

The Building of the Christian Community, the *Word of God* for the Neighbourhood and the City. A Proposal of Evangelisation for Architecture and City Planning

El edificio de la comunidad cristiana, Palabra de Dios para el barrio y la ciudad. Una propuesta de evangelización para la arquitectura y el urbanismo

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RESUMEN

El espacio litúrgico no puede evitar dar testimonio del milagro de la Presencia, y sólo puede hacerlo por sus propios medios: a través de la evidencia de masas estructurales, de la combinación de materiales, texturas, colores; de la combinación armoniosa de formas; del movimiento fluido de la luz que la cubre y, al mismo tiempo, que está dominada por ella. Así se activa una comunicación silenciosa que conmueve el alma a través de los sentidos, y que, al tocar nuestro espíritu, nos ayuda a vivir la experiencia de Dios, nos gusta a todos los que, en todos los tiempos y lugares, hemos vuelto nuestros ojos al cielo, hemos elevado oraciones y hemos construido templos. Creo firmemente que esta vocación natural de la arquitectura litúrgica conserva su valor intacto incluso en la confusa configuración de la ciudad contemporánea, y que el espacio de la iglesia todavía debe esforzarse por responder a esa necesidad de lo sagrado que habita en cada uno de nosotros. Esto no significa que tengamos que dar forma a proyectos más o menos audaces, intentando sugerir un vago misticismo o inducir una indefinida sugerencia emocional, sino que implica una investigación consciente y deliberada en los temas de arquitectura que durante siglos han sido capaces de darle al lugar de culto sus rasgos claramente vinculados a la persona de Cristo, a la teología de la revelación y a la historia de la salvación.

ABSTRACT

The liturgical space cannot avoid testifying to the miracle of a Presence, and can only do so by its own means: through the evidence of structural masses, the combination of materials, textures, colours; the harmonious shape of forms; the fluid movement of light that covers it and, at the same time, is dominated by it. This activates a silent communication that stirs the soul through the senses, and that, by touching our spirit, helps us to live the experience of God, thereby making us like all those who, in all ages and places, have turned their eyes to heaven, have elevated prayers and built temples. I firmly believe that this natural vocation of liturgical architecture preserves its value intact even in the altered setting of the contemporary city, and that the church space should still strive to answer that need of the sacred that dwells in each of us. This does not mean shaping more or less bold prospects, intended to suggest a vague mysticism or induce an indefinite emotional suggestion, but it implies a conscious and deliberate inquiry into those architectural themes that for centuries have been able to give the place of worship traits clearly referable to the Person of Christ, to the theology of revelation, to the history of salvation.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Arquitectura religiosa; arquitectura cristiana; planificación urbana; evangelización; La Palabra de Dios.

KEYWORDS

Sacred architecture; Christian architecture; City planning; Evangelisation; The Word of God.

«Christianity does not have to be seen (...) as a beautiful and noble building that can have (...) an immense historical and political value, but as a living reality, which has its roots in the human spiritual reality and its tallest trunk in Revelation: human *humus* and supernatural flowers» (Giovanni Papini)¹.

«For, in giving us, as He did, His Son, which is His Word — and He has no other — He spake to us all together, once and for all, in this single Word, and He has no occasion to speak further (...) since that which He spake aforetime, in part to the prophets, He has now spoken altogether in Him, giving us the All, which is His Son» (St. John of the Cross)².

It is with great pleasure that I take part in this laudable educational initiative on liturgical architecture as, while on the one hand, this topic has become the privileged object of my studies and of my work in recent years, on the other, this necessary trip to Spain has carved in my schedule of commitments a most welcome interlude of rest and a precious pause for reflection in the company of the distinguished speakers present.

It would be presumptuous on my part not to admit at once to experiencing, in circumstances as this one, an albeit slight form of uneasiness, resulting from my being extraneous to the field of architecture and from a consequent feeling of embarrassment at finding myself debating with those who, instead, have long been engaged in this specific and challenging field of research. But then, in analysing whatsoever content, it is indeed most profitable to compare multiple experiences and competences; and it is also true, furthermore, that in my most recent work years, I have been somehow *forced* to an intense dialogue with artists, liturgists, theologians and architects with whom I could exchange ideas at length and with profit.

