

THE CHURCHES WE DESERVE?

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FIVE years ago the position of architecture in this country changed radically. The Festival of Britain, the South Bank Exhibition in particular, marked the final victory of the 'Modern Movement' within the architectural profession; a change which seemed both popular and officially acceptable.

The Festival Exhibition did not contain any one building which could be called great architecture; there was little, by European standards, that was even very good. But the glamour and the freshness of the various pavilions, the spaciousness and excellent acoustics of the Festival Hall had good publicity value. And the free, ambling layout of the South Bank reminded visitors of those pleasures of town life which we, in this country, had lost and almost entirely forgotten.

The change was radical; but it was not sudden. During the war social conditions had altered a great deal, and after 1945 much of this adjustment became statute, so that building, which for long had been a private perquisite, turned into public business. Hence the abandonment of many quasi-traditional prejudices and increased discussion of architecture at a rational level. It was no longer: 'I'm paying for it, I'll have what I like and I know what I like' but 'We all have to pay for it, so we had better agree on what is best'. Hence, too, the increased prestige of the architect as a technocrat and—this last with much coyness on the part of some architects—as an artist.

As a result of all that, architecture is the art most in the public eye at the moment and the Arts Council have at long last recognized this state of affairs by organizing a photographic exhibition of Ten Years (1945-1955) of British Architecture. There is also another innovation: this is the first properly designed Arts Council exhibition. The merits or otherwise of the particular design are of relatively minor importance. What matters is the Council's belated recognition that an exhibition is also a work of art—not just a matter of tasteful arrangement—and that its impact depends not only on the intrinsic merit of the different exhibits, but also on their relationship and setting.

The material of this exhibition does not, in fact, make any great impact. Partly this is due to the weakness inherent in architectural photography as a medium, partly to the wide publicity the material has already had. But mostly it is due to the lack—of which the Festival of Britain was indicative—of any major architectural figure or group, the lack of any emphatic direction. It is in no way the fault of the selection committee, who have been very careful and fair, and in the presentation have laid emphasis on the more important or influential buildings.

If not in quality, the exhibition is certainly impressive for the bulk of goodish building that is going on all over the country. 'One category'—says Mr John Summerson in the sensible and just essay which forms the bulk of the catalogue—'traditionally of the highest importance of all, is conspicuous by its absence: churches.' 'Clearly'—he goes on a little further—'the want has been felt of a programme capable of rational analysis, and church building can offer no such programme. It is a case of tradition or nothing.'

It is certain that no churches of even the modest merit required by the jury of this exhibition have been built recently in Britain. This is true not only of Catholic churches, but of all building by the various Christian bodies. At the Building Centre in Store Street, Bloomsbury, the Council for the Care of Churches has organized an exhibition of some 60 out of over 200 ecclesiastical buildings—mostly churches—built by the Established Church since 1940. The exhibition is certainly representative, with one or two mediocre designs standing out against the wretched quality of most of the exhibits.

The better designs include some by Mr Basil Spence whose winning competition scheme for Coventry Cathedral, now being built, has become the most talked-about building since the Festival. Mr Summerson mentions it in connection with the remarks which were quoted earlier; but remembering the almost insoluble terms of the programme for the competition—*pace* Mr Summerson, anything but traditional—the resulting whimsicality of the design, the archness of the private symbolism and the incomprehension of the problems of the modern Christian are not surprising.

Having said that much as an architectural critic, as a Catholic one must at once admit that an exhibition of Catholic building

activity within the same terms of reference would be considerably worse. But if the situation is bad in this country, and—to limit oneself to Europe—in Spain and Portugal, it has improved enormously in France and Italy, while in the Low Countries, in Germany and Switzerland the level previously established has been maintained; details of the most interesting church designed in Germany recently, St Nicholas in Leipzig by Egon Eiermann, have not yet been fully published.

In France, where building standards are lower than in this country while those of painting and sculpture are a good deal higher, the movement for new churches started by affecting the decorations, while certain changes which are associated with the liturgical movement (the altar facing the congregation, increased importance of the baptistery) were incorporated in the planning. This soon led to an appeal to the only great architect in France, le Corbusier. His first church, at Ronchamps on the Swiss frontier, is a pilgrimage chapel isolated on a hill; it was solemnly blessed by the Archbishop of Besançon last June, and since then Corbusier has been engaged on a new Dominican priory and church at la Tourette. Whereas the first is clearly a masterpiece, the design of the second building has only been published in fragments, and it is extremely difficult to make very much of it, though naturally expectations are high and this writer for one does not believe that they will be disappointed.

