Sacrifice and Sacred Space

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In The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, science fiction author Douglas Adams imagines that all civilisations in the galaxy are familiar with a drink called a G&T – though it isn't necessarily gin and tonic for everyone. In fact, everyone puts different ingredients into it; however, everyone feels the need to drink something called a G&T. The same could be said of most religious concepts: the concepts of sacrifice, sacred space and the altar are almost universal religious phenomena. Whilst it is true that in every culture and every religion, a different meaning is attributed to them, the fact remains that building altars to offer sacrifices and regarding them as sacred in many respects is a widespread practice. The Old Testament frequently refers to the construction of altars and their various uses –[2]. In this regard, it is worth recalling what J. K. Chesterton said in Orthodoxy: what divides religious groups is not so much religious practice as religious belief. Furthermore, this belief is expressed in "a grammar and syntax "[3] of religious practice that retains a remarkable consistenc e[4]. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and even Anglicans have their own professional hierarchy, their days of fasting and celebration, their sacred places and their places of offering.

The testimony of Scripture

In the Old Testament, there is a well-attested theology of the sacred nature of the Promised Land, and in particular of Jerusalem and Mount Zion; by contrast, one might think at first glance that, in the New Testament, the trend is towards desacralisation. Our Lord tells us that He has no place to lay His head and that, wherever two or three are gathered, He will be

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[1] Lecture delivered at the 3rd CIEL Colloquium in Versailles, October 1997.

[2] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. i, pp. 760–771; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. i, pp. 343–352; *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 40; B. Lang, H. Ringgreen, J. Bergman TDOT iv *zabah* 8–12; J. Milgrom TWAT iv *mizbeah* 787–803.

[3] AIDAN NICHOLS, O.P.: Looking at the Liturgy – A Critical View of its Contemporary Form, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1996, pp. 11–48.

[4] MIRCEA ELIADE: "Chronological Survey: 'The History of Religion as a Branch of Knowledge'", in: *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion – The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*, Harvest Books, New York 1959, pp. 216–232; here one will find an overview of the position of classical authors on this subject.

among them. What Our Lord says generally seems almost to point towards the exclusion of specific place s [5]. Thus:

> "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation comes from the Jews. But the hour is coming—and is now here—when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for such are the worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth r"[6].

Protestant authors generally tend to adopt a theology of sacred space that is careful to avoid any 'topolatry', always focusing on the unique mediating role of Christ Our Lord. One of the characteristics of Protestant theology is that it places less emphasis on the created reality: rather, it emphasises the "spiritual" nature of the liturgy as opposed to the use of mere material objects, which have no value in themselves but must be valued according to their capacity to stimulate faith. A good example of this is provided by Nicolai Grundtvig, a Danish Lutheran composer of the early 19th century; in one of his many hymns, dedicated to the reopening of a church, he takes up several themes from the New Testament in a typically Protestant manner.

Surely in temples made by human hands God, the Most
High, does not dwell;
His temple stands high above the earth, Far
surpassing all earthly temples; Yet He, whom the
heavens cannot contain, Has chosen to dwell on
earth among men; He has built His temple in our
bodies.
We are God's house of living stones, Built for Him to
come and dwell in;
Through the grace of baptism, He possesses
us, We, the heirs of His marvellous salvation;
Even if there were only two of us to speak His name,

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[5] SUSAN WHITE: "The Theology of Sacred Space", in: The Sense of the Sacramental – Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time, SCPK, London 1995, p. 37.

[6] Jn 4:21 (trans.: *The Jerusalem Bible*).

He would still deign to dwell among us, With
all his grace and goodness . [7].

This hymn at least has the merit of having a perfectly evangelical tone, but theologically it struggles to attribute a special status to the sacredness of the church, the altar or the baptismal font. This attitude is entirely in line with Protestant thought, according to which, without grace, the human intellect cannot draw near to God. The baptised Christian is the temple of God. Religious buildings, as well as the furnishings and objects found within them, are merely symbolic of the inner dispositions of faith. This theology does not recognise any space that can be considered truly sacred or, religiously speaking, different from any other space.

Susan White has proposed a theology based on the following scriptural references: "Clearly, the aim was not to identify the kingdom of God—which was the central message of Christ's preaching—with a place; this kingdom in fact described that encounter with the living God whose fruit is peace, love and reconciliati [on"8].

She then presents what she calls a "Barthian view" of the question of sacred space. She regrets that theologians have devoted little time or effort to this question, at least not in a systematic way. In the same vein, she regrets that the little theology that has been devoted to sacred space has come from liturgists and historians of religion who, in her view, are both judge and jury on the matter and do not take into account what the Scriptures say. In her view, the solution would be to propose a conception of sacred space based on an ethical understanding of the central message of the New Testament. A holy place is a place where Christians do holy things, in particular those holy things which are: promoting justice, practising mercy and caring for the poor.

