

#### 1. THE NEW ITALIAN CHURCHES IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In Italy, during the six decades after the end of the II World War, before and after the II Vatican Council, an extraordinarily high number of new churches were built in the shortest time allowed by the technology and the circumstances. There are several reasons explaining such a vast and quick building spree, which is unprecedented in other historical times: the huge destruction caused by the war, the repeated earthquakes (Belice, Friuli, Irpinia, Umbria, Marche, Abruzzo), the remarkable demographic growth, the fast and deep economic changes which elicited an intense and widespread urbanization process, etc. The agrarian Italy became an industrial country in just 60 years, and, later on, a post-industrial one.

The exact number of churches built in Italy during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is unknown; however, experts estimate that it could be around 5000. This is a considerably high number corresponding to an equally resolute will with regard to the matter of projects, and the pastoral and financial standpoints. It must be noted that not only churches were built, but *parish complexes*, including the church, the priests' dwellings and rooms for catechesis, charity events and other activities. The complex is a reference point serving the population residing in a specific territory -the parish- in areas such as liturgy, catechesis, charity and the various forms of meetings and religious training. In order to complete the picture, it must be added that, at the start of the third millennium, one cannot claim that the issue of the new Italian churches has been totally solved, although it seems that the most dramatic and urgent period has been already overcome. According to the information submitted by the *Servizio Nazionale per l'Edilizia di Culto* (National Service of Worship Buildings) belonging to the General Secretariat of the Italian Bishops' Conference, 35 new parish complexes were still under construction in Italy in 2009, and the works will last for several years. For instance, some new parish complexes are being built in the outskirts of Rome, and the same applies to the Milan dioceses (over 300 parish complexes were built in that dioceses since the war ended). Besides, at least 40 temporary churches will be required in the aftermath of the recent Abruzzi earthquake.

Mere dioceses bishops have been commanded with the management and responsibility for all this work (together with their administrators), and the situation still remains so. At the end of 1984, they were 325, and their number has later decreased to 226. The Italian Bishops' Conference (IBC) began to show an interest in the problem of new churches in 1989, merely trying to assist, rather than replace, the dioceses. Therefore, the strong will of the Italian dioceses to build new parish complexes was born and has developed through the years in a fragmented way, there lacking a project and a real and appropriate guide at national level; while the

great uniformity of the approaches must be the result of an extraordinary common feeling of the Italian bishops.

From the financial standpoint, the dioceses have been able to resort to some humble state grants at first. Since 1989, the Italian dioceses have received –though not each of them– contributions from the IBC which allocates an eight per thousand of its budget to that purpose. The average price of a parish complex in Italy is ca. 3 million Euros. In case the Project is financed by the IBC, the IBC spends  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the forecast expenses, while the remaining is borne by the dioceses and the parish (if possible).

As regards the Project makers, we may say that they are appointed by bishops and their administrators in 99% of cases, and they are chosen depending on their personal knowledge. Since 1988, the IBC started to organize contests which, anyhow, account only for a small percentage of projects.

In late 1983, there were no national guidelines in Italy upon which the new projects could be based as regards the dimensions, and the financial, liturgical and architectural issues. Every diocese proceeded freely according to its own traditions or habits, and with absolute freedom. In some cases, for instance in Rome, Milan and Bologna, the dioceses themselves set the guidelines. At national level, the *Pontificia Commissione Centrale per L'Arte Sacra in Italia* has exercised a discreet direct and indirect orientation; this was established in 1924 and suppressed in 1989. It was only in 1993 that the IBC released the Pastoral Note *La progettazione di nuove chiese* (The projects for new churches), containing what could be deemed as guidelines for the project of new churches in Italy.

Italian bishops, with a few exceptions (Milan, Rome, and Bologna) have not shown an explicit and profound interest in the cultural, architectural and artistic elements of the parish complexes they decided to build. On the contrary, it may be said that, because of pastoral and political opportunities, the bishops preferred to keep their profile as low as possible when it comes to building new churches, also from the viewpoint of communication. Being watchful shepherds, afraid of possible internal reactions in the Church and external ones, they have been working hard but quietly; their wish being simply to provide Christian communities developed in the outskirts of middle and big cities with the churches and the pastoral services required in a short time and spending as few financial resources as possible (both for the project maker and for the construction of the project). This was framed by a scenario where financial resources were scarce and the political, administrative and ideological context was often difficult, not to say openly hostile.

