

Did Vatican II Promote the Reform of Church Architecture?

By Michael S. Rose

'Sacrosanctum Concilium' was the only Vatican II document that addressed the question of art in our churches. Interestingly, it did not employ the word 'architecture' even once.

The basilicas of the early Church established the idea of a sacred place where Christians gathered for public worship. The Romanesque inspired the search for symbols that would lead the spirit toward God. In the Middle Ages, intense religious fervor and intellectual vigor led to the Gothic “sermons in stone,” followed by Renaissance architecture, which reflected the new love for erudition, science, and metaphysics. Yet during each of these architectural epochs, church architects and artisans based their designs on the same basic principles to effect the individual “styles,” each of which the Church has admitted into her treasury of sacred architecture.

During the Protestant Reformation, however, architects devised new church forms and arrangements that reflected their idiosyncratic theologies and philosophies. During this period some Catholic churches were stripped of their traditional symbols — statuary, paintings, and other iconography. Stained glass windows were smashed, altars dismantled and tabernacles sacked. The church building became less a sacred place than a functional meeting hall for Protestant worship.

Reacting to this 16th century iconoclasm, the Catholic Counter-Reformation movement encouraged a return to the cruciform basilica plan of the early Church, since that arrangement was understood to be most conducive to the catechesis and preaching it considered essential to battling the various heresies of the day.

It is this Counter-Reformation model that inspired the exterior and interior of Catholic churches in western Christendom until just a few decades ago. The old master craftsmen and architects expressed (and sometimes defended) the Catholic faith in the very birth of their art by means of elaborate high altars and tabernacles, special niche and aisle shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the saints, prominent pulpits for preaching, and an abundance of art in glass, sculpture and painting to teach the truths necessary for salvation. The atmosphere created on this model was one of religious mystery wherein one could experience a little of the unearthly joy of the New Jerusalem, where one’s soul could meet with Christ in a unique way. Every detail, however small, held meaning for both artist and layman, either consciously or unconsciously. These churches told the story of Christ and his Church, taught, catechized, and illustrated the lives of the Church’s saintly souls. In the same way that the earthly liturgy is a foretaste of the “heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, and in which Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle,” the church building is a foretaste of the “place” where such a heavenly liturgy takes place (SC, 8).

In the early 1960s when Sacrosanctum Concilium was being drafted by the venerable Council Fathers, the Church’s patrimony of sacred architecture was rich by any standard. Catholic churches, even the most modest structures, could be readily identified in almost any setting—rural or urban. For the most part, gone were days when the church edifice or monastery dominated the town skyline or the rolling hills of the countryside. But the church still asserted itself as a significant presence in the fabric of town and country. Its steeple or dome, surmounted by the cross, contrasted to the varying forms of secular buildings in most places and the campanile was a welcoming sign to pilgrims and tourists, locals and merchants. Its bells resounding through the city square or the neighboring farmland served as both a timepiece and a call to prayer. In short, the church was a recognizable structure, its function well-known.

Not only was the church used for the sacred liturgy — its primary purpose — it was understood as a place of refuge from the world, a sanctuary where one could stand with the angels and the saints, adoring Christ and honoring his blessed mother. It was a place conducive to intercessory prayer, a place where one could repent, confess and reconcile. This was the common understanding of a church building as the Council Fathers gathered to discuss the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which was promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1963. Although most laymen would not even know of the existence of Sacrosanctum Concilium until years or even decades later, this document was misused to justify the reform of Catholic church architecture in the years immediately following the Council.

Even well before the Council, churches of previous centuries were deemed irrelevant by an elite corps of Church intellectuals — mainly liturgists and architects — who would have greater influence throughout the

Church in the years to come. The traditional architectural elements and furnishings were disparaged and a new model based on architectural modernism, with its cold and hard lines, its starkness and over-emphasis on utility, was born. The post-war building boom saw the construction of numerous Catholic churches as parishes grew and the Church greatly increased in numbers throughout North America. The churches built in this brief era were diverse in their designs, but some were obviously disconnected with the tradition of Catholic architecture, reflecting more a Protestant or secular influence. These few churches were designed as hulking masses in the shape of seashells, sailboats, arks and other nautical themes; rocket ships, beehives and lunar landing pods — forms that would become more common in later decades.

