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Archi-Liturgical Culture Wars

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Abstract

From a comparison of the much-discussed and supposedly epoch-making Neo-Modernist 'Jubilee church' in Rome and a new study of John Ninian Comper's church architecture, the article enquires into theologically informed principles of church design and in their light considers some crucial elements in the symbolics of ecclesial space, notably altar, screen, communion rails and tabernacle.

Keywords

Church-building, Liturgy, altar, tabernacle, Comper

Introduction

Church architecture has joined the disputed issues of contemporary Western Catholicism. Indeed, one commentator, the American Michael Rose, does not scruple to speak about 'architectural culture wars' in progress today.[1] That the same author can vary that phrase by introducing, in place of 'architectural', the neologism 'archi-liturgical' should alert us to a fairly obvious fact.[2] The debate about architecture is as organically connected with dispute about the Liturgy as a Modernist church in the twentieth century International style is disconnected from the traditional modalities of Catholic worship.

The 'Jubilee Church', erected by the Roman diocese in the year 2000 to a plan suggested by the New York architect Richard Meier, might be not the worst place to open an enquiry. That is owing to the high profile nature of this scheme, which was intended as a pilot for the third millennium of the Church's story. An external view of the building must mention first its combination of rectangular and curved surfaces with no obvious symbolic resonance; the appropriate

[1] M. S. Rose, *In Tiers of Glory. The Organic Development of Catholic Church Architecture through the Ages* (Cincinnati 2004), p. 109.
[2] Ibid., p. 102.

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adjectives would be 'analytical' and 'cubist'. Inside, the professor of fine arts at the American University in Rome found a stark interior, raw in its geometry, its furniture banal.[3] The altar is an uncovered block of travertine, the ambo a box. No one had provided for the sanctuary either crucifix or image of the Mother of God, so a borrowed version of the one, from a neighbouring parish, and a repository version of the other took their place, the crucifix disconcertingly de-centred in regard to the altar. Though this observer praised the tabernacle for its colour and surface, she implies what a photograph soon confirms: it is a box—another one, if a golden one—with a circle inscribed on the side that opens. She admits that the aspiration of the building to austerity of form impresses, but doubts whether it adds up to a church, exactly—as distinct from a public building of some other kind. Her ascription of 'iconoclastic tendencies' to its architect, a secular Jew, would not necessarily be denied by their object. Meier argued that, had the diocese of Rome wanted a traditional church, they would not have invited him in particular to enter the competition to design it.[4] That is a perfectly reasonable point. A defining feature of the Modern movement in architecture is to sever, of set purpose, all nostalgic ties with the past of a tradition.[5]

As the year 2000 came and went, so it happens, an English Jesuit was working on a comprehensive study of probably the greatest of the twentieth century's liturgical architects, John Ninian Comper, whose vision and technique could hardly stand in sharper contrast to Meier's. Father Anthony Symondson's biography of Comper is still awaited, but his study of Comper's approach to building a church has already appeared.[6] It is not only a fastidiously researched, excellently written and superbly illustrated study (from black and white photographs, many of them early, of these buildings). It is also a declaration of war. For Symondson, architectural Modernism has resulted in a rash of mediocre churches and the ruination of many old ones which depress their congregations, starve them of transcendence in worship, and deprive them of a sense of place.[7]

The importance of Comper is that

> more than any other English church architect of the twentieth century, [he] endeavoured with passionate conviction to penetrate to the very

[3] B. Ennis, 'A Vacuum in the Spirit. The Design of the Jubilee Church in Rome', *Sacred Architecture* 9 (2004), pp. 10–13.

[4] Cited in M. S. Rose, *In Tiers of Glory*, op. cit., pp. 103–104.

[5] D. Watkin, *Morality and Architecture* (Oxford 1977); idem., *Morality and Architecture Revisited* (London 2001).

[6] A. Symondson, S. J., and S. A. Bucknall, *Sir Ninian Comper. An Introduction to his Life and Work, with Complete Gazetteer* (Reading 2006). Mr Bucknall's contribution took the form of the Gazetteer.

[7] Ibid., p. 227.

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> core of Western civilization by studying the church art and architecture of Europe to find there spiritual values applicable to his own time.[8]

The 'ideological *impasse* in which modern church architecture sleeps', could be overcome with no compromise of liturgical principle if Comper's understanding not only of the 'indispensability of beauty' but, more specifically, of the 'legacy of Christian tradition' were renewed.[9] If I say that the overall effect of text and photographs in this book comes as a revelation, I shall also be declaring an interest. What follows in this essay is an attempt to second Father Symondson's plea, notably by bringing into consort some voices harmonious with his, mainly—but not exclusively—from the United States.

The ground of my partisanship lies in the history of the subject—namely, sacred space as envisaged in Church tradition. Any visit to that history, with a view to drawing out pertinent principles, will prove hard to reconcile with those radically innovatory twentieth century buildings that reject both structure and content as found in pre-twentieth century use.

Some principles

We can note first the importance of the church building for traditional Christendom. It is hardly to be overestimated. Vera Shevzov writes of Russian Christian attitudes:

> Given the meanings ascribed to the temple [i.e. church building], it is not surprising that Orthodox writers and preachers considered it an essential aspect of the Christian life. Without the temple, they maintained, there could be no salvation, since only it could facilitate the formation of the inner spiritual temple. Insofar as believers strove toward union and communion with God, by their nature they needed the structure and stimulus of matter. The church building provided the primary source of nourishment and healing for the human soul in its journey toward God.[10]

That tells us of the vital place of the church building, albeit in an idiom somewhat uncertainly positioned between religious rhetoric and social anthropology. Shevzov's statement needs supplementing by a more theological definition of what a church *is*. For any reality, after all, ontology underlies function. Preferably, such a definition should draw on both Western and Eastern emphases since although our interest, like the problem, is Occidental, the Church here as

[8] Ibid., p. 228.
[9] Ibid.
[10] V. Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (New York 2004), pp. 69–70.

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elsewhere cannot be healthful unless she also breathes with her Oriental 'lung'.

