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HEAVEN wedded to EARTH

Figure 1

Thinking about sacramental architecture

The history of Catholic sacred architecture, at least for the first 1,900-odd years, concerned the question of how to express something quite beyond words, quite beyond any symbolic structure, quite beyond our imagination. "No eye has seen, nor ear heard" (1 Cor 2:9). (Figure 1)

This immediately raises the question as to how immaterial reality — that is, spiritual things — can be conveyed to us who live in the material world. We know the world outside of ourselves primarily through the senses and through rational thought (the creation of ratios or parallel connections). Yet, the very stuff of Catholicism is grounded in immateriality — in God and the heavenly realities. As the church instructs us, "Church buildings are to be signs and symbols of heavenly things" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [1969] 253). How, then, can and does this occur?

Perhaps the one great insight that distinguishes Catholicism

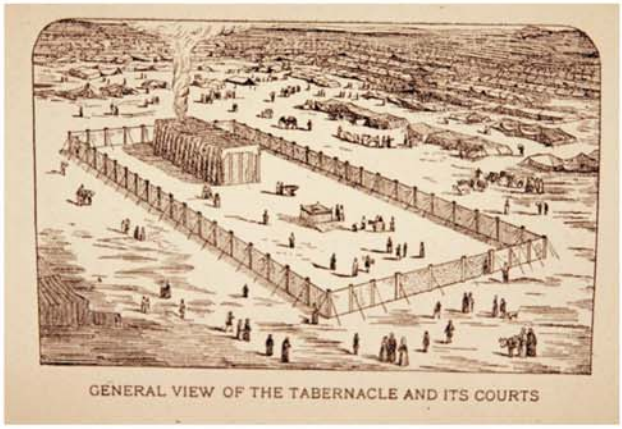
(and the other apostolic churches) from all other branches of Christianity and all other faiths is the sacramental principle. We as human beings — body and soul — come to God precisely through our humanity in a profoundly material world. It is through the material world, and not in spite of the material world, that we connect with the spiritual realities. By God's design, all of material creation is, to use the phrase of Dionysius the Areopagite, a theophany revealing God to us. It is through the material world that God gives us grace in loving communion with God's beloved: the physical bread and wine that feed and nourish us in the Body and Blood of Christ, the water that washes us physically and spiritually in baptism, the gift of self in spousal love that is an objective participation in divine love in the sacrament of matrimony. It is this sacramental insight that mandates our concern for the needy; in the words of Jesus, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these …, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

Throughout the Scriptures we see that it is through the material world that we participate in the spiritual life. God speaks to humanity through both words and symbols: figures, dreams, law, directives, parables, analogies, metaphors, fantastical imagery, visionary language, liturgical arrangement and gestures, and so forth. Across Scripture God communicates to humanity in a manner apprehensible to humanity — through material things knowable to the senses: the dream of Jacob, the three visitors at the oak of Mamre, the burning bush, the pillar of fire and the tabernacle containing the ark in the desert (figure 2), the glory of the temple (figure 3), and most perfectly in the incarnation. Jesus himself used parables and metaphors to explain the kingdom of God (itself a metaphor), and the writers of the New Testament developed a series of primal and interrelated metaphors to explain the ecclesia. While there are many images used to explain and understand our relationship to God in the church (the mustard seed, marital imagery, wineskins, the shepherd and his flock), three primary metaphors each concern the most fundamental and foundational experiences of the human condition: embodiment, dwelling, and community.