The Second Vatican Council gave this clique a new opportunity. They capitalized on the spirit of change that swept through Western society during the tumultuous Sixties and applied this spirit to the Council, which they falsely and dishonestly used as the catalyst for reformation of church architecture. No longer were they limited to constructing new modernist churches in the few places where they were allowed to carry out their experiments; they quickly found they could now invoke the Council to advocate the structural reform of existing churches. It made selling both their renovation and new building design ideas much easier. In other words, they used the Council to legitimize the modernist church designs that the common people had consistently rejected.

Renovations of traditional churches in the years immediately following the Council were arguably the most drastic, reflective even of the spirit of the 16th century Protestant Reformation. In a burst of iconoclastic pride, high altars, statues, shrines, communion rails, confessionals, and kneelers were removed from many churches. Others were whitewashed — murals and frescoes succumbed to the roller — all supposedly to fulfill mandates issued by Vatican II. At a time when the actual Council documents were rarely consulted and not readily available, the laity were easily hoodwinked. There existed an inherent trust of church authorities that is not enjoyed today. If a pastor or a bishop or a priest-liturgist explained to parishioners that their church building had to change or that a new modernist church was required, the laity mostly grinned and bore it because “Father said so.” And in those years Father invariably said so on the authority of the Second Vatican Council. Proponents of this new architecture were taking great liberties with the Council documents, and little was called into question.

Sacrosanctum Concilium was the only document that addressed the question of art in our churches. Interestingly, the Constitution did not employ the word “architecture” even once. Thus, it follows that the Council had precious little to say about the reform of church architecture. The changes promoted in the parishes were not based on Council mandates. Catholics were forced to accept the new church designs merely on the basis of subjective and contrived opinions derived from modernist architectural theories and progressive liturgical ideas that would eventually change the liturgy of the Mass to reflect an overly horizontal worship.

Misinterpretation

Although Sacrosanctum Concilium does not directly advocate the reform of church architecture per se, the document briefly addresses the subject of sacred art and furnishings. One of the most significant statements of this section comes in paragraph 123: “[In] the course of the centuries [the Church] has brought into being a treasury of art which must be carefully preserved.” And bishops are warned that they “must be very careful to see that sacred furnishings and works of value are not disposed of or allowed to deteriorate; for they are the house of God.” Yet the fast and furious attack on our traditional churches in the late 1960s and early 1970s proves that these statements were little heeded in Christendom. The situation got so bad that in 1971 the Vatican issued a further warning to the bishops in a short document on the care and preservation of the Church’s historical and artistic patrimony, ‘Opera Artis.’

Disregarding the warnings and legislation of the Holy See, many people have made unwarranted changes in places of worship under the pretext of carrying out the reform of the liturgy and thus have caused the disfigurement or loss of priceless works of art. Mindful of the legislation of Vatican Council II and of the directives in the documents of the Holy See, bishops are to exercise unfailing vigilance to ensure that the remodeling of places of worship by reason of the reform of the liturgy is carried out with utmost caution. Nevertheless, the zealous renovators of the 1970s steered their own course, and continued to do so in the name of the Second Vatican Council and the reformed liturgy (with which a great many liberties were being taken as well). Again, however, this was accomplished primarily through a perversion of Sacrosanctum Concilium. Renovators and church designers, for instance, like to quote the Constitution’s call for “noble simplicity” in reference to church architecture as if this advocated iconoclastic modernism. Consulting the text, however, one finds the reference to “noble simplicity” ascribed to the rites of the Church not to the church building or sacred furnishings. Rather SC calls for “noble beauty” in church ornamentation (SC, 124). Although the document warns that “mere extravagance” be avoided, one can hardly maintain that the

Council is arguing in favor of the cold, hard lines of sterile modernist architecture devoid of any ornamentation.

Although SC states that “the practice of placing sacred images in churches” is to be “firmly maintained,” it cautions that “their number should be moderate and their relative location should reflect right order.” Unfortunately, “right order” has often been misinterpreted to mean that our churches should be purged of religious imagery. How many churches built in the 1970s and 1980s are devoid of statuary and other sacred art? Even Stations of the Cross have suffered the same banishment.

