

The sacred space is a particularly appealing study subject for Aesthetics. The philosophical reflection on the metaphysical core of beauty leads us hand in hand to the contemplation of human beauty which artists are capable of invoking¹, in a key which is not only ontologically superior, but which is also provided as its best and its own foundation. That foundation is the theological aesthetics, i.e., the intellectual sphere where we may contemplate the beauty of shape echoing the original Beauty of God.

Thus, the configuration of a sacred space faces us with the slow analysis of the coordinates establishing the temple identity: on the one hand, the sacramental essence it hosts, on the other hand, the Christian essence it holds, while it serves as an amplifier of the Apostles' mandate setting off the Church's temporal existence: «go and preach the Gospel to the whole creation»².

Inhabiting space is the initial engine of every architectural work. The human being's automatic response to a need for shelter, let us say, is rooted in people's specific nature and, as a result, it takes on the shape of an appropriation shaping space: it configures it, turning it into existence. The response to that human need places us in an essentially anthropological context:

«Inhabiting is a fundamental character of human life (...). Human beings inhabit their homes. In a wider sense, they also inhabit cities. However, inhabiting is something more than «being» or «being at», given that both concepts only have a peripheral relation with space»³.

Within an anthropological-theological scenario, these words bring to mind, by analogy, Nathan's prophecy⁴. Given that inhabiting is one of the features integrating human beings, and people gradually turn their houses into homes, then what can be said about God's home? How do we deal with the issue of configuring a space which is, simultaneously, God's abode and the scenario of the realization of human beings' religious essence, both individually and inside the community of believers? In other words, is the configuration of the sacred space merely a technical and functional problem or does it require a silent meditation about the essence of temples, about their meaning, their deepest *raison d'être*? The specific habitation of the sacred space configures a particular architectural type, perhaps a unique one, since one does not just live in it, one also contemplates. Moreover, its specific habitation is a contemplative one. The functionality of sacred space is one sanctified by the

¹ Cf. John Paul II, «Carta a los artistas» (1999), nn. 1 and 2, *passim*.

² Cf. Facts 1-2.

³ Otto Friedrich Bollnow, «Hombre y espacio», Labor, Barcelona, 1969, p. 119.

⁴ 2 Samuel 7, 1-17.

building itself, by its essence, by its radical service to God and to men⁵.

Let us return for a minute to Nathan's prophecy. The Bible tells us that Iahvé, tired of accompanying his people here and there around the desert, and throughout the ordeals of the life of Israel –certainly in a mysterious way, since God appears at that time as a defenseless and poor traveler requiring attention and care- he listens to David's generous offering. He intends to build a stable place, a sacred space where the Lord may rest. This rest is conceived and expressed as the foundation of a permanent abode in the midst of men, a figure for the future gift of Eucharist, of the saving sacramental presence which will not be restricted anymore to the limits of the chosen people, but it will reach every people on the Earth, forever redeemed by Christ⁶. The sacred text reads:

«And it came to pass when David sat in his house, and the Lord had given him rest on every side from all his enemies, he said to Nathan the Prophet: "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, and the ark of God dwelleth within the curtains". And Nathan said to the King: "Go, do all that is in thy heart, for the Lord is with thee". On that same night, the Lord said to Nathan: "Go and tell my servant David, this is what the Lord says: you shall not build me a house to dwell in"»⁷.

Therefore, God's habitation among people is expressed as a camping, as the permanent establishment of a progressive covenant which points from the start towards the configuration of physical spaces devoted to worship –in fact, since the proto-Gospel- but, above everything else, to the permanence of God among his creatures⁸. These places of adoration are configured by the essential divine will, according to which, the meeting should take place within a spatial framework especially configured to be a communication channel–for prayer, cult and communion. That is, there is a double dimension across which this religion is spread: vertically, between God and every person, and horizontally, between the community of God's children, i.e., the

⁵ The temple's own function is being a meeting place with God: that is its service. Nevertheless, these terms are obviously inadequate when researching the deep implications of designing a sanctified and sanctifying space. We should bear in mind that Yahweh himself ordered Moses to take off his shoes during the burning bush episode, «because you are treading on sacred ground» (Exodus 3, 5.) The holiness of the sacred space is pre-determined, it is previous to the architectural design which must serve that high purpose. On the other hand, the fact that the Leviticus is full of the details given by Yahweh in order to specify even the most minute liturgical detail.

⁶ Cf. John 2, 19-21.

⁷ 2 Samuel 7, 1-5.