The question remains as to whether one can truly reduce Our Lord's message to the Kingdom of God, and even more so, to what extent one can reduce the idea of the Kingdom of God to a series of ethical precepts. In his preaching, Our Lord also spoke of his relationship with God, of the necessity of his suffering and death for the Redemption of humanity. What the Apostles preached was not the Kingdom of God but the kerygma of redemption and the Resurrection. In his sermon in Acts 2:22, Peter does not mention the Kingdom of God even once; what interests him far more, in fact, is to convey a theological message concerning the

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[7] K. STEVENSON: *Handing On – Borderlands of Worship and Tradition*, Dartman, Longman and Todd, London 1996, pp. 83–84.

[8] SUSAN WHITE: *ibid.*

person of Jesus Christ and his role in the economy of salvation rather than any specifically ethical message. And indeed, the outcome of Peter's sermon is specifically theological and liturgical in nature: it involves baptism and the Eucharist, and prayer in the temple several times a day. This does not mean that conversion lacks a moral component, but simply that the essential focus lies elsewhere.

Yet, in recent times, it would seem that an immanentist conception of sacred space has become fairly widespread. In its architectural expression, this conception manifests itself in a tendency towards a single, uniform space rather than a differentiated one. David Stancliffe has proposed a taxonomy of sacred space based on this distincti on[9]. The sacred character of a place is expressed through a progression of differentiated spaces that directs us towards a transcendent conception of our relationship with God. In contrast, an undifferentiated circular liturgical space tends to express an immanent conception of this relationship, as is the case, for example, with Susan White's ethical conception.

Susan White is not without her criticisms of a conception of sacred space inspired by what might be called, for want of a better term, the social sciences: sociology, anthropology, history of religions, and the study of comparative religions. In line with her Barthian conception, she considers that the study of this question must draw inspiration first and foremost from 'Christian theology', and in particular, as we have seen, from the study of Scripture. Quoting the opinion of Fr Jean Corbon, who says:

> "The church of wood or stone into which we enter to participate in the eternal liturgy is … set apart because it is a space that the Resurrection has burst open"9, Susan White comments on this: "I do believe that, nowadays, most theologians would contest this sort of assertion, for reasons of a systematic nature. How does the Resurrection 'break open' a space? And can there be a space that the Resurrection has not broken open? [10]

She considers that it is indeed quite possible to develop an idolatrous relationship with certain places, with the Christian then finding themselves chained to what is purely natural and human, to the detriment of our encounter with the kingdom of God. This is an important theological consideration, presented in a direct and provocative manner by a theologian with a "sharp mind". However, Catholics must adopt a different conception of the relationship between the

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[9] DAVID STANCLIFFE: "Creating Sacred Space – Liturgy and Architecture Interacting", in: *The Sense of the Sacramental – Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time*, SCPK, London 1995, p. 44.

[10] SUSAN WHITE: *op. cit*., p. 34. JEAN CORBON: *The Wellspring of Worship*, Paulist Press, New York 1988, p. 130.

nature and revelation, a conception in which, theologically, sufficient weight is given to the nature of the rite and of sacred space as human realities. The answer to Susan White's question—as to how the Resurrection could "break open" a particular space—depends on how we express our theology of the Incarnation.

Whilst it is true that, in comparing Christianity with non-Christian religions, one risks falling into syncretism and indifferentism—temptations which we have not always been able to resist well in recent times—it is nevertheless a purely Catholic instinct to study created nature as a means of better understanding the supernatural revelation of Christ. If one appreciates the analogia entis, one cannot ignore the discoveries of the social sciences or the realities they describe, even if they encroach upon theology, provided, of course, that the respective methodologies of these different sciences are duly respected , [s. 11]. The cosmos, regarded as the culmination of God's creative power, possesses an inherent intelligibility, which is illuminated and brought to perfection by revelation, not replaced by it. This is an important consideration to bear in mind when speaking of sacred space.

In the first volume of his **Gloria Domini**, Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses the theological foundation of this idea with great precision. His theological aesthetics is based on the tension between the limitations of created being and its use by God in the Incarnation as a means of divine revelation: **Gratia perficit naturam non supplet**.

> The very same Christian centuries that were remarkably adept at reading the language of forms in the natural world are the very ones whose eyes were trained, first of all, to perceive the formal quality of revelation with the aid of grace and its illumination, and only then—but only then!—to interpret revelation. In fact, the Incarnation of God brings to perfection the entire ontology and aesthetics of created being. The Incarnation utilises created being at a new depth as the language and means of expression of the divine Being and its essent [e 12].

Just as, in inspiring the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Spirit did not replace human language; we should not believe that the Incarnate Word, in his sacraments, will ignore the ritual 'grammar and syntax' of humanity; rather, he will elevate and perfect them, and use them to communicate his grace. The study of these human forms can enable us to grasp the reality of the liturgy more fully.

