Edifice and Image

Reform of the
Roman Catholic Worship Environment

Mark E. Wedig, O.P.

What considerations ought to guide the work of artists and others in the creation of the physical environment in which the Christian assembly worships? In this essay the author reviews the recent history of creating the spaces in which we gather as Church. He then draws from this history some norms which help us understand recent disputes about the design of ecclesial space.

Seldom do we hear of the faithful learning about the visual properties of Christian spirituality or how, as a religious people living in the contemporary world, church buildings and their art help to mediate Christian vocation. Religious educators infrequently are shown how the edifice and the image catechize us about God, Christ, the Church, and its liturgy. We are not given the tools to “read” the visual resources of the local ecclesia. Instead, too often we are trained simply to ignore them.

There are complex reasons why the Christian churches in modern western, north Atlantic societies have devalued the role that environment and art play as essential monuments of the faith and why modern Christianity often has been characterized by religious iconoclasm. This is further exacerbated by cultural factors in the late-modern world in which the high visual stimulation of the tube generates an increased insensitivity to visual metaphor and why the contemporary telephonic culture is conditioned to ignore the tremendous impact of certain ocular resources (Belting, Eco, Postman).

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Nevertheless, in spite of these visual-epistemological limitations, the arrangement of space, the colors, shapes, and materials of the church building and its furnishings, the lighting, the images, the iconography, the vessels, and the vestments still mold and model a fundamental religious and ecclesial identity. For better or for worse Christians always are formed by their environments, regardless of whether they have been incorporated into their formal understandings or not. Edifice and image instruct us to differentiate the sacred from the profane and the religious from the secular. Furthermore, environment and art serve as foundational resources for the faithful in how to live as Church in a particular culture and history.

In this article I want to concentrate on some valiant attempts in the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century to sort out for the faithful the complex visual factors of the age and provide aesthetic-theological criteria for them. These years have not been singular in focus. The Church has witnessed a number of developments in the reform of its art and environment. For instance, the aesthetic cultural transition from restorationism to modernism to postmodernism has affected significant changes in style and interpretation. Disputes over the centrality of certain liturgical principles of reform during this time have complicated or even clouded the viewpoints. To the best of my ability I will attempt to both narrate and interpret those developments.

In order to do so, first I will examine briefly the aesthetics of Catholic restoration in order to illustrate the architecture and art forms against which new models and standards were developed. Reformers experimented with new aesthetic forms and interpretations and set out to educate the faithful about a particularly modern visual ecclesial identity. An important part of that response involved a reaction against earlier solutions.

Secondly, I will show how the liturgical reforms of Vatican II ushered in a new paradigm. The triumph of the liturgical movement changed the face of the Church. Roman Catholics, especially in Europe and the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century, witnessed the building of new space and the renovation of the old. New purposes for architecture and imagery shaped the religious imagination of a people. These changes were aligned carefully with projects of ongoing liturgical reform. Consequently, a new Catholic identity was
formed out of environments whose primary purpose was to house the liturgical action of a local assembly.

Thirdly, I will demonstrate that as a result of this new paradigm, certain disputes have arisen about the reception and interpretation of the reform of environment and art. Some have advocated restoring an original but different intent of reform. Others have defended the praxis of current models, but recognize the great need for education about them. Accordingly, there remain different and competing views about contemporary church architecture and art. I suggest that the crisis about the criteria of religious space reflects a postmodern crisis of both aesthetic and ecclesial identity. Therefore, in the final section of this article I want to delineate the overarching issues that need to be addressed in order to sort through the ecclesial aesthetics of postmodernism.

