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VATICAN - "STONES, SOUNDS AND COLOURS OF GOD'S HOUSE" Bishop Mauro Piacenza - The centre of the liturgical space the heart of human sacrality: Sanctuary and Crucifix (4)

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - 9. Today we hear a frequently used term, happy in my opinion, "iconicity space", to indicate the capacity of the architecturally arranged liturgical space or pieces furniture themselves to be "icons", or architectural elements serving not only functional but also as signs of a spiritual reality and mystery: this realty, made present in the liturgical celebration, constitutes a sort of iconology of which architectural elements and images should be revealing signs, iconography. In other words, the altar - and also the lectern, the baptistery etc - thanks to their material, shape and position, should themselves be bearers of a significance which transcends them (celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and banquet, proclamation of the Word, immersion in the death and resurrection of Christ) and the same can be said for the space in its relation with the light and the inhabiting assembly. In this sense the altar should not appear as a table but rather it should have the characteristics of the Altar of the Sacrifice.
Whatever the case, in keeping with a very early custom, the altar is decorated either with the application of frontals or sculpting directly in the material of which it is made. With regard to iconography - to be sculptured, chiselled, painted or embroidered - it portrays the mysteries of the Lord's life from the Incarnation to the Parousia, celebrated in the Mass; the mysteries of the Passion and Death of the Lord, or the Last Supper, or the biblical "figures" of Christ's sacrifice; or symbolic elements such as the slain Lamb, taken from the Book of Revelation and referred to the Paschal Mystery of Christ; allegories can be used (the pelican) or naturalistic elements (wheat and grapes) or also (a chalice), taking care to ensure immediate comprehension.
10. With regard to images we take another point from the mentioned book by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Lo spirito della liturgia, ed. German 1999, ed. Italian 2001), who finds in the image of the crucifix the solution to a question he raised with regard to the direction of liturgical prayer "conversi ad Dominum". With intuition, in my opinion admirable. he writes: "The direction towards the east is in close connection with the 'sign of the Son of Man' (cfr Mt 24, 27), with the cross which announces the Lord's return" (p. 79).
Therefore an essential piece of furniture, the altar, is completed and becomes a "liturgical" image. I think it is most opportune today to speak of liturgical images at a time when most Christian art, with serious harm for everyone, is simply "religious", simply an expression of the artist's own spiritual experience. Whereas Liturgical art (in my opinion this term is preferable to the ambiguous and controversial term "sacred" art), combines the previous aspect, with the purpose the Church at least in a triple modality: worship, catechesis and devotion. In particular liturgical art - just as the rite, the singing, the vestments, and furniture - fosters participation of the faithful in the holy Paschal Mysteries of Salvation which we celebrate.
Side-stepping a more complex discourse about images, in Latin Liturgy the only explicitly requested image is the crucifix: "A cross with the image of Christ crucified must be placed either upon or next to the altar, clearly visible for the assembled people. This cross should remain close to the altar even when there is no liturgical service to remind the faithful of the Lord's redeeming Passion" (IGMR n. 308). And : «Among sacred images the most important is "the figure of the precious Cross source of our salvation", the recapitulating symbol of the whole Paschal mystery. […] The Holy Cross represents Christ's passion and triumph over death and at the same time, […] teaches about his second coming» (Benedictional, n. 1331). The Cross is therefore the figurative icon which includes the other three Christological focuses and must bear the figure of Christ with eyes open or closed.
The presence of the Cross at the celebration of Mass is found as early as the 5th century and a constant from the late Middle Ages onwards was the presence of crosses suspended over the Ciborium or a pole cross placed beside the altar. From the 10th -11th century, in concomitance with the moving of the altar to the end of the apse, it became customary in the West to have an altar cross in the form of a crucifix fixed or placed on the rear part of

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the altar flanked by two candle sticks: after becoming common practice in the 13th century this was made compulsory with the Tridentine Missal. It was also common to place a large crucifix on the top of the door of the jubé (French architectural term) behind the altar known as the “the crucifix jubé”, or to suspend a cross in the triumphal arch or over the altar.
Late medieval theology saw the crucifix as a symbol of victory through the representation of the body of the Body of Christ conformed to ideal beauty and without signs of suffering. Examples of this are late medieval bejewelled crosses, similar to mosaic or painted crucifixes on early Christian apses, a sign of the second coming of the Son of Man in the parousía (cfr. Mt 24, 4-31; 25, 31) and Revelation, where gems are the prerogative of the heavenly Jerusalem “where God lives among human beings” (Rev 21, 3). Only later, on the basis of the Byzantine prototype and the influence of theology (Anselm of Aosta), spirituality (Franciscan mystics modern, Devotio) and spreading devotion to the suffering humanity of Christ, the Crucifix begins to appear with eyes closed and signs of the passion, portraying suffering increasingly, according to a typology much loved by the faithful.
However it would seem that today the altar crucifix is called to be something more than a simple devotional image, which stirs affective participation or simply calls to mind the historic event of Calvary: it should express the whole of the Paschal mystery. It must be able to combine and render evident the very mystery of Christ who died, rose again, ascended into heaven and will come again. In other words the paschal mystery celebrated at Mass, should be clearly represented in this liturgical image of the crucifix, which should be given a place where it becomes the point of orientation of the prayer of the priest and the faithful “conversi ad Dominum” (Ratzinger, pp. 79-80).
Towards the Cross, lastly, other images converge, the Retable on which usually the dedicatory title is presented. The Retable is in the apse because the Blessed Virgin Mary, the angels and saints intercede for the people to the Saviour. There must always be a sense of the warm embrace of the family of God! + Mauro Piacenza, President of Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, President of Pontifical Commission di Sacred Archaeology. (Agenzia Fides 3/10/2006 - righe 80, parole 1103)

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