One of the reasons that we are amazed by the beauty of architectural masterpieces is that they appear to go beyond the ability of mortals to conceive them. Their harmony and proportions seem to have been constructed by angels. In order to bring to fruition these sacred works, ranging from the nave of Amiens Cathedral to the exterior of San Vincent de Paul in Los Angeles, many hills have to be climbed.

The unique involvement of the patron, the limitations of materials or craftsmanship, the large sums of money required and the length of years necessary for construction have historically distinguished architecture from her sister arts, painting and sculpture. In addition, the modern architect must also work with zoning boards, building committees, finance committees and Offices of Worship, which only complicates matters further. All the more reason to laud all new buildings which express the ineffable through their materials and composition.

But what is the purpose of the sacred building, or of any building for that matter? As an architect, one serves the client by creating something for his or her needs and taste, working diligently to construct a building within a budget and time frame. But for the Catholic architect, mere professionalism is not enough. It is necessary also to create an architecture about which people can remark, “I am moved, for truly God is in that place.” The Catholic architect understands that after the patron, the zoning board, the building committee and the Bishop, his ultimate patron is the Father above, to whom he must eventually answer. So we ask, shouldn’t the work of architecture please God in the same way as the heartfelt prayers of a saint, a sacrificial gift to the poor, sung Gregorian chant, or the “Fiat” of the Virgin?

Designing a church can be likened to painting an icon, which is a spiritual act, done with prayer and fasting. The church building itself is not unlike a well conceived sermon or a theological text, both of which must communicate the message entrusted by Christ, to a diverse group of people. To conceive, design, and construct a building for worship is itself a holy act — and to be involved in this holy act is a great privilege for an architect. The architect imitates the Creator while asking the Holy Spirit to inspire his drawings and models. It has been said that the teacher will be judged more harshly than the student, and insofar as architecture can teach the faith of the Apostles and direct our actions in prayer and liturgy, the architect will certainly be judged by his fruits.

Finally, just as priests, religious, and all the baptized are called to be perfect, so the architect is called to be perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect. Our work in designing churches, schools, hospitals, airports and homes must always be of the highest standard — both temporal and eternal. By designing and building edifices for commodious use, durable construction and incredible beauty we both imitate and serve the Divine Architect. This is a humbling idea for many, especially those of us who have been trained to see architecture as self-expression rather than as “a noble ministry.”

Blessed Angelico and Saint Barbara pray for us.

Duncan Stroik
Notre Dame, Indiana
Summer 1999
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THE ARTIST, IMAGE OF GOD THE CREATOR

In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. For him art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them.

The artist has a special relationship to beauty. In a very true sense it can be said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of “artistic talent”. And, certainly, this too is a talent which ought to be made to bear fruit, in keeping with the sense of the Gospel parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14-30).

Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people, witnesses of the faith, teachers, fathers and mothers, who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community by means of that supreme art form which is “the art of education”.

The art which Christianity encountered in its early days was the ripe fruit of the classical world, articulating its aesthetic canons and embodying its values.

When the Edict of Constantine allowed Christians to declare themselves in full freedom, art became a privileged means for the expression of faith. Majestic basilicas began to appear, and in them the architectural canons of the pagan world were reproduced and at the same time modified to meet the demands of the new form of worship. How can we fail to recall at least the old Saint Peter’s Basilica and the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, both funded by Constantine himself? Or Constantinople’s Hagia Sophia built by Justinian, with its splendours of Byzantine art?

There are the great buildings for worship, in which the functional is always wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an intuition of the mystery. From here came the various styles well known in the history of art. The strength and simplicity of the Romanesque, expressed in cathedrals and abbeys, slowly evolved into the soaring splendours of the Gothic. These forms portray not only the genius of an artist but the soul of a people. In the play of light and shadow, in forms at times massive, at times delicate, structural considerations certainly come into play, but so too do the tensions peculiar to the experience of God, the mystery both “awesome” and “alluring”.

[The complete text can be obtained from the Vatican web site — http://www.vatican.va]
THE SHRINE, A PLACE OF GOD’S PRESENCE
A PLACE OF THE COVENANT

[Following are excerpts from a Vatican Document entitled THE SHRINE: Memory, Presence and Prophecy of the Living God, released this past May by The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People.]

“All Christians are invited to become part of the great pilgrimage that Christ, the Church and mankind have made and must continue to make in history. The shrine which is the goal of that pilgrimage is to become ‘the Tent of Meeting’, as the Bible calls the tabernacle of the covenant.” These words invite us to consider the relationship between the notion of pilgrimage and that of shrine, which is usually the visible goal of the pilgrim’s journey...

...A shrine is first of all a place of memory, the memory of God’s powerful activity in history, which is the origin of the People of the Covenant and the faith of each believer. The shrine thus becomes a sort of living memorial of the origin from on high of the chosen and beloved People of the Covenant. It is a permanent reminder of the fact that God’s people is born not of flesh or blood (cf. Jn 1:13), but that the life of faith is born of the wondrous initiative of God, who entered history to unite us to himself and to change our hearts and our lives.

...Today too, by their witness to the manifold richness of God’s saving activity, all shrines are an inestimable gift of grace to His Church.

...A shrine is a sign of God’s Presence, a place where men’s covenant with the Eternal One and with one another is constantly renewed.

...As they gaze upon the Lord, the new temple whose living presence in the Spirit is evoked by every church building, Christ’s followers know that God is always living and present among them and for them. The temple is the holy dwelling of the Ark of the Covenant, the place where the covenant with the living God is constantly renewed and the people of God become aware that they are a community of believers, “a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” (1 Pet 2:9)

...In this sense, a shrine appears as a constant reminder of the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, bestowed upon us by the Risen Christ (cf. Jn 20:22) to the glory of the Father. A shrine is a visible invitation to drink from the invisible spring of living water (cf. Jn 4:14); an invitation which can always be experienced anew, in order to live in fidelity to the covenant with the Eternal One in the Church.

...The Virgin Mary is the living shrine of the Word of God, the Ark of the New and Eternal Covenant. In fact, Saint Luke’s account of the Annunciation of the angel to Mary nicely incorporates the images of the tent of meeting with God in Sinai and of the Temple of Zion. Just as the cloud covered the people of God marching in the desert (cf. Nm 10:34; Dt 33:12; Ps 91:4) and just as the same cloud, as a sign of the divine mystery present in the midst of Israel, hovered over the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Ex 40:35), so now the shadow of the Most High envelops and penetrates the tabernacle of the new covenant that is the womb of Mary (cf. Lk 1:35).

[Readers are encouraged to obtain the entire text for a profound exposition of the multifaceted role of the Shrine. The full text can be obtained from the Vatican web site — http://www.vatican.va]
CARDINAL GEORGE
ON EACW
by Bjorn Lundberg

At the past fall meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C., Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago, made some significant remarks regarding Environment and Art in Catholic Worship (EACW), a 1978 statement of the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy. The Chicago prelate spoke to the question of what exactly constitutes a committee statement as opposed to one issued in the name of the entire episcopal Conference. George recognized and defended legitimate utterances of the Conference, as well as committee reports, which can assist an individual bishop in his ministry. In addition, however, he made the following remarks:

… a few [statements] complicate an individual bishop’s pastoral ministry. At that point the Conference becomes not a help, but a great difficulty, a source of enormous tension, because we’re faced with committee statements, that in fact don’t help us to minister in our own diocese… and I think in particular of the Art and Environment document that has been elevated to a status that is beyond all comprehension. People who dismiss Humanae Vitae as just somebody’s personal opinion, will swear that we all must abide by Art and Environment...

[See Featured Article in this issue of Sacred Architecture for a critique of EACW]

WORLD’S EARLIEST CHURCH

Archaeologists have discovered the world’s oldest known church, the first purpose-built Christian place of worship, at Aqaba in Jordan. Built between 293 and 303, the building pre-dates the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, both built in the late 320’s.

It pre-dates the greatest of all the Roman anti-Christian persecutions, which was carried out in the reign of Diocletian in 303-313. Historical texts indicate that there were many more such churches built, according to the director of the excavation, Professor Thomas Parker, of North Carolina State University. It is expected that other late third-century churches may soon be discovered. Likely locations include Antioch, Ephesus and Nicolemedia (all now in Turkey), Sidon and Tyre (Lebanon), and Alexandria and Carthage (North Africa).

constructed in the form of a large east-west oriented basilica, with apse and aisles, the building also had a narthex and chancel screen as well as an adjoining cemetery. Excavations have unearthed walls up to 4.5 metres high and a collection box with coins. Professor Parker said, “The discovery is very significant for the history of Christian architecture and of Christianity itself.”

EACW STATUS

The Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy has appointed a task group to revisit EACW and has also released a statement regarding the authority of the EACW document:

The purpose of [EACW] is to provide principles for those involved in preparing liturgical space. The committee statement received the approval of the Administrative Committee in keeping with Conference policy. Because the document was not proposed as a statement of the whole conference of Bishops, the full body of bishops was never asked to consider it. EACW does not have the force of law in and of itself. It is not particular law for the dioceses of the United States of America, but a commentary on that law by the Committee for the Liturgy. However, it does quote several documents of the Apostolic See and in that sense it has the force of the documents it quotes in the areas where those document legislate.

The Committee on the Liturgy intends to submit a revised edition of this document as a statement of the Conference of Bishops. It is therefore anticipated that the revised document will be considered by the full body of Bishops. The bishops are scheduled to discuss the revision of EACW when they convene in Washington this November.

BRIEFLY NOTED

✦ Discovery during this past April of the purported site of the Tower of Babel in the Pontus region of the Black Sea coast of Turkey, contradicts the popular belief of its location in Mesopotamia, north of Baghdad in Iraq. Michael Sanders, a British archeologist and publisher, said that other scholars agree that the Black Sea location is the logical location of the tower and is also the origin of all the modern languages of the West.

✦ Bishops have limited leeway in changing parish names, which come into question when closing or consolidating parishes. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments (Vatican) has sent a “notification concerning the title of a church” to bishops in North America and Europe. Issued to help bishops with pastoral concern for people with “emotional ties” to a closed or consolidated parish, it notes among other suggestions, that the parish can have a different title from the church name and/or the patron saint.

✦ Cardinal William M. Keeler of Baltimore announced that the mother church of Catholicism in the United States will be restored to its 19th century splendor plus added new utilities. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in downtown Baltimore (1806-1821) was the vision of Bishop John Carroll and was designed by Benjamin Latrobe, who was also the architect of the nation’s Capitol. Two New York architectural firms, John G. Waite Associates and Beyer Blinder Bell Architects and Planners were contracted to analyze the present structure and develop a master plan for its res-
toration with construction to start June 2000.

Another casualty of post-Vatican II modernization might be restored to artistic health. The Gonzaga University Chapel, in Spokane, Washington, contains 22 paintings by Brother Joseph Carignano S.J., painted on the walls during the late 19th century and painted over by students during the 1960s. There is presently a movement to recover the paintings and restore the chapel.

Fourth-year architecture students at Notre Dame University recently presented designs for Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Winfield, Louisiana. The church, to accommodate 100 parishioners, is budgeted at $300,000. The students gained real-world, first-hand experience and the parish, with its pastor Father Peter Grant obtained designs, together with professional advice. It is hoped that this program for mission parishes can be repeated yearly. [See pg. 30]

After 24 years of ostracism, expulsions, and persecution, the Catholic Church has been given authorization by the government to build churches in Bokeo, a northern province of Laos. This positive news is an answer to the prayers of Laos and their friends throughout the world.

NOT ONLY IN THE U.S.A.

A row has broken out over plans to build a car park and supermarket under a Romanesque 13th-century cathedral in a Tuscan hill town popular with foreign visitors. The soaring pink, white and green cathedral at Massa Marittima is prized by scholars and tourists because it has remained largely untouched since it was built between 1287 and 1304. According to one authority, it is one of the most beautiful and richly decorated churches in Tuscany.

