In the last century we have seen a steady devolution of Catholic sacred architecture from grand and formal edifices to decidedly more residential scale and casual buildings. This was not accidental, but rather a deliberate effort to return to what mid-century liturgical scholars considered was the true character of Christian worship as understood in the early Church.

A desire of the ressourcement movement was to recover the true meaning of the Christian liturgical assembly and the true meaning of Christian assembly space. Therefore, it was commonly held that the Church should emulate the early Christian Church in their liturgical practices and its surroundings. The architecture should be simplified to heighten the symbolic expression of the gathered community. Architectural accretions should be removed as non-essential, distracting, and counterproductive to the goal of “active participation.”

Active Participation

It is historically curious that the desire to promote active participation of the faithful came to imply a radical reductionism in the majesty, beauty, iconography, and symbolism of church buildings. The notion of “active participation” as the genesis of the twentieth-century liturgical reforms was first articulated by Saint Pope Pius X (d. 1914) in a small exhortation on sacred music, Tra le Sollecitudini. Pius X reminds the faithful of the importance of the church as the House of God in which the august mysteries of religion are celebrated, and where the Christian people assemble to receive the grace of the Sacraments...Nothing should have place, therefore, in the temple calculated to disturb or even merely to diminish the piety and devotion of the faithful, nothing that may give reasonable cause for disgust or scandal, nothing, above all, which directly offends the decorum and sanctity of the sacred functions and is thus unworthy of the House of Prayer and of the Majesty of God.1

For Pius X, “the sanctity and dignity of the temple” was important so that the faithful might acquire the proper spirit for true “active participation” in the holy liturgy. Active participation properly understood is the goal of worship in the liturgy; it is the end, not the means. Among other things, the means include that the liturgy is done well in a place aptly designed for worship. In the mind of Pius, the church building ought be constructed to express the majesty and dignity of the House of God.

Given the clear intent expressed in this motu proprio of Saint Pius X as the point of departure for the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement, how are we to explain the subsequent diminishment of the church building as a sacramental sign of the heavenly realities?

The Mid-Century Liturgical Arguments

The typical rhetoric of the mid-century liturgical authors was that we ought to build churches for the “modern man” or “constructed to serve men of our age.” Styles and forms from previous ages were declared “defunct” or “no longer vital.” One even finds the condemnation of wanting a “church that looks like a church” as being “nostalgic” in an unhealthy yearning for a past Golden Age that really never was.2

For instance, Edward Mills wrote in The Modern Church: “If we do not build churches in keeping with the spirit of the age we shall be admitting that religion no longer possesses the same vitality as our secular buildings.”3 His book concerns topics such as efficient planning, technology, cost abatement, and environmental considerations. It is worth mentioning that only a few years before this book, Mills had written The Modern Factory, with the same rationalistic concerns for efficient planning, technology, cost abatement, and environmental considerations.

But we see something else going on in the mid-century writers. One cannot simply discard two millennia of sacred architectural forms and styles without having a new paradigm to replace it, and one cannot have a valid new paradigm without have grounds for discarding the old paradigm. The paradigm itself needed to change: and all the better if the new paradigm was promoted as the “authentic” paradigm, the recovery of what was lost.

Within this rhetoric of building churches for our age and in the willingness to discard the past is an embedded mythos. By this accounting, the Church began to formalize her liturgy and her architecture only after the Edict of Milan, when Constantine first legalized Christianity. The imperially sponsored building programs brought formality and the hierarchical trappings of ele-

**Domus Dei, Quae Est Ecclesia Dei Vivi:**

**The Myth of the Domus Ecclesiae**

Steven J. Schloeder

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1. Pius X, Tra le Sollecitudini.
2. Edward Mills, The Modern Church.
ments take from the Imperial court. Prior to this Pax Constantini, the Church was a domestic enterprise, and the model of domestic architecture—the *domus ecclesiae* (literally, “house of the church”)—was the simple, humble, and hospitable residential form in which early Christians gathered to meet the Lord and meet one another in the Lord for fellowship, meals, and teaching. This became valued as a model for contemporary worship and self-understanding. The early house church—seen as pure, simple, unsullied by later liturgical and architectural accretions without the trappings of hierarchy and formality—was to be the model for modern liturgical reform.

As Father Richard Vosko surmised, “The earliest understanding of a Christian church building implies that it is a meeting house—a place of camaraderie, education and worship. In fact, the earliest Christian tradition clearly held that the Church does not build temples or too poor, or too much persecuted. Centuries built almost no houses of worship. The Gothic style was criticized for its alienating monumentalism and for its rhetorical imperial formality, where the ministers are hidden behind the iconostasis, only to venture out in courtly processions. The Romanesque was rejected for its immensely long naves that separated the people from God, and the proliferation of side altars required for the monks to fulfill their daily obligations to say private Masses. The Gothic style was criticized for its alienating monumentalism and for its rhetorical imperial formality, where the ministers are hidden behind the iconostasis, only to venture out in courtly processions. The Romanesque was rejected for its immensely long naves that separated the people from God, and the proliferation of side altars required for the monks to fulfill their daily obligations to say private Masses.

