

# THE CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF CHURCH BUILDING AS SACRED PLACE

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## Abstract

*Using the same term both for the community of people that follow Christ and for the building in which the believers meet with God, all Christian people acknowledged the inseparable link (i.e. Christ) between the Church as community and the church building. If in the former He is present in a spiritual way, in the latter, Christ is present in a more visible way. Thus, the community cannot be dissociated from the church building and vice versa. The church building is sacred not for the inert stone from which is built but for the sacred place that is constituted between its stones through the actions and events that take place inside of it.*

**Keywords:** church building, sacred space, sacred place, mysterium tremendum, holiness, sacredness, grace.

## Introduction

The centre of the church building as sacred place is Christ: Christ the sacrament preserved in the tabernacle, Christ whose earthly life we commemorate in the services of the Church, and Christ the model followed by the saints whom received churches as shrines for their relics. Same as there is a hierarchy of sainthood of people there is also a hierarchy of sainthood of places. The buildings where the believers gather to assist and partake to sacred acts have a special sacramentality. They come here because they believe that God dwells in these places in a special way. In Church it is possible to transcend place and time in a sacred way as the purpose of God relating Himself to a sacred place is a twofold one: (1) to unite everyone and (2) to impress everyone His state of sacrifice. One cannot exist without the other. The sacrifice is not possible without the union with the church of Christ and the union is not possible without sacrifice.

In order to make a critical exploration of the church buildings as sacred places I will address the subject of sacramentality of the place, and mostly the sacramentality of the church place, from two perspectives: action and presence. Making use of the questions addressed by Linenthal to the subject of desacralisation of places in his discussion on the instability of sacred place<sup>1</sup>, I will apply them to the sacramentality of church buildings and I will discuss what counts and what makes a church to be sacred. The focus of this exploration will be on the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Traditions as they appear during the first millennium.

## 1. What makes a church to be sacred?

### The consecration service

What makes the church building to cease to be a place of symbolic acts and to start being the place of the Trinity and the centre of the saving work is its consecration. The study of the consecration service is a useful tool to explore how the Church understood its sacred places of worship. The liturgical rite of consecration started to develop from the first centuries of Christianity and presupposes that the place where the people of God gather for prayer, Word, and communion is a sacred place by the virtue of these elements. The consecration service is accompanied by other two very important rituals. One ritual refers to the future functional use of the church building and is usually a Liturgy celebrated to mark one of the sacramental actions that are going to take place in the future in that church building. The other one consists of placing relics as a witness of apostolicity but also to show the link with the world of saints that is still connected to our world through their relics.

We see that the consecration service too emphasises the two dimensions of action and presence. The church is consecrated by the bishop as a visible sign of succession that reaches Christ. Through the priestly succession that comes from Christ the bishop places and relates the church building with Christ's earthly ministry. In consecration, peoples' prayers supplicate God to bestow his grace over that building and to start „dwelling” in it. The witness for

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Linenthal, „The instability of sacred place: Sacralisation and desecration”, in *Material Religion*, 2011, 72, p. 278.

that is the first Liturgy that is celebrated in it. What we must notice is that Christ is not being encapsulated in it but through the communion received by the believers during the Liturgy they start to bear Him in the world from the new consecrated church building, witnessing His work among the others. The place that the future church will occupy is been taken out from the common use, cleaned, and sacrificed to God.

The way in which the church building is „self-consciously «sacred place» and different from the ordinary place”<sup>2</sup> is by transformation. Starting with the consecration and continuing with the services, the church becomes the place where all the saving events take place. It becomes crib for Incarnation, Jerusalem for Entrance, cross for Crucifixion, Tabor for Transfiguration, grave for Resurrection and East for the Second Coming etc. This reminds us of our own salvation and not only that but engages with us to push forward towards it. When we recall them not only we remember but also, we live them together with Christ during worship. By becoming more than a mere memory they work in us for our salvation. Christians not only remember Christ but also come to the sacred place where they can meet Christ.

#### Acts as source of sacramentality

Now, the church building becomes sacred also by the actions that are performed inside of it. Tom Wright suggests that „when God is known, sought and wrestled within a place, a memory of that [place] remains”<sup>3</sup>. In church, God continues to work directly His sacramental and saving work. Through this work He unites with Himself and among them those that have faith in Him. He leads creation toward its perfect unity through Christ and through God giving himself to us in Christ. For us, the church is the liturgical centre of creation from where the saving power of Christ spreads over all creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. We become united by the model of the Trinity where the persons are united in love without being confounded. The church in its use

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<sup>2</sup> Susan White, “The Theology of the Sacred place”, in *The sense of the sacramental: movement and measure in art and music, place and time*, edited by David Brown and Ann Loades, London, SPCK, 1995, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Craig Bartholomew, and Fred Hughes (eds.), *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2004, p. 208.

becomes an authentic sign and a witness to the love of God in a delimited space<sup>4</sup>. A sign and witness that, in that place, the people of God struggle to be a holy one for the sake of the sacrifice taken by Jesus on the cross.

