

OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

IN a previous article (*Our Catholic Heritage*, February 1949) the present writer made reference to the generally poor standard of Catholic art in this country and pointed out how very unrubrical are the majority of our churches. It is not a question of lack of means—many of our churches suffer from over-decoration in fabric and fittings—but rather an ignorance of, or at any rate an indifference to, the mind of the Church as expressed in her clearly defined rubrics. Before the advent of the Gothic Revival in the nineteenth century our churches, though usually unpretentious and often poverty-stricken, emphasised the essential purpose of a Christian place of worship to a degree to which too often their more imposing successors have failed to attain. It should always be remembered that the primary purpose of a church is to provide a shelter for the altar upon which is offered the sacrifice of the Mass. A church should be built for the altar, not the altar for the church. The failure of so many churches of the past century to create the right atmosphere is due largely to a confusion of ideas. The mediaeval Gothic church with its screens and spacious chancel belonged to an age when virtually everyone was of the household of the Faith and all were content to accept the Church's teaching as a matter of course.

The atmosphere, though rich and beautiful, was usually restrained. With the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century the authority of the Church was no longer unquestioned and she was compelled to adopt a more aggressive attitude, seeking to impress the senses by emphasising the dramatic side of divine worship. Hence the churches of the Counter-Reformation were usually without screens and the altar was raised on numerous steps and often backed up by a sumptuous display of sculpture and carved work. The style *par excellence* of the Counter-Reformation is the Baroque and superb examples may be seen in most parts of Christendom from Rome to Mexico and from Brazil to the Philippines. Gothic with its screened altars and air of mystery may be summed up in the word *Credo*, while Baroque with its almost theatrical display seems to echo *Emmanuel*—God with us.

Some of the early Gothic Revivalists, like Pugin, in their enthusiasm were prepared to return whole-heartedly to the mediaeval standards but the majority sought a compromise and endeavoured to give a Gothic form to Baroque principals with most unhappy results. This compromise is well illustrated by the normal nineteenth century Catholic church which has a very shallow chancel,

or rather sanctuary, and no screen. The altar is raised on a flight of steps and is often backed by a towering erection, very Gothic and of white stone and variegated marble, all pinnaced and niched, in the centre of which is set the permanent Exposition throne occupied by the altar crucifix except at Benediction or during Exposition. Usually several tiers of shelves rise from the *mensa* in the middle of which is fixed the tabernacle of aggressive Gothic character with a small curtain about the size of a pocket handkerchief hanging in front of the brass door. The altar, which has become little more than the base of this fearsome erection, is frequently devoid of a frontal and the front is either elaborately carved or consists of a series of open arches affording ample accommodation for dust and cobwebs. There is often an imposing chancel arch which is occupied not by a screen but by the altar rails which are either costly metal monstrosities of the type beloved by commercial church furnishers, or stone or marble affairs exhibiting thirteenth or fourteenth century details, an absurd anachronism since altar rails were unknown in mediaeval times. Aisles, where they exist, are usually disproportionately narrow since the building, though Gothic in detail, is designed with what may be termed a Baroque mentality. There is a quite natural desire to assure that the high altar should be visible from every seat in the building and the true Gothic church does not necessarily lend itself to this arrangement. There is often a superfluity of side altars and shrines, sometimes set at right angles to the main axis of the fabric and the font is frequently hidden away in some corner and quite unworthy of its sacred purpose.

In one respect many modern Catholic churches are deserving of praise and that is in the position of the organ which frequently occupies a gallery at the ritual west end.

It is generally held that windows are for the purpose of admitting light, but the Victorian revivalists seem to have had a rooted objection to clear glass even in a country setting. If the available funds did not run to painted glass a horrible substitute commonly known as 'cathedral' was employed. This opaque monstrosity, perhaps not out of place in a bathroom, which might otherwise be exposed to the public gaze, is totally unsuited to a church. To add to the general gloom produced by this frightful glass the internal surface of the walls was either decorated with stencilled patterns or distempered in what are most inappropriately termed 'nice warm colours' which often include a dado in chocolate or green with a 'Gothic' border. This scheme was sometimes extended to the roof. Nor is the frenzy of misplaced colour altogether a thing of the past among Catholics. Recently the present writer visited a small church in the eastern counties which had been lately 'redecorated', having heard that

the scheme had been warmly approved by a local dignitary. On coming to after the first shock the only remark which seemed appropriate, bearing in mind the surroundings, was 'Oh that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me'.

