

'Environment & Art in Catholic Worship': A Critique

By Michael S. Rose

The theology behind the 1978 document that changed the face of Catholic liturgical architecture - for the worse

In July of 1998 Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter regarding the authority and limitations of national bishops conferences. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, president of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explained that, according to the Pope's letter, *Apostolos Suos*, a statement issued by an episcopal conference cannot be considered authoritative unless the bishops adopt it unanimously in plenary session or receive prior approval from the Vatican. Ratzinger emphasized that "truth is not decided by a majority vote."

Other Vatican officials have emphasized that a document issued by a committee of bishops would have "informational" value, but must be regarded as "provisional" statements. Such documents, says the Pope, should not be published in the name of the bishops' conference.

Environment & Art in Catholic Worship is one such document which was never adopted (unanimously or even by a majority vote) by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB). In fact, EACW was never even brought before the NCCB for approval by the bishops of the United States, nor did it receive the approval of the Vatican. In Volume 55 of *The Jurist*—an eminent Canon Law journal—an article regarding EACW declared that "the statement is not, nor does it purport in any way to be, a law or a general decree of the conference of bishops, emanating from the NCCB's legislative power; neither is it a general decree of that body. Thus it lacks, and there is no suggestion that it has, juridically binding or obligatory force.

EACW therefore remains a provisional opinion statement, and has no authoritative nature. Nevertheless, renovation proposals for countless American parish churches have been predicated on the fulfillment of directives set forth in EACW, an authority which, as it has been established—yet ignored, it does not have.

EACW was released in 1978 as a provisional draft statement by the Bishops Committee on Liturgy (BCL) under the leadership of San Francisco's then-Archbishop John Quinn. Yet the BCL wrongly published and highly publicized EACW in the name of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and implying the tacit approval of the Holy See.

Since 1978 not a few dioceses adopted EACW's recommendations as a set of "directives" to be employed during the renovation of existing churches as well as in the design and construction of new ones. In short, the BCL's recommendations promote the secularization of Catholic church architecture.

Whose ideas, anyway?

Committees of the NCCB, such as the BCL, consult advisors whose names remain anonymous in perpetuity; thus we will probably never know who actually drafted the controversial document. The BCL simply stated in their March, 1978 newsletter that EACW is "the result of a cooperative effort on the part of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and the Bishop's Committee."

It is of more than passing interest, however, to note that a book authored by Lutheran architect Edward Sovik in 1973—five years before EACW was released—proposes many of the same architectural recommendations set forth in the BCL document. However, Sovik's work goes a bit further. He articulates the ideology behind his practical recommendations. He forthrightly discloses his motivation and his desired results.

Continuing the work of the Reformation

His book, *Architecture for Worship*, published by Augsburg Publishing House in Minneapolis, elaborates on his desire to continue where the Reformation Protestants left off four hundred years ago. "The history of the church building through the Middle Ages," writes Sovik, "is a record of a more explicit expression of a theology, a liturgy, and a piety that contradicted in important ways the essential message of Jesus. And when the Protestant and Catholic reformations of the sixteenth century came, the architectural forms that resulted were only partially corrective. The destruction of images and relics and the rearrangement of furniture in the existing buildings, and the sharp contrasts of form that appeared in some of the few new places of worship built in those times, did not effectively bring the minds of churchmen back into harmony with the minds of the early church" (p.18).

Sovik rightly states that architecture is a more influential factor in the life of society than most people suppose. "The incompleteness of the Reformation in terms of architecture was no doubt the result of the longevity of architecture," explains Sovik. He laments the fact that these medieval edifices are not easily removed or changed. Even after the iconoclasm of the Reformation, writes Sovik, "The 'houses of God' from medieval times continued to stand, continued to assert themselves as 'houses of God' because of their strong ecclesial character, and continued to teach the people around them that there ought to be such a place as a 'house of God'," says Sovik (p. 19).

He purports that neither Jesus nor the Fathers of the Church wanted anything such as 'house of God' and we should work toward the elimination of such a "misguided medieval pattern." He is distressed that most of the churches built within the last 400 years—both Catholic and Protestant—have continued to establish "holy places," more or less on the medieval pattern.

