What Makes Architecture “Sacred”? 

Discussions of sacred architecture often revolve around the concept of beauty and its theological dimension. However, in the context of modernity, the question of beauty has been reduced to a subjective judgment, on which one can reason only to a limited extent. For those who do not share the presuppositions of the classical philosophical tradition, the concept of beauty is elusive. When it comes to church architecture, it will not carry us very far. We may not think that Renzo Piano’s church of St. Pius of Pietrelcina in San Giovanni Rotondo works as a church (figure 1), but how do we respond to someone who finds its architectural forms, or the space it creates for the assembly, “beautiful”? 

For these reasons I propose another concept that I believe will provide us with clearer categories for architecture in the service of the Church’s mission: the concept of the “sacred.” A reflection on the sacred also seems timely, because we customarily speak of “sacred” architecture, art, or music, without giving an account of what this attribute means. And yet for more than half a century theologians in the Catholic tradition have contested the Christian concept of the sacred. Ideas have consequences, and it seems evident to me that these theological positions are manifest in a style of buildings dedicated for
worship that fail to express the sacred and hence are not adequate for the celebration of the liturgy. As a starting point for my argument, I should like to draw on the reflections of two well-known architects who designed important church buildings in the recent past.

1. Ideas of the Sacred in Contemporary Architecture

Massimiliano Fuksas: there is no “sacred architecture”
The internationally renowned Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas, in collaboration with his wife, Doriana Mandrelli, completed the church of San Paolo in Foligno, Umbria, in 2009. This church is one of the “pilot projects” (progetti pilota) of the Italian Bishops’ Conference and has attracted much attention and controversy.

In a long interview given in April 2009, Fuksas discusses the ideas that guided him in this project. As he makes clear at the beginning of the conversation, he does not believe “that you can do sacred architecture”; what is possible is “architecture that tends to spirituality.” This spirituality is diffusely articulated, above all with reference to the category of light, not only as an architectural element but also as a philosophical idea.

For Fuksas the relationship of a building with its exterior environment is of key importance. The particular character of a church is expressed in the fact that it stands out. Fuksas observes that most contemporary constructions, either for housing or other functional purposes, create urban spaces that lack a center or point of reference. With his church in Foligno, the architect wants to “return to a structure that is no longer horizontal,” a structure that, interestingly, he associates with the Second Vatican Council, and he sees in his accent on the height of the building a reference to Gothic architecture. In the church at Foligno, this vertical dimension is in fact a striking feature that is realised by the sheer height of the interior space (figure 2).

Particular attention is given to the facade and the entrance to the church. Fuksas rejects the practices of the “church of the Counter-
Reformation,” which he sees exemplified in the Church of the Gesù in Rome: “You enter after being attracted by a great staircase, a great facade, by the dynamism, by the majesty of the facade and by [its] great power. You enter because it is an act of faith. Once you enter inside, you understand that this faith is something extremely complex” (figure 3). Fuksas’s own concept of the facade could not be more different: in extreme abstraction, it presents itself as one side of the cube that is the shape of the building, in plain concrete and without any ornamentation or prominent Christian symbolism. The entrance to the church, which is marked by a front of glass doors and windows on the ground floor and includes a relatively small cross, is reached by means of a large ramp (figure 4).

Inside the church, the actual liturgical space makes a banal and, in a strange way, dated expression. When I visited the church in Foligno, I was reminded of churches of the 1970s that have aged badly, although this church was completed only three years ago. Inside, you would also note the attempts to make the church a “home” to regular worshippers by including a traditional large crucifix, a historical tabernacle, and a baroque statue of Our Lady.

The rejection of the idea that a church should distinguish itself as a sacred building in its architectural forms is not original to Fuksas, but rather typical of the modernist movement as such. With reference to his famous chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1955), Le Corbusier explained that “the requirements of religion” had little impact on the design; the form was rather intended to stir “the psychophysiology of the feelings.” Likewise Mies van der Rohe, when he designed the chapel at the Illinois Institute of Technology (1952), is said to have been “interested not in the specific solution for the church . . . but in the universal form; an architecture which could accommodate any function.”

