

# SECOND SPRING

M A R C H ❖ 1 9 9 5

## What Happened to Church Architecture?

**A Return to Catholic Architecture**

**By Steven Schloeder**

**W**hen people learn that I—an architect and a practicing Catholic—am professionally concerned with Catholic church architecture, they frequently raise surprisingly similar questions and observations: “Why can’t we have beautiful churches anymore?” “How come our churches look so ‘Protestant?’” “How come that new shopping mall (or museum, or library, or hotel lobby) is more splendid than any recent church?” “Why do our modern churches lack transcendence...the sense of majesty...beauty...the ability to inspire awe...(fill in your own missing characteristic)?” Very provocative perceptions on the part of the faithful!

The immediate and simple answer is that we, as 20th-century Western Catholics, have lost our understanding and language of church architecture. We no longer build in the tradition of our faith. We no longer see the building as a sign pointing beyond itself. It has become only a building to house a congregation. A more elaborate response must look at what this language of church architecture is, how it developed, what are its vocabulary and grammar and syntax, and why we have lost it. I hope to lay a foundation for further explorations in restor-

ing the essential elements of the language of sacred architecture in the Catholic tradition.

### **Not a Matter of Style**

Our present concerns are not questions of architectural “styles.” For 1800 years the Church has built in the prevalent style of the age, with the best technologies of the day.

Indeed, the building programs of the Church generally define the styles and the epochs of Western art history: Roman, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque. There is, in fact, no “Catholic style” of architecture, because the Church transcends all particular cultures that space and time necessarily constrain and define.



**1. The Gothic Cathedral as the “Heavenly Jerusalem.” Wells Cathedral. (Ink wash by author)**

The traditional styles all developed within specific cultures. Their builders took advantage of contemporaneous building skills and technology, and had in mind specific understandings of theology, cosmology, art and the human person. In these styles we can see

noticeable connections between the Church’s theology, her sense of mission, and the strength of her arts. The strong architectural expressions of each of the great ages of church building manifested the equally deliberate thoughts of the Church of the time.

From the time of the legalization of Christianity, the Church’s first



major buildings were built on the model of the Roman judicial courts, the basilica. These basilican churches can be seen as a statement of the Church's bringing forth the Justice of Christ into the world: the *pax Romana* perfected in the *pax Christi*. After the Imperium moved to Constantinople, the Byzantine liturgy, architecture and arts gave form to the contemporaneous Patristic theology and spirituality. Eight hundred years later, the Gothic cathedral embodied the Augustinian cosmology and theolo-

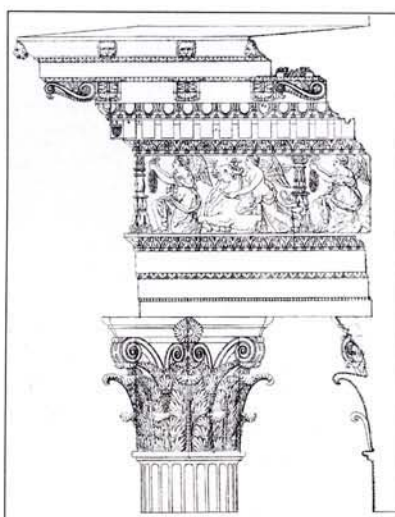
an architectural language. The elements of Classical architecture, however, which spoke of the pagan sacrifice no longer speak to us (see ill. 3). Similarly, while we can deeply appreciate and learn from the Gothic cathedral we, for better or for worse, are no longer medieval thinkers. We can no longer cut stone into sculpture with the eye and the mind of a medieval mason. Nor are we any longer engaged in the Counter-Reformation polemics which gave form to the glorious Baroque churches.



**2. The exuberance of the Counter-Reformation Baroque. (Photo by author.)**

gy, where the Church on earth was understood as a foreshadowing of the "heavenly Jerusalem" (cf. Rev 21:1) (see ill. 1). Still later, the Baroque exuberances of the Counter-Reformation architecture—with dual emphases on the cult of the Eucharist and the proclamation of the Word—simultaneously affirmed the Council of Trent's dogmatic definitions, and implicitly criticized Calvinism's austerities and iconoclasm (see ill. 2).

There is, indeed, much to learn from the past, which in no way demands that we imitate previous styles. The beauty, structure, language, and articulation of the Five Classical Orders (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite, and Tuscan), for example, have much to teach us about the advantages of careful discipline and proportion in



**3. The elements of pagan sacrifice in Classical architecture. (From Vignola)**

If we merely ape previous styles of architecture, how can we expect our buildings to be relevant to the modern human consciousness? We have

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razed the bastions, and the Church has accepted the challenge issued at Vatican II to renew the temporal order with the spirit of Christ. Rather, we must become like "The wise steward who can pull both old and new from the storehouse..." (Mt 13:52). In the realm of architecture, this scripture challenges us to look for a new and robust architecture, impelled by the heroic vision of the Second Vatican Council, that grows organically out of the traditions, while taking full advantage of the materials and techniques available to us today.

### **The church as icon**

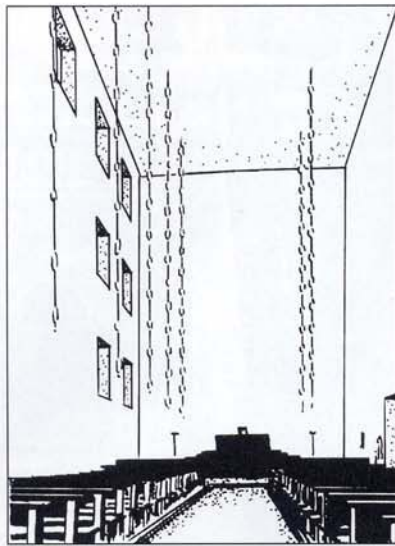
Over the past 40 years Catholic church architecture has been dominated by the "radical functionalist" approach. Its proponents believed that the church building will begin to take on an appropriate symbolic character when "truly well ordered for liturgy and parish life." Defining "truly well ordered" entails matter for another discussion. Suffice it to say that there are often unhappy solutions that have limited the buildings even in this regard. This approach, an extension of socialistic philosophy in the realm of architecture, has been largely responsible for the banality of churches built during this time (see ill. 4). Symbolism is necessarily intentional: if the symbolic aspect is left to "take care of itself," the building will no doubt be "speaking" of something unintended, and there will probably be conflicting messages.