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[11] SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: *Summa Theologiae,* 1a, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2.

[12] HANS URS VON BALTHASAR: The Glory of the Lord, Volume One – A Theological Aesthetics: Seeing the Form, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1982, p. 29.

Odon Casel found it very useful to be able to draw analogies between Christian liturgy and the rituals of non-Christian religions s13. Victor Turner, a distinguished anthropologist, has made some very instructive comparisons between the tribal rituals of the Ndembu of Zambia and the traditional Mass e14. Mary Douglas, a specialist in the sociology of religion at Cambridge, has offered some very interesting insights into certain issues that have recently arisen in Western society regarding rituals 15. Fr. Aidan Nichols' recent book on liturgy presents a synthesis of the sociological research of a number of authors who bring a fresh perspective to the discussion on liturgy and sacred space from the point of view of the social sciences 16. Recently, the question of liturgical language has also been examined from this angl e17.

By way of comparison: sacred space among Australian Aborigines

If we observe the relationship that the oldest populations have with the cosmos, we see that a deep bond ties them to particular places, which we might describe as sacred. These places are described in the mythical narratives of the peoples who regard them as sacred s18. These places are often assigned a central role, not only in the performance of rites but also in the 'founding' of the world as a habitable and intelligible place. This is particularly true of peoples such as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

Roughly in the centre of the Australian desert stands a monolith commonly known as Ayers Rock or Ul uru19. It is a very special place, as confirmed by all who have visited it. It is not surprising that the story of Uluru features in the "Dreamtime" myths of Australia's Aboriginal peoples, regardless of which part of the continent they originate from. It is a place where the natural numinosity is very strong, as is also the case with many natural sites in Central Australia, such as the Devil's Marbles, the Olgas or Carnarvon Gorge. The Aboriginal people's contact with these natural formations gave rise to etiological tales,

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13 BURKHARD NEUNHEUSER: "Odo Casel in Retrospect and Prospect", in: *Worship 50* no. 6 (1976), p. 503.

14 VICTOR TURNER: "Ritual, Tribal and Catholic", in: *Worship 50* no. 6 (1976), pp. 504–526.

15 MARY DOUGLAS: Natural Symbols – Explorations in Cosmology, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth 1973.

16 AIDAN NICHOLS: *op. cit.* (note 2).

17 For example, BARRY SPURR: *The Word in the Desert – Anglican and Roman Catholic Reactions to Liturgical Reform*, Lutterworth Press, Cambridge 1995; EAMON DUFFY: "Rewriting the Liturgy: the Theological Implications of Translation", in: *New Blackfriars'* 78/911 (Jan. 1997), pp. 4–26; CATHERINE PICKSTOCK: "A Short Essay on the Reform of the Liturgy", in: *New Blackfriars'* 78/912 (Feb. 1997), pp. 56–65.

18 MIRCEA ELIADE: *Australian religions: An Introduction*, Cornell University Press, 1973 (*Religions primitives - Religions australiennes*, Payot, Paris 1972); CHARLES MOUNTFORD: *Winbaraku and the Myth of the Jarapiri,* Rigby Press, Adelaide 1968.

19 W. E. ARNEY: *The Significance of Ayers Rock for Aborigines*, Melbourne Bread and Cheese Board 1970.

which attempt not only to explain the presence of these extraordinary landforms, but also to express a connection with the cosmos. I once had the chance to accompany some of these Aborigines to Uluru, and I was able to listen to their 'Dreamtime' stories told by elders living in Central Queensland. The bus driver's explanations provided a highly instructive counterpoint to the elders' narrative: he measured time in millions of years and offered geological explanations and scientific figures – in short, he expounded the secular religion of the late 20th century. To this driver, Uluru was a large rock. For the Aboriginal people, it was – and still is – a "sacramental" sign of their relationship with the cosmos.

To believe that religious concepts of this kind do not exist in Christianity would be to turn a blind eye to reality, to deny the obvious. It cannot be denied that Christians have sacred places that are inseparable from the 'mythical' narrative; the best example being the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, the site of the Passion of Our Lord. Similarly, the various Marian shrines and sites of other apparitions throughout the world bear witness to an attachment to certain places where particular events are commemorated. A more obvious practice is the custom among the early Christians of building churches where martyrs had been put to death or buried. All this testifies to the fact that Christianity uses the ritual 'grammar' of the common human experience to express its own beliefs and give them sacramental realisation.

