

LITURGICAL ARTS

CONTENTS: NOVEMBER, 1958

Editorials	1
Art and Architecture for the Church of Our Age THE MOST REVEREND ROBERT J. DWYER <i>Bishop of Reno, Nevada</i>	2
The Tapestry of Sixtus IV in the Convent of Saint Francis in Assisi D. REDIG DE CAMPOS	6
The Editor's Diary: XXVI	7
Illustrations	13-16
The Liturgical Revival and Low Mass THE RIGHT REVEREND JOAQUIM NABUCCO, P.A.	19
Catholic Art in America: Debits and Credits JEAN CHARLOT	21
Correspondence	23
Recent Publications	26
Advertising following	page 28

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Drawing on page 28 by Richard J. Zimmerman

I have traveled a great deal as liturgical observer, both to give and to receive, and I have seen everywhere the most incredible things. In one locality a certain priest was invited to preach at the mass of an important parish. Naturally, he asked the pastor how long he might speak, and received the immediate response: "Begin when the priest arrives at the altar; you will then have the whole mass." The good father answered: "But, Father, is the mass suppose to adorn my sermon or should my sermon adorn the mass?" I know of a college where during mass, on Sunday as well as week days, a priest takes up all the time in repeating catechism lessons with his pupils: he begins with the recitation of the commandments of God and of the Church. In another church the pastor said to me: "You know the people are very busy; within a half hour they have confession, rosary, homily with the weekly announcements, and the mass." In a certain seminary

when there is not sufficient time for meditation, this is made during mass: the first point before the consecration and the second point afterwards. Since the meditation was obligatory it just had to be done, and the mass offered a convenient time.

One must admit that it is because of the obligation *sub gravi* that Catholics, most of them, at any rate, still go to mass. A pious woman said to me: "Ah, Father, I don't miss a single communion," and I answered, "And mass?" She answered, "Oh, that only on days of obligatory attendance." This is the way that many devoted people act, and indeed it is the direction which many receive.

In the beautiful secret prayer for the feast of Saint Ignatius, the Church tells us, in speaking of the mass: *sacrosancta mysteria, in quibus omnis sanctitatis fons est constituiti*. Saint Ignatius knew it well, since all the spiritual graces which he received, especially toward the end of

his life, were received during the celebration of mass. If one is not able to make the mass a living and comprehensible function one will never be able to evangelize the millions of the faithful.

If one recalls the beautiful words of the pope and martyr Saint Clement speaking to the Church of Corinth (A.D. 95), giving each one his place in the Breaking of the Bread, one sees the Church which prays. From the celebrating bishop with his priests and deacons to the faithful in their rank as baptized and confirmed Christians, let it be that each person, he says, know how to remain in his rank. And Gregory Dix says that this is certainly an apostolic injunction stemming from Christ Himself.†† It is the only way of combining hierarchical and pastoral liturgy, for pastoral liturgy will be hierarchical or it will be neither Catholic nor apostolic.

†† *Slope of the Liturgy*, page 2.

Catholic Art in America: Debits and Credits

JEAN CHARLOT *

THE SIGHTS that assail the eye of the American faithful every church-going day rarely illustrate a sane concept of the liturgical arts. Taken at its face value, this daily visual experience would indicate that church art is, for unstated reasons, a doubly debased imitation of past forms of art, shaped indeed in abhorrence of its intended function. Average church art is debased because no contemporary could hope to breathe life into art forms whose once cogent reasons for being are long dead and gone; it is doubly debased because these archaeological fakes are not even given to us first hand, turned out as they are by the thousand as heartlessly and irreverently as video sets or toasters.

Differing from this widespread practice is the correct concept of what the sacred arts should be. Leaving for the moment feeling and theology aside, let us tackle function. In the 1920s the French architect Le Corbusier crisply stated that a house is a *machine to live in*; thus implying that all of it, from floor to crockery, must be shaped, textured, and

inter-related to meet living requirements as exactly as the cogs of a watch conform to their purpose of marking time. Though a church is a more mysterious unit than is a house, it may be described along functional lines: from God's point of view a church is a *machine to live in*, and from man's point of view, a *machine to pray in*. Function is more than implicit in the many practical rulings of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Its laws are more factual than esthetic. They specify practical requirements for a whole gamut of objects, from the plan of a nave to the matter, texture, and shape of a single paten. To start thus at the functional level of the liturgical problem is one sure way to push away the scruples, actually only skin-deep, that artificially and perennially arise about matters of style.

