

## Liturgy and Space

In considering the relationship of architecture and liturgical practice, we may begin by pondering the definition of liturgy, and the role of art in worship. The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek "leitourgeo" which is compounded from "laos" (people), and "ergon" (work). Literally, it means "work of the people". Thus it may be said that in its primary sense liturgical practice is work as an effort of the people of God to commune with Him. Worship is the most important activity of Christians and therefore should be the focus of our creative endeavors, whichever form those take.

Viewed from this perspective, ecclesiastical art has the potential to become the highest expression of human creativity. If the liturgy, the Eucharistic assembly, is the supreme activity of Christian life, then every aspect of it – movement, hymnody, music, art, and space – assumes transcendental character, assisting man in the ultimate experience of communion with the divine.

"The Church entrusts art with a mediating role, analogous, we might say, to the role of the priest or, perhaps better, to that of Jacob's ladder descending and ascending. Art is meant to bring the divine to the human world, to the level of the senses, then, from the spiritual insight gained through the senses and the stirring of the emotions, to raise the human world to God, to his inexpressible kingdom of mystery, beauty, and life. [...]The fine arts are rightly classed among the noblest activities of man's genius; this is especially true of religious art and of its highest manifestation, sacred art. Of their nature, the arts are directed toward expressing in some way the infinite beauty of God in works made by human hands. Their dedication to the increase of God's praise and of His glory is more complete, the more exclusively they are devoted to turning men's minds devoutly towards God." [\[1\]](#)

If we therefore study ecclesiastical architecture as the organization of physical space which supports the very purpose of the liturgical process, that of transformation, i.e. re-incorporating the mundane into the sacred, then we may begin to understand how the most successful church buildings appear to transcend limitations of material reality beginning with their own. The transcendence and transformation of material reality is Church art par excellence. For in this ascent the material art is no longer veiled as an end in itself but that which nurtures and sustains life. As Christos Yannaras writes in his book *The Freedom of Morality*, "the worship of the Church is art: it is the work of a *communal* use of material reality, building and shaping the

earth's material so as to render it capable of serving life, that existential fullness of life which is communion and relationship.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Church architecture should be primarily considered in the context of art as shaping space around ritual, since it is first and foremost the liturgical rites of the church that determine the shape and organization of the church building. As St. Symeon of Thessalonica wrote, “Splendor of the temple signifies the beauty of paradise, therefore the Divine temple pictures paradise or better to say presents the heavenly gifts of paradise, including in itself not just the tree of life, but Life itself, consecrated and distributed [...]. In the beginning of prayers we stand outside of the temple as if outside paradise or heaven itself. And when the songs are finished and the gates open we enter the Divine temple like paradise or heaven. It means that heavenly dwellings are open to us and we have access to the Holy of Holies, we ascend to the light and approach the throne of the Lord. For we proceed to the east and the altar, and ascend, as if on the clouds, on the divine hymns and songs, into the internal temple, as if into the air unto the meeting of the Lord, who, by ascending into heaven, raised also us on high and prepared himself as the way, so that we would always dwell with the Lord himself, consecrating for us. Therefore the gates open and the curtains open, to manifest that the heavenly dwellings open and come into oneness with the dwellers of the earth.”<sup>[3]</sup>

During the liturgical service, clergy and faithful concelebrate the Eucharist. Therefore the space itself should complement the act of the community gathered in liturgical prayer. All parts of this space, all material objects and all physical activities are organized for a common purpose. Here we may apply the Orthodox concept of “sobornost”, the unity of the Church as the body of Christ, and its communal consciousness, to church art and architecture. The principle of “sobornost” defines the church building and art as an expression of ecclesial consciousness. The church building is a synthetic one, because it fulfills the function of synthesizing art, ritual and music. In a way it may be regarded as an attempt on the part of the people to define our physical environment so that it may assist us in touching the mystery of the communion with our Creator.

In ancient Russian building practice the ultimate goal of ecclesiastical planning was described through the concept of “stroinoe mesto” – “a place congenial to building [...] whereby a building place was chosen in relation to the whole world”<sup>[4]</sup>. The word itself is related to “stroit” (to build) and “stroiny” (graceful) and shows an understanding of a building as a graceful and harmonious whole, whereby the building delineates the spatial and celestial center of the world. From this cosmic center there comes a twofold dynamic of liturgy and space. On the one hand the cosmic center draws the world into itself. On the other hand the cosmic center, by drawing the world into

itself, extends its spatial and temporal parameters so that the entire Cosmos becomes sacred space.

Given this, we may consider the church building as a theological statement. It is in its spatial structure, its iconographic scheme and the organization of its furnishings that the church is a theological cosmogram. Its interior is designed to convey the unity of the universe in God. The church building acts as a microcosm stretching to become a macrocosm. Its parts do not act independently of each other, but rather convey the harmony, unity and sanctity of God's world.

