

1. The New Churches of Europe by Christopher Cornford.

How possible is it to design a first-rate new church in the middle of the twentieth century? Our grandchildren, perhaps, will be able to answer this question better than we can, because what is being built now will, if it survives at all, be much easier to evaluate after it has been lived with and used for a couple of generations. Meanwhile one can at least draw up a balance sheet of our contemporary advantages and disabilities. On the positive side, the apparatus of rationality, simplicity and appeal to first principles which the modern architectural movement wrought for itself should, anyway notionally, give its present-day followers a good start – or at the very least it should preserve them from the worse kinds of pretentiousness and vacuity. A generation reared on le Corbusier's dictum that 'the plan is the generator' ought to be able to devise liturgical spaces that are light, plain and sensible if they are nothing more. Further, the independence from 'historic styles' which the modern movement asserted should make our architectural idiom more readily responsive to changes in liturgical practice and indeed to all the new kinds of religious sensibility and orientation which, long latent, seem at last to have found expression in Pope John and the Council. If, as seems tremulously possible, the Church does in fact decide to enter the twentieth century, understand it and lead it, there is available at least the makings of an architectural vocabulary to suit the purpose.

But there are of course immense difficulties. A very good indication of where these lie was given by the critic Robert Melville in a lecture when he made a distinction between *sacred* art and *religious* art. The sacred – and this would include everything from an African fetish to a high Gothic cathedral – is that which results from a massive and virtually unquestioned metaphysical assumption on the part of a whole community. Being an authentically collective expression it has the quality of anonymity or non-individualism even when its actual author (say Ghislbertus of Autun or Henry Yevele) is known by name. Moreover the most difficult of its stylistic decisions are given in advance by the existence of commonly accepted images both of the object (chalice, statue, font, cathedral) to be made and also of the metaphysical concepts for which the object is the visible equivalent. Since little or no energy has to be expended on the solution of these antecedent problems,

a proportionately greater fund of it is available for the elaboration of the work in hand. In a word there is *confidence*, and anyone who has ever designed anything knows how much that means. It is no accident that the second syllable of the word derives from *fides*.

All sacred art is of course religious, but not all religious art is in Melville's sense sacred. He used the word 'religious' as distinct from 'sacred' to describe works of art which originate not from collective conviction or acceptance but from the sensibility of more or less isolated individuals. By definition such works would occur only in epochs like our own when there is no collective conviction or assumption to draw on, and when therefore the individual artist, designer or architect must, even when serving the Church, be to a great extent his own collectivity – or, more exactly, must spend exhausting years in gathering together and verifying his own artistic convictions. Melville instanced Graham Sutherland's Northampton Crucifixion, a tormented effort for which even so the artist had to draw upon a sixteenth century German source. Dozens of similar examples will come to mind, and good or bad they have in common the disadvantage that they inevitably reek of the individual and to that extent fail in their common transcendent liturgical function. The sense of strain they generate moreover, the frantic effort as of a crippled bird failing to flap itself off the ground is in itself artistically fatal, a contravention of the ancient precept that art consists in concealing art.

How then has it come about that even in our times there has been created a handful of really great religious buildings and works of art such as le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp and his monastery at la Tourette, or Fernand Léger's windows at Audincourt? The answer must be that religious art in its highest manifestations rises to the level of the sacred – just as, for that matter, the best secular art often rises to the level of the religious. More specifically, the clarity and harmoniousness which made le Corbusier's and Léger's work so moving are the fruit of a lifelong dedication to Platonic forms and to the transcendent impersonal beauties of geometry. For lesser talents which cannot find a comparably universal inspiration there waits in the shadows that assassin of grandeur, cleverness.

Thanks to a new publication from the Architectural Press¹ it is now possible to form some idea of the general post-war achievement in church building throughout Europe. Save for a few minor irritants such as the habit of printing inset photographs edge to edge so that they tend to coalesce visually, the book is excellently produced. The photographs are luminous and sharp and there is a sufficiency of diagrammatic data conveniently placed – it was a particularly good notion to devote a quadruple-page spread to reproducing on a common scale plans of all

¹*The New Churches of Europe* by G. E. Kidder Smith: Architectural Press, 73s 6d.

the churches discussed. Mr Kidder Smith's commentary, though tending to the cosy rather than the penetrating, contains useful descriptive material and serves well enough as a lead-in to the act of looking.

