



In God's House

By Paul Nitta

Booklet

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By Paul Nitta



Scepter Publishers

PO Box 360694,

Strongsville, Ohio 44136

Toll Free: 800-322-8773 (US & Canada only)

Tel: 212-354-0670

Fax: 646-417-7707

info@scepterpublishers.org

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INTRODUCTION

A small but noisy group of writers on religious topics recently has been promoting the idea that church buildings, as we have known them for almost 2,000 years, are old-fashioned. For these people, the idea of the church as a "sacred place" is alien to contemporary man's way of thinking. Since these ideas exist and show signs of spreading, I want to recall to your mind some basic notions on divine worship, and on appropriate places to carry it out.

GOD'S RIGHT TO BE WORSHIPPED

Every created thing has its own way of manifesting its total dependence on God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. Nonrational creatures show this subjection by their very existence: "The heavens show forth the glory of God, and the firmament declareth the work of His hands" (Ps 18:2).

Man, however, being endowed with intellect and will, needs to turn himself and his whole life consciously towards God in recognition of his complete dependence on the Creator: "Man is rightly oriented toward God when he recognizes His supreme majesty and His supreme truth, when he humbly accepts truths divinely revealed, when he religiously observes the laws laid down by Him, turning all his actions and his powers toward Him; when, in a word, through the virtue of religion he gives to the one true God due worship and obedience."¹ This is not only a duty of each individual person, "but it is also the collective duty of the whole human community bound together by mutual social ties, since the community also is dependent on the supreme authority of God."²

External, public, and social recognition of this dependence on God should, therefore, be the first manifestation and the most basic attitude of any human community. Thus, from earliest times, all peoples have publicly practiced some religion—even if their religion was tainted or even completely corrupted as a consequence of original sin. It was precisely to correct such possible deviations and errors that God directly revealed His positive wish to be worshipped as well as the correct way to go about the practice of religion. In the Old Testament, "we see Him proclaiming precepts concerning sacred rites and determining set norms which the people must observe in rendering Him legitimate worship,"³ and establishing sacrifices, ceremonies, times, places, occasions, people, vestments, and objects that must be devoted to divine worship.

The ceremonies of the old law were abolished by Christ because they were "but a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb 10:1). Nevertheless, the

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, No. 13.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

duty to honor the Creator publicly, far from being suppressed, was reaffirmed and centered on the only act of worship that could really please God: the holy sacrifice of the Mass, that commemorates and renders present the divine sacrifice of Calvary.⁴ "For from the rising of the sun even to the going down of the same, my Name is great among the Gentiles, and in every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered in my Name a clean oblation" (Mal 1:11).

Through the sacrifice of the Mass, the Church fulfills in a perfect manner man's obligation to honor God. "The Sacred Liturgy is, therefore, the public worship which our Redeemer, the Head of the Church, renders to the heavenly Father, and which the society of Christ's faithful renders to its Founder and through Him to the eternal Father."⁵

The Church has always understood that through the sacred liturgy "by way of foretaste, we share in that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, and in which Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle."⁶ The liturgy then provides us with nothing less than a foretaste of our future worship of God in Heaven.

Nowadays we sometimes hear it said that the liturgy should instead be the expression of our human existence, of our everyday earthly life. We are told that liturgical celebrations ought to be like an extension of our workaday lives. The danger here is a reversed interpretation of the Church's teaching, since this view implies that new liturgies should be patterned after the ordinary lives of ordinary people, rather than after heavenly liturgy. It would no longer mean that the daily life of a Christian should be a continuation, an extension, of the sacrifice of the Mass, but the other way around. It is easy to detect here the process of secularization which aims at desecrating what is sacred and excluding God from human activities.

⁴ Cf. Council of Trent, sess. XXII, chap. I; Denz. 938.

⁵ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, No. 25.