The issue of the new churches has been considered for a long time by Italian bishops as a real pastoral emergency. As regards architectural, artistic and liturgical matters, the bishops trusted the skills of the architects chosen by them to make projects, given that they were reputed and trusted professionals and, therefore, they were considered as capable of fulfilling their duties. Both the bishops and the Christian community were implicitly expecting the architects to plan churches that fulfilled every criterion: solid and well made buildings, long-lasting and easily recognizable as churches, in line with the great Italian architectural tradition that had made throughout the centuries repetitive and readily identifiable models.

During the years of Pope Pius XII —characterized by a cautious opening to the contemporary, rather than by the rigid closeness represented by Pius XI until 1939—, the bishops did not exclude a moderate opening up towards the language of modernity. Most of them were aware of the fact that historical models were not unchangeable by principle, on the contrary, they had been interpreted in different ways and had been modified very gradually through time, bearing in mind the vernacular formal and building traditions. The implicit assumption of both the bishops and the community of believers trusted that the gradual evolution was still in place, that it was still the rule. In other words, that the Italian cultural tradition remained alive, that it was still ripe and had not experienced fractures or tears. Nevertheless, and in the presence of partially auspicious ecclesial, historical and cultural circumstances, together with the overcoming of the old stern closeness to contemporary culture, a new stage starts quietly; this is the start of a search period that still continues. It may be argued that the times of the Council were anticipated by the architecture of the new churches.

## 2. EVALUATIONS

The evaluations of the new Italian parish complexes built during the chosen period have been varied, according to the individuals who carried them out and they have changed through time. For the sake of convenience, we shall classify those evaluations into three categories: those of the faithful, those of the pastors and those made by critics with a commitment.

No studies are available in order to shed light on the evaluations made by the faithful about the ca. 5000 Italian parishes where new churches have been built. It seems that the believers have not been questioned directly about it, except for a few cases. Nevertheless, the faithful have expressed some criticism, although it has been more operative and active than written or in the form of reflections. If we observe the behavior of the faithful, we may see that the new churches and parish complexes have been readily accepted and occupied without any problem by the respective communities. Not a single one of the new churches has been rejected or abandoned, or radically modified after a period of time. However, the believers have felt free to evaluate those new churches, even those planned by famous architects. Certainly, they have pointed out different types of flaws related to some points: the iconographic program and the religious images, natural and artificial lighting, acoustics, maintenance, summer and winter conditioning, outdoors spaces such as the atrium, etc. As a result, almost every single new church has been interpreted and completed with a great scope of freedom by the respective community through the years. The assimilation process has been more or less respectful with the building at a given time. It must be noted that, in some cases, the completion works were carried out without informing the project makers and without listening to their remarks. In some cases, projects were completed, while in others they were not, generally because of a lack of financial resources, and sometimes because the project was not accepted. If one could compare the projects for the new churches with the works actually performed in those buildings through time, one would probably obtain some clues so as to understand what the believers have actually taken on and accepted from the new churches and what they did not.

We may deduct from the fact that Christian communities regularly use and occupy with relative freedom their respective churches without a great difficulty, we may reasonably believe that those same Christian communities totally recognize themselves in the new churches and parish buildings, or that, at least, they have been welcome. To conclude, we may say that the Italian believers have detected most of the problems related to the constructive and technological profile of the new parish complexes, and to a lesser extent, some identity issues.

The expressed evaluations by the pastors or bishops were generally positive, though vague. They have not made significant distinctions, but they have positively evaluated the fact that the new parish complexes were built quickly and at a low cost, and that they fulfill their duty with dignity.

It was only close to the 90s that a generally critical evaluation has been made, both by the faithful and by bishops, as regards some architectural aspects of the new parish complexes, although this discontentment was rather undefined.

The evaluations made by the critics committed to the architecture of the new Italian parish complexes have been varied to a great extent, and mostly negative for different reasons. It should be noted, first of all, that the new church architecture, in spite of being an impressive phenomenon from the quantitative point of view, has been substantially ignored by the Italian critique. It was considered as an uninteresting building product from the architectural standpoint. At most, it was assimilated to the new residential constructions, to social services such as schools and hospitals. The main Italian architectural magazines, except for a few cases (churches by well-known architects such as Giovanni Muzio, Ignacio Gardella, Gió Ponti, Ludovico Quaroni, Giuseppe Vaccaro, Angelo Mangiarotti, Adalberto Libera, Carlo Scarpa, Vittorio Gregotti, Paolo Portoghesi and some others), did not publish projects for new churches or tackled the phenomenon in its full scope.

