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Theology in Sacred Architecture

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A CHURCH BUILDING is the extension and ornamentation of the altar.¹ History and theology agree in the primary significance which has been given to the Christian altar in the sacred building, and thus it is the rightful focus, centre, and climax of interior design in church architecture. The simple statements of St. Thomas that the "altar represents Christ" and, again, "the consecration of an altar signifies the sanctity of Christ" (*Summa*, III. 83. 3) continue the echo which sounds eloquently from the primitive Christian pictures of the visionary and glorified, and yet strangely realistic, worship of the Apocalypse. The whole theology is given its basis in the doctrine of the Atonement in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and it was carried out by men in the oblation of their lives on the fields of martyrdom. So it is St. Polycarp who can testify that "widows are the altar of God" (Phil. 4:3). It is just this idea that people are the living altars of the living God where the living Christ is made available for the sins of the world that is so necessary in communicating the sacred presence and the reality of atonement in church architecture. A church can communicate its meaning, its experience of life, which is life indeed, by the language of form, through the analogical significance of the art:

It must be through its consecration that the building will acquire a supernatural character. The prayer recited for the consecration of a chalice expresses this in a very definite way: "That Thy benediction may sanctify that which neither art nor the quality of the metal is able to render worthy of Thy altar". . . . The *authentic* signification of a church derives from its dedication and the natural signification of the building is connected with its veritable signification by analogy. As to the form, the building must be considered as a *fiction* of a supernatural reality, the process of analogy being something purely human. We are satisfied with such a resemblance because we are generally aware of the relation of the two orders—natural and supernatural.²

People fill a church, surround its altar, give it its circumstances (quite literally), and so are the living spark that jumps between the material world and the supernatural order. The analogy between the created world of God and the created world of the artist finds its meaning in the Incarnation. The church building is, in a sense, the incarnated worship of the community. If the community worships the broad-loomed Edenesque luxuriance of the American dream world, this is what the church will express. If the community hovers each Sunday morning, trembling on the

1. Paschal Botz, o.s.b., "Meaning of the Altar" (Reprinted from *Sponsa Regis*, February, 1956, by St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, n.d.), p. 8.

2. D. H. Van der Laan, o.s.b., "Does the Form of a Church Belong to the Natural or the Supernatural Order?" *L'Art d'église*, no. 1 (1955), Insert, English Text, p. 1.

brink of awe, if the liturgy presents to the people all of their redeemed past as present, and the present is caught up into an apocalyptic future, and yet all of it is viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*,³ then it is this experience that the church building will express. The natural and the supernatural orders meet at the altar; there grace perfects nature. So it is most reasonable that the altar should be the symbol of Christ himself, denoting his presence, as the Lord of the structure which he sanctifies by dwelling in it, although he is far from being contained by it. It is his sanctuary, the altar his throne, over which the church is built as a canopy. Thus a church is really an altar with a roof over it, a space set aside from sacred and profane use forever, for the celebration of the mystery of redemption in the midst of the redeemed community.

THE APOSTLE IN HIS CHURCH

What is so amazing to one engaged in a study of the development of church architecture is that the church building is a structural and spatial and temporal manifestation of the Body of Christ. From the earliest times, the church has been a tangible, visible, palpable realization of both the communion of the faithful servants of the Lord, and also communion in holy things, the *communio sanctorum*. To say this is really only to claim that church architecture, developing through the vicissitudes of twenty centuries, is a solidified picture of the Church's understanding of itself. Churches are theology set in stone. The theological integrity of the church structure is a mute or sometimes eloquent testimony to the richness or the poverty of the faith that builds it, the theology that governs its being, and the vision of God that inspires it.

