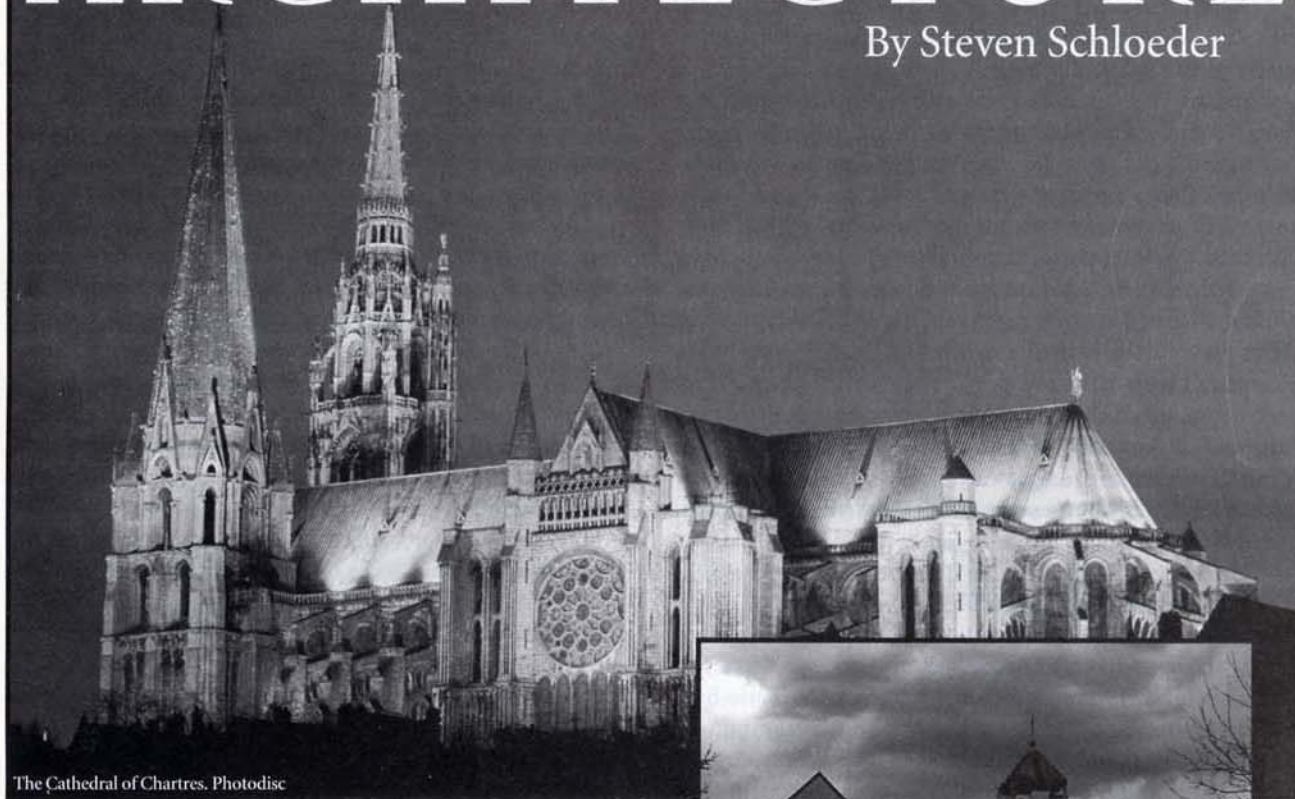


# BACK to the DRAWING BOARD: *Rethinking* CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

By Steven Schloeder



The Cathedral of Chartres. Photodisc

The U.S. bishops' reconsideration of the 1978 document *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EACW) heralds glad tidings to Christ's faithful who are fatigued by the legion of prosaic and uninspiring recent Catholic churches. There is great hope for a new era in Catholic church design—one rooted in the great tradition of Catholic architecture, which speaks freshly to contemporary society with the perennial message of transcendental beauty, symbolic meaning, and human dignity. The new document, provisionally entitled *Domus Dei* (The House of God), was presented for discussion to the plenary session of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) in November 1999.

