



## Old Churches and New Liturgy

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Perhaps nothing so visibly manifests the *Aggiornamento* that is taking place within the Church as the liturgical renewal. In churches across the land, new table-altars facing the people are popping up overnight. Chairs for the presiding celebrant or "president," as he is now called, are being installed, often in front of the old high altar. Ambos for the proclamation of the Word fill the sanctuary, while hymnals and participation cards are found in every pew. Even the most uninformed or uninterested Catholic cannot but be struck by the differences in the new worship of his parish and, following from this the often somewhat startling rearrangement of liturgical furnishings of the place of worship—the actual church edifice. Aesthetically speaking, the new disposition is often not tastefully done and frequently spoils the character of the church, or at least seems awkward. Yet thankfully, in most places we have only temporary measures meeting the present pastoral needs of the people, and for the rest—the complete liturgical re-orientation of the structures themselves—many pastors seem to be waiting to see what the more definitive shape of the liturgy will be, and also, for the liturgists and architects to come to grips with the problem of adaptation. This is probably the best policy, for church remodeling is indeed a delicate task. A great need now exists for dialogue between pastors, liturgists, architects,

theologians and musicians to consider not only how to build new structures for the new liturgy but also how to adapt already existing ones for this "new order of worship." The aim of this article is to explore the problem and, while avoiding rigid "rubrical" decisions, to proffer some solutions or least a few principles of solution.

### ***The Churches of Yesterday***

The churches which most of us worshipped in as children were the product of an entirely different conception of the liturgy. Whether they were large or small, imposing or simple, they all tended to be "theaters" in which the congregation's attention was directed towards the "stage" up front to watch the sacred drama taking place. The thrust of these buildings was forward, liturgical East, while the priest, back to the people and often a great distance away, represented the people and officially prayed for them. The main center of attention was not so much the altar but the tabernacle, or more precisely the altar as an imposing throne for the Eucharistic Presence in the tabernacle. The altar was often a great "wedding cake" structure replete with soaring pinnacles, adoring angels and dramatically posed saints. Yet the main altar usually competed with the various side altars, shrines and statues to be found up front or often all around the edifice, each with its array of vigil lights, appealing to the private devotions of the people. The baptistry was usually tucked away near the entrance, but often as not was found in the sacristy or some other obscure spot not visible to the people at all. This type of building, reflecting the spirit of its time, was certainly valid for the performance of a liturgy of ceremony to be enjoyed by the spectators, while they really prayed their simple devotions manifested by the various shrines scattered throughout the church. However, the new liturgy has different needs and consequently demands a new setting which brings about new relationships and is indicative of new values.

### ***The Churches of Today***

Today's church structure is quite different from that described above. If it is well designed, then it is planned from the point of view of its function. Its ground plan is not a "metaphysical allegory," it is not shaped "like a fish, or a crown of thorns or praying hands" or to cite a more familiar example, not a Latin cross, as were the

medieval cathedrals.<sup>1</sup> Such symbolism is rather false, for the only people who can see the symbol and its meaning are those who view it from an airplane. Instead, all is very carefully articulated in terms of the church building's primary function—to shelter the Christian people, engaged in worship. The People of God, as a priestly people, offer the sacrifice of Christ to the Father through the instrumentality of the celebrant who presides over them. Their role in the church edifice is liturgical and therefore dictates that the whole design and fabric of the building manifest its liturgical nature. We are not discussing the church as the *Temple of God* here, but rather as the *House for the People of God*, for the faithful, the Body of Christ, "are the temple of the living God" (II Cor. 6:16) for God dwells in them and "not in temples made with hands." (Acts 17:24) Thus, the church building is primarily not so much the *Domus Dei* — the House of God — as the *Domus Ecclesiae* — the House of the Church, insofar as the Church — the *ecclesia* — is the assembly of the people: "the Church is not the walls but the faithful."<sup>2</sup>

The new churches, then, are not only liturgically orientated but also community-minded. The new liturgy stresses the communal, priestly prayer of the one People of God. Consequently, the new emphasis is on a building that psychologically forms the communitarian mentality and for this purpose Godfrey Diekmann, O.S.B., suggests that a church hold a maximum of from 600 to 700 places for the faithful or, possibly a thousand with a cantilevered balcony.<sup>3</sup> This means that our churches will be smaller, more intimate. Huge city parish churches defy any attempt to create a familial experience of the eucharistic celebration by the one Body of the Lord. "It is cynicism to speak of a community or family, in which the experience of personal encounter with both head and fellow members of the body is *a priori* ruled out or rendered next to impossible."<sup>4</sup>