As a building designed to express the complementary actions of the Gospel, the proclamation of the good news through Word and Sacrament, the structure is vitally related to the chief interpreter of the Word and the chief celebrant of the Sacraments. The Apostle in his church, the bishop in his cathedral, is the uniting of primitive doctrine and practice, worship and architecture, theology and life, as the kerygmatic community has come to know them. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110 A.D.) sees in the bishop the same focus of worship and theology that we saw in the altar: "Around the Bishop all is in common: the same prayer, the same supplication, the same spirit and hope in charity and in irreproachable joy: all that is in Jesus Christ, to whom nothing is preferable" (*Magn.* 7; *Philad.*, 4).⁴ The bishop represents Jesus Christ himself, and so is the living focus of the church's worship and teaching, just as the altar is the chief artefact with which the church worships and proclaims that teaching. It is in his cathedral that the bishop keeps the memorial of the death of the Lord on behalf of all those for whom the Lord died. It is there that he feeds his flock as the

3. A. G. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society* (London: Faber, 1935), pp. 68-9.

4. Boniface Luykx, *O. Praem.*, "The Bishop and His Church," *Worship*, 35 (August-September, 1961), 489.

servant of the Good Shepherd, and so rejoices in the titles of *Pastor fidelium*, nourishing with the Bread of the Word and with the Eucharistic Bread, incorporating new lambs into the priestly flock by the mystery of crossing the Red Sea in Baptism. The paschal people are born anew in a cathedral where they experience again the sharing in these mysteries with the chief shepherd, living and renewing their own passage from death to resurrection. It is no mere happenstance that the primitive *cathedra* is in the primary catachetical and liturgical position in the apse. It is from this location that the mystery is proclaimed in the taught Word, and communicated in the sacramental Word.⁵ The bishop with his presbyters presiding at the messianic banquet is the precise and exact counterpart of that scene described in Rev. 4:4-11 where God is on his throne with the elders disposed to his right and left. The *cathedra* is the pulpit of a bishop, and so it is most intimately connected with the celebration of the Eucharist, and with the proclaiming of the sacred text. There is nothing here of the exclusion of the pulpit to an area far removed from the sanctuary, so that the actual sacramental significance of the sermon is lost, or the removal of the lectern from the altar, the customary place, with the bishop's *cathedra*, for the hearing and enacting of the scriptures. Before these central furnishings in a church building, the *cathedra* and the altar, the body of the faithful gather to be fed. There is one other focal point in the church building, the one other significant functional artefact—the womb of the Christian life—the font. These, in line, are in the highest measure the expression of the life of grace, wholly incarnational, teaching and actually communicating the supernatural realities of which they are the visible and efficacious signs.

THE EUCHARISTIC COMMUNITY

As the cathedral with its customary observance of the sanctification of time in the church year and its splendid celebration of the Eucharist is both the norm and ideal of Christian worship, so when each local church assembles for worship, it is a type of the cathedral, a microcosm of the whole Christian people, in fact, and the promise of the final gathering of all in heaven. Thus each local church itself expresses the meaning of the bishop presiding at the Christian assembly to be constituted as the redeemed community, to be fed with the life of the Head of the community, and to express that life in mission directed towards the world. It is in the architecture of the local church that the life of the Christian community is expressed, for it is in the functioning of the assembled community as it performs its most characteristic action that the meaning of the community is found: "The Church at worship creates its place of worship, and to that place it gives its own name."⁶ There can be no doubt that the Eucharist is the chief and characteristic

5. J. G. Davies, *The Origin and Development of Early Christian Architecture* (London: S.C.M., 1952), p. 93.

6. Aelred Tegels, o.s.B., "The Church: House of God's People," *Worship*, 35 (August-September, 1961), 498.

corporate action, the encounter of the sacred community with its Lord, and that action again determines the shape which the assemblage will take. At the centre is the focus of the eucharistic banquet, the cornerstone of the church, set in its midst, and signifying the presence of Christ. Facing the focal point is the assembly of the people recalling his actions, rejoicing in his presence, and yearning with anticipation for his appearing. And facing the people is the apostolic representative, praying for all with the support of all: "The Bishop is a type of the Father, and the presbyters are the Council of God and the College of the Apostles; without these the name of 'Church' is not given" (Ignatius of Antioch, *Trall.* 3). It is not sheer chance that the climax of the Prayer Book form of consecration of churches ends with two prayers for the consecration of the altar, and then continues with the celebration of the Eucharist itself; for this purpose the church is erected and consecrated.