From a transcribed record of the lively discussion session at that November meeting, which appeared in the Decem-



Melanie Turner

ber 1999 *Adoremus Bulletin*, we have reasons for great hope for the imminent recovery of an authentically Catholic architecture. For instance, Cardinal Law's questioning of the dubious trend of removing the tabernacle from the sanctuary was widely echoed by many of his brother bishops, most of whom added carefully considered theological, pastoral, canonical, and practical reasons for maintaining the centrality of the tabernacle in the sanctuary. Very encouraging was Bishop Lori's call for a recovery of the symbolic signification of the church building—designing the building to express

the heavenly Jerusalem (the body of Christ or the temple of the Holy Spirit), which was reiterated by Bishop Slattery and Bishop O'Malley. Others voiced concerns that the proposed document implicitly continued the iconoclasm of the recent past (Bishop Banks of Green Bay), needed better sections on architectural history (Bishop Ramírez) and aesthetics (Bishops Morneau and Braxton), was ambiguous regarding provisions for kneeling (Bishop Braxton), and neither adequately respected the architectural and artistic patrimony of western civilization (Archbishop Chaput), nor appreciated the church building as a place for personal devotion as well as liturgical assembly (Cardinal George).

Despite these concerns, the bishops were extremely positive about the proposed document, and many seemed especially pleased that the overall approach and theological grounding of *Domus Dei* was a vast improvement over EACW. Many of the bishops agreed with Cardinal Mahony's suggestion that *Domus Dei* should enjoy a much wider consultation from scholars and experts in liturgy, art, and architecture. Given the explicitly provisional nature of the *Domus Dei* draft, comments regarding style and content were to be expected. Also, several bishops raised questions about the timing of the document, given that a new *editio typica* (the definitive edition) of the Roman Missal is being prepared in Rome and with it is anticipated a revision to the General Instruction in which many of the issues of liturgical ordering are clarified. So while a good start, it would seem that *Domus Dei* will still require extensive revision before it is ready for widespread acceptance and approval as an official statement of the NCCB.

### Theology and the Arts

The years since the Second Vatican Council have not been particularly fruitful for sacred art and architecture. The churches built in the predawn of the third millennium have tended to be stark and devoid of symbolic meaning (see *Photo 1*). The growing consensus is that these purportedly "functional" liturgical spaces are failing to function at their most vital level: They fail to help us enter into the mystery of worship with our whole being—body and soul, will and intellect, memory and imagination, emotions and senses. In short, they are not good places for prayer, neither corporately nor individually. Strangely, after centuries of developing a viable and subtle language of architecture and liturgy—and a profound body of wisdom concerning how we engage in the spiritual realities through our very humanity—the Church apparently jettisoned this understanding in only a few short years after the Council.

This is particularly curious considering that conciliar eras have often been times of great artistic involvement and advancement. For instance, Nicaea I (325) saw the first widespread building program of the great patriarchal basilicas in Rome, such as St. Peter's, and the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The Church adopted the grand governmental architecture of the *Imperium* to announce the



Photo 1. A classic example of a church as described in EACW

Melanie Turner

reign of the King of Kings. As Christology was clarified in the fifth and sixth centuries—the age of the councils of Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), and Constantinople II (553)—the Church's theology was expressed architecturally in the great church projects of the Justinian age (e.g., Hagia Sophia, San Vitale, etc.).

Similarly, after Nicaea II (787) mandated the validity of icons in the liturgy, an iconographic renaissance developed in both eastern and western Christianity. Centuries later, the Council of Trent's reformational agenda fostered the polemical art of the Baroque age. The work of the great Baroque masters—Palladio, Bernini, Borromini, and Guarini—as well as the fantastic Jesuit churches throughout Europe and the New World were a Catholic response to the iconoclastic tendencies of Protestantism and to the reduction of Enlightenment thinking.

Given this history, it is all the sadder not only that the heroic vision of Vatican II has failed to elicit a corresponding artistic response, but also that, we have seen an indecisive age of alienating buildings and idiosyncratic sacred art. It is certainly paradoxical that with the marvelous technological advancements, the potentials of modern building materials and methods, and the unparalleled economic achievements of the past 50 years, churches today tend to be mean, nondescript, and uninspiring.

