

Mount Tabor in Motor City

By William Heyer

The renovation of Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Detroit

In 1970, the Archdiocese of Atlanta hosted a Worship Congress at which popular liturgical designer Robert Rambusch spoke. In one of his lectures, Mr. Rambusch claimed that "everyone is for church renewal until they see what it looks like, and then they balk. What we are doing is redefining. Who are we as people of God?"²

Mr. Rambusch is a director and fellow of ARC: the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture, a multicultural arts organization which has had seminars on the religious art of Andy Warhol (1998) and the Andean concept of Reciprocity (1998). Rambusch is described as "a liturgical artist whose works grace churches through-out America. Lecturing widely and irreverently on objects of reverence, he challenges the conventional."³

Rambusch, in his typical irreverent tone spoke once of the Last Supper: "A lot of people think Christ had an altar rail at the Last Supper — he did not ... But altar rails came in and we started kneeling. Standing represented a resurrectional theology — kneeling a penitential one."⁴ Aside from the strange assumption that Christians began to kneel only after the communion rail was invented, pitting standing against kneeling is not only absurd, it is a devious way to set two compatible concepts against one another in order to "redefine" how we worship.

What is evident from his lectures and designs is that he makes things up. He stated that one "problem with Americans is that they are immigrants and feel they must build great shrines for religion. The National Shrine in Washington is great for pageantry, but it destroys community ... it is destroyed any time you have over 300 or 400 persons worshipping."⁵ Again, aside from the quip that it is a problem that Americans are immigrants and want to build shrines (didn't Catholics always want to do this?), Mr. Rambusch has obviously ignored the social history of great shrines like Chartres, Notre Dame, or Canterbury.



Tabernacle (left) and cathedra (right) after the renovation of Detroit's cathedral

Mr. Rambusch is more recently noted as liturgical design consultant for the renovation of the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit, Michigan, completed in 2003 (above). He was part of a new building committee reformed in 1997 by Adam Cardinal Maida, which included Msgr. Anthony Tocco as organizer, internationally renowned architect Gunnar Birkerts, and Fr. Timothy Pelc as architectural and liturgical critic. These four commanded the helm of the renovation of Blessed Sacrament. What is apparent, after reading the literature surrounding this project and conducting personal interviews, is that these men shared the same vision. A vision which aims at Making All Things New;⁶ that is, embracing "passing tastes" and "strange or unbecoming expressions," pitting complementary concepts against one another; and inventing a new wheel.

Most Blessed Sacrament Church in Detroit was organized as a parish in 1905 by Fr. John Connolly who eventually raised funds to build a church by 1912 and saw to the planning of a Norman-Gothic structure designed by architect Henry A. Walsh of Cleveland. It was initially completed in 1915 without the two towers at the entry, which were added in 1951 under the direction of local architect George Diehl. Detroit became

an archdiocese in 1937 and a year later Archbishop Edward Mooney named Most Blessed Sacrament the Cathedral with permission from Pope Pius XI. Thirty years later, under the leadership of John Cardinal Dearden and in the name of Sacrosanctum Concilium, Blessed Sacrament was "one of the first Catholic Cathedrals in the nation" to remove the altar rail, separate the tabernacle from the altar, create a Eucharistic chapel, and relocate the choir to the sanctuary.⁷ In 1976, because the initial changes were done "in a temporary fashion,"⁸ the cathedral again began planning for an extensive renovation. Gunnar Birkerts, a Lutheran architect originally from Latvia and formerly with the office of Eero Saarinen, was invited to design the new interior. His initial conceptual sketch revealed a radical alteration to the sanctuary and transepts. A new undulating wall, "the scrolls of the Torah,"⁹ was inserted and wrapped the interior like a ribbon hiding the detailed Gothic work, including the reredos and high altar. Although not pursued further at the time, when the cathedral planned its extensive renovation in 1997, they once again called on Birkerts.

Though a veteran modernist architect, Gunnar Birkerts claims a distaste for anything dogmatic. By giving "each building its own theoretical base" he seeks to free himself from "the imposition of a set structure on any design" and believes that "the theory can be deduced" from the resulting forms he creates.¹⁰ Some readers will be familiar with the contradiction in terms which is constantly utilized by modernist architects; i.e., the dogmatic belief that an architect should never follow anything dogmatic. The idea of creating rules without organic reference to the known Good, True and Beautiful is a bit like a Cartesian mind game attempting to create its own past, present and future.

