

A LIVING CHURCH ART

IN England, and in most English-speaking countries, we are still bound fast by convention to styles of ecclesiastical art which have long since ceased to live. We are struggling to be free, but we can only think in terms of Classic or Gothic. If we only dared, some of us might build a church in the style of an Egyptian temple; but that also would be a revival. Rather than be deprived of our Gothic arch we prefer to sling it from the ferro-concrete roof. There is nothing new, no development from the past into the terms of the modern. It must all be copied. We can build beautiful factories and cinemas, but we can hardly produce one pleasing statue of a religious character.

In this state of decrepitude it is of great assistance to look to our contemporary ecclesiastical artists abroad. In Italy, Germany and Holland a modern style has developed since the War. It has not broken with the past, but in the true living tradition it is not interested in copying. An English visitor in Holland, for example, will be amazed at the modern architecture which he there finds flourishing. He has become accustomed to entering a new church and finding a Perpendicular, Romanesque or Gothic building in stone or brick covered with plaster. He expects to see lifelike statues in gaudy colours, and windows trying to look as though they were not windows at all, but sentimental pictures in stone frames. In Holland it is different. The material, being the material of the country, is nearly always the same beautiful Dutch brick in its various shades of warm brown. They are not ashamed of that pleasant material and do not cover it with plaster or slabs of marble, but prefer to make patterns with the bricks, thus emphasizing the fact that they really are bricks. Besides the pleasing effect of this material, the Englishman is struck by the fearlessness with which modern conceptions are carried out, sometimes on a very large scale. Liturgical requirements hold the place of greatest importance. On this liturgical

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basis massive brick walls and arches are thrown up. These fulfil their duty by enclosing the house of God; but whether they are finished pointed, round or oval is of little moment. This is true equally of parish church, presbytery, religious house, or college. Nor is this style confined to general architectural outlines, for the smaller details bear out the general theme. The stained glass windows are symbolic patterns of pleasing and vivid colour. The statues in austere white stone convey the idea of the saint or of Christ in the same direct manner in which the whole church strikes the note of worship and the abode of God. The crucifixes represent dignity and strength in suffering. Candelsticks and chalices are plain and clear-cut in design.

It could not always be said that the result is beautiful. The style yet remains in its infancy, while many of the buildings are in the nature of experiments. Thus the architect of the Dominican house of studies at Nijmegen has experimented in the chapel, with an oval arch springing straight from the ground. In spite of the uninterrupted line the result is a diminishing of height giving a dark tunnel effect. In one of the parish churches of the same city the round, black marble pillars break the line of the brick pointed arches. But to condemn an art because of an occasional failure would be unjust. These errors—if they can be called such—may be condoned since they are the results of a genuine attempt to launch out into a living ecclesiastical art. One is tempted to praise them rather than criticize them.

Indeed, the primary reason for this instinctive indulgence towards any slips in design or detail lies in the obvious spontaneity inspiring the whole movement. So many modern buildings are disfigured by their blatant self-consciousness. They set out to be 'modern' and they succeed in being cheap and vulgar. This ecclesiastical art in Holland avoids all vulgarity and cheapness, because it lacks any taint of self-consciousness. The architects, sculptors, painters and glaziers are not striving to be modern: they are merely expressing their liturgical art liturgically, that

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is symbolically. They have to express in material things the experiences of the spirit—a living Catholic spirit, which is nourished by the Mass and its surrounding liturgy.

