The architects of the reconstructed Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome, Italy, Pasquale Belli and Luigi Poletti (1855), sought to a create a beautiful, new church which could be seen as a daughter of the original without being a literal rebuilding.

CHAPTER 18

Learning from Rome[1]

Zeal for thy house has consumed me.

Psalm 69:9

For many architects, there are few places that can match Rome for inspiration. I have had the opportunity to visit and live in Rome a number of times, and I always learn new things. One of the highlights of any trip is going to St. Peter's Basilica at 7 am for Mass, which is one of the best-kept secrets of Rome. While the rest of Rome is still sleeping, before the hordes of pilgrims and tourists arrive, St. Peter's is a-bustle with faithful participating in Mass at the myriad side altars and in the crypt. As the light streams in this loftiest of temples, the day begins with a liturgy celebrated by people from all over the world in all possible languages in the presence of Saint Peter and all his sons. One is filled with awe by the beauty, the reverence, and the holiness of the Lord's temple.

The churches have always been a major tourist attraction in Rome and other European cities, but often their meaning has suffered by becoming museums of religious art. This is most striking in Florence, where the history of Italian Renaissance painting and sculpture can be traced by visiting Santa Maria Novella, Santa Croce, San Lorenzo, and the Duomo seemingly without ever bumping into anyone at prayer. This is a sad development for churches that were constructed out of a deep faith and the material sacrifice of patrons and artists. To overcome this "museumification," the people and clergy of Rome have begun to reclaim these monuments as places of prayer and liturgy. This has been accomplished in part by reverential liturgies, conferences on Scripture, triduums in honor of feast days, and most importantly, perhaps, the Eucharistic adoration instituted in the major basilicas by Pope John Paul II. All of these activities utilize the churches for the holy activities

1. Originally published as "Learning from Rome," *Inside the Vatican* (December 1998): 64–66. Reprinted with permission.


ALEXANDER SEPT · P · M · S · ANDREAE APOSTOLO AN · SALVTIS MDCLXV

The ten angels holding instruments of the passion on the Ponte Sant'Angelo were sculpted for the Holy Year of 1675 by the workshop of Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

they were originally built for. This reclaiming of the *domus Patris* as a house of prayer for all people has also had an architectural corollary in the use of raised ambos for reading the Gospel, the reinstitution of candlesticks and crucifixes on high altars, and the request for silence and proper dress. In addition, many façades and interiors of churches are under scaffolding so that they can be restored. This care for places that have been centers of spiritual renewal and have witnessed the sacraments down through the ages is only fitting. It shows awareness that, as a sacramental people, we acknowledge that God chooses to work through material elements to give his children spiritual graces.

Despite being located in a vacuous Roman suburb, the Church of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in Rome, Italy by Santiago Hernandez (1995) articulates a sense of the sacred by employing a traditional church typology and Catholic symbols.

Facing page: Roman churches like the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle in Rome, Italy (façade by Carlo Rainaldi, 1663) have always been a major tourist attraction, but often their meaning has suffered by becoming museums for religious art.

Also, in honor of the great Jubilee (of the year 2000), the diocese of Rome embarked on a substantial program to rectify the great shortage of churches in the city's periphery. The program was called "Fifty Churches for Rome." Surprisingly, the leaders of this project to prepare the Eternal City for the holy year were architects and clergy who seem to be enamored with the legacy of Modernist architecture and its associated iconoclasm. The most prominent church that was built is "The Church of the Year 2000," designed by American architect Richard Meier in the suburb of Tor Tre Teste (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.1). It is considered by some as the model of the sacred edifice for the new Christian millennium. And yet, incredulously, as reported by the Italian newspapers, on the exterior of this masterpiece there will not be a crucifix or any other recognizable symbol. At the same time, Pope John Paul II has remarked that he is perplexed by modern church architecture in which there is no sign of the sacred. Furthermore, his Cardinal Vicar of the diocese of Rome, Camillo Ruini, has gone on record criticizing the Catholic churches built in recent decades for lacking a rapport between form and content.