Writing as an Anglo-Catholic with Rome-ward inclinations,[11] Comper comes obligingly to our aid. His prose has late Edwardian lushness but the saturated quality of this particular passage turns on its richness of allusion to Bible and Tradition.

> [A church] is a building which enshrines the altar of Him who dwelleth not in temples made with hands and who yet has made there His Covenanted Presence on earth. It is the centre of Worship in every community of men who recognize Christ as the *Pantokrator*, the Almighty, the Ruler and Creator of all things: at its altar is pleaded the daily Sacrifice in complete union with the Church Triumphant in Heaven, of which He is the one and only Head, the High Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech.[12]

Comper goes on to emphasise the *catholic*—that is, the ecclesial and cosmic—character of the church building, to the point of arguing that 'a Protestant church' (as distinct from meeting-house for preaching) is a contradiction in terms. Only a high doctrine of the ecclesial mystery can explain the existence of the historic church building of traditional Christendom and the attention paid it by the community.

> A church built with hands . . . is the outward expression here on earth of that spiritual Church built of living stones, the Bride of Christ, *Urbs beata Jerusalem*, which stretches back to the foundation of the world and onwards to all eternity. With her Lord she lays claim to the whole of His Creation . . . And so the temple here on earth, in different lands and in different shapes, in the East and in the West, has developed or added to itself fresh forms of beauty and, though it has suffered from iconoclasts and destroyers both within and without, . . . it has never broken with the past, it has never renounced its claims to continuity.[13]

In his keynote essay 'The Atmosphere of a Church' from which I have been quoting, Comper infers from such a conception that 'it must . . . reduce to folly the terms 'self-expression' and 'the expression of the age', and most notably so when they are 'used to cover such incapacity and ugliness as every age has in turn rejected'. And he inquires, pointedly, 'Is there such a supremacy of goodness, beauty and truth in the present age as to mark it as distinct from the past, and demand that we invent a new expression of it?'[14] A saint or mystic may pass directly to God without any need for the outward beauties of art, or nature for that matter. Most people cannot.

[11] A. Symondson, S. J., and S. A. Bucknall, *Sir Ninian Comper*, op. cit., p. 186.

[12] J. N. Comper, *Of the Atmosphere of a Church* (London 1947), p. 8. This essay is conveniently reprinted in A. Symondson, S. J., and S. A. Bucknall, *Sir Ninian Comper*, op. cit., pp. 231–246.

[13] J. N. Comper, *Of the Atmosphere of a Church*, op. cit., p. 9.

[14] Ibid.

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Comper stresses the eschatological setting of worship.

> The note of a church should be, not that of novelty, but of eternity. Like the Liturgy celebrated within it, the measure of its greatness will be the measure in which it succeeds in eliminating time and producing the atmosphere of heavenly worship. This is the characteristic of the earliest art of the Church, in liturgy, in architecture and in plastic decoration, and it is the tradition of all subsequent ages.[15]

This need exclude no genuinely 'beautiful style'. But the basic layout must be 'in accord with the requirements of the liturgy and the pastoral needs of those who worship within it', while 'the imagery [found within it] must express the balanced measure of the faith'. For these purposes it is necessary to 'look to tradition'. It is no more satisfactory to suppose, so Comper argues, that one can properly interpret these needs without reference to tradition than were we to neglect tradition in interpreting the New Testament or the Creeds of the Church. Anti-traditionalists are, generally speaking, consistent since 'modernism in art is the natural expression of modernism in doctrine, and it is quite true they are both the expression of the age, but of one side of it only'. And Comper goes on with frightening prescience: 'Rome has condemned modernist doctrine, but has not yet condemned its expression in art. The attraction of the modernistic is still too strong'.[16]

Contemporary difficulties

It would be hard to imagine a manifesto in more brutal contradiction to Comper's principles than the United States Bishops' Conference Committee on the Liturgy document *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, produced exactly thirty years after he wrote. The 1978 text declared the assembly of believers the most important 'symbol with which the liturgy deals'. The document thus relegates all other elements of Catholic worship, not only the ordained ministry but the rites themselves, and so, inevitably, their artistic and architectural elaboration, to a secondary status.[17] In due course, this text stimulated a robust counter-reaction in the American church.

Thus, for instance, the liturgical theologian Francis Mannion found behind its extraordinary choice of controlling option an attitude he called theological 'experiential-expressivism'. That is his term for a

[15] bid., p. 10.

[16] Ibid., p. 11.

[17] M. F. Mannion, 'Beyond *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*', *Antiphon* 4: 2 (1999), pp. 2–4, 7, and here at p. 2. An expanded version appeared as 'Towards a New Era in Liturgical Architecture', in idem., *Masterworks of God. Essays in Liturgical Theory and Practice* (Chicago 2004), pp. 144–175.

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situation where liturgical forms serve chiefly to express the inspirations of a group. The role of art in exploring, after the manner (we might add) of Comper, the 'Christologically founded rites' of the Church's 'sacramental order' can only have the most precarious future, so Mannion opined, if such a view of the Church's worship should come to prevail.

The most frequent visual embodiment of 'experiential-expressivism', at least in North America, is probably the domestication of church interiors. The only 'model' appeal to group self-expression can readily find in the paradigm contemporary Western culture turns out to be the living room or, more institutionally, the doctor's waiting room or, yet again, the hotel foyer. Comfortable or plush, these have it in common that they are always tame. Such accommodation to secular space is hardly unknown in Britain either. In the words of one English commentator (like Comper, an Anglo-Catholic, at least at the time of writing): 'The sanctuary became less a place to worship God than the apotheosis of 1960s man's homage to G-Plan furnishing and his own immanence'.[18] Mannion's critique was equally severe, if more soberly expressed.

