

Celebration and Sacrament: Holy Place and Holy People

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Introduction

If you are keen to visit old buildings, some of the best examples of medieval ecclesiastical remains are to be found in East Anglia. On a recent visit I had occasion to spend some time church crawling and stumbled across Binham Priory, the remains of a Benedictine monastic settlement 4 or 5 miles from Walsingham. Why this place sticks firmly in my mind is the stark contrast between what now exists and what had been. Apart from the monastic ruins, the only utilised building (apart from a farm) is the nave of the church. The poignancy of juxtaposition makes the place special, a holy place in the sense that it has a continuity with the past and also a sense of dramatic personal history; it seems to have been a building that moved with the times as the different styles of architecture and furnishing show, but its truncated nave and aisles, gives the impression of a magnificent church built for monks and people in a remote place. Its setting is typically East Anglia, the rear approach is through a gatehouse, ruined, and then a paved way, into the door to face a magnificent medieval seven sacrament font, benches with carved figures on the poppy heads, the old holy water stoop, and a fine tapestry behind the Jacobean table altar.

I use Binham as an example of what one could call the 'sacrament of building', a place which engaged and still engages people with a transformative presence. This might be fanciful language but it hints at the importance of place and ritual in the context of human life. Why is it that people of different religious traditions and none find an uplift in the quality of this place? It never was a huge pilgrimage church like Walsingham or Bury St. Edmunds, yet one gets the impression that it has been a locus of encounter for generations of people throughout times of turbulent local history. Is it because it provides an environment that people can make something of? Michael Mulvihill, writing about liturgy and inculturation, states: "God's grace in Christ does not suppress or eliminate the human capacity to be creative. On the contrary, if truly

received by human beings, it can open up new and further horizons within which the work of creation and salvation can be advanced. But this human 'autonomy' cannot be separated from the fact that God is the Creator and Saviour of each and every human person, and of the human race as a whole. To think and act with regard to the human person without constant reference to God is to miss the whole point of human existence." (M. Mulvihill, *Liturgy and Inculturation in Liturgy*, Vol 19, July 95, p. 210. See also Vatican 2, *Gaudium et Spes*, N.38).

Perhaps it is this creative dynamic which animates the experience such as found in places like Binham. An impulse to create a place, build on it, beautify it and then experience within and around it the interaction of the 'autonomous' human with God. It is because Binham is linked to this 'other' dimension that it somehow challenges, supports, acts as a catalyst and an opener to those further horizons within which the work of creation and salvation can be advanced.

Domus Dei

Domus Ecclesia

This introduction brings us to a point of current reference. There has been much debate in recent years about the place and role of our "ecclesiastical plant" in present society. Various models of approach can be distinguished amongst people; the functional who see only a necessity for buildings when required by need; the mystagogical who want their buildings to teach, and possibly exist without the need for cultural considerations; the syncretists who borrow from cultures around them and try and apply new methods and materials to the space for Christian cult, and the Temple builders, those who, like the mystagogues, want a building to reach beyond, but this time they want it as a 'home, a place for their Divine Being'. Within these groupings two trends can be discerned: the sense of our churches being 'places for the Holy', 'Domus Dei', and the other, a meeting place for the Holy people, 'Domus Ecclesia', house of the Church.

Vatican II in the reform of the liturgy, placed a heavy burden on all who care and are responsible for worship, when it stated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, "...the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvellously strengthens their power to preach Christ and this shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign gathered up among the nations, under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one sheepfold and shepherd." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 Dec. 1963. Introduction 2).

The emphasis I have chosen to place on this stresses firstly liturgy in its root sense of daily work, something that we grow into and with, secondly the holiness of a people who are themselves individually and collectively 'temples of God in the Spirit', and thirdly, the evangelical mission which empowers them to preach and become a sign of reconciliation and unity. This thrust roots us in the ancient understanding of Church as living building, living Temple and hints at the place somehow being sanctified by the meeting and activity of this people with their God.