Even so, and good intentions notwithstanding, this approach is necessarily limited because it denies the whole person: including our capacities for memory and imagination. Whether conscious or not, the designers and liturgists of the past 40



years—especially those who raised the cry for “whitewashed barns” while stripping bare once glorious churches—have been trapped in the anti-human, socialistic mind-set of the Enlightenment. Their buildings have been incapable of addressing the deeper, mystical knowledge of the faith, much less the human soul’s yearning for the mystery of transcendent beauty. Rather, they have fallen into a reductionist mentality, stripping the churches of those elements, symbols, and images that speak silently to the human heart. Their buildings speak only of the immanent—even as their liturgies studiously avoid the transcendent to dwell on the “gathered assembly”—and thus have departed from the theological and anthropological underpinnings of the traditional understanding of Catholic church architecture. They have forgotten, or chosen to ignore, that religion necessarily points beyond itself. We as human beings are naturally religious, because we can only find our validation, worth and dignity outside ourselves. We are not our own “ground of being.” Were we, we would have no need for external love relationships, no need for mystery, no need at all for liturgy or community. In short, we must now recapture the sense of the building that speaks to the whole human being: the dynamic, transcendent, rational, imaginative person engaged in his own search for meaning, validation, and infinitude.

In response, we must now look beyond the merely functional arrangements (and the “functional” approach to liturgy), to rediscover where even the language and the grammar of the building might contribute to understanding the things of God. We must look, therefore, at the elements common to church buildings that transcend epoch and cultural milieu. At this deeper level, we see clear similarities in vision, intention, understanding, typological form, and symbolic meaning—despite obvious differences in stylistic expression. At the heart of this concept lies the



4. The white-washed barn of Modernism. *Corpus Christi, Aachen, Germany* by Rudolf Schwarz.

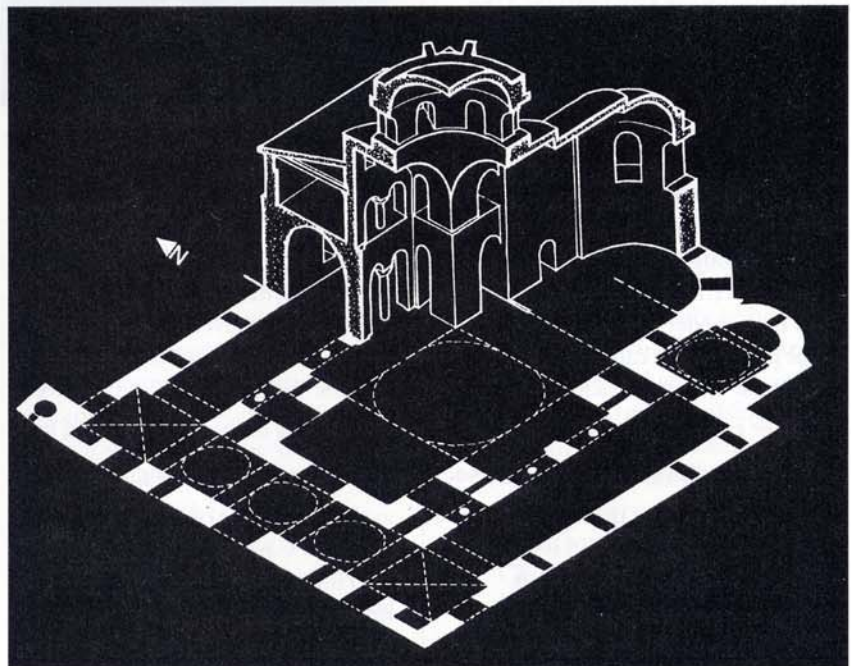
understanding that the church building becomes a sacred symbol, an *icon* if you will, of the spiritual reality of the Church.

There is a Catholic understanding that we can order all material things for the glory of God and the sanctification of man. Through all of Scripture, God uses material things to speak to and sanctify humanity. It was in the Incarnation, in the very physicality of the material and historical body of Jesus, that our salvation was wrought. It is part of

the economy of salvation, therefore, that we use physical things to participate in spiritual grace. The participation of material things in the operation of grace is on the level of a *sacramental*: a blessed, consecrated, or otherwise dedicated material object which is set aside for the glorification of God and the sanctification of man. The church building, because of the intentionality of its builders and by virtue of its dedication can also become a vehicle for grace for those properly disposed to participate in it.

#### The iconic language of the church

In the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, the bishop reserves the church building “entirely and perpetually to Christian worship” and for the edification of God’s people. In this rite the Church intends that this building participate in the manifested realities of God’s presence among his people: it is the Kingdom of God; it is the Body of Christ; it is the Heavenly Jerusalem. Through our participation in the building, both in its careful design and when we worship in a building designed for such, we can enter into these sacramentally symbolized heavenly realities.



5. The Byzantine “cross-domed” church. *Hagia Sophia, Salonica*. After Krautheimer.



This idea should hardly surprise us. At the Holy Mass we are sacramentally participating in the entire reality of the Lord's mission: the Last Supper, Our Lord's Passion and Death and Resurrection, and the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb in the Heavenly Jerusalem. The sacramental Liturgy manifests all these themes as one organic reality; these themes, though largely lost, should be informing our concept of the church building. It seems necessary that this understanding and language be deliberately restored, so that our church buildings can again become more effective vessels of these sacramental graces.

