

The Church Building and the Paschal Mystery

By Fr. Timothy V. Vavarek

In his assessment of the NCCB document 'Built of Living Stones,' Fr. Vavarek explains why this document fails to provide a fully adequate expression of the Church's architectural tradition.

In November 2000 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) approved a new statement on art and architecture entitled 'Built of Living Stones' (BLS). The document is intended to build on and replace 'Environment and Art in Catholic Worship' (EACW, the 1978 statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy) in order to address the needs of the next generation of church building and renovation.

In part, the NCCB is attempting to resolve the extraordinary controversy which has surrounded EACW for twenty years. This conflict arose because EACW presented principles and suggestions that had never been advocated by the Church and whose authenticity were questionable. To make matters worse, there was a systematic effort by some liturgical and design experts to foster the impression that the vision of EACW was binding for Catholic church art and architecture in the United States. Ultimately, it became clear that EACW expressed only the opinion of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, not the legislative intent or architectural vision of the American bishops, and that the time had come for the NCCB to address the issue.

If past mistakes are to be avoided and the controversy put to rest, it is imperative that those using BLS accurately assess the authority of its theological, liturgical, and canonical statements. Any misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the authority of BLS, as happened with EACW, would inevitably cost the Church in the United States dearly in time, money, and goodwill. We simply cannot afford another generation of confusion and bitterness over church art and architecture.

The present critique of BLS will consider its authority and purpose as a NCCB statement and will then examine its conceptual framework in light of the Catholic tradition. This analysis will reveal that BLS has no normative force and that it fails to provide a fully adequate expression of the Church's tradition, suggesting therefore that those interested in church art and architecture will need carefully to weigh and supplement BLS in light of the primary sources of the tradition.

The authority and purpose of BLS

BLS discusses its authority in the penultimate paragraph of the Preface:

This document has been approved by the bishops of the Latin Church of the United States and issued by the authority of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on November 16, 2000. Built of Living Stones contains many of the provisions of universal law governing liturgical art and architecture and offers pastoral suggestions based upon the experience of the last thirty-five years. The document presents guidelines that can serve as the basis for diocesan bishops to issue further guidelines and directives for their dioceses. Where the document quotes or reiterates norms from liturgical books and the Code of Canon Law, those prescriptions are binding on local communities and dioceses.

To be more exact, the document was approved by a majority of the bishops in a voice vote. BLS therefore makes no claim to be a general decree having force of law for the dioceses of the United States. Such a decree would have required a two-thirds vote of all the bishops, present or not, and a subsequent recognition by the Apostolic See. Since BLS is not a general decree, the "competence of each diocesan bishop remains intact" and its suggestions are not binding on a single diocese unless the diocesan bishop determines otherwise. For this reason, and because the "conference [...] is not] able to act in the name of all the bishops unless each and every bishop has given his consent," it is imprecise to refer to BLS as "the national guidelines of American bishops." The NCCB has issued BLS in its own name, not in the name of all the bishops of the United States.

In the text of BLS and the manner chosen for its promulgation (a simple majority vote) the NCCB has clearly indicated that BLS does not establish any new liturgical norms. Therefore, while BLS is weightier than a committee document such as EACW, it has no more authority than the many other statements routinely issued by the NCCB on a wide range of issues (pastoral, sociopolitical, environmental, economic, etc.) which express the mind of the NCCB as an organization without ever claiming to speak definitively on behalf of all the bishops. Ultimately, BLS has only the limited authority it claims: to be guidance from a majority of the American bishops offered in the name of the NCCB to help foster a better understanding and

implementation of the Church's tradition regarding church art and architecture.

BLS states its rather modest purpose in the Preface:

Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship is presented to assist the faithful involved in the building or renovation of churches, chapels, and oratories of the Latin Church in the United States. In addition, the document is intended for use by architects, liturgical consultants and artists, contractors, and other professionals engaged in the design and/or construction of these places of worship. The text also may be helpful to those who wish to understand the Catholic Church's tradition regarding church buildings, the arts, and architecture. While the suggestions and guidelines within the document have been carefully prepared, they are not exhaustive of the subject matter. They are intended to serve as the basis for decision making at the local level and also can become the foundation for the development of diocesan guidelines and legislation governing liturgical art and architecture.