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The decided trend of mid-twentieth century liturgical and architectural thinking was to reject historical styles. Clearing the table to start anew, with a sweep of the hand, Father Reinhold dismissed all previous architectural eras, styles and forms:

Conclusion: We see that all these styles were children of their own day. None of their forms are ours. We have concrete, steel, wood compositions, brick, stone, glass of all kinds, plastic materials, reverse cycle heat and radiant heat. We can no longer identify the minority, called Christendom, and split in schisms, with the kingdom of God on earth. Our society is a pluralistic one and lives in a secularist atmosphere... [O]ur architects must find as good an expression in our language of forms, as our fathers did in theirs.

The Problem of the Domus Ecclesiae

Thus were 1700 years of Christian architectural history discarded as liturgically erroneous and inapplicable for contemporary buildings in favor of simpler domestic-scaled places for assembly. This however, was not manufactured out of thin air. It was clear from Scripture that the early Church worshipped in the residences of the wealthier members of the community. The Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* mention a wealthy and powerful man who gave over his great house to the Church to establish what ought to be considered the first ‘cathedral’ as the chair of Peter. Given the lack of excavated basilicas from the pre-Constantinian era, it was assumed that there was some sort of organic development between the domestic house and the basilica that only found full expression in the fourth century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many historians grappled with the question of transition between these two forms, looking at the Roman house with the *triclinium*, various sorts of intermediate structures such as the *aula ecclesiae*, adaptations of the Roman civic basilica, and the architecture of the imperial palace, among others.

These speculations all went by the wayside in the mid-century, and the model of the house church came to the fore, with the discovery of the church at Dura Europos in the 1930s. This discovery was of profound importance given that it was the only known identifiable and dateable pre-Constantinian church. It was obviously a residence converted to the needs of a small Christian community. Significantly, it was also a rather late dated church about 232 AD and quite in keeping with the expectations from all the various scriptural references to a domestic liturgical setting. Henceforth, especially in the late 1950s and the 1960s, the dominant
The Problem of Place

Despite the textual evidence that argues for significant church buildings before the age of Constantine, the dearth of archeological evidence for formal church buildings has seemed persuasive. With the recent discovery of a pre-Constantinian basilica at Aqaba it seems timely for liturgists and architects to reconsider the validity of the residential domus ecclesiae as a meaningful model for contemporary church architecture. The Aqaba church dates comfortably to 300, and perhaps as early as 280 A.D. We have no knowledge of what other pre-Constantinian churches looked like, but we can have certainty that Christians had special, purpose-built, urban-scale churches before the Emancipation in 313 A.D. We should therefore reevaluate the claims about the “authenticity” of the simple house church as a meaningful architectural model for the Christian assembly both in the early Church and for today.

However, we should also consider the emotional impetus for the house church. The romantic notion of the primitive house church has a strong sense of attraction: the desire for more communitarian and domestic church buildings is enticing in the alienating condition of post-agrarian and post-industrial modern life. Both the massive scale of the modern city and the anonymity and placelessness of suburban sprawl contribute to the desire for a sense of domestic rootedness. In-
increased mobility in the modern work force and the consequent breakdown of traditional community and family life also create a tension and a desire for familiarity, welcome, and belonging in the parish community.

These perhaps contribute to the nostalgic longing for a more domestic parish facility. But the church building must function on a variety of levels. Church architecture is necessarily symbolic, and the various metaphors by which we understand church buildings are derived from the metaphors by which we understand the Church. These metaphors find their poignancy and potency in the human condition: matters of embodiment, relationship, dwelling, and community life form a matrix of symbols for the Church, the parish community, the liturgy, and church architecture. Among the most significant Scriptural images for the Ecclesia (and therefore the liturgy and the church building) are the Body of Christ, the nuptial relationship, the Tent of Dwelling/ Temple of Solomon, and the Heavenly City. These speak of the fundamental human experiences of embodiment, of marriage and domestic family life, of dwelling and habitation, and of social life.

This residential model of domus ecclesiae has been placed into a false opposition to the domus Dei as a model for sacred architecture. Both are models that find their validity in the human experience of dwelling and family life, but the former has come to imply an immanent expression of the home for the local community whereas the latter has a transcendental and eschatological horizon that is more apt for sacramental buildings that are called to be “truly worthy and beautiful and be signs and symbols of heavenly realities.” The desire for a domestically-scaled liturgical environment is not wrong per se, but it cannot stand in isolation without reference to the broader framework of ecclesiastical, liturgical, and architectural symbolism. All are needed for the person and the community to understand how the liturgy and the liturgical environment express and participate in a greater sacramental reality beyond the confines of the local assembly.

If the domestic model has no sure foundation, then the arguments erected for rejecting the hierarchical and formal models of liturgy; for discarding the sacramental language of Christian architecture in favor of a functionalist and programmatic approach to building; and for dismissing any appeals to the rich treasure trove of Catholic architectural history and various historical styles are susceptible to falling like a house of cards.

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