More recently, when Santiago Calatrava presented his design for the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, California, which originally won the commission but was then not executed, he stated his ambition to give the building “a universal character independent
of the Catholic Church,” because of the many different cultures in the city.\footnote{8}

\textbf{MARIO BOTTA: ARCHITECTURE IN ITSELF A SACRED WORK}

The Swiss-Italian architect Mario Botta (born 1943) is distinguished not only by the number of significant churches he designed, such as the Cathedral of the Resurrection at Evry near Paris, dedicated in 1995, and, more recently, the Church of the Holy Face in Turin, but also by his theoretical reflections on the subject of sacred architecture.

In a lecture given at Zurich a few years ago, Botta observes that buildings have the capacity of communicating “values” that transcend their proper function. One such value is the sacred, which he describes as the realization of a connection that leads us beyond the technical or functional aspects of a building and allows us to recall an experience of a reality that transcends what is immediately perceptible to the senses.\footnote{9} Note that the sacred recalls this experience: for Botta, the idea of the sacred is linked with a particular history or memory.

It would appear that this memory is constituted in the act of building itself, which he defines as a “sacred act”: “It is an action that transforms a condition of nature into a condition of culture; the story of architecture is the story of these transformations.”\footnote{10} Botta appears convinced, therefore, that any architecture carries with itself the idea of the sacred, in that it is an expression of human work. The first step of “making architecture” begins by putting a stone on the ground, and this action in itself has a sacred meaning, because it transforms a condition that is not controlled by human activity, at least not exclusively, into a living space formed by man. The second step consists in marking a boundary, without which no architecture exists. Thus an “interior and therefore sacred” realm or state is separated from the exterior.\footnote{11}

This refers not only to the construction of a church (or synagogue or mosque), but of any edifice. As Botta says in another contribu-
tion, a building is an expression of the human labor that created it, with all its joys and efforts, and so communicates sentiments and aspirations that, according to him, “belong to the spiritual sphere.” The building thus holds a sacred potential as a memorial to the transforming force of human work. Botta recognizes that in the Western Christian tradition, the history of architecture is largely one of church architecture. By comparison, he regards the impact of civil and military architecture before the twentieth century as marginal. An architectural historian may well dispute this statement, but this is not our concern here.

This extension of the category of the sacred to architecture as such raises the question what, if anything at all, is added to this in the building of a church? Botta introduces the aspect of durability or solidity, which he defines as “creating an artefact (manufatto) as a physical presence between earth and heaven.” This would seem to be connected to Botta’s conviction that nature should be integrated into architecture and vice versa, because they are complementing each other—an idea he realized, for instance, in his cathedral of Evry in France, where a crown of trees is set on top of the cylindrical structure (figure 5), not unlike another project of his, the Petra winery in Suvereto, Italy.

The noted architect describes a church as “an elementary space for the assembly, where for the faithful the original event of the Christian sacrifice is repeated.” This description can serve as a starting point for a conversation on the historically informed understanding of church building. Botta also speaks of the necessity not to subject this space to changing fashions and mentions as his ideal style the Romanesque because of what he perceives as the austerity of its forms. Still, with the extension of the sacred to all architecture, it remains unclear what distinguishes a building that is dedicated to divine worship.

It will be instructive also to consider Botta’s Cymbalista Synagogue and Jewish Heritage Centre in Tel Aviv. The University of Tel Aviv, anxious to respect the secular tradition of the city, decided that
the religious building should not dominate the structure and therefore asked the architect to construct a cultural center next to it. The architect interpreted this request by making both edifices, the sacred and the secular, identical in form and dimensions, in the materials and in the light design (figure 6). In his reflection on this project, Botta notes that he deliberately went against the hailed principle of modern architecture that form should follow function. Here, the same form serves two different functions.¹⁶

