



Architecture and Liturgy

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Liturgical renewal is the cry of the day and yet, as a prerequisite to any reform in our life of worship, the question must be asked, "What is the liturgy?" It is precisely because this question was asked that such scholarly work has been done, laying bare the nature of liturgy, its background, evolution, and history. That the experts today possess such understanding is due in large part to the scholarly efforts and research of the past hundred years, beginning especially with Dom Gueranger, O.S.B., the founder of the liturgical movement. Thus equipped with this information, the experts can truly reform; i.e., cut away liturgical excesses or accretions, restore ancient practices, and give new shape and direction to the liturgy, and all of this firmly relying on the fruits of sound scholarship.

Similarly, in the allied field of church architecture if any progress is to be made in solving the problem of twentieth century ecclesiastical architecture, a like question must be asked, "What is a church?" It is only in posing such a query that we get down to basics and are then able to eliminate prejudices and misconceptions of what a church should be. Only after carefully considering the nature of the church building, is it worth while pursuing related questions on art and architecture in the service of the Church.

The Function of the Church Structure

All buildings are basically shelter, but to discover what makes a railroad station different from a library, the purpose of the building must be scrutinized. A knowledge of its end paves the way for the consequent judgment as to whether or not it is a *good* building. Louis Sullivan, the "inventor" of what some consider to be the sole American contribution to architectural progress, the skyscraper, has expressed this well in his dictum "form follows function." This statement caused a sensation when enunciated by him around the turn of the century and gave impetus to the whole modern movement in architecture. Sullivan was emphasizing that the form—the shape and outward expression—is not the primary consideration of the architect at all; rather it follows from the function or purpose of the edifice as does the decoration or ornamentation. This means that our pre-conception of banks as Greek Temples and churches as miniature Gothic

Cathedrals are invalid, for the exterior, as result of the interior function, should mirror that function. In this vein, Eric Gill once asked how many architects thought of a church in terms of pinnacles, towers, and steeples, rather than in terms of what it does, i.e., form a covering for the altar. Do we not find this to be true of our own thinking? Don't we think of a church as a spired structure, with pointed windows and a dim, churchlike, and "devotional" interior in which we find it easy to pray? So we hear the church called "a prayer in stone." After pursuing a somewhat scriptural and theological investigation into the nature of the church edifice, we will be able to see that such an attitude is more the result of our conditioning than a reflection of the primary purpose of the church building itself.

The Theology of the Sacred Edifice

The Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, is the "The House of God" (I Tim. 3, 15) and so its very members are "the habitation of God" (Eph. 2, 22). Christ called his own physical body a temple and St. Paul forcefully reminds the Christian community, Christ's Mystical Body, "You 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) such as the pagans knew. The Christians themselves are the *Ecclesia*—the assembly of those who have been chosen by God in Christ. And although the People of God is a "spiritual house" (I Peter 2, 5), insofar as they are given a new spiritual existence by Christ in the Holy Spirit, this does not mean that they form an invisible relationship; rather they form a visible society—a sign lifted up for all the nations to see. The community gathers together to celebrate the mysteries of Redemption, commemorating the great things God has done for them in the Old Covenant and especially in the New.¹

Because man is body as well as spirit, his reception of grace is sacramental—through word and sign. His worship utilizes the body and consequently demands an earthly setting in which he can give praise and glory to God. The community must have a place to assemble for the liturgical action, and the Eucharistic room, the church, fulfills this function. Since the liturgy, the prayer of the People of God, is communal, the church is built for this communal worship primarily. Thus *raison d'être* of the church

¹ For a fuller handling of the theology of the church edifice, altar, pulpit, font, etc., consult *Contemporary Church Art*, by Anton Henze and Theodor Filthaut (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), of which this treatment is basically an adaptation.

structure is purely a practical one—to provide a shelter for the liturgical assembly of a particular Christian community.