What, then, is the connection between these practices and the case of any given parish church? Generally speaking, the existence of these buildings is justified neither by divine attestation nor by mythical narrative, but solely by the fact that they have been legitimately consecrated and are used by Christians for their liturgy. Yet the use of icons, altar relics, statues, Stations of the Cross, and even the conduct of the liturgy itself, implies this attachment to the sacredness of certain places. It is true that, limited to these elements, such a building is far from eliciting a direct personal commitment comparable to that aroused by the sacred sites of the religious experience of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, or even that of Christians who pray at the holy sites in Palestine or at the tombs of the martyrs and apostles [s20], or even at the sites of an apparition; all of this nevertheless implies a certain conception of the sacred, and in particular of sacred space, which goes beyond the functional or the utilitarian. Even among Protestants, whose theology a priori excludes a 'lofty' view of holy places, one nevertheless finds elements that imply

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[20] O'CONNELL: *Church Furnishings* 128 no. 1; W. H. C FREND: *"Altare Submixtus* – A cult of relics in the Romano-British Church?" in: *Journal of the Anthropological Studies*, April 1997, 49/1, pp. 125–128.

a strong connection with the places in Palestine where Our Lord lived, even if they manifest themselves in a "biblical" form characteris [21].

In Aboriginal religion, the cosmic significance of sacred sites fosters a relationship between the religious individual and the transcendent, and thus the Eternal. The Aboriginal “Dreamtime” is not only recalled but made present through the various aspects of the land with which the people are connected. "The Dream" is a present reality, not a past one. By communing with the sacred space, the individual connects their life with "Dreamtime" and with their totemic ancestors. In short, certain places are considered hierophanic. The heroes and gods of the "Dreamtime" continue to act in a certain way in these places: one can speak to them, and they can reveal secret things. This implies a certain relationship with time, with the mythical time referred to in the stories of the ancestors.

Furthermore, the numinosity of the place, engendered by immersion in the mythical time of ancestral tales, prompts the individual to adopt specific behaviours in relation to that place. To continue with the example of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples, I remember very well that, before going to see Uluru, the elders gathered the children around them to instruct them on the correct behaviour to adopt in the presence of the many numina that inhabit this place, and in particular Uluru itself—the kangaroo of the ‘Dreamtime’ in the story I was told, but also the Rainbow Serpent, whose home is a small lake at the foot of the rock. The elders feared that, by behaving badly, the children might provoke Uluru’s wrath. Since I visited, some of these sites have been closed to tourists, out of respect for the religious sentiments of the Aboriginal people. The concept of ritual tribal law is still very strong among some Aboriginal Australians, particularly those who live close to their "Dreamtime". Breaches of tribal law and the violation of taboos are still severely punished, through the kadaitja. Among the Aboriginal people of Australia, initiation rites, performed at the age of puberty, are shrouded in strict secrecy, as are the places where these initiations take place. Certain ‘taboo’ sites are off-limits to only one or the other sex; this is the case, for example, with Uluru.

Thus, the manifestation of the Divine in a place gives rise to specific modes of differentiation and ritual behaviour. The shaman has his role, men have theirs, women too, the parents of the male line have their function, maternal uncles another. Undoubtedly, Christianity has given a different meaning to some of these elements (for example, the Christian conception of Sacred Time – just like that of Judaism, for that matter – is

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[21] THOMAS HUMMEL: “The Sacramentality of the Holy Land – Two Contrasting Approaches”, in: *The Sense of the Sacramental – Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time*, SCPK, London 1995, p. 78.

fundamentally linked to the 'historical' nature of revelation); in the case of Christianity, this aspect is further accentuated by the historicity of the Incarnation; sacred time is no longer mythical but rather the re-enactment of the historical events of the Incarnation or the E xode 22); yet it would be perilous to attempt to isolate part of the central Christian message from its inculturation, and in particular from the ritual forms and modes of relating to the world.

In our conception of sacred space, we must give sufficient weight to those elements of universal human language that are rites. It is important not to underestimate the capacity of created reality to communicate the revelation and redemptive presence of Christ.

Liturgy and sacred space: the current situation

It must be said, however, that modern man does not have the same conception of the world nor lead the same life as the traditional desert nomad. Having adopted the epistemological and metaphysical categories of the Enlightenment, he struggles to transcend a certain disposition that can only find meaning in the subjective and the personal experience. Yet, by its very nature, the liturgy must go beyond the mere relational and communal dimension. The fact remains that modern society struggles to conceive of the cosmos as an objective reality capable of conveying meaning. There is an alienation between 'modern man' and the liturgy because, fundamentally, there is an alienation between him and the cosmos, an alienation unknown to his ancestors. Writing shortly before the Second Vatican Council, Mircea Eliade observed of modern Christianity:

> "It has long since lost the cosmic values it still possessed in the Middle Ages. The cosmic liturgy, the mystery of nature's participation in the Christological drama, have become inaccessible to Christians living in a modern city. Religious experience is no longer open to the cosmos. In the final analysis, it is a strictly private experience; salvation is a matter concerning man and his God; at most, man acknowledges that he is accountable not only to God but also to history. But in these relations between man, God and history, there is no place for the cosmos. One might conclude that, even for a genuine Christian, the world is no longer perceived as the work of God u23".

