

Analysis of 'Built of Living Stones'

By Duncan G. Stroik

Dioceses and Catholics need to return to the ideal of our forefathers that constructing a church is a long term spiritual investment.

People often ask me what texts one should read in preparation for designing or renovating a Catholic church. I typically recommend starting with Church documents such as 'Sacrosanctum Concilium,' the 'General Instruction on the Roman Missal,' the 'Rite for the Dedication of a Church,' a few paragraphs in Canon Law, the Catechism, 'Opera Artis' and Pope John Paul II's 'Letter to Artists.'

In addition to these short passages, I suggest turning to well written tomes on the history of architecture, to be accompanied by books written specifically for this purpose such as O'Connell's *Church Building and Furnishing*, Roulin's *Modern Church Architecture* and Rose's *Ugly As Sin*.

While the Church documents define the liturgical and canonical requirements for sacred architecture, the latter books help to interpret these documents in the light of architecture, both historic and contemporary. The document from the American Bishops, *Built of Living Stones*, purportedly offers a little bit of both and can serve as an introduction to the topic of Catholic architecture for a pastor or building committee.

There is much to appreciate in 'Built of Living Stones' (BLS hereafter), for it includes many of the requirements and statements from Church Law within its text and it brings up a number of issues that should be taken into consideration when building a church. Issued on November 16, 2000, BLS does not claim to be Church law but rather offers helpful guidelines; as the Preface states, BLS "contains many of the provisions of universal law governing liturgical art and architecture and offers pastoral suggestions." The guidelines found in BLS were developed over a four year period by a task group of the Bishops Committee on the Liturgy and was chaired by Bishop Rodimer. Its drafting saw no little controversy and one of the most lively debates by American bishops in recent memory. The first draft of *Built of Living Stones* titled *Domus Dei*, was fatally flawed and continued many of the mistakes of the notorious booklet "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," published by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1978. Fortunately, many of the recommendations by the bishops were taken into consideration in the final editing of BLS, and the document was re-written by the task group which included Rev. James Moroney, secretary of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, and Rev. Brian Hughes, an architectural historian from the diocese of Sioux City.

The first chapter of BLS approximately concerns the theology of the church building and refreshingly treats it as more than a functional structure for the liturgy. One of the important debates in modern times has been whether the church building is a *domus Dei* or a *domus ecclesiae*, and BLS rightly points out that it is both and therefore must be "expressive of the presence of God, suited for the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ, as well as reflective of the community that celebrates there." It acknowledges that the church building signifies and makes visible the Church in a particular place which of course is the reason that from early times Christians have called their buildings "churches" and not meeting houses. Since churches are also houses of worship they must be suited to sacred celebrations, dignified and beautiful. BLS makes the significant point that "church buildings and the religious artworks that beautify them are forms of worship themselves," which is quite a tonic to the conventional wisdom that the building is merely a container for the liturgy. However, following this rather nice introduction, BLS falls back into a viewpoint which could be termed "ritual functionalism," which understands church architecture as determined mainly by the liturgical rites. The document enumerates five "liturgical principles for building or renovating churches" including designing buildings in harmony with church laws and serving the liturgy, fostering participation in the liturgy, the different roles within the body of Christ, respecting the culture of time and place, and most importantly that the church should be beautiful and raise people's hearts and minds to the Author of all beauty. It is at this point that it becomes clear, that the prejudices of EACW and *Domus Dei* are very much still alive: BLS emphasizes the local, the contemporary, and the diverse over the universal, the historical and the unifying. While it is certainly true that the Church has produced a great variety of art and architecture over time and place and will continue to do so, it is also true that early Christian basilicas, Spanish missions, and Byzantine churches and icons continue to speak to modern man across time and culture. Just consider the number of Japanese tourists who love to visit St. Peters and the Sistine chapel yet have little interest in visiting Ronchamp or the church of the Autostrada. Even more crucial is the idea that any believer should feel at home in a church whether he is in Western Europe, Africa, Oceania, South America or Asia. Church buildings inspired by tradition that seek to be timeless are more likely to speak to people from a variety of

cultures and future generations.