Good architects of today's churches place great stress on the contemporary character of these sacred edifices for we cannot be content to build echoes of the past. They are also rightly concerned about honesty in structure, function and materials, and here want free reign to experiment with all the latest developments in building materials. Closely allied to this is the insistence that costly and luxurious material be shunned and the simple, honest and inexpensive be utilized to manifest the poverty of the pilgrim Church. Our buildings must bear witness to poverty of spirit and service. The Lord took the form

of the servant, and our church structures must proclaim to the world that the Body of Christ wishes to serve it, not to preside over it. "If they do they will no longer be called 'impressive forms' or 'imposing edifices.' They will not 'dominate' our communities nor 'crown our hilltops.' They will not be 'impressive monuments' or self-important buildings — self-conscious and self-assertive as almost every church built nowadays attempts to be."<sup>5</sup>

### **Renovation or Destruction**

After examination of the new ideas of a church structure as revealed to us by current theology and liturgical study, we can see what a great contrast there is between this and the churches we have known and grown up with (perhaps not unlike those described in the beginning of this article). Yet it is the latter that present the most difficult problem. To remodel an old church so that it functionally and psychologically meets the demands of the new order of worship without destroying the architectural character of the building (presuming that it has one) is no easy task. The old building is the product of another era and was built to provide for those liturgical needs which have completely changed. Yet the older architecture may be of good design, the altars, shrines and other liturgical furniture may be beautifully carved and painted. Perhaps old but good paintings, mosaics, and statuary do not seem to stress the values that we are now emphasizing, but have real artistic value. Iconoclasm is not the answer — we must not wantonly destroy beauty. Dom Debuyst complained in his talk at last summer's Liturgical Conference that in the remodeling of some European churches "incredible acts of unconscious vandalism have been committed on beautiful Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque churches."<sup>6</sup> They were committed by priests who took matters into their own hands and plunged directly into alteration without any consultation and often ended with disastrous results. The problems of liturgical change are often overwhelming, but here experts — architects, artists and liturgists — are required to transform delicately the old church with a view to its total artistic reality.

It might be argued that such might not be the case in this country, for we have so few beautiful churches; most are such monstrosities that they have no character to destroy. While this is certainly true of many edifices here, there are quite a few that were well designed

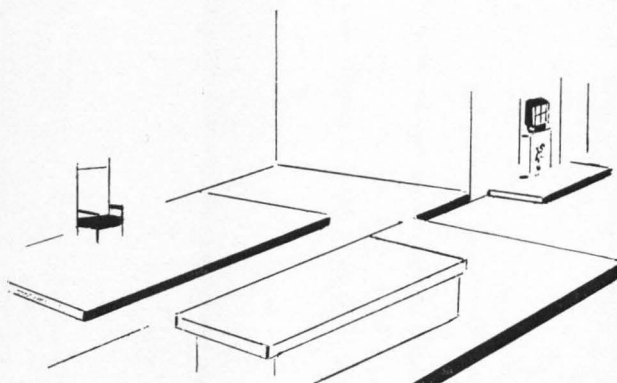
for their day. Besides the great historic and artistic worth of the Spanish Missions, the old cathedrals of Baltimore, Bardstown and St. Louis, there are worthy Gothic revival churches of the Victorian era and later those of Ralph Adams Cram. They are not the buildings we would build today and are "revivalistically" designed, looking back to a moment of former glory (and to that extent, they were not really ever of their own time). Yet, when they are carefully treated to bring out their assets, the good art in them is preserved and they are skillfully adapted, they may even prove far more satisfactory than some of our more ill-advised contemporary ventures.

