Le Corbusier's pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp, France. Photo: Groucho / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 / https://www.flickr.com/photos/groucho/13556662883

LIVING STONES

The Vernacular in Church Architecture

Alexis Vinogradov

The liturgy of the Early Christian era was about *doing* rather than *saying*. This distinction is borrowed from Dom Gregory Dix by Fr. Kyprian Kern, who was responsible for the first major Orthodox investigation of the sources and practices of the Christian *ecclesia*.[1] The Jesuit scholar Marcel Jousse reinforces this assertion in writing of the early Christian practice and understanding of "eating and drinking" the word, rooted in a mimesis of gestures passed on through generations.[2] "*Do* this in remembrance of me," says Christ at the last gathering with his disciples (Lk. 22:19).

The present essay is about the vernacular in church architecture. It is not an examination of those earlier Church practices, but no exploration of religious art and architecture can be meaningful without consideration of the heart of worship that is ultimately to be expressed and enhanced by both art and architecture. Of course this consideration must include literature, music, and ritual movement and gesture.

Our earliest archaeological discoveries substantiate the nature of the "doing" performed by the Church. The celebrants did not initially constitute a distinct caste, for all who were gathered were involved in the rites. One can therefore understand the emergence throughout Christian history of anti-clerical movements, which have pushed back against the progressive exclusion of the faithful from areas deemed "sacred" in relation to the "profane" precincts of the laity. Already at the close of the first century, Clement of Rome speaks about the *liturgy of the bishop, the liturgy of the priest, the liturgy of the deacon,* and *the*

[1] Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945), 12–15. Kiprian Kern, Евхаристия (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1947).

[2] Marcel Jousse, *L'Anthropologie du geste* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

liturgy of the laity. In this designation is presupposed the appropriate training (as much as three years for the laity!) for all the ranks of faithful. *Liturgy*, for Clement, refers to actions performed in a kind of ritual choreography of a harmonious whole.

For the most part, we have today a bifurcated liturgy, in which a trained and active clergy perform the celebration according to arcane rules that exclude an essentially passive "audience," no longer engaged in the sacral choreography. Whether tethered in immobile pews or rows of chairs or somewhat liberated in a clear floor space, the faithful nonetheless remain in basically fixed locations as passive observers of the cult. This is not to say that silent standing in church is not a form of participation—in a non-stop age, such opportunity for pious standing may be the one antidote to be treasured, and not countered with concocted liturgical "ministries" designed for dubious aims of inclusiveness!

It would not do justice to the depth of liturgical theology and history to make any summary assertion about how liturgy was once and now ought to be done, and on its heels to institute a quick liturgical reform. Liturgy is not a game for scholars and experts. Its evolution reflects a slow appropriation of precisely those gestures and forms examined by Dix, Kern, and Jousse. A certain ritual conformity is not a slavishness to form, but what they call a unitive "language" that speaks across the province of precise verbal semantics.

By the same token, neither the iconographer nor the architect is free to pull arbitrary elements out of a file of "Orthodox styles" and apply them at whim for the sensual satisfaction of the community. The Roman Catholic scholar Aiden Kavanagh, arguing against the excessive carpeting of churches, writes: "One comes to the liturgy to transact the public business of death and life rather than to be tucked in with fables and featherpuffs." In describing the late medieval introduction of pews into worship, he likens it to the placement of bleachers directly on the basketball court, writing that "it changes the event into something entirely different."[3]

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While today we are rarely, if ever, able to experience what the early liturgical practices felt like, we can still examine what we know about them and create a language of architectural space that provides, at the very least, an opportunity to restore the spirit of those practices. There is absolutely no need to ape what we discover in archaeological research, because the Church's tradition is a living reality, informed continually by the Holy Spirit. Early history already perfectly demonstrates this dynamism and resistance to the dogmatization of forms and materials.

The purpose of both church architecture and iconography, as they combine with music and aromas and light, consists not in bringing us to an exalted perception of external delights, but rather in a transformation within the hearts of the assembled faithful. The question for architecture is how it can serve its own iconic purpose. In the icon we must pass through the paints and lines to the prototype, just as the pieces of a parable must move us beyond the immediate story towards its central revelation. Architecture cannot satisfy participants by dazzling with formal and technical gymnastics. The forms themselves must move us toward their hidden content, bringing us to Paul's affirmation of "Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

[3] Aiden Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (1966; New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1982), 21–22. In the same volume, Fr. Kavanagh explores the great decline in ritual beauty: see especially the chapter "Some Common Mistakes," 72–80.

Church of St. Gregory the Theologian, Wappingers Falls, New York. Deisis mural behind open iconostasis.

Gothic cathedrals such as the one in Cologne tower 50 stories into the sky trying to reach that kingdom which the Savior says is actually within each of us. In my small parish church, the 16 by 17-foot *Deisis* mural icon in the sanctuary depicts some 26 figures from sacred tradition surrounding the glorified Savior enthroned. He is there among them, and yet their individual gazes are not focused adoringly on him in expression of a sentimental delight, but are rather oriented inward. They are calm, at peace, knowing that he is in them and they in him.