In the new design, Birkerts came up with a scheme for the cathedral, this time claiming a use of light as a construction element. In the side aisles, for instance, the new "prism windows" as they are called "open the church to the community and to the outside." The lighting in general, "changes entirely the ambience of the whole space."¹¹

With walls now pierced by reflective glass prisms, light replaces the fortress-like darkness of the original Gothic design. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone (Isaiah 9:1).¹²

After visiting the renovation and reviewing archival photographs going back to the 1930s, it is hard to tell that the interior is substantially brighter or that the original Gothic design had had a "fortress-like darkness." The new directional lighting highlights different aspects of the interior, but it can hardly be said that the earlier worshippers "dwelt in a land of gloom" or that the church was not "open to the community and to the outside." Msgr. Tocco, in an interview, spoke about the supposed darkness:

"You know, one of the first things that he [Birkerts] wanted to do was to change the nature of a gothic cathedral, which by its very nature is very dark down below with large stained glass windows above. Now, that reflected the Church of the Middle Ages where people were insignificant and were always looking up to the godly. We're in a more unified Church where people have a much stronger role today than in the past. They're involved in every single part of church life and so we wanted some light to come in to that cathedral ... "¹³

Here we have the medieval Church pitted against the modern Church in order to justify the new lighting scheme. And despite Tocco's claims, Birkerts did not change the nature of the Gothic cathedral even with the added lighting and other novel insertions. In fact, it is remarkable how the Gothic church that exists still overpowers the intruding elements simply by beauty of form, scale, and proportion. The new elements look more like a Star Trek set inserted into the crossing of a venerable Gothic church.

The crossing is where Birkerts made most of his changes; the new organ placed in the former location of the high altar and reredos, the new stone free-standing altar, and the most curious elements — heavy angular stone forms on either side of the sanctuary for the ambo and cathedra. According to Birkerts these are to be a symbol of strength and size, a metaphor of Peter the Rock. "I chose to put these big rocks on the altar [sic] and attach the liturgical points to it so the Cardinal is really seated on the foot of this rock or on the rock." These forms were Birkerts' "search to bring a 20th century gothic into the 21st century." He claims to be paraphrasing the gothic.¹⁴

According to Fr. Timothy Pelc, "These rock-like focus points are intended to recall Christ's promise to Peter." They also "evoke Mount Tabor near Nazareth, the traditional site of the Transfiguration." The new stone inlay floor of the sanctuary, according to Pelc, "reads like a colorful glacial scree that builds up at the base of a mountain range." The cathedra is likened to the "seat of Moses" on Mount Tabor from which the bishop "proclaims Christ as the light of humankind."¹⁵ However, instead of paraphrasing the Gothic architecture, the new white marble and the angular forms work against the verticality, lightness and consistent language

of the Gothic. Still, Birkerts maintains that the design carries "allegiance to gothic geometry... I think it is asserting itself in a way through the manipulation of form in a new way and in the choice of color which is contrasting to the dark space and enclosure... this is opening up and bringing in reality and all that."¹⁶ When Msgr. Tocco was asked why such a radical concept for design he stated, "The concept was Gunnar Birkerts and when you get Gunnar Birkerts you're going to accept the ideas that he has knowing that some of them might go counter to the [Gothic] design."¹⁷ The stained-glass windows were restored by Conrad Schmitt Studios, and the exterior was cleaned revealing beautiful Gothic detailing and stone coursing built almost one hundred years ago. A statue of St. Peter carved in the middle entry pier holds a banner stating, "Thou hast the words of eternal life," beckoning us to come and adore the Blessed Sacrament, of which Peter acknowledges his belief in this Gospel passage. (John 6:47-70)¹²

And yet probably the most glaring contradiction in this church named for the Most Blessed Sacrament is the location of the tabernacle. It is not visible on entering the church, and only after walking to the steps of the sanctuary can the Reservation Chapel be seen in the southeast transept. It would have seemed logical to have the Blessed Sacrament as the focal point of a church named in His honor.

After all the poetics and justification for the design, and all the money and time that went into this project, the end result still reflects a contradiction in ecclesiology and architecture. The older church architecture still reads more coherently than the new, and the two do not speak the same language. If they cannot be reconciled, wouldn't it have been better to just build a new and consistent cathedral for the ecclesiology of today?¹⁸

Msgr. Tocco offered this observation: "No question that's what everybody would have preferred and my first question to Cardinal Maida was, 'Are you sure you don't want to build a new cathedral?' But we knew what that cost would be... so we took this old pathetic cathedral and it was pathetic — it hadn't been touched in 50 years — and we turned it into one of the jewels of the diocese." According to Tocco, Cardinal Maida was determined. "No, we're going to use this Cathedral and we're going to make it new." He said, "the Cardinal loved the architecture of the cathedral."¹⁹ Ironically, the National Parks Service and the archdiocesan publications make it clear that the cathedral was a jewel before the renovation (not pathetic) although it did have water damage and needed to be cleaned.

