LIKE A BRIDE ADORNED

By JEANNE SHEEHY

ANYONE TODAY who loves and appreciates the art and architecture of the past, and who is concerned about our cultural heritage, finds the problem of the organization and decoration of churches particularly difficult. To begin with, we have the directives on church planning and furnishing contained in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, promulgated at the end of the second session of the second Vatican Council, in 1963; and the resulting needs to accommodate our church buildings to the new liturgy, to sweep them clear of what has been dismissed as irrelevant clutter. At the same time, there is the necessity, which seems no less important to a great number of people, to care for, and preserve, the cultural achievements of the past. A sharp division has arisen between those who value art of whatever period, and those who wish to get rid of what they regard as the vulgar and ostentatious ornament of previous ages. This is, apparently, a problem common to the whole of Europe. In an essay in *Change and Decay*, a book on the plight of churches today, produced in connection with an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1977, James Lees-Milne has pointed out that statues, candelabra, chalices and jewelled reliquaries, thrown out of churches, can be bought in any antique and junk market, and that in France, Spain and Italy, church interiors are being ripped apart.[1] In the British Isles, the problem seems particularly acute, because so many Roman Catholic churches date from the nineteenth century. We are still suffering from the remnant of a reaction against the taste of that period; and the consequence is that too many people are willing to accept the judgment of the uninformed that nineteenth-century architecture and decoration are false and overdone, and without any aesthetic merit.

The reason why so many Catholic churches date from the nineteenth century are historical. It was only in the late eighteenth century that laws restricting Catholic worship began to be relaxed,

[1] In *Change and Decay*, eds. Marcus Binney and Peter Burman (London, 1977), pp 148-49.

and it became possible to build churches whose appearance proclaimed their ecclesiastical function, and to site them in prominent positions, rather than in back streets or in private houses. It was only the Catholic Emancipation Act, in 1829, which brought complete freedom, and encouraged a tide of church building in Britain and in Ireland. The style of these buildings was similar to developments in secular architecture. The earlier churches tended to be either classical in a georgian or regency idiom, or gothick in the playful manner associated with the Strawberry Hill of Horace Walpole. From the eighteen-thirties when church building began to proliferate, architects became more serious-minded, allowed their minds and talents to reflect archaeologically on the buildings of the past, and tried to recreate their character and atmosphere. One of the most influential figures of the period was Augustus Welby Pugin, a convert to Roman Catholicism, who devoted a great deal of his prodigious talent to the building, decoration and equipping of churches. The principles he enunciated would not be disowned by architects and designers today:

> first, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety; second, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building.[2]

He advocated the gothic style as the only possible one for a christian community, and was particularly attached to certain features of medieval architecture; for example, the rood-screen. The arguments he put up in favour of his ideas today appear pretty far-fetched and unconvincing: but this should not blind us to the fact that the work itself is valuable for its beauty. Pugin's arguments in favour of rood-screens may not be a convincing reason for retaining those that still exist, but the same is not true of the beauty of the screens themselves. He had a large number of followers, in Britain and in Ireland, who took up and developed his ideas. There was, for example, J. J. McCarthy, 'the Irish Pugin', who designed more than seventy churches and several cathedrals, which gives some idea of the scope of the movement. Not everyone, however, was in favour of Gothic. Some, like the Oratorians, preferred the inspiration of the art of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods; with their clear, open

[2] Pugin, Welby A.: *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (London, 1841), p 1.

interiors, enabling the congregation to be in contact with the altar. What all churches of the nineteenth century had in common, whether they were arranged according to Pugin's ideas of mystery, or were aiming to give everyone the best possible view of the altar, was a belief that ornament, and richness of decoration were a fundamental part of what churches are about. Pugin, as usual, expressed this forcefully and lyrically:

> But if the exterior of the temple be so soul-stirring, what a burst of glory meets the eye on entering, a long majestic line of pillars rising into lofty and fretted vaulting! The eye is lost in the intricacies of the aisles and lateral chapels; each window beams with sacred instructions, and sparkles with glowing and sacred tints; the pavement is a rich enamel, interspersed with brass memorials of departed souls. Every capital and base are fashioned to represent some holy mystery; the great rood loft, with its lights and images, through the centre arch of which, in distant perspective, may be seen the high altar blazing with gold and jewels, surmounted by a golden dove, the earthly tabernacle of the Highest; before which burn three unextinguished lamps. It is, indeed, a sacred place; the modulated light, the gleaming tapers, the tombs of the faithful, the various altars, the venerable images of the just — all conspire to fill the mind with veneration, and to impress it with the sublimity of christian worship.[3]

Pugin was speaking, in this passage, of a medieval building, but his own, and other victorian churches, strove for, and very often achieved, the same effect. The attitude he expresses, with its belief in the spiritual value of church decoration, was one which prevailed until the nineteen-sixties, though reaction against it had set in much earlier.