> The kind of hospitality appropriate to worship is not psychological intimacy in the ordinary cultural sense: it is theological intimacy, that is, the bonding of persons of all degrees of relationship by their participation in the trinitarian life of God through sacramental initiation. By the same token, transcendence does not mean divine remoteness from the communal, but the embodiment of divine glory in communal events.[19]

An alternative organisation of space to the domestic could bear a closer resemblance to the garage. But, as the closing sentence of this citation indicates, the *Bauhaus* style of stripped down simplicity is scarcely more helpful than *Biedermeier* cosiness. In total if unwitting conformity with Comper's essay, Mannion comments: 'there exists considerable difficulty in reconciling the principles of aesthetic modernism and those of the sacramental tradition of Catholicism'.[20]

That is the artifice of under-statement. How can they *possibly* be reconciled if architectural Modernism seeks, as it does, to expunge symbolism and memory whereas the sacramental sensibility of Catholicism is founded on precisely these things? Helpfully, Mannion points for guidance to the post-Conciliar rite for the Dedication of a Church and Altar and the relevant sections of the 1992

[18] R. Low, 'Go East, Young Man', *New Directions* (2001), pp. 17–19, and here at p. 17.
[19] M. F. Mannion, 'Beyond *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*', art. cit., p. 4.
[20] Ibid., p. 3.

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Catechism of the Catholic Church.[21] Given the Second Vatican Council's movement of *ressourcement* in matters of early Christian Liturgy, it was certainly extraordinary that the bishops and *periti* expressed so little interest in the recovery of the forms of ancient Christian architecture and art, forms which are the matrix of all the subsequently developed styles the Church has known. In the post-Conciliar period, some assistance was granted, however, to the recovery of sanity by these ceremonial and catechetical documents.

In the year 2000 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States approved a replacement set of guidelines for *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*. *Built of Living Stones*, for such was its title, represents a considerable advance on its predecessor. It does so by conceiving the church building as chiefly in function of the Church's rites. But there is a price to be paid in terms of devotional purposes, as distinct from liturgical goals strictly so defined.[22] For the document did not do justice to a swingeing—but not wholly unjustified—judgment passed by the Swiss dogmatician Hans Urs von Balthasar on how we live now.

Only in an age when man gives up his personal prayer

> and contents himself with being simply a communal animal in the church can one design churches which are determined purely functionally by the services of the congregation.[23]

The need for re-iconisation

Steven Schloeder is an American architect who takes as his points of reference the dedication rites and the *Catechism*, as well as texts from the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II. What he terms Modernist 'whitewashed barns'—examples such as the Fronleichnamkirche at Aachen, date from so early as the late 1920s[24]—proved,

[21] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church,* Nos. 1179–1186; 1197–1199; 1667–1770.

[22] Thus T. V. Vaverek, 'The Church Building and Participation in the Paschal Mystery: Assessing the NCCB Document *Built of Living Stones*', *Sacred Architecture* 5 (2001), pp. 10–15.

[23] Cited from Balthasar's essay 'Unmodern Prayer' in D. Stancliffe, [review of] Richard S. Vosko, *God's House in our House: Re-imagining the Environment for Worship* (Collegeville, MN, 2006), in *Art and Christianity* 48 (2006), p. 14.

[24] Dating from the years 1928–1930, its creator, Rudolf Schwartz, a friend both of the father of architectural Modernism Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and of the theologian Romano Guardini, sought to provide a theological interpretation of his otherwise symbolically minimalist churches (relating different ground-plans for them to Christ's pre-existence, life, Passion and Parousia) but did so in idiosyncratic, and possibly heterodox, fashion quite unrelated to the previous history of Catholic church architecture: see S. J. Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion. Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (San Francisco 1998), pp. 234–238. Schwarz's *Vom Bau der Kirche* (Würzburg 1938) was translated into English as *The Church Incarnate. The Sacred Function of*

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he reports, influential models for re-ordered, as well as newly built, churches in the post-Conciliar epoch. The emphasis of the Modernist movement on 'universal space' tallied only too well with the anti-hierarchical communitarianism which was a temptation of the mid-twentieth century liturgical movement, just as aesthetic reductivism dovetailed into notions of liturgical simplicity. The ruling maxim became 'assembly is all'. Emphasis on the meal-aspect of the Eucharist at the expense of its more primordial sacrificial dimension[25]—the 'meal' is enjoyment of the fruits of the sacrifice—followed naturally. In their worst, i.e. their most consistent, examples, writes Schloeder:

> [The Modernists'] buildings have been incapable of addressing the deeper, mystical knowledge of the faith, much less the human soul's yearning for the mystery of transcendent beauty. Rather they have fallen into a reductionist mentality, stripping the churches of those elements, symbols, and images that speak to the human heart. Their buildings speak only of the immanent—even as their liturgies studiously avoid the transcendent to dwell on the 'gathered assembly'—and thus have departed from the theological and anthropological underpinnings of the traditional understandin of Catholic church architecture.[26]

By the early 1960s, some commentators were resigned to soulless churches as all that a supposedly inescapable architectural modernity could provide. 'Apart from the community which gathers in these churches', wrote R. Kevin Seasoltz with seeming equanimity, 'the buildings have little meaning'.[27]

For Schloeder, in striking contrast, *the church building is an icon of the spiritual reality of the Church*.[28] Here he has, I believe, rightly identified the nodal issue. Schloeder outlines briefly how in East and West this 'iconic' character of the church-building worked out. Given the authoritative role of Church tradition in these matters, this is in fact an indispensable exercise.

For the East: drawing on such Fathers as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Maximus Confessor and Germanus of Constantinople as well as later divines like Nicholas of Andida, Nicholas Cabasilas and Symeon of

Christian Architecture (Chicago 1958). A benign interpretation is found in W. Zahner, *Rudolf Schwarz: Baumeister der neuen Gemeinde. Ein Beitrag zum Gespräch zwischen Liturgietheologie und Architektur in der liturgischen Bewegung* (Altenberge 1992). Cooler is T. Hasler, *Architektur als Ausdruck, Rudolf Schwarz* (Zurich-Berlin 2000).

[25] Cf. John Paul II, *Dominicae Cenae*, 9: 'The Eucharist is above all else a sacrifice'.

[26] S. J. Schloeder, 'What Happened to Church Architecture?', *Second Spring* (March 1995), pp. 27–38 and here at p. 29. Schloeder's criticisms, as well as his positive proposals, were set out at much greater length three years later in his *Architecture as Communion*. See note 24 above.