If one may accept this book as a representative anthology it reflects a situation by no means as disheartening as some of the above remarks might lead one to expect. There is more going on than we in this country are aware of. Not many churches of distinction have been built in Britain in the period covered: in fact the number in any given country seems, naturally enough, roughly proportional to the amount it was bombed in 1939-45, with Germany therefore the epicentre and on the whole the most interesting, though with the Scandinavian countries in this respect not far behind. The characteristic German aberration is expressionistic quirkiness: that of many French and Italian examples a curiously dead marriage of symmetrical planning with self-conscious modernity of detail. Coventry looks embarrassingly fussy and eclectic, though it must be admitted that there are other things across the channel which are no better. Let us anyway be thankful that Liverpool (R.C.) was not sufficiently advanced for inclusion.

There are however many pleasant and even exciting effects and suggestions of effects: though how much these owe to the photographer's skill could only be exactly determined by a visit to the site. The new structure at Lourdes seems a fine piece of engineering whose very massiveness and span must be impressive in actuality. Rudolf Schwarz's *S. Maria Königin* at Saarbrücken lodges itself in the imagination. Of the Ronchamp-influenced plans, the church at Bruderklausen near Basel by Hermann Baur seems the most logical, and nearby at Reinach is a tough and blockish edifice by Ernst Gisel which looks as though it would well repay a visit. Marvellously picturesque effects are promised by Aalto at Vuoksenniska, by Ruusuvuori at Hyvinkää and by Poulsson at Gravberget – a setting of heath and pine trees both absorbs and enhances the extravagant gesture, it would appear, more readily than the urban scene can do.

Such pleasures notwithstanding, one cannot confidently say that modern architecture has done more than grope at the problem of the sacred edifice. One can only say that it has tried, that a start has been made, and that there is something touching and inspiring in this very fact.

Negative critical comment is, alas, more easy to make. From the evidence of this book it is tempting to compile a list of 'don'ts' for those commissioning an architect to build a church. Don't, to begin with, let him persuade you that his ground plan or elevation is a profound metaphysical allegory. If he has shaped it like a fish or a crown of thorns or praying hands, remind him that the plan is the generator not of whimsical fancies but of architectural logic: and, for that matter, that

what generates the plan itself in the first instance is liturgical requirement.

Then don't let him engage a decorative artist of the second, third or any subsequent rank to apply fiddling little bits of art to a structure which will probably at least have the humble merit of plainness. Again and again as one turns these pages one is struck by the pity of it – messy ceramic plaques, vacuous mural reliefs, busy semi-abstract stained glass windows of overblown cosmological significance, facile streamlined statues of sacred personages *appliqué* to fine blank walls with about as much relevance as if one were to stick a Valentine card on a Mondriaan abstract . . . if only they'd refrained! So unless you can afford the prices payable to the Chagalls, Rouaults or Légers of this world, let the architecture do the talking: it has a far better chance of avoiding the arbitrary, the personal, and therefore the distracting.

This should not be taken to apply to church furnishings. A number of designers are available who could make perfectly good and even excellent chalices, candlesticks, chasubles, chairs. It is only in the realm of large fixed decorative surfaces or solid objects that there is a danger of the visually-aware members of the congregation suffering from recurrent distraction or irritation as a result of receiving, in Jacques Maritain's phrase, 'Mr X's religious sensibility full in the chest'. Mr X might be a very good artist and a very sincere man, but in one way even a pink and blue repository statuette is preferable to what he'll give you, because although repellent it is familiar enough to be ignored.

Lastly, for reasons given above, don't expect too much. Don't assume that, because the architect you've commissioned is young and a disciple of the modern movement, this is either much credit to yourself (you could do no less) or a guarantee of anything more than bare adequacy in terms of a solution. The state of the culture is against you: but you are a long way on if you recognise the fact and start from there. There is even some meagre comfort in the thought, because to admit that the times deny us certain possibilities is by implication to suggest that those possibilities may one day, perhaps not far hence, be swept within our grasp. For times change: what human beings have once done they can do again. What has been withdrawn might be restored.

2. Music in Vernacular Liturgy by Anthony Milner.

In considering the place of music and the vernacular in the restoration of the liturgy commanded by the Second Vatican Council, the main purpose of the reform needs to be constantly kept in mind. 'All the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of liturgy . . . In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy *this full and active participation by all the people* is the aim to be considered before all else;