⁶ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 8.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Expressions such as "the whole life of a Christian is sacred," and "Christianity is not like other religions which need to make a separation between the sacred and the profane in terms of actions, times, and place..." tend to blur the fact that Christianity is a revealed religion and, as such, something willed by God as a necessary means for salvation. Its difference from other religions does not lie in a lack of distinction between what is sacred and what is not; the fundamental difference lies in its supernatural character and its divine origin.

The duty to offer public worship to God derives from natural law as well as from positive divine law, and cannot be fulfilled in just any way we choose. God did reveal that it had to be done in holy places, by consecrated men (priests), and through sacred ceremonies. In Old Testament times, Moses already had received through revelation a great number of detailed instructions concerning the worship God expected from the people of Israel. These instructions dealt with such matters as the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, and the altar, the type of victims, the feasts to be observed, and the people who were to carry out the priestly functions.

By means of these minute instructions, God clearly marked out a certain field of reality that had to be considered as sacred, i.e., exclusively devoted to the function of cult or worship and set aside from everything else—which, by contrast, remained profane or secular. The consecration of people, places, and objects was to be performed in the name of God by a special ceremony that had the effect of sealing the destiny of whatever was consecrated, so that it could no longer be used for anything else. The anointing with oil was done to signify that God was taking over as direct owner, and that further nonsacred use would be punished.

Among the orders that the Lord gave Moses, the following is a typical example:

And thou shalt make the holy oil of unction, an ointment compounded after the art of the perfumer, and therewith thou shalt anoint the tabernacle of the testimony, and the ark of the testament, and the table with the vessels thereon . . . Thou shalt anoint Aaron and his sons, and

shalt sanctify them, that they may do the office of priesthood unto me. And thou shalt say to the children of Israel: "This oil of unction shall be holy unto me throughout your generations. The flesh of man shall not be anointed therewith. ...It is sanctified and shall be holy unto you. What man soever shall compound such, and shall give thereof to a stranger, shall be cut off from his people" (Ex 30:25-33).

Sacred things and sacred places, therefore, are not determined by the use men make of them; on the contrary, it is precisely their consecration to God that defines the new function of the particular object, place, or person: from now on, because of its total dedication to divine service, it cannot be used for nonsacred purposes.

The belief that sacredness is somehow based on certain human attitudes contains a hidden fallacy. To think that it is wrong to attribute the quality of sacredness to "things," also leads to error. The consequences of either line of thought would tend to rob revealed religion of its most solid foundation. In fact, they amount to saying that the sacred character derives from God-oriented man, and not from a God-willed ordinance providing that a certain part of reality be set aside for His exclusive service. This error radically perverts the key concept of Christian religion, i.e., the fact of its being supernatural; and it does this merely for the sake of a well-intentioned humanism.

In other words, overemphasis on the sanctity of all created things tends to subvert the doctrine of original sin and its consequences for all creatures. It also leaves the door open for the rejection of God's right to dispose of His creatures as He pleases, so that that divine right becomes merely a "useful concept" for man's life.

THE HOUSE OF GOD DWELLING AMONG MEN

The concept of the sacred as opposed to the profane or secular is found throughout the whole of Sacred Scripture. At times, God not only dictated the smallest details of the objects to be used for His worship, but He also clearly showed His acceptance of things that had been consecrated to him. Once Moses had carried out the orders received from the Lord, "the cloud covered the tabernacle of the testimony, and the glory of the Lord filled it" (Ex 40:32).

At a later period, when the dedication of Solomon's temple had been accomplished following orders from God, "a cloud filled the house of the Lord, and the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord" (I Kings 8:10-11). In both cases God showed in a visible manner His pleasure at the completion of a place of worship where He could dwell among His people (cf. Ex 25:8). Offering sacrifice outside the temple was strictly forbidden, to the point that the strongest displays of divine anger took place against those who sacrificed in places not selected by God for His cult.

