

Urban and Social Design: Reconnecting the Church

Un proyecto urbano y social: reconectar la Iglesia

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<https://doi.org/10.17979/aarc.2013.3.0.5094>

RESUMEN

As first described by *Gaudium et Spes*, we know the Church's relationship with society should and must evolve. Our moment in history, perhaps, is not as simple as past eras when the Church (the physical edifice and the institution) acted as the axis of both life and culture. For most modern Westerners, it is no longer so; the Church is far removed from the daily routine. It is the sanctuary where we attend Mass on Sunday, but not much more. For those who have fallen away or have yet to be evangelized, the church building is often nothing more than part of the homogenous fabric that constitutes most urban, suburban and rural cores. The church does not require more grand architectural gestures, but rather new, more networked and nuanced ways to exist and connect to each other and God in the built world; in other words, new ways to manifest to contemporary women and men «the mystery of God, who is their final destiny» (*Gaudium et Spes*).

ABSTRACT

Tal como fue descrito por primera vez en la *Gaudium et Spes*, sabemos que la relación entre la Iglesia y la sociedad debe y tiene que evolucionar. Nuestro momento en la historia quizás no sea tan sencillo como en épocas pasadas, cuando la Iglesia (físicamente y como institución) actuaba como eje de la vida y de la cultura. Mucho ha cambiado en la sociedad occidental actual; la Iglesia es una entidad alejada de nuestras rutinas diarias. La iglesia se ha convertido en el edificio donde asistimos a Misa los domingos, poco más. Para aquellos que se han alejado de ella o que aún no han sido evangelizados, las iglesias no son más que una parte de la estructura homogénea que constituye los núcleos urbanos, suburbanos y rurales. La iglesia ya no necesita grandes gestos arquitectónicos, sino formas nuevas; maneras más interconectadas y matizadas de existir y conectarse entre sí y con Dios; en pocas palabras, una nueva forma de manifestar a los hombres y mujeres de hoy en día «el misterio del Dios que es nuestro destino final» (*Gaudium et Spes*).

PALABRAS CLAVE

Arquitectura religiosa; Iglesia; transformación; parroquia; ciudad.

KEYWORDS

Sacred Architecture; Church; Transformation; Parish; City.

Viewed from the macrocosm of history, the Roman Catholic Church's sustained prominence and pivotal place (both as an institution and as an ideology) in the world and its events is, to somewhat understate the matter, rather unprecedented. A fervent adherent to the faith might attribute this remarkable persistence to the divine ordination of Holy Mother Church as the Bride of Christ. From a less mystical view, however, it can be seen that the Church, throughout its 2000 year history, has benefited and pragmatically or shrewdly taken advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves through the course of world events. Much like an organism that evolves to best thrive in an ever changing environment, the Church has made and remade itself into the image best suited to each moment in history: from the oppressed and persecuted of Nero, the Church transformed itself into an institutional arm of the Roman Empire; when the Empire itself fell, the Church filled the governmental and structural void that followed, and became both the secular and religious authority for almost the entirety of Western Europe; with the rise of the age of exploration, the Church gave birth to new types of religious, eager to travel the world over to find and convert the heathen; these orders —the Dominicans, the Franciscans, and later on the Jesuits among others— remade the Church's very complexion and challenged preconceptions of the ways and means by which it lived and spread the Gospel; when Martin Luther posted the *95 Theses*, once again, the Church, by some unknowable combination of expedience and foresight, undertook the task of self-reflection and reform, and emerged unrepentant and newly revived.

In the 20th century, the second Vatican Council, called under the aegis of the visionary Pope John XIII, saw the need for the Church to transform itself and the manner in which it engaged the world. It is by means of these strategic pivots, opportunistic decisions, and a good bit of luck, that the Church has maintained its somewhat oversized prominence on the world stage today.