Chapter Two continues BLS' focus on the sacred rites as a determinant of form, which is not surprising in a document written by liturgists, but exhibits the same limitations one would find in the description of a restaurant written by a cook, or the design of a hotel written from the vantage point of the bellhop. While the document makes a distinction between the nave and the sanctuary, it offers little in the way of principles of design to create this distinction architecturally, such as in the use of materials like marble, the triumphal arch or altarrail to create a threshold, or ways to make the sanctuary the major architectural focus of the church through the use of pilasters, domes, mosaics, etc. After the paen to diversity and variety of traditions in chapter one it comes as a surprise that there is little acknowledgement that these different architectural traditions (such as the iconostasis in Byzantium) have tended towards creating a distinctive and separate sanctuary rather than spatial unity. If one reads the footnotes which tend to be quotes from church law, one learns important things such as that the freestanding altar ordinarily should be fixed, dedicated, with a mensa or table made of stone. This is because the altar is Christ as well as "the place of sacrifice and the table around which Christ gathers the community to nourish them." BLS is a bit confusing in this regard, implying that relics should be placed in the floor under the altar whereas church law indicates they should be placed under the mensa (or top stone). As evidenced in architectural tradition, the altar should be the center of attention in a church, which is best accomplished when the design of the interior and the altar work together to emphasize the altar. One of the least successful aspects of church architecture since the Vatican council has been the banal sanctuaries and freestanding altars which are too small for the size of the church and look rather silly, like a folding chair placed in a throne room. One of the best ways to return prominence to the altar is to raise it on steps, make it as wide as one eighth of the nave, and cover it with a baldacchino or tester as was employed in the early basilicas as well as the liturgical movement of the twentieth century. On the contrary, BLS claims that a highly elevated altar might cause "visual or symbolic division from the liturgical assembly." In making this statement, BLS dispenses with the benefits of prominence, sightlines, and transcendence that a raised altar can afford while ignoring examples from architectural history and the basic desire of the laity to see the altar and the action of the mass. And while most architects will provide wheelchair access to the sanctuary in a new church, the notion that the altar needs access by ministers or others in wheelchairs is highly questionable (excepting retirement homes for priests).

The recommendations for the design of the baptistry are even more speculative and it is of great interest that there is more written about the baptistry than any other element of the church. BLS notes that it is customary to locate the font either in a special area within the church or in a separate baptistry, the recommendation is to place the font in the central aisle and design it to emulate the altar and sanctuary. While the font can be thought of as the sacramental entry into the Church in preparation for the Eucharist, by overemphasizing this, one lessens the distinctiveness of the altar and the preeminence of the sacrament called Blessed. It has been popular among liturgists to locate the font at the entry of the church to emphasize the common priesthood of all believers and to deemphasize the ministerial priesthood of the ordained which is most visible in the sanctuary. However, not only does the placement of the font at the central aisle tend to treat it like a glorified holy water font (a sacramental rather than the sacrament), but it creates a competition with the altar and tabernacle. Along with the fact that there is little basis for this location in church documents or in Catholic Tradition, placing a font in this location creates numerous practical difficulties for solemn processions especially during weddings, funerals and even baptisms. The six criteria for designing a font exhibit some of the most obvious limitations of the liturgical functional theory of architecture including the notion that the "location of the baptistry will determine how, and how actively the entire liturgical assembly can participate in the rite." What about the ancient symbolism of the catechumen or child being baptized in private outside of the church, before being able to enter?