Christianity did not cancel this divine law. Rather it changed it into a new, intimate relationship to the Body of Christ, as the purest temple of God, since "in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9). The greatest glory of the temple of Jerusalem was not its silver and gold nor the beauty of its architecture, but the fact that it prefigured the temple of the living God: Jesus Christ. Hence the cryptic answer given by Christ to the Jews who demanded a proof of His authority: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:20). To this they reacted with disbelief and anger, but St. John remarks that "He was speaking of the temple of His body" (Jn 2:21).

When the curtain veiling the Holy of Holies was rent in two at the moment of Christ's death, signifying that God would no longer dwell in the temple of the Jews, the old covenant came to an end. It was succeeded by the

New Testament and a new form of worship based on Christ's sacrifice. Christian churches are the material representation of the true temple of God which is the most blessed humanity of Christ. The church has now as its center a Tabernacle that men could not have even dreamed of: the incarnate Word really present under the sacramental species. In our churches, Christ is forever present in the Eucharist until He comes again in His glory at the end of the world.

The Catholic Church is God's house because Jesus is there in the Blessed Sacrament, and because the sacrifice of the new covenant is offered on its altars. It is, moreover, a representation of the spiritual edifice that we all form with Christ, "as living stones built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood" (I Pet 2:5). Thus the feasts of dedication of churches are, liturgically considered, feasts of our Lord.⁷

THE TEACHINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23), have never been interpreted as opposing the need for external public cult. The implied meaning is rather that the type of cult He came to establish must always be based on faith, hope, and charity, i.e., on internal acts, without which all external displays of religiosity (such as those for which the Jews were repeatedly castigated by Jesus) would be void and empty.

Jesus Christ himself clearly showed His fondness for the temple of Jerusalem. There He was presented and offered shortly after His birth. There He remained for three days, teaching the doctors of the law, when He was only twelve. There He often went on the occasion of the great feasts of the Jews. There He preached, performed miracles, and did countless other things.

After His Ascension to Heaven, the apostles and disciples kept going to the temple (cf. Acts 3:1; 21- 26, etc.) to praise God and preach the Good News while, at the same time, they began celebrating the Eucharist (cf. Acts 2:42) elsewhere. The situation gradually became unbearable because of the attitude of the Jews who opposed Christ's teachings, and ceased altogether with the destruction of the temple in the year 70. The Acts of the Apostles informs us that the faithful, "breaking bread in their houses, took their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:46). Preceded usually by readings and prayer, the Eucharistic celebration would not take place in any ordinary house, but—as we learn later in Acts 22:7-6—in some special place (the "upper room" with "many lamps"), to emphasize the solemnity that surrounded this liturgical ceremony.

There is no doubt that the meaningful aspect of the "Lord's Supper" was exclusively the Eucharistic sacrifice—not the "common meal." This latter could, and should, be done in their own homes, on account of the excesses and undesirable effects which became obvious from the very beginning, unleashing St. Paul's scathing rebuke: "When you meet together, it is no longer possible to eat the Lord's supper. For at the meal, each one takes first

his own supper, and one is hungry, and another drinks overmuch. Have you not houses for your eating and drinking? Or do you despise the church of God and put to shame the needy?" (I Cor 11:20-22). Though they were not churches in the strict sense of the word, St. Paul's letters evidence the sacred character of the premises being used for the Eucharistic cult. Otherwise it is difficult to make sense out of the words quoted above or out of St. Paul's directions that certain people refrain from speaking in church and instead ask any questions they may have at home (cf. I Cor 14:34-35). Here the distinction between church (as the place for divine worship, whatever it be) and house (in the ordinary sense) appears in a very precise manner.

FROM EARLY TIMES

The places especially devoted to the Eucharistic cult were called *domus Ecclesiae*. Some of the better-off among the faithful would let the Church make use of their well-appointed houses for the celebration of the Eucharist. While the Christian communities were still small, their financial resources scant, and persecution still rampant, these liturgical celebrations took place in such houses. However, as soon as it became possible especially designed buildings were erected for the specific purposes of divine worship. Church building was a logical consequence of the growing number of Christians and of the increasingly long periods of peace between persecutions.

