



## Church Buildings as Sacred Spaces

### ABSTRACT

*This paper centers on two important concepts, namely church architecture and sacred space. It attempts to unravel the theologies behind the architectural façade of the churches and the parallel development of church architecture and sacred space. The paper provides a brief tour through the historical development of sacred space and church buildings, beginning with the Old Testament, then on to the New Testament and proceeding chronologically through history to the present day. Along the way, it traces the general patterns of change in the understanding of sacred space and worship practices over the past two millennia. The theological insights of Philip Sheldrake are used to shed light and deepen the insights regarding the sacred space. This paper also zeroes in on the Redemptorists' experience of built spaces.*

### INTRODUCTION

Quite recently, a non-Catholic organization, the *Iglesia ni Cristo* (INC) built a huge structure that is said to be the world's largest indoor arena. A question then arose: Does such a huge and expensive building really help to foster religion?



Prior to this event, the Catholic Church was similarly confronted with the same question regarding massive structures. Last August 20, 2009, a Php 1-billion El Shaddai House of Prayer was inaugurated on Bro. Mike Velarde's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. No less than President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo inaugurated the Php 1-billion church. Bishop Angel Lagdameo, the main celebrant of the concelebrated Mass for the inauguration, was quoted as saying that the structure was so big that he needed six eyes to address the crowd.<sup>1</sup> Fr. Fernando Suarez, a Catholic priest, also attempted to construct a billion-peso shrine. He conceived of constructing a Php 1-billion "mega-shrine" to Mother Mary in Alfonso, Cavite.<sup>2</sup> In these instances, questions were similarly raised on the motives for constructing mega-structures.

This is also true in the larger world. In Romania, there is an ongoing church-building boom. They are aggressively building an astonishing number of churches, but this is something that is being frowned upon. Romania is one of Europe's poorest countries, and the funds being used for church construction are from the public purse. In many cases, politicians give public funds to churches, and in exchange, the priests support them in electoral campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does the construction raise concerns but also disquieting is the destruction of churches and other religious sites. In the Philippines, many of the so-called restorations and renovations of old churches have received disapproval, with some calling such initiatives "uglification." Even the local heritage advocates have questioned the conservation approach employed by local church authorities. Many have become quite emotional and oftentimes, the project has even become a source of conflicts. Internationally,

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<sup>1</sup>*Manila Bulletin*, "Celebration: El Shaddai Marks 30<sup>th</sup> Founding Anniversary and 75<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Brother Mike Z. Velarde," August 19, 2014. <http://www.mb.com.ph/celebration-el-shaddai-marks-30th-founding-anniversary-and-75th-birth-anniversary-of-brother-mike-z-velarde/>.

<sup>2</sup>Ramon Tulfo, "The healing priest's rich lifestyle," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 6, 2014. <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/582650/the-healing-priests-rich-lifestyle>.

<sup>3</sup>Tessa Dunlop, "Romania's Costly Passion for Building Churches." *BBC News*, August 7, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23420668>.

the ISIS militants' demolition, desecration, destruction of tombs, statues, mosques, and shrines of importance to Christians, Muslims, and Jews have received worldwide condemnation. The United Nations has even called such deliberate cultural destruction a "war crime," but ISIS militants are undeterred and appeared to be proud of their actions.<sup>4</sup>

With these events that are happening locally and around the world, it has become imperative to reexamine the close relationship of religion and architecture. There is a need to go back to a fundamental understanding of where God dwells. What is God's resting place? These events call us to reflect on the role that architecture plays in the Church and our understanding of sacred space. As Norris Kelly Smith said, architecture is revealing "not only the aesthetic and formal preferences of an architect/client but also the aspirations, power struggles and material culture of a society."<sup>5</sup>

## GROUNDING THE CHURCH: SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

Crucial to this section is the origin and the stages of development of sacred places in the Old and New Testament. This traces back the shifts of divine architecture from open spaces to enclosed edifices and from being central to becoming tangential in worship.

### *Open Spaces*

God was first worshipped not in enclosed, roofed, or elaborate centers of worship. He was first worshipped in open spaces. He was worshipped in natural places along rivers and on mountains. He was encountered in deserts and bushes. He was revered wherever people recognized him.

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<sup>4</sup>Susannah Cullinane, Hamdi Alkhshali, and Mohammed Tawfeeq, "Tracking a trail of historical obliteration: ISIS trumpets destruction of Nimrud," *CNN*, April 14, 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/09/world/iraq-isis-heritage/>.

<sup>5</sup>Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power Myth and Marcos State Architecture* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), 7.

