

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and modern architecture. PART IV by Bernard Lauwyck



Proposed new Cathedral in the Capital of HAITI

After reviewing the evangelical and sacramental type of church buildings, I devote my last article on this subject on the third type “the communal type”. The proposed design for the new cathedral in Port-au-Prince in Haiti seems to be of this third type. Another example is the new Cathedral in Antigua.

New developments in the catholic Mass and in architecture took place in the last century and subsequently converged to produce this “communal type” of church building. These changes, in theology, liturgy and architecture, presented a significant break with the past.

The first development was within the Catholic Church (see “Contemporary Irish Church architecture” by Hurley and Cantwell). A fresh wind was blowing “in continental Europe, where the liturgical movement had been gaining strength... Its origins can be found in Benedictine monasteries in France and Germany, following an in depth “exploration of the meaning and of the history of liturgy”. A Belgian Benedictine, “Dom Lambert Beauduin, a man of prophetic vision, was a forceful advocate of the participation of the laity in the liturgy.” At the urging of the Cardinal Mercier, he was allowed to present his ideas at a National Congress in 1909.

“The desire for closer involvement - active participation- in the celebration of Sacred Mass was later fuelled by the publication of missals in the vernacular or local languages, which had been forbidden since 1661. Where before the celebrant, standing with his back to the congregation, said the Latin prayers, now people began to read the prayers of the Mass, silently with the priest. The main forms of participation by the laity in the Mass which developed between the 1930’s

and the 1950's were either spoken or sung. In both forms the laity sang vernacular equivalents of the Gloria, Sanctus, Creed and Agnus Dei." All this was overtaken by the liturgical renewal launched by the Second Vatican Council in which our own bishop Arnold Boghaert participated actively. In December 1963 Pope Paul VI solemnly promulgated "THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY".

In this document we read under the heading " **GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE RESTORATION AND PROMOTION OF THE SACRED LITURGY** ":

"Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" .

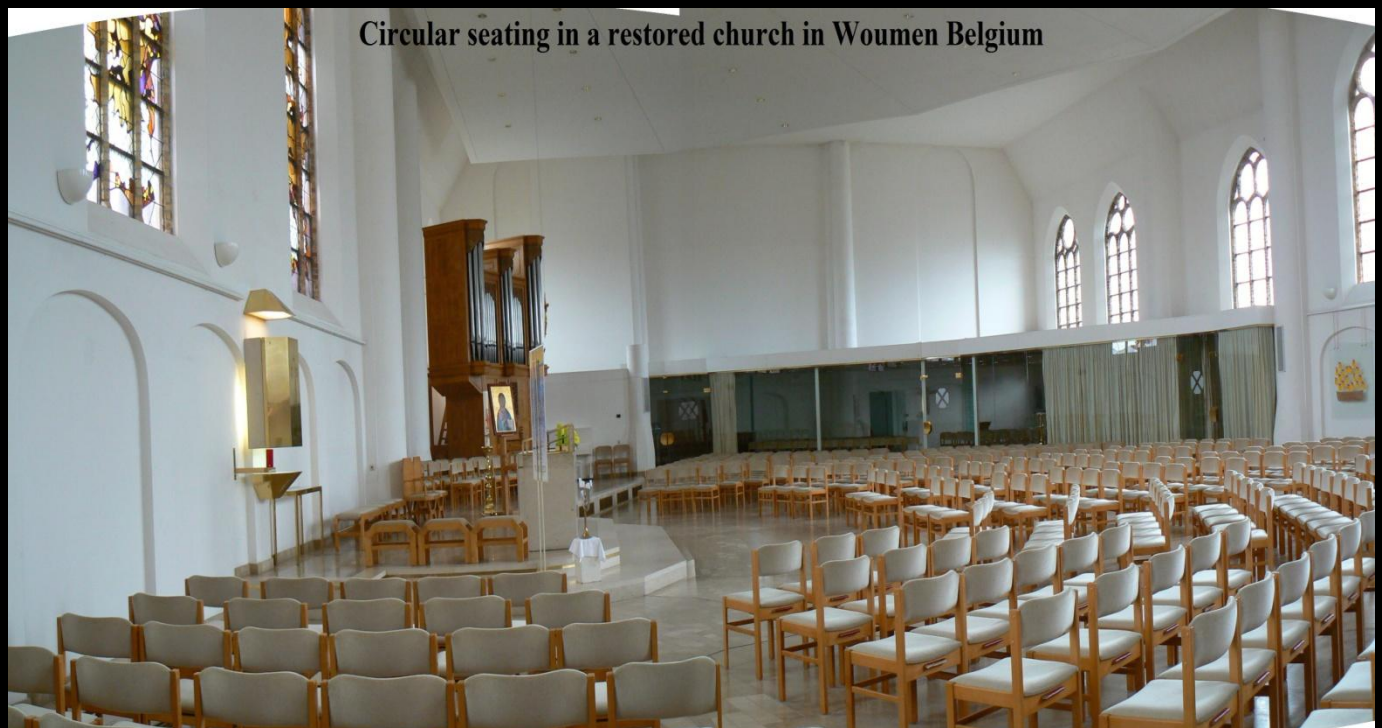
From then on the celebrant faced the people. Interiors of many churches in Dominica were altered in an effort to conform to these new ideas by bringing the altar forward towards the congregation and remove all physical separations such as the communion rails and screens. The Church also encouraged new designs for churches, built with one single aim "Let us gather around Christ's table", which was interpreted as having a circular or semi circular seating around the altar.



