ISSN# 1535-9387

SACRED ARCHITECTURE

Issue 21 2012

Journal of the Institute for Sacred Architecture

DOMUS DEI, QUAE EST ECCLESIA DEI VIVI:

THE MYTH OF THE DOMUS ECCLESIAE

Steven J. Schloeder

In the last century we have seen a steady devolution of Catholic sacred architecture from grand and formal edifices to decidedly more residential scale and casual buildings. This was not accidental, but rather a deliberate effort to return to what mid-century liturgical scholars considered was the true character of Christian worship as understood in the early Church.

A desire of the *ressourcement* movement was to recover the true meaning of the Christian liturgical assembly and the true meaning of Christian assembly space. Therefore, it was commonly held that the Church should emulate the early Christian Church in their liturgical practices and its surroundings. The architecture should be simplified to heighten the symbolic expression of the gathered community. Architectural accretions should be removed as nonessential, distracting, and counterproductive to the goal of "active participation."

Active Participation

It is historically curious that the desire to promote active participation of the faithful came to imply a radical reductionism in the majesty, beauty, iconography, and symbolism of church buildings. The notion of "active participation" as the genesis of the twentieth-century liturgical reforms was first articulated by Saint Pope Pius X (d. 1914) in a small exhortation on sacred music, *Tra le Sollecitudini*. Pius X reminds the faithful of the importance of the church building in the formation of the Christian soul through the Christian liturgy:

> Among the cares of the pastoral office...a leading one is without question that of maintaining and promoting the decorum of the House of God in which the august mysteries of religion are celebrated, and where the Christian people assemble to receive the grace of the Sacraments...Nothing should have place, therefore, in the temple calculated to disturb or even merely to diminish the piety and devotion of the faithful, nothing that may give reasonable cause for disgust or scandal, nothing, above all, which directly offends the decorum and sanctity of the sacred functions and is thus unworthy of the House of Prayer and of the Majesty of God.[1]

For Pius X, "the sanctity and dignity of the temple" was important so that the faithful might acquire the proper spirit for true "active participation" in the holy liturgy. Active participation properly understood is the goal of worship in the liturgy—it is the end, not the means. Among other things, the means include that the liturgy is done well in a place aptly designed for worship. In the mind of Pius, the church building ought be constructed to express the majesty and dignity of the House of God.

Given the clear intent expressed in this *motu proprio* of Saint Pius X as the point of departure for the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement, how are we to explain the subsequent diminishment of the church building as a sacramental sign of the heavenly realities?

The Mid-Century Liturgical Arguments

The typical rhetoric of the mid-century liturgical authors was that we ought to build churches for the "modern man" or "constructed to serve men of our age." Styles and forms from previous ages were declared "defunct" or "no longer vital." One even finds the condemnation of wanting a "church that looks like a church" as being "nostalgic"—an unhealthy yearning for a past Golden Age that really never was.[2]

Photo: Berthold Werner

Basilica of Constantine at Trier, nave and large apse at one end

For instance, Edward Mills wrote in *The Modern Church*: "If we do not build churches in keeping with the spirit of the age we shall be admitting that religion no longer possesses the same vitality as our secular buildings."[3] His book concerns topics such as efficient planning, technology, cost abatement, and environmental considerations. It is worth mentioning that only a few years before this book, Mills had written *The Modern Factory*, with the same rationalistic concerns for efficient planning, technology, cost abatement, and environmental considerations.

But we see something else going on in the mid-century writers. One cannot simply discard two millennia of sacred architectural forms and styles without having a new paradigm to replace it, and one cannot have a valid new paradigm without have grounds for discarding the old paradigm. The paradigm itself needed to change: and all the better if the new paradigm was promoted as the "authentic" paradigm, the recovery of what was lost.

Within this rhetoric of building churches for our age and in the willingness to discard the past is an embedded *mythos*. By this accounting, the Church began to formalize her liturgy and her architecture only after the Edict of Milan, when Constantine first legalized Christianity. The imperially sponsored building programs brought formality and the hierarchical trappings of ele-

Photo: stjohnwc.org

Interior of Saint John the Evangelist Church, West Chester, OH, by Richard Vosko, PhD and John Ruetschle Architects

ments take from the Imperial court.[4] Prior to this *Pax Constantiniana*, the Church was a domestic enterprise, and the model of domestic architecture—the *domus ecclesiae* (literally, "house of the church")—was the simple, humble, and hospitable residential form in which early Christians gathered to meet the Lord and meet one another in the Lord for fellowship, meals, and teaching. This became valued as a model for contemporary worship and self-understanding. The early house church—seen as pure, simple, unsullied by later liturgical and architectural accretions without the trappings of hierarchy and formality—was to be the model for modern liturgical reform.