This art, therefore, aims first at being practical and functional. It must be used for liturgical worship, so everything is made to serve that idea. The high altars are made the centre, able to be seen by all; the tabernacles are large enough, and strong; statues convey the idea of the holy person they represent without distracting with detail and sentiment. The artists, however, do not restrict themselves exclusively to functionalism. They allow themselves a margin of exuberance in the same style. The surplices have simple, pleasantly coloured designs on them. A line of different coloured brick is introduced to set off an arch or cornice. All is simple and straightforward without being over-simplified or plain. Some of the stained glass and mural paintings, indeed, defeat their purpose by being so symbolic that one cannot grasp what they intend to symbolize. This is not, however, a result of that over-simplification or excessive functionalism characteristic of self-conscious modern art. They may have been marred through concentration on colour and pattern, but certainly not through a determination to be devoid of all complexity. The simplicity of this art follows naturally from the proper use of materials combined with a preoccupation with liturgical practicality.

This staid and modest liturgical art appears all the more remarkable when contrasted with its predecessor. The older churches seem to be at the other end of the scale entirely. They are often in the most flamboyant and exuberant baroque style. The altars are supported by large sumptuous cupids with no shame for the flesh. Marble columns leap up in profusion on all sides. Enormous paintings depict the saints struggling vainly with their togas in the most impossible attitudes. The chalice can scarcely be held on account of the crowd of saints gathered round the knob or standing on the foot. Much of this art is good according to its own standards; yet somehow, without con-

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sciously breaking with the past, the modern architects and artists have left all that superfluity behind. With such a past it is hard not to be eccentric or reactionary, yet these artists appear to have succeeded in developing without destroying. They busy themselves with constructing rather than with criticizing. This is one of the lessons we need to learn from them.

One of the main reasons for the success of this church art lies in its acceptance by the people. The ordinary working Catholic worships in these churches with as much composure as we do, through force of habit, in a neo-Gothic edifice. No carping or critical eye can be detected among the large numbers that frequent these places, for the people take it all for granted—seeing nothing strange in it. Indeed, there is nothing strange in it, though many an Englishman would stare. The latter would expect pleasure or business in such buildings, not prayer; because in his experience only pleasure or business buildings have any resemblance to this style of architecture.

In fact, it may be conjectured that the people have not only accepted, but also inspired this movement. This is evidenced by the fact that the same spirit runs throughout all the Dutch modern art. All their modern buildings display the same simple grandeur. Their cars are all of the most up-to-date models, scarcely one being more than two years old. The grey and red Diesel trains cross the green flats like incredibly swift and enormous serpents. The domestic architecture is extremely practical as well as a delight to the eye. The art, therefore, is the same in all its expressions, be it ecclesiastical or otherwise, for religion is not severed from life. Too often elsewhere religion is a thing apart, having no relation to the rest of life. Consequently as soon as an artist treats a religious subject he becomes self-conscious, feeling that he has to express himself in an element which, though he would not admit it, is really foreign to him. A dead convention is set up, so that the Sunday clothes of architecture are Gothic or Classical, of sculpture and painting a sentimental realism. The archi-

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tect must be as stiff and unnatural in his pointed arches as in his hard high collar.

In Holland, parts of Germany and Italy this seems to be different. Religion has its place in the week-day too. Avoiding both irreverence on the one hand and self-consciousness on the other, the modern living art has been introduced to the Church. It is very encouraging, for the world has been waiting for many years for a living ecclesiastical art. Flickers of life have appeared from time to time, but now one has risen up which is flourishing strongly and healthily. Already well established in three countries in Europe, there is good reason to hope that it will spread through the whole Catholic Church. Once again we may see fitting monuments erected to the worship of God in all directions, as they were in the Middle Ages under the strong impulse of faith united to a keen desire to express this faith in the then modern idiom. But before this can be achieved in England the corruption due to the copying of outworn forms and modes must cease. We may learn from our foreign brethren to admire the past without the presumption of attempting to repeat the past. At the same time the self-consciousness of being 'modern' must be avoided at all costs. But the fundamental preparation for a living church art is to repair the breach between religion and daily life. It is essential that the English architect be as much at home in constructing a church as the dressmaker is in designing a modern frock. This wholeness of a life inspired by religion throughout must be the basis, but no outsider can dictate or even suggest what form this new art should take. That depends on the people, position and material.

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