### The Recent Past

Of course, this apparently sudden burgeoning of iconoclastic churches did not happen overnight. Their architectural roots go back to the 1920s, to the Bauhaus modernism of Walter Gropius and the machine aesthetic of Le Corbusier. The first particularly Catholic application of architectural modernism is found in the collaboration of Romano Guardini with Rudolf Schwarz. Schwarz designed the liturgical center for Guardini's "Quickborn" Catholic youth movement at the Burg Rothenfels. In the castle's Knight's Hall,

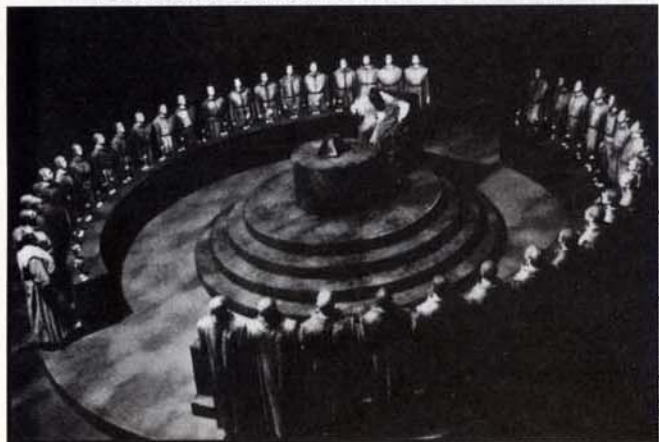
STEVEN SCHLOEDER is a practicing architect specializing in Catholic church projects and a doctoral candidate in theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He is the author of *Architecture in Communion: Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (Ignatius Press, 1998).

Guardini gathered the youth for liturgy around three sides of a centralized altar, seated on sleek, black, cuboid stools. This multifunctional room was a spartan, flat-ceiling space.

Now, it would be unfair to accuse Guardini of liturgical minimalism or of promoting an egalitarian, demotic approach to liturgy. This was hardly his agenda, as his books, *Sacred Signs* and *Spirit of the Liturgy*, testify. Rather, he seemed interested in helping the idealistic Catholic youth, who had left behind the bourgeois decadence of the Weimar Republic, find meaning in the liturgy through engaging in a sort of chivalric quest. Guardini's project for the youth had far more to do with rebuilding a Christian civilization in the spirit of the German Romantic movement and the heroic ideals of the Round Table and the Grail legend—one thinks of Wagner's *Parsifal*—than with the reductivistic philosophy and socialism of the Bauhaus (see *Photo 2*). Despite these good intentions, the combination of Schwarz's sleek functionalism and Guardini's centralized liturgy has had a widespread and enduring impact. At a festschrift for Guardini, Karl Rahner stated it plainly, "It is a widely known fact that the Rothenfels experiment was the immediate model for the liturgical reforms of Vatican II."

There were, of course, other influences that deepened the current architectural malaise. Peter Hammond, an Anglican cleric, proposed "radical functionalism" for church design in his highly influential *Liturgy and Architecture* (1960). Hammond's basic premise was that "good churches—no less than good schools or good hospitals—can be designed only through a radically functional approach." Since he arbitrarily concluded that traditional architectural styles "have no message for the contemporary world," he (at least implicitly) rejected the idea that symbolic signification is part of function. As long as the process of radical functional planning is done properly, the church building's "symbolic aspect can be left to take care of itself." Similarly, the Lutheran liturgical architect Edward Sovik, in his *Architecture for Worship* (1973), explicitly rejected traditional symbol structure and advocated the "non-church." Thus, the human need for sacramental participation through a deep and multivalent architectonic symbol structure—common to traditional architectural styles—went begging.

**Photo 2. Wagner's *Parsifal*: Was the Round Table a liturgical model?**



©Bildarchiv Bayreuther Festspiele

Many of the architectural and liturgical principles of these works, along with other random ideas of the modern zeitgeist, found their way into EACW. This document came about when the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (FDLC) requested the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) to give clear guidelines for church design. Largely based on the FDLC's own church design position paper, EACW was a tag-team effort written largely by Robert Hovda and Frank Kacmarcik, two liturgical progressives of their day. By publishing their ideas under the aegis of the BCL, the authors were able to enshrine and legitimize their peculiar notions of liturgy and their idiosyncratic aesthetic tastes—a most successful stratagem.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of this document was its timing. The authors, who sought to be progressive, effectively hurled the Church into the 1920s of the Bauhaus and Burg Rothenfels. Immediately, they were already out of step with the best academic thinkers in both architecture and cultural anthropology. A decade earlier, the architectural academy had concluded that reductionism in design was passé. In 1966, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* inverted Mies van de Rohe's dictum "Less is more" by asserting "Less is a bore." This book gave rise to architectural postmodernism, which sought to recover an architecture that evoked memory, imagination, and emotion through multivalency and historical allusion.

By 1975, Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* had already revealed the vacuity of the modern art world's reductionist agenda—just the stuff that Kacmarcik and Co. were selling in the "Illustrations" appendix to EACW. Cultural anthropologists, such as Mircea Eliade, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Edward Farley, had already brought to the fore the universal human need for deep and multivalent symbol structures for us to engage the sacred—thus validating an understanding the Church has held for millennia.

