People often ask me why we have not been building beautiful churches in recent decades. It is not a simple answer of course: there are the changes from Vatican II; the embrace of modernism by the architectural profession; the expense of craftsmanship; the parsimony of the faithful; and the belief that the church is merely a functional building. Today, when laity and clergy alike desire to build beautiful churches again they are confronted with a limitation that their great-grandparents did not have to contend with: the strict monetary policies of the diocese.

These requirements, which are often seen as more binding than papal encyclicals, vary greatly across the country. They usually reflect some mix of cash, pledges, and loans. At the extreme there are dioceses that require their pastors to have one hundred percent of their budget in cash and pledges before the architect can finish the drawings. In that scenario, is it any wonder that our modern churches do not inspire? Most of us could not have bought our houses if we had to have fifty percent cash down. So why does the Church require that of the house of God? To make matters more difficult, parishes are expected to pay their mortgage off in five years. Again, an impossibility for most families but considered reasonable for parishes!

This scenario helps to explain why churches are so cheap and ugly today, and why many built in recent decades are falling apart. Many parishes in the suburbs are filled with young families, creating the need for larger churches and schools. Yet, these same families are the ones least likely to make a substantial contribution. The limitation of clergy often means that the bishop wants the parish to build a new church with seating for twelve or sixteen hundred people—the equivalent of a cathedral—usually with the budget of a nice gymnasium. Even if they wanted to, parishioners could not afford to build a church like their grandparents did in part because of the requirement to have fifty percent of the cost up front and to pay back the mortgage in five years.

Instead, the parish will end up with a camel, a building too big for its budget, with low proportions, and some traditional motifs slapped on. Years ago, a parish in the west raised only $3 million in cash and pledges for a new $6 million church. They were told to continue to raise money, which they obediently did, only to find out that the cost of construction doubled over the next five years, and they were worse off than they had been previously.

How did we come to this? These stringent monetary requirements seem to be a fairly recent development in the Church’s history. They may grow out of the need to build a large number of churches and schools quickly and cheaply in the suburbs after World War II. They may also be due to the fact that there have been parishes that defaulted on loans, and the bishop is left holding the debt. So it is no surprise that the bishops are trying to be fiscally responsible and to help their pastors make wise financial decisions. But inasmuch as church buildings are central to the liturgy and the salvation of souls, how does one balance the need to feed the sheep with the admonition to count the cost? If we do not build worthily, will they still come?

It is important to point out that few of our parish churches from previous eras could have been built under such tough requirements. Notwithstanding a major donor, most of the Catholic churches of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were built and paid for over a long period of time by poor immigrants and their children. These churches would be “dedicated” after construction but were not “solemnly consecrated” until their mortgage was all paid off. This process, often taking from twenty to fifty years, allowed the faithful from different generations to participate in paying for them, and is the main reason for the existence of these incredible cathedral-like structures in the working-class neighborhoods of our cities. Today, many of these churches continue to be the pride of their neighborhoods, and the faithful work hard just to maintain and restore them.

In the past, when Catholics were less financially successful than today, pastors were allowed to build as they saw fit. Often, Monsignor O’Callaghan had a taste for Rome or for Lombardy and hired a talented architect who designed a beautiful, solid, and expensive building. Unlike today, these working-class parishes were not endowed with owners of companies or wealthy professionals. Yet over time, with prayer and raffles, the church would get built and eventually paid off. These were entrepreneurial pastors, who thought big, and were willing to take a risk for the sake of the house of God. It probably helped that these builder priests stayed in the parish until the building was paid off and that the debt was seen as theirs and the parish’s, not the bishop’s. When they succeeded, and sometimes the people had to wait decades, they would have built a beautiful church that would stand for generations.

Our buildings are a symbol of our faith, catechisms in stone for the faithful, and should be seen as a gift for future generations. Elements, whether custom stonework or brick and stone, should be considered for their life-cycle costs, not just their upfront costs. If we build in this way we will understand that our Catholic buildings are investments, investments in faith and in the future of the Church. Thus parishes should be allowed to have reasonable budgets for the size of their churches.

New churches should be able to borrow like a homeowner would, for twenty or thirty years. Not only will this allow us to build better buildings, but it also means that the cost of the building will be paid for by more of the people who will eventually use it. If the diocese could develop a more realistic cash-and-pledges scenario (such as twenty percent cash down) a three-thousand-family parish trying to build a twelve-hundred-seat church could afford to build a beautiful church closer in quality to the ones our poor immigrant forebears constructed.

Duncan Stroik
July 2008

On the cover: The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC.
Photo by Nicole Gingras.

CATECHISMUS IN LAPIDEM

Therefore, though it is God who takes the initiative of coming to dwell in the midst of men, and he is always the main architect of this plan, it is also true that he does not will to carry it out without our active cooperation. Therefore, [are we] to commit [ourselves] to build “God’s dwelling with men.” No one is excluded; every one can and must contribute so that this house of communion will be more spacious and beautiful.

—Benedict XVI
SACRED ARCHITECTURE

ISSUE 14  2008

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

2   † Catechismus in Lapidem ................................................................. Duncan Stroik

NEWS & LETTERS

3   † Pope Benedict’s first visit to the U.S. † Ave Maria Oratory dedicated † New church of Our Lady of Fatima †
† St. Teresa of Ávila Basilica † Chicago’s Holy Name Cathedral closed † Chinese shrine still stands †
† Westminster Cathedral in need of repair † National Shrine of St. Katherine Drexel †
† Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration to build new convent † Shrine of St. Francis to be restored †
† Pope celebrates Mass ad orientem † First church in Qatar † Barat College chapel may be demolished †

ARTICLES

12   † The Living Heart of Our Churches: The Placement of the Tabernacle ............... Fr. Giles Dimock, OP
14   † The Virgin and the Heavenly Hosts: Liturgical and Devotional Art ............... Denis McNamara and Duncan Stroik
17   † Lights of Faith: Stained Glass Windows as Tools for Catechesis ....................... Carol Anne Jones
21   † Sacred Art Institute Now: a Mandate of Vatican II ........................................ Hugh J. McNichol
24   † The Christian Scandal in Dialogue: a Return to Sacred Images ....................... Paul G. Monson

DOCUMENTATION

28   † Homily at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York ............................................. His Holiness Benedict XVI

BOOKS

31   † Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics by Aidan Nichols, OP .......... reviewed by Daniel McInerny
32   † A Glimpse of Heaven: Catholic Churches of England and Wales by C. Martin. .... reviewed by Roderick O’Donnell
33   † From Abyssinian to Zion: Manhattan’s Houses of Worship by Donald W. Dunlap. .... reviewed by Matthew Alderman
34   † Sir Ninian Comper: an Introduction to his Life and Work by Symondson and Bucknall. ... reviewed by Timothy Hook
35   † America’s Church: the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception by Gregory W. Tucker .... reviewed by Fr. Dan Scheidt
37   † From the Publishing Houses: a Selection of Recent Books .................... reviewed by Sacred Architecture

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Journal of the Institute for Sacred Architecture

The Institute for Sacred Architecture is a non-profit organization made up of architects, clergy, educators and others interested in the discussion of significant issues related to contemporary Catholic architecture. Sacred Architecture is published biannually for $9.95.

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When Pope Benedict XVI visited Washington, DC, this April he celebrated the Mass at Nationals Stadium at an altar designed by architecture students studying in the capital. Over twenty designs were submitted to a competition held at the School of Architecture and Planning at Catholic University of America to design the cathedra, ambo, and altar for the Mass celebrated by the pope at the stadium. The furnishings were built for the celebration for over forty-six thousand faithful. The winning design was by graduate students John-Paul Mikolajczyk and Ryan Mullen, assisted by undergraduates Rachel Bailey and Victoria Engelstad.

As part of the Pauline year, an ecumenical chapel has been planned at the papal Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. The chapel will be placed in a baptistery that was remodeled in the early twentieth century and will offer a place for non-Catholic Christians to pray and celebrate liturgies. The altar for the chapel will be one that was found during the recent excavations near the tomb of St. Paul. The Pauline year began June 29, 2008, and will be celebrated until June 29, 2009, as a celebration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of St. Paul.

A pre-Civil War church in Wisconsin was radically altered recently to fill the needs of a growing parish. St. Anthony’s Catholic Church in Menomonee Falls, which was built in the nineteenth century, was almost entirely demolished to create the extended nave. The orientation of the nave was turned ninety degrees from the entrance and a new laminated wood frame and fabric enclosure, which seats one thousand worshippers, was inserted. The bell tower and two façades were all that remained of the original church, while the interior walls were stripped and the original stonework exposed.

The largest Hindu Temple in America has just been completed in Lilburn, GA. Built entirely of gleaming limestone, marble, and Indian pink sandstone, using traditional construction methods, the suburban Atlanta temple was completed in just eighteen months for a cost of $19 million. Each stone of the temple was carved by hand by native craftsmen in India, shipped to the U.S. by stone, and assembled according to numbers assigned in Indian workshops. No steel or concrete was used in the construction of the temple, which features nine domes and five spires.

The “quasi-parish” of Ave Maria Oratory was dedicated by Bishop Frank J. Dewane of the Diocese of Venice, FL, on March 31, 2008. The bishop anointed the new church and altar during the inaugural Mass. The quasi-parish, equivalent to a parish, will serve the students, faculty, and staff of Ave Maria University and the residents of the town of Ave Maria.

The Hindu Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Georgia was built using traditional methods of construction and hand-carved stone.
In October of 2007, Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone dedicated the new church at Fátima, Portugal, the site of an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary that has become one of the largest centers for pilgrimage in the world. The new church, built where three shepherd children saw a vision of the Blessed Virgin, was built in a low-slung modernist style, with enough room to hold nine thousand worshippers. The church cost €80 million ($120 million) to build, and is designed with large open spaces so that television cameras can take advantage of unobstructed views during broadcasts. In a remote corner of Portugal, the shrine welcomes nearly eight hundred thousand pilgrims a year devoted to the Blessed Mother. Devotions to the apparition at Fátima have grown immensely over the past thirty years, since Pope John Paul II attributed his surviving an assassination attempt to Our Lady of Fátima.

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The shrine of St. Katherine Drexel in Philadelphia this February was declared a national shrine. The declaration by the USCCB makes it the twenty-seventh such national shrine. St. Katherine Drexel was born into the highest circles of Philadelphia society but gave away her entire inheritance to the poor and to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, which she founded and served as mother superior. She was beatified in 1988 and canonized in 2000, and her remains are buried under the St. Elizabeth Chapel.

A fire caused by lightning has severely damaged the historic St. Alphonsus Catholic Church in the heart of St. Louis. The church was at first condemned, but should be back in operation with the help of parish members and insurance. The $7 million effort to rebuild includes repairs to the roof and tower and repastering the ceiling vaults.

Historic preservationists in Washington, DC have granted landmark status to the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, despite protests from the church’s members, who want to be free to tear it down and replace it, as the space no longer suits their needs. The 1970 church and attached building are an example of the Brutalist style, which uses harsh angles and exposed masses of concrete. The Washington Historic Preservation Review Board says that the church is perhaps “the most important Modernist church in the city.” A public interest law firm may challenge the decision, stating that the historic designation is “imposing a substantial burden” on their religious expression.

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Faith & Form has awarded a 2007 Merit Award for the Stanwich Congregational Church to Grandberg and Associates Architects of Mount Kisco, NY. The award is given to projects with “the goal of honoring the best in architecture, liturgical design, and art for religious spaces.” The church was designed to fill the modern needs of the congregation while evoking traditional New England congregational churches. The 36,000 sq. ft. complex features a 3,200 sq. ft. sanctuary and 3,000 sq. ft. fellowship hall. The church was completed in 2006, and has also been featured in Traditional Building Magazine.

The new church at the Fatima Shrine in Portugal seats 9,000 worshippers for Mass.

Cormac Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor has launched a £3 million appeal for urgent repairs to the Westminster Cathedral. It is reported by the Times Online, UK, that the Cathedral could be forced to close within a decade if funds are not found. The Archbishop said of the Cathedral, built in 1895, “It is a Grade I listed building that is recognized as one of the finest examples of Victorian architecture and Byzantine art in the world.” The interior’s exposed brick domes and arches are in danger of deteriorating, electrical and mechanical systems need modernizing, and the upper-level galleries have been closed for thirty years because of safety issues.
The government of Spain has approved a proposed high-speed train tunnel below the famous Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona. The excavations below Expiatori Temple of the Sagrada Familia, designed by the architect Antoni Gaudi will run some four meters in front of the basilica’s façade. Architects working on the basilica have expressed concern that the high-speed train tunnel will undermine the foundations of the church, among the largest in the world, and put it in danger of collapse. The church is one of the last works of the Catalan architect Gaudi, and is not expected to be completed for another century. Gaudi has been advanced for the cause of sainthood, due to his piety and devotion to the Roman Catholic Church.

Preservationists at World Monuments Fund have listed a seminary in Scotland among the “World’s Most Threatened” sites. St. Peter’s Seminary, which sits just outside of Glasgow, was closed in 1980 and for the past forty years, structural problems, vandalism, and encroaching vegetation have taken their toll. The 1966 “brutalist” concrete structure, designed by Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan, was considered avant-garde with similarities to Le Corbusier’s monastery at La Tourrette. St. Peter’s Seminary was never loved by its residents, as it suffered from leaky roofs and a cold and damp interior that doubtless contributed to a lackluster enrollment, which at its peak was only half full. Preservationists and architects are working with the Diocese of Glasgow to stabilize the building as a ruin. Recently the magazine Prospect named the building Scotland’s best modernist building.

After being closed for seventy years, a parish church in Vladivostok, Russia, is reopened and reconsecrated. Most Holy Mother of God Roman Catholic Church was reconsecrated by Bishop Kirill Klimovich, February 3, 2008, seventy years to the day after the martyrdom of five members of the church in 1938. The church building dates to 1899, but was taken over by the Communists in 1935. In 1992 missionary members of the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord volunteered to head the refounding of the church. A young American architect, Matthew Alderman, is responsible for the design of the interior of the church, including the new altar, reredos, tabernacle stand, chapel altars, and baptismal font.

A popular shrine to Our Lady in the Chinese province of Henan has been saved from demolition, but the government has banned visits to the site by those who are not locals. The annual pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was canceled in 2007, but traditionally attracts over forty thousand pilgrims for the feast day of Our Lady of Carmel every July 16. The Chinese communist government has stationed troops in military exercises in the area of the shrine since May 2007, when the demolition was initially announced. The Shrine was constructed in 1903 in thanksgiving to the Blessed Virgin for preserving Catholics during the Boxer Rebellion, an uprising in which over eighteen thousand Catholics were murdered.