The prime metaphor is undoubtedly the Body of Christ. In all its layered meanings — the incarnation, the Eucharist, the church assembled — the body speaks at once to our most basic reality that we ourselves are embodied: that we exist, sense, operate, interact, and connect as integrated composites of body and soul. The metaphor also speaks to the relationship of parts to the whole: we as individuals are one body composed of different parts — hands, heart, eyes, spleen — each with unique and distinct functions, forms, locations, relationships, and meaning. (Figure 4)

The metaphor of the temple, the "great and kingly house," is rooted in the primal and now largely forgotten experience of what it means to set apart a place for human habitation from raw and brutal nature. Safe from storms and wild beasts, people created shelter in which to dwell and establish civilization. Walls for defense and to block the wind, a door for access and security, windows to allow light and breeze, a pitched roof to shed the rain — these basic elements of dwelling have been with us from time immemorial: what Joseph Rykwert calls "Adam's House in Paradise." (Figure 5) For the ancients, the family house was the first church: the sacred hearth was religiously tended in perpetual remembrance of the ancestors. Used to explain the ecclesia, we see in this metaphor a relationship of parts to the whole: Christ as the door and the cornerstone and capstone, the apostles as columns, and we as "living stones," each with a specific purpose and indispensable to the whole.

The third metaphor of the city recalls the establishment of community: families banding together for common purposes, setting apart the community from the wilds of nature and marauding tribes, creating a secure place for family life and commerce. For the ancients, building a city — selecting the site with the assistance of the augurs, conscribing the walls, digging the foundations, marking the center with the sacred fire — was a sacred duty and a religious act. In Italy during the Middle Ages, being a citizen of the city granted rights both politically and ecclesially, and citizenship was granted at baptism. Today we have largely lost the sense of what it means to live in a *civitas.* Our cities no longer have protecting walls, defensive portals, plazas and marketplaces,


GENERAL VIEW OF THE TABERNACLE AND ITS COURTS

Figures 2 (above) and 3 (left).

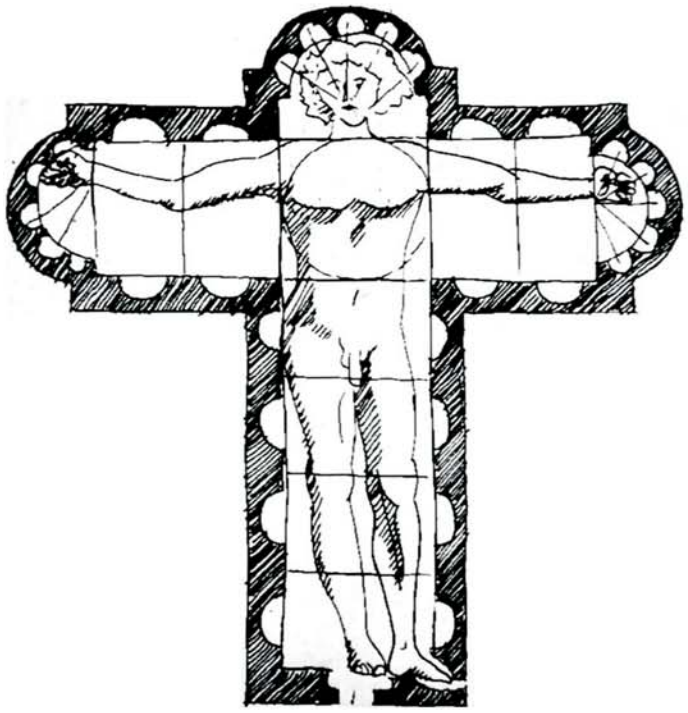


Figure 4

sacred precincts, common wells, and such. In our post-agrarian urban and suburban lifestyles, with bedroom communities, shopping malls and strip centers, sprawling housing tracts, highways and arterials for transportation, and cities merging into cities, it is difficult to imagine the reality that spoke so clearly to the early Christians when this image was used to describe the church as "the heavenly Jerusalem," fulfilling the image of the 12 tribes assembled around the desert tabernacle, poignantly recalling the earthly Jerusalem (which by then had been laid to waste by Rome), now founded on the Twelve Apostles with their names inscribed in the foundation stones. (Figure 6)

