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VATICAN - "STONES SOUNDS AND COLOURS OF GOD'S HOUSE" Bishop Mauro Piacenza - The centre of the liturgical space and the heart of human sacrality: Sanctuary and Crucifix (2)

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - Well known to all is the affirmation made by the Sacrosanctum Concilium (n. 7) that "Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister… but especially under the eucharistic species…He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings…[…]. These different statements indicate that Liturgy is not something static, a spectacle at which we assist, it is something dynamic, in the sense of an act through which God makes himself present and in which we are called to 'take an active part'.
In the light of what we have just said certain elements of the liturgical reform would appear to have now been acquired: a) only one freely standing altar, around which it is possible to incense, and which does not in itself indicate which way the celebrant must face; b) altar separate from the tabernacle; c) an enveloping lectern in a fixed position for the proclamation of the Word; d) a chair for the person who presides the liturgical celebration, preferably not central but chastic to the lectern; e) a visible position for the baptismal font (outside the sanctuary, possibly, even outside the church building). There necessity to make a clear distinction between sanctuary and hall remains.
4. We wish now to treat the relation between the single elements in the arrangement of the sanctuary, particularly the altar, the focal point of the church.
The General Introduction to the Roman Missal translates theological principles into practical instructions and to these - as well as introductions to the texts of liturgical books - architects of churches must pay serious attention. At paragraph 295, describing the arrangement of the sanctuary GIRM speaks of an opportune distinction between the nave of the church "by means of elevation or a particular structure and ornamentation". It is evident that this is rightly to underline in this way the essential difference between the ministerial Priesthood and the universal priesthood of the laity. It is also true that this norm must be co-ordinated with the point expressed in the previous paragraph (n. 294), the overall arrangement of the sacred building must present the image of a gathered assembly, facilitating each in the carrying out of his or her function.
Therefore any elevation or structural element must enhance the dignity of the sanctuary and create an area to foster respect certainly not to distance the faithful. This was the reason for the pergulae in early Christian basilicas, which later evolved into elements which separated the altar from the assembly (jubé, Lettner, trascoros, cancel) and in fact were removed after the Council of Trent so the altar would be visible. Altar rails were added later so people could receive communion while kneeling and they have not necessarily terminated this function: the reception of communion while kneeling is not prohibited and to remove altar rails in old churches would be mistake.
In the arrangement of the church, steps must be ritual, in other words numerically symbolic, and allow liturgical movement, incensing, genuflection, prostration, processions, room for the seat of the bishop, etc.,
5. The unifying element of the sanctuary and the whole liturgical space is naturally the altar which must be "the centre towards which the attention of the faithful is drawn" (IGMR n. 299) and again: "altar is the centre of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist" (ivi n. 296).
In the same way with regard to the lectern it is stated "the importance of the Word of God demands a suitable place in the church for the Word to be proclaimed, and towards which the attention of the faithful turns spontaneously during the Liturgy of the Word" (ivi n. 309). The lectern must also be enveloping, to recall the empty tomb, the news of the Resurrection.
These norms, not in the least in contradiction, reveal the principle of the unity of the two parts of the Mass, the

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Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Liturgy, “closely united to form one act of worship” (Sacrosanctum Concilium n. 56). The GIRM also places these two Parts in a relation of complementarity: “The altar on which the Sacrifice of the Cross is made present under sacramental signs is also the table of the Lord to which the People of God is called together to participate in the Mass […] (n. 296).
Naturally these requirements raise questions which the architect in collaboration with the liturgist must solve: how to put these two poles in relation? How to express the idea of parallelism between the “table of the Lord’s body” (Sacrosanctum Concilium n. 48) and a “table of God’s word” (ivi n. 51), not forgetting the centrality, not only ideal but real and architectonic, to be reserved solely for the altar as the centre of the act of thanksgiving accomplished in the Eucharist?
For example to be altogether excluded is the type of sanctuary with the lectern on the same line as the altar or the elliptic arrangement which puts the altar and lectern in the two engaging points attributing to them an erroneous substantial equivalence. However this must not deter architects from searching for new solutions, availing themselves of healthy Catholic doctrine and history of architecture for worship in which novelty never stands for eccentricity, but rather fidelity to the religious message to be communicated in the flow of living tradition. + Mauro Piacenza, president Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church and president of the Pontifical Commission di Sacred Archaeology. (Agenzia Fides 19/9/2006 - righe 69, parole 912)

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