BLS makes no effort to offer an exhaustive treatment of art and architecture, but merely to establish a foundation within the tradition for the development of church designs and diocesan norms. BLS can fulfill this purpose only to the degree that its principles reflect those of the Catholic tradition. Even a relatively minor inaccuracy in the statement of principles would result in a distorted presentation of the authentic canonical, liturgical, and theological heritage of the Church. To borrow an analogy from construction: if a foundation or structural design is defective, then the entire edifice is at risk even if otherwise built of sound material. The defects might be quite subtle and go unnoticed in an inspection, but if they are not corrected neither the skill of the builder nor the quality of the material can secure the structure.

The critique which follows will attempt to show that the principles and schema of BLS do not adequately reflect the Catholic tradition which bases its understanding of church art, architecture, and liturgy on the Paschal Mystery of Christ. BLS departs from this foundation in two major ways: 1) it relates church art and architecture primarily to the liturgical rites rather than to the Church herself, and 2) it relates the rites primarily to the presence of God and Christ rather than to the Church's participation in the Pasch. These defects in turn give rise to inadequate and mistaken design criteria.

Where to begin: with liturgical rites or the identity of the Church? The Preface of BLS provides an unambiguous statement of the principles that will determine the foundation and structure of the document: The document begins with a theological reflection on the liturgy and liturgical art and architecture. Since decisions about church art and architecture should always be based upon the theology of the eucharistic assembly and its liturgical action and the understanding of the Church as the house of God on earth, the first chapter is foundational for the chapters that follow. The second chapter outlines the liturgical principles for parish communities to apply when building or renovating liturgical space, and it reviews the spatial demands of the major liturgical celebrations during the year. The third chapter offers suggestions for including art in places of worship...

Notice how often the terms "liturgy" and "liturgical" appear in this passage. Apparently it is axiomatic for BLS that church art and architecture is liturgical art and architecture (no citation from Church teaching is offered in defense of this claim). This leads BLS uncritically to assume in the first chapter that considerations of art and architecture should always be based on the Eucharistic assembly and its liturgical action as well as on the identity of the building as the house of God. This unsubstantiated corollary in turn becomes "foundational for the chapters that follow." Thus, for example, the second chapter is devoted to liturgical principles for liturgical space shaped by the demands of liturgical celebrations and the third chapter considers the use of art in places of worship. The entire development of BLS depends on the integrity of the initial assumption that church art and architecture is first and foremost designed to reflect the liturgical worship occurring in God's house. But this assumption is defective.

To understand the gravity of the defect, consider the treatment of church architecture found in Vatican II and the postconciliar Rite of Dedication of a Church and Altar (RDCA). According to these authentic and authoritative expressions of the Catholic tradition, the Church herself, the living temple of God, is "symbolized in places of worship built of stone" so that the church building is a "visible sign of the living Church, God's building that is formed of the people themselves." The church building is meant to reflect the mystery of the Church, which is the communion of God and humanity wrought through the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension; a communion to be fully revealed only on the Last Day in the kingdom which is the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The entire building is therefore "sacramental" in that it visibly represents the Church, the kingdom of God present now in mystery. Put simply, the church building is an icon of the Church herself and a witness to the kingdom.

According to Vatican II, the Trinity has chosen to accomplish the saving work of Christ's Pasch in and

through the Church, for which reason Christ “always associates the Church with Himself in this great work in which God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified.” The paschal work of the Church is shared in various ways by all her members, living or dead, under the headship of Christ as the basis for all Christian apostolate and ministry. It follows that daily life and liturgy are equally real participations in Christ's saving work; they are both genuine priestly offerings of that “rational worship” by which the Christian prophetically lives and witnesses to the Pasch of Christ, thereby advancing the kingdom. Therefore, it would be an egregious error to limit the realization of the Pasch, the spiritual life of the Christian, or the activity of the Church to liturgical celebrations. There is more to the Church and Christianity than the liturgy.