In recent decades, the font has been enlarged and moved out of a baptistry and into the church, while at the same time, the tabernacle has often been moved out of its place of prominence in the sanctuary and placed in a type of baptistry outside of the nave. Presumably this swap was due to a misreading of the 1975 GIRM alongside the creation of a false dichotomy between the "active presence" of Christ at the altar and the "static presence" of Christ reserved in the tabernacle. However, the writings of Pope John Paul II, the 1983 edition of Canon Law, the 2000 edition of the GIRM and the sense of the faithful have helped to put most of these ideas to rest. Not surprisingly, the location of the tabernacle was the topic of greatest interest in the Bishops' discussion of the *Domus Dei* draft in 1999. Among those criticizing *Domus Dei* for its emphasis on the Blessed Sacrament chapel were Archbishops McCarrick, Rigali, Sheehan, Chaput, as well as Cardinals Bevilacqua and Hickey. BLS somewhat reflects these sentiments although it still seems to favor the chapel of Reservation, while acknowledging that it must be "integrally connected with the church and is conspicuous to the faithful." It also rehashes the modernist concern that the tabernacle "not draw the attention of the faithful away from the eucharistic celebration" which has never been a concern of canonical documents and assumes that the laity cannot do the liturgical equivalent of walking and chewing gum at the

same time. This is unfortunate. BLS points out that it is preferable that the tabernacle should not be on the altar of celebration, but omits the allowance for the tabernacle being placed on an existing high (though reading the footnotes and GIRM 2000 #315 will make this clear).

The majority of chapter two is spent describing the numerous rites and functions that will occur in a church with the belief that designing for all of these individual elements such as veneration of the Cross, the altar of Reposition, the paschal candle or the holy oils will add up to a well-designed church. This may be due to the fact that in the past few decades the Church has built functional looking buildings which do not function. Yet, unfortunately, the document often reads as if we are designing the house of God like some sort of commercial kitchen where we have to make sure that each spiritual implement and appliance is in its place. There is no evidence that the architects of our historic churches spent any time worrying about these things because like a well-designed room, a well-designed and spacious church can accommodate all of these rituals and elements.

One of the most disconcerting developments during the past few decades has been the design of churches as semi-circular or fan shaped theaters following the lead of Protestant denominations. Interestingly, one of the stated goals of many of the large mega-church buildings has been to make people feel as comfortable and anonymous as if they were going to a show without any need to participate. BLS seems to acknowledge this trend when it recommends "parishes will want to choose a seating arrangement that calls the congregation to active participation and that avoids any semblance of a theater or an arena." On the other hand, the document sounds like it is advocating the theater model when it states that "ideally, no seat in the nave would be located beyond a point where distance and the lighting level of the sanctuary severely impede the view of and participation in liturgical actions." Yet, one of the most transcendent and attractive aspects of the great cathedrals such as Chartres or St. Peters is their great length, their side aisles, and their light and shadow. And while BLS does offer some caution to placing the choir in or near the sanctuary, it makes no mention of the acoustical benefits and American tradition of the choir loft.

BLS acknowledges the significance and the diversity of pious devotions which are central to the life of Catholics and need to be fostered in the design of churches. While there are numerous devotions which are practiced by different ethnic groups, it must also be remembered that there are a large number of universal Catholic devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, devotion to the Blessed Virgin in the Rosary, and devotion to Christ in the Sacred Heart, or the crucifix. Images of the saints and scenes from their lives remind us that we are joined with them in the Mystical Body of Christ and should be a part of the design of a church. The crucifix, stained glass, paintings and sculpture are often those elements of the church which are most inspiring for the lay faithful and should be of high quality and beauty and respectful of traditional iconography. No one likes to see their mother portrayed in an ugly fashion and Catholics are no different. Yet, the discussion of images also includes some liturgical functional tendencies such as the recommendation that images depict saints for whom devotion currently exists and, if saints are only venerated by a few, then their images can be removed. This sentiment does not sufficiently reflect the Communion of Saints and the reality that the longer a church stands the more it reflects the devotions and saints from a variety of times. On the contrary, one of the rich aspects of historic churches is to see sacred art and saints from all different periods giving one a taste of the longevity and great richness of the Body of Christ.

