Architecture and Active Participation

Thomas Gordon Smith

> It is best to avoid pastiche. Instead of attempting to mimic historic designs, the designer should provide opportunities for contemporary artists and craftspeople to create works that are genuinely of their time.[1]

The Second Vatican Council issued the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium* in 1963 with exhortations to instill vitality into art and architecture in Catholic churches worldwide.[2] Many liturgists and architects in the United States took advantage of the stir of change to interpret these directives in one direction and to effect a radically new standard for the function and beauty of Catholic churches. They applied the tenets of secular modernism in the arts to the design of liturgical objects and sacred architecture. They sought to overturn traditional signs of articulation, hierarchy, and time-honored definitions of beauty.

The new model would allegedly stimulate active participation in the liturgy through physical, cultural, and spiritual accessibility. A cruciform church plan with an apsidal sanctuary clearly articulated as separate from the nave, for example, should be replaced by an "open plan." Such breaking down of hierarchical definition was intended to enable "full, conscious, and active participation" by the laity. On the other hand, traditional elements that had enabled participation for centuries were rejected. Signs of excellence, such as the organ, were classified as old-fashioned status symbols and removed along with the choir loft. The assembly area was turned into an auditorium contiguous with the altar. Prior to Vatican II, architects had initiated similar changes but these professionals also fell by the wayside and liturgists took over as para-professionals. They superficially emulated several key churches built after World War II to create amateurish imitations. Architects were not blameless. Most, however, had no interest in the culture or objectives of the Catholic Church.

Hierarchical models of leadership also were repudiated; the pastor as guide of the flock, the architect as chief builder, or the organist as choir director had traditionally exerted judicious use of the authority that came from rigorous preparation. Populist committee-oriented models of organization replaced traditional responsibilities, however, while the church as a formal sanctuary gave way to community gathering spot. Over the past forty years, the situation has become standard. Instead of the world "church," many priests and lay people use the less redolent "sacred space." Despite the ubiquity, many Catholics find that these types of churches obstruct "full, conscious, and active participation" in the liturgy.

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[1] Nicolas W. Roberts and Leo A. Daly, *Building Type Basics for Places of Worship* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley, 2004) 256-57.

[2] This address was originally delivered at the Society for Catholic Liturgy Annual Conference in Mundelein, IL, on 24 September 2004.

The undifferentiated approach to "sacred space" was propagated by *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, published by the United States Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1978. This pamphlet became the guide for church renovation and new construction geared to achieving "a full experience in public worship."[3] Although the booklet offered "principles to guide rather than blueprints to follow," the form belied the statement. The visual half was given over to photographs of exemplary renovations and new churches. One illustrates "before and after" pictures of a renovated gothic interior.[4] A new church in Hopkins, Minnesota, St John the Evangelist, is also a demonstration piece.[5] Duncan Stroik has pointed out that most projects illustrated the work of liturgical designer, Frank Kacmarcik.[6] Not surprisingly, illustrations of the vision of a single man in *Environment and Art* provided "blue prints to follow" by suggesting visual models for encouraging "active participation" in the liturgy.

In 2000, the United States Catholic Conference published *Built of Living Stones*.[7] It was realized that *Environment and Art* was flawed, and the new document was to redefine the role of architecture and design for Catholic worship. The bishops were much more involved in the new title and had discussions about a draft called *Domus Dei* during their meeting in November 1999. Many of their comments focused on the restoration of axial placement of the tabernacle.[8] Yet the old aesthetic and intent are pervasive, as is evident for example in a new book for architects, *Building Type Basics for Places for Worship*.[9] This influential guide to building all types of religious structures promotes a universal approach. Most of the content is actually Catholic but several synagogues, Protestant churches, and an occasional mosque or temple are included. Despite this heterogeneity, the pictures and text reflect the artistic and liturgical message of *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*. The authors ignore the bishop's clear discussion of the position of the tabernacle. As noted, when discussing *Built of Living Stones*, the Catholic bishops clearly desired to return the tabernacle to the central position in the sanctuary. The authors of *Building Type Basics*, however, ignore this clear directive. They also marginalize the topic of Catholic tabernacles to a section called "Other Furnishings for Catholic Worship." This awkwardness stems from relying primarily on Catholic models while ambiguously claiming application of principles to all faiths. The anthropological approach to all, however, insults each. In the unique case of the Catholic tabernacle, it is spun off as an idiosyncrasy. The author's comment on the tabernacle actually ignores the consensus of the National Council of Catholic Bishops. Refusing to adhere to ecclesial guidance, the book proclaims that, "in contemporary Catholic worship, it is conveniently placed for individual devotion in a separate chapel or on a secondary altar in the nave."[10]

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[3] Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* [henceforth: E&A] (Washington DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Conference, 1978) 9.

