

**Authority, Prophecy and Tyranny:
The Shared Role of Pastor and Community
in the Construction, Care, Reconstruction
and Restoration of Worship Spaces**

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One of the most significant and formative experiences in the life of a parish community is the process of building or renovating a church.

§ 1 § Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship

When I was a very young priest in the late 1970s, one of my seminary classmates described his older pastor in a place far away as a man whose taste ran to “the best plastic that money can buy.” This man, educated before Vatican II, decided that his parish worship space needed an update. He hired an architect with whom he conferred over drinks one evening, got the necessary forms from the Chancery, and insisted that the young priest forge the signature of the parish council president on them. Then, he commenced to have built plywood platforms, constructed a semi-reredos behind the altar (not bearing religious imagery, but squares of wood as decoration on a background that appeared to be vinyl), installed indoor-outdoor carpeting in an alarming shade of brown, trimmed down the large side altars but left them and much of the communion rail in place, relocated the tabernacle beneath the newly-painted, bright blue statue of Mary, attached a rosary to her open hands, and pronounced the place done. I am not sure if he quoted John’s

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gospel on the last day of construction (he did not hold much truck with scripture), but he might have sighed: "It is finished" (19:30).

The man's aim in all of this, as he told it, was somehow to cover up the two sacristy doors that had opened into the sanctuary on either side of the altar. And once he got rolling, well, he had done a restoration according to Vatican II. As he understood it. It seemed something of a tyrannical approach to some parishioners then, as it certainly did to the younger priest. The product, which never seemed to fit the small brick church into which it had been imposed, endured under the oversight (!) of successive pastors. However, it was redone again about 25 years later by a younger priest who seemed very certain that he alone understood the spirit of Vatican II (at which he judged that the Holy Spirit was not present). He restored things to his own vision of what a worship space should look like. His view was heavily influenced by his grandmother's memory of 1957 when the Church was true, and when the tabernacle had only one possible location.

Neither of these pastors set out to be tyrannical or would ever describe himself as a tyrant. But each approached the renovation project in a way that was then and can now be observed as tyrannical. Even the dullest of pastors has prayed the lines from Mary's Magnificat in which she praises God who "has shown might with his arm, [and] / dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones / but lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:51-52). There is no Christian future for either tyrants or tyranny itself. Sacred scripture, the prayer of the Church, and our rich Christian history all attest to the fact that tyranny is an abomination in the sight of God.

How then ought the people of God approach the problem that might be perceived as tyranny in the construction, care, reconstruction and restoration of worship spaces? Because the Church is *Built of Living Stones*,² there are two approaches that must be ruled out immediately: acquiescing to tyranny; and, quitting and going away. How can the People of God, pastor and people together, undertake these tasks in a way that is consistent with their Christian dignity, and respects the authority both of the pastor and of the flock? The task is prophetic in that it sees, proclaims and seeks the coming Reign of God through visions, dreams and inspiration.

The possibility of a prophetic voice

*Colors which you can hear with ears;*²
*Sounds to see with eyes;*²
*The void you touch with your elbows;*²
*The taste of space on your tongue;*²
*The fragrance of dimensions;*²
The juice of stone.

—Marcel Breuer³

Christian people can never discount the possibility of prophetic voices sounding in their midst. Some inspired designers may come to a church building project with such a prophetic voice. Listening closely to the needs of a community as it seeks to build a house for the Church in which the assembly can be gathered for

² <http://old.usccb.org/liturgy/livingstonesind.shtml>

³ “In the agony of search for a precise formulation, once, quite a few years ago, I wrote my first and only poem (of a sort).” In *Marcel Breuer: Buildings and Projects 1921-1961* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1962), Preface, based on an address given at a symposium on *Individual Expression Versus Order* (New York, April 20, 1961), unnumbered pages.

See also http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/St_Johns_Abbey.html

sacramental celebrations, a designer could craft a unique space that fits a community, serves the Church and offers a stone and fiber invitation to holy souls to lift their hearts in prayer. Perhaps William Schickel offered such a service when he was commissioned to convert a dairy barn in Grailville, Ohio, into an oratory. The Schickel Design Company website reports, “By keeping most of the original barn structure, the Oratory becomes an integration of splendor and humility, expressing the most fundamental Christian outlook.”⁴ Schickel used simple materials and plain construction as is evidenced also in his renovation of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, the oldest Trappist Monastery in the United States, once home to Thomas Merton. No doubt such genius as Schickel’s is rare; it must be revered when found. Any further work on such a project must never be undertaken by a single person’s vision unless another genius is found and commissioned.