House of the people

To move beyond this medieval pattern, Sovik argues for the return of what he calls the "non-church," or a "house of the people." He writes: "It is true that down through the centuries church buildings have not been consistently seen as exclusively places of worship. Church buildings have been multi-purpose buildings, houses for people, used for a variety of public and secular activities that nourish the human and 'secular' life." Sovik states this as the ideal in liturgical worship spaces, and devotes his entire book to providing practical suggestions to accomplish this through architecture.

Sovik defines the "house of the people" as a structure which should not be a church: "it is to be a place through which the church can minister." He believes that in the United States the Puritans and the Methodists once did this well: "The Puritans built meeting houses, quite secular in form and detail, and used them for any public assembly. The early Methodists had their places of worship in any convenient barn or loft, and when they built, their architecture was consciously non-ecclesiastical" (p. 21).

Introducing the "centrum"

Sovik writes that the non-church should not be divided into a sanctuary and a nave. It should not even be referred to using traditional terms of church architecture, lest there be confusion. "It is a meeting place for people," he writes. "It will be so different a thing from the usual 'church' that any of these terms which carry the sense of special purpose liturgical centers is inappropriate." Sovik proposes instead to use the word "centrum."

He explains that a centrum "is a place for more than one purpose, and must be seen, and so used. If it is not, if for one reason or another it is reserved for the liturgy, it will sooner or later be thought of as the 'house of God'; and then it will be thought of as a holy place; and then other places will be seen as profane or secular."

The throw-away non-church

Sovik also articulates his desire for a "throw-away" interior for his centrum. "For the space itself must be simple, allowing for many configurations of use. And the furnishings and symbolic devices will be portable, so they may be varied, replaced, augmented or abandoned as the parishioners of future times desire."

How then should one properly design a centrum which will not be mistaken by anyone to be a "holy place" or a "house of God"? Sovik proposes the following:

Removing pews and replacing them with portable chairs;

Setting up a separate room to reserve the eucharistic species (if necessary at all);

Removing any artwork which might be construed as strictly religious in context, i.e. religious statues or icons;

Eliminating the traditional sanctuary by bringing the "table"—he will not call a table an altar—into the congregation and arranging the chairs around the table;

Eliminating the use of crucifixes in favor of portable Greek crosses (a.k.a. "plus signs") which would be used only in processions and during the liturgy.

Sovik's proposal is virtually the same scheme which has been so oft-times used in the renovation of and

construction of new Catholic churches since the 1970's; it is the same practical advice which is offered in the BCL's Environment & Art in Catholic Worship.

The ideology which predicates Sovik's proposal is both interesting and revealing: He states that his book is a handbook for both Catholic and Protestant congregations—"especially useful for church leaders, clergy, and building committees of Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, it offers practical, economical advice on both the remodeling of existing structures and the construction of new ones."

Towards the Japanese tea house

He is clearly motivated by an aversion to the traditional church building and traditional Christian worship. "It is clear," he writes, "that some of our heritage in the history of ecclesiastical architecture must be abandoned." Perhaps the following quotes will help illustrate:

Sovik begins by making some observations of what he considers to be "good liturgical space": It should be one space, he suggests; its horizontal proportions should not be too elongated so as not to give the impression of a traditional church arrangement, which Sovik sees as problematic. "The design tradition we have inherited from the Renaissance," he writes, "has led us to assume that every large room should be organized symmetrically, and we tend to look for some dominating feature about which the room comes to focus." This is an approach to design only taken by rank amateurs, says Sovik, because it is the easiest solution to a design problem.

In short, the Renaissance approach (which was ultimately inherited from the Greeks) does not fit his ideology. He believes that axial symmetries are troublesome. "If we declare that people are really the focus of what happens in the liturgy then any very strong architectural focus can subvert our intentions." Thus Sovik argues against the tabernacle, crucifix, cross or altar as a central focal point in liturgical space.