It follows from this sacramental understanding of the building and of the Church's participation in the Pasch that church buildings must reflect the identity of the Church as *Christus Totus*: the entire people of God united to Christ its head accomplishing the Pasch in life and liturgy. To design a building that represents only the ritual worship of the community would therefore run the real risk of distorting the image of the Church (and the liturgy) by ignoring both the paschal life of the Church outside of public worship, and those members not present in the assembly. Theologically this would reduce the Church to a particular worshipping congregation, the building to a congregational worship space, and the liturgy to a celebration of Christian fellowship. The relation of the Church, the building, and the liturgy to the Pasch and the kingdom would be obscured or lost. BLS heavily favors such a reductionistic approach by limiting its reflections to liturgical art and architecture rather than beginning with the broader ecclesial and paschal vision of Vatican II. The only way it could avoid becoming trapped in a reductionistic vision would be by considering the liturgy in its fullest sense as a recapitulation of the entire life of the whole Church (living and dead) participating in the Pasch. Then the ecclesial and paschal aspects would emerge because the design would reflect the reality encountered in liturgical ritual: the Pasch which lies at the heart of the Church's life and worship. But BLS has not considered the centrality of the Pasch in the Church and the liturgical rites.

The heart of the liturgy: ritual presence or participation in the Pasch? BLS's reliance on a reductionistic concept of the liturgical rites becomes increasingly evident and detrimental throughout the first chapter. The chapter begins with a section on “The Living Church: God's Building.” The first three paragraphs are in many ways compatible with the vision of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5-13 except for the crucial difference that BLS makes no mention of the Pasch. It offers no clear statement that the Church participates in Christ's Pasch such that her whole life (not just the liturgy) is seen to be a priestly, prophetic, and kingly act of worship giving praise to God and advancing the salvation of the world. Instead, the focus is entirely on the Church's ritual life. For instance, the fourth paragraph states that “every time the Church gathers for prayer, she is joined to Christ's priesthood and made one with the saints and angels, transcending time and space...”, when the full truth is that she is always joined to Christ's priesthood, to the angels and saints, in a communion transcending time and space for the purpose of participating in the fulfillment of the Pasch. The text makes it appear that communion with God and His people is the source and summit of Christian worship so that the experience of communion in liturgy “is a window to eternity and a glimpse of what God calls us to be.” But it is impossible to enter the presence of God or to have communion with Him apart from the Pasch of Christ. Therefore, the liturgy cannot be a window to eternity or to what we are called to be unless it is a communion in the Pasch of the Lamb. By ignoring the Paschal Mystery in this discussion BLS has ignored the heart of the liturgy—and of the life of the Church.

For Vatican II, continual participation in the Pasch is the basis of Christian daily life and worship. The Church's liturgical celebrations, the Eucharistic sacrifice, and the Eucharist itself are each rightly called “the source and summit” of Christian and ecclesial life precisely because they are uniquely privileged expressions and realizations of this on-going participation in the Pasch. But they are not the only means of participation and, whether in liturgy or out, Christ's Pasch itself remains the source and summit of our lives. As BLS states it, the liturgical rites would appear primarily to be about recognizing our communion with God and His presence to us. It is difficult to see how an understanding of liturgy based on a theory of divine presence rather than on a sacramental communion in the Pasch could possibly give rise to the full, conscious, and active participation in Christian life and worship sought by Vatican II. To the extent that a theory of presence permits participation, it would seem to focus on participating in the performance of the rites rather than on celebrating the rites as a means of deepening our participation in the Paschal mystery they signify. The ritual presence of God and Christ are wonderful realities, but for Vatican II those presences have a specific purpose: to enable our sacramental communion with Christ in the Pasch which we are to live each moment until we come to its fullness in the kingdom. Participation in the Pasch enables Christian life and liturgy to be distinct foretastes of the communion of heaven. It is precisely this participation which constitutes redeemed humanity as the living church, God's temple built on the cornerstone of Christ. Here the concept of temple or building must be supplemented with that of a body. The people of God constitute not only a community in which God is present (as in a temple), they are a community which He continually enlivens and works through (as with a body).