As some of you may know, I have conducted studies in philosophy and theology, delving into monastic spirituality, sacred music and the history of Christian art, yet my formation has been primarily focused on Jungian psychology. This is probably why sometimes I happen to feel especially in harmony with the thinking of artists and architects, who often continue to compose, fortunately for us, drawing on a vocabulary of archetypes intimately related, all in all, to those *archetypes of the collective unconscious* described by the founder of analytical psychology.

To avoid any misunderstanding, and as a confirmation of the unconditional respect that I have for all of you, I want to confess immediately that in the context of the debate on sacred art I am often pointed at as a character, at the very least, suspicious: the most convinced modernists accuse me indeed of stubborn traditionalism, while those siding with a certain conservatism see in me a tenacious progressive, if not a dangerous subversive. Such a unique combination of comments and interpretations caused me great astonishment at first, which in the course of time, however, has given way to some sort of reassuring satisfaction: the fact that I have been assigned multiple and contradictory labels proves, in fact, a clear distance from the tired sectarianism that would still like to oppose two supposed models of the Church. This realisation, despite the tumbles and afterthoughts that inevitably leave a mark on the path of each and all, seems to me a welcome confirmation of the goodness of my work and the appropriateness of choices evidently inspired by an intellectual freedom shaped over time, through spontaneous and mutual fecundation between prayer, experience, and study.

It has been over forty years since Henri de Lubac wrote of the «Crossfire of progressivism, or modernism, and fundamentalism» which causes not so much «discussions, albeit heated» but rather that «mutual fear that causes men to avoid each other and that generates an *a priori* desire not to meet», with the result that «we avoid meeting and continue to remain divided»³. These several decades do not seem to have placated the people at all, and it is not surprising, therefore, that Pope Francis continues to warn us against the danger of gossiping, of speaking ill of others, of conflict. In the General Audience of last June 19, Pope Francis reminded us that «being part of the Church means (...) learning to overcome subjectivism and division, to understand each other better, to harmonize the variety and the richness of each person; in a word to love God and the people beside us more» because «this is the way of Jesus», and I think that the debate on sacred art, too, should finally respond to this heartfelt appeal.

Given the fact that the road that we need to follow is exactly the one opened by the Second Vatican Council, and that in the guidelines suggested by the Council Fathers there is no trace of discontinuity with the past, least of all of alleged revolutionary ferments, for my

part I can only betray some surprise in observing with what sort of insistent obstinacy, ideas, concepts, tendencies and thoughts are mutually set against each other which, especially in view of the freedom of faith, can actually be put together. I am referring, for example, to the false antagonism that would oppose tradition to modernity, past to future, matter to spirit, aesthetics to ethics, canon to creativity, memory to project, faith to reason, or even, as some stubborn and impertinent chatter seems to suggest in recent months, the action of one Pope to that of his successor.

In short, what happens is that energies are wasted in dragging on idle and tired controversy, thus diverting time and enthusiasm that could easily be employed, to the benefit of all, in the search for new instruments to deal with the many emergencies that afflict the Church and society. Globalisation, secularisation and the economic crisis have quickly shaped a scenario that is highly problematic and ever-evolving, in which there emerge, among the acutest phenomena, the chaos of the megacities subject to out-of-control expansion; the deterioration of suburban areas; the drama of unemployment; the difficulties of multiculturalism and religious coexistence; the alarming increase in the number of those who lack decent dwellings and essential commodities, and the multiplication of migrations or mass exoduses mainly triggered by conditions of extreme poverty and by the outbreak of civil unrest or wars. The recent tragedy of Lampedusa is just one of the possible outcomes of a global struggle for survival in which inequalities, egoisms and injustices increasingly intensify such as to give a great and growing cause for concern.