In liturgical and architectural terms, the stress on the post-Vatican II building has been towards a community model, the "Domus Ecclesia", but the misunderstanding of and perhaps misplaced stress on communitarianism has resulted in some very dissatisfactory churches. A few architects have grasped the nettle and tried to visualise what the reforms of the liturgy have been about. In our culture three spring to mind: A Winkley, W. Hurley and W. Cantrell. They tried, with varying degrees of success, to integrate the planning of a church with the demands of the Assembly, participation, the liturgy and the mission of the Church. Confusion still reigns, many hankered after an older model of church and its rituals which in symbolic terms was encapsulated in the architecture of a 'Domus Dei', a building created for God rather than people. This, of course, is a pastiche. In every building the needs of cult and community have to be met, but it does point to some unresolved questions. The swing backwards and forwards between community centred place and Temple blurs the difference between two styles of cult, the specific pilgrimage place with its identification of holiness, and the local, cultural setting of a particular community with its ritual and sacramental acts from birth to death, daily, weekly, yearly. The complaint one often hears about 'lack of mystery and the iconoclasm of reforming zealots' has a point to make. The deeper problem is multi-faceted and it speaks of a non-integration between religious ritual and life, between faith and practise, between devotion and worship. Our perceived crisis cannot be blamed wholly on liturgists or (in the case of buildings) architects. Bryan Sprinks, writing about culture, rightly says that "the idea of liturgy and the Christian values it articulates interacting with society was of course one of the central hopes of the Liturgical Movement." (Bryan Spinks, *Liturgy and Culture in Liturgy and Dialogue*, eds. Paul Bradshaw and Bryan Spinks, SPCK: London, 1993, p 29).

This was given greater impetus by the Liturgy Constitution, reinforced by *Gaudium et Spes*, but as he maintains, the reforms have not interacted with modern culture, "It is my contention that the crisis

Western liturgists allege exists...is more a problem of perspective than failure to guard against modern liturgies being just a religious loss on a developing western culture. Modern western rites cannot but help reflect the culture from which they spring, either in affirming that culture (Christ of culture), or in challenging it (Christ against culture), and/or in working for its transformation (Christ the transformer of culture). If there is a crisis, the fault is probably not that the liturgies are not modern, but possibly because, in affirming culture, they have obscured the mystery and transcendence of God. But it is possible that the fault also lies elsewhere — with preaching, mission, pastoral, and public stance. The liturgy cannot be the whole missionary activity of the modern Western Church, nor can it be the scapegoat for all other ecclesiastical shortcomings". (p. 49, Spinks, Op Cit.)

If the liturgy, the celebration of Word and Sacrament and its place of worship have been targets, it is perhaps because they are the most obvious, the nearest connecting point that many have with the Church itself. A community invests much in its pattern of history and ritual even if this is not fully explicated. A church building, a place associated with cult and devotion, has a deeper resonance than we perhaps realise. Talking with an Anglican parish priest in the Diocese of Norwich (August 1995) I asked about the state of the church and community life. He was an architect and builder before ordination and knew the locality well. On reflection he told me that although new housing could be built in older areas, there was little chance of success if, as he put it, "the presence of the village church declined by closure". Significantly, it seemed that many rural communities went downhill once their church was closed, and as a pastoral policy, the present Bishop insisted on a maintained presence.

Something deeper is at work: church, presence, building all stand for an interaction even if it is the minimal connection of silhouette on skyline, chiming bells or the visibility of the worshippers; a holy people does not need numerical strength to be a light.

History

Past ages give us pointers to our own search for culture and identity, whilst we cannot predicate the past in terms of our own understanding, we can learn some of the basic patterns of human life. The cycle of birth, life, death is invariable no matter how we clothe it. Alexander Schmemmann, whose writings have done much to bring into focus the shift in liturgical understanding in the 4th and 5th centuries, traced in his seminal work *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*. (St. Vladimirs Press. New York. 1986), the development of certain patterns which marked a

move from the early understanding of the ecclesia as 'locus of the holy', to a more (and pre-Christian) tendency to equate objects with holiness. This complex legacy resulted in a return (during the middle ages and beyond) to an understanding of place as Temple, 'Domus Dei'. Harold Turner, writing about the change from House Church to Temple Church in his work *From Temple to Meeting House*, echoes Schmemmann's theory that the architectural and liturgical shifts had an influence on theology, which in turn were influenced by popular understanding, a development that was not necessarily totally healthy. There were, of course, warning voices, just as there had been in earlier ages when prophets warned against too much 'idolatry'. As Nathan said to David, "Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt". 2 Sam 7:5-7. (See Micah 6:8)

