

# LITURGICAL ARTS

*Building churches • the Tridentine Mass • lay preaching*

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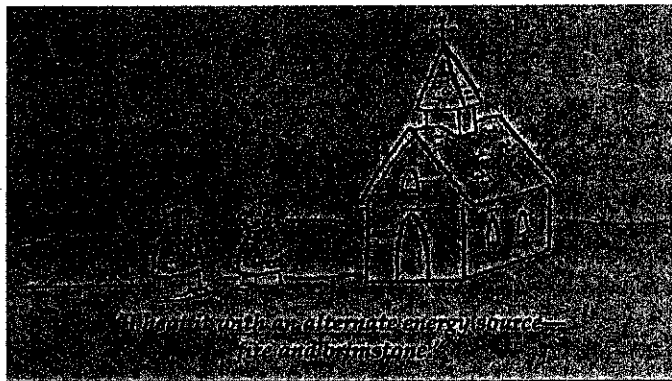
## BUILDING CHURCHES

**S**ome months ago I had a spirited conversation with a friend who is a member of a nearby parish—let's call him Al. I have heard him referred to as a "traditionalist" and a "conservative." He is happy to speak his mind either way. He and his wife identify strongly with Pope John Paul II. They refer to the catechism in discussion, have aesthetic taste that is—as we say here in Cincinnati—soooo Cincinnati! They read the *National Catholic Register*, do home schooling, and seem borderline affluent. Al confided to me that the "so-called education program" being "foisted" on the parish in preparation for the building of a new church smacked more of "indoctrination" than education.

A few months later I had a lively talk with an acquaintance visiting from out of state—call her Tina. She worships at her diocesan cathedral, a historic building for which a renovation plan is in the works. I have heard Tina called "liberal," "progressive," and a few other things. Like Al, she is more than happy to speak her mind and she speaks it well. She is single, feminist, an artist, and as repelled by the tang of orthodoxy as Al is drawn to it. Tina reads the *National Catholic Reporter*. She said the "liturgical consultants' education program" underway for the cathedral renovation "process" was really not education at all, but "shallow proselytizing."

That Catholics as seemingly opposite as Tina and Al should find common ground in their opposition to these education programs bolsters my growing conviction that something is amiss in liturgical art and architecture, and particularly in the so called "education programs" and "process" that are now considered the *sine qua non* for enlightened projects.

In "Powers of Persuasion" (*America*, October 9, 1999),



Nathan D. Mitchell, director of the Notre Dame Pastoral Center, states that documents like the 1978 *EACW (Environment and Art in Catholic Worship)*, crafted primarily by the late Robert Hovda, properly belong to the literature of persuasion rather than the literature of legislation. *EACW* embodies some of the best early post-Vatican II principles of liturgical art and architecture. It reads, says Mitchell, "like a poem, a prayer," and is "lean, spare, strong, loving, and wise." On the other hand, Mitchell is not so sanguine about a new draft liturgical document, *Domus Dei*, now being considered by the U.S. bishops: "Although it seeks to persuade without legislating...*Domus Dei* seems to legislate without persuading." I share Mitchell's admiration for *EACW* and his sense that liturgical documents, in general, should persuade rather than legislate. But I think he ignores a certain irony here: namely, that it is *EACW*'s advocates who have contributed to facts on the ground which make the distinction between persuasion and legislation largely meaningless.

Over the past decade, many proponents of *EACW*, perhaps unwittingly, have supported the creation of a new liturgical bureaucracy—in the form of diocesan guidelines and boards of review—that has become increasingly authoritarian in tone and judicial in procedure. Members of diocesan review boards probably do not see their role in this light, but talk to artists, architects, and parish representatives who have gone before such boards and you will get an earful. While the bulk of *EACW* is an exhortation to excellence in liturgical art and architecture, it is the smaller portion, dedicated to technical and specific recommendations, that has captured the attention of review boards. The result has been the production of a plethora of technically correct but banal and uninspired liturgical spaces.

In educational outreach and community consultation, the liturgical bureaucracy has nearly turned *EACW* inside out. In theory, church building projects involve a process that includes town meetings, surveys, and many other opportunities for community input. In practice, the drumbeat of "the people need to be educated" sounds early and often; and this mantra is so broad and amorphous that it is impossible to determine what it means. It is often used to stigmatize opponents (for their lack of piety or refinement), and thus to discourage open discussion of the many important issues that a building project brings to the fore. Has the current consultation process created liturgical art and architecture that deeply explore and powerfully express the unique soul of a worshipping community? Just look about you. The results are dismal.

My problem with today's liturgical bureaucracy is that it advances measurable technical goals at the same time it diminishes the more essential immeasurable exhortative ones at the heart of *EACW*. My grandfather, the American stained-glass artist Emil Frei, once remarked that a board of review eliminates the worst and the best in art and architecture. My own experience has been that bureaucracy and art are natural adversaries. Thanks to the current liturgical bureaucracy, the wonderfully paradoxical duality of local and universal in Catholicism—with its great potential for an almost infinite variety of rich artistic expression—has been nearly lost in the United States in favor of a sterile and homogeneous "American" vision, one created by committees of liturgists at academic conferences and then imposed on local communities through the so-called "education" process.

When I raise these issues with diocesan liturgical staff, they generally admit that the overall quality of liturgical art and architecture is mediocre. But they continue to favor diocesan review structures because, "we can't have another Saint Disaster in this diocese." Again and again I have heard the sad story about how Saint Disaster did not meet the requirements of *EACW*, that the bishop was upset, and that this must not happen again. So I find myself shaking my head both yes and no when Mitchell, using *EACW*, takes *Domus Dei* to task for emphasizing mechanics over mystery. I agree with him that *EACW* intended just the opposite, but, as implemented, it is an imperfect tool for critiquing the

new draft document. Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Artists* (*Origins*, May 6, 1999), strikes a deeper note. As in *EACW*, its emphasis is exhortative and encouraging, not technical. It calls us to ponder the profound relationship between goodness and beauty. It makes no reference to boards of review or other bureaucratic structures to advance its goals.

The skepticism and concern that Al, Tina, and many others have about the "education" they have undergone is, for me, a sign of hope. It is appropriate that the laity should take an active, perhaps even leading, role in the movement for cultural and liturgical renewal in the church. Real education, like art, does not exist by legislative, judicial, bureaucratic, or clerical fiat. It has its own authority.

Of course, there is risk in moving away from the bureaucratic model the American church has embraced. There will be less control, less uniformity. Some projects will be downright bad. But let's admit it, more than a few are downright bad now. (I even question whether my grandfather was right about bureaucracy preventing the worst!) Still, the potential for improvement and innovation would seem to outweigh the risk by far. In a recent column (*Worship*, July 1999), Mitchell calls for a "vernacular" architecture in our worship spaces: "We...experts," he writes, "do not like the idea that ordinary, uneducated people may have ideas—good ideas—about how to shape ritual space, about how to create architectural environments that are truly hospitable to the community that inhabits them." Amen!

With less bureaucracy, the art and architecture of our worship spaces would be far more diverse, creative, and authentically local. A wider variety of rich, artistic expression—called for in *EACW* and welcomed in the *Letter to Artists*—would be given freer rein. We need to emphasize more both the local and the universal, to throw off the false security of bureaucracy, and to take the risks required for cultural renaissance and spiritual revival in our time. It may mean that the weeds and wheat will have to grow along-side one another for a while. That's better than living in a desert. □

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