

ON THE BUILDING OF A CHURCH—THE DREAM AND THE BUSINESS

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IF I were given three words in which to summarize my feelings about church art today, I should choose difficult, dangerous and delicate; and I should add that the nearer we get to practice the more applicable do these words become. It is all too clear that we live today in a non-religious culture. Our current aesthetic ideas and values are secular, even when they are not actually materialistic. Thus the artist who dedicates his talents to the service of religion will inevitably have to work against the current trends and feelings of the modern world. Then the practical, the technical and economic difficulties are, as will appear, both acute and numerous. It is also a disability that the artist who devotes himself to religion, in this country works in an intellectual vacuum. There is little philosophical or theological literature available to him, and though he is often unconscious of this serious deficiency in his equipment, it is none the less there.

So much for difficulty! But surely also, to jump a point, the practice of church art calls for delicacy and restraint, and in artists or craftsmen who are not of the first order there is a woeful lack of either. This makes the whole business exceedingly dangerous for those who engage in church art. I mean that below a certain level of competence the 'artist' is a menace! It is no light matter to seek to give aesthetic expression to Christian truth and mystery, which, I suppose, is what is really meant by church art. The artist here is after all dealing (whether he knows it or not) with the depths of the human spirit, and these are troubled waters. . . .

Architecture is of course the master art, and art is no mere emotional addition to a work. It is the work properly executed, the *recta ratio factibilium* as they say. Things made may conveniently be defined in terms of their use or purpose—*ratione finis*, in Thomist language. Now a church is a building in which men worship God and worship includes prayer—meditation—the preaching of the word of God, and, penetrating all these activities, the sacramental life of the Church. The Eucharist is the Sacrament

of sacraments or, as Abbot Vonier liked to call it, the Sacrament-Sacrifice, namely the Mass. This is what a church is for: in Belloc's phrase a church is a Mass-house. The dramatic focus will then naturally be the altar, just as Calvary is the spiritual focus of the Christian life.

We are all agreed today that in the plan of a church the altar and sanctuary should be visible from all points of the building. There is however a danger in this, namely that the interior can all too easily be made to look like an assembly hall, especially if it culminates in a sanctuary of tame and feeble design. There is a certain subtlety required in 'high-lighting' the altar and the sanctuary, and yet at the same time making it a fulfilment of the whole design in its combination of colour, shape and symbol. Moreover, the altar itself and everything upon it should be individually designed and made. This calls for an architect with a genuine talent for design and for craftsmen of competence and integrity. The machine-made article can be spotted a mile away by any discerning eye.

There are two forms of decoration for a sanctuary which are well within the technical competence of our day, but which are not used as often as they might be. I refer to the triptych and baldacchino. The triptych is not only an ancient form of decoration but is also highly functional, and should commend itself to the busy parish priest. The baldacchino especially in the form of a suspended or floating tester is a structure which can easily be made of lightweight material and is well within the competence of a good joiner or worker in wood, and if there is a judicious use of colouring and gilding an impression of elegance, lightness and colour is easily obtained.

I come back however to the main theme, and shall risk a dogmatic statement: the essence of good architecture lies in the faithful development of structure, and the control and use of techniques. The builder, the master-builder as the architect was sometimes called, inherits a type of structure and a set of techniques. These are part of the material civilization to which he belongs. The Greeks, for example, developed the post and the lintel; the Romans developed the round arch; the Gothic age, speaking very broadly, developed the ogive and the buttress.

Now any good architect in any age will study his structure and ask: how can I handle this to get proportion, elegance, beauty?

How can I combine it with the sensitive use of material? How can I use colour and ornament along with it, and how finally can I pay due regard to its function, and the material conditions in which it will be situated: these include landscape, the light, the surrounding buildings, and even the climate? This is all too plainly a large and difficult programme: indeed it is so difficult that complete success is impossible. Architecturally speaking, there is no such thing as the perfect building. If politics, as they say, is the art of the possible then architecture is the art of the impossible. But then architecture as distinct from mere building is a thing one rarely finds.