One of the ecclesial treasures of the United States is found in central Minnesota at Saint John’s Abbey, a Benedictine Monastery. There, rising over the fields, fauna and wetlands, is the grand Abbey Church designed early in the 1950s by Marcel Breuer. Writing in *Arch Daily*, author Brian Pagnotta judges “This cast-in-place concrete marvel is a stepping-stone in modern design of religious architecture in the United States.” Pagnotta reports, “In 1950, Abbot Baldwin Dworschak made an audacious decision resulting in what art historians have called a milestone in the evolution of the architecture of the Catholic Church in this country. He contacted

⁴ <http://www.schickeldesign.com/grailville-oratory-loveland-ohio.shtml>; viewed January 6, 2013.

twelve exalted architects, among them was Marcel Breuer. Abbot Baldwin asked the architects to submit a building design for the second century of Saint John's."⁵

Writing in *Commonweal*, Albert Eisele sees "Breuer, the New York Bauhaus-trained architect, and Dworschak, the far-sighted abbot", as "the central figures in a unique collaboration that produced one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century religious architecture." Eisele, a 1958 graduate of Saint John's University, interviewed Abbot Baldwin in 1991, 20 years after his retirement. Eisele reports, "He made it clear the church was to be the cornerstone of the plan, declaring it should be 'truly an architectural monument in the service of God.' He added, 'The Benedictine tradition at its best challenges us to think boldly and to cast our ideals in forms which will be valid for centuries to come, shaping them with all the genius of present-day materials and techniques.'" Eisele also reports that "Some critics, including monks and parishioners, found the church uninviting, austere, and not conducive to devotion. But it was judged an architectural masterpiece by others."⁶

Importantly, the Church is today as it was; the building has not been tampered with, cluttered or changed. A chapel for eucharistic reservation has been crafted out of a small space in the back of the nave. A low tabernacle first sat on the main altar as was the custom before Vatican II; that tabernacle is now in a small chapel in the monastery infirmary. But the monks who voted to employ an architectural visionary, and their successors, have also honored the vision by

⁵ <http://www.archdaily.com/255902/ad-classics-st-johns-abbey-church-marcel-breuer/>; entry dated July 12, 2012.

⁶ "The Monks & the Modernist," 4/6/2012, Vol. 139 Issue 7, pp. 10-13.

maintaining the Church and hallowing it with prayer, not allowing competing or conflicting visions authority to modify or change.

What About When There Is No Individual Genius?

[D]ecisions about church art and architecture should always be based upon the theology of the eucharistic assembly and its liturgical action and the understanding of the Church as the house of God on earth.

§ 11 § Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship

Environment and Art in Catholic Worship was published by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1978. The first pastor referenced above performed his labors earlier; but had he wished to consult authoritative documents, both the Apostolic See and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops had by then provided documents implementing the provisions of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 128. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* could have offered some initial guidance. He preferred a more efficient approach. But the result fell somewhere between inadequate and lamentable. The second renovating pastor in that same place had many additional resources available to him. He was either ignorant of them or felt that he knew well enough what to do based on his own perceptions. His result fell even closer to the intersection of inadequate and lamentable as he clearly had abundant resources to consult for guidance, but he chose not to do so and was not challenged by those in chancery or parish.

Both of these men, their parishes, and the process they employed fell far short of the ideal expressed in *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*: “One of the most significant and formative experiences in the life of a parish

community is the process of building or renovating a church” (1). What a great sadness to miss such an opportunity for catechetical work that could yield a harvest 100-fold.

Church architecture ought to remind the believer that the call to holiness involves personal transformation followed by the transformation of the world. In his essay “Art To Help Humankind Cross the “Threshold Of Hope,”” Carlo Chenis writes, “Who more than the artist can express in the sensible the workings of his own of mind, heart and will in its quest for God? Who more than he can convey beauty in the world of forms to make them a sign of the new creation?” He notes that the artist is called to be “the prophet of a new adventure of the spirit.” The “exalted splendour of art” will “stimulate in peoples and in the young - the obvious sign of the future - a vigorous, constructive and creative critical conscience.”⁷

Church buildings are different from strip malls and government centers; all buildings are made to be functional, but churches are also built to give witness to Christian presence and the transforming power of the gospel. Chenis notes, “Art is sacred if it is above all beautiful, that is, intrinsically splendid, because it is fully intelligible, so that it makes first the artist and then the person who enjoys it want to cross over into infinity.” Clearly, a church door should issue just such an invitation. So, he continues, “art is religious if it produces a longing for the divine, namely, if it leads one to transcend one’s own self in order to meet God and with him one’s neighbour.” Surely any gathering place for the assembly ought to prompt and

⁷ Art and Culture Commission, “Art To Help Humankind Cross The “Threshold of Hope,”” located July 13, 2013, at: http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01091997_p-67_en.html

inspire such a longing. Both the building and its appointments are truly Christian “if, through the adventures of the spirit, it recounts what happened between God and man in the history of salvation, if it rises to God like a sweet and profound prayer, if it makes ‘God’s glory’ visible, though in a hidden manner, in the celebration of the divine mysteries.”