These three themes are deeply interwoven. The body is a type of house — it is a house for the soul. The house is a shelter, a "sanctuary" safe from the elements, animals, and marauders. This human need for shelter precedes and even informs religion. Thus, the temple is a type of house, a house for the gods, and the primitive house was an intrinsically religious place dedicated to the family's ancestor worship. Archeological investigations show that the earliest temples, the Neolithic earth temples of Malta, symbolically express the woman's body, and Schwaller de Lubicz's work shows an uncanny parallel between the human skeleton and the ancient Egyptian temple. (Figure 7) It was with this deep and now obscure understanding that Jesus could announce that his body was the true temple and that St. Paul could liken the Body of Christ to the church. Similarly, the city is a house writ large, primitively as the house of the tribe, the "body politic." The king dwelt there, as did the gods. Primitive cities were often both palace-cities and temple-cities, such as Nineveh and Jerusalem.

In Scripture we see these three themes come together symphonically in the fantastical vision of John in Revelation 20 — well worth rereading for this consideration — in which the themes of embodiment, dwelling, city, and marriage are seen as interweaving images that combine to express the ineffable. This matrix of symbolic forms — body, temple, city — expressed over the centuries in a variety of architectural styles — Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Revivalist — constitutes a primary vocabulary of Catholic architecture.

This architectural vocabulary was largely discarded over the course of the 20th century. Without comment on the myriad cultural forces that contributed to the loss of this language, it is worth noting that historical architectural styles, and the architectural forms that they engendered, have created the sense of "cultural memory" by which we understand "church" as a built form. This is certainly to be respected, and the abandonment of this language in the past century undoubtedly is a root cause for so much of the dissatisfaction with modern churches. In the past decade or so we have witnessed a general movement away from the austere and aniconic, reductivistic, and rationalistic approach to sacred

Figure 5

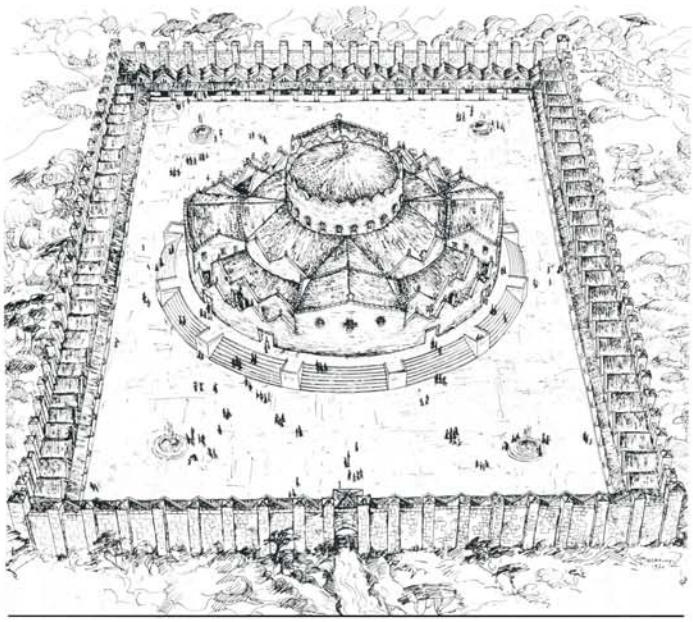
architecture; this movement is not only appropriate but is mandated for meeting the liturgical requirements of the Second Vatican Council.

If beauty is symphonic, and if symbol structures are necessarily complex, multivalent, layered, and even at times ostensibly contradictory, so ought our liturgy and sacred architecture seek to engage the human person in the many interconnected facets of our being: body and soul, will and intellect, passions, appetites and emotions, senses, memory and imagination, our capacity for wonderment and delight and awe. In short, this is a call for a return to and a recovery of a rich, complex, and symbolic architecture. It is not a stylistic question, as if building anew Gothic or neo-Renaissance temples could adequately respond to the vision of the Second Vatican Council, but a sacramental question: how to create contemporary churches that help us understand our true place in the Body of Christ, "living stones" in the temple of the Holy Spirit, dwellers in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Typically today, parishes want "Catholic churches that look like Catholic churches." Yet simply designing neo-Gothic churches or dressing up centralized modernistic spaces in fancy neo-Palladian ball gowns cannot be the answer. The problem for modern architects can be understood as how to communicate the meaning behind those traditional architectural forms without aping those formal elements that constitute the "style."

