

## ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY

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WHEN church building became possible again after the second World War there must have been many English Catholics who looked forward confidently to an era of vigorous and inspiring new churches enriched with the best examples of contemporary art. Among them were certainly a number of architects who, after a long enforced separation from their calling, longed for an opportunity to express, in the creation of a new church, their gratitude for a safe return and their hope for the future.

Now, after nearly ten years during which many new churches have been built or planned, the prospect is so bleak that most of these architects, and many laymen with them, are feeling nothing but discouragement and frustration. A few of the new churches really do express a living art. The rest are pitiful proof of timid conventionality and of the still powerful effect of Pugin's teaching that Gothic is the only proper and morally defensible style of architecture for churches, or for any buildings even remotely connected with them. Even where the strict Gothic is abandoned, the alternative seems only too often to be a veritable fruit salad of mixed conventional forms, something for all tastes.

Art, it has been said, is the mirror of society. Just as Classical Greek culture produced the refined beauties of the Parthenon, so the vigorous and exuberant background of the four centuries following the Norman Conquest produced, by gradual development from the staid Romanesque, all the upsoaring excitement of Gothic architecture. And when, as happened so often in that age of daring innovation, part of a great church fell down or a small one needed enlargement, there was never any question whether the building was to be restored or enlarged in its original style. Always it was done in the latest manner, exploiting every structural development known to the often much-travelled masons; and sometimes the enthusiasm for new ways of building was so great that early work was covered up by new, as at Gloucester and other cathedrals. Looking at such examples, who can regret the

covering of the old or fail to be thrilled as much by the courage of the builders as by the beauty of the result?

How desperately disappointing by comparison are our mean little brick buildings with their sham Gothic windows and Italian marble fittings; and even the larger and more expensively built churches, however scholarly and correct they may be as essays in the style of a particular region at a particular period of Gothic development, lack always that vital spark of life which the creative genius and enthusiasm of the medieval masons imparted to the living architecture which they were creating.

But these masons, and the carpenters who roofed-in the churches and made the lovely stalls and rood screens to furnish them, enjoyed the confidence and the enthusiastic support of their employers. The universal eclecticism of the nineteenth century, which even the romantic outpourings of Pugin and Ruskin and the persistent efforts of the ecclesiologists failed to cure, has destroyed the confidence of potential employers not only in the creative abilities of architects and artists of our own generation but in their own judgment as well. It is also unfortunately clear from several recently completed buildings, and from the designs for others which have been published, that there are still architects in practice who lack the courage (or perhaps, what is worse, the vision) to lead their clients away from the supposed safety of familiar 'church' forms. At the same time there is ample evidence, for those who will seek it with an open mind, that there is not lacking a vigorous creative spirit which can emulate those medieval builders in striving constantly to use the newest developments in structural forms with a wise combination of new and traditional materials to produce buildings, for whatever purpose, which are practical, dignified and beautiful.

What, then, are these new structural developments and new materials, and how can they affect the design and planning of churches?

The medieval churches tended to be long and narrow, because of the limited span which was possible for a timber roof or a stone vault. They were also lofty, in order that light could be admitted by clerestory windows above the aisle roofs. If such a church be small, only those who can find seats in the nave can hope for a clear view of the altar. If it be large, and therefore long, those sitting towards the back are so remote from the altar that piety

little short of the heroic is required to enable them to feel themselves part of what is happening so far away. And on the purely material plane, what Anglican incumbent of a clerestoried medieval church will not speak with feeling of the difficulties and expense of heating such a building, where the warmed air dissipates itself high above the heads of the congregation?

'It may well be argued that the one over-riding aim in modern church-building must be to focus attention upon, and make possible the sight and assimilation of, the great realities of the Mass and the sacramental life—to reproduce, that is, so far as may be, the immediacy and consequent sense of reality of the slum room of today's industrial city, the "hiding-hole" of the times of persecution in England, the catacombs of the early christians. The essential is that the Mass should not be a far-off spectacle but an *actio* (as the Canon of the Mass is called) in which all are near enough to share and which all, therefore, can absorb and assimilate.'<sup>1</sup> This ideal, the offering of the Mass as a corporate act of worship, can only be fully realized in a building in which all the people present are gathered near, if not actually round the altar; so that, just as the Mass is the hub and centre of their Christian life, so the altar becomes the hub and centre of their worship. This is not a new idea, as the sixth-century church of San Vitale at Ravenna and many others bear witness; but it is interesting to reflect upon the question whether the creators of these earlier 'centrally planned' churches were not influenced as much by a striving after a perfect architectural form as by the conception of the altar as the focal point (in San Vitale, for instance, the altar is in fact placed in an apse in one face of the octagon).