[27] R. K. Seasoltz, *The House of God* (New York 1963), pp. 125–126.

[28] S. J. Schloeder, *Architecture as Communion*, op. cit., pp. 168–224, a chapter entitled '*Domus Dei*: the Church as Icon'.

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Thessalonica, Schloeder produces an overall identikit Byzantine interpretation of the church building. At the church entrance, the narthex signifies the unredeemed world: here in early times the catechumens and penitents foregathered. By contrast, the *naos* or central space represents the redeemed world crowned by a dome whose primary task is to recall the heavens, where Christ the Pantokrator, figured there, sits in his risen humanity at the Father's right, holding all things together in heaven and on earth. But, writes Schloeder:

> the dome also gives a sense of immanence, and suggests that the *naos* is also the Womb of the Virgin, as well as the Holy Cave of Bethlehem and the Holy Cave of the Sepulchre. Thus the building evokes many images of places where the Spirit vivifies the Church, which is born into the world, and redeemed into the Glory of the Lord.[29]

Continuing his analysis, Schloeder describes the developed icon screen of late medieval and modern Byzantine-Slav churches as veiling the sanctuary which is 'the fulfilment of the Mercy Seat of the Mosaic tabernacle, . . . the perfection of [the] Holy of Holies, and . . . even the sacramental representation of the very Throne of God'.[30] The multiple 'layeredness' or rich complexity of such symbolic interpretation of the church building, even at a comparatively early stage of Greek Christian reflection, is shown in Schloeder's summary of three chapters from the *Mystagogia* of the seventh century doctor St Maximus:

> The entire church is an image of the Universe, of the visible world, and of man; within it, the chancel represents man's soul, the altar his spirit, the *naos* his body. The bishop's Entrance into the church symbolizes Christ's coming into the flesh, his Entrance into the *bema* [the sanctuary] Christ's Ascension to heaven.[31]

Turning now to the West, such high mediaeval treatises as the canon regular Hugh of St Victor's *Speculum de mysteriis Ecclesiae*, the black monk Abbot Suger's *Libellus de consecratione Ecclesiae sancti Dionysii*, and bishop William Durandus's *Rationale divinorum officiorum* furnish an analogical treatment to that found further east. The themes of the Body of Christ and the Heavenly City bespeak divine order in its integrity and fullness, which buildings shaped for the celebration of the Liturgy should reflect.

As Schloeder points out, the most common schema in the Western Middle Ages is the cruciform church as representation of the Lord's

[29] S. Schloeder, 'What Happened to Church Architecture?', art. cit., p. 30.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., p. 31: an encapsulation of *Mystagogia*, chapters 2, 4, and 8. See G. C. Berthold (tr.), *Maximus Confessor. Selected Writings* (London 1985), pp. 188–190 and 198. As Berthold explains in a note, 'the term mystagogy signifies a liturgical contemplation of the mystery of the Church' understood as 'new creation in Christ', ibid., p. 214. That is precisely why Maximus cannot avoid discussing the church building.

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own body on the Cross. In, for example, a mediaeval English cathedral with a black monk chapter:

> Christ's Head is at the apse which is the seat of governance represented by the bishop's cathedra; the choir is his throat from which the chants of the monks issue forth the praise of God; the transepts are his extended arms; his torso and legs form the nave since the gathered faithful are his body; the narthex represents his feet, where the faithful enter the church; and at the crossing is the altar, which is the heart of the church.[32]

That is not without a biblical basis. St Paul had called Christ the cornerstone (Ephesians 2: 20), and Christians members of his body (Romans 12: 5; I Corinthians 12: 12), so it was natural for Christians to see the church building as an expression of the body of the Lord. There was here a kind of Gospel transfiguration of the ancient conviction, classically expressed in Vitruvius's *De architectura*, that the wonderful proportions of the human body—confirming in the microcosm the macrocosmic harmony of nature—are architecture's proper measure. On such an understanding, nothing is more naturally than to cover church walls with frescoes of the saints, or punctuate them with statues, since these remind the faithful how they are indeed part of Christ's 'mystical' body. A church is, in Schloeder's phrase, 'built theology'.[33]

Post-medieval churches continued to be designed to markedly symbolic plans. So Schloeder reminds us how Francesco Borromini, when remodelling the nave of St John Lateran, set up the twelve apostles in monumental statuary with the consecration crosses by their side, to bespeak the city of the Apocalypse which 'stood on twelve foundation stones, each one of which bore the name of the one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb' (Apocalypse 21: 4).[34] Although St Charles Borromeo's influential treatise *Instructiones Fabricae et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae* which sought to summarise Catholic traditions of Church design shows a markedly practical bent, Borromeo began his work with the words:

> This only has been our principle: that we have shown that the norm and form of building, ornamentation and ecclesiastical furnishing are precise and in agreement with the thinking of the Fathers . . .[35]

That could not but ratify patristic (and post-patristic) theological symbolism—not least for Borromini.

[32] Ibid., p. 32. Schloeder subsequently inserted this passage into a description of the ideal 'house of God'—implied, he holds, by a combination of the main ecclesiological concepts and images of *Lumen gentium*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Thus *Architecture in Communion*, op. cit., p. 30.

[33] Ibid., p. 12.

[34] Ibid., pp. 217–218.

[35] *Instructiones*, 21.

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The *Instructiones* were re-printed, largely unchanged, on at least nineteen occasions between 1577 and 1952.[36] They remain pertinent to post-Conciliar Catholicism, since, in a passage from the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council highlighted by Schloeder, in any aspect of liturgical life:

> care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing.[37]

That passage furnishes the *leit-motif* of his comprehensive 1998 study *Architecture as Communion*, just as it does for a more general study of liturgical principles which appeared a few years later, Alcuin Reid's *The Organic Development of the Liturgy*.[38]

Schloeder's exposition itself indicates that the tradition of symbolic interpretation was not uniform. It had variants, stemming from differences in both architectural style and theological background. Comper had increasingly sought to maximise the advantages of such pluralism by a policy of 'unity by inclusion': Gothic and Classical styles, for instance, are not, in Christian use, *opposites*.[39] Enough is in common to call this, in broad terms, *the* Tradition (of iconic interpretation of architecture, q.v.).