The natural domicile of the Church is indeed the plural city with its effervescence and its contradictions, and the reflection on the future of the places of worship cannot prescind from a serious confrontation with the complex reality delineated above. It is now manifest that a thorough re-examination of the presence of the church in the city is needed, along with devising, if necessary, new solutions that may more effectively respond to the profound changes that are taking place. The ancient and reassuring model of the city as neatly distributed around the places of worship is now confined within the perimeter of old town centres, and if religion is no longer recognised as the prime factor in social aggregation, the urban fabric has been populated with new protagonists tied to civil institutions, to economic power or to the

presence of ethnic groups that need to express their beliefs and identity. We are therefore called, without exception, to understand, interpret, accept and if necessary criticise what is happening around us, because it is on this very ground that the relation between Christianity and the contemporary world and thus also the future of the Church are played out.

In this regard, the Council Fathers provided very clear guidelines, among which I mention, for example, a few excerpts from *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*: «May the faithful, therefore, live in very close union with the other men of their time and may they strive to understand perfectly their way of thinking and judging, as expressed in their culture». And also, «In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception and of actively helping him when he comes across our path»; «Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them»⁴. Although primarily intended for worship, the church-building must therefore be able, now more than ever, to give testimony to charity, encourage dialogue, promote culture as a place of integration and as the privileged expression of the divine imprint that we all bear.

In the urban context, the church is an architectural presence that condenses multiple meanings: it is the reflection of our anthropological structure; the womb from which we are born as Christians; the expression of our faith identity and of a circular dynamics that links earth and heavens; a place of communion with God and neighbours; a space that gathers, keeps, welcomes our hopes and reechoes our gratitude; a symbolic form that, by *actively participating* in the liturgy, leads man to the destiny of salvation and eternal life designed for us by Christ. This complex semantic aggregate has been embodied, in the course of the centuries, in univocally characterised yet diverse architectural models: the house-church of the early Christians, forcefully undercover among residential housing to elude the eyes of the persecutors; the structured church of the first basilicas, intensely aimed at codifying the material signs of its identity; the huge church of the medieval cathedrals,

relying on its by then solid and well-established hegemonic role; or the triumphant Counter-Reformation church, striving for the dramatic reaffirmation of its doctrinal heritage. If, therefore, the different arrangement of the cultic space expresses the understanding that the Church has of itself, the confused schizophrenia that seems to characterise contemporary ecclesiastical architecture can only testify to, along with the by now clearly perceived fragmentation of the cultural scene, a widespread hesitancy about the contents to express, a state of general anxiety that seems to affect, on closer inspection, even the certainties of faith.

Among the causes of such an involution there are small and big events that have developed ever since the Renaissance: just think of the gradual emergence of strong individualism; of the neo-Enlightenment presumption that any expression of faith should be relegated to a strictly private ambit having no effects on the collective sphere; of the, at times disordered, cultural ferments that in the early twentieth century questioned even the ancient link between form and content; of the guilty betrayal of the symbolic dimension that we know to be innate in any human approach to reality; or even, of that sad European page of totalitarianisms and of propaganda architecture, subject to hasty condemnation along with any other artistic experience accused, rightly or wrongly, of preserving any, though vague, *monumental* aura. The investigation of the nature of these dynamics would imply reflections certainly very far from the perimeter of the topic assigned to me, about which I will therefore limit myself to mentioning that today's problems have not arisen all of a sudden but have multiple roots that run to the distant past.

Whether we speak of the building or of the community that inhabits it, the word *church* manifests a dual nature: as the Christian family is called to «be in the world but not of the world»⁵, that is, to serve man without forgetting that we are Mystery and Jesus' Body, so the liturgical space gathers the assembly of the faithful without being reduced to a mere *container* since, as already mentioned, it is instead the vehicle of far-reaching semantic richness. Indeed, in the liturgical context, art and architecture do not limit themselves to defining a context suitable for prayer, contemplation and ritual; rather, they help liturgy to achieve its general scope, which is «the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful»⁶. Thus,

they assume a real sacramental value and, in a sense, allow us to rehabilitate the much-maligned category of the *sacred*. As Romano Guardini wrote, in the Christian perspective «*sacred* is not that sense of mystery spread everywhere under the starry sky (...) refers to the Revelation in the strict sense (...). The church is sacred, and it is the house of the Lord, (...) [because] in the act of Transubstantiation, a divine presence realises itself that has no equal. The Saviour is present in the community with his saving love»⁷.