However, there is a recently completed church that makes for a worthwhile comparison with the "Church of the Year 2000." The church of St. Josemaría Escrivá is also sited within a vacuous suburb of Rome, and though less striking than the "Church of the Year 2000," it more successfully articulates a sense of the sacred by employing many symbols from Catholic art and architecture on both the exterior and the interior. It is an abstracted Romanesque building with a simple nave and prominent reredos, which to many Roman Catholics more adequately captures the essence of a place set apart for liturgy and devotion than does Meier's design.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF JUBILEE

It may be beneficial to recall that many of the pilgrimage avenues and bridges of Rome were built in time for holy years by the bishop of Rome under his title of "bridge-builder," or *pontifex maximus*. In the first Year of Jubilee in 1300, the architect Arnolfo di Cambio and the painter Giotto came to Rome to work at the Vatican and the Lateran. It will also come as no surprise to those who have spent time in the Holy City that the Spanish Steps (1725), the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo (1475), the Piazza of St. Peter's (1675), and the angels of Ponte Sant'Angelo (1675)—as well as manifold other works of art—were

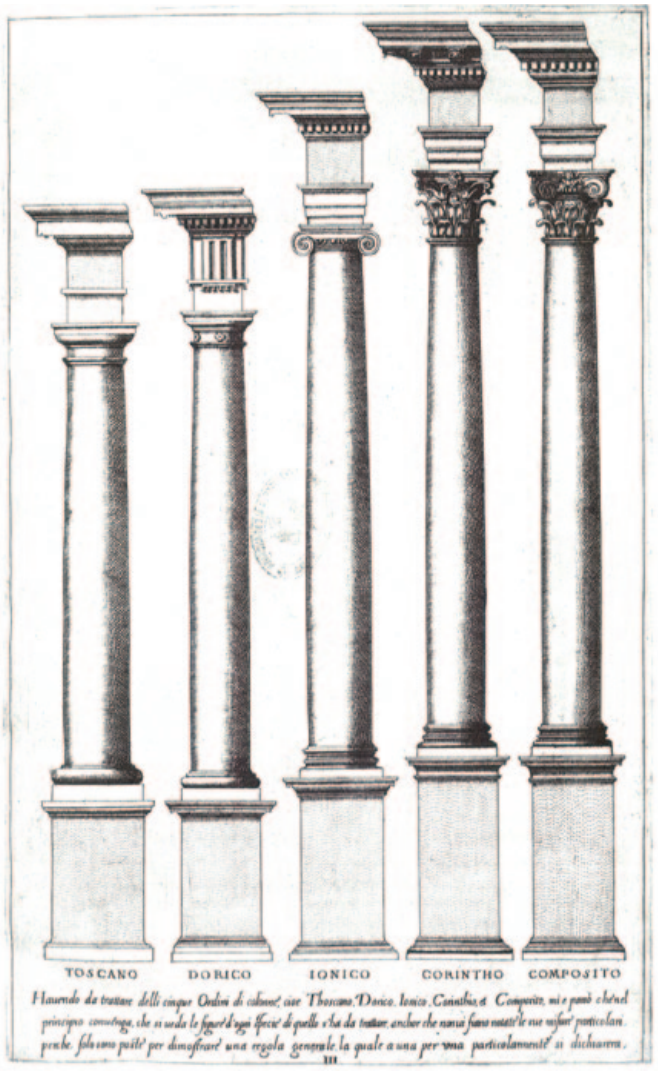
commissioned for holy years. Churches and other public works built in honor of the Jubilee are poignant reminders that works of faith have both pragmatic and spiritual reasons for coming into being.

There was a particular emphasis on renovating the major basilicas for years of Jubilee. In 1625, the construction of St. Peter's was finally completed under the reign of Urban VIII. The nave of St. John Lateran was renovated by Francesco Borromini in time for the Holy Year of 1650 under Pope Innocent X. After the great basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls burned in 1823, Pope Leo XII employed the Holy Year of 1825 as impetus for an international fundraising effort to rebuild this shrine. The basilica was redesigned by the architects Belli and Poletti, whose interventions sought to demonstrate the present-day possibility of producing a "Classical-Christian Temple." Without literally reconstructing the original church, they proved it was possible to build a beautiful, new basilica that could be seen as a daughter of the original.