It is a tradition which requires reinstatement in our own time, above all through the construction of buildings that actually call for a reading along some such lines. Indeed, the post-Conciliar rite of *Dedication of a Church and Altar* demands it, explicitly calling the church building a representation of the heavenly Jerusalem.[40] If that rite bears any authority, then the shapes and volumes of sacred space need relating to ecclesial functions within an organic composition, and both massing and decoration allowed to recover their full symbolic valency. This in turn will permit the personal, devotional inhabiting of space as well as its corporate liturgical equivalent.

Architecture and devotion

Mannion, writing in 1999, shortly after Schloeder, and on the eve both of *Built of Living Stones* and Meier's Jubilee church, was not

[36] M. E. Gallagos, 'Charles Borromeo and Catholic Tradition regarding the Design of Catholic Churches', *Sacred Architecture* 9 (2004), pp. 14–18.

[37] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 23.

[38] A. Reid, *The Organic Development of the Liturgy* (Farnborough 2004).

[39] A. Symondson, S. J., and S. Bucknall, *Sir Ninian Comper,* op. cit., pp. 105–112. Compare Quinlan Terry's remark that 'Gothic and Classical are not opposed to each other like modern and traditional construction....[I]n many ways [Gothic] is one of the many interesting digressions within the classical tradition': thus Q. Terry, 'The Survival of Classicism', *Sacred Architecture* 12 (2006), pp. 16–19, and here at p. 19. Terry, whose Catholic masterwork is the re-built cathedral at Brentwood, implies that the advent of Modernism shows up A. W. N. Pugin's mistake in taking for granted such contrariety.

[40] *Dedication of a Church and Altar*, I. 1.

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especially sanguine as to prospects. In the secular realm, architectural Postmodernism and New Classicism were in full-scale reaction against the shortcomings of the twentieth century Modernist movement, and not least, its canonising of its own practices over against all earlier historical models. Among 'liturgical-architectural theorists', however, and by implication the practitioners who drew on their writings in constructing or 're-ordering' church buildings, there seemed no lessening in the 'hostility toward the past and the radical distance from traditional church styles sought by architects and designers after Vatican II'.[41] The minimalism and chilling frugality of iconography in most modern or recently re-ordered Western Catholic churches was impossible to square with the sort of historically accurate rules-of-thumb Comper had laid down. The largely aniconic interiors of Modernist Latin-rite churches were increasingly out of kilter with the major place still given to images in domestic Catholic life and devotion.[42] In his courageous editiorial Mannion wrote:

> The functionalist principles of modern architecture and their inability to handle the ambiguity and polyvalence of Catholic devotionalism have conspired to render church architecture since Vatican II exceedingly anti-devotional. Many have lamented the removal from Catholic churches of popularly revered elements, as well as the disappearance of important conditions for the devotional life. The alienation from modern church architecture that exists on the part of many ordinary Catholic worshipers derives in great part from the rejection by the newer styles of traditional elements conducive to the devotional.[43]

That has reference to a wide variety of devotional objects, as well as to the overall 'atmosphere of a church' (Comper's phrase). The most important issues it raises are, however, those of altar and tabernacle, for which a comparatively full treatment seems, consequently, justified.

(i) The altar

In particular, the chief devotional focus of the Church gathered for the Holy Sacrifice, its principal rite, is, as Comper so forcefully realised, the altar, which is the symbol of Christ and the place where his paschal sacrifice is renewed. The altar is also the place from which, in holy Communion, the faithful are fed by the Bread of his body and the Wine of his precious blood. In a wider symbolic cosmology, the altar holds a central place as well. Their name coming

[41] M. F. Mannion, 'Beyond *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*', art. cit., p. 3.

[42] See for an account of 'material culture' as it affects popular Catholicism, C. MacDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven 1995), and notably the chapter 'Christian Kitsch and the Rhetoric of Bad Taste' – though her (gender-based) account of 1960s iconoclasm seems over-simplifying.

[43] M. F. Mannion, 'Beyond *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*', art. cit., p. 4.

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from the word *altus*, a high place, the altar-steps bring to mind the ascent to the Temple of Jerusalem, the climb up the sacred mountain on which Zion was built. As the holy 'mountain', the altar remains the heart of the church. This makes treatment of the altar especially crucial.

First of all, there is the issue of *orientation*. In traditional usage, the altar is where possible placed at the east, on the solar axis. Facing the altar, one faces the rising sun, which overcomes cosmic darkness as Christ's Resurrection and Ascension overcame spiritual. Orientation is a particularly neuralgic topic in contemporary Catholicism. The now widespread desire for a general return to *versus apsidem* celebration for the Liturgy of the Sacrifice (as distinct from that of the Word) constitutes an inescapable 'head-on' challenge to 'Modernism'—understanding by that term a stance that is at once architectural, liturgical, ecclesial, sacramental and—by implication at least—eschatological.

'The custom of orientation is biblical and it expresses the eschaton.'[44] This simple statement sums it up. In a more complex presentation of the Judaic and early patristic materials, the Oratorian scholar Uwe Michael Lang has shown that *sacred direction*—specifically to the East—was the most important spatial consideration in early Christian prayer.[45] Its significance was primarily eschatological (the East was the direction of the Christ of the Parousia, cf especially Matthew 24: 27 and 30) and, naturally, it applied to all the faithful, including their ministers. Archaeological evidence shows the great majority of ancient churches to have an oriented apse. Granted that the altar was the most honoured object in such buildings, the only safe inference is that the celebrant stood at the people's side, facing East, for the Anaphora. In the minority of buildings (notably at Rome and in North Africa) that have, by contrast, an oriented *entrance*, the position is less clear, but Lang argues persuasively that the celebrant in such a case prayed facing the doors (and thus the people) but did so with hands and eyes alike raised to the ceiling of the apse or arch where the decorative schemes of early Christian art are focussed. For Lang—who stresses that even when 'orientation' is not the geographical East but only a conventional 'liturgical East'—common direction is theologically important. Celebration *versus populum* in the modern (eyeball-to-eyeball) sense was unknown to Christian antiquity.[46] Not

[44] H. Dietz, 'The Eschatological Dimension of Church Architecture. The Biblical Roots of Church Orientation', *Sacred Architecture* 10 (2005), pp. 12–14, and here at p. 12.

