

## ARCHITECTURE AND EUCHARIST

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Beginning as early as the mid 1960's and the beginning of the implementation of the liturgical reform, almost every single church and chapel in the United States and Britain has been subject to a process of renovation. Moreover, thirty years on, many of these renovation have been or soon will be renovated anew. In short, communities have invested vast amounts of money in church building projects.

The experience of designing and building churches and chapels is a complex matrix of artistic, architectural, sociological and theological issues. An often these issues intrude into the life of a community in ways that, if you will pardon the pun, are less than constructive. The Liturgy has become in many cases the lightning rod for debates in our communities on issues such as the shortage of priests, the role of lay ministries and the role of women in the the church.

As often as not, our reactions to these issues tend to be somewhat polarized even though we are naturally inclined to want to deprecated such terms as 'conservative' and 'liberal' or 'right' and 'left'. My experience of such conversations, when they occur, is that one is left with a sense that everyone is in a mad scramble to claim for themselves the 'middle' and thus delineate everyone else's position in relation to his or her own. The risk one takes in trying to present a paper on church architecture in relation of the way the Eucharist is celebrated in such buildings is that the paper is likely to come across as a bid for the superior position of the middle ground. My hope today is that I will be able to touch on a few issues which if nothing else will spark conversation, a conversation which needs to be ongoing and genuine. My approach will be to address a few facets of the question, not from the standpoint of someone well schooled in either liturgics or architecture, but as one who, like all of us, spends an awful lot of time praying and celebrating the Eucharist in church, and for whom the issues involved are very important.

In terms of my own experience, I have for nearly the last decade served my community as Master of Ceremonies, and have had a share in developing the liturgy as it is celebrated, or perhaps a more sensitive term would be as it is

interpreted, at St. Louis Abbey in the United States. Those of you who are familiar with our community will know that our Church is a very remarkable expression of the bauhaus architectural style of late 1950s. The most remarkable thing about it from a liturgical point of view is that it is built entirely in the round with the altar located in the exact middle. This altar, which is a solid block of granite weighing about nine tons, is the immovable fulcrum around which the whole church turns. From an architectural standpoint, one of the most remarkable things about this church is that unlike so many other pre-conciliar churches, it has not undergone any significant renovation or restoration which involved a reordering of the altar or other sanctuary furniture. Our happy experience is that the Abbey Church has absorbed the liturgical reforms of the Novus Ordo Mass without any drastic artistic or architectural changes. There have been small adaptations over the years and there are perhaps now further adaptations that need to be made, but over all it is a building that has proved well suited to the needs of a small monastery with a busy school and parish apostolate. In almost all ways, the Abbey Church of my profession has influenced my thinking on both Church Architecture and the Eucharist. I think that this is highly significant. My suspicion is that the positions we hold on these two issues will be significantly influenced by our age and experience of the church, especially during our earlier or formative years. The answers to questions we might ask ourselves such as what does “full, active participation” and whether or not there is such a thing as a “Catholic style” of architecture will be significantly affected by our experience. Our pasts have either nourished our spirituality or failed to do so and these issues will influence our thoughts in the present. It is this link between the issues and our own spirituality that generates the amount of passion such issues invariably provoke.

If I may concentrate on three key issues: (1) the position of the assembly relative to the altar; (2) the location of the tabernacle; and (3) the more amorphous issue of a so-called “Catholic Style” of architecture and whether certain architectural styles are inappropriate for Catholic church buildings. An overall point of departure for these issues is the question of what constitutes full, conscious, active participation in the liturgy, and my point of reference will be to my experience of the Abbey Church of my own community.

## THE POSITION OF THE ASSEMBLY VERSUS THE ALTAR

The Abbey Church in St. Louis is arranged in such a way, that no member of the congregation is ever more than about fifty feet from the altar. The seating is fixed pews arranged in bays of about ten pews deep spaced in a circular arrangement, with the choir making one bay of the circle, but facing inward to itself rather than outward to the altar. This arrangement is a significant departure from the more traditional and indeed more practical Basilican arrangement of rectangular theater style seating.