The church does not seal in it what is being performed inside but extends God's work over creation. This means that the acts are not a representation or a symbol of the saving work of Christ, but they are a form of expressing it. The church building is the centre of the saving work of Christ because in it we all meet in Christ's name and have Him among us, there it takes place the meal (i.e. the Liturgy) that feeds us on our way to salvation and in it, the gates (i.e. the Sacraments) through which we start and finish the way to salvation are opened. This use for worship makes the church building sacred<sup>5</sup>. The Liturgy and the Sacraments performed in church are channels of grace (i.e. of holiness) and are experienced by the believers as holy events performed on earth. They come beyond this world, transform a part of it, and witness an inseparable unity between the church building, the community, and the presence of Christ. But, the most important act is the Liturgy. Through Liturgy, Christ promised that He will be with His followers to the very end of age<sup>6</sup> and the building „is sanctified by its dedication to the goal of the Liturgy”<sup>7</sup>. The Liturgy, „this experience of the sacred”<sup>8</sup>, makes Christ present among us, it makes us sacred because we receive the Most Holy One, and it makes the church sacred because is the place where we receive Him.

Now, to respond to White's question: „in what way and for what purpose does God communicate through place?”<sup>9</sup> I will say that believers do not come to church only to pray together to a God that remains distant or only to hear His word preached. As Seasoltz argues, „the sacred significance of those places always derives from and is dependent on the essential relationship that

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<sup>4</sup> Susan White, "The Theology of the...", p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Susan White, "The Theology of the...", p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>7</sup> *The church, the Liturgy and the soul of man: the Mystagogia of St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. by J. Stead, Still River, Mass., St. Bede's Publications, 1982, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Marchita B. Mauck, "Sacred place for Worship: State of the Question", in *Liturgical Ministry*, 1997, 6, p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Susan White, "The Theology of the...", p. 35.

such ministry has with Christ"<sup>10</sup>. The church building is also a place of His transmission. He does not stay in heaven to listen to our prayers but comes to us<sup>11</sup>. As He is in heaven, He is on the altar too, in the form of bread and wine and becomes part of us when we receive Him in the Holy Communion. In this, we are drawn into the mystery of His death and resurrection and thus into our own conversion, because we do not only witness the mystery but also become the mystery with everything that surrounds us<sup>12</sup>.

Christians understand that following Christ is not a goal to meet all at once. They know that Christianity is a way of living and the Church a place where they start living, live, and end this Christian way of living. The descending of God in the church building make the believers think of church as a place where we meet God in a special, personal, and intimate way, a place called the „house of God”. The incomprehensible and incommensurable God is possible to be experienced in a church building because He became personal through Incarnation in Christ’s person. This makes His house personal too. Or, as happened in the Old Testament, „a place where God had appeared in such a unique way was consecrated for all future generations”<sup>13</sup>. The church building is a place where we meet as God’s people, as a „holy nation”<sup>14</sup>, and it is different from other houses because it is built for God and God dwells in it. So, we do not call it anymore simply a house, but a sacred house because it has been made sacred by the holy action of God. Then, all these things that take place in a church building get imprinted in the mind of the believers and make them to return to the church as to a sacred place. They remember it as the place where themselves, or their children, have been baptised, confirmed, married, or attended the first Liturgy. The beauty of the place, the depth of prayers, the richness of content, or the harmony of hymns are features that could have raised the state of these people’s souls and prepared it to receive the grace of God that makes possible to see the church as sacred. This means that the community who gathers

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<sup>10</sup> R. Kevin Seasoltz, *A Sense of the Sacred: Theological Foundations of Christian Architecture and Art*, New York, Continuum, 2005, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Gal. 2:20; Ephes. 2:9, 3:24.

<sup>12</sup> Marchita B. Mauck, p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> Gerard von Rad, *Genesis*, SCM, 1972, p. 242.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Pet. 2, 9.

inside the church building has a great responsibility for the sacredness of the place: to remember, live, and hand on this sacramental dimension of the place.

