

The Future of Renovation and Renewal

By Michael S. Rose

Armed with the wisdom of hindsight, it is time to correct the mistakes of the recent past.

With hindsight, many are waking up to the fact that the experimental church architecture designed and built in the latter half of the twentieth century has miserably failed the Catholic people. The “innovative” forms used by church architects in the sixties and seventies—think how clever they thought themselves then—look not only outdated at the dawn of the new century, they look ugly. The non-churches of the eighties and nineties that can pass for libraries, post offices, or nursing homes are so uninspiring and banal that they fail to attract, to evangelize, or to raise the hearts and minds of men to God. They fail to acknowledge that Christ was made flesh and dwelt among us. They fail to serve the Catholic community, and they fail to make Christ’s presence known in any particular place. Similarly, the insensitive renovation of traditional churches that stripped these sacred edifices of their Catholic trappings, not only denuded a physical place, it effected the worship and beliefs of the people.

Happily, however, the realization of this failure—on the part of laity, priests, bishops, and architects alike—is the first step that will lead to the renewal of our sacred places. Designer Francis X. Gibbons, for instance, now speaks of his 1968 renovation of St. Mary, Star of the Sea Church in Baltimore as a “raping” of that church.¹ Helen Marikle Passano, the primary patron for the restoration of the 1869 chapel at Notre Dame College in Baltimore, remembers loving the “modernization” of the chapel when she was a student there. “We thought we were moving forward with a contemporary space. But guess what? We’re moving back,” she told the Baltimore Sun in early 2001. “It’s time to bring [the chapel] back to its original glory.” To this end, she donated \$1.5 million to peel away the 1960s alterations “including a flat ceiling and metal ducts that obscured the vaulted spaces above, wood paneling that covered plaster walls, and carpeting that smothered the handsome pine floor.”² Even the Vatican finally addressed the renovation problem earlier this year when Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez, prefect for the Congregation for Divine Worship informed Milwaukee’s Archbishop Rembert Weakland that his proposed cathedral renovation did not conform to Church norms or liturgical law and is doing a disservice to Milwaukee Catholics.

This “realization period” should lead to four distinct ways to improve the architecture of Catholic churches, returning these edifices from meeting spaces to sacred places. The first is the restoration—or “re-renovation”—of traditional Catholic churches. That is, architects and pastors must work together to return the older, traditionally-oriented buildings that were renovated over the past three or four decades to their former glory. The second is to salvage and renovate the modernist churches built in the latter-half of the twentieth century by re-orienting them. Many of the buildings erected during the 1960s and 1970s, although irregular in form, can be transformed into beautiful transcendent places within. The third method is to transform ugly, modernist churches into parish halls or school buildings, and build “replacement churches” that will serve as genuine sacred places, designed in continuity with the Church’s tradition. The fourth method is perhaps the easiest: to build beautiful churches anew when parishes are established.

Re-orienting the renovated church

The first step must always be to restore the hierarchical form. The sanctuary must be made distinct again from the nave, where the congregation sits. In many cases this will mean that altars that have been moved into the midst of the congregation be returned to a proper sanctuary. The altar platform—usually consisting of one or two steps—that sits out in the nave with chairs gathered around is not a sufficiently defined sanctuary by any means. Most, if not all, of the traditional churches are designed in the basilican cruciform plan. That means that there already exists a proper location for the sanctuary. The proper location is at the elevated “head” of the building. The nave serves as the body.

In other renovated churches the sanctuary has been moved to one of the nave’s side walls and the entire building re-oriented so that when one enters the church building, there is no natural progression down an aisle toward the altar of sacrifice. This type of renovation is really just a dis-orientation. Again, the sanctuary needs to be restored to its proper position at the head of the building and the nave reoriented to lead once again toward the restored altar.

The sanctuary should also be “re-defined,” that is, if the raised platform of the sanctuary has been removed, it must be restored. If the communion railing has been eliminated, the restoration of such a device would provide a distinct boundary for the sanctuary, and it would also be functional if Communion were to be

distributed to kneeling penitents at the restored railing. The design of a restored railing should match the architecture of the church and the altar especially. However, in many cases, the altar in renovated churches is itself inadequate.