The Chinese Communist Government has halted the demolition of the shrine of Our Lady of Carmel in Henan but banned an annual pilgrimage to the site.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life surveyed thirty-five thousand Americans and put forth a comprehensive new study giving a detailed picture of the religious identity of the U.S. The Catholic population today totals 24 percent, a decrease from the past but partially offset by the large immigration of Catholics, especially Latinos. The study shows that the total Protestant population stands at 51 percent of the total population, but is comprised of one hundred denominations amongst which Christians switch freely. Though the Catholic population has shrunk to 23.9 percent, it still nearly rivals or exceeds the three main groups of Protestants, Evangelical Protestants at 26.3 percent, mainline Protestant churches at 18.1 percent, and historically black churches at 6.9 percent.
The Diocese of Salamanca is making the final push to complete the unfinished Basilica of St. Teresa of Ávila in Alba de Tormes, Spain. The town in the western province of Salamanca is where St. Teresa died and where her incorrupt body lies in the convent of St. Teresa of Ávila. The basilica was begun in 1898, but work stopped in 1933 just before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Construction resumed in 1980 in preparation for the four hundredth anniversary of the saint’s death, and now local bishops are hoping to make a final push with an appeal for $4.4 million to complete the stone basilica by 2014 for the four hundredth anniversary of St. Teresa’s beatification.

Parishioners at St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in Baker City, OR, recently celebrated the renovation of their cathedral. Local artists and craftsmen volunteered over the course of a year to renovate the cathedral, which had been marred by 1980s revisions. The renovation removed a screen wall that had projected into the sanctuary and had taken up space. Architects and builders also built a new altar and tabernacle at the center of the sanctuary, surmounted by a new baldacchino. The renovation also revealed ninety-year-old stencil paintings on the apse walls, which were lovingly restored. Bishop Emeritus Thomas Connolly celebrated the rededication of the cathedral.

A new baldacchino and altar were added to the renovated St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in Baker City, Oregon.

Pope Benedict XVI made an apostolic journey to the Shrine of Mariazell, home of the Heiligenkreuz Abbey, to mark the occasion of its 850th anniversary. It is the oldest continuously active Cistercian monastery in the world. The Holy Father addressed the monks saying, “Truly it would not be presumptuous to say that, in a liturgy completely centered on God, we can see, in its rituals and chant, an image of eternity. Otherwise, how could our forefathers, hundreds of years ago, have built a sacred edifice as solemn as this? Here the architecture itself draws all our senses upwards, towards ‘what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined: what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor 2:9). In all our efforts on behalf of the liturgy, the determining factor must always be our looking to God.”

Plans have been approved for a new basilica in Cancun, Mexico to be dedicated to Santa Maria del Mar y de la Santa Cruz. In January 2008 Archbishop Christophe Pierre blessed a ten thousand square meter (2.5 acre) site for the new basilica complex in the tourist center of Cancun. The complex will serve both the local population and the millions of tourists the city receives each year. The project is estimated to cost approximately $8.3 million and could start receiving visitors in two years, although construction is scheduled to be completed in five years. The basilica will allow about three thousand people to attend Mass simultaneously, half within the church and half on an overlooking terrace.

An article in a recent magazine devoted to metal construction reported on trends in religious building construction. Parallel to the slowing home-building market, religious building construction in 2006 totaled $7.8 billion, only a 3 percent increase from 2005. FMI Corp. forecasted a slight increase for construction spending for 2007 and for 2008. Also noted was the growth in the construction of megachurches. Average attendance at megachurches increased 57 percent from 2000 to 2005, compared to the increase of 12 percent in attendance at traditional churches. Larger churches are becoming more like mixed-use venues, adding coffee shops, daycare centers, and multimedia centers. According to the article, this could lead some churches to lose some of their tax-free status.

Art today is plagued by “the loss of a sense of tradition,” says an art history professor at Rome’s pontifical art school. Art historian Rodolfo Papa in a lecture in Rome lamented that modern art is limited and that “we must think of man in different terms than those used in political and economic ideologies” of modernity. In a report published by ZENIT, Papa also called for art to “return to being a place of contemplation” of beauty. Papa, who teaches at the Pontifical Academy of Arts and Literature at the Pantheon, concluded that, “in the end, as Benedict XVI said, beauty is ‘faith made visible.’”

The historically Polish parish of St. Hyacinth in Glen Head, New York, has installed a stained glass window with the image of Pope John Paul II with his coat of arms and a globe, symbolizing the many travels the pontiff made throughout the world.
Many Traditional Neighborhood Developments (TNDs) are building meetinghouses and chapels, in the hopes that they will be rented for weddings, meetings, and church services. At the Waters, outside of Montgomery, AL, a 3,400 square foot meetinghouse with a colonnaded façade and white steeple is the focal point of the picturesque Chapel Hill Street. While no churches have used the meetinghouse for services, the town relies on wedding rentals to pay for its construction and maintenance. Several other TNDs have meetinghouses and chapels, and many of them also have dedicated churches that are owned by their congregations.

A recent restoration has revealed treasures of Renaissance art at one of Rome’s most popular pilgrimage sites, the Scala Santa. A team of Vatican art restoration experts has revealed a series of sixteenth-century frescoes by the Flemish artist Paul Bril. The collection of Renaissance landscapes was revealed under years of grime and dirt at the chapel of St. Sylvester in the building containing the famous Holy Steps. The restorers found that layers of dirt, oils, glues, and varnishes from previous restorations attempts, as well as layers of candle soot had completely obscured the paintings. Pope Sixtus V commissioned the frescoes at the complex, which contains a set of stairs that tradition holds Christ had scaled before he was handed over by Pontius Pilate to the mob to be crucified.

The Vatican has announced that a drawing by Michelangelo showing a design for the cupola of St. Peter’s Basilica has been found. The sketch was found among the archives of the Fabbrica di San Pietro, the office in charge of construction issues at St. Peter’s. Specialists have confirmed the authenticity of the sketch, which is dated 1563. It appears to be instructions from Michelangelo to the carvers fabricating the stone for the basilica.

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The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Springfield, IL, will be undergoing a major restoration and renovation project over the next year. The $11 million project to clean, restore, and remodel the cathedral will take over a year and force the closure of the church. The cathedral’s freestanding altar, which was installed “temporarily” thirty years ago, will be replaced with a permanent altar, along with improved disabled access to the sanctuary. The largest change is the addition of an atrium on the side of the church. The atrium will be used as a parish hall and additional entrance to the church. Part of the existing convent will be demolished to make way for the new addition. The architecture firm of Graham & Hyde is supervising the work with Carol Frenning as liturgical design consultant.

According to an article in Architect magazine, Craig Hartman of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill looked at Rudolf Schwarz’s book The Church Incarnate for inspiration in designing the Oakland Cathedral of Christ the Light. According to the article, “In [the book], Schwarz advocated arranging parishioners in a circle around the altar to create a sense of community and inclusion, a concept that was later adopted as Catholic doctrine.” Hartman expressed his desire to create a “fresh,” contemporary building, saying, “We are here on the Pacific Rim in a multicultural place, not in fifteen-century Europe.” The article states that the “glue-laminated wood ribs that support both the sanctuary walls and the glass veils were an ideal choice for a building intended to survive for hundreds of years.”

The former Archbishop Quigley Preparatory Seminary High School in downtown Chicago has been preserved by the Archdiocese of Chicago. The former high school, which closed in 2006, will become the new Archbishop Quigley Center, intended to become offices for nearly 250 employees formerly employed at the Archdiocese’s Pastoral Center. Along with Quigley, an 1864 building on Lake Shore Drive will be renovated to become offices for another 150 employees, consolidating several offices and preserving historic buildings in the process.

Southern California has a new home for an ancient rite with the dedication of St. Margaret’s Church in Oceanside. Bishop Robert H. Brom of the Diocese of San Diego dedicated the church in November of 2007.
On college campuses across the country, an unusual event is popping up. Slowly marching along carrying candles, praying and singing, students process holding a canopy over the Blessed Sacrament. Moving along paths filled with busy students, tailgaters, and fraternity brothers, Catholic college students across the country have revived the tradition of liturgical Eucharistic processions. While this might not seem so out of the ordinary at Catholic colleges and universities, such as Notre Dame where for the past few years the processions have been held, many of the processions are taking place at public and state universities. Often organized by Newman Centers on campuses nationwide such as the University of Iowa, the events draw attention to the Catholic faith that is sometimes hidden on public university campuses. Organized to foster devotion for the faithful, the processions draw curious onlookers to inquire more about Catholicism, opening up new paths to evangelization.

Robert Venturi has been commissioned to design the chapel at the heart of Episcopal Academy’s new campus outside of Philadelphia. The school, founded in 1795, with an enrollment of one thousand students had outgrown its previous facilities, where the school had been since 1921. Venturi, a graduate of the school, designed a chapel to harmonize with the designs of three other architecture firms hired to design the remaining other buildings on the new 120-acre campus some fifteen miles from the heart of Philadelphia. The chapel project is expected to cost $8.5 million and is planned to open for the beginning of the 2008 academic year.

Many of England’s cathedrals are imposing cover charges on visitors, often up to £5.50 ($11). Despite aid from the official Church of England, England’s sixty-one cathedrals are continually in need of money and major repairs. Other cathedrals have been inventive in ways to make money, such as charging for parking or renting space for conferences. The trend may reflect the general distancing from religion that has become characteristic of British culture.

Bishop Jerome Listecki has issued a decree concerning the ordering of churches for the Diocese of La Crosse, WI. The Norms for the Construction and Ordering of Church Buildings in the Diocese of La Crosse covers the building of new churches as well as the renovation of existing churches and is intended to show that “a well-ordered and carefully-built church is an offering of love to God.” Of particular note in the norms is the call for tabernacles to be placed on the central axis of the church, and the church nave itself “must not resemble the audience’s space in a theater.” The document commentary states that “even those who are unable to contribute monetarily to the building of the church, including the poor, have a right to expect their church to be beautiful, a sign of God in our midst.”

On May 14, 2007, the Diocese of Harrisburg marked the centennial of the dedication of St. Patrick Cathedral, newly restored for its one hundredth anniversary. The interior renovations included the return of the tabernacle to the apse in a new reredos niche, a new cathedra, and other furnishings, a new mural of the four evangelists in the sanctuary, comprehensive restoration of decorative painting, and restoration of the marble floor. The interior and exterior work was managed by Conewago Enterprises of Hanover, PA, and Evergreene Painting Studios of New York City restored the interior.

The sisters of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration have begun construction of a new convent in the desert near Tonopah, AZ. Enclosed and separated from the outside world, the nuns will live in a cloister, complete with chapel for their daily devotions and masses. A public chapel is planned for 150 worshippers to pray though separated from the sisters. The chapels, designed by SSPW Architects and Steven Schloeder of Phoenix, AZ, have been designed in the manner of medieval churches built in the times of St. Francis and St. Clare and are expected to cost $12 million.

Our Lady of Solitude Monastery, Tonopah, Arizona.

The Diocese of Cleveland will join numerous other dioceses across the U.S. closing parishes. Bishop Richard Lennon announced this past year that at least twenty-three parishes, or 10 percent, will be closed, consolidated or reorganized in response to financial difficulties in the diocese.
A 1960s church in New Orleans has been demolished after suffering damage from Hurricane Katrina. St. Francis Cabrini Church, completed in 1964, met the wrecking ball in June 2007 to make way for a new Holy Cross High School, whose historical campus was also severely damaged in the hurricane. A public forum with a panel of architects and preservationists was held prior to the demolition, where concern was expressed that twentieth-century buildings are being sacrificed, while the public is quick to protect older buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This past summer Pope Benedict XVI visited the largest cathedral in the Western hemisphere when he visited the Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil. The basilica, one hundred miles east of São Paulo, was built starting in 1955 to replace an older chapel and was blessed by Pope John Paul II in 1980. The site, which has had a chapel since 1745, attracts millions of Brazilian and foreign pilgrims to venerate the statue of Our Lady housed in the basilica. Pope Benedict visited the basilica during his visit to the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Australian Muslim Imam Sheik Isse Musse has decided, according to the National Catholic Register, to name his mosque after the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Muslim leader who decided on the name “Virgin Mary Mosque” said, “what’s stopping us giving her name to our mosque? We both revere the Virgin Mary. Let us show there is nothing wrong in naming a mosque after a person like Mary.”

Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Mass ad orientem at the Sistine Chapel’s historic altar, facing ad orientem beneath Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, instead of at the removable altar used by Pope John Paul II. This was the first time Mass had been celebrated ad orientem in the chapel since the Second Vatican Council. The pope baptized thirteen babies during the Mass.

The National Shrine of St. Francis in San Francisco recently began a year-long restoration. The $10 million restoration will also feature a replica of the Porziuncola chapel at Santa Maria degli Angeli, near Assisi, the little chapel where St. Francis founded the Franciscan Order. The Porziuncola will be housed in a restored building adjacent to the Shrine church itself. The church will be seismically refitted, and a portion of the street facing the church will be closed, creating a pedestrian piazza.
Chicago’s Holy Name Cathedral has been closed since February 26, 2008, after a ten-pound piece of decorative wood fell from the ceiling the night of February 12. Initially the cathedral was kept open with a protective canopy stretched the length of the church, but was closed when forensic engineers discovered the ceiling had weakened structurally over time. Since then all masses have been celebrated in the Cathedral Auditorium, and all weddings originally scheduled through the summer at the cathedral have been relocated. Holy Name’s pastor Fr. Dan Mayall hopes that the cathedral will reopen late in the summer, but the decision to reopen will be considered on a month-to-month basis.

The University of Dayton is planning to renovate its Chapel of the Immaculate Conception as part of a new campus master plan. Changes for the 1869 chapel could include expansion of the capacity from 350 seats to 500, the addition of a new baptistery, and increased accessibility for the disabled. An anonymous “major league” donor has supported the project, and although no total cost has been released, the university is prepared to fundraise for a “multimillion dollar” project. The university has hired Rafferty Rafferty Tollefson Lindeke Architects of St. Paul, MN, and liturgical consultant Ken Griesemer of Albuquerque. Griesemer said of the project, “Jesus was radically inclusive, so I think our parishes should be radically inclusive.”

For the first time since the seventh century, Catholics will have a home in the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar. The Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Rosary in Doha, Qatar is the first Catholic church in the nation.

Dominican friars laid the cornerstone for a new academic center last September in Washington, DC. The ceremony was presided over by Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the Vatican ambassador to the U.S. and Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, DC. The center, to be completed in the fall of 2008, will be a new home for the Dominicans’ library, administration offices, and classrooms for the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception. The building features state-of-the-art classrooms and a lecture hall and a climate-controlled rare book room in the new library. The exterior of the building is designed to harmonize with the existing Dominican priory.

The historic Sacred Heart Chapel at Barat College may be demolished as part of a redevelopment of the shuttered Illinois college. In April 2008 the city of Lake Forest approved the final development plan for Barat Woods, a development project for twenty-three acres of condominiums, overturning two previous decisions by its own preservation commission that denied the demolition. Lawsuits filed by the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois and the National Trust have been filed against the city of Lake Forest to seek administrative review of the decision, but the trial has been delayed until January 2009. The Barat Education Foundation is finding new homes for the statues and other religious artifacts from the chapel, and plans are being made for the removal of the stained-glass windows. The demolition may be called off as a result of the failure of the entire condominium project.