### Presence as source of sacramentality

Now there is a sense in which the church building could be considered a „physical container of the living Body of Christ”<sup>15</sup>. The church is neither a place that encloses God because God cannot be limited nor the only place where the sacred can be encountered nor the sacramentality is limited to be experienced only within it, but it is one of those sacred places (i.e. the human person can be also regarded as sacred place)<sup>16</sup> in which sacramentality is present, making the church itself a sacred place.

First, we can speak about the church as a container of sacramentality in terms of its use to house the tabernacle where, for various reasons, depending on the Christian denomination, the Body of Christ is being reserved. The constant existence of the Body, and of the Blood of Christ in the case Eastern Church, shows the permanent sacrificial state of Christ. Because we are close to Him but, yet, not fully with Him, we see that the Eucharist is not only about a commemoration but also about living the actual state of sacrifice.

Second, the church building can be regarded as a sacred place due to its function as shrine or as a place of pilgrimage due to its close relation with, for example, one of the saving events from Jesus’s life. Even from the first centuries the place of the church was for most of the time associated with the burial place of the holy people (e.g. Apostles or martyrs) and when Christians started to give more and more importance to the place of burial of saints it emerged a concern towards relics<sup>17</sup>. The custom became that each church is to be dedicated either to a saint, if it was built on its tomb (e.g. the martyrs) or if it sheltered inside the relics of that saint, or to a special event from Jesus’ life, if it was built on the place that that event took place (e.g. the Holy Sepulchre). In the case of the saint, the idea was that the saint exercises the holy power that he

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<sup>15</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Places for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity*, London, SCM Press, 2001, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Places for the Sacred...*, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003, p. 94.

has in the midst of the living and to point ahead to the future form of existence in heaven, joining – as we will see more detailed in the next section – two worlds together<sup>18</sup>. The saints do not replace God but partaking in Him they become mediators of the divine power and the church building dedicated to them becomes a shrine of their work. Today, the result is that, in the foot of the altar table it is placed a small piece of martyr relics to mark the place „as a sacred place for Christian worship”<sup>19</sup>. In other words, the church is being built on the sacrifice of Christ and is sustained by the sacrifice of the people that witnessed Christ’s sacrifice with their own life. This has the effect of reminding believers that we cannot reach the final stage of our existence without being in the same stage of pure and living sacrifice as that of Christ when He redeemed us. Since we cannot attain this state all by ourselves we need Christ to help and bring us to this state.

## 2. The sacred dimensions of the church building

As we saw in the previous section, the church building was identified to have as source of sacramentality the actions that take place and the elements that are present inside of it. Now, I would like to discuss how this idea of sacramentality has been understood and expressed in visual forms and in the last section to show the result of this understanding of church buildings as sacred places. The analysis of the physical dimension of the church building will help us to explore the sacramentality of place. Everything is holy in the One Holy Church or needs to be made holy: spirit and matter, people and activities, time and eternity, house and cosmos<sup>20</sup>. The mission of the Church is not to make only the people holy, but the creation corrupted through Adam’s sin, too. Now, the church building has more than a sacred functional role – it has the purpose to point beyond, towards a spiritual dimension. In this way it can be called a pointer to the divine<sup>21</sup> and this can be noticed by observing the physical dimension of the church.

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Places for the Sacred...*, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Davies, “Christianity”, in *Sacred Place*, ed. by Jean Holm and John Bowker, London, Continuum, 2001, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Patriarh Daniel, *Comori ale Ortodoxiei*, Iași, Trinitas, 2007, p. 247.

<sup>21</sup> Katharine Green, “The Importance of Place: What Should we do with Old Church Buildings?”, *Theology and Ministry*, 2001, 1, p. 9.

The Christians understood that the church building, as a constituent part of the Christian cult, must express in a visual form what the faith expresses in the spiritual one. Thus, the church architecture became a visible advocate of faith. However, the Christian architecture, through all its forms, it does not have a fundamental role in cult but a complementary one. The sacramentality of church buildings found a visual expression through architecture and the architecture, in return, tried to help the mystical experience creating a sacred place for prayer and communion with God. That is not to say that a church is sacred because of its beauty or is profane because it is un-aesthetic, but the sacredness of a church finds expression through the aesthetic dimension of the church. The architecture resonates with what happens and what exists inside the church.