The liturgical space cannot avoid testifying to the miracle of this Presence, and can only do so by its own means: through the evidence of structural masses, the combination of materials, textures, colours; the harmonious shape of forms; the fluid movement of light that covers it and, at the same time, is dominated by it. This activates a silent communication that stirs the soul through the senses, and that, by touching our spirit, helps us to live the experience of God, thereby making us like all those who, in all ages and places, have turned their eyes to heaven, have elevated prayers and built temples. I firmly believe that this natural vocation of liturgical architecture preserves its value intact even in the altered setting of the contemporary city, and that the church space should still strive to answer that need of the sacred that dwells in each of us. This does not mean shaping more or less bold prospects, intended to suggest a vague mysticism or induce an indefinite emotional suggestion, but it implies a conscious and deliberate inquiry into those architectural themes that for centuries have been able to give the place of worship traits clearly referable to the Person of Christ, to the theology of revelation, to the history of salvation.

We must recognise that artists and architects are not always willing to engage in the patient reinterpretation of this rich heritage, as they find it easier to use gratuitous though original citations, references at times heterodox, or *ad hoc* allegories anchored to merely individual reflection and as such lacking communicative power altogether. It is obvious that such an approach cannot be reconciled with the legitimate needs of the Church which, while having the specific task of speaking to every man testifying to the attention of a God who first loved us and continues to seek each of us, is also based on a theological architecture that is exact, crystal-clear, entrusted to an ancient and shared vocabulary of symbols passed down to the history of cultu-

re and art, and that the Christian faith has been able to fertilise and interpret based on its belief system.

As I was saying, it is clear that the entire reform introduced by the Second Vatican Council tends towards renewal in the wake of the two-millennia-old tradition of the Church, and that it considers novelty only in continuity with the past. A renewed reflection about the symbolic language on which artists and architects have always drawn appears thus as the most effective of all design tools, as it not only guarantees the continuity that we cannot renounce but also ensures communication that is direct, persuasive, immediately able to stir in the memory a dense network of references and echoes. Obviously, the criterion of continuity does not coincide with banal repetition, with blind historicism or with the sterile repositioning of architectural and liturgical forms that no longer belong with us. As the great architect Mies van der Rohe wrote, «Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space, nothing else. (...) Therefore, it is a hopeless effort to apply to our time the contents and forms of the past ages. Here even the strongest talent would fail, (...) since it does not matter with how much enthusiasm one does what is wrong»⁸. And, it seems significant that the same thought repeatedly re-emerges in the Magisterium of the Church: in 1958, Paul VI sustained that «religion, when it is alive, not only does not exclude novelty, but it wants it, demands it, looks for it, knows how to obtain it in the soul»⁹, and in more recent times, Pope Francis, then- Cardinal Bergoglio, sustained that «Staying, remaining faithful implies an outgoing. (...) Paradoxically precisely because one remains, precisely if one is faithful one changes. One does not remain faithful, like the traditionalists or the fundamentalists, to the letter. Fidelity is always a change, a blossoming, a growth»¹⁰.

About the importance of the symbol, I gladly devote a brief aside to the recent Convegno Liturgico Internazionale held in Italy, like every year, at the Monastic Community of Bose. I've indeed learned of the passionate speech given by Cardinal Godfried Danneels, who termed today's disaffection with the figures of symbolic thought as a dangerous *malattia dalla quale dobbiamo guarire* [malady from which we must recover]. The wise words of the Cardinal remind us that the symbol, belonging to the class of the images, is a privileged vehicle for any revelation, and that beauty, understood as a synthesis of all that can fill our

hearts with joy, is still an effective tool to reach God, disarming radiance that wins any fears, any skepticism, any rational resistance. In effect, our Pope Emeritus Benedict has dealt at length with beauty as an «essential element»¹¹ of ritual and liturgical art, providing us with a valuable instrument to return to meditate on this long-neglected issue that has now returned to the fore.