The origins of this language lie in Sacred Scripture, both in the language of the Apostolic writers, and in the forms and spaces in which our salvation history has been wrought. From Scripture we also know that there are special places which God has ordained to safeguard, to meet and to sanctify mankind—all of which have found expression in churches built over the centuries. Among these places are the Garden of Eden, the ark of Noah, the tent of dwelling, the ark of the covenant, the Mercy Seat, the Holy of Holies, Solomon's temple, the womb of the Virgin, the cave in Bethlehem, the upper room of the Last Supper and of Pentecost, Golgotha, and the tomb of the Resurrection.

We find this tradition particularly in the Eastern churches, where the Fathers explained both their church buildings, and the Holy Liturgy, in the light of the mystical realities (see ill. 5). The entrance to the church is usually through the narthex in the three western bays, which is symbolically the unredeemed world, hence it is the place for the catechumens and penitents. The central square, the

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*naos*, is the center of the building physically, liturgically, and symbolically. The dome surmounting it emphasizes its importance. This dome recalls the heavens, for the room symbolizes the redeemed world of the "new heaven and new



**6. The iconostasis at the Monastery of the Cross, Jerusalem. Photo by Dr. Virginia Randall.**



**7. Eve banished from Paradise. Tal Meliha, Malta. (Photo by author)**

earth" (2 Pet 3:13). On the dome is the image of the Redeemer as Pantocrator, He who holds all things together in heaven and on earth. But the dome also gives a sense of immanence, and suggests that the *naos* is also the Womb of the Virgin, as well

as the Holy Cave of Bethlehem and the Holy Cave of the Sepulcher.

Thus the building evokes many images of places where the Spirit vivifies the Church, which is born into the world, and redeemed into the Glory of the Lord. The *iconostasis*

veils and obscures the sanctuary, which is reserved for only the priest and his deacons, because the sanctuary is the fulfillment of the Mercy Seat of the Mosaic tabernacle, it is the perfection of Holy of Holies, and it is even the sacramental representation of the very Throne of God (see ill. 6). The cathedra is Christ's heavenly throne; the civory over the altar commemorates the site of the Crucifixion; and the deacons in their golden dalmatics moving between the altar and the *naos* are the angels who are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Heb 1:14). Because the sanctuary also represents Paradise, images of Adam and Eve are sometimes shown being excluded from that Original Glory, depicted on the nave side of the chancel arch or the rood screen in the Western tradition (see ill. 7). As is clearly stated in Patristic writings, we should learn to understand both the church building and the liturgy symbolically. As Saint Maximus the Confessor (c. 630) writes:

The entire church is an image of the Universe, of the visible world, and of man; within it, the chancel represents man's soul, the altar his spirit, the *naos* his body. The bishop's Entrance into the church symbolizes Christ's coming into the flesh, his Entrance into the bema



Christ's Ascension to heaven. The Great Entrance stands for Revelation, the Kiss of peace for the union of the soul with God; indeed every part of the liturgy has a symbolic spiritual meaning.

There is a rich body of thought in the East, both before and after the Schism, that represents the liturgy and the church building in symbolic terms. Saints Theodore of Mopsuestia and Germanos, as well as Nicholas of Andida, Nicholas Cabasilas, and Symeon of Thessalonike are a few of the Eastern theologians who gave intricate, systematic, and multivalent symbolic interpretations to the building and the liturgy. It is a tradition well worth re-examining for Western liturgists and architects to regain an appreciation of iconography and symbolism.

### **The Heavenly Jerusalem and the Body of Christ**

We also see particular traditions in which the apostolic writers describe the Church of God in architectural terms, or in terms of the human body. St. Paul first used the metaphor of the body to create an analogy between the visible Church and the mystical Body of Christ (cf. Rom 12:4-5 and 1 Cor 12:12-26). With this understanding, by the year 380, Saint Ambrose intentionally ordered a church in a cruciform to symbolize the Victory of Christ. This theme, as we shall see, becomes the dominant architectural form for churches across Christendom, and gets widely developed in the Middle Ages.

The other great theme, the church as the Temple or the City of God, is the dominantly recurring New Testament metaphor. In this great building, Jesus is the cornerstone (Mk 12:11), the keystone (Acts 4:8), the foundation (1 Cor 3:11), and the door (Jn 10:9). The apostles are the columns which support the building (Saint Paul calls James, Cephas and John "pillars" in Gal 2:9), and the people are the actual "living stones ... built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:4). Eph 2:19-22

compares the whole Church to the house of God: Christ is the Cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundations, and the Lord joins together the people to form a holy temple that becomes "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." When cast in the language of urban planning, the apostles are foundations that support the walls around of the City of God (Rev 21:14); while the believers are individual temples of the Holy Spirit in the City

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of God (1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16).

Numerous writers in the Patristic and Middle Ages adopted and developed this theme that the People of God comprise a great building or a city. Eusebius, who was Constantine the Great's court historian, explained the arrangement of a particular church built during his time as ordered by the bishop with respect to the local community. For instance, the weaker members served simply as the walls surrounding the complex; while the stronger served supporting the walls of the basilica. The bishop chose "the undefiled souls" as foundations for the great pillars that support the roof of the basilica. Within this great edifice the bishop found places for all his flock who were "securely laid, and unshakable stones," and thus built his community into "a great and kingly house, glowing and full of light within and without."

Over 700 years later, Hugh of St. Victor, in his treatise *The Mystical Mirror of the Church*, also described the Church's composition in the language of church buildings: "The material church in which the people come together to praise God, signifies the Holy Catholic Church, which is built in heaven of living stones." Continuing the Scriptural teachings, Jesus is the Cornerstone, upon which is the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, and the lay faithful members of the Church are the stones that make up the walls—

whether Jew or Gentile—who are "polished and squared...and placed so as to last forever by the hands of the Chief Workman." The cement that joins the stones is charity, and the bond is one of peace.