circular seating in the Cathedral in Oakland, California

These were exciting times for many young priests and architects as it “liberated them from the straitjacket of centuries” old church architecture. It also coincided with the reconstruction of numerous churches in Germany, destroyed during World War II and the building of new churches on the outskirts or suburbs of cities in Europe and America.

Also in architecture, limitations imposed by materials were overcome. No more need for short arched spans, thick load bearing partitions or columns. No more small window openings. With the development of new materials and technologies such as high-tensile steel, reinforced concrete and later pre-stressed reinforced concrete even traditional materials such as glass could be used in a new way. One of the prime examples of this was the CRYSTAL PALACE, a cast-iron and glass building originally erected in Hyde Park, London, to house the Great Exhibition of 1851. The building was 1851 feet long and 128 feet high. Because of the invention of the cast plate glass method in 1848, which allowed for large sheets of cheap but strong glass, it astonished visitors with its glazed walls and ceilings, thus the name "Crystal Palace".(Wikipedia) This also became evident in the huge railway stations which were built first in Britain such as Victoria Station. These railway stations were called the secular cathedrals of modern technology.



Modern architecture is characterized by simplification of form and lack of ornamentation. "**FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION**", a battle-cry of Modernist architects after the 1930s, led to some very odd looking modern churches as we have seen.

An odd-looking church in Northern Europe



A reader wrote “Modern interiors tend to be notably sparse so we may have to accept that. Still, we design for future generations because we expect churches to outlive us. The question is, do we expect our children to experience their belief in the same way as we do or do we accept that physical changes will not eclipse the spiritual? “

We have to acknowledge that the physical environment influences the spiritual and that architecture has a powerful influence on humans. Many people find that the lack of complexity, mystery, decorations & symbols together with the loss of traditional & recognizable architectural forms in MODERN CHURCHES has done irretrievable damage to the spiritual life of present day Catholics.

There is indeed something I would call a symbolic and spiritual resonance, a sense of sacredness in an old church which is frequently lacking in a modern church.

If we look for solemnity, a sense of moving forward in one direction, then we will chose a building with a long processional aisle and nave, which symbolize the spiritual process of moving towards God to the Eucharistic table or altar. The need for solemnity cannot be understated in a cathedral.

A cathedral needs to be a building which is rich in historical narrative and local culture, has splendid meaningful rituals grounded in shared memories and a wealth of imagery and symbols, which tells us of the mysteries and connect the past with the future.

That’s why I think that our Bishop made the right decision to restore the 162 year old Roseau Cathedral to its former glory and beauty.