The Cardinal loved the architecture, but told the architect that "he was only really protective of the stained glass... that all the other architectural developments could be changed or eliminated or whatever needs to [sic] to bring this church into the 21st century."²⁰ The architect wanted to contrast with the Gothic but he wanted to have allegiance to it. The committee wanted to put big rocks and a mountain range in the sanctuary to help remind us of Petrus but put the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament out of view in a church named for Him. The lighting was supposedly changed to connect us all with the community, to "reality and all that," yet did not perceptibly change the interior light levels. It seems that all the words used to describe this project are contradiction enough to dismiss the fifteen-million-dollar renovation as rather pathetic in itself. But beyond the actual building, the language surrounding this project serves as a self-condemnation for modernist interventions in general. Fr. Pelc, in an article in *Faith and Form* in 1987, stated that "Catholic Christians, in the main, now know that they can never be comfortable celebrating one type of ecclesiology in a building that silently screams another."²¹ In other words, traditional architecture cannot be reconciled to the new liturgy. Is traditional architecture obsolete then? Msgr. Tocco believes that we still have room for it:

"I would have said yes ten years ago, but I'm not sure that in the climate of the church today that's necessarily true. We have a lot of areas where we're not only looking forward, we're looking backward as well ... it is much easier to do liturgy in a church that is designed with the new directives for art and architecture, where people can gather around the altar, where sight lines are better, where there are not so many barriers, where you don't have a thousand things pulling them away from the altar, where the sound system is good, where the word and music are in-tegral to the building itself."²²

This sounds strangely like a condemnation of the renovation itself. Msgr. Tocco was asked the following question as well: Will people outside the Catholic Church be confused when they see two completely different ecclesiologies, two contradictory languages of Catholic architecture?

"Well, I think people are confused. When they see cathedrals in Europe that are centuries old, they come back thinking those are really magnificent churches. Then they walk into a church that's contemporary and they say, 'Well, what is all this about?' And unless there is someone like me to tell them, 'A church that is built today should look like there is something missing until it is filled with people; when it's filled with people and they are worshipping the space justifies itself because the people are the Church and the space of the

church needs to embrace the congregation [sic]."²³

People may be confused because the liturgical and architectural experts are confused. The hierarchy is confused because they listen to the liturgical and architectural experts.

John Senior, professor of literature at the University of Kansas, in his book *The Restoration of Christian Culture* points out that "the rage for novelty and informality in everything today is a sure sign of our spiritual emptiness."

Modernism with all its novelties eventually takes us away from our only hope. By removing the "accidental and incidental forms" of the Christian culture, it "has worked to disconform us from the love of God."²⁵ Msgr. Klaus Gamber, writing about the Catholic liturgical and architectural revolution, noted something similar. "To constantly change a ritual and to abolish almost completely time-honored customs and traditions is synonymous with robbing a person of his religious home and thus shaking the foundations of his faith."²⁶

Fr. Pelc says of the renovation of the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, "This is us. This is now. This is who we are."²⁷

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Notes:

1. Message to Artists, Paul VI. 1965.
2. Murphy, Harry, Two Architecture Sessions Delight Worship Congress, Georgia Bulletin, The Archdiocese of Atlanta, April 23, 1970.
3. ARC website, Drawing on the Human Spirit, Biographies of the Speakers.
4. Murphy, Harry, Two Architecture Sessions.
5. Ibid.
6. Making All Things New, is the title of the brochure for the Detroit Cathedral renovation, The Archdiocese of Detroit, 2003.
7. Pelc, Reverend Timothy R., Looking for Michelangelo and Finding Bernini, Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art & Architecture, No. 37, Fall 1987.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Birkerts, Gunnar, Buildings, Projects and Thoughts 1960-1985, p. 24, Univ. of Michigan, 1985.
11. From an interview with Gunnar Birkerts, quoted with permission, August 6, 2003.
12. Pelc, Reverend Timothy R., Transfiguration: An Architectural and Liturgical Narrative Regarding the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, Making All Things New, p. 14.
13. From an interview with Msgr. Anthony Tocco, quoted with permission, August 8, 2003.
14. Birkerts Interview
15. Pelc, Transfiguration
16. Birkerts Interview
17. Tocco Interview
18. Pelc, Looking for Michelangelo refers to the change in liturgical focus from the vertical to the horizontal as implied by the author.
19. Tocco Interview
20. Birkerts Interview
21. Pelc, Looking for Michelangelo
22. Tocco Interview
23. Ibid.
24. Senior, John, The Restoration of Christian Culture, p. 126, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA, 1983.
25. Ibid.
26. Gamber, Msgr. Klaus, The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background, p.110, Una Voce Press, San Juan Capistrano, CA 1993.
27. Gallagher, John, Shaping the Skyline: Birkerts is back on the architecture scene, Detroit Free Press, March 12, 2003.
28. The author was able to get in the side door of the Cathedral in the early afternoon to find it completely empty, and exited at the main entry only to find that the doors were locked when trying to reenter. Down the street, in contrast, was the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul—designed by Ralph Adams Cram—with doors wide open, people praying inside, and the original high altar, choir, pulpit, and communion rail intact.

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