The ill effects of the reductionistic approach to the Church and the liturgy are apparent in the second section of Chapter One, entitled "The Church Building." BLS states that "the house of prayer must be expressive of the presence of God and suited for the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ, as well as reflective of the community that celebrates there." This is not an holistic vision; it is a concatenation of diverse realities (house of prayer, God's presence, liturgical celebration, celebrating community) which makes no mention of the extra-liturgical life of the Church or her participation in Christ's Pasch in and out of liturgy. In suggesting that the church building should be designed to express God's presence and to reflect the worship of the community BLS offers no insights into the most fundamental meaning and purpose of that presence or worship.

For Vatican II, churches are designed to express the saving Paschal Mystery of Christ revealed and accomplished in the entire life of the Church. This architectural proclamation is meant to continue, like the life of the Church, even outside of liturgical events. Because the building is an image of the paschal kingdom present now in mystery, it is necessarily also an expression of God's presence through Christ, suited for liturgical celebration, and reflective of the entire Church (not just the worshipping assembly). Thus, Vatican II can explain why the building should also be useful for liturgy, whereas BLS cannot explain why anything not immediately required for the rites should be included in the building. Vatican II suggests a comprehensive and coherent vision of the church building; the vision in BLS is incomplete and disjointed.

The fourth section of Chapter One seeks to lay the groundwork for moving from a general consideration of church architecture to concrete guidelines for church design. Given the document's reduction of church art and architecture to only liturgical considerations, it is natural that BLS should turn to the Mass for guidance at this step. After all, the Mass is the supreme expression of the Church's liturgical life and the stereotypical ritual assembly of the faithful. This is so, according to the teaching of the Church, because the Mass is the great sacramental participation in Christ's Pasch. But, as we have repeatedly observed, BLS does not consider the centrality of participation in the Pasch. Instead, it understands the liturgy as the worship of a particular community in which the presence of God is manifested. So BLS chooses to discuss the Mass under the heading "Christ's Presence in Sign and Symbol" rather than under the heading "Paschal Participation in Sign and Symbol." The Eucharistic liturgy is presented only in terms of how it realizes Christ's presence in the assembly through the baptized members, the Word of God, sacramental celebration, and the Sacred Species. Consequently, BLS claims that church designs must begin with a reflection on the relation of the places where Christ's presence is manifested: altar, ambo, presider's chair, and space for the congregation. There is no indication that for Vatican II the understanding of church design—and of the Church, the liturgy, and the entire Christian life—must begin with a reflection on the Church's participation in the Pasch of Christ, God's saving work by which He gathers a people uniquely His own, sharing His divine life. BLS substitutes experiencing God's presence for participation in Christ's Pasch as the basis of liturgy, forgetting that it is only through our share in the Pasch that we have communion with the Father.

Design criteria: ritualistic or ecclesiological? Having reduced the building to an image of the liturgical assembly and the liturgy to the ritual celebration of God's presence, BLS has no choice but to base its design criteria solely on the demands of the rites. Chapter One concludes by offering the following criteria:

Liturgical principles for building or renovating churches

- 1) The church building is designed in harmony with church laws and serves the needs of the liturgy.
- 2) The church building fosters participation in the liturgy.
- 3) The design of the church building reflects the various roles of the participants.
- 4) The church building respects the culture of every time and place.
- 5) The church building should be beautiful.

These design criteria reflect the rites celebrated at a particular time and place, not the reality of the entire Church participating in the work of the Pasch in time and eternity.

Consider how the same type of criteria might have been expressed if BLS had followed Vatican II's lead by beginning with the ecclesiological identity of the building rooted in the Pasch:

Ecclesiological principles for building or renovating churches

- 1) The church building is designed as an image of the Church, which is the kingdom of God present now in mystery and the Body of Christ sharing in His Pasch.
- 2) The church building therefore fosters participation in the paschal life and worship of the Church, including the liturgy and public and private devotions. Consequently it accords with liturgical norms.
- 3) As an image of the Church which fosters participation in ecclesial life, the design of the building reflects the distinct, hierarchic charisms of the members of the Body of Christ, living and dead.
- 4) The church building therefore reflects the identity and heritage of the Church universal and of the particular Church. 5) The church building, an image of the bride of Christ, should be beautiful.