The new and unique churches planned by well-known or very innovative architects (such as those by Giovanni Michelucci, Renzo Piano, Richard Meier and Maximiliano Fuksas) have elicited far-reaching controversies and stances which quickly vanished.

According to some reputed critics -though these were isolated and very partial positions, even from the ideological point of view- the sacred could not be and was not relevant for contemporary architecture.

Oversimplifying and summarizing a lot, we may reduce the criticisms made about the new Italian churches to two. On the one hand, and seen from the outside, the new churches show a poor architectural quality and a weak identity, or they would even lack identity, being ambiguous. On the other hand, seen from the inside, the new churches, often being austere and bare, are often accused of resembling Protestant or undefined, public buildings. To sum up: the new Italian churches are accused of having a weak and poorly defined identity as regards a tradition in which churches were immediately recognizable from afar in any landscape, while having a profusely decorated interior, full of images.

A third criticism has been recently added: the liturgical quality of the new churches. By the way, the most widespread criticism until recent times was that the new Italian churches had not learnt sufficiently the lesson of the liturgical reform, that is to say, that they were not fully in tune yet with the II Vatican

Council. A few years after the first criticism, a noisy and controversial minority of believers and critics accused the new Italian churches of having interpreted very radically the II Vatican Council, having completely forgotten about Trent.

### 2.1 Evaluations by committed critics. Context.

The reception made by the committed critics to the new Italian church architecture would consist of a selection of the new forms of time, filtering from it the flashy ideological ingredients, as well as the recent media elements (both of them being unavoidable and necessary, though often one-sided, partial and distorting).

That reception has been, above all, an occasional phenomenon, related to different periods of time, motivations and formulations. In fact, no explicit, authentic and appropriate debate was ever held; neither in the Church nor in the civil fields. Extracts of reflections or reactions to single events have surfaced; however, no wide and articulated critical research has been published.

On the one hand, the Church and the civil contexts did not foster either this or other discussions on religious matters. As a matter of fact, the Italian Church did not really try to promote it inside, given that pastoral concerns have widely prevailed over cultural ones. As is well known, Italian dioceses have not succeeded in stimulating the world of culture and University in the fields of art and architecture. On the other hand, the Church has left the reflections about architecture, art and liturgy to the hands of a small cultural elite.

It is also well known that, since the Italian unity, Italian culture has paid scarce attention to religious subjects (on the other hand, different historical periods contemplating Liberal, Fascist and Marxist hegemonies have taken over). It seemed that the situation should change from 1989 onwards, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Marxist cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, the situation did not substantially change, both due to a persistent cultural shyness of the Church and to the emergence of markedly secularist positions in Italian culture which are very noisy in the media, trying to exclude any fertile relationship between culture and religion.

### 2.2 Evaluations in the Church. Context.

The most widespread reactions which gradually arose in the Church field about the new churches were very often general, as already mentioned. There was a feeling of disappointment and discontent when considering the identity of the new churches, but there was no rejection or nostalgia for the historical styles. It seems that, on the one hand, great expectations were disappointed, while, on the other, no alternative proposals have been put forward. To sum up: it seems that innovation is the only path forward nowadays.

However, it seems that the deep reasons for that disillusion have not been discovered, that is, the historical, cultural and religious reasons which lie in the identity of church architecture, and, in general, in the whole Italian architecture.

In the first place, from the historical perspective, it must be remembered that the cultural experience of two decades of Fascist rule entailed a deep recession for the whole Italian institutional architecture during the post-war years. As is well known, the Fascist regime, which was obsessively state-oriented, made an effort

during the 20s and 30s to give maximum relevance to the Regime buildings and the state institutions, just like the rest of European totalitarian regimes, by giving them markedly ornamental characteristics. This reached the extent of causing people to identify Fascism with its monuments. The return to parliamentary democracy, led by a strong anti-Fascist movement, meant a quick abandonment of that approach to the subject in later years. Democracy has been synonymous with a radical anti-monumental trend in Italian architecture. Monuments were identified for a long time with Fascist architecture. Any kind of architecture which attempted to bear witness to any value through time was considered as politically incorrect. It must be added that anti-Fascism has been used as a weapon of Marxist-oriented culture and politics from the end of the II World War until 1989, both politically and culturally, against the remaining cultures in Italy: the liberal and the Catholic ones. All this has had a deep impact on Italian architecture, generating a lot of debris in the paths of culture, theory and practice.