The book of Genesis contains some descriptions of these open spaces that are considered sacred. The sacred sites were already there even before the arrival of Abraham and were not exclusive to Israelites alone. The Bible text itself supports and gives hints to the notion that the Israelites' places of worship were previously considered the places of worship by other groups.<sup>6</sup>

### *Nomad Sanctuary*

The open spaces evolved into nomad sanctuary. This nomad sanctuary was transported by Israelites through their journey.<sup>7</sup> This served as a constant reminder that God was with them on their journey. Wherever they went, God was with them. It is sometimes referred to as dwelling, a portable temple, mobile sanctuary, and/or tabernacle.

By forming a holy and priestly community of worship around the nomad sanctuary, the tribes grew together and became one, close, national community, capable of preserving itself. From a very loose tribal organization, it started to be more structured. It marked the transition from being a colony of slaves to that of an independent nation.<sup>8</sup>

### *Solomon's Temple*

When the Israelites conquered Canaan, they adopted a settled way of life. The nomad sanctuary was no longer carried about with them.<sup>9</sup> God's dwelling became permanent and got tied to a specific place.<sup>10</sup>

They built Solomon's temple, and this made Jerusalem the religious center of Israel. This temple became the only place

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<sup>6</sup>Rafael Avila, *Worship and Politics* (New York: Orbis, 1981), 8.

<sup>7</sup>Ruth Connel and Tim Dowley, eds., *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Great Britain: Lion Publishing, 1982), 137.

<sup>8</sup>Avila, *Worship and Politics*, 11.

<sup>9</sup>Connel and Dowley, *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 138.

<sup>10</sup>Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, trans. David E. Green (London: SPCK, 1973), 126.

where sacrificial worship could be legally performed and other places of worship were banned. It was an obligation to worship in this Temple, and this placed the Israelites and Canaanites under a common obligation and bound them together.<sup>11</sup>

The construction of the temple met with a measure of opposition. It was criticized as being “pagan.” Those who opposed it were not interested in sanctuaries with their symbols of God and the increasingly elaborate cult that served this religion. Instead, they wanted to remain faithful to the God of Sinai and the desert.<sup>12</sup>

### *Worship in the Second Temple*

When Jerusalem was captured by a foreign power, the people of Israel were exiled, and Solomon’s temple was destroyed. Since the collapse of the state, the need for a center of public worship had assumed greater importance. When the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem, they restored the temple. The restoration of the Temple meant that the priesthood, not the monarchy, was to play a leading role. Judaism, thus, acquired a new structure, under the leadership of priests.<sup>13</sup>

### *Worship in the Synagogues*

Aside from the temple, the Jews also used other structures for worship. The origins of the synagogues are uncertain, though it was believed that the synagogue first began during the exile, when there was no temple and the people were far away from the Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> The absence of a temple in which to worship resulted in the creation of the synagogue. The people of Israel must have developed some way of continuing their religious and communal life in exile following the destruction of Solomon’s temple.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>13</sup>Henry Renckens, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 291.

<sup>14</sup>Connel and Dowley, *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 147.

### *New Testament: From Christology to Ecclesiology*

The New Testament does not give a clear picture of Jesus's attitude to places of worship. It is rather complex and ambiguous. Jesus did not seem to have objected to the synagogue, where he on occasions taught despite his obvious objection to some of its other officials. Matthew 4: 23 says that Jesus went around throughout the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom. In John 18:20, he claims that he had always taught in the synagogue or in the temple area.

However, there are scripture passages that seem to indicate Jesus relativizing the importance of sacred places. In John 2:19-21, Jesus claimed to be the new temple: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up... But the Temple he was speaking about was the temple of his body."<sup>15</sup> Hence, this is read to mean that the meeting place with God is the person of Jesus and that no material enclosure can confine him.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the final words of Jesus to his disciples were: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20), and this echoed and fulfilled the promise that was given in the naming of Jesus, that he should be called 'Emmanuel,' God with us. This says that the presence of God does not dwell in houses made by human hands, not even in temples. The abiding presence of Jesus is with the people.

Having a specific center of worship was not an end-in-itself in Jesus' ministry. His actions could even be seen as relativizing what used to be seen as very sacred by the temple officials. He widened and enlarged the usual places of worship to even say that God dwells in the space of his people.

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<sup>15</sup>Juan Mateos, *Beyond Conventional Christianity*, trans. Kathleen England (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1974), 112.

### *Domus Ecclesiae*

In the New Testament, the temple was still at the heart of Israel's religious life. Crowds of pilgrims went to the temple for the great annual festivals. It was also a center for religious teaching.<sup>16</sup>

The earliest Christians were Jewish, so it is not at all surprising that they drew much from their Jewish background. They continued to worship at the Jewish temple, but when they were barred from the Jewish temple, the house churches (*domus ecclesiae*) provided a setting for regular worship among the Christians. Worship in house churches paved the way for them to continue and relive the experience of Jesus and make alive his memory. To the early Christians, the word "church" referred to the act of assembling together rather than to the building itself.

### CHURCHES IN THE POSTBIBLICAL TIMES: FROM RAGS TO RICHES

Ecclesial architecture is perceived as an avenue to the experience of the sacred. This section offers an historical overview of the church architecture that emerged throughout the postbiblical times.

