A TIME FOR BUILDING

By AUSTIN WINKLEY

IT WOULD be hard to envisage a pilgrim coming over the hill at Harbeldown, whose spirit did not leap at the sight of Big Harry and the other towers of Canterbury. Our pilgrimage has brought us over the hill of Vatican II to survey a rather more complex scene; where some spirits droop, while others leap with joy.

It is often said these days that Christians do not need churches; usually this with reference to the money which could be saved and help us to discharge our responsibilities to the third world. It would be ungracious to quote John's gospel in rebuttal,[1] for the remark has its important ring of truth. God is not confined to churches; they are not the 'temples of the living God', of which Paul spoke.[2] Christ's presence in the world is surely first in his people. We must also rejoice in the other modes of his presence: especially when two or more are gathered in his name.[3] The size of such gatherings varies from two to several thousands; though more and more are coming to prefer smaller groups for regular worship, where such a choice is available. Despite several years of debate, and the wide-spread variation in priest to people ratio, no compelling pattern has emerged to suggest an ideal size of assembly. We must accept that each is the product of several factors, principally the catchment area and commitment of those attending.

Large gatherings are for special occasions: the death of a pope, a Eucharistic Congress or in places of pilgrimage. In quite recent times, huge new churches have been built at Guadaloupe and at Lourdes, where the place is below ground and in line with the desire to avoid scandalous waste of resources; but it also conveniently meets the need to retain the scale of existing town and landscape.

---

[1] Cf Jn 12, 7.
[2] 2 Cor 6, 16.
[3] Cf Mt 18, 20.

The justification for building today must stem from the needs of the people. In medieval times, many of the 'wool' churches of Norfolk were the product of one merchant's desire: resulting in the curiosities of magnificent buildings capable of seating many hundreds of people who never existed. At the time of the Industrial Revolution in England, Wellington's victory was marked by the erection of the Waterloo churches; and we are now told that this crop of buildings was not derived from the ardent wish of the people, but from the shrewd observation of the funding industrial overlords that grim conditions in town and factory would need tempering with constant reminders that sacrifice and discomfort offered credits for the next world.

Reluctance to build churches today stems not from distrust of these largely forgotten considerations, nor from mere shortage of funds, but rather from an examination of the purpose of churches: with a resulting lack of conviction that they are needed as separate places from other social-facility buildings. Whatever the reasons for their existence in the past, we can readily see in the better-endowed churches, how the stature and richness of the architecture and furnishing represented a special delight for everyone. Now, however, the wonder of stained glass has been eclipsed by colour television, and perhaps stone-carved statuary by those three ducks dashing across the chimney breast. It may well be that we are faced with an overstimulating environment, where subtlety of taste in visual terms is being discarded from our value system, to be supplanted by an insatiable appetite for change. Yet the outcry against faceless office blocks and distaste for brute concrete suggests that aesthetic value-systems are not dead, only changing.

To return then to the need for churches, we might seek their justification on the basis of comparison with other 'unnecessary' structures. To see a film, we do not have to have cinemas; to justify football, we do not need a stadium: both of these examples, however, are commercial 'spin-offs'. What of the unproductive? A large part of our uneasiness with churches lies in their being used for only a few hours each week. Again we might say that the football stadium poses a similar problem: short-use periods and high maintenance costs. Yet how do we measure time in use against capital expenditure? Commercial aircraft, to be viable, have to be in use most of the time; whilst the Cenotaph in Whitehall may appear to be used for only one hour each year. Churches have traditionally stood somewhere in between these examples, used for several hours each

week, standing the rest of the time as a symbol of something we have
felt to be invaluable. Perhaps the simplest test of need is to observe
how groups of people come together, do something and discover
what is required to help them do it better. Some Christians may
gather over a period of years in someone's house; then acquire a
hut, add to it; acquire more land and build again, invariably in
stages as they can afford and see fit. There is ample restraining drag
in modern life to check the half-hearted; so that, if new places
emerge, there has had to be plenty of good will and determination
to turn the idea into reality. And to give credit where credit is due,
there is often a weary priest in the background or foreground.

At this point, we might accept, however grudgingly, that some
Christians may want a building especially for their community. If
it works, then it should be a power-house for the Church's mission;
if it does not, then perhaps the building is more at fault than its
users. However, to talk in general terms can be safely remote from
the complexity encountered in specific examples. Let us look in
some detail at new buildings, and at caring for the old ones: how
the need for a new place arises in one district, while the need for
renovation is generated elsewhere.