Arranging the seating around the altar gives a certain sense of immediacy and even intimacy to the sacred action taking place in the sanctuary. Acoustically it seems to help with congregational singing. Over all, it seems to invite people to participate in the liturgy and seems to open up an element of hospitality that many people find attractive to a world that seems to be seeking 'community'. However, the sight lines are a bit unusual, and there are certain 'blind spots' that are created in terms of seeing what is taking place. Over all there can be a considerable element of 'disorientation' in such an arrangement if taken to the fullest extreme. Also processional movement during the liturgy takes on an unusual character. One of my brethren at home has likened a procession in our church to the Israelites wandering in the desert. Here again, lack of 'directionality' causes a certain sense of dislocation, and considerably diminishes the sense of transcendence and solemnity which are helpful to interior prayer and which are fostered by longitudinal ranks of pews. At St. Louis, we have tried to create a focal point for the celebrant and assembly at the altar by returning the high altar crucifix to its central location. The design of the crucifix is such that it doesn't dominate or block the celebrant and ministers and yet provides a sound liturgical and indeed theological focus to the celebration. The crucifix becomes the heart of the architectural space, drawing the celebration into that great mystery where by the Eucharist is offered to the Father, through the Son and grace received in the Holy Spirit.

Having said all this, it has to be underscored that I believe that church architecture is essentially 'the art of shaping space around ritual', and that the liturgical rites of the church are in large part determined by the shape of the building. Of course another way of putting this is that the liturgical rites should themselves determine the shape of the building. But since most of our

liturgical spaces were built to serve a different form of rite this raises important issues in regard to how we reorder them for celebrating the Eucharist. As the saying goes, you cannot put a round peg in a square hole. Often times in trying to adapt linear spaces for seating around the sanctuary, very unsuccessful arrangements have been reached. The site lines and linearity of good architecture, and many of our 19th and early 20th century churches and chapels are good, even splendid, architecture, will force the mind into an orientation which makes some of our attempts at reordering unsuccessful.

### **THE LOCATION OF THE TABERNACLE**

Perhaps the most vexing issue that surfaces in any conversation about church architecture is the question of where to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. I think it is clear that most would believe that that when people enter a Catholic Church they should be aware that the Eucharist is reserved there and that the place of reservation should reflect the due honor and reverence the reserved Eucharist deserves. A great deal of delicacy is needed in our discussion of this particular issue, which has proved to have been one of the most divisive issues of the liturgical reforms. As I mention earlier, the majority of our church's and chapels were constructed in a style which focused the mind and directed the prayer of the faithful to the focal point of an altar at at least something of a distance to the assembly. This was a dramatic and highly effective way of creating a sense of awe and dignity to Catholic sanctuaries. The visual climax of this architectural vista was the tabernacle with the reserved sacrament. In this arrangement, the Altar and Tabernacle were fused into one ritual point. In such a situation, adoration of the reserved sacrament in the tabernacle could be seen as dependent upon and leading back to the Eucharistic celebration, but at the same time separate from that celebration and not confused with it. When the celebrant was oriented toward the tabernacle this arrangement seems to have caused very few difficulties. However given the nearly universal contemporary practice of celebrating facing the congregation, clear problems have arisen. The first attempts at addressing the issue of Mass facing the people was to place freestanding altars in front of preexisting altars, continuing the practice of reserving the sacrament in the tabernacles as before. In some situations this has continued to the current day. While this situation seems to be one which works fairly well, it is perhaps less than satisfactory. By creating two points of reference – the liturgical altar and the tabernacle

altar, a certain dichotomy is created. There is a sense of separation which draws attention to itself. It also leads to an awkwardness in the ritual of the Mass. In the Abbey Church at St. Louis, tabernacle was never placed on the High Altar. In the initial planning of the liturgical space, it was placed on an altar at the back of the retrochoir on axis with the principal altar but separated from it by nearly thirty feet and flanked by the monks choirstalls. This was truly a position of 'honor and reverence' and was separate from, but related to the sanctuary in a way that was architecturally effective. However from the point of view of the ritual action of the choir, it was a total disaster. The brethren were constantly torn between two very strong foci. It was unclear if one should be bowing to the high altar or genuflecting towards the reserved sacrament. A sense of 'dislocation' made the architecturally excellent arrangement functionally impossible. The solution was to move the tabernacle to one of the 12 side altars which ring the walls of the church. While this resolved the ritual situation, it has still not been a satisfactory arrangement in the minds of many people, as now the reserved sacrament seems to be more of a cult object in much the same way a relic or statue might be. Perhaps it is significant that on Holy Thursday, the altar of repose continues to be set up in the original position of the Blessed Sacrament Altar in the midst of the monastic choir.