Luca Sani, the left-wing Mayor, said Massa Marittima only had one very small car park. “Like other Tuscan towns, we have enormous problems coping with rising numbers of visitors for the millennium,” he said. A plan approved by the town council envisages additional parking spaces and lock-up garages next to and beneath the cathedral, together with 10,000 square yards for commercial use. Local reports say a supermarket chain has put in a bid for the space, which would be created by demolishing old storerooms next to the cathedral and excavating beneath it. Signor Sani stated that the scheme was viable, and said it would cost $2.3 million, a third of which would be met from state millennium funds.

Critics of the scheme say it will endanger the fabric of the great cathedral and make Massa Marittima’s traffic congestion worse by attracting cars into the ancient centre without widening medieval access roads. Restoration of the cathedral has revealed its structural fragility, church officials said. The foundations are said to be water-logged, and the campanile, or bell tower, is described as precarious. Some of the neighbouring buildings have been closed because of subsidence.

Massa Marittima, which has Etruscan and Roman origins, is set in the classic southern Tuscan landscape of cypress trees, chestnut trees, sunflower fields and Renaissance churches, with the added attraction of hot steam geysers.

La Repubblica said the cathedral and surrounding piazza formed “one of the architectural jewels” of Italy. “The cathedral is at risk, and could collapse altogether if this plan goes ahead,” the paper said.

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON LITURGICAL ARCHITECTURE

A conference on Liturgy and Architecture will be held in Rome October 12-15, 1999 at the Pontifical Urbanianum.

The Congress will be divided into three parts: 1) a presentation of the theological-liturgical tradition, 2) a description and evaluation of the present situation, 3) proposals for the future.

The Congress is being sponsored by the Pontifical Liturgical Institute of S. Anselmo in Rome, Rev. Cassian Folsom, O.S.B. director.

For information, call 011-3906-579-1201, fax 011-3906-57-54-004, email: pil.roma@iol.it

COMPETITION

Jubilee 2000 Design Competition
Our Lady Of Guadalupe Church
Milford, Indiana

In celebration of the Jubilee, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend in Indiana is sponsoring a design competition for a new home for a rural Hispanic parish consisting of a church with social and educational facilities. Since the location is central to the diocese, the parish will also serve as a center for Hispanic celebrations and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The project will be built with volunteer labor and community involvement. A video of the community life of the parish is a segment of the program package.

Program information will be available late summer 1999. Submission and judging December 1999.

Information available from:
Jubilee 2000 Design Competition
Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend
1330 East Washington Center Road
Fort Wayne, IN 46825
phone (219) 483-3661
email: lfurge@fw.diocesefwsb.org
A few years ago I spoke with a pastor in Chicago about a new church his parish was about to build. They had obtained the services of a liturgical consultant and an architect and were in the process of educating the building committee about the principles of church architecture, mainly by reading and discussing the little booklet Environment and Art in Catholic Worship, published by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1978. I asked him if they were also reading any other texts such as the Vatican II documents, Canon Law, or the Scriptures. “Oh no,” he said, “the Vatican documents were written thirty years ago, this is 1995 and we’ve gone far beyond them.” And so they had.

The recent competitions for the design of a “church for the year 2000” in Rome and for the Los Angeles Cathedral have brought renewed attention to the importance of sacred architecture in Roman Catholicism. Parishes and cathedrals all over the country are embarking on substantial building campaigns. By all accounts, the past forty years have produced few church buildings that the American laity are proud of and fewer of which the cultural establishment approves. No doubt some credit for the present state of architecture should be given to a small booklet entitled Environment and Art in Catholic Worship (EACW) presently being revised.

For the past two decades, this document has been used in dioceses across the United States and Canada as the “bible” for new church design and renovation. Both its promoters and its detractors would concede that the statement has been more successful than anyone dreamed twenty years ago. Its authority has been invoked to require theater shaped interiors, removal of tabernacles from sanctuaries, removal of religious imagery and a puritanical style. The lack of a good alternative to EACW coupled with its heavy promotion by the liturgical establishment has resulted in EACW exerting an undue influence over the face of our sacramental architecture during the past two decades. It has also been supported by a secular architectural profession often willing to strip older churches and design new buildings in a reductionist mode.

EACW’s status has been controversial since its inception, particularly over the question of its canonical standing. However, it has long been recognized that EACW has no legal status in the Church. In fact, one of the document’s promoters, canon lawyer Frederick McManus, has written in The Jurist that “the statement is not, nor does it purport to be, a law or general decree of the conference of bishops.... Thus it lacks, and there is no suggestion that it has, juridically binding or obligatory force, for which two-thirds affirmative vote of the conference’s de iure membership and the recognition of the Apostolic See are required.” In fact, many in the American hierarchy seem to have reservations on the statement including a number of bishops who have proscribed its use and have published their own guidelines. These sentiments coupled with the rejection of the document by many laity have resulted in the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy calling for a new or companion document to EACW which they hope will have some binding force.

As Fr. Andrew Greeley has pointed out, the average Catholic maintains a higher interest in the fine arts than his Protestant brethren. It follows, and experience bears this out, that most Catholics have an interest in and strong opinions about what their church should look like. Most laity would agree with Greeley that “new Catholic churches should look like Catholic churches and not like Quaker meeting houses.” One hopes that in writing the new document, the American bishops will reevaluate the “low church” style that has characterized many post-Vatican II buildings and recommend principles which will promote the richness, diversity, and ingenuity inherent in Roman Catholicism.

For a document which has affected the pocketbooks of parishioners all over the country, EACW is quite short, only 50 pages of narrow text including a foreword by Archbishop John Quinn. It seems to have been hastily written with a text which often suffers from opaque language and overgeneralization. However, these limitations are also its strength in allowing for a dogmatic reading. Though the document was ostensibly put together by a joint committee of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and the Bishop’s Committee on Liturgy, it is widely held that the text was the work of one person, Fr. Robert Hovda, a well known liturgical consultant who has since passed away. Equally surprising is that of the 39 photographs illustrating the text, 34 are photographs of buildings designed by one person, Frank Kacmarcik, who is best known as the liturgical consultant for the Benedictine Abbey at Collegeville, designed by Marcel Breuer.
The Action of the Assembly

Generally, EACW seeks to base the design of the “liturgical environment” on the liturgy as “the action of the assembly” of believers. Most of the document’s prescriptions flow from an emphasis on the assembly’s feelings, needs, and experiences. It becomes for most intents and purposes a theory of architecture based on a type of Congregationalism to the exclusion of worship, the sacraments, or God’s call to mankind. Beginning with the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on Christ’s presence in the assembly celebrating mass, EACW goes a giant leap further in making the “assembly the primary symbol of worship.” The liturgical environment draws on the “community’s recognition of the sacred,” “its own expression,” “the concerns for feelings of conversion, support, joy…” more than on principles from liturgy, theology, or even architecture. For instance having eye contact with other people is posited as crucial to participation. “Not only are the ministers to be visible to all present, but among themselves the faithful should be able to have visual contact, being attentive to one another as they celebrate the liturgy.”

The Rites for the Dedication of a Church state that “When a church is erected as a building destined solely and permanently for assembling the people of God and for carrying out sacred functions, it is fitting that it be dedicated to God with a solemn rite, in accordance with the ancient custom of the Church.” According to EACW, a liturgical space acquires a sacredness from the sacred action of the community rather than by being dedicated to God. No longer should a building be built ad maiorem Dei gloriam but for the feelings of the assembly. There is an implication that it is the people who make the sacraments efficacious. The understanding of the sacred in EACW seems to go against what we know about mankind from an anthropological, sociological, historical or theological perspective.

In reading the text, one has to wonder how much the “needs of the assembly” is a populist ruse, only to be consulted as long as the views of the assembly agree with EACW. The continual referral to the “needs of the assembly” seems to be less interested in democracy or inculturation but is rather a convenient slogan to bring about specific changes. This comes out in the advice to the elite architect: “A good architect will possess both the willingness to learn from the congregation and sufficient integrity not to allow the community’s design taste or preference to limit the freedom necessary for a creative design.” [italics mine] The architect should assume the assembly knows nothing about what they really “need”. Ironically, only one of the 39 photographs shows a liturgical environment with an assembly. Most unfortunately, in emphasizing the centrality of the assembly and its liturgical celebration, EACW finds little to say about the God who has called the assembly together to be Church.

A Skin for Liturgical Action

Given that the stated purpose of the document is to give guidelines for new or renovated “liturgical spaces,” it is surprising that EACW was written with such a limited emphasis on architecture. The section of the document which gives particular focus to the building itself is a mere six pages of discussion. In fact, the document seems to harbor a mistrust of strong architecture because it might distract from the liturgy. It sets up an unfortunate duality between the assembly and the building, and in order to strengthen liturgy, architecture must be weak. Broad and indefensible statements are made such as “the historical problem of the church as a place attaining a dominance over the faith community need not be repeated.” This antagonism towards the church as a “place” tends to favor a multipurpose assembly hall or “non-place”. In spite of the document’s laudable calls for beauty, authenticity, good materials and craftsmanship, EACW states that the building should be merely a shelter or “skin” for a liturgical action. In this “functionalist” view of the church building, the architect’s only role is to provide enough space for the assembly with good audibility and visibility. Interestingly, this view, growing out of the American meeting house tradition, parallels the recent success of the megachurch movement in which the building is consciously designed not to look like a church or anything else. In this vision of architecture there is no room for “great buildings for worship, in which the functional is always wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an intuition of the mystery.”

The document says very little about the exterior of the church, its signification as a “domus ecclesiae,” and its appropriate siting in the city or the country. There is no recognition of the scriptural metaphors of the city set on a hill, the lamp on a lampstand or the city of God. The ability of the church building to symbolize the Christian community and her belief in Christ, through domes, spires, bells, generous portals, atriums, gardens, and iconography is ignored. This is problematic, since the exterior is the first image of the Church with which people come in contact. It is also one of the most expensive parts of a church, the proper design of which can ensure its durability, and the people’s investment. The document could be greatly improved if it would examine the impact the design of the exterior can have on the street, in the community, on the understanding of the interior, and on the preparation for worship. The Church sends her people out into the world to serve, to witness, and to continue to pray, so the architecture should help to reinforce these things. Most importantly, if we understand the Church to be the central institution of modern life we would expect her architecture to be of the same quality.
as the finest libraries, courthouses, schools, and city halls.

The emphasis of EACW seems to be on the interior environment, though there is very little that it suggests specifically. One way to understand the interior is through a discussion of architectural "typology" or the study of generalized types that reoccur throughout history. A discussion of the basilica, hall, cruciform or centralized types, their historical derivation and theological expression would have helped EACW immensely. Each of these types has its own principles of axes, symmetry, hierarchy, and volume which must be followed for the building to be integral and coherent. In all church types one of the most important elements is a focus on the sanctuary as a place set apart. The raised bema and ark in early synagogues and house churches as well as the Jewish Holy of Holies may have developed into the concept of the sanctuary. From earliest times the altar, bishop's cathedra and sometimes other elements were located in this hierarchical place. The raised platform and iconostasis, baldachino, altar rail, dome, and apse were developed to articulate the sanctuary architectural composition or else they wish to undermine the importance of the altar. In a document written to assist the faithful in designing Catholic churches, it is essential that concepts such as typology, sanctuary and axiality be defined.

On the topic of architectural style EACW is for all intents and purposes a paean to modernist abstraction. Although Sacrosanctum Concilium is invoked in regard to "noble simplicity," the rhetoric and the aesthetics of EACW seems to be limited to modernist architecture of the 1960's. The photographs of new and "renovated" churches reinforce this view and already look outdated. In the Church's long artistic history, it could be argued that one of the least successful phases was American architecture of the 1960's and 1970's, yet it is held up along with Shaker furniture as the only inspiration for liturgical buildings.