A NEW INSIGHT

The current tendency in both building and in restoration is to come more and more to the idea of a "single room" type of church. No longer is it adequate to have a Gothic nave, and another room as a choir, and a third as a sanctuary, each set off from the next with obstructing screens, railings, and pillars. The trend is established towards a basilican construction, where the eucharistic room takes pre-eminence, particularly in the famous examples of the new churches of Germany and France, and in England notably in the single rooms of Guildford and Coventry. About the function and nature of the cathedral and its vocation, few bishops have spoken with more theological clarity than Cuthbert Bardsley about his new edifice at Coventry and about its architect, Sir Basil Spence:

Foremost in his vision was the conviction that the altar must be central to the whole design, which must be a kind of case built around a pearl. He recognized that everybody must have an unbroken view of the high altar. The centrality of the altar is not something merely architectural, but rather will it be central in the whole life of this house of God. . . . The celebration of the liturgy is the central work of any cathedral.⁷

The policy is not new to English cathedrals. The Bishop of Blackburn has carried out an extensive restoration of his cathedral, making it into a single room by almost the only means possible. He realized that the altar, to be seen by the people who sit in the side-aisles or transepts, must be literally in the midst, and so he has placed the altar in a central position. The community can again focus on a visible presence. We do not realize our bondage to Gothic architecture until we begin to analyse the function of a genuinely Gothic church in its *sitz im Leben*, and compare it with the needs of a parish church today. The Gothic cathedral was designed as a monastic house, where the divine office was offered in the choir by the choir monks,

7. Cuthbert Bardsley, "Resurrection at Coventry," *Anglican World*, 2:5 (May-June, 1962), 11.

and where all of the choir had an unobstructed view of the altar. But the people and lay brothers were relegated to the nave where they could neither see nor share in the worship, unless an altar were brought into the nave itself. The primitive climax of the Eucharist in communion gave way to a climax in consecration; the place of the priest was exalted to the ultimate neglect or exclusion of the laity.⁸ The choirs and lay brothers have passed into oblivion, but the heritage of Gothic buildings and Gothic theology remains with its death-clutch on our second-rate church draftsmen still perpetuating the eucharistic mistakes of the Middle Ages.

New movements are in the air in church architecture, and it is significant to notice that the ecumenical movement is making its contribution for co-operation in scholarships, research, and the dissemination of findings and information. Much new material is being prepared for diocesan and parochial authorities to make them informed about the implications of the sacred building. Thus the *Report of the Cathedrals Commission* (Church of England, 1961) has these constructive comments about the function of a cathedral in expressing the theology of the church:

They are to be the visible counterpart of the episcopal system. Just as there has to be a bishop to ordain and confirm, so there must be a Church which outwardly symbolizes the organisations of the family life of a diocese around a Mother Church. The Cathedral is the natural centre for Ordinations and some other episcopal functions. Besides this, the traditional arrangement whereby the worship of the cathedral is entrusted to a Dean or Provost and Chapter provides a ministry of depth and variety which is beyond that normally available in a parish Church. The worship offered there is often of an artistic quality higher than is normally possible. Its corporate nature, in which Dean and Canons all participate, preserves in miniature what was good in the monastic tradition of a corporate devotion to the *opus Dei*. . . .⁹

Furthermore, there has been a movement in the Church Assembly (Church of England) to have the Central Council for the Care of Churches prepare a "statement of advice," to be used in the briefing of architects of new church buildings.¹⁰ Full cognizance will be taken of the many and rich Roman Catholic statements of advice which have explored the whole relation between the incarnational community and its expression in worship. The glossy church magazines have featured the new churches often without informed and critical comment, it is true, but at least they have published articles and photographs with a desire to stimulate a new approach to the complex problems of relationship and theology.