2. Theological Roots: the Sacred in Question

The problem I have attempted to sketch is by no means limited to the field of architecture. In fact, the sacred in Christianity has been called into question by a liturgical and sacramental theology that is inspired by the more radical currents in the writings of Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner.¹⁷ At the risk of simplifying matters, it can be said that in this vision the whole created world is regarded as already endowed with or permeated by divine grace. As Schillebeeckx writes in his influential book Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God, “the whole created world becomes, through Christ’s incarnation and the God-man relationship which is consequent upon it, an outward grace, an offer of grace in sacramental form.”¹⁸ While the early Schillebeeckx’s sacramental theology is still indebted to a Thomistic Christology and ecclesiology, in his later writings the sacraments appear to be subsumed into the general category of rituals that lead to an existential encounter with God.¹⁹

Schillebeeckx had a notable influence on the development of Rahner’s theology. According to Patrick Burke, Rahner, from the early 1960s, “although never actually denying the grace-nature distinction, stresses ever more their existential unity and . . . begins to see categorical revelation as only the posterior explicitization of what man always and originally is.”²⁰ This idea of “transcendental grace” later develops into his theory of the “anonymous Christian”; the consequence Rahner draws for his understanding of grace is that
he “sees it coming to categorical expression in any categorical experience, even if not specifically Christian or even religious.”

Consequently, the notion of “sacramentality” is extended to such a degree that the Church’s sacraments are considered nothing more than manifestations, albeit significant ones, that make explicit what already takes place in the world. In 1970, Rahner writes that

The sacraments constitute the manifestation of the holiness and the redeemed state of the secular dimension of human life and of the world. Man does not enter a temple, a fane which encloses the holy and cuts it off from a godless and secular world which remains outside. Rather in the free breadth of a divine world he erects a landmark, a sign of the fact that this entire world belongs to God, a sign precisely of the fact that God is adored, experienced and accepted everywhere as he who, through his ‘grace’, has himself set all things free to attain to himself, and a sign that this adoration of him takes place not in Jerusalem alone but everywhere in spirit and in truth. The sacrament constitutes a small sign, necessary, reasonable and indispensable, within the infinitude of the world as permeated by God.

In other words, unlike classical theology, Rahner no longer takes the sacraments as signs that confer the grace they signify, or instrumental causes of grace extra nos, but rather as visible manifestations of the inner event of grace that is already taking place in man, and is not necessarily linked with Christian Revelation. At this point Rahner introduces Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of the (still invisible) “liturgy of the world”: “The world and its history are the sublime liturgy, breathing of death and sacrifice, which God celebrates and causes to be celebrated in and through human history in its freedom, this being something which he in turn sustains in grace by his sovereign disposition.”

What is described here is a kind of primordial liturgy, which is reflected in “that which we are accustomed to call liturgy in the more
usual sense.” Or, as he explains elsewhere, sacramental celebrations symbolize the “liturgy of the world” that is already taking place. From such a theological perspective, the distinction between the sacred and the nonsacred hardly makes sense. Rather, I would argue, the sacred merges into the ordinary or quotidian, which is already permeated by God’s grace.

3. Toward a Reappraisal of the Sacred in Catholic Theology

For a reappraisal of the sacred in Catholic theology I will take as a starting point the work of the Belgian religious historian and anthropologist Julien Ries (who was created a Cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI on February 18, 2012). Ries notes the originality of the Christian conception of the sacred, which can be understood only in relation to Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, the theme of God’s holiness appears frequently, for instance, in the Trisagion of Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” In fact, God alone is called the “Holy One” (qadoš) in the full sense of the word. “Holiness” is a quality that belongs above all to God and describes his being divine; in other words, it expresses his transcendence. In the long discourse that is contained in chapter seventeen of St. John’s Gospel and known as his high-priestly prayer, Jesus invokes his “holy Father” (Jn 17:11) in line with the conception of the Hebrew Scriptures. There is, however, an important difference here, in that the enormous distance between God and man, which is implied in Isaiah’s proclamation of God’s all-surpassing holiness, is mediated by the communion that is established by the mission of the Son into the world. Holiness, which is rooted in God’s transcendence and characterizes the unity of the Father and the Son, also constitutes the unity of Christ with his disciples and their unity among one another.