The Aesthetics of Catholic Restoration

Several years ago while studying in Washington, D.C., I observed a student brother give a tour of the Dominican House of Studies Chapel. While standing in his white habit, the young Dominican instructed the onlookers on appreciating the glorious accomplishment of the medieval environment that had been achieved right there on Michigan Avenue across from The Catholic University. The student went on to describe the fourteenth-century Belgian religious house that had been replicated. I could not but think to myself, however, that the Belgian prototype of this structure had served but as a metaphor for the modern world. Neither the large building nor its chapel was a medieval achievement at all, but an excellent example of the Church searching for an allegory to reconstitute itself against the onset of the modern world. Like with St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City or the numerous other examples of revival architecture that fill the landscape of northern Europe, England, and the United States, an architecture was born out of the need to appropriate images and metaphors of another age where secularization and industrialization had not taken hold of the cultural imagination.

The great architects of the restoration Church were well aware of the role they played in social-religious interpretations of the modern industrial world. Even though there were efforts to renovate and restore premodern structures in northern Europe and England, many noted architects of the period were interested more in retrieving a genre of style expressly for the purposes of modern society. The architecture served as intentionally created pastiches of premodern environments. The new buildings represented highly interpretative genres rather than true historical reconstruction. Much of the structure’s central focus was on how to create an environment that would avoid the affront of the modern even though its construction may have utilized industrialized steel and poured concrete.
These aesthetic and architectural achievements paralleled projects for ecclesiastical and liturgical renewal. The architecture and art of the Catholic restoration mirrored aesthetic interpretations of religious community life, especially monasticism. The reestablishment of Benedictine communities under the leadership of Prosper Guéranger at Solesmes in France and the Wolter brothers at Beuron in Germany served as prototypes for that renewal (Hameline, 57–86).

Catholic Patronage of Aesthetic Modernism

The architecture and liturgy of the Catholic restoration in Europe and the United States both set the stage and acted as a foil for the achievements of a new generation of aesthetic reformers associated with twentieth-century ecclesial and liturgical renewal. By the early 1930s a group of Catholic avant-gardes consciously had moved away from the solutions of the restorationist Church in order to respond more openly to the culture of modernity. Artistic and architectural revival styles were rejected as overly romantic solutions to the modern world. Instead, the projects of this small but influential association of aesthetic reformers attempted to awaken the Church to a completely new genre for church-building and image.

These ideas and projects were generated by the campaigns of the Dominicans Marie-Alain Couturier and Pie-Raymond Régamey in France with their journal L’Art Sacré, Maurice Lavanoux in the United States with Liturgical Arts, and Rudolf Schwartz, Emil Steffan, Dominikus Böhm, and other architects associated with the liturgical institute at the monastery of Maria Laach in Germany with its periodical Jarbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft. The shared aesthetic and liturgical interpretations of these early reformers cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the environment and art projects of these people were clearly linked to broadening developments for social and ecclesial renewal. For instance, L’Art Sacré was aligned with the comprehensive projects of the Paris Dominicans at Les Éditions du Cerf. Liturgical Arts was connected to the larger agenda of social, political, ecclesial, and liturgical renewal in the United States. Maria Laach served as a centerpiece for the German-speaking ecclesial and liturgical renewal (Wedig, 106–15; Pecklers, 213–55; Neunheuser, 163–78).

The momentum of these campaigns reached a heightened level especially in the years following World War II and would influence the reforms of Vatican II. Even though there were distinct differences in viewpoints between some of these avant-gardes, it is possible to garner an overall aesthetic and ecclesial perspective representative of them collectively. Their agenda advocated criteria for the transformation of church environment and art that was guided by the tenets of both aesthetic modernism and the liturgical movement.

Their modernist aesthetic solution for the Church necessitated an overall rejection of the Catholic restoration aesthetic and required the adoption of an al-
together new architecture and art. Retrieval of historical styles would not resolve the social and religious crises of modernity. Moreover, ornamentation that hid the function of the edifice took away from the fundamental beauty and design of the modern structure itself. Academicism in painting and drawing obscured the quality of a rendered image. Instead, the Church needed to generate edifice and image that would engender genuine and original symbolic encounter of the sacred in contemporary culture. Forms stripped of nonessentials would appeal to the most basic and underlying religious sense. They would render universal significance achieved through aesthetic reductionism. No single aesthetic style would suffice; however, church structures needed to assume a bare-bones and streamlined beauty.