In fact, in Germany, France, and England, in the nineteen-twenties and 'thirties, there was a swing towards greater simplicity in decoration. People began to feel the need for closer contact between priest and people at mass. Attitudes towards the liturgy had begun to change significantly, and the current literature on these changes had a profound influence.

> Architects and priests, having digested the two volumes of *Der Christliche Altar*, written by Father J. Braun, S.J., and first published at Munich in 1924, were filled with an urge to get back to a primitive type of

[3] Pugin, Welby A.: *Contrasts* (London, 1841), pp 4-5.

> holy table, free from all unnecessary accretions, from which even the cross and candlesticks were excluded until the Middle Ages. Fr Braun, with tremendous erudition, had left no room for doubt that the ideal altar must be placed in a position where it can be seen by all, and that it is 'most fitting, most beautiful, and also most traditional' if the Eucharistic table of the sacrificial community is placed in such a position that it can be freely approached on all sides.[4]

The change in taste was also influenced by the modern movement in architecture as a whole. It was during the nineteen-twenties when this pioneering work established itself. 'Functionalism' became the byword, and architects like Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier set out to produce buildings stripped of unnecessary ornament, and using modern materials. It is interesting that one of the first churches which displays the new austerity in its attitude to decoration, Notre Dame, Le Raincy, Paris, built in 1923, was designed by Auguste Perret, one of the pioneers in the development of reinforced concrete as a building material. Church architecture and decoration reflected contemporary taste, as it had in every other age.

In England the reaction against the past was expressed by Eric Gill in the nineteen-thirties:

> To revive the liturgy it is first necessary to disinter it. It is buried at present beneath a load of medieval and post-medieval custom. The divorce between the clergy and the people, between the people and the altar, has become as wide as the distinction between the artist and the factory hand. . . .[5]

From then on, the move towards simplicity gathered momentum, and it was intensified by the enforced austerity of the war. It was still, however, largely in the hands of an *avant garde*. It was not until 1963, and the appearance of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, that liturgical reform, and the consequent re-thinking of church design, became official church policy. This gave rise to a desire not only to build churches in keeping with the new ideas, but to 'modernize' old ones.

One would not pretend that the modern movement has not produced some superb architecture and decoration: famous examples

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[4] Anson, Peter F.: *Fashions in Church Furnishings, 1840-1940* (London, 1965), p 361.
[5] Anson, *op. cit.*, p 360, quoting Gill.

like Le Corbusier's pilgrimage church at Ronchamp, or Matisse's decorative scheme at Vence, spring to mind. In England also there has been some interesting work; and in Ireland, in recent years, notably by Liam McCormick. The modern movement has also brought about many necessary reforms in church decoration, which tended to degenerate in the early decades of the twentieth century. Ecclesiastical art had become commercialized. Many churches were full of indifferent stained glass, oleograph stations of the cross, and plaster statues of nauseating sickliness: St Thérèse of Lisieux and St Anthony of Padua were particularly unfortunate. There was certainly a need to stand back and take a hard look at such objects; and hardly anyone regrets their loss. The difficulty is that very little discrimination has been exercised over what is good and what is not, and a great deal of fine and irreplaceable work has been destroyed. In the reorganization of churches, architects and decorators, who sometimes seem to suffer from a kind of occupational arrogance, have rarely resisted the temptation to begin again from bare walls.

A great deal of the church art of the nineteenth century was of very high quality. This is a truth which is fairly generally acknowledged at the highest level: Pugin is one example. It is also true of hosts of lesser architects and anonymous designers. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, growing industrialization, craftsmanship was highly valued, and we have inherited surprising amounts of good work. There was a certain amount of the bad and the tawdry, as there is in any age; but people were quite capable of true discrimination. It was only during the period of reaction, from which we are only just emerging, that *every* product of the past century was dismissed as inferior. In the past fifteen or twenty years, a reappraisal has been taking place, and a great deal of historical research has been done. It is now becoming possible to assess both with clarity and knowledge the work done in the nineteenth century in its entirety, and to arrive at a balanced judgment about it. Obviously, this can be done only by those who know what they are talking about; who have studied and reflected on the period as a whole. Unfortunately, no more than a handful of the custodians of our ecclesiastical buildings, and their architects and designers, have such expertise; whilst those who do not have it are slow to seek the right advice, and even slower to act upon it.

There are a number of good reasons why we should wish to preserve intact the best of our church architecture and decoration of the past. It is part of our cultural heritage; it is the expression

of the piety of past ages, to which we owe respect. It is also generally acknowledged, nowadays, that we have a duty to preserve the art of the past as it has been handed down to us. Our cultural heritage is a gift of great value, and we are merely its custodians. If this is generally accepted, there is no reason why it should not apply within the Church, as well as outside it; especially as the Church has been preserving works of art for over a thousand years; nor, in the case of many of its treasures, has anyone suggested that this should not continue to be the case. In spite of the extent to which they are out of step with modern progressive ideas about church interiors, the Basilica of St Peter's has not been stripped of its bronze, stucco and decorative marble, nor has the great *trompe l'oeil* ceiling of S. Ignazio at Rome been whitewashed over.