Take a parish in the Midlands of England, in a diocese where
many new churches have been built since the Council. We find a
neat little church built in the 1930s, large enough to seat two hundred
and fifty people in comfort. It was built with hand-made red bricks,
and a matching tile roof. Inside an arched timber ceiling concealed
a more utilitarian steel roof structure. As a focus for the interior,
there was a large statue within a surprising reredos, designed in the
Odeon cinema aesthetic, derived perhaps from early Egyptian
Styles. This church has a strange but genuine quality, stemming not
from great age but from the caring hand of its architect. It is liked
by most of its parishioners, but it became too small and awkwardly
sited to allow opportunity for the much needed extension. Twelve
hundred worshippers had an overcrowded building and virtually no
social facilities. Thus, with three priests, Masses started every half
hour, alternating in the church and adjacent school hall. Then the
school was scheduled for replacement elsewhere, and the shortage
of priests reduced the number to two. It was time for building; but
what was needed?

A brief emerged for the architect, calling for a new building,
linked with and retaining in an adopted form the existing church.
The whole scheme was to include a multi-purpose divisible large

room, a week-day chapel, restaurant, club room, library, meeting room and supportive lobbies, sacristies and toilets. Squash courts were left out, when this ambitious project was pruned, and the brief adjusted to reflect parishioners' pockets, emptied under the impact of car-factory strikes.

It was decided to build in three phases, first the multi-purpose space, secondly, the conversion of the existing building, and finally the additional social rooms. The project reflected clearly-defined needs; but it also had to meet the requirements of a City Planning Authority, and the mass of building and fire-regulations which accumulated in the post-war years. With all this, it had to be a place of worship, expressing meaningfully to Christians and other citizens what it was all about. To be merely utilitarian would have been to fall short of its purpose.

What then were the unwritten needs? By good fortune, the opinions of the planning officers, architect and client about the external image were of a piece. There were already two churches in the street, the existing Catholic one and a Free church; and both modest in scale, so that neither they nor the adjacent terraced houses would welcome a large monumental building. The exterior was to be of a domestic scale, not only fitting comfortably into the neighbourhood but reflecting a christian desire to make this a house-church. Yet the new multi-purpose scheme was to seat six hundred and house most of the parishioners on major festivals; so that the floor area was to be quite big. These needs, for a large space with an apparently small exterior, could militate against the further desire to minimize the distance of worshippers from an altar, and produce a rather squat building. To avoid this, the designers had to ensure a well-proportioned space in which adequate height would make the worshippers feel closer together.

There was the further complication of a movable partition, a device thought by many people to be the epitome of flexibility. In practice, they are full of disadvantages: good ones are very expensive — £25,000 ($50,000) with one door, and even so, poor in sound insulation and restrictive in installation. They encourage dropped heads to the opening, produce uncomfortable clusters of stacked partitions and tend to produce impersonal spaces like those of conference centres. In many multi-purpose churches the sense of unity is frustrated, the partitions reminding people that they are in a makeshift place, where, at best, it is just possible to see from room to room.

These conflicts, it is hoped, have been resolved in this church by a determined effort to make of the building first a unified place of worship, then divisible by one large, well-concealed movable partition, which can divide the big space into two rooms of unequal size. Despite the complications which could make the place mundane, every effort has been made to retain in the overall scheme the ideal that it is a house of God: a place in which a fine structure and carefully controlled daylight combine with attention to detail, to provide the user and visitor alike with a little sense of wonder. Externally the building is integrated in its surrounding by the use of red brick and sections of tiled roof, harmonizing with other buildings in the neighbourhood. Internally, masonry blockwork is used on walls to maintain a tangible scale. Planned movement-pattern of people within and around the building will gently lead them to meet one another, with the aim of strengthening the community.

From a large entrance porch with a glazed roof (part of a solarium-concept in the original brief), access is provided to most parts of the building complex. In phase two, the Sanctuary end (half) of the existing church will be the week-day chapel; whilst the remainder will become two storeys, with a newly-introduced first floor providing for a family club room which is practically in the old roof, above a restaurant serving the complex as a whole. A Lady Chapel has been converted into a much-needed Sacristy; whilst the open arches between it and the existing church have become a blind arcade to match the existing walls. Such alteration may seem to be somewhat destructive to the existing building, but the Lady Chapel is kept in use, whilst a valuable resource is made to serve another generation.