At this point, mention should be made of the second volume of Benedict XVI’s book Jesus of Nazareth, where he reflects on the high-priestly prayer of St. John’s Gospel. At a significant moment
in this prayer, Jesus asks his heavenly Father with regard to his disciples: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth . . . For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth” (Jn 17:17, 19). Earlier in the same gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the one “whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world” (Jn 10:36). Ratzinger comments on the meaning of “consecrate” or “sanctify” (both words translate to the same Greek verb hagiázein), which he reads in “connection with the event of atonement and with the high priesthood.”

The meaning of “sanctify” here is rooted in the Old Testament, where God is the “Holy One,” and hence means “handing over a reality—a person or even a thing—to God, especially through appropriation for worship.” This can happen in preparing and offering sacrifice to God (cf. Ex 12:3; Deut 15:19) or in consecration for priesthood (cf. Ex 28:41). According to Benedict XVI, the process of “sanctification” or “consecration” of which Jesus speaks in the high-priestly prayer comprises two aspects that only appear to be opposed, but are in reality two aspects of the same complex reality. On the one hand, consecration means “setting apart from the rest of reality that pertains to man’s ordinary everyday life.” The person or object that is consecrated is handed over entirely to God and hence is no longer under human control. On the other hand, such consecration always includes “the essential dynamic of ‘existing for’”: precisely because it is handed over into the sphere of God, the consecrated reality exists now for the world and for its salvation. These two aspects of consecration are only seemingly contrary to each other, as is shown by the three moments of consecration, of which Jesus speaks in John’s Gospel.

The first consecration—that of the Son by the Father—is identified with the Incarnation. Peter confesses Jesus as “the Holy One of God” in the synagogue of Capernaum (Jn 6:69) and by applying this title to Jesus, which the Old Testament reserves to God alone, as is done in other New Testament passages as well, Peter professes his divinity. As the Holy One of God, Jesus belongs totally to God, and
at the same time, in his Incarnation, he is sent into the world and exists for it. His “holiness” is at the heart of his messianic mission.

The second consecration is indicated when Christ speaks of consecrating himself. In his exegesis of this passage, the highly influential biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann noted the temporal vicinity of this so-called farewell discourse with the beginning of Christ’s Passion. Moreover, this act of consecration or sanctification (the Greek ἁγιάζειν) is made “for their sake” (ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν), thus giving it a sacrificial dimension. This second consecration anticipates the sacrifice Christ offers of himself on the Cross. Bultmann also sees in this an allusion to the words of the Last Supper.32

In the reading of Benedict XVI, the liturgical background of the high-priestly prayer of Jesus is a hermeneutical key. The setting in which this important Gospel text is presented is the great Day of Atonement, which is renewed in the new liturgy of atonement, of which Jesus himself is the high priest, “sent into the world by the Father”; at the same time he is the sacrifice, “made present in the Eucharist of all times.”33 The meaning of the Day of Atonement is thus fulfilled in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51). From the moment that Jesus came into this world in human flesh, he is consecrated priest to offer sacrifice and to intercede for his people, and this consecration is perfected in his Passion and Cross. The messianic mission of Christ thus also has a cultic dimension, and its focal point is the priesthood of Christ, the mediator between God and humanity.

The third consecration consists of the disciples’ participation in the consecration of Christ according to the two aspects already mentioned. The disciples are appropriated into God’s sphere and, at the same time, they are sent into the world to fulfill a priestly mission. According to Benedict XVI this third consecration of John 17 is important because it presents not only the consecration of Jesus Christ as priest, as does the Letter to the Hebrews in language that draws on Temple worship,34 but also includes the participation of the apostles in this consecration. For this reason the Pope recognized in this gos-
pel passage the institution of the priesthood of the New Testament, which is nothing but a participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the one high priest of the New Covenant.35