The first Roman Catholic seminary in the Balkan nation of Serbia began construction in August of 2007. Theodore Cardinal McCarrick presided over laying of the foundation stone in Subotica, Serbia. The seminary is the first in Serbia proper, filling a need for a local seminary as all of the six seminaries in the former Yugoslavia lie in other now independent states. Catholics are still a small minority in the state, where Orthodox account for 85 percent of the population, but the seminary is important to maintain a unified teaching and pastoral program for the diocese.
Everywhere I go, I hear people speaking of churches, the churches of today, the churches of their youth, or the great churches of Europe. They often express the desire to see “churches that look like churches.” They mourn the loss of statues, murals, stained glass, marble altars, etc., but most of all, they ask why the tabernacle was moved. They remember it in the most important place in the middle of the high altar in their parish churches and do not understand why the tabernacle with the Real Presence had to be moved. And frankly, looking over our collective experience since Vatican II, nor do I. Our churches now are perceived as barren, without color or symbolism, without the living presence of Christ in the tabernacle. There used to be a hushed silence in the church, as the people waited for the unfolding of the holy mysteries; now our churches are treated as assembly halls, where people chatter before and after Mass, rather than pray.

I tend to think that re- ssource-ment of the new theology, which had the laudable desire to re-discover the biblical and patristic roots of theology, is unintentionally responsible. Suddenly after the Council, the patristic model, rather than the medieval, became the norm. We started using the vernacular at Mass, received under both species and eventually in the hand. Deacons were restored as were consecrated virgins and the minor orders were abolished. Architecturally, the basilican arrangement seemed to be given preference for the building and decoration of churches: 

1. the chair at the head of the apse;
2. the altar facing the people;
3. the placement of the choir all seem to suggest the basilican plan.

The old General In- struction of the Roman Missal (1970) with its preference for a separate Eucharistic chapel seems in line with this emphasis.

Even though Eucharistic reservation was allowed in the sanctuary, the notion that the tabernacle had to be moved to the side became standard with the result that often the old altar with its reredos, dorsal, or baldacchino was torn down and the back wall was left bare except for the celebrant’s chair, which was not to look like a throne.

Old churches were left without a visual center, and yet all their lines converged on the nearly empty sanctuary, because fine old marble altars were often destroyed. Noble simplicity was interpreted to mean no decoration, no images, no statues. The latter were often moved to an alcove in the back of the church for “peasants” who needed them, but mainly so they did not “distract” those participating in the liturgy. Where is the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) who joins us when the heavenly liturgy comes to earth on our altars? The present GIRM (2003) treats the whole question of sacred images in a richer way than did the old, as does the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

One begins to see new trends, a possible reversal of the present situation. In my opinion, the new GIRM is an improvement over the former one (1970). In terms of the placement of the tabernacle, it no longer sees a separate chapel as the first option, but the second, giving pride of place to the sanctuary, but leaving all up to the local bishop. It is interesting to note that the Catechism treats the tabernacle, immediately after its treatment of the altar, whereas the new GIRM treats it after discussing the altar, the ambo, the chair, places for the faithful, the choir and the organ. I think the Catechism is more correct theologically because, as Msgr. Peter Elliott points out in his book on the present Roman Rite, Pius XII warned against dissociating the Real Presence from the altar. It is true that the present directives state that the Eucharist should not be reserved on an altar where Mass will be celebrated to make a clear distinction between the signs of the Mass being celebrated and that of the reserved Sacrament. Still, where an old altar is no longer used for Mass, the Sacrament may be reserved there in an old church.

It would seem that existing high altar of artistic merit would be a perfect solution for reservation. A new altar could be built further out and receive the attention during the Mass (perhaps by lighting), but after Mass the focus is on the tabernacle for quiet prayer and contemplation.

It should be clear by now to the reader, that I favor reservation of the Eucharist in the sanctuary. The GIRM says that the “most Blessed Sacrament should be reserved in a tabernacle in a part of the Church that is truly noble,
prominent, visible, beautifully decorated and suitable for prayer. Why couldn’t the chair in such a case balance the ambo of the other side? While the basilican plan of the apse seems to be suitable and suitable for prayer.

One could argue that the custom of most of the English-speaking world was to have the tabernacle “in medio” and altars to Our Lady and St. Joseph on either side. One today would not want to fashion non-functioning altars merely to be the bases for shrines to the saints, nor would we want to obscure the symbolism of the one altar in a new church. Still shrines without altars can be erected. Is our custom part of American inculturation? I am not arguing for a return to yesteryear, but I do think that the restoration of the tabernacle to a prominent place in the sanctuary (and I would argue for a central focus) would help to restore the atmosphere of reverence and silence that was once so characteristic of our churches. Proper catechesis would be necessary, but Catholic teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist would be “incarnationally realized” in the sanctuary setting. People would know in what direction to genuflect, and faith expressed in the bended knee would symbolize and undergird faith held in the mind and heart. The concern of some liturgists that reserving the Blessed Sacrament in the sanctuary where the altar for Mass is, sets up a “conflict of mysteries” is in my opinion overdrawn and is not a real problem for our people. True, the altar ought not to be “smack dab” in front of the tabernacle and a suitable distance should be observed. The tabernacle might be on a higher plane as it is in the monastic church of Solesmes or in a wall niche as is skillfully done in Duncan Stroik’s Church of All Saints in Walton, KY. A beautiful reredos or dorsal could be the backdrop for the tabernacle when Mass is not being celebrated and serve as the glorious background when it is.

A separate Eucharistic chapel is an option, but in my opinion this ought to be reserved for cathedrals and historic or pilgrimage churches where the number of visitors, pilgrims or tourists so overwhelm the edifice that a separate quiet place to pray is necessary. One immediately thinks of St. Peter’s in Rome. If this became the rule in ordinary parish churches, Sunday Mass Catholics might think that prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is an esoteric rite for devout souls and not for ordinary Catholics. This is Msgr. Elliott’s fear. If there is a separate chapel, the GIRM directs that it be “organically connected to the Church and readily visible to the Christian faithful.” There should be easy access from the altar.

The tabernacle itself must be solid, unbreakable, immovable, and not transparent. There should be one tabernacle and it may be on a pedestal, in a sacrament tower or a wall aumbry. Veils are not forbidden, and the lamp (candle or oil lamp) may hang in front of the tabernacle, be on a wall bracket, or on a stand. The former rubric was that there could be one, three, five or seven lamps. Clear or white glass is preferable for the Blessed Sacrament, but red has become traditional in the English-speaking world.

Our churches are not “simply gathering places, but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling place of God with men reconciled and united in Christ.” God dwells with His people in the Eucharist celebrated, and reserved and outside of the Mass, it is the tabernacle that is the “living heart of our churches,” according to Paul VI. As Msgr. Elliott writes: Devotion to Our Lord in the Eucharist is embedded in the religious psyche of our people. It is not an optional extra for devout souls. This devotion remains essential for the continuity of the living tradition, not only of our rite, but of the faith itself.

Let us then design churches that embody this principle and let us return the tabernaculum, the dwelling tent of God with his people, to a place of glory.
**The Virgin and the Heavenly Hosts**

**Is There a Conflict Between Liturgical and Devotional Art?**

A Conversation between Denis McNamara and Duncan Stroik

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**Duncan Stroik:** A reader of the *Zenit News Agency* liturgy column asked whether the image of Divine Mercy may be hung behind the altar, if it is against liturgical rules. Fr. Edward McNamara answered:

> While it is not forbidden to display an image of Christ, Mary or a saint behind the main altar, in modern churches this is usually reserved for the church’s patron. At the same time, the apse may be decorated with murals and mosaics figuring several personages. Therefore, I would say that the image of Divine Mercy would not normally be set up behind the main altar unless the church was dedicated to this devotion. How can one say you should not have an image of Christ behind the altar? What do you think?

**Denis McNamara:** It seems to me that there is some distinguishing going on between a devotional image and a liturgical image. The Divine Mercy image is a devotional image. The heavenly liturgy as described in the Book of Revelation is liturgical. Typically, having the patron saint behind the altar seems to be only one part of the liturgical imagery. Salt Lake City Cathedral of the Madeleine is a good example of the liturgical image … the whole heavenly ensemble is present … Mary Magdalene appears over the altar as the patron of the church, but understood to be part of the larger whole. So to have Christ seated on the throne surrounded by angels and saints is fine behind the altar. The imagery is of the heavenly liturgy, of which the earthly liturgy is a part. Therefore there is no conflict. A devotional image, however, should be in a devotional area and not be set up so as to “compete” with the liturgy and its appointments. A subtle distinction, but a very important one, I think.

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**Duncan Stroik:** I think what you say is a well-reasoned argument and I believe a good way to develop the iconography of a church. On the other hand, I am not sure that there is or should be a tension or division between the liturgical and devotional when it comes to the art of a church. It gets back to the either/or viewpoint and overemphasizes the church building as liturgical in my mind. Philosophically, I have difficulty with that. It is interesting to bring up the Madeleine at Salt Lake City because I would think having a prominent patron above the altar would always be problematic if one wants to emphasize only the heavenly liturgy. Doesn’t she get too much attention? In my view, no, but I like Chiesa Nuova and Sant’Ignazio in Rome, as well as the many Marian churches, such as Santa Maria in Campitelli in Rome where the small devotional image of the Virgin gets enshrined in a large Baroque altarpiece.

Are the images of saints and founders up high in St. Peter’s devotional or liturgical? The four doctors, the floating cathedra, and the Holy Spirit in St. Peter’s? The four evangelists under a dome? Does the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel seem to reflect the heavenly liturgy? I guess it does. What about the painting of the Nativity below the apse mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore? What about the painting of St. Andrew’s crucifixion and statue ascending in Sant’Andrea al Quirinale? Most high altarpieces from the Renaissance and the Baroque; or images of the Assumption above a high altar; the Gesù with its painting of the circumcision and statue of Christ in front of it (seems to have been removed and replaced with the painting these days); most side chapels, which we today think of as devotional but were also built for the liturgy, albeit normally private.

Rather I think that these themes can...
Denis McNamara: I don’t see an either/or distinction between devotional and liturgical art except to the degree that they are in different categories of art. I think a church should, indeed must, support both, but properly speaking, liturgy is primary and devotions are secondary. I don’t mean that devotions are unimportant, but in the proper ordering of things, the Eucharist comes before any novena or devotion to St. Lucy. The devotions flow from and return to the liturgy. The church building is not liturgical only, but it is liturgical first. I am completely sympathetic to your points, as you know. I’m the last person in the world who wants to banish devotional areas from churches.

To me it is one of the glories of the Western Church that we have such a variety of ways of integrating iconography into a church, unlike the East, which has tended more to having a regula or formula, albeit an elegant and clear one.

Do any of the great Renaissance or Baroque churches of Europe follow your schema? Don’t most of them do something else? Is it more of a Byzantine or early Christian view that gets expressed at other times and particularly in the twentieth-century liturgical movement? I guess one of my other concerns is that the labeling of devotional art has been used by the modernists to strip the churches of imagery.

At the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, Mary Magdalene is shown in a big image above the altar with her hands up interceding for us, looking up to the heavenly liturgy. So in a sense, she is bridging that gap between the earthly and the heavenly liturgy. She is emphasized because of the church’s dedication, but no one would be going to that image to pray in the way that people go to Our Lady of Guadalupe, for instance.

Sant’Andrea al Quirinale is another good example. Behind the altar is St. Andrew being crucified, but then he is also presented as sculpture sitting up on the entablature in the heavenly realm. So the heavenly, liturgical St. Andrew is up high and the memory of his life and crucifixion is down low.
Here’s a great both/and situation.

The Baroque period provides a situation where the individual saint does begin to stand out more from the heavenly whole, I think in response to Luther et al. But you always see the Trinity and angels in those sculptural groups unless they are purely devotional. Bernini’s *St. Teresa in Ecstasy* leans more toward the purely devotional, a place for meditating on one particular aspect of God’s work in the world. The big *Apotheosis of St. Ignatius* in the Gesù, with all of its Ignatius-centrism and relatively narrow focus, still has the Trinity sitting at the top and angels everywhere—but it is primarily about Ignatius and venerating him.

The Last Judgment at the Sistine Chapel is not really liturgical in my eyes—in a sense it is sacred history (or prophecy)—a meditation on our Last Things. It does not really show all of creation praising God. The Cathedra Petri in St. Peter’s I would describe as devotional as well, albeit with a strong didactic role. It is a giant reliquary to the chair of Peter, a place for meditating on the role of the Petrine office. The big saints in the crossing piers at St. Peter’s do both—they are the “pillars of the Church” (Gal 2:9) whose attention is fixed on God, but they can also serve as devotional. Compare them to the bronze statue of Peter that everyone rubs, which is clearly devotional.

In the Middle Ages, like the Merton College chapel reredos (or St. Thomas on Fifth Avenue), you see all the saints piled up in their orderly heavenly arrangement. This is liturgical as well.

The mosaics at Santa Prassede are deeply liturgical. So are the ones at St. Paul Outside the Walls (the one seated surrounded by an emerald rainbow) with the white robed elders surrounding Him. Anywhere you see the imagery from the Book of Revelation about the one seated on the throne, you can pretty much be sure there was a liturgical emphasis (the Wheeling, WV Cathedral is a perfect example). Then other walls in the churches might have devotional or sacred history images on them. Side chapels are the perfect place for devotional imagery—and, of course, there can be altars in them. They all work together, but I would think they are not interchangeable. The symphony can sound good, but the first violinist is not the conductor and the melody (liturgy) will be more important than the harmony (devotion), even though they work together.

Of course all of these things are different facets of the same God, and all give him glory. Having a devotion to a saint is a way of coming to God. So there should not be an either/or understanding in any of this. It is about clarifying the proper role and place for each wonderful thing.

The reason that I care about this is that there are two fundamental problems with imagery these days. One is that people who think of themselves as traditional sometimes think that the liturgical minimalism of the “Mary on one side, Joseph on the other” is enough. Why not give them the whole heavenly liturgy instead of two statues and a crucifix? And then on the “progressive” side, people think that all imagery is devotional and therefore deserves to be banished from the sanctuary. By recapturing the notion of imagery as liturgical, it allows a theologically based justification for rich murals and imagery that are part of the liturgy itself, and therefore not to be banished to the side chapels in favor of cream drywall and a few palm trees. I see this distinction as a way to protect the proper role of imagery as well as to give people something as rich as the whole heavenly assembly to imagine as they come to Mass or prayer.