In our own day the multiplication of materials, structures and techniques has not lessened the problems which face a conscientious and responsible architect. For example, many modern architects want to explore the possibilities of reinforced concrete as a structure material, because they see in it a material which would give new free and interesting structure forms. Some, however, have fallen back, especially in this climate, on the use of traditional materials like brick or stone simply because of the effect of the weather on this material and also the widespread opposition to concrete as having a stark and inhuman appearance. Here, of course, your inferior designer (who always lacks any sense of responsibility) will rush at a new material. The results are there for us all to see. It is one more difficulty that change in materials and techniques is so rapid today, just as it was an advantage in the past that they grew slowly; that the very slowness of growth was, in itself, a sort of discipline, and without discipline and restraint there is no even moderately great art. I think it was Gill who said that all great art is mortified art; and yet there are those among us who think of art as a species of emotional incontinence! Is it a blessing or the reverse that there is no controlling style among us today, no framework of design, that is, within which an architect and his team can work? Some would say that the absence of 'tradition' in this sense is a healthy challenge to creative ability. I am not at all sure that the challenge is not too great, because where church design is concerned there is a depressing lack of even moderately talented architects, especially if choice is restricted to the Catholic body. In part no doubt it is an educational problem and our education has inevitably, like most other activities in the modern world, become in

an unhealthy degree mass-produced. The criticism is levelled not only at architecture, but equally at medicine and the Church. Architects, doctors, priests are needed by the hundred and the thousand, and it is very hard to aim at quantity without affecting quality. A common criticism of the architectural schools is that on the theoretical side the emphasis is on the history of architecture, and on the practical side on teaching draughtsmanship and the elements of building construction. The theoretical is not theoretical enough and the practical not sufficiently practical. Certainly a speculative basis is lacking. What is needed is a philosophy of art. Of course it is disputed whether profitably and legitimately you can have such a thing, but few would I think deny that considerably more fundamental thinking and discussion on the subject of art would not come amiss.

II

Ornament, using the word in a wide sense, is surely an integral part of church design. It seems to me that ornament has a three-fold function to perform. First to clarify, and to express, as it were, the beauty of the structure in its mass, line and proportion. Secondly, to provide that indefinable thing which we call 'atmosphere'. Thirdly, to exercise its function as a symbol or image.

As to the first, colour and surface-treatment are called for and I would plead for restraint and the use of only a small number of colours, say some three or four at the most.

Atmosphere is an even more subtle business. For the men of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries light was considered as the source and essence of all visual beauty and clearly for us it is the fundamental factor in the creation of atmosphere. Here perhaps I may make a few obvious comments. The natural lighting of a church should be so directed as to get the sunshine into the windows, and it is attractive to have the south and the south-west light streaming into the sanctuary on the Gospel side. While sunshine in its proper place is always a delight (with us a rare delight), in the wrong place it can be a curse; and the worst place of all to have it is through a window at the back of the sanctuary. The natural light of a church should be adequate but also subdued: the meditative frame of mind which it should induce is incompatible with a bright staring atmosphere, which is the inevitable result of using

too much glass. In a word, the natural light of the church, while being religious, should, Milton notwithstanding, avoid being too dim.

To come to ornament in its character of symbol—statues, namely, carvings and paintings—the problems increase and multiply! If we are foolish enough to call in the ‘idol manufacturers’ and choose from the stock-list of objects of piety, the result will quite literally be deadly. The trouble here is not simply the production of a given article by mechanical methods, so much as the lack of good design of the thing before it was made. Indeed, in the modern world the mechanical production of many so-called objects of piety is inevitable, and nothing is more needed than real expertise in design before the thing goes into production. But it means trouble and expense to discover the rare craftsman, and to coax, cajole and control him when you have caught him; but without him there can be no meaningful ornament in the church. The ornament, the symbol, must be meaningful, it must say something, however limited; moreover, its meaning should be doctrinal in the very widest sense of that word. Medieval churches had a wealth of symbol in the form of glass, carvings, statues and I doubt if its purpose was pedagogic as is so often maintained; I imagine it was the expression of sheer artistic vitality. In England I think it will be admitted that one of our great lacks is a good popular theological literature, that is theology which is literature, which in its own right is readable. I am sure that if our national Catholic culture was more theological, this would have a deep subconscious effect on the image-maker.