Each architect will find his or her own expression of what this means; each project will suggest its own solution related to budget, region, architectural vernacular, site context, community expectations, demographics, program, and so forth. The history of Catholic architecture shows that these central themes of body, temple, and city have inflamed the imaginations of architects and builders in every age. The imperial basilica in the patristic age (image 8), the image of the "city of glass" in the Middle Ages, the recovery of the Greco-Roman temple in the Renaissance, the image of the body and the expression of the Solomonic temple in the 18th-century Baroque, the fantastical churches of the Rococo age (figure 9), even icons of modern architecture such as Perret's La-Raincy show the perdurance of these themes (figure 10).

Figure 6



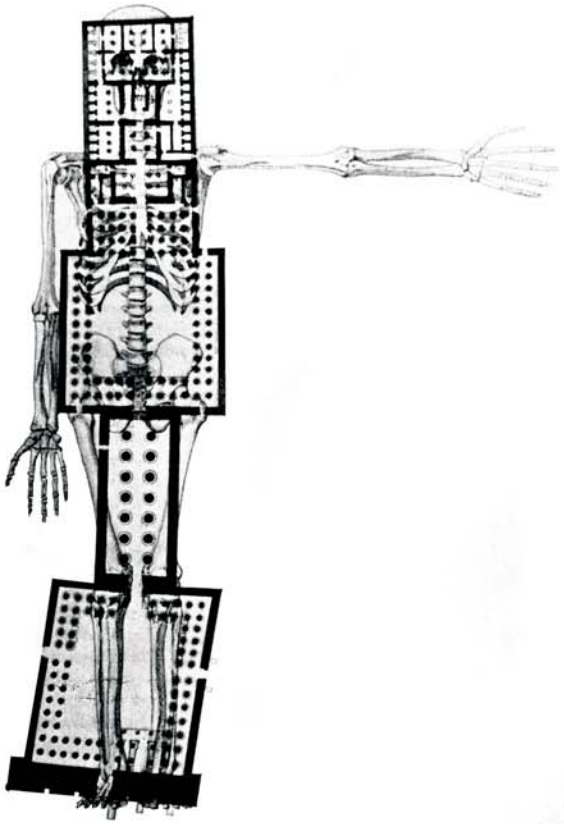


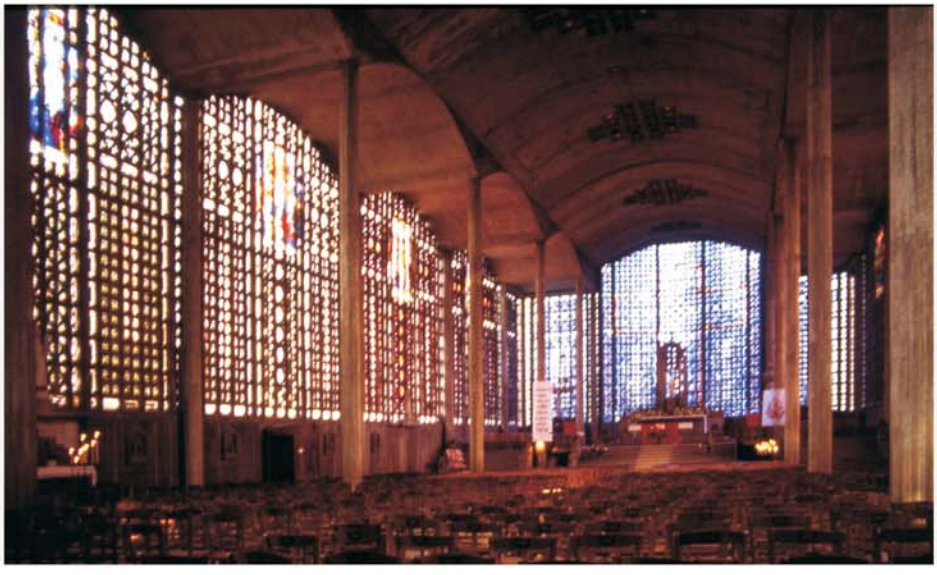
Figure 7

In my own work, I eschew any sort of historicist or archeological approach to church architecture. As the 18th-century neo-Palladianism and the 19th-century Gothic Revivalism showed, these are very different projects from antique classicism and the 12th-century Gothic flowering in Europe. We are no longer patristics, or medievals, or renaissance thinkers — both our experience of the world and our building materials, methods, and systems are contemporary. It is not that our architecture must reflect this reality but that our architecture can only reflect this reality. Furthermore, there is no sense in which either the documents of the Second Vatican Council or the insights of the mid-20th-century liturgical movement can be responsibly understood as a call to return to the past, a *retour aux* sources; that is, modern architecture may reflect the theological underpinnings of the liturgy from antiquity onward but should not return to the same styles.

(continued on page 31)

("Heaven wedded to earth" continued from page 11)

Figures (top to bottom) 8, 9, 10