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SHINE FORTH UPON US IN THINE OWN TRUE GLORY
LIGHTS OF FAITH: STAINED GLASS WINDOWS AS TOOLS FOR CATECHESIS
Carol Anne Jones

In those parts of the modern world that enjoy a high degree of literacy, catechesis has come to rely heavily on written communication to impart the truths of the Faith. Catechumens, and others seeking to deepen their knowledge of the Faith, take ownership of beliefs, morals, and prayers through the written word. However, “Faith... cometh by hearing.”1 The Word of God, because it is alive, is intended to be conveyed, nurtured, and guarded through living succession: “He that heareth you, heareth Me.”2 For the first thousand years of Christian catechesis (as well as thousands of years of Hebrew tradition), oral witness was the primary means of passing on the Faith. In medieval Europe, a new type of catechesis synthesized oral teaching with visual representations and became the standard for teaching, reinforcing, elucidating, and experiencing the Faith, a pedagogy that, to this day, is still intimately associated with the truths of the Catholic Faith: stained-glass windows. In fact, the widespread destruction of stained-glass windows during the Reformation was directly related to the specifically Catholic subject matter upon which these “lights of Faith” were based.3

While the beauty of these magnificent windows still engages modern sensibilities, it is hard to imagine how powerfully these artful compositions of brilliantly colored light captured the medieval imagination. The modern world is peppered with visual images of a number and variety unprecedented in history, but the visual palette of people living in the predominately agrarian, illiterate, harsh world of the eleventh century was extremely limited by our standards.4 Yet, beginning in the late Romanesque and early Gothic periods, the advent of stained-glass windows gave Christians a visual imagery that summarized the truths of the Faith while adding new context and grandeur to their understanding of these truths. In the twelfth century, structural innovations in cathedral architecture allowed for expansion of narrow, vertical Romanesque windows into Gothic walls of colored sunlight that visualized Biblical, theological, hagiographic, moral, and historical narratives of supreme teaching value and gave stunning glory to God—all this while serving as a primary source of catechetical knowledge, inspiration, delight, wonder, and the experience of even deeper spiritual mysteries.

“A speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight”5

Sir Philip Sidney’s defense of the power of poetry to shape men’s minds and hearts applies as well to the power of stained glass windows as a catechetical tool for bringing them to the truths of the Faith. But the windows were not self-evident. In an age of aural learning, these windows were designed to be explained, to be taught: the shorthand of their visual symbols evolved over several centuries into a lexicon of identifiers for those initiated into its complex theological “facts.” The very walls of the cathedral brought to life scenes from the Holy Bible and the Golden Legend, a thirteenth-century compendium of saints’ lives, along with epigrams of moral teaching, episodes from the history of Christendom and the life of the local community, its patrons, and guilds—all ensnared in glorious light—to be taught, cherished, remembered, and passed on.

Stained glass, as an art form for decorating windows, is said to have originated in the Orient, with the first European attempts being wrought in Venice in the tenth century.6 The craft of cloisonné in jewelry making, the plastic arts of classical sculptors displayed on sarcophagi bas-reliefs, and the techniques of illustration and decorative embellishment found in illuminated manuscripts are thought to have provided artistic antecedents for the development of the visual imagery in stained-glass windows. Not many examples of early stained glass from the late Romanesque period (when church windows were narrow, deep-set, and rounded at the top) have survived; the oldest extant examples are four of the “Five Prophets” windows in Augsburg Cathedral in Germany, ca. 1100.7 As techniques developed to displace the weight of the roof to exterior load-bearing supports called flying buttresses, more wall areas could be opened to apertures topped with characteristically Gothic pointed arches. Further refinements in window structure allowed for narrow stone mullions and traceries between individual windows (rather than thick stone walls), providing even more artistic and thematic freedom in combining window groupings with intricate shapes, as well as allowing more visibility from every perspective inside the building.8

Early stained glass designs involved the use of “pot metal” glass (in which glass color is effected by adding specific metal oxides to the molten glass...
mixture), which is then formed, cut, and integrated into a framework of lead came specifically shaped around cut pieces to hold the glass together and form the final picture; further pictorial elements were achieved by etching or rudimentary styles of glass painting. As the craft evolved, new techniques of coloring, such as flashing (laminating clear glass) and painting with glass pigments, both done before the glass was fired, allowed for greater design freedom and detail and eliminated excessive caming.

The technical advances in stone construction that opened up the walls to allow for more light allowed the resulting windows to give more complex treatment of theological realities. Complex groups of stained-glass illustrations in huge window areas included such themes as corresponding Biblical typologies from the Old and New Testaments; the Twelve Apostles (and Prophets)—with each Apostle holding a phrase from the Apostles’ Creed; the Jesse Tree of Christ’s ancestry; the life of Christ; the life of the Blessed Mother; the Four Evangelists; stories of saints’ lives; saints of patronage; the Seven Sacraments; the Seven Works of Mercy; the Nine Orders of Angels; and the Last Judgment (sometimes including the Dance of Death). Even the rose-window patterns had catechetical value, with designs using the circle (eternity) and patterns in multiples of twelve, nine, and seven considered theologically significant numbers.9 Because it appeared as a sunburst, the rose window was also symbolic of Christ.10

Not only were these standard thematic treatments, but like so many aspects of the design of the cathedral itself, windows with specific themes were placed in specific locations in the church according to symbolic theological or cosmological beliefs. From earliest Christian times, the priest (ad orientem) and laity faced the direction of the rising sun, awaiting the Second Coming of Christ; for this reason, Catholic churches were usually oriented to the East. Thus, Old Testament themes were placed on the north side, since the North was associated with darkness, cold, and evil; conversely, New Testament narratives were placed on the south side. The west side, associated with human history, typically featured the Last Judgment,11 serving to remind the faithful that they passed from time into eternity when they crossed the cathedral threshold.

Within the ordered worldview of medieval Christianity, these hierarchies of spiritual truth, set within the hierarchy of time and space that was the cathedral itself, put everything into an eternal perspective, in a teaching moment that was both organic and inclusive. Within the walls of the church, in the very place where heaven and earth met in divine liturgies and devotional exercises, truth itself was narrated in parables of light. One famous example is the group of windows at Canterbury Cathedral, known as the “Poor Man’s Bible,” of which only three of the original twelve have survived. Such windows were, for most people at that time, the primary visual referents to selected stories and lessons taken from Scripture; yet Louis Gillet has written of the Chartres windows: “Nul prince n’a possédé un livre d’énluminures comparable [Never has a prince owned a book of comparable illuminations].”12 Even the form of their presentation, with ascending pairs of emblems read from left to right, balanced each Old Testament prefiguration next to its New Testament fulfillment, e.g., Jonah emerging from the whale on the left and Christ arising from the tomb on the right. This method of Biblical exegesis can also be found in manuscript treatments, known as “Bibles moralisées,” that depicted type and antitype stories in pairs to highlight the moral lessons implicit in the analogy.13 Windows narrating a progression of events, such as the life of Christ, the Blessed Mother, or a saint, displayed a series of vignettes based on Scriptural sources, apocryphal texts that supplied anecdotal details (mostly about the life of...
of Mary), and the medieval compendium of the saints’ lives known as The Golden Legend. The stories are told by gestures and poses. Everything is abbreviated in a highly expressive form of narrative shorthand. Such windows, whose treatments of subject matter were often transplanted by master craftsmen who traveled, came to define not only factual details but deeper spiritual realities in a shared visual language: “This is symbolism in its deepest sense, communicating concepts by creating understandable metaphors.” Even seemingly decorative details had symbolic and, in this context, catechetical value: “Colours, numbers, letters, geometry, flowers and trees all played a part in the visual textbook of the Faith.” In the artistic economy of stone and wood and glass, every element of cathedral design was valued as an opportunity to display the Faith and reflect the glories of God. Each Sunday, when the priest gave his sermon, he had the power to underscore his verbal teachings with the rich tapestry of visual images that surrounded the congregation. By simply pointing at a window or series of windows, he could reinforce the narrative of the readings for the day, the thrust of his sermon’s moral, or the depth of his religious sentiment—making the windows teaching artifacts that would always remain present to his audience as an aid to memory and a stimulant to reflection.

“All this was done with solemnity of celebration and appetite of seeing.”

Beyond considerations of the development of this craft or the manipulation of its subject matter, yet another catechetical lesson can be gleaned from the experience of stained-glass windows. Although Gothic windows opened up walls of light within the cathedral, the effect was not as much to illuminate the interior as to create an atmosphere of physical and spiritual beauty: “...stained glass prevents much of the natural light from entering [providing instead] colored and changing light in the windows themselves and flickering light over the stone interior.”

Chartres, one of the few cathedrals that retains most of its pre-Reformation windows, has the inestimable advantage of ensemble, an unbroken, unifying condition establishing a pervasive harmony in the interior and controlling the subdued atmosphere of light and color. In the great vessel of the Cathedral, no extraneous light is allowed to destroy this harmony.

In this subdued lighting, an optical phenomenon called the Purkinje shift, or “twilight vision,” causes “heightened sensitivity to all colours, with maximum receptivity after about half an hour inside the Cathedral.”

Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, who was himself instrumental in the planning and development of early Gothic cathedral interiors, described his sense of being transported “from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.”

Beyond an obvious ability to inspire, this experience of light had still deeper ramifications.

St. Augustine built on St. John the Evangelist’s characterization of Christ as the “true Light” by making philosophical distinctions between physical and spiritual light. Neo-Platonic thought argued an ontological connection between physical light and the “essence” of light. In the sixth century, Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy connected light with spiritual wisdom and Heavenly knowledge.

Grant that we may so find light that we may set on Thee unblinded eyes; cast Thou therefrom the heavy clouds of this material world. Shine forth upon us in Thine own true glory. . . . To see Thee clearly is the limit of our aim.

Marsilino Ficino, the Italian Neo-Platonist, correlated the experience of God directly with light: “Beauty is a kind of force or light, shining from Him through everything . . . the single light of God illumines the Mind, Soul, Nature, and Matter. Anyone seeing the light in these four elements sees a beam of the sun, and through this beam is directed to the perception of the supreme light of the sun itself. In the same way, whoever sees and loves the beauty in these four, Mind, Soul, Nature, and Body, seeing the glow of God in these, through this kind of glow sees and loves God Himself.”

Given these philosophical underpinnings, it is easier to understand why light “was perceived as an attribute of divinity” and therefore “was believed to have mystical qualities.” The desire to “see” the truths of...
The rose window at Chartres Cathedral.

The modern church would do well to rediscover these proven catechetical techniques, filling church interiors with beautiful images of colored light, thereby satisfying human desires for visual stimulation, symbolic representations of theological truths, and the touch of the mystical in prayer. Modern eyes are exposed to so much sophisticated visual imagery; our catechetical efforts should include much more than written words by building upon the rich heritage of visual catechesis displayed by the traditions associated with stained glass windows. The Church teaches that eternal bliss in Heaven is the Beatific Vision—auxiliary experience expressed as a “visual” encounter with the knowledge of God, a “light” that fulfills and completes each person’s existence for all eternity. By providing visual and atmospheric beauty that captures the eternal truths in “lights of Faith,” the windows in our churches can teach as before and give an experience of the transcendent to the faithful, to “go beyond mere teaching—unless the sudden instinctive recognition of beauty is the greatest lesson of all.”

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1. Rom. 10: 17 (Douay-Rheims Version).
4. The reader is encouraged to consider that illiteracy in those times should not be viewed pejoratively, since it did not necessarily correspond to any deficiency in intelligence or ability to learn or retain concepts. Most people in the working (and often ruling) classes were aural learners, accustomed to being educated through verbal instruction, hearing the hours of their day marked by bells, standing in Church to listen to long sermons and liturgies, and being apprised of news and advertisements by official criers in the marketplace or town square.
17. Lee, Stained Glass, 32.
18. Ibid.
19. On a tour of Canterbury Cathedral in June, 2004, the veteran guide pointed to the oldest surviving stained-glass windows, demonstrating how the priest would use them as teaching tools during his Sunday sermons.
23. Ibid., 21.
25. Benton and DiYanni, Arts and Culture, 381.
27. Sears Reynolds Jayne, trans., Marsilio Ficino’s Commentary on Plato’s Symposium: The Text and a Translation, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1944), 140.
28. Benton and DiYanni, Arts and Culture, 381.
Sacred Art Institute...Now!

A Mandate of Vatican II

Hugh J. McNichol

Episcopi vel per se ipsos vel per sacerdotes idoneos qui peritia et artis amore praediti sunt, artificium curam habeant, ut eos spiritu Artis sacrae et sacrae Liturgiae imbuant.

Insuper commendatur ut scholae vel Academiae de Arte Sacra ad artifices formandos instituantur in illis regionibus in quibus id visum fuerit.

Bishops should have a special concern for artists, so as to imbue them with the spirit of sacred art and of the sacred liturgy. This they may do in person or through suitable priests who are gifted with a knowledge and love of art.

It is also desirable that schools or academies of sacred art should be founded in those parts of the world where they would be useful, so that artists may be trained.

--Sacrosanctum Concilium, 127

One of the most important teachings of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council was the provision for the establishment of schools or academies of sacred art in order to train artists. To the best of my knowledge, this responsibility entrusted to local Episcopal conferences has not been implemented. Not only does the council specifically mention artists; it specifically entrusts the responsibility of ensuring the quality of their work to the concern of the Bishop and appropriately trained priests to help in this endeavor.

My questions are simply these:

Where is the Institute for the Sacred Arts in the United States?

Why have the bishops not established this particular institute for the United States?

Why do the American Bishops frequently use artisans not from the United States when commissioning liturgical art?

It confounds me that our own Catholic clergy persist in absolute decision-making authority when it comes to the execution and implementation of new liturgical spaces or the commissioning of sacred art. Most clergy with which I am familiar do not know the difference between Baroque and Bauhaus but they insist on making the decisions about church design and architecture.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council did not intend for this to happen. When proclaiming an appreciation of art and artists the Council Fathers envisioned a partnership between the communities of Church and artisans. Such a relationship is to incorporate mutual understanding of the Church’s needs for artistic integrity and the implementation by the artisans of qualitative expressions of religious belief. Such an understanding does not imply that the most expensive representations of religious expression constitute the highest quality of the artistic endeavor; rather it suggests that the highest quality compositions by artists should be included in the Church’s expression of her beliefs.

It seems that in neglecting the need
to establish an American Academy for Sacred Art, the symbiotic relationship between Church and Artisan is deemed as unimportant or unnecessary.

As the Catholic Church in the United States develops a richer understanding of its mission and sacramental activities, it is time to implement the decrees of the Second Vatican Council and establish an institute for the study and preservation of sacred and liturgical art.

Most often, the major metropolitan areas of the country contain many of the individuals that possess artistic expertise and creativity. It makes logical sense then that most artists that specialize in liturgical and sacred arts would cluster around the larger Catholic populations in our larger dioceses and archdioceses. Sacrosanctum Concilium makes a very specific point that the Bishop should entrust the proper understanding of proper artistic and liturgical integrity to priests especially trained and associated with the visual arts. One step further would also to provide for the establishment of a liturgical arts organization within each bishop’s local jurisdiction. This group would serve as a conduit for local artists and parish communities that are seeking to utilize each artist’s and artisans’ unique skills and talents. At the same time, perhaps this same “liturgical arts” group could provide an educational element for priests and parishioners alike. Lectures, seminars, and workshops as well as exhibitions of liturgical and sacred art might take place so all of the faithful would appreciate and understand the true importance and necessity of such contributors.