The business of the living church is with the living. To answer its function, a church building should achieve be-

tween today's American parishioner and its architecture, its statues and pictures, a moving affinity not unlike the one that, in Europe, existed for centuries between the faithful and their material church, be it a cathedral or a crossroads chapel. The point is not at all that America should compete with Chartres on its own terms, but rather that our churches should fit the requirements of New World Catholics as successfully as Chartres answered the needs of its own people in a very different time and place.

In the Old World, the battle against ecclesiastical gothic can be fought on the grounds of fitness in time; its battle cry is: *to each period its style!* But Europe is the birthplace of cathedrals. Still in place and in use they blend today, as they did yesterday, into a willing landscape.

In America — in these United States — gothic architecture constitutes a boast flaunted in the face of reason, as insane as importing a haunted Scotch castle. On this continent we have good European medieval works, such as those

* Artist in residence, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, T. Hawaii.

displayed in the Museum of the Cloisters of New York. Once they have crossed the Atlantic, they become mere beautiful curios, as extinct as stuffed dodos in a museum of natural history. Copies, of course, are worse. Even if we could afford more American cathedrals, far outdoing their European models in size, and many more replicas of Bruges belfries (equipped with push-button carillons), the problem of fitness would by no means be solved by such excessively costly esthetic sins.

Does modern art offer a better solution? Yes, if by modern art we mean an art created by contemporaries, like ourselves soothed and buffeted by the times we live in — works whose style will reflect our common experience. Today's artists wear neither knight's armor nor musketeer's cape, and genuine artists see no reason for creating an art of fancy dress.

The excellence of this simple formula — that we have no choice but to be of our own time — should also be applied to geography — to a conformity with the place we live in. Within the relative cohesion of our Western culture, there exist local nuances that the religious artist has no more right to bypass than he has to deny the larger problems raised by the kind of church art that will best fit Asia or Africa. An indiscriminate importation of up-to-date art formulas is but a doubtful panacea for what ails our American liturgical arts. As stated, building fourteenth-century churches in the twentieth century is totally illogical. Nor can one sincerely long for the day when a so-called international style will lay a rash of identical, slab-like architecture on our ever-varied American landscape.

WHEN MODERN ART is mentioned, usually French art is meant — or rather that of the School of Paris, which has ridden for eighty years on a peak of fashion. The French liturgical movement at its most daring became identified with a Dominican, Father Marie-Alain Couturier, whose artist friends were a roster of the better-known names of this School of Paris — Rouault, Léger, Lurçat, Braque, Matisse. Father Couturier stated that he did trust genius above piety. To practice this saying, he required no confession certificates or even baptismal papers from those of his friends he put to work. His trust was rewarded with such beautiful achievements as the chapel for Dominican nuns at Venice, by Matisse.

Its poise reflects the plastic purity that great age, at times, brings to a tempestuous master. This mature work by a major artist lacks, nevertheless, in functional competency. Matisse either failed to remember, or could not be bothered with, the *why* of his decoration. For example, when making the stations of the cross, one should take a few steps between stations in imitation of Our Lord's last journey. Hence the fourteen pictures spaced around the nave in orderly display. To make the stations in the Venice chapel, distracted faithful must meander in front of the single wall on which the stations are crowded in disordered tiers, with the hazard of colliding against each other in mid-devotion.* Since form should not be at odds with function, Americans cannot enthusiastically make their own the thesis of Father Couturier — so much more credible when stated in French and in France — that when we deal with genius the rest will take care of itself.