As Father Richard Vosko surmised, "The earliest understanding of a Christian church building implies that it is a meeting house—a place of camaraderie, education and worship. In fact, the earliest Christian tradition clearly held that the Church does not build temples to honor God. That is what the civic religions did."[5] This notion was put most forcefully by E.A. Sovik, writing: "It is conventionally supposed that the reasons that Christians of the first three centuries built almost no houses of worship were that they were too few, or too poor, or too much persecuted. None of these is true. The real reason that they didn't build was that they didn't believe in ecclesiastical building."[6]

The ascendency of the residential model as the authentic liturgical form raised another question of architectural history: what to do with the intervening 1700 years of church building? For the mid-century and later architectural writers, the simple answer was that the domestic model was the ideal, and all later grand and hierarchical buildings are the deviations. Therefore, all the intervening eras, liturgical and artistic expressions, and architectural forms and styles came in for censure.

The changes in the age of Constantine were implicated for the advent of clericalism, turning the congregation into passive viewers at a formalistic ritual, the loss of liturgical and spiritual intimacy, and the subjugation of the Church's evangelical mission to the politics of the Emperor. The Christian basilica was thereby rejected as an expression of power-mongering and imperialistic tendencies.[7] The Byzantine churches were rejected for their courtly imperial formality, where the ministers are hidden behind the iconostasis, only to venture out in courtly processions. The Romanesque was rejected for its immensely long naves that separated the people from God, and the proliferation of side altars required for the monks to fulfill their daily obligations to say private Masses.[8] The Gothic style was criticized for its alienating monumentalism and for its reliquaries of dubious merit.[9] Baroque architecture comes in for special censure: for triumphalism, for Tridentine rubricism, for pagan artistic themes and sensuality, for hyper-valorization of the Eucharist in reaction to Protestantism, and for dishonesty in the use of materials.[10] Father Louis Bouyer's judgment of the Counterreformation liturgy was that it was "embalmed" – devoid of life and vitality.[11]

The decided trend of mid-twentieth century liturgical and architectural thinking was to reject historical styles. Clearing the table to start anew, with a sweep of the hand, Father Reinhold dismissed all previous architectural eras, styles and forms:

> Conclusion: We see that all these styles were children of their own day. None of their forms are ours. We have concrete, steel, wood compositions, brick, stone, glass of all kinds, plastic materials, reverse cycle heat and radiant heat. We can no longer identify the minority, called Christendom, and split in schisms, with the kingdom of God on earth. Our society is a pluralistic one and lives in a secularist atmosphere… [O]ur architects must find as good an expression in our language of forms, as our fathers did in theirs.[12]

The Problem of the Domus Ecclesiae

Thus were 1700 years of Christian architectural history discarded as liturgically erroneous and inapplicable for contemporary buildings in favor of simpler domestic-scaled places for assembly. This however, was not manufactured out of thin air. It was clear from Scripture that the early Church worshipped in the residences of the wealthier members of the community. The Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* mention a wealthy and powerful man who gave over his great house to the Church to establish what ought to be considered the first 'cathedral' as the chair of Peter.[13] Given the lack of excavated basilicas from the pre-Constantinian era, it was assumed that there was some sort of organic development between the domestic house and the basilica that only found full expression in the fourth century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many historians grappled with the question of transition between these two forms, looking at the Roman house with the *triclinium*, various sorts of intermediate structures such as the *aula ecclesia*, adaptations of the Roman civic basilica, and the architecture of the imperial palace, among others.[14]

These speculations all went by the wayside in the mid-century, and the model of the house church came to the fore, with the discovery of the church at Dura Europos in the 1930s. This discovery was of profound importance given that it was the only known identifiable and dateable pre-Constantinian church. It was obviously a residence converted to the needs of a small Christian community. Significantly, it was also a rather late dated church—about 232 AD—and quite in keeping with the expectations from all the various scriptural references to a domestic liturgical setting.[15] Henceforth, especially in the late 1950s and the 1960s, the dominant

Photo: rihabresearchcenter.blogspot.com

Saint Georgeous Church, Rehab, Jordan, of 230 AD, which stands atop an archeological site of a first century church discovered in 2008.

thesis in liturgical circles took the *domus ecclesiae* as the architectural model for pre-Constantinian Christian architecture. The common vision for new parishes built in the wake of Vatican II was therefore toward simpler, more domestically-scaled buildings in emulation of the *domus ecclesiae* in which Christians supposedly gathered before the Imperial approbation of Christianity in the fourth century.