Rather, the question as I approach it concerns how best to express those ineffable relationships that were encoded in traditional architecture quite apart from the matter of style. Those styles that formed the cultural memory of Catholic architecture are a rich trove of architectural sources from which to work, but it would be a mistake to focus on the matter of style and miss the underpinning theological ideas that the architects and builders of these styles sought to express.

These themes — body, temple, city — all of which seek to express some insight into the heavenly reality, find fresh vitality in contemporary projects. At St. Therese in Collinsville, Okla., the combination of the parish's explicit desire to have "a Catholic church that looks like a Catholic church," the desire for an intimate building with a lateral plan, the budget, and rural location brought forth a design that had strong allusions to late patristic, early Romanesque northern Italian architecture. (Figure 11) Themes of the heavenly Jerusalem are expressed in the 12 columns that define the nave and sanctuary and in the 24 clearstory windows that allude to the 24 elders around the throne in the Book of Revelation. (Figure 12) Images of the body are explored in the Greek cross plan and the square — symbols of Christ — overlaid by the octagon, which is a symbol of the resurrection. (Figure 13) The dedication to the Little Flower is subtly referenced in the "Mystical Rose" formed at the intersection of the arches in the octagonal ceiling. (Figure 14) The building was consecrated on the Feast of the Little Flower in the Jubilee Year, Oct. 1, 2000.

At St. Mark in Peoria, Ill., the beautifully proportioned neo-Gothic church suffered greatly in a 1970s "reordering" that involved stripping; whitewashing; replacing the solid oak antique pews with veneered plywood pews; wood-grained plastic laminate altar, chair, and ambo; rusty candlesticks and matching chandelier over the altar; and orange shag carpet in the sanctuary. (Figure 15) The remodel sought to restore the church