One of the only examples of such an exhibition of liturgical and sacred arts took place in Philadelphia in 1976 during the 41st International Eucharistic Congress, held in August of that year. The location was the old Philadelphia Civic Center where exhibition space was provided to highlight local examples of sacred and liturgical art. It was also an opportunity for me as a high school student to begin to understand the truly symbiotic relationship that exists between the Church and the Artist, Sacred Art, and Liturgical Expression, as well as the relationship between architecture and sacred space. During my tour of the exposition, I was introduced to many artists and craftsmen that continue to produce exceptional pieces of art that are most worthy additions to sacred spaces. Some of these artists, such as Robert McGovern, Bill Daley, Wayne Bates and Anthony Visco have been great sources of friendship as well as artistic mentors over the past 35 years or so. During my tenure as a seminary student, I was very fortunate to have experienced a high school student to begin to understand, the truly symbiotic relationship that exists between the Church and the Artist, Sacred Art, and Liturgical Expression, as well as the relationship between architecture and sacred space. During my tour of the exposition, I was introduced to many artists and craftsmen that continue to produce exceptional pieces of art that are most worthy additions to sacred spaces. Some of these artists, such as Robert McGovern, Bill Daley, Wayne Bates and Anthony Visco have been great sources of friendship as well as artistic mentors over the past 35 years or so. During my tenure as a seminary student, I was very fortunate to have experienced a 

Of course, one of the most enduring mandates of the implementation of Sacrosanctum Concilium was the entrusting of an educational understanding of the sacred and liturgical arts to the Bishop, who in turn delegated this task to Msgr. John Miller in Philadelphia. Throughout the years, Msgr. John Miller has taught many a future priest the qualitative differences between vellum and plain old paper, the nuances of quality between hand woven wool and mass produced polyester, as well as the material exquisite nature of the handcrafted vessels when compared to off the shelf items. Quite frequently his voice was similar to St. John the Baptist calling out in an artistic wilderness where the message of liturgical quality of materials was not always understood or appreciated. I am glad to say that after thirty years he is still teaching me and other former students about the necessity of highest quality materials in our oblations to the Almighty.

Clearly, the intentions of the Second Vatican Council regarding art and artistic expression within the Church is intended to launch a Renaissance of artistry in our contemporary Church. Unfortunately, in most cases this rebirth and new appreciation of artisans and their crafts is only realized on a limited basis. That is exactly why the United
States Bishops need to establish an institute that promotes and fosters an appreciation of all of these artistic disciplines. Not only would such a school of sacred art provide much needed education for clergy and faithful alike, it would provide a creative incubator for ecclesial art. Artisans, clergy, faithful people would all have vast resources available to further appreciate and explore the relationship between the Church and Artistic expression. Such a relationship would provide opportunity for cooperation with all parties to explore artistic expression and its age-old relationship to the worship of God.

We are 40 plus years since the end of the Council and sacred art still does not have a domestic United States academy for its study and development. Since the close of Vatican II hundreds if not thousands of Catholic churches have been renovated, renewed, restored or even ruined by a disregard for their architectural and artistic integrity.

As a result, we have neglected as a Church to appreciate our own gifted Catholics that worship God through their artistic expressions. At the same time, the responsibility for the creation of liturgical and sacred art has been consigned to companies that mass-produce religious articles for hundreds of Catholic churches throughout the world.

In addition to the initiation of a school for sacred arts, every parish community is best served by trying to incorporate local artists into all of their projects. It seems that the notion of community also involves appreciating the fields in which all of our parishioners labor.

Education of priests and faithful should not be a subject that is overlooked. Sacrosanctum Concilium also recommends that clergy and future clergy be educated in an appreciation of all of the arts. This is not something that the Fathers of the Council considered optional, it was part of the declarations of Sacrosanctum Concilium. It would also help a considerable bit if parish communities were involved in a catechesis regarding the importance of quality in our liturgical and sacred arts. Quite frequently, our post-Industrial society prides itself on the expediency of just about everything. It would be an enriching insight for parishioners to understand the difference between mass produced religious materials, and the essential quality and dignity of handcrafted articles destined for sacred expression. Rarely in our modern United States do we place a high regard on artistic craftsmanship that includes material quality. This disregard for humanly created things quite honestly is reflective of the dangers of secular humanism that present themselves to Catholicism. An individual’s essential value and worth at times are neglected for more collective goals, and the dignity of a human person’s life and work is sometimes disregarded.

In a time when more is best, biggest is better, most expensive is best and mechanical engineering is superlative, perhaps we should pause and rethink our Catholic appreciation of human labor. Sacred Art in our liturgical activities is reflective of man’s deepest desire to pursue an understanding of God. Sacrosanctum Concilium implied there is an interconnected relationship between art and religion, the Church and the artisan, and the artisan with the Church community. It is an appropriate time in the 21st century to revisit the Church’s appreciation of artistic expression with a manner of material integrity. We have had enough of mass produced religious art, inferior representations of quality materials and the exclusion of Catholic artistic talents. It has been 44 years since the Holy Spirit through the Second Vatican Council inspired Sacrosanctum Concilium. It is time we implemented and paid attention to its significant message.

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The Christian Scandal in Dialogue: A Return to Sacred Images

Paul G. Monson

For centuries, three signs have encompassed the convergence of cultures around the Mediterranean. The cross, the star, and the crescent identify the intermingling of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic civilizations. In our day, a fourth dominant sign has emerged, at least in the West. It is the sign of secular nothingness. This “sign” stands for the abolition of the other three, assuming a sort of immunity from them as it asserts itself as intellectually and culturally superior. It maintains that it is, not only the culture, but the one and only rational culture, a culture of the cult of humankind. In our postmodern age it has come to permeate human life, so that one often must straddle a cultural fence in schizophrenia, assenting to faith while functioning in a secularized society severed or at least hostile to religious influence.

On September 12, 2006, in Regensburg, an Italianized German called secularism’s bluff. In his address, Pope Benedict XVI pinpoints secularism’s false objectivity as it holds reason hostage and presupposes its incompatibility with faith. Moreover, Benedict calls the bluff of those within the Church who seek something similar in delegating religion to morals rather than doctrines. This he names a process of “de-Hellenization,” or the eradication of reason from faith. His point is that if there is to be any cultural dialogue, not only among the sons of Abraham, but also across the divide to the secular world, Christianity, for its part, must remain steadfast to its Greek integration of faith and reason, manifested in its conviction that God’s own reason and word, his logos, became incarnate as the Son of God.

Benedict’s speech was met with a cacophony of reactions, especially with respect to his use of a Byzantine emperor to articulate his point. Rarely, however, was the question asked, Why a Byzantine? Surely another supposed bigot from another unenlightened era could serve a similar purpose. However, I believe there is something deeper lying underneath this figure. Indeed, the use of a Byzantine in an essay on de-Hellenization is, well, quite appropriate. Merely setting foot in the Hagia Sophia, one awes at the Byzantine achievement of integrating faith and reason in communicating the human with the divine. Merely setting foot in the Hagia Sophia, one awes at the Byzantine achievement of communicating the human with the divine.

Byzantium’s “sign” is, not only religious signs, embodying not just a religious sign, but an image of the invisible God who became incarnate, the splendor of the Father in Christ, the true Imago Dei. In this article, I wish to identify iconoclasm as a particular aspect of the process of de-Hellenization within the Church and to propose a remedy to it through a Byzantine approach. It is to make a case for the restoration of sacred images, i.e., icons, statues, mosaics, carvings, stained glass, and paintings. My emphasis is a return to the creedal and to St. John of Damascus to free us from this quagmire, and then relate this to Benedict’s call for authentic dialogue.

The Confusion

About forty years ago, Loraine Casey walked into her small parish church in rural North Dakota to discover the high altar missing. It was simply gone. No warning, no reason, no discussion. For a woman who had prayed her whole life in front of the altar’s crucifix, with its humble adornment of small statuettes, the absence of the church’s centerpiece, replaced by a bare sturdy table, was agonizing. The side altars were also missing, along with Mary and Joseph. The scapegoat for such an
abomination became the faceless edicts of a distant “Vatican II,” which came to figure as a sort of culprit in her mind.

From the Eternal City to this prairie outpost, the state of the liturgical reforms in the past half century can only be described as utter confusion. The questions swirling around the removal of sacred images in the Catholic world, especially in the West, progressed from a dumbstruck “What happened?” to a more earnest “Why?” The answer concocted to both questions I call the “doctrine of distraction,” a pseudo-teaching that has become almost sacred itself. Its adherents maintain that sacred images are dangerous distractions from the Mass. They obscure the deeper spiritual meaning behind the Eucharist. Both little Johnny in the pew, as well as his father, get lost in the figures of saints and angels soaring above them, failing to concentrate on the ambo and the altar. A misinterpretation of the “noble simplicity” of Sacrosanctum Concilium became the license for a fresh coat of whitewash.

Today little has changed. In 2007 we are not only confused but strangely bipolar. In the city of St. Paul, MN, for instance, the cathedral’s interior directs one’s gaze to a magnificent baldacchino below mosaics of the sacraments. At the opposite end of the same boulevard, the new altar of the renovated seminary chapel purposely directs attention away from the apse frescos toward a new organ, where once the portal stood. More often than not, church renovations trump restorations and continue to cleanse sanctuaries of statuary, paintings, altarpieces, and stained glass. Alcoves stand bare. Crucifixes, pietàs, monstrances, and stations of the cross are remnants left for auctions and eccentric art collectors. Even in the erection of new cathedrals, bare, chic designs neglect thought of color and image. Almost everyone knows of at least one old Gothic church razed for the construction of a cube (to use a Weigelian image). An inescapable discontinuity emerges between, say, St. Patrick’s in New York and Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Our architecture may be advanced, but do we advance our faith? We speak no longer of domus Dei but of a “gathering space.” The fear of the distraction from the Lord’s Supper has ironically shifted our focus away from the heavenly banquet in the New Jerusalem to the guy sitting across from us. Do we worship in a house of God or a house of man for God?

Perhaps one could go further to ask, is our age one of neo-iconoclasm? Some would contend that this is too severe. Regardless, contemporary Catholicism is at least iconophobic. It hesitates in fear of offending the doctrine of distraction. Although we have not gone to the extent of the imperial iconoclasts of the sixth century, smashing icons and torturing monks, the rejection of sacred images in past decades reeks of a similar elitism. Decisions to whitewash or minimize images, such as experienced by Mrs. Casey, are usually the incentive of a zealous pastor, an esteemed liturgist, or a forgotten commit-tee, rarely the consensus of the parishioners. It is a top-down approach, the assurance that “we know better than you.” Oddly enough, Emperors Leo III and Constantine V took similar stances. The desecration of the apse mosaic of the Theotokos in the Hagia Sophia was, after all, an imperial decision. In the West, Charlemagne and the Libri Carolini adopted a similar, albeit less severe, position. Yet the notion of sacred images as the liber pau-perum, the book of the poor, holds a significant degree of truth. Icons have always enjoyed the devotion of the masses over the learned. The iconodules were irate monks, not court bureaucrats. So it is today that the cult of icons has caught our attention once again, as John Paul II notes in his apostolic letter Duo-decim saeculum (1987). Oddly enough, however, we do not know why they are good, why they should be loved, if they are to be venerated and not hidden in a closet.

We need a reason for our faith tradition and its iconography. For this, let us turn to a Byzantine, St. John of Damascus, for a theology that, as Benedict asserts it should, inquires into the “rationality of faith” and provides an antidote to our iconophobia. Here I do not attempt to reinvent the wheel but rather point to the fact that the tire is flat, and St. John offers the method to patch the hole.

**A Ressourcement to the Byzantine**

In On the Divine Images, St. John of Damascus counters the rampant iconoclasm of his day. As a monk in Palestine, John encountered the abolition of icons in both the empire and Islam. The iconoclastic controversy centered on a similar concern for distraction, only its focus was on the nature of worship. Let us recall the arguments of the iconoclasts. First, the prohibition of “graven images” in Ex 20:4 is to be heeded. Likewise, Paul’s command to worship God in “spirit” (Phil 3:3) points to God’s invisibility and incomprehensibility, whereby the spiritual is superior to matter. A true image, moreover, must have the same essence of Christ if...
SACRED ARCHITECTURE

it is to be venerated, which the icon certainly does not possess. Finally, icons tend toward the heresies of Nestorius and Eutyches, confusing and dividing Christ’s divinity and humanity in depicting one nature to the detriment of the other.

In contrast, John constructs his apologia for icons upon Dionysius the Areopagite’s notion of creation as a theophany as well as St. Basil’s distinction that “the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the hypostasis [or person] represented.” John develops these theologies to lay the framework for the Second Council of Nicea in 787, articulating both a distinction of types of worship as well as insisting that the Christian must venerate icons in light of the Incarnation.

In regard to the iconoclasts’ first point, John asserts that God’s command was against idols and not strictly images, such as the seraphim of the ark. Likewise, with the coming of Christ, “we have received from God the ability to discern what may be represented and what is uncircumscript.” John’s argument echoes that of Benedict, that through Christ, God’s logos, Christianity is a religion of faith and reason, and reason helps direct our faith. In response to the iconoclasts’ second objection, John is not trepid but rather boisterous in his joy in the Incarnation:

[N]ow when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honor it, but not as God.

This leads us to John’s third counterargument, that there are “different degrees” of worship. One “bows down before” the icon—a proskynesis—that venerated the sacred image with the honor reserved for kings in Scripture, while absolute worship of latreia (adoratio) is reserved for God alone. Likewise, veneration of an image passes through to its “prototype,” that is Christ, the image of the Father. The icon is not a stationary block of painted wood; it is a window into heaven. The window, however, does not depict a human nature, but the person of Christ, the union of both His divine and human natures. The icon thus portrays not the nature but the hypostasis, the personhood of Christ as articulated at Chalcedon. All the more, in communicating the person of Christ, the icon is not only licit, but required. The Christian is compelled to worship the union through veneration of its image, for, as John quickly adds, “The man who refuses to give this image due ... honor, is an upholder of the devil and his demon hosts.” Instead, the icon “brings us understanding” of the union and our salvation. It is indeed “necessary” for understanding the invisible, that we “are able to construct understandable analogies.”

It is this understanding that leads to the reason behind our faith, which is to set us free in our worship of what we cannot see. Thus John exhorts us to “Fear not; have no anxiety; discern between the different kinds of worship.” These words resonated at Nicea after his death.

Another man known to exhort the faithful to “fear not” is the late John Paul II, who revisited the iconodule triumph in Duodecim saeculum, marking the anniversary of Nicea in 1987. He insists that for Catholics, “Church art must aim at speaking the language of the Incarnation and, with the elements of matter, express the One who ‘deigned to dwell in matter and bring about our salvation through matter’ according to Saint John Damascene’s beautiful expression.” The Polish pontiff further advances the theology of icons as a needed testament to human dignity in a secular age:

The rediscovery of the Christian icon will also help in raising the awareness of the urgency of reacting against the depersonalizing and at times degrading effects of the many images that condition our lives in advertisements and the media, for it is an image that turns towards us the look of Another invisible one and gives us access to the reality of the eschatological world.