The poorly designed table altars that replaced high altars of past centuries can be deficient in several respects. First, they are often crafted of wood alone. In order to focus again on the sacrificial nature of the altar, the altar ought really to include an altar stone, the plain horizontal slab upon which the priest places the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The restored altar should also be a permanent fixture, built of durable materials. A simple table that could be used for a thanksgiving dinner in our homes is insufficient.

In some renovated churches the high altar fortunately still remains, although it has often served only to hold flowers or candlesticks since a freestanding altar was introduced after Vatican II. The most obvious solution in these fortunate churches is to eliminate the inadequate freestanding altar and revert to using the high altar, which is often already the natural focal point of the church, accented by either a reredos or baldacchino. In fact there is a growing movement, given impetus by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, among younger priests especially to return to the *ad orientem* (or *ad apsidem*) Mass, that is, reciting the Eucharistic prayer while facing in the same direction as the congregation at the elevated altar.

Although many priests and not a few members of the laity believe this practice has been outlawed, banned, or otherwise made illegitimate, it is not so. Nor is this centuries-old practice awkward in any way. In fact, it is quite natural for a priest to lead his congregation by turning with them toward the Lord. This solution is so obvious that it can only be politics that are preventing such a restoration.

In many other churches, however, the high altar and reredos or baldacchino have been summarily removed. Although this is a most unfortunate situation, for those parishes that are committed to restoration it can be an opportunity to design and build something even more worthy and beautiful than the original. Such is the case with St. Paul's Cathedral in Worcester, where a beautiful new wood reredos and cathedra were constructed in 1996 to replace a semicircular concrete block wall that was put up in place of the old reredos.

It is also the case with several traditional churches that were restored in the Victoria, Texas diocese. The Diocese of Victoria is noted for its preservation of the famous "painted churches" in the Schulenburg area. Some of these churches had lost many of their sanctuary furnishings shortly after the Second Vatican Council. A generation later, however, nine parishes in the Victoria diocese tried to recapture what they had lost. The ornate high altar and reredos at St. Joseph's Church in Moulton, Texas, for instance, was completely reconstructed from scratch by local carpenters in 1994.

There really is no reason that dignified altars cannot be made anew, complemented either by a beautiful reredos or baldacchino, depending on the style and design of the church. These elements will not only bring the focus back to the altar, they will ennoble it.

Restoring the tabernacle to prominence

Another important aspect—perhaps the most important—of a sanctuary restoration is moving the tabernacle back to its original position in the center of the sanctuary, behind the altar. In 1997 Father Richard Simon of St. Thomas of Canterbury Church in Chicago blazed a trail in this regard. He announced to his parish that he planned to make such a liturgical move because he felt that the experiment of removing the tabernacle from the sanctuary had failed. In his June 24, 1997 letter to his parishioners he wrote:

I believe that much of the liturgical experimentation that began thirty years ago has failed. We are not holier, nor more Christ-centered now than we were then. In fact, we are facing a generation of young people who are largely lost to the Church because we have not given them the precious gift that is at the heart of Catholicism, that is, the Real Presence of Jesus. Mass has become simply a drama, a vehicle for whatever agenda is currently popular. The church building is no longer a place of encounter with the Lord but a sort of a social center, not a place of prayer, rather a place of chatter.

In many churches, including our own, the tabernacle was moved from the center of the church to add emphasis to Mass and the presence of the Lord in the reception of Holy Communion. That experiment, however, has failed. We have lost the sense of the sacred that formerly was the hallmark of Catholic worship. The behavior of many in the church is outrageous. When Mass is over it is impossible to spend time in prayer. The noise level reaches the pitch that one would expect at a sporting event. The kiss of peace seems like New Year's Eve. Christ is forgotten on the altar. You may counter that He is present in the gathering of the Church, and though this is true, it should not detract from the Lord present on the altar. If the Lord is truly recognized in the congregation, it should serve to enhance the sacredness of the moment.

This is simply not happening...