Secondly, it must be remembered that the crisis of institutional architecture had strictly cultural roots, and, generally, also the crisis of typology in architecture. Certainly, modern architecture, as expressed by the various manifestations of the Modern Movement, has moved away from every reference to historical tradition, has tried to break its ties with a tradition considered to be stifling, and has ripened towards a position that is very fluent as regards institutional types, even denying the existence of almost any specific interest. Moreover, it has placed at the core of its commitment issues such as dwelling, work, culture and leisure, and only slightly, the topic of institutions. It has consciously left aside religious matters, believing that religion belongs to the individual experience, and not to social life (against every evidence, by the way, given that every master of modern architecture has dealt with religious subjects). Besides, it must be noted that, since the last post-war period, and thanks to the massive access of the citizenship to University, the cultural and professional profile of Italian architects changed deeply. Also, with the multiplication of Architecture Faculties and their profound reform, the profile of their teaching offer has also changed.

Thirdly, the issue of the identity of the new churches must be placed within the context of the religious development of society and the evolution of the Church itself as regards its relations with society.

The Italian society has clearly assumed the identity signs of a secularist society unwilling to grant neither a central nor a prominent role to the religious communities and experiences, compulsively reducing them to the private sphere. The consequences of this secularist process have been portrayed in the urban planning (it is very hard to receive plots for building parish complexes and they are chosen according to their residual value). At training level, there has been an almost total exclusion of religious topics from the world of teaching and University research -including artistic and historical topics in their artistic dimension-. The result of all that was that the foundations of knowledge required for designing churches were weakened. These consequences have been felt also at the strictly architectural level.

In the years immediately before the II Vatican Council and particularly in the following ones, the Church acknowledged that the Italian society was becoming more and more secular, as it started cooperation and dialogue with the contemporary society and culture. As a consequence, the Italian church has set itself the conscious goal of a new evangelization. In this context, it has seriously explored the most appropriate ways of materializing the presence of the Church in the cities, i.e., the form/identity of new churches. This form could no longer be the form of the past, nor could it be pre-established; it could only be considered as a pursuit. Therefore, it was inevitable to start searching for new church images. This is not a formal search, but, in general terms, a cultural Project and, in specific cases, an individualized search as regards procedures, limits and method. That is, an open, unavoidable search with no alternatives.

### 3. THE LIMITS AND THE PROTAGONISTS OF THE SEARCH

Let us reflect briefly upon the topic of church identity from a more analytic standpoint, that is, from the real intentions/expectations of the client, of his advisors, of designers and artists. From their free, patient and systematic convergence, there will be works which are integrated in tradition and bear witness to the contemporary world. Both requirements allow a conscious response to the demand of identity made by Christian communities for their churches, without being able to specify strictly and a priori styles or canons.

#### 3.1 The client

The guidelines for a unitary style provided by Italian bishops -the main clients- as regards the topic of church identity are present in the Pastoral Letter «*La progettazione di nuove chiese*», from 18 February 1993.

It must be highlighted that Italian bishops did not propose or suggest in that document -least of all imposed- concrete types (the Latin cross church) or specific models (the new Gesù Church); not even an established system of rules similar to the famous *Istruzioni* by Saint Charles Borromeo. Just like Saint Charles, the Italian bishops have trusted the interpretative wisdom of architects.

They have preferred to indicate an ecclesial project method (considering the church community as involved in it) and a multidisciplinary one (considering the architect as collaborator with an artist and advised by a liturgy specialist in the presence of the client); requiring the attention of the project-maker on fundamental pastoral issues.

With regard to identity, these notes were reduced to some concise remarks marked by trust in architecture (n° 24).

The theological context which has served as a background to this Pastoral Letter is marked by the provisions of the II Vatican Council in the matters of revelation, nature and structure of the Church; relations between the Church and society and liturgy. That is, the bishops, through their Pastoral Letter, ask project makers to consider churches, both in the project stage and in the final formal definition to be manifestations of the Church according to the definition by the II Vatican Council: a Church listening to God's Word (*Dei Verbum*), a Church that is God's people and mystery (*Lumen Gentium*), a praying Church (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), a

Church holding a dialogue with contemporary society and having an attitude of service, rather than domination (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Besides, the Pastoral Letter has consciously followed on the century-long tradition of the Church in the field of art and architecture; a tradition that can be easily recognized in the decisions made during the long period lived by the Latin Church throughout two millennia.