The task of rebuilding fell heavily on the churches of France and Germany

8. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, pp. 81ff., 115ff., 239-41. Reaction against such perversions of worship and theology won a great victory in the restoration of the Benedictine Abbey Church at Maredsous which was reconstructed into a central altar structure. See *L'Art d'église*, 108 (1959), 209-13.

9. George Pace, "Modern Powerhouses of Faith," *Anglican World*, 1:6 (June-July, 1961), 22. Cf. also George Pace, "Modern Church Architecture" in *The Church and the Arts*, ed. Frank G. Glendenning (London: S.C.M., 1960), pp. 55-69.

10. Gilbert Cope, "Building a New Church," *Anglican World*, 1:4 (February-March, 1961), 45.

after the Second World War. In the light of the liturgical revival, reconstruction, restoration, and new building tended to further the aims of the movement. Altars were built in the centre of churches, and the number of altars was restricted to one in the eucharistic chamber; art was contemporary (even in the restored Gothic buildings); windows let in light and colour to enliven the drab post-War years. Well-known artists, such as Le Corbusier and Rouault, Picasso and Matisse, executed designs and windows, sacred vessels, crucifixes, pews, fonts, and all church furnishings. But this reconstruction was neither impulsive nor diffuse; it was carefully governed by the theologians and the hierarchy. The bishops and other church leaders had used the theological commissions to prepare the theology of the church and the theology of the laity for their expression and embodiment in relationship in the architectural revival. Father Theodore Klauser, Rector Magnificus of the University of Bonn, prepared the *Directives for the Building of a Church* for the Bishops of Germany:

This house of God is the place in which the eternal union of God with His People in life everlasting is anticipated, and therefore the Christian Church edifice is rightly regarded as the heavenly Sion descended upon earth. . . . The most significant and the most worthy needs of modern mankind must here find their fulfilment; the urge toward community life, the desire for what is true and genuine, the wish to advance from what is peripheral to central and essential, the demand for clarity, lucidity, intelligibility, the longing for quiet and peace, for a sense of warmth and security.¹¹

Such sober appraisal of the nature of the house of God is the product of at least fifty-years' experience of the liturgical revival. From its beginning, when Dom Lambert Beauduin of Mont Cesar trumpeted his vision at the Malines Conference of 1909,¹² the movement in France and Germany, as well as in Belgium, and some more diffuse efforts elsewhere, was characterized by a realism in frankly accepting people where they are, and by working with the actual liturgical texts as they are. A complete contrast is offered by England and North America at the same period. Anglicanism, along with the free Churches (in that the latter often tended to copy some externals of Anglican ecclesiology), was embroiled in sentimental Gothic reconstructions, the revival of medieval ceremonial instead of a truly catholic expression of liturgy, and an antiquarian or dilettante approach to the liturgical texts. Gothic architectural expression was related to the new insights which had come from the theology of the Oxford Movement, it is true, so that the Gothic revival actually did try to embody the rediscovery of the richness of Christian worship. The time has long been ripe for a new and critical look at the buildings where worship takes place, with a frank awareness of the needs of the worshipping community, and the extent to which the building is a proper setting for the worship which is envisaged.

11. Theodore Klauser, "Directive of the Bishops of Germany for the Building of a Church," *Worship* (December, 1949); reprinted in *Documents for Sacred Architecture* (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1957), pp. 15f.