There is not space here to deal in detail with the unsuitable minor decorations in the way of images, altar ornaments, vestments and the like. Too often they are as inappropriate and tasteless as the fabric and its major appointments. Images are more often than not exceedingly mawkish and ill-favoured with insipid features and garish colouring, all too obviously the product of commercial art.

Enough, however, of criticism; it is time to put forward some constructive ideas in the hope that they may help forward the cause we have at heart.

What are the principles which should guide us in the design and furnishing of a church? Obviously the first consideration must be suitability for the purpose of the building. A Catholic church is God's house, the home of the Blessed Sacrament, and everything about it should proclaim this essential fact. It is also, therefore, the place where the faithful gather together to render to God their bounden duty and to receive the means of grace. Its purpose is to promote in those who frequent it a spirit of worship and devotion and to emphasise the continuity of our Faith in its fulfilling of the Divine Founder's commands. I cannot do better in this connection than quote Mr J. N. Comper, the greatest ecclesiastical architect of the present day. In his essay *Of the Atmosphere of a Church* he writes (page 10): 'The note of a church should be not that of novelty but of eternity. Like the Liturgy celebrated within it, the measure of its greatness will be the measure in which it succeeds in eliminating time and producing the atmosphere of heavenly worship. This is the characteristic of the earliest art of the Church, in liturgy, in architecture and in plastic decoration, and it is the tradition of all subsequent ages. The Church took over what is eternal in the Jewish and Greek temples, adapting and perfecting it to her use.' Again (pages 12 and 21) he says: 'Knowledge of Tradition is the first requisite for the creation of an atmosphere in a church. . . . In the fourth century we find fully established so as to postulate an earlier origin, the 'lay-out' of the plan of a church which is suited to the needs of today in a way in which the medieval plan, to which we in England still adhere amidst all vagaries of styles, is not suited, developed as it was for monastic use; the main feature of the early plan is the position of the altar, one might say, in the midst of the worshippers, and not separated from them by any choir but only by a very open screen, or merely by low *cancelli*.'

A church need not be pretentious or imposing in order to serve its proper purpose and afford an atmosphere of devotion. Dignity, a sense of proportion and, so far as circumstances permit, an air of spaciousness and freedom from fussiness are the essentials required. Many medieval churches, especially in poor or remote districts, were austere simple, being little more than barns with rough whitewashed walls, but made glorious within by comely and appropriate fittings. Such a type is eminently suitable at the present time when needs are great but funds and materials hard to come by. Mere size and costliness are no guarantee of a satisfactory church, but if we abide by the rubrics and canons of good taste it is possible to produce a church with the right atmosphere however limited the means at our disposal.

Let us briefly summarise the essential points to be observed. Good proportions and straightforward design are the first requirements. The plan is a matter of great consequence. Since modern Catholic custom favours an 'open' church with the high altar as far as possible in view of the whole congregation it would seem that an unaisled parallelogram with, perhaps, a recess for the altar would meet the case most effectively for a parish church of moderate size. As alternative suggestions the round and polygonal plans with the altar in the centre are worthy of consideration and have moreover a long-standing precedent. An aisled parallelogram can equally well meet our needs if the arcades are wide and lofty, as in Mr Comper's lovely church at Cosham, where the altar is perfectly visible from all parts.

The interior should have light coloured walls, preferably broken white, and the windows should be filled with clear glass in rectangular leading unless means allow of a certain amount of painted glass which, however, must only be of the very best and not obstruct the entrance of light. Probably less than half a dozen first class painted-glass artists are now functioning and unless it is possible to employ one of these it would be far better to stick to clear glass. Seating, whether fixed or movable—preferably the latter—should be kept within bounds allowing a wide central gangway and a very considerable clear space in front of the sanctuary. Where the church is barely adequate for the congregation this principle may be hard to enforce but aesthetically it is essential.