Active Participation

Most of the changes in church architecture, however, are predicated on the idea of promoting “active participation” in the liturgy. In fact, many beautiful churches have been destroyed in the name of “active participation”; many ugly edifices have been constructed under the same pretense. In older churches the altars were often moved into the “midst of the people,” causing the disfigurement of the former sanctuaries. Communion rails were ripped out with crowbars. High altars, often with beautiful reredos structures, were hacked up with buzz saws, and baldachinos were chopped down to use for firewood.

In the name of “active participation” statues were evacuated and tabernacles banished. Works of art were removed; murals and mosaics were whitewashed or covered with paneling—all because these things were said to distract people from “active participation” in the Mass. Reflecting back on this now, many Catholics see the absurdity in such a rationale; the logic is fallacious and the results are banal.

This line of reasoning reached the height of absurdity when, a few years later, pews were ripped out. They too were a kind of distraction, and all that kneeling was said to be misplaced and impeded “active participation” — the ideal set forth in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

“Active participation,” however, was simply an abused concept. It was used as a cover to justify some of the radical theories that are still being promoted widely to this day. Most of these ideas and practical recommendations can be traced back to the liturgical ideal promoted by architects—both Protestants and Catholics — in the 1960s. That ideal was to eliminate the understanding of the church as a “*domus Dei*” and replace it with a new paradigm, one that is a “non-church,” a place where the people gather for horizontal worship, a place devoid of all religious imagery and one that bears no resemblance to a church — with its familiar elements—as it has been known throughout the past eighteen centuries. The promoters of this ideal facilitated a radical break with history, a radical break with tradition, all for the sake of their subjective and contrived opinions, which were passed off as being derived from the mandates of SC.

The term “active participation” was widely misunderstood, and is still misunderstood to this day. The official Latin version uses the term *actuosa participatio*. The term *actuosa* incorporates both the “contemplative” (internal) and “active” (external) aspects of participation. *Activa*, which also means active, normally excludes the contemplative aspect. The choice of *actuosa* instead of *activa* is significant.

In liturgy, as in our daily Christian lives, both the contemplative and the active complement each other. How do we foster both in a setting that still retains the mystery of the Eucharist, and the hierarchical nature of the Mass and the Church? How is *actuosa participatio* — both the contemplative and active aspects — fostered by throwing the altar into the midst of the congregation, by removing the statues and sacred works of art, by banishing the tabernacle, by using moveable chairs instead of pews? In fact, it is hard to argue that these design moves can accomplish anything of the sort. With thirty-some years of hindsight Catholics are increasingly coming to realize that this new paradigm of church architecture is a failed experiment.

When Catholics or others pass-by the newer churches, do they naturally understand the building to be a church? Does it look like a church? Do we understand it as a refuge, a place where we can go to meet Christ in a unique way, a place where we can pray in silence or worship God through the sacred liturgy? Or do we wonder if the building is a nursing home, a bookstore, or a library?

When we enter the new church buildings do we understand that we are in a Catholic church? Or do we search in vain for the vigil lamp? Do we mistake the building for a gymnasium or conference center, a theater or Japanese tea house? Do we wonder about the faith and beliefs of those who worship at such places (e.g., Do we know if they are Catholic, Protestant, or Unitarian?)

There is simply no honest way to argue that the Second Vatican Council envisioned such a change in our church architecture. The Council likely had little to say about church architecture because the universal Church at that time was blessed with beautiful churches that were conducive to public and private worship.

There were no grave problems that needed to be corrected in this respect. And after almost forty years of experimenting, the tide is finally turning. A new appreciation of traditional sacred architecture has taken hold among clergy and laity alike. A renewed effort to preserve the Church's artistic and historic patrimony is a more accurate reflection of the wishes of the Council Fathers as set forth in Sacrosanctum Concilium.

*Michael S. Rose is the author of several books on church architecture, including **In Tiers of Glory** and **Ugly As Sin**. He is the creator and editor of dellachiesa.com.*

Copyright 2004 dellachiesa.com