Even though these reformers organized their ecclesial projects around these aesthetic solutions, they still argued and varied about the degree to which aesthetics alone would solve the crisis of modern ecclesial life. In their projects and writings the functional concerns of liturgical appropriateness remained in tension with aesthetic concerns. The genius of modern art and architecture was to be respected and given certain liberty in generating new ecclesial solutions. Nevertheless, modern aesthetics itself could not override the importance of liturgical authenticity and the essential role that worship played in creating a new environment and art for the Church. The reform of the liturgy and the reform of aesthetics needed to work hand in hand.

During this period, one can glean from the writings in L’Art Sacré, Liturgical Arts, and Jarbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft that the theological principles formulated in the liturgical movement were being correlated with modernist aesthetics. An excellent example of this can be seen in an article by Yves Congar where he aligns the liturgical principle of active participation of the assembly in the liturgy with the aesthetics of architecture. For Congar, an ecclesial aesthetics of simple and unadorned forms would aid in clearing away the nonessential function of church ritual in order for the faithful to participate as integral and complete subjects of the liturgical action (Congar, 205–20).

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The Local Assembly as the Subject of the Reform

Vatican II, and the extensive liturgical reforms that followed the council, sanctioned much of the agenda of the liturgical movement. It was the Roman
Catholic Church’s official promulgation of documents affecting liturgical change that in turn ushered in a new paradigm for art and architecture. Particular writings determined the direction and outcome of these changes. Criteria for the new paradigm especially can be gleaned from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC, 1963), the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM, 1969), and eventually the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar* (1977). As a result of these directives, local bishops’ conferences set out to interpret them. The guidelines provided by the United States Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy in *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EACW, 1978) are representative of some of the most comprehensive efforts.

Ultimately it was these official church reforms that determined it would be functional criteria, not aesthetic criteria, that reoriented the church environment and identity. In other words, liturgical criteria superseded aesthetic criteria in establishing the purpose and function of a church building and its decoration. Above all else, the fundamental principles of full, conscious, active participation in the liturgy and the centrality of the assembly in worship officially directed the changes for edifice and image. Consequently, church environments needed to conform to the central requirement of embodying the local *ecclesia* enacting the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. All other criteria were subordinate to this primary focus. The sacredness of space was rendered by the action of a community, and therefore the design of each building reflected the liturgy and the community responsible for its enactment.

That is not to say that documents such as SC and GIRM (1969) failed to address the aesthetic quality of forms or that sacred art as an intrinsic value was completely ignored by church teaching. Ecclesial norms raised the importance of beauty and of manifesting signs and symbols of the heavenly reality. They emphasized that the plan of the church and its appointments should reflect a noble simplicity and avoid ostentation. Thus, no single style of architecture or art sufficed. The particularity and cultural distinctiveness of edifice and image for worship in the local church must be respected and promoted. Therefore, church guidelines stressed that aesthetic issues ultimately needed to conform to the functional issues in church design and decoration.

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The interpretation of these norms by the U.S. Catholic bishops in EACW shed light on the Church's struggle to provide clearly articulated criteria for the renewal of church space. Even more so than SC or GIRM (1969), EACW wrestles with the competing criteria of liturgy and aesthetics. On the one hand, EACW aligns itself with the Roman guidelines for art and architecture, asserting the primacy of functional criteria over aesthetics. On the other hand, the quality of forms and the appropriateness of the liturgy are set in tension with that function so that the formal values of the art and architecture remain necessary considerations in the design and purpose of the worship space. EACW goes so far as to say that a church environment without aesthetic worth will have no contemplative meaning or significance and will eradicate transcendence.