4. The Sacredness of the Liturgy

These biblical reflections will guide us toward reapproaching the theme of the sacred in Christianity. I believe that this is so because the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council properly defines the liturgy as “an exercise of the priestly office (munus) of Jesus Christ,” and goes on to say: “In the liturgy the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members.”36 This passage restates a key principle of Catholic worship, formulated by Saint Thomas Aquinas,37 proclaimed in a very similar way by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical Mediator Dei,38 and resumed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.39 In these magisterial documents, the liturgy is seen as the exercise of the priesthood of Christ; to be more precise, of Christus totus (a favorite phrase of Saint Augustine’s), that is, the whole Christ, the Head and the members of His Mystical Body, which is the Church. Those who participate in this exercise of Christ’s priesthood are the ordained priest, who acts in the person of Christ the Head (in persona Christi capitis) by virtue of his priestly ordination, and the baptized faithful as members of the Mystical Body. Note that at this point, Sacrosanctum Concilium introduces the notion of the sacredness of the liturgy, when it explains: “From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.”40

In other words, Sacrosanctum Concilium considers “sacredness” always derived from the liturgy, which is the presence and action of
what makes architecture “sacred”? Christ in his Mystical Body. This principle has also been formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas: “Something is called sacred (sacrum), because of its relation to the act of public worship (ad cultum divinum).” The German philosopher Josef Pieper, who has written on the subject in an epoch when it was fiercely contested, argues that this concept of the sacred is widely confirmed by ethnology and philosophy of religion, “and no less by the theological interpretation of the Old and New Testaments.” He also records a use of language that points to an essential characteristic of the liturgy: it is never simply “done,” but “celebrated.” Both in classical Latin and in the use of Latin in the Christian liturgy, the verb celebrate means “carrying out an action in a non-ordinary manner, on the part of the community.” Moreover, unlike personal and interior prayer, the liturgy is an external action, which has its concrete and material forms of expressions, in which the human senses are always involved. Public worship thus is in need of its proper place, its proper time, and its proper objects that are specifically dedicated so that it can be celebrated as a sacred action. It is in relation to this sacred action that we also speak of sacred space, sacred time, or sacred objects.

There is another important argument to consider here: from the Christian perspective, the sacredness of the liturgy is based on its sacramental character. When Sacrosanctum Concilium affirms that in the liturgy, which is the exercise of the priesthood of Christ, the sanctification of man is signified and at the same time effected by signs perceptible to the senses, it obviously refers to the sacraments. Now, the essential rites of the sacraments—form and matter in scholastic terminology—are distinguished by a stupendous humility and simplicity. The liturgy, as sacred action, surrounds these essential rites with other rites and ceremonies that illustrate them and help the faithful to understand better the great mystery that is made present. The reality of the sacraments, which is veiled and hidden to the senses, is translated into signs that are perceptible and hence more easily accessible to our understanding. The purpose of this is that the Christian community, “instructed by the sacred ac-
tions (*sacris actionibus erudita*),” as an ancient prayer in the *Gregorian Sacramentary* says, be properly disposed to receive God’s grace and blessing.” The sacred character of the liturgy can thus be seen as part of divine pedagogy.

For Aquinas, the elements of human institution in the sacraments, while not being essential to them, belong to the “solemnity” (*solemnitas*) that serves to awaken devotion and reverence in those who receive it, especially in the Most Holy Eucharist. Pieper proposes a broad definition of “sacred language,” which includes signs and gestures as well as the words used in public worship. In a similar way, the English Dominican Aidan Nichols speaks of “the idiom of worship”; both concepts are by no means restricted to the linguistic aspects of the liturgy and cover more or less the same ground as Aquinas’s idea of *solemnitas*. I would therefore propose to see in the sacrality of the liturgy the expression of its sacramentality. Consequently, the question needs to be asked whether Catholic theologians who have endorsed the movements towards a “desacralization” have a strong enough sense of the sacramental principle. It has been Pieper’s argument that such theologies “are ultimately rooted” in a “denial of any sacramental reality.”