12. Louis Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), p. 61.

Among the most significant contributions of the liturgical renaissance on the continent is the new apprehension of the eucharist as the means by which the community is known to its God and to itself, and as the means by which the grace of such a new relationship is bound to the life of the community of faith. To express the dialogue which should be a part of the eucharist, there should be an architectural dialogue, so to speak, between the sanctuary and the nave, and it might possibly take place to best advantage using the ancient position of the celebrant facing the people.¹³ There should be adequate room for the processional movement of more solemn liturgical functions, as the people who are on a journey in this life enact the transitory nature of their pilgrimage in the light of eternal reality. The people must have a freedom to come to and move from the altar with the composure that such an action and occasion demands. The altar itself is to be, simply and singly, its own *raison d'être*; it is not to be a pedestal for the tabernacle, cross, crucifix, candelabra, reliquary, or whatever bric-à-brac the pastor and congregation believe to be pretty. Whatever its secondary furnishings might be—chairs, benches, lighting fixtures, kneelers, *prie-dieux*, and so on—they are to be eliminated if they are not strictly essential to the liturgical function; if they are included, they must not be allowed to clutter or obscure the primary furnishing of the sanctuary. The whole building should “present to the view of the congregation an ensemble of the theme of our holy faith, not in a fragmentary way, but with a certain completeness and in significant proportions and with right placing of accent.”¹⁴ One might wish that these instructions were lettered out and made the required evening meditation of every person who has to do with the vast programme of rebuilding and redefining the whole structure of the church edifice. Even more modern and more carefully defined are the official conclusions of the French *Centre de Pastorale Liturgique*, held at Versailles in 1960. These *Conclusions* have been published in *Worship*, the leading English-language liturgical review. In brief compass the essential nature of the Church edifice is affirmed, and its function and significance are defined in terms of space and light, area, movement, design, meaning, symbolism, and material.¹⁵

THE ARCHITECT AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

Increasingly the Church has taken the advice of the statement on “Architecture and the Church,” produced by the World Council of Churches at Bossey in May, 1959: “The Church should let the architect be the architect.”¹⁶ But on the other hand, the Church has a formidable task in present-

13. Basil Minchin, *The Celebration of the Eucharist Facing the People* (Bristol: Warden Press, 1954), pp. 9–18.

14. Klauser, “Directives of the Bishops . . .,” p. 22.

15. “First Principles for Church Architecture,” *Worship*, 35 (August–September, 1961), 509–15; tr. from *La Maison-Dieu*, 63 (1960), 234–9.

16. Edward Mills, “Architecture: Peter Hammond and Peter Anson,” *Anglican World*, 1:1 (1960), 63.

ing the architect with both his challenge and the apostolic community which he must house. The education of the architect has been the subject of a number of recent books, including one by the Reverend Peter Hammond, the Secretary of the New Churches Research Group in England. His book, *Liturgy and Architecture*, has this to say about the first things.

The cardinal principle of church planning is that architecture should be shaped by worship—not worship by architecture. The architect must first establish a satisfactory and theologically expressive relationship between an altar and a congregation; only then can he go on to create an appropriate spatial setting for an activity which, in the last resort, is independent of architecture. . . . It is essential to start from the worshipping assembly and its needs, and only then to consider the type of setting which will best enable the community to be itself and to fulfill its primary function.¹⁷

That architects are becoming increasingly vocal, stating over and over again that their architecture should be shaped by worship, must be a cause of rejoicing. One only wishes that the churches had ears to hear. At Swanwick, England, in January, 1961, at an Ecumenical Liturgical Conference, two architects, Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, delivered a paper on "Architecture and Christian Meanings."¹⁸ They argued that the Church sets apart time (Sunday), and all of time is sanctified by this act; the Church sets apart people (clergy), for the sanctification of the whole people of God; and the Church sets apart space (the church building), thereby sanctifying the whole of space. It is worship, they argued, that must structure the Church's use of place; that Baptism, the use of water in the laver of rebirth, must not take place in a vessel designed to look either like a bird bath or a soda fountain, but in one in which the passage from death to life can be adequately expressed. There must be sufficient water, and there must be eloquently expressive architecture. This attitude to Baptism is well seen in the impressive new baptistry at Coventry. How poorly it is seen in many parish churches where the font is obscured by the narthex, hidden in a corner, or added as an afterthought. The font is also the subject of too frequent errors of proportion. A church which boasts an altar of some monumental quality finds itself embarrassed by an insignificant font. Errors of proportion can obscure the significance of the altar too. An altar cross, whether placed on the altar itself (where it technically should not be found), or on the wall behind it, or suspended above it, should be a simple adjunct to the altar, and in proportion to it. The fad of a gigantic cross overshadowing the altar, and filling what would otherwise be a simple brick

17. Peter Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), in Frederick R. McManus, "Some Principles of Church Planning," *Worship*, 35 (November, 1961), 657.

18. Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, "Architecture and Christian Meanings," *Studia Liturgica*, 1:2 (June, 1962), 115-27. Cf. Paul Bellot, o.s.b., *Propos d'un batisseur du Bon Dieu* (Montreal: Fides, 1948), *Cahiers d'Art Arca*, in which Dom Paul writes of the theology which informs his own architecture, as seen in the great buildings at Quarr Abbey, Isle of Wight; the Abbey of St. Benoit-du-lac, Quebec; and St. Joseph's Oratory, Montreal: true style, intemporality of beauty, interaction of the ideal and the ascetic in Christian art, the primacy of form above light and colour, and so on.

or stone background for the main focus, vitiates the liturgical and sacramental significance of the altar in the primary place of worship. Similarly, the squeezing of an altar against the east wall, thereby precluding any use of the westward position at the eucharist, at the very least turns the table into a side-board or vanity. Monumentality and three-dimensional spaciousness demand that the altar be free-standing. Furthermore, the material of the altar should be expressive of the significance of the function of an altar. Decoration, by the same argument, must be strictly subject to the demands of the liturgical action of the community engaged in its corporate activity. If the decoration speaks of the world's standards, or detracts from the singleness of effect, or is trivial, weak, and insignificant in design or execution, it must be eliminated. It is not the aim of sacred architecture to turn the church into an ecclesiastical version of a modern business office, complete with potted palms and sectional furniture, or into a quasi-theatre, with rugs and cushions, palms and coat-racks, to ease the flesh of the spectator. The church is designed for participation. The modern decor tends to reflect the death-wish, and other abhorrent associations of the funeral parlour. Sacred architecture does not aim to conform to the standards and whims of the "interior decorator" any more than it should follow the designs of *Better Homes and Gardens*. It is a tragic comment on our evaluation of worship in the life of a parish that far more will be expended on the cost of a heating system than on thought for what is to be heated. We are content to imitate the grossest perversions of Gothic architecture, corrupted by reconstructions and "copies" of well-intentioned liturgiologists of the nineteenth century, even introducing into our churches the neo-barbarisms of a space-age sentimentality. But until there is an enlightened diocesan or area policy formed, until the bishops and parochial church councils act with enlightened and pastoral concern and responsibility, until the architects and church artists have competent advice from bodies of theologians and historians, the same outmoded "church-like" buildings will be erected in the name of progress and not of Christianity.

A church is a sign—it is a symbol and a promise of what is to come. If it fails in expressing the true meaning of the sign, if the symbol loses reference to what is symbolized, if the promise is lost because the church does not point to what is beyond it, then the church has failed to express what it is intended to be; it has ceased to be properly incarnational. We can be certain that such a building is not made for the people of God, and that the worship of the community will lack just that element of significance (the making real of the "sign"), of symbolism, and of promise which should be an ultimate characteristic of the *plebs sancta Dei* at work. The church, then, is not merely functional; still less is it merely beautiful. It must fulfil the meaning which lies behind the façade. It must be in fact the gate of heaven, a place of mystery and tremendous awe, a space set apart for contact with the holy. It is of these things that the church must speak to the man who seeks them as he enters her doors. And the language that

the church edifice speaks to such a man must be meaningful simply by the fact that the church is, and by the way that it exists. If it is precise and true to the community which will make it alive by their presence, then its message will be the right one and will be communicated adequately. If it is true to the God who is its ground, and who will sanctify it by his presence, it will communicate that presence to those who seek him there. If it is vague and confused, then it will speak confusion to its people. The time has passed when a circumspect treading of the middle way accomplishes the proper end; man must decide in the light of God's self-revelation, and then must step out with determination. What he builds along the pilgrim way still denotes his appropriation of God's acts; the choice remains between God and Mammon.