⁸ Cf. John 4, 7-26. During his dialogue with the Samaritan, Jesus sets the bases of the relativity of the temple as the only place of worship: He is forever the new temple of God among men. That is why Catholic temples must revolve around a double axis: the Eucharist –the tabernacle-, which is the sacramental source of the Church's life, and the pulpit, the place from where the Word is proclaimed and the faithful receive explanations and preaching. On the other hand, God accepts the temple in the Old Testament, so its relevance is relative, since everything depends on the obedience of God. (Cf. 2 Re 9). That is why God abandoned the Temple in Ezechiel's time, allowing its destruction. However, the people still exists in exile. The topic in the New Testament focuses on Jesuschrist who replaced Jerusalem's temple with his own body (Jn 2, 12-25). Is there no Temple in the New Testament? There was not one for the first few centuries, though it would be wrong to think that there should not be one, as if it was something from the Old Testament. See about this topic: Joseph Ratzinger, «Un nuevo canto para el Señor» (Sígueme, Salamanca, 1999), with a chapter (originally an article) on the Christian temple from this perspective.

Church. Thus, God's house becomes a meeting place with the gift, a signal of world's sacredness, a sacrament and sign of the mystery.

Thus, the deep meaning of the sacred building, of the temple, must be rediscovered once and once again in the core of the Gospel message. It must be its «spirit», the spirit of faith, hope and charity; therefore, the spirit of joy and humbleness, those virtues marking Christianity as a religion for and of human fulfillment and joy. The symbology contained by the temple as belonging to its field –as if to say, its essential semantic field– is the one referred to unity, simplicity, light, the primeval elements, the effective material signs of the grace granted by the sacraments, which specific and genuine *ubi* is the Church⁹.

At the start of these reflections we wondered about the metaphor as a valid concept for configuring the sacred space. What do I mean by metaphor in this context? The metaphor is the field of meaning in which the full sense of the architectural work is born from and through symbolism. That is, the metaphorical is more significant than the explicit, particularly when referring to the habitation of sacramental realities in which the sign becomes obvious and visible through the material. That is what constitutes that same sense. The elements contained by the temple are the bread, the word, the procession, the hierarchical structure shown in the liturgy, the brotherly communion, etc. They are figures of the gift, vehicles of the mystery of God's life amid men¹⁰.

In that new logic born out of the dialogue between the Father and each of his children, represented mainly in the temple which is the shelter for each person's intimate prayer with God, the human being is integrated in the mystery of God's love. God himself is the mystery which becomes the ideal home for everyone, because it is only in the solitude of a personal meeting with God where the miracle of a free reception of the I by the You takes place¹¹. The sacred space must provide a response to this sacramental reality in its multiplicity, perhaps avoiding those canons or expressive means which are well consolidated but a little hieratical¹².

⁹ The great Frank Lloyd Wright considered light to be the explicit signal of beauty, of full humanity. Cf. Frank Lloyd Wright, «A Testament», N.Y., New York, 1957.

¹⁰ «The fact that Ronchamp is a church, a building, therefore it is destined and conditioned by its destiny in every detail, was not a hindrance for the master builder. Dancing in chains is part of his profession –chained by what a thing!– shaping objective interests in a manner that is lit up at the level of what is disinterested in itself. The goal is raised here to the kingdom where human interests go dumb because they are assumed by the invisible interests of one who is totally someone else, whose kingdom men may only grasp and tread on by sacrificing all of his purposes to Him. If this liturgical space is totally at the service of that sacrifice, the radiant activity of human imagination in the mystery, should it not meet another illuminating force, i.e., that of the Holy Ghost? – does it happen at the time of the starry conjunction which is not prolonged by a mere transmission of sacred forms and which, least of all, can be replicated?» (Hans Urs von Balthasar, «Geleitwort Ein Tag mit Ronchamp», Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln, 1958.

¹¹ Prayer was thus defined by John Paul II: A dialogue where You is more important than I. Cf. John Paul II, «Cruzando el umbral de la esperanza», Planeta, Madrid, 2000, chapter 1.

¹² Beauty, every type of beauty, talks about God. The appropriation of particular kinds of beauty or the exclusion of an alleged «canon» of works of art that do not refer explicitly to God indicates faintheartedness and metaphorical poorness. The architect's job in the field of designing the sacred space entails the expansion of the concepts of admiration and surprise, it entails reconsidering the gift and grace as the axes articulating human existence in the world.

The ambiguity and polysemous wealth of the Eucharist message points towards the need that constitutes the architect's work, which is, paying attention at the way in which the structural elements of the building must be integrated from the metaphorical essence revealed by the signs¹³.