Chapter Three is a pithy essay concerning Art which repeats many of the concepts from the previous chapter as well as developing a few new ones. It begins with an address by Pope Paul VI in which he states that "art is meant to bring the divine to the human world, to the level of the senses, then, from the spiritual insight gained through the senses and the stirring of the emotions to raise the human world to God, to his inexpressible kingdom of mystery, beauty, and life." BLS points out the necessity of the artist to understand and reverence the liturgy and to be respectful and supportive of the doctrines and practices of the Church. However, one can go further than that. Following Sacrosanctum Concilium, artists who desire to make religious or sacred art should see themselves as serving God's glory and "engaged in a kind of sacred imitation of God the Creator," which implies that the artist is a person of faith. Faith coupled with a knowledge of symbolism and iconography and the necessity of beauty by the artist would go a long way towards a restoration of sacred art. BLS states it is the patrimony of sacred art which provides a standard by which to judge contemporary art. Yet, there are other aspects of this chapter which are unfortunate, including the fear of art and architectural styles from a previous time, a false dichotomy between liturgical and devotional art, and the surprising idea that parishes should be cautious about promoting features identified with any class, ethnic or age group. Is it not one of the most obvious ways that a building reflects its builders and the people who pray there than in the particular architectural style, as well as in the inclusion of art portraying St. Patrick or St. Anthony, St. Stanislaus or St. Lawrence Ruiz, Our Lady of Guadalupe or Our Lady of Lourdes? How can we better inculturate the gospel in our churches than with the presence of

sacred art?

The final chapter of BLS "Building a Church: Practical Considerations" is written to introduce pastors and parishes to the building process and the different roles such as the bishop, the diocese, the pastor, the parish and the architect and contractor. Most priests today will probably get the chance at some point to build or renovate a church, chapel, school, or another building. This material construction has spiritual ramifications and the pastor has the responsibility to educate himself in the history of architecture and church law. The pastor is the chief liturgist for his parish and ultimately he will get the praise or the blame for the building, even though the bishop may dedicate it and legally own it. Though he needs the advice and support of a building committee, the pastor is the patron of the project, without whom the project will falter. He should be more than a good manager, he must also be a visionary who calls the parish and the architect to a high standard, while reminding everyone that the parish is building a temple in honor of the Lord. Today, parishioners expect to be consulted on the design of their church, and it is my view that everyone should have a chance to be heard early on in the process. However, at some point after the schematic design has been proposed and accepted by the people and the diocese, the pastor will have to make specific decisions about colors, different materials and managing the budget. The old joke that a camel is really a horse that was designed by committee rings true for many of our building projects, especially churches built in the last decades. BLS seems to recommend more committees than are helpful including committees to study furnishings, seating arrangements, the chapel of reservation, devotional items, artwork and landscape design. There is no question that the parish or the building committee should educate themselves before commissioning an architect. The recommendation that the parish embark on a self study and liturgical education is admirable; however, what parishes and pastors would really benefit from is a course in church architecture appreciation.

One of the difficulties today in constructing new churches is that dioceses have unreasonable requirements that parishes have fifty percent in cash and are required payoff their mortgage in five years. If banks had requirements like that, few parishioners could own their own homes. Dioceses and Catholics need to return to the ideal of our forefathers that constructing a church is a long term spiritual investment and a worthy building should be paid off over fifteen or more years, which has the added benefit of allowing more than one generation to have a hand in it. However, while it includes some suggestions and guidelines for church architecture, these should only be seen as binding "[w]here the document quotes or reiterates norms from liturgical books and the Code of Canon Law..."