### *Underground Church: Private Homes, Caves, Cemeteries, and Catacombs*

Christianity was not accepted in its early days, and many of its members were poor and illiterate. Christians were seen as illegitimate and subversive. They only believed in one God, and they refused to worship other gods/goddesses, including the Roman emperor. As a consequence, they became an easy target for discrimination and persecution. This prompted them to become an underground movement. They did not openly worship in public, but they would usually hide in fear from authorities. House churches (*domus ecclesiae*), catacombs, caves, and cemeteries became the meeting and assembly places. They gathered in the cemeteries,

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<sup>16</sup>Connel and Dowley, *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 147.

following the Roman custom of funeral meals. They celebrated the Eucharist close to the martyrs' burial places and decorated the gallery walls with iconography.<sup>17</sup>

### *From Humble Beginnings to Privileged State*

The number of Christian worshippers increased gradually over the first few centuries. It grew quickly after the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Soon house churches (*domus ecclesiae*) became too small for the increasingly large number of people. The transformation of Christianity is dramatically evident in the comparison between the architecture of the pre-Constantinian churches and that of the Constantinian churches.

From an intimate house church, the places of worship evolved into something grand and regal with the constructions of basilicas. The house churches (*domus ecclesiae*) fostered a close and warm atmosphere akin to a household where one was related to others as brothers and sisters. Basilicas, on the other hand, exude the glory and majesty of a monarch, a king, a sovereign, a judge, a lord, a savior, and a messiah. God who is a king who reigns in heaven and earth was then housed in illustrious palaces, a place deemed suited for rulers. Jesus Christ was no longer depicted like a Roman shepherd but was depicted in majesty—robed in the insignia of power on his throne like an emperor at that time.<sup>18</sup>

From the time that the Church was pronounced as the state religion, the structures and architecture of the basilica remained basically the same in the succeeding ages. Most church architecture drew inspiration from the basilicas imitating its architectural style while at the same time making innovations so as to respond to

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<sup>17</sup>Maurice Dilasser, *The Symbols of the Church* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>18</sup>M. Dilasser, *The Symbols of the Church*, 71.



the changing beliefs, practices, and local traditions. These changes and innovations paved the way for the Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque architectural styles.

### *Architectural Defects*

The emergence of Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque architectural styles was not always welcomed. Many times, they met with opposition. For instance, Byzantine architecture gave birth to iconoclasts. Iconoclasts were opposed to religious art and put limits on the influence of monks.

Cistercian and Cluny reform movements, mendicant orders, and itinerant preachers challenged the lavish and sometimes whimsical church architecture by living a simple life of manual labor and self-sufficiency. They also opted for smaller and modest architecture. St. Francis of Assisi was against the construction of big churches. When he had an encounter with Christ Crucified who spoke to him and said: “Francis, rebuild My house; as you see, it is all being destroyed,” he built a church that was very small compared to the churches of those times.<sup>19</sup>

Dissident groups that were against a church that became too prosperous eventually gave birth to Protestant church architecture. According to the ideals of the Protestant reformation, the spoken word, the sermon, should be accentuated in the church ministry. This required that the pulpit become pivotal to the church interior and that churches should be designed to allow all to hear and see the minister.<sup>20</sup>

The prominent figures in the patristic era were not silent either. They highlighted not the importance of buildings but of the believers. John Chrysostom said,

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<sup>19</sup>The Franciscan Friars, “Prayer Before the Crucifix at San Damiano.” <http://franciscan.org/how-to-help/prayer-requests-3443/prayer-before-the-crucifix-at-san-damiano-4119>.

<sup>20</sup>*Encyclopedia of Art History*. “Protestant Reformation Art.” <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/protestant.htm#characteristics>.

Do you want to honor Christ's body? Then do not scorn him in his nakedness, nor honor him here in the church with silken garments while neglecting him outside where he is cold and naked. For he who said: "This is my body," also said: "You saw me hungry and did not feed me." A gift to the church mayor prison compound can become holy when Christ finds a place there – he who at his birth was laid in a manger since there was no place for him in the inn, and who remarked that he did not even have a stone on which to lay his head.<sup>21</sup>

*Irenaeus of Lyons said that the glory of God is man fully alive. Gloria Dei est vivens homo. Minucius Felix and Origen said that Christians required no temples for worship, and that the heart was the altar.<sup>22</sup> Tertullian called the church the house of God, meaning the place where the body of Christ gathered.<sup>23</sup>*

### Contemporary Church Architecture

With the dawn of a new era or the coming of the modern period, the new emphasis was on individuality that reduces the force of traditions in church architecture. Before, there used to be a more unified singular architectural style. But now, several styles exist. We have witnessed the disappearance of the single accepted style in architecture. The progressive aspects of the new millennium led to new types of architectural wonders that sometimes placed the church architecture at the peripheries.