Another constant theme is that commonness and simplicity of elements are always to be preferred to richness and complexity. Symbols, icons, liturgy and architecture must all be reduced in order for people to better understand their faith. If the design of the church building affects worship and worship informs belief, is this reductionism in our churches not in part responsible for the recent study which found Catholics to be quite ignorant of their faith? EACW states that "the rejection of certain embellishments which have in the course of history become hindrances... has resulted in more austere interiors, with fewer objects on the walls and in the corners." This architectural minimalism promoted by EACW which requires "modern materials" and "honesty of construction" is simply abstract modernism with a font. If the highest goal of a liturgical environment according to EACW is hospitality rather than transcendence, the presumed model for a church seems to be the family room of a suburban house rather than the nave of an early Christian basilica. The document states that the scale of a space should not "seek to impress or even less, to dominate," eliminating all of the great churches of western civilization such as Notre Dame, the Palatine Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral, Santiago de Compostela, or even St. Patrick's in New York.

Tradition and History

For a document of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, it is shocking that there is no citation or acknowledgment of the existence of sacred architecture and church texts before 1960. History and tradition are dismissed as "unkind" and it is difficult to find positive treatment of historical churches. In contrast, one would expect that a Catholic document on architecture would have room for Bernini, for Pugin, for the Medieval master-builder and for Constantine's architects. With few exceptions, EACW would criticize the masterpieces of Western architecture as not being simple enough, common enough, and distracting us from the action of the assembly. This is a surprising view coming from a faith which relies both on innovation and tradition.

As a ritualized faith which is grounded in tradition, Roman Catholicism would be foolish theologically, liturgically, and anthropologically to jettison our wide variety of building traditions. Yet in writing that a church "does not have to 'look like' anything else, past or present" EACW rejects the concept of a regional building tradition under which Christendom has operated up until recently. Could we say the same about a hymn, that it does not have to "sound like" anything else, or that a prayer does not have to "meaning like" anything else? This view of the architect's creativity is naïve; architecture is never done in a vacuum and even so-called abstract buildings "look like" other abstract buildings or even other objects. Thus, when churches look odd they are given nicknames, such as "Our Lady of the Maytag" or "Our Lady of the Turbine" or the "Corkscrew to Heaven." It can be argued that in order to maintain continuity, new churches like children, should look like they are part of a family.
Along with promoting architectural continuity a document of the Universal Church should include reference to and photographs of sacred buildings from all places and times. Missing in this statement are images of the Spanish missions of the Southwest, the French missions of the Southeast and of Canada, as well as the great variety of parish churches, shrines and cathedrals built by the Germans, Irish, Africans, Italians, and Slavs. These buildings are part of our American Catholic heritage, and while they can be criticized architecturally or liturgically, they have few competitors from recent decades. And it is important to meditate on the fact that these churches continue to serve the liturgy and to “meet the needs” of a substantial portion of the lay faithful.

For historic preservationists and parishes seeking to conserve their traditional churches, the principles and images of church renovation in EACW leave a lot to be desired. The document states that “many local Churches must use spaces de- signed and built in a former period, spaces which may now be unsuitable for the liturgy.” It reminds me of a liturgist in Rome who once told me that none of the 300 historic churches in the Eternal City were appropriate for the new liturgy because they had not yet been renovated. His comment would have undoubtedly surprised the Fathers of Vatican II who held up the early Christian basilica as a model for church architecture. On the other hand EACW presents a typical 19th century Gothic church which has all of its decoration whitewashed, the removal of historic chandeliers and the altar and tabernacle replaced by the presider’s chair. One of the other examples prominently displayed is the New Melleray Abbey in Iowa, designed by a student of Pugin, in which all of the original 1867 Gothic architecture is ripped out with the ironic caption “a renovation can respect both the best qualities of the original structure and the requirements of contemporary worship.” Presently a number of parishes across the country are defending their churches from liturgical designers who claim that they must whitewash them in accordance with EACW.

Art and Iconography

In retrospect, titling the statement Environment and Art in Catholic Worship seems to have been a misnomer since there is even less on the subject of art than on architecture. The statement’s orientation is decidedly against imagery, to the point almost of iconoclasm. At first glance one might think that it was a document written for Calvinist Geneva and not for the faith which produced Cimabue, Giotto, Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Raphael, Van Eyck, Rubens, Poussin, El Greco, and Mestrovich. The topic “Images” which concerns painting, sculpture, and banners receives two paragraphs, while the topic of “Decoration” which treats banners, plants and getting rid of clutter receives four paragraphs. The lack of interest in the traditional arts—stained glass, mosaic, fresco, polychromy, altarpieces, statuary, bas relief, carved wood, ornamental patterns—combined with the call for simplicity is telling. Audio-visuals are seen as a parallel and possible replacement of the traditional function of stained glass. What hubris. “In a period of Church and liturgical renewal, the attempt to recover a solid grasp of Church and faith and rites involves the rejection of certain embellishments which have in the course of history become hindrances. In building, this effort has resulted in more austere interiors, with fewer objects on the walls and in the corners.” The goal is an abstract minimalism: the International Style for the Universal Church.

EACW refers to beauty a number of times but then states that it is “admittedly difficult to define.” Throughout the text there is a romantic belief in handicraft as better than mass produced items, but the photos chosen are usually of mass produced architecture or hand made items which look machine like. The discussion of fine arts recommends consultation with a consultant, and the requirement that the art not threaten or compete with the action of the assembly, again creating an opposition between the liturgy and the art.

Conclusion

The vision of church architecture which Environment and Art in Catholic Worship gives us is a carpeted auditorium or a large room replete with plants and banners. It suggests that a successful church building will be created by an architect working with liturgical and art consultants, aware of the congregation’s “self-image” to make a functional looking design which will serve the assembly’s needs. Rather than draw on the rich Roman Catholic tradition, EACW would leave us in a Modernist straitjacket. In an EACW church there is no complexity: there are no columns to sit next to, no shadows for a penitent to kneel in, no places for private devotion, no mystery and no images of the heavenly hosts. EACW makes a plea for simplicity, commonness, authenticity and the contemporary shape of liturgy but does little to develop theological or architectural concepts which are treated in canonical Church documents. In a document written to help direct new church design it is crucial that these concepts be developed: the church as icon, house of prayer, sacramental place and house of God.

The committee drafting the new statement, which may be considered by the American bishops as early as this fall, includes people from various disciplines,
including at least one architect. I am optimistic that they will compensate for the limitations of EACW and provide us with a new and improved document which will appreciate and foster the rich tradition of Roman Catholic architecture and iconography. One looks for a bishops’ document which in tone and emphasis will be as universal as possible, drawing on a breadth of theological and aesthetic sources. And there is also hope that there will be a degree of consultation on this issue which has economic ramifications and spiritual consequences for this and future generations. It is an appropriate time therefore to consider the strengths and weaknesses of EACW and bring these issues up for discussion and debate.

EACW is a document of architectural reductionism that reflects a liturgical reductionism. It is fearful of symbols, complexity, history, art and even architecture. The statement’s conception of architecture is antinomial; things are always either/or rather than both/and; black or white rather than having multiple layers of meanings. It seems that the BCL produced a document worthy of the “non-church” promoted by Protestant architect Anders Sovik. One is left believing that the document does more damage than good and that it is preferable for parishes to look to documents which have substance and real authority such as Sacrosanctum Concilium, the General Instruction on the Roman Missal, the new Catechism and the Rites for the Dedication of a Church. Always remaining faithful to the Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, today we should move beyond Environment and Art in Catholic Worship to an architecture of sign, symbol, tradition and the sacraments.

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3 America, May 18, 1996.
4 Eucharisticum mysterium, n. 55. “In the celebration of Mass the principal modes of Christ’s presence to his Church emerge clearly one after the other: first he is seen to be present in the assembly gathered in his name; then in his word…”
5 EACW, no. 58, p. 28.
6 EACW, no. 47.
7 EACW, no. 42.
8 Letter to Artists, Pope John Paul II, no. 8, 1999.
9 GIRM, no. 257-258.
10 EACW, illus. 10.
12 EACW, p. 25.
13 Such as the “unkind history” which has fastened slogans and symbols onto vestments, EACW, no. 94.
14 EACW, p. 21.
15 San Francisco Cathedral and the Cathedral of Brasilia.
16 EACW, 43.
17 EACW, illus. 13.
18 EACW, illus. 21.
19 EACW, 105.
20 EACW, 34.
There was a time when nearly every church of the Latin Rite had, as the main focus of its interior, a high altar surmounted by an elaborate architectural canopy, a kind of tabernacle, which both marked the location of the altar as a place of special honor and drew the eye to it. While by no means consistently in use throughout the history and geographic extent of Roman Catholicism, the baldacchino, as such a canopy is usually called, was standard in Early Christian churches at Rome and was later mandated in the *Ceremoniale Episcoporum*, the principal Counter-Reformation statement of liturgical practice, promulgated in 1600.1 Certainly, Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s great example at Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome is the best known, although the oldest surviving one is in San Apollinaire in Ravenna (9th century)2 and we know from literary sources that the Emperor Constantine gave a baldacchino fashioned of silver to the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano.3

In fact, practice has oscillated between use of a free-standing altar under a canopy and the placement of the altar against a flat wall, with or without a vestigial canopy above. During the Middle Ages and most of the Renaissance, altars placed against a wall were standard, often surmounted by a reredos or a dramatic work of painting or sculpture.4 Despite Bernini, the wall altar remained the most common form until the Second Vatican Council, which recommended the practice of celebrating mass *versus populum*. The implementation of the Council’s reforms for the most part reflected an interpretation that the altar against a wall or reredos was now liturgically obsolete.5

The new orientation of the celebrant, whatever its theological or liturgical merits, had an unfortunate consequence for existing churches, especially those whose altarpieces were of artistic importance. All too often, a portable altar has been placed in the sanctuary in front of the former high altar which, now bare and unused, still visually dominates the church interior. Or, worse, the old altar and reredos were simply demolished and replaced by a free-standing altar of undistinguished and often temporary appearance, lacking in scale, ornament and visual interest. While seeking to comply with the reforms of the Council, we continue to face the problem of how to make the altar the visual center of the liturgical space.

The baldacchino presents itself as both a liturgical and architectural solution to this dilemma, one which appears ripe for a comeback. The reasons for reconsideration of this once ubiquitous element are both symbolical and pragmatic and are the same reasons that prompted the development of the form in the first place: Most important of these is the desire to mark in an unambiguous architectural gesture the location of the altar and visually reinforce its centrality to the liturgical setting.

Like so many other aspects of ecclesiastical design, the baldacchino is layered with symbolic and associative content. Its meanings are illuminated by considering its historical origins and the stream of images that link it with other theological, biblical and liturgical ideas.

The altar canopy is evidently derived in part from a secular practice in the ancient courts of Asia and the Eastern Roman Empire. Monarchs and other high personages presented themselves on their thrones under fabric canopies. Apart from whatever shelter from the elements it may have provided, the canopy was a sign of honor, representing the majesty of the royal person, and also made him or her clearly distinguishable and easy to see in a crowd. A lightweight framework and fabric hangings allowed the canopy to be portable. This practice entered the Roman world in the late Empire and, following the collapse of Roman civilization, was revived again in the Carolingian period. A painting of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III in the year 1000 depicts him enthroned below a canopy supported by columns and hung with fabrics.6

Similar canopies were erected over the thrones of bishops, and many cathedrals feature elaborate baldacchinos.
over the bishop’s throne, a practice no longer permitted in new construction. The baldacchino was also found in the papal conclaves. Before Paul VI discontinued the practice, the Cardinals assembled in the Sistine Chapel sat under fabric canopies color-coded for the pontificate in which each had been elected. After the new Pope was selected and pronounced his new name, the other Cardinals collapsed their canopies as a sign that authority had now passed from the College of Cardinals to the new Pontiff. A fascinating photograph from around 1950 shows a papal procession with Pius XII carried in his sedan chair under a billowing portable canopy supported on poles carried by his attendants.