Even before the Edict of Milan ended the period of persecution (in 313) real churches had already been built. The oldest one known is that of Doura Europos (second century) in Syria, where Christianity had experienced an extraordinary development. During the third century, the Church also grew rapidly in North Africa, necessitating special places of worship where the bishop could officiate at the Eucharist for the multitude of the faithful. Following the Edict of Milan, mass conversions brought about a remarkable growth in the Church, which found it necessary to build larger churches to accommodate the growing numbers of the faithful. Under the peace of Constantine, Christians were allowed to display publicly the sacred character of such buildings. Private donations as well as imperial endowments made it possible to build splendid churches and use rich liturgical objects for the divine cult.

Thus began a custom which has been constant and uninterrupted in the life of the Church: the exclusive use of special buildings of a sacred character for divine worship, in line with the ancient tradition of the temple of Jerusalem. The idea that the concept of a temple was alien to the thought of the early Christians, or that their places of worship were never conceived as the "house of God," is historically inaccurate and contrary to the uninterrupted teaching of the Church throughout the centuries, manifested in the liturgy which developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the earliest times, the dedication of a church was effected by the first Mass celebrated in it,⁸ but a regular ceremony of consecration was soon introduced after the manner of the Old Testament. The sacred character of the church was indirectly confirmed by the 25th constitution of the Council of Lyon whereby any nonsacred activity within a church is forbidden, in order to safeguard the holiness of the place and the reverence owed to the worship of God.

The ornamentation and decor of churches has always served to convey their sacred character. Repeated actions on the part of the Magisterium (both ordinary and solemn) have affirmed that it is lawful and desirable to use images of saints and representations of the mysteries of Christ's life for the sake of their pedagogical and doctrinal value in fostering devotion among the faithful.⁹ The same thought also occurs in the documents of the second Vatican Council where we read that "to the extent that these works (of sacred art) aim exclusively at turning men's thoughts to God, persuasively and devotedly, they are dedicated to God and to the cause of His greater honor and glory."¹⁰ For the same reason, the Church has always reserved for herself the right to pass judgment on the arts, deciding which of the works of artists are in accordance with faith, piety, and cherished traditional laws, and thereby suited to sacred purposes.¹¹ All of the foregoing, though briefly sketched, will help explain the implications of some of today's common misconceptions. Not even divine worship seems to escape the scrutiny of those who consider themselves called to rid the Christian spirit of the supposed deformations of previous centuries. Based on pseudotheology and naive ideas resulting from a superficial acquaintance with history, pronouncements suggesting new attitudes concerning the worship of God require the faithful to be on their guard.

Restricting ourselves to the most common of the erroneous views, the following are worthy of note.

⁸ Cf. Pope Virgil's Epistle to Profuturus de Braga, PL 69, 18.

⁹ Cf. Council of Nicea II, Denz. 302 ff.; Council of Constantinople III, can. 3, Denz. 984 ff.; etc.

¹⁰ Sacrosanctum Concilium, No. 122.

¹¹ Ibid.

A “DESACRALIZED SOCIETY”

The first position from which the attack is mounted against the traditional form of public worship is based on the changes that present-day society is undergoing. At times these changes are described as the transition from a rural, patriarchal, nonindustrial, theocratic civilization to one that is, in contrast, urban, open, technical, non-sacred, and secular. Such a change they say necessarily affects the root of the religious institution itself, calling into question, among other things, the adequacy of the temple or church edifice as we have always known it, and even its very need.

To argue from change, however, betrays a painful lack of acquaintance with the history of a twenty-centuries-old Church.

As was mentioned before, churches and buildings devoted to the worship of God made their first appearance precisely in the midst of a largely atheistic society of Roman and Hellenistic background, where the mixture of beliefs, the religious syncretism, and moral degradation had all but ruined the right understanding of a religious sense. The fact that Christians first built their temples, and then multiplied the number of their churches all over the land, was certainly not due to the favorable environment of a theocratic society, but to the supernatural vigor of their faith and to the zeal of their Christian lives. This is what brought about the change of the hostile society around them.