These ecclesiological criteria are holistic in that they consider the entire life of the Church and situate the liturgical rites within the broader context of that life by staying centered on the Pasch of Christ. According to these criteria the building is suitable for ritual use precisely because it is an adequate image of the Church, not vice-versa. The building expresses the unique and hierarchical relation of the members to Christ their head with an emphasis on their continual participation in His Pasch, not only on encountering His presence as they act out various liturgical roles. The beauty of the building is not measured simply as worship space, but in relation to how well the design reflects the Church as she is, as she has expressed herself historically (including in particular cultures), and as she will appear on the last day when the work of the Pasch is accomplished.

Using Vatican II's ecclesiology it becomes possible to understand why the altar is central (it is the place of the Pasch, the source of the Gospel and the Eucharist); why the tabernacle is placed prominently and visibly in the sanctuary or a chapel integrally joined to the main body of the church (Christ is the head of the Church); why there are images of the saints and angels (they are members of the Church); why the priest's chair is situated in the sanctuary at the head of the assembly (he presides in the person of Christ the head); and why there is a distinction between sanctuary and nave (there is a distinction of charism among the members)—all these reflect the hierarchical ordering of the Body of Christ, the Church. The identity of the Church as *Christus Totus*, not the structure of the rites alone, is the key to church design. A building built on sound ecclesiological principles is naturally able to take into account the specific needs of the liturgical and devotional worship of the Church because in worship the Church is herself. But a church designed only for ritual use will not necessarily be able to reflect the complete identity of the Church because her identity is not limited to specific ritual celebrations.

By choosing to base designs on ritual criteria, BLS has not only failed to sufficiently ground itself in the ecclesiology and liturgical theology of Vatican II (both of which are rooted in the Pasch), it has set for itself an almost impossible task. Since liturgical and canonical legislation have generally presumed the existence of church buildings, they have not attempted to present a comprehensive architectural plan for churches. Besides, the liturgical books generally limit their considerations to the needs of specific rites. Therefore, there is no reason to believe a priori that a survey of all the ritual books will provide sufficient criteria for church design, or that the resulting criteria will be entirely consistent. Indeed, one of the reasons for writing BLS was to deal with lacunae and apparent conflicts. The resolution of such problems, if resolutions exist, obviously are not to be found explicitly in the liturgical books. This means that BLS had no choice but to remain silent on such contested issues or to present innovative solutions. However, to be authentic these innovations would have to be developed in complete continuity with the tradition of the Church. Unfortunately, as we have seen, BLS has failed to consider ecclesiological and liturgical principles that are absolutely fundamental to the Catholic tradition. Thus, when BLS offers insights or criteria based on its own principles, it is likely to be offering inadequate guidance.

Other examples of distorted criteria. As a demonstration of how the defective principles and design criteria offered in BLS lead to further distortions of the tradition, consider the document's treatment of the placement of tabernacles and religious images. Tabernacles and religious images are almost completely incidental to sacramental celebrations and therefore the ritual books have relatively little to say about them. Because BLS has limited its design criteria to the demands of rites, the placement of the tabernacle and of religious images are not matters of high priority in Chapter Two (entitled "The Church Building and the Sacred Rites Celebrated There"). The tabernacle is treated in a section on the "Reservation of the Eucharist" that comes after sections devoted to the major furnishings of the Eucharistic liturgy and to the baptistery. Images of Christ's saving work and of the angels and saints are relegated to the very end of the chapter under "Popular Devotions." Thus, BLS has reduced the tabernacle and religious images to being objects of worship,

completely ignoring their symbolic function as expressing the identity of the Church in relation to Christ and the company of heaven. This is the necessary conclusion of having begun with a "ritual use" conception of church design, rather than an ecclesiological or sacramental conception. Had BLS considered the building to be an image of the Church, the heavenly Jerusalem, then the places accorded to Jesus Himself (i.e., the location of the tabernacle) and to images of Christ and the saints would have been treated as primary issues for church design.