This eschatological world is none other than the Communion of Saints partaking in the same adoration of Christ. Paragraph 135 of the U.S. bishops’ Built of Living Stones states: “Since the Eucharist unites the Body of Christ, including those who are not physically present, the use of images...”
in the church reminds us that we are joined to all who have gone before us, as well as to those who now surround us. *Sacred images provide the context for the Eucharistic feast, calling to mind the presence of something eternal. The Church is not only this Christ. Our mission as Christians is to communicate this reason of God, and, in light of the Byzantine theology of St. John of Damascus, we can justly see that the sacred image, literally, the *eikon*, serves this very purpose. We communicate the doctrine of the Incarnation and the redemption of creation through sacred images. Thus Benedict reminds us that “between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy.” This, moreover, extends to Christian worship, which he describes as “logic *latreia*—worship in harmony with the eternal Word and with our reason.” To be in harmony with the Word is to recall His Incarnation. Thus, this harmony is found in our faith in sacred images, communicating the reality of God’s *logos* incarnate, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Here we are brought to what Benedict calls an “encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion,” and based on the Incarnation, Christianity’s faith is enlightened through images.

Thus we come to a fork in the road, a choice between submission and scandal. If the Church follows secularism’s push toward a de-Hellenization, to an exclusion of reason from the divine, toward an unintelligibility of her faith, she cannot meet other faiths in “genuine dialogue.”* As Benedict notes, secularism is not competent of such dialogue, for “[a] reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures.”* Without images, we too are deaf to the divine and succumb to an empty, moralistic religion. We become a body without Christ. Unless we are authentic to our religion we cannot be authentic with other religions. We become hollow, like the cult of secularism, confused about who we are. Our sign, the cross, is to be more than a quaint plus sign; it is to be an intersection of faith and reason with the human and the divine. It is to be the scandal, in the words of St. Athanasius, that “God became man so that man might become God.”* 

Bavaria and Beyond

Benedict concludes his Regensburg address with an invitation to a dialogue of cultures based on an integration of faith and reason. What do sacred images have to do with cultural dialogue? If we pay attention to Benedict’s use of a Byzantine and his warning against de-Hellenization, both inside and outside the Church, then the tradition of images becomes essential to the face of Christianity in any dialogue, especially with other religions.

We must ask the question, What have we inherited from Byzantium? Benedict’s answer is the marriage between faith and reason. In the West, he fears, this synthesis is being culturally submerged in a flood of secularism. Today, the joy of the incarnation, an intrinsic aspect of our religious identity, has given way to an apologetic secularism within the Church in the form of iconophobia, a fear of displaying sacred images so as not to risk offending other religions. This is not a mere matter of ascetic tastes. Rather, confusion abounds in distancing ourselves from images, one that, at least according to Byzantines such as John, risks our understanding of faith, and thus the rationality of our faith. It furthermore threatens our very soteriology, a much greater risk. We lose sight of the creed, our fundamental belief in the resurrection of the body. We forget the goodness and reasonableness of creation. We forget that Christ came to redeem us in our entirety and that in his resurrection he makes creation anew. Art can convey this; bare concrete cannot.

At this point we come to the heart of the connection between an authentic Christianity and fruitful dialogue. What were those supposedly preposterous words of the Byzantine emperor again? “[N]ot acting reasonably [literally, without *logos*] is contrary to God’s nature.” As Benedict explains, the emperor speaks of God’s *logos*, which means “both reason and word—a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication.”* For the Christian, this is Christ. Our mission as Christians is to communicate this reason of God, and, in light of the Byzantine theology of St. John of Damascus, we can justly see that the sacred image, literally, the *eikon*, serves this very purpose. We communicate the doctrine of the Incarnation and the redemption of creation through sacred images. Thus Benedict reminds us that “between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy.” This, moreover, extends to Christian worship, which he describes as “logic *latreia*—worship in harmony with the eternal Word and with our reason.”* To be in harmony with the Word is to recall His Incarnation. Thus, this harmony is found in our faith in sacred images, communicating the reality of God’s *logos* incarnate, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Here we are brought to what Benedict calls an “encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion,” and based on the Incarnation, Christianity’s faith is enlightened through images.

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1. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, [Sacrosanctum Concilium], 34.
3. Benedict XVI, “Papal Address at University of Regensburg.”
6. Ibid., 20.
7. Ibid., 21.
10. Ibid., 20.
11. Ibid., 18-19.
13. Ibid.
15. Benedict XVI, “Papal Address at University of Regensburg,”
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Athanasius, De Incarnazione, 54:3: PG 25, 192B.

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*Articles*
DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

With great affection in the Lord, I greet all of you, who represent the Bishops, priests and deacons, the men and women in consecrated life, and the seminarians of the United States. I thank Cardinal Egan for his warm welcome and the good wishes which he has expressed in your name as I begin the fourth year of my papal ministry. I am happy to celebrate this Mass with you, who have been chosen by the Lord, who have answered his call, and who devote your lives to the pursuit of holiness, the spread of the Gospel and the building up of the Church in faith, hope and love.

Gathered as we are in this historic cathedral, how can we not think of the countless men and women who have gone before us, who labored for the growth of the Church in the United States, and left us a lasting legacy of faith and good works? In today’s first reading we saw how, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles went forth from the Upper Room to proclaim God’s mighty works to people of every nation and tongue. In this country, the Church’s mission has always involved drawing people “from every nation under heaven” (cf. Acts 2:5) into spiritual unity, and enriching the Body of Christ by the variety of their gifts. As we give thanks for past blessings, and look to the challenges of the future, let us implore from God the grace of a new Pentecost for the Church in America. May tongues of fire, combining burning love of God and neighbor with zeal for the spread of Christ’s Kingdom, descend on all present!

In this morning’s second reading, Saint Paul reminds us that spiritual unity—the unity which reconciles and enriches diversity—has its origin and supreme model in the life of the triune God. As a communion of pure love and infinite freedom, the Blessed Trinity constantly brings forth new life in the work of creation and redemption. The Church, as “a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit” (cf. Lumen Gentium, 4), is called to proclaim the gift of life, to serve life, and to promote a culture of life. Here in this cathedral, our thoughts turn naturally to the heroic witness to the Gospel of life borne by the late Cardinals Cooke and O’Connor. The proclamation of life, life in abundance, must be the heart of the new evangelization. For true life—our salvation—can only be found in the reconciliation, freedom and love which are God’s gracious gift.

This is the message of hope we are called to proclaim and embody in a world where self-centeredness, greed, violence, and cynicism so often seem to choke the fragile growth of grace in people’s hearts. Saint Irenaeus, with great insight, understood that the command which Moses enjoined upon the people of Israel: “Choose life!” (Dt 30:19) was the ultimate reason for our obedience to all God’s commandments (cf. Adv. Haer. IV, 16, 2-5). Perhaps we have lost sight of this: in a society where the Church seems legalistic and “institutional” to many people, our most urgent challenge is to communicate the joy born of faith and the experience of God’s love.

I am particularly happy that we have gathered in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. Perhaps more than any other church in the United States, this place is known and loved as “a house of prayer for all peoples” (cf. Is 56:7; Mk 11:17). Each day thousands of men, women and children enter its doors and find peace within its walls. Archbishop John Hughes, who—as Cardinal Egan has reminded us—was responsible for building this venerable edifice, wished it to rise in pure Gothic style. He wanted this cathedral to remind the young Church in America of the great spiritual tradition to which it was heir, and to inspire it to bring the best of that heritage to the building up of Christ’s body in this land. I would like to draw your attention to a few aspects of this beautiful structure which I think can serve as a starting point for a reflection on our particular vocations within the unity of
the Mystical Body.

The first has to do with the stained glass windows, which flood the interior with mystic light. From the outside, those windows are dark, heavy, even dreary. But once one enters the church, they suddenly come alive; reflecting the light passing through them, they reveal all their splendor. Many writers—here in America we can think of Nathaniel Hawthorne—have used the image of stained glass to illustrate the mystery of the Church herself. It is only from the inside, from the experience of faith and ecclesial life, that we see the Church as she truly is: flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit. It follows that we, who live the life of grace within the Church’s communion, are called to draw all people into this mystery of light.

This is no easy task in a world which can tend to look at the Church, like those stained glass windows, “from the outside”: a world which deeply senses a need for spirituality, yet finds it difficult to “enter into” the mystery of the Church. Even for those of us within, the light of faith can be dimmed by routine, and the splendor of the Church obscured by the sins and weaknesses of her members. It can be dimmed too, by the obstacles encountered in a society which sometimes seems to have forgotten God and to resent even the most elementary demands of Christian morality. You, who have devoted your lives to bearing witness to the love of Christ and the building up of His Body, know from your daily contact with the world around us how tempting it is at times to give way to frustration, disappointment and even pessimism about the future. In a word, it is not always easy to see the light of the Spirit all about us, the splendor of the Risen Lord illuminating our lives and instilling renewed hope in his victory over the world (cf. Jn 16:33).

Yet the word of God reminds us that, in faith, we see the heavens opened, and the grace of the Holy Spirit lighting up the Church and bringing sure hope to our world. “O Lord, my God,” the Psalmist sings, “when you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:30). These words evoke the first creation, when the Spirit of God hovered over the deep (cf. Gen 1:2). And they look forward to the new creation, at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and established the Church as the first fruits of a redeemed humanity (cf. Jn 20:22-23). These words summon us to ever deeper faith in God’s infinite power to transform every human situation, to create life from death, and to light up even the darkest night. And they make us think of another magnificent phrase of Saint Irenaeus: “where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace” (Adv. Haer. III, 24, 1).

This leads me to a further reflection about the architecture of this church. Like all Gothic cathedrals, it is a highly complex structure, whose exact and harmonious proportions symbolize the unity of God’s creation. Medieval artists often portrayed Christ, the creative Word of God, as a heavenly “geometer,” compass in hand, who orders the cosmos with infinite wisdom and purpose. Does this not bring to mind our need to see all things with the eyes of faith, and thus to grasp them in their truest perspective, in the unity of God’s eternal plan? This requires, as we know, constant conversion, and a commitment to acquiring “a fresh, spiritual way of thinking” (cf. Eph 4:23). It also calls for the cultivation of those virtues which enable each of us to grow in holiness and to bear spiritual fruit within our particular state of life. Is not this ongoing “intellectual” conversion as necessary as “moral” conversion for our own growth in faith, our discernment of the signs of the times, and our personal contribution to the Church’s life and mission?

For all of us, I think, one of the great disappointments which followed the Second Vatican Council, with its call for a greater engagement in the Church’s mission to the world, has been the experience of division between different groups, different generations, different members of the same religious family. We can only move forward if we turn our gaze together to Christ! In the light of faith, we will then discover the wisdom and strength needed to open ourselves to points of view which may not necessarily conform to our own ideas or assumptions. Thus we can value the perspectives of others, be they younger or older than ourselves, and ultimately hear “what the Spirit is saying” to us and to the Church (cf. Rev 2:7). In this way, we will move together towards that true spiritual renewal desired by the Council, a renewal which can only strengthen the Church in that holiness and unity indispensable for the effective proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world.

Was not this unity of vision and purpose—rooted in faith and a spirit of constant conversion and self-sacrifice—the secret of the impressive growth of the Church in this country? We need but think of the remarkable accomplishment of that exemplary American priest, the Venerable Michael McGivney, whose vision and zeal led to the establishment of the Knights of Columbus, or of the legacy of the generations of religious and priests who quietly devoted their lives to serving the People of God in countless schools,
hospitals and parishes. Here, within the context of our need for the perspective given by faith, and for unity and cooperation in the work of building up the Church, I would like say a word about the sexual abuse that has caused so much suffering. I have already had occasion to speak of this, and of the resulting damage to the community of the faithful. Here I simply wish to assure you, dear priests and religious, of my spiritual closeness as you strive to respond with Christian hope to the continuing challenges that this situation presents. I join you in praying that this will be a time of purification for each and every particular Church and religious community, and a time for healing. I also encourage you to cooperate with your Bishops who continue to work effectively to resolve this issue. May our Lord Jesus Christ grant the Church in America a renewed sense of unity and purpose, as all—Bishops, clergy, religious and laity—move forward in hope, in love for the truth and for one another.

Dear friends, these considerations lead me to a final observation about this great cathedral in which we find ourselves. The unity of a Gothic cathedral, we know, is not the static unity of a classical temple, but a unity born of the dynamic tension of diverse forces which impel the architecture upward, pointing it to heaven. Here too, we can see a symbol of the Church’s unity, which is the unity— as Saint Paul has told us—of a living body composed of many different members, each with its own role and purpose. Here too we see our need to acknowledge and reverence the gifts of each and every member of the body as “manifestations of the Spirit given for the good of all” (1 Cor 12:7). Certainly within the Church’s divinely-willed structure there is a distinction to be made between hierarchical and charismatic gifts (cf. Lumen Gentium, 4). Yet the very variety and richness of the graces bestowed by the Spirit invite us constantly to discern how these gifts are to be rightly ordered in the service of the Church’s mission. You, dear priests, by sacramental ordination have been configured to Christ, the Head of the Body. You, dear deacons, have been ordained for the service of that Body.

You, dear men and women religious, of you, who fill this cathedral today, as well as your retired, elderly and infirm brothers and sisters, who unite their prayers and sacrifices to your labors, are called to be forces of unity within Christ’s Body. By your personal witness, and your fidelity to the ministry or apostolate entrusted to you, you prepare a path for the Spirit. For the Spirit never ceases to pour out his abundant gifts, to awaken new vocations and missions, and to guide the Church, as our Lord promised in this morning’s Gospel, into the fullness of truth (cf. Jn 16:13).

So let us lift our gaze upward! And with great humility and confidence, let us ask the Spirit to enable us each day to grow in the holiness that will make us living stones in the temple which he is even now raising up in the midst of our labors. If we are to be true forces of unity, let us be the first to seek inner reconciliation through penance. Let us forgive the wrongs we have suffered and put aside all anger and contention. Let us be the first to demonstrate the humility and purity of heart which are required to approach the splendor of God’s truth. In fidelity to the deposit of faith entrusted to the Apostles (cf. 1 Tim 6:20), let us be joyful witnesses of the transforming power of the Gospel!

Dear brothers and sisters, in the finest traditions of the Church in this country, may you also be the first friend of the poor, the homeless, the stranger, the sick and all who suffer. Act as beacons of hope, casting the light of Christ upon the world, and encouraging young people to discover the beauty of a life given completely to the Lord and his Church. I make this plea in a particular way to the many seminarians and young religious present. All of you have a special place in my heart. Never forget that you are called to carry on, with all the enthusiasm and joy that the Spirit has given you, a work that others have begun, a legacy that one day you too will have to pass on to a new generation. Work generously and joyfully, for he whom you serve is the Lord!