The portable canopies carried above the monstrance in Corpus Christi or Holy Thursday processions are another illustration of the type. Given these examples, one can understand the implied transference of the honorific canopy from the throne of an honored personage to the altar itself.

The term baldacchino comes from the Italian "Baldacco," meaning Baghdad, which was the chief source of the fabrics used for the canopies, mostly fine silks. Another term used to denote an altar canopy is ciborium. Strictly speaking, a baldacchino would be a non-permanent structure, presumably fabric, whereas ciborium refers to a permanent structure of wood, metal or stone. In practice, the two terms are used interchangeably. The origins of the word ciborium are obscure, possibly derived from the Greek kiborion for the seed-pod of the Egyptian water-lily or from the Latin cibus, for food. We recall that ciborium also denotes a type of vessel containing the Eucharistic elements. The name for the vessel may simply have been transferred to the structure within which the Eucharist was consecrated, or vice versa.

The baldacchino has many symbolic resonances with biblical events, all related to the creation of a space of honor. In the Old Testament, we read of the exacting requirements given by Yahweh to Moses for the tabernacle of the Ark in the desert, with its fabric draperies hung from moveable posts and beams. From the New Testament, we recall the Transfiguration, at which event Peter offers to build three tabernacles. This has been an obscure passage for modern readers, but perhaps we can best imagine these structures as simple fabric canopies of the type we have been considering here. Peter has sometimes been ridiculed for this interjection, which some commentators have characterized as a desire to fix or ‘objectify’ the revelatory experience by placing the three figures before him into structures of some kind. But perhaps Peter’s offer simply bespeaks the human impulse to place an honored person or object on a pedestal or, in this case, within a suitable frame. In my own view, Peter’s gesture was an architectural act of worship.

We should not forget another image suggested by the baldacchino: that of a banquet. The Eucharist has often been characterized as a banquet and in the Mediterranean world, such a gathering might well be held under a festive tent. The wedding at Cana, traditionally seen as a “type” of the Eucharist, comes to mind. In Jewish weddings to this day, the chuppah, a fabric canopy held above the heads of the bride and groom, captures the combined sense of consecrated and festive space which might appropriately be seen as analogous to the celebration around the Eucharistic table.

Finally, the baldacchino is associated with death and burial through its use over a tomb or as a shelter for a relic. Erection of a small temple-like shrine over a tomb is an ancient practice dating back to Roman times and before. Temporary canopies were often erected in connection with the funeral rites of monarchs, princes or bishops. In the 18th century, these catafalques were architecturally elaborate, incorporating large baldacchino-like structures and massed draperies. In the nave of the Old Saint Peter’s there were many canopies, marking both altars and tombs, and of course, the basilica itself may be seen as a grand baldacchino erected over the gravesite of Saint Peter. At San Giovanni in Laterano, the great 14th century baldacchino...
does double duty by sheltering the altar of the Pope and housing the relics of Saints Peter and Paul. The association of altar and tomb is further reinforced in many cases by the use of a sarcophagus (literally or a representation of one) as the altar itself. The tradition of the altarstone containing a relic remains as a vestige of this practice.14

In the form of the baldacchino itself there is more symbolism. The four columns may be seen to represent the Four Evangelists. Sometimes, as at Saint Peter’s, the columns are of a twisted or Solomonic type, thought in the 17th century to have been the form of the pillars before the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s temple at Jerusalem.15 A representation of a starry sky on the ceiling of the canopy suggests the universal presence of God, the Creator of the Cosmos. A dove on the ceiling of the canopy represents the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Mass. Often the whole structure is crowned by figures of Seraphim, recalling those in Isaiah and their hymn, “Holy, holy, holy Lord…” 16 On a more fundamental level, the overall silhouette of the baldacchino, with its strongly vertical orientation, may be seen as a simple pointer, directing our eyes and the actions of the liturgy heavenward as we offer up our worship ad Patrem.

Aside from its symbolism, the pragmatic appeal of the baldacchino flows from its role as a place-maker. In the churches where it appears, it gives pride of place to the altar, which is supposed always to be the central focus of any liturgical space. But how do you make an object about 3 feet high and 6 feet long the visual center of a space many times larger than these dimensions? Perhaps the best way is to place it in its own space—a sanctuary within the sanctuary. We see a good example of this at San Lorenzo fuori le mura in Rome. However active or complex the surrounding space, the altar remains the centerpiece.

Historically, the baldacchino has had lavished on it some of the best artistry and design available, but modernist architecture has had difficulty with liturgical design (and churches in general), lacking the symbolic and ornamental language to both direct and satisfy the eye. The baldacchino, when it appears at all, is typically reduced to an abstract reference to its former self. For example, at the Church of St. Francis de Sales in Muskegon, Michigan (designed by Marcel Breuer in the late 1960’s), the baldacchino appears as a kind of marquee suspended above the altar, and at Saint Mary’s Cathedral in San Francisco (designed by Pietro Belluschi and Pier Luigi Nervi in the 1970’s), the altar stands beneath Richard Lippold’s abstract metal sculpture which resembles nothing so much as a cascade of icicles.

To demonstrate that the traditional baldacchino is still artistically viable in our own time, we may contrast these examples with the magnificent one at London’s Saint Paul’s Cathedral, designed by Dykes Bower about the same time (in the 1960’s). It uses Solomonic columns, seraphim, a dome, and all the symbolic content we expect in the sanctuary of the altar. (London’s Roman Catholics can also boast a beautiful example at Westminster Cathedral, designed by J. F. Bentley at the end of the 19th century).

To conclude, I offer two examples of how the baldacchino can be used in new or remodeled church interiors today. In the first case, I show a traditional baldacchino executed in stone and modeled after Early Christian and Romanesque examples. It stands in an apsidal sanctuary at the liturgical east end of a basilican space. The canopy is both a marker and a gathering place, inviting the community to gather around the table of the banquet that is the Eucharist. The classical columns are a restatement of the structure’s symbolic and honorific role. While a monumental realization of this design suggests the use of fine marble, it could also be fabricated of a more modest material, such as wood or copper. The latter material, with a patinated finish, would be very attractive, glowing warmly in candlelight.

Finally, there are circumstances when a permanent baldacchino is not practical or affordable. We can return to the model of the fabric canopy (also called a tester), hung from the walls or ceiling of the sanctuary. This approach would be particularly appropriate in remodeling modern church interiors, or where the insertion of a free-standing structure supported on columns might obstruct views of the altar. If the fabric is rich and beautifully colored and the installation is done with great attention to scale, proportion, and proper lighting, the effect can be both festive and prayerful.

While many welcome advances in liturgical design have flowed from the reforms following the Second Vatican Council, there are important design issues that have yet to be resolved. Among the most important is the proper placement and visual centrality of the altar. The return of the baldacchino offers one way in which this problem can be addressed to satisfy both liturgical and aesthetic requirements.

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2 The Dictionary of Art.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 GIRM no. 262, “Normally a church should have a fixed and dedicated altar, free-standing, away from any wall, so that the priest can walk all around it and can celebrate facing the people.”
6 See illustration in Krautheimer, Roma Profile of a City, p. 147.
9 Dictionary of Art.
10 Exodus 10: 10-19, Exodus 36—38.
11 Matthew 17: 1—8.
13 Dictionary of Art.
14 GIRM, no. 266. The Rites of the Catholic Church vol. 2, “Dedication of a Church” no. 61.
15 II Chronicles 3: 15-17.
16 Isaiah 6:3.
THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CLOISTER: IMAGE OF A UNIVERSE OPEN TO HEAVEN
The New Benedictine Monastery at Le Barroux, France
John Burns

From June 24 to June 26, 1998, I had the privilege of visiting the Benedictine Abbey of Sainte Madeleine, located next to the chateau and hamlet of Le Barroux in the Provence region of France. Founded in 1971 by Dom Gerard, a Benedictine from En-Calcat, the abbey is home to a fervent and flourishing community of some sixty monks. Dom Gerard has established a form of primitive Benedictine life at Le Barroux. There is no abbey school nor parish ministry. Life at the abbey revolves around the liturgy, fully sung every day in Gregorian chant. Manual labor, study, and the reception of guests and retreatants round out the life of the monks.

The community spent the first ten years of its existence in an abandoned medieval chapel dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene. In 1978, the site of Le Barroux was found, a seventy-five acre parcel of rocky land amid gorgeous hills dotted with vineyards and lavender fields. Construction of the new monastery began the following year and lasted over a decade. The church alone took more than three years to complete. To say that the abbey is in the Romanesque style is not to say enough. Not only does Le Barroux look Romanesque; it is Romanesque, both structurally and materially. Built entirely of beautiful yellow limestone with an orange tile roof, no expense was spared in the design and construction of this monastery. Even the floors are stone. But what is truly unusual for our age is the fact that the abbey’s masonry is load-bearing. This is a stone structure through and through. Many modern buildings have beautiful stone revetment on their exteriors, but few can claim to have that same beauty on the interior. Not every interior wall of the abbey is of stone, but one will see it in all the principle rooms of the monastery as well as in every room which has an exterior wall. The Abbey is a wonderful witness to that beauty and permanence which should characterize our Catholic structures.

Standing in the abbey church, gazing at the powerful stone arches and barrel vaulted ceiling, the realization comes over me that many of the features of traditional church architecture which we consider aesthetically pleasing and appropriate for worship also serve important structural purposes. Columns, pilasters, and arches bear loads; domes and vaults span spaces. The link between structure and aesthetics is not accidental; it should be seen as part and parcel of the wondrous order, integration, and harmony of the cosmos, established by the Creator as a reflection of Himself. Harmonic proportions are another example of this integrated order, namely, the relationship between spatial proportion and musical intervals, first discovered by the ancient Greeks. At Le Barroux, we behold a beauty which is more than skin deep; the buildings breathe an air of authenticity. When beauty springs from the very structure of an edifice, it gives to that edifice a transparency and integrity which is awesome.

The church at Le Barroux is a basilica of three naves, oriented towards the East. Each of the three naves terminates in an apse, a typical feature of French Romanesque churches, probably derived from Byzantine architecture. The altar is free standing, slightly forward of the chord of the apse, while the tabernacle rests deep in the apse on a stone pedestal. There is a bell tower directly over the altar, in what would be the crossing if this church had a transept. The location of the bell tower here is also a feature of French Romanesque architecture. The bells are rung manually, the ropes being tied off to the sides in order to prevent them from hanging over the altar. The location of the bell tower certainly makes it easy for the monks to coordinate the ringing of the bells with the action of the liturgy. It is enjoyable to watch the ringing before and during the services.

The sanctuary has been raised a few steps above the nave in order to distinguish it from the latter. There is no channel screen between the sanctuary and the choir of the monks. Rather, as is common in monastic churches, this feature has been moved westward and placed between the choir of the monks and the area reserved for guests at the west end of the nave. At Le Barroux, the screen is a simple communion rail of wrought iron.

Hefty choir stalls fill most of the nave, providing seating for about 80 monks. While this feature is traditional in Benedictine monasteries, at Le Barroux it has

View of the interior of the abbey
the deleterious effect of shutting off the nave from the side aisles. In my opinion, some of the beauty of basilican architecture is lost when the nave does not communicate freely with the side aisles. However, since the aisles of Le Barroux church open on to a series of niches designed for the celebration of private Masses, the choir stalls do provide a welcome element of intimacy and seclusion for the niche chapels.

It appears to me that the monks wanted their church and monastery to have a primitive and austere feel, something certainly in keeping with their way of life. Ornamentation in the chapel is simple and art work sparse. A beautiful polychrome crucifix hangs over the altar, while a 14th century statue of Our Lady stands on a pedestal to one side of the sanctuary. The half dome of the apse is painted with a row of standing saints.