Worse than this reductionistic treatment of the tabernacle and religious images, BLS actually invents a criterion for tabernacle placement utterly unknown in the tradition of the Church: that its location "not draw the attention of the faithful away from the Eucharistic celebration." BLS makes this assertion without justifying its claim. Surprisingly, it cites *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (EM) 55 despite the fact that EM 55 states no norms, never mentions the tabernacle as a source of distraction, and is concerned only with symbolic reasons that recommend placing the tabernacle somewhere other than on the altar. This peculiar citation of EM 55 strongly suggests that once again BLS is being guided by an inadequate understanding of the liturgy based on a theory of presence according to which the rites revolve around seeing or recognizing distinct modes of God's presence. Apparently BLS is reasoning that the act of seeing the tabernacle (which contains the Eucharistic species) during Mass could somehow preempt or conflict with seeing the Eucharistic species on the altar after the consecration. But we do not see the Eucharist in the tabernacle and, in any event, the liturgy presumes that we are capable of recognizing Christ's presence simultaneously through a variety of "modes" and images while remaining primarily focused on celebrating our participation in His Pasch (which is the purpose of His diverse presences).

The Eucharist is Christ. His being in the tabernacle does not distract us from our Christian life and worship. Were the reserved Eucharist a distraction from full participation in the Pasch, then we would have to suspend our communion in the Pasch while we prayed before the tabernacle. This would be absurd. The Christian finds himself more deeply drawn into his daily living of the Pasch while praying before the Lord in the tabernacle. Whether during personal prayer in front of the tabernacle or during the celebration of Mass with the tabernacle visible, we are capable of participating deeply in the Paschal Mystery while being aware of Christ's presence. The presence of Christ in the tabernacle (or in the assembly, the priest, the Word, or the Host on the altar) cannot in any adequate account of the liturgy possibly distract from the Pasch being celebrated. That BLS could posit a source of conflict between the tabernacle and the Mass—and that it would think EM 55 supports such a claim—are indications that it has radically misconstrued the nature of the liturgy as well as that of church art and architecture. The Church has never posited such a conflict and BLS lacks the authority to introduce one.

Conclusion

The present article has brought to light a number of issues which should be kept in mind by those using BLS in the development of church designs or diocesan norms. First, BLS makes no claim to be a set of national norms issued by the American bishops; it is a statement of the NCCB meant to foster a deeper understanding of the Catholic tradition regarding church design. Given this purpose, BLS does not attempt to bind anyone to its suggestions and it clearly presumes that its readers will continue to rely on the primary sources of the Catholic tradition.

Second, the principles and schema of BLS are based on the mistaken assumption that considerations of Catholic church art and architecture begin with the liturgical rites rather than with the identity of the Church. As a consequence, art and architecture in BLS are not called upon to express the paschal reality of the Church, whose complete life and membership transcend the gathered assembly.

Third, the document's reductionistic reliance on the liturgical rites is worsened by its uncritical acceptance of a liturgical theory focused on the ritual presence of Christ rather than on the Church's communion with Christ in His Pasch. This leads BLS to present an impoverished vision of the liturgy which fails to reveal the paschal and ecclesial dimensions of the rites.

Fourth, BLS develops specific design criteria based on ritual requirements rather than on the symbolic function of the building as an image of the Church. Given BLS's emphasis on ritual presence, this leads BLS to suggest a ritualistic rather than a sacramental (and hierarchical) arrangement of altar, tabernacle, images of Christ and saints, and the seating for the priest and the congregation.

From its first statement of principles, BLS fails to articulate and focus on the Paschal Mystery as the foundation of the Church and her liturgy and hence gives insufficient consideration to the paschal and ecclesial aspects of art, architecture, and liturgy. The resulting reductionistic treatment of the building as

ritual space and of the liturgy as the ritual presence of God creates a framework which does not adequately represent the Catholic tradition. Therefore, wherever BLS interprets, summarizes, or elaborates on the authentic teaching and legislation of the Church there is the danger of unintended distortions. Claims that are unique to BLS (e.g., regarding the tabernacle) are apt to be attributable to its mistaken principles. Consequently, Catholics interested in church design will need to continue to rely on Vatican II and the Church's liturgy as the primary inspirations for their work. Such considered reflection on the sources of the tradition will foster the goal of BLS—a deeper understanding and acceptance of authentic criteria for church art and architecture. Only then will our buildings truly reflect the identity and beauty of the Church built of living stones.

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