Through its specific elements, the architecture expresses both the divine beauty and harmony and the mystical and sacramental work that take place inside of it. Considering only a few examples we see this visual sacramentality at work<sup>22</sup>. Divided in three parts, the building receives a Trinitarian symbolism. At the entrance we find the font where the baptism, the entrance into Christianity, takes place, then follows the nave that symbolises our present state in this world and finally comes the altar which represents the future to which we all aim. Even if the church is divided, all its parts are sacred because they are all united with the sanctuary. In the same way, the whole building is sacred because it is united with God as its source of sacramentality. The church building is often designed as a ship because it is the „eschatological ship”<sup>23</sup> that carries us to the kingdom of God. The ceiling is high like the heavens and the columns on which it stands represent the four parts of the world<sup>24</sup>. The two side arms of the church offer the feeling that the congregation is situated inside Christ’s cross or that they are incorporated by Christ in it in a state of sacrifice. The altar is separated – through a screen in the Eastern Church or through remoteness in the Western Church – from the nave to show that we have partial access and

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<sup>22</sup> David Stancliffe, “Creating Sacred Place: Liturgy and Architecture Interacting”, *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* edited by David Brown and Ann Loades, London, SPCK, 1995, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *L’art de l’icone*, Paris, Desclée, 1970, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *L’art de...*, p. 125.



knowledge of what it is happening inside of it and on the other we still must wait for a full knowledge of it.

Now, the orientation towards East is the best way to notice that the church building points towards a greater dimension of sacramentality, towards a closer union with God. This orientation shows the journey feature of the earthly life towards the eschatological meeting in God. Basically, for the eyes of the believer, the orientation of the church building suggests a future life: Christ is the divine Son of the Resurrection that will come from the East. It is East and no other cardinal point because East is the direction where our earthly light comes and from where „Christ, our light” will come<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the architecture has the role to point towards God. In the church building we only experience glimpses from the future kingdom of God. The altar is the unseen world and the nave is the present world. The place of the altar at the eastern end is not in itself an end, since its purpose is to raise the eyes of the people towards the following Christ. When we see a beautiful architecture of a church our thought runs immediately to the architect and the craftsman that build it<sup>26</sup>. And it does not stop here but it remembers us that only God could have inspired the architect to project such a beautiful construction.

### 3. The church building joins two worlds together

At this point I will bring together my arguments discussing the result of the actions that take place in church, of the things present inside the church, and of the relation between the visible and the spiritual dimensions of the church. I mentioned in the first section of this paper that God does not remain remote to hear our prayers but comes among us in church to be received through the Holy Communion and to hear and answer to our prayers from inside of us. Descending on the Holy Table, Christ, same as in heaven, brings the heaven down to earth. The communion in heaven finds expression in the communion existent in Church. In a church building we do not come to pray individually but to pray in communion with the others<sup>27</sup>. During Liturgy the angels come down to continue their

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<sup>25</sup> 1 John 1:5, Luke 1:78.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Places for the Sacred ...*, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Ephes. 5:19.

unceasing prayer by praying in communion with us. Now, during this earthly life, God brings the heaven on earth but at the end of ages it will take the church in heaven. Therefore, the church unites in it both heavenly and earthly elements and makes possible to continue in this world the saving work of Christ until the end of time. Therefore, the believers when enter in a church building, or when they pass by it, they cross themselves or pass with awe because they pass close the place where the Trinity works our salvation. They pass by Christ that bore crucifixion for them. Inside a church building the believer feels that he is outside the usual dimension of life and, as a result, in the mentality of people, the church building becomes a refuge from this world and not any kind of refuge, but one in which we are with one foot in another world. A world where all present afflictions will disappear and where everything will be peace and joy.

Then, the church is seen as a window to heaven<sup>28</sup>. Though it is a small window it opens a view so great that cannot be covered with the human eyes. It unveils the unseen world from heaven<sup>29</sup>. In church, since we live in another reality, everything is transformed; the past is not anymore separated from present and future or the earth from heaven. People perceive everything in terms of their inner life. For them, the beauty of the church becomes the beauty of the heaven, the beauty of the heaven the beauty of the church, and the church an image of the cosmos. In this way we speak about church buildings as places for Christian revelation where the form and content of that revelation is shaped by the direct „identification of that place with the saving work of Jesus Christ”<sup>30</sup>. The church buildings are worlds representing the eternal heaven of God<sup>31</sup>: standing in God’s church in heaven it seems to be standing. Architecture is there to evoke wonder<sup>32</sup> and the sacred actions and elements to be windows to heaven<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> John 1:51.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *L’art de...*, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Susan White, “The Theology of the...”, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Seasoltz, „Sacred place, the Arts and Theology: Some Light from History”, *Worship* 2008, 82, p. 521.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Shelldrake, *Places for the Sacred ...*, p. 53

<sup>33</sup> Philip Shelldrake, *Places for the Sacred ...*, p. 59.

