

REFLECTIONS ON
THE RE - ORDERING
OF
FRENCH ROMAN CATHOLIC
CHURCHES

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The Editor

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This is neither a learned paper nor an historical over-view, nor is it an architectural survey of the re-ordering of French Roman Catholic Churches. It is not even an "Editorial" as we have come to expect. It is, rather, an ordained tourist's reflections on what he has seen over the past ten years which might give pause for thought to those currently engaged in the re-ordering of buildings - particularly those of antiquity and style.

The freedom of a car and the innate abhorrence of "Autoroutes" allowed the writer to explore villages and towns off the beaten track - initially whilst returning from the Taize Community in Burgundy and via Belgium. All the buildings visited were, with only one exception, built in traditional style (whether cruciform or apsidical) between the IIth and XVIIIth centuries.

The one exception, however, was the Church of the Reconciliation in Taize itself. Though whether the original XIIIth century village church which the Taize brothers first used was re-ordered as the result of a general trend, or whether it was re-ordered under the influence of the Community itself, which then modelled the XXth century Church of the Reconciliation on what had been achieved in the village - I have yet to discover.

With the possibility of over 1,000 worshippers in the Church of the Reconciliation at any time, the concept of "seating" perforce, undergoes radical re-thinking. In Taize there are no chairs. The congregation sits

or kneels on the floor or on tiny wooden kneeling-stools. In Scottish kirks that would be unthinkable. However, what is worthy of thought is what has been done to the nave "prayer space". In Taize the Community itself worships with the congregation, facing east to the altar. Marking the Community's "prayer space" off from that of the congregation is a rectangle formed by box-hedge greenery laid out on the floor - similar to that found in English country gardens setting the boundaries of paths or herb gardens.

(I saw a similar concept put into practice in a slightly different way at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh at their 1990 Advent Carol Service. There "spaces" were delineated by rows of tiny "night-lights" placed on the floor.)

Most startling of all the impressions created in every French Church was that of "freedom". Gone were the great High Altars in the east, supporting Tabernacles for "The Reserved Sacrament" and carrying six "baroque" or "roccoco" silver candlesticks - three on each side - and covered with embroidered frontals. Where "The Reserved Sacrament" Tabernacle was still to be found in the east, it had been placed on a simple small stone "table". In many churches the Tabernacle had been moved to a side chapel, thereby allowing the people's devotions a more intimate atmosphere.

The main Altar had often been removed from the east end of the building and placed either in the Chancel or in the "Crossing". No doubt the result of Vatican II's westward facing celebration. Where it had been moved to the Chancel it was already two or three steps above the congregation. In Churches where the altar had been moved to the "Crossing" it was often placed on a wooden dais. In every case the altar stood on a large plain carpet of green or gold. In apsidical buildings (like that of the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Vezelay - en route for pilgrims on their way to the Church of St James at Compostello) the altar was in the centre of the apse.

Gone were the heavy embroidered frontals - instead there were stone "tables", rather like our "holy tables" but not masquerading as War Memorials nor inscribed with pious thoughts about previous ministers or worthy benefactors. However, they were in proportion to the rest of the building and not hemmed in by Choir Stalls or Elders' seats.

Candles were still placed on these altars, but not in the ornate candlesticks of previous times. Nor were they towering high above the altar. In every case they were approximately nine inches tall and two or three inches in diameter. Sometimes they were inserted into small wrought-iron holders on tripod feet about three or four inches in height, but more often they were placed in pottery bowls.

What was noteworthy was that the two candles were placed together at the north end of the altar and not as in Anglican practice at the north and south ends.

The altars were no longer "vested" in frontals. Instead there were "runners" placed on them. They were made of white or "unbleached" linen and stretching to about three or four inches off the floor. At non-service times these "runners" were covered by a plain coloured top "runner" often repeating the colour of the carpet.