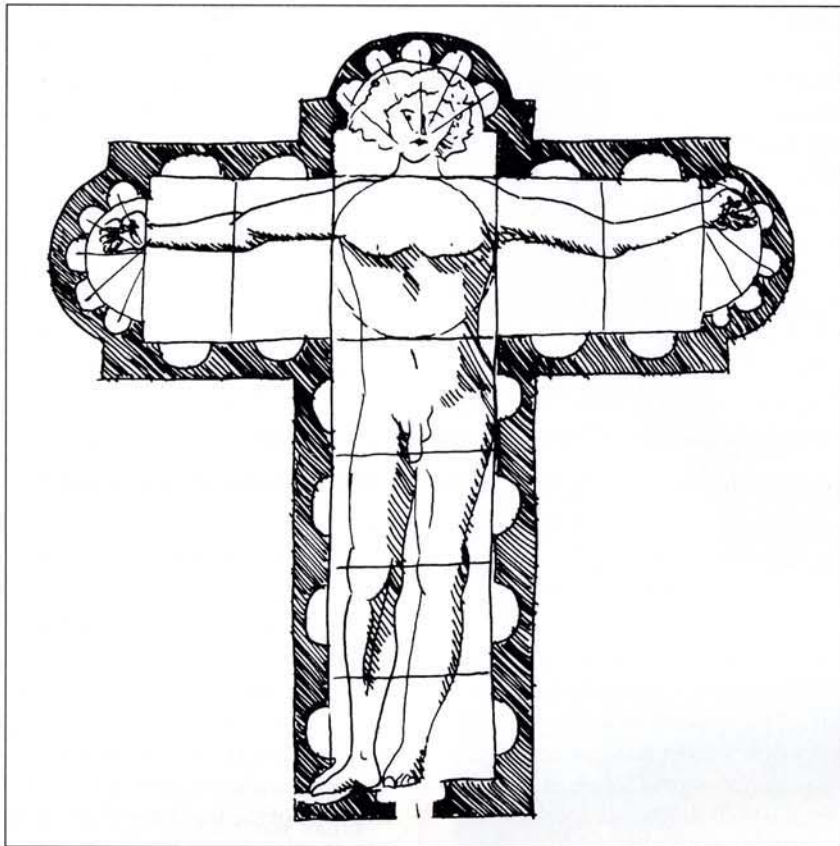
At the end of the 13th century, Bishop William Durand of Mende began his great work, *de Rationale*, much in the manner of Hugh of St. Victor. He first clarified the two-fold meaning of the word 'church': "the one, a material building, wherein the

Divine Offices are celebrated; the other, a spiritual fabric, which is the collection of the faithful ... For as the material church is constructed from the joining together of various stones, so is the Spiritual Church by that of various men." Again, like Eusebius and Hugh before him, Bishop Durand considered the places and roles of the faithful with building construction terms, but again amplified and enriched the analogy. All members of Christ's faithful are, again, placed "by the hands of the Great Workman into an abiding place in the Church":

The faithful predestined to eternal life are the stones in the structure of this wall which shall continually be built up unto the world's end. And one stone is added to another, when masters in the Church teach and confirm and strengthen those put under them; and whosoever in Holy Church undertakes painful labors for brotherly love, he as it were bears up the weight of the stones which have been placed above him. These stones which are of larger size, and polished, or squared, and placed on the outside and at the angles of the building, are men of holier life than others, who by their merits and prayers retain weaker brethren in Holy Church.

The parallel ideas of the church building representing both the Body of Christ and the Heavenly Jerusalem were profoundly developed by both





**8. The church as the Body of the Crucified Redeemer. After Francesco de Giorgio Martini.**

Hugh and Bishop Durand. A city, like a human body, like a building, is an assemblage of individual components, each with a form and location determined by its function or purpose. Whether speaking in terms of limbs and organs in the body, or city walls, gates, roads, piazzas, and various kinds of buildings in the city, the church building with its various functions was readily likened to these archetypes. These two great ideas, the Body of Christ and the Celestial City, both spoke of the integrity and completeness of the Divine Order which buildings built for the Divine Liturgy ought to reflect.

With this understanding in mind the medieval theologians set out to consider comprehensively each of the components in the church building: the walls, the towers, the windows, the stairs, the foundations, the piers and columns, the roof ornaments, the bells, the choir stalls. Each element has meaning in a complex analogy. The general schema is widely known: that the cruciform church represents

the Body of the Lord on the Cross (see ill. 8). Christ's head is at the apse which is the seat of governance represented by the bishop's cathedra; the choir is his throat, from which the chants of the monks issue forth the praise of God; the transepts are his extended arms; his torso and legs form the nave since the gathered faithful are his body; the narthex represents his feet, where the faithful enter the church; and at the crossing is the altar, which is the heart of the church.

No element in the building goes without comment. The doors, of course, represent Christ. The windows are likened to the Holy Scriptures for two reasons. As windows repel wind and rain, protecting the interior from the elements, so does the study of Scripture protect our hearts from the evil of the world; likewise, as the windows let in the sun's light, so does the True Sun illuminate our hearts with his Word. The four walls are the doctrines of the four Evangelists, as well as the four cardinal

virtues. The foundations are like faith, for they are things unseen; the pavement is humility "for the Psalmist said, 'My soul cleaveth to the pavement'" (Ps 119:25); and the roof is charity for it "covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8). The interior pillars are the Doctors of the Church, "who spiritually hold up the Temple of God by their doctrines," and the columns are the Evangelists—"silver columns: for according to the Song of Songs, 'He made the pillars there of silver'" (Song 3:10). Some of the images have a beautiful poetry about them, such as the passage on the sacristy, which is "the womb of the Blessed Mary, where Christ put on his humanity. The Priest, having robed himself, comes forth into the public view, because Christ, having come from the Womb of the Virgin, proceeded forth into the world."