Therefore, I have decided to restore the Tabernacle to its former place in the middle of the sanctuary and to begin a campaign of re-education as to the sacredness of worship and the meaning of the Real Presence. This means that I will nag and nag until a sense of the sacred is restored. I will be reminding you that a respectful quiet will have to be maintained in church. Food and toys and socializing are welcome elsewhere, but the church is the place of an encounter with the Living God. It will not be a popular policy, but this is unimportant.

I can hear one objection already. Where will the priest sit? I will sit where the priest has traditionally sat, over on the side of the sanctuary. Here as in many churches the "presider's" chair was placed where the tabernacle had been. I am sick of sitting on the throne that should belong to my Lord. The dethronement of the Blessed Sacrament has resulted in the enthronement of the clergy, and I for one am sick of it. The Mass has become priest-centered. The celebrant is everything. I am a sinner saved by grace as you are and not the center of the Eucharist. Let me resume my rightful place before the Lord rather than instead of the Lord. I am ordained to the priesthood of Christ in the order of presbyter, and as such I do have a special and humbling role. I am elder brother in the Lord and with you I seek to follow Him and to worship. Please, please let me return Christ to the center of our life together where He belongs.

Once Fr. Simon returned the tabernacle to its former location at the center of the sanctuary behind the altar he was surprised, he said, at the response. It was overwhelmingly positive and effective. Some sense of reverence was indeed restored at Mass in his church. On September 16, 1997 he reported the results of the move in a "form letter":

You cannot imagine the response I got to the letter I addressed to my parishioners on June 24th. I have received so many calls and letters that I am reduced to saying thank you in a form letter. Still, I simply have to write to say thank you for your support and prayers. So many people thought I was brave to do what I did. Brave? I simply read the Catechism and moved a few pieces of furniture. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. In the parish, some people even wept for joy when they saw the change. I am still kicking myself and asking why I didn't do this years ago. The response has been so supportive. Many wrote and expressed their sense of loneliness in the battle for Catholic orthodoxy. Well, you are not alone, neither among the laity nor the clergy.

Perhaps you have heard the definition of a neo-conservative. He is a liberal who has been mugged by reality. That certainly describes me. I was in college in the late Sixties and went the whole route: beard, sandals, protest, leafleting for feminism, and all the rest... [I]f a parish like this and a person like me can be turned from foolish liturgical experimentation, it can happen anywhere to anyone. Don't give up! For instance, if they have taken the kneelers out of your church, go to the front and kneel on the hard floor. You'll be amazed how many will join you. That's what's happened here.

Inspired by this well-publicized move by Father Simon many other pastors have restored the tabernacle to prominence in their churches. This, as he attests, was simply "moving furniture," but it restored the kind of prayerful reverence in his church that he and many others desired. With the tabernacle located directly behind the altar on the building's main axis, the two elements work together as one: the tabernacle was returned to an extension of the altar, which is the focal point of the church, just as the Blessed Sacrament is an extension of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Since the reserved Sacrament is an extension of the Mass, it logically follows that, architecturally speaking, the tabernacle ought to be situated in direct relationship to the altar, whether on the altar or behind it. This arrangement has ramifications far beyond interior design. Ultimately, it is a matter of devotion and worship. In the words of Pope John Paul II, proper devotion to the Blessed Sacrament will inevitably lead to a fuller participation in the Eucharistic celebration: In his letter on the 750th anniversary of the Feast of Corpus Christi he wrote, "Outside the Eucharistic celebration, the Church is careful to venerate the Blessed Sacrament, which must be reserved... as the spiritual center of the religious and parish community. Contemplation prolongs communion and enables one to meet Christ, true God and true man, in a lasting way... Prayer of adoration in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament unites the faithful with the paschal mystery; it enables them to share in Christ's sacrifice, of which the Eucharist is the permanent sacrament."³

Tying in to this theology of the Eucharist is the crucifix, the figural representation of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, that which is re-presented in an unbloody manner by the hands of the ordained priest at the altar. The crucifix—the corpus of Christ on the cross—was removed from many churches during renovations, and replaced by either symbolic processional crosses or other figures such as the risen Christ or paintings of wheat, sun, and birds. As beneficial as these new symbols may be to some, the restoration of the crucifix is

integral to a proper restoration of the sanctuary. It is the crucifix which directly symbolizes the whole meaning of the Mass.