Iconographers and architects may debate styles and schools, but the living tradition offers a challenge at every moment to transfigure the historical "flesh" that is presented to the Church. The Christian Church is material because its savior is the Word and Son of God become incarnate. All matter is the potential word and manifestation of its creator. The Savior arrives in a humble setting. Nothing remains "common," and that means that distinctions between vernacular and sacred are artificial in light of the incarnation.

The Church's decline in history began when, from her goal of the salvation of the world so loved by God, she shifted her attention onto herself. One can be a specialist in ecclesiology with little or no interest in one's surrounding culture. From a living historical and eschatological body reaching outward in mission, Christians made a "choice" (which is the meaning of "heresy") to idolize particular historical expressions of their religious life in self-satisfied tribal enclosures. Hence, we can speak of a kind of Byzantine or Russian or Greek captivity regarding liturgy, dress, art, music, architecture, and even an ethos of daily discipline and life unrelated to the prevailing culture. It is in fact a denial of history not to see that these forms had their "place" and expression adequate to *that* historical moment and no other. Our work is to examine how those architectonic "words," that particular language of architecture and art, "spoke" in and thereby transfigured their context—but all this in order to know what to do with the cultural word particular to our *own* time and cultures.

Students and theologians of early Christianity insist that Christians did not create new rites and symbols, but rather filled old symbols with the new meaning imparted in Christ. All subsequent ecclesial evolution implied this now familiar duality of the continuity of the old and the discontinuity brought about by the radical newness of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. So how are we to find an expression adequate to

worship today, somewhere between the third-century house church of Dura-Europos on the one hand and the grandeur of cathedrals and Byzantine domes on the other?

A short essay is not the place to delineate principles shaping an architecture that can take what is perceived as vernacular and render it sacred. Often we must look at architecture purely, putting aside for a moment its specific programmatic purpose. Good music, good literature, and good art have an "epiphanic" quality, revealing divine truth by stirring within us the experience of the transcendent for which other words may often prove inadequate. What better summary of the failure of medieval theology and ecclesiology is there than Ivan's tale of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*? In architecture, an epiphanic character is evident in Henri Matisse's Rosary Chapel and Le Corbusier's pilgrimage church at Ronchamp. Such examples cannot be adopted outright for Orthodox worship, but both reveal architectural sensibilities that can be experienced and "translated" for Orthodox liturgical life, for the simple reason that each resulted from efforts (however imperfect) to express contemporary liturgical experience in form and light. The vocation of church architects and iconographers is not to cater to a client's whim but to interpret tradition—a tradition in which they must therefore of necessity be immersed.

In the late fourth century, Christian architecture adopted the model of the Roman basilica, which lent itself to the form of the liturgical *synaxis* around the clergy. But the basilica itself was in some sense the vernacular, albeit prominently civic, architecture of the time, intended simply to accommodate large gatherings. Once Christian worship could become public, this form proved exquisitely accommodating to Christian mural art—whose origins had appeared already in Dura and the catacombs—and evolved primarily in its internal articulation.

Only one major variant ever evolved to rival this type: the Greek cross, the arms of which accommodated antiphonal choirs and eventually subsidiary chapels, memorials, baptisteries, confessionals, and the *diakonikon* or place of *proskomide* (the preparation of the Gifts). A lesser-known but unique and liturgically important contribution is found in Georgian churches, with their prominent narthexes and sensitivity to the vertical "ascent" from there in the Liturgy of Catechumens to the nave to complete the Liturgy of the Faithful. It would be helpful to examine those sources that had not come under the influence of Western liturgical changes (which ultimately impacted the Mediterranean East as well).

In light of this history, it is a shame that in any given culture its prevalent architectonic features and elements are not engaged in the service of church architecture. I have written elsewhere of my disappointment in missed opportunities in places like Japan, rich with a history of architecture, art, and dress which would have been remarkably appropriate to Christian worship, but where the lure of different and "exotic"—in this case, ironically, Western—styles gave rise to an architecture that simply opposes the given culture rather than transforming it.

To begin a conversation on architecture, it might be profitable to suggest an "apophatic" approach—that is, to describe what should be avoided. This could at least give us a head start in recognizing a counterfeit idea when, for example, it is suggested by

a wealthy benefactor desiring to "leave his mark."

- Don't import a foreign building that has no relation to anything built in the area already.

- Avoid architectural firms that offer a hybrid composed of elements you choose from a pictorial buffet and then throw into a computer—and out comes your camel that began his journey as a horse!

- A place of worship is not a rubber stamp, but evolves from the consciousness and (often unarticulated) desires of a very specific community. Do not introduce many distractions; keep things inherently simple at the outset; allow the iconography to develop; and don't leap into final decisions.

- The liturgy emphasizes forward movement and ascent. Static architecture without clear axial direction or vertical transitions through structure and light oppose that movement. Economics often play adversely on this point. Best, then, to build in stages.