Today, with our poverty in craftsmen and our unwillingness to spend large sums on church building, it is surely best to confine our symbolic ornament to the expression of a few of the central mysteries of the Christian religion. Calvary and the Cross must receive expression in our churches, because the Cross is central both to our belief and our worship; but the Resurrection which is the fulfilment of Calvary should also receive expression; and Pentecost is a theme of rich symbolic value to the artist, and there is a whole wealth of tradition to guide him in the art of the past.

The art of church building is, however, a popular art, in the sense that it is made for the populace. St Bernard forbade all ornament in the churches of his Order, and one has a certain sympathy with him; but the churches which we build are almost

always for the people, and he himself said: 'Since the devotion of the carnal populace cannot be incited with spiritual ornaments, it is necessary to employ material ornaments.' What St Bernard meant by 'spiritual ornaments' I do not know. But, great saint as he was, he had his limitations, and there may well have been more than a touch of puritanism in his make-up. The 'carnal populace' may all unconsciously have had a truer insight into the incarnational nature of the Christian religion. However that may be, the people must be catered for, and it is my own experience that the popular taste can be educated upwards, and this is done not by argument, but by giving them good things to use and live with. There is no substitute for experience, and art itself, after all, is essentially the expression of something felt or experienced. 'Repository art', one may observe, is just as much imposed upon the people from above as the occasional outrageous modern thing or the rare work of excellence and beauty.

Architecture, in every possible sense of the word, is a public art, so that the architect cannot legitimately take refuge in any esoteric doctrine. There may, as we have suggested, be a certain time-lag before approval of a really creative design starts to trickle through. But approval the architect and his team must somehow ultimately win; otherwise they must admit failure.

One part of our difficulty lies in the fact that we live in a world of change, while the Church in nature, function and spirit is in many ways a relatively unchanging institution. On the other hand the material, social and political structures of our life have changed in a revolutionary manner during the past fifty years, and the end is not yet.

Good church architecture, we may readily admit, must have a strong traditional core in its design: it must witness to its own history and origins, because the life of the Church is a part of the Church's structure and being. The rubrics and liturgical directives of the Church assure this, if they are respected not merely in the letter but also in the spirit. In the architectural world, however, it is very widely considered that church building has fared even worse than most other kinds of architecture in the past hundred years. It is generally conceded that public taste has declined since the Industrial Revolution, because since then, for the first time in the history of Western civilization, the mechanically-produced forms available are without design, are in fact aesthetically

debased, and the technical skill to be drawn on in the form of craftsmanship is an ever-diminishing quantity. But we must not exaggerate this or imagine that the common man of past ages was in some miraculous way a highly cultured and a sensitive being. He was a man of simpler responses and he was surrounded with beauty, and so when he reproduced or imitated he reproduced beauty.

III

One problem I have not so far mentioned is that of the patron of art. All art needs a patron—whether the patron be an individual or an institution, or an individual representing an institution as happens almost always when a Catholic church is built. I know that the Anglicans have a committee, but the Catholic Church it would seem, at least in this country, is allergic to committees. Anyhow, the patron calls the tune: it is natural he should do so, and if he is informed and sensitive he will call a good tune. If, however, as is usually the case, he is neither informed nor sensitive, then the task of the architect and his team is going to be a hard one. The Catholic Church in this country has built far more churches than any other Christian body in the past hundred years. Pugin apart, and he was not an unmixed blessing, most of them have been architecturally bad. The proximate reasons for so many of our churches being of poor design are fairly obvious, and I have indicated one or two of them already; but the remote reasons are perhaps more interesting. A large and multiple reason is our very history as a body in the past century. Arnold Toynbee, the historian, described the Catholic body in nineteenth-century England as ‘an inner proletariat’, and this he defined ‘as a body within any given culture who were in it but not of it’. The observation may not be quite so true today as it would have been in the nineteenth century, but there is still a good slice of truth in it. There is nothing which should annoy us in such a comment: it is just an inescapable historical fact. A Catholic is still something of a stranger or misfit even in modern England. His philosophy, his ethics, his religious outlook are not those of the majority: he may be tolerated and even admired occasionally, but he is seldom liked simply and solely because of his Catholicity. Being an inner proletariat carries certain disabilities with it, among them the lack of leadership in most secular concerns, and particularly in