Church buildings used to tower over everything, now they are set aside, dwarfed by commercial buildings, and even at times simply becoming add-ons to urban planning (e.g., subdivision). To a large extent, church buildings are still seen as integral parts

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<sup>21</sup>Anscar Chupungco, *What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2010), 59–60.

<sup>22</sup>Christian Classics Ethereal Library, "Fathers of the Third Century." <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.iv.iii.xxxii.html>.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Vosko, "Ecclesiology and Church Design." <http://ism.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Ecclesiology%20and%20Church%20Design.pdf>.

of town centers and urban centers but no longer as the center of everything. With the industrial, technological, and scientific development, church architecture has lost ground.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, modern-day church architecture reflects more the universal character of the Church and of a world religion. Church architecture is no longer restricted to the classic church architecture that is mostly of European origins. Localization became a must, a necessity, and not just an option. There is a proliferation of styles. There is a wider recognition of plurality on the basis of cultural diversity that opens the door to pluralism. Church architecture now comes in different forms, shapes, and sizes. But while there has been plurality and diversity in church architecture, there are also revivalist movements who look back to the glory days of Christianity.

“The architecture of Relativist space, like the universal model it embodies, is homogeneous, directionless, and value-free. A Relativist church building downplays or even denies the concept of sacred space, rejects linear forms, and is designed so that every part of it appears to be of equal importance.”<sup>25</sup>

## THEOLOGICAL MUSINGS

Architecture alludes to space and its utilization as place.<sup>26</sup> Ecclesial architecture implicates space and its appropriation as sacred place. The underlying inquiry in this section is the understanding of sacred spaces and sacred places. In this section, the thoughts of Philip Sheldrake are utilized to shed light on the Christian conception of sacred spaces; this is the theme that runs throughout this section.

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<sup>24</sup>Erwin O. Christensen, *The History of Western Art* (New York: Mentor Books, 1959), 279.

<sup>25</sup>Why Are There So Many Ugly Churches?: An interview with Moyra Doorly. [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/print2007/mdoorly\\_intervw\\_aug07.html](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/print2007/mdoorly_intervw_aug07.html).

<sup>26</sup>Lico, *Edifice Complex; Power Myth and Marcos State Architecture*, 1.

## Sacred Space

There is no such thing as sacred space. The sacred space is an abstract idea that does not have an actual and concrete existence of its own. There are only places, and each is something experienced in particular and not as an abstract whole. The place is a concrete and symbolic construction of space that serves as a reference for all those whom it assigns a position.<sup>27</sup> Henri Lefebvre's analysis of place says that systems of spatialization are historically conditioned and are not merely physical arrangements of things but are also patterns of social action and routine, as well as of historical conceptions of the world.<sup>28</sup> This involves some politics wherein the one who defines "space" holds power over it and controls access to it.<sup>29</sup> Linked to this is the issue of empowerment and disempowerment. The one who defines the "space" can enhance or restrict, nurture or impoverish those who occupy the place. This makes places a human and social construct. It is shaped by human intention and intervention.

In understanding places, Christian theology maintains a balance of the immanent and transcendent. As transcendent, God is above and beyond the world. As immanent, God is close and involved in the world. It understands the place as God's revelation in particular and God's place as ultimately escaping the boundaries of the localized. It is both "this, here, and now" and, at the same time more than "this," a pointer to "elsewhere."<sup>30</sup> He is nowhere, but everywhere.

Christianity does not have a definitive understanding of sacred places. In fact, it has evolved and continues to evolve throughout the centuries. The New Testament itself shows how Christianity turned its attention away from geography towards

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<sup>27</sup>Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 8-9.

<sup>28</sup>Philip Sheldrake, *Placing the Sacred: Transcendence and the City*, 244. [litthe.oxfordjournals.org/content/21/3/243.full.pdf](http://litthe.oxfordjournals.org/content/21/3/243.full.pdf).

<sup>29</sup>Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, 15.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

people as the “loci” of the sacred. For Christians, God is to be worshipped in whatever place they find themselves. The first martyr of Christianity, Stephen, is described as dying precisely for questioning the supreme sacredness of the Temple and for reminding the people that God “does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7.48).<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, the experience of “being in transit,” on a journey, became a central metaphor for an encounter with and in response to God. In a sense, it seems that the marginal ground between fixed places is where God is most often encountered.<sup>32</sup>

According to the biblical scholar Dominic Crossan, Jesus rejects the exclusivity of the permanent sacred site in Jerusalem’s Temple promoted by Jewish authority as God’s home and instead “goes about” seeking “the lost sheep” *wherever they are*.<sup>33</sup>

What matters is not the places themselves, but what happens in them, and how, in a quasi-sacramental way, the believer may be brought into contact with the saving events. The primary sacred place is singly or collectively described as the temple of the Spirit in women and men of faith. The locus of the sacred transgresses former boundaries and is to be found particularly where people seek to be a community in Christ, distinguished by the destruction of traditional separations and by a quality of common life.<sup>34</sup>

In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the mid-4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the location of the sacred began to shift. The locus of supernatural power was increasingly focused on a limited number of exceptional human beings.<sup>35</sup> The places that had created a saint were considered sacred, too, by association—burial sites for instance. Cemeteries and tombs of the saints were becoming centers of public Church life. The saints are “with God;” the saints continue to be with us;

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>33</sup>Sheldrake, *Placing the Sacred: Transcendence and the City*, 244.