As we saw earlier, the church architecture has the role to express this sacred interrelation. The sanctuary is the world above and the nave is the world below<sup>34</sup>. The altar symbolises the heaven because the altar table becomes the throne of God. The journey from the entrance in the church to the altar represents the journey that the believer takes from the baptism through the sacraments of the Church to the end of his life when he meets the throne of God in heaven. Or, in the same terms as Maximus puts it, the church building could be in the image of man where the sacred altar represents his soul and the nave its body<sup>35</sup>. Both can become sacred by meeting God, the former by contemplation and the latter by receiving the Holy Communion. This form of inter-existence is possible because „this visible world is verbally present in the world of thought; the world of thought is present in the visible images”<sup>36</sup>. This means that is not only God that uses the material in order to communicate with us, but it is also about us using the material in order to communicate with God and to offer ourselves to Him<sup>37</sup>. A mutual encounter and a relationship is being established between the divine and human nature, between God and humans with a movement in both ways.

Yet, the two worlds remain distinct but united and we move from the visible to the invisible one, where God makes the opposite movement. And the very proof of this possibility is the Incarnation of the Son of God with its human-divine aspect. Some scholars, however, argue against an overemphasis of the Incarnation and suggest that the resurrection marks a total transcendence of place, as for example the empty tomb that shows the Jesus’s place is not fixed<sup>38</sup>. But God united in Christ two natures – the human and divine – and two worlds. Through His Incarnation he keeps them united and offers us the possibility to have a taste of the future life. Place has a new status in the divine economy. It shows that God’s place is now His body<sup>39</sup>, and His body has also a visible form in His followers and through them, in the place where they gather.

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<sup>34</sup> *The church, the Liturgy and the soul of man ...* p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> *The church, the Liturgy and the soul of man ...*, p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> *The church, the Liturgy and the soul of man ...*, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> Susan White, „The Theology of the ...”, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Katharine Green, „The Importance of Place ...”, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Places for the Sacred ...*, p. 52.

Or, as we saw in the second section, the saints join the two worlds together because they are with God through their spirit and continue to be among us through their relics. A consequence of this unity between heaven and earth in church is that there remains no place for the unsacred between the two worlds.

#### **4. The concept of "sacred place" in the Eastern and Western Church**

Even though both the Western and the Eastern Church see the church building as a sacred place they do not have the same understanding of it. The Eastern Church considers the church building to be slightly more sacred than the Western Church does. The Eastern Church calls both God and the church to be holy where the Western Church calls only God to be holy and the church sacred. The Western Church considers the grace from God to be created and calls all its results sacred. In the Eastern Church the grace is considered uncreated and every work of God holy as He is holy. All that God touches, or transforms, becomes holy because God is not separated from them but becomes a source of its holiness and is personally present in them. Thus, the church building, because it can be seen only related to Him, it becomes for the Eastern Church holy and for the Western Church sacred. This difference in understanding finds expression in the architecture of buildings of the two churches. The Western Church expresses the sacramentality as something impersonal with a great force, a *mysterium tremendum*, a great glory but remote from us. This is witnessed by the dark and sharp angles of the ceiling and by the square form of the churches, the singing of the organ having the same effect. The Eastern Church expressed the sacramentality as something more personal and loving but not fully experienced yet. It is about a sense of communion where there is no fear other than that of losing the love of the One whom you love. The sense of holiness from Eastern Church finds expression in the round ceiling with its edges covering all the people, imitating Christ that bent to cover all of us, and in painting Christ on the top. This shows that our journey inside the church building is a twofold one: one towards Christ sacrificed on the altar and one towards what is above us and waits us in the heaven. Nonetheless, for both Churches, the church building becomes part to a shared

sacramentality. The church is not sacred in itself, but through the power of God that descended in it, of the same God that is the source of sacramentality. In both cases, the Church tries to express through the art of its church buildings an apophatic way of knowing God.

## **Conclusions**

The church building is sacred not for the inert stone from which is built but for the sacred place that is constituted between its stones through the actions and events that take place inside of it. From this perspective we could see the church building as a place that gathers inside itself a multitude of sacred aspects, things, and beings. In terms of function, it has the function to unite people with God and it remains a sacred building as long as it fulfils its function. In the Holy Communion celebrated in church and received through sacrifice and in sacrifice, all the boundaries and differences between the Christian people and the Churches around the world are over-passed. Though in different places and at different times, all people receive the same sacrificed Christ. Thus, the place that encompasses and reaches all these dimensions cannot be anything but sacred.