The main influence on church art remains that of the Englishman Eric Gill. Attractive and not too difficult to copy is the calligraphic purity of his line. Unlike the fickle French, in his sculptures and in his writings he stressed an awareness of function, and a respect for whatever material he worked in. In those churches decorated after his spirit, one may discern the smooth relationship achieved between theactors in the divine service and their sacred "props." The effect on the open-minded spectator is not always flawless, however. The willful shearing of all superfluity smacks at times of the classroom or the sickroom. The altar slab, once denuded of its artificial flowers and pious dollies, can look all too plainly like a morgue slab. "Gillite" art forms keep chastely in check any loud outpouring of religious emotion. Such understatement, praiseworthy by the standards of English etiquette, hardly fits a more extroverted America. Gone also, together with the hair-raising, dust-storing accessories that reformers reject on esthetic grounds, are the testimonials of the love to which these ugly things bore witness. Liturgical purists bear the brunt of proving that exquisite taste is more pleasing to God than many a candid human value.

* It should be remarked, in this connection, that the chapel is that of the Dominican nuns in Venice — hence a private chapel. The nuns, perhaps, have another set of stations placed in the more usual and necessary sequence.

Despite these faults — based on personal traits, not in quality — both France and England have solved for themselves the basic problems of liturgical art, and have done it so forcefully that American clerics cannot bypass these problems any more. Gill illustrates respect for craft and attention to function. Father Couturier spectacularly restates an old and nearly forgotten truism: great art is none too good for God.

AMERICA WILL better solve its problems if it uses these foreign examples as a spur rather than as a model. That ours is a country lacking in traditions is a cliché that is useful as an excuse for wholesale esthetic borrowings. It is true that America esthetic religious tradition is far from coherent, and unconscious of its quality when compared with that of the formidable corpus of church art in Europe. Yet we must come to love this humble artistic residue as our own, as the only one we can safely build upon.

Prehistoric Indian cultures are to America what the gothic style is to Europe. The climate, the open ranges, the scenery, that inspired the Indian artist are still here, especially in the west. The scene controls in turn, however subconsciously, the sensitive artist of today. We part altogether from Europe at this deeper level. Compared with Indian art, both romanesque and gothic appear descriptive, even illustrative. In fact, it was only with the advent of the more drastic among "isms" that the modern European artist caught up with the American past.

Next in time, and now equally our own, the Catholic Hispanic tradition is still alive and productive, signally in New Mexico. Those who dismiss Catholic Hispanic art as merely an import from Spain fail to realize how tenaciously it transformed itself, and how well it governed its American growth to fit changed conditions. This art aimed its message at men who were both too rustic and too free to have any truck with pictures conforming to the mannerisms of a far-flung court and courtyards. While the earliest of these devotional panels still depend on the sophisticated formulas of Castille, *aster* evolved steadily toward an abstracted calligraphy, in which some art critics profess to see the influence of American esthetics. Whatever the reason, nineteenth-century New Mexico folk-painting vividly answers our standards

of good art. Humble as the *santos* may be, they hold for us a lesson of imperative actuality, as an art that drastically transformed itself to fit another continent.

Less defined but equally touching is another kind of American architecture and church decoration, even though this time the makers were totally unconcerned with problems of fitness to place or to time. In the mid-nineteenth century, the parish priest or missionary who came from the old country — often Belgium or Germany — felt lonely for the traditional beauty he had left behind, for which the middle-west had no equivalent. The exiled cleric attempted with limited means to recreate this longed-for visual atmosphere. The mock-medieval chapels one comes across at times in the countryside were truly built as a labor of love, however ignorant their makers may have been of architecture and the refinements of taste. I think of a church visited perchance in Iowa, crammed with gold and brown woodwork and polychrome statues, antedating even Barclay Street. Gaudier even than the average plaster cast, these effigies were also more edifying, since they lacked the fearsome "smell of money" that clings to today's manufactured products. Paradoxically, mid-west gothic managers to be creative. Between this folk expression and the American super-cathedrals that cost millions exists a chasm as deep as that between Lazarus and Dives.