<sup>34</sup>Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, 37-38.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 38.

ergo, they are mediators between us and the Divine.<sup>36</sup> Christian theology of physical “sacred places,” such as great churches or places of pilgrimage, was essentially associated with people, living or dead, as the loci of the sacred. Pilgrimages were to the shrines of the saints. The great churches were simply a space within which the living story of God’s dealings with the human community could be told through architecture, glass, stone, and the liturgical assembly.<sup>37</sup>

This means that church buildings make spiritual-theological sense ultimately in relation to the human community and the quality of discipleship that they encapsulate and enable.<sup>38</sup> What makes the church is the faithful, not the architecture. Even Augustine’s fundamental understanding of the Church is a community of people, of the faithful, who make up the body of the church, *tabernaculum admirabile*.<sup>39</sup>

## REDEMPTORIST EXPERIENCE

This section looks closely on how the Redemptorists built sacred places and on how they live out their understanding of sacred places. This gives flesh to the discussions in the previous sections.

### *Churches in the Philippines*

Churches were instrumental in furthering Christianity and in advancing the colonial rule of Spain. The Law of the Indies contains building regulations, and town planning stipulates that the church is to be in the plazas.<sup>40</sup> With the implementation of this royal decree, natives were resettled under the bells or *bajo de las campanas*. Wherever a church was erected, a community of natives

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>40</sup>Norma Alarcon, *Philippine Architecture During the Pre-Spanish and Spanish Periods* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2003), 74.

would live within its vicinity. It was as if the community of natives was built for the church structures.

This was still the prevailing situation in 1906 when the first Redemptorists arrived in the Philippine Archipelago. Church buildings were still the prominent structures in the town centers even with the end of the Spanish colonial regime.

The Redemptorists, who are itinerant preachers by charism, spread the Word of God to the people to whom they are sent. The construction of church buildings was not a priority; they came much later. They were consequences of their missionary activity. Thus, church buildings and edifices were built for the faithful. These church buildings at present include the National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help and the Our Mother of Perpetual Help Parish in Davao City.

#### *National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help*

Located at the north end of Paranaque City is the National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, also known as the Redemptorist Church or the Baclaran Church.<sup>41</sup>

Every Wednesday, it welcomes around 120,000 devotees from all walks of life. The Baclaran church is popular not only for novenas and masses but also for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.

The Baclaran Church plays an important role not only in responding to the spiritual needs of the people but also in public life in general. The celebration of the sacraments is complemented by social services, which try to address the everyday problems of ordinary people.

The number of devotees flocking to the church helps support a variety of local businesses in its vicinity. Outside the church

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<sup>41</sup>A shrine is a kind of public or semi-public oratory that exists to foster a certain devotion in the publicly recognized piety of the Church. Catholic Diocese of Richmond, "Frequently asked questions." <http://www2.richmonddiocese.org/planning/faqs.htm>.

compound are displays of ready-to-wear clothes, accessories, and novelty items. The flea markets and shops around the church create job opportunities that help hundreds if not thousands of families earn their daily bread.

Historically, Baclaran Church made its own contribution to the cause of justice and peace during the Marcos regime, which eventually led to the People Power uprising. When Ninoy Aquino was assassinated in 1983, it was to Baclaran that his family and welcoming party went to pray. During the 1986 Snap Presidential Election when the vote tabulators walked out, they headed to the Baclaran Church and spent the night there.<sup>42</sup> From that day on, the church continued to help shape political discourse by preaching and active involvement in civic affairs.

The church also celebrates artistry and creativity. Theater, music, and dance are incorporated in its liturgical celebrations. Even outside official liturgy, these are openly encouraged and showcased. It has been supportive of the arts, and for a number of times, has even been made available for local filmmaking. This has empowered artistically-minded people to utilize their God-given talents.

The blending of the sacred and profane and the holistic approach in its ministry makes Baclaran reminiscent of what the Cathedral used to be in the medieval age. The Baclaran Church is used for far more than worship. It makes real encounter of everyday people with God possible, it is where there is no partitioning off of religion, as there is today in many churches.

### *Behind the Façade*

Baclaran Church was built at a time when there was a national effort to rebuild the country from the rubble of war.<sup>43</sup> In fact, in the 1950s, the practice of architecture was institutionalized

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<sup>42</sup>John Maguire, *To Give Missions to the Filipino People Wherever They Are Needed* (Paranaque: Redemptorist Media Center, 2006), 63.