[45] U. M. Lang, of the Oratory, *Turning towards the Lord. Orientation in Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco 2004).

[46] I have made use here of some material from my review of Dr Lang's book in *New Blackfriars* 86. 1002 (2005), pp. 249–250. The 1964 instruction *Inter oecumenici* of the Congregation of Rites and the first edition (1970) of the *General Instruction of the Roman*

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for them the situation where:

> The sight-lines stop at [the celebrant], centre on his person, competence, visage, voice, mannerisms, personality—uplifting or unbearable alike.[47]

At its most objectionable, such a practice 'elevates the priest above the Sacrament, the servant above the Master, the man above the Messiah'.[48] The late Louis Bouyer remarked with disarming frankness:

> Either you look at somebody doing something for you, instead of you, or you do it with him. You can't do both at the same time.[49]

The historian of the Western Liturgy Klaus Gamber put it more theologically:

> The person who is doing the offering is facing the one who is receiving the offering; thus he stands *before* the altar, positioned *ad Dominum*, facing the Lord.[50]

From the English experience Lang makes the powerful point that the adoption of the eastward position by the Oxford Movement clergy was key to their efforts to give a Catholic character to the Church of England, precisely because that position was taken (by opponents as well as allies) to express the sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic rite as a Godward act.[51]

To the issue of the oriented altar may be added the issue of *veiling* which covers such topics as not only veils of fabric, as in the side-curtains of the 'English' or 'Sarum' altar revived by Anglo-Catholics like Comper in the early twentieth century,[52] but also, in paint, wood, and stone, the iconostasis of the East and the rood screen and *cancelli* or communion rails of the West. The Writer to the Hebrews addresses his readers:

> Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for

Missal allow for the *option* of *versus populum* celebration. The answer to the question of how this became treated as a binding mandate remains to be answered. One proposal is, by an illicit inference from the first intentionally televised Mass from St Peter's (a basilica which, on account of the siting of the martyrium and therefore *per modum exceptionis*, had westward celebration). Thus S. J. Schloeder, *Architecture as Communion*, op. cit., p. 69.

[47] R. Low, 'Go East, young man', art. cit., p. 18

[48] Ibid.

[49] L. Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (Et South Bend, Ind., 1967), p. 59.

[50] K. Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background* (Et San Juan Capistrano, CA, 1993), p. 178.

[51] Cf. A. Härdelin, *The Tractarian Understanding of the Eucharist* (Uppsala 1965), pp. 309–312.

[52] Actually, it was as much French as English. Comper had discovered it in miniatures in French and English Books of Hours. See D. Stancliffe, 'The English Altar [1]', *Art and Christianity* 41 (2005), pp. 1–7, and here at p. 4.

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> us through the curtain [veil], that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart. (10: 19–22)

The American Dominican Michael Carey, recalling how *cancelli* or 'rails' where the faithful receive the Lord's body and blood have historically given this access to the sanctuary architectural expression, comments:

> If the sanctuary [of the church building] is that sacred place which holds in a special way the Real Presence of the Lord on the altar and in the tabernacle; and if the veil or veiling structure around the sanctuary represents the humanity of Christ, as the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches; and, further, if we can only enter into God's Presence *through* the humanity of Christ: then, that veiling structure is necessary . . . Some veiling structure, then, continues to be of utmost importance for a proper liturgical spirituality. Its removal would symbolically eliminate the necessity of Christ's Humanity, as if we could enter into the presence of the Divinity without it.[53]

For Carey this is crucial to, in the title of Comper's essay, 'the atmosphere of a church'. The sense of, in Romano Guardini's words, 'the altar as threshold', sets up an isomorphism between the movement of the Incarnation and the spatial inter-relation of sanctuary and nave. In both cases God stoops down to encounter us, from there to assist us, not without difficulty, across the barrier into his own realm of burning holiness and light. Here, as with the Byzantine icon-screen, threshold is not only borderline. It is also crossing over.

In that Byzantine tradition, indeed, the earlier low railed screen of the *cancelli* into which occasional images might be fixed, had developed by the sixteenth century into the full, floor to ceiling, wall-like iconostasis of first Russian and subsequently Greek and other churches. The role of the iconostasis is subtle, as the early twentieth century Russian Orthodox philosopher Pavel Florensky explains.

> [T]he iconostasis is a boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, and it functions as a boundary by being an obstacle to our seeing the altar, thereby making it accessible to our consciousness by means of its unified row of saints (i.e. by its cloud of witnesses) that surround the altar where God is, the sphere where heavenly glory dwells, thus proclaiming the Mystery. Iconostasis is vision.[54]

In other words, veiling at one level permits unveiling at another. The iconostasis does not only carry images of the saints but evokes the inter-related mysteries of Incarnation and Atonement. As a sympathetic English interpreter explains:

[53] M. R. Carey [O. P.], 'Veiling the Mysteries', *Sacred Architecture* 3 (2000), pp. 23–27, and here at p. 24.

[54] P. Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Et Crestwood, N. Y., 1996), p. 62.

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> In front of the altar, the Royal Gates with Gabriel's message and the Virgin's answer open the way to God's historical gift of Himself, still present with us. And on the two sides of the gates the double significance of Bethlehem and Olivet is revealed: on the north, the Virgin and the Child; on the south, Christ Pantokrator – the All-Emperor: the kenosis is answered by the Kingdom. Behind the veil, the altar speaks of Calvary, but Easter at once is all around us. The altar is also the life-bringing Tomb, the Fountain of the Resurrection.[55]

The Western rood screen performs the same function of theologically significant veiling, with its painted or carved saints running along the line demarcating nave and sanctuary, surmounted by the Cross of the Lord. It does not represent an obscuring of the altar but its visibility through a 'window' framed by the saints and other motifs of Catholic doctrine. It is strange that, although the 1970 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* deemed that the sanctuary should be 'marked off from the nave either by a higher floor level or by a distinctive structure and décor',[56] its promulgation was followed by a rash of 'removalitis': the demolition of screens and even communion rails in many—if not most—Latin-rite church-buildings. For Durandus, the rail between altar and choir had taught specifically 'the separation of things celestial from things terrestrial'.[57] Awaiting communion kneeling at the rail encourages a moment of concentrated recollection before the altar which is less easy to reproduce when standing behind other communicants in a line.