The church at Le Barroux functions magnificently as a locus for Catholic liturgy. The reflective surfaces of the walls and vaulted ceiling make for excellent acoustics and give the chant a pleasing, ethereal quality, which is conducive to prayer and creates a sense of reverent mystery. The monks are masters of the chant, though they have not incorporated any of the newer semiological discoveries into their style of singing. In my three days at the abbey, I did not note a single mistake in the singing. Matching this perfection is an equally impressive mastery of the ceremonies of the liturgy.

The monks make little use of electric lights, either in the church or in the refectory. The use of natural light has the wonderful effect of manifesting the relationship between the Divine Office and the hours of the day. When the morning office of Lauds speaks of the reddening sky, and the evening office of Vespers sings of the setting sun, this was clearly visible from the light entering the abbey church through the deep-set windows with their splayed sills and jambs. Here the liturgy of creation is taken up into the liturgy of the Church, and the cycles of natural life are both sanctified and seen as revelatory of Christ, the light of the world.

Access to the cloister and other rooms of the abbey is reserved to the monks alone. Pictures of cloister show columns, capitals, bases, and arches all of stone, an impressive feat for our age. In the hot Provènçal sun, the stone cloister must surely provide a welcome bit of cool and shade in an idyllic atmosphere of restful silence. Yet cloisters also serve the very practical function of linking the various buildings of a monastery together and providing a protective conveyance between them. In addition to the cloister of the monks, the Abbey of Le Barroux also has a second, smaller cloister for the guests and retreatants. This charming space, with massive wooden columns and capitals, adjoins the guesthouse, church, and refectory, the three areas of the monastery accessible to guests. One can only admire the careful planning displayed here. As is typical of Benedictine monasteries, guests of the abbey eat in the refectory of the monks, at separate tables, while listening to the reading of scripture or another religious book. The refectory is a long, spacious room with a barrel vaulted ceiling. The table for the Abbot, Prior and Sub-Prior stands at the far end of the room under a large crucifix. The pulpit for the reader is located midway along one of the long walls, facilitating the ability of the reader to be heard. Of all the rooms of the monastery which I was able to visit, this one reminded me most of something right out of Romanesque France.

I have no clear idea of building costs in France, but I could not imagine building such a monastery in America for less than twenty-five million dollars. Le Barroux represents more than an architectural feat; it is a financial one as well. It demonstrates that people still value the opportunity to patronize a project of superior architectural quality. In my limited experience, architects and clients alike are too willing to settle for second best on the basis of budget. In the end, a lot of money is spent for something that fails to inspire and probably won’t last. Meanwhile, a building like Le Barroux will stand, gathering character and a history for succeeding generations to enjoy. One has to ask if we are making wise use of our resources by settling for plasterboard, auditorium-style churches. The Turkish proverb, “I’m not wealthy enough to afford cheap merchandise,” applies quite well here. Longevity aside, there is no price tag to be put on a church artistically well designed and durably built of fine materials. Beauty transforms space and transcends time, revealing to us the very nature of God himself. Like truth and goodness, it is a transcendental quality which has the capacity to transform those who behold it. Perhaps this is what Dostoyevsky meant when he said that beauty would save the world.

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What Do We Mean by Beauty?

Beauty is an ultimate datum, distinguishable from other things which are sometimes related. There are all sorts of spectacular things, such as huge explosions, fearful things, such as earthquakes and interesting things—all of them have their place—but they are not the same as beauty. Well, where do we find beauty? First of all, in nature. That is what we mean by something natural as opposed to something artistic. Something artistic requires a rational creator—one of us. Using hands or voice to form the pre-existing stuff of the world into something else. That is art, both fine and manual art. But nature is that which arises spontaneously in so many different levels beginning with the sky above, the forests and the trees, and the animals and the water. Nature presents different aspects; sometimes nature is dull, boring, neutral, (like a gray day in some undifferentiated landscape) but nature also gives us glorious sunrises and sunsets. Nature gives us magnificent forests and individual trees, animals which are beautiful and in the vegetable kingdom, one thinks of the rose. Such a beautiful thing, a rose is exquisitely beautiful. So, beauty is in those things. Also, in the mountains: snow covered or not. In the day, in the night, in the summer, and the winter, and finally, beauty resides in human beings. Everybody knows there are beautiful women and men and children. But there is something mightily attractive and it has its own unique glow to it, that answers the questions of beauty. I simply point to this ultimate datum, and I note that it is when we meet things under the aspect of beautiful, we delight in them. The delight is the subjective correlate to beauty, and we love them. Love really is the response to the beauty of another person. One can also love the world such as in the poem, “O world, I cannot hold thee close enough.” This sorrowful beauty, this sad beauty, really, of the impersonal world, where you want to clutch it.Beauty is this radiant thing on the object side, which accounts for exhilaration, delight, love, and sometimes desire, on the subject side.

Is Beauty in the Eyes of the Beholder?

If, for example, there is a man who is wild about Susan, and he keeps singing her praises, — he is madly in love with her. And if you look at Susan and you say, “she’s not that pretty”, or you say, “What does he see in her?” And people say, “Well, love is blind and if he thinks she’s beautiful, she’s beautiful.” And so, too, is Cyra-no de Bergerac. It is not exactly a part of anything on the object side calling for this response! I simply ask you, who might think beauty is subjective, have you once in your life ever considered anything objectively beautiful? Was it a rose, or a mountain top, a play of Shakespeare or your fiancée? Now, when you say this is beautiful, isn’t it the case that all you are saying is: “I met something out there, which though totally neutral, somehow provided a subjective reaction and now I am having all of these goose-bumps and I am all excited about beauty. But if others don’t see anything there, they are just as right as I am?”

When you look at a rose, it is first of all a living thing, and it has geometric patterns and formation, but so do a million other things, but there’s something about a rose, which shines from it. Now what if you say, “I don’t see it.” Well, I’d have nothing more to say to you, because you have nothing to say about beauty, really. Perhaps you might be able to admit that in the charm of a child, in certain faces or figures of women and men, in sunsets and sunrises, in certain music, is a quality which has every right to be called beauty and has a certain enchantment about it. We are drawn into a higher sphere. When I say something is beautiful, I mean there is a property on the object’s side, which justifies my exhilaration and it is such that if you could grasp what I grasp, you too would have the same exhilaration. But maybe you are not able to grasp it. It could be that you are colorblind. That’s too bad, but should your colorblindness be the norm? Simply because you can’t see the radiant colors of the sunset or sunrise, then you attribute everything to subjectivity when I see more than you.

And so too, in the case of a piece of music or painting. In principle, it is quite possible when you show me a late work of Picasso, which at first sight seems total nonsense, but if I had certain intelligence, perception or patience, I would see something on the object side which is truly beautiful. When I have profound experiences with beauty, especially natural beauty, that is indisputable. Roses are not on the same level as dandelions. A redwood forest
The Importance of Beauty

I come now to the importance of beauty in our life. As stated previously, there are two huge avenues of beauty: natural beauty and artistic beauty.

For the most part, nature is visible beauty, it comes through your eyes and sometimes your ears. You can get gripped by the beauty of visible things in nature so much your heart aches. So often the Psalmist says, “Oh, how I yearn to see your palace, oh God.” And the yearning is set forth, because he has seen something beautiful on the mountain, or in the sunrise. Natural beauty is almost unlimited. Beauty in nature always stirs our hearts.

When it comes to art, sometimes the artist wants visible things displayed as in architecture and audible things heard as in music, and mental things shared as in literature. No matter where you are, you can always have access to certain works of art. Best are you if you live in a beautiful city. Private homes are usually more beautiful than most modern churches now. In a private home you have a little touch of a charming gable or something like that, whereas most churches today are like cold barren concrete mausoleums. We need to be surrounded by genuine beauty in art, not simply enclosures.

The writer of literature can describe the beauty of a person, the inner beauty of a person, the beauty of intelligence, of humility, and of fidelity. This can be similarly said of the creators of liturgy. The liturgy is the highest act of the human person, it is the adoring and glorifying of God, and we must surround that worship with the most available beautiful things, beginning with architecture, then with the very words of liturgy, and the music of liturgy.

There are two things when you are talking about beauty in liturgy, which is mostly architectural and musical and, I suppose, dramatic. Number one, are the proposed inputs beautiful or not? Secondly, even if everyone should agree that something is beautiful, is there a new question in liturgy, which is not the case in other art, “Is it sacred?” There are many marvelous arias of Verdi, and of Mozart, which are not sacred. And if they are brought into liturgy, they are giving us something beautiful, but they are disharmonious with the meaning of holy worship.

When I went to Italy, and particularly to Florence, I found out what architecture is all about. Not that I am rich enough or talented enough to do it, but at least I know what I am talking about when I talk about a beautiful building. In the past, even in the villages of the poor, there were gifts that the people always enjoyed in beautiful churches. In California, the only beautiful buildings are the Franciscan missions or anything based on them.

We must be acquainted with past masterpieces. Above all, if you are a pastor, a liturgist, or a church architect, please be humble enough to know that it didn’t all start with you.

We Don’t Live by Bread Alone

We ought to resolve to make everything about us more beautiful. We know the direction in which we’re going, and the path has to be something of beauty, of humaneness, of the human dimension. I think this gift of beauty is especially active in Franciscan spirituality. Something like that Franciscan sense of charm and loveliness is in their Missions, which were not Taj Mahals, but always had a very special sense of transcendent beauty.

William A. Marra was professor of philosophy at Fordham University. He was a scholar passionate about all things Catholic, including architecture. This essay is from a lecture he gave at Franciscan University of Steubenville. In December 1998 he passed over to a more beautiful world.
For many people, the tradition of church architecture in Los Angeles is seen as being predominantly of the Spanish style before the advent of Modernism. However, this is partly due to the great revival of interest in Mediterranean and Mission architecture which began in the late Nineteenth century. Interest in California’s missions—a time period beginning in 1769 with the founding of the first mission through their demise in the 1840’s—was not only to inspire buildings, but also books, poetry, “romance”, tours to the extant buildings, and eventually scholarship.

By the 1920’s the most important style for church building in Los Angeles was Spanish. There are Gothic examples, one Tudor revival, which comes to mind, or another local church with an Italian ancestry from Lombardy, but the most important style of the moment was Spanish. These designs came in several very definite varieties with preferences modified mostly by available funds—in short, this style could be deceptively simple—or very expensive.

The earliest of these revivals was based on California’s missions, and appropriately is referred to as the “Mission Revival”. Few of these early buildings actually copied extant mission structures, but perhaps might be said to have been “inspired” by them. What is usually cited as the first building in the state to revive any kind of Spanish decorative elements was built for the San Francisco Mid-County International Exposition in 1894 in Golden Gate Park. Designed by A. Page Brown, it was simply a copy of the facade of Santa Barbara Mission on a rather monumental scale and attached to the usual fair structure. This building and its so-called “style” was a popular success, but it was not until the early twentieth century that familiar design elements began to appear and a viable style was born. Churches did not hurry to raise buildings in the “new” style. In Los Angeles, architects McGinnis, Walsh & Sullivan, a group which almost always provided Gothic designs, or designs which had some Gothic elements, supplied the plans—apparently their only attempt in the style. The Church of St. Thomas, a small parish to the southwest of Los Angeles, is still extant and, with the exception of changes made through the years, its facade remains as built: a very simple building in the Mission Revival style.

Perhaps the finest extant of these mission-inspired churches is the Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills. Ironically, this church was not built early in the century, but in 1924. Local architect J. J. Donnellan provided plans for an historically accurate facade: two towers, flanking what appears to be the usual narrow nave, and free from decorative distractions. However, while architect Donnellan and his parish building committee were influenced by the Santa Barbara Mission, the church as designed uses side aisles—hidden by the towers—to greatly increase the seating capacity.