In the urban context, the church has a value as *monument*, too; as obsolete or even antiquated as this term may sound, it is however undeniable that whenever a place of worship is threatened by risks of neglect, abandonment, or even only by the hypothesis of a radical and reckless transformation, mass mobilisations are promptly organised for its protection. The church is in effect a public building dedicated to the custody of a living tradition, of shared values, of a cultural heritage that surpasses the confines of a particular religion, and with respect to which all, whether believers or not, have understandable expectations. Therefore, if a church arises in a marginal location or close to other buildings of public value, this should not lead to retreat gloomily or, even worse, to featurelessness, since testimony and evangelisation demand a strong presence and a recognisable identity. The monumental character of a building does not depend, however, on adherence to pre-packaged stylistic features or on outsizing the surrounding buildings, since it is above all a matter of proportion, measure, appropriateness, symbolic thickness and density of meaning, qualities that the liturgy itself synthesises and expresses at the highest level. In effect, the Christian message does not pursue the presumptuous logic of command but rather the logic of joyful invitation, of confident and discreet offer. In building churches, no less than in everyday life, it is therefore necessary to shun all triumphalism, and beware of falling into absurd forms of competition with other entities or institutions: the *Word of God* is in fact to be proposed with simplicity, with the sole objective of giving testimony to the presence of God among men, to His caring welcome, and to that Different destiny that awaits us.

The theme of testimony and evangelisation provides clear guidelines with which to stimulate reflection on the design of liturgical space, and suggests that it should reflect the life of a cohesive but open community, called to act in the city so as to make it better and to prompt it towards change with the generous purpose

of being at the service of man. In this sense, there is a clear need to devise diversified solutions, wisely adapted to the specific type of church, to the socio-geographical context in which it is introduced, to the environment for which it is intended and to the particular community that inhabits it. In large cities, for example, it will be necessary to return to rely primarily on the role of cathedrals which, as the heart of the diocese, shall be able to provide stimuli, proposals, and examples to follow: just think of those cathedrals that are yet awaiting a liturgical requalification, that lack a suitable space for worship, personal prayer and devotion, or that, rejecting any possible cultural initiative, deprive themselves of a valuable opportunity for dialogue, growth and interaction with the social fabric. Numerous urban centres of Northern Europe and North America unfortunately face a drastic reduction in the number of the faithful and the consequent abandonment of many churches, in relation to which it is increasingly difficult to raise funds for preservation or even ensure, as stated in the Code of Canon Law, their «profane but not sordid use»¹². From the mission countries, instead, experiences of great interest emerge since, precisely where there is a lack of funds, technologies, skilled workers and building material, it often happens, paradoxically, that buildings can be built that, albeit small, essential, sometimes very bare, are yet profoundly imbued with the local culture and able to express an unmistakable character. A monastic church that arises in an isolated place and is destined to a community with strong internal ties will obviously manifest needs completely different from those of a urban parish church: in the former case, it will be easier to use extremely simple spaces and iconographic settings, widespread clarity and sober moderation, while in the latter case, it will be inevitable to tune in to popular culture, emphasise the marks of identity and promote the system of the places for devotion and personal prayer. To complete such a varied picture, new realities keep blooming out: among the many, let me mention the Monastic Communities of Jerusalem that bring together monks, nuns and lay people, have bravely settled in the heart of the big cities, and have already given rise to most valuable experiences from the artistic, architectural, ecclesiastical and spiritual points of view.

The liturgical space must be able to express the Mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ generated by

the liturgy: it is not sufficient, therefore, to devise a *container*, albeit hospitable and attractive; rather, it is necessary that the architectural forms be *tailor-made* to liturgical action. This simple realisation cannot but prompt us to greater discernment in defining the design choices, since in the variegated scenario of styles, poetics and strands of thought that animate the debate on contemporary architecture, one identifies, among others, two distinct and opposite approaches: one tending to conceive the building as space originated from within; the other prone to the modelling of sculptural objects as mere casings, not devoid of interest but totally indifferent to their own content. The aforementioned architect Mies van der Rohe expressed this concept very clearly: «Form as a goal always ends in formalism. For this striving is directed not towards an inside, but towards an outside. But only a living inside has a living outside. Only intensity of life has intensity of form»¹³.