Restoration of sacred art

Another element especially significant to the restoration of the sanctuary is the restoration of sacred art. Many unfortunate churches were whitewashed thirty years ago in an iconoclastic attempt to remove so-called "distractions" from the house of God en route to reducing the church to a non-church. Others parishes had their statues summarily removed for the same reason. Fortunately, these misguided purges have begun to wane, yet plenty of churches have been left barren and stripped because some pastor, liturgist, or designer was a slave to fashion and bad taste. This is what church designer Francis X. Gibbons called "rape."

But not all is lost.

With the newest methods of art preservation and restoration, murals and frescoes can be recovered, whitewashed statues can be returned to their original colors, and deteriorated works of sacred art can be restored. Such advances in the art of preservation ought to give hope to many a pastor who desires to bring the sacred back into his church building.

Furthermore, there are, contrary to public understanding, talented artists who can be commissioned to execute beautiful new murals or mosaics in churches that are unable to recover their artistic patrimony.

With regard to statues, icons, and other pieces of "moveable" art, there exists a treasury of old sacred art available at architectural antique shops around the U. S. and beyond. A few calls can put a pastor or restorationist in touch with groups that have salvaged these often-times priceless works of art from Catholic churches that have been closed and their churches razed. The same goes for architectural furnishings such as old wooden confessionals, sacred vessels, crucifixes, Stations of the Cross, pews, and communion rails. Some of the more well-known internet auction web sites, for instance, offer a steady supply of these beautiful works of art. Unfortunately, these items more often wind up being used for secular purposes rather than in new or restored churches. We've all heard of confessionals being used as telephone booths in restaurants or ornate hand-carved pews being used for seats in a pub.

Reordering the nave

The same steps apply to the restoring the nave. Side shrines and Stations of the Cross that have disappeared over the decades can be refashioned anew or purchased from antique dealers and architectural salvage companies. Yet sometimes the destruction of church interiors goes far beyond what was removed. In many cases, it is also what has been added. Wood paneling, drop ceilings with acoustical tiles and wall-to-wall carpeting are the biggest offenders. Fortunately such materials date the project to the late-sixties and seventies when homeowners were renovating their houses in much the same manner. The use of these cheap materials has dropped out of fashion, Deo gratias. The removal of such "homey" items will offend few.

Because these materials are so flimsy and impermanent they are easily removed. With any luck they will have preserved what they were once hiding. The removal of ceiling tiles may reveal vaulting, clerestories, or ceiling murals intact and in good condition. Carpet removal can reveal terrazzo flooring or beautiful hardwood floorboards, and the removal of wood paneling can give way to beautiful plaster walls, sometimes decorated with beautiful stenciling or even mosaics.

More difficult to deal with, however, are the modern furnishings that often replaced the traditional ones. These newer furnishings are often at odds with the original design and style of the building.

The seating is another major restoration item. First, in those churches that had the kneelers removed from the pews: install new kneelers! For those churches that have skewed or turned their side aisle pews supposedly to better focus on the altar: turn them back facing forward. And for those churches that discarded the old pews in favor of cheap (or expensive) portable chairs, it would be ideal if new wooden pews with kneelers were to eventually be restored to the church. The fad of homey cushioned chairs will soon pass.

All in all, when restoring an historic church, the parish needs to hire competent restorationists with a proven track record of accomplishments. They must be sensitive to the original architecture of the church, but need not necessarily recreate exactly what existed some time in the past. However, any new furnishings or artwork introduced into the church should be in keeping with the architectural scheme rather than looking like

foreign invaders.

The restorationist should be concerned with 1) reordering the church into a properly defined narthex, nave, and sanctuary in keeping with the original design, 2) re-establishing an iconographic program of sacred art and furnishings, 3) recovering any verticality that has been lost, and 4) establishing a unified whole so that the church will be restored to a sacred place with transcendent qualities.