Space limitations allow only a small sampling of their reflections of the medieval understanding of architectural and liturgical iconography, but these sources are again finding new life for the architects and liturgical designers who are looking to revive the language and traditions of Catholic church building. In the next article, we will examine how Renaissance and Baroque architects continually enriched this language, why we have lost it only in the past 70 years, and see how it is still implicit in the guidelines that the Church gives her designers. We must also consider how we can revive the architectural language in ways that respect the Church's building traditions while taking full advantage of modern technologies and efficiencies. Any attempt at a revival must respect our modern consciousness. We must again learn to speak architecturally about the timeless truths of the faith without lapsing into a facile historicism. Only then will we be able to build churches that again challenge our society in a profound architectural dialogue with the message of the Gospel, with buildings that again speak to our minds with rich and fecund symbolic meaning, and that again nourish our hearts with beauty. ●



# The Early Christian Imagery of the Church

**W**e have seen how the major themes of church symbolism were developed. Across the ages the church building has been understood symbolically as the kingdom of God, as the Celestial City of the Apocalypse, and as the Body of Our Lord. There are other symbols, symbolic geometries and recurring themes layered in the church building. These various layers of meaning have gradually evolved over time.

At first, once separated from the synagogue, the early Christians' liturgical environments were of a makeshift nature. It is clear from Scripture that they first met in houses of the faithful members of the community (cf. Acts 20:7-12, Rom 16:3-5, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, Philem 2). After the Peace of Constantine, the Church began a vigorous building program. Since these 4th-century Christians did not have their own defined architecture, they used the techniques and forms that were known to them, often amalgamating various building types in bits and pieces—the synagogue, the Mithraic temple, the Roman private house, the mausoleum, the public baths, and the judicial basilica.

None of these forms were strictly copied, but were altered and adapted so that, while still carrying the symbolic content, they also sought to address the needs of Christian worship, the local community's piety, and their builders' technical abilities. As the Church's influence grew, the pagan temples were often used as quarries for columns, capitals, entablatures, and other architectural



9. Typical basilica showing nave and apse, San Clemente, Rome. (Photo by author)

details. In some cases, the pagan temple was razed, and a new Christian church was built over the site, as we see at Santa Maria sopra Minerva—perhaps expressing the triumph of the Risen Lord over the false gods of Rome—and other instances where

the whole building was left intact and made over to Christian worship, the Pantheon being a notable example. Moreover, the building forms which were taken from the pagan culture and used for Christian worship were given new and deeper meanings for the emerging Catholic culture.



10. Octagonal baptistery, Florence. From Burckhardt.

## The Roman basilica

For instance, the Roman basilica was originally the Imperial hall of Justice: a large and long building with a taller central room, lower side aisles along both long sides, and an apse at one or both ends. This form, already in wide use throughout the Roman empire, was adopted and adapted for the Christian church for several reasons. The building was simple to build and could accommodate a large group. The columns along the side aisles opened the space, the clerestory windows high in the side walls of the nave gave

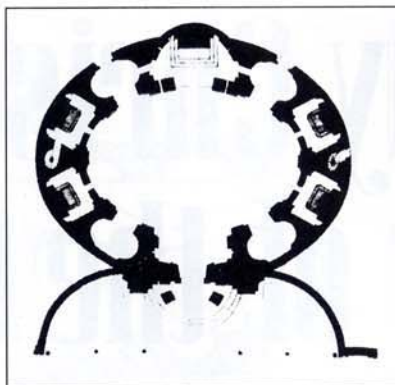


good light, and it had relatively short spans in framed timber. Symbolically the basilica also represented the judicial authority of the culture. By using the form, the early Christians could remind themselves, and announce to the pagan culture, that there was a yet higher authority, a final and absolute Judge of the Universe, and that the *pax Romana* could only be perfected in the *pax Christi*. Thus the bishop as Christ's representative sat in the apse, replacing the judge who was Caesar's representative. He was surrounded by his presbyters and deacons, in place of the assessors and clerks. The altar of incense, standing in front of the judge on which was offered a sacrifice for a just verdict, became the altar of the True Sacrifice as the final guarantor of Justice. With the addition of a lateral bema or transept for the clergy, taken from the Jewish synagogue, the basilica became cross-shaped. This created a cruciform plan, at which point the building began to take on an iconographic image of the church as the Body of Christ.

### Other ancient symbols

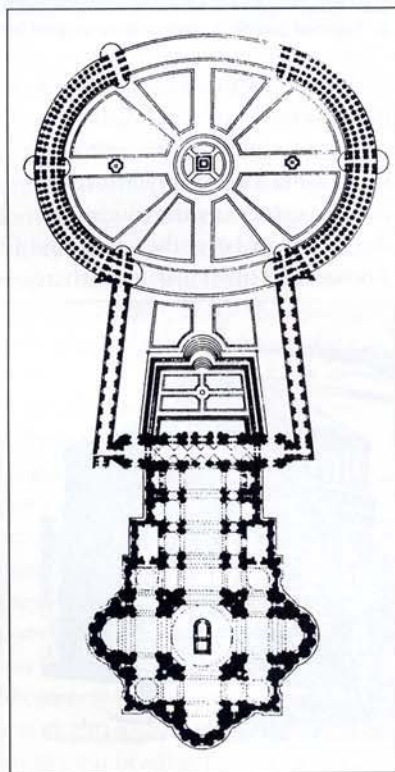
The 4th- and 5th-century builders also developed an elaborate language of architectural forms, using symbolic geometries to govern the arrangements of the churches. Apart from the cruciform basilica, centralized churches were often built as martyrshrines (*martyria*) to commemorate the site of a martyr's execution, or other important sites (e.g., the octagonal church over the House of Peter in Capernaum). Baptisteries, for instance, were centralized to represent the site of Our Lord's baptism in the River Jordan, and also, as we shall see, for symbolic reasons. Churches dedicated to Our Lady also tended to be centralized (perhaps to recall the womb of the Virgin), as were churches dedicated to St. Michael, which were usually sited on hills or promontories.