The spires of Saint Patrick’s Cathedral are dwarfed by the skyscrapers of the Manhattan skyline, yet in the heart of this busy metropolis, they are a vivid reminder of the constant yearning of the human spirit to rise to God. As we celebrate this Eucharist, let us thank the Lord for allowing us to know him in the communion of the Church, to cooperate in building up his Mystical Body, and in bringing his saving word as good news to the men and women of our time. And when we leave this great church, let us go forth as heralds of our time. And when we leave this place in my heart. Never forget that you are called to carry on, with all the enthusiasm and joy that the Spirit has given you, a work that others have begun, a legacy that one day you too will have to pass on to a new generation. Work generously and joyfully, for he whom you serve is the Lord!

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To Manifest Transcendence
Sacral Aesthetics


Reviewed by Daniel McInerny

Readers of this journal, passionate about the ability of architecture to “speak” the glory of God, have every reason to rejoice at this new publication by Aidan Nichols, OP. For this is a book about the way in which the arts serve as epiphanies of divine transcendence and, above all, of Christ Himself. It is thus a book on a theme central to the continued renewal of Christian culture, rich in historical knowledge of Christian art and profound in its theological assessment of how that art magnifies the Lord. It is an exciting book for which the reader must be sincerely thankful.

In pursuing his theme, Fr. Nichols takes various “soundings,” or samplings, of what he calls in his subtitle “sacral aesthetics.” He is interested in the variety of ways in which Christian theologians and artists have reflected upon or put into practice the Christian artist’s mission to manifest the Beautiful. There are three kinds of soundings that Fr. Nichols takes, corresponding to the three parts of the book.

In the first part, Fr. Nichols sounds the theologies of art developed by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, on the one hand, and in the Iconoclast controversies, on the other. In the second part he examines three twentieth-century theologians of the image: Hans Urs von Balthasar, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pope Benedict XVI. In the third part Fr. Nichols turns to some difficulties involved in the actual practice of Christian art, taking up, first, the conflict in the last century involving the French Dominicans and the journal L’Art sacré, and second, the uses made of Jacques Maritain’s Thomist aesthetics by the British Catholic artists Eric Gill and David Jones.

The first audience for at least some of these chapters was that of the scholarly book and journals in which early versions of the chapters first appeared. Thus the argument of the book often demands of the reader a fair amount of philosophical and theological sophistication, a demand made even higher by the fact that the style is at times overwrought. Yet even in its most demanding moments the book repays attention. The opening chapters on Augustine and Aquinas and on the Iconoclast controversies alert the reader to how long and how subtly the Church has pondered the meaning of art and the role of sacred images. It is fascinating to see, in part 2 of the book, how the ecumenical resolution in favor of sacred images proclaimed at the Second Council of Nicaea (787) was still being both critiqued and reformulated by theologians in the twentieth century. The chapter on Balthasar serves as a useful introduction to that writer’s disclosure of the artistic character of Revelation. The following chapter on the Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov reveals Bulgakov’s attempts to place the resolution at Nicaea II on an even firmer theological foundation. The chapter on Benedict XVI discusses his argument that all sacred art takes its ultimate meaning from the Resurrection and the Second Coming.

The last part of the book focuses on practical applications of theological aesthetics involving thinkers and artists who are perhaps still unknown to many readers. The mistakes committed in the post–World War II era by certain French Dominicans, anxious to make modernity relevant to sacred art, serve as a sad preview of so much of what has happened with sacred art, not least sacred architecture, since that time. It is a fascinating but cautionary tale. The final chapter on Eric Gill’s and David Jones’s appropriations of Maritain’s aesthetics tells a happier story, showing us two artists who, with no little success, incorporated the insights of Aquinas as creatively thought through by Maritain into artworks that both reflected and criticized modernity.

The book’s conclusion is no perfunctory epilogue. It takes up the broad question: Why are the arts important? Fr. Nichols’s reply is that the arts serve to manifest transcendence. They do this by opening up larger questions of life’s meaning, questions that inevitably lead to talk about “a supreme rationale.” But at their best the arts go beyond even this; they serve as “a kind of epiphany of divine presence, of divine light.” In the final paragraphs Fr. Nichols beautifully links this understanding of art as the revelation of divine truth with Christ as the Perfect Work of Art: Christ realizes “those goals that all artistic making has as its explicit or implicit ends. Because he is infinite meaning, life and being perfectly synthesized with finite form, the cave-painters at Lascaux, or Hesiod penning his hymns, or Beethoven working on his last quartets, were all gesturing towards him though they realized it not.”

Fr. Nichols ends with the suggestive claim that in order for the arts once again to make a substantial contribution to culture, they must be “baptized” in sacred settings, most of all in the liturgy: “In the modern West, the Muses have largely fled the liturgical amphitheater, which instead is given over to banal language, poor quality popular music, and, in new and re-designed churches, a n celebrity sometimes totally absent visual art. This deprives the wider Christian mission of the arts of essential nourishment.”

This insight alone would be enough to send this reviewer, at least, to the rest of Fr. Nichols’ works.

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Reviewed by Roderick O’Donnell

Christopher Martin’s A Glimpse of Heaven is a spectacularly illustrated gazetteer of over one hundred Catholic churches in England and Wales, photographed in color by Alex Ramsey. Described as for the “non-specialist,” it is published by English Heritage in collaboration with the Patrimony Committee of the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. Ramsey has found striking new photographic angles, which with control of exposure and of natural lighting make rural Dorset look like Tuscany and the dour city of Hull like Palermo, achieving a heightened even surreal mood. Certain Modern Movement churches (St. Mary’s Leyland, Liverpool, and Clifton cathedrals) photograph superbly too. This book follows on the English Heritage four-volume work on Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses (1986-2002) by Christopher Steel and Sharman Kadish’s Jewish Heritage in England (2006). (English Heritage is the government’s statutory adviser on all aspects of the historic environment: it has been able to grant aid to historic churches since 1977.)

Martin (an Anglican) has not made this his life’s work (unlike Steel or Kadish). His difficult task, then, is to achieve for the Catholics what Sir John Betjeman did for the Church of England, to re-evaluate its nineteenth and twentieth-century buildings. He has certainly succeeded for the non-specialist, less so for the expert. Here the publisher may be at fault. The proofreading is appalling, with mistakes of names and dates; misquotations abound; there are no indexes. There is an evident lack of connoisseurship. For example, the Cambridge window (11) is not nineteenth century and does not show St. John Fisher (but is post-1945 and is perhaps meant to be St. Thomas More.)

The canvas is very broad, from the Middle Ages to the 1990s, with a preference for the broadly classical and for the hegemony of the twentieth-century Modern Movement. There is a welcome emphasis on the Second Catholic Relief Act (1791), which legalised church-building and thus many Pugin churches are described.

The balance is less sure for the twentieth-century with no less than five Giles Scott commissions, but nothing by, for example, H. Goodhart-Rendel. This is a somewhat mid-twentieth-century mindset, the view of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, which canonizes Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. But this approach comes rather unstuck with the rebuilding in the classical style by Quinlan Terry of Brentwood Cathedral, which he says “paradoxically…looking determinedly backward…conforms to the liturgical expectations of Vatican II.”

Liverpool Cathedral was the result of a competition, and its architect comes from a Nonconformist background; Terry is an Evangelical Anglican, and he was chosen directly by the bishop. However, the more normative architects of this culture were Catholics. A.W.N. Pugin, a fervent Catholic convert of 1835, was the founder of a dynasty of architects. Pugin’s conversion was to be followed by many other architects mentioned—all of whom took an integral approach to their religion and their art, which was a crucial aspect of the design and furnishings of their churches. The best example of this gesamtkunstwerk is Pugin’s St. Giles, Cheadle (1840-6), a jewel box of color, detail, and liturgical and ritual elaboration. This artistic lavishness was often in tension with the tastes of the clergy and of church repository art. It was the aim of all-reforming movements—the Gothic Revival, the Arts and Crafts, the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement—to educate the former and eradicate the latter. The best examples achieved both—Pugin, J.F. Bentley, Giles Scott and Weightman and Bullen.

Much of the text is therefore about furnishings and atmosphere, most engagingly at Chicheley, Dorset, an existing vernacular building adapted by the patron and decorated by his family, and with most romanità at Brompton Oratory, although the re-ordered St. Joseph chapel (2005 by architect Russell Taylor) is missed.

The splendor of such new classicism at the Brompton Oratory stands in contrast with the doleful list of episcopally sanctioned vandalism (“re-ordering”) that followed the Vatican Council. But since 1994, works to listed churches and cathedrals must obtain agreement from the diocesan Historic Churches Committees, which have gained wide respect. The excellent reintegration of the interior of the Greek Revival style St. Francis Xavier, Hereford, (1838) is a hopeful indicator of the future, at a church that the bishop wanted to close and sell. The Jesuit churches in Liverpool and Manchester, which came within an ace of closure in the early 1980s and 1990s, have been restored with English Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund money, and now fulfill a very wide apostolate to the universities. This partnership between clergy, the people of God, and the “patrimony” authorities—the Historic Churches Committees, English Heritage, the Lottery, and the local planning authorities—must be the way forward. This lavish picture book will be a fillip to those who both use and study this Catholic patrimony.

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Pinnacles and Onion Domes of New York
Manhattan’s Houses of Worship


Reviewed by Matthew Alderman

My first significant encounter with the churches of Manhattan came my sophomore year in college, when two of my best friends and I spent spring break in the Big Apple. Our tour included not only the usual hot spots—the Met, Lincoln Center, the diner from Seinfeld—but also the pinnacles of St. Thomas, Fifth Avenue, the blue gloom of the Dominican church of St. Vincent Ferrer, and one wax Roman martyr dressed like a Roman centurion, colloquially called “the dead cop,” that lay behind glass in a cavernous, moldering German parish in a not-quite-gentrified stretch of the Lower East Side. The grand total was fifty churches in all. Three years later, I moved there.

David W. Dunlap’s From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan’s Houses of Worship taps into a very elemental part of my New York—its oft-neglected churches, synagogues, and temples. In the peripheral vision of my apartment windows is the subject of the book’s final entry, Zion–St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, wedged between two brownstones. I read now that this bit of Manhattan stage-scenery lost a horrendous 784 members in the burning of the steamer General Slocum in 1904. One block over and one block south is St. Elizabeth of Hungary, spiked with faintly Transylvanian pinnacles; I now know it started life nearly eighty blocks south in a building currently owned by a denomination with the puzzling name of the Orthodox Church of the Hispanic Rite. The Church of Our Savior, my usual spiritual home, turns out to be one of the city’s youngest Catholic parishes, despite its Romanesque-revival shell. And it had the novelty, in 1959, of being air-conditioned.

The city is filled with such obscure architectural gems. Dunlop’s guide introduced me to the Lutheran Church of All Nations, a Frank Furness look-alike rich with nineteenth-century terracotta work; the Hanseatic deco experiment that is Trinity Baptist; decrepitly Gothic synagogues; and the now demolished Unitarian polychrome Romanesque riot nicknamed the Church of the Holy Zebra. And there are the humbler storefront churches and brownstone temples—the long-gone Rigging Loft Methodist Meeting Place, something called the Zendo Shobo-Ji that meets in an uptown carriage house, and even one storefront cathedral belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist Church of North and South America.

The names and dates and places alone are a pleasure to read, sometimes even serving to bend Manhattan’s geography to their own ends. Park Avenue Synagogue is not on Park Avenue, and neither is Park Avenue Methodist. South Reformed Dutch Church ended up on the Upper East Side before folding three years later and selling off the building—a magnificent craggily sanctuary resembling Paris’s Sainte-Chapelle before drug-testing—to the Disciples of Christ.

Such Protean recycling abounds in the pages of From Abyssinian to Zion. One church, belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox, started off life as the prim and proper Church of San Salvatore, set up for a congregation of Italian-speaking Anglicans. The Gospel Tabernacle, once the cradle of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, is now John’s Pizzeria, its sanctuary/dining room crowned with a gigantic stained-glass skylight. Not all transitions were peaceable—or as tasty. The cheerily out-of-place St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral that enlivens a dull Upper East Side street with its roof garden of ceramic onion domes was feuded over in the courts by two competing groups of Russians at the height of the Red Scare before finally being handed back to its original owners by none other than Felix Frankfurter. Who knew?

From Abyssinian to Zion is a worthy addition to the practical shelf of any ecclesiological tourist. It is a practical, compact volume, which is alphabetized, cross-indexed, and crammed with maps, easily slipped in a pocket for an afternoon of sightseeing. It will appeal heartily to the many species of armchair tourist as well. The antiquarian will delight in the histories and locations of churches long forgotten; the armchair tourist as well. The antiquarian will delight in the histories and locations of churches long forgotten; the architect will be introduced to a whole new world of uniquely American spires flavored with the emigrant tastes of the old country; and for the simple lover of the obscure charms, it turns the whole island from Battery Park to the Broadway Bridge into, not merely a moveable liturgical feast, but an entire martyrology of wonder and beauty ripe for discovery.

Matthew Alderman, a graduate of Notre Dame’s School of Architecture, lives and works in Manhattan. His writing has appeared in First Things, Touchstone and STAR. His design for the new 40-foot-tall altarpiece of the historic Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Church in Vladivostok, Russia, was featured in a recent article in Catholic World Report.

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While little known in the United States, the British church architect Sir John Ninian Comper (1864-1960), after John Betjeman’s championing of his work in the 1930s, received a cult following in his native United Kingdom. Since Betjeman, however, there has been only a smattering of mostly unremarkable, often skeptical reviews of Comper’s work. Anthony Symondson, S.J., and Stephen Bucknall’s new book, *Sir Ninian Comper: An Introduction to his Life and Work, with Complete Gazetteer* comes therefore as a timely breath of fresh air.

The first part of Symondson’s thesis is structured around a chronological background to Comper’s key works, while the second is a critical commentary on the background and impact of Comper’s pivotal paper “Of the Atmosphere of a Church” (1947). The book concludes with the thoroughly useful gazetteer of Comper’s works, researched by Stephen Bucknall, his great-nephew.

Symondson shows how Comper’s inquisitive artistic and socio-liturgical intellect and practice built on his strong Anglo-Catholic foundations and his training under glass designer C.E. Kempe and architect G.F. Bodley. Comper’s first independent church work owed much to his master Bodley. Indeed, he was to continue Bodley’s model in his desire to restore historical continuity with what he considered to be the high point of English ecclesiastical architecture, namely, that of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. In this, what he was to call his “unity by exclusion” period, Comper became uncommonly passionate in his study of English and northern European forms and iconography pertinent to the liturgy. Comper’s early innovations, embodied in works such as St. Cyprian’s, Clarence Gate, (1902-3) and his 1893 paper “Practical Considerations on the Gothic or English Altar” were highly influential. Yet, while having earned recognition for pioneering a shift in the perceived focus of the liturgy from the reredos to the altar itself, Comper soon considered this merely a first step to a much more significant conceptual shift in liturgical planning.

Symondson discusses how Comper’s lifelong search for the best examples in art, craft processes, and liturgical planning most often began with practical considerations of the relationship between the liturgy and the faithful. Symondson is careful to qualify this for, to Comper, the abiding imperative was beauty.