Yet, almost 50 years on from the closing the Second Vatican Council, its intentions, interpretations and implementation remain hotly contested. Some attribute the steep fall in vocations, weekly Mass attendance, and a panoply of other ills to the council's efforts to be in the world and not apart from it. Those that ascribe to this school of thought, favor instead a reflexive return

to a previous paradigm, as demonstrated by a predilection for all things pre-conciliar, ranging from clerical garb, politically powerful prelates and liturgical rites to the very architecture of worship. The fundamental problem with this stance is that it supposes that by returning to pre-conciliar norms and milieus, that the rest of the world will necessarily follow, reverting back era that never truly existed in the real world. With this frame of mind, we end up with an anachronistic institution that looks hopelessly lost and left behind by the cultures in which it exists.

The architectural manifestation of this urge results in, at best, pale reflections of previous architectural forms and styles, and, at worst, caricatures and *pastiche*s of past masterpieces plucked at random from history books. But, I'm going to leave for another time the discussion of ecclesiastical architectural *appropriateness*, and rather, focus more on the how the church (building) exists in relationship to the urban fabric and therefore the communities it ostensibly serves.

The Church could once rely on its privileged place both in society and the physical world, with grand and imposing architectural expressions often anchoring public squares, not so subtly reminding all of the Church's ever present role in daily life. And the church was not just a physical anchor, its bells tolled the order of the day, calling all to work and prayer alike; the liturgical calendar established the very rhythms of the seasons, and thus life itself. For most modern Westerners, it is no longer so; the church is far removed from the daily routine. It is the sanctuary where we attend Mass on Sunday, but not much more. For those who have fallen away or have yet to be evangelized, the church building is often nothing more than part of the homogenous fabric that constitutes most urban, suburban and rural cores.

Because the Church no longer dominates culture, society, and our cities in the way it once did, it is forced to compete with virtual connectedness for the attentions, affections and devotion of the masses. We cannot pretend that the world has not changed, and continue to preach, serve and build using the same tired methods that once worked. We must have the courage to understand the necessities of the world and Gospel today, and not cleave to what has been. The Church does not require more grand architectural gestures, but rather new, more networked and nuanced ways to exist and connect

to each other and God in the built world; in other words, new ways to manifest to contemporary women and men «the mystery of God, who is their final destiny»¹.

But we do not have to look very far find inspiration for a *new* paradigm; we only have to look to the Church's own past. Our early Christian brothers and sisters did not worship in glorious basilicas, or even large auditoria; they worshipped from their homes.

After the temples and synagogues became inhospitable to the early Christians, the center of ministry moved almost completely to what were termed house churches. This means of gathering reveals much about the intentions, architecturally, religiously, and liturgically of those who gathered there: the Latin term for the house church, *domus ecclesia*, refers not so much to the domestic building, but to the gathered assembly; it was not until much later that the term church (note lower-case) began to be associated with a structure rather than those belonging to the Christian community². Thus, architecturally, the house church represented to the early Christians a *de facto* solution to multiple problems; it gave them space when they were expelled from the synagogues; it allowed them to easily expand and adapt as the nascent movement continued to grow; and finally, it allowed the early Christians to be nimble, to change, move, and redirect efforts as needed. It also reflected the belief of the imminent *parousia*, such that they did not cling to earthly possessions, buildings or real estate. The Church (note upper-case), was, in a very real and physical way, a part of the community. Not a-part from it, not standing over it, but weaved within the very fabric of it.

The situation of the Church today is much more akin to the early Church than the Church post-Constantine. It is familiar, yet disconnected from the daily lives of most people. Therefore, it cannot be comfortable or complacent about its status in the world, and it cannot be idle in its charge to (re)-evangelize. As eloquently stated by Benedict XVI, the Church's «mandate to preach the Gospel (...) requires the regular adjustment of lifestyles, pastoral planning and diocesan organization to this fundamental dimension of being Church, especially in our continuously changing world»³. To heed the Holy Father's exhortation, we cannot be wedded to accidental or extraneous worldly objects, including buildings, even beautiful ones. Now this is not to say that we should resume meeting in

homes, but what is to prevent the Church from borrowing forms and ideas (as it has always done) from more secular endeavors, such as say, the pop-up restaurant or store⁴.