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22 MIRCEA ELIADE: *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 111–112.

23 MIRCEA ELIADE: *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 178–179.

It is this sort of problem that the Fathers of Vatican II quite legitimately sought to resolve. It is not for us, within the scope of this presentation, to consider to what extent, in the end, they achieved the goal they were pursuing.

The orientation of the altar: a typical example of the phenomenon of cosmic alienation

This issue of alienation is clearly raised by the direction in which the priest faces when at the altar. The notion that the celebration *versus populum* was the exclusive practice of the early Church, with later generations having abandoned this ancient custom, has been seriously challenged in recent times [24]. According to an article published by *Notitiæ*, the journal of the Congregation for Divine Worship, historically, facing east was the norm [e25]. Shortly before his death in 1996, the late Fr Max Thurian called for a return to facing east during the Ca [non26]. A theology of orientation is attested to from apostolic times, and even in the New Testament era [nt27]. This practice has, moreover, been maintained by Muslims when they pray. Apologists for the versus populum position can therefore no longer invoke the form of the early liturgy. They have thus had to find arguments other than purely historical ones. For example, Jaime Lara presents an interesting defence of this position by drawing on what he calls the 'nascent science of proxemics', that is, the science of geographical relation [que28].

From an anthropological perspective, ritual orientation is of great importance. This orientation—not only of the priest but also of the congregation—during the celebration of the liturgy places the community gathered for the liturgy within the broader context of creation, through the symbolism of the rising sun. This metaphor, found in the New Teste [nt29], was taken up and expanded upon by the early Church Fathers, as evidenced by both their writings and

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[24] This is, amongst other things, the view expressed by J. O'CONNELL – a liturgist and specialist in rubrics well known in the English-speaking world, whose position likely reflects a consensus among his contemporaries – in his work: **Church Building and Furnishing: The Church's Way – A Study in Liturgical Law**, Burns and Oates, London 1955, pp. 16–17, 151–155. See also J. JUNGMANN S.J., a recognised German expert in the field: *The Mass of the Roman Rite*
: Its Origins and Development, Herder Verlag, Vienna 1949; English edition: Burns and Oates, London 1959, pp. 181–182.

[25] *Notitiæ* 29, no. 332 (1993), pp. 245–249.

[26] Fr. MAX THURIAN: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 July 1996, p. 6. On this point, he follows the path laid out by Cardinal RATZINGER in: *La Célébration de la foi*, Téqui, Paris 1985; KLAUS GAMBER: *The Liturgical Reform in Question*, Éditions Sainte-Madeleine, Le Barroux 1992; AIDAN NICHOLS O.P.: *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 99–100. A summary of the classic debate between O. Nussbaum, K. Gamber and M. Metzger can be found in SIBLE DE BLAAUW: *Archiv für Liturgie-Wissenschaft*, vol. 33, Maria Laach 1991, p. 5, note 22.

[27] G. ROUWHORST: "Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity", in: *Vigiliæ Christianæ* 51/1 (1997), pp. 72–93, regarding the orientation of ancient Galilean synagogues towards Jerusalem.

[28] JAIME LARA: "Versus Populum Revisited", in: *Worship 68* no. 3 (1994), pp. 210–221.

[29] Luke 1:78; Rev 1:16b.

the archaeological remains of this e poque[30]. Thus, ritually, God's revelation in Christ through the Incarnation is expressed in a spatio-temporal form, namely the custom of turning towards the east. The sun, which measures time (day/night) and space (directionality), is a primary symbol of God's acts of creation and redemption. One cannot help but wonder whether this inability of modern Christianity to grasp the inherent sacramentality of the cosmic order – which is expressed in particular by the abandonment, to a large extent, of practices such as liturgical orientation – does not also manifest itself, as a reaction, in the emergence of excessive environmentalism. Some even go so far as to say that certain forms of paganism have emerged, both within the Church e[31] and outside it[32].

The question of sacred space in Catholic circles today

In an article published in *La Maison-Dieu*, Father Pierre-Marie Gy O.P. presents an elegant summary of the various viewpoints on this issue by posing the following question: is the church, as a building, "the house of God or the house of the people of God?"[33] There are various interesting answers to this question, and this dilemma is not easily resolved. Ambrose and Tertullian both say that the church is the House of God u[34]. Yet, in recent times, the discussion has centred essentially on the church-building considered as the house of the people of God. New churches have been designed, and old ones refurbished, from an essentially functional and utilitarian perspective, in relation to the needs of a particular ecclesial communi re[35].

This discussion is not new, and it stems in part from the laudable desire to rediscover the order and clear structure of patristic liturgy. As we have seen previously, Catholic theologians who speak of liturgy attach far greater importance than

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[30] E. KIRSCHBAUM: *The Tombs of St Peter and St Paul*, Secker and Warburg, London 1959, pp. 40–42. Of particular note is the mosaic of Christ-Helios, dating from the 3rd century, in the Tomb of the Valerii *in the Vatican*. Kirschbaum cites F. DOLGER: "Sol Salutis – Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum", in: *Liturgiegeschichtliche Forschungen*, vols. 4–5, Münster 1925, demonstrating that this image was a common liturgical theme even before the end of the 1st century.