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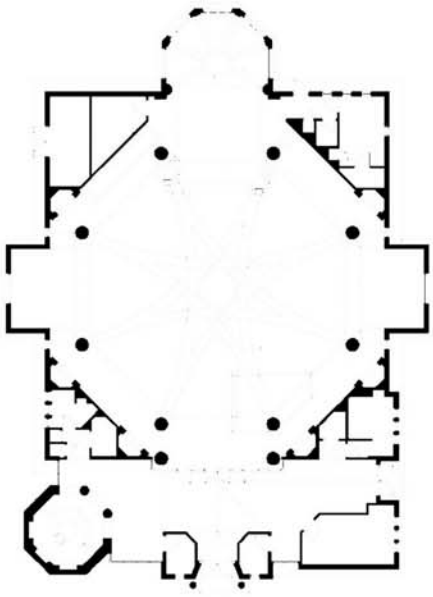
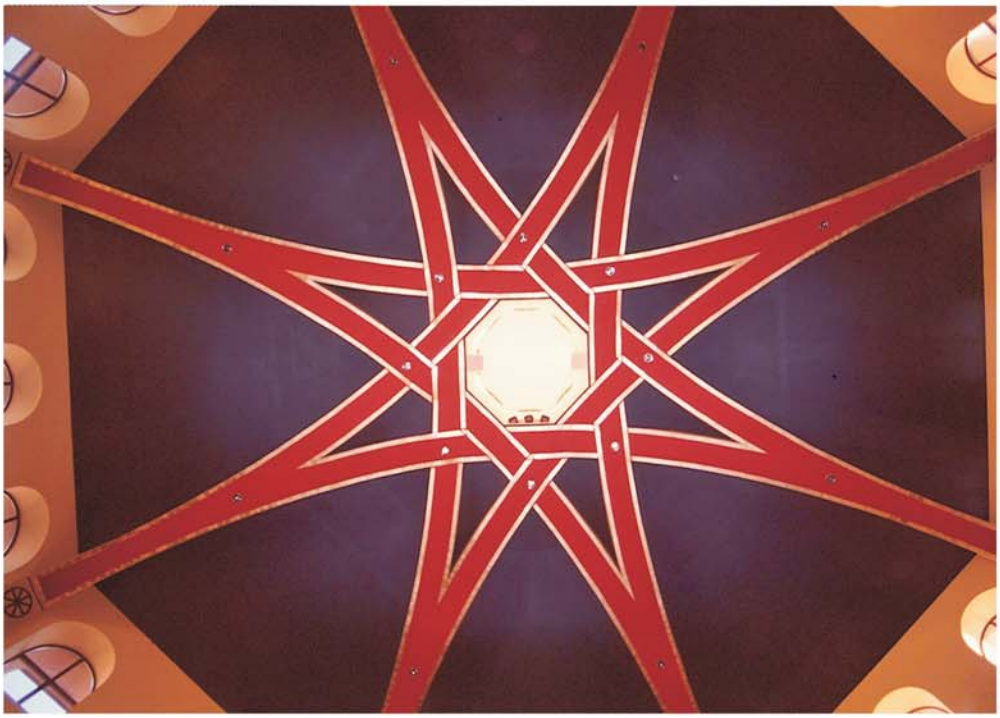
Figure 11

These themes — body, temple, city — all of which seek to express some insight into the heavenly reality, find fresh vitality in contemporary projects.

Figures 12 (above), 13
(below left), 14 (below right)





to some semblance of its former glory while addressing numerous issues of accessibility, iconicity, liturgical arrangement, devotional life, and aesthetics. The high altar (badly vandalized in the remodel) was restored to the center of the apse, new liturgical furnishings were designed, and a complex iconographic program based on the art of Blessed Fra Angelico was devised and implemented by Murals by Jericho. (Figures 16 and 17) ▶

Figures 15 (above left), 16 (above right), 17 (below).

These are just two examples of how contemporary church buildings can speak to the ineffable ideal of "heaven wedded to earth." The idea of church buildings as "signs and symbols of heavenly things" was largely lost in the middle of the last century. Yet these scriptural themes of the ecclesia — body, temple, and city — have perdured precisely because they are so essential to our comprehension of the human condition. In the history of Catholic architecture, these themes have inflamed the imaginations of builders and architects across the ages. Today they can continue both to inspire contemporary architects and to move the hearts and minds of the faithful, responding to the growing desire to once again build churches that move beyond the functional, beyond the stylistic, to a truly sacramental architecture. **ML**

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