As to the "prevailing secularity" of contemporary society, it will be good to note that such secularity has been a constant companion to the growth and development of the Church. She has spread her saving message in the midst of many "secular" cultures. Nonsacred "values" were never a motive of fear for the Christian. Quite the contrary: he has shown the power to completely transform such cultures, endowing them with a more supernatural sense of destiny.

The growing desacralization of everything sacred is presented as if it were an asset, something positive, which might even encourage Christian penetration of the world. This is, of course, nonsense. Who needs to "penetrate" the world, except perhaps someone who is outside it? Certainly not the average Christian who lives, works, and suffers together with his

fellow men, without feeling out of place in this world. The second Vatican Council teaches that "the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world . . . They work for the sanctification of the world from within, . . . closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort."¹² The Christian does not have to run after and climb into the world's wagon, as if he were a newcomer to it. The Church and the Christians of all ages have always lived in the world. They have transformed it by virtue of their faith, aided by grace. They have tried to make it a better place, to bring it to God. On the other hand, there seem to be a number of people who look on this society made up mostly of secular values as if they were opening their eyes for the first time. And the view makes them feel "alienated," foreign to this world. Is it not they who are indeed out of touch with reality, out of place, out of time?

THE CHURCH: "A FELLOWSHIP HALL?"

Another line of reasoning goes somewhat like this: changes in the liturgy demand changes also in the type of building, substantial alterations in the concept of the "house of prayer."

Such a concept of the liturgy is indicative of a confused background. The basic error here—as has been pointed out before—lies in mistaking the true liturgy for a vague feeling of the supernatural. It actually goes farther than that—it leads to the substitution of man for God as the real object of worship. The transcendental dimension of the liturgy is reduced to a mere horizontal plane. Instead of primarily giving God His due worship, some vague fraternal sentiment towards the other members of the human community is emphasized.

As a natural conclusion, the feel that the design of a church should no longer be considered as "sacred" architecture, but rather as some sort of "fellowship hall," open to all without distinction of creed, so that all may meet to satisfy their need to pray as they think best; thus bearing witness to God's love....Common sense, however, compels us to recall an elementary notion of faith. The church is the house of God, not the house of men. It is God that must be worshipped. This primary aim cannot be supplanted by the secondary aim of service to other men without robbing God of something which belongs to Him. The church is also the house of men, but only insofar as it is first the house of God. It is a fraternal place where God's children, having become brothers through Christ, get together to honor their common Father. Replacing this worship due to God by a new liturgy made to the measure of man's needs would be a disservice to man and even to his very needs, which can only find their fulfillment in God. The liturgy is not so much an activity of man directed towards God as the action of Christ himself through His Church, the inseparable work of Christ the Priest and of His Body the Church, where the efficacy stems from Christ's personal action as it causes and supports the personal action of the faithful.

The conception of the church as a multi-purpose place where the Eucharistic celebration and secular activities are held in succession leads to the idea that, in Christian terms, there is no longer a spatial differentiation

between sacred and nonsacred areas; that it is rather the use the community makes of the premises that gives them their character. Thus the building is a church when people meet there to celebrate the liturgy. It will be a conference hall when they gather to hear a lecture To reduce the sacred place to a mere stage where the sets can be switched at will is grotesque.

Granted, all that is noble and human must be brought close to God. But this does not mean that it has to be materially brought into the temple. Using God's house as an exhibition center, a concert hall, or a place for social meetings or cultural events is simply a profanation of something sacred, an incongruity which becomes obvious to any sane person, an affront to the faith of the ordinary Christian.