[31] DONNA STEICHEN: *Ungodly Rage – The Hidden Face of Catholic Feminism*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1991; C. FERREIRA: "One World Church Expected This Year", in: *Christian Order* 38/3 (March 1997), pp. 135–146.

[32] J. PARKER: *At the Heart of Darkness – Witchcraft, Black Magic and Satanism Today*, Sedgewick and Jackson, London 1993; B. WILKER: "The Repaganisation of the West", in: *New Oxford Review* LXIII/4 (May 1996), pp. 19–22.

[33] PIERRE-MARIE GY O.P.: "Space and Celebration as a Theological Question", in: *La Maison-Dieu* 136 (1978), pp. 39–46.

[34] TERTULLIAN: *On Idolatry* 9; AMBROSE: *Letters* 20, 19.

[35] See, for example, MARK A. TORGERSON: "An Architect's Response to Liturgical Reform: Edward A. Sovik and his Non-Church Design", in: *Worship*, January 1997, 71/1 28; HORST SCHWEBEL: "Liturgical Space and Human Experience", in: *La Maison-Dieu* 197, 1994/1, pp. 39–61.

Protestant theologians to apostolic and patristic testimonies. Thus, in the book he published in 1955 on church furnishings, J. O'Connell, a leading expert on rubrics, considers the late development of the reliquary screen behind the altar to be an "invasi ion"[36] and a regrettable alteration of the early patristic form of the altar. Suggestions of this kind can be very useful but, once again, one must always guard against a notion of tradition that absolutises certain particular periods in the history of the Church. In seeking the historical purity of form based on one's conception of the supposed practice of the early Church, one can sometimes fall into a sort of 'archaeologism', as Pius XII noted in **Mediator Dei** . Nor has one always escaped the temptation of a certain formalism . [37]. As for determining, furthermore, what the practice of the early Church was regarding architecture, this question is not without its problems, as Noël Duval pointed out: "Since Vatican II, certain liturgists have been mistaken in believing they could recreate the organisation of the early Church by placing the altar in the midst of the people and 'turning' the celebrant towards the centre of the building. The early Church had no uniform ru , p. [38]."

Given that, in the Roman Empire, Christianity was clandestine and that, prior to 313, the liturgy was most often celebrated in private homes, our knowledge of the formal elements of Christian architecture from this period is necessarily limited.

While what the early Church believed regarding sacred space is, once again, necessarily a matter of conjecture, the fact remains that we find, among the Fathers, a well-attested notion of sacredness, and even of sacred space. In *On Idolatry*, for example, Tertullian displays a keen sense of the supernatural and of man's obligations regarding rites. In *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, Cyprian employs arguments based on the sacredness of the altar, the Christian priesthood and the sanctity of the sacrific e [39]. In his defence of the Basilica of Portiano against the Arians in Milan, Saint Ambrose uses terms that attribute a special character to this building, in the sense that it is precisely a sacred space ré[40].

Even in the oldest churches, one finds a chancel for the clergy and, very often, a screen separating the central area from the space surrounding the altar. However, in recent times, certain discussions centred on the fundamental equality of the people of God have encouraged

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[36] J. O'CONNELL: Church Building and Furnishings – the Church's Way: A Study in Liturgical Law, Burns and Oates, London 1955, p. 129.

[37] VIRGILE NOE: "The Liturgical Space in the Post-Conciliar Church", in: *La Maison-Dieu* 193 (1993), pp. 129–139.

[38] NOËL DUVAL: "L'Espace liturgique dans les églises paléo-chrétiennes", in: *La Maison-Dieu* 193 (1993), pp. 7–29.

[39] CYPRIAN: "The Unity of the Catholic Church", chapter 16.

[40] AMBROSE: *Letters*, no. 20.

the establishment of different practices , p. [41]. As for whether we have always succeeded in avoiding a certain sociological preoccupation with “power”, that is a question best addressed in another context , p. [42]. That said, there is one element which, sociologically speaking, is not without significance: the fact that, until recently, no one approached the altar unless they were ordained. As for the structure of the altar, it has evolved into a table-like form, made of ordinary materials, most often wood. In churches of the Roman rite, the stone altar has very often been replaced by a sort of table reminiscent of a plank resting on trestles, which is not without reminding us of Cranmer’s reforms.