Yet flowing from this primary purpose of the assembly room, there emerges another. Since the Church is a visible mystery, the Sacred Sign, and uses the visible to lead man to the invisible, the church building may also be considered as a sacred sign. It is an embodiment and a manifestation of what the Church is and believes, and in this sense, it can even be said that it bears *witness*. However, the edifice is a sign precisely in the sense that it fills a function (the community's worship) and thus the whole building itself witnesses to the liturgical action celebrated within. In other words, the church is not a sign in that it is a "monument" to the glory of God, nor far less to the accomplishments of man. The concept of the soaring spire pointing to the heavens and dominating the surrounding town is somewhat of an anachronism in today's cities where the heights of modern office buildings frustrate any such attempt. One architect has pointed out that expensive steeples and bell towers should be considered superfluous in a day and age in which highways are plainly marked and church towers are no longer needed for lookout posts and landmarks. The point is that the church as a sign is not the result of trying to make the building stand out as "different," either by dramatic features or by covering it with crosses and symbols. If the internal functions are articulated in the exterior—if form truly follows function—then the House of God will be recognized.

Liturgy: the Norm for Design

Since the church building is defined in terms of the liturgy, that "summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time . . . the fount from which all Her power flows" (*Const. on the Liturgy*, n. 10), it is necessary to investigate the nature of the liturgy if we are to see how its celebration determines the structure which shelters it. Surely the most relevant teaching on the nature of the Church worship is found in that document assented to by all the Conciliar Fathers and promulgated by Pope Paul. The teaching of the Constitution is both masterly and illuminating, but perhaps a more succinct definition is in order. In *Mediator Dei*, Pius XII states that the liturgy:

"is the public worship which our Redeemer, the Head of the Church, offers to the Heavenly Father and which the community of Christ's faithful pray to its Founder, and through him to the Eternal Father; briefly, it is the whole public worship of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, Head and members."

This description of the liturgy brings out its communal nature, for it is not only the prayer of Christ the High-Priest but also of his Mystical Body. And the members are not to attend "as strangers or silent spectators" but are to "take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing with devotion and full collaboration" (*Const. on the Liturgy*, n. 48). Nor is this participation a concession to the faithful, rather it is "their right and duty by reason of their baptism" (*Const.* n. 14), for they are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (I Peter 2, 9).

Thus the church building must mirror this purpose: it is built for worship—liturgical, i.e., public, communal worship. This means that the edifice must truly be an assembly hall, with everything designed for maximum participation and not a devotional setting for private piety. The Constitution directs that churches be built "suitable for the celebration of the liturgical services and for the active participation of the faithful" (n. 24). Private prayer is necessary but all we wish to affirm here is that this is not the primary purpose of the church structure, though any well designed church makes provision for such.

But the liturgy, though communal, is also ordered. The Church is hierarchical with each member having his special function in the Mystical Body and this is also true of her worship. The president of the liturgical assembly is a priest (originally the bishop) and it is he who presides over the celebration and offers the Eucharistic prayer. He is assisted by deacons or acolytes (servers). The choir has its proper parts to sing and the congregation theirs. All participate though in different ways—all pray the Mass, but the priest consecrates and the people offer the Mass through and with the priest. This distribution and specification of roles should find expression in the design of the building. The space that the architect creates for worship should be delineated but not compartmentalized. The sanctuary is a place slightly apart—the proper place for the ministers of the Mass, celebrated on the "Holy Table" and as such is especially sacred. Yet it is never to be made aloof or estranged from the faithful in the mistaken notion of increasing the "mystery." The liturgy commemorates *the Mystery*, but it is not of its nature to be mysterious and, thus, the sanctuary is apart—but—not—separate. The expression of the unity of communal worship is primary, and the vital dialogue between priest and people must be helped rather than hindered in the planning of the sanctuary.