Leaving aside the issue of a wholly separate chapel of reservation, which in the case of existing buildings is almost always problematic, I think that most would agree that there is a need for beauty and distinctiveness in the place of reservation and even that there should be some sort of link, though not necessarily physical, between the altar and the tabernacle.

If I may venture an opinion, I think the idea of a 'hanging pyx' or suspended tabernacle has much to recommend in this context. It has a good historical pedigree and it makes a clear but distinct separation between altar and the Reserved Sacrament. Moreover, it doesn't interfere with the ritual movement of the liturgy in the same way two foci will often tend. Such a method of reservation would move the issue off the floor plan if you will into another area of architecture which for lack of a better term can be called 'massing', or the arrangement of walls to windows and ceiling to floor etc. Such an approach focuses on the geometric and 'acoustic' and is in as sense even 'iconographic' as witnessed by the Cistercian architecture of the 12th

century.

### IS THERE A CATHOLIC “STYLE?”

This perhaps brings me to my third and final point; the question: Is there a Catholic style of architecture? I think the answer is basically yes. For instance, there is clearly a pagan form of architecture. The pagan temple was built primarily to house a cult object, whereas the Christian church is primarily to house the assembly and its sacramental life. It might even be argued that there is a distinction to be made between Protestant Architecture and Catholic Architecture. Catholic architecture is sacrament- and word-oriented rather than fundamentally word-oriented, and Catholic architecture has a strong sensorial dimension that exploits the mediating power of the saints and of material creation.

This having been said, I do not think it would be right to claim that the architecture of any certain historical period has a privileged value for today's liturgy. The history of architecture has proved that the church has adapted to major cultures and styles in the past. This suggests that it needs to continue to do so. Perhaps here a quote from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is helpful: “The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as its very own but has admitted styles from every period, according to the proper genius and circumstances of peoples and the requirements of the many different rites in the church” (#123).

What is perhaps most important is that sacred architecture is primarily one which grows organically out of and follows an historical trajectory from a whole tradition of liturgical architecture. Another quote, might be helpful here. Pablo Picasso said, ‘Tradition is not putting on your grandfather's hat, but having a baby.’ In this context it might be argued that there are styles which in a better, more complete, and more articulate fashion express and embody the complexity and relative importance of the various aspects of Catholicism: the place of the church in the city, the proper place for people, priest, and rite, the union of the living with the dead in the communion of saints, the transhistorical identity of Catholicism and its role in human history. Certain architectural ‘styles’ (particularly certain facets of modernism and its design methods which focus on individual or self expression are perhaps not

always suitable for Catholic use. For the Catholic, beauty is one of the transcendental attributes of God, and thus has a nature in and of itself which infinitely exceeds his consciousness of it. Good Architecture is an expression of and shares in this beauty. Thus, the Catholic architect seeks constantly to produce architecture which embodies substantive principles, while he rejects an architecture which embodies a relativist world-view. Our architecture must embody with the greatest clarity the substantive content of our Theology not just our ecclesiology. The preeminent examples of the Catholic tradition throughout the ages, although quite varied in outward appearance, are likely to have several characteristics in common: they indigenous to their time and place; they are honest expressions of the needs of the church at the time they were designed; they draw strength from achieving excellence in the timeless architectural principles of form, light, proportion, harmony and rhythm; they must be well-crafted, utilizing available craftsmen and materials, and innovative use of existing and new construction technologies.

The Catholic style, should be beautiful and should say “church” to those who worship there. It must speak of both transcendence and hospitality creating a balance between the mystery of God and the enduring and accessible presence of Christ in our midst.