John Chrysostom, Augustine, Cyril and others made reference toward a tendency for the classification of objects as holy, and in certain cases gave explicit warnings about distancing the action of the people at worship. The same tendency to exaggerate took place in the sixteenth century, emphasising one aspect such as Word, failing to recognise that the central feature of the two great sacraments of Initiation and Eucharist is an action. Rubricism in our Catholic tradition was another evolution, an orthodoxy ensured by fanatical fidelity to the small print, often resulting in some bizarre liturgical conundrums. However, historical work also shows a continual pulse which beats throughout the ages, determinants which remained even in the most aberrant rituals.

We can label this in four ways. Firstly, Approach: Every act of celebration needs an approach, whether physical environment or psychological movement. Even if God is in the midst of the ordinary, we need to approach a moment, create a space to hear, think, learn, understand or whatever. In spatial terms, this has always been transformative, the shift of tempo. Secondly, there has to be a threshold, a place to leave behind (even if for a time) the cares of the day, to put off the old, to put on the new, and the place of actual activity has always had some consideration of a place for choice, rather like the Narthex for the catechumen and pagans in the great early Christian basilicas. Thirdly, our commitment in terms of taking on the holy as been implicit in the figurative statement of the Font. This is the place of our entry into Christ's life. In early churches it was a separate, highly decorated and imposing place. In later medieval times it was, as we see in many of our old parish churches, placed at the entrance, a sign for the incoming and outgoing. It is only in recent years that the importance of this visual symbol has been fully recovered and more needs to be made of it, but

the fountain of living water has always been a reminder of the holiness of a people. The *Testamentum Domini*, a collection of material dating from the latter part of the fourth century, has a prayer, said daily by the presbyters of the church, which stated, 'We unceasingly praise you in our hearts, always, as we depict in ourselves the image of your Kingdom'. (*Testamentum Domini*, Syriac. I .52:R78.6. quoted by Grant Sperry-White in *Liturgy in Dialogue*, p. 113). People still found in their place of worship the images of the Kingdom to which they belonged.

Fourthly, the interior led through the people's space to the focal point of the holy table, the altar, which in essence is communion, community, sharing, sacrifice, meal, commitment, ..The determinants of the liturgical action are still present in the building. Implicitly, the statement was made even in the high middle ages, that though this was God's house, it was still there because God was with the Holy people. The sacramental stress on Baptism, though obscured by some scholastic developments, still stated in architectural terms the holiness of the people.

We forget that past ages did not have a division in our terms. Even in the great cities such as Constantinople the liturgy, though redolent with quasi magical symbolism, still remained an action done by the whole people not as we experience in uniformity but in unison as time and place allowed. John Baldovin, in *City, Church and Renewal*, details the worship of Constantinople as a city community "Through the liturgical use and the dynamic interplay of churches, streets, plazas, and extra-urban spaces, the entire city became something like a church. By its very structure the liturgy of Constantinople identified the participants as inhabitants of a sacred city... For the medieval Byzantine, this *civitas* was inconceivable without worship at its most public". (John F. Baldovin. *City, Church and Renewal*. The Pastoral Press: Washington, DC. 1991, p. 24.)

Word and sacrament were part of a lived experience, some of which was also devotional, such as the Icon of the Theotokos, to whom the city was dedicated. It was she who saved the city several times and who symbolised divine protection. Echoes of this blend between liturgy and devotion are found in many of our medieval churches and cities. There is an integrative quality which saw worship, even if 'performed' by a clergy, still as part and parcel of life. Witness the comments found in Chaucer. Look at the lavish care expended by the crafts people on fabric and furniture. The sense of homely (and sometimes malicious) fun in the carvings and manuscript cartoons. There was a comprehension that life was sacramentalised, not only by the reception of the sacraments themselves, but by the sacramental and devotional activities of a people

who saw God at work in the sanctification of time and place.