The centralized buildings were loosely derived from the compact mausoleum found across the Empire, but enlarged for the needs



11. The cross of Saint Andrew used as an ordering device. San Andrea al Quirinale, Rome, by Bernini.

of Christian worship. By adding interior colonnades to broaden the width, the volumes became correspondingly more complex. The builders frequently used primary shapes—squares, octagons, quatrefoils, circles, hexagons, and ellipses—in various configurations. These shapes had obvious symbolic meanings for the Christians of their day. For instance, where the hexagon speaks to the sixth day of the week—the day Adam was created and the day that Christ died—the octagon speaks to the eighth day of



12. A "keyhole" for the keeper of the Keys? St. Peter's Square, Rome, by Bernini.

the Resurrection. These two shapes are often found in early baptisteries, to remind the initiates that "as you have died with Christ, so shall you rise with him" (cf. Rom 6:3-4 and Col 2:12). The octagon also was understood by the early builders as a circle (called by one early theologian as "a circle with eight sides"), and used to express the completeness and oneness of God. In Augustinian cosmology, the square is understood as a symbol of Christ, the second person of the Trinity: as a square has two equal sides, formed by taking one length and developing it at a right angle—"a magnitude multiplied by a magnitude"—so the Son is equal to, and proceeds perfectly from, the Father.

### The traditions continue

The use of these symbols continued across the centuries, and were especially reworked, elaborated upon, and complicated during the Renaissance and the Baroque Counter-Reformation. Images of the Body, of the Heavenly Jerusalem, and of Solomon's Temple are found in churches across Europe and in the New World. Churches continued to be ordered iconographically, and sometimes quite ingeniously as in the case of Bernini's San Andrea al Quirinale which is planned on the diagonal cross of St. Andrew. Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter's is often said to be like two great arms welcoming the world into the Church, although others see the whole piazza as a gigantic keyhole, alluding to the Keys of the Kingdom entrusted to Peter by the Lord. And certainly the spiraling columns in his civity at St. Peter's refer to the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, which speaks of the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the Sacrifice of the New Covenant.

Similarly Borromini, Bernini's contemporary and rival, continued, adapted and invented iconographic expressions. His use of twelve pilasters at the Collegio di Propaganda Fide recalls the tradition of Eusebius regarding the Apostles.



What is implied at this chapel is made explicit in the nave of St. John Lateran, which Borromini remodeled. Here, the twelve Apostles are portrayed in monumental statuary, ringing the nave, with the consecration crosses at their sides. Their names are written on the bases in a reference to Rev 21:4, where “the city stood on twelve foundation stones, each one of which bore the name of one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

Borromini often went to subtle and ingenious lengths in his iconography. He was evidently familiar with Bishop Durand’s writing, as many of his allusions are direct. Themes of the Heavenly City, such as symbols of date palms, stars, and cherubs’ heads enliven his façades and interiors, as Bishop Durand recommended. Pomegranates carved into the nave capitals at St. John Lateran allude to the Temple of Solomon. At San Ivo della Sapienza, Borromini transformed the classical egg and dart molding into cherubim’s heads, with their wings taking the place of the darts. It has been suggested that this whole church is a complex, iconographic statement of Divine Wisdom: the church is ordered on a six-pointed star, the Star of David, which recalls the wisdom of Solomon, the Temple in Jerusalem, and the fulfillment of the Temple in the Heavenly Jerusalem. The original plans called for seven pillars behind the high altar, in reference to the passage from Prov 9:1, “Wisdom has built her house, there she has set up her seven columns.” Around the perimeter are twelve niches, originally meant to take statues of the Apostles. When these items are understood in the context of the whole schema, with the symbol of the Holy Spirit in the lantern above the dome, it becomes evident that Borromini is recreating the setting of Acts 2, when God’s Holy Spirit anointed the early Church with wisdom at Pentecost.

### The church building today

Once again, space limitations do not permit either more detailed

explanations or more illustrations of the abundant examples. I have tried to identify a few major themes found in the history of Catholic church building, with the hopes of reviving our awareness of the great symbolic traditions of the faith. The question must now be asked, “What does this mean for us today?”

Our faith is a continuum, reaching into the obscure past, and stretching forward into the unknown future when all things will be fulfilled in Christ. It is therefore not surprising, though certainly interesting, that the Church implicitly has continued this traditional language of form and symbol. In *Lumen Gentium* and in the *Rite of Dedication of a Church*



13. The twelve columns as the twelve Apostles, Collegio di Propaganda Fide, Rome, by Borromini. From Salvadori.

and an Altar, we are reminded of the rich imagery used in Sacred Scripture to understand the Church, many of these images are also found in the iconography of the church building: the vine and the branches, Solomon’s temple, “that Jerusalem which is above,” the Body of Christ, and so on. In the *Rite of Consecration* the building is explicitly said to represent the Heavenly Jerusalem. When the church is consecrated, the twelve consecration crosses distributed around the interior walls are anointed in reference to the twelve apostles, who are the twelve foundations of the city. And while traditionally twelve anointings are made, nowa-

days four anointings may be used to signify the four walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

### Where we went wrong

If the Church has tried to continue this tradition, to convey the symbolic sense of the building to the faithful, why do churches today look so different? What happened to the language? Where did we go wrong? The problem, briefly, was in the wholesale adoption of Modern Architecture.

Here again, we need to be reminded, we are not speaking of only style. Rather we must look at the ideas which underpin the Modern Movement in architecture, and the Modernist understanding of architectural language. Modern architecture, *per se*—that school of thought that was developed in the German Bauhaus in the 1920s and imported to America in the 30s with the migration of intellectuals fleeing Hitler—is the architectural expression of a socialistic, reductionist, materialist philosophy. For our purposes, we need look at only two aspects of the school—the understanding of the person, and the understanding of architectural language—to see why the Modernist approach is singularly unsuitable for Catholic churches.

