in sacred themes. If the contemplation of sacred art can draw men to God, who should more strongly feel that Divine attraction than the artist whose creative image is there expressed? Even the "unbelieving" artist will find the best in him—the *anima naturaliter Christiana*, or the vestiges at least of his Christian heritage—asserting itself most forcefully as he applies himself, heart and soul, to this inspiration. Such indeed has been the case, for it has been a special concern of Father Couturier and his successors to appeal to precisely those artists who were estranged from the Catholic tradition, to unbelievers. And if some, perhaps the majority, have not come the full way back, still, as happened with the aged Matisse at Vence, a deeper spiritual dimension has entered their lives.

Nor should we forget the properly artistic benefit to be found in sacred Church art. As Father Regamey, O.P., remarks:

"It is precisely the liturgical, sacred role of these works which . . . permits artists, whom the public perhaps finds shocking, to break forth from the "ivory tower" where their crypticism has imprisoned them. Raising their art to the highest level of significance—religious and sacred significance—they find here a new meeting ground with all that is best in mankind. It is no longer a matter of "the public," but rather, the *faithful*; no longer "objects d'art," but rather *sacred* objects. The opportunity the Church bestows on modern artists is a normal custom with her, but for them it is something tremendous and beautiful: that supreme degree of accomplishment that only *monumental* art affords. Neither the State, nor any private patron could grant such an opportunity. The task of the Church alone demands



such transcendence—a meeting on her higher plane of the works themselves, their creators, and those who by contemplation, then, are raised to true contemplation.<sup>8</sup>

This is only to say that the building of God's house, the temple, the church, has always been the supreme task of architecture. Until today's artists have offered their best to Almighty God, they still lack the crowning glory of their art; their greatest masterpieces still await them. It is for the Church, then, with courage, with patience, with understanding and sincere friendship, to extend this magnificent invitation. Thus, more than in any other way, will we achieve in architecture that "Veritas" which is the very essence of the Word Made Flesh.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Published by Editions du Cerf, 29, Boulevard de la Tour-Maubourg, Paris. Bimonthly. 1200 fr. per annum in U. S.

<sup>2</sup> These small chapels, which represent the concrete achievement of Fr. Couturier's efforts to have the great artists of our time, even if unbelievers, produce work of truly sacred character, have been widely hailed as among the real masterpieces of contemporary art which have appeared since the war. One should add Le Corbusier's pilgrimage chapel of Notre Dame du Haut, at Ronchamp, the most recent triumph of the movement begun and fostered by our French brethren. For views of all four, see Henze, Anton, *Contemporary Church Art*, Sheed and Ward, 1956. On Matisse's Chapelle de la Rosaire at Vence, see *Time*, April 7, 1952, and *Rosary Magazine*, Jan., 1955. On Ronchamp, see *Time*, July 18, 1955 and *Jubilee*, January, 1956. Editions du Cerf has published a brochure, *Vence et Ronchamp*, with the best illustrations available of these two distinguished chapels (Paris, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Religious Buildings for Today*, ed. by John Knox Shear, F. W. Dodge Corporation, 1957. pp. 77-80, "The Horizontal Cathedral: A Discussion with Mario Salvadori."

<sup>4</sup> As instance of the deep beauty to be found in these humbler churches, one could cite the twelfth-century Cistercian structure pictured in Thomas Merton's *Waters of Siloe* (Harcourt, Brace, 1949). See also Cali, François, *Architecture of Truth*, New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1957.

<sup>5</sup> As cited in Cali, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-61. In Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 182:915. Cf. also Cali, p. 75, for a similar statement from Blessed William of St. Thierry (P.L. 184:331).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hoinacki, Ceslaus, O.P., "The Holiness of Saint Dominic," *Dominicana*, September, 1957. p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Henze, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33; 41-43.

<sup>8</sup> Regamey, P.-R., O.P., *Art Sacre au XXe Siecle?*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1952. p. 336. Cf. also pp. 323-350.