The Roman Catholic Church of the late twentieth century created a new paradigm for its praxis of church environment strongly emphasizing the norm of the worshiping assembly as the subject of its reform. The Church, however, remained wary about asserting any aesthetic model or standard. Like the modernist reforms launched before Vatican II, the official conciliar and postconciliar solutions did reject architectural and artistic pastiche as a way for achieving sacred environments. Clearly a simple and uncluttered environment for worship focused on the actions of the worshiping assembly was preferred. Yet, because of a greater recognition of the social, economic, and cultural pluralism of the Church in the modern world, no uniform aesthetic patronage or stylistic perspective would be maintained. The Church purposely remained reserved in its judgments about correlating the sacred and the beautiful. Speculation about human encounter with “heavenly realities” within church buildings remained an open-ended question: was encounter of the sacred to be found solely within the framework of liturgical action? or was there reason and purpose to believe otherwise?

**Reforming the Reform?**

By the time the U.S. bishops published their document EACW in the late 1970s, criticisms already had arisen of the paradigm it represented. Some criticized what they viewed as an overemphasis on the functional criteria of the worshiping *ecclesia*, resulting in an inordinate emphasis on the assembly as subject of the liturgy. Others criticized what they viewed as a tentative religious aesthetics that undermined transcendence. Still others were critical of what seemed to be an almost complete disregard for Roman Catholic spirituality based on popular religious devotions. Moreover, in the last ten to fifteen years there has surmounted a more systematic and organized assessment of the reception and interpretation of liturgical reforms in general. Such appraisal has generated documents from the Roman Curia like the new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2000) and *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001).
Some of these contemporary criticisms simply can be understood as romanticized reactions against the post-Vatican II liturgy, denying the social and cultural exigence that a new paradigm addressed. Yet it is important to realize that certain concerns about Catholic self-understanding, cultural inclusiveness, and changing spiritualities also demand that the modern paradigm for worship and the arts continually be made intelligible, especially for what legitimately can be viewed as the concerns of the postmodern world. In this case what I have delineated already as the tension between the functional and aesthetic horizons of the worship environment continue to play out in the present situation.

Responding to the contemporary critiques of the worship environment and attempting to integrate documents like the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, the *Ceremonial of Bishops*, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, and especially the new *GIRM* (2000), the U.S. Catholic bishops once again have responded with another guidebook for church space. *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture and Worship* (BLS, 2000) is a courageous attempt to provide continuity between the Vatican II reforms and subsequent pastoral concerns. First of all, BLS clearly aims to replace *EACW*, yet it remains plainly in line with the liturgical and aesthetic criteria of the Vatican II reforms and *EACW*. It does not abandon the central principle that the church building is above all else the locus for the enactment of the liturgy. Furthermore, it underlines that the assembly is the principal subject of the liturgical action and that the building of new churches and the renovation of old ones must reflect that basic ecclesiology.

Secondly, BLS does attempt to accomplish a number of things *EACW* did not do. BLS provides a more comprehensive theology of the Catholic environment, helping Catholics to understand how and why the church building and its images engender fundamental religious and ecclesial identity. BLS demonstrates that, as ecclesial and sacramental reality is one, so the church building and the Church’s liturgy are one. Following from this, BLS links the church building to the celebration of each of the rites, giving attention to devotional contexts for prayer that need to be reintegrated into contemporary churches and their art.

BLS’s rather comprehensive ecclesiology of the worship space is organized into clearly articulated liturgical principles for building or renovating a church. The building and its art must embody the following: (a) a sacred unity between assembly and devotional shrine; (b) the image of the gathered assembly, fully participating and properly ordered by a hierarchical but diverse set of roles;

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BLS’s rather comprehensive ecclesiology of the worship space is organized into clearly articulated liturgical principles for building or renovating a church. The building and its art must embody the following: (a) a sacred unity between assembly and devotional shrine; (b) the image of the gathered assembly, fully participating and properly ordered by a hierarchical but diverse set of roles;
(c) aesthetic quality reflected in those roles but also in the cultural diversity of the local church, especially as lived out in its popular devotion; and (d) aesthetics as reflected in the historical narrative of the local church, specifically U.S. Catholic culture, yet aesthetics that are transcendentally universal.