### **New Norms**

The directives for the revised worship and the norms for the proper construction of churches are found in the *Instruction* of Sept. 26, 1964, issued jointly by the Commission for the Implementation of the *Constitution on the Liturgy* and the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Here are found the principal alternatives that must be considered and executed, insofar as possible, in building new edifices and renovating old ones. The first and most familiar one is that the main altar shall properly "be constructed separately from the wall . . . so that celebration may take place facing the people," and it must occupy a place in church "which is truly central so that the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful is spontaneously turned to it." (91) The cross and the candlesticks need no longer be on the altar, but may be placed right next to it. (94) There should be very few minor altars and these should be placed in "chapels in some way separated from the principal part of the church." (93) To show its importance, the celebrant's seat is treated right after the altar. It is to be placed where it can easily be seen by all and in such manner that the "celebrant may truly appear to preside over the entire community of the faithful"; however it is not to look like a throne. (92) The ambo is required for the reading of God's Holy Word. (96) The Blessed Sacrament may be reserved now on altars other than the main altar and in different ways according to licit customs and the ordinary's approval. A "small but suitable" tabernacle may be placed on an altar facing the people. (95) The schola and organ are to be placed in such a way that it is clear that they are part of the people. (97) The baptistry shall be arranged so that the "dignity of the sacrament of baptism is clearly apparent and that

the place is suitable for the community celebration of the sacrament." (99)

These directives are not merely niceties of rubrical law, but practical conclusions flowing from a deep theological reflection on the nature of the liturgy. The fact that every church must be constructed liturgically — for a community of *men*, worshipping together — has been mentioned earlier in this discussion. However, no implication should be seen here that God's People are all lumped together in one great generic mass or crowd. They are still individuals and have individual functions in the Mystical Body. (I Cor. 12:1-31) This diversification of roles is also mirrored in the liturgy. There are many different parts, and each adds to, and enriches, the whole worship experience. There is participation in varying degrees — that of the commentator, the lector, the deacon and lastly, the celebrant. Gone forever are the days of community worship when the celebrant



appropriated the roles of others to himself, saying all the parts for them, or even repeating them if they had said them. Therefore, this specification of functions must be seen in the architecture, in the design of the various places for different people and the various locations for the different aspects of the liturgy.

### **The Altar**

The altar, while still holding the primacy of place, now shares the sanctuary with the ambo, chair, and with the place of reservation. Therefore, instead of just one center of attention in the sanctuary, the



altar with its peripheral accessories, we now have several poles of liturgical action. For an old church the problem of a new altar *versus populum* is very complicated. First, if the old altar is of no particular artistic merit (and this should be decided by a curator of the local museum or a *qualified* architect or artist) it can simply be removed and one that complements the best features of the existing structure designed. If the old altar has a high reredos which is especially well executed — an especially fine painting and/or good carvings (and this is rarely found in the case of wedding cake altars) — then perhaps the altar itself can skillfully be removed from the reredos and moved forward, while the latter forms a decorative background for the celebration of the liturgy. This is how the main altar of the National Cathedral (Episcopal), Washington, D. C., is constructed. The *Ter Sanctus* reredos, which appears to be a part of the altar, forming an artistic whole with it when viewed from a distance, is actually separated enough from it to allow for a dignified Eucharistic celebration facing the people. If the altar's character would be destroyed by pulling it apart, perhaps it could remain the altar of reservation, while another is built that is not out of harmony. This will probably work best in a church with a long choir apse or sanctuary. The post-conciliar Commission stressed the existence of a "notable space" between the two altars when it affirmed that Mass could be celebrated at the altar *versus populum*, while turning one's back on the Blessed Sacrament on the other altar.<sup>7</sup>

The solution of two altars is less satisfactory in view of the fact that the altar symbolizes Christ and, thus, there should be but one in the church, or if there are others, they should be in separate chapels. (*Instruction* 93) This very ancient tradition: "One God, one bishop, one faith, one eucharist" (St. Ignatius of Antioch), was gradually replaced as the monasteries started to have many altars so that each monk could say Mass.<sup>8</sup> In this context, then, two altars "back to back" with no space between could hardly be approved, for the symbolism of the altar as Christ is completely obscured. In fact, such alarm has been expressed on the poor quality of some temporary altars, that Cardinal Lercaro, the head of the post-conciliar Commission, felt obliged to point out that since the whole liturgy of the Word is celebrated facing the people, a new altar *versus populum* is not an absolute necessity.<sup>9</sup> The same point is made by Pere Cocagnac who argues that a lovely old altar that cannot be changed should

simply be left, and the liturgy of the Eucharist celebrated as before.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps in a very small old church with an exquisite altar (and there are many such in France) this makes sense, but in this country there are not that many churches with a priceless altar where there is not a "notable space" before it to allow for a temporary but dignified altar facing the people, with all the pastoral advantages it entails.