The altar is, of course, the most important feature of a church and indeed its *raison d'être*. Unfortunately this is precisely the feature which is often the most unsatisfactory. It should be conspicuous, dignified and rich without an excess of meretricious ornament. A permanent consecrated altar must consist of a *mensa* of stone, or marble, resting on supports of similar material, and should

have a movable frontal of textiles or metal. The candlesticks and crucifix should stand directly on the *mensa* flanking and slightly behind the tabernacle. The crucifix may have a long shaft fitted into a slot on the back edge of the *mensa*. The tabernacle should have a domed top and be completely enveloped in a silk veil of the same colour as the frontal and vestments. Flowers should not be placed on the *mensa*, but there is no reason why large jars of flowers should not be placed on the adjacent steps. From the earliest times it was customary to have a canopy over the altar, called a *ciborium*, of metal, wood or stone, resting on four columns which should, if possible, be richly decorated in colour. There should be, as a rule, a low reredos, or at any rate a textile dorsal. Sometimes in place of the *ciborium* a textile canopy, called a baldaquin, is suspended from the roof. In England the baldaquin was often of wood and called a tester. This arrangement is definitely in accordance with the mind of the Church as shown by various decrees of the Congregation of Rites. It is equally clear that normally a permanent Exposition throne is contrary to liturgical propriety; the employment of a movable throne, or stand, of wood or metal, is the correct procedure. Side altars should be orientated with the high altar and not placed against the lateral walls; they are best placed in separate chapels. The normal parish does not require more than one side altar.

The font comes next in importance to the altar and should be made as beautiful and dignified as means allow, being set in a prominent position near the main entrance, raised on at least one step and surmounted by a cover which should be as richly decorated as possible.

The organ is best placed in a gallery at the lower end of the church and can be made a beautiful feature if provided with a handsome case. The Stations of the Cross are too often crude and over elaborate. While a handsome set like that at St James's Church, Spanish Place, London, by Mr Geoffrey Webb, can be a great embellishment, it is possible to provide all that is necessary by utilising simple ebony crosses with the appropriate numbers and inscriptions, as at St John's, Norwich. Sacred images can, and should be, most attractive and devotional accessories if the work of real artists and not the mawkish product of commercial art; here again there is scope for good colour decoration. A pulpit is not an essential item but it is one which can be made very attractive if rightly treated. The type rising from a wineglass stem and surmounted by a tester is perhaps the most satisfactory. Here again there is precedent for the employment of colour which if wisely applied adds to the general effect.

The judicious and skilful use of colour is an essential adjunct to a church which can only be fully appreciated if the background formed by the walls is white and plenty of light is admitted through clear glass. White walls give an impression of spaciousness which is largely lost when the plaster is drab coloured, or decorated with stencilling and dadoes reminiscent of a Nonconformist Bethel.

There is no reason whatever why many of our over-ornate Victorian churches should not be reduced to a more comely appearance. With clear glass, white walls, open spaces, correctly arranged altars and the elimination of tasteless images and other paraphernalia the dullest nineteenth century Gothic church can be made devotional and even a thing of beauty. If we seek to make our churches more liturgically and aesthetically correct we shall help to increase the devotion of the faithful and promote the conversion of England.

T. E. LONG.

OBITER

ESPRIT ET VIE, a quarterly published by the Benedictines of Maredsous, might be described as a Belgian *Month* (new model). The August number includes William Law, Arnold Toynbee and Gertrud von le Fort among its authors, and Existentialism, Lewis Carroll and the Psychological Causes of Juvenile Delinquency among the subjects considered (though not, of course, by the authors already mentioned). Of special interest in a number that runs to more than a hundred and fifty pages (which provides concrete evidence of Belgium's economic recovery) are the 'Letters from Prison' of Helmuth von Moltke, executed by the Nazis in 1945, which have appeared in English in *A German of the Resistance*. Father Thierry D'Argenlieu, who was for many years Superior of the Dominican Mission in Sweden, gives an authoritative account of the Catholic prospect in that most Protestant of countries. He concludes:

What a source of strength it would be for the Catholic Church if she had at her service the boldness, the endurance, the gift for organisation, the technical resources, the sense of human dignity and the true susceptibility of the peoples of the North.

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THE WIND AND THE RAIN prints further extracts from the Autobiography of Christopher Dawson in its Summer number. He writes of his childhood in Yorkshire and of his learning of the past 'not so much by the arid path of the *Child's History of England* as through the enchanted world of myth and legend'. He continues:

No doubt this initiation into the past had its disadvantages from