In his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ratzinger offers another perspective on the meaning of the sacred in Christianity, when he responds to theological critics of the idea that there should be any such thing as “sacred time” and “sacred space” for Christians. Their critique takes as a scriptural basis Christ’s announcement in St. John’s Gospel of a worship “in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:23), a passage also invoked by Rahner in the passage quoted above. This is correctly taken to mean “the transition from Temple sacrifice to universal worship,” with the consequence, however, that such universal worship is no longer bound by the restrictions of “the sacred.” The then cardinal recalls that we live in the time of “not yet,” that is, we have not yet passed over to the New Jerusalem, where God himself and the Lamb are its Temple (Rev 21:22–23). Certainly, with the revelation of the Son of God, this new reality has entered our world, but only
What makes architecture “sacred”? In an inchoative way, such as at “the time of dawn, when darkness and light are intermingled,” as Ratzinger explains with reference to the commentary of St. Gregory the Great on the Apostle Paul’s word, “The night is far gone, the day is at hand” (Rom 13:12). This is the time of the Church, which is an intermediate state between “already” and “not yet.” In this state, the “empirical conditions of life in this world are still in force,” and for this reason the distinction between the sacred and the quotidian still hold, even if this distinction is not conceived of as an absolute separation. With the Church Fathers, this time can be described as “image between shadow and reality” and the dynamic character of the sacred is highlighted: through it the whole world is to be transformed into the worship and adoration of God, but this will be fully realized only at the end of time. Human existence in this world is structured by space and time, and so are prayer and divine worship. Therefore the Christian liturgy needs a place where it can be carried out as a “sacred action.” This reappraisal of the sacred can be summarized with the words of Benedict XVI in his homily for the solemnity of Corpus Christi 2012: “God . . . sent his Son into the world not to abolish, but to give fulfilment also to the sacred. At the height of this mission, at the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Sacrament of his Body and his Blood, the Memorial of his Paschal Sacrifice. By so doing he replaced the ancient sacrifices with himself, but he did so in a rite which he commanded the Apostles to perpetuate, as a supreme sign of the true Sacred, which is he himself.”

5. Toward an Architecture of the Sacred

In conclusion, I propose to consider some of the implications this recovery of the sacred has for the building of churches today. As Benedict XVI says in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis of 2007, “the purpose of sacred architecture is to offer the Church a fitting space for the celebration of the mysteries of faith, especially the Eucharist. The very nature of a Christian
church is defined by the liturgy.”

There is a great richness in the Catholic understanding of the church as a sacred building. Does this mean that architects embarking on such a project will have to be theologians in their own right? I do not think so, but it does require the willingness to enter into a conversation with their clients in order to understand what the function of a church is in a profound and meaningful sense. This is a challenge not only for architects, but also for their ecclesiastical clients. The theological currents I have briefly sketched in this paper have contributed much to the desacralization of church architecture in the second half of the last century. It would be too hasty to claim a direct causal link between this theology and the church architecture I have considered earlier. Nonetheless, the weakness or, in some cases, failure in expressing the sacred is not simply a question of architectural styles, but also a question of the theological presuppositions that have gone into these projects, even if they are not always articulated.

When reading the published version of a lecture by Rafael Moneo, I was struck by his comments on one of two essential requirements he followed in his design of Los Angeles Cathedral (figure 7), namely, “the orientation of the apse, which according to ecclesiastic tradition had to face Rome in recognition of the importance of ecumenism for the Catholic congregation.”

Such a statement betrays above all an astonishing failure of theological and liturgical consultancy in the planning of a major ecclesiastical edifice. The lack of input on the part of the Church is a lost opportunity, because many architects, including those who are best known internationally, are still quite keen on building churches, because they realize that here they have the chance to leave a monument of greater and more lasting significance. As Massimiliano Fuksas said in the interview I cited earlier: “But a church is something you must do (Però una chiesa è una cosa che devi fare).”