The major difficulty with such a programme is knowing whether on completion of phase one, the new multi-purpose space and lobby can generate the funds needed to complete phase two and three in reasonable time, before the vision of the whole is lost or distorted. Nevertheless, phasing has the advantage of offering time for re-thinking as development proceeds; and it is expected that details of the original concept will be modified as the users see more clearly their newly-found needs and challenging mission.

But what of the parish that has more than it can cope with? There is nothing more depressing than the sight of a huge old church standing like bomb-damage in the middle of a demolished residential area. Cleared urban wasteland is too often a symbol of doom; and it is hard to see how Christians can hope to resurrect such a building

as a dynamic expression of Eucharistic celebration. Coventry Cathedral is described as a phoenix from the ashes; but this paragon is the original 'rare bird'.

We have not, as yet, many examples of redundant churches, but we do have used ones. The Church of England, through its Pastoral Measure of 1968, established a procedure for facing up to the growing problem of redundant churches, taking the bold but controversial step of identifying buildings which are little used, classifying them as redundant and leaving a comparatively short period of two years for an acceptable alternative use to be found: failing which, it has to be demolished, or rarely, and only if a gem of architecture, vested in the Redundant Churches Fund.

For most urban dwellers, the disappearance of familiar landmarks which churches invariably are, must seem to be a personal loss. But we must ask ourselves whether it is acceptable to have old churches standing as signs of a retracting Christianity. Is it better for these to be removed, and for the christian community to retreat into house-churches of modest expression, or should the great monumental churches be retained?

During the past two years, the first government funds have become available for grant-aid to churches of appropriate architectural or historic merit, for the essential repairs needed to keep them alive. It is interesting that conditions for the grant include that of the Church being open to the public, and in regular use for worship. Such grants are available through the Department of the Environment for churches of all denominations, but so far very few Catholic churches have taken advantage of them. Why is this? Probably because the scheme is not well-known; but there are two other likely reasons. Most of our churches have managed, through the generosity of their congregation, to meet the repair bills. Secondly, as we have no regular custom of inspection of the fabric like the Church of England Quinquennial, many churches are not yet aware of accumulating decay. Some parishes could soon be facing heavy repair bills.

Let us consider one such case: that of a church designed by Augustus Welby Pugin, the celebrated catholic architect. Opened in 1851, it is a fine church, with generous side aisles and a tall spire: an example of a seemingly well cared-for building, which had accrued defects not readily apparent to casual observers. It was substantially refurbished in 1971, when the sanctuary was re-ordered, and defective plaster and flooring were repaired before the building was painted. In the summer of 1977, some parishioners noticed a

rusty red football-size fungus growing on the side of a main rafter above the gallery. Someone thought it was unsightly and knocked it off: an action which might be compared to spraying that area of the building with a flame-thrower. The red ball was the explosive fruit body of dry-rot fungus which can spread the growth to other parts of a building: it sends out tendrils which, in this case, penetrated through six feet of the granite rubble tower wall. In one part of the roof most of the cross-section of a principal rafter was destroyed: crumbling to dust internally, but leaving the external face intact to deceive the eye. The infection was spread through several other rafters and roof-timbers, and could have brought a substantial part of the roof crashing into the church, bringing the organ with it.

By good fortune, some observers suspected trouble and brought in a timber-treatment specialist, who in turn insisted that an architect survey the condition and prepare a specification for repairs. This was a major piece of surgery, requiring elaborate temporary structural support while infected timbers were replaced and the walls injected with sterilizing fluid. In order to do this work, extensive areas of plaster had to be removed and parts of the organ and electrical wiring had to be moved. But this was only part of the tale. Once inside the building, the architect made the normal check against the possibility of other dangers, and a disturbing catalogue of trouble was found, including death-watch beetle. Fortunately, this was confined to two small areas, but access for repairs was generally impeded by mounds of pigeon-lime. The birds had also caused considerable damage by breaking window protection. Rain had consequently penetrated the tower, and the dampness there had encouraged furniture beetle to thrive, which caused extensive rusting of steel fixing plates and bolts. Some were covered in rust over half an inch thick; and it seemed at one stage that the spire structure might be at risk. As though these defects were not enough, it was found that two large neo-gothic windows were in danger of falling outwards. Serious corrosion of iron tie-bars had split several stones, forcing them out of line. The mullions in long stones had been improperly bedded and were laminating, a condition affecting all the church windows, and further aggravated by earlier inappropriate repairs.