Of course, an even more radical view toward restoration was held by the Renaissance architects of St. Peter's. When it was judged that the shrine of the apostle was in need of major structural renovation, Pope Julius II and his architect Bramante seized the opportunity to rebuild it on a much grander scale, by "placing the dome of the Pantheon on the Temple of Peace."[2] And yet, the new design was still seen as a restoration, or *instauratio,* of the Constantinian church.

The need to restructure or rebuild was always seen by noble families and princes of the church as a felicitous opportunity to beautify the holy places of Rome. Sometimes, as in the reconfiguring of San Crisogono or Santa Maria Maggiore in the Baroque period, early Christian architecture was reordered, corrected, and improved. Of course, to the purist, the Renaissance concept of *instauratio,* or improving an early Christian church, might be anathema; but it was fairly common in previous epochs. And this is where the modern archeological impulse could be seen as at war with a living Catholicism. To keep a church exactly as it was or to return it to some mythic golden age, as Americans do with the houses of their presidents, is to make it into a museum. When the church becomes a museum, it is no longer useful except to teach us about the past.

When visiting in Rome, one is struck by the difference between the magnificent Roman ruins and the early



The most essential elements of the Classical language of architecture are the five orders, which range from the simplicity of the Tuscan to the richness and elegance of the Composite. From Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola's *Regola delli Cinque Ordini d'Architettura* (1562).

Christian churches. Both are great works of human ingenuity and religious sense: yet while the triumphal arches and Coliseum are stunning monuments, they have become museums or artifacts; it is the Catholic churches which still function for the same noble purpose for which they were built sixteen centuries ago. Take away the churches from Rome and it loses its lifeblood.

Ever since the Popes returned to Rome in the fifteenth century, there have been those who have advocated the preservation and even the reconstruction of the ancient Roman monuments. This archeological movement has had its greatest success in the twentieth century, when we have been most in danger of forgetting our past. Unfortunately, this has often led to a type of stripping away of later accretions and adaptations in order to return

2. See Wolfgang Lotz, *Architecture in Italy 1500–1600,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

The piazza can be designed in concert with the church, as is the case at the Church of Santa Maria della Pace in Rome, Italy, by Pietro da Cortona (1667), shown in an etching by Giuseppe Vasi.

to an earlier state, as was done to Santa Sabina and Santa Maria in Cosmedin in the 1900s. Yet we realize the sacred architecture of the Church is fundamentally different from the Roman monuments in that our churches are not merely examples of a great civilization past, but continue to offer witness to the saints of the past while serving the saints of today.

Rome offers us many fine examples of how church buildings can evolve over the centuries. The beauty of Baroque baldacchinos in early Christian edifices, Renaissance side chapels in Medieval basilicas, and Neo-Classical façades on Baroque masterpieces demonstrate the ability of the artistic languages to harmonize with the past. Just as the Church has room for more saints, her temples should always have room for new artwork, decoration, and elaboration, as long as it is done with harmony, beauty, and respect for the Catholic tradition.

LOOKING TO ROME

As in the past, a spiritual renewal will be accompanied by architectural renewal. One thing that many of the best recent churches in Europe and the United States have in common is that the architects have looked to Rome for inspiration. As Christians, we look to Rome for theological grounding: in particular, documents—such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—that draw together the developed beliefs of the Universal Church. It is equally wise for us to look to Rome for architectural inspiration. No other place in the world has built such a large number of churches of such high caliber for the glory of God and his Bride the Church. And the brilliance and transcendence of the finest architecture can move people to prayer, to repentance, or even to conversion. Once I met a young mother in Los Angeles who told me that her conversion began when she visited the Basilica of St. Peter, where she sensed the catholicity of the Church and the Real Presence of Christ. At the beginning of the third millennium after Christ's birth, we are finding a great desire on the part of laity, pastors, and even many architects to see a rebirth of church architecture. By looking to Rome for principles of sacred architecture, we can help to bring about a new springtime in church buildings.

The city of Rome is the city of Peter, who symbolizes the unity of the faith. This unity is expressed in the sacred buildings of Rome, which have been built by people from all nations for the benefit of all. Rome's architecture is inherently universal, quite varied, and can be learned from by all nations and then expressed regionally. In this sense, one key to understanding both Mexican Baroque and French Neo-Classicism is to look to the city of Rome. As the Eternal City, Rome's architecture has always sought to express the eternity of heaven through great massiveness and physical longevity. There are few other cities where we can find churches in which the faithful have been receiving the sacraments for 400, 800, 1,600 years. What has made this possible is that these churches were, in modern parlance, "overbuilt," with thick walls, marble floors, and tile roofs.