The socialist mentality—which subjugated the individual to the whole; which saw human beings not as persons in relationship but as economic units (interchangeable, replaceable, functional); which spawned the “International Style” mass-housing—is equally responsible for the dehumanizing Soviet worker’s housing of Nowa Huta and the high-rise tenement projects in the slums of inner-city America. This mentality is consequent to the Enlightenment thinking that man is a *sociable*, rather than a naturally *social*, being. For the modernist, man is isolated, unitary, socially atomic, and not in *natural* relationship with others in family and voluntary associations of friendship and corporation. His value is determined by his “function” and thus cannot be considered





14. Statue of Apostle with Consecration Cross, St. John Lateran, Rome, remodeled by Borromini. (Photo by author)

as divinely endowed with intrinsic dignity and value which is wholly extrinsic to the needs of the State. Furthermore, the empiricism of the Enlightenment had no room for the idea of objective, transcendental knowledge, and still less for the entire classical anthropology of man as a rational, volitional being with capacities for imagination, memory, and aesthetic participation in Divine Beauty.

This underlying philosophy of Modern Architecture makes it hostile to the human spirit. The high-rise buildings of New York City—with their modular window wall systems

and ceiling grids and standardized plug-in fixtures—were first envisaged in the 1920s by Mies van der Rohe as housing projects for workers—a very appropriate form to house the plug-in, standardized economic units in the Industrial State. In an analogous manner, modern architecture has stripped architectural elements of their symbolic meaning. Le Corbusier, for instance, codified modern architecture to five “points,” or fundamental principles (the load-bearing column, the free plan, the ribbon window, the free façade, and the roof garden), none of which have transcendental value. In the mod-

ernist vocabulary, a door is a door. With the modular system, the door is replaceable by window or wall. It has no symbolic value: it cannot speak to the processes of entering, threshold, transition, or passage. Due to these limitations it certainly cannot speak, as it did to Bishop Durand and Abbot Suger, of the person of Christ.

Likewise for the modernist, space is determined by the function occurring within, hence the notion of “universal space.” Space cannot be sacred, it cannot be “set aside.” The function determines the space; there is no internal and intrinsic hierarchy. The “radical functionalist” approach in church architecture has gradually impoverished us with “multi-function” spaces in which we can worship, play basketball or bingo, or have wedding receptions, depending on the configuration of the furniture. After all, when not used for the liturgy, the altar makes a handy buffet table.

One can examine the problem even deeper by probing, for instance, the epistemological question of language and knowledge, or the reductionist understanding of truth and the utilitarian value given beauty. Suffice it to say, the vision of mankind and civilization embodied in modern architecture is largely alien to the Catholic understanding of creation, humanity, and culture.

### Where should we go?

Having seen the problems of Modernism in church design, yet further questions arise. How should we build our churches? What should they look like? How can we revive the traditions of language? What place, if any, do historical styles have for us today? To reconnoiter a way out of the modern banality, the first step is to regain the awareness of the iconic potential of the building. We as church designers, liturgists, pastors, and lay faithful need to reacquire ourselves with the idea of the icon, and this involves study both of scripture and the Church fathers, as well as time spent in contemplation and prayer.

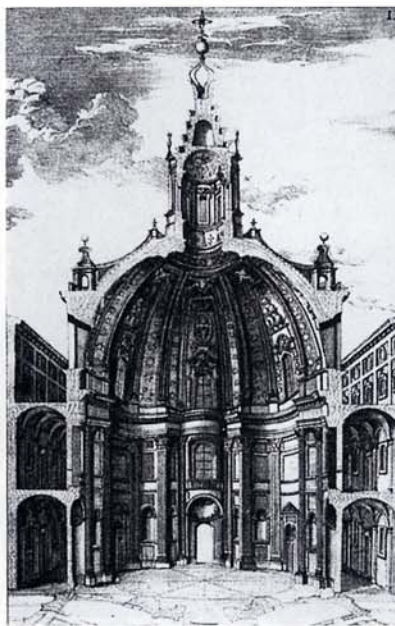


The symbolic understanding of the church must be regained, but we as Catholics must first regain an authentic understanding of *symbol* in general. A symbol cannot stand on its own: it mediates between the perceived object and that which is signified. We can only understand what it means to eat of the Body of Christ because we know what it means to eat food. Had we never seen a wedding banquet, we would not understand the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. The more we understand the reality of marriage as a human institution, the more we may understand marriage as a sacrament, and the symbol of the Church as the Bride of Christ. The symbol always points to something beyond, but, as Frederick Wilhelmsen cautions, “Human experience teaches us that unless you grasp the reality ‘in-it-self,’ in its own dignity and worth and function, you cannot understand it as a ‘more than itself,’ as a symbol.”

### Regaining the iconic

The problem of adopting the Modernist approach to church architecture is simply this: being nonsymbolic it cannot communicate transcendent ideas. There are, however, also corresponding problems with trying to revive Classical architectural elements, or previous historical styles (be they Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, or Baroque). These styles each grew out of a specific cultural milieu; they each sought to express particular values to the prevalent mind set; and each used the available architectural technology of its day. Put simply, for better or worse, the architectural forms and vocabulary that informed and imbued historical styles no longer speak to us.

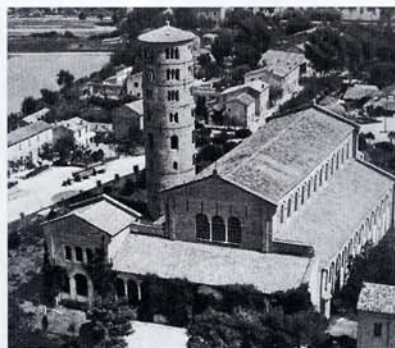
And yet, we are part of the same Church, our human nature has not changed, and neither has the eternal Liturgy in which we participate. According to the Second Vatican Council, there ought to be a “continuity in tradition,” and historical precedent is explicitly to be respect-



15. San Ivo della Sapienza, Rome, by Borromini. From Janson.

ed. Given the immense number of Catholic churches built over the centuries, one could hardly argue that this guideline would limit creativity. But the Council also reminds us that while the mission of the Church is ever the same, the strategies we use today must be different because the world today is so different.

Hence, I suggest we look not at stylistic precedent, but at the linguistic, architectonic precedent which has continued to convey the thematic messages of the Church regardless of epoch. Beyond the symbolic language that we have already considered, there is also an implicit language of massing, form, function, location, and meaning throughout the history of church building (at least, that is, until the adoption of



16. Typical massing of the early Christian basilica. San Apollinare in Classe, near Ravenna. From MacDonald.

modernistic “universal space”). The relationship between function and massing is perhaps the single most important aspect to be regained, especially as we are today largely illiterate in the more subtle iconographic language.