Finally, looking at the document in terms of its effort to correct the paradigm of church modeled since Vatican II, BLS tries to amend what might be viewed as the one-sided emphasis in EACW on the assembly to the exclusion of sacred aesthetics. BLS gives credence to the objectivity of transcendent beauty while recognizing the necessity of pluriformity in church design and image in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, one is left with questions regarding how objective beauty and cultural pluralism might be reconciled philosophically. How does the Church make aesthetic claims without making judgments about forms and genres of art and architecture?

Also on the negative side, BLS as reflected through GIRM (2000), manifests an irregular concern for the tabernacle in terms of church design. In its effort to appropriate the objectivity of the sacred in worship space, BLS is preoccupied with the location of the shrine of the reserved sacrament to the point of obscuring all other arrangements of devotional worship. The concern to reinstate the devotional axis of church environment will not be solved by this single solution. Instead, the fuller narrative of Catholic devotional practices and the contemporary inculturation of popular religion remains far more complex and comprehensive. The sensus fidelium of popular religion extends much further than this ritual focus.

Catholic Identity, the Worship Environment, and Postmodernism

Even though BLS undoubtedly attempts to amend what it sees as certain limitations of the environment and art praxis of the last twenty years, it clearly remains situated in the context of the paradigm of reform brought about by Vatican II. It is best to view BLS as a later development in a comprehensive ecclesial project that addresses Catholic identity and mission for the late modern world. In examining particularly the nuances of the reform of edifice and image, one can see the Church working out its place in culture and history.

It is not enough, however, just to say that Catholic identity, as embodied by its architecture and art, de facto remains a modern concern. In the last twenty years enough has been said and done to substantiate the claim that the global world has entered into what is commonly called the “postmodern” situation. Moreover, enough of a case has been made that the intellectual and social forces that shaped the post-Enlightenment, subject-centered, secular, scientific-empirical, and technological life commonly referred to as modernity, has engendered its
own limits. In other words, there has arisen critiques of modern life that attempt to undermine the fundamental claim of the social and intellectual project itself.

Realizing that such critiques of modernity are far from settled, particularly in Roman Catholic circles, and that there remains a modern-postmodern continuum of thought and practice, it is necessary to situate the Church’s project for art and environment within the confines of new understandings of culture. How as Roman Catholics do postmodernist claims affect the paradigm of environment and art that were put into motion by Vatican II? I believe a return to the two factors that have dominated the landscape of the modern reform can help organize the problem.

As delineated, the modern reform of church environment was generated by two factors: aesthetics and liturgy. The initial project of Catholic renewal by intellectuals and artists in the 1930s involved what they saw as the competing claims of two factors. Both formal and functional criteria have remained in tension and have been juxtaposed in various ways throughout the modern ecclesial context. Postmodernist critique requires that we understand that these two factors remain evermore as proper cultural and religious censors of each other.

A necessary juxtaposition of aesthetics and liturgy reveals that the locus of the sacred remains, as our long tradition has shown, both in the objective realism of visual perception as well as the subjective abstraction of communal action. It gives credence to the restoration of two poles of Catholic religious identity that have existed from the origins of Christianity, but have suffered under the duress of increased epistemological dualism in the modern western world. Those two poles of identity and self-understanding were embodied in the basilica and the martyrria of the post-Constantinian Church and were brought under one roof in the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the post-medieval world increasingly saw these two poles of the sacred as fundamentally opposed. Significant aspects of modern social and religious history can be seen as the battleground between the two.

Much of postmodern criticism opposes such subjective-objective splitting and underlines the need to overcome such dualism. Christians living in the complex environments of the global world, attempting to reconcile radical social plural-
ism and epistemological ambiguity, often are pressed to turn to sacred realities that to modern eyes seem contradictory. Ironically, the postmodern sensibility provides new ways to understand the locus of the sacred whereby both objective and subjective realities do not cancel out the other. Aesthetics and liturgy together help to identify the locus of mystery and God's self-communication. Both of these factors provide ways to understand the broad and inclusive spectrum of Catholic identity in a postmodern world.

References