It would be helpful for our purpose to draw a few conclusions about the liturgical rules issued by the Church during the II Vatican Council. It is revealing that the Apostolic Constitution *Sacrosantum Concilium*, containing the rules regarding divine worship, was the first one to be enacted on 4 December 1963, two years before the ending of the Council's work. Nevertheless, we may say generally that in the last 40 years there has been a striking decline in the aesthetic criteria guiding the work of architects, priests and designers within the Church. I am not just referring to the change or deletion of particular elements having a radical influence in the spatial distribution of temples, such as the elimination of the pulpit in favor of the ambon, but -in a more central way as regards the sacramental essence of the temple, a problem which remains open to theological and disciplinary debate- to the provision according to which the priest stands *coram populo* during the performance of the Eucharist, thus creating a new dimension for the concept of presbytery, the *introitus* procession or the choir, just to mention a few of them¹⁴.

Therefore, it is advisable for the architects to know well the Council's recommendations about the liturgy, so that their work effectively serves the cult and the formation of the sense of sacredness among the faithful. Moreover, their creativity should serve as a vehicle for educating a new vision, a sensitivity more in tune with the sanctity of the sacramental life around which the individual and community existence of Christians revolves¹⁵.

¹³ Just to quote one example, the building plan and the location of the sacristy, the baptistery of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament should reflect the meaning of the temple as a living body. The temple functionality stems, as already mentioned, from the sacramental essence of the worship place and not from an alleged practical autonomy of the parts: «The building is elementally among us as a work full of spirit. Here spirit means, above all, human spirit, genius, which cannot exist without a fully mastered *téchné*, but which matures successfully in a final result that charms as a miracle, above technical skills toyed with by the spirit in the image of divine wisdom (cf. Prov 8, 30-31). Certainly, there are some things in the building technique which facilitate the sensation of oscillating lightness: bridges, road layouts, houses of seemingly inexistent weight. Nevertheless, this is not the purpose, even though the whole necessary technique was used, but the purpose was the game of the unique and free spirit released by the strength of its creative fantasy, a game that raises us to the kingdom of ontological freedom, loaded with the weapons of mastership» (Hans Urs von Balthasar, op. quote).

¹⁴ In that regard, cf. Valeria Anecchino, «El presbiterio en la arquitectura sacra», at www.upra.org/archivio_pdf/ec61-annecchino.pdf. Nevertheless, it should be born in mind that the Council did not order the *coram populo* celebration, nor even the 1967 updated edition of the Missal. Actually, the Missal only mentions in its 2001 edition that the celebration is *coram populo*. The practice gradually imposed itself, though it was questioned by Joseph Ratzinger himself. Cf. The final interview in «La fiesta de la fe», Desclee de Brower, Bilbao, 1999. Card. Schönborn of Vienna has also asked the Congregation of the Cult for explanations about the addition to the 2001 Missal edition. The answer he received qualifies the statement that the celebration should be facing the people.

¹⁵ «When building temples, careful diligence should be applied to their aptness for the celebration of liturgical actions, and to achieve the active participation of the faithful» (*Sacrosantum Concilium*, chap. 7, n. 124). Please note that the regulatory aspect is implicitly stated, it is

Modern Finnish architecture provides an interesting and revealing example of an artistic, sub-creative work where the metaphoric has taken on an entity which reveals or, at least unveils (sooner than referring to itself) the mystery it serves. Many of these Lutheran temples were built after the Second World War. The core of Lutheran liturgy lies in listening to the Word and the sermon. Therefore, the central part of these churches is oriented East-West¹⁶, and built around the altar and the pulpit. In funerary chapels, the main feature is the sensation of a sequence of spaces framed by the funerary procession. Besides, the interaction between light and space configures the designs from inside out, simultaneously making explicit the radical relation between the temple and Nature. All of this architectural work, rooted in the comprehension of the mystery through the metaphor -the material sign which is a figure of something else and, finally, of what is radically alien-, generates a pure atmosphere of closeness and openness to the mystery¹⁷.

rather an advice than a duty. The specific means of turning these indications into inhabited volumes and spaces is left to the architect's prudence, sensitiveness and Eucharist piety; according to the term «habitation» used herewith.

¹⁶ «(...) with the strength of the Holy Ghost, you imbue with life and sanctify everything, and gather your people incessantly, so that they offer a stainless sacrifice in your honor from dawn to sunset», start of the III Eucharist Prayer.

¹⁷ A few examples are: the Resurrection Chapel in Turku; the Otaniemi Chapel in Espoo, by Kaija & Heikki Siren; the Three Crosses Church in Vuoksenniska; Imatra, by Alvar Aalto; or the Vatiala Chapel in Kangasala.