Interpretation in light of buildings

One of the most basic expectations of a document on art or architecture is that there be concrete examples to express particular principles. This is a typical weakness of articles on architecture written by many liturgists. A document on architecture without citations of buildings is like a theology text which does not quote the bible. For the Catholic faithful, principles of church architecture are interpreted in the light of actual buildings. A good example of this is John Paul II's much shorter Letter to Artists of 1999 in which the Holy Father refers amply to the Church's patrimony of art and architecture: "When the Edict of Constantine allowed Christians to declare themselves in full freedom, art became a privileged means for the expression of faith. Majestic basilicas began to appear, and in them the architectural canons of the pagan world were reproduced and at the same time modified to meet the demands of the new form of worship. How can we fail to recall at least the old Saint Peter's Basilica and the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, both funded by Constantine himself? Or Constantinople's Hagia Sophia built by Justinian, with its splendours of Byzantine art?" (Letter to Artists, JP II, 1999) One expects to find a reference to the history of architecture in BLS especially since the Church has helped to write much of that history over the past two millennia. Again, John Paul's Letter is full of that sensibility. It is the sensibility of a Catholic document fully immersed in Tradition. However, on this score BLS gets failing marks. There is almost no awareness of the history of architecture, whether explicit or implicit, and examples of church architecture are more likely to be found on a shelf at a bookstore than in this Catholic document on sacred architecture. These shortcomings are due to the fact that this is not a document with a love, nor even an appreciation, of Tradition, but rather a well crafted essay of a rubrical nature. That being said it comes as no surprise that BLS includes no pictures of architecture per se.

Evidently some argued that to include images would slant the document in a particular direction, possibly toward abstract modernism. The images were of course one of the great weaknesses of EACW. For a document to be Catholic and to uphold the highest standards, it would be wise if it included images of a variety of churches and altars from a spectrum of time periods, styles and countries. This is of course one of the glories of the universal Church that it is ever ancient and ever new. These examples could all be drawn from the finest examples throughout history, adjudged by people of good will, thus discrediting the mediocre,

average, or merely recent. It is interesting to note that the one place that Pope John Paul II does not use specific examples is in reference to church architecture after Vatican II. While I appreciate the fact that BLS is not slanted toward modernism as its predecessor EACW was, the lack of examples points out an inherent limitation of the document. An essay on art and architecture which leaves out images and examples is incomplete and anyone who reads BLS will need to supplement it with history books and other books on church architecture.

In conclusion, I would acknowledge that Built of Living Stones is more faithful to Church documents and an improvement over the 1977 Environment and Art in Catholic Worship. While it concludes many provisions of universal law which are quoted or footnoted, other points are simply pastoral suggestions or guidelines and are not binding. (FN BLS, #10, p.3) In general, BLS seeks to be flexible offering a variety of alternatives to design issues but these should not be analyzed nor taken too seriously. There are some major lacunae such as the important subject of the historic preservation of art and architecture, as described in the Vatican document "Opera Artis" (1971). BLS can be rightly criticized as emphasizing a lot of non-architectural issues while say very little about architecture. Thus we are surprised to find one of the most important and cherished aspects of church architecture, its exterior design and siting, almost totally ignored. It is my hope that architects and pastors, building committees and bishops, will not ignore the exterior of the house of God but will instead go beyond the limitations of BLS and read the catechisms written in stone throughout history. BLS is a step forward in the writing on church architecture but by itself it offers little hope that we will build churches worthy of the Almighty once again. For that to happen, we look to the pastors, the bishops, the laity and the architects who are bringing about a new Renaissance in church architecture.

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Notes

1 Built of Living Stones, Art, Architecture and Worship, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 2000, p.3.

2 For this author's critique of these documents see "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship: A Critique," Sacred Architecture, Summer 1999 and "Displaced Tabernacles: Bishops' Document Needs Revision", Crisis, June 2000.

3 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1180; Rites for the Dedication of a Church, ch. 2, no.1.

4 Timothy V. Vaverek criticizes BLS' mistaken assumption that Catholic church art and architecture begins with the liturgical rites rather than with the identity of the Church in "The Church Building and Participation in the Paschal Mystery: Assessing the NCCB Document Built of Living Stones," Sacred Architecture, Spring 2001.

5 RDCA, ch. 4, no.4.

6 GIRM, 315, 2000.

7 Pope Paul VI, Address to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy (December 17, 1969).

8 Ibid., p. 3.

9 Such as Michael S. Rose's recent book, *Ugly As Sin*, Sophia Institute Press.

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