The Greek cross plan, with four equal arms and the altar at the crossing, goes some way towards realizing the ideal. But even here there are distinct compartments, so that those in one arm may be scarcely conscious of those in another arm at right angles to them. It can only be fully realized in a plan which is some part of a circle, or perhaps of an octagon. The Greek theatre, originally planned for the performance of religious rites, would seem to be very nearly the ideal shape (and is there really any reason why the seats should not be raised in tiers for better vision, with gently sloping access and processional gangways?). It has yet to be proved that such a plan would offer serious obstacles to the full and digni-

1 Gerald Vann, O.P. *The Water and the Fire*, footnote to p. 158.

fied performance of the Church's ritual; even if there were minor difficulties, the gain in having all the congregation gathered as one family round the priest at the altar is great enough to offset them.

With the limited structural knowledge and the few materials available to the medieval mason such a plan was clearly impracticable (though the great fourteenth-century lantern at Ely Cathedral proves that it was not impossible in exceptional circumstances). But the great advance in the structural use of metals, alone or combined with concrete, and of laminated timber members, now makes the construction and the roofing over of almost any shape quite practicable; while the development of various kinds of lightweight metal sheeting and of manufactured materials of great stability and often high insulating value has made possible buildings of long life and low upkeep and heating costs.

Of the older materials bricks still hold their own, for the better bricks have a beauty and a permanance only equalled by the best building stones; and these latter are now too expensive for general building purposes, so that they must be confined to a limited use where their beauty of texture and colour can be most fully exploited. Timber is still the 'kindest' of all materials, and new hardwoods of great beauty from Africa and the East are available, hardwoods which do not need to be carved into elaborate shapes because there is beauty enough already in their colour and figuring. There are also, unfortunately, manufactured materials which pretend to be something else—concrete dressed up as stone, plastic sheeting skilfully surfaced to resemble wood and a number of other things; but they are but cheap imitations and a few years use or weathering will show them up literally in their true colours.

It is sometimes said that a church 'should at least look like a church'; which begs the question 'what does a church look like?' We are back at our Gothic beginning. The idea that Gothic forms create the only proper background for Christian worship is so absurd when considered in its true perspective in the whole picture of the Church's history that it should not be necessary to refute it now. But it is a deplorable fact that churches in this and other dead styles are still rising as monuments to muddled thinking, not only here but also in parts of the world far removed from the regions in which these styles of building developed so naturally out of their environment.

Does it really matter if a new church is a complete departure

from traditional and familiar forms? Can unfamiliar shapes not be beautiful as well as more practical? There is, as many converts realize, a more than aesthetic importance in this question, for it has a profound theological significance. Writing on 'the movement within the Church to restore the purity of its worship and to free it from vulgarities and sentimentalities and bric-à-brac', Fr Gerald Vann has expressed this significance very clearly:<sup>2</sup>

'We have much here to be thankful for; in contemporary church building which not only shows an admirable asceticism in its art, an insistence on essentials, on the idea of the church as a temple of sacrifice and not a repository of ecclesiastical *objets*, but also is admirable in its use of contemporary idiom, underlying the Church's actuality instead of presenting it as something outmoded and moribund by attempting to resurrect for it styles which have long since ceased to be an expression of a living culture'.

In this brief paragraph Fr Vann sums up both the solution which is being sought by all too few and the error into which all too many are still falling. Outside the Church there are plenty of enemies who are only too anxious to point to it as a survival of something appropriate to another age. How long shall we continue to play into their hands and to bring unnecessary scorn and ridicule upon the Church in England? A living church architecture will only emerge when clergy, laity and architects are once again united in their determination to use the best and most appropriate of all the means of building which God has given us to create for him houses which will be living, vital expressions of a living, vital faith.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 178.