The sanctuary derives its significance from the altar as does the whole church. "We have to think of a structure designed for the altar, rather than the altar designed for the structure."² The altar is the "table of the Lord"

(I Cor. 10, 21) upon which is celebrated the Sacred Banquet wherein Christ feeds us with the Bread of Life and from the Chalice of Salvation. The altar also represents the stone of sacrifice, for here is commemorated and reenacted the Sacrifice of Calvary, the new Pasch, the Passage of the Lord. It is the meeting place of God and man, God giving himself to earth and the Church offering earth to God. Symbolically, the altar has a deeper significance: it represents Christ as priest, the Mediator between God and man, for here are offered gifts to God and here God's gifts descend on us. Further, the altar, anointed with chrism at its dedication, represents the Anointed One. The Christological interpretation of the altar renders more meaningful the enclosing of the relics of the saints in the altar. The saints are members of Christ, and their union with him is so intense, they are said to be "in Christ." It is fitting then, that these relics are in the altar, Christ's image. The sacredness of the altar is quite apart from the consideration of whether or not the Blessed Sacrament is reserved there. The present mode of reservation in the tabernacle on the altar, though altogether fitting, is comparatively late in the history of the Church's usages, and springs from the great extra-liturgical devotion to the Eucharist which developed during the Middle Ages. The holiness of the altar demands that it be given dignified treatment *in itself*, and not be considered a substructure for paintings, statues, flowers, extra candles, relics, and various *objects d'art*. The required liturgical appurtenances of tabernacle (if an altar of reservation), crucifix, and candlesticks are adornment enough. That the altar be given a fitting background is quite another matter. Needless to say, the altar must be seen by all. Pope Paul, when Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan, stated in his pastoral letter on the liturgy, "it (the altar) must be central and visible." He goes on to point out that in the great old churches and cathedrals, one often sees "altars which are only provisional, but which are visible, taking the place of monumental altars that are buried in distant and obscure apses."³

The most important object in the sanctuary after the altar is the pulpit. Not only does Christ feed his people with the bread of his Body, but also with the bread of the Word of God. Just as the sacrament is given from the "Holy Table," so the Word is proclaimed from the pulpit, thus setting up a relationship between the altar and the pulpit, for it is one Lord who gives himself in sacrament and word. Practically, it follows that the pulpit's place is in the sanctuary in proximity to the altar, rather than halfway down

² Peter Hammond. *Liturgy and Architecture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 166.

³ *Liturgical Arts*, Vol. 32, (August, 1963), p. 106.

the nave. Another object of liturgical furnishing that has a direct relationship to the altar is the baptismal font. Here is accomplished the mystery of death to sin and the old man, and resurrection to new life through incorporation in Christ. Since by Baptism one becomes a member of the priestly race whose right and duty it is to offer sacrifice, the font for the Christian is the entrance to, and preparation for, the altar. This is so because the Eucharist is "the end and consummation of all the sacraments" and Baptism is the "door to the sacraments" (Summa, III, q. 63, a. 6, c.). So the baptistry is placed on an axis with the altar, to point up this correlation. Traditionally the font is located near the entrance of the church to remind the faithful that it was through Baptism they entered the Church.

Churches of the Past

Since we've explored the nature of the church structure from the viewpoint of its purpose, perhaps it might be profitable to trace, in a very sketchy way, the history of church architecture in this light. This will not only serve as a background, assuring better understanding of the contemporary scene, but will also help us to see how the churches of the past expressed their liturgy and also manifested the religious emphases of the time.

The early Christians worshipped in their homes. The Acts of the Apostles give us only slight information, but our knowledge of contemporary Jewish practice helps us to fill the gap. The Jews, for their domestic meal-services, used the ordinary table covered with a clean cloth, and it is likely that the Christian did the same, although probably a special cup was reserved for worship. The most natural place to locate the table was the center of the room. The Jewish ceremonial custom of lighting the lamp was also Christianized, and signified Christ as the Light of the World. All was done ceremonially in the context of a meal, but with the spirit of closeness found in a family.

As the size of the congregations grew, it was necessary to search for gathering places larger than private homes. Some local Churches were forced into warehouses and storerooms where these were available. This growth in numbers seems to be responsible for the separation of the meal, or Agape, from the specifically Christian Eucharistic action. The first could take place outside the Eucharistic room, leaving space there as the tables needed for the Agape were removed, and a single table or altar sufficed for the liturgy.