<sup>43</sup>Lico, *Edifice Complex; Power Myth and Marcos State Architecture*, 35.



to support the construction and building boom that was happening at the time. It was in this context that the Baclaran Church was built.

Having been built in the 1960s, Baclaran Church is fairly recent and does not follow the mold of old and historic churches. The architectural design of Baclaran is Modern Romanesque Revival; it participates in the rich traditions of ecclesiastical buildings, but it is contemporary at the same time, blending modern and some indigenous forms. Modern Romanesque expresses the protective strength of God in unpredictable times.

The present church in Baclaran, this place of the fish traps (*baclad*), is the third reincarnation of the church since 1906. The original Redemptorist Church was a small wooden structure dating back to 1932. It had to be replaced and enlarged to accommodate the growing number of devotees.

The construction of the church was mainly funded by small donors and only around one-fourth of the cost was contributed by prominent donors whose names are duly recorded. The donation came through weekly collections and through the loose change dropped in donation boxes.<sup>44</sup> It is a church mainly built not by big benefactors, but by the ordinary people. It belongs to the people.<sup>45</sup>

The architecture of the church, though western in style, is simple and solemn. The façade is symmetrical, with strong vertical planes and lines that rise and fall. A vertical line in the direction upwards creates an idea of height, rise, growth, and a feeling of victory over gravity. A descending vertical line creates the feeling of defeat, retreat, refuge, shelter, solitude, agreement with gravity, and ever-increasing limitation.

The Church is lacking in interior decoration, but it is grand and massive. Its massiveness is not intimidating but inviting.

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<sup>44</sup>National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help Redemptorist, "Architecture," <http://www.baclaranchurch.org/architecture.html>.

<sup>45</sup>Samuel Boland, *The Redemptorists in Luzon: Spreading the Net* (Manila: Redemptorist Fathers, 1982), 77.

Its cream-colored structure and austere interior give the church a populist atmosphere that seems to welcome everyone to enter its more than 50 doors. The façade of the church has a rose window over the principal door that lights the nave. It also has recessed doors and simplified arches and windows that give the church a picturesque quality.

### *Our Mother of Perpetual Help Parish Davao*

Located along J.P. Laurel Avenue, Bajada in Davao City, Our Mother of Perpetual Help Parish sits across a commercial complex known for its wide array of shopping, entertainment, residential projects, and cultural offerings.<sup>46</sup> Back in 1979, the church was tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the old downtown area. It has since then witnessed the transformation of this large area of swamp and marsh into an urban sprawl.

The development comes with pros and cons. Owing to the developments in the area, church services have had to be increased. The location has become very convenient because of its proximity to restaurants, malls, and entertainment centers but insufficient parking space has become a real problem. The church has become trans-parochial attracting churchgoers from other parishes. The number of churchgoers has grown significantly through the years. It has defied the initial expectations in the late 1970s that the number of churchgoers would drop and that there would be no need for future church expansion. The church was simply built for 700 churchgoers.

We might add here that this church has become a popular place for weddings. The church is preferred for its intimate ambience, simplicity, spacious grounds, and lower fees. Many of those who are married in this church are even nonparishioners. Besides this, the parish has become known for the novena to Our

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<sup>46</sup>A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (*pastor*) under the authority of the diocesan bishop. Code of Canon Law, “Parishes, Pastors, and Parochial Vicars,” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_\\_\\_P1U.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P1U.HTM).

Mother of Perpetual Help, which has attracted more devotees through the years. In fact, three novena masses are celebrated in this parish every Wednesday. During Holy Week, the church is one of the most visited in Davao.

These are exciting times for the parish as changes and developments continue. It has to face challenges, but it is also confronted with great opportunities.

### *Beginnings*

The Redemptorists first arrived in Davao in 1955. In 1958, the construction of a “temporary” church began. In the year 1959, they transferred to their present location at Bajada. A temporary wooden church was built at once. This was meant to last for about twenty years until a more permanent structure could be built. In 1970, a permanent church was planned.

In 1972, another challenge was posed by the Bishop: he invited the Redemptorists to accept a parish. In the wake of Vatican II, the Redemptorists felt that shrine churches without parish responsibilities were anomalous; parishes could be seen as permanent missions where they could get into Basic Christian Communities (BCC) for the long term. The offer was approved, and with their lay cooperators, the Redemptorists set up BCCs from Bajada to Callawa. In 1980, the foundations of the new church were laid. The new parish church was blessed and consecrated the following year.<sup>47</sup>

After 21 years of service, the temporary wooden church showed serious signs of deterioration. In 1979, a group of parishioners met with the Redemptorist community to discuss the problem. There could be no other alternative but to build a new church.