Traditionally, Catholic theology taught that the liturgy, and in particular the Eucharist, was the act not only of the Church but primarily of Christ the Priest, who acts through the ordained ministry to bring about his sacrifice. For modern theology, beginning with that of Karl Rahner r[43], the Church, insofar as it was instituted by Christ, constitutes a primordial sacrament (Ursakrament) which is manifested in the seven particular sacraments of the Church. Whilst such ideas are not without interest, it is possible to exaggerate their importance. The liturgy must always be understood as the action of Christ. The sacred signs instituted by the Incarnate Word and entrusted to the Church to bring people into contact with Him must never become primarily the action of the community for secular purposes. To borrow the words of the American novelist Flannery O’Connor: “Religion must be more than poetry or therapy”. It is difficult to see how the altar could have any meaning, either as a sacred space or as a place of sacrifice, in an immanentist context where one seeks the Divine in psychological processes and in an exchange of confidences akin to group therapy. A truly Catholic theology must always speak coherently of sacramental reality—whether in the order of nature or that of grace—within the created cosmos, and of man redeemed through the Incarnation.

It has been observed for the past thirty-five years—and this is not, sociologically speaking, without significance—that the number of the faithful has declined considerably in Europe and America. All the statistics confirm this, and no one seriously disputes this decline. In Australia, the

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[41] Women in the Church: Sub-Committee of the Council of Priests – Report to the Council of Priests, Archdiocese of Adelaide, South Australia.

[42] On this issue, it is very instructive to read the reflections of K. MANNING in “My Road from Gender Feminism to Catholicism”, in: *New Oxford Review* LXII/7 (September 1996), pp. 20–25.

[43] In "Acts of Christ, Signs of Faith", in: *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology*, Anchor Press, London 1979, pp. 97–114, CORNELIUS ERNST O.P. provides an explanation and offers a critique of this aspect of Rahner’s work.

The situation is identi[44]. This can be seen as clear evidence of a radical shift in religious attitudes, one of historic proportions. These statistics highlight a significant pastoral problem, to the solution of which our present discussion could make a substantial contribution. For religious ritual, the alienation that has arisen between modern man and the cosmos poses serious difficulties. To the extent that one no longer perceives that certain rites, spaces, persons and specific texts have an intrinsic relationship with the Divine other than that which is attributed to them by the individual psyche or the community, one no longer understands the rite as a whole. It is therefore understandable that, in recent times, discussions have placed greater emphasis on the human and social elements of the Catholic celebration than on those aspects of it that pertain specifically to the transcendental and the supernatural.

Yet, modern scholarship has led to an understanding of sacred space that, on the face of it, runs counter to intuition and offers a perspective markedly different from that of classical theological and liturgical studies. Speaking of sacred space, Fr. Aidan Nichols expresses this idea clearly:

> Paradoxically, rites that do not involve a distancing deny the faithful a means of appropriating the act of worship, for they paralyse them precisely at the point where, through a leap of religious imagination, they might soar towards God , p.[45].

It is interesting to note that modern man still exhibits a desire to be in communion with the sacred. Sociologists have observed that, when transcendent symbols are diluted or abolished, they must necessarily be replaced by something els , p.[46]. Furthermore, in our post-modern world, the thirst for the spiritual may very well take on inauthentic forms. The whole concept of the sacred and ritual has been reinterpreted from a more or less pantheistic perspective; this is often referred to as the 'New Age'. The sacredness of a space arises from the invocation of the elements and directions of the cosmos[47] and the psychological energies of the assembled "community". From this perspective, any objective sacredness within the sacred space appears elitist simply because it establishes distinctions. The sacredness of a text, an altar, a sanctuary and

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[44] JOHN CARROLL: "Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night – On the Retreat of Faith and its Consequences", in: *Conversazione of the Seminar on the Sociology of Culture,* La Trobe University, Melbourne 1986.

[45] AIDAN NICHOLS: *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 65; he elaborates on the ideas of K. Flanagan presented in: *Sociology and Liturgy – Re-presentations of the Holy*, Macmillan, London 1991.

[46] PETER L. BERGER: *A Rumour of Angels – Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Sacred*, Penguin Books, London 1971. This is the fundamental thesis presented in this book.

[47] A religious service of this kind was organised in 1990 during the diocesan synod of Canberra/Goulbourn. And this phenomenon is certainly not unusual. I myself have been asked to 'create a sacred space' for a school retreat.

Architecture is thus reduced to a practical or psychological dimension. It is in subjective experience that the sacred is discovered.