Can one regard the addition of a ciborium (civory) or tester (painted canopy) as veiling? Though altars with civories—a columned structure above the altar made in stone, wood, or metal—often had curtains enabling the altar itself to be veiled between the beginning of the Preface and the end of the priest's communion (missals from the first half of the sixteenth century still refer to this)[58], the civory's function was, rather, to honour the altar. They were favoured features of Comper's buildings. The Anglican liturgist Bishop David Stancliffe writes:

> To give [the altar] emphasis, and to combine physical proximity with a sense of transcendence, a ciborium adds dignity and colour. It also gives it a defined place within the undefined space of the church. Comper is familiar with the early Roman basilicas, and uses their syntax, if not their vocabulary.[59]

[55] D. J. Chitty, 'The Communion of Saints', in E. L. Mascall (ed.), *The Church of God. An Anglo-Russian Symposium by Members of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* (London 1934), pp. 155–172, and here at p. 163.

[56] *General Instruction of the Roman Missal,* No. 258.

[57] *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, I. 1. 31.

[58] A. A. King, *The Liturgy of the Roman Church* (London 1957), p. 87.

[59] D. Stancliffe, 'The English Altar [1]', art. cit., p. 4.

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The 'tester' is an alternative way of making the same gracious point. A feature of Comper's earlier work, and presuming the 'English' altar, this canopy, suspended from the ceiling, was a lighter structure than the civory. Characteristically, Comper decorated the tester with a painted Christ in majesty comparable – he hoped—to the great mediaeval Sicilian mosaic majesties of Cefalù and Monreale. From the civory or tester would hang (if Comper could persuade the patrons) the reserved Sacrament in a pyx, of which Stancliffe remarks:

> Where this has been done, there is a remarkable sense of the presence of Christ filling the building – something the more locked-away methods of reservation fail to communicate.[60]

(ii) The tabernacle

The question of the *the Eucharistic tabernacle* (the normal Roman Rite equivalent to Comper's hanging pyx), and its adornment and placing, is inescapable here. The history of tabernacle design is more interesting than cupboards like the box at the Roman Jubilee church might lead once to suspect. In early modern Catholicism, Eucharistic tabernacles were most frequently constructed on the model of the Ark of the Covenant in the Solomonic Temple: that is why they were veiled with a fabric covering usually changed according to the liturgical colour of the season or day. Fairly commonly, adoring angels appear in the iconography on tabernacle doors or adjacent areas, again evoking the Israelite Ark which had its own figures of attendant cherubim (Exodus 25: 18–22). In earlier epochs, animals, fruits or flowers could be incorporated into tabernacle design, to signify how the entire world is *en route* to transfiguration via the Eucharistic Lord. Tabernacles have also been designed as churches in miniature, since the Eucharistic sacrament which they house 'unifies the person of Christ and his living body, the Church'.[61] Again, the tabernacle has taken the form of a treasure-chest, because the entire spiritual treasury of salvation is present in Christ, or, in another format, of a tower reaching up toward heaven: an obvious symbolism for the earthly tabernacle *qua* prefiguring the heavenly. So much iconological effort implies the existence of a powerful theological rationale.

> The sense of distance that Catholics have traditionally kept from the Eucharistic tabernacle, often venerating it from afar, is not so much

[60] Ibid. Quarr Abbey is a rare (possibly unique) example of this in a Catholic church in England.

[61] M. F. Mannion, 'Eucharistic Tabernacles: a Typology', *Sacred Architecture* 3 (2000), pp. 10–13, and here at p. 11.

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a pagan devotional remnant, but rather a statement that the earthly worshipper remain at some distance from the heavenly tabernacle. The Eucharist will only be received in all its fullness in the eternal banquet of heaven, while on earth the fullness of Eucharistic reality remains literally and spiritually 'reserved' for the future.[62]

Whatever sculptural form the tabernacle takes, both popular feeling and the general *Tendenz* of Roman documents since the immediate aftermath of the post-Conciliar reform militate against the marginalisation it has suffered in many new or re-ordered churches. The 1967 Instruction *Eucharisticum Mysterium* of the Congregation of Rites appeared to lack a proper theology of the distinct but inter-related modes of relation to the Paschal Mystery of Christ enjoyed by the tabernacle on the one hand, the consecrated Elements on the altar on the other.[63] Yielding to a pervasive contemporary temptation, it foreshortened the eschatological orientation which was itself the main theological advance, vis-à-vis earlier magisterial statements on the Liturgy, of Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.[64] Once again, it is an American voice that sounds the alert.

As permanent signs of Christ and His Pasch, the reserved Eucharist and the Church do not conflict with the unfolding of the paschal sacrifice in the liturgy when they are present prior to the consecration, rather they are signs formed in previous liturgies which draw us back to the eternal Pasch present anew in the contemporary celebrations . . . Because the consecration, the Host on the altar, the assembled Church, and the tabernacle have distinct relations to the Pasch, they do not detract from each other when simultaneously present.[65]

By 1980, when John Paul II's Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship issued its Instruction *Inaestimabile donum*, it seemed plain that 'problems had arisen with a diminution of devotion to the Eucharist, not disassociated from inadequate attention to the place of reservation in new or renovated churches'.[66] Hence the Instruction's insistence that the tabernacle be located in 'a distinguished place . . . , conspicuous, suitably adorned and conducive to prayer'.[67] The same note is struck in Benedict XVI's Post-Synodal Exhortation

[62] Ibid., p. 12. A more classical theological statement of the same point would refer to the 'fullness of that reality the Eucharist signifies' being so 'reserved'.