Comper traveled widely in search of the best and most authentic models for each of his discoveries. It was his understanding of the practical and aesthetic universal relevance exhibited by such models that gave Comper the impetus requisite for what he was to refer to as his theory of “unity by inclusion.” St. Mary’s, Wellingborough, (1904-31) became the laboratory for this developing theory. In England, Comper saw a rich precedence for the studied borrowing of foreign architectural vocabulary: “English architecture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and one may add the sixteenth is, it is true, the culmination of Gothic in [England], but it is not the rock from which we were hewn, nor yet the end beyond which we cannot go.”

Symondson notes that Comper’s proposals for his most radical development, the English appropriation of the early Christian altar beneath a ciborium, were “the first instance in the twentieth century of an altar brought into direct visual relationship with the congregation.” Indeed, Comper was before his time, having anticipated the practical agenda of the Liturgical Movement, ratified in Vatican II.

Reflecting upon this book amidst the entrenched nihilist, technocratic, atraditional philosophies of art that pervade today’s culture and the modern Church, upon what precedents are architects and liturgists to build? To Comper “the [artistic] purpose [of a church] is to move to worship, to bring a man to his knees, to refresh his soul in a weary land.” A revival of the will and hope expressed in this quote is becoming evident in the increasing numbers of traditional church projects built today. However, the greater challenge discernable from this book has to be whether the Church can foster, even champion, a flourishing of the traditional arts and crafts; one that sustains a growth in a depth of artistic and practical knowledge, as exhibited by Comper’s example. Many believe that the Catholic Church is in a unique position to inculcate such a resurgence in the traditional arts. It is certain that the atmosphere of a church is dependent upon those arts. Perhaps we should draw hope from Comper’s example, and pray that we, as the body of Christ, can act upon this hope and reinvigorate the Church’s historical and enduring power to inspire for generations.

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Reviewed by Fr. Dan Scheidt

At first glance, Gregory W. Tucker's America's Church: The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception might seem to be yet another attractive religious shrine commemorative volume destined to take its place in that inexorably horizontal, closed position where picture book meets coffee table. But both the National Shrine and Tucker’s volume, which lovingly recounts its history, are indeed deserving of our more sustained attention.

Although there are hints from the time of the meeting of American bishops at the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore in 1846 that a “magnificent Catholic church” should be built in Washington, D.C., and dedicated to the honor of “Mary Immaculate, Patroness of the Americas,” the National Shrine was originally conceived at the end of the nineteenth century to serve as a “University Chapel” for the growing academic population of the Catholic University of America. The Shrine’s founder, Rev. Thomas Shahan (first as university rector and later as bishop), additionally wished Catholic University to be a center for meetings of America’s bishops and for the plethora of Catholic religious orders and lay organizations that aspired to have a presence in the nation’s capital.

As early as 1891, Shahan’s architectural vision was of a glorious basilica to the Blessed Virgin “around which would one day center the great edifices of a new Catholic Oxford.”

America’s Church traces chronologically the tortuous, century-long path from Shahan’s dream to the reality of the National Shrine as the largest Catholic church in the Western hemisphere. Tucker’s narrative of the basilica’s design and construction is so fascinating because it also simultaneously describes the shared yet shifting priorities of generations of American Catholics spanning the decades of the twentieth century.

Initially proposed in 1915 as a church in the fourteenth-century French Gothic style, the National Shrine was intended to give form in stone to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, promulgated by Blessed Pius IX in 1854, and to express the ability of American Catholic immigrants to replicate the “delicate tracery and lofty proportions” of some of the venerable Marian cathedrals of Europe.

Eventually an Irish immigrant, Charles Donagh Maginnis of the respected Boston firm of Maginnis and Walsh, was chosen as the Shrine’s chief architect. Maginnis opted for the Byzantine-Romanesque style, in part as a counterpoint to the Gothic design of the Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (popularly known as the Washington National Cathedral), whose construction across town had recently commenced in 1907. According to Tucker, Maginnis sought a style more amenable to a “contemporary, uniquely American interpretation,” yet one that “clearly articulated the ‘divine presence,’ one that bore witness to the aspirations of a ‘nation under God.’”

Critiquing the iconoclastic principles of modernism in architecture, Maginnis wrote: “I am completely disconcerted when I encounter the aggressive modernist with the conscience of a Puritan or a Trappist monk who refuses to make a sinful compromise with beauty.”

Due to the outbreak of World War I and later of the Great Depression, progress on the National Shrine was slow and fitful. The ceremonies and fundraising surrounding the laying of its cornerstone in 1920 characterized the shrine as a “war memorial.” A more winsome appeal to ten thousand “Marys of America” paid for the golden onyx altar of the crypt church, which was completed in 1924. Nonetheless, the nation’s perilous economic circumstances throughout the 1930s and the seemingly endless disagreements concerning the shrine’s relation to Catholic University and to the financial support of the bishops of the United States threatened the future of the entire project. Tucker conveys well how ambitious building projects, even ones with the noblest spiritual aims informed by faith, can be faced with the prospect of death by ten thousand doubts.

And yet Tucker also highlights the crucial importance of prophetic individuals, raised up in the darkest hour, whose faith succeeds in rallying the multitudes to push forward toward the goal. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, for example, the heroic efforts of men like Bishop John F. Noll of the Diocese of Fort Wayne (founder of Our Sunday Visitor) and Bishop Fulton Sheen catalyzed interest in continuing construction of the National Shrine, particularly as an appeal to (and eventual thanksgiving for) Our Lady’s intercession in overcoming the respective threats of Nazism and Communism. Commending Marian devotion as the most efficacious weapon against the latter, Sheen declared dramatically in a televised fundraising broadcast from the Shrine: “Thirty-seven out of one hundred people in the world today are beaten by that hammer and cut by that sickle. There is danger that we might be engulfed by these barbarians. ... If there be this evil thing marching through the world, it is fitting that we make some

Sacred Architecture Issue 14 2008
sacrifice in order to affirm our love of God and to invoke the assistance of the woman whom God said would overcome the Red Serpent! … Through these sacrifices we will pile under the architecture of divine love stone upon stone until it all cries out in praise to God and in truth that we love the woman whom God chose—His mother—and yours.” American Catholics in response donated millions of dollars for “stone upon stone” to be added to complete the National Shrine (no wood or reinforced steel, incidentally, was used in its construction).

In the 1950s Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr., assumed the role of chief architect of the basilica. He was assisted by an “iconography committee,” led by John De Rosen, charged with articulating a theologically and artistically coherent program for the variety of sacred art on both the building’s interior and exterior. De Rosen is the artist responsible for the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator, which dominates the Shrine’s north apse. (De Rosen sought a more modern interpretation of the great mosaic of Christ in the apse of the Cathedral of Monreale, which Tucker mistakenly locates in Canada rather than Sicily.)

Tucker’s chronological narrative communicates well the progressive realization over the next decades (even to the present) of the National Shrine’s myriad sculptural and mosaic works based on a wide array of biblical and patristic themes. But unfortunately his text does not provide even elementary diagrams, which might graphically illustrate for the reader De Roser’s programmatic vision of the iconographic whole in all of its carefully negotiated specificity. Instead the reader is offered suggestive representative examples of sacred art scattered throughout the shrine, sometimes frustratingly incomplete and visually and theologically under-contextualized.

Even a cursory examination of the images in America’s Church reveals that there are as many photographs of persons and events associated with the National Shrine as there are images of its sacred art and architecture. That the author of this history is the former communications director for the basilica might partially account for this emphasis. But one quickly realizes that Tucker is aiming to represent the “living stones” who for generations have allowed themselves, as the First Epistle of Peter admonishes, to “be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 2:5). In this sense, America’s Church is more like a family album of the spiritual household than an exhaustive theological guidebook for prospective pilgrims to the Basilica.

In creating a family album, Tucker intersperses throughout the principal narrative of the book, much like apsidal chapels radiating from the center of the shrine, many sidebar descriptions of noteworthy figures who have shared in the Basilica’s history: popes and presidents, shrine directors and influential Catholic laity. These figures are not tangential to understanding the edifice; they are its essence, for a church exists so that people may come to pray to God. In a suggestive example, Tucker recounts how Dorothy Day came to the crypt church of the shrine to pray in 1930, when she was a reporter covering socialist demonstrations in Washington. There, providentially on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Day offered up what she would later call “a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and with anguish that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.” In considering the countless pilgrims like Day who journey regularly to churches to make “a special prayer” touching on the destiny of their lives, one is reminded of the grave responsibility of church architects and artists to place their imaginations and labors at the service of the Church’s prayer.

In homage to Maginnis, Kennedy, De Rosen, and the countless others who contributed to the design and construction of the National Shrine, I must conclude by adding to Tucker’s tribute my own personal testimony. In the late 1990s I was doing graduate studies at the John Paul II Institute, across the street from the basilica. Each day I would attend Mass in the lower crypt church, praying like Dorothy Day “with tears and with anguish” that the Lord would show me what he wished me to do with my life. I had been discerning a priestly vocation for many months, and one June day my spiritual director made it clear that I should apply to the seminary. We decided that the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, where I had lived most of my adult life, was the most appropriate place to begin.

But before phoning Bishop John D’Arcy (one of whose predecessors was Bishop Noll of Fort Wayne), I thought it would be good first to say “a special prayer” of thanksgiving to God at the shrine for showing me the next step toward my mission. Approaching the basilica, I was so lost in thought that
when I arrived I walked up the steps to the upper church in a daze, finally stopping before the far left outside door of the east transept. Thinking to myself how odd it was that I took this unusual route, I glanced up and saw for the first time—written in enormous letters over the door—the inscription, Behold Your Vocation.

Stunned and more than a little amused that the Almighty would literally show me the handwriting on the wall, I began to laugh until I noticed the mosaic lunette immediately above the inscription. It depicted a priest in a canoe, Fr. Stephen Badin, the first priest ordained in the United States of America in 1793. (Tucker’s text mentions Fr. Demetrius Gallitzin as the first priest ordained in the United States; Fr. Gallitzin was ordained in 1795, the first to receive all the degrees of Holy Orders in the United States.) Fr. Badin traveled the territory that now includes the Diocese of Fort Wayne–South Bend and is buried in the log chapel at the University of Notre Dame, on the very land he donated for the founding of my alma mater in 1842. My laughter turned to awe and, eventually, to my ordination to the priesthood for the Diocese of Fort Wayne–South Bend.

In each of my six years as a priest, I have made the pilgrimage back to the National Shrine with many of my high school students for the Vigil Mass for Life during the annual March for Life, certainly the largest annual gathering of Catholics in the United States. The pilgrim throngs converge on a place where stones literally speak, and where the worshipping community is palpably larger than the visibly gathered assembly, because the latter is surrounded on all sides by representations of the angels and saints. In the Basilica’s sacred art and architecture, the newest generation of believers is catechized and seekers evangelized into the mysteries of the whole economy of salvation. George Tucker’s America’s Church is a beautiful and worthy invitation for the future priests and lay leaders, artists and architects of the New Evangelization to behold their vocation.

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FROM THE PUBLISHING HOUSES
A Selection of Recent Books


Jake Morrissey’s Genius in the Design traces the legendary rivalry between Baroque Rome's greatest architects, Gianlorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini, from their common start in the building yards of St. Peter's Basilica through their work for 17th century Rome's most important patrons, though Morrissey chooses to begin the book with the tragedy of Borromini's suicide and in general concentrates on the drama and intrigue of the lives of the two architects and their papal patrons. The book follows in the vein of popular nonfiction novels, which are entertaining reading for architecture or history fans, but not necessarily satisfying to the critical reader looking for an accurate and insightful history.


In An Architecture of Immanence Mark Torgerson writes a well researched examination of the theological, philosophical and architectural roots of modernist church architecture in the 20th Century. Torgerson as a Protestant emphasizes the theology of “God’s presence being expressed through the people of God,” and clearly bases his analysis of church architecture on this principle. An Architecture of Immanence demonstrates how the Protestant theological notions of immanence combined with the iconoclastic modernist architecture to create “multipurpose churches (those using their worship space for both liturgical and nonliturgical activities)” that “tended to maximize references to immanence.” Torgerson argues that the multipurpose “immanence as a basis for ecumenical dialogue, a point echoed by Richard Vosko in his review of the book. Vosko writes: “His ecumenical framework will help the search for common ground in the field among many Christian denominations,” and that the book is filled with “valuable references for anyone building or renovating a place of worship.”


“The modern age has witnessed the construction of the most banal and uninspiring churches in history,” so begins No Place for God, Moyra Dooryl’s polemic against the state of modern church architecture. The book seeks to find the roots of modernist architecture and how it came to be embraced by the Catholic Church. Ms. Dooryl makes the argument that this embrace has had an immense negative impact on faith itself. No Place for God both identifies the symptoms of malaise in modernist church architecture and proposes a new direction in architecture that will help to restore faith in a transcendent God.
FROM THE PUBLISHING HOUSES
A SELECTION OF RECENT BOOKS


Visions of Heaven is an attractive volume of photographs taken in various churches, mosques, synagogues and palaces throughout Europe. The book consists almost entirely of photographs taken directly below the center axis of domes. The images are of high quality and show a great variety of periods and styles of domes and crossings found in Catholic and Orthodox churches as well as exquisite domes of several Spanish mosques. A short foreword precedes the photographs and a brief historical essay follows to give context to the photography.


Philip Wilkinson has produced a fine book for the enthusiast of English monastic architecture in England’s Abbeys: Monastic Buildings and Culture. The book is divided into three sections, the first dealing with the history and development of the Monastic Abbey in England, complete from the first mis-


The architecture of the past century is described and criticized by Herbert Bangs in The Return of Sacred Architecture as ugly, boring and dysfunctional. Bangs argues against what he calls the “scientific-materialist culture” of modernist architecture and in favor of a return to the principles of classical architecture or a “return to the spirit” that is lacking in stripped down materialist architecture. The principles of classical architecture, Bangs asserts, are to be found in the understanding of geometry. The Return of Sacred Architecture argues that the “Golden Ratio” is found in all things beautiful, both things found in nature and those that are man-made.


Rock Beneath the Sand is part of a series of books published by Texas A&M University on life in rural Texas, this volume dealing with the life of rural “open-country” churches in the Lone Star State. The book focuses on the life of small country churches in Texas, and as the editor’s foreword states, “records the beginning, apex and decline of rural churches in McLennan and adjacent counties.” Through the lives of their rural churches, Myers tells the stories of rural people who came to the vast plains of central Texas. Scattered among the stories told by people from remarkably diverse cultures and religious denominations are evocative and poetic black and white images of the people and architecture of this corner of America.
Creativity, innovation, a new song, a new culture and the presence of the entire cultural heritage are not mutually exclusive but form one reality: they are the presence of God’s beauty and the joy of being his children.
~Pope Benedict XVI

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Dedicated April 2008

SACRED ARCHITECTURE
P.O. Box 556
Notre Dame, IN 46556
$6.00 Newsstand Price