Despite the fact that EACW had no authority in its own right and was self-confessed to be only guidelines "rather than blueprints to follow," it has set the course for liturgical architecture for more than 20 years. Liturgists and "liturgical designers" have waved it as a banner and quoted it as a manifesto while gutting many a perfectly adequate, or even beautiful, Catholic parish—stripping away traditional architectural details; whitewashing stenciled ceilings and walls; breaking statues; busting out illustrative stained glass; tearing out altar rails, pews, and reredos; and, worst of all, using EACW's dubious justifications to remove tabernacles from sanctuaries. Because of EACW's serious flaws, we have spent perhaps billions of dollars building churches that deviate from the wide and deep tradition of Catholic architecture, fail to implement the vision of the Second Vatican Council, fail to touch the human heart, and are already often being remodeled or replaced with more beautiful and appropriate buildings.

No doubt the widespread dissatisfaction with that approach to church building has given the U.S. bishops pause

for reflection. The prospect of the new document, *Domus Dei*, which is proposed to be an official statement of the entire conference of U.S. bishops, holds hope for recovery of an authentic Catholic understanding of liturgy, art, architecture, and the human person. But how ought we proceed?

### Learning from Experience

It seems a happy coincidence, perhaps even providential, that the Vatican II document on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, gives us guidelines for reconsidering liturgical changes, especially noting that “the experience derived from recent liturgical reforms” ought to be considered before implementing further changes. The NCCB is now in the optimal position to learn from recent experience and to make necessary corrections as it sets the course for future Catholic church architecture in America.

The NCCB must come to grips with the original EACW, understand its strengths and weaknesses, and use the best scholarship available to engender authentic renewal in the liturgy and the arts. The first part, however, is hardly easy. When reading sources such as EACW (or Sovik or Hammond), it is interesting to see just how slippery and complex the issues are—complicated by the imprecise language used. Certainly, none of these authors, or most modernist liturgists or “liturgical designers,” intentionally sought to do damage. One can conclude that, despite their best intentions, they made many ill-considered judgments, were not informed by the best academic scholarship, used imprecise and unclear language, and were frequently out of their depth.

For instance, in Article 14, EACW uses the language of the need for sacramental signification and even mentions that “tradition furnishes the symbol language of that action [i.e., the liturgy], along with structures and patterns refined through centuries of experience.” And yet, EACW effectively discarded this symbolic language and substituted a very different understanding of the structure and pattern of the liturgy from that which the Church has continually held. This is perhaps at the core of the problem with EACW: Throughout the document one is constantly reminded of the communitarian, subjective, and immanent aspects of the liturgy, to the virtual neglect of the transcendental, objective, sacramental aspect.

Never does EACW so much as allude to the Holy Mass as a sacramental participation in the heavenly liturgy (the angels and saints in worship of the Trinity, the Son continuing to offer Himself to the Father for the salvation and sanctification of humanity, etc.). Having failed to start with the correct first principle of liturgy—that the earthly liturgy is a symbolically presented sacramental participation in the cos-

mic liturgy—the authors resort to all kinds of squishy language trying to express what the Church already described in a robust and articulate language. Having discarded the transcendent participation in an objective reality outside ourselves, the authors are left trying to base liturgy on a collective or subjective experience. Hence, we are treated to a theology of immanence in phrases like:

- “Therefore, this celebration is that of a community at a given place and time, celebrated with the best of its resources, talents and arts in the light of our own tradition” (Article 10).
- “Every word, gesture, movement, object, appointment must be real in the sense that it is our own” (Article 14).
- “To identify liturgy as an important *personal-communal* religious experience is to see the virtue of simplicity and commonness in liturgical texts, gestures, music, etc.” (Article 17).
- “The most powerful experience of the sacred is found in the celebration and the persons celebrating, that is, it is found in the action of the assembly: the living words, the living gestures, the living sacrifice, the living meal” (Article 29).



Photo 3. Palladio's San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, as the Temple of the Holy Spirit

Steve Schloeder

The reader may be at a loss as to what these quotes should have to do with the loss of beauty, transcendence, and symbolic meaning in church architecture. The architectural implications of this communitarian emphasis are expressed in a strange passage, one highly evocative of Hammond and Sovik:

The norm for designing liturgical space is the assembly and its liturgies. The building or cover enclosing the architectural space is a shelter or “skin” for a

liturgical action. It does not have to “look like” anything else, past or present.