Throughout the history of Christian building, one sees (despite significant stylistic differences) this common approach to the massing of the building. This idea is first seen in the simple basilica, with its major spaces all clearly expressed as harmoniously intersecting forms. San Apollinare in Classe, for instance, is a simple and elegant form of a prominent central nave and articulated side aisles with an abutting apse, narthex and campanile. All these elements are clearly defined, and the success of the building lies in this simplicity. In the Eastern churches, the centrality of the domed nave, with the articulated apse, side chapels, and narthex clearly read from without. This general approach was continued throughout the Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque ages: the buildings had a clarity of form that gave harmony between the interior volume and the exterior form, and between the function of the space and its location and massing.

The language of church architecture is a language of shapes and volume: great cruciform basilicas, higher central naves flanked by clearly articulated side aisles, semi-cylindrical apses, dominant central lanterns defining the crossings, side chapels massed against transepts and apsidal chapels ringing ambulatories, octagonal baptisteries and chapter houses, and towers announcing the entrances and punctuating the corners of the buildings. Each function is given a special place and a special form: altars, confessionals, chantry chapels, tombs, doors, and so on are given due prominence within an organic composition. Across the ages we see this relationship of massing to distinct volume, always with a concomitant separation and expression of the individual function of the place. This way of organic building has allowed



the church to be understood as a “body” or as a “city.”

This is the path to which we must return, particularly as it is precisely in keeping with the Church’s guidelines. For instance, the Church calls for the baptistery to be a clearly defined place reserved for the sacrament; the sanctuary is to be clearly distinguished from the rest of the church by, among other possibilities, a “special shape;” the shape of the church is to recall the form of the assembly; the tabernacle is to be in a place which is “truly prominent;” and so on. In the language of architecture, things are given prominence and distinction by assigning them special forms. By approaching church design with this in mind, an articulated plan can generate the building massing so that these special functions and relationships are perceptible from both the interior and the exterior.

Furthermore, this approach presents the opportunity for the architectural forms to give nuance to a liturgical or theological idea. For instance, the baptistery can express the transition from the world to the Kingdom by being placed at the entrance to the church between the narthex and nave, or even as a separate and special entry into the building. The confessionals can become architectural reminders of the need for personal preparation by being placed at the entrance to the nave. The tabernacle, too, can stand in a chapel that is expressed as a distinct form, thus according it the true prominence it deserves. When it is built in this manner, the church itself can express the form of the assembly, while its major elements (viz., baptistery, nave, sanctuary, confessionals, Eucharistic chapel), express the relationships between the sacraments and the people of God. This appreciation of function, location, volume, and massing is, I think, vital to building churches in the tradition of Christian church architecture, and to building churches that again communicate the idea of “Church.”

With these means I think we can return to the great tradition of



**17. The organic harmony of function and massing in the Middle Ages. Paray-le-Monial.**

Catholic architecture that has produced churches and cathedrals that go far beyond the mere functional requirements of accommodating the various aspects of parish life. In the end, for a church to serve only the functional utility is, to a certain degree, to be useless. Mankind has a higher calling, and the mission of the Church is therefore higher as well. The church building is a message to the world of that calling. It is to be a

“sign of contradiction” to the world in the architectural dialogue within the urban fabric. But it is not just to the world that the Gospel is announced, but within the Church as well, and therefore the building must speak to the faithful of their place in the people of God.

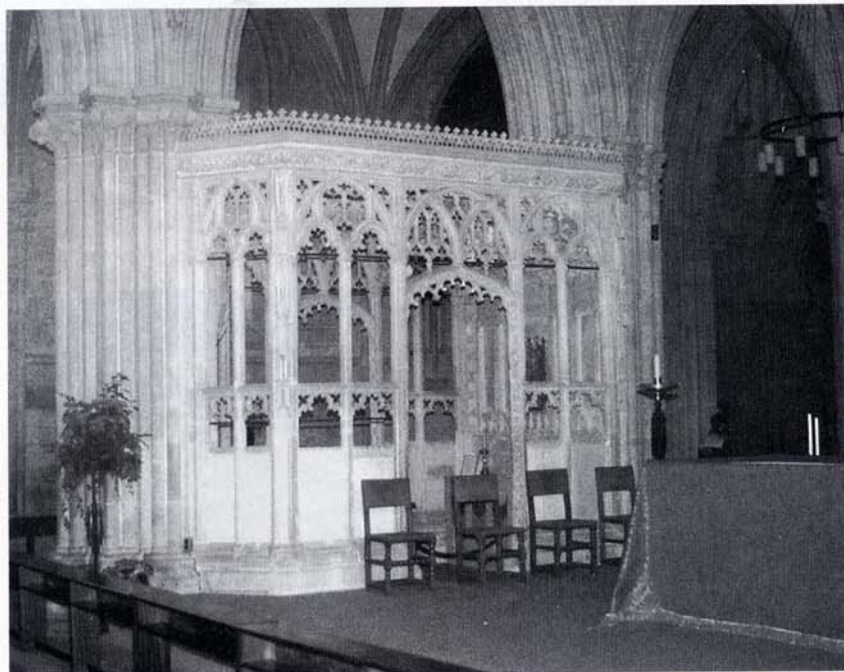
As the Old Testament speaks of the Temple, the Church is to be the place of “glory,” and as such, too, the place where man’s cry of distress is brought to the ear of God. The Church must not settle down with what is merely comfortable and serviceable at the parish level; she must arouse the voice of the cosmos and, by glorifying the Creator, elicit the glory of the cosmos itself, making it also glorious, beautiful, habitable and beloved.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,  
*Feast of Faith*

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**18. Special liturgical functions are assigned special architectural forms. Chantry chapel, Wells Cathedral. (Photo by author)**