Few of us among God’s people are either visionaries or artists; fewer still of our committees are so inspired. We should not think that we can become artists as we seek to build or renovate the house of the church; we should also be careful not to think that we will find all of the art that we need in the catalogs that tumble through our mail slots. Because one can sign checks or locate a contractor in the yellow pages is no assurance that one knows how to think with the Church (*Sentire Cum Ecclesia*).

Distinguishing Between High Art, Folk Art, Catalog Purchases, and Political statements

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§ 11 § Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship

I visited a small rural church that had been constructed in the 1960s, shortly after the conclusion of the Council. There was much to distinguish it in its design as it was clearly “based upon the theology of the eucharistic assembly and its liturgical action and the understanding of the Church as the house of God on earth” (*Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*, 11). However, over the years, the primacy of this approach was lost as the building was cluttered with extraneous

artifacts that represented the devotional life of individual members. The worst piece, in my estimation, was a crudely rendered drawing, in a dollar store frame, nailed up at the entrance to the baptistery so as to be seen by each person entering or leaving the assembly and all who entered the baptistery. The drawing, in white on a black background, was of a weeping Jesus holding a fetus in an outstretched hand. The point of the piece, as I understood it, was not just to remind worshipers of Church law, but to go a step beyond and relate the presumed feelings of Jesus about particular law breakers. I imagine that the drawing could have had a caption: "A person who procures a completed abortion incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication (Canon 1398)." The point here is certainly not to dispute or even discuss what the Church teaches. That teaching is abundantly clear, though it has not always been communicated, as Paul asks in Ephesians, by "living the truth in love" (4:15). But sensitive souls might ask why such a piece is hung in a church building, and what effect that might have on worshipers who have suffered a miscarriage or the sudden death of an infant, or even a lamented abortion. How are parents and godparents and grandparents and guests to feel when being so greeted on entering the baptistery?

One can find similar but more expensive memorials to unborn innocence, as they are called, readily available for installation in worship spaces. One could ask then if artists should be busy building monuments for Minnesota Catholic Churches that would mourn the 2012 failure to adopt an amendment to the state constitution defining marriage as between one man and one woman. Should there be monuments to proper Catholic thinking on legislation concerning immigrants and

immigration? When municipalities or the federal government forbid the display of the 10 Commandments on public property, the response of many Churches is to erect granite markers etched with the Commandments; some observe that their placement seems more defiance than reverence. Why just the 10 Commandments? Why not granite markers advising passers-by of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy? What about the precepts of the Church? The seven sacraments? Should there be monuments that would encourage legislators and celebrate or damn legislation that upholds or offends Catholic points of view on certain social issues? A free-thinking and well-heeled individual could craft a sculpture garden out of all these monuments, but it is somewhere between difficult and impossible to suggest that they belong inside or at the entry of a Catholic worship space.

Devotion to Sister Faustina, the Polish nun, saint and visionary, has brought scores of reproductions to church buildings of the first Divine Mercy painting, from 1934, by Eugeniusz Marcin Kazimirowski, on exhibit at the Divine Mercy Sanctuary in Vilnius, Lithuania. One can argue that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and observe as well that the two rays emanating from the heart of Jesus in the painting are also the colors of the Polish flag. Other devotees bring home from their travels inexpensive reproductions of Our Lady of Guadalupe or other popular pieces, and make grand gestures of donating them to their parishes with the clear expectation that they be hung prominently and venerated. Others mourn the absence of stained glass windows in their churches and take the initiative to affix colored, translucent paper to clear windows in cheap imitation of remembered glory elsewhere. Those responsible for such gifts and additions, and the pastors who allow them, will often

be quick to assert that their parishes are not fancy like other, richer places, and they are doing their best to honor God. This approach, too, is pastoral tyranny in that the individual members are free to impose their visions, feelings or purchases on worship spaces and worshipers. Failing to exercise properly attuned pastoral authority may seem less confrontational, but it is not leadership, and allows the loudest voice or loosest wallet to impose, tyrannically, on others. It also evidences a clear misunderstanding of what a parish church is to be, and why.

There seems in these places and by these practices to be a particular lack of understanding about the purposes served by a Church building. One can argue that a healthy devotional life is to be admired, cultivated and emulated. One can also argue that one person's art is another person's kitsch. But a fair-minded member of the Church should then conclude that personal, private devotion, which may well be a good thing nourished by substandard art, should not be imposed on an assembly or place of assembly whose primary purpose and function is to gather around font, book and table. Sister Faustina and the recently beatified German nun whose graphic visions inspired Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* can provoke and invite their followers to rich lives of private prayer, but reproductions of art pieces done by their followers cannot legitimately claim to find a proper home in Catholic worship spaces.