### **Reservation of the Sacrament**

The problem of reservation of the Blessed Sacrament is closely associated with the altar. It need no longer be reserved on the main altar, especially if it is one facing the people. It may be reserved in a side chapel or on another minor altar, or some other way approved by the ordinary. Yet it still can be reserved on an altar facing the people in a "small but suitable" tabernacle. (*Instruction* 95) Now since the practice of consecrating the hosts at each Mass is encouraged (*Constitution*, 55), there is no need for a very large tabernacle. However this is the least satisfactory solution because, in a sense, as Fr. Diekmann points out, we have here a "conflict of mysteries."<sup>11</sup> Christ's presence in the celebration of the Eucharist, his being made present again by the consecratory prayer, is obscured by the fact that right on the table the Sacramental Presence has been there right from the beginning of the Mass. In view of this it would seem more fitting to reserve the Sacrament elsewhere.

Perhaps the best solution is a separate Blessed Sacrament chapel which could be used for week-day Mass, weddings, funerals and private devotions. Even here it would seem that an altar facing the people would be desirable, for otherwise daily Massgoers would be deprived of Mass facing them every day except Sunday. Also such a chapel should be close to the main altar, for even a parish which has the ideal liturgical practice of consecrating all the hosts at every Mass may run out occasionally. Perhaps an old side altar could be used for reservation, but if so, it must be a Blessed Sacrament altar. All statues of saints, etc. must be removed and the tabernacle must be the most prominent center of a truly Eucharistic setting. The great reaction of so many of the laity against the removal of the Eucharist from its traditional place on the main altar is, one suspects, in direct proportion to unworthy solutions to the problem of reservation. The Blessed Sacrament is removed from the main altar so that more honor can be paid to the Eucharistic Presence in a special place, but this



new place must possess dignity and artistic worth. Other practices such as the wall cupboard or ambry or the placing of the tabernacle on a free-standing column on the right-hand side of the altar may also be used if approved by the local ordinary. However, such must be dignified and prominent places, not just hasty afterthoughts. As to tabernacles which are buried in the altar and rise mechanically, they are neither fitting nor should they be tolerated!

### ***The Place for the Liturgy of the Word***

The proper place for the Liturgy of the Word is both the chair and the ambo in the high Mass as well as the low. The chair (not a throne) is to be placed in such a way that the celebrant is presiding over the people during the whole service of the Word. Consequently, the chair should be facing them from behind the altar, or if not, "a position on the 'Epistle side' of the sanctuary near the apse, with the bench turned wholly or diagonally toward the faithful would seem second best."<sup>12</sup> The important point is that the celebrant face the people and not sit on the side facing the other wall of the sanctuary, for then he is not presiding, but simply *waiting* for the next liturgical function he has to *perform*, as he used to in the old liturgy. The president presides over the liturgy at the ambo and the altar, "but it is the chair which according to sound tradition symbolizes his presidency."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps a fine old sedile could be adapted for this purpose, but since the celebrant's chair is *the* important symbol of presiding in service and other ministers' seats are purely functional, the sedile would not really manifest this meaning.

The ambo is the place for the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, and should be of sufficient size to show the importance of God's Word. It is not a pulpit, but a reading desk or lectern. There need be only one, for this is the earliest and most authentic tradition, and after all, God's Word is one.<sup>14</sup> The ambo's place is in the sanctuary and should normally be on the "Gospel side" of the altar.<sup>15</sup> If it is made of the same material as the altar, the relationship of the "table of the Word" and "the table of the Lord" will be shown. If a church has an especially rare old pulpit, it should be kept and perhaps used for the liturgy of the Word unless it is too far away from the altar. Sometimes pulpits can be skillfully remade into ambos without destroying their character. The homily should be preached from the same ambo that was used for the readings, for this manifests

the importance of the homily as an explanation of the Word, and not some intrusion into the Mass.