[4] E&A, Ilus. 12-19.

[5] Duncan Stroik, "Displaced Tabernacles: Bishop's Document Needs Revision," *Crisis* 18.6 (June 2000) 28; see E&A, Ilus. 25-29.

[6] Frank Kacmarcik, "Notes & Comments," *Journal of the Interfaith Forum of Religion, Art & Architecture* I (2004).

[7] *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000).

[8] Despite *Built of Living Stones*, the effect of *Environment and Art* remains imbedded in practice.

[9] See note 1 above for full bibliographical information.

THE ICONOCLASTIC ICON OF MODERNIST CHURCHES

Around 1910 European artists and architects developed a movement we call modernism. They overturned the renaissance method of imitating ancient and medieval paradigms and developing them for new applications. In general, the modernists took an iconoclastic stance toward secular and religious European culture. There were many expressions of this tendency, but in the mid-1920s one group became dominant. While rejecting traditional models for emulation, they set up a new canon. Architects like Le Corbusier (1887-1965) of Switzerland advocated replacing temples or cathedrals with objects of industrial functionalism such as automobiles, airplanes, and grain elevators. One hundred years later this and related approaches still dominate artistic theory and practice.

In 1955 Le Corbusier completed Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp in southeastern France (Figure 1). In this post-war chapel, Le Corbusier introduced a new expressionistic style different from his previous cubism. The curvaceous structure was still abstract, however, and it became an icon for Catholic churches in the 1960s. Recently, its effect has been revived.

Expressionistic modernist architecture is akin to the aesthetic of non-representational modernist sculpture. Le Corbusier did arrange the ship-like forms of Ronchamp around a functional chapel, but traditional hierarchies were intentionally broken down (Figure 2). The enablers, Canon Lucien Ledeur and Dominican Père Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954), sought to enliven post-war churches in Europe by promoting the abstracted forms of modernist design. In the case of Notre Dame du Haut they also broke from the requirement that an architect or artist serving the Church be Catholic. The genius of the architect, they argued, superseded spiritual commitment. The Dominicans, under Couturier's influence, encouraged the architect to take on the project. They insisted that Corbusier would have "the possibility to go all the way . . . you will be given free rein to create what you will."[11]

Le Corbusier created an undulating concrete frame filled with rubble from a ruined chapel destroyed during World War II at Ronchamp. The sail-like surfaces were unified by a skin of rough, white stucco. Participating in the abstract aesthetic of expressionistic modernism, Le Corbusier juxtaposed deeply pierced trapezoidal windows within the sinuous geometries to create monumental syncopation. In the context of modernist art, this is a great building. Notre Dame du Haut was genuinely uplifting for many war-worn Catholics weary of Tridentine baroque splendor. The church was also appealing to non-religious *cognoscenti della cultura*. They saw Ronchamp as modernism breaking through the last bastion. With such a stir, Notre Dame du Haut quickly became an icon of mid-twentieth century architecture. It continues to be published by authors of every textbook about architectural history. Authors as diverse as the classicist David Watkin and the modernist Marvin Trachtenburg acknowledge its place in history.[12]

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[10] Roberts and Daly, *Building Type Basics*, 48-49, 229-30.

[11] Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Abrams, 2002) 10, 105.

Other architects and artists had broken ground since the 1920s by designing abstracted Catholic churches, but Ronchamp's raw dynamism became the key expression. Most imitations of Le Corbusier's chapel were inept. Countless chapels in American hospitals and airports are aspiring digests with irregular rectangular embrasures framing colored glass blocks. While this was going on, the dean of architectural historians at the time, Nikolaus Pevsner, warned:

> woe to him who succumbs to the temptation of reproducing the same effect in another building, a building less isolated, less remote, less unexpectedly placed, and less exceptional in function. . . . Seriousness does not exclude a challenge to reason, but it must be a serious challenge, as many visitors feel Ronchamp to be. What it cannot be is irresponsible, and most of today's structural acrobatics, let alone purely formal acrobatics imitating structural acrobatics, are irresponsible.[13]

RONCHAMP REINVIGORATED AS A MODEL

Architects and patrons who intend to perpetuate modernist principles in Catholic church design revived Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp as the model for millennial churches. Prime examples of such houses of worship are Dio Padre Misericordioso, built in Rome for the Jubilee of 2000 (Figure 3), and the recent Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles (Figure 4). The patrons were anxious to demonstrate that the Catholic Church promotes artistic expressions "of our time." The fact that each building is a revival of Le Corbusier's fifty-year-old model is rarely mentioned. The public is so unaware of architectural history that they generally believe the buildings to be fresh and innovative. The patrons sought to achieve international recognition akin to Le Corbusier's at Ronchamp. Whether they have lasting value or become footnotes to modernism's hegemony in the mid-twentieth century, Los Angeles and Rome are exerting current influence by being imitated in new churches.