The only problem for this romantic model of a domestic residential architecture, built for a small gathering of early Christians celebrating a simple *agape* meal, is its dubious merit.

Domus ecclesiae—popular among liturgists to emphasize the communal nature of the assembly—is not a particularly apt term. More to the point, it is simply anachronistic. The phrase *domus ecclesiae* is not found in Scripture. No first, second, or third-century author uses the term to describe the church building. The phrase *domus ecclesiae* cannot be found to describe any church building before the Peace of Constantine (313 A.D.), but rather seems used to imply a building owned by the Christians, such as a bishop's residence.[16]

There are many other ancient terms used to identify the church building, but *domus Dei* seems to be of particular importance. Throughout the New Testament, the assembly of Christians is called *domus Dei*, the house of God. Paul's passage in 1 Tim 3:15 could not be clearer: *in domo Dei … quae est ecclesia Dei vivi* ("the house of God, which is the church of the living God"). Likewise, *domus Dei* or its derivative *domestici Dei* (household of God) is found in Eph 2:19, Heb 10:21, and 1 Pt 4:17.

Following scripture, Tertullian (d. 220) used *domus Dei* in a way that can only mean a church building. This key term, domus Dei and its Greek equivalent *oikos tou theou*, is found in Hippolytus (d. 235), Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), and Eusebius (d. 339), among others. But even *oikos* or *domus* does not suggest any humble residential or domestic association. *Oikos* is generally a house, but it can also serve to describe a temple (as in a house of the gods). Similarly, *domus* could also refer to the grandest of buildings, such as the emperor's palace—*domus divina*—or Nero's ostentatious *Domus Aurea*. These are hardly small-scale and intimate associations. It seems that long before the time of Constantine, the Church had already begun to move out of the residential environments we read of in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul.

Textual Counter Evidence

The problem is that we know very little about pre-Constantinian liturgy or Christian architecture. Yet from the scant literary evidence we do have, we should not reject the strong probability that even in the second century the Church owned land and built special buildings for the community. The earliest record of the special purpose church building seems to be from *Chronicle of Arbela*, a fifth-century Syrian manuscript which tells us that Bishop Isaac (*Ishaq*) (135-148) "had built a large well-ordered church which exists today."[17] The *Chronicles of Edessa* mention a Christian church destroyed in a city-wide flood around 201.[18] Around the year 225 A.D. Christians acquired a piece of public property in a dispute with inn-keepers to build a church with the explicit blessing of Emperor Severus Alexander, who determined "that it was better for some sort of a god to be worshipped there than for the place to be handed to the keepers of an eating-house."[19]

The pagan Porphyry (d. 305), writing in the second half of the third century, attacks the Christians who, in "imitating the erection of the temples, build very large houses[20], into which they go together and pray."[21] The Emperor Aurelian (d. 275) makes passing reference to a Christian church (*Christianorum ecclesia*) in contrast to his own religious temple (*templo deorum omnia*).[22] Lactantius (d. 320) recounts the destruction of the church in Nicomedia, calling it a "lofty edifice" and describes how it was "situated on rising ground, within the view of the palace" and how the emperors Diocletian and Galerius could see it and debated whether to burn it to the ground or pull it down.[23] It seems that, if the Emperor of the Roman Empire knew a Christian church when he saw one, it was no simple obscure house.