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<sup>47</sup>Karl Gaspar, “A Century of Perpetual Departures: The Social History of the Redemptorists in the Philippines, 1906-2005,” <http://karlsmusings.blogspot.com/2005/07/century-of-perpetual-departures.html>.

In December 1979, the plans were shared with the people. Work started on February 1, 1980 and was completed in the same year, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Redemptorists' coming to Davao. There was an energetic campaign to raise funds for the construction both among the rich and the poor and in the Redemptorist communities.

The present church was built very much in the spirit of Vatican II. Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* No. 122-125. "When churches are to be built, let great care be taken that they be suitable for the celebration of liturgical services and for the active participation of the faithful."<sup>48</sup> The church was designed to be fan-shaped, directing the people towards the altar. The idea was to make people gather around the table of the Lord and encourage more active participation in the church celebrations. This gives a more people-oriented and a more egalitarian atmosphere to the Eucharistic celebrations. This is quite different from the traditional church that is rectilinear. The shape of the church also focuses the action on the people indicating that God is within the people, in the assembly (SC 7).<sup>49</sup> The intimacy of worship is created by the proximity of the faithful to the altar.

The shift in emphasis in the architecture of this church is something that can be described as pioneering, if not revolutionary. The emphasis on the people shifted the focus of the church's worship to "God present in the people." It also relaxed a little the formal aspect of the church. Its unique architecture challenges the common perception of what a church must look like. It is clearly a defiant breakaway from the traditional ecclesiastical architecture that is horizontal and rectilinear.

The church has an unassuming facade that is neither lavish nor splendidous; it can be linked to a house-type design. Viewed

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<sup>48</sup>Paul VI, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963." [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

from the top, the design of the church is a fish. The fish design comes from a very ancient symbol of Christ—the *ichtys*. *Ichtys* is an early circular symbol created by combining the Greek letters, which when translated mean “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” This inspiration has given the church a unique shape that can be described as sculptural rather than architectural.

Its architecture is modern in style and design, not merely a copy or reinterpretation of ecclesiastical architecture. It even responded to the thirst for local art at the time. More importantly not only design but materials are indigenous to the people. It blends with the landscape and the context of the people at that time.

The people responsible for this church architecture were inspired to make the edifice aesthetically pleasing, but their greatest desire was that those who enter it would have a true appreciation of its purpose. Its architecture goes beyond the basics, and the challenge is not only in the appreciation of its outward beauty but in its being a home of the community.

### *Prognosis*

A sacred place is something that is constructed. Those who are in authority to create and define the sacred place can emasculate or emancipate, can enhance or restrict, can nurture or impoverish those who occupy the sacred places. This raises questions such as: Who defined the sacred place of Baclaran Church or of Our Mother of Perpetual Help Parish? Whose place is it? Who owns it?

Jesus in the Scripture points to the community of believers as the ones who make the place sacred. This is supported by the early Christian writers who gave utmost importance to the community of believers. This is affirmed as well by Philip Sheldrake who says that church buildings and structures make spiritual and theological sense in relation to the human community. This means that the construction of the sacred cannot be entrusted to the elite few. This also means that the community of believers has to have a say and what they say carries a lot of weight in every decision that is made. Their voices from the pews need to be heard. This calls for more

active collaboration and participative engagement in the creation of sacred places. It is the larger community that creates the sacred. The “sacred” is created not because of the consent of the institution but because of the community of believers.

The community needs to be the focus and the foremost priority when planning churches, buildings, and other parish structures. The buildings must make the community feel at home. The church has to be a place of sanctuary, of refuge, and a place of respite. But who are those at home in these churches? Is it hospitable to all? Is it accessible and available to all? Do people belonging to other faiths feel welcome? How about the old, the sick, the disabled, the LGBT, and the different sectors of society? Does it give room for differences? Who are those still left out?

The shrine must not concern itself alone with material needs, but it must offer a doorway to the eternal. It must offer something beyond the drudgery of everyday life in the way it relates and cares for people.

While the Christian community is the one who creates a sacred place, a sacred place, at the same time, forms the Christian community. Churches are known to draw a flock of devotees, but it is unclear whether it is merely forming a teeming crowd or a band of brethren. The quality of common life and discipleship that is created in those spaces, the climate of values that are promoted, and the sensibilities of people that are formed are things that need to be addressed.

It is common knowledge that a large percentage of Christians do not frequent the church. If God is supposedly where the people are then God must be outside the church. Are there structures to extend to the community outside the confines of the church? Most of the young are disconnected from the church, but they are connected online, and they are in the cyber world. How do we reach out to them? Do we see it as a new frontier for shrine or parish engagement?