Apart from the historical argument, there is also a lot to be said for preserving expressions of religious feeling from past ages, because they still work, and enrich our lives. The spiritual benefit accruing from the generations of the contemplation of the great Gothic Cathedrals, of a Crucifixion by Fra Angelico or a Madonna by Piero is inestimable. Even Bernini's Saint Teresa, though it is unfashionably over-emotional, is acknowledgedly of great power. Such works may become unfashionable for a time, but they always reassert themselves. Nor is their value a monetary one, though christian tradition testifies that the most precious materials are best spent in God's honour. This is what Abbot Suger says, the man who rebuilt and decorated the great Abbey Church of Saint Denis outside Paris in the early twelfth century, on the value of art and precious materials in a church:

> Often we contemplate, out of sheer affection for the Church our mother, these different ornaments both new and old; and when we behold how that wonderful cross of St Eloy — together with the smaller ones — and that incomparable ornament commonly called 'the Crest' are placed upon the golden altar, then I say, sighing deeply in my heart: *Every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, the topaz and the jasper, the chrysolite, and the onyx and the beryl, the sapphire, the carbuncle, and the emerald.* . . . Thus, when — out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God — the loveliness of the many coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in

> the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.[6]

It has become the fashion to condemn such delight in art and precious materials in the church as materialistic:

> The building must express the universal values of the christian faith and way of living.
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> In our times the first step towards this expression is the rejection of ostentatious waste, and, in its place, the substitution of the spirit of poverty.[7]

There is a sense in which such sentiments are an expression of materialism in themselves: an inability to see the art of the past four hundred years except in terms of 'ostentation or show of wordly power or wealth',[8] and blindness to its spiritual qualities.

We also owe some respect to the expressions of piety of past ages. Pope Pius XII, worred by changes in attitude towards the liturgy, and the movement backwards to the simpler rituals of the early Church, issued, in 1947, the encyclical *Mediator Dei*. In it he said:

> The liturgy of the early ages is worthy of veneration; but an ancient custom is not to be considered better, either in itself or in relation to later times and circumstances, just because it has the flavour of antiquity More recent liturgical rites are also worthy of reverence and respect, because they too have been introduced under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, who is with the Church in all ages, even to the consummation of the world. These too are means which the august Bride of Christ uses to stimulate and foster the holiness of men.[9]

If this is true of the liturgy itself, is it not also applicable to the setting of the liturgy?

In the past fifteen years or so, none of these arguments has carried much weight, and a great deal of good work has been lost. The changes have usually been made in the name of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and it does seem that this document has been used to

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[6] 'The Book of Suger, Abbot of St-Denis', in Elizabeth G. Holt: *A Documentary History of Art*, vol 1, *The Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (New York, 1957), p 30.

[7] *Pastoral Directory of the Episcopal Liturgical Commission of Ireland: Building and Reorganisation of Churches* (Dublin, 1972), p 9.

[8] *Ibid.*, p 7.

[9] In Anson, *op cit.*, pp 364-65.

excuse changes which were not strictly necessary. Many alterations have been made which were simply the result of a restless desire for novelty common to our society as a whole, and engendered, as Walter Gropius has pointed out, largely by advertising. This is certainly the case in Ireland, a country which is among the pioneers of liturgical reform.

Unfortunately, Ireland also lacks confidence in the quality of her achievement in the visual arts over the past few hundred years; and because she does not yet know enough about them, vandalism has proceeded almost unscathed. Whole churches have been gutted — down to the rubble of their walls. In some cases. it is the east end of a church which has been mutilated, so that the whole focus of a Gothic design, with its movement towards the altar, has been lost. Old fittings have been transmogrified into new ones, often with ludicrous effect, and minor changes have been made which, cumulatively, are disastrous. Altar furniture has been relegated to odd corners of attics and cupboards, and vestments have been thrust to the back of sacristy presses, sent away to be cut up, even allowed to rot. In many cases the new schemes have been good in themselves; but never could they have been so good as to warrant the destruction they have entailed. In some particularly unfortunate cases, the new art has been every bit as vulgar and tawdry as any nineteenth-century plaster saint or oleograph.

Is there any hope for such interiors as remain? The idea of conservation has been accepted in other areas, and ordinary people have begun to fight for the preservation of what they value, increasingly as they learn more about it. This is bound to affect attitudes to church art, which has always, in the past, reflected changes in other areas. The Church was very slow, however, to accept the modern movement in architecture, and may be equally slow to abandon it. By the time that it does, will there be anything left worth saving?[10]

[10] In addition to those quoted in the footnotes, two useful books are: Hammond, Peter: *Liturgy and Architecture* (London, 1963); Little, Bryan: *Catholic Churches Since 1623* (London, 1966).