Thus EACW casually discarded an 1,800-year-old tradition of sacramental architectural language as being inapplicable for modern Catholic sensibilities. Under the guise of appealing to the needs of the “assembly and its liturgies,” and in explicitly rejecting “universal sacred forms,” the authors rejected the Church’s wise and even scientific tradition of building to express spiritual realities and theological ideas.

All great church architecture is necessarily “built theology.” Across the centuries, the Church has developed a subtle, complex, and poetic language of architectural form and arrangement to express the great scriptural paradigms of the Church—the body of Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the temple of the Holy Spirit (see *Photo 3*). Every Christian age, save our own, has seen church building as a participa-

tion in the heavenly reality. For instance, the Church's early adoption of the imperial judicial basilica spoke to the *pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) perfected in the *pax Christi* (the peace of Christ). In 382, St. Ambrose first ordered a church with transepts to create a cruciform church, intentionally seeing the church building as the body of Christ. In the Middle Ages, the Gothic cathedral was the celestial "city of glass" that St. John witnessed in his Revelation. Since the Renaissance, Greco-Roman temple facades were used in allusion to the temple of Solomon and its perfection in the temple of the Holy Spirit.

By way of this analogical language, Catholic churches built across the centuries and in widely diverse cultures have been able to be beautiful, appropriate, and actually look like Catholic churches. It has only been in our own age that liturgical designers have given us buildings that do not speak to us of the things of God. This is hardly surprising since many liturgists have rejected the idea that buildings *can*—let alone *should*—speak to us sacramentally.

## A Wish List

The main problems with the old document, liturgically and architecturally, are the loss of transcendental sacramental signification in the liturgy and the adoption of asymbolic architectural modernism. One would hope that *Domus Dei* will redress these shortcomings. Beyond that, as a practicing architect specializing in the study and construction of Catholic church buildings—one who will actually have to *build* churches based on this new document—I offer the following as a sort of wish list, in the spirit of seeking the recovery of authentic Catholic art and architecture.

First, there is a need to return to Catholic anthropology. Good anthropology must be present before good liturgy, architecture, medicine, jurisprudence, or any other endeavor that affects the human person can result. EACW has noted correctly that full human participation in liturgy is more complex than merely rational or intellectual and that the recovery of an authentic Catholic understanding of the human person "is one of the urgent needs of contemporary liturgical renewal."

Architecturally, this would first suggest that we return to a more complex, emotionally laden architecture. Church buildings are required to carry a tremendous burden of emotional weight: They must allow us to rejoice at weddings and baptisms and grieve at funerals, and they must console us when we are hurting, repentant, in crisis, fearful, or despairing. Despite EACW's calls for designers to be concerned with the full range of human emotions, most recent Catholic churches—with the skewed emphasis on the "gath-

ered assembly"—are designed as rather univalent spaces: They tend to be boxy, well-lit rooms with no place to hide. In doing so, these buildings ignore the very real need for private devotional spaces in which to light a candle when a loved one has cancer, places of solitude to be alone with one's God, and dark corners in which to slink back if one has been away from the Church for a time.

In turn, this should challenge the prevalent idea underpinning EACW—that a worshipper is only actively participating if "gathered around the altar" and looking at others in the congregation (hence, the recent predominance of "theater-style seating," as shown in *Photo 4*, wrapping around three sides of the sanctuary).

The action of the human soul ought not be determined by such liturgical engineering. Rather, we must recover a profoundly human approach to the question of participation in liturgical worship, including the universal human regard for what Otto called *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—that innate, awe-inspiring sense by which the holy is both attractive and intimidating.

We ought to return to an architecture that invokes memory and imagination. It is interesting that the design intent for the recent spate of major-league baseball stadiums has been to invoke stylistically the great ballparks of baseball's Golden Age. Phoenix's BankOne Ballpark, for instance, is a red-brick and green-steel building, with memorabilia displays and vintage signage in the concourses. This approach was taken in response to the dissatisfaction with the utilitarian, concrete "doughnut in the parking lot" approach of the 60s and 70s. These buildings have had great success with the owners, teams, and fans. The Catholic Church can certainly learn a valid lesson from the secular world about the power of memory and imagination.