In Italy the new developments have been most interesting however. It was there that the influence of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art was greatest. Even when a good artist was commissioned to work for the church, he would—without prompting—feel that he had to modify his style. 'Cosa vuoi'—a distinguished Italian sculptor answered a criticism of an altar he had designed in a style quite alien to himself—'i preti non comprendano.' There was incomprehension for the achievements of Italian art between the two wars and since among the clergy; an incomprehension due to the official determination to establish an ecclesiastical 'style' and artistic manner which would be quite different from the art used for secular purposes. That most of the production of that period now seems to fall in with the less creditable results of official fascist patronage, does not alter the fact that this desire for isolation in art was inherent in the intellectual position occupied by Italian Catholicism at that time. The change which occurred

since the war has been a slow one, but already there are tangible signs of it. The latest number of *Casa Bella*, the best perhaps of current architectural publications, is devoted largely to three churches, all of them already built. The first, by Lodovico Quaroni, was a part of the village plan for la Martella, in the South of Italy; the second, by Magistretti and Tedeschi, is a circular church—selected through competition in 1948—for a large mixed experimental housing estate in Milan. The third, and the finest by a long way, by Gino Figini and Luigi Pollini, is also part of a new but more recent housing estate in Milan.

The last of these is a reinterpretation of the traditional basilica so familiar to the Milanese—the old church of St Ambrose must be the finest one outside Rome itself still in use—but a reinterpretation in the spare, harsh terminology of modern technique. Because of its present gauntness perhaps—it is still unfinished and undecorated—this is a moving and wholly convincing building. When and if it is finished, as it deserves to be, it may acquire a different quality.

But these three schemes are not an isolated instance. In September last year the first (Italian) national congress of religious architecture took place in Bologna. Its publications are limited so far to a duplicated *résumé* of the proceedings. But its importance amounts to a reversal of the policy of several decades of ecclesiastical patronage.

The tone of the meetings is set by the Archbishop of Bologna, Cardinal Lercaro who, in commenting on some passages from the Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, appeals for a new architectural interpretation of the Christian assembly. The other principal speakers were Lodovico Quaroni, architect of the church at Martella, and Giovanni Michelucci, whose best-known work is the railway station in Florence, one of the first 'modern' buildings in Italy; and for the clergy Fr Tarcisio Piccari, O.P., lecturer in liturgy at the Angelicum, and Fr Giulio Bevilacqua, editor of *Humanitas*.

The whole tone of the speeches is a new one. 'We must assert', says Fr Bevilacqua, for instance, 'the vitality of excess. God has given his beloved Son: God recognizes no boundaries: why should we shrink before the possibilities of concrete and steel?' and so on. To the English ear this may sound a little rhetorical, and hardly to the point. In speaking of church architecture we are more accustomed to the minutiae of rubrical rectitude (can the

sedilia be chairs? or the tabernacle have a flat top? or the altar a fixed antependium?), and in practice to cosy whimsicalities, archaeologizing without flounces at best. So if the Italians sound a little excited, a little rhetorical, it may be worth remembering that the three churches built in Italy recently are a great deal better than any church building elsewhere since the war, excepting only the chapel at Ronchamps.

To turn back to Mr Summerson: if we are to have valuable and exciting church building—and they are a pastoral necessity, not an aesthetic luxury—what will be needed will be precisely the ‘programme capable of rational analysis’ whose possibility Mr Summerson denies. No effort has yet been made by those who commission Catholic church buildings to formulate such a programme. And yet the elements which will have to go to the making of it are to hand in the writings of the liturgical movement and in the works of those theologians who have concerned themselves with the true dimensions of the Church’s needs today.

NOTICE

The May issue of *BLACKFRIARS* will contain articles by Henry St John, O.P., on ‘The Ecumenical Movement and Authority’, by J. M. Jackson on ‘Monopoly and the Just Price’, and the first of a series on ‘The Religious Orders in England and Wales’ by Illtud Evans, O.P.