As the Church emerged from persecution, new public buildings were

needed and it was only natural that the basilica form was chosen. It was the commonest type of building for holding large crowds throughout the Roman Empire. It was a large hall supported by pillars. Basil Minchin, the English liturgist, holds that the altar was originally placed third of the way down the nave, and only later moved to the apse.⁴ We do know that, regardless of the location of the altar, the Eucharistic action was celebrated facing the people. The bishop's chair was behind the altar in the apse, and he it was who celebrated the liturgy surrounded by priests, deacons and people. The choir, separated from the people by low railings, found its proper place in front of the altar. Lessons were read from one or two ambo (pulpits) placed near the altar or on either side of it.

The basilica was arranged to display the importance of the *basileus* (emperor) who was always surrounded by his court. Byzantine court ceremonial was formalized and possessed great dignity and beauty, and gradually various court practices found their way into the liturgy. Certain vestments (such as the stole, borrowed from the ceremonial dress of the magistrate), incense, and the processional cross came in at this time. The concept that began to pervade the basilica was that it was the palace of Christ, seen as Emperor, and the altar, bearing his presence under sacramental veil became his throne. About this time it became important to face East for worship. This directional emphasis is probably connected with the symbolism of the rising sun as Christ (whose image as Pantocrator filled most apses at this time), but it seems that this concept was responsible for the priest turning his back on the people, a phenomenon that scholars are still examining.

By the fourteenth century, the normal position for the altar was against the east wall, and the liturgy had changed considerably. The Gothic Cathedral mirrors these changes, and, as a church structure, has become the setting for a resplendent spectacle to be watched from afar rather than the object of active participation. Since the altar was usually against the wall, it was surmounted by a towering reredos or retablo, glorious with color. Its location was at the end of a long choir which was frequently separated from the congregation by great carved rood screens, almost creating a separate room within the church. The practice of elevating the Host came in at this time because the people could not see what the priest was doing. The great distances of the cathedral echoed with the more elaborate Greg-

⁴ Basil Minchin. "The Liturgy and Its Setting," *True Worship*, ed. Lancelot Sheppard, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), pp. 102 and 103.

orian chant that could not be sung by the people and had to be performed exclusively by the choir. Worship had become almost entirely clerical, and possibly this can be explained, at least in northern Europe, by the monastic character of the churches established by the missionary monks. The Mass became more "mysterious" and the symbolic explanation of merely practical changes developed profusely. Christ was seen as the knightly Lord of heaven and earth, and the church edifice was viewed as his castle.

In the early Renaissance period, there was a reaction against this long type of church, and the humanistic architects began experimenting with circular and centralized plans, using ancient pagan buildings as their models. The altars still remained on the periphery. They were treated not as tables, but as architectural compositions. The medieval notion of the liturgy remained, but the accent on majesty and courtly ceremony heightened especially during the ensuing Baroque era. The Baroque church, product of the Counter-Reformation, literally attempted to transport the beholder to heavenly glory. If the Protestants denied the Real Presence, the Church emphasized its belief, by reservation on the altar, which became the throne of the Sacramental King. The interior was ornamented beyond description, and the whole again was a breathtaking setting for the splendor of the courtly ceremony performed before the heavenly Sovereign, who reigned with the Church Triumphant.

The Scene Today

And what of the contemporary scene? What are the current trends and tendencies in planning today's church? Most modern architects have completely espoused the principle that churches built today must reflect this age, rejecting the concept that it is feasible or advisable to erect pseudo-Romanesque, Gothic or Baroque buildings. These styles, as they evolved organically and were the vital expression of their time, were valid and meaningful. They were *modern* then, for man has always built in the style of his epoch until the eclecticism of the nineteenth century gained hold. So today, our architecture should be modern and reflect *our* age, for to fail to do so would be "admitting that religion no longer possesses the same vitality as our secular buildings" and merely confirms the atheist or agnostic in his conviction that the Church "is no more than a curious anachronism: that Christianity itself is merely the by-product of a vanished culture."⁵ Modern man does not reflect the medieval mentality, so the Gothic Cathedral, though timeless in its beauty and appeal, cannot be taken as a model to be copied today, for when this is done, a lifeless version of the