As is well known, the Latin Church, as opposed to the Eastern Churches, has not canonized art and architecture for the liturgy. Assuming Saint Augustine's perspective of the Church in History, the Latin Church has decided to hold an intense dialogue with a contextual culture in constant evolution, sharing it and following it as much as possible. The Church reserves itself the decision to value and to accept or not the different works of art and architecture (Trent Council, 1545/63). It has reserved itself also the role of client (Nicaea Council, 787), and that of artist trainer (II Vatican Council, 1962/65), though allowing the artists freedom (II Vatican Council). It has also trusted the artists' interpretation capacity in contemporary times, without excluding any school or trend (II Vatican Council).

Moving from institutional clientele -bishops- to the user/client, it is hard to figure out what were and are the expectations of the Christian communities that the projects were -and still are- made for in Italian new churches. These are highly articulated and culturally heterogeneous communities, integrated by people, families and groups coming from various cultural areas of Italy, incapable of formulating unitary proposals or requirements. This type of clientele is firmly rooted in traditional popular culture, more than in the elitist one, expecting from architects a patient work of listening and making a synthesis.

Few stimuli by liturgy specialists and theologians have reached project makers. Certainly, it is also the Italian case of theological disciplines to have followed paths of renewal, but they are only opening up very gradually towards the aesthetic dimension. However, they also need some basic contribution in times of great uncertainty and swinging trends which theological disciplines may shed some light on.

In turn, the research lines followed by Italian architects and Architecture in the last 60 years were multiple and they are characterized, as in the rest of the world, by an irreducible plurality of languages and a progressive weakening of the cultural references of the Church. Nevertheless, and from different positions, that research has provided and can still provide some contributions which are capable of responding to the expectations expressed -though not passed- by Christian communities. This will be possible provided that architects are able to listen to what the Church clients propose, interpreting it in a responsible way.

Artists, just like architects, have made a pursuit that was often sensitive to spiritual values, though walking along paths which were distant and alien from the world of the Church, understood as a starting point that is difficult to approach. They have also been questioned and some useful answers can be expected of them, provided that meeting points and deep exchange mechanisms with the Church client are

provided. Just like architects, they have been and are also living part of an on-going research.

#### 4. RESEARCH AND ITS CONTEXT

These are the main characteristics of this on-going research.

During the second post-war years, Italy has set into motion an ecclesial and social search of a cultural nature; this is a dynamic and seemingly unstoppable reality. Its goal is the physical form of churches corresponding to the current Church (which cannot be separated from its History). That search encompasses, unavoidably, the issue of church identity, although it is argued in general terms and as a requirement. It enjoys considerable freedom and it continues in an almost completely spontaneous way, in conditions of exchange, and not closing itself or being opposed to the social and cultural context of the present times, which are also in a process of transformation.

The research has been immersed for some time, but now it surfaces, that is, it is starting a public stage of conscious dissemination.

The search for quality, not just quantity, has become a value-adding element, although it is not a key element of the search in practice.

Let us conclude by mentioning four important features of the context in which the search is taking place and which, undoubtedly, condition it greatly.

A historical context in which artistic searches tend to diversify and renew themselves continuously, fighting each other and exchanging themselves without geographic or chronological limits. Simultaneously, the different subjects - architecture, arts and liturgy- and theological disciplines try to approach each other, meet and hold a dialogue.

The pastoral context tends not to be very participatory and is scarcely sensitive to the topic of updating; it is not closed to the contemporary art, but it is used to the language of popular tradition, extremely retiring and not prone to ruptures.

The media context is very strong; it expands enormously the limits of specialized information and possibilities of assimilation, stimulation, *métissage* and exchange, at the same time taking on aggressive and provoking tones. Obviously, such an atmosphere does not foster relaxed reflections and evaluations, but a way of settling the scores that exaggerates differences and generates shallow conflicts.

A Church context which, in spite of its proven loyalty to the II Vatican Council, is no longer serene or naïve, but integrates some previously missing controversial trends. Certain distrustful positions have emerged, some of them explicitly opposed- either totally or partially- to the Council's decisions. These formerly quiescent positions seem to be sterile to us. They do not put forward any alternatives, but, quite the opposite, they are paralyzing and dissolving.

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