Second, development of church buildings should be based on clear and solid theological principles. If church architecture is "built theology," then one must have good theology to have good church architecture. The original EACW perhaps sought to root its architectural vision in theological principles, yet these were often dubiously developed. For instance, the whole question of beauty—in Catholic theology, an aspect of God in which all physical beauty participates—is reduced to that which is "simple," "authentic," "honest," and "genuine." This language is reminiscent of the early 20th-century socialist polemics—for the 19th-century idea of beauty was considered bourgeois—and is sadly lacking the genuine advancements and insights of the recent past, from Catholic thinkers such as Maritain, Gilson, von Balthasar, and Maurer.

There are many other instances of how dubious theological principles have adversely affected church design, such as



Photo 4. An example of theater-style seating

Melanie Turner

is found in the discussion on why EACW insists that the tabernacle be removed from the sanctuary: "Active and static aspects of the same reality cannot claim the same human attention at the same time."

This is problematic on numerous accounts. There can be no "static" aspect to the glorified body of the Risen Savior. Also, a more integrated Christology would ask with St. Paul: "Has Christ been divided?" Is there any *essential* difference between Christ presenting Himself in the reserved sacrament or in the liturgical action? In addition, the very fact of multivalency in sacramental signification allows us to enter into sacramental mysteries and keeps sacramental symbols from degenerating into "symbolic algebra." And the human soul is perfectly capable of receiving, sorting, and ordering a tremendous amount of information without confusion. None of these principles is accounted for in the impoverished understanding of EACW, and a dubious conclusion is thereby drawn. It would be of great service to the Church if *Domus Dei* was thoroughly informed by the theological, liturgical, and anthropological principles of the *Universal Catechism*.

Third, dubious and problematic ideas should be reconsidered. There are a myriad of statements dotted throughout EACW that are questionable and need to be reconsidered based on solid scholarship. One instance is the proposed introduction of audiovisual media into worship. Catholic parishes will never compete with Hollywood in the entertainment sec-

tor, and they shouldn't even try. Furthermore, a church should be one place where we aren't assaulted with transitory, fragmentary imagery. And of course, for all the modern liturgists' talk of "active participation," the solutions proposed can only reinforce a "spectator mentality."

Likewise, the insistence on temporary cloth banners and potted plants and trees for decoration in place of traditional imagery is ill-advised. We have thrown out a tremendous cultural patrimony of stained glass, fresco, mosaic, and marble statuary only to create a felt-banner industry. I would rather see the U.S. bishops advocate a return to beauty in the arts, one rooted in the dignity of the human person and one that treats the material world as good in itself.

Finally, I hope *Domus Dei* will restore the clear and precise traditional language of the Church. EACW is full of trendy and imprecise language. For instance, to call the Blessed Sacrament "bread" and "wine" is theologically imprecise (e.g., "While the bread is broken on sufficient plates for sharing...") and sounds distinctly Protestant. Words such as priest, altar, nave, sanctuary, Holy Mass, and divine liturgy are clearly defined, well established, and unambiguous. I hope the U.S. bishops will insist on clarity and precision. After all, an architect can only design based on the information given: If the information is unclear and subject to wide interpretation, the results will be uneven. The people of God deserve better than that. ♦

Attention Talented High School Students . . .

## STUDY LEADERSHIP IN LONDON

July 11 to August 1, 2000

Three weeks • Three College Credits

*Each summer, the University of Dallas offers two distinct "Case Studies in Leadership" courses in England for talented high school students: Thomas More in England and Winston Churchill in England.*

*The purpose of these courses is to teach students that great and principled leadership is both possible and desirable, and to equip our future leaders with the practical and intellectual virtues necessary for success in any undertaking.*

**Application Deadline: Rolling**

Call Stephen Smith at 972.721.5206, email [udtravel@acad.udallas.edu](mailto:udtravel@acad.udallas.edu), or visit our website at [www.udallas.edu/udtravel](http://www.udallas.edu/udtravel) for more details.

### Wanted: Catholic School Principal

In the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, a parish needs an energetic Roman Catholic Principal willing to make a commitment to a new Catholic School, K-8, which will open in the Fall of 2001, with the position to be filled by July 1, 2000.

A successful candidate must be a practicing Roman Catholic with a strong commitment and knowledge of the Roman Catholic Faith. Knowledge of philosophy and curriculum of Catholic School education is essential. A theological background is helpful. Minimum qualifications: Masters Degree in Education Administration.

Interested candidates should send resume no later than April 15, 2000. Salary and fringe benefits based on education and experience.

Please send all inquiries to:  
Pastor  
P.O. Box 62241  
Minneapolis, MN 55426