The *santos* of New Mexico and mid-west American gothic are most unlike. Yet both were created by men who approached their task with hearts that were pure, unswayed by lucre. These men, who were hardly more than amateur artists, have left us a lesson to ponder: however sophisticated or elaborate the style of the coming reform of American church art for which so many long, only men equally pure of heart will prove strong enough to reverse the tide of bad taste. Great art, even good art, has cleansing properties close to the sacramental. As with blessed water and holy chrism, to be touched by art is a purifying rite. It is this inner virtue that binds together the diverse strands of valid Christian art styles the world over, from the catacombs to Chartres, from Assisi to Assis.

THE HISTORY of western art was long synonymous with that of the Church. The Church was the most active patron of artists, and all flocked

naturally to her. Time was when a pope, picking an adolescent out of a crowd of applicants, found his reward in a Sistine Chapel or Raphael's Stanzas. Today, the link between artists and Church that in the past worked wonders seems severed. The Church today is an uncertain patron, fallen from its great estate as appreciator of untried styles; the Church is also an irascible patron, quick to suspect the new, its memory of the art revolutions that it once consistently helped, lost. The artist is still at work, painting ways of the cross and flights into Egypt, only to put them eventually in storage; carving statues worthy of God's house, only to leave them behind to avoid freight charges on moving day. The cleric now shops for church art not where he would naturally find it, in the artist's studio, but more conveniently in the rectory, from a mail-order catalogue. What esthetic junk he buys as a result will visually foul his church, debase the piety of his parishioners into pietistic routines, and be seized upon by the gleeful unbeliever as another proof that the Church is indeed in its decadence.

There are of course exceptions. At times, the artist waiting at the church gates in sackcloth and ashes is bidden to enter, and the plastic cacophony one has come to expect as accompaniment to divine service is wonderfully replaced by visual music. Every time this happens, impatient well-wishers acclaim a renaissance! After thirty years of meditating on the shortcomings of the liturgical arts, and of laboring to narrow the gap between sane theory and insane practice, I feel most cautious in claiming such a clear-cut victory, or in conceding defeat either. Defeat there is of a sort in being an absolute minority when one's aims are altogether catholic. There is a defeat of a sort in producing objects — paintings or statues — that may never reach their rightful place inside a religious building, never edify, as is their birthright, praying crowds. The victory, as I see it, is of a more metaphysical nature: the vocation of the creative liturgical artist has become so fiercely impractical today that it must be more than ever a tried way, if a trying one, of serving God.

Correspondence

BLAUVELT, NEW YORK

To the Editor of LITURGICAL ARTS:

Dear Sir:

May I, as another religious art and articles merchant, comment on James A. Hunt's pertinent letter published in your November 1957 issue.

We can well agree with Mr Hunt that "... to raise the standard of the religious articles which are available to the overwhelming majority of Catholics through the usual retail and catalogue outlets" is one major step toward reform of religious art objects yet to be taken in this country. "To get the American manufacturer or distributor of religious articles to meet and stimulate this need for improvement" is indeed a basic problem, but I submit that the "... pre-established institutional patterns" which bind our present manufacturers and distributors offer us little hope that such stimulation can be expected from that quarter. True, in charity, "... those willing to make an effort to restore essential values in this field" must continue to "... direct [their] most considerate attention to [these religious article dealers]".

I believe, however, that the more fruitful path lies closer to that which Father Kron advocates in his excellent article entitled "Meet the People," [August 1957 issue]: the establishment of religious art centers. Experience here at Catholic Art Education indicates that there are *pockets* of artistically alert Catholics — clergy, religious, laity — in every one of our forty-eight states, who are actively seeking out good religious art and well-made religious articles, and who are anxious and willing to introduce these to their friends and neighbors. These *pockets* of artistically-alert Catholics might well provide the nucleus and stimulus for establishing the religious art centers Father Kron urges upon us. One clear danger is present, however, and was underscored wisely by Father Kron in the only italicized sentence in his entire article: "... such a center must be managed by a competent person — good intentions are not sufficient." To which we must add a hearty *Amen*. The designation of a manager or guiding force for the religious art center will be one of the crucial decisions made by members of that center. Indeed, this is the crucial decisions for launching any