Instead of using Renaissance or medieval church plans as precedents for the design of Sovik's non-church centrum, he proposes that designers look to the prototypes of the "Japanese tea house and the dining room/living room combos which became popular in post-World War II houses."

On the issue of pews or chairs, Sovik writes: "Nothing gives the conventional church building its ecclesiastical character more than do pews and nothing inhibits flexibility more than pews. Chairs have the advantages of flexibility." Out with the pews then, he recommends, and in with portable chairs. Sovik would not want anyone to mistake his centrum for a church.

On the topic of elimination of the sanctuary, he writes: "It should be recognized that the intent of a dais or platform is not to accent a sanctuary as separate from the congregation space. It is simply to provide enough elevation so that certain liturgical functions which need visibility can get it."

Writing about the "eucharistic table": he states, "The eucharistic table is usually called an altar, but ought to be distinguished from the sacrificial altars of other religions. Its genus is the dining room table. It is the table at which the a ritual meal is served, and its symbolic value is like that of the dining table in the home.

"The eucharistic table ought to be located where it can be sensed as belonging to the whole gathered community."

Sovik also argues for the elimination of kneeling to receive communion because, he claims, "a celebration ought to be joyful, but kneeling is not the posture of joy; in a communion one ought to be particularly conscious of the community; ... but kneeling is not a posture in which we can properly commune."

On the issue of visual projections, Sovik argues that in new buildings and church renovations, technology for visual projection and moving pictures must be accommodated. "If a church can provide a good place for cinema, it has an additional way of serving a community and making a building more useful." Five years later EACW makes the same recommendation in paragraph 104: "It is safe to say that a new church building or renovation project should make provision for screens and/or walls which will make the projection of films, slides and filmstrips visible to the entire assembly."

Sovik also demands that never are crucifixes to be used. He writes: "The iconoclastic reformers removed the corpus and left the Protestants with a symbol which is the image of an instrument of torture. We have become used to this curiosity so that we most often forget what it is, or suppose the absence of a corpus is an adequate symbol for resurrection. Would an electric chair symbolize resurrection? Or would we accept the electric chair as a proper symbol of the Christian faith if Jesus had been executed in this century?"

Thus, Sovik recommends neither the crucifix nor the traditional cross be used. He argues for use of the so-called "Greek cross" which appears in the shape of a (+) "plus-sign." He believes that this form is obscure enough not to be identified with the sacrificial cross, the "instrument of torture."

Sovik's ideal non-church centrum

Sovik concludes his treatise by offering his readers his ideal of the non-church centrum renovation. He cites the work of St. Katherine's parish in Baltimore, Maryland (remember, this is back in 1973: "Here Fr. Joseph Connolly, a priest whose sense of liturgy and human concern belong together, is leading the parish to immerse themselves in providing for the welfare of the people in the area. He now calls his church building a 'community service center.' The nave has been cleared of pews and other hindrances. It has become the meeting place for any kind of assembly that needs a place, and movable screens can separate different kinds of activities that occur simultaneously. Children swarm. Rock music, dances, clinics, educational enterprises, eating and drinking, even a homosexual group have been given shelter. For if Jesus didn't reject the company of publicans and prostitutes, why should the church be less hospitable?"

A Sovik connection to EACW?

Was EACW influenced by the work and treatise of iconoclast architect Edward Sovik? Was Sovik an advisor to the Bishops Committee on Liturgy? We probably will never know. He may very well have never been directly or personally involved but his archi-liturgical ideology of secularizing the sacred was en vogue amongst liturgists during the mid-1970s. Sovik and like minds were caught up with the liturgical experimentation of the late 60s and early 70s. The architects' penultimate goal was the elimination of the sacred from church architecture, their ultimate goal the elimination of the church building.

EACW, admittedly, does not state it as such. Nevertheless, the practical recommendations offered by Sovik in 1973 to create his ideal throw-away, non-church centrum are the same recommendations offered by the Bishops' Committee on Liturgy in their controversial 1978 document. There is so much of a similarity in the practical advice offered by both documents as to warrant a closer look at EACW, a look the document is now, finally, receiving from a new committee of American bishops and bureaucrats.

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