Inside the body of a church building, there exists a dynamic relationship between the narthex, nave and sanctuary. The nave is potentially the sanctuary, the sanctuary is the nave in action. St. Symeon writes, "The temple is double in nature, having the altar and the external. In this way it represents Christ, being both God and man, and how the one nature is visible and the other not. It also represents man, being of both soul and body. Moreover, it most excellently represents the mystery of the Holy Trinity, that it is inaccessible according to its essence, yet known in its providence and powers, likewise revealing the visible and invisible world; but that same visible and invisible world is revealed only by the divine temple, with the sacred bema (altar) it represents heaven, the earthly with the rest. In another way the divine temple is regarded as Triadic, by the area before the nave, the nave and the sacred bema; this represents the Holy Trinity and the angelic orders which are in sets of three, and the pious also divided into three, that is, the ordained, the perfected faithful, and those in repentance. The scheme of the divine temple also teaches regarding earth, heaven and the heaven above the heaven; the pre-nave teaches of the earth, the nave teaches of heaven, and the things of the heaven above heaven are taught by the most holy bema."<sup>[5]</sup> And in the words of St. Maximus the Confessor, "the nave is the sanctuary in potency by being consecrated by the relationship of the sacrament toward its end, and in turn the sanctuary is the nave in act by possessing the principle of its own sacrament, which remains one and the same in its two parts."<sup>[6]</sup>

In considering the dynamic organization of the church building, we can see that it follows the axes of theologically significant directions. On the horizontal plane, our movement during the liturgy proceeds from the outside through the narthex, the world, into the nave, the body of the church, and towards the altar, where the focal points of the worship – the veneration of the icons and the Eucharistic communion – are taking place. The building should then be organized in such a way that there is a natural "draw" toward the heart of the mysteries, the focus of attention and desire. On the vertical axis, the beauty and otherworldliness of Heaven is beckoning the worshipper and filling him with longing and joy. Yet there is no dichotomy, but rather unity and interrelationship

between the axes, for the body of Christ is mystically present in the Eucharist, making the Eucharistic assembly the center of the universe.

If we regard the different elements that are combined in the attempt to create the dynamic character of the experience of the building, we shall see that none are as important as light. Ironically, this is one element of the building that ideally is *not* created by man, and its successful implementation in the architecture may be regarded as the supreme accomplishment of man's collaboration with nature. The relationship of the created "natural" light to the uncreated Light of God, as well as its natural beauty and warmth, are nowhere as keenly experienced as in the church. One is only to think of the giant dome of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople which appears to float on the ring of small windows; the Cross of the Church of the Light in Tokyo; the glorious glow of the mosaics in the dome of the Florentine Baptistery and the light well on its top; the mosaics of St. Sophia in Kiev and the frescoes of the Cathedral of Dormition in Moscow that seem to float over the darkness of the lower church; and of every church building where the spirit is awed and soars at the same time as one moves through the space. It is the reminder of "the light" that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." <sup>[7]</sup>

Yet another important part of experience of church architecture is not in what the building is filled with, but what is *not* there – the empty space pregnant with the presence of the divine. In every great church building there is emptiness - not of the sort of hollow, lonely *nothingness*, but rather "silence, clarity, and transparency. Emptiness may resound without sound, may be filled by its potential to be filled, and make open what is complete..." <sup>[8]</sup>

This kind of emptiness conveys readiness, expectation and, again, desire to be filled with the sublime presence. It is worth noting here that in the English the words "temple" and "contemplation" derive from the same Latin root "templum". The temple can be understood as the space for contemplating the divine.

The act of building a church is essentially in itself an act of worship, an embodied prayer. In this prayer, the physical properties of a building are revealed for what they must be in the cosmological context of the Divine economy. As iconography reveals both the temporal and the eternal, so should church architecture be created for the same purpose.

When one enters a great church, one's experience of the space is inevitably a transcendent one, humbling even the faithless people. One stands in awe of God's glory ever-present among men, and worshipped in His house. The Russian emissaries to Constantinople who had stood in the

nave of Hagia Sophia reported to Prince Vladimir upon their return: “we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men.”<sup>[9]</sup>

“Truly the church is Heaven upon earth; for where the throne of God is, where the awful sacraments are celebrated, where the angels serve together with men, ceaselessly glorifying the Almighty, there is truly Heaven. And so let us enter into the house of God with the fear of God, with a pure heart, laying aside all vices and every worldly care, and let us stand in it with faith and reverence, with understanding attention, with love and peace in our hearts, so that we may come away renewed, as though made Heavenly; so that we may live in the holiness natural to Heaven, not bound by worldly desires and pleasures.”<sup>[10]</sup>

“After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.’ Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices.

Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!’ Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.’”<sup>[11]</sup>

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- [1] *Built of living stones* (Catholic guidelines on Art, Architecture and Worship). USCCB, Washington, 2000
- [2] Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of morality*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996, p. 232
- [3] St. Symeon of Thessalonica, *On the Holy Temple and its Consecration*, Ch. 108, 123. In J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, V. 155, Paris, 1866.
- [4] Oleg Shvidkovsky, *Tradition and Modernity: Whither Soviet Architecture Today?* Architectural Design Vol. 57, issue 7/8, 1987, p. 7.
- [5] St. Symeon of Thessalonica, *Discourse on the Holy Temple*, Ch. 3, 4. In J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, V. 155, Paris, 1866.
- [6] St. Maximus the Confessor, *The Church's Mystagogy*. Ch. 2. In *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George Berthold, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1985.
- [7] John 1:5
- [8] Michael Benedikt, *For an architecture of reality*. New York: Lumen Books, 1987
- [9] *The Russian primary chronicle, Laurentian text*. Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953
- [10] St. John of Kronstadt, *My life in Christ*. In *Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt*, ed. by W. J. Grisbrooke. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1967
- [11] Revelation 4:1-11