- By the same token, don't arrest the sense of movement at the altar wall or iconostasis. I believe that the plane or planes articulating the boundary between nave and sanctuary deserve profound study and deliberation, as they set the tone for the engagement of the worshipping body. Many of the assumptions generally accepted today are deeply problematic. Theologians will argue until the *Parousia* about the symbolism of the veil and about whether icons are a "window" or a "wall," but historically the screen developed for crowd control and only later received its official theological "rationale" as averting the eyes of the impure (even though, tragically, this impulse began very early in the history of the Christian empire). The monastery of New Skete

Holy Wisdom Church, New Skete Monasteries, Cambridge, New York. Templon.

in Cambridge, New York shows how the precursor of the modern iconostasis, the *templon*, worked as an open yet still space-defining colonnade that, through its U-form, invited the faithful to surround and envelop the clergy gathered around the altar and the Gifts. This architectural feature was already evident in the church of St. Euphemia, built in Constantinople around 416.

- Don't design the building from the outside in, beginning from a cocktail of domes, cross shapes, arched windows, and roof vaults. Rather, allow liturgical needs to shape the building from the inside out. Many historical monuments show how organically building shapes evolved, as necessary functional spaces were added over time. Byzantine models in particular suggest a marked disregard for the exterior, often blending into the surrounding architectural masses.

- While avoiding exaggerated exterior forms, don't forget that in our contemporary context, the building must still "speak" to the community, inviting inquiry and interest. The fact that our worship includes gathering, procession, and the sanctification of the world outside means that exterior zones and spaces, platforms and stairs, barriers and plantings form an integral extension to the building in both liturgical and evangelical dimensions. This is why there is no single building model that can be placed at will on any site, as each site has peculiarities that must inform the architecture.

- Size matters, and budget is not its sole criterion. We can no longer build as big as we can afford, even if money falls from the sky (or the lottery). Communities need to reflect on "optimal" numbers, which means considering and perhaps defining what constitutes a viable worshiping community in which members can interact with one another and grow together.

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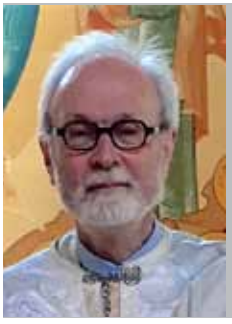
It is possible that we are now experiencing (though perhaps not often admitting or seeing) a critical transition in the nature of the parish church. This transition should be examined by all who are engaged in the process of sustaining and building faith communities. If we are moving towards the model of Dura-Europos, it is not necessarily a step back in time or spiritual development. The return of the house-church invites us to reconsider what Jesus said to a woman from Samaria: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). If such a process means cleaning house, putting away inessentials, then should not such a house-cleaning also involve the very house in which we gather to worship the Father?

The defining "moment" in Christian liturgy can never be reduced to architecture or iconography or beautifully rendered liturgy. That moment—clearly visible in the faces of the faithful during Holy Week, during Pascha, during feast days—is the gathering of "two or three" in the name of Christ. Everything else exists to serve and support it. In effect, however, it is complete by virtue of the One who promises to be with the two or three. The early Christian gathering understood this—understood that Christ is among us, and therefore gathers us around the the gifts of his body and blood on the altar. Fr. Alexander Schmemann

lamented the decline that occurred when theologians began thinking in reverse, presuming that the gifts are on the altar and Christ in our midst through what *we* have said and done. We wrongly imagine that it is we humans who set up the conditions for God to be present. We have forgotten the Liturgy's opening assertion: "It is time for the Lord to act!" We imagine that only in the "proper" performance of liturgy, with the proper music and texts, with the proper iconography, and inside proper architecture can Orthodoxy be manifest.

There is absolutely no doubt that we ought to apply our efforts at bringing the best symbolic language to bear in all spheres of church life. There is also no doubt that there exists bad architecture, bad literature, bad art, bad music. This is not because its consituent elements are bad, but because they are misapplied, without prayer, without understanding, and above all without reference to the one thing needed. That reference is the essential ingredient of all artistic, musical, and architectural creation. It is reference to the eschatological dimension of life, or, more simply put, to the experience known to the Church concerning the kingdom of God in Christ, and thus in the Eucharist. Here, finally, the answer in favor of the vernacular is revealed in the fact that the Church finds her true experience of the mystical notion of "home" in the Eucharistic gathering, for which she establishes the sacred space in the first place. This "home" is no bourgeois idea of a sentimental, cozy living room, but rather a home conjoined to the Father's house, in which there are many "mansions" (as there are many diverse and unique faithful).

The age of the immigrant ghetto in America is over. That means that the national styles of Russia, Greece, Macedonia, and Romania no longer need to be enlisted to hold together a transplanted culture in a foreign land. In America at least, while Christians can indeed remain eschatological "strangers" and aliens, they are commissioned to transform the "flesh" of their own historical context just as Christ labored within the flesh of Palestinian culture. We are not at the point of answers, but merely at the stage of exploration and discovery. It is important for us to say with humility that we are still finding out what we must do among new paradigms. Every new church building should be an experiment—one whose success will not be measured in architectural critiques but by the fruit of a genuine life in Christ that is facilitated within it. Will it promote the glory of the community, the glory of its designer, the glory of its builder? Or will it show forth the glory of God's kingdom, spilling from its walls into the heart of the neighbor and travelling stranger? ✠



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