Until very recently, Roman Catholic architecture has always been synonymous with excellence. And in Rome, the patrons of churches always sought the finest artists, the most rigorous designs, and the best materials money could buy. America's passion for excellence in science, technology, and democracy is a corollary to Rome's historic love of the arts. In the next century the true test of America's wealth will be the legacy it leaves behind in art, literature, and architecture.

The art historian Richard Krautheimer saw the city of Rome as a very conservative place in which the same "basilica type" was built for over a thousand years, showing little awareness of the Romanesque and Gothic developments going on in other parts of Europe.[3] Yet this conservative nature also gave the city a coherence and an architectural continuity, which reminds us of the constancy of the faith. Much like Byzantine icons, the basilica type can be appreciated as part of a timeless tradition.

Along with its appreciation of tradition, Rome is also home to many inventive geniuses, such as Borromini and

3. Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 176.

Michelangelo. During the Renaissance we find infinite permutations of the cruciform plan type, variations on the circle and oval, and almost one hundred different domes. The churches which were produced can be likened to children within a family, each resembling the grandmother but with their own unique characteristics. The architectural limitations of patron, site, or religious order challenged the architect to pursue a type of inventiveness within a sophisticated and understandable architectural syntax.

THE CLASSICAL LANGUAGE

Since the Emperor Constantine built the Cathedral of St. John Lateran in AD 325, over 350 historic churches have been built within Rome's *centro storico*. What unifies the majority of these churches, whether basilical, centralized, cruciform, early Christian, or Baroque is that they all employ what Sir John Summerson calls the "Classical Language of Architecture." It is a language using the vocabulary of walls, vaulted ceilings, domes, towers, columns, and arches. Like any language, there is syntax, grammar, composition, poetry, and prose. The most essential elements are those of the columnar "Orders," the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. In some way, all Classical buildings employ the Orders, if only as a vestige in their moldings or proportions.

The Classical is an architectural language that seeks beauty, harmony, and transcendence, therefore becoming a most appropriate vehicle for expressing the faith. Classicism is systematic—much like Catholic theology—offering the architect rules for ordering the material expression of liturgy. At the most fundamental level, it allows one to distinguish between the interior and the exterior, the nave and the sanctuary, the major and the minor chapels. Because of the sophistication of the Classical language, some buildings do not reveal themselves to us all at once, but unlike many Modernist masterpieces, Classical churches seldom become "one-liners."

THE ELEMENTS OF CHURCHES IN ROME

In many cases in Rome, the church building is given a prominent location in order to set it off, to give dignity to God's house. The piazza, or the widened street, helps define the significance of the sacred building within the city, and is practical as a gathering place before or after liturgy. The piazza can also help in drawing people inside for prayer. In some cases, as in Santa Maria della Pace or Sant'Ignazio, the piazza was designed later as a foyer to the church, taking cues from the Church's façade and interior plan.

The "façade," which comes from the word face, is the countenance of the building. In earliest times Christians seemed to have been more interested in the liturgical area within the church rather than in the exterior. But there was always a large portal, or *prothyron*, to indicate one's crossing of the threshold. At San Clemente the *prothyron* leads into an atrium where the unbaptized would stand during Mass. The Medieval porch, often constructed using columns from Roman temples, is a place of gathering, shelter, and burial, which seems to be related to the evolution of the narthex. As the portal begins to take over more of the façade, the gable and walls above take on iconography in mosaic and statuary.

The façade of the church of the Gesù by Giacomo della Porta can be seen as a culmination of High Renaissance developments as well as the starting point for later Baroque inventions. The scale of the large columns is grander than any other buildings in the piazza, so as to give the Church prominence and hierarchy. There is a clear movement from the compression of the central entrance to the release of the end bays. Likewise, there is a thematic repetition of elements such as the aedicule (two columns with a pediment), which become doorways, windows, niches, and even the façade itself. This nesting of aedicules within aedicules allows a very large building to have elements that can be seen from very far away, as well as substantial elements which can be seen up close and touched.