Naturally, the altars were not repositories for brass flower vases. To one side of the altar and often slightly behind it was a very large free-standing vase on the floor, containing very large sprays of greenery or greenery and blossom. This was the case in Annecy in all four churches in the old town last Holy Saturday. Counter-balancing the large vase was a smaller one on the north side, with the same greenery and/or blossom but often with the addition of several large blooms (nearly always chrysanthemums) numbering either three, five, seven or nine.

The old carved choir stalls or, in monastic foundations, the stalls with their fine misericords, had been moved to the north and south walls of the building - presumably to preserve their workmanship for future generations.

So, too, wooden pulpits had moved into the nave - and although this might not square with our Reformed understanding of "Word and Sacraments", it did allow the altar to stand as the focal point. Portable lecterns stood in front of the altars, but to one side, again to the north and south sides. These were used not just by the priest for his "homily" but also by the laity when reading the lessons or when interceding.

The plaster Madonnas pointing to anatomically incorrect "hearts" had also

been moved out of the central area and relegated to side chapels along with the votive candelabra.

Even the forest of "Confessional Boxes" had been reduced in number. In one church in Annecy there was even a notice to say that the priest was available for "confessions" in the Presbytery on certain days and at certain times, and not a single "Confessional Box" was present in the Church.

Except for Chartres Cathedral the "heavy" stained-glass had often been removed (at least from the Sanctuary area) and displayed in another part of the Church, often in the "UnderChurch". Now clear glass allowed light to flood the altar area, giving a new insight to Gothic buildings in particular. This effect of "clarity" was often complemented by the cleaning of the interior stone-work.

The "clergy furniture" had been reduced to what was often six simple wooden chairs, three at either end of the altar, north and south - without kneelers. From my sporadic attendance at Mass, I noted that the clergy stood for prayer.

Bishops' "Thrones" were now difficult to find. Very occasionally one could be encountered gathering dust in a corner, but it was evident that for most "episcopal functions" the bishop occupied the central seat of one of the two sedilia or that one of the sedilia was moved behind the altar to the westward position and he sat in the centre chair, supported on each side by his priests.

Dark "romantic" painting of saints suffering the rigours of their martyrdom had been re-sited on the nave pillars of many churches, facing - not inwards into the congregation - but outwards towards the north and south walls. Any devotional "aids" now appeared to be "ikon-style" paintings of either God the Father, God the Son or Mary with the Holy Child, discreetly placed in side chapels with two or three chairs in front of them - but always with a single "light" burning close by.

At the west door where Fonts were still in their traditional position, an open space had been created - the Paschal candle standing permanently by the Font except at Requiems when it was moved to the head of the coffin - the

baptismal party gathering around the Font which stood in the centre. In some churches a new "Baptistry" had been created in one of the side chapels - but still the open space prevailed.

Overall there was a refreshing sense of "liberation" whereby, with the central altar, the focus was on the liturgy of the people and priest. Even our (and their) pre-occupation with "heavy" flower arrangements in wrought-iron pedestals had been reformed. "Ikebana" in side chapels was the order of the day. My "dropping-in" to French churches proved to be a refreshing and worshipful experience. If only that were the case in Scottish kirks - assuming one could "drop in" in the first place !

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The Revd R STUART LOUDEN, MA, BD, DD, DLitt
Honorary President of The Society

An appreciation of the life and work of Dr Stuart
will appear in the next issue of "The Record".

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FUTURE ACTIVITIES

of

THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY

As a result of discussion within The General Assembly's Advisory Committee on Artistic Matters the Council has agreed to the publication of a book dealing with "Church Interiors".

Among the contributors will be Dr H Sefton, Mr D Maxwell, Mr D Laird and The Revds C R Williamson and T G Longmuir. A "Table of Contents" has been

drawn up and, when the book is published it is hoped that it will be of benefit to The Church at large.

In the meantime, The Council would be eager to learn from members of The Society and readers of "The Record" of their wishes or hopes for the future programme. It would be of considerable help if these "wishes" were sent to Colin Williamson before the Annual Meeting during Assembly Week.

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"A M E N"

Readers of "The Expository Times" will have noticed that in the April edition a definitive reply by Mr Ross (London) to the Revd CIG Stobie (St Andrews) was featured.

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