the arts. We are an uprooted people, cut off from our inheritance in the past: we have thus no traditions in the arts to appeal to. To avoid a misunderstanding I hasten to add that the proletarian quality (in Toynbee's sense of the word to which I have referred) has all kinds of good incidental results, which we should never lose sight of. I am fond of saying, for instance (but I would have you note carefully exactly what I do say), that the everyday Catholicism of the English-speaking world is perhaps in its way something better than has ever been seen at any previous period of Catholic history. By everyday Catholicism I mean such things as attendance at Mass, reception of the Sacraments, obedience to the Church's law, and above all a sound elementary knowledge of the teachings of the Church. In the ages of faith the religion of the people would have had more imaginative vitality, and have been a part of everyday life; but it is doubtful if it was as free from superstition and morally as well regulated as is the life of the modern English-speaking practising Catholic. Art abides on the side of the mind; it has nothing to do with the will and morality.

IV

The essential function of a building is made articulate in its plan. By comparison with a large modern building the plan of a church is relatively simple; but it is surprising how often exasperating blunders are made. The treatment of the site is a part of the plan. One could point to churches which have the entrance or main door on to a busy street, when the choice of a quiet secluded street was all the time available. It is plain commonsense to consult your architect on the choice of the site where this is at all possible.

The exterior of the church calls for a word of particular comment. This is what the world sees, and all that most of it sees; but it is more likely to proclaim its message through the quality of its architecture than through incidental ornament. Sculpture, if it can be afforded, must be integral with the main design; but more prosaically the choice of material is vital. A beautiful material can distract attention from small defects in design, while a poor or ugly material can ruin all. As brick is so commonly used it is important to choose a good brick, mellow in tone and matt in surface—and may Ruabon be far from us! In addition it is almost equally important to use a suitable coloured mortar.

If we consider that mortar constitutes at least thirty per cent of the surface of a brick building it will be seen how important it is not to make a mistake in this matter. Pure cement mortar should not be used, nor those which are made from crushed cinders: the basic materials are sand and lime (hydraulic), and a sand rough in texture and deep red in colour gives the most satisfactory results.

Where a tower or campanile is part of the design there is much to be said for having it placed physically separate from the main structure. A second point is that it should be easily visible from all sides. It is not unheard of that this costly item in a church building scheme has been so situated that a plain unimpeded view of it is impossible. This is just one ludicrous effect produced by faulty planning. Incidentally a campanile may serve a useful purpose, as with a little contrivance the floor level may be used as a baptistery, and where this can conveniently be made part of the plan the symbolism of baptism is emphasized. If however the baptistery is included in the general structure of the church, it should be placed a step below the level of the nave. The font itself should not be too tall. Otherwise there will be unsuitably comic difficulties with baby during the ceremony of baptism. The basin of the font should be generous in size; steps should be at a minimum. The base of the font, one might add, should be made so that there is no obstruction to the nether limbs of the minister!

I began by mentioning the difficulty of the business of church art. If all that has followed has stressed this difficulty, I hope it has not exaggerated it. The business in architecture is always very much to the fore; but behind the business there is always the dream. It is in the nature or supernature of things that the dream of giving visible and beautiful expression to Christian mystery and truth can never be fully realized. That we should know there is a dream is a first step towards an improvement in our standards of church art; perfection is unattainable but the unattainable is the only thing worth striving for.