Had the Spanish revival depended only on California mission ideas, it would have faded long before the 20’s, as design possibilities were quite limited. The introduction by architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue—oddly enough, again for a fair—of a style which was to carry the name of its 18th century originator, Churrigueresque, provided the necessary excitement to again make Spanish architecture important. This highly decorative style offered many new possibilities for a wide variety of buildings—an important element in the continuing popularity of the revival. Although the fair—this time at San Diego—did not open until 1915, the published designs created enough interest that a church was actually conceived and finished before the “official” unveiling of the new style. The First Congregational Church at Riverside, a city
some seventy miles southeast of Los Angeles, opened their new church with its dramatic and highly decorated tower in 1914. Pasadena architects Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey—both usually better remembered for buildings other than churches—provided the plans. The essence of Churrigueresque was to combine highly decorated elements and contrast them against absolutely plain wall surfaces. As many twentieth century church buildings were built in concrete, the baroque decorative details, usually precast in either concrete or terra cotta, could then be added directly to this surface.

Elements of these highly decorative ideas began to be part of the developing style which Californians would eventually call just “Spanish”. The Churrigueresque perhaps had more to offer non-church buildings, but in ten years oil magnate E. L. Doheny and his wife donated funds for a new St. Vincent’s Church in Los Angeles. Their selection was Churrigueresque and they opted for a full-scale treatment of the highly decorative style. Local architect A. C. Martin, who designed many of the city’s Catholic churches, provided plans for a very large church, actually monumental in scale and setting, and historically accurate in both exterior and interior details. The central unit of the facade and the upper stories of the tower carry elaborate decorative detail. The only other decorated feature is the dome over the crossing, which echoes the architectural details and is roofed with decorative tiles. The walls below are totally without ornament. This magnificent monument to the second phase of the revival was built in 1923–1924.

Out of this decade came another type of church building; one that would suit the needs of a parish, that might be an example of several of the “Spanish” styles, and was not predicated on a Spanish cathedral. St. Elizabeth’s of nearby Altadena, built in 1924, is a dazzling example of what was happening to Spanish ideas. Although the building has been called “Medieval”, Spanish, one can look closer to home for its origins. The decoration on the tower, the sparse, but still baroque decoration surrounding the niche on the facade, have their genesis in the Churrigueresque. The long narrow nave, with the deeply recessed windows echo the thick walls of adobe missions, although this building is built of concrete and its nave is wider than a building of the mission period could have ever hoped to build. Along the south side of the church runs an arched corridor, an element which also came from the missions. And yes, the medieval? Well, the other element that joins those of California, was inspired not by a church in Spain, but from a monastic building. Architect Wallace Neff, a man who unfortunately never designed another church, is well remembered for his many California homes.

It was during the 1920’s that many of these seemingly different ideas of what was supposed to be “Spanish” architecture began to come together in a particular style—actually a style of many origins, but so carefully blended that it became uniquely Californian. At no other time in Los Angeles history have the unique factors of rapid growth, the need for many new churches and the financing to build them come together at precisely the same time. In addition to the large expensive designs, there were also parishes that wanted smaller buildings; a building that offered expansion for the future, one that they could finance without courting disaster, and perhaps above all, they were so interested in that nebulous thing called Spanish style—for this is the elusive element that is the essence of the era’s churches.

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Swiss-born architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), better known as “Le Corbusier,” maintained an almost cult-like hold upon the architectural profession of the twentieth century. With projects for Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia, his influence upon architects and students helped strengthen the world’s embrace of architectural modernism. Followers of Le Corbusier often donned his signature round black glasses, praising his design abilities and visionary genius. His famous “Plan Voisin,” which proposed the demolition of the historic fabric of Paris to replace it with expressways and high-rise apartment blocks, captured the imagination of architects and social planners who marveled at the idea of rebuilding a modern world based on industry and socialism. Le Corbusier’s 1931 book, *Towards A New Architecture*, critiqued traditional architecture for not being as up-to-date as automobiles and ocean liners, and taught wide-eyed students to value the role of industrial materials and determinist philosophy in solving the world’s problems. Decidedly unsympathetic toward institutional Catholicism, he believed that societies advanced when they passed “through the age of the soldier and the priest and attain what is rightly called culture.”

It was nonetheless a priest, Fr. Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P. (1897-1954), who cleared the way for Le Corbusier to design the Monastery of Sainte-Marie-de-La-Tourette (1957-60) for the Dominican community at Eveux-sur-L’Abresle outside Lyon, in France.

Like many Catholics, Fr. Couturier placed great importance on the incarnational nature of Christianity and the role that art and architecture played in understanding the sacred. By contrast, Le Corbusier concentrated his efforts on redefining artistic standards by glorifying industrial forms and promoting deterministic belief in the advancement of civilization. Consensus among Le Corbusier scholars reveals that he “had no place for institutionalized religion within his ideal society.” Nonetheless, Couturier’s philosophy of art and his personal friendship with Le Corbusier made the architect the obvious choice to design a monastery rooted first in modernist art, secondarily in religion. By mistaking the “spirit of the age,” or Zeitgeist, for the Holy Spirit, Couturier assisted in the production of structures by famous modernist architects at the expense of the essential features of Catholic artistic work.

Couturier sought to renew sacred art and architecture in much the same way Le Corbusier sought to renew architecture: through the utilization of powerful contemporary forms and materials. Couturier remained disappointed in much nineteenth and twentieth-century church art in which pallid, sentimental images were copied and recopied. As a remedy, Couturier placed his trust in artists, believing that all true art revealed something of the sacred. Since true art could only be revealed by true artists, he therefore sought the services of the masters of his time, Catholic or not, to reach the sacred through the production of a supposedly ”true” art.

Born in Montbrison, France, Couturier intended a career as an artist from an early age. Called away to the First World War before he could study formally, Couturier returned to painting and drawing after being wounded in battle in 1916. He presented his first watercolor show in 1918, then left for Paris to study in the Atelier d’Art Sacré...
Sacred Architecture

View of the Monastery of La Tourette with the chapel in the top left corner

of the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Under the tutelage of artists Maurice Denis and Georges Desvalliers, Couturier learned the arts of fresco and stained glass before joining the Dominican Order as a candidate for the priesthood.

Soon after his 1930 ordination, Couturier began his life-long quest to improve the sacred art of the Catholic Church. After founding a journal of Christian art entitled L’Art Sacré, Couturier penned numerous articles critiquing the state of church art, suggesting a new approach to ecclesiastical commissions. In order to reverse the trend toward insipid sacred art, the Church would need to readjust its understanding of its role as art patron in the larger society. It could no longer simply rely on the safe artistic formulas of the past being reproduced in mass quantities. Instead, the greatest artistic masters of the day should be put to work in the service of the Church, with or without reference to their personal artistic and religious philosophies.

A forceful writer, Couturier enhanced his arguments with powerful juxtapositions of photographs. In a 1951 article in L’Art Sacré entitled “Sacred Art and Its Public,” Couturier presented two images. The first, a powerful late Romanesque Christ, slightly abstracted and full of expressive emotion, he labeled “What the Church gave the people in the ages of faith.” This he compared with two prayer card images. One illustrated a saccharine child Jesus embracing his girlish and pretty mother. The other showed a distorted Christ hovering over an illuminated Blessed Sacrament. He labeled the images “That which one finds in the pages of prayer books....” Couturier chose exaggerated examples to make his point, but a clear message emerged: trite, sentimental and overly prettified art must be replaced with “living art” composed of strong bold forms which could renew religious fervor through true revelation of the sacred. The idea was not new; traditional artists and architects had been making similar claims for decades. However, most sought to revitalize art within the context of recognizable Catholic tradition and philosophy. With his determinist belief in the advancement of civilization, Couturier saw art of the past as less relevant to the modern age than something produced according to the specific conditions of the twentieth century. He therefore chose a more radical break and favored more avant-garde artists.

To Couturier, true art always revealed something of the sacred, whether its maker was Christian or atheist, sympathetic to Christianity or its worst enemy, incorporating or ignoring artistic tradition. In an article in Harper’s Bazaar, Couturier wrote: We knew very well that some of the artists were not strictly Christians; that some were separated from us by serious divergences of a political as well as of an intellectual order. Trusting in Providence, we told ourselves that a great artist is always a great spiritual being, each in his own manner. Couturier’s trust in “Providence” was part of it. Into my work I bring so much effusion and intense inner life and prayers, and this is the religious, the spiritual, each in their “own manner.” For Couturier, “excellence and artistic sincerity were... to come before faith and piety,” and therefore he commissioned artists and let them determine the artistic outcome.

Couturier rarely, if ever, used the words “Catholic” to describe the content of the modern art he proposed. Instead, he chose the more inclusive term “spiritual,” a favorite of many modernist artists, which allowed them latitude in content and form. He called his confidence in the master artists of his time “‘betting on genius,’ genius being that freedom of spirit which knows no creed.” Since he thought that secular artists were “more religious than the clergy,” Couturier hired them to produce true art, and therefore, reveal some facet of the sacred. Since all artists were “predisposed to spiritual intuitions,” he thought their contemporary work could in fact “be the coming of the Holy Spirit.”

The question arises: did these artists disposed to “spiritual intuitions” make their work appropriate for sacred use by molding their inspiration to the requirements made by an intellectually and spiritually demanding Catholic standard? Or did Couturier trust in their artistic abilities to the detriment of authentic Catholicism?

Since Couturier placed faith in the spiritual intuition of great artists, he asked his friend the highly regarded architect Le Corbusier to design a new Dominican monastery. The principles which organized Le Corbusier’s belief system were those of rationality and industry rather than those of Catholicism. "Le Corbusier’s ideas began and ended with the concept that industrial society had an inherent form, an objective order derived from the nature of man and the nature of machines, an ideal structure, which—if realized—would bring prosperity, harmony, and joy.... For Le Corbusier, any industrial society must be centrally located, hierarchically organized, administered from above, with the most responsible people in the most responsible position." A monastery project therefore spoke to certain of Le Corbusier’s interests in housing projects: a functional program, monastic cells, and the Dominican Rule, which he could view in its more mechanistic regularity.

Le Corbusier also was intrigued by things spiritual, often speaking of laws of nature which hinted at a divine order in geometry, light, and form. He wrote: I am not a churchgoer myself, but one thing I do know is that everyone has the religious consciousness of belonging to a greater mankind, to a greater or lesser degree, but in the end he is part of it. Into my work I bring so much effusion and intense inner life that it becomes something almost religious.
Le Corbusier's allusion to the "inner life," while highly personal, apparently satisfied Couturier. From his early years, Le Corbusier had written of things spiritual, though in wide divergence from Catholic understanding. He claimed in *Towards a New Architecture* that the modern world needed a "spiritual revolution," and he called for a "revision of values" and the "mass-production spirit." The concrete grain silos and coal bins pictured in the book replaced church steeples as symbols of the new age. Nonetheless, Couturier employed Le Corbusier's "almost religious" architecture as medium for a community with religion at its core.

When asked to design other churches after the popular success of La Tourette and his earlier pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp (1950-55), Le Corbusier stated quite clearly that La Tourette monastery held no particular interest for him as a place for sanctification through a Catholic devotional life. Moreover, this feature of the program actually formed an obstacle to his participation. In a 1961 letter declining a request for another church commission, Le Corbusier explained that he designed La Tourette because its program and natural site intrigued him:

I built...the Convent of La Tourette...because the program (ritual, human scale, space, silence, etc.) was favorable, as also were the landscape conditions exceptional. I am not a builder of churches.... Had you said to me, "Will you create a place open all the year, situated on the hillsops in the calm and the dignity, in the nobleness of the beautiful Jura site?", the problem could have been considered. It was a problem of psychic nature and, for me, of decisive value. Le Corbusier, then, by his own admission, could not let himself build a church *per se*. La Tourette had other offerings to interest him: monastic cells which he could equate with his theories on worker housing, and a prime natural site. Le Corbusier was therefore able to filter out the Catholicism and build Couturier's monastery.