This approach of not admitting random collections of pious reproductions into the worship space, while thoroughly Catholic, is often avoided because of fear of offending good members of a parish. But while their feelings are certainly to be considered, the feelings of others who may feel quite alienated by someone else's

piety taking hostage the parish church should also be taken into consideration. Healing a well-intentioned but misshapen understanding of the function of a parish facility can easily take place with a proper catechetical effort. Such an effort ought to begin with local bishops and be augmented by pastors and pastoral teams. A renewed or refreshed understanding of how art serves the Church does not mean that all plaster of Paris reproductions must be consigned to the dustbin. Parishes are certainly free to have rotating displays of the art or artifacts and reproductions owned or made by parishioners. Perhaps they can be installed in niches in gathering spaces, in classrooms or meeting rooms, or in the parish hall. People who loan them may prepare statements orally or in writing explaining how and why they are personally significant and thus help keep record of the parish history and membership and devotional practices. Then, the worship space is free again to be a space for worship; private devotion will have found its proper place, too. Saint Benedict, in chapter 52 of his *Rule for Monasteries*, gives an instruction that we do well to follow: “Let the oratory be what it is called, a place of prayer; and let nothing else be done there or kept there.”⁸

How Do Those Who Eschew Tyranny Proceed?

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.

2 Timothy 1:7

Perhaps we must acknowledge that there will always be tyranny, always until the Day of the Lord. Further, tyrannical behavior will be unleashed both by

⁸ <http://www.osb.org/rb/text/rbeaad1.html#52>

those who seek to be tyrannical as well as those who are pushed into it either by their own pusillanimity, or by the force of being part of a crowd who misunderstands both democracy and what it means to participate fully in the work of the church. Whether a tyrannical pastor rules, or an ill-prepared or poorly-equipped committee hands down directives as if from on high, we can be sure that the Reign of God is ill-served and the architecture authorized by either may or may not be functional, but will rarely be better than mediocre in lifting hearts and minds to higher truths. Perhaps the buildings they commission or the renovations they approve may produce spaces that are functional, but not beautiful. But buildings, too, should evangelize; having a shell to house the church is important; it is not enough.

Jeffrey Tucker, writing in *Crisis Magazine: A Voice for the Faithful Catholic Laity*, notes that “George Weigel reports having spent three solid hours just gazing up while he visited Chartes in France. That’s the idea: not abstraction but instantiation in a way that appeals very intensely to the senses.”⁹ Probably most would agree that we would like our worship spaces to invite such a prayerful response. We would have smaller chance of agreeing on which spaces do so; seeking to fashion such a place is not a task for tyrants or tyros.

If we seek to avoid tyranny, we first must acknowledge that we seek to avoid it whether inflicted by clerics or committees. Tyranny is no better when it comes from a mob than from a dictator. If we seek to topple tyranny, then we seek the Kingdom of God, for God will be found when both tyrants and tyranny itself are

⁹ <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/the-casino-and-the-cathedral-on-recovering-our-abandoned-culture>; July 22, 2013.

vanquished. Next, we will have to acknowledge that there is not a plan or a structure that will please everyone. Then we must begin with prayer, asking that the Holy Spirit direct our efforts and guide our artists. Pastors and parishes who fail to have the discussion outlined in this paragraph are at great risk; they can expect to produce a mediocre effort, or engage in behavior that fails to meet the standards they should want to seek.

A parish might choose to employ a design team and trust them, even if, in the end, not all will agree that the project is inspired in every way. Here is where a true spirit of consensus must come in: can there be agreement that all of those involved can live supportively with what has been chosen? The parish, or its designated committee, is still involved: they begin by making a list of all the needs that the new space must meet, possibly ranking these desires. To give either a pastor or a committee power over every decision is certain to be problematic.

We ought frankly to admit that any number of Catholics would not be happy if either Notre Dame Cathedral or Saint John's Abbey Church were the result of their new project. And the unhappy members will certainly feel either free or even bound to express their unhappiness, often confusing their own preferences for artistic and ecclesial sensibility. Consequently, all involved must be prepared to hear and address any numbers of concerns, including: "What we have is fine;" "I don't like what is planned or proposed;" "It does not seem holy and homey to me;" "It seems protestant in its inspiration;" "The money allocated would be better spent elsewhere." Yes, everyone has a voice. Well, members have voice; visitors should refrain from offering their infallible judgments. But be clear: voice does not equal

veto. Those who think that everyone should be pleased, and that all must approve and endorse every detail of the project, are both naïve and soon to be bitterly disappointed.

In the end, we seek to be people who understand, appreciate and give thanks that “From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace” (John 1:16). We seek to be transformed: “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). So, even in the midst of human imperfection and imperfectly fashioned worship spaces, we might take to heart the recommendation of Blessed John XXIII of increasingly happy memory: “See everything, overlook much and correct a little.”