The reflection on the liturgical places enjoys momentum nowadays, and exactly on this issue often arise heated debate and open conflicts; I gladly reiterate that I would find it much more useful to engage talent and enthusiasm in research instead. In this respect, let me bring to your attention three elements that, alone, would be enough to dispel most disputes: first, the Magisterium of the Church, the safe guide in understanding faith; then, the precious criterion of unity in variety, brilliantly demonstrated by the entire history of Christian liturgy, art and architecture; lastly, the unquenchable vitality of the Gospel, which day after day continues to bestow its richness in plenty. «Those who want to renew themselves in fidelity (...) perpetually plunge into this font (...), which is for them a bath of rejuvenation. (...) The Gospel (...) is not an inert deposit that we keep untouched (...), it is a font of life, and our meditation on the Gospel is at the same time our openness to the world, our apostolic openness; it is a new awareness of the richness as well as of the needs of our Catholic faith»¹⁴. There is still much to be investigated about the symbolic structure of the liturgical places and their possible formal interpretations, and in the manifold approaches and realisations proposed in the post-Conciliar age we can hardly overlook the signs of renewed fervour, the expression of a fecund dialectic between time and eternity, the effort of a Christian community that examines and illustrates the characteristics of its presence in today's world.

As effectively summarised by the title assigned to me, the building of the Christian community is called, in short, to bear testimony to the *Word of God* in the heart of the city, and we know that «the Father's one, perfect and unsurpassable Word»¹⁵ is Christ himself. To my friends, the architects, I wish to say, drawing to the conclusion of my remarks, that this is the safest and most real reference that can enlighten their difficult work itinerary. Christ is indeed the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the Tree of Life, the icon of the Father, the *living altar*¹⁶, our East, our Light, cornerstone, *Porta Fidei*, supreme Beauty, model of Charity; even if the long chain of images related to Him were to stop here, we would already have an overabundance of ideas, themes and guidelines capable of motivating countless projects and of guiding each individual choice.

When applied to a specific context, each of these semantic items can assume a different weight and give rise to a wide variety of solutions. It is evident, for example, that the once-dominant criterion of orienting the liturgical space towards the east has lost much of its eloquence in the contemporary city, since our churches often arise in peripheral waste areas that are densely urbanised and burdened by, at times humiliating, regulatory requirements. Yet, even under such circumstances, the symbolic value of natural light and of solemn ritual pacing towards the east remain unscathed, and it cannot be excluded that setting constraints can stimulate the imagination of the designers to the extent of devising bold and decisive expedients. A striking example is the by now well-known Cathedral of *Our Lady of the Angels* in Los Angeles, where the architect Rafael Moneo cleverly reinvented the classic cruciform-basilica plan so that the apsidal wall be oriented towards the east.

I find very suggestive the words used by another architect, Louis Kahn, to explain his idea of church: «A space for those who never enter, for those who want to be near it without entering, and for those who enter»¹⁷. In further delineating his thoughts, Kahn describes, in particular, a sequence of spaces enclosed one inside the other: the liturgical area, the ambulatory, the porch preceded by a garden, and finally a wall that someone will never cross, as they will limit themselves to merely passing by or to peeking in through openings in the protective fence. In large cities, the problem of safety at

night often calls for the adoption of variously configured perimetral railings, but it is clear that this must not conflict with the primary vocation to a warm yet discreet welcome. Hence the importance of the *Porta*, which represents Christ in Christian imagination and that, today more than ever, emerges as a place to rediscover, reinvent, promote: the act of crossing the threshold is indeed already a liturgical act, and it is also by shaping this liminal space that we can choose whether to hide or reveal the beauty of our faith, affectionately embrace those who come near us, or show cold indifference instead.

Along with the confirmation of the symbolic role of that one *Porta* that is Christ, it may be advisable, where possible, to envision the place of celebration as a permeable space, with diversified points of access, so that those that do not belong to the community but wish to step in may freely move, stay, observe what is going on, get in or out without feeling observed, extraneous, nor being afraid of causing disturbance. For the same reason, although the principle of *actuosa participatio* has gradually led to the design of liturgical spaces that are increasingly more compact and unitary, the hypothesis cannot be excluded of reinterpreting colonnades and ambulatories so as to ensure dim areas especially meant for those who are not motivated to participate in the celebration but are looking for a quiet and hospitable place for meditation. The frenetic and alienating chaos of contemporary cities is often full of noises, images and stimuli that mortify any contemplative tension, and this must be countered by an offer of order, peace, silence, personal attention.