Salvaging renovations

Some may ask: We're stuck with this ugly building that looks like a _____ (fill in the blank); what can we do to improve upon the modern design? Fortunately, in some cases there is an easy answer. In E.A. Sövik's theory of the non-church, he expressed his desire for a building that has a "throw-away interior," that is, an interior that can be easily altered to suit the needs of the people at any time. Accordingly, the interiors of many of the non-churches built in the latter half of the twentieth century are easily altered. Their "throw-away interiors" can simply be thrown away and new furnishings and works of sacred art can be commissioned.

Of course, the new architect or designer has no obligation to subscribe to the modernist theory of the throw-away interior. On the contrary, he has the obligation of transforming the building into a beautiful church. It can be done, but not by designing another interior that can just be thrown away. The architect has the opportunity to reconnect with tradition in order to create a sacred place that will transcend generations and possibly cultures too.

Just as with the restoration project of a traditional church building, the first task is to properly reorient the interior spaces into a hierarchy of sanctuary and nave. This is more difficult to do with the modernist edifice than with the traditional church building because the floor plan may be somewhat irregular. Churches-in-the-round, fan-shaped theater-style churches, and asymmetrical layouts are three popular arrangements that ought to be corrected.

In this regard, the altar needs to be established at the "head" of the building, in a distinct sanctuary that is elevated above the nave and set off from the congregational seating. Most likely the altar in the modernist church to be renovated is unworthy to be used even for your kitchen table. The opportunity now exists to design a new altar that will establish itself not only as the focal point of the church but will set the tone for the new interior. Every other element of the renovation should lead to the altar in some way.

A new baldacchino or reredos can give the altar the nobility and prominence it deserves, and the close relationship of the tabernacle with the altar is just as important in the renovation of a modernist edifice as it is in the re-renovation of an historic church. The same goes for other elements and furnishings—pews, sacred art, pulpit, and communion rail. There is no reason that the traditional trappings of a Catholic church cannot be introduced into the modernist building to create a sense of the transcendent and eternal.

Replacement churches

Of course, if it is at all possible, it is better to begin anew designing a church that can serve as a "city on a hill," one that through its traditional form and exterior elements has the capacity to carry meaning, inspire, educate, and attract both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Since many or even most of the modernist church edifices do not appear as permanent structures, their buildings can be adapted to another use, one that would serve the parish in another way, for instance, as a school building, food pantry, theater, gymnasium, or parish meeting hall.

Many of the modernist churches, because of their layout and arrangement, lend themselves easily to such a transformation. Not a few people have entered one of these new churches or non-churches and exclaimed, "my, this looks more like a gymnasium (or a theater, etc.);" If it looks like a gym or a theater, chances are it can easily be converted into a gym or theater while a new church, designed in continuity with the Catholic tradition of church architecture, rises nearby. These are properly called "replacement churches."

In fact, a pastor or bishop can easily save face by telling a parish that the current modern facility they are using as a church was only intended as a temporary solution until a time came when parishioners could help build a permanent house of God that would speak equally to generations of Catholics to come. Well, the time has come.

Finally, perhaps the greatest opportunity comes when a new parish is established. The pastor, architect, and parish can start at ground zero, so to speak. The parish has the great advantage of hindsight. It can look back over fifty years of ugly, uninspiring church designs in order to avoid building a fad that will pass away

even before the current generation has died out. There is that opportunity to connect with the tradition of creating transcendent vessels of meaning that will not only look like a churches but will be churches in their essence.

Notes:

1 "I've often said after I did that job," said Francis X. Gibbons, the man who designed the renovation, "that I raped St. Mary, Star of the Sea." (John Rivers, "Churches try to retrieve grand trappings of past," Baltimore Sun, May 21, 2001.

2 Gunts, Edward. "Happy undoing of a modernist makeover," Baltimore Sun, March 4, 2001.

3 John Paul II, 'Letter on the 750th Anniversary of the Feast of Corpus Christi,' no. 3.

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