The patrons at Rome and Los Angeles insisted that the Catholic Church is up-to-date. Unfortunately, the cultural tenets they share are iconoclastic in deeper ways than mere forms of art. They are engaging with a culture that perpetuates a century-old attack on the authority of the Catholic Church. In 1960, Msgr Rudolph G. Bandas wrote in reaction to the artistic equivalents of Le Corbusier's Notre Dame, "Why should we reject and destroy this great artistic, liturgical, and catechetical life in our churches, and replace it with the hieroglyphics of abstract art? Why should we replace this clear and artistic catechism – a joy to the eyes of the soul – with a pictorial puzzle?"[14] The rhetorical answer is, "it depends on what you mean by art." Since 1910 this retort has shaken the confidence of lay people asking Msgr Bandas's question. When frustration with "pictorial puzzles" surfaces today, the demeaning response is, "It is best to avoid pastiche. Instead of attempting to mimic historic designs, the designer should provide opportunities for contemporary artists and craftspeople to create works that are genuinely of their time."[15] "Of our time" is the mantra repeated in building committee meetings as well as in publications. It is the effective cliché for promoters of modernism in Catholic architecture.

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[12] David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture* (London: Watson-Guptill, 2000); Marvin Trachtenberg, *Architecture: From Prehistory to Postmodernity* (New York: Abrams, 1986) 515-16.

[13] Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963) 429-30.

[14] Rudolph G. Bandas, "Modernistic Art and Divine Worship," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 143.4 (1960) 234-35.

A BAROQUE PARADIGM

In contrast to the rather smug phrase "it is best to avoid pastiche," we should challenge ourselves to confront the deepest implications of mimicking historical designs. One example we can emulate is the brilliant seventeenth-century Roman architect, Francesco Borromini. He was so candid as to write, "I would not have given myself to this profession to be a mere copyist. . . . I ask you to remember, when I am sometimes a long way from the common designs, what Michelangelo, Prince of Architects, said: 'He who follows others, never goes onward.'"[16] Borromini's intention was to create innovative buildings by participating within a fifteen-hundred-year-old tradition. When he railed against "mere copyists," he was not denying the past. Instead, he sought to build upon the best models and to synthesize the fruits of both Michelangelo and anonymous early Christian architects. Borromini had a prolific but difficult professional life. He was favored, however, during the pontificate of Innocent X (1644-1655), who had Borromini reconstruct the early Christian basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano for the 1650 Jubilee. In spite of the dilapidated condition of the building and the burden of a restrictive deadline, Borromini created a masterpiece for the cathedral of Rome. He developed hundreds of references to the recent and distant past to create a new building of Innocent's time. The nave reflects St Peter's Basilica in the scale of its Corinthian pilasters, its arches, and the presentation of monumental statues of the apostles bearing instruments of their martyrdom. The early Christian heritage of the basilica is also rejuvenated. Borromini was the first Renaissance architect, for example, to revive the Greek monogram for Christ as a symbolic motif (Figure 5). The prohibitionists of modernist art and culture still militate against following the approach Borromini and thousands of others have employed to make architecture "of their time." When will the power of such restrictions end?

HOPE IN THE FUTURE OF CURRENT EVENTS

Perhaps the high water mark of modernism in Catholic churches was circa 1955 with Le Corbusier's Ronchamp and the cut-out vegetation of Matisse's stained glass windows and vestment designs. Could the neo-modernist millennial efforts be false starts that look back nostalgically to a time other than "ours"?

A counter-cultural movement called post-modernism surfaced in the mid 1960s. One facet later developed into neo-classicism and this has produced a group of new paradigmatic churches. As has always been true historically, architects build in collaboration with traditionally-vested and forward-looking patrons. Current patrons include Archbishop Raymond Burke of St Louis, Missouri, and the administration of Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California; each is working on projects with Duncan Stroik. Bishop Robert J. Carlson of Saginaw, Michigan, and the administration of the University of St Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary at Mundelein, Illinois, are patrons working on buildings with the firm Franck Lohsen McCrery Architects. The leadership of the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter and the hierarchy of the

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[15] Roberts and Daly, *Building Type Basics*, 256-57.