Perhaps because of Le Corbusier's "problem" with building churches, he handed off much of the design work for the most sacred sections—the chapel and the altar—to his assistant Iannis Xenakis. In 1987, Xenakis wrote a detailed memoir of his time with Le Corbusier on the La Tourette project, revealing his own philosophies on the subject. Xenakis wrote:

In the face of this project I had to struggle against my atheism rooted in ancient civilizations and, having been an orthodox Christian, against the "schismatic" reflexes buried in my psychic unconscious. As a matter of fact I felt suited to create as if I were a believer, since I had escaped twofold from religion—from the ancient religion with which I had been impregnated as well as from Christian-ade. Le Corbusier “relatively free to explore his own preoccupations.”

While Couturier may have hoped that the Holy Spirit would inspire two contemporary architects who were firmly rooted in their non-Catholic philosophies, evidence shows that Le Corbusier was more interested in the parts of the program that fit his social agenda while his assistant Xenakis modeled the sanctuary with pagan ritual in mind. While it is indeed true that non-Catholic artists can produce acceptable Catholic art if they are willing to educate themselves in and express Catholic beliefs, Couturier made no such demands. Xenakis confirmed this situation:

But of course never during my collaboration with Le Corbusier was the religious or ideological side brought up by him, not by me or the monks. Like other clients who wanted a Corbusian building, the Dominicans left Le Corbusier free to explore his own preoccupations.”

Since Couturier’s death came years before the completion of the project, one might imagine that the remaining Dominicans stood in awe of both Le Corbusier and his patron Couturier who was so sure of the architect's abilities. When asked if the monastery served their religious life well, one Dominican responded: "Le Corbusier knew what we are and what we want." Soon after its completion, the friars were calling the monastery, dedicated to St. Marie-de-la-Tourette, the "Corbusiæ." In addition to his desire to employ contemporary artists, Couturier echoed the traditional doctrine that sacred things are separated apart from the mundane and ordinary. This distinction relied upon tangible expression outside of the common vernacular of the secular world. Couturier provided a concrete example of this "separateness:"

Stravinsky was talking to me of the day when, for the first time, Mozart held in his hands a manuscript by Bach. And I remember what he said in the course of the conversation, "You don’t realize what a treasure Latin is for the Catholic Church. Latin is a 'reserved' tongue. Now it has no other use that to serve supernatural mysteries. A sacred tongue.”

The refectory at La Tourette
didactic function, and were established
in its isolation and position atop many
sacred. La Tourette sits as an object in the hills, starkly
gray and geometric among the
lush and steeply sloping
site. Its dramatic siting and
contrast to the surrounding
environment can be read as
an attempt to emphasize the
building’s separateness, and
by Couturier’s standards,
sacredness. In another
sense, though, the siting of
the complex depended upon
Corbusian thought, particu-
larly his emphasis upon the
role of transportation in
determining the form of cities
and buildings in them. Just
as Le Corbusier had argued
for new city planning prac-
tices because of the mobility
afforded by the automobile, so
Couturier placed La Tourette in the hills, dependent
upon automobile access, and apart from the
city where Dominicans have tradition-
ally built their communities.

The interior of the large chapel dis-
plays the architect’s attempt to fulfill
Couturier’s request for a renewal of sacred
architecture. While grand and imposing,
the interior is devoid of associations with
traditional iconography and architecture.
The large gray box was meant to focus the
attention of the friars on the altar, which
in its isolation and position atop many
steps, retains something of Xenakis’ Az-
tec sensibility. Unlike traditional stained
glass, the clear glass windows served no
didactic function, and were established
according to the scientific and rational
criteria praised by Le Corbusier. Xenakis
himself admitted that the fenestration was
determined according to the readings of a
light meter held inside the finished build-
ing. Holes were then cut in the walls as
needed.

For Le Corbusier, the design of a
church building at Ronchamp, Le Corbus-
er replied:
People were at first surprised to see
me participating in a sacred art. I am
not a pagan. Ronchamp is a response
to a desire that one occasionally has
to extend beyond oneself, and to seek
contact with the unknown.

The La Tourette project formed just
such an occasion for Le Corbusier’s “occa-
sional” desire to look beyond himself into
the unknown. What he neglected though,
with Couturier’s encouragement, was the
known character of things beyond him
as revealed through the Church and ex-
pressed in recognizable symbolism, history
and iconography.

Scholarly assessment of the La To-
urette project has filled volumes with flow-
ery and sometimes simplistic praise of Le
Corbusier’s design skill and the building’s
influence throughout the world. Nearly all
critics write of technological innovations,
formal design properties, and Le Corbusi-
er’s psyche rather than use of the buildings
for a life of prayer and devotion. Martin
Purdy, one of the few writers to address
Le Corbusier’s theological understanding,
claims that Le Corbusier’s ecclesiasti-
cal works “may have little to teach the student
of ecclesiastical architecture who is primar-
ily interested in the relevance of the church
to society...”

La Tourette garnered much attention
as a visual representation of the new art-
stic impulses of the Church, yet it offers
little to promote relevance of the Church in
the modern age. The indict-
ment stings all the more since
it was Couturier’s stated goal
to establish and amplify that
relevance.

This failure is not Le Cor-
busier’s, for it was never his
intention to embody Catholi-
cism in his work or make it
relevant to twentieth-century
society. Both he and Xenakis
remained frank about this
matter. Le Corbusier’s archi-
tectural designs came within
the bounds of the aspirations
he set for himself; he de-
sired to produce a dramatic
building on an imposing site
and work through issues he
personally felt important.
Promoting the claims of the
Church was not his aim, nor
was it achieved.

It was Couturier’s respon-
sibility to make La To-
urette suitable for a religious
community. Catholic teach-
ing, heavily dependent upon
both its own traditions and
Tradition as conveyor of
truth, could not blend with
Couturier’s philosophy. Lost
in Couturier’s aesthetic are the artistic
complexities of imagery, intellectual con-
tent, and architectural continuities that
raise a building above the mundane
and often support personal piety. Although
Couturier found himself in an age which
necessitated a reform of Church art, his
method did violence to Christian tradi-
tion. It also placed too great a trust in
modernist architects who did not neces-
sarily aspire to hold their art to the stan-
dards needed by the Church.

While Couturier lamented that the
Church had gained nothing from modern
painters like Manet, Degas and Chagall,
he did not consider that their art and phi-
losophies might not be compatible with the
Christian faith. In short, Couturier sought
to use the heroes of a worldview in opposition to his own in order to advance his own artistic agenda. For their art to serve his aims, he had to surrender important elements of the Faith he claimed to profess. From all indications, Couturier was a sort of determinist, believing that the correct expression was the modern expression. He adopted the Hegelian model of history in which artistic change comes about through an unknown collective force, but he equated the ever-shifting and inherently secular Zeitgeist with inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Zeitgeist and the Heliger Geist did not always agree.

Le Corbusier knew how to provide the architecture that Couturier wanted, irrespective of the religious effect it might have. Le Corbusier wrote:

I have not experienced the miracle of faith, but I have often known the miracle of inexpressible space, the apotheosis of plastic emotion.28

This limited understanding of the spiritual satisfied Couturier’s immediate needs. His professed mission was to advance the Church by infusing its artistic creations with the true sense of the sacred, and there is no need to doubt his sincere intention. However, his method and philosophy can be better seen in the light of passing time, and can clearly be found wanting. Sacred art and architecture must use the means at its disposal to amplify the teaching of the Church and inspire piety and holiness through what Sacrosanctum Concilium called “signs and symbols of heavenly realities.” This was more than Le Corbusier was willing to give and more than Couturier was willing to demand. The Monastery of La Tourette was the result.

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5During Couturier’s activity in the 1950s, the Dominicans of France were embattled in a struggle of will and theology with the French bishops and the Vatican. Criticizing the Dominicans for their political actions and theological writings, which contradicted the teachings of the Church, the Vatican’s Cardinal Pizzardo in October of 1953 sent the Master General of the Dominican Order a letter: “You know well the new ideas and tendencies, not only exaggerated, but even erroneous, that are developing in the realms of theology, canon law and society... this deplorable state of affairs cannot help but precupy the Holy See when it considers that the religious orders are forces upon which the church can and must depend in a special way in its struggle against the enemies of truth.” This not unfounded suspicion of French “modernity” extended to the work of non-traditional artists like Couturier, whose work could be associated with these movements. See Thomas O’Meara, “‘Raid on the Dominicans’: The Repression of 1954,” America 170 (February 5, 1994), 8-16.


7Le Corbusier, Towards... 6.


9Purdy, 303: “[Le Corbusier] seems to have accepted the [La Tourette] project because it was concerned with housing a community, rather than simply encasing a cultic act.”


11Xenakis, 143.

12Xenakis, 146.

13Xenakis, 143.

14Purdy, 290.


17Couturier, “A Modern Church...,” 121-122.


19Xenakis, 146.


21Purdy, 318.

22Purdy, 299.

Reviewed by Christopher Olaf Blum

Notre-Dame of Amiens (1220-ca. 1269) is the largest in area of the French Gothic cathedrals and second to St. Pierre of Beauvais in height. Praised poetically by Ruskin and beloved of pilgrims and tourists, it has nevertheless been seen by art historians as a copy of Chartres or a poorman's Reims. Chartres is said to typify 'high Gothic'; Reims has the ultimate west front. Amiens, by comparison, has height and light, but not much else. Yet now Our Lady of Amiens has a champion.

The organization of Professor Murray's volume is novel and significant. He eschews the style of a monograph, preferring to guide the reader on a walk through the building. The selection and organization of the excellent photographs (many his own) make this strategy work. By the end of the volume, one has seen what Murray describes. More importantly, the reader has contemplated Our Lady's house: entered through Christ the door; approached in awe the sacred space of the choir, marveled at the spaciousness of the New Jerusalem, been moved by the mysterious geometry of the building; assisted at a sermon; caught a glimpse of the inventive engineering behind the west front; returned outside to read with care the sculpture of the portals; and, perhaps even seen a miracle. (A visit to the Amiens Cathedral Web Site will allow a similar tour of the building: www.learn.columbia.edu).

There is vast erudition here. Extensive evidence supports Murray’s conclusions about the chronology of the building; detailed appendices discuss controversial matters and present translations of the key 13th-century texts; the archival research and bibliographic apparatus behind the volume are exhaustive. Yet the scholarship is worn lightly. This is a great virtue, because what this book is about, in the end, is entering into the ‘mentalité’ of the Gothic age.

The great Gothic monuments were not stamped out of a mold, still less did they emerge on the landscape of Christendom without toil, sacrifice, expense, and even conflict. Gothic, Murray insists, “should be understood more as a process than a thing.” If we understand this to mean that the Gothic Cathedrals emerged from a certain ‘mentalité’ and were constructed with a similar method (in the widest sense of that term), then the lesson that emerges for those who would restore sacred architecture to its glory is one of cautious hope. Of hope, because as we approach closer to the mind of the Gothic builders and their patrons we see that the decisions they made could be made again. Of caution, because it becomes clear that reviving a taste for pointed arches will not suffice: a whole way of thinking about the Church and with the Church will need to be restored.

Christopher Olaf Blum, is assistant professor of history at Christendom College [Ed. Note: Readers are advised to obtain their copies while it is still available, since this publication is presently out of print.]
Sacred Art as Inner Reality

Reviewed by Michael R. Carey

John Saward’s graceful and insightful book was developed from the Bernard Gilpin Lectures which he delivered at the University of Durham in 1996. The “theological meditations,” and this is the phrase Saward correctly uses to describe his prose, “lead us to understand what beauty is, and how it can be recognized in works of art and holy lives.”

Saward uses a definition of beauty which comes from antiquity and which is repeated by Saint Thomas Aquinas. According to this tradition, beauty requires radiance (claritas), harmony (consonantia or debita proportio), and wholeness (integritas). The integritas of a work of art tells us that it must be complete; debita proportio refers to the material form of the work; but claritas refers to its substance or essential form. Saward then makes a judgment which seems to be the hinge on which his entire book turns: of these three, he tells us, “the chief is claritas.”