### **The Font**

Since the *Instruction* directs that the baptistry be constructed so the place is suitable for the community celebration of baptism (99), it is difficult to see how any place in the rear of the church fulfills this condition, although Fr. Diekmann thinks that this is the suitable place for it.<sup>16</sup> Dom Debuyst disagrees with him and advances the arguments of Dr. Egloff, a Swiss theologian, that children born of Christian parents already, in some measure, belong to the Church as do adult catechumens.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, then, the symbolism of entering the Church need not be as much emphasized as before, and the baptismal font could be placed in the front of the church so all might see it. This is frequently done by our Protestant brethren. It should not, however, be placed in the sanctuary which would certainly seem cluttered with the addition of another center of liturgical action. Perhaps a place to one side of the nave of the church, which could also serve as a space for overflow crowds, would be the best solution.

### **Conclusion**

The many problems of renovation of old houses of worship have only been sketched briefly. The actual answers will be found in each individual case as pastors, artists, architects and liturgists engage in dialogue over the problems they encounter. Here it cannot be emphasized enough that the clergy cannot solve these problems without *competent* help. The degree of training in sacred art that is offered in American seminaries is low indeed, despite the encouragement and even legislation by Popes Pius X, Pius XI, Pius XII and now the Council itself. (*Constitution*, 126) The only course that most students for the priesthood take is usually the rather meaningless one offered in archeology. Yet it is they, the future pastors, who will have the most to say about our churches. There is a great need for co-operation in this area then. Busy pastors should be able to get help from the diocesan commission on Liturgy and Sacred Art, first commanded by Pius XI, later by Pius XII, and again by the Council. (*Constitution*, 126) Yet where can such commissions be found with liturgists, architects, artists, musicians etc., participating? These experts can promote the apostolate of good liturgical art in our churches,

and advise pastors whose churches are in a state of transition. Their help can be invaluable in planning new structures and carefully renovating the old, not hesitating to change when necessary, yet aiding the ordinary in the execution of his duty to see that good "sacred furnishings and works of art are not disposed of or dispersed." (*Constitution*, 126)

If we realize how great a task it is to build a house for God's People, or to renew one that was built for them in the past, then we must approach the challenge with the courage to do what must be done and the humility to ask the help of those whose business it is to do it. We must proceed with sensitivity to the values and creativity of the past, while aware of artistic shortcomings, and yet venture forth boldly into today's art and liturgy. Only by advancing thus can we be sure that our churches will be effective signs of God's presence among his holy people.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Cornford, "Heard and Seen: The New Churches of Europe," *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 46, (March, 1965), p. 352.

<sup>2</sup> Etienne Ménard, O.P., "L'Eglise, Maison de L'Assemblée," *Communauté Chrétienne*, Vol. 4, n. 20, (Mars-Avril, 1965), p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> Godfrey Diekmann, O.S.B., "The Place of Liturgical Worship," *The Church and the Liturgy*, Concilium Vol. 2, (Glen Rock, N. J.: The Paulist Press, 1964), p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> Edward A. Sovik, "The Architecture of Kerygma," *Worship*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (April, 1966), pp. 204-205.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Debuyst, O.S.B., "A Vision of Peace," *Jesus Christ Reforms His Church: The 26th North American Liturgical Week, 1965*, (Washington, D. C.: The Liturgical Conference, 1966), p. 246.

<sup>7</sup> *Notitiae*: Dubia, n. 8, ad *Instructionem*, n. 91, Vol. 5, (Maio, 1965), p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Diekmann, *op. cit.*, p. 91-92.

<sup>9</sup> Giacomo Cardinal Lercaro, "Epistola ad Praesides Coetum Episcoporum," *Notitiae*, Vol. 9-10, (Septembri-Octobri, 1965), p. 262.

<sup>10</sup> A. M. Cocagnac, O.P., "La Réforme Doit Éviter L'Informe," *L'Art Sacré*, Vol. 7-8, (Mars-Avril, 1965), p. 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Diekmann, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Diekmann, "The Reformed Liturgy and the Eucharist," *Church Architecture and the Shape of Reform*, (Washington, D. C.: The Liturgical Conference, 1965), p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> Diekmann, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Debuyst, *op. cit.*, p. 247-248. For a more complete version of Dr. Egloff's views, consult Dom Debuyst's article, "Architecture Moderne et Célébration Chrétienne," *Art d'Eglise*, (no. 130, 1965, B.—English summary).