[16] Francesco Borromini, *Opus architectonicum* 3r, XIX, 53r, written with Virgilio Spada in 1647 about the Oratorio degli Filippini (reprinted Milan: Edizioni il Polifilo, 1998).

Benedictine Monks of Fontgombault are working with me to build a seminary in Nebraska and a monastery in Oklahoma. These six buildings have different functions and styles, but all of these collaborations emulate established paradigms. Each follows and develops the rich heritage of Catholic tradition. Let us hope that the elevation of Benedict XVI will inspire further creation of buildings that restore the benefits of imitation and create churches for "full, conscious, and active participation."

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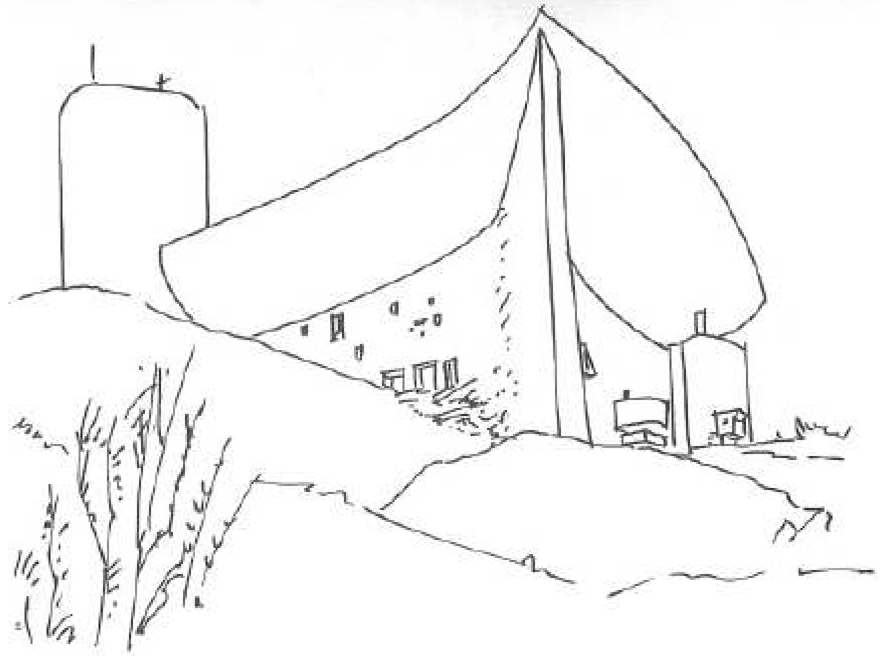
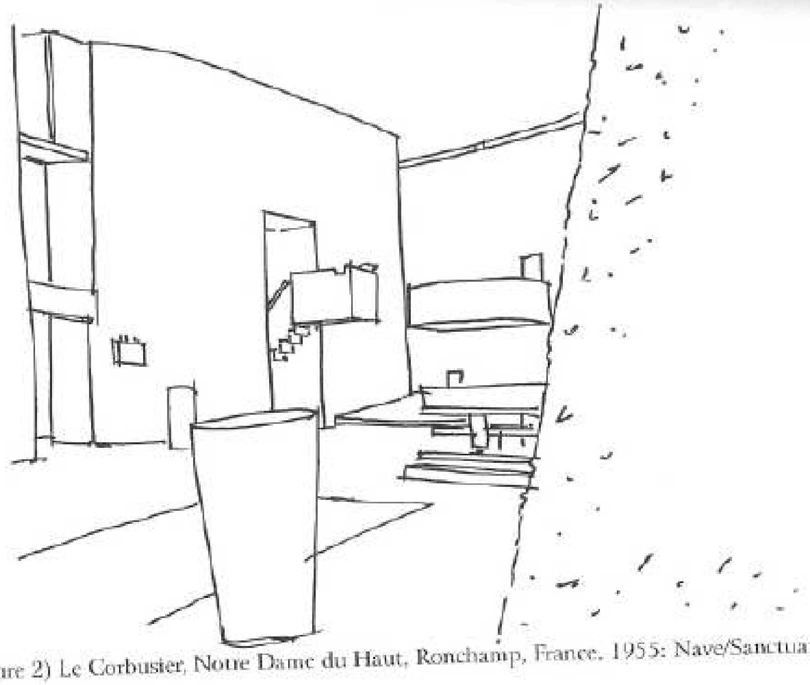
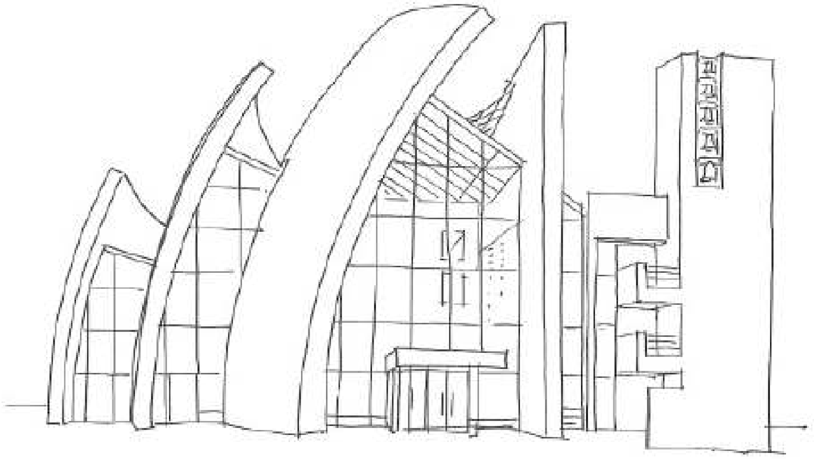