Physical Space

The church buildings of the past reflect this approach. Firstly, the physical presence is immediate and powerful. Secondly, the portals are an entrance to another dimension, but one which is worked towards, a drama between various conflicting forces in life, where in the tympanum of judgement the good are saved, the good redeemed by Christ in the sacramental actions of baptism, seen at the font, and the Eucharist, seen at the altar. The space of the past was a holy space, but in which a people could find an identity, they could wander amongst the pillars, the chantry, the shrines. Even a parish church held a pilgrimage quality.

Accounts found in medieval churches such as the 15th/16th centuries Book of Reckonings of Shere Church in Surrey, mention frequently the candles for the rood, bequests for lamps, vestments and linen paid for by parishioners, doles for food and ale on festivals, reckonings at Candlemas for tithes, bonfires for vigils and such like. We still find this in cultures around us, a blend of religion and life which we lack. At worst, they may be bizarre and dangerous manifestations of aberrant psychology, but normally these rituals and customs 'sanctified' in some way the people and gave them an identity as a people 'in touch with God'.

Today

What do we face now that Celebration and Sacrament have undergone renewal and revision since Vatican II? Perhaps it is too early to claim any comprehensive overview of our current situation. The Victorian reforms, especially in Pugin's imagination, tried to return us to a catholicism of a golden age which never was. In some ways, it has not been a helpful legacy, though one cannot but admire the craftsmanship and devotion of those who built these places. Inadequate reforms have not helped us appreciate the complexity of space for our celebration, to understand that there is no blue print, only some determinants pointing out a way. Other religious cultures still build grandiose temples (the Hindu community in Neasden), or vast mosques (Regents Park, Whitechapel). For other religious cultures, the Holy is found in people, in their actions and ritual which reveal its transformative power, and they celebrate this in space and place.

Why, then, do we find our buildings, our celebration a problem? Schmemmann pointed out what we need to discover, that there is something underlying liturgy, the 'locus' of worship as a whole, the manifestation in the Church's liturgical art and experience of the eternal

Kingdom of God in space and time within the life of a people. However, it cannot be isolated from the critical task of theology, "The question of the correspondence between the community's understanding of Christian truth, and its expression in liturgy and that of the authentic whole tradition, must continually be placed. To respond responsibly to that problem, other sources of theology must be introduced along with the liturgical — practical grounding of the knowledge of faith." (Edward Kilmartin. *Christian Liturgy*. Sheed and Ward: Kansas. 1988. p. 97.)

Our church buildings need to emphasize the place a catholic christian people has as Church in this world. Architecture and space, mould, shape and determine so many things. One has only to look at the uniform ranks of pews in a Victorian chapel to see the model of Church which stresses 'institution'. Somehow a balance has to be achieved. Participation, we have discovered, does not equal individuality; ministry is not power but service. Our appreciation of sacramental worship shows the power of involvement and when the visual and symbolic elements are at work, there is an immediate existential experience.

Perhaps we have not fully taken on board the devotional and ritual quality of popular religion including the cultural activities of our youth. Despite the negative media hype about the Sheffield "Nine O'clock Service", something was working, even if only for a while. Whilst we must recognise a fidelity to a tradition, to the determinants of our worship as a holy people, the Body of Christ, the priestly people, 'Take, bless, break, give and do this in memory of me', we need to find vehicles for expressing it. It is indicative of a shift in emphasis that people are now beginning to see the need for re-evaluating our space in building terms, to balance the holy place with the needs of the holy people, to create zones of encounter which respects the authenticity of the focal symbol. That is why in earlier ages the altar remained on its own, the pulpit in its place, the shrine in its location, the font at the church door. As the liturgy expresses who we are individually and corporately as a faith community, so our place needs to respect and evolve these elements.

As Donald Gelpi puts it, "The Breath of God comes first, not to isolated individuals, but to the Church as a whole ... the Church is a matrix of grace that nurtures individual believers to Christian maturity and advances them toward a share in the glory of the risen Christ". (Donald L. Gelpi, *Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology for Correcting Christians*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn. 1993. p. 115.) Whatever one may think about R.C.I.A. and its programme (and as a recent external examiner in theology reminded me, "it's NOT the only way", whenever it has 'engaged' the community it seems to have

been very successful. The same observations could be made of Eucharistic celebration.