The ancient narthexes, which once welcomed catechumens and penitents, have seemingly lost all function and utility, but the inclusive logic of Christian love can help us to identify new vocations for them: preceding the *Porta* with a shady and hospitable place means in fact deferring and giving value to the crossing of the threshold, and the natural familiarity between the space fronting the temple and aquatic symbolism, shared with many other religions, can perhaps become an instrument with which to weave new friendships. To the same philosophy should be inspired the arrangement of the churchyard which throughout history has undergone twists and turns: we have seen raised courtyards, both spacious and excessive; churchyards cancelled by driveways that run unbelievably close to the *façades*;

small churchyards, delicate and full of life; and finally, mortifying churchyards turned into parking lots. But, what quality of space do we need today? Certainly, liturgical needs remain a priority, which exactly from churchyards weave some ritual actions; yet, it is equally important that this significant place stand out *by difference*, partaking in the urban layout as a recognisable interval, orderly and well-tended, welcoming and able to illustrate the grateful and loving gaze with which the church observes the city and the whole world.

The church has also profoundly changed its functional organisation, and if in the past liturgical space, sacristy and rectory were a self-contained unit and a recurrent distribution pattern, today's parish complexes show a certain affinity with the ancient *domus ecclesiae*, which also included spaces intended for residence, for catechesis, for the welcome and care of whoever was in need. Churches with rooms for visitors or residents in need, for example, are becoming increasingly frequent, and in this praiseworthy practice, too, we recognise the Christian attitude to service, the expression of sincere closeness.

We have already mentioned the need to invest on art and culture as privileged instruments of dialogue and growth in faith. Yet, also in this field, much vigilance is necessary, since not all expressions of human creativity reflect the thinking of the Church, nor does the dignity of the liturgical space entail an indiscriminate openness to any kind of initiative. In recent times, Jean Clair has dealt at length with that «cult of culture» that has replaced the old «culture of cult»¹⁸, and it is clear that the Church cannot be forced to accept passively any proposal or tendency from outside, unless it has carefully observed and examined it in the light of the Gospel and of its own doctrinal identity. In other words, the desire to listen to society and culture must not clash with those foundations of faith which remain unaltered, since only fidelity to what is essential ensures a safe evolution, a steady maturation and a fruitful dialogue with the changing reality around us: a reality that we would like to be more reassuring sometimes and that often challenges us, but of which we must understand the nature and infer the possible developments, because being Christians, no less than designing architectures, implies an open look to the future.

Today's parish centres are configured, in brief, as rich and articulated microcosms that create spaces for ritual

and worship, for devotion and personal prayer, for catechesis and dialogue, for welcome and charity, for culture and entertainment, so as to be a visible sign of the fruitfulness of a faith which, by transforming the heart of man, can indeed contribute to change the world. In this complex hierarchy of places and activities, however, it is important that the liturgy, «the font and the summit»¹⁹ of the life of the Church, stand out as a beating heart, the centre from which everything originates, the lush plant to which all fronds firmly cling.

From these reflections, there emerges that the theme of the church in the contemporary city is to be considered within a broader reflection on the quality of our liturgical life, the commitment to evangelisation, the duty of testimony. The mandate that the Second Vatican Council has entrusted to us still requires the commitment of each and all, and invites us to rethink ourselves as an ecclesial body and to give expression to our being Christians in a profoundly changed society, in the certainty that the path awaiting us is not a challenge to be looked at with fear, but a valuable opportunity, an opportunity to be faced courageously and with enthusiasm. Also in the field of liturgical architecture, in the end, renewal can only come from a preliminary process of conversion: as written by Henri De Lubac, «every time that the Church has truly reformed (...) this has happened under the action of the Holy Spirit, implored by the saints who sought to renew first of all themselves (...). The authentic reforms, therefore, are mostly prepared in silence»²⁰.

NOTES

(1) Giovanni Papini, «Lettera a Ardengo Soffici», in Giovanni Papini–Ardengo Soffici. *Carteggio IV 1919–1956. Dal primo al secondo dopoguerra*, ed. Mario Richter (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2002), 160. [Il Cristianesimo non bisogna vederlo (...) come un bello e nobile edificio che può avere (...) un valore storico e politico immenso, ma come una realtà viva, che ha le sue radici nella realtà spirituale umana e il suo più alto fusto nella Rivelazione: humus umano e fiori soprannaturali (TN)].