This idea that religious forms can degenerate into inauthentic forms is not new. This phenomenon occurs, for example, when the distinction between Creator and creature is fundamentally blurred. In this case, no offering can be sacred, except within the framework of a certain animism that seeks to draw psychic energy (a process called "empowerment") from the release of vital forces at the moment of death. If, in the Old Testament, it was forbidden to build altars of earth, with sacrifices to be offered only on altars built to the prescribed standards and by legitimate priests, one might think this was to avoid sacrifices to chthonic deities as well as practices such as "self-empowerment" (self-empowerment) by drinking blood for the purpose of divination [48]. A radical distinction existed between offerings to YHWH and those made to the gods of the underworld, and this was reflected even in ritual practice: in the latter case, the victims were slaughtered face down in a sort of gutter. This religious phenomenon is not without a modern equivalent. We might thus cite a Prayer for Life [e49]. The author presents a series of prayers for 'our enemies' – who are none other than those who oppose abortion. The prayer concludes with the following invocation:

> Let us gather in our hearts all the life in potential that cannot be welcomed into the fullness of human existence. Let us return it in full responsibility – with regret but also with humble trust – to its source, the All-Wise God, who is at the heart of creation and extends to its furthest reaches. All-Wise God from whom all things spring, in whom all things abide, to whom all things return, our Mother in whom we are born anew, God our future.

And now?

The question of sacred space is closely linked to the question of the Incarnation, as we have already said. The Hellenic metaphysical framework of pre-Nicene Christianity was not always well suited to addressing the mysterious contradiction between the transcendence of God, conceived in the

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[48] ZIONY ZEVIT: The Earthen Altars of Exodus 20, 42–26 and Related Sacrificial Restrictions in their Cultural Context, in M. Fox et al., eds.: Texts, Temples and Traditions: a Tribute to Menahem Haran, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake 1996, pp. 53–62.

[49] MARGARET COLLIER-BENDELOW: *Women Church – Australian Journal of Feminist Studies*, Sydney (New South Wales), Spring 1995, pp. 19–21; see also by the same author: "Suffer Little Children", in: *Women-Church*, Spring 1994, pp. 13–19.

Neoplatonic manner, and the manifestation of this God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth [50]. The theology of Athanasius and the Church Fathers at the time of Nicaea made it possible to overcome this paradox by avoiding a strictly materialist conception of "space" in a philosophical sense. In the Nicene conception, space was not simply that which contains matter (which is the materialist view), but a field of relational possibilities. Thus, it was possible to consider that the Incarnate Word was both fully in his human existence and fully in his divine relationship with the Father – and even with the cosmos, which was created by Him. The particular space occupied by the God-man and the various sacramental modes through which He communicates Himself could then be envisaged in an icon [51]. In relation to the human, space must be considered as closed but, in the other direction, as opening out towards the infinite and towards the Divine, just as, in the creation of a traditional icon, the artistic rules of perspective are reversed: the "vanishing lines" converge towards the eye of the beholder and not towards a distant point situated in the background of the painting.

Theologically, the question of the Incarnation inevitably takes the form, in every age, of a dialogue between faith and [52]. Since the 1960s in particular, relations between theology and culture have not been easy, and there is no indication that this difficulty is on the wane; on the contrary, it would seem to be intensifying. Yet, engaging in a discussion on faith and culture does not mean that one must capitulate to what might be called blind 'historical movements' or 'social forces'. It is only in this way that the discussion can move forward, taking into account the theological tradition of the Church and the research of modern social sciences. The question of sacred space and its relationship to the liturgy must necessarily be included in this ongoing discussion. Susan White is right to emphasise that theology must never relinquish its right to judge which issues are strictly theological in nature. On the other hand, if this analysis is unable to integrate the perspectives of both faith and reason, of both theology and culture, it is deficient. Christ was fully human and fully divine. To the extent that theologians do not fully recognise the sacred character of certain words, gestures, places and other modes of mediation

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[50] THOMAS TORRANCE: 'The Greek Conception of Space in the Background of Early Christian Theology', in: *Divine Meaning – Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*, T & Y Clark, Edinburgh 1995, pp. 289–347.

[51] Note also the idea of liturgical space considered as eschatological in BRUNO BURKI: "L'Église lieu d'une communauté célébrante", in: *La Maison-Dieu* 197 (1994/1), pp. 9–21. Burki also examines the concept of *analogia entis* and its relationship to the capacity of created things to serve as intermediaries with the divine (p. 18).

[52] KIERAN FLANAGAN: *The Enchantment of Sociology – A Study of Theology and Culture,* Macmillan Press, London 1996; see also: "The Sociology of God: Facing the issues raised by Kieran Flanagan's The Enchantment of Sociology", in: *New Blackfriars'* 78/913 (March 1977). In this, he follows the path laid out by MARY DOUGLAS, who made these same observations as early as 1968 in "The Contempt of Ritual I & II", in: *New Blackfriars'* 49, 577–578 (1968), pp. 475–482 and 528–539.

particular, historical and concrete contexts, the human and the divine are bound to become dissociated in the religious experience of our culture. Whatever we may undertake, it remains essential that we strive to take due account of the vanishing lines which, “radiating” from eternity, converge in theology and liturgy, and at the same time that our reason and reflection do not forget the infinite, ineffable and invisible God. It is then that our sacrifice will become pleasing at the altar of God and that our lives will radiate the very mystery we perceive in this space “which the Resurrection has brought to light”.