Since one thing leads to another, the defenders of the multi-purpose church sooner or later run into the problem of what to do with the Blessed Sacrament. What room is left for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist? The primary and exclusive object of worship must be relocated. And the renovator eventually finds a place for Him—a little closet in the back room. This is a crucial decision but, unfortunately, not yet the ultimate decision. For there are already some who, bothered by the continued Real Presence of Christ among men, would not cease until they manage to get rid of Him altogether.

The above mentioned danger is, unfortunately, too real to be taken lightly. Sometimes a chain reaction of this sort has been triggered by seemingly minor concessions to a spirit of "renewal," as when someone begins by shedding priestly vestments for the celebration of the Holy Mass, or when someone else decides to drop the Roman canon entirely, using only the second version of the canon "because it is shorter," or even "because it is not the Roman canon"—a sad pastoral reason in either case.

“NOT WORTH THE INVESTMENT?”

There is a third series of arguments currently being used against the construction of churches or any kind of building devoted to the public worship of God. In this case at least the reasons are not camouflaged under pseudo-liturgical or pseudo-theological cloaks. They are stated directly and flatly, and they boil down to the simple statement that "building a church is not worth the investment."

The rationale behind this, however, is a little unclear. A first step is to question the appropriateness of spending large sums of money for something that is only used for a few hours a week. Next comes a theological somersault which states that the financial aspect raised not only ethical and moral problems but also deeper theological questions concerning nothing less than the nature of God and the function of the Christian community in the world. What kind of God is this, whom temples have to be erected for? Is it someone who takes pleasure in having monuments built in His honor, rather than in providing for the needs of men?

This God, however, is the same one who is close to all men, His children, who is mindful of and compassionate towards their needs, who lovingly cares for each and every one of them as his Creator and Father. He is the God who is grieved by the offenses of those He loves so much, and who expects the meager proofs of faith and love that we men so stingily offer Him. He is the same God who taught us that the first commandment of the Law is the duty to love Him above all things. And He is the one who taught us how to worship Him, how to thank Him, and how to implore His mercy and His love.

Earlier I listed a number of quotations which show what kind of worship God expects from men. He who is the Lord and Ruler of all that is good justly deserves anything that man—a mere administrator of earthly goods—can offer Him. The indignation of those who take scandal at the generous use of financial means for the worship of God is often pharisaical, and never solely due to sincere and unadulterated concern for social justice. In order to be truly sensitive to the needs of other men and to seek a Christian solution to their problems, one must first be capable of understanding the meaning of magnanimity towards all that concerns God and His worship.

To blame some of the inequities of society on the expenses required for the worship of God is to take things out of their proper context. The complaint that the money could have been better used to alleviate some local problem is as old as the gospel: "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii, and given to the poor?" (Jn 12:5). A seemingly sensible remark, considering the "wastefulness" of Mary's action: "a pound of ointment, genuine nard of great value," just for the feet of Jesus. And the poor were there. . . . Said St. Josemaría: "The woman in Bethany, who anoints the Master with precious ointment, reminds us of our duty to be generous in the worship of God. All beauty, richness, and majesty seem little to me. And against those who attack the richness of sacred vessels, of vestments and altars, stands the praise given by Jesus: *opus enim bonum operata est in me—she has acted well towards me.*"¹³

God has given us great proof of love by remaining with us in the Holy Eucharist for our consolation and strength. It is only fitting that we should always give Him our best in terms of honor and attention as is due to one we love very much. The author just mentioned once commented: "The day I see a man offering the woman of his love a present of bags of cement and a few iron bars as a token of his feelings for her..., that day I may decide to do the same with our Lord who is in Heaven and in the Tabernacle."

Many of those who insist on economizing when the cult of God comes into question are, themselves, poor examples of detachment and temperance in their own lives. The "Church of the poor" has a meaning which is often misunderstood. The poor and those of limited means have a long history of generosity and magnanimity towards God throughout the ages, ever since the time that our Lord praised—and did not stop—the offering of the poor widow who "out of her want put in (the gift box of the temple) all she had to live on" (Lk 21:4).



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