originally modern structure is achieved and as such is hackneyed and outmoded. The style of the churches of the past was the outgrowth of the period's method of construction. The Romanesque church became Gothic when the arch was perfected and could span greater distances. Gothic churches could have larger windows as men learned to construct arches that could carry the stress from the walls out to the buttresses. When such could be done, the need for thick walls to support the roof was no longer felt, and so the style gradually changed. Today with modern construction advances, with concrete, steel, and other new materials, new forms may be attempted which were impossible earlier. The Church should not fail to utilize in building her sacred edifices, that which is used so skillfully in secular building. It is time we sanctified concrete, fiberglass, steel, aluminum, and plastics of many varieties and put these to the service of God. Such can be less expensively done than building with more traditional materials, i.e., brick, stone, and marble, which are now more costly than when they were common building materials. The new Cathedral of Liverpool, constructed in concrete, cost one fourth the amount that would have been spent if the more traditional plan had been carried out.

The tendency to conceive the sacred edifice in terms of function is operative now, and consequently architects are again designing assembly rooms for the Eucharistic action. There seems to be a nostalgia for the Upper Room and the intimate atmosphere of family celebration. Dom Debuyst, O.S.B., editor of *Art d'Eglise*, suggests that our churches be of smaller, more familial, and domestic.⁶ He feels that the great hospitality of our homes should be the keynote and that there is no necessity for the structure's exterior projecting an ecclesiastical image. Anton Henze proposes the Tent of God as the church structure for our age, deriving its form from factories—tents of labor—that so characterize our industrial society.⁷ He shows the appropriateness of the tent image, as the people of today are always "on the move" and lack the security of their forebears. Migrations and technical achievement show man the relative insecurity of any building today, and in spirit he is like the nomadic Jews wandering in the desert. So too, the new People of God, Henze's thesis continues, are pilgrims realizing that they "have here no lasting city" (Heb. 13, 14), and so they dwell in the Tent of God. The elements common to both conceptualiza-

⁵ Hammond, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 and 3.

⁶ Frederick Debuyst, O.S.B.: "Church Architecture and Christian Celebration," *Liturgical Arts*, Vol. 32, (November, 1963), pp. 3-5.

⁷ Henze, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-43.

tions are simplicity, austerity, and poverty. There is a trend away from costly and ostentatious materials, the feeling being that all should be functional and not luxurious. In the Constitution on the Liturgy, ordinaries are exhorted to favor art that strives "after noble beauty rather than mere sumptuous display" (n. 124).

Liturgical changes, and especially the new liturgy that is now being considered and planned, will definitely demand new solutions for new situations. Since it is quite probable that the fore-Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, will be conducted away from the altar, new prominence is given to the pulpit and/or the clergy bench (sedilla). The place of the clergy bench in the ancient position behind the altar, facing the people, is being revived. The double ambo for the proclamation of the Gospel and Epistle are also in use again. The Constitution on the Liturgy, in its excellent chapter on sacred art and furnishings, provides for the revision of the canons and ecclesiastical statutes governing the building of churches. In fact, the Declarations of the Preparatory Committee, added to the Schema, have been printed in *Liturgical Arts*⁸ and many of these changes are spelled out. The presidential seats—bishop's throne and clergy benches—and their placement, the free-standing altar and its construction, sacred images, and especially the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament are discussed. This last is of great moment since the present legislation for reservation on the main altar tends to discourage Mass facing the people. The new law should conceivably be elastic enough not to obstruct the people's view in the Mass "versus populum."

The future looks bright indeed for church architecture, for while there are architects who are still putting up clichés of past eras for those priests and parishes who demand them, yet many others, along with the clergy and laity, are rethinking the question of the nature of the church structure, doing so in terms of the liturgy. With the use of new materials and new forms and this necessary rethinking, many churches of great beauty, originality, and functionality cannot but emerge. The People of God, gathered in such an edifice to celebrate the sacred mysteries, will know that this is truly "the house of God and gate of heaven" (Gen. 28, 17).

⁸ *Liturgical Arts*, Vol. 32, (February, 1964), pp. 42 and 43.

The Design for a Small Church illustrating this article was worked out in accordance with principles stressed in the article by Thomas Higley, student of the School of Architecture at Catholic University.