Why is it that a clinically reordered church does not necessarily make for an integrative act of worship, and yet another location can be a transformative experience? Brentwood and Plymouth Cathedrals have made the news in recent years, one a new building with qualities of classical revival, the other as nondescript Gothic building made exciting by a partial reordering. Whatever one may think about our current styles of architecture, both cathedrals attempt to conceptualise a vision of the holy people, gathered in a place made holy by their celebration and the encounter with God. Both have stepped further along the path of understanding the relationship of space and people. As I mentioned earlier, this concern is more than a correct reordering of sanctuary, it is a complete approach which sees the mission of the church as both outwards and inwards.

Marchita Mauck, who is Professor of Art History at Louisiana State University, is also a design consultant for liturgical reorderings. With others actively engaged in the pastoral work of the church, he sees the future of our space in terms of "actively worshipping well". Four specific areas need to be looked at: the gathering space, the threshold, the font and the table. This is where we are now. Recognition of gathering is socially important, the hospitality of a home, the ministry of welcome in a community. This raises questions of access, interaction, arriving and departing. It is symbolic of that call to faith we receive from God. The threshold is our crossing point, we cross a threshold in all our sacramental rites, in our cyclical rituals of the Paschal mystery, in our weekly gatherings for Eucharist. This is, as Mauck would say, 'reaffirming' our baptismal commitment and our rights and obligations, the integration of Christian life with our mission and witness. The threshold is therefore a critical place, it needs greater thought.

The Font is perhaps the most neglected of our focal points, yet its history shows us its importance, immersion or submersion. "In our sacramental life we are constantly reminded of our baptismal commitment to a life of faithful witness to the transformative power of Jesus Christ". (Liz Clarke. *Ritual People: Ritual Space in Liturgy*, Vol. 19, No. 57, July 1995. p. 230).

Surely our history and revitalised sacramental celebrations need to reaffirm the importance of this powerful symbolic place. The table reflects the centrality of Eucharist, but in arranging our Eucharistic space we need to carefully consider the links with chair and ambo, so that these focal points reflect the sense of liturgy being an action and dynamism of the whole assembly and presider.

And lastly, I mentioned the necessity of listening to our social rituals and devotional needs, a restoration of balance is necessary. In this sense we need to look again at our buildings as a place with multi focal spaces, a central space with other areas providing for different moments and moods. This may help us to recover the 'transformative presence' which enables a community to resonate with its past, interact with its present and 'walk humble' with its God.

Reviews

THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER by Richard Lennan, Clarendon, Oxford, pp. ix & 289, £32.50

The publication of Richard Lennan's doctoral dissertation on *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (supervised by George Vass and Edward Yarnold) comes at a timely moment and reflects something of the change in mood which has been occurring in recent Rahner studies.

Ten to fifteen years ago the matter appeared to be settled. In official Roman circles at least Rahner's influence had been on the wane for some time, his receding star being eclipsed by the rival promotion of von Balthasar into the ascendancy. More generally something of a consensus was beginning to prevail, shared to a greater and lesser extent by friend and foe alike, whereby the constructive value of Rahner's work was deemed to have been compromised by the transcendentalising slant of his philosophical-cum-theological mode of procedure. A range of charges held sway: that Rahner started with a generalised account of human experience to the cost of the irreducible particularity of human life on the one hand (Joseph O'Leary) and of Christian faith and the person of Jesus on the other (Bruce Marshall); that the emphasis which he placed upon the individual human subject, a focus which continued in place even as late as the publication of the *Grundkurs*, prevented due recognition being given to the role of the communal and the public (Fergus Kerr) and, related to this, that the overly theoretical thrust of his transcendental method was incapable of giving sufficient weight to the primacy of practice in Christian life (Sobrino, *Segundo et al*).

However, Rahnerian devotees have not been passive in the face of these challenges. Recent years have witnessed a steady trickle of publications and a number of significant doctoral theses which have been written with the express intention of challenging this developing consensus and of promoting a rehabilitation of Rahner's theology that is