Historically, architects who received important commissions from popes, bishops, or superiors of religious congregations entered into conversations with their patrons, which could at times become dif-
What makes architecture “sacred”? Difficult. However, such tensions proved to be immensely creative, and opened up depths of artistic expression that otherwise may not have been reached. In other words, the Church has nurtured architects and brought out greatness in them that may not have manifested itself otherwise. The Church has become too timid in this field, seemingly because of the fear of appearing out of touch with modernity.

In the last decade or so, the New Classical movement has gained experience and maturity in the field of sacred architecture. Two well-known examples, Thomas Aquinas College Chapel in Santa Paula, California, and Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary Chapel in Denton, Nebraska, were designed by leading representatives of the University of Notre Dame’s School of Architecture (figures 8, 9, 10, and 11). While this school is committed to a classical style of building, there is a notable difference between Duncan Stroik’s elaborate use of elements from the Italian Renaissance and from the colonial Spanish Baroque in his designs for Thomas Aquinas College, and Thomas Gordon Smith’s restrained style, indebted to the Romanesque, as was the wish of his client, the Fraternity of Saint Peter in Denton.

I believe that the recovery of these styles is our best option to renew sacred architecture today. We should not be afraid of imitation, because in this process something new is created, as the historical periods of the Renaissance and of Classicism show us. At the same time, it should be noted that such a renewal is not linked to one particular style. It would be a mistake to conclude that only a stark and simple style, or only an ornate and exuberant one, is capable of expressing the sacred. However, an architecture that is not ready to let itself be formed by the Church’s liturgy, or that even rejects the liturgy, does not produce a building that functions well as a church, as the historical styles of Christianity do. At any rate, the renewal of church architecture that is happening today needs to be supported by a more robust theological reflection on the sacred in Christianity, which will help architects to design apt and indeed beautiful buildings for the Catholic liturgy.
Notes

I am very grateful to Duncan Stroik and his staff at the Institute for Sacred Architecture for their help in acquiring the images that appear with this article.

1. See Beauty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), the fine book by Roger Scruton, which shows how the metaphysical foundations of beauty were eroded in the eighteenth century, when “aesthetics” became a separate philosophical discipline. In the end, Scruton modestly aims at an education of taste.


3. “La prima cosa da dire è che io non credo si possa fare architettura sacra. Si può fare architettura che tende alla spiritualità. L’architettura sacra o l’architettura profana non vogliono dire nulla.” Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. “Io non sono per la chiesa controriformista, come la chiesa del Gesù, come la chiesa del Vignola, che tu entri dopo essere stato attratto da una grande scalinata, da una grande facciata, dalla dinamicità, dalla possanza della facciata e dal grande potere. Tu entri perché è un atto di fede. Entrato dentro capisci che questa fede è qualche cosa di estremamente complesso.” Ibid., 2.


12. “Io credo che l’architettura porti con sé l’idea del sacro, nel senso che è espressione del lavoro
dell’uomo. L’architettura non è solo un’organizzazione materiale; anche la più povera delle capanne ha una sua storia, una sua dignità, una sua etica che testimonia di un vissuto, di una memoria, parla delle più segrete aspirazioni dell’uomo. L’architettura è una disciplina dove—più che in altri settori—la memoria gioca un ruolo fondamentale; dopo anni di lavoro mi sembra di capire come il territorio su cui opera l’architetto si configuri sempre più come ‘spazio della memoria’; il territorio fisico parla di una storia geologica, antropologica, ma anche di una memoria più umile legata al lavoro dell’uomo. Ecco che allora, da questo punto di vista, l’architettura porta con sé un potenziale di sacro perché testimonia una saggezza ‘del fare’ con gioie e fatiche che trasmettono sentimenti ed emozioni che appartengono alla sfera spirituale. Di fronte ad una casa o ad una chiesa proviamo un’emozione che non è solo data dal fatto costruttivo in sé ma dai significati simbolici e metaforici.” C. Donati, “A colloquio con Mario Botta: Le nuove forme della memoria,” Costruire in Laterizio 72 (November/December 1999), 40–44, at 41.