Upon entering a Roman church—whether it is large or small—we are immediately struck by the spaciousness in both vertical and horizontal directions. Roman churches are generous, made for both liturgical and devotional movement. In distinction to many American churches, which have tended toward the functional, Roman churches have large aisles, few seats, and deep apses. This generosity is a gift to the pilgrim, who has traveled far to reach this place, as well as a light to the agnostic who is looking for a place of peace. These large volumes increase our sense of the breadth and depth and height of Christianity, as well as ably accommodating processions, major liturgies, people in wheelchairs, little children, people praying in the nave, or people popping in to light a candle.

Along with their spaciousness, Roman churches have an obvious verticality, which gives material form to the heavenly realm. The verticality of Italian churches—a

The *prothyron* or porch of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin (eighth century). From the earliest times, Christians created a portal to indicate the crossing of a threshold.

height at least equal to its width—allows windows to be placed high above our heads so that the light can come in as mysterious heavenly light. In contrast, some of the great French Gothic cathedrals have naves two to three times higher than their width. Chartres is 45 feet wide and 120 feet tall while Reims is 40 feet wide and 124 feet high. This is one of the reasons it took centuries to build some of them, as well as why some of them such as Beauvais collapsed. Few of the churches in Rome have nave proportions so vertical that their height approaches twice their width (except under their domes). However, their modest verticality emphasizes the ceiling, and gives a sense of the transcendent. For instance, St. Peter's Basilica is 84 feet wide and 150 feet tall in the nave (taller than all Gothic cathedrals except Beauvais) and 352 feet to the inside of the dome. Some of the auditorium or fan-shaped churches we are building today are as wide as St. Peter's, but without the concomitant height, so they are experienced like bowling alleys rather than as a piece of heaven. This development is a result of thinking about churches as if they were like office buildings: in terms of cost per square foot.

The articulation of the nave using colonnades or pilasters can emphasize simplicity as in many early Christian basilicas or more complex rhythms as in Baroque churches. The clear unfolding of the processional axis towards the sanctuary is crucial, and the transition is often marked by giant columns, triumphal archways, and detailed cornice work framing the view. There is a multiplicity of architectural solutions to mounting a dome over a crossing, and the definition of transept and corners can be developed much like the rigorous definition of doctrine. Employing the Classical language, Roman churches define the parts of the church as distinct while still maintaining spatial unity of the whole.

THE SANCTUARY

The sanctuary, coming from the Latin *sanctus*, is the most holy place in a church—much like the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple, where the ark of the covenant was reserved. Beginning with the earliest Christian temples, a raised area within the apse was the location for the altar and bishop's *cathedra*. Often a colonnade was placed in front of the apse as a screen. The early Christian triumphal arch, held up by large columns and surmounted by mosaics of saints or the Annunciation, emphasizes Christ's victory over death and the paradise that awaits the believer. The sanctuary becomes a temple within the house of God. More often than not, it is quite elaborate,

due to the fact that this is the major focus of attention in the church. The Eastern tradition sees the whole sanctuary as an extension of the altar, and that concept actually describes the Roman churches quite well. The total design of the sanctuary emphasizes the altar, which symbolizes both the sacrifice and communion of the Mass; as well as the tabernacle, which hosts the abiding presence of the Savior.