[63] See T. V. Vaverek, 'The Place of the Eucharistic Tabernacle: A Question of Discrepancy', ibid., pp. 10–13.; idem., '*Eucharisticum Mysterium* 55 and the Four Modes of Presence: Inadequate Principles of Church Design', ibid., 4 (2000), pp. 22–26, and note 53 below.

[64] Idem., 'The Controversy over Symbols: Roots of the Conflict in the Misuse of *Eucharisticum Mysterium* 55', *Antiphon*, 7: 2 (2000), pp. 10–20.

[65] Ibid., p. 17.

[66] P. J. Elliott, *The Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite. The Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours* (San Francisco 1995), p. 324.

[67] *Inaestimabile donum,* 24.

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Sacramentum caritatis.[68] Without a prominent tabernacle (or hanging pyx – why not?) there is no possibility – special supernatural graces aside—of what Stancliffe terms a sense of the presence of Christ *filling* a building. In *The Spirit of the Liturgy* Joseph Ratzinger maintained:

> The Eucharistic Presence in the tabernacle does not set another view of the Eucharist alongside or against the Eucharistic celebration, but simply signifies its complete fulfilment. For this Presence has the effect, of course, of keeping the Eucharist forever in church. The church never becomes a lifeless space but is always filled with the presence of the Lord, which comes out of the celebration, leads us into it, and always makes us participants in the cosmic Eucharist. [And he asks rhetorically,] 'What man of faith has not experienced this?'[69]

Conclusion

Francis Mannion relaxed his characteristic iron discipline of understatement when he wrote:

> [A] future generation of historians will make a stronger connection than we do today between the early iconoclastic movement, the Reformation 'stripping of altars', and the post-Vatican II treatment of the historic heritage of Catholic art.[70]

Three years previously, in the unlikely context of the London *Tablet*, the stained glass artist Patrick Reyntiens had entered a similar plea.

> [I]t begins to become more and more obvious that the exact ambience and cultural context of the visible elements in the interiors of modern churches should be thought out and acted upon in far greater seriousness and depth than hitherto . . . [T]he sacred space has been violated since Vatican II very much as it was first at the time of the Reformation, and this must be rectified for the health of the Church.[71]

And so, *Quo vadis?* As if with prophetic insight into the ravages of architectural Modernism, the American Neo-Gothic builder Ralph Adams Cram wrote in the opening year of the twentieth century:

> We must return for the fire of life to other centuries, since a night intervened between our fathers' time and ours wherein the light was not.[72]

[68] *Sacramentum caritatis* 69.
[69] J. Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Et San Francisco 2000), p. 90.
[70] M. F. Mannion, 'Beyond *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*', art. cit., p. 7.
[71] P. Reyntiens, 'All Distraction and Half-truths', *The Tablet,* 1 June 1996, p. 731.
[72] Cited from R. Adams Cram, *Church Building: A Study of the Principles of Architecture in relation to the Church* (Boston, Mass., 1901), in M. S. Rose, In *Tiers of Glory*, op. cit., p. 91.

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That was Comper's message too, but in his case, it came to entail a comprehensive openness to all the great stylistic epochs of the Church as builder. That was possible owing to both the ontological character of beauty as a transcendental determination of being and the fundamental internal coherence or organicity of the Church's tradition. The unifying element in any particular building comes from the architect's contribution. A church must be not only a rationally designed liturgical space but a unified work of art.

John Henry Newman, in the nineteenth of the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* took as his text Psalm 78: 69, which in the Authorised Version reads, 'He built His sanctuary like high palaces, like the earth which He hath established for ever'. Newman used the homiletic opportunity to argue against the opinion that Jesus's prediction to the Woman of Samaria—future worshippers 'shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth' ((John 4: 23)—nullifies the psalm in question (and in so doing renders trivial the topic of this essay).

> Our Saviour did *not* say to the Samaritan woman that there should be no places and buildings for worship under the Gospel, *because* He has *not* brought it to pass, *because* such ever have been, at all times and in all countries, and amid all differences of faith. And the same reasons which lead us to believe that religious edifices are a Christian ordinance, though so very little is said about them in Scripture, will also show that it is right and pious to make them enduring, and stately, and magnificent, and ornamental; so that our Saviour's declaration, when He foretold the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, was not that there should never be any other house built to His honour, but rather that there should be many houses; that they should be built, not merely at Jerusalem, or at Gerizim, but every where; what was under the Law a local ordinance, being henceforth a Catholic privilege, allowed not here and there, but wherever was the Spirit and the Truth. The glory of the Gospel is not the *abolition* of rites, but their *dissemination*; not their absence, but their living and efficacious presence through the grace of Christ.

A church-building, says Newman, represents

> the beauty, the loftiness, the calmness, the mystery, and the sanctity of religion . . . and that in many ways; still, I will say, more than all these, it represents to us its eternity. It is the witness of Him who is the first and the last; it is the token and emblem of 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever' . . . That is why they are: happy . . . who, when they enter within their holy limits, enter in heart into the court of heaven. And most unhappy, who, while they have eyes to admire, admire them only for their beauty's sake, and the skill they exhibit; who regard them as works of art, not fruits of grace; bow down before their material forms, instead of worshipping 'in spirit and in truth'; count their stones, and measure their spaces, but discern in them no

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> tokens of the invisible, no canons of truth, no lessons of wisdom, to guide them forward in the way heavenward!

We enter these iconic buildings aright if, as we do so, we contemplate the mystery of the Church and, through the Church, the Kingdom. Go to the greatest of Comper's churches – to St Mary's Wellingborough (Northamptonshire), or St Cyprian's, Clarence Gate (London)—and you will learn how.[73]

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[73] One Comper church, All Saints, London Colney (Hertfordshire), came by purchase into Catholic hands in 1974. If not by then at any rate soon after Catholics had unfortunately forgotten how to use such a church. On my own visit, I found that, despite Comper's provision of a high altar enjoying total visibility from all parts of the building, a table had been erected for Mass at its west end, thus ensuring that the worshippers (except for the celebrant) turned their backs throughout the Liturgy on sanctuary, altar, civory, and the great east window with its typical Comper Majestas of the eternally youthful Christ.

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