There is nothing wrong in beautifying sacred places. Anything beautiful evokes awe, wonder, contemplation,

appreciation. It points to the source of all that is beautiful. Everyone is drawn to beautiful things. Even the poor appreciates beauty. But the aesthetic must not be separated from ethics. The beautiful must go hand in hand with what is appropriate, good, and acceptable to the community of believers since churches live off the largesse of the people. It is callous to display too much economic wealth and power in the midst of overwhelming poverty. This does not draw the people to the beautiful. Instead, they are drawn away. The community of the believers is the Tabernacle of God that needs to be adorned and not so much the sanctuaries. It is necessary to create orderly systems, good engineering, and pleasing aesthetics, but it becomes a threat to the sacred once it becomes impersonal and bureaucratic.

Churches cannot be monofunctional or they risk being exclusionary architecture that creates division, compartmentalizing all aspects of life. When it does, it degenerates into a ghetto or a garrison and not a home for the community of believers. Church buildings cannot be reduced to the spiritual and functional alone. It is not enough to cater to one aspect of life. It is not enough to exercise ministerial duties and neglect other areas of life. It has to embrace all aspects of life and find a balance in all. It needs to break down those barriers that separate the spiritual from other realities. God is not experienced in isolation. He is encountered only through the medium of relationships, whether interpersonal or social. He is encountered through the relationships that are built with the spaces that are created.

The challenge is to be more catholic in embracing all aspects of human and community life where work for social justice and social involvement is not peripheral to the ministries of the churches. Churches have to share in the joy and hopes, sorrow and anguish of the people to whom they minister. They must have a voice and speak about the realities of the people they are serving. The cathedrals of old are not purely functional but evocative. They deliberately speak of the “condition of the world.” They both express the history of human experiences and transcend them.

Church buildings are theological statements; they reveal the God they profess. Examining sacred places closely would unmask the theology behind church architecture. This would show if we have moved beyond the church that is concerned with the buildings and structures to a church focused on the people. It would serve as a litmus test as to the extent we recognize the church as the community. This hopefully would lead to a realization that it is not enough to keep doing things the same way it was done before. There is a need for a greater recognition of the Church as the people who make spaces sacred.

## CONCLUSION

The historical development of sacred space and church buildings tells us that there is a more encompassing understanding of God's dwelling place, but it has become so severely limited with the passage of time. We have given undue importance to what is commonly thought of as God's dwelling place—the enclosed spaces of church buildings. This has become a repressive mechanism, which has reduced our rich understanding of God's sacred presence. This has become nihilistic and minimalist. It does not give sufficient space and freedom for many to be drawn to that profound sense of the divine and to the grandeur of the mystery of God's ubiquitous presence.

Our understanding of God's dwelling is like pure water from the mountain that picks up a lot of dirt along the way. There is a much more elastic understanding of God's dwelling in the past. Everything that enables us to see God and feel God's presence could be seen as a sacred place. This allows a God-encounter that overflows and spills over in the rough grounds of life. But now our understanding of God's presence is made susceptible to the limitedness and finiteness of human beings.

We need a fresh perspective. We have to reimagine, rethink, and reevaluate our understanding of God's dwelling place. There is something inside the box, in our faith traditions that could allow us to embrace and once more enrich our understanding of



the sacred place so that that we may face the uncertain future with confidence.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the insights that God is not solely found in church architecture and church premises and that a church building is not the only avenue where people can experience God, these are some pointers for future discussions:

1. Reimagine sacred space that is not limited to physical and geographical places, but sacred space that would go beyond and include the natural world, secular places, and cyberspace. God is constantly incarnating himself wherever and whenever he wants. He was worshiped in the natural places, and then He chose to pitch a tent among his people. Surely, he can manifest himself also in cyberspace where new communities of people are now formed. The phenomenon of cyberspace strongly speaks of the need for relationality; it is forming “a new way of being a church” in our present reality of a borderless world.
2. This invites us to think about the architecture of the present and future churches. Where and how we live inevitably affects the kind of people we become. We seek to mold our surroundings—but our surroundings also mold us. Do we have to limit ourselves to a few church architectural designs or can we open ourselves up to other possibilities? Can we even think of a churchless Church?
3. The kind of church we build also speaks of our ecclesiology. Architecture follows our understanding of being a Church. This raises serious questions: How do we understand the church? Which matters most, the church edifice or the church as the people of God? If it is the people, are there systems and structures that build community, and not only buildings? How much

material resources are consumed in the construction and maintenance of buildings? How much goes to the building up of the Body of Christ in providing the least with their daily bread?

4. Ours must be the church that does not separate and isolate itself from other realities of life. It has to be where the sacred blends with the profane. It has to be affected by and be involved in the other areas of public life and not limit itself on spiritual and religious matters alone. Moreover, aesthetic must not be separated from ethics. Dignity and beauty in worship must not be seen as different from what is right, good and just. In the beautifications of the churches, are the people drawn to experience the divine or are they drawn away and not made at home?
5. God pitched his tent among us. He is now calling us to spread the tent-pegs and make room in the tent for the entire human race and the whole cosmos.

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