13. “Per esempio, costruire una chiesa vuole anche dire confrontarsi con il tema della durata, della solidità, vuol dire creare un manufatto come presenza fisica fra terra e cielo.” Ibid.

14. The sliced cylinder is a characteristic of Botta’s ecclesiastical buildings and also features in his church of San Giovanni Battista, Moggio (1986–1996) and in his chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, Monte Tamaro (1990–1996), both in the Swiss Alps.

15. “La chiesa è comunque uno spazio assembleare elementare dove per il fedele si ripete l’evento originale del sacrificio Cristiano.” Ibid.


18. Edward Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 216. This was published originally as Christus, Sacrament van de Godsonnooting (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1960), which is a shorter version of De sacramentele Heilseconomie, published in 1952.


This idea is already contained in Rahner’s article “Sakrament: V. Systematik,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (2nd ed.), vol. 9 (1964), col. 227–30, at 228, and more radically articulated in *Über die Sakramente der Kirche: Meditationen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1985), 20.

24. Karl Rahner, “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event,” 170.


29. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 86. The German original uses only the word “heiligen” for hagiazein but then explains its twofold meaning as “heiligen” and “weihen”: *Jesus von Nazareth. Zweiter Teil:Vom Einzug in Jerusalem bis zur Auferstehung* (Herder, Freiburg 2011), 104. The fact that the same Greek verb is translated differently is significant: the sense of hagiázein in John 17 is not restricted to moral holiness, neither to a dedication to a particular mission, but indicates a more profound dimension of consecration.

30. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 86. The Pope sees this connection is clearly expressed in “the special vocation of Israel: on the one hand, it is set apart from all other peoples, but for a particular reason—in order to carry out a commission for all people, for the whole world. That is what is meant when Israel is designated a ‘holy people.’” Ibid.


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33. Benedict XVI, Jesus of Nazareth, 88.
34. Christ is “high priest of the good things that have come” (Heb 9:11) and “the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15), established in his blood which purifies our “conscience from dead works” (Heb 9:14).
37. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, IIIa q13 a2: “Totus autem ritus christianae religiosis derivatur a sacerdotio Christi.”
38. Pope Pius XII, Encyclical Letter on the Sacred Liturgy Mediator Dei (20 November 1947), no. 20: “The sacred liturgy is, consequently, the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members.” Ibid., no. 22: “Thenceforth the priesthood of Jesus Christ is a living and continuous reality through all the ages to the end of time, since the liturgy is nothing more nor less than the exercise of this priestly function.”
40. Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 7.
41. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae Ila-IIae q99 a1.
44. Cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 7.
45. Cf. Council of Trent, Session XXII (1562), Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass, ch. 5: “On the Solemn Ceremonies of the Sacrifice of the Mass,” Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no. 1746: “And since the nature of man is such that he cannot without external means be raised easily to meditation on divine things, holy mother Church has instituted certain rites... She has likewise employed ceremonies, such as mystic benedictions, lights, incense, vestments, and many other things of this kind, derived from an apostolic discipline and tradition, whereby both the majesty of so great a sacrifice might be emphasized and the minds of the faithful excited by those visible signs of religion and piety to the contemplation of those most sublime things which are hidden in this sacrifice.”
bs tibi dicata piae devotionis affectu: ut, sacris actionibus erudita, quanto maiestati tuae fit gratior, tanto donis potioribus augeatur."


51. Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Holy Mass for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi* (June 7, 2012). The translation of the last has been modified in light of the German version. The Pope notes the “educational function” of the “sacred” and warns: “its disappearance inevitably impoverishes culture and especially the formation of the new generations. If, for example, in the name of a faith that is secularized and no longer in need of sacred signs, these Corpus Christi processions through the city were to be abolished, the spiritual profile of Rome would be “flattened out,” and our personal and community awareness would be weakened. Or let us think of a mother or father who in the name of a desacralized faith, deprived their children of all religious rituals: in reality they would end by giving a free hand to the many substitutes that exist in the consumer society, to other rites and other signs that could more easily become idols.”