The Problem of Place

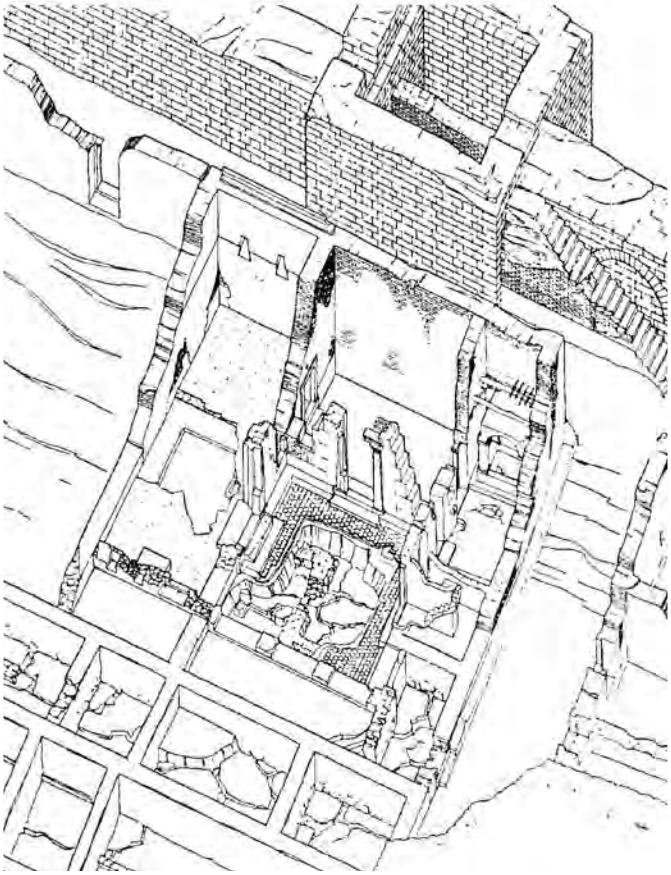
Despite the textual evidence that argues for significant church buildings before the age of Constantine, the dearth of archeological evidence for formal church buildings has seemed persuasive. With the recent discovery of a pre-Constantinian basilica at Aqaba it seems timely for liturgists and architects to reconsider the validity of the residential *domus ecclesiae* as a meaningful model for contemporary church architecture. The Aqaba church dates comfortably to 300, and perhaps as early as 280 A.D.[24] We have no knowledge of what other pre-Constantinian churches looked like, but we can have certainty that Christians had special, purpose-built, urban-scale churches before the Emancipation in 313 A.D. We should therefore reevaluate the claims about the "authenticity" of the simple house church as a meaningful architectural model for the Christian assembly both in the early Church and for today.

However, we should also consider the emotional impetus for the house church. The romantic notion of the primitive house church has a strong sense of attraction: the desire for more communitarian and domestic church buildings is enticing in the alienating condition of post-agrarian and post-industrial modern life. Both the massive scale of the modern city and the anonymity and placelessness of suburban sprawl contribute to the desire for a sense of domestic rootedness. Increased mobility in the modern work force and the consequent breakdown of traditional community and family life also create a tension and a desire for familiarity, welcome, and belonging in the parish community.

These perhaps contribute to the nostalgic longing for a more domestic parish facility. But the church building must function on a variety of levels. Church architecture is necessarily symbolic, and the various metaphors by which we understand church buildings are derived from the metaphors by which we understand the Church. These metaphors find their poignancy and potency in the human condition: matters of embodiment, relationship, dwelling, and community life form a matrix of symbols for the Church, the parish community, the liturgy, and church architecture. Among the most significant Scriptural images for the *Ecclesia* (and therefore the liturgy and the church building) are the Body of Christ, the nuptial relationship, the Tent of Dwelling/ Temple of Solomon, and the Heavenly City. These speak of the fundamental human experiences of embodiment, of marriage and domestic family life, of dwelling and habitation, and of social life.

This residential model of *domus ecclesiae* has been placed into a false opposition to the *domus Dei* as a model for sacred architecture. Both are models that find their validity in the human experience of dwelling and family life, but the former has come to imply an immanent expression of the home for the local community whereas the latter has a transcendental and eschatological horizon that is more apt for sacramental buildings that are called to be "truly worthy and beautiful and be *signs and symbols* of heavenly realities."[25] The desire for a domestically-scaled liturgical environment is not wrong per se, but it cannot stand in isolation without reference to the broader framework of ecclesiastical, liturgical, and architectural symbolism. All are needed for the person and the community to understand how the liturgy and the liturgical environment express and participate in a greater sacramental reality beyond the confines of the local assembly.

If the domestic model has no sure foundation, then the arguments erected for rejecting the hierarchical and formal models of liturgy; for discarding the sacramental language of Christian architecture in favor of a functionalist and programmatic approach to building; and for dismissing any appeals to the rich treasure trove of Catholic architectural history and various historical styles are susceptible to falling like a house of cards.