Modern art criticism often turns on a consideration of material form. Accordingly, any subject can be the matter of art so long as it is well-formed by the artist. It would not be inconsistent, then to speak of a “beautiful obscenity,” for example. To counter this notion, Saward turns to Aquinas who, while not denying the beauty of the sensible form, “wants to plunge more deeply into the intelligible form of a thing, its inward form, the light that enlightens the mind.”

The major example Saward uses to illustrate his theological aesthetic is the altarpiece from the Convent of San Marco in Florence, painted by Fra Angelico in the late 1430’s. He describes all the major figures there: the angels, the saints, and especially the Madonna. Of her, Saward notes how “the fairness of her soul, the substantial form, shines through the fineness of her features. Through the material light of his colours (the radiance of Our Lady’s Christ-gazing face), through the spatial proportions he has bestowed on her members (the perfect poise of her Christ-bearing arms), we can glimpse the spiritual splendour of her pure mind and humble heart.”

In this analysis Saward illustrates that beauty is an attribute of being. “An artwork that is truly beautiful should reveal the thing’s inner reality, its intelligible form which makes it to be what it is.” In language typical of these meditations, Saward explains that a form “is a kind of ray emanating from the brilliant Wisdom of the Creator. . . . [It] mirrors an eternal idea in the mind of God, an idea contained within the Idea, the eternal Word, in whom the Father knows Himself and His creatures.”

These ideas are an important corrective to modern aesthetic theory. They remind us not only that art should represent what a thing really is, but also that a thing is what God means it to be. This is why the beauty of art is connected with the beauty of holiness. “The moral virtues,” Saward writes, “while retaining their orientation towards the end of man, can also further the ends of art.” Saward uses the example of the virtue of purity:

A man without the spiritual beauty of temperance will be too blinded by his passions to perceive the many-splendoured thing; he will tend, for example, to see the body, not as a sacrament, the expressive incarnation of the spiritual soul and thus of the person, but as a machine for obtaining pleasure. By contrast, the pure heart will have eyes that are clear and unclouded.

The virtuous person sees most clearly what a thing really is. His artistic representation of it will reflect more of its inner form. It will have a deeper claritas. Art, therefore, has its beginning in seeing, in what Josef Pieper calls “contemplation” and Maritain “creative intuition.”

Saward does not fill his book with theory alone. It is filled with eloquent reflections on the reach of art and beauty. Concerning art and the Eucharist, Saward quotes Pope John Paul II as saying:

The cathedrals, the humble country churches, the religious music, architecture, sculpture, and painting all radiate the mystery of the verum Corpus, natum de Maria Virgin, towards which everything converges in a movement of wonder.

In this context, Saward urges us to maintain a beautiful liturgy by attention to “vestments and vessels, by chant and icons, by the consecrated space of her temples.” Even though the hidden beauty of the liturgy is always greater than its visible forms, still the Church “does not, cannot, abandon her iconographic mission.” As the Second Vatican Council asserts, “the fine arts are rightly numbered among the noblest expressions of human genius. This is especially true of religious art and its highest achievement, namely, sacred art.”

Some of the most interesting passages in Saward’s book are those almost incidental meditations on some of the Church’s martyrs. He explains convincingly how Saint Cecilia came to be associated with music. He tells the story of the wonderful Jesuit poet-martyrs St. Edmund Campion and St. Robert Southwell. He speaks of the dedicated Catholicism of the composer William Byrd, and of the martyrdom of the Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution, which inspired Poulenc’s Dialogues des Carmelites.

If there is one drawback to this book, it is perhaps a too polemical attitude toward what Saward calls “the martyrdom of art.” In this short section at the end of his book, Saward discusses the brutal iconoclasm of post-Reformation England. Worse even than Calvin or Zwingli, “the burning and breaking of holy beauty was the work not only of Cromwell’s soldiery in the seventeenth century but of Anglicanism’s founding fathers in the sixteenth.” From there Saward moves to the iconoclasm of the twentieth century which is to be found within the Roman Catholic Church herself. Philistines have seized the sanctuary. The stone altar of sacrifice has been supplanted by a wooden communion table. The priest no longer looks to the East, whither Christ ascended and whence He will come again, but stares at the people, like the chairman of the board. . . . The Holy of Holies has been exiled—banshied from the central gaze and adoration of the faithful.

Saward continues his litany of grievances for several more lines and then concludes: “The integrity and thus the beauty of the Roman rite have almost been destroyed.” This is perhaps the best illustration of that integritas which is one of the hallmarks of beauty, notable here by its absence.

I have great sympathy for Saward’s complaint. I agree that the iconoclasm of Reformation England and that of contemporary Catholicism are lamentable in the extreme. It is only the tone of these remarks which bothers. He leaves the placid prose of his theological meditations for a sharp edged polemic, and in doing so he breaks, in the last few pages, the integritas of his own work.

Even so, this is a book that will be numbered among those which are most important to me. It has helped me to understand what beauty is and how it shows its face. I recommend it to anyone who has been moved by great art or great lives and who wants to understand why.

Rev. Michael R. Carey, O.P. is the director of The Sante Fe Institute, Berkeley, California.
AUGUSTUS WELBY NORTHMORE PUGIN (1812-1852) was the subject of two past exhibitions: the first, in London, at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1994); the second, at New York City’s The Bard Graduate Center for the Studies in the Decorative Arts (1996). These books are catalogues published in conjunction with these exhibitions.

While Phoebe Stanton wrote a biography of Pugin in 1971, and continues her effort to write the definitive Pugin biography, the current interdisciplinary study of Pugin is considered to have begun with the publication in 1985 of Alexandra Wedgwood’s comprehensive listing and detailed description of the works of Pugin held by the Victoria and Albert Museum. This renewed interest in Pugin has spawned the creation of the Pugin Society and the publication of its semiannual periodical, True Principles, and a site on the Internet.

These catalogues document how, virtually single-handedly, Pugin made Gothic a universally accepted style in Great Britain and around the world. He accomplished this through his precocious artistic abilities, his prodigious output; his teamwork with clients, benefactors and craftsmen; his marketing savvy; and his work in a multitude of media.

Born in London in 1812 as the only child of an English mother (Catherine Welby) and French father (Auguste Charles Pugin) who worked as an illustrator, Pugin was trained at home by his parents and some private tutors, and was self-educated by his frequent and long visits to the British Museum whose doors were 50 yards from his. “From the earliest times in his life, Pugin was meeting, traveling with, working alongside, and living in the same neighborhood as men established in the businesses of art, architecture, theatre, publishing, and literature.” By age 15 he had a royal commission designing a gold cup.

Initially, Pugin used his artistic abilities to earn a living by making furniture and designing theatrical sets. By the time he turned 25, he had taught himself architecture and the foundation for his first building had been laid. Over the next 15 years he designed six cathedrals and over 100 large and small churches, built in England, Ireland, and Australia. Some critics belittled his work by calling him “church-a-week” Pugin.

Pugin’s parents had raised him Protestant, but after their deaths he converted to Catholicism in 1835 at age 23. The Catholic Emancipation Act had been enacted just six years earlier and, although the Oxford Movement had been founded two years earlier, Anglican Father John Henry Newman would not convert for 10 more years. Religious orders were still illegal, no Catholic worship was permitted in public, and public officeholders could not wear their robes or jewels of office at Catholic services. Indeed, 16 years later, in 1851, when Rome announced the restoration of the English hierarchy, there were riots and the pope was burned in effigy.

It was a time of polemics not only in religion but in architecture and Pugin entered the fray, writing and publishing over seven books, such as The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture (1841) and An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England (1843). He also wrote a piece urging the restoration of Gregorian chant. For Pugin, Gothic architecture was to Christian architecture as Gregorian chant was to Christian music or as Thomistic philosophy was to Christian philosophy.

Pugin worked closely with benefactors, especially Lord Talbot, the 16th Earl of Shrewsbury, and Ambrose Lisle March-Phillipps de Lisle. In addition, Pugin developed what we would call today “partnering” relationships with entrepreneurs in various media. These entrepreneurs included the builder George Myers; the wallpaper and furniture maker John Gregory Crace; the ceramics manufacturer Herbert Minton; and the jeweler, metalsmith, and stained glass maker John Hardman, Jr. The London catalogue consists of 21 chapters, most of them focused on different specific media, including also his work in book design and production, monuments and brasses, textiles, as well as secular buildings, most notably the Houses of Parliament rebuilt in 1847, after the fire of 1834.

Nothing escaped Pugin’s attention: wall and floor tile, chandeliers, candlesticks, woodworking, doors, dinner plates, silverware, even spittoons. Nothing was outside his ambit; Pugin designed seminaries, chapels, rectories, convents, hospitals, houses, even barns. For an extra guinea, he drew illustrations for Father Newman’s books. On the range of Pugin’s production, Dr. Clive Wainwright wrote: “One should imagine the Pugin silver and ceramics standing on the Pugin table which in turn stood beneath a Pugin ceiling on a Pugin carpet in a Pugin building. It is this ability to articulate mass, colour, texture, flat pattern and utility and apply these to the architecture of an interior and the furnishings which it contains that demonstrates [his] genius.”

Pugin’s work culminated in his contribution to the Great Exhibition of 1851, the first world’s fair. There were 15,000 exhibitors that attracted six million visitors. It was held in London’s “Crystal Palace,” and the area demarcated as Pugin’s was called The Medieval Court which was a grand success. Queen Victoria walked through it twice so that Pugin’s future and the future of Gothic Style was assured. Alas for Pugin. He had overworked himself, and died in 1852 at the age of 40. Yet the Gothic revival that subsequently occurred in Germany, Belgium, Scotland, and the United States can be attributed to this architect’s prodigious but short career.

James Thunder is A.W.N. Pugin’s great-great-grandson; the publisher of “The Young Catholics Collection,” and a consultant to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on end-of-life issues.
It is important to remind ourselves of the purpose of a church. It’s not a hall, or a residence, or an administrative building; rather, it is the house of God, and must reflect that primary mission in its design. One can walk into a house, and feel totally unmoved by it, or one can be drawn into the warmth and love of a true family ambience, but in each case, it’s those who live there, and the way they use the house, which make it into what it is. A house is basically functional, and is given character by its occupants. A church is different. It should be a place which grabs hold of one’s attention, creating an atmosphere which says “This is God’s house — holy ground!” What we should strive for in church design is to provide the physical environment for prayer, and a deepening of our relationship with God. When building a house, few would insist that the design of the kitchen or dining room should make one feel hungry! However, a church should make one hungry; hungry for God.

Bear in mind the reasons why people come to a church. Some will come in times of tragedy or disaster, such as the recent massacre at Littleton in Colorado. They are seeking God’s help to bear the pain of loss or suffering, and to try to make sense of something for which there is no satisfactory worldly explanation. Others will come to give thanks to God and rejoice with and in Him for the graces they have received: a proposal of marriage; the birth of a child; a new job or promotion. Some will come as a matter of routine, with faith that has grown tepid with familiarity: but the atmosphere they encounter should be one which challenges them to renew their commitment. All these things take place in the world, but all have a Divine dimension to them as well — indeed, this is their most important dimension! It is most appropriate that we should find and express that Divine dimension in a church that displays and emphasizes that transcendence.

The design of churches can produce buildings that will affect thousands of people over the life of the building. Relatively few will visit a house; many will visit an office complex or shopping mall, but few will remember the atmosphere as being inspiring. Sensitive and inspired architects can create church designs which though very simple, due to budgetary and space restrictions, nonetheless use space and visual elements to draw people’s awareness to the supremacy of God, and to emphasize His Eucharistic presence, and the reality of Jesus’ sacrifice for us on His Cross. These churches will confront visitors, no matter how lukewarm their faith, with the intense and vibrant existence of God, portrayed and embodied in a physical structure. And many, many people will remember their encounters with our Lord, which were helped to become possible through these purposeful church designs.

Fr. Peter Grant is pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Winnfield, Louisiana. This article was taken from his critique of student designs at the University of Notre Dame.
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