(2) St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 22.

(3) Henri de Lubac, «Paradosso e mistero della Chiesa», in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 9 (Milan: Jaca Book, 1997), 82-83. [«Fuoco incrociato di progressismo, o modernismo, e integralismo (...) discussioni, sia pur accese (...) timore reciproco che fa sì che ci si eviti e che si generi come una volontà a priori di non incontrarsi (...) si evitano gli incontri e si continua a restare divisi» (TN)].

(4) Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes*, 62, 27, 28.

(5) See John 17, 15-18.

(6) Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*, 1.

(7) Romano Guardini, *Il testamento di Gesù* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1993), 54-55. [«Si riferisce alla Rivelazione in senso stretto (...). La chiesa è sacra e casa del Signore, (...) [perchè] nell'atto della Transustanziazione si realizza una presenza divina che non ha eguali. Il Redentore è presente nella comunità con il suo amore salvifico» (TN)].

(8) Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, «Baukunst und Zeitwille», in Fritz Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe. Le architetture, gli scritti* (Milan: Skira, 1996), 261. [«L'architettura è sempre volontà di un'epoca tradotta in spazio, nient'altro. (...) Perciò è uno sforzo senza speranza quello di applicare alla nostra epoca il contenuto e le forme di epoche passate. Qui persino il più forte talento fallirebbe (...) dal momento che non importa con quanto entusiasmo venga fatto ciò che è sbagliato» (TN)].

(9) Giovanni Battista Montini, «Benedizione della Chiesa Parrocchiale dedicata alla Madonna della Misericordia a Baranzate (MI)», 7 Novembre 1958, in *Discorsi e scritti Milanesi (1954-1963)* (Brescia: Istituto Paolo VI, 1997). [«La religione, quando è viva, non solo non esclude la novità, ma la vuole, la esige, la cerca, la sa ricavare nell'anima» (TN)].

(10) Jorge Mario Bergoglio, «Intervista», *30 Giorni* 11 (2007).

(11) Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 35.

(12) *Code of Canon Law*, 1222.

(13) Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, «Sulla forma in architettura», in Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe*, 271. [«La forma come scopo sfocia sempre nel formalismo. Infatti questo sforzo si rivolge non verso l'interno, bensì verso l'esterno. Ma solo un

interno vivente ha un esterno vivente. Soltanto un'intensità di vita ha un'intensità di forma» (TN)].

(14) De Lubac, *Paradosso*, 89-90. [«Chi vuole rinnovarsi nella fedeltà - Henri De Lubac wrote - si rituffa perpetuamente in questa sorgente (...) che è per lui un bagno di giovinezza. (...) Il Vangelo (...) non è un deposito inerte che conserviamo senza toccare (...), è una sorgente di vita, e il nostro raccoglimento sul Vangelo è in pari tempo la nostra apertura al mondo, la nostra apertura apostolica; è una nuova presa di coscienza delle ricchezze così come delle esigenze della nostra fede cattolica» (TN)].

(15) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 65.

(16) See Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *Benedizione degli oli e dedicazione della chiesa e dell'altare* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1980).

(17) Louis I. Kahn, L'architettura è la meditata creazione di spazi, in Christian Norberg-Schulz, Louis I. Kahn. Idea e immagine (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1980), 68. [«Uno spazio per chi non vi entra mai, per chi vuol starvi vicino senza entrare, e per chi vi entra» (TN)].

(18) See Jean Clair, *L'inverno della cultura* (Milan: Skira, 2011).

(19) Second Vatican Council, *Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

(20) De Lubac, *Paradosso*, 87. [«Tutte le volte che la Chiesa si è autenticamente riformata (...) ciò è accaduto sotto l'azione dello Spirito Santo, implorato dai santi i quali hanno cercato di rinnovare anzitutto sè stessi (...). Le autentiche riforme, dunque, si preparano per la maggior parte nel silenzio» (TN)].



Fig. 01. Michael J. Zielinski (right) with Andrea Longhi, Seville 2013.