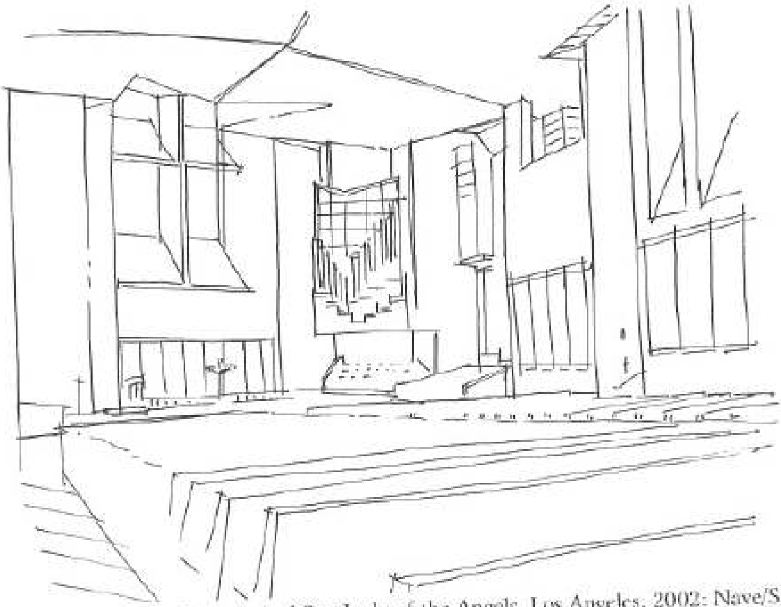
(Figure 1) Le Corbusier, Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, France, 1955: Exterior Approach.



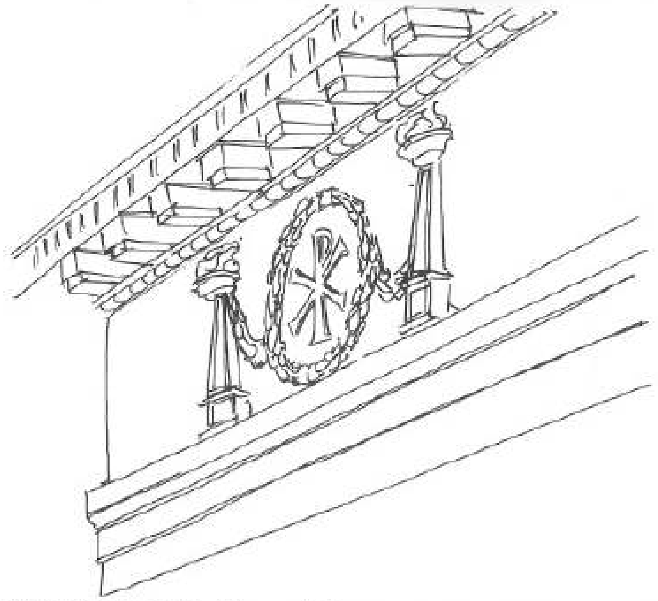
(Figure 2) Le Corbusier, Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, France, 1955: Nave/Sanctuary from Entrance.



(Figure 3) Richard Meier, Jubilee Church or Dio Padre Misericordioso, Rome, Italy, 2003: Entry Elevation.



(Figure 4) Rafael Moneo, Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles, 2002: Nave/Sanctuary.



(Figure 5) Francesco Borromini, San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, 1650: Detail of Frieze in Nave.