Repair of some stonework was undertaken, but the major defects of the windows could only be met by replacement. The result was that the stained glass had to be removed and the windows re-leaded and repaired. The probable cost of the timber repairs, and work to

the spire and windows is expected to be more than £50,000: a
disturbingly large sum. However, parishioners have responded with
impressive generosity. It is gratifying to realize the strength of the
feeling that this place is there for the glory of God and must be
saved. At the same time, however, it is disturbing to reflect that this
great caring and sacrifice, to make the church safe and keep it for
future generations, was not matched by the appeal for reordering
the church, made about six years earlier and estimated at half this
repair cost; but it generated nothing like the same enthusiasm at the
design stage. The very idea of change was unpopular with many,
but once carried out, the reordering had been quickly paid for and
some of the most ardent critics had made the changes their pride
and joy.

  On the question of the existing churches and their reordering, it
is worth dwelling a while on the slowly emerging patterns of change.
It is an area where the more the understanding and appreciation of
an existing church, the greater is the reluctance to make a start: and
the high cost of some projects are undoubtedly a restraining mechan-
ism. As has already been illustrated, once a start has been made,
pressing reasons may be found for doing extensive work; yet this is
not always so. Well cared for churches and chapels can be altered
quite economically.

  A convent chapel comes to mind, neo-gothic with a rather ornate
high altar, having several gradines and monstrance throne, all in
marble. The brief was to rearrange the sanctuary to provide an altar
suitably visible from the conventional choir and the visitors' chapel
at right angles to it, making maximum use of the materials and
artefacts that were there. These included a crucifix with a beautiful
wood medieval *corpus*, many times painted over, which, when
stripped by a member of the community, was tremendously moving;
a very satisfactory victorian lectern, and of course the existing altar,
which was the central problem. The first exercise was to measure
each piece of marble and guess the shape of those which disappeared
from view. Then, as in a puzzle, one began to rearrange the pieces,
introducing a minimum of new ones but inevitably introducing a
completely new *mensa*, since the new free-standing altar top was
quite a different depth from that of the sideboard-like altar: a depth
which had been determined by the need to reach across it to the
tabernacle. Eventually an acceptable new altar design was agreed;
but estimates tendered were incredibly high. As we have learned
from this and subsequent exercises, the use of existing altars as a

quarry is generally more expensive than using new material. Most of the cost in these jobs lies not in the material but in the labour charges, which are less when new materials are used: altars have rarely been assembled with ease of demolition in mind! What can be used are the existing tabernacles. In the case of this convent chapel, a suitable new altar was designed for half the price of the old one.

The destruction of altars and other artefacts is of course a matter of concern. Any responsible conservationist must endeavour to retain in use all that he can. We have been properly reminded by the Holy See as well as by our Victorian and Georgian Societies about the care of our churches. Wanton destruction of furnishing and other building fabric is to be deprecated; but we have at the same time to accept that the substantial changes, in which we are engaged, must be handled with firmness, so that they harmonize the elements when that is right. Neither must we be reluctant to make a bold contrast when that is more appropriate.

A time for building is also a time for rebuilding. Part of our heritage is not only fine buildings but also some dreadful monstrosities. It was encouraging to learn that a church built only six years ago had paid off its debt after replacing a prefabricated shed of no great distinction with an ambitious church complex; not in this case with a multi-purpose worship room, but with a separate church, week-day chapel, hall, library and meeting rooms. Increased value in the sale of some land helped; but the vigorous use of the new buildings for worship and social activities has helped the local community and the third world alike. That is of course how our apostolate should work. If it is our lot to be faced with a sheltered house-church or an existing victorian masterpiece, we should make the most of both, recognizing that utilitarian solutions or neglect are enemies of our best tradition. Whether we are guardians of the historical and artistic patrimony of our Church, or the generators of new and invigorating churches, our responsibility is to care and ensure the glory they manifest.