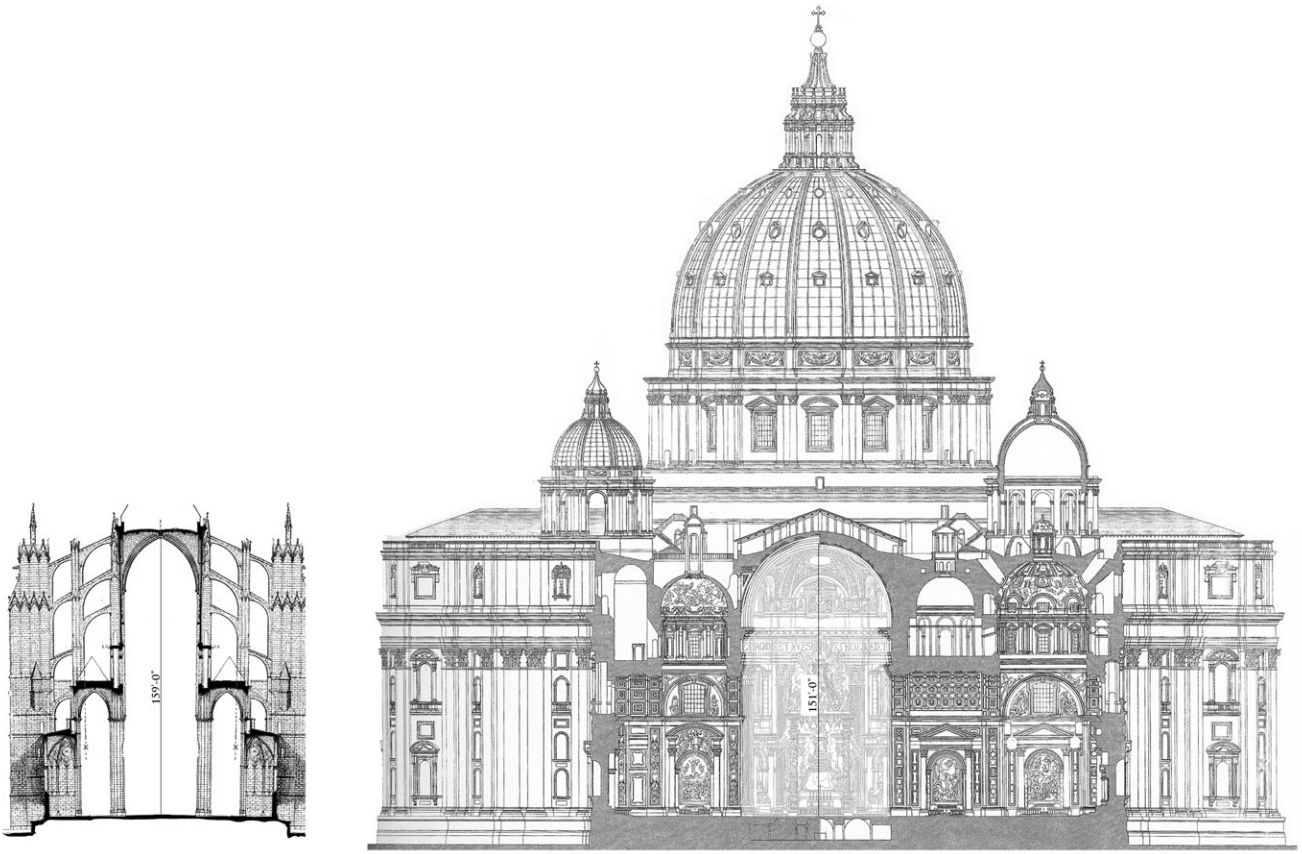
The baldacchino (a tent-like covering on columns), which usually surrounds a freestanding altar in Rome, is an aedicule within the sanctuary, which helps to focus our attention on the importance of the altar, which is Christ. The most famous baldacchino, of course, is Bernini's bronze one with Solomonic columns placed on the same spot where—1,300 years earlier—Constantine built his shrine. The cousin of the baldacchino is the tester, which is simply the tentlike roof without columns seen on many high altars. As we seek to recapture the reverence due the altar and tabernacle, the baldacchino or tester—once required in our churches—should be reconsidered for our altars.

The interior of the Church of San Andrea della Valle in Rome, Italy begun by Giacomo della Porta (1584) and continued by Carlo Maderno, is the headquarters of the Theatine order in Rome.

The altar rail—one of the most misunderstood elements in American churches—is an integral part of most sanctuaries in Rome. The rail helps to create a clear threshold at the sanctuary. Just as partially closed doors make us curious about what is behind them, a partially veiled sanctuary gives us a sense of the mystery of the sacrifice of the Mass. And creating a threshold at the sanctuary gives the believer all the more reason to want to reverence the altar and tabernacle. Interestingly, if these elements of definition are used in the sanctuary, both believers and agnostics understand that it is a holy place.