These temporary structures or installations allow the purveyors to set-up, stay, move and transform at will, affording them the fluidity and adaptability often necessary in world that now measures time and change in milliseconds rather than minutes or hours. These types of installations can be set up in unused spaces, on streets, in parks, and other areas that are both prominent and unexpected. They do not encumber the proprietors with heavy initial debt, and allow them to walk away if, for whatever reason, the endeavor is unsuccessful.

But the temporary nature of this strategy is, in and of itself, problematic. The act of evangelization is not mere marketing, but rather the intentional and persistent building of lasting and meaningful relationships. Here, another model comes to mind: community policing. In the United States, much has been made of the corruption, brutality, and endemic racial divides between police forces and the communities they serve; in essence, similar to the pre-conciliar Church, the Police force existed as a walled fortress, ostensibly acting for the community's greater good, but not always being a part of it. Community policing, conversely, emphasizes the power of relationships to create safe and vibrant places; the police officers do not merely patrol their beat from their squad car, they get to know the people who make up the community; the officer's home base isn't the precinct, but a small office within the community center; they play basketball or soccer with the kids; moreover, they are invested in people's lives, not for an ulterior motive, but because they themselves care⁵.

In much the same way, the Church cannot evangelize by patrol car; time, care and love must be invested. And in order for this to occur, greater diffusion of people and resources is necessary. We must break down the mega-parish, and instead establish micro-parishes that penetrate cities and communities at the granular level. This also necessitates a careful rethinking of what constitutes a parish, a parish building and even perhaps the exclusivity of the priesthood.

This type of strategy would allow the church to truly be amidst the people, to reconnect. Often we allow our churches and edifices to become our own prisons or *ghettos*; we are comfortable within our own ideologies

and among those with whom we easily agree, and instead of seeking them out, we wait for the hungry, the hurting, or the searching to find us. The Church, if she is to be an active and vibrant witness to the Gospel in the 21st century, must be actively engaged and entrenched in the world.

Pope Francis at World Youth Day in Brazil this year made much the same exhortation: «I want a mess» he said. «We knew that in Rio there would be great disorder, but I want trouble in the dioceses! (...) I want to see the Church get closer to the people. I want to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools, or structures»⁶. To adequately preach the gospel in our time, we must be willing to abandon those things not essential to the gospel, including the traditional notion of church architecture. We must not be afraid to let go of what is no longer relevant, and remember that all traditions, at one time or another, began as novelty. The basilical, cruciform, stolid architectural form is not *dogma*, or even an essential aspect of liturgical worship.

It is time to learn from the Church's own history; if we are to remain relevant, we must pivot and transform. We must not think that we embody the establishment, for we no longer do. We must be like our early Christian

brothers and sisters, pragmatic and perhaps, even a bit subversive; we must be nimble, able to change tactics and methods with relative ease; and we must be humble, for it is not the glorious church building that brings salvation, but rather, the communication of the Gospel of Christ, through acts of faith and love. The building is but a tool: a means to a much greater end.

NOTES

(1) Austin Flannery, ed., *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II* (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 208.

(2) Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman world: Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 108.

(3) Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for World Mission Day 2012*, Vatican Website, January 12, 2012, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/mis-sions/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120106_world-mission-day-2012_en.html (accessed October 1, 2013).

(4) Cf. Louie Elaine, «How a Pop-Up Store Pops Up», *New York Times*, September 13 2013, www.nytimes.com.

(5) Cf. U.S. Department of Justice, *Community Policing Defined* (Washington DC: Office of Community Policing Services, 2010).

(6) Raymond Arroyo, «Pope Francis's 'Mess'», *National Review Online*, August 1, 2013, www.nationalreview.com.