Isometric of the House Church at Dura-Europus circa 232 AD (after Crawfoot)

Photo: Dura-Europus, by JW Crawfoot, Antiquity Vol 19, No 75: 113-121

◆

Steven J. Schloeder, PhD AIA is the founder of Liturgical Environs PC, an architecture firm specializing in Catholic church projects across the United States. He is the author of Architecture in Communion *(San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1998), among many other articles in scholarly and popular journals. He can be contacted at steve@liturgicalenvirons.com.*

(Endnotes)

1 Pius X, *Tra le Sollecitudine*, November 22, 1903.

2 See for instance, Maurice Lavanoux, "Religious Art and Architecture Today," in F. McManus, ed. *The Revival of the Liturgy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 152-54.

3 Edward Mills, *The Modern Church* (London: The Architectural Press, 1956), 16. See also Mills, *The Modern Factory* (London: The Architectural Press, 1951).

4 Cf. Kevin Seasoltz, *A Sense of the Sacred* (London: Continuum, 2005), 95-98.

5 Richard Vosko, *God's House Is Our House: Re-Imagining the Environment for Worship* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 22.

6 Edward A. Sovik, "The Place of Worship: Environment for Action," in Mandus A Egge, ed. *Worship: Good News in Action* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), 98. Quoted in Mark A. Torgerson, *An Architecture of Immanence: Architecture for Worship and Ministry Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 152-53.

7 Vosko, (2006): 27; Michael E. DeSanctis, *Building from Belief: Advance, Retreat, and Compromise in the Remaking of Catholic Church Architecture* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 30.

8 Joseph Rykwert, *Church Building* (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), 81.

9 H.A. Reinhold, *The Dynamics of Liturgy* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 87.

10 H.A. Reinhold, *Speaking of Liturgical Architecture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952), 13.

11 Louis Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), 7. Also Kevin Seasoltz *The House of God: Sacred Art and Church Architecture* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 110-114.

12 Reinhold, *Speaking of Liturgical Architecture* 32.

13 Ps.-Clement. *Recognitions*. 10.71.

14 E.g., S. Lang, "A Few Suggestions Toward a New Solution of the Origin of the Early Christian Basilica," *Rivista di archeologia Christiana* 30 (1934): 189-208.

15 Cf. Kimberly Bowes, "Early Christian Archaeology: A State of the Field", in *Religious Compass* 2/4 (2008): 575-619.

16 Katerina Sessa, "Domus Ecclesiae: Rethinking a Category of *Ante Pacem* Christian Space," in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 60:1 (April 2009): 90-108.

17 Cf. *Sources Syriaques*. t.1, trans by A. Mignana (Mossoul: Imprimerie des Peres Dominicains, 1907). NB: Davies gives the dates even earlier as 123-136 in his *The Origin and Development of Early Christian Church Architecture* (London: SCM, 1952), 14.

18 Cf. Uwe Lang, *Turning Towards the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 67. Harnack makes note of this in his *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1908).

19 Lampridius, *Life of Severus Alexander*, 2.49.

20 The Greek in Macarius is "they build very large buildings". Porphyry distinguishes between these large buildings and residential houses, "their own houses", in which they lived. In Ezra 4:1, the same construction is used specifically for the building the Temple. There is no reason therefore to assume "oikos" meant a residential dwelling house, since it could be used for a house, any building, or a temple. Cf. *Macarii Magnetis Quae Supersunt*, ed. C. Blondel (Paris: Klincksieck, 1876), 201.

21 Porphyry, *Adversus Christianos*, known to us from the fragment addressed by the later Macarius in *Apocriticus*, 4. 21. Cf. T.W. Crafer, The *Apocriticus of Macarius Magnes* (London: SPCK, 1919), 146. Crafer notes that some took this passage as proof that Porphyry lived and wrote after the Emancipation, though he considers this argument weak. The conventional dates for Porphyry are c. 234 - c. 305.

22 *Epistle of Aurelian*, quoted in Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae* (London: 1722), 8.1.1.

23 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 12. Cf. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, "Lactantius" (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1886). Lactantius uses the term *editissimum* to speak of the tall building, and notes the church was *ex palatio videbatur*.

24 Another formal basilican church, Saint George at Rihab Jordan, is quite controversially and, in my view, improbably dated to 230. The earliest accepted church currently is the Christian prayer hall in Meggido, Israel, which is not a basilica and found in the structure of a larger early third-century Roman villa. NM

25 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 288.

◆