This brings us to the vertical altarpiece, or reredos behind the altar, which often has an image of the saint for whom the church is named. The Death and Resurrection of Christ seen in the cross and the altar, are also reflected in the life of his holy saints, who are intercessors for the living. The complexity and richness of our faith is expressed in a series of images and architectural elements which frame the altarpiece and set off the altar. Thus, the purpose of the design of the sanctuary and its iconography is not a simple one. But if designed well, like a good book or a symphony, one will be able to gaze on it day after day and continually find new relationships and meanings. In this way our sanctuaries can continually nourish our senses and our faith.

We see in Rome a variety of solutions for designing the altar: as a tomb, an altar of sacrifice, and a table. The use of colored marbles, bas-reliefs of the Passion, angels of the Resurrection, and geometric symbols can be employed to create a most beautiful focus for the church. Whether on the high altar or in a Blessed Sacrament Chapel, the



Renaissance churches have a height that is usually one and a half times their width, in contrast with the more vertical proportions of Gothic churches. Compare the sections of the nave of the Cathedral of St. Peter in Beauvais with the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, which are of a similar height.

tabernacle is designed as a beautiful palace, a circular temple, or a jewel box, usually crafted in bronze, gold leaf, marble, or other precious materials. In the Blessed Sacrament Chapels in the major basilicas, there is often a *tempietto* above the actual tabernacle which, by virtue of its size and design, helps us to see the tabernacle as the *domus Dei* and the ark of the covenant. It also associates the Eucharist with the sacrifice of the cross, the saints in the altarpiece above, and the cloud of witnesses painted on the ceiling. Of course, Rome is also a great laboratory for studying the design of other liturgical-sacramental elements such as the ambo, chair, and font.

WHAT HAS ROME TO DO WITH AMERICA?

I have found that, for many people who otherwise enjoy traveling to the Eternal City, there is a great fear of building an architecture back home that is not "American." This may be due in part to our experience with the most banal examples of International Style architecture, which always seem to have dropped onto the landscape from outer space. On the other hand, we recognize that one meaning of "catholic" is breadth of taste, which allows a Catholic to learn from Rome while remaining American. Being universal, Roman Catholicism has always been more interested in designing the finest architecture, rather than seeking to be nationalistic in style. And as any connoisseur knows, dining *al fresco* in Piazza Farnese is very different from eating Italian nouvelle cuisine in New York.

I have visited countless churches in the States that are self-proclaimed "replicas" of a church in Rome or a Cathedral in France, and I have yet to see anything close to a replica. Instead, these churches turn out to be either competent or less than competent variations on a European theme. Some have criticized these churches as being evidence of American culture's historic inability to invent its own architecture, but I would suggest that these churches are no less American than Monticello or the Boston Statehouse (both of whom have clear European antecedents). On the contrary, America has been fortunate to have had architects and patrons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who looked to Europe for inspiration. These men were really no different than the architects of the Renaissance who looked back at the ancient buildings of Rome for inspiration and guidance.

The splendid tabernacle in the Sistine Chapel of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore by Giovanni Battista Ricci, Bastiano Torrigiani, and Leonardo Sarzana (c. 1590) can continually nourish our senses and our faith.

Facing page. The sanctuary becomes a temple within the house of God. Here we see the the medieval Church of San Crisogono in Rome, Italy, with recycled antique columns and a baldacchino by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

The Church's doctrine has developed over the centuries. So has her architecture. As heresies arrive, she has reason to define the faith. Just as Sixtus III built the Basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in order to articulate in brick and stone the doctrine of the *Theotokos* against the erroneous teaching of Nestorius, so must we build for our own age. Now, when there is confusion over the meaning of the *domus Dei*, and lack of faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, it is necessary for us to build churches that reestablish the meaning of the church as a sacred place and reassert the sacrificial aspects of the Mass. As a Church under the siege of materialism, our church buildings must indicate that the purpose of the material world is to lead us to the eternal.

Since we are sons and daughters of Peter, Rome is for all of us. Like the Polish Pope, John Paul II, we can claim it for our own: the city of saints and martyrs, the early Christian community and Sts. Peter and Paul. Rome is a symbol of the future, as well as a testimony to the architecture of the past. Each Roman